



COURTESY OF HISTORY FLIGHT

Scientific recovery expert Johan Rodriguez, left, and archaeologist Archie Tiauzon, both with History Flight, examine an excavation on Red Beach 2 during recovery operations on Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll in 2020.

Until They All Come Home

History Flight is Dedicated to Locating, Excavating Remains of Missing Marines

By Nancy S. Lichtman

In 2014, Wendell Perkins and five other veterans of the Battle of Tarawa arrived on Betio for the first time since they had fought the Japanese there in 1943. This time, however, they weren't being shot at by a firmly entrenched enemy intent on their defeat. The Marines were there with Mark Noah, founder and president of History Flight, to see firsthand the work Noah's team was doing to locate and recover the remains of their fellow Marines who died during the battle and were still buried on the tiny island in the Pacific.

Over the years, Perkins had often thought of revisiting the place where he



PFC Wendell Perkins, left, and PFC Harold Hayden

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first experienced the chaos of combat, but this trip was more than just a walk down memory lane for him. Perkins wanted to see the History Flight excavation site because for him, it was personal. The bones being unearthed there belonged to the men who had fought fiercely alongside Perkins. They were his fellow Marines—they were his friends.

Wendell Perkins was 19 when he landed on the north side of Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, on the evening of Nov. 21, 1943. It was D+1, the second day of a bloody battle on a tiny coral atoll in the South Pacific. Perkins was a machine gunner with Company A, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division and this

Almost half of the KIAs buried in the aftermath of the battle, however, were not recovered after the war.

It has taken more than 75 years, but through the work and dedication of History Flight, a nonprofit organization, those men are finally being brought home to their families for proper burial.



USMC



LCDR CHARLES KERLEE, USNR

Cemetery 13 (left) is one of the many cemeteries created after the battle ended. As the war in the Pacific raged on, some of the cemeteries on Betio were relocated to accommodate the construction of base infrastructure. Unfortunately, the wartime relocation of the cemeteries later resulted in confusion about where the men were buried. The unknown cross (right) is one of many marking the graves of servicemen who died during the battle on the island and whose identities were lost.

was his first taste of war. When darkness fell, he dug in next to a log and slept intermittently, waiting for the fight that was sure to come the next morning. When dawn broke, Perkins realized that the log he had been using for cover was actually the body of a dead Japanese soldier.

The fighting on Betio was fierce, but Perkins survived. Many of the men in his squad, including his two good friends, Private First Class Harold W. Hayden and PFC Mervin D. “Monk” Galland, were not so lucky. Perkins, now 95, can’t forget the moment he saw his friend, Harold, die. The two Marines were setting up a machine gun when an enemy round hit Hayden in the head, ending his life. “We were stopping and setting up our defenses, and Harold Hayden was bringing a box of ammunition up to me; he got alongside of me and set the box down and just about that time he got hit,” said Perkins.

The Battle of Tarawa was a victory for the United States, but a costly one; more than 1,000 Marines and Sailors were killed and more than 2,100 were wounded.

The Marines and Sailors who were killed during the battle, including Perkins’ friends Harold Hayden and Monk Galland, were buried in makeshift cemeteries across the island. In 1946, the 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company of

the American Graves Registration Service disinterred all the U.S. casualties they could locate into one centralized location on Betio, the Lone Palm Cemetery, for later repatriation. Some of the men were able to be identified and were sent to their families; others were buried as “unknowns” at the National Memorial of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii. Almost half of the

KIAs buried in the aftermath of the battle, however, were not recovered after the war. It has taken more than 75 years, but through the work and dedication of History Flight, a nonprofit organization, those men are finally being brought home to their families for proper burial.

History Flight is the creation of Mark Noah, a full-time pilot for UPS who be-



SGT MELANYE MARTINEZ, USMC

Jordan Windish, left, and James Murphy, archaeologists with History Flight, excavate a site on Betio, July 15, 2019.

In the immediate aftermath of the battle, fallen Marines were buried in makeshift cemeteries all over the small island of Betio.



