

GUEST: JESSIE HIGA

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Two years ago, we had one veteran who was ill. He said, Jessie, I won't make it for the 70th, but if I come back, you're gonna let me come to Hickam? I said, Oh, absolutely, I'll give you a tour. Well, his wife calls me after Christmas, and she says, You can pick Fred up at United Cargo. And I was like ... United Cargo? It was his casket.

Jessie Higa refers to herself as an old soul, and has taken it upon herself to preserve the stories of Hickam Air Force Base. Remembering the past with historian Jessie Higa, next, on Long Story Short.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Jessie Higa is a military wife and mostly volunteer historian for Hickam Air Force base. She leads historical tours of Hickam, chronicling its role in the 1941 December 7th attack, while highlighting some of the pre-war history and Hawaiian cultural sites of the area. Jessie Higa grew up around the world in mainland communities like San Antonio, Texas and Maryland, and faraway places like Yokota Air Base in Japan, and Tehran in the Country of Iran. She said that as a military child, it was hard to claim one geographical location as home. Both of her parents were born and raised in Hawaii, so during her summers, she would often come and connect with her island roots.**

So, you have such an interesting history, in that you look like a local girl, and you are Japanese American, Hawaiian, Chinese, and yet, you've spent much of your life away from here. And you weren't born here, either.

No. *Katonk*, I guess, is what my cousins used to call me. And being a military child, it gave me the opportunity to travel the world. And being that my parents were from Hawaii, I still had that cultural background of knowing that I had Hawaiian ancestral roots, Japanese American and Chinese American. So, it's been great to be able to know that I have a multitude of experiences in my ethnic and military background as a child.

How much time did you spend in the islands while you were growing up?

Just the summer. It would just be maybe when school got out, the end of May 'til maybe about August. My mom's parents live in Pauoa Valley, and Kanedalii Avenue. And that was home. Cute little house that was built by Grandpa. We call him Poppy Joe. And the avocado tree, the plumeria, the mango trees. It

was literally coming home to what we felt was our grassroots. And it was during that summertime that my grandparents would really teach us Hawaiian lei - making, taking care of the plants. It was like home school, and learning our heritage, and my grandfather speaking his *moo'lelo's*, his stories to us. And then, my dad's side, we would spend the weekends in Waipahu. And I can still smell the stench of driving up that hill to the sugarcane mill.

Oh, and Waipahu Sugar Mill was still going.

Correct. And actually, my grandfather and my grandmother were still living in the old plantation areas of Waipahu. And it was great. You talk about nostalgia. You go back there now, you can't even identify the streets anymore. But those are my fondest memories, to come back to Hawaii during the summertime.

When you say coming back, you weren't born here, so your life in Hawaii was during the summer.

Absolutely. And that's the predicament of being a military child. You don't know what is home. And even if it's the base that you've been there the most, which would be for me Japan, I still don't consider myself technically Japanese. And though I've lived most of my adult life here in Hawaii, now I can say this is home. But as a child, that was the one challenge, was to really feel a sense of place. And you almost had to make it the best wherever you went. And that's what my mom taught us as children, to just make home, home where it is, wherever you go.

Your parents have not only traveled the world, but they still haven't come back to Hawaii to live. They left shortly after graduating from University of Hawaii at Manoa together, and off they went.

Yes; they are still on their adventure, what I call it. And they deserve it. My parents have been hard workers, they love Hawaii, they always get their time to come home. But I really find that Japan has been an important place in their lives, probably because so much of them, the memories of us as kids are still there. They've become unofficial ambassadors at Yokota Air Base, and my mom's a teacher. And that really fills a void in her heart of us having grown up. She can now invest in these younger kids. And my dad's also a professor there, associate professor, and they just love where they're at right now in their lives. And the thought of even retiring ... we'll see. They're seventy - three.

[CHUCKLE]

And still going.

Still going. When they file their official retirement papers, then I can start planning that they're coming home. Yeah.

But they really did a good job with you, then, of making you feel comfortable and able to take whatever came your way in a new environment.

