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Pilot's remains finally going home

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After spending 62 years buried on a remote and wind-swept O'ahu mountain ridge, Navy Ensign Harry Warnke may soon be going home.

A mission to recover the missing World War II fighter pilot is winding up, and team members with the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command have found what is believed to be Warnke's remains in the crumpled wreckage of the F6F-3 Hellcat that crashed at a steep angle on June 15, 1944.

"I can say we (found) significant human remains in relatively poor condition," said James Pokines, a forensic anthropologist with the recovery mission.

Pokines had speculated last month when the ridge-side excavation was under way in the Ko'olau Range near the H-3 tunnel that Warnke might be found in the wreckage.

"We found plenty of pilot-related things," including a life vest, parachute parts, a survival kit and some personal effects, Pokines said.

Although a biological profile matchup and possibly a mitochondrial DNA analysis still have to be completed, a process that could take several months, Warnke's 86-year-old sister in Arizona, Myrtle Tice, has been told of the recovery.

"I'm just sorta waiting, is all," she said yesterday. "But I think that's a wonderful thing that they can find those (service members) after all those years."

Her parents died thinking their only son had crashed at sea. The Arizona resident still would like to bury her brother by their graves in Westville, Ind. With advancing age, Tice had worried she might not see that day.

"It's a relief (for me), but I think my mother and father would be grateful to have him back," she said.

A failed Navy recovery effort in 1944, lack of attention to the case for many years, and prodding by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., at Tice's request meant that it took six decades to finally excavate the crash site on an upper Halawa Valley hillside.

There were environmental and cultural concerns over the recovery site, but since July 21, a dozen civilian and military members with the Hawai'i-based Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command had been on-site, digging out the partially buried aircraft.

High winds, constant rain, cloud cover and lots of mud made for an often gut-churning helicopter ride to the crash site and weather-shortened work days in the ravine bisecting a ridge where the plane came to rest.

Eight-hundred rounds of 50-caliber ammunition were pulled out of the right wing, which jutted out of the jungle hillside.



Harry Warnke



Pokines said the initial crash did not drive the aircraft too deeply into the earth, but a subsequent landslide buried the cockpit.

"It took a while for it to sink in with the team — that, no, we won't have to go up there again tomorrow," Pokines said yesterday.

Hawai'i National Guard Chinook helicopters sling-loaded 57 tar loads of mud — about 80 to 90 tons altogether — off the hillside, Pokines said.

Because of the difficulty of working at the site, and with the desire to keep the environmental impact to a minimum, JPAC hauled the dirt to East Range at Schofield Barracks, let it dry, and sifted it with screens.

Native vegetation is being replanted on the hillside where the recovery took place.

Although complete skeletons sometimes are recovered by JPAC, that's often not the case with the violence of aircraft crashes. Soil acidity hastens decomposition, and only bone fragments are recovered in some cases.

The excavation was completed on Sept. 10, and the sifting is almost done at East Range.

"I suspect they will be done within a few days," Pokines said.

On June 15, 1944, the 23-year-old Warnke, a Navy reservist, took off from Barbers Point Naval Air Station with seven other planes to practice dive-bombing at Kapoho Point, near what is now the Marine Corps base at Kane'ohe Bay.

When Warnke didn't return, it was presumed that he crashed. Two days later, his unit identified the site. A June 19, 1944, U.S. Pacific Fleet report said a "piece of left leg was buried at scene of crash."

For reasons that remain unclear, his command reported him missing at sea.

"It's a big mystery in between as to what actually happened," Pokines had said during the recovery mission. "His squadron apparently shipped out that week and something happened and he apparently wasn't recovered."

In the early 1990s, an aircraft salvager and historian found the crash site, revealing to Tice that her brother hadn't crashed at sea as her parents were told.

In 1999, the predecessor unit to JPAC spotted remnants of Warnke's aircraft in an aerial search. JPAC has 18 recovery teams whose personnel travel around the world to recover missing service members.

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