Memorial Day, every day

Using computers, old records and determination, Fall River native Ted Darcy identifies unknown World War II dead and gets their remains properly buried.

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FALL RIVER -- The F6F-3 Hellcat plummeted into the wilds of Oahu, Hawaii, on June 15, 1944, strafing a hillside with metal debris. Accident reports were filled out, World War II ended, and the lush landscape eventually swallowed the fighter plane.

Nearly 50 years later, Fall River native Ted Darcy went hunting for it. On his sixth trip into the remote Koolau Range, the aircraft salvager found the one-man cockpit. It was crushed and upside down.

Then he saw something he wasn't expecting to see: human bones. Initially, the pilot, Navy Ensign Harry Warnke, had been reported missing after his plane crashed during dive training.

Darcy immediately notified military officials of his find.

"You guys get the pilot out and I'll get the airplane," he offered. The response he got was, "Yep, we'll look into it."

Sensing indifference, Darcy delved into declassified records. He learned that soon after the crash, the Navy had, in fact, recovered some of Warnke's remains and buried them at the crash site. So Darcy took it upon himself to track down Warnke's family and tell them he had discovered a few of these bones.

"Really? We were always told he was missing," said a sister, eager for the remains to be buried in their hometown in Indiana.

"This is 1991," Darcy recalls. "Ensign Warnke is still on the side of the hill."

Ever since this experience, Darcy, a 55-year-old Vietnam veteran, has devoted himself to identifying unknown World War II dead and getting their remains properly buried. He shakes his head and chuckles at the government snafus that shroud MIA cases in mystery for decades and the bureaucratic hurdles that meet his attempts to solve them.

But as another Memorial Day arrives, he remains serious about the credo of his fellow Marines: "Never leave your dead behind."

"They gave their lives fighting for this country, and it's the least the government can do -- bring them home," he says. Military officials "have no right to deny families their dead."

THE EPICENTER of Darcy's bureaucracy-quaking campaign is a small office in the triple-decker where he grew up in Fall River. The room is a veritable memorial to those who made the ultimate sacrifice in World War II. But it's a monument not cast in bronze or stone, but made of paper and microchips.

Filing cabinets and tabletops overflow with case folders, and a computer and CDs contain the fruits of two decades of research: an exhaustive list of Americans who died or were lost in the war.

Type in a name, hit search, and the screen will instantly reveal where the service member was lost or killed and where he was buried. Darcy can also select a specific battle to get a list of its casualties or enter a particular cemetery to find out who's buried there.

He and a Pearl Harbor veteran he met while in Hawaii, Raymond Emory, have long been collecting and sorting this information.

"There's no set of centralized records for World War II," says Darcy. "This is the only database in the world that can do that. It took 17 years."

How many names are on the list?

"72,598 as of yesterday morning," he says one recent day, "2,327 from Rhode Island. Of those, 436 are missing."

So how does Darcy use this information?

Take the case of Seaman 1st Class Wilson Rice, of West Warwick. Military records indicate he was killed when a Japanese fighter crashed into his ship, the Curtiss, during the Pearl Harbor attack. But his remains were never identified.

Research by Darcy and Emory indicated that 2 of the 21 killed aboard the ship were not accounted for and that their remains, along with those of many other unidentified casualties, were eventually buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, in Honolulu, also known as the Punchbowl.

In 1999, their research led the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory to exhume remains from one of the two gravesites at the cemetery. It was the first time a World War II veteran's remains had been exhumed for identification purposes. And dental records proved it was Seaman Apprentice Thomas Embree.

"That opened the Pandora's Box," says Darcy, because it exposed how readily these cases could be solved.

Darcy is convinced the other grave is Rice's. But there's a hitch. He opens a folder containing records for the unknown sailor. One page shows a picture highlighting the parts of the body that were recovered and buried. It's only some ribs and a pelvis.

"See the problem?" Darcy says. "With that few remains, you may or may not be able to get DNA."

Another local case began when a research assignment brought him to Island Cemetery in Newport. There Darcy noticed an unmarked grave in a row of veterans. When he asked about it, he was told it was an unknown sailor.

Darcy got a local veterans group to place a marker on the site. But he pressed on, unraveling its mystery. He eventually

learned it was a sailor who perished when a whaleboat, on the way from Newport to the Navy piers in Middletown, capsized in a gale in December 1942. Three sailors were never accounted for, and one badly decomposed body, found months later, was never identified.

