

Elmsford woman, sisters head to Pacific to honor life of WWII uncle

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Grace Jean Hofmann didn't talk much about her only brother, killed at the end of World War II while a prisoner of the Japanese. Growing up in post-war New York City, her three daughters mostly knew "Uncle Mike" as the handsome uniformed man in the photos decorating the family's Bronx apartment.

The sisters didn't even know where he was buried. After their mother died in 2009, they started searching the Internet for any information on Moszek "Mike" Zanger. They soon learned more than their mother ever knew about his final months, thanks to the dogged work of a pair of World War II buffs.

This week, Andrea Talbutt of Elmsford, Susan Nishihira of Washington state, and Marcy Hanigan of California will travel to the jungle-covered island of New Britain, where they'll visit the wreckage of what is believed to have been Zanger's fighter plane. They'll also visit the former airfield where he was imprisoned and killed by his Japanese captors just weeks before the war ended.

For the sisters, now all in their 60s, the trip will be a poignant milestone in their Jewish Polish family's journey that began when the Zangers immigrated to America soon after Uncle Mike's birth in 1920.

"This has gone to my very heart and soul," Talbutt, a 69-year-old retired high school teacher, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview from her home.

"I think it's going to be a real catharsis for all of us, a completion," said Hanigan, who works in retail in Los Angeles.

From Los Angeles, the pair will stop in Australia, then head to Papua New Guinea to meet Susan and her husband, Ray Nishihira, of Kirkland, Wash. Then it's to Rabaul, on New Britain. Once there, they'll drive to within a few hundred yards of the crash site before finishing the trek on foot.

Also making the trip is Henry Sakaida, a writer of World War II books from Temple City, Calif., and Justin Taylan, who'll serve as guide. Taylan is founder of PacificWrecks.com, a 17-year-old online database of wartime aircraft crash sites, missing servicemen and air battle details from the Pacific Theater.

It will be the 60-year-old Sakaida's first trip to the region he has written about in nine books on Japan's air forces in World War II. This will be Taylan's 12th journey to New Britain since 2000 to document the island's hundreds of known aircraft wreck sites

from the war.

“History is very much alive there,” said Taylan, 34, of Hyde Park, N.Y. The sisters say the trip is a way to link their mother and her brother one final time. “I don’t think she ever got over his death, and we just didn’t ask about him,” Hanigan said.

Zanger was an infant when his parents moved the family to New York. He enlisted in the Navy in July 1943 and later transferred to the Marine Corps to be a pilot. After flight training in Southern California, he was assigned to a Marine fighter squadron. In December 1944, he bailed out of his Corsair fighter plane after colliding with another U.S. fighter over Rabaul.

All Hofmann knew about her 25-year-old brother’s fate was what the Marine Corps told their parents: Zanger was killed by the Japanese while trying to escape in the summer of 1945. After Japan surrendered in September 1945, Zanger’s body was uncovered near Rabaul’s Tobera Airfield. It would be six more years before it was returned to the United States.

Hofmann apparently believed her brother was buried somewhere in the Pacific. She had married during the war and remained in the Bronx, raising three daughters whose only connection to their “movie-star handsome” uncle came from photos, his large collection of jazz records, and the leather flight helmet, boots and jacket he left behind.

Shortly after Hofmann died in October 2009, her daughters found Taylan’s website, which included information on Zanger provided by Sakaida.

Taylan put them in touch with Sakaida, who had stumbled across the Zanger name decades ago while interviewing a Japanese pilot who had seen the American POW at Rabaul. Sakaida spent 10 years on the trail of Zanger’s story, compiling stacks of military records and attempting to find his grave and next of kin.

Then he told them some stunning news: Zanger appeared to have been beaten to death by his captors — and he was buried in a Jewish cemetery in East Los Angeles, just a few miles from where his sister spent the last years of her life. A week after their mother’s death, Talbutt and Hanigan visited Zanger’s grave, the revelations supplied by Sakaida swirling their emotions.

“That was like the mantra when we were growing up: Uncle Mike was killed while trying to escape,” Hanigan said. “Now we know it isn’t true.”

“Finally, after all of these years,” said Hanigan, “we can salute him and love him and send him on his way.”