They taught us to know how to be resilient. They taught us how to learn how to make friends easily, no matter where we went. And I watch my mom and my dad, how they interact with people, the generosity, the sincerity. That is what I think I learned the most from my parents, and I'm just so grateful.

You have siblings. Who are your siblings?

My older sister, four years older, but sometimes even though I'm forty - five, I feel like I'm sixteen around my sister. She's incredible. She's always been the independent one, very forthright, and I've admired my sister, I still do. My brother, Richard ... not too many people know this on Hickam. But I had a younger brother who was a year and a day from me. My birthday is May 19th, his is May 20th. And my mom brought us back to Hawaii, 'cause my father was serving in Vietnam, so he was born here at Tripler. We're so close in age. We grew up together, there for one another. We had our sibling rivalries, like most siblings do. But there came a point about two years before his death that we really matured, and we were done with the fighting and the pettiness, and he just grew up to be a great young man. And it was cut short ... but I have no regrets. I tell people ... to have sixteen years with him is better than nothing. Sorry.

He drowned.

Yeah, there was a drowning incident, and it was one of the first deaths on our base. But the community just came together, they were there to uplift us and to support us. And I think that's why in many ways, there are these very strong ties to Yokota, because that's what I remember. And it's an honor that he's buried at Punchbowl.

In 1991, Jessie Higa was hired as a park service ranger for the Pearl Harbor December 7th Fiftieth Anniversary Remembrance. She reentered military life when she married Irving Higa, a local boy and Air Force officer. They were stationed at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, and then in 2003, the family was transferred to Hickam Air Force Base. Now back in Hawaii, she along with other military wives began to research the history of the base. In 2009, Paul Casey, the former president and CEO of Hawaiian Airlines and current CEO of Island Air, requested a Hickam Base tour for his father, a World War II Australian Air Force veteran. Jessie Higa volunteered to lead the tour. In doing so, she gained a mentor.

And you're still in military life, and that's because you married an officer.

Yes. Now here I am in my mom's footsteps. I tease my husband that unlike my sister, who followed in my dad's footsteps to be an Air Force officer at UH ROTC, I found the other way to get an ID card. And that was to marry into the military.

You wanted to get into the PX, didn't you?

[CHUCKLE] It turned out that way, interesting enough. And my husband says, Okay, we're married, what do you want to do tomorrow? It's the day after our honeymoon. Let's go to Hickam and get my ID card. And it was so wonderful to have that little card back to go into the commissary and the BX, 'cause I was so accustomed to that.

So, you've talked about your parents being really important influences in your life. What other formative influences have you had?

There's been so many recently, but in regards to what I've been able to do now at Hickam in restoring and preserving the history, is Mr. Paul Casey. He found me at a time when I was most vulnerable, not knowing the direction I was going with being a volunteer historian for the base. And his father was with the Royal Australian Air Force, and he and their friends were coming from Australia to visit Hawaii. And Mr. Casey says, Hey, anyone at Hickam could help out and give my dad a tour? And our veterans that I know if, my friends, were very good friends with the Royal Australian Air Force, so of course, I wanted to meet him. And I've heard about Mr. Casey, his background with Hawaiian Airlines, and Hawaii Visitors Bureau, and I thought, what a great opportunity to meet new people. So, I did the tour, and through that came an incredible friendship and trust. I needed mentorship, and that's what Mr. Casey provided me. Belief in myself, belief in my passion, and to just be able to know where I was going with my goals, and if I had to redirect how to do that.

You're awfully young to be so immersed in history. What is it about you, you think, that calls to you?

You're so nice to say I'm young. But it's the Asian, I think, it fools people how young I am. It's because of my heritage. My grandfather told us the stories, I grew up learning the history in college as an intern at Hickam, the base historian was my mentor, and being able to participate in the 50th anniversary in 1991 as a park ranger. It was just the sequence of events that happened early on in my life. But I did take a long sabbatical to get married, be an Air Force wife, have kids, and I've now just picked up where I left off. So, it's been about eight years, nonstop, of work in the history to where I am today. But it's my life investment, so I'm not done yet.

