



Episode 901, Story 1 – Ni'ihau

Eduardo Pagan: This case asks whether these pristine metal parts tell a little known story of heroism from the Pearl Harbor attack. December 7th, 1941, Imperial Japan launches a devastating surprise attack on the US Pacific fleet. Three hundred and fifty-three carrier launched bombers and top secret Zero fighter planes deliver one of the most crippling blows in us military history. By days end, thousands of Americans lay dead or dying, and 18 warships have been sunk or damaged. The assault brought the very best from the military personnel defending Pearl Harbor. Fifteen Medals of Honor would be awarded, but the civilian population of the islands would also be sorely tested. Seventy years later, John Stover of Battle Creek, Michigan has a fragment of metal which may tell a little known story of heroism that day.

John Stover: I've always wondered if I was holding a piece of history or just a GI's story for his young sons.

John: Hello, Eduardo. Come on in.

Eduardo: Thank you.

John: These are parts that my dad said were from a Japanese Zero that crashed during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Eduardo: There is some pretty good heft to these pieces. Was he actually there during the attack on Pearl Harbor?



John: No he was there in late 1942 and 1943.

Eduardo: How did he come by these pieces? John says his father, a truck repairman and driver, was stationed on Oahu, and at some point, he was sent to do a job on a small island called Ni'ihau.

John: The Hawaiian National Guard had trucks that they couldn't repair so they sent Dad and some other mechanics to Ni'ihau to fix the trucks and that's where they found the plane and brought back the pieces.

Eduardo: You know I notice right away this marking, RE2. What do you know about that?

John: That was in there when we first saw them when Dad would tell us about them when we were kids.

Eduardo: And he never explained what those were.

John: Never did.

Eduardo: What can I find out for you?

John: I'd like to find out if they are from the Japanese Zero that attacked Pearl Harbor and landed on Ni'ihau.

Eduardo: I will bring you back some answers.



John: Thank you.

Eduardo: This I recognize from my auto shop 101 days back in high school. This is part of a combustion engine. The longer thinner piece is almost certainly some kind of engine valve. This other piece though, I don't have any idea what this might be. The only thing that I can make out of this is that there are these curious etchings here that I can read rather clearly that has me a little bit curious. If these pieces came from a Japanese Zero, why would they have English writing on it? The other thing is that I've never heard of the island of Ni'ihau, so let me do a little research and see what I can find. Here we go, 100 miles West of Honolulu, it's Hawaii's smallest inhabited island - with a population of around 200. It has been privately owned by one family since the 1860's. A listing calls Ni'ihau "the forbidden island." For access, visitors must request permission. This going to make for a challenging investigation.

Let me see what I can find out about the crash. Here's something, *New York Times*, December 17, 1941. It doesn't give a lot of information but it does confirm that there was a disabled enemy aircraft on the island of Ni'ihau. Here's another article – *Chicago Tribune* same dateline. It mentions that the Japanese pilot terrorized the island for several days. But there's nothing here that can help me identify the pieces, and I want to learn more about that Japanese pilot who attacked the island. I guess I'm on my way to Hawaii.

Pearl Harbor – a perfect island deepwater shelter. During 1940 as tension grew in the Pacific, President Franklin Roosevelt moved much of the US Pacific fleet to the harbor to deter Japanese expansion in the region, but on December 7, 1941, much of that fleet lay peacefully at anchor. Historian Daniel Martinez has invited



me to join him on Kilo Pier facing the harbor with a view of where the Japanese attack first began.

Daniel Martinez: Nice to meet you. Welcome to Pearl Harbor.

Eduardo: Thank you.

Eduardo: I'm investigating a story about some parts that were supposed to come from a crashed Japanese Zero on the island of Ni'ihau.

Daniel: This looks like somewhat of a rocker arm from an engine.

Eduardo: Daniel is not sure if the parts are from a Zero, but he explains how the Zero was at the cutting edge of the Japanese strike force that arrived over Pearl Harbor shortly before 8'oclock that December morning.

Daniel: The Japanese strike force is in that direction.

Eduardo: It's 230 miles to the north. They have now approached Oahu undetected. Suddenly, waves of aircraft poured from the sky.

Daniel: In a matter of moments the Pacific fleet is lying in agony.

Eduardo: Daniel explains how of the 125 Zeros that launched off of six Japanese aircraft carriers that day, the imperial fleet lost just nine. Three crashed on land, including one on Ni'ihau. It was piloted by airman first class, Shigenori Nishikaichi.



Daniel: He was a hit. This is going to spell his fate because he's not going to be able to make it back to his carrier, the Hiryu.

Eduardo: This is where we are, right at Pearl Harbor, and his route then went...

