Episode 3, 2012: Empire State Building Plane Crash Piece

Irv Atkins: My name’s Irv Atkins. In July 28th, 1945, I was living with my family in the Bronx. On that day, a Saturday, a twin-engine Army bomber crashed into the 79th floor of the Empire State Building.

Recording: We’re speaking from the hall in the middle of the 79th floor of the Empire State Building. We can see 11 bodies.

Irv: My father had an office across the street, and when he came to work Monday morning, he found this piece in his office. And it's been in my family every since. I was wondering whether this in fact was a piece of that Army bomber.

Eduardo Pagan: I’m Eduardo Pagan. The Empire State Building looms high above Midtown Manhattan, raised in the depression, it was the tallest building in the world during World War Two. Its broad shoulders and soaring art deco spire were the pinnacle of engineering know-how and national pride.

The early summer of 1945, Hitler was already dead. And American troops were amassing for an invasion of Japan. And there stood the Empire State Building, a symbol of America's greatness. And then in July of 1945, a B-25 bomber tragically flew into its side.

The mighty skyscraper became a deathly inferno. At first, the city feared the Japanese had attacked and couldn’t understand how such a disaster was possible. I’m meeting Irv at a local coffee shop to discuss his father’s possible encounter with history.

So, this piece was just sitting there in his office for...?

Irv: It came through the window or through the ceiling.

Eduardo: Give me a sense about your father. Was he ever one to -- to embellish stories, was you know...?

Irv: Well, he was a, uh, outspoken type of individual, a salesman, after all. And, uh, he could get pretty excited about things.

Eduardo: There are some locking nuts on there, as well...

Irv: Yeah, that might be of -- of that period that would help identify it, yeah.

Eduardo: You know, there’s a lot of melting here too, right?

Irv: That was a big explosion. A lot of gasoline was on the plane.

Eduardo: You mentioned your father worked around the Empire State Building?

Irv: It was across the street. 10 W. 33rd Street.
Eduardo: Do you remember the name of the business?

Irv: Charm Tred Mills. Textile manufacturing company he was a sales representative for.

Eduardo: Okay.

Irv: Very recently I decided I wanted to prove that this in fact is a part of that plane.

Eduardo: All right. We'll see if we can nail this thing down.

Irv: Appreciate it.

Eduardo: Could this be a fragment from that awful day? I'll need a little help from the History Detectives Researchers.

Robin Hutchins: This is Robin.

Eduardo: Hey, Robin. I wonder if you could verify for me Irv's father's employment in 1945. He worked at a place called Charm Tred Mills. And it was at 10 W. 33rd Street. And could you pull some newspaper clippings, investigative reports, any kind of material surrounding the incident.

Robin: Let me see what I can find. In the meantime, I've set up a meeting with a historian, Arthur Weingarten, who literally wrote the book on the topic. He's going to meet you at the E. 34th Street heliport.

Eduardo: Got it.

Art's book is considered the definitive account of the disaster. He's offered to help in our investigation.

Have you ever seen anything like this?

Arthur Weingarten: No, never. It's a fascinating piece. But is it real? I don't know.

Eduardo: I ask Art how such a disaster was possible.

Art: If we took off and followed the flight path of the bomber to the Empire State Building, maybe we could put that into context.

Eduardo: Art tells me the B-25's pilot that day, 27 year-old Lieutenant Colonel William Smith, was a West Point graduate with an impressive wartime record. Smith's flight is a routine mission out of Bedford, Massachusetts Army Airfield bound for Newark, New Jersey. But from the start, the weather is foul. An Atlantic squall is pushing heavy clouds, rain and fog, up and down the coast. But Smith has had plenty of experience flying in bad weather in wartime Europe.

So, it sounds like, given the weather of that day, this was the perfect man to be flying on that day.

Art: Absolutely. He'd flown over 50 missions over France and Germany.

Eduardo: As Smith enters New York airspace, the weather deteriorates…
So this skyline that we're seeing right now, this is all obscured by cloud cover that day?

