

MEMORANDUM FOR CORRESPONDENTS

No. 179-M
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Remains of eight U.S. Navy sailors who were missing in action from World War II have been identified and are being returned to their families for burial in the United States.

They are identified as Lt. Maurice S. Smith, Lodi, Calif.; Ensign Edward W. Riepl, Herndon, Kan.; Petty Officer 1st Class Clifford M. Pindell, Washington, D.C.; Petty Officer 1st Class James W. Pearson, Alliance, Neb.; Petty Officer 2nd Class William R. Pipes, Chickasha, Okla.; Petty Officer 2nd Class Merlin J. Rich, Wheeler Township, Mich.; Petty Officer 1st Class William H. Osborne, Martinsville, Va.; and Petty Officer 2nd Class Vernon H. Stolz, Saginaw, Mich.

On Aug. 6, 1942, these crewmen were flying a routine patrol mission whose search sector took them over the island of Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides. The weather was reported as adverse, and the aircraft never returned to its home base in New Caledonia. Searches failed to uncover any traces of the PBV-5 Catalina aircraft or crew.

In 1994, the U.S. Embassy in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, notified the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory Hawaii that relic hunters had discovered the crash site of an American aircraft on Espiritu Santo (now part of the Republic of Vanuatu.) A CILHI recovery team excavated the site in March and April 1994 and recovered human remains, personal effects, and crew-related items among fragments of the aircraft wreckage.

Over the next five years, CILHI specialists applied the latest forensic identification tools to the effort of identifying these crewmen. Among the tools used was that of mitochondrial DNA, in which a blood sample from the maternal blood line is compared to the DNA from a bone fragment of the deceased serviceman. Mitochondrial DNA tests are conducted by the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in Rockville, Md.

More than 78,000 Americans remain unaccounted-for from World War II.