

‘That Is What Matters To Us’

Three members from the VFW Department of Montana traveled to the site of World War II’s Battle of Tarawa in order to help bring home the remains of an unidentified Marine

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On the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Tarawa, three members of the VFW Department of Montana participated in bringing home the remains of an unidentified Marine killed in action at the Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands more than 2,000 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor.

VFW Post 10010 member Tim Sowa of East Helena joined Post 276 members Mike Pryor and Fred Hamilton from Whitefish in traveling to Kiribati’s capital via a History Flight mission last November to retrieve the remains of a Marine killed during the Battle of Tarawa.

For Sowa, who joined the Marines in 1971 and did a three-year tour as a generator mechanic in places such as Okinawa and Thailand, the opportunity to return a fellow Marine to his family helped him ease some of his own wounds.

“It was an unbelievable experience to be able to help bring closure to a family,” said Sowa, who also served 10 years in the Marine Corps Reserve and 27 years with the Montana Army National Guard before his retirement in 2011. “But I needed this for my healing, too, for my survivor’s guilt. I can look at it and know I did something for someone else.”

The once-in-a-lifetime trip to Kiribati by Sowa, Pryor and Hamilton stemmed from years of planning and coordinating between VFW Department of Montana Adjutant Tim Peters and the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA).

Through Peters, who began conversations with the DPAA in 2019 and coordinated the History Flight, according to Sowa, the three VFW members were granted a nearly all-expenses-paid trip to Kiribati that the VFW Department of Montana mostly funded.

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“I am really grateful to the VFW Department of Montana and everyone that was involved in making this happen,” Sowa said. “It showed their warmth and their devotion to bringing people home, and that is what matters to us, taking care of our veterans and bringing them home.”

As part of the History Flight and the timeliness of their trip during the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Tarawa, the VFW trio also participated in a commemoration ceremony alongside members of the Marine Corps, U.S. Ambassador Marie C. Damourand and Kiribati President Taneti Maamau.

They toured the battleground and learned what transpired when on Nov. 20, 1943, 35,000 troops from the 2nd Marine Division and the Army’s 27th Infantry Division invaded and took the island from the Japanese in 76 hours.

Despite the overwhelming victory by the Allied forces, the aftermath reports noted 1,020 American soldiers went missing or were killed during the battle, as well as the death of 4,836 Japanese troops, with only 17 survivors.

The VFW members also participated in honoring the remains of the Marine, which were flown to Hawaii, where they will undergo testing for proper identification.

“You’re humbled to know that that person gave his life for you,” Sowa said. “And when we sent him on the plane, you are humbled again. And then when we walked the beaches, you are really humbled to know what they went through. You are walking there, but you do not have bullets or shells or explosions around you.”

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