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ETERNAL PATROL



The Fate of the U.S.S. Grunion and the Search for a Native Son



Overture to the
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ETERNAL PATROL



The Fate of the U.S.S. Grunion and the Search for a Native Son

Amidst the turmoil of the early months of World War II, a newly launched submarine, the USS Grunion, left Pearl Harbor on June 30, 1942. After 10 days of intensive training in the surreal atmosphere of the devastated naval base, the sub was heading into action. Lieutenant Commander Mannert "Jim" Abele, 38, was at the helm, with 69 other crewmembers on board.

The Grunion reached Midway Island in the North Pacific Ocean; then entered the chilly waters of the Bering Sea—3,000 miles from the Alaskan mainland—for her first war patrol. On June 7, Japanese troops had occupied the Aleutian Islands of Attu, Agattu and Kiska—a fact largely unknown in the United States at the time—and the Grunion was sent to patrol the area. It soon saw action: It was attacked by a Japanese destroyer north of Kiska and returned fire, with apparently little harm done. The sub patrolled off Kiska throughout the month of July, sinking two enemy patrol boats, and damaging a third.

In the early morning hours of July 30, the Grunion reported heavy antisubmarine activity around Kiska, and that she had ten torpedoes remaining. It was its final radio message. The sub was ordered back to base in Dutch Harbor on Amaknak Island. There is no way of knowing if the Grunion ever received the order.

The submarine was never heard from, or seen, again. Numerous air searches throughout the area found nothing. On Oct. 5, 1942, the Grunion was reported "overdue from patrol" and assumed lost with all hands.

Shortly thereafter, a telegram was sent to the families of the lost crewmen. It read: "The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you that your son, — of the U.S. Navy, is missing in the performance of his duty and in the service of his country. The Department appreciates your anxiety, but details are not now available. Delay in receipt therefore must necessarily be expected to prevent possible aid to our enemies."

The USS Grunion's name was struck from the Navy List on November 2, 1942.

Picking up the Pieces

Catherine Abele, the wife of the Grunion commander Jim Abele, was left with three sons to raise on her own. Bruce, the eldest, was 12 at the time. "I remember my mother sat down and hand-wrote 69 letters to the next of kin," he said. "And then, when the Purple Hearts were sent out, she wrote to all of them again."

Abele said the family couldn't believe all the letters that poured in from the families of the dead crewmen, looking for any bit of information to explain what happened to their loved ones. "What a piece of history," he said.

Catherine Abele never stopped hoping for Jim's return, or for at least some indication of what actually happened. But details were never forthcoming. For more than half a century, the Navy officially considered the submarine "missing in action, cause unknown." The Grunion families were left to their own conclusions, without the closure they all so desperately needed. Because the men

were listed as missing, there were no funerals, no headstones, and no last farewells.

Time softens the edge of pain, and life goes on. But the families never forgot. Many Grunion widows refused to remarry, hoping their spouses would somehow, someday, return home. One woman carried her husband's letters in her apron pocket every single day for years.

Finally, a Clue

The three Abele brothers grew up to be successful businessmen in the Boston area, and kept the memory of their father alive. Brad wrote "The Jim Book," highlighting chapters of his father's life, as well as extensive research about the Grunion, that he published online. They often talked about the submarine itself, wondering where it was resting under the frigid waters off the Aleutian Islands. And most of all, they wondered what really happened.

In 1995, Air Force Lt. Col. Richard Lane, a military history buff, paid one dollar for a wiring diagram of a WWII-era Japanese ship's winch that he found in an antiques shop in Denver. The name of the ship, Kano Maru, was written on the back. Unable to find out anything about the vessel, Lane decided to request information through a posting on a military history Web site.



A young historian from Japan, Yutaka Iwasaki, responded with information about the Kano Maru. He claimed that it had sunk the USS Grunion.

To say that Bruce Abele was hit with mixed emotions when he was shown this startling piece of information is an understatement. He proceeded to conduct a tedious Internet search for Iwasaki. "I think it took 72 e-mails to find him," Abele said.

Finally, one of Abele's e-mails hit pay dirt. "I am he," Iwasaki e-mailed back to the query. "I pray for the repose of your father's soul."

The Stream of Improbables

Abele says that this amazing journey of discovery is due to a "stream of improbables" "And that's not even a word," he laughed. "It's not in any dictionary. But that's how I describe it."

By a stroke of luck, Iwasaki was fluent in English. He translated an article from an obscure Japanese maritime document that had been written by the commander of the Kano Maru, recalling details about what had happened in the encounter with the Grunion.

