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MIA HUNTERS - LATEST PRESS RELEASE:



Press Release : 11/07/03

AMERICAN FORGIVES JAPANESE PILOT FOR SHOOTING DOWN HIS UNCLE. AND KAMIKAZE COMMANDER'S WIDOW REVEALS SECRET GRAVE OF ANOTHER LOST WW.II US PILOT.

The telephone call to the MIA Hunters was totally unexpected. She was the widow of a Japanese WW.II Commanding Officer of a classified Special Forces Unit. It was much later that Mrs.Shimao would add that her late husband's unit was a little known human Kamikaze Torpedo Squadron and that his treatment of an American airman may be one of the War's most extraordinary secrets.

AMERICAN RELATIVE OF WW.II MIA HOLDS REMEMBRANCE CEREMONY WITH JAPANESE PILOT WHO SHOT HIM DOWN.

Two Minnesotans, father/son Bryan and Christopher Moon, both MIA hunters, had recently flown to Japan and on to the islands of Amami Oshima, midway between southern Japan and Okinawa. The purpose of their visit was to bring closure to a quite different WW.II event when US Navy pilot Robert Westbrook, on April 3rd 1945, was shot down by Japanese fighter pilot ace Hayao Fujimoto. The Moon's had brought to the Japanese islands Max Westbrook, a police lieutenant from Austin Texas and nephew of the US MIA pilot to meet for the first time, the man who had shot down his uncle.

Hayao Fujimoto described to Max Westbrook the combat over the waters with his uncle near Amami Oshima. He was one of 40 Japanese pilots whose mission was to attack US aircraft carriers. They came face-to-face with a squadron of US Navy fighter aircraft. In the conflict that followed, US Navy pilot Robert Westbrook, on his first combat mission, was

seen to shoot down one of the Japanese fighter aircraft only then to be shot down by Hayao Fujimoto. Lt. Westbrook was last seen alive in his parachute descending into the waters miles from the island. He became another of America's MIA's.

The MIA hunters had been researching for leads to the pilot's possible resting place for two years. Christopher Moon, a qualified scuba diver, checked out sightings of underwater aircraft wrecks around the island some as deep as 150 feet. But for the American police lieutenant and the veteran Japanese pilot, now inseparable on Amami Oshima, some closure would come on the waters near where pilot Robert Westbrook was last seen.

On a chartered boat, a Buddhist Monk would lead a memorial service to lost American and Japanese airmen, and to all others who had died in the war as the American and the Japanese pilot stood side-by-side. A Catholic Priest then also paid homage to the deceased. Two crosses and flowers were launched to drift on the waters yet mysteriously came together as they floated away perhaps recognizing in their unison, the spirit of the two men who had also come together.

From a press conference on the island in which the Americans and the Japanese pilot told their stories, newspapers and television reported the historic memorial service of the missing pilot and also asked for any information on other lost American pilots in the hope that an islander would come forward with more news...



SECRET GRAVE OF AMERICAN MIA REVEALED BY WIDOW OF JAPANESE KAMIKAZE TORPEDO COMMANDER.

The next day came the unexpected and surprising telephone call from the widow of a Japanese WW.II Commanding Officer of a Special Forces human Kamikaze Torpedo Squadron based at that time on a neighboring island. Mrs Shimao had seen the press reports on the memorial service by the MIA hunters and reported that another American airman had been shot down and landed on the neighboring island of Kakeroma. She stated that he was found dead in his parachute and his body brought to her husband.

In one of the War's most unprecedented, and to this day still secret actions Mrs Shimao's late husband directed his men to bury the US airman in a small local civilian cemetery and had a cross placed over his grave. The local civilians protested and kept removing the cross but his men were directed to keep replacing it. To verify this extraordinary report of a Japanese officer's treatment of a fallen American airman, the MIA hunters traveled to the southern end of Amami Oshima where they chartered a boat to reach the more remote island of Kakeroma and the cemetery which now rests unattended in a near deserted village.

An elderly lady who has lived in the village since pre WW.II was the first to confirm the story of an American being buried in the cemetery. An interpreter then translated a second villagers confirmation of these circumstances. The elderly lady guided the MIA hunters to the cemetery and pointed to the now overgrown grave of the US MIA airman. The next day, after assimilating the news of this burial of an American MIA which has been a local secret for nearly 60 years, the Moon's with their interpreter, visited the widow, Mrs Shimao.