And I think you have a great understanding of relationships, from your travel and from your family. And you use that today in what you do. And you don't do much of it for pay; much of this is for love as a volunteer historian.

Yes. There's a lot of budget cuts in the military, and it takes volunteers many times to step in and help the military advance, especially in the area of history. Veterans who can't travel anymore, I need to now find them and travel to them. And I don't have very many hobbies or expenditures, or expensive habits, so my husband knows if I need to take a flight to go to the 11th Bomb Group reunion in Texas, I'll do that. And for even the veterans that come back, there's not much funds to provide *leis*, coffees, to host them. And it's amazing that through my friendships at the base, we're able to do those type of things. To be able to say as volunteers, we will make sure that we can still roll out the red carpet, give them the *aloha* they remember. Can you imagine when they were here, before the war years, coming to Hawaii on those Matson ships with the *lei's*, and the *hula* dancers, Waikiki, truly the *aloha* spirit. And that is what we try to do as volunteers, if the Air Force is unable to provide that financially, that we can come in as volunteers and make that all happen.

Pearl Harbor is so well known, and kids go on excursions there, and people take visitors there. But Hickam Field is not on the beaten path for many of our local residents. When you go there, it looks like the place that time has stood still since 1941. Tell us about Hickam Field.

Indeed. Hickam Field, when you get to the base and you come through the main gate, you're welcomed by these two beautiful concrete portals that say, Hickam Field in replicas of the original art deco letters, beautiful amber lantern. You really do, when you enter the base, you feel that you're going back in time. When you find the building, the barracks building where those three thousand two hundred airmen lived, it's still battle scarred. And children or visitors that come run their hands across it, it really is amazing that you can connect with the the past, a day that will live in infamy. On Hickam, there's a main street in front of the barracks building called Vickers Avenue. There's a door that leads out from what was the kitchen, and on the sidewalk is a manhole cover. The story is that a young lieutenant, very brave, skinny, tall, red hair, just managed to muster that steel cover lid off. And as these scared boys were running out of the kitchen, he started to trip each one of them into this manhole. It was when the twelfth young man ended up on the top of the pile that the barracks building was hit, the kitchen got a direct hit, disintegrating the lieutenant. We still don't know who he was. But one of the veterans who was in the manhole whose life was saved came back, and he told that story. And it was just so poignant, because we drive up and down that street, never realizing how important things like a manhole could be, the door to the kitchen that today is the communications squadron. That is why at Hickam, unless we keep these stories alive, it'll just be another little hole in the sidewalk.

And meanwhile, there were pilots scrambling to get up in the air. Did they?

That happened more at Wheeler, where there was also a group of P - 40s that were at Haleiwa Field. Those were the ones that got airborne. For us, we had the big bombers, the B - 18s and the B - 17s. We were able to get three airborne, but that was after the attack. And for us, it was just disbursing to pull apart engines, there were so many fires that were just domino effect down the runway. Because of anti - sabotage measures, they were all parked so close together. So, most of our men were being strafed and killed in the chaos of trying to separate all the aircraft and salvage what they could, and also respond to the many wounded. But what isn't told a lot, besides just the men that lived in the barracks trying to stay alive, get to the aircraft, help with the wounded, the untold story is what happened in our housing area. The women and children that were commandeering their cars out the base to get to safety, hiding out in the houses, listening to empty artillery shells pinging off the roofs. What happened when some of these Navy shells ended up in the neighborhood, luckily one hit a house, but the child was in the dining room having breakfast instead of her bedroom. So, there was a lot of bedlam, a lot of situations where families could have been killed. And ... that's the story that's not told. And I have a friend of mine, Paul Coghlin, we are trying to tell stories.

That it's not just the actual veteran that's a Pearl Harbor, Hickam Field survivor, but so are the women and the children.