Art: All obscured by cloud cover. Or, at best, tiny tips were poking through as the winds blew.

Eduardo: To make matters worse, Smith is not familiar with New York geography.

Art: He had never been over the city in the air.

Eduardo: As he flies west to Newark, the little bits of buildings and water he sees, he believes is Manhattan. It's not.

Art: He was flying at about 650 feet through dense fog, and Welfare Island seemed to him to be Manhattan, because he could see tall buildings.

Eduardo: So, he was totally disoriented at this point?

Art: Totally disoriented.

Eduardo: Ok.

Thinking he had cleared Manhattan, Smith starts his descent to Newark Airport. But the concrete canyons of Midtown lay directly ahead.

Art: He was flying at approximately 250 miles an hour.

Eduardo: So Dave, how fast are we going now in this helicopter?

Dave Vogt: We're doing about 70 knots, about a third of that.

Eduardo: The air traffic controller issues a warning.

Art: The tower said to him, "Will, I cannot see the top of the Empire State Building from here. I wish you would turn around."

Eduardo: Art says that Smith is confident, to the point of arrogance.

Art: He said, "Thank you very much, Tower," and he snapped off.

Eduardo: A dictation machine inside a nearby building captures the sound of Smith approaching…then an explosion.

Newsreels show the awful aftermath: 14 dead and a gaping 20-foot hole on the north side of the 78th and 79th floors. Destruction created by over 6,000 gallons of explosive aviation fuel.

Eduardo: Back on the ground, art explains how on that fateful day, he had been tagging along with his father, a New York City Fire Marshal who responded to the scene.

Art: I was right there, 10 years old, sitting in a squad car, police squad car, watching the entire thing, and people were screaming and running here. A woman ran past holding her head with blood coming out.

Eduardo: In an eerie echo of the World Trade Center Disaster- New York Fireman carried heavy equipment up 79 floors to fight the inferno and rescue survivors. The crash
commanded headlines for days. Then on August 6th, the U.S. dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Americans turned their attention elsewhere. The building was repaired within three months. Looking now, it’s hard to imagine the carnage that was.

All right so, this is the north side of the building, and this is the side that the airplane hit.

Art: Yes.

Eduardo: Well, our contributor, his father, worked right there on W. 33rd Street, maybe a couple buildings in, there.

Art: When the bomber hit the building, he went straight into the 79th floor, traveled right through the width of the building, blasted a hole in the 33rd street side.

Eduardo: So, it's entirely possible that if this piece came from that B-25 bomber that’s where it would have landed, right over there.

Art: Yes. It would have landed... It would have landed there.

Eduardo: Right over there, 10 W. 33rd?

Art: Right there. That's it.

Eduardo: But Art tells me much more than plane debris fell to the ground that day, parts of desks, radiators, beams: It all rained down.

RECORDED: Many fixtures have been melted down – all the paint has been melted down. Metal has been melted down. Plastic handles or files are melted.

Eduardo: This piece of metal, in theory, could have come from anywhere.

Art: Could have come from anywhere. And within a very short time, the Air Force sent people to clean up the area. According to them, they picked up all the pieces. So is there a chance that this was missed? Uh, yes. Is there a chance that would, if they had seen a piece that large looking this way, they would have picked it up? Absolutely.

Eduardo: Ok.

Art: They were looking for things like this.

Eduardo: They were.

Researcher Robin Hutchins has been running down some of art’s story.

Eduardo: Ok, so, where are we?

Robin: Well, after they collected the debris, they took it to Newark Airport. And then everything just sort – seemed to have been discarded. Even the Army report has gone missing.

Eduardo: "Unfortunately we cannot locate the accident report."

Robin: I did find one thing I wasn’t expecting. I've set up a meeting for you.
Eduardo: I’m about 2700 miles away from Manhattan, in the middle of the California desert, in a location that I’ve been asked not to disclose. But it’s there that I’m hoping to find some answers to our mystery.

