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## After 50 Years, They're Going Home

By

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[The following is an edited version of a news feature which appeared in the July 28, 1995, edition of the *Tropic Times*, the authorized, unofficial weekly information publication of the U.S. Southern Command. The article reflects the unique activities of the U.S. Military Liaison Office in Brazil in support of the recovery of the remains of the crew members of a U.S. B-24H Liberator bomber which crashed in the Amazon jungle in 1944 during a ferry mission from Trinidad to Belem, Brazil.]

MACAPA, Brazil—Flying over the dense and still uncharted Amazon jungle, the pilot of the B-24 had asked for a weather report and was answered promptly by a near-by radio operator. But all the radio operator in Zandery, Brazil, heard in response to his weather report was static. No one ever heard again from the American crew of that B-24H, which crashed in the depths of the northern Amazon jungle on April 11, 1944, forever taking with them the answers of what happened during the ill-fated flight.

A native Brazilian found the crash site and reported it in 1944, but the dense jungle and difficulty in maintaining supply routes into the interior thwarted investigations. Shortly after the crash, local Indians reportedly killed five members of a six-man team which were searching the area.

Forty-six years after the initial discovery, in 1990, Brazilian officials again located the site, and a new investigation was initiated to identify precise grid coordinates to support a proposed retrieval of the crew remains. However, it wasn't until earlier this month [July 1995] that a team was able to dig deep into the Amazon jungle to recover the aircrew's remains, but they too had no answer to the mystery behind the fiery crash. A 12-member U.S. team from the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, based in Hawaii, and its Brazilian counterparts, excavated the remains of the 10-member crew which had been on a ferry mission between Trinidad and Belem, Brazil.

The Brazilian government returned the remains to the U.S. Honor Guard during a ceremony in Macapa, Brazil, on July 24, 1995, honoring the fallen fliers of World War II. Joao Alberto Rodriguez Capiberibe, Governor of Amapa territory, was pleased that his people could help the families in the United States learn what had happened to their lost loved ones. "I was glad to help and be able to do this for the relatives that are waiting for these remains," Capiberibe said.

The recovery team had to overcome the Amazon, said Col. James R. Bjork, USAF, the Chief of the U.S. Military Liaison Office (USMLO) in Brazil and U.S. coordinator for the recovery mission. The Brazilian contingent's participation in the mission was crucial to mission success.

"It was not so much the terrain in terms of mountains and things like that," Col. Bjork said. "The problem occurred because of the dense jungle and the fact that there was very little means to actually get into the site itself."

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The Amazon River was low because the rainy season was still a few weeks away, so the site could not be reached by boat. The team coordinator chose to go in by air, cutting a landing zone for Brazilian Army helicopters. UH-1 Hueys and French-made Squirrels. There were two major bases of resupply," Col. Bjork said. "Amapa, a World War II air base built by the U.S. as a dirigible base, was where the main supplies were delivered. Then there was a smaller gold miners' airstrip. Supplies were taken by helicopter to the landing zone. The Brazilians did a marvelous job of handling and planning everything."

The Brazilian support continued on the ground, Col. Bjork said. A 15-man team, including three Brazilian Jungle Battalion soldiers from Macapa, went into the crash site ahead of the U.S. team to prepare the site. "The Brazilian Air Force had gone in three days prior to the arrival of the main team from Hawaii, and they had built everything up to prepare for the team's arrival," he said. "The U.S. team members indicated that it was probably one of the best operations they had ever been to in the way the facilities were prepared to receive them."

The Brazilian's efforts not only made living conditions better in the remote jungle location; they also allowed the team to finish the excavation ahead of the projected July 27 closing date. "Around the end of July and early August, they get into the rainy season, and there was some concern that the project might extend into that time-frame," Col. Bjork said. "But, by the Brazilians going in early and building the camp and having everything virtually completely ready, it was just a matter of the team arriving, landing on the ground, and, within a day, they were out digging in the actual crash site."

Although the crash occurred 51 years ago, the excavation yielded many more remains and personal effects than were expected. Bone fragments were preserved because the plane burned at a high temperature during the crash, said Bill Grant, a U.S. government anthropologist. At the crash crater, 99 percent of the bone was found in the crater with a little on the side," Grant said.

Because the area is remote, the crash site had not been scavenged as was the case in many of the crash sites the U.S. team had previously investigated in Vietnam and Laos. Because the Brazilian crash site was essentially undisturbed by man, several of the crew member's personal effects were still at the site, Grant said. In addition to bone fragments, the team unearthed parachutes, pieces of leather jackets, pistols, ammunition clips, and 28 identification tags naming the 10 members of the crew, Grant said.

The remains and personal effects collected were sent to the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii for analysis, Grant said. Anthropologists there will identify as many remains as possible, separate them according to the individual service members, then return the remains to the families. Any remains that are not linked to one person will be buried together as group remains with a marker listing each crew member at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

The Brazilians were eager to help the U.S. recover the lost service member remains. Melvyn Levitsky, the U.S. Ambassador to Brazil, characterized the mission to recover the remains as "a real partnership" between the two countries. "This is going to be a real positive boost for our relationship," he said. "The Governor of Amapa is trying to increase attention to the state here, and in a way this has put them on the map, because there have been a lot of articles in the press," Levitsky said. "This is, after all, a dramatic story. After 50 years, finding the mortal remains of 10 of our service men that were in World War II is quite a dramatic thing." Levitsky said. "We will never give up in trying to find the remains of people that have been lost . . . so that they can be given a proper burial."

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Levitsky said he was extremely pleased with the professionalism of the U.S. service members who participated in the mission. "It is very encouraging to see young people come to a remote area of the world on a mission like this and be so enthusiastic about accomplishing their purpose," he said. "I think that signifies not only what our country is all about, but what the U.S. military is all about."

"This was an act of brotherhood and of humanity by the American people," said Capiberibe, the Amapa governor.