

Sleeping With Torpedos

Cherie DuPlayee-Brown

I have always believed things happen for a reason, because of a greater power. One who dictates whether or not something happens for me, for you, for anyone. Everything I've ever done - low points in life I've gone through or high times I've soared through, I have felt that it was possible because of nothing in *my* power. I love that!

The most recent example of this that I can write about for you is my trip to Cleveland Ohio. With the help of Kathy Tobin and the Tomahawk Leader, I was able to take part in a special memorial service for the USS Grunion, the US Navy Gato class submarine that sunk in WWII, off the coast of the Kiska Islands, in the Aleutian waters. As of a little more than a year ago, the sub was still missing, its 70 men presumed dead, after over 65 years. Some of you may remember the recent story I wrote for this paper regarding this boat and one of its sailors, Elmer T. Schumann, of Tripoli.

At the last possible moment, I was able to finagle a road trip, over 1400 miles in all as I drove myself to Ohio. I had my cell phone and a GPS unit. I knew no one who would be there. I came home three days later feeling like I finally met 70 men who had been whispering my name in my head from a time in this universe when their lives ended over three decades before mine began.

Arriving late Friday night in downtown Cleveland at a ritzy hotel, I was greeted by Mary and Dick Bentz in one of hotel's meeting rooms. Mary's uncle Carmine Parziale was a Torpedoman's Mate Third Class on the Grunion when it went down, being fired at from the Japanese vessel the Kana Maru. In this community room I watched conversations among strangers happen. These people, for the most part, had never met each other before, yet they chatted it up like old college buddies, reliving story after story- the laughter thumping loud in the room by the end of the night. I know they weren't retelling old college stories; they were meeting here to tell of a dead relative, someone who most of the world never knew - someone their mothers and grandmothers never forgot.

Early Saturday Morning I loaded a hotel bus which took groups of us down to Lake Erie, where the USS Cod now rests as a Navy Museum. The Cod is a sister sub to the Grunion, a "twin, with different hair styles", different guns stationed on her deck one of the few differences between the two. I walked its deck, snapping pictures, trying to feel what it was like for a man in the 40's to walk the same path. It was a somber feeling, imagining that this big old boat lost its sister somewhere hundreds of miles under the waves that crest the Bering Sea.

Leaving the boat for awhile, I went aground to where the memorial booths were set up. Book after book of letters from moms and wives of 70 men filled the pages. While the books were orderly and alphabetical, within the pages I read chaos in these

women's words; letters starting simple, requesting information of their man. Turn the page and read a letter with observant alarm- they haven't come home yet-*Why haven't they come home yet?* A following letter perhaps steady and full of prayer- they know they are not dead, a wife says, she feels it in her heart. She knows they are alive. I read these lines and I am transported in time. A sadness comes over me I am not used to – I know something she doesn't. The letters continue until the sailors have the finality put to their names, words crying over lost husbands and unknown fathers, are put to paper, as the Navy has by then acknowledged the men of the USS Grunion are not coming home. They will forever be put on "Eternal Patrol".

These memorial books were made possible because of one incredible woman, Catherine Abele, the Lt. Commander's wife. I can only imagine this woman, raising her own children at home, grieving the loss of her own husband, Mannert "Jim", yet she took the time to personally write family of the 69 men her husband was in charge of. She wrote them before they knew of the Grunion's fate. She wrote them to keep their chin up, to have faith when the sub went missing. Before email and phone lines made conversation simple, before copy machines existed, she eloquently wrote to dozens of families waiting for positive word from anyone. She touched base with them, and I know touched their hearts in the process. Most families wrote back, some did not. Some sailors aphetically arranged pocket remains empty, just their face staring out from a picture.

In Ohio, I finally was able to see a picture of the Grunion men. Most were young teenagers (but a few in their 30's!), how handsome they all were. Eyes twinkling bright in black and white photos, some hiding behind a cowering smile while others shone bright, these men were on the brink of their young lives, setting out to sea, to fight in a war they believed in, or at least one they convinced themselves so because it was the right thing to do. *These* men, like the ones who came before them, were protecting *me* long before I got here. Their pictures make me wonder about their personalities. Who was the rowdy cowboy? The responsible big brother? The quiet scholar? I've seen them now, and I find myself saddened for not knowing them.

I read actual Western Union telegrams from the military telling of the deaths. You cannot witness those things and not be touched by them. I felt heartache for strangers, and yet I felt like a voyeur into their lives in such an intimate way that they didn't feel like strangers at all to me. I watched as the gathered looked at pictures of men they had never seen before. I saw a man tear up when he flipped a page in a book and saw a picture of himself as a young child with his father before the Grunion left shore. He had never seen the picture before, never saw his father again, and yet here was this memory for him, created out of this memorial weekend.

I witnessed emotional closure take place before my very eyes.

Going back on board the submarine Cod, I can see that people are disappearing into a hole you have to nearly be a contortionist to get into. They have opened the sub up for tours and I go along. Taking my time to put camera bag, notebook and jacket away,

by the time I make it in the 'hole', and climb my way down a ladder no bigger in width than four inches, I'm nowhere near another person touring the sub. Definitely feeling like the only tourist underneath the surface, I come face to face with three men in their naval best. The only way I can explain these men to you is to say I know they're important. They reek of importance, to be honest. The one man, he stands out in a crowd in his shining Navy suit, crisp creases, ribbons, medals, his "cover" (hat) in his hand. I pretend I have just as much right as he to be there, and look around on my own, long before I knew who they were. Tour guide Ron approaches me and offers to take me on a tour of the sub, explaining to me each little cubby we come across, how the men slept, ate, lived, breathed in such cramped quarters. In my head, I picture 70 guys here, sharing stories and space. I can't imagine how they did it. Ron tells me usually there were 90 or more on board such a sub. We go to the torpedo room and inches away from torpedoes shells bigger than I am, are cots were the men slept. How's that for a restful night's sleep?

