



## Season 6, Episode 1: WWII Diary, Florida

Wes Cowan: Our first story turns the pages of a long lost diary from a World war two bomber pilot. December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1943. The US Army Air Force 445<sup>th</sup> bomb group attacks enemy shipyards beneath the skies of Kiel, Germany. It's their first of 280 air raid missions inside a new bomber called the B-24 Liberator. The bomber is the allies' great hope, flying farther, longer, and carrying more bombs deep into Hitler's Germany. Not a single plane is lost on this mission. But the 445<sup>th</sup> will rarely be so lucky again. The liberator earns itself another more ominous nickname – the flying coffin – due to the high casualty rate among B-24 pilots. Why were these missions so deadly, and what convinced their crew to accept such terrible odds?

60 years after the last of those missions, Jim Chapman of Lexington, North Carolina, has a diary that may reveal new information about these planes and men who held Hitler at bay. I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm heading to meet Jim.

Jim: Nice to meet you.

Wes: Let's take a look at this diary.

Jim: My dad brought this home with him after he finished his tour of duty during World War II.

Wes: The obvious question to me is: It's not your dad's diary?

Jim: That's correct. The diary belonged to his co-pilot, named William Moran. Both served on the B-24.

Wes: Both men flew planes in the 445<sup>th</sup> bomb group stationed in Tibenham, England. How did your dad get it?

Jim: Well, that's a good question. I actually discovered the diary in a box of my father's mementos.

Wes: He discovered it after his father died 20 years ago. Can you read me some entries?

Jim: Yes, I'll be glad to. "Sure dreaded going, especially after I found the target to be Hamburg, felt sure I wouldn't get back. At least I know now I will be able to face death when my time comes. The only thing that I feared was leaving Mary Jane. I adore her every breath".

Wes: Mary Jane was Moran's wife. It's these personal details in the diary that haunt Jim.



Jim: "May 9<sup>th</sup> 1944. An airmail letter from my angel. My baby is pretty sure she is pregnant. Thank god! Bought the boys beer with my last six shillings to celebrate".

Wes: That's really great. There's something important missing from this diary...an ending. The last entry is from October 29<sup>th</sup>, seven months before the end of the war in Europe. What can I do for you?

Jim: Well Wes...I'd like to find out what happened to Bill Moran. If he came back home, or if he was killed? I'd like to really know what happened to him.

Wes: Jim is eager to know more about what the men his father flew with saw and did during their time in England. And he wants help with another question too.

Jim: I would like to be able to reunite the diary with Bill Moran's family. I think it's very important for the family to have this.

Wes: I am going to have to take the diary with me, and I am ready to get going. Well, let's see...I've read my fair share of accounts of battle, but I never lose the thrill of discovery, or my sense of privilege at being let into a private account of the past. Every time I read one of the soldier's diaries I just get the sense that I'm holding a piece of history in my hand. The diary covers about a year, from October 1943 to October 1944. Much of it is written mechanically, more like a log than a personal journal, but it's clear his unit is in the thick of the action. Here's one: September 27<sup>th</sup>, "Started a letter to my angel, but Bahn stopped in to tell me our squad lost 4 out of 9. It was Withey's last one." A lot of bombers went down with men Moran knew. If he's shaken by this, I wouldn't know it from the matter-of-fact language. And here's Bill Moran's last entry: October 29, 1944. More death, and more matter of fact language.

Bill writes, "Mass and communion. Put a couple of hours on the ship. Heard a rotten German broadcast late last night calling Eisenhower a rat."

But there are no clues why Moran stopped writing. Did he go back home, or was his next mission fatal? There are plenty of names here. Maybe someone Bill Moran wrote about is still alive and can fill in these blank pages for me? Lennie it looks like, Goldman, Chappy, Pelton and I were lucky not to go. I'll call my office and ask them to try to track down some of Bill Moran's war buddies.

Wes: Wes Cowan.

Bill: Bill Oldson...glad to meet you Wes.



Wes: While they're searching, I've come to Florida to meet with Professor William Oldson from the Institute On World War Two and the Human Experience. Here's the diary that I sent you the transcript of.

William: Nice. Very unusual cover. And I must say his handwriting is better than most, too.

Wes: William says unearthing journals from the battlefield is always an important discovery – a unique window on the men who actually did the fighting.

Bill: It's the unvarnished truth, and it's the yardstick you can hold up to everything else, to letters home, to the propaganda, to the newsreel and say here's what he felt.

