

EPILOG

Now that this true story has played out its final chapter, I think about how easily it might have been for me to have no role in it at all. It most likely would have come to the same conclusion of a soldier, son, cousin, loved-one recovered, identified and returned home after being MIA for eighty-two years.

I did not know this man. He died three years before I was born. I only knew of him as a name on graduation notice in a drawer, a person whose name my mom told me to forget and the coldness from my dad at even the hint of its mention, reinforced. But in life, the strength of that denial became the root of the desire to know. How did this man have such an indelible impact on my parents?

Surprisingly, finding that answer had an indelible impact on me! Certainly, what led up to the final chapter was extraordinary. It is the stuff of movies – but this was no movie. It was someone's real story seeing the light of day and being recorded for posterity. It allowed me to appreciate my parent's pain and know them better than I ever did while they were alive. It allowed me to forgive, but it also brought me regret not having known the story, as I truly believe I could have been a better son if I did.

What I did not expect, however, is how deeply the final chapter is etched in my soul. So much so, I cannot find the words to describe it.

Thus, as I finished writing the last chapter of this story, I wondered. Am I just an overly emotional old man or have others had similar experiences and reactions. That led me to an article written by a group called 'Project Recover' (formerly called The BentProp Project).

They are a nonprofit organization founded by Dr. Pat Scannon in the 1990's. Following almost 20 years of work executing scientifically based research and search missions with a small group of like-minded friends, Dr. Scannon met scientists from the University of Delaware and Scripps Institute of Oceanography in 2012 while on a mission in Palau. A collaboration was born that used the universities' underwater search technology to greatly advance the efforts of underwater site searches.



This partnership was formalized in 2016.

In 2018, The BentProp Project nonprofit changed its name to Project Recover to also reflect the name of the partnership. The Project Recover nonprofit, the University of Delaware College of Earth Ocean and Environment team, and the Scripps Institute of Oceanography teams are each an official partner of DPAA, and each conduct missions in support of the Project Recover mission to find and bring home America's MIAs.



In 2020, Lauren Trecosta wrote an article entitled "Project Recover: Bringing Our MIAs Home; Finding MIA's: The Impact on the MIA Families." I found the article to be a good expression of my own feelings, so I share it here –

Finding MIAs represents a new beginning for their families. Missing in Action (MIA) service members whose remains or aircraft are found 75 years after they are reported missing bring families and communities together. Emotions are stirred. People identify with love, hope, gratitude, and

are emboldened to step forward. Family bonds are strengthened. Community stands together with a common purpose. A voice is given to the long lost. The bereaved are comforted by knowing. The next generation understands their past and teaches their young. People are motivated to stand for something bigger than themselves.

When a family's MIA is found, the long-dead breathe vitality into the present, put a healing salve on wounds of the past, and change the trajectory of the future. The young service members who died fighting in World War II for peace, justice, and freedom, return as a subtle reminder and ethereal motivation to gather in love, gratitude, and hope.

Finding WWII MIA Brings Life to Family Now

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- *Dennis Kelvie is the nephew of Lt. William Q. Punnell. Dennis is 75 years old, a piano tuner by trade and soft-spoken by nature. He was exuberant when he explained to Pat Scannon, Project Recover Founder, what it meant to have Project Recover locate his uncle after 73 years.*

"When I was growing up, my uncle was my hero. A superman. At the same time, he seemed unreal. Like he never really existed. For the first time in my life, I know he is real, was real, did exist."

- *Jim Gray, the great-nephew of ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk, shared the sentiment. The generations that followed Bud knew him as a photo on a mantle; a larger than life war hero with no accompanying life stories. "It's like dusting off a book, opening it up, and learning all this stuff. Now, this mythical person is real. It's like going back in time without going back in time."*

"I was literally sobbing when I got the news. When you think about it, someone you were named after for almost 70 years and then to have them come to life. It was incredible."

- *Richard Kozak, the nephew of ARM3c Walter E. Mintus, said, "It was such a surprise, it almost took my breath away. We are so very happy that he was found especially while our generation is still alive to celebrate."*

New Beginning for MIA Families

It is typical to call the experience of finding a WWII MIA or their aircraft a 'closure.' That tells only part of the story. Most families agree the impact of finding their family's MIA marks a new beginning for their family. It is far more of an awakening than a closure.