Daniel: ...West toward the island of Ni'ihau, right there. Roughly 100 miles.

Eduardo: Nishikaichi headed towards an island the Japanese military believed was uninhabited.

Daniel: That is what he was told and that way he could be picked up by a submarine and rescued.

Eduardo: Ni'ihau is still off limits and getting to the crash site will be a challenge, but I have my own secret weapon. The incredible research staff at *History Detectives* has done the impossible, got us access to the Ni'ihau. We're on our way there to talk to the owner of the island.

Helicopter pilot: It's a pretty good sized land mass, it's bigger than Manhattan. It's bigger than San Francisco.

Eduardo: Is it really?

Helicopter Pilot: Yeah.

Eduardo: Once farmed for sheep and cattle, it's been privately owned for almost



150 years.

Helicopter pilot: I see the truck at 12 o'clock. We'll be landing there.

Eduardo: It was Keith Robinson's ancestors who bought the island in the 1860's. Many of its mostly Hawaiian-speaking inhabitants remained on the land, and their descendents still live there today. Keith takes us close to the site where Nishikaichi crash landed. From family lore and the oral history of residents, Keith recounts the surprise landing.

So the plane comes bouncing along here, making a lot of racket I imagine as it came skidding along.

Keith Robinson: And kicking up a lot of dust as well. It came to rest somewhere around here.

Eduardo: Keith explains how one of the Hawaiian residents, ranch hand Howard "Hawila" Kaleohano was first on the scene.

Keith: Then the aviator was just recovering from his bouncing around and he looked up at Hawila and reached for his pistol, so Hawila decided to relieve him of his pistol.

Eduardo: The pilot spoke Japanese and some broken English. To translate, Hawila brought the stranger to the home of Yoshio Harada, a Japanese-American who worked on the island.



Keith: For the next few days, he was pretty much in the hands of the Ni'ihau people.

Eduardo: The remote islanders had no radio and knew nothing of the Pearl Harbor attack, but they grew increasingly suspicious of the pilot and his bullet riddled plane.

Keith: They realized something had gone far wrong in the wider world. Of course, they began to connect the aviator with whatever that something wrong was.

Eduardo: And then, for reasons unknown, Harada, the Japanese-American translating for the pilot, turned against his own neighbors, and helped the enemy flier escape his captors. To keep the top secret plane from falling into American hands, the pair set fire to the aircraft, and used its machine gun to terrorize the village. The rampage was short-lived. A local farmer, Ben Kanahale, took matters into his own hands, literally. Despite being shot three times the muscular Hawaiian rushed the pilot, and threw him head first against a stone wall. With the pilot dead, Harada turned his gun on himself. Years later, as a child, Keith says he even remembers playing on the plane's wreckage.

Eduardo: Was there an engine in the airplane that you played with?

Keith: No, no trace of any engine.

Eduardo: The story goes that this particular GI was only here for a couple of days, and he was sent actually to repair some of the trucks that were on the island. And these are some of the pieces that he claims that he took from the



downed Zero.

Keith says when the military arrived right after the incident, they made an official report and took parts of the plane for study.

Keith: I'm no engine mechanic, but I cannot say for sure that that part came from a plane that participated in the raid.

Eduardo: Keith says the Pacific Aviation Museum came to Ni'ihau in 2006 and excavated the remains of the zero for an exhibit. That museum is on Ford Island. During the Pearl Harbor attack this was an active naval station. I'm meeting with operations director, Scotty Scott.

Scotty Scott: Nice to meet you.

Eduardo: Scotty says the capture and killing of the Japanese pilot was largely overshadowed at the time by the horrific events at Pearl Harbor.

Scotty: It's a story of bravery and Bene Kanahale was heroic. He was awarded a Medal of Merit and a Purple Heart for the wounds he received.

Eduardo: The museum replicated what Nishikaichi's Zero would have looked like before it crashed. It's an exact match - with one difference; it doesn't have an original engine.

Scotty: And unfortunately, we can't match it against what's behind you because when this aircraft was restored they had no Sakae engines.



Eduardo: So if these pieces are authentic, where would it have fit on this airplane?

Scotty: Well, your best bet would be to talk to our restoration shop, the mechanics that actually work on the aircraft.

Eduardo: Designed for aircraft assembly in 1938, Hanger 79 bore witness to the attack on Pearl Harbor. It now houses an active restoration shop. I'm hoping aviation mechanic John Sterling can tell whether our parts came from a Japanese Zero.

Eduardo: Is there any way for us, one way or another, to verify if these pieces came from an American engine or a Japanese engine?

John: American engines were all measured in American standards, Japanese engines and Japanese aircraft are metric, so that would be able to get you a little bit closer on.

