

Wes: Our first story relives a deadly attack on one of the most famous battleships of the Second World War. It's March 1945. The future of the Pacific War is shrouded in gun smoke and uncertainty. The Japanese are fighting a desperate campaign to defend the island of Okinawa. If they lose the island, mainland Japan will become vulnerable to a U.S. invasion. They send hundreds of kamikaze planes to attack the American Invasion Fleet. Those planes are remarkably successful wreaking havoc and scoring a direct hit on the heavy cruiser the U.S.S. Indianapolis. 51 years later, a Cleveland area man has several items that may shed light on this key battle of World War II and tell him more about his uncle, who served on the famous warship.

Larry Klubert: Since he died at sea, our family really has very little to remember him by, and so I'm just looking for more information to make the connection a little bit closer.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm on my way to meet Larry Klubert. The U.S.S. Indianapolis was one of our most famous warships. Its sinking in the final week of World War II by a Japanese submarine was the worst disaster in U.S. naval history. Nearly 900 men died. But I don't know much about the rest of the ship's service. So I'm very interested in hearing Larry's story. Well, Larry, what have you got for me?

Larry: Well, my aunt gave me these souvenirs from my uncle, who was in World War II.

Wes: Let's take a look at what you got here. We have some navy patches, metal fragments, an I.D. tag. And all these items came in a cigarette pack. What can you tell me about your uncle?

Larry: My uncle's name was Arthur Mitchneau, and here's his photo.

Wes: Boy, look how young he is. Larry tells me his uncle, like thousands of young men, was so eager to serve in the navy that he lied about his age and enlisted when he was just 17. Did your uncle survive the sinking?

Larry: No, he went down with the ship.

Wes: So what do you want me to find out?

Larry: I want you to tell me if these came from a kamikaze attack on the Indianapolis.

Wes: Larry says that when his uncle came home on leave in April 1945, he talked about some sort of an attack that had occurred on the Indianapolis. Well, I've been doing a little research and found out the ship came under a kamikaze attack. When Arthur Mitchneau went back to sea for the last time that July of 1945, his souvenirs remained at home, their origins a mystery. Do you mind if I take these things with me?

Larry: No, go right ahead.

Wes: This plaque with the Japanese characters on it, it's aluminum. One of the columns here has kilograms over "centimeter squared." It's clearly been pried off of something. Now, these two patches both have an anchor on them, and I'm almost sure that these are sleeve patches from the Japanese navy. The chrysanthemum is the symbol of the Japanese emperor. This last thing -- boy, this is really intriguing. This is just a chunk of super-heavy metal. There's no recognizable shape. I have a feeling that this is going to be the toughest thing for me to figure out what it is. You know, the first thing I've got to do is do some basic research about the service record of the U.S.S. Indianapolis. In peacetime, the Indianapolis had been a navy flagship, and following Pearl Harbor, she saw action throughout the Pacific campaign. [Explosions and gunfire] In March of 1945, the heavy cruiser took her place in the largest invasion fleet in history. Off the coast of Okinawa, her guns lay down a devastating barrage on the heavily-dug-in Japanese, but before the invasion is launched, the Japanese score a direct hit on the U.S. warship. It says here that on March 31st, the Indy had suffered a near-fatal kamikaze attack off the island of Okinawa. It looks as if Larry's research was accurate. The Indy was struck by a kamikaze. But the ship was about to experience much worse. Just four months later, after being repaired in California, she's assigned to a top-secret mission to the island of Tinian in the western Pacific Ocean. Unbeknownst to her crew, the Indianapolis is delivering components of the first operational atomic bomb. The Indy makes a 5,000-mile trip from San Francisco to Tinian in a record ten days, and delivers its mysterious cargo in perfect condition. Days later, while

heading to the Phillipines, the Indianapolis is struck by two torpedoes. [Explosions] She sinks in just minutes. By the time the crew is rescued nearly five days later, only one quarter of the men are still alive. There's a lot here about the sinking, but not much on the kamikaze attack, And Larry's story raises some questions, too. How would somebody pick up these artifacts off of the deck of a flaming ship just seconds after a bomb had hit the deck? I'm heading to Fredericksburg, Texas, to meet with U.S.S. Indianapolis survivor I.D. Cox. He was just 19 years old when the ship sank, and he personally witnessed the kamikaze attack.

Wes: Wes Cowan.