After the war her husband had become one of Japan's most respected authors so she autographed some of his books as gifts to her visitors. She described her husband as a "humanitarian" which accounted for his treatment of the fallen American and his insistence that the cross on his grave be replaced and his grave respected. In one of Mr. Shimao's books were pictures of him in uniform and also of caves in which the kamikaze torpedoes were stored. On a second visit to the island of Kakeroma, the caves at waters edge were discovered. Inside one of them rests an unarmed monster 54 foot long torpedo which once carried a 3,000 pound explosive warhead, five times that of conventional American torpedoes, one strike from which would sink an aircraft carrier.

In 1945, these islands were all that stood between mainland Japan and the advancing American fleet. The Kamikaze torpedoes and their crews, hidden in the caves on these islands, were a last ditch suicidal response by Japan to stop the American warship armada. Not far from the caves is the cemetery in which the American MIA airman lay buried.

To honor the deceased American airman, the elderly lady conducted a simple Japanese ceremony placing soil from the grave on a makeshift "boat", covered with flowers and with four incense sticks. She walked to the shore and cast the memorial on the water, kneeling at the waters edge as the memorial drifted gently out toward the sea.

The MIA hunters last talk with Mrs Shimao elicited from her memory the name of the buried American who she repeatedly said was Norman Wheatridge, shot down sometime in Febuary, March or April 1945. Upon return to the USA, the MIA hunters began their follow-up research to find out if, in fact, there was a Norman Wheatridge shot down and missing. The preliminary studies revealed that there was a Norman Westervelt who is an MIA pilot from a B-29 bomber lost on March 4th 1945. His crew of nine all survived and were presumably picked up from the water by a US submarine or rescue aircraft, both of which operated in those waters for the purpose of rescuing downed airmen.

The search for background on Norman Westervelt and his surviving crew members continues as does the search for nearly 68,000 WW.II MIA's.



Japanese fighter pilot ace Hayao Fujimoto & his fellow pilots.

Press Release : 9/23/03

JAPANESE FIGHTER ACE JOINS MINNESOTANS IN SEARCH FOR AMERICAN MIA PILOT HE SHOT DOWN IN WW.II

In the closing months of WW.II, Japanese fighter pilot ace Hayao Fujimoto shot down American fighter pilot Lt. Robert Lafayette Westbrook 111 over shark-infested waters north of Okinawa. The Japanese pilot, now 80 years old, will join two Minnesotan MIA Hunters, father/son Bryan and Christopher Moon in their search for the American pilot who was shot down nearly 60 years ago.

Accompanying the Moon's, will be a police lieutenant from Austin, Texas. Lt. Max Westbrook is the nephew of the MIA pilot and will be meeting Hayao Fujimoto, who shot down his uncle, for the first time. On April 3rd 1945, the American pilot, from McNeill, Arkansas, flying a Grumman Wildcat naval fighter, was operating from the converted aircraft carrier Bataan and flying his first combat mission. It would be his last. The allied landings on the island of Okinawa had begun two days earlier. Westbrook's squadron was to attack airfields on the Japanese held islands 100 miles north of Okinawa, Amami Oshima and Kikaijima. they were met at 8,000 feet over the islands by a force of Japanese fighters. Japanese fighter ace Hayao Fujimoto intercepted Westbrook and vividly recalls even today, the fearsome combat in the skies when he shot down Robert Westbrook and last saw him alive in his parachute descending toward the water between the two islands.

Pilot Fujimoto circled Westbrook as he descended to 5,000 feet when Fujimoto returned to the conflict. But having been shot down by an American pilot only two months earlier who did not shoot at Fujimoto in his parachute, he did not shoot at Westbrook after the American had bailed out of his stricken fighter. It was the last time anyone had seen Lt. Robert Lafayette Westbrook 111 and he became another WW.II MIA. But the pilot who shot him down always wondered what had happened to the American airman that day in April 1945.

It was a press report in Austin, Texas of the Moon's successful mission to Sicily when they found the grave of a WW.II Minnesotan pilot, that generated the interest of police lieutenant Robert Westbrook. He immediately corresponded with the Moon's and briefed them on his uncle's last mission which included further correspondence with 51 year old Japanese-American Henry Sakaida, a WW.II historian and nursery owner in Temple City, California.

Sakaida had brought together a number of WW.II Japanese and American combatants and had introduced Hayao Fujimoto to the Westbrook family. They had corresponded but not met.

The theory most accepted on Westbrook's disappearance in 1945 is that he landed in the water and drowned. A dinghy, believed to be his, was seen the next day by searching American aircraft which seem to support this theory. But the Moon's have a counter theory based upon the older Moon's wartime experience. Born in England and living in a coastal town during the Battle of Britain, he was witness to many aerial conflicts. Many pilots parachuted from their damaged aircraft into the water off the coast of Britain. And in every case, whether friend or foe, boats would rescue these airmen. The Moon's believe that if the Japanese islanders also witnessed the conflict, they would not ignore a parachuting pilot and Westbrook could therefore have been taken ashore by a fishing boat or rescue crew.