Darcy obtained records for the three sailors. Knowing that the Defense Department now uses DNA to identify unknown remains, he began trying to reach the sailors' families. It took eight years, but by last fall he had helped arrange for a member of each family to give DNA samples. Now Darcy and the three families are anxiously waiting for the remains to be exhumed so DNA samples can be obtained. The wait, says Darcy, is long and unnecessary. One relative has contacted a congressman to talk to military officials.

"I have a hard time believing these people care," he says.

MILITARY SERVICE runs deep in Darcy's Irish Catholic family.

He's the son of a Navy sailor who served in World War II and grandson of a career Navy man. After graduating from Durfee High School in 1968, Darcy decided it was his turn. He enlisted in the Marine Corps and was sent to Vietnam in 1970. He worked at a base maintaining aircraft.

Darcy got so good at it that he once was asked by his commanders to assemble two World War II fighters, a Hellcat and a Corsair, that a museum wanted to fly.

"They handed me a book and said, 'You can do it,' " he recalls, pointing to a model of one of the planes on a shelf. "It wasn't hard. It took about four years."

Soon Darcy was hunting for wrecked planes to salvage on his own and seeing a future career in it. But by the time he put in his 30 years with the Marines, he had stumbled upon Ensign Harry Warnke and his interests had broadened.

His database work with Emory matured, encompassing plane wrecks, shipwrecks and World War II veterans missing or killed. He found that people were willing to pay for his records and research skills, including governments and individuals working on family genealogies.

This year, for example, Darcy is working to verify the Fall River veterans who were killed or reported missing in World War II. The names will be included on a city memorial to be unveiled in the fall.

So on a recent day, Darcy drives to Notre Dame Cemetery and begins strolling among the headstones. Thin with short salt-and-pepper hair, he wears his usual attire -- sweatpants, a T-shirt, white basketball sneakers and a windbreaker to keep off the chill.

He carries a list of service members his records indicate are buried here, as well as the list provided by the city. He's looking for graves of veterans not on either list and information on markers that might not be in the records.

"I'm looking four rows at a time," he says, occasionally kicking at grass covering bronze markers to read the inscriptions.

He stops at a marker for Navy Seaman Paul R. Pelletier, who died Feb. 18, 1942, at 22.

"What happened to you?" he asks, turning to his list. Then he answers his own question. "He's not buried here," he

says. "He's lost at sea off of Newfoundland, Canada. [The marker] is supposed to say memorial on it."

After an hour, Darcy has covered just one grid in the expanse of greenery and headstones.

"This cemetery will take six days," he says. But, he adds, "I never get tired of it. It's fascinating."

DARCY SAYS the money he earns from his research helps pay for his investigations into unknowns. The work can be expensive. There are the costs of his weeklong forays to the National Archives, in Maryland, for records that help him track the movement of service members' remains from country to country, cemetery to cemetery.

Also, the government charges $28 for the records of each deceased service member.

"It's almost like the government is holding the records for ransom," he says.

The price makes it too costly to just make blanket requests for hundreds or thousands of them. Instead, Darcy focuses on particular battles such as Tarawa, the Pacific islet where 3,000 Marines died uprooting Japanese troops in 1943.

"The bodies shifted seven times. This is the ultimate shell game," he says, describing photographs he's studied of where the remains have been buried. "I've been working that for nine years. . . . We hope to bring home 343 in one shot."

By that, Darcy means getting the 240 bodies on the island identified and brought home as well as identifying the 103 unknowns at the Punchbowl cemetery that came from Tarawa.

Darcy says he probably won't attend any Memorial Day services tomorrow, not that there's anything wrong with them. It's just that he'd rather spend his time on his own memorial efforts. He had expected that he would just be getting back this weekend from a trip to the National Archives with reams of information to enter into his databases.

"I usually come back with six months of work," he says.

But he delayed the trip. One reason is because of inquiries he received from a U.S. senator from the West Coast who is familiar with his work and is interested in bringing unknowns from her state back home.

Darcy says his efforts could help build political pressure to resolve MIA cases.

"I think this is the most important thing I've ever done in my life," he says. "The government could have done so much better. But they've ignored the problem for 60 years."

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