The kitchen would not fit more than one man, the dining hall, maybe ten if you squeezed. The bunks they slept in fit four men in a space smaller than most closets. I've come to the conclusion that all the submarine movies must be fiction. You know the one; when it shows some burly man running down the aisles of the boat at top speed in order to get out, press a button, save the world? Yeah, those...can't be true. Those aisles are so cramped, I watched the skinniest grandma-looking woman suck in her gut just to get through. There is no space anywhere. Every door is built for a midget. Aisles are filled with buttons, dials and gauges that permit the sub to run the way she should. Gleaming gold levers jut out everywhere. Storage compartments fill up any left over space there may be. The refrigerator is in the floor. And to top it off, they expect at least 70 men to live here, to get along living here, under not only the pressure of the seas, but also the pressure of leaving loved ones and battling in a war? It shouldn't be feasible. Yet it is exactly what generations among the Navy have done throughout history.

I walk the submarine corridors and listen to Ron explain Navy things to me. We eventually catch up to the three important looking men, and Ron, being a retired Navy guy himself, gets real quiet. He all of a sudden gets respectful. I still don't know who these people are, mind you. We all come to a ladder with plexi-glass covering it, so anyone would know going up the ladder is not an option on this tour. It leads to the conning tower I find out and this important looking man, he just pops that glass right off and up he goes. I know I'm in the midst of someone who has the power to well, someone who has the power to go popping off plexi-glass! Ron and I talk at the base of the ladder until we hear a cell phone ring. A hurried man scrambles down the ladder and explains he must go outside to meet the Mayor's people. He asks Ron to take over the tour as the men walk down the ladder. I ask to tag along and am granted that although Ron pulls me aside to say, "I can't explain to you how important these men are, and I can't stress how important it is that they aren't interrupted by *your* questions". I get the hint. Tag along, yes, but keep my mouth shut. Turns out, that important looking man, he's Douglass T. Biesel, Rear Admiral of the United States Navy, Midwest Region, and I just clambered my way into his personal tour of the USS Cod. From there on out, I get access to overhear questions your average tour wouldn't include. How awesome is that! I want to

tell the Rear Admiral that my husband is in the Navy; serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, he did his part too! I stay completely silent and find that as sure as Ron got respectful and quiet, so am I. I wonder if ever in their wildest dreams the men of the Cod and the Grunion thought that someday their duty would bring about the Rear Admiral of the US Navy asking questions about them and their lives, their submarines, honoring each of them as a hero.

The day went on with a memorial service for the men who lost their lives on the Grunion. It was long overdue. My story on Elmer T. Schumann of Tripoli, who perished on the submarine, was surprisingly, remembered by many there who I talked to. Members of Mr. Schumann's family were unable to make the trip to Ohio, so I was privileged to represent this sailor, casting a flower into the water below off the deck of the Cod, in his memory. I felt part of a much bigger family; a much bigger purpose. I saw things that weekend that will stay with me for a long time. During the name reading ceremony when the names of each of the 70 were read aloud, acknowledging their service and sacrifice, I was seated behind the widow of the boat's chef...the actual wife of one of these great men, one of three still alive today, seated in a wheelchair. In her 90's, her life has gone on years without him. She raised their daughter without him. She certainly had made a life for herself without him present in it, yet by the way her shoulders slightly sank when his name was read aloud, I could tell she was able to let go of some of the heartache that was still with her all this time. I figured her heart had to let out a sigh, something she waited for more than 60 years.

I sat with Mary and Dick Bentz that night at the reception. A live feed of Yutaka Iwasaki, the young Japanese historian who helped us all understand what happened to the Grunion, boomed on the wall via the internet live from Japan, families of the Grunion talked. Seated at my table were two men with their own interesting story. They were the son and grandson of the only man to get off the Grunion alive, when he had become seriously ill and the sub docked to let him off for surgery. The boat went back out to sea, never to be seen again. Had that not happened, these men eating dinner with me would not be here today. The son, Dick Sampsel, talked about how his father dearly missed his 70 friends all the rest of his life.

I believe people get so busy with day to day life, they forget instances like this; they forget the big picture that's framed out in small moments. I have never felt so honored to be reminded of that.

The night continued with story sharing, tears, standing ovations for the wives alive and the Abele sons who did the work to facilitate finding the submarine. It was an unbelievable weekend. Then it was over, and I drove 700 miles home the very next day.

Always with a little flair for writing, it has been a long standing joke in my family about when I will write a book. I took the job at the Tomahawk Leader over three years ago, because it let me earn a paycheck while working at home. I needed that, you see, because my husband was deployed at the time, with the US Navy, and I didn't want something that took me away from our children, even for one eight hour shift.

Over the summer I covered a story that brought me into the Tomahawk Historical Society. Spending time there observing the military section, I noticed one name among the list of Tomahawk's Killed in Action whose stats were not complete, misinformation on his death, date, etc. That man was Elmer Schumann. I was able to complete unanswered questions on his life, because I knew the story of his death by heart. Funny isn't it, how things pan out? There is a power out there I definitely have no control of. Things happen for reasons we do not know. The Grunion has touched my life in a way that little anything else has. I have become a part of it, I hope, as it for sure has become a part of me. I think I may have found my inspiration, my muse...70 of them to be exact.