Another thing that outsiders know, because we really don't know a lot about Hickam, I think that we need to be educated, is the former water tower, now Freedom Tower, which gets decorated every Christmas, just festooned with lights.

Absolutely. It's the iconic structure of the base, and especially at Christmastime, it is the tallest Christmas tree on all of Oahu. It sits right in front of the Hickam Elementary School, where my children have gone to school, and it's just a beautiful structure, which my grandfather helped build back in 1938. And it's grand, it really gives you a perspective of how important architecturally this base was gonna be for Hawaii. Architects and designers that had their hands in it, that truly wanted to make their mark in making sure that Hickam was by far the greatest endeavor in the 1940s to build an Army air corps.

Jessie Higa's family connections to the World War II experience and to Hickam Air Force Base can be traced back to both sides of her family. In one instance, her family suffered a tragedy directly linked to events at Hickam during the December 7th attack.

My grandfather had a brother, and he was walking down Fort Street Mall with his child in his arms.

In Downtown Honolulu?

Downtown Honolulu, Fort Street. And a Navy shell came over. It was friendly fire, and the shrapnel went through him and the child. So, my grandfather had a very difficult time. When I became a historian during the 50th anniversary of the attack, and he says, Oh, the Japanese killed my brother, killed my niece. And it was so challenging to have to sit him down and explain to him that it wasn't the Japanese, but had they not come, it wouldn't have happened.

Just looking at all the war connections you have, other family members in the war?

Yes; my dad's maternal uncles, both of them served in the 442nd 100th Battalion, and for both of them, Purple Heart. And my Uncle Irving Masumoto, actually was a Silver Star recipient. And it's ironic that for our family, because we're Japanese American, they had jobs on Hickam, but they weren't welcomed back because of their ancestral roots. So, what they ended up doing was, enlisting to prove their loyalty, and also, they felt American and they really were. And thankfully for us, both of them were wounded, so they had Purple Hearts. And my Uncle Irving actually had a bullet that went underneath the helmet, grazed his ear, came out the top. And my great - aunt still kept that helmet. And it's an honor to realize that through that patriotism, that my dad was inspired to, while at Waipahu High School, become a civil air patrol, and then University of Hawaii ROTC. And my great - uncles, to know that they had that immense patriotism to want to say, We too will serve.

The area surrounding Hickam Air Force Base has a rich Hawaiian history that pre-dates the founding of the base in 1935. Jessie Higa has researched that cultural history and educates the military and the Hawaii community about the ancient Hawaiian burial sites in the Fort Kamehameha area of Hickam.

The fact that you're Native Hawaiian too, you're sensitized to *iwi* or bone issues, burials. And there are burials that are still being discovered in the Fort Kamehameha area of Hickam.

Yes. Being Native Hawaiian, my grandfather always talked to us about *iwi*, how he lived on Molokai and would bury his ancestors. When we came to Hickam, I was interested in finding out about this burial crypt, because during many of the military construction projects, we've accidentally uncovered Native Hawaiian burials. Through the Grave Repatriation Act, we by law need to report that to the Oahu Burial Council, and an archaeological monitor will come in and will assess what to do. And it's just beautiful that there at Hickam, we're able to honor the Hawaiian history that a lot of locals don't even know about. And for me to speak at a *makahiki* to the Royal Order of Kamehameha, and to share with them the story of Queen Emma, to share the story of how the *kupuna iwi* are buried here and that we're doing our very best to take care of the ancestral bones, it's amazing that the Air Force is able to bridge that gap, and cultural understanding is always in motion. It's a process that each person that comes through Hickam their two years has to learn, but it's just amazing that we're able to keep a very good relationship and respect to the Hawaiian history that's there.

It must be difficult with so many people moving on. I mean, that's the way of Hickam, it's the military way, people who are into their jobs, and they're focused. But you're there. You don't go.

I think I'm the continuity. And I'm here to help those commanders and those in leadership positions, that when they leave every two years, I can be here to say, How can I help you? Here's what I know, here's the best way to go about this. To be a bit of an advisor. And that's what I feel my role is too, as a volunteer, to offer them information to where they can now make a judgment call based upon being educated now about the history. 'Cause it's not just military; we have to respect what was there before us.