You Carl?

Carl Scholl: I am and you are Eduardo. How are you?

Eduardo: I’m Eduardo, very nice to meet you.

Carl: My pleasure.

Eduardo: This is a great spot you’ve got here.

Carl: We’re out in the middle of the boonies, that’s for sure.

Eduardo: Miles away from civilization, 15 acres of land are filled with every part, piece, and parcel of B-25s.

Eduardo: Are these all B-25s out here?

Carl: These are all B-25s. These two came out of Alaska. This one came out of Venezuela a number of years ago.

Eduardo: Each piece of twisted metal in Carl’s graveyard tells a story. Will we be able to confirm the origin of ours?

Let me show you this piece that I’ve been telling you about. Yeah, I imagine this is like looking for a needle in a haystack. There’s so many different parts to an airplane.

Carl: Well, I mean it’s certainly aircraft. Just the basic structure, and the fasteners – these are called nut plates.

Eduardo: So, that’s pretty exclusive to aircraft?

Carl: Pretty much so.

Eduardo: Ok.

Carl says if it is from a B-25, it would be aluminum.

Eduardo: You know this is something that caught my eye here. It looks like the metal is melting here.

Carl: If you want me to show you how we can do that, I’ve got some aluminum over here on the work bench, so we could, uh, put the torch on and I could show you how quick it melts.

Eduardo: Yeah.

Carl: 24-ST aluminum.

Eduardo: What’s 24-ST?

Carl: The special alloy that they came up with during World War II era.
Eduardo: Alright, let’s torch this thing.

Carl says B-25s was made from this 24-ST aluminum, which starts to melt between 600 and 800 degrees.

Carl: You can see where it starts to form globules. See how that?

Eduardo: Yeah – Yeah.

I’m sitting here thinking about when that B-25 crashed into the Empire State Building, the hell that it was. Everything was on fire...

Carl: Well, I mean, you had a lot of fuel in it.

Eduardo: Yeah.

Carl: I mean, obviously enough to cause an explosion. And it ripped things apart, doesn’t take much to destroy aluminum.

Eduardo: Carl thinks our piece is a fragment of a World War Two era aluminum aircraft. But does it come from the B-25 that hit the Empire State Building? Between the molten metal and the bolt pattern, Carl thinks he knows the answer...

Well, tell me what we’re looking at right here.

Carl: All right so we're looking at the belly of the airplane. Why don't you let me take a look at that piece and see if we can’t come up with a little better of an idea where that came from.

Carl: Now these doors seal the fuel compartment. This bolt line is covered up by this fairing right here. Alright? I think this edge is this edge along there.

Eduardo: And he spots another clue.

Carl: You see that line?

Eduardo: Yeah.

The curious, faded line on Irv’s part points to a verdict in our case. I meet Irv back in New York City.

It's been a pleasure to investigate this piece and – and to really tell this part of American history that so many people have forgotten about. We confirmed that plane debris did land on his father’s office building. The melted metal suggested an inferno and presence of high octane aviation fuel.

But it was the faded line on the part that had convinced Carl of what Irv's father had picked up.

Carl: I think that's the chafe line where this fairing was rubbing on there.

Eduardo: The metal was from a fuel tank door on the underside of the plane that had hit the building first and hardest.

Carl: I’m positive it is.
Eduardo: Alright, if you're positive, then I'm positive.

Carl: Ok.

Eduardo: Let me show you the picture. Right here in black is where he was able to identify exactly where this comes from. And this is the right underside of the airplane. And that's the fuel door right there.

Irv: Another facet to the whole story that I've been living with all these years, and now it's something a little different, but more amazing.

Eduardo: While the Empire State Building bears little evidence of the tragic events of 1945, the crash had a large impact on federal law. In 1946, congress passed legislation granting citizens the right to sue the federal government for actions committed by individuals’ acting on behalf of the government. The law still stands today.