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EMBARGOED UNTIL June 28, 2015

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History Flight recovers dozens of Tarawa Marines from burial site lost in 1943

‘Cemetery 27’ remains include those of Medal of Honor recipient Alexander Bonnyman Jr.

BETIO ISLAND, TARAWA ATOLL, Republic of Kiribati — An archaeological team from Florida-based History Flight, Inc. has solved a 70-year-old mystery with the discovery in March of a long-lost burial trench and the recovery of at least three-dozen U.S. Marines killed in the battle of Tarawa, Nov. 20-23, 1943.

“History Flight is extremely pleased to announce the discovery and recovery of historic Cemetery 27 on Betio Island as part of its 10-year, multi-million-dollar effort to recover hundreds of Marines lost to history, their nation and their families in 1943,” says founder and director Mark Noah. “Our trans-disciplinary team of forensic anthropologists, geophysicists, historians, surveyors, anthropologists, forensic odontologists, unexploded ordnance specialists, medics and cadaver dog handlers excelled in difficult conditions to produce spectacular results.”

History Flight works in cooperation with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, the federal agency tasked with recovering the remains of missing U.S. service personnel.

“We are very grateful for the efforts of Mark Noah and History Flight for the recovery of these Marines lost during the Battle of Tarawa. We are working with History Flight and the Marine Corps to repatriate these remains to the United States, after which DPAA's laboratory will expeditiously confirm or complete the identities of the recovered Marines,” says Lt. Gen. Michael S. Linnington, director of DPAA. “This is a tremendous example of how private-public partnerships can contribute to our accounting efforts both now and in the future.”

The remains of at least 40 men killed in fighting on the north side of tiny Betio were recorded as having been buried at a site near the terminus of a Japanese-built pier. An American Graves Registration Service team returned to the island in June 1946 and exhumed some 500 Marines, but was unable to locate Cemetery 27. The men buried there were among hundreds officially declared “unrecoverable” by the Quartermaster General’s Office in 1949.

Among the Marines recovered and now positively identified are those of 1st Lt. Alexander Bonnyman Jr., one of four recipients of the Medal of Honor for actions at Tarawa, and the only one whose remains had been unaccounted for.

“The location of Cemetery 27 has been one of Tarawa’s most challenging historical puzzles. History Flight’s discovery and recovery of the site is a testament to the tenacity and professionalism with which it has searched for all the missing Tarawa Marines,” says Clay Bonnyman Evans of Niwot, Colorado, who was working with the team when his grandfather was recovered May 29. “Our family, including Lt. Bonnyman’s two surviving daughters — my mother and aunt — is deeply grateful to History Flight for accomplishing what nobody else could for more than seven decades.”

Bonnyman’s daughters have decided to have his remains interred in the family plot in Knoxville, Tennessee, next to his parents, two sisters and brother. The family is currently planning a public funeral service for sometime in the fall.

Few Americans were aware U.S. Marines were still buried on Betio between 1950 and the dawn of the 21st century. Noah learned of the “lost graves of Tarawa” while searching for a downed plane in the Betio lagoon in 2006. History Flight spent thousands of hours searching archives for clues before sending teams to the island for six weeks in 2008 to locate former cemetery sites and scan them with ground penetrating radar.

To date, History Flight has recovered a minimum of 120 individuals once declared “unrecoverable” from Betio’s sandy tombs. Among those recovered at Cemetery 27 by the recovery team are six sets of unknown and possibly unrecorded remains.

“It has been an honor and privilege to lead our recovery team and find these long missing U.S. servicemen,” says archaeologist Kristen N. Baker, History Flight Recovery Team leader. “These brave men made the ultimate sacrifice over 70 years ago, and they deserve the best possible repatriation that we can give them. I hope they that they will finally receive the heroes departure and welcome home that they truly deserve.”

The team will continue to work the Cemetery 27 site through the end of June in advance of a forensic review of recovered remains in July, including comparison with dental records and DNA of descendants of missing Tarawa Marines.

Family members of individuals still unaccounted for from the battle of Tarawa are encouraged to contact History Flight at www.historyflight.com or 1-888-743-3311.

“Although we have dental matches to known missing Tarawa Marines for more than half of the recovered individuals, we are seeking DNA reference samples from families of the Tarawa missing,” says Ed Huffine, board secretary for History Flight. “We plan to have all of these recovered heroes identified by the end of the summer.”

PHOTOS: Photos and outline information of the team’s work on Betio are available. Please contact Cathy Kornfield. Photos must be credited to Clay Bonnyman Evans/History Flight, Inc.

VIDEO: Short video clips of the team's work on Cemetery 27 is available for broadcast and online publication. Please contact Cathy Kornfield. Photos must be credited to Clay Bonnyman Evans/History Flight, Inc.

INTERVIEWS: To speak with Mark Noah or another member of the History Flight team, contact Cathy Kornfield.

Clay Bonnyman Evans, who took part in the recovery of his grandfather in May, is available for interviews through June 30, and after Aug. 1. You may contact him directly at claybonnyman@gmail.com or 720-771-5233.