



Michael Claringbould

A childhood interest in WWII aircraft wrecks became a lifetime project.

“I was mad keen on planes as a kid. My father was posted to Papua New Guinea in 1963, so I did my primary school there under the old colonial system and our history lessons were very Eurocentric, all about Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. On a nearby hill was an aircraft wreck, and on weekends I would go into the bush with native guides and hunt out other crashed planes that had been lying there for

decades. I used to think, who gives a damn about Dunkirk when there was clearly a war here? What the hell happened? There were all sorts of wrecks – complete P-38s, B-17 bombers. I had no idea what I was looking at – I was only about ten – but I really wanted to know.

I worked out that most of them were American because of the markings, but that was it. I tried to find out more but there was nowhere

I could turn to. What I later discovered was the psychology to all this. The Americans wanted to forget about the war so their records stayed classified. The Japanese were the same. Everything you needed to work out who had died where was stuck in government archives; no-one was allowed anywhere near it.

When I finished school, I did a year of serious wreck-hunting in Lae. It was still virtually impossible >

to properly identify things, so I used to just catalogue what I found and where I found it and leave it at that. Then a couple of things happened. The first was that World War II aircraft started becoming collectable. The second was that I began finding human remains.

The first time that happened was in April 1976. It was an SBD-III, a Douglas Dauntless, in a thick jungle near Lae. We found parts of the lower torso, definitely human. The native guy with me wouldn't go near it. But if there were human remains here, this person was officially listed as Missing In Action. Relatives would not know what had happened to him. I started realising a mammoth air force had fought its way through these bloody skies, and left hundreds of wrecks – American, Australian, Japanese – which no-one but me seemed interested in. No-one had bothered coming back.

I went back to Australia and began delving into the history. After a while I had enough information to identify some from a distance. Most were from the US Fifth Air Force, which conducted thousands of missions over the area during World War II. People, largely Americans, started getting in touch from all over the world, some with information but many more with questions about fathers whose fates they had never known, husbands who had disappeared forever.

Where I could clear up mysteries, I did. I even started taking relatives to crash sites – I've seen a lot of emotional reactions and believe me, feelings still run very, very deep. Several years ago I took 19 Japanese people to a site in Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. Some of the women who came on that trip were in their eighties, and they wept and wailed for hours. It is hard to underestimate the significance of finally being able to say goodbye.

The stories I have heard are incredible. There is an intact Lockheed Lightning fighter plane in PNG's Ramu Valley and the guy who flew it is still alive and in his eighties. Escaping from that situation took him three weeks, and he had to kill two natives to do it. Many others didn't make it, dying where aircraft still lie.

Chasing after human remains is not my bag, though. I am more interested in the history of aerial warfare in the Pacific, and in finding all these aircraft before they get looted and sold for scrap. I do it all from a distance now – my days of jungle-bashing are over – but my knowledge is second to none. When anyone finds a wreck, they send me the details and in 99 per cent of cases I help. I get e-mails every day from veterans or relatives wanting to know what happened to certain aircraft. A recent case I helped resolve involved a 60-year-old man whose father disappeared in PNG in 1944. The son wanted me to confirm or deny if a certain wreck had contained his father. I urged the US military to do a DNA cross-check on some teeth they had found at the site and they had, indeed, come from the father. Mystery resolved after 56 years.

I am compiling a database of every aircraft which served in the theatre. It is a massive jigsaw that I will never finish. It's too big. I try and limit the amount of time I spend on it because I don't want it to take over. It is my passion, not my full-time job. What keeps me going is knowing that there are still 80,000 Americans alone missing worldwide from World War II. ♣