Based upon the eye witness report of pilot Fujimoto, Westbrook is believed to have come down in the water north-east of Kikaijima and drifted toward Amami Oshima. To an article on this subject in the Amami Oshima newspaper, a dive school on the island reports that in 80 feet of water offshore lay the remains of the nose section of a WW.II aircraft. Christopher Moon is a qualified scuba diver and he will make the dive to establish whether this could have been Westbrook's aircraft.

Supporting the search program are two ex Northwest Airlines Japanese employees from the Company's Tokyo office. Atsuko Amagi served as an Executive Secretary for three vice presidents of NWA. Another bi-lingual retiree is Hiroshi Masui who served 27 years at NWA in a variety of management roles. Because the search of the downed airman involving the Japanese pilot and the MIA's nephew is so unique, the city officials on the Islands are planning a special commemorative event on a fishing boat. At this ceremony, a Buddhist Monk and a Priest will conduct a service as Westbrook and Fujimoto cast bouquets of flowers upon the water.

On October 1st, MIA Hunters Bryan and Christopher Moon, with Austin police lieutenant Max Westbrook leave for Tokyo where they will first make contact with Hayao Fujimoto before flying on to the islands. It is on these islands that a search for an American MIA coupled with the mutual interest of Japanese pilot Hayao Fujimoto and Max Westbrook, the nephew of the man he shot down, will come to a close - one way or the other.

END

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At the B-24 crash site in Papua, New Guinea

Press Release - 9/12/03

Eleven American MIA's, missing for 60 years have been found by two Minnesotans following a million to one coincidence.

In 1943, a top secret WW.11 B-24 bomber, specially radar equipped for low-level bombing of Japanese shipping at night ,with a crew of eleven, disappeared over mountainous jungle in northern Papua New Guinea. Previous expeditions to find them had failed.

But a remarkable coincidence via the Internet sparked a new search which was to lead to the discovery of the long lost bomber. It began when Christopher Moon, of Shakopee, MN, intercepted a message on the Internet. Christopher and his father Bryan operate an MIA search and retrieval group called MIA HUNTERS with 32 MIA discoveries to their credit.

The message intercepted by Christopher Moon was from a Carolyn Fox, origination unknown, who was seeking help to find a Joseph Thompson, a family relative WW.11 MIA. Joseph was a private in the Army Air Corps. He was attached to the AAF, 43rd Brigade, 63rd Squadron. His plane B-24 serial number 42-40475 went down on December 3rd, 1945 over Papua New Guinea. 60 years since his disappearance, her message was being read by one of the few who could possibly solve the mystery. Christopher shared the email with his father.

Carolyn Fox could be anywhere on the worldwide Internet system which essentially meant anywhere in the world. Bryan's follow-up Email message to Carolyn requested more details on the MIA and a response by Email adding that he lived in Cannon Falls, Minnesota, USA. The telephone rang the next day. It was Carolyn Fox responding. She said "You won't believe this. I live in Cannon Falls, Minnesota, USA !" A million to one connection had been made and a new search for Joseph Thompson's bomber had begun. Carolyn passed on to the Moon's all the evidence she had gathered from US, Papua New Guinea and Australian sources which focused on the Owen Stanley Range of mountainous jungle near Cape Ward Hunt on the north shore of the island. The inhospitable terrain is not unfamiliar to the Moon's who lived in similar jungle 100 miles to the north three years ago. At that time,

living in a native village, they discovered another lost WW.11 aircraft which led to the recovery of the pilot and a Red Cross staffer "passenger" from St.Louis Park, MN.

After each MIA discovery, the Moon's pass on the location information to the US Army's Central Identification Laboratory (CILHI) in Hawaii who then retrieve the remains of MIA's, conduct their forensic tests to authenticate identity and eventually return the remains to relatives. But in this case, the Army's search teams plus another independent searcher had been unsuccessful in finding the lost American bomber with the serial number of 42-40475 and its eleven crew members. Last known to be returning from an armed reconnaissance mission over islands north of PNG, its final radio message was "Why aren't lights on?" presumably as it could not find its land mark. A two day search at that time also failed to find any trace of the aircraft.

The Moon's studied all the evidence which pointed to the small coastal town of Benoin in Cape Ward Hunt. One report identified a local native by the name of John Arete as having in his possession a crew-member's dog-tag. If this was accurate, clearly this town and this man were the keys to finding the bomber. 30 miles to the south east is the town of Popondetta which provided airfield access to the area. From here a boat trip along the coast and a banana boat to Benoin would take searchers to a cross-country starting point.