Eduardo: Well, let's see what we can find out.

John: We'll go over to the work bench over here and we'll see what we can do. I've got a gauge right here, and this is metric gauge. You try to measure the pitch, the threads per inch. You have different templates here and they just need to be able to mesh. This one here actually measures to 1.50 millimeters. This is a metric thread.



Eduardo: So that confirms it then. These pieces are definitely not American?

John: Yes, this is not American. This is kind of a neat thing. There's a couple of markings on here, looks like it's stamped in there. This is Japanese Kanji and so is this, so that's, wow.

John: They're real tiny. I don't know if you can make those out.

Eduardo: I completely missed that. There they are. You're absolutely right.

John: This is a Japanese part.

Eduardo: Our story appears to be coming together. Although John can't be certain our part came from the Zero that crashed on Ni'ihau.

John: You'd have to go to a shop that's restoring a Zero.

Eduardo: Larry Will and the folks at vintage aircraft limited in Fort Collins, Colorado have restored numerous World War II planes.

Eduardo: Very nice to meet you. Is this what I think it is?

Larry Will: Yes it is.

Eduardo: Larry's team has been commissioned by the Evergreen Aviation and Space Museum in Oregon, to build a Zero, from spare parts acquired from sources around the world.



This is fantastic. I've got some pieces to show I've been researching a story on these two pieces that may or may not have come from a Japanese Zero. What do you think?

Larry: It's very possible they are.

Eduardo: If they are Zero parts – he says it's an astonishing find.

Larry: They're very rare.

Eduardo: What makes it rare?

Larry: The Japanese actually as part of the armistice they had to destroy their war machine. So most of the airplanes were just destroyed after the war. Blueprints and everything.

Eduardo: One of the things I found very curious is if you look at it you can see Japanese markings.

Larry: Let's take a look.

Eduardo: But if you look here there's the English letter R and then E and then the number 2. Why is that?

Larry: Let me show you.



Eduardo: So what do we have here?

Larry: We have a Japanese Sakae 21 engine. It belongs to Evergreen Air and Space Museum.

Eduardo: Are those bullet holes?

Larry: Yes they are. It's actually from a crashed Zero. Would you like to take it apart?

Eduardo: I'd love to, thanks. Larry wants to show me something on his Zero's rocker arm.

Eduardo: There we go.

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Larry: Pull it out of there. Let's take a look right up here. You see this RE2?

Eduardo: Yeah.

Larry: What do you see on that one?

Eduardo: RS1

Larry: There you go.

Eduardo: Why would the Japanese use English writing on their parts?



Larry: Because the Japanese were actually building radial engines under license from Pratt & Whitney and Wright previous to World War II, so I think it was just industry standard that they had continued to use that during the war time. The S is obviously for intake instead of exhaust.

Eduardo: But something is still amiss. Although both have English markings, Larry's rocker arm is clearly different from ours. What Larry tells me next will certainly be of interest to John.

Well John, I thought I knew about the history of Pearl Harbor; but, in trying to authenticate these pieces, I discovered a little known story of World War II.

I tell John about what transpired on the island of Ni'ihau that fateful week following the attack on Pearl Harbor, and that not long after the incident, the military had stationed personnel on Ni'ihau to defend the island, just like his dad had told him.

John: Well that's great, that's what I wanted to hear.

Eduardo: Now as to whether these pieces are authentic from a Japanese Zero from World War II, I think you'll be intrigued by what I have to tell you.

When we disassembled an authentic Zero engine, what we found inside wasn't exactly what we expected. Why the difference between these two rocker arms? This one is clearly different.

Larry: This is off of a Sakae 21 a little later variant. The straight rocker puts it into



the earlier category the Sakae 12 engine which would put it into the timeframe of the Pearl Harbor attack. Congratulations for having a piece of history!

Eduardo: I'm quite confident that these pieces came from the island of Ni'ihau from the downed aircraft of Shigenori Nishikaichi.

John: To have a piece of history like that of the attack on Pearl Harbor, I'm glad I contacted you.

Eduardo: Thank you, it's been great.

John: Well, thank you very much.

Eduardo: It has never been fully understood why the Japanese-American translator Yoshio Harada helped the pilot escape his Hawaiian captors. Two months after the Pearl Harbor attack, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt issued executive order 9066, resulting in the relocation of over 100,000 West coast residents with Japanese ancestry. Although Harada's actions that day and their consequences still inspire debate, there's no conclusive evidence that his behavior influenced the president. For example, FBI chief, J. Edgar Hoover, sent the White House a personal memo describing the events on Ni'ihau, but it is dated March 28, 1942 – more than a month after Executive Order 9066.

