



Episode 4, 2012: WWII Patches

Mike McCune: My name is Mike McCune, I live over by the Barksdale Air Force Base. When I hear a plane flying over, I'll run outside. The sound of jet engines and bomber planes, it's just raw power. I have a brother named Jack. About four years ago, Jack was dumpster diving for cardboard boxes. What he found instead was a military style footlocker. Inside was a whole stack of World War II paperwork. They all belonged to a World War II pilot named Lionel Potter, but what caught his eye were these. I'm pretty sure that these were patches that were worn by a bomber pilot. I posted pictures of 'em on a whole bunch of different military memorabilia sites. One guy emailed me saying that these patches are just unidentifiable. So, what I want to know is what these patches are.

Wes Cowan: Wes Cowan here reporting for duty, and I'm a sucker for World War II aviation. Woah. Got a bird over a cloud dropping this, uh, egg with fins on it. I'd guess they're, you know, some sort of Air Force patches, right?

Mike: That would be my guess, definitely.

Wes: The service records found with the patches list Potter as a B-24 pilot with the 320th Squadron of the 90th Bombardment Group, from 1942 to 1943.

Where was he stationed?

Mike: Well, one of the places that he was stationed was New Guinea.

Wes: New Guinea was a frontline in the Pacific War.

So, he got the Distinguished Flying Cross. Was it with the, with the rest of this stuff?

Mike: No, it wasn't with it. It was just the patches and the papers.

Wes: Mike Says Potter's medals appear to have come at a price.

Mike: Very severe combat service. Seven emergency landings in a row.

Wes: "Present emotional status: Abnormal. Terror dreams. Restlessness. Tenseness."
Wow!

Mike wants to learn more about what Potter went through in New Guinea, and whether these patches can help unlock that story.

So this is not the insignia of the 320th Bomb Squadron?

Mike: No, those aren't.

Wes: Well, okay, who's...who do they belong to?

Mike: You know, I would really like to find that out.

Wes: You know, the papers that were with these patches, I think are just as interesting if not more interesting than the patches themselves because they tell something about the guy, Lionel Potter. It talks about his mental condition and physical condition after the war. And there's some really revealing stuff there.

Whatever these patches symbolized, they sure didn't come off an assembly line.

The beak and head don't come across very well, but this dark wing dropping this bomb through the clouds is clearly what is trying to be shown here.

The Story recalls one of the most important, personal investigations I've done for *History Detectives*. In 2008, I investigated a World War II diary written by another B-24 pilot, William Moran, who died in action. We reunited that diary with the daughter he never knew.

I remember from that investigation that B-24s were known as "Flying Coffins." They flew daylight raids over enemy territory, were hard to escape in an emergency, and had an appalling casualty rate. In the fall of 1942, nearly a year after Pearl Harbor, the first squadrons were dispatched to the Pacific theatre. The mission of the 90th Bomb Group: to slow the near relentless Japanese advance towards Australia. All the patches of the 90th Bomb Group are listed in this unit history. Their symbol was the "Jolly Roger", but each of the squadrons had their own insignia. Potter's squadron, the 320th, wore the "Moby Dick." But it's just as Mike reported, our patches are nowhere in the record books. The one person who could tell me what these patches are, and what he experienced in New Guinea, is Potter himself.

Here's a Lionel B. Potter. Born 1917. Died in 1998. His last residence is listed in Riverside, California. That's where Mike's brother Jack found the footlocker. Got to be the same guy, but there's not much else here to go on. I'm going to need some help on trying to run down who he really was.

While my office is looking for a family member, I'm meeting historian Chuck Clark. He's studied the US Combat Units which fought in New Guinea.

I don't know if you've ever seen these patches?

Chuck Clark: I've not ever seen this particular patch, no. Just looking at the style of these, they look Second World War to me.

Wes: He says the patches are typical of how young aircrews in World War II literally wore their pride.

