



By Erica Hobbs

Ann Arbor man spends time searching for American soldiers lost in South Pacific

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While many area residents will pay tribute this holiday weekend to the sacrifice of those who died in the nation's wars, Ann Arbor resident **Paul Schwimmer** has made honoring war dead and ensuring that they receive proper burials his year-round passion.

For the past two years, Schwimmer has participated in [The BentProp Project](#), a 28-member national team that locates the bodies of American soldiers who died in the South Pacific during World War II. Chelsea resident Flip Colmer is also a member.

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"Nobody should give their life up for their country and not be able to be buried on American soil," Schwimmer said. "They deserve to come home."

The volunteer effort, which Schwimmer said costs him about \$6,000 a year, involves a year of researching the estimated locations of specific soldiers before culminating in a three-to-four week trip to the South Pacific each winter. The team then crisscrosses the jungle in search of the remains. If bodies are found, the information is passed on to the federal government, which is then responsible for excavating, identifying and shipping the bodies back to the United States.

While many members of the team are experienced divers, researchers or archeologists, Schwimmer's more than 40 years of experience as a land surveyor for Washtenaw County are what make him a valuable asset to the group. According to BentProp's website, the team often must rely on old hand-drawn maps to locate the soldiers. But Schwimmer, the site said, is designing an interactive mapping system to make finding the remains more efficient. "My specialty is finding things," he said. "It's the least I can do, and I'm good at it."

While Schwimmer is still relatively new to the team, which began in 1993, his participation in recent expeditions resulted in what the team believes are the bodies of three American soldiers who died after parachuting out of a B-54 bomber in the Republic of Palau. BentProp is waiting to get the identities of the remains confirmed.

The other eight members of the plane had been found on a previous expedition, confirmed by the government and honored in a burial ceremony earlier this year in Arlington National Cemetery.

Schwimmer attended the event and said the ceremony was incredibly emotional, even after more than 60 years had gone by.

"It's a total closure for these families to finally get the story of how their loved one, their uncle or their brother, passed away," he said.

Schwimmer, who served as a staff sergeant in the Army Reserve during the Vietnam War, said the military and the wounds suffered by soldiers during war time have always been of interest to him.

Before becoming a member of BentProp, Schwimmer was active in [Pride and Honor Flight](#), a volunteer organization that pays for and escorts World War II veterans to Washington, D.C., to view the World War II Memorial.

While Schwimmer never saw war himself, he said it's fascinating to watch veterans get together after decades and discuss the situations and horrors they experienced so many years before, memories they mostly kept to themselves.

"The war vets usually won't talk, but you get two or three together and you would not believe the stories," he said. "They go back as if it was yesterday."

Schwimmer will share his story at Oakland Cemetery Monday in **Saline** after the city's Memorial Day parade. The parade starts at 10 a.m.



Ann Arbor resident Paul Schwimmer holds an American flag while standing at the site of a Navy fighter he and other members of The BentProp Project recovered earlier this year. The volunteer organization searches for the bodies of American soldiers lost in the South Pacific during World War II.

Photo courtesy of Paul Schwimmer

and runs on Michigan Avenue from Harris Street to the cemetery.

He said he will continue the effort as long as he is able to.

“If these guys carried these burdens for so long, the least I can do is bring the ones who can’t talk back home,” he said. “We will continue to look for these kids.”

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