I.D. Cox: Oh, hello, Wes!

Wes: He suggested we meet at the National Museum of the Pacific War. I.D., the investigation that I'm working on involves a second-class seaman. His name was Arthur Mitchneau. You recognize him?

I.D.: You know, believe it or not, I do. I recognize the man. I wasn't a close friend, but I remember seeing him aboard ship.

Wes: That's amazing. I.D. tells me about the terrifying night the submarine attacked.

I.D.: I was on the bridge just going on watch. And, whoom, an explosion hit. [Explosion] We didn't know what it was. It was just out of the darkness of the night, these explosions. With the Indy ablaze and taking on water, the captain gives the order to abandon ship.

Wes: How in the world did you get off the ship?

I.D.: I went over the main deck, and I swam as fast as I could away from the ship, because the suction will take you down, and turned and looked back. And the ship had already rolled on the starboard side and men were still jumping.

Wes: Within 12 minutes, the great ship sinks. In the darkness of night, hundreds of sailors plunge into the Philippine Sea. I.D. tells me that hours later, many began to hallucinate and suffer from dehydration. Not long afterwards, they noticed the sharks.

I.D. You could see dozens of them. You could see the fins in the water circling, and every now and then, one would just, like lightning, come up and take a sailor.

Wes: And you were in the water for how long?

I.D.: We bobbed up and down in that life preserver for four and a half days and five nights. Finally, one afternoon, I heard a motor in the distance. That's when every one of my hairs stood straight up. Tears came in my eyes, and chills came over me. That was the happiest day of my life.

Wes: Only 317 of nearly 1,200 men survived. Sadly, Arthur Mitchneau, just 19 years old, is not among them. That's one of the most amazing stories that I've ever heard. I ask I.D. about the attack that occurred on the Indianapolis just months before the sinking. Were you on the ship when the kamikaze attack took place at Okinawa?

I.D.: Yeah, I sure was. I was having breakfast in the mess hall, and over the loudspeaker came a message, the words "Man your battle stations." I got about midships, and I saw this plane or the shadow, just got a glimpse as it was coming down, and all of a sudden, I went up in the air.

Wes: The plane crashes through the ship's decks, flooding compartments, knocking two propellers off, and killing nine men. The Indy is crippled. I ask I.D. if Arthur Mitchneau's souvenirs could be from that attack.

I.D.: I don't know about these, but, now, this piece of metal could easily have come off the deck. In fact, I picked up some debris, a piece of aluminum from the airplane wing.

Wes: I.D. tells me he brought his fragment home and later donated it to the museum. That's why he wanted to meet me here. So that's your souvenir?

I.D.: Yes, sir.

Wes: He says that the shattered Japanese plane was pushed into the water, but some debris remained on deck. And this was one of the larger pieces still on deck, and I just picked it up and thought that would be good to keep.

Wes: And there were other guys out there picking souvenirs?

I.D.: At that time, we were pretty busy. We was trying to shoot down airplanes, but there was still quite a bit of smaller stuff, you know, laying around. Even though the two metals don't look the same, maybe they came from different parts of the aircraft.

Wes: I drop off a small sample of the two pieces at the University of Texas at Austin for a chemical analysis. My next stop is the U.S. Naval Intelligence library in Washington, D.C.

Jack Green: Jack Green, Naval Historical Center.

Wes: Wes Cowan. How are you? I'm meeting with historian Jack Green. He explains that in the spring of 1945, Okinawa was the focal point of U.S. military strategy in the Pacific.

Jack: The battle of Okinawa is critical both to the Americans and the Japanese. Okinawa will be the spring-off point for the invasion of Japan, which was scheduled for the fall of 1945. Okinawa is only 400 miles from Japan. The Imperial military knows that the more American ships they can sink, the more time they will have to prepare for the defense of the mainland. The Japanese send hundreds of kamikaze planes into the sky. It is a fight to the death... For both sides.

Wes: So how successful were the kamikaze pilots at Okinawa?

Jack: They were very successful.

Wes: The navy ends up losing 30 ships and 368 were damaged by the conclusion of the battle. I tell Jack that I'm trying to find out if there's any connection between Larry's artifacts and the kamikaze that hit the Indianapolis.

Jack: You need to really talk to someone who's an expert on Japanese World War II aircraft.

Wes: But these are Japanese navy, World War II. My hunch was right. The anchors and chrysanthemum signified Japanese Imperial navy. Jack shows me the official U.S. intelligence manual used to identify various ranks.