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- *Tommy Doyle, son of SSgt Jimmie Doyle, said the experience of finding his Dad's downed B-24, then scuba diving on it in Palau, and finally bringing him home for burial beside his beloved wife in 2009 was an awakening for him.*

"People talk about closure. I have a hard time with that, it was more like an awakening, not a closure. It opened up more than it closed."

The odds of your family's World War II MIA being found are remarkably small. There are 72,000 World War II MIA service members still unaccounted for nearly a century after the war ended. Of those, approximately 35,000, nearly half, are considered recoverable. Still, as Dennis Kelvie said, "The ocean is a big place." When your family's MIA is located, it marks a miraculous beginning.

MIA Family's Burden Of Not Knowing

To understand what it means to an MIA family to find their family's MIA or even learn the location of his war-time grave, you must first understand what it meant to not know.

- *For Martha Haake, it meant not knowing what happened to her older brother, Ens. Donald Baxter. Ten years older than she, Martha looked up to him as the father figure.*
- *For Tommy Doyle, it meant not knowing whether his father, SSgt Jimmie Doyle, was a war hero or, as rumors claimed, survived the war and started a new family elsewhere.*
- *For Frank Waters, Jr., it meant spending his entire retirement trying to find out what happened to his twin brother, LTJG Francis M. Waters. Frank Waters, Jr., woke up screaming in a WWII hospital bed from a nightmare about his twin crashing on the day he died.*
- *For the family of 2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr., it meant a generational pain that had been sealed shut. The topic was too painful to broach, too painful to heal.*
- *For Sister Mary Ann Rybarczyk, O.P., sister to ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk, who was 14 years old when the telegram arrived, it meant a part of her was frozen in time.*
- *For Joan Stough, sister to AOM2c Ora H. Sharninghouse, Jr., it meant a lifetime of waiting to bury her brother.*
- *For Arnold Schumacher, brother of 2nd Lt. Arthur Schumacher, and his family, it meant relentlessly pursuing every detail and resetting after every misdirection, until they finally got the lead that would reveal the evasive truth about what happened to Arthur.*

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- *For Ted Mikita, first cousin once removed to SSgt Herbert Farnam, Jr., it meant traveling to Palau multiple times to find answers and the rest of his cousin's aircraft.*

MIA Families Haunted By Uncertainty

For the MIA family without a body to bury and few words of explanation, there is an emptiness where there was once life. There are no words to explain, no remains to bury, no gravestone to visit. There is no funeral to mark the passing; not even concrete evidence of a death. There is emptiness. The emptiness of not knowing haunts MIA families for generations after the service member is reported missing.

MIA Families Carry Generational Grief

Upon hearing their family's MIA or his aircraft is located, families go through a wave of emotions. First is shock and sadness. For people who never knew their family's MIA in person, the grief itself is a surprise. Diane Christie, niece of 2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr., said, "We didn't know what we'd lost until it was found."

For many during World War II, the pain of losing a loved one was cauterizing. Memories and anecdotes were locked inside broken hearts. After the initial loss and stoic to the end, grief broke through the surface in small, quiet, almost imperceptible gestures.

- *2nd Lt. Arthur Schumacher's mother wrote beneath her eldest son's last military address: "Never came back."*
- *SSgt. Walter Graves' mother carried her son's last military pay in her purse until the day she died.*
- *2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr.'s, father made sure his son had a gravestone even though he did not have remains to bury, and he visited the cemetery often.*

Mostly, though, the deafening silence spoke the loudest to the generations who followed.

- *The Kelly family could never play "I'll Be Home For Christmas" again.*
- *The Rybarczyk family watched a single black and white photo of ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk sit on the mantle for decades; a family war hero without a narrative to bring him to life.*

Closure For Past Generations

When a family's MIA is located, relatives feel a connection to him and to those who lived through the loss. They remember the pain of their parents' generation. The relatives in the middle, too young to really know the MIA and old enough to have grandchildren of their own, feel great satisfaction. They know they are helping to heal a wound their parents could not. In their hearts, they feel they are finding peace for their parents' generation and for the generations that follow.