And here may be the biggest obstacle. Papuans are very protective of their territories and equally possessive of aircraft wrecks which could offer financial benefits. Consequently, they are seldom willing to share their knowledge with strangers unless they see reciprocal advantages. This was the case when villagers demanded \$15,000 from the Moon's before transferring to them the remains of the two MIA's they were seeking three years ago. This sum was finally negotiated down to \$2,000. Later, a US Army recovery team, guided by the Moon's, reached the village when all the native men were absent and the women, fearful of the Army's presence, handed over the remains without receiving any financial benefit.

The Moon's therefore believed previous searchers may have failed because they were unwilling to offer the natives some payment for their "services." With this in mind, it was decided to make a different approach by sending in a group of more compatible fellow Papuans with the means to extend some financial benefit to willing guides. Three years prior, the Moon's had worked with an educated Papuan who became their on-site liaison, guide and interpreter. Michael Roy worked for an accounting firm in Lae, 100 miles west of Cape Ward Hunt and two Papuans from that area promptly joined Michael for the search. The Moon's sent directions, maps and funds with specific orders not to interfere with the crash site if found since this would complicate the US Army's follow-up retrieval and forensic procedures.

Michael Roy and his two colleagues reached Deboin at 5.30pm on Tuesday, June 24th after a banana-boat trip. The small town of 600 people received them well and they enquired about the man John Arete who reportedly had a crew-man's dog-tag. There was no such person but there was a John Atade who had left to become a missionary. His father Johnson Karigo was the village Chief who, with his son, had originally found the lost bomber on May 12th 2002 and was the only other person who knew the aircraft's location.

The Chief agreed to guide Michael and his party to the crash site, a torturous six hour walk climbing mountains and thick jungle, wading through water and almost impassable thick bush which cut and poison the skin. They reached the crash site only to find that on hitting the mountainside, the aircraft had broken into pieces which were scattered and partially

buried. The fuselage was half full of soil. All four engines were at the site but one wing had settled near a village.

After taking photographs at the crash site, the Chief guided Michael back to Deboin offering to cut a path through the thick bush if the Moon's came to Deboin. When asked about the dog-tag, the Chief said he had dug inside the fuselage of the bomber where he had found it bearing the name Robert E Frank. Aircraft records list him as S/Sgt Gunner on the B-24 Serial Number 42-40475, the same B-24 as crewman Joseph Thompson, the first name given to the Moon's by Carolyn Fox.. The Chief no longer had the dog-tag but had recorded the details in a book. Curiously, these details also showed that on the back of Frank's dog-tag was written the name "Mrs. Blanche Terry, Plain Field, NJ." Subsequent check revealed that Mrs. Blanche Terry was the airman's mother who had remarried and was since deceased.

The evidence of the Robert Frank dog-tag coming from the wreck makes it virtually certain that the lost B-24 Serial Number 42-40475, missing since December 3rd 1943 has at last been discovered. Positive identification of crew members will come from the forensic tests conducted by the Army and the families of eleven WW.11 MIA's will finally receive their loved ones back in the United States for burial. One of those crew members is believed to come from northern Minnesota.

To retrieve the bodies of the lost airmen, the CILHI will require an area near the crash site cleared of trees and brush to be used as a helicopter landing site. Here they will land a 13-man team consisting of a team leader, team sergeant, two medics, two forensic anthropologists, an explosive ordnance disposal technician, a photographer, a communication technician, a mechanic and several mortuary affairs specialists. They and their supplies will likely be delivered to the site by helicopter for up to a grueling 45-day deployment.

After reviewing the evidence of the crash site retrieved by Michael Roy, the Moon's decided more input was needed to better guide the CILHI Recovery Team. Early in August they therefore directed a second expedition to photograph the aircraft remains in greater detail and to locate a nearby site which could be cleared for a helicopter landing.

The second visit revealed that a helicopter site, ten minutes from the aircraft wreckage, had already been cleared.. Apparently, a search team had previously landed there but had not found the crash site. Since the first visit by Michael Roy, sections of the aircraft wreckage had already been pirated by local natives, engine cylinders for instance, being taken and doctored for use as cooking pots. This makes it all the more important for an early rescue of the eleven MIA's human remains by the CILHI's Recovery Team.

To guide the CILHI to the crash site, a detailed report, maps and photographs have been sent to them and the Moon's stand ready to provide further support if called upon to do so. The Minnesota MIA HUNTERS have raised their total of MIA's discovered to 43. Their next mission takes them to islands north of Okinawa in October, 2003.

END

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