USMC

came compelled to locate the remains of missing servicemen through his passion for flying restored historical aircraft. Noah, who was named an Honorary Marine in 2015, initially formed History Flight in 2003 as an organization that would restore World War II-era aircraft and take them on flying tours, selling rides on the warbirds to fund the cost of their restoration and historic preservation. As he researched the vintage aircraft, Noah learned of the thousands of men whose remains were still missing in overseas graves, so he shifted the focus of his organization to locating and recovering U.S. military personnel previously deemed unrecoverable.

Combining historical and archival information with technologies such as ground penetrating radar surveys, magnetometry and forensic archaeology, History Flight currently has a 93 percent success rate in locating the remains they have searched for. To date, the History Flight team has recovered 332 full sets of U.S. remains from Europe and the Pacific.

“The project is very edifying,” said Noah. “Other than being a good citizen and a good family man, it’s the best thing that I’ve ever done in my life.”



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Sgt Fae V. Moore, assigned to E/2/8, 2ndMarDiv, was killed on the first day of the Battle of Tarawa, Nov. 20, 1943. He was recovered by History Flight in 2015.

During a 2015 excavation on Betio, Noah’s team located the remains of First Lieutenant Alexander Bonnyman Jr., who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during the Battle of Tarawa. Bonnyman’s grandson, Clay Bonnyman Evans, was on site when his grandfather’s grave was excavated, and in his book, “Bones of My Grandfather,” he describes how important it was to his family to have his grandfather buried in the family plot in Knoxville, Tenn., instead of in an unmarked grave in the South Pacific.

“As I watched an archaeologist expose my grandfather’s remains to sunlight for the first time in 71 years, it was the culmination of my family’s long, broken-hearted search to bring him home,” said Evans. “And burying him next to his family members brought our family together and gave immense solace to his two living daughters, now 86 and 79,” he added.

In 2018, retired Marine Sergeant Major Justin LeHew joined the History Flight team as the chief operating officer. Not long after he joined the organization, a positive identification was made of the recovered remains of Technical Sergeant Harry A. “Bud” Carlson. “To anybody

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USMC

To pay respects to their fallen brothers in arms, Marines fire a rifle volley during a memorial ceremony on Betio in January 1944.

else,” said LeHew, “that’s one of [many] Marines . . . who gave his life in wave one on Tarawa.” But for LeHew, a veteran of combat in Iraq, it was impossible to ignore the parallels between himself and TSgt Carlson, a Marine who was killed in battle nearly 50 years before LeHew stood on the yellow footprints at Parris Island. TSgt Carlson had served as the platoon sergeant of 3rd Platoon, “Alpha” Company, 2nd Amphibian Tractor Battalion. Sixty years later, when LeHew was in combat in 2003, he was the platoon sergeant for 3rd Plt, Alpha Co, 2nd Amphibian Bn, Task Force Tarawa. “[TSgt Carlson] personally did my job 75 years before. In the same unit, right down to the same platoon . . . there is a higher power that guides the hand of all of this,” said LeHew.

LeHew, who received the Navy Cross for his actions on March 23-24, 2003, during the Battle of Nasiriyah, Iraq, leads the day to day operations and management of archaeologists, explosive ordnance disposal technicians, medical personnel, team leaders, specialty scientists and volunteers whose mission is to locate and recover the missing remains of U.S. servicemembers, not just on Betio and in the Pacific, but worldwide. Like Noah, LeHew is driven by a sense of responsibility to



KATHY REESEY

MajGen James Lukeman, left, presents Mark Noah, the founder and head of History Flight, with the title of Honorary Marine during a ceremony at the National Museum of the Marine Corps on July 24, 2015. Noah said he was humbled by the honor.

the families of the young men whose remains are still missing. That sense of purpose is a constant among all of the History Flight team members—civilians and military veterans alike.