As an unofficial liaison to the Hickam Field, Pearl Harbor survivors, Jessie Higa along with other military wives continues to host events, and often receives some very special requests from veterans and their families.

So, it never ends. I continue to have families that go, Jessie, I think my grandpa was here. And you just find it coincidental. A former base commander at Hickam, Colonel Barrett, his mom's first cousin was there, and I was able to help him with that history, and it became a personal interest to him as he sponsored

these veterans every year for December 7th. That is where I find everything comes at its ... right time. Two years ago, we had one veteran who was ill. He said, Jessie, I won't make it for the 70th, but if I come back, you're gonna let me come to Hickam? I said, Oh, absolutely, I'll give you a tour. Well, his wife calls me after Christmas, and she says, You can pick Fred up at United Cargo. And I was like ... United Cargo? It was his casket. And within a day, we worked it out with the base leadership to have his hearse come into Hickam, escorted by security police, and his wife was in my car. And we drove around Hickam flagpole, like he wanted to, and there were eight hundred Hickam personnel ... there, standing at attention around the flagpole, saluting the hearse as it went by. And that was his final wish. And that's what I feel my calling is too, is to make sure that these veterans' wishes are done, and that I can help the families make that possible. Hickam Field in the December 7th attack brings back such horrific memories. It is still the one place that beckons them, because of all the great experiences they had before the war. And that's why today, so many of them come back and say, Jessie, I want you to scatter my ashes; Jessie, I'm gonna be buried here in Hawaii. And that's their final wish, is to truly come home. That's why I think I'm like an old soul, Leslie. I really feel, with the stories that my grandparents tell me of the 40s and the veterans, I feel like I live in this nostalgic world, that when I'm with them, they tell me I almost make them feel young again. But I am happy that I'm still young yet, that I'll be around for the 100th anniversary, and in hopes in the next five years finish a book. There's never been another book on Hickam Field history written since 1991, and there's so much more to tell.

And you've already spoken with quite a few of the survivors of World War II.

I have.

In the attack.

Yes. And truly, we are able to still find primary sources. The men still exist, and not everybody in their nineties has dementia and Alzheimer's. So, it is a race against time to find these veterans now, to get their stories firsthand. And then, the continuum to that is, also give the history now and educate the community, but then at the end of that continuum, it's to educate the next generation. I need to seed all that I've been working so hard to preserve into a generation that will carry on that legacy for me.

So, have you answered your own question of, Where do I belong, and exactly where and how do I navigate that?

I have. I have my sense of place now. My husband and I haven't decided where we're gonna permanently buy a house, but I do know that this is home, Hawaii in general. I know where I am. As far as the history, I'm gonna continue to do this. Again, my life investment is the Hickam history. And I'm happy, I'm content. I don't feel like I don't have a home, so to speak. I feel like now I can plant my roots and say, This is where I will be and flourish. To be able to set my roots and say, Ah, won't be transplanted again, this is where I'm going to stay. I

will travel, I'll do a lot of that with my kids and my husband, but this is where I know I finally have come home.

Volunteer historian Jessie Higa, who draws from her diverse family history and her life as a military wife, says she will continue to research, preserve, and inform the community about military heroes, including the women and children of Hickam Field. Jessie Higa continues to volunteer many hours at the base, and also moonlights once a week as a private contractor for the Hickam Historical Tours. Mahalo to Jessie Higa for sharing her story with us, and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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But what isn't told a lot, besides just the men that lived in the barracks trying to stay alive, get to the aircraft, help with the wounded, the untold story is what happened in our housing area. The women and children that were commandeering their cars out the base to get to safety, hiding out in the houses, listening to empty artillery shells ping off the roofs. What happened when some of these Navy shells ended up in the neighborhood, luckily one hit a house, but the child was in the dining room having breakfast instead of her bedroom.