

AirSpace Season 3 Episode 6: The Long Way Home

Intro music up then under

Nick:

Welcome to Airspace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Nick.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Emily:

And I'm Emily.

Nick:

There are around 82,000 American service members listed as missing in action between World War II and the present day, and more than half of those were lost at sea, often when their airplanes were shot down over open water.

Matt:

Recent technology like robotics submersibles and advanced sonar that can detect and explore wreckage and DNA matching have made it easier for recovery operations to find those airplanes and for the military to identify the remains of service members that went down with them.

Emily:

Today, we'll follow one service member's story from an aerial battle in the Pacific in 1944 to recovery and repatriation more than 70 years later. And we'll talk to the head of an organization that leads some of these recoveries, coming up on Airspace.

Music under and out

Emily:

So Nick mentioned that about 82,000 American service members are missing in action sort of from World War II through until now. Do we know how many of those 82,000 were lost just during World War II?

Nick:

Yeah. Yeah. It's most of them. It is something like 72,000 of the MIAs. 72,000 out of 82,000 went missing during World War II. So it makes sense if you think about it, because not only was World War II, World War II, which we've referenced before as one of the largest events in human history, but there was extraordinarily heavy fighting in the Pacific, which is of course the largest ocean on the planet. And with so much fighting over water, a lot of people went down into the ocean. And if you go down in the ocean,

it's obviously harder to find and recover you than it would be if you fell on a battlefield in France or Italy, for instance. That makes sense, right?

Emily:

Yeah. It's the, sort of, statistical probability. You're going to land in the thing that covers the most space, and in this case, it's the ocean.

Nick:

Although, 'lost at sea' is daunting and mysterious for a reason. I don't want to say it's easier, but there's a methodology to finding where soldiers and sailors may have gone down in the Pacific that makes it possible. It's slow, it's painstaking, but it is possible to actually track down somebody that went into the ocean decades and decades ago. Particularly when you consider that some of the areas of the Pacific saw extraordinarily heavy fighting. So some of these wrecks are really concentrated in a particular geographic area.

Matt:

And our ability and our methods that you mentioned, we have methods for looking. Those methods have only gotten better over time with new technologies and our ability to explore the ocean.

Nick:

Like in this case where we're going to start today's story in the Western Pacific. On July 27th, 1944, Navy radioman Walter Mintus was in the lead airplane of an attack squadron of TBM Avenger Torpedo Bombers. Mintus' plane was flown by pilot, Lieutenant Richard Houle and also manned by a gunner. They took off from the USS Jacinto and we're near the Island of Palau, which is East of the Philippines.

The group was attacking a Japanese Naval base near Malakal Harbor. The plane was three to five miles out ahead of the other aircraft when it disappeared from view. And when the rest of the squadron mates got over the area, they saw a burning wreckage in the water of the Harbor, and they saw one of the crew members from the aircraft with a parachute standing on top of the wreck. That crew member was never recovered and all three of them were declared missing in action and later presumed dead.

Now, all of this took place one day short of Walter Mintus' 23rd birthday. His family received a telegram letting them know that he'd gone missing, and they also received a 45 record that he had recorded and sent home just before he disappeared. And that was the last that anyone in the Mintus family heard from Walter for more than 70 years.

Emily:

In those 70 years, Walter Mintus was not forgotten by his family. They always held out hope that he might be found. His nephew Rich Kozak always remembered his fun Uncle Bert.

Rich Kozak (Interview):

I remember him coming to our farm when I was a young kid and playing with us. We lived on a farm. We used to have these big hay piles and he'd throw us up on top of them hay piles and had a lot of fun with this. I remember he was a real fun guy. Other than that, that's the last I pretty much knew of him.

Emily:

So many aircraft went down in this area that several groups have sort of come together over the years to actually search these waters for the wreckage of these downed planes, as well as the remains of any service members they might be able to find. And a lot of these searches have happened in this area because of one really notable story of a really well known pilot who survived.

Matt:

Yeah. Former President George H.W. Bush, who had a harrowing experience during World War II when he was shot down over the water and his crew was killed, and he survived in shark-infested waters for a time before being rescued by a submarine. And one of his best friends in his squadron was Lieutenant Houle, who had disappeared along with Walter Mintus just a few months earlier.

Nick:

The area around Palau saw extraordinarily heavy fighting during World War II and President Bush's war story drew a lot of attention to that area over the years. And those two things combined made this a really logical place to start searching for some of these missing service members and eventually a group called Project Recover led a series of searches and recoveries in the waters around Palau.

Emily:

So a lot of the recovery efforts didn't just start recently. Project Recover certainly isn't the first one. There's been recovery efforts starting as early as 1945, and they've been ongoing through until today and they'll continue. And a lot of these organizations are government agencies, as well as non-profit organizations that are sort of coming together in what I think is a really interesting confluence of science and technology being used for these kinds of recovery efforts, because of course recovery efforts don't necessarily have the resources to sort of fund innovation, but the innovation that's happening in the tech sector can really be broadened and expanded in terms of its applicability to this really important effort.

