Beat: News

U.S. identifies remains of 7 Marines missing from WWII plane crash

-, 30.11.-0001, 00:00 Time

USPA News - The remains of seven U.S. service members who went missing when their military aircraft crashed on an island in Vanuatu during World War II have been identified and returned to their families for burial, the U.S. military announced on late Tuesday. The accident involving a PBJ-1 patrol bomber, the U.S. military variant of the North American B-25 Mitchell, happened on April 22, 1944, when seven U.S. Marines were on a night training mission over the island of Espiritu Santo in New Hebrides, at the time a French?British condominium but today known as the Republic of Vanuatu.

Neither the wreckage or the crew members were recovered at the time and the group was officially presumed deceased about a year later. But in 1994, a group of citizens notified the U.S. that aircraft wreckage had been found at an elevation of 2,600 feet (792 meter) in extremely rugged terrain. Some human remains were turned over to the U.S. Defense Department at the time and a survey team from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) traveled to the location in 1999. They determined the team would require specialized mountain training to safely complete a recovery mission, which resulted in a further delay to the operation. Between 2000 and 2011, multiple recovery teams excavated the site and recovered human remains, aircraft parts and military equipment. Scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) evaluated circumstantial evidence and mitochondrial DNA - which matched that of the Marines` family members. As a result of the investigation, six of the Marines were identified earlier this year and buried as individuals at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, although this was not previously made public. With now all seven crew members identified, they will be buried as a group, in a single casket representing the crew, on Thursday at Arlington National Cemetery. The seven victims were identified as Marine Corps 1st Lt. Laverne A. Lallathin of Raymond, Washington; 2nd Lt. Dwight D. Ekstam of Moline, Illinois; 2nd Lt. Walter B. Vincent, Jr. of Tulsa, Oklahoma; Tech. Sgt. James A. Sisney of Redwood City, California; Cpl. Wayne R. Erickson of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Cpl. John D. Yeager of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Pfc. John A. Donovan of Plymouth, Michigan. More than 73,000 Americans remain unaccounted-for from World War II.

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-15/us-identifies-remains-of-7-marines-missing-from-wwii-plane-crash.html

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