Jack: Now, this one, because of the laurel wreath tells us it's a petty officer. The interesting thing is it's yellow. Now, yellow was the seaman's branch. This is a seaman first class. Green is aviation maintenance.

Wes: Aviation branch. Well, that's interesting. That's potentially very important for us. Now, is there any way to check to see what type of plane actually hit the Indianapolis that day? Next, Jack takes me to the naval archives to hunt for more specific information about the kamikaze that attacked the Indianapolis. The files are extensive. Finally, some luck: A press release has some key information. Listen to this: "The Indianapolis was participating in the pre-invasion bombardment of Okinawa's beach defenses when she was attacked by a lone Jap Oscar." What kind of a plane is an Oscar?

Jack: Well, during World War II...

Wes: Jack explains that the Oscar was a single-seat army fighter, but my two patches are both navy. So there's no way that those uniform patches could have come from a kamikaze pilot.

Jack: That's right.

Wes: But what about the plaque and the chunk of metal? Todd? Wes Cowan. Todd Peterson is an expert in wartime Japanese aircraft.

Todd Peterson: Well, now that I have the piece in my hand, I notice that it's aluminum, and that strongly suggests that this was likely removed from an aircraft component. The plaque lists the operating parameters for an engine part. Basically, this is from an oil- or fuel-pressure regulator. And one of the lines here specifically says the operating parameters: 0.3 to 0.6.

Wes: He shows me a dial from a fuel-pressure gauge that would have been used in a Japanese army airplane, and he compares the parameters on both pieces. And that happens to correspond with a Japanese Imperial army instrument which redlines at 0.6. It's a fit. Todd thinks our piece may have come from a Japanese army plane. One thing I found out was that the kamikaze plane that crashed onto the Indianapolis was an Oscar. Could this plaque have come from a plane like that?

Todd: It could have based on the number range on the plate and how it matches up with the dial. It likely came from an Imperial Army aircraft.

Wes: But Todd also tells me that these types of plaques were often collected and traded among servicemen. Anything that had Japanese lettering on it or from Japan from the combat theater was sent home. I'm heading back to Texas to meet with chemist Jim Holcombe, who's been testing the two metal samples. Jim shows me a machine called an inductively coupled plasma time-of-flight mass spectrometer. The device heats the sample to 16,000 degrees Fahrenheit and turns it into tiny particles called ions. From there, Jim can determine what elements are present in each piece. So did you find out anything interesting?

Jim Holcombe: Yeah, actually, quite interesting. Let me take you over here, and we'll show you the data.

Wes: What Jim has discovered is a little surprising, and I'm anxious to report back to Larry. First I tell him about my visit with I.D. Cox and his memories of Arthur Mitchneau. When I showed this photograph to I.D., he paused a second, and he looked at it, and he said, "You know, I recognize the face."

Larry: Wow. That was one of the things I was hoping to hear, that someone remembered him.

Wes: Then I tell him that the navy patches are almost certainly not from the army kamikaze plane, and although the metal plaque might be, what Jim Holcombe had discovered had put a different spin on Arthur Mitchneau's story.

Jim: Well, Wes, this is the mass spectrum for the piece from the museum, and as you might expect, we'll see a very substantial aluminum signal.

Wes: How does that compare with the other sample?

Jim: As you'll notice, the aluminum peak is actually quite small. The dominant peak that we're picking up is nickel, probably 90, 95% pure nickel. Nickel, essentially, was considered in short supply in Japan during this time. So to find such a high-percentage nickel component on the plane, either the engine or its armament would be very unlikely.

Wes: I tell Larry we couldn't say exactly where the nickel had come from but that it was entirely possible that none of these items came from the kamikaze attack. It's very possible that all of these were merely souvenirs that were collected. So what do you think?



## Episode 5, 2006: U.S.S. Indianapolis Cleveland, Ohio

Larry: Well, that's good to know. We really have very little to remember him by. So this kind of gives us just a little bit more information.

Wes: I also tell Larry how, in his uncle's final mission delivering the atomic bomb to Tinian, Arthur Mitchneau and the crew of the Indy may have helped bring about an early end to the war in the Pacific. They were part of a greater picture the history of World War II, and your uncle was part of that story. And he was a real hero.

Larry: Well, that's good to hear. More than I knew before.

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