

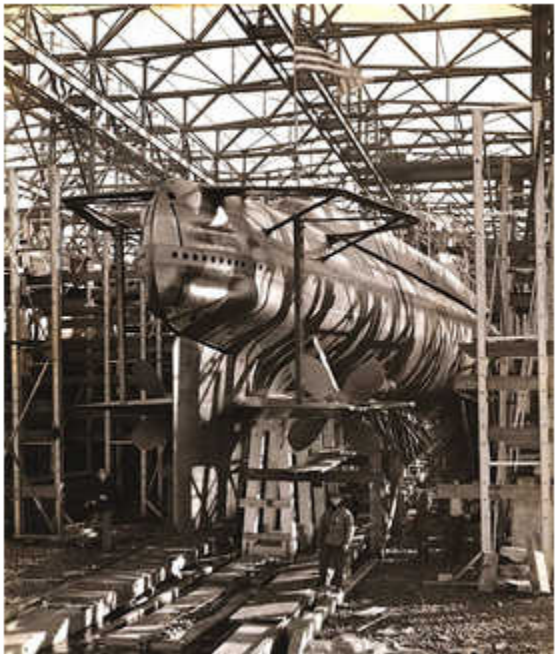


Farewell to USS Grunion crew

Kansas man among submariners lost in battle near Alaska in 1942

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The Wichita Eagle



The last moments on board the USS Grunion had to have been hell.

Its crew, engaged in battle in icy cold waters off the Aleutian Islands, radioed that it had sunk two Japanese patrol boats and damaged a third.

The submarine was under fire.

Then, there was silence.

For 65 years, the sub and its crew -- including Kansan John Stewart Clift, 22 and newly married -- were listed as missing in action.

It took strangers coming together, asking questions and searching for clues.

It took a string of improbabilities to piece those clues together.

Then, it took luck.

In August 2007, the submarine commander's three sons financed an expedition to the site near Kiska, Alaska, where the Grunion was believed to have disappeared.

Less than 20 minutes into the water, a mini-sub spotted a submarine's remains on a slope 3,000 feet down in the Bering Sea.

Now, 66 years after the men died, their families plan to come together Oct. 12 to say goodbye.

Clift's life, family

Had he survived, John Stewart Clift would be 88 years old.

He was born on Kansas Day, Jan. 29, 1920, the youngest of 10 children in a Harper County farm family.

His mother, Alice, died a few days later. His father, Joseph, gave him up for adoption.

John and Flossie Clift, of Bluff City in Harper County, took him in. He grew up knowing both families.

During the Depression, a young Keith Sanborn went to spend summers with his grandmother in Bluff City. Now a retired Wichita judge, Sanborn recalls looking up to Clift, who was six years older.

The two families became friends and kept in touch through the years.

At some point, Clift moved to Wichita.

He married Agnes Lorine Boswell in 1941. He was a torpedoman's mate, second class. He was serving his second enlistment with the Navy on the maiden voyage of the Grunion, one of the first subs commissioned after the U.S. entered World War II on Dec. 7, 1941.

The sub went down July 30, 1942.

Clift's adoptive father died the next year. His mother received his Purple Heart.

When Clift didn't come back from the war, Sanborn