“There’s no other more honorable

mission than this mission right here,” said retired Marine Staff Sergeant Robert “Bobby” Perez II, an explosive ordnance disposal technician and History Flight team leader. “It is the greatest generation of American history right there,” said Perez, who added that it’s a privilege for him to “come out to one of our most famous [battlefields] and search for my brothers . . . they paved the way for me.”

“What it really comes down to,” said James Murphy, a scientific recovery expert with History Flight, is “having the right to understand and know the fate of your loved one . . . there’s never really any closure to it, but just knowing that they’re home . . . you can never underestimate the impact of that and so it’s a real honor to be part of it.”

“It’s a really different kind of archaeology,” said Jack Rossen, another scientific recovery expert who has been excavating the site on Betio. Rossen, who has a master’s degree and doctorate in anthropology, came to History Flight with more than 40 years of experience in archaeology. He spent more than 20 years in academia and also did field work all over the world. But Rossen said this mission is unlike any of his previous field assignments. “I’ve done archaeology—there’s a curiosity to it,



BILL DASHNER

Members of the DPAA conclude a repatriation ceremony on July 25, 2017, for 17 servicemembers located and recovered by History Flight on Betio.

there's a joyous curiosity to a lot of archaeology and this is not like that at all," Rossen said. "This is very sad and emotional and urgent archaeology."

Rossen grew up in a family that felt the full impact of World War II. His father was an Army medic in the European theater during the war, seeing action in the Battle of the Bulge, and he had a cousin who was wounded on Iwo Jima. Rossen also has relatives who survived the Nazi concentration camps as well as many who did not.

"I believe in the mission, I am happy that my skills can be put to good use," said Rossen who delayed his retirement in order to work with History Flight.

History Flight works very closely with the government's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) to ensure that the evidence unearthed is collected and maintained according to the highest standards. DPAA forensic scientists and anthropologists are the ones who analyze the remains in their laboratories in order to make positive identifications of those remains. "We are in constant contact, and if we have any questions or any kind of thing that emerges or arises, we are in

constant contact with them," said Murphy. "We make numerous trips, have meetings both online and in person at their offices ... or whenever that opportunity arises, and whenever they visit the island, we take those opportunities then to be sure that everything we are doing is parallel to what they are doing. And they've been very happy with the progress ... it's a very, very good relationship," he said.

Murphy and Rossen made one particularly impactful trip with their DPAA colleagues, traveling aboard a military transport aircraft to Hawaii with remains that they had just recovered. Both men were struck by how moving it was to witness the official transfer of remains to DPAA personnel. "Repatriation ceremonies are extremely powerful," said Murphy, adding that he was impressed by the care and dedication of the active-duty servicemembers who perform those honors.

"I thought that was one of the greatest honors I have ever received in my life to ride that plane then to witness the [repatriation] ceremony back at the airport as the Marines were being brought out in their flag-draped caskets," Rossen said. "It

was so emotional, and I was very moved and I'm not really an emotional guy in general," he added.

"As a scientific archaeologist, we're sort of taught we're not supposed to be emotional, we are supposed to be scientific and that's almost impossible to do all the time," said Rossen.

The other History Flight archaeologists express similar sentiments. Some days "it hits you pretty good," said Jordan Windish, an osteoarchaeologist. Windish recalled a dig on Betio about a year ago during which a hand that she recovered was holding a cross from a rosary. "The cross was still inside [his] palm," she said. "That kind of stuff that you see, personal effects like class rings or wedding rings ... or even a pair of glasses or dog tags, it's that kind of stuff that's real personal that hits you pretty hard," Windish added.

Windish studied osteoarchaeology and paleopathology in England. She did field work there where her area of emphasis was leprosy in medieval times and the bones she was excavating and examining were from people far removed from what we know in the modern era. For Windish, her work with History Flight hits a little closer

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to home—she had two grandparents who served in the Pacific during WW II. Her grandfather was in the Army and her step-grandfather was a Marine in the Pacific.