Chuck: Remember the B-24 is an unpressurized bomber, so they wear these heavy jackets. And they put these patches on them so that when you're...when you're hanging out in...in the...the post bar, whatever, on...you're on liberty, everybody can know what squadron you come from. It's really neat, by the way.

Wes: Chuck confirms the 90th Bombardment Group saw some of the fiercest fighting of the Pacific Theatre, throwing themselves at the Japanese forces which menaced Australia.

Chuck: One of their greatest successes was the so-called Battle of The Bismarck Sea, where they sunk several Japanese transports.

Wes: While it's not clear from the documents if Potter was in that attack, Chuck says the 25 year old was certainly in the thick of the fighting. He notes that out of 46 missions that Potter flew, 26 were attacked by enemy planes.

And then you come over here to his personality estimate and present emotional status, "abnormal", operational fatigue, "mild", under severity.

Chuck: Right. It looks like the way they've got it underlined here, uh, friends or colleagues killed, is the, the specific, uh, combat experience. He has the startle reaction, bad dreams, restlessness, and tenseness. They're just beginning to figure out what we would call PTSD. What they called combat fatigue or combat exhaustion.

Wes: Chuck explains that the post traumatic stress disorder, which Potter almost certainly had, leaves a complex and potentially long lasting psychological scar. But during World War II, it was not so well understood.

Chuck: The standard treatment for mild cases of combat fatigue was a shot of whiskey, a mild sedative, and six hours sleep at the battalion aid station. And then you go back in.

Wes: Oh, man, you're kidding me? That's it?

Chuck: I'm not.

Wes: Although he at least partially recovered, he was one of the 1.3 million American soldiers who received treatment for battle fatigue during WWII, but who often found difficulty talking about their experiences.

Chuck: For the most part, they come home, they talk to other veterans about it. They do not talk to civilians.

Wes: Chuck suggests another veteran might be able to help identify the patches and give us more information on what Potter encountered in the Pacific. Now 89, Wiley Woods is one of the last surviving veterans of the 90th Bombardment Group. We're meeting at the Commemorative Air Force Museum in Addison, Texas.

Wiley was a navigator in the 320th squadron. He didn't know Potter, but he confirms that his fellow airman had flown into a nightmare of hot steel and violence.

Wiley Woods: Potter came at a very bad time because the Japanese had air superiority, and the 320th Squadron usually was intercepted every time they went on a mission.

Wes: Wiley explains that mission after mission, Potter and his fellow airmen climbed into the B-24s knowing that the Japanese Zero's would attack. And mission after mission they were attacked, but refused to back down, flying deep over enemy territory, despite shocking causality rates.

Wiley: The Japanese were very good flyers, no question about it, and of course we suffered some losses.

Wes: They must have been scared witless, weren't they?

Wiley: Well, you learned to live with it. I mean you had learned to accept whatever was in store. You had no other choice.

Wes: These patches were in his affects and, do you recognize what bomb group those are from?

Wiley: No. It, uh, was not the squadron patch of Lionel Potter.

Wes: What...and what did that look like?

Wiley: I'll show you. Now that is the 320th patch.

Wes: Now why'd they call it "Moby Dick"?

Wiley: Well, the crew had been very successful in sinking Japanese ships, so they, uh, felt that that would be appropriate for their airplane.

Wes: It's the same design I saw earlier, but something about it catches my eye.

When you look at these two patches, the coloration and the pattern is identical.

Wiley: It certainly is.

Wes: These patches look to me like they were made at the same place.

Wiley: Uh, most of 'em were made in Australia.

Wiley says when the 90th went on leave, they hired locals to embroider their designs.

The patches are handmade and similar, but I still don't know what my patch represents. Time to check in with the office.

Ashley Karitis: Hey, Wes.

Wes: What have you got for me?

Ashley: Good news, I found Lionel Potter's son, Bruce, and I'm going to have him meet you at the Veterans Memorial in Birmingham.