Sandy Althaus, whose son, Scott, led the Kelly Family Research team, said, "We could never have done this (search for WWII B-24 named 'Heaven Can Wait') while Toby's (2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr.) generation was alive because they couldn't have handled the pain."



- *Jo Schumacher went to Palau with Project Recover for her father who spent years searching for answers about 2nd Lt. Arthur Schumacher. She found peace searching for MIAs with Project Recover on the land where her uncle last lived.*
- *Don Haake, Jane Haake-Russell, and Jane's daughter, Sarah, traveled to Palau and touched the unique Bureau Number of the wrecked TBM Avenger of their uncle, ENS Donald E. Baxter. They did so, in part, to search for answers and to give some relief to their mother who continues to grieve for the loss of her older brother.*
- *Thirteen years after his father died without getting the closure he so desperately sought, Frank Waters, III, typed his uncle's name, LTJG Francis M. Waters, in the Google search bar. Results popped up immediately. He learned Project Recover had found his uncle's TBM Avenger eight years prior.*

Certainty Brings Relief, Pride, Gratitude

With the certainty of knowing comes relief, pride, and gratitude. For families fortunate to learn their family's MIA died quickly, there is peace. As they learn more, all families experience a surge of pride and awareness knowing their uncle, father, and cousin died a hero fighting for a free country and just world until the end.

Finding MIAs Teaches Younger Generations

Searching for and finding a family's MIA inspires family members to reach across the miles and reconnect with living family members who they haven't seen in decades. It also provides a vehicle for relatives to bond across generations, the young with elders.

- *"The younger generation has been included in everything we do. They now see the value their parents and grandparents put forth in life. It has been a very humbling, pensive, thoughtful time for these young children to realize the importance of family, the history of our family, our bond of family, and that we are family forever." (~Sandy Althaus, cousin to 2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr.)*
- *When ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk was buried in Michigan, Jim Gray, 42, saw his great aunt in a new light. Sister Mary Ann Rybarczyk O.P., Bud's only surviving sibling, kept staring at the casket. She was incredulous that her brother had finally*

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come home. As Jim watched her, he saw her in a new light. It was as though it was 1944, and she was a 14-year-old who just lost her brother.

"It wiped away the differences between our generations. I understood I was just sitting there with another human being who experiences the same heartache and emotions we all do."

Kids Connect With History

- *The young connect with their family's past and learn about history in the process. Cindy Gray, Jim's mother and niece of ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk said the experience introduced herself and her family to Uncle Bud.*

"The kids have a new awareness, they ask more questions. The whole experience has been quite a history lesson."

- *Multiple generations fill the church at MIAs' burials. Richard Kozak, the nephew of ARM3c Walter E. Mintus, watched the young people with surprise.*

"I was amazed at younger people, the nieces and nephews. They respected him as a hero. They understood we have what we have today because of people like him who fought and died. Kids eight or ten years old would go up and stand up by the casket. It was like they lost a friend." (~Richard Kozak, nephew of ARM3c Walter E. Mintus.)

Community Responds to MIA Finds

MIA families are overwhelmed with the number of people who step forward to pay respects. In a somber, but celebratory occasion, airports give a water cannon salute while the Honor Guard formally receives the MIA home. Police escort the MIA from the airport, sometimes hours, to the county line. Often the neighboring county police will spontaneously pick up the escort. Streets are lined with people welcoming their family's MIA home. People of all ages are moved to tears.

Dignitaries come to the airport and the funeral. Reporters share the news of the MIAs return. Sometimes film crews are there.

- *Dennis Kelvie, nephew of Lt. William Q. Punnell, expected three or four people to join him, his wife, and son for his uncle's funeral. He said he couldn't believe it when he stepped inside and 50 heads swung in his direction. In a voice both enthusiastic and wondrous, he said, "My uncle was given a marching band, a 21 gun salute, and was carried to internment on a caisson with horses. One of the horses had an empty saddle."*
- *"The United States has made a sacred promise to its citizens that it will bring home with dignity all those who have served. " (~Scott Althaus cousin once removed to 2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr.)*

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When they do, her citizens celebrate. It is impossible to say how much the community support means to the family – and in turn how much the MIA means to the community. What is clear is that the returning MIA prompts families and communities to gather in love, gratitude, hope.