Her expertise in skeletal remains means that when a site is being excavated, Windish can tell quite a bit about the remains even before they are collected and sent to the DPAA laboratory. One of the things that is often immediately apparent is how young each Marine was when he died. “Looking at them osteologically, a lot of the guys ... their bones hadn’t even started to fuse,” Windish said. Another thing visible to her trained eyes is the evidence of the wound that caused the Marine’s death. “When you see the trauma ... how they died, that kind of gets me,” she said. “It doesn’t matter who it is, it was a person [and] you can see how they got killed.”

Windish said her mother has taken a keen interest in her work on Tarawa. “She thinks it’s absolutely amazing and I’ve taken her to two of the funerals that I went to,” said Windish, adding that meeting families who were burying the remains of their loved ones killed in battle more than 70 years ago showed her mother a more complete picture of the History Flight mission. “You can only go through and you can explain only so far what we see at



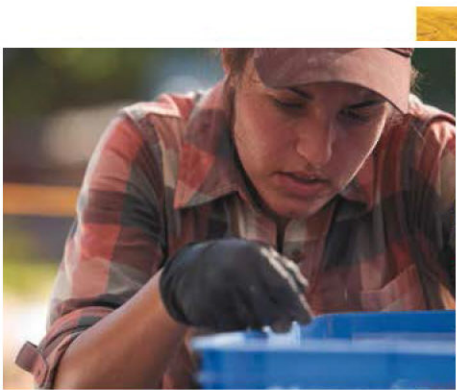
NANCY S. LICHTMAN

Retired Marine SgtMaj Justin LeHew, center, has been the History Flight chief operations officer since 2018. His passion for the mission is so contagious that his wife, Cynthia, right, a retired FMF corpsman, and their daughter, Aisley, an information technology professional, both left high-paying jobs in the private sector to be a part of the team.

work and what we go through every day.”

LeHew has made it a priority to have the History Flight team members represent the organization at as many of the funerals as possible because he believes that the archaeologists and the families all benefit from the experience. The families sometimes form a strong connection with History Flight team members because they represent a link to a loved one who has been missing for more than 75 years after sacrificing his life for our country. “Because you helped bring their grandfather home, and now they associate that with you,” said LeHew, who attends as many funerals as he can. He travels with a supply of steel pennies minted in 1943; it’s the calling card he leaves behind when he visits the grave of a Tarawa Marine.

“It all really comes home when I have a chance to go to a funeral of one of the guys we recovered and meet his family members,” said Jessica Gadis, another archaeologist with History Flight. She hadn’t expected family and community involvement and the gratitude shown to her by the extended families of the Marines who have been recovered caught Gadis off guard. “Coming to that funeral and seeing that this guy was [from] a family of eight and everyone remembered him



For archaeologists Jessica Gadis (inset) and Jack Rossen (right), these excavations are unlike other field work they have done during their careers. “Putting a face to a name is a huge part of our process ... we have a whole wall of ... photos to keep these guys in mind,” said Gadis. (Inset photo by Sgt Melanye Martinez, USMC)



SGT JACQUELINE CLIFFORD, USMC



COURTESY OF HISTORY FLIGHT

Although the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions have caused excavations to come to a temporary standstill, local teams have been able to continue their work (above) to restore sites to their original condition after the completion of excavations. Local teams are integral to the success of History Flight's mission on Betio, and during active excavations, they play a role in recovery efforts (below) sifting soil on site, under the supervision of scientific recovery experts.



COURTESY OF HISTORY FLIGHT

... the impact that one life had and how glad they are to see him home, it kind of becomes something that brings that family together across the entire country.”

Her efforts with History Flight are quite different from her previous work in medieval archaeology. “To find any way of having an impact and doing something

good for living individuals and not just [writing] a line in a report that no one is going to read,” Gadis said, makes all the difference for her.

Much to the frustration of the entire History Flight team, the organization's recovery operations were temporarily shut down in March due to the coronavirus

pandemic. “I got the last plane out,” said Rossen. “I almost got stuck there,” he added.