Wes: I'm on my way

Bruce Potter is the second of Lionel's three sons. Growing up, Bruce often wondered about his dad's war experiences.

What did your dad tell you about the war?

Bruce Potter: Actually, he didn't like to talk much about it. Every time I mentioned to him, he kind of push... pushed it aside. It was pretty traumatic for him.

Wes: After Lionel Potter died, Bruce found his father's diary, and came face to face with a part of his father he never knew.

Wes: "January 10th, 11th and 12th, 1943. It's amazing how you can go out and kill a couple hundred men, and perhaps have a few of yours missing or killed, and come back, sit down and relax at a rubber of Bridge."

Bruce: It's heavy stuff.

Wes: That's very heavy. Yeah.

Potter had been eyewitness to the grisly aftermath of the famous Battle of the Bismarck Sea, where Japanese destroyers and troop transports were sunk by American bombers and PT attack boats.

"March 5th, 1943. The PT boats having polished off the damaged ships, were touring at high speeds through the Jap landing force, having a great time strafing and throwing hand grenades into the crowded Japanese lifeboats."

It's a shocking detail – a glimpse of the appalling violence that Potter witnessed and lived through.

Wow. It's all about becoming inured, or used to, death.

Bruce shows me another entry that haunts him, as it did his father.

"September 28th, 1943. What I'm about to describe will long live in my memory. After turning off our bomb run, we were jumped by six Zeros who were really eager to add a B-24 to their trophy room. Mine.

One pass knocked the left waist gun out of commission. Another pass caused a twenty millimeter to explode in the tail turret which was already injured. I saw this silver Zero come right straight at me with wings smoking. The bullet went through the fuse box. Two inches anywhere but lower, and you're author would have been a regrettable casualty."

The diary is an extraordinary document, and answers my question about Potter's combat service.

I want to show you this stuff I think you're going to be very interested in.

But what about the patches?

Bruce: Oh. I never thought I'd see these again.

Wes: Bruce says the patches and documents had been in his house growing up, but went missing possibly during a move. He never had a chance to study the records.

These are not officially recognized by the Air Force as the insignia of the 320th Bomb Squad. Did your dad ever write about 'em at all?

Bruce: No, he never wrote about 'em, but I do know what they are.

Wes: You know, it was a great story for me. I love, uh, World War II history.

I tell Mike how Potter had been made his way back, literally and also psychologically, from some of the bloodiest fighting of the Pacific Theatre. Like Mike, I'd struggled with the mystery of the bomb-dropping bird.

So the real question is, what are these patches?

Mike: It's been killing me for all this time.

Wes: Mike doesn't know it, but Bruce Potter is about to solve his mystery.

Mike: I mean, if I could find out what these patches and the bomb group and squadron that they belong to---

Bruce: Does this look kind of familiar?

Mike: Hey, that's the same patch. Wow. That is unreal.

Bruce: I'm Bruce Potter. I'm his son.

Mike: Oh, my God. Nice to meet you.

Bruce: You too, Sir.

Bruce: This is a patch that I had from my dad, that I went ahead and had sewed up on a leather vest for my motorcycle riding.

Bruce: That's the, uh, 320th Bomb Squadron patch that my dad and his crews came up with, for their group of bomber pilots.

Wes: Bruce doesn't know how many of the patches were actually made, but believes his father had them created for his fellow crew members. They'd not been part of the recorded history of the 320th squadron, until now.

Mike: So they designed this patch and...

Bruce: They did.

Wes: What do you think of this?

Mike: That looks like, uh, an original little drawing of the patch.

Wes: Now we know that what he was really drawing was a bald eagle. And it didn't quite come out on the patches here.

Mike: Oh, really.

Bruce: No.

Mike: I could never figure out that bird. You know, I have to say one thing is, uh, these belonged to your dad. So, you know, with my honor, I'd like to present it all back to you.

Bruce: Well, how about we do this? How about you keep one and I keep one?

Mike: That would be awesome.

Bruce: OK.