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‘To What Remains’ Documentary Is a Moving Salute to Missing World War II Vets

In remote wreckage, Project Recover finds heroes who were lost but never forgotten

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The Republic of Palau is as beautiful as it is small. Located in the western Pacific Ocean, between the Philippines and Guam, it encompasses more than 300 islands with a collective land area of less than 200 square miles. Therein lie infinite nooks and crannies that are flush with tropical forests, pristine waters and prolific coral reefs.

It's stunning, but also sorrowful. Because if you look closely, beyond the lush lagoons and magical marine life, you can't help but notice the unmistakable wounds of war: abandoned concrete bunkers that are etched with moss and memories. Rusted artillery that's scattered on forest floors like litter on a freeway. Tarnished tanks that loom like grieving ghosts. And most haunting of all, the underwater wreckage of sunken planes and ships, whose imposing silence is so imposing, it's actually loud.

These tragic treasures have peppered Palau since World War II, when the archipelago was a military stronghold for the expanding Japanese empire. Pat Scannon, M.D., saw them for the first time in 1993. A biomedical researcher who practiced historical diving in his free time, he was part of a prestigious dive team that converged on Palau for the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Peleliu, one of the deadliest conflicts in the Pacific theater. In advance of the anniversary, the Palauan government wanted to find and photograph a missing Japanese trawler that sank in 1944 at the hands of a famous naval aviator: President George H.W. Bush.

After his dive team found the boat, Scannon made his own discovery. While diving with his wife off the coast of a tiny coral island, he encountered the severed wing of a sunken B-24 bomber. He wondered what had happened to the rest of the plane — and to its hapless crew.

"I knew there had to be more to it than this one wing. So when I got home I did some homework," Scannon says. "I went to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and to the Air Force Historical Research Agency in Montgomery, Alabama, and I realized that there were many planes missing in Palau from World War II. I decided then and there that I was going to find out what happened to them and to the crews that flew them."

And so was born Project Recover, a grassroots organization that is the subject of a new documentary, *To What Remains*, which chronicles Scannon's decades-long mission to find and recover the remains of American soldiers declared missing in action (MIA).

‘The smallest needle in the largest haystack’

The U.S. Department of Defense says more than 81,600 service members from modern American wars remain missing. Most of them — 72,354 — are from World War II. Filmed over a period of several years, beginning in 2014, *To What Remains* tells the emotional story of volunteers who are trying to bring them home. Among them are scientists, oceanographers, archaeologists, historians, researchers and military veterans whose efforts one MIA family described as "looking for the smallest needle in the largest haystack."

Which is to say, it's painstaking, meticulous work. It starts with in-depth analysis of military archives and action reports, through which researchers identify missing individuals, as well as large areas of land and water where U.S. service members were killed or captured. From there, Scannon and his team seek oral histories from eyewitnesses or their descendants, interviews that can yield valuable intelligence. Then comes the search phase, during which teams descend into jungles or oceans to survey and document crash sites, prisoner of war (POW) camps and other points of interest.

“When you can tell a Gold Star family that their loved one has been found, they have the same kind of grief reaction that you’d expect from a proximal death. But very rapidly it turns into a certain type of joy from finally knowing what happened. It’s remarkable.”

Pat Scannon, M.D. founder of Project Recover

"When I first started, my technical portfolio was a machete and a compass on land, and scuba gear underwater," says Scannon, who now partners with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography to bring high-tech tools to bear, including underwater autonomous robots that map dive sites using sonar and other cutting-edge sensors. "Just one underwater autonomous vehicle can survey about 4 square kilometers a day ... Using two or three of them over a 10-day period, we can cover an enormous area."

Even with the best technology, however, searches can take years or even decades.

"Anyone who's looking for a quick thrill need not apply. It takes a great deal of patience and perseverance," says Scannon, who so far has completed more than 60 missions in more than 20 countries and territories. Under his leadership, Project Recover has located more than 185 service members and 50 aircraft, and returned to U.S. soil the physical remains of 14 MIAs.

A family affair

Project Recover is actively searching for at least 3,000 more MIAs as part of ongoing missions. In *To What Remains*, director Chris Woods, producer Dan Friedkin and writer Mark Monroe fixate on one of them in particular: Lt. Roland Richard Houle, a Navy pilot who was shot down on July 27, 1944, during a mission to bomb Japanese storage facilities at Palau's Malakal Harbor. Houle's wingman that day was George H.W. Bush, whose military service helped spawn Project Recover nearly 30 years ago.

"When Ensign Bush sank the Japanese trawler that we went looking for in 1993 ... the airplane next to him was flown by his close friend, Lieutenant Houle ... Houle was shot down [two days] after they sank that Japanese trawler," says Scannon, who first made note of Houle in 1994 and has been searching for him ever since.

His presidential connection notwithstanding, Houle is typical of American MIAs. Not only because of how he died — after parachuting to safety, he was captured and likely killed by the Japanese — but also because of how he is remembered: Although they never met, Houle's grandnephew, Doug Berglund, has flown a black POW/MIA flag in his front yard for more than 15 years in honor of his granduncle's sacrifice.

Scannon notes: "When I first started talking to families, my initial thoughts were, 'It's been 70 years. Surely there won't be much emotion left ... Life goes on.' In reality, I've never been in the home of an MIA family where there wasn't some acknowledgment of the missing individual, some preservation of their memory. These families never forget."

MIA detective work can be as adventurous as it is emotional. But it's not adrenaline that fuels Project Recover. It's families' elephantine memory — even among the youngest generations, who thirst for ancestral answers despite decades of distance between themselves and the deceased.

"I will admit that when you go around a coral head or part tree branches and see a wreck, there is a certain feeling of success. But we know at that moment that this is the start of a journey home for an American who is no longer missing, and that's the reason we do this," Scannon says. "When you can tell a Gold Star family that their loved one has been found, they have the same kind of grief reaction that you'd expect from a proximal death. But very rapidly it turns into a certain type of joy from finally knowing what happened. It's remarkable."

For communities, too, remembrance can be a powerful tonic. And so *To What Remains* is simultaneously a tribute to Americans who died and a toast to the world that remains because of them.

"There's nothing political about what we do. There's absolute unity in celebrating lost Americans coming home," Scannon says. "And in these tumultuous times, that there are still things that can bring communities together, I think is an important message."