“I was very sad because I felt I have left work unfinished. I was very unhappy about leaving. I tried my best to leave everything in good shape. We made sure that we had blue tarps down and before we ... filled everything in, we left good markers so we can go back and find the exact spots again so everything was done carefully. But I've never, believe it or not, in 45 years, I've never begun an excavation and then filled it in without completing it. I've never done that,” Rossen said.

Perez, who lives on Betio year-round, has continued to lead the locals who are employed by History Flight in projects that have improved the island. “Every day we try to do something positive with the community,” Perez said, adding that not unlike that of the Marine Corps, the History Flight mentality is to leave places where they are working better than they found them.

Rossen and his colleagues will resume their work as soon as travel restrictions are lifted. In the meantime, research and planning continues for future recovery operations in other locations. According to Noah and LeHew, they are in the planning phase for completing recovery operations in the Philippines where it is estimated that 10,000 U.S. servicemembers were never recovered after dying in Japanese prisoner of war camps there.

The logistics behind organizing recovery efforts are complicated, time-consuming and expensive. History Flight operations are paid for by private donations and from contracts with DPAA. “The mission is so huge,” said Noah. “There's 79,000 missing from World War II; there's 8,000 missing from Korea; there's 1,600 missing from Vietnam and 214 missing from the Cold War ... the amount of funding that's available ... is not anywhere close to what's necessary and so I always tell people if you like the mission, and you want to support the mission, to donate because the project has been chronically underfunded ever since the beginning to today,” Noah said.

At the office for History Flight, located in Fredericksburg, Va., there's a wall covered with the photographs of the Marines whose remains were left behind on Tarawa after the war. The men from Wendell Perkins' machine-gun squad are

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The History Flight Tarawa field team gathers for a group photo after a repatriation ceremony in July 2019. The camaraderie among the group has been solidified as they search for missing men who gave their lives in battle. (Photo courtesy of History Flight)

included on the wall. And SgtMaj LeHew can tell you something about every one of these Marines as if they were the men he served with during his own 30 years in the Marine Corps. He and Perkins have developed a rapport; they even have similar enlistment stories. LeHew's mother didn't want him to become a Marine. Her brother was a Marine who served in the Pacific during WW II and she always said he came home a changed man. She didn't want that to happen to her son. As for Perkins, his father adamantly refused to give his permission for his son to join the Marine Corps when the war began. He had fought and been wounded at Belleau Wood and knew all too well what it meant to be a Marine in combat. In spite of the generation that separates LeHew and Perkins, when they talk to each other, they are just two Marines, reminiscing. "Instantly the age and everything goes out the window, and it's like you both went to boot camp together," said LeHew.

Perkins attended one of the funerals for a recovered Marine, who fought with him in 1943, but said that with the restrictions on large gatherings created by the coronavirus pandemic as well as the health risks for him, it's unlikely he will be able to see his friends Harold Hayden and Monk Galland laid to rest. Their



COURTESY OF HISTORY FLIGHT

Wendell Perkins was one of six veterans of the Battle of Tarawa who visited New Zealand and Betio in 2014 to see the work History Flight was doing to recover the remains of their fellow Marines who died during the battle. He is pictured here at the restored rail station at Camp Paekakariki, New Zealand.

remains were identified earlier this year, and funeral plans are pending.

For Mark Noah and his team at History Flight, their success in bringing solace to hundreds of families who have wondered about their loved ones for decades doesn't

mean they are satisfied. In fact, quite the opposite—those successes seem to fuel their drive. "You know there's so many missing persons cases to be completed so I can't imagine being able to get that completed in my lifetime," said Noah. "But ... if we continue full-time work on Tarawa, in five years we think that we can get the Tarawa project completed," he added.

Perkins still thinks about the men he went to war with, particularly the ones who didn't come home. When DPAA announces positive identification of Tarawa Marines who were previously unaccounted for, History Flight publishes each announcement on Facebook. The first person to pay his respects in the comment section is almost always Wendell Perkins, with his simple, but heartfelt message, "Welcome Home, Marine. Semper Fidelis."

For more information about History Flight, or to make a donation, visit: www.historyflight.com.

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