The article stated that the freighter Kano Maru, heading towards Kiska with a load of supplies, was attacked by the Grunion. The submarine fired four torpedoes. While two were duds and one missed, one torpedo did hit the Japanese

vessel, crippling the main engine and generator. As the Grunion surfaced in an attempt to sink the Kano Maru with gunfire, the freighter managed to open fire with its deck gun. The submarine disappeared in a spew of oily bubbling water.

Later, Iwasaki discovered and translated another important document that provided specific details about the location of the naval battle between the two ships—which he personally brought to the Abeles in Massachusetts. "He drew a diagram exactly where the conflict took place," Abele said.

Armed with this information, the brothers decided it was time to look for the Grunion.

The Grunion Found

After months of preparation, they were ready. In August of 2006, with information supplied by Iwasaki, along with assistance from other sources (including some sound advice from Robert Ballard, who discovered the Titanic) the brothers initiated their search and made the arduous journey to the remote Aleutians with a full crew. The venture was completely funded by the Abeles, as the U.S. Navy declared it did not have the resources to help.

Using a side scan sonar, the team members found a target near the tip of the Aleutian chain, almost a mile down. It was about the right length and width

of the Grunion and appeared to have an appendage called a prop guard, which was characteristic of that class of submarine.

The most important factor of the find was that the target was located almost exactly where it was predicted by their source. It also added credibility to the report translated by Isawaki.

The discovery warranted another visit to the Aleutians. The team decided to return a year later with a Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV) equipped with HD video to more clearly identify the target.

In August of 2007, the team once again made the 3,100 mile journey from Massachusetts to Seattle, returning with 37,000 pounds of ROV and equipment. From Seattle, they were taken by the crab boat, Aquila, 2,240 more miles west to a spot just north of Kiska Island at the tip of the Aleutians.

The 2007 team, led by John Abele, performed the first of two dives at a location based on the data from last year's sonar search. Their goals were to find last year's target, confirm, once and for all, that it was the Grunion, and determine what caused the sinking.

"It was unbelievable," Bruce Abele said. "It only took us 20 minutes to find it again!"

The first two goals were accomplished. Although no identifying names or numbers were found, the existence

and style of the prop guards, the conning tower arrangement, the fact that it was the only American sub lost in that area, and the accuracy of the predicted location are overwhelming evidence, to the Abeles, that it was the Grunion. More than 700 photos and over three hours of video were taken.

The cause of its destruction has yet to be determined, however.

"The most surprising thing was the damage," he said. "It was much more than we or anyone else imagined. Initially, it was very hard to recognize as a ship."

Although the sub is quite mangled, there's no sign of shell penetration on the conning tower or hull.

"We don't know if we'll ever have the complete story," Abele said. "We do know the sub lost depth control."

Whether it was fatally damaged by an enemy shell, or by one of the Grunion's own torpedoes circling back like a boomerang after being fired, or whether the depth control system was faulty to begin with, it is the last piece of the mystery that may never be solved.

As a final gesture to the men lost under his father's command, John Abele filled vials of seawater from the final resting place of the Grunion and sent one to each of their families. 📍

SEARCHING FOR HERBERT JOSEPH ARVAN

DeQuincy native Herbert Joseph Arvan was one of two black crew members serving as mess attendants aboard the USS Grunion on its 1942 maiden voyage. They were waiting in officers' dining rooms, one of the few positions open to blacks at that time in the segregated Navy.

Little information is known about the young crewman, as no one has come forward to claim him. He was born on May 1, 1924, which means he had barely turned 18 when he was killed.

His father, Delton Arvan, was listed as his next of kin, and received his purple heart. Death records show that the senior Arvan passed away in 1982 in DeQuincy at the age of 84, leaving a daughter, Elter Marie, and a son, Felton, both of Lake Charles. Felton died in 1989, and Elter Marie died in 2006 at the age of 91.