MIA Families New Appreciation For The Military

MIA families, through their experience with Project Recover, DPAA and their own MIA, have a greater awareness for those who serve and sacrifice in the military.

- *“One of the messages we are getting is that we never forget those who have sacrificed their lives to give us the freedom we have today.” (~Sandy Althaus, cousin to 2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr.*

Relatives of all ages have a new awareness of men and women in uniform that they didn’t have before. Holidays like Memorial Day and Veterans Day are not the same. By getting to know their family’s MIA, they understand more about the duty, dedication, and sacrifice of those who serve. They talk about it with their children.

- *“We have an awareness now of people who serve in the military. My wife and I talk about it with my teenagers. We talk about what they do for us now and what they have done for us in the past. It is humbling, sobering. ” (~Jim Gray, great-nephew of ARM2c Albert ‘Bud’ Rybarczyk.)*

Gratitude Inspires Action

When MIAs are located and brought home, their families are overwhelmed with gratitude to everyone who helped. Gratitude, itself, is inspirational, motivational. People break out of their normal routine, take bold action. With new awareness, they make new decisions that can change the trajectory of their lives.

Moved and emboldened, many people begin to step out of their comfort zone and share their stories. In doing so, they find their own way to contribute to the MIA project. They also discover a greater sense of community.

- *Jim Emmer, nephew of SSgt. John W. Emmer, said, “I have a greater sense of community now.”*
- *Adam Gray, great-nephew of ARM2c Albert ‘Bud’ Rybarczyk became passionately interested in history and Project Recover’s MIA project. He got his SCUBA certification, flew to Palau with his mother in April 2019, and dove 100’ to his uncle’s wrecked TBM Avenger. The self-described ‘homebody’ is now a member of the Project Recover team.*
- *Tommy Doyle, son of SSgt. Jimmie Doyle, is often invited to tell his story in front of a variety of audiences. “I’m no speaker, but the story tells itself.”*

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- *Jo Schumacher, niece of 2nd Lt. Arthur Schumacher, was invited to go to Palau. It was a stretch for her, but she felt strongly that she had to do it. The pull was so strong that when her husband unexpectedly passed away three weeks before their trip, Jo resolved to go for both of them. "I had to do it for Arthur and for all the military people. I told myself if BentProp (now Project Recover) is going to do it for complete strangers, I want to honor them and do it, too."*

MIA Find Changes Everyday Life

- *Cindy Gray, niece to ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk, has a new awareness of veterans and the issues they face. Vocal and informed, she is now an advocate of homeless veterans in her area. She is a resource for veterans and colleagues, alike.*

Jim Gray, great nephew of ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk, has a new view on life and his role as a supervisor at work.

"It has changed the way I view life and the way I work. My happiness comes from serving other people. My whole view of leadership has changed to servant leadership. I am a supervisor at work. Now I view it as an opportunity to serve those under me." (~Jim Gray, great nephew of ARM2c Albert 'Bud' Rybarczyk)

- *Sandy Althaus, cousin to 2nd Lt. Thomas V. Kelly, Jr., is the point person for the WWII B-24 Heaven Can Wait extended family. She is 79 years old and lives in a retirement community. "This has been a new sense of life to me. I am so energized by increasing the size of our family and seeing the impact of our little community. We hope it will be a positive influence on our world whoever hears this story."*
- *Major Casey Doyle, USMC, and Project Recover team member, shared that locating his grandfather's (SSgt. Jimmie Doyle) remains changed the narrative of his father's life. In 2009, Casey escorted his grandfather on the final leg of his journey home.*
- *Ted Mikita, a Delta Airlines Captain, traveled to Palau multiple times to locate the wreck of his cousin's downed B-24. He has conducted considerable research on the aircraft and its crew. He runs a Facebook Group for relatives of the 'Dixon crash' which he describes as a kind of 'non-blood related family' who search for answers together.*

Project Recover and DPAA are honored to bring recognition to MIAs and provide closure — and new beginnings — for their families and a grateful nation. Their work is their thank you for service and sacrifice.

God Bless them – every one.