Matt:

Yeah. And as we've talked about on previous episodes of the podcast, after World War II, there was an incredible increase in the amount of scientific interest in the ocean floor, in mapping it and in the increased use of sonar and exploring the ocean floor. A lot of it for national security reasons, for the introduction of more powerful nuclear submarines, et cetera. But with that came a lot of scientific interest, new submarine technologies for exploring the ocean floor, and just this sort of increase in the number of uses and applications for sonar technologies.

Emily:

As we're talking specifically about Walter Mintus today, just one of the many, his remains were recovered by this nonprofit that we mentioned Project Recover, which is run by retired Marine Dr. Derek Abbey.

Derek Abbey (interview):

My name is Dr. Derek Abbey. I'm the president and CEO of Project Recover.

Emily:

Project Recover, which was formerly known as the Bent Prop Project, it actually works in 18 countries, which I think is really impressive. For this recovery efforts specifically that we're talking about today,

Project Recover partnered with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, as well as the University of Delaware, who at the time were already doing work in Palau developing technology that was able to help discover and recover downed aircraft.

Derek Abbey (interview):

Yeah. It takes a lot of work with a lot of expertise in a lot of different areas and it starts with the archive work, but it's not just the archive. Sometimes it's interacting with gold star families, MIA families that have lost a loved one and there might be a trunk of information in an attic somewhere that has information that could be vital to our searches. First-hand accounts, which unfortunately are becoming less and less with the World War II era, but. So we gathered data related to each case, they'll typically start with some sort of reconnaissance or search mission. And in the Mintus case, it was in and around Palau, the lagoon surrounding the Palau islands. We'll work with our partners at Scripps and the University of Delaware to determine what we think the highest likelihood of success is in a certain area. They'll program their robots to search a certain part of the ocean or lagoon, depending on where we're at. They'll do that, and then we'll assess that data and you can make determinations on that imagery to determine if it's something that looks manmade, or if it is maybe a coral head or something like that. And then from there, once we pick spots that we think might be manmade, we'll investigate those sites with either scuba diving or remote operated vehicles to get a visual of what is on the ocean floor.

Matt:

So, and this is where advances in robotics really have helped and improved their ability to find these wrecks and locate the missing individuals because they used to have to use divers. And it would take a whole team of divers working to explore a grid that had been identified through reports of where the wreckage might be, to actually identify the rack and then explore it. But using a robotic submersible with sonar equipment attached to it made that job a lot easier and used a lot less humans in that search process.

Derek Abbey (interview):

We're searching for people. The aircraft are just a means to finding the people. And so from there, if it is an aircraft that's associated with an MIA, we'll document that site as best as we can and then we'll build a case around that. We'll submit all that information over to the Department of Defense. Their organization is the defense POW MIA accounting agency, or DPAA. They'll further assess that information, then make a determination on whether or not they're going to do a recovery mission and then they'll plan that recovery.

Matt:

Once they've recovered those remains, the next steps are pretty familiar forensic methods, including dental and DNA identification that can be used to identify who these people were matching them up with existing records.

Nick:

This is where we pick back up with Walter Mintus. Of course, there's the story of him going down with his fellow service members and then the decades and decades that he was missing and the search was ongoing. And then eventually he's found, identified, recovered, and we pick back up with him personally,

as he's returned to his hometown in Pennsylvania, by way of Pittsburgh, for what you would fully expect to be a war heroes welcome and full military burial. And Derek told us a little bit about that.

Derek Abbey (interview):

It's an incredible thing to see. In Walter Mintus' story, he was interned in Portage, Pennsylvania. So it was middle of Pennsylvania. It was a November day, cold, rainy. His remains were flown into Pittsburgh, and then they were driven from Pittsburgh to Portage. And it was very, very impressive to see them arrive, the family welcome him back to Pittsburgh, but then the whole entourage of vehicles drove from Pittsburgh to Portage.

And when the family and the remains arrived into Portage, the entire community came out to welcome him back to town. And like I said, it was a rainy November afternoon. It was cold, but the schools had let out. So children of all ages from elementary to high school were lining the streets, waving flags, hands over their heart, very emotional moment to witness, but absolutely incredible that the impact that this has on not only the families, but the entire community. They all come together to show respect to this person that sacrificed the most.

Nick:

And for the family, Mintus had become a figurehead in family history. One that stood for the sacrifice that he had made in World War II.

Rich Kozak (Interview):

I can remember where every once in a while somebody say, I wonder if he's captured or if he's dead. You know, it was always that question mark there when his name would be brought up.

Derek Abbey (interview):

Having the opportunity to interact with this large family that has a tradition of military service, for several of them had told us the story that we had heard about our uncle and when we made the decision to join the military, we were sat down by other family members and told this is what it means to serve in this family and you have to live up to the sacrifice that Walter Mintus made, (*America the Beautiful fades in under*) and everyone had that story. And so he had taken on this mythical status within his family, and now it was all so much more real to them that he was brought home. The myth was more than just a story. It was real, and it was absolutely incredible to interact with that family, to witness them come together from across the country, as well as the entire community come out and show their respect and honor to the sacrifice that was made by this individual seven plus decades prior.

Matt:

There are still tens of thousands of American MIAs that are considered recoverable and the efforts to find and repatriate them is an ongoing mission for many, many people.

America the Beautiful fades into exit music

Emily:

Airspace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram @airspacepod.

Nick:

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