Wes: And there certainly was a lot to write about. William explains that in 1943, Allied bombing raids on Germany are often ineffectual at hitting military and industrial targets. But by 1944, with Ford cranking out a new B-24 every hour, the American bombers are successfully targeting Hitler's factories and fuels supplies, and helping turn the war in the allies favor. But the carnage among flight crews is horrendous.

Bill: In '43 we lost over 3,000 planes. In '44 we lose over 11,000 planes.

Wes: William believes there's a good chance Moran was killed over Germany. Flying daylight raids made the bombers easy prey for German fighter planes, and anti-aircraft guns.

Bill: If you're flying with British bomber command you had a 65% chance of being a casualty. If you're flying in the American Air Force, you got a 40% to 60% chance of being a casualty. If you're lucky enough to be in a kamikaze squadron, you've only got a 53% chance of being a casualty.

Wes: You're kidding me. While logistics problems often kept Japanese kamikaze squadrons grounded, in Europe the big Allied bombers were seeing combat almost daily. So a kamikaze pilot, who is supposed to kill himself, stood a better chance of surviving than a B-24 bomber pilot?

Bill: Hard to believe, isn't it?

Wes: William says the often remote and matter-of-fact language in such wartime writing was a way of walling-off or escaping the horror of everyday life.

Bill: I think it's not only typical, it's necessary. They can't brood about it; it's going to interfere with their own performance. It's going to depress them.



Wes: The writing is a form of self defense. In Bill Moran's case, the details of the day are matter of fact, while the emotion is mostly reserved for his girl back home.

Bill: They've got to go out and fight the next day or fly the next day. They can't afford to dwell on this. What's unusual about the diary you have is the romantic aspect of it. I don't know any other diary that I've seen where somebody is referring to his wife as angel. We have lots of letters where it says hello honey, or something of that sort but not in the diaries.

Wes: Thanks very much for sharing this with me.

Bill: Thank you for letting me see this. This is a very special document.

Wes: I still don't know exactly why Bill Moran stopped writing in the journal. But my office has been able to track down his military records, and they've sent them to me at the library. It's sobering news. On October 31, 1944, Bill Moran was flying with pilot Edward Speers and six other men when their plane disappeared. In this report of aircraft accident or missing aircraft report confirms that Moran was killed in some sort of a training accident. It's not clear exactly what happened. He took off in the formation, after he took off, nobody else in the aircraft formation ever saw him again. The wreckage and Moran's body are never found. This took place two days after the last entry in his diary. Mary Jane was seven months pregnant when Bill died. If I'm going to help Jim return the journal to Bill's family, I'm going to need help tracking down his descendents. My office has located Jack Pelton, one of Moran's buddies mentioned in the diary!

Wes: Hey, Jack.

Jack: Hey, Wes.

Wes: Jack agrees to meet me at the American Aero Services hangar in Florida where the Collings Foundation maintains a B-24 bomber.

Wes: Boy this is quite a piece of machinery, isn't it?

Jack: Oh, it really is. A wonderful airplane.

Wes: And you were a pilot of one of these things?

Jack: I was a pilot, for 32 missions.



Wes: How'd you like to go on up in the cockpit?

Jack: Love to.

Wes: It's been more than 50 years since Jack's taken a seat at the controls. Wow. So what was it like to fly one of these babies?

Jack: It was very exciting really.

Wes: Jack tells me in order to attack heavily defended targets, pilots like he and Bill Moran flew at altitudes over 20,000 feet, where temperatures reached minus 30 degrees.

Wes: So it was cold, you're wearing an oxygen mask, there are no hydraulics in these steering wheels, it must have been a hell of a job.

Jack: It was a strange feeling you, you're in another world.

Wes: Jack explains that the lightweight frame that made the B-24 such an efficient bomber also made it vulnerable to enemy fire.

Jack: We brought one plane almost 153 holes in it.

Wes: Bullets and shells from German fighter planes tore through the American aircraft, and helped earn the B-24 its reputation as a flying coffin. You know, I've got Bill Moran's diary here. What kind of a guy was Bill Moran? What was he like?

Jack: Bill Moran was a great copilot, great sense of humor, Irishman all the way.

Wes: Jack has a picture of Bill and Mary Jane, Bill's pregnant wife, taken right before the airmen left the states. So that's Bill, that's Mary Jane and look at them holding hands there. I'd recognize you anywhere. Looks like you guys were having a lot of fun.