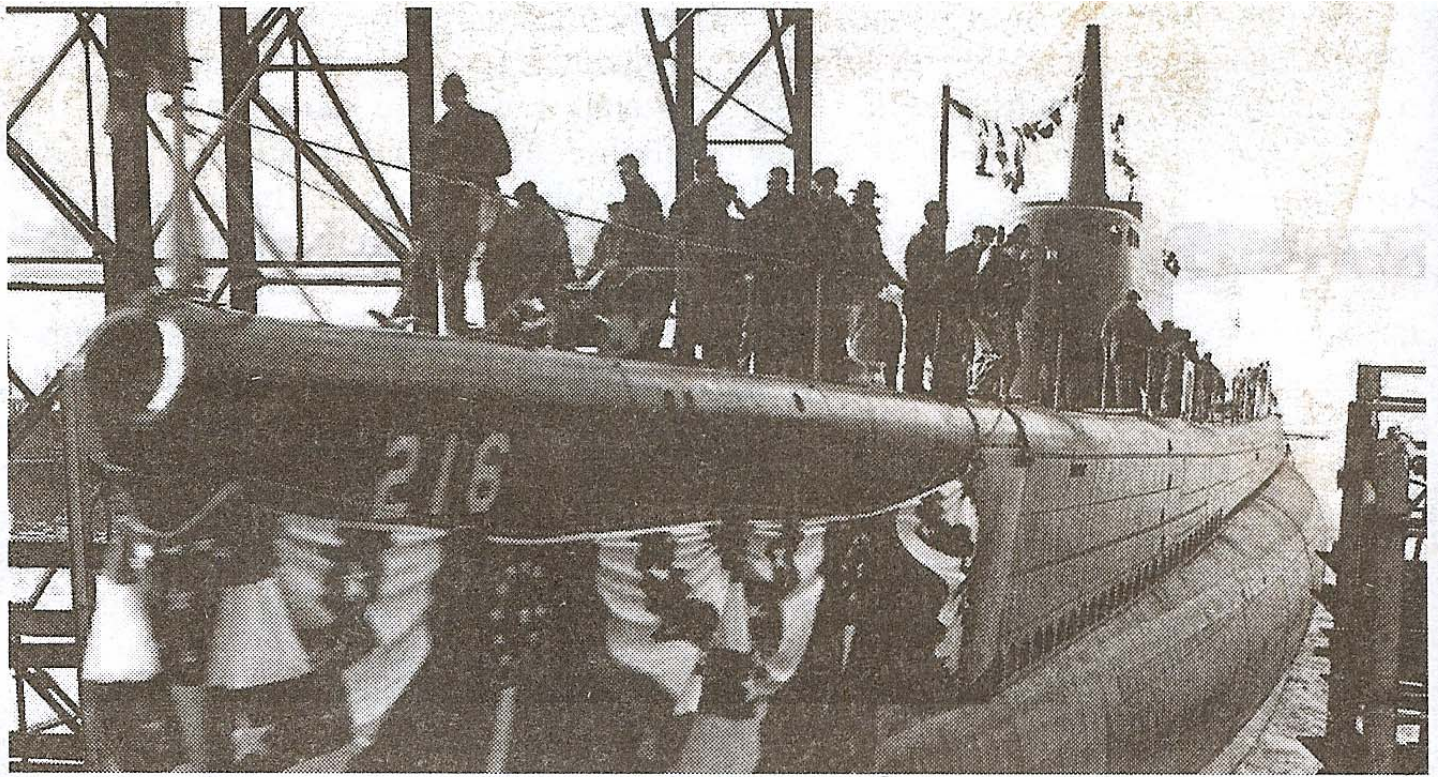
Elter's death notice states that she had a sister, Anita Feast. Since Feast was not mentioned in Delton Arvan's obituary, she was

most likely a step- or half-sister with no blood relation to the Arvans. But she, too, has passed on.

"When we began searching for families in 2006, contact was made with somebody who knew him (Herbert), but for whatever reason, didn't want to be involved;" Mary Bentz said sadly. "We had another crew member with the same situation."

"I hope somebody remembers him so that we can add a remembrance to his name in the files that will ultimately be going out to submarine museums all across the country for their archives of the 3,200-plus submariners who have been lost at sea," said Bentz. "To me, Herbert Arvan is a lonely soul in that the only person who knew him didn't seem interested in him or the tremendous sacrifice he gave for the love of his country."

If anyone has information on Herbert Arvan, please contact Mary Bentz at ca.par@hotmail.com.



THE SUB LADIES

In 2006, three women who lost family members aboard the Grunion--Rhonda Raye of Georgia, Vickie Rodgers of Kentucky and Mary Bentz of Maryland--dubbed the "Sub Ladies;" embarked on a mission to locate and contact the next of kin of the 70 men who lost their lives on that fateful day.

"My dad's baby brother, Carmine Anthony Parziale, from Weedville, Pennsylvania, was on the Grunion;" said Bentz. "That's how I became involved in the search;"

Her personal experience with the Grunion families over the past two years has been incredibly rewarding. She and her fellow Sub Ladies have collected photographs and information about the crewmen to put on the Grunion's Web site, and are compiling several volumes of information as a legacy to those that were lost aboard the submarine.

Bentz has also been working to have stories published in local newspapers for each of the crew - in either their hometown, or where their next of kin presently reside.

"The families of our crew, now" about three generations later, are very grateful to have these stories as a respectful tribute to their loved ones, and feel that now they are granted eternal rest;" she said. "It's not only a tribute to each of them; it serves as their obituary as well, since they never had one."

The articles will be sent to U.S. Navy museums throughout the country.

"Years from now, when we are gone ... anybody who wants to learn about these WW II sailors will be able to access them;" Bentz said. "We are making history available."