



May 6, 2019

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Yap Newest Addition to WWII Tours of Micronesia

Colonia, Yap. For more than ten years, the Yap Visitors Bureau has been working closely with Patrick Ranfranz, founder of the Missing Crew Project, and villages throughout Yap to conserve important sites that are associated with World War II. Yap's mainland and its neighboring islands were a strategic location during the final year of the war where daily air battles took place between the United States and Japan. As a result, the planes that were downed and the artillery equipment, caves and even foxholes that remained when the war ended were left to rust and be consumed by the forest and surrounding ocean.

Thanks to Ranfranz, twenty three of those sites have been cleared and preserved with informative signs installed that tell visitors to the island about the men who fought during those last months between 1944 and 1945 as well as the impact of the Japanese presence that had been in Yap for more than 30 years by then.

The memorials, considered among the best in the Pacific region, have caught the attention of California-based Valor Toursthat offers group tours to World War II sites around the world. In late March, Valor Tour guide Anderson Gilesarrived in Yap to begin preparing to accompany the first group that will visit Yap in 2020. Accompanying him were active duty military men and women from the U.S. Third Fleet, I Marine Expeditionary Force and Navy Expeditionary Combat Command. Among the visitors were operational planners who were also visiting Palau-Peleliu, Guam, Saipan and Tinianin commemorationof the 75th anniversary of the Allied campaign to liberate the Pacific islands and gain an understanding of the people and places throughout the region, explained MGySgt Demetrio Espinosa.

Their arrival coincided with a visit by Ranfranz, the visionary for the restoration of the sites who established the Missing Air Crew Project to search for his uncle, T/Sgt John R. McCullough,one of ten crew members on a B-24 Liberator that was shot down by a Japanese fighter on June 25, 1944. All of the plane's crew are still listed as Missing in Action.

Ranfranz's deep knowledge and passion for his work on Yap were on full display as he led the men and women on a tour of the sites,providing information about the wreckages and equipment, the men who flew the planes, and the Yapese who endured that difficult time.

Among the visitors was Col. James R. Hensien, Commanding Officer, Combat Logistics Regiment 17, 1st Marine Logistics Group, I Marine Expeditionary Force, who noted, "I first visited Yap in 1997 and,

honestly, I never expected to have the opportunity to return. That first visit was memorable, but it was basically just a five-day scuba diving trip. This visit was much more. The next time I come to Yap I plan to bring my wife and daughters along. Everyone should have the pleasure of experiencing Yap at least once.”

Don Evans, General Manager, Yap Visitors Bureau, said, “We are very fortunate to have the Valor Tour group visit Yap, especially at the same time as Patrick who gave them an introduction to the history of the war in this region as few others can. We are very excited that Valor Tours is adding Yap to their tours throughout Micronesia and look forward to welcoming many more visitors to experience the island and its history and culture.” Evans added, “We are also very pleased that Yap will be among the Pacific islands included in the events commemorating the war and the people who so valiantly fought to liberate the island and return this land to the Yapese.”

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PHOTO CAPTIONS:

- 1) Members of U.S. Third Fleet, I Marine Expeditionary Force and Navy Expeditionary CombatCommand offer a prayer at WWII memorial park in Colonia. Photo: Joyce McClure
- 2) Tom Tamangmow (left), Yap Visitors Bureau, and Anderson Giles, Valor Tours, at Gael Village Stone Money Bank. Photo: Anderson Giles