Jack: Yes, we had a great evening, last time we saw our wives for a year.

Wes: One more question, where was Bill Moran from?



Jack: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Wes: Mary Jane was from there too, then?

Jack: Yes she was.

Wes: What ever happened to Mary Jane, do you know?

Jack: I don't know, I tried to find her when I got back to the States; could not. One time when I was on business in Pittsburgh I heard that she was there but I still couldn't track her down.

Wes: Thoughts of Mary Jane filled Bill Moran's days during his time in England, and over Germany. I wonder what happened to her, whether she even knew of Bill's journal, and if Jim might be able to return it to her. So I'm back at the library to search through genealogical records. At first, I draw a blank looking for Mary Jane. Maybe I can get information from another family member. I finally get a break with the Social Security Death Index for Bill's mother, Veronica. Bingo, here she is, she died in March 1967 in Miami, Florida.

Her obituary eventually leads us to the names of two of Bill's surviving sisters: Adelaide Young and Jeanie Kimbrough of Seabring, Florida. If there is a local listing, maybe we're in business.

It takes a while, but eventually I get lucky. Adelaide Young, there's her phone number, address, born August 1930. Its got to be her, I can't believe I've found a living relative. Hello Mrs Young? Adelaide is excited by news of the diary. And we make plans to meet.

Wes: You know why I've come to see you

Adelaide: Yes.

Wes: I have a diary that was written by your brother.

Adelaide: Oh. "My Life in the Service".

Wes: Do you recognize that handwriting?

Adelaide: Of course.

Wes: It's the constant references to Bill's wife that catch Adelaide's eye.



Adelaide: He always speaks of her in such a gentle way.

Wes: You get the sense that they were really in love.

Adelaide: Oh, from the time they met.

Wes: Adelaide was 14 when her brother died.

Adelaide: The telegram was laying on the dining room table we kept saying, "they'll find him, they'll find him, someday they'll find him." There was never any memorial service or anything because someday they'll find him.

Wes: At first, the very-pregnant Mary Jane wasn't even told her husband was missing. She learned Bill had been killed from a friend who visited her right after she'd given birth to their daughter.

Adelaide: She was un-consolable; she was just unbelievably in grief.

Wes: Mary Jane died roughly twenty years after her husband. But what Adelaide revealed next will be extraordinary news for Jim.

Wes: This has been an incredible story for me. I tell Jim about some of the things I've learned while working on Bill's diary. I've got to tell you though that I have some bad news. I let Jim know that Bill Moran died in a training mission, and his wife passed away over forty years ago. But the story doesn't end there. There's someone I do want you to meet, so if you want to follow me we will go meet that person.

Jim: I would like to do that.

Wes: Adelaide told me that the baby that Bill was so eagerly expecting was born 32 days after he died. Her name was Janie.

Adelaide: She's married; she has two children and four grandchildren.

Wes: Bill Moran would have been a great grandfather.

Wes: Hey, guys.

Adelaide: Hi.



Wes: I want you meet somebody Jim.

Adelaide: Who is this?

Wes: this is Jim Chapman, this is Chappy's son.

Jim: Hi.

Adelaide: Hi, how are you?

Wes: This is Adelaide Young, this is Bill's sister.

Jim: Oh, hi Adelaide!

Adelaide: He talked about Bill Chapman all the time.

Jim: Oh, so nice to meet you.

Adelaide: Oh I am so glad to meet you and this is Bill's daughter, Janie.

Jim: Oh my heavens.

Janie: Hi Jim, it's nice to meet you thank you for taking care of the journal.

Jim: I am so glad to have found you.

Wes: I tell them how Bill Moran's diary was a unique and important look at how he and hundreds of young men like him had faced their world in 1943 and 1944. Day after day they had climbed into their flying coffins, clutching thoughts of loved ones at home. Thanks to Jim, Bill Moran's thoughts are now finally going home to the daughter he never knew.

Jim: I just feel like I know so much about you already. Excuse me. Sorry. The diary has been in our family for 63 years. What was so fascinating was reading in the diary about your mother carrying you and your dad being so happy and excited about your mom being pregnant. In the diary itself it just comes through that he loves your mother very much.



Wes: Moran and his fellow pilots had helped deal Hitler's war machine a crippling blow...and their children and children's children would live in a world they had transformed.

Jim: This is a glimpse into your father's life.

Janie: Thank you very much Jim for treasuring it and taking care of it for all those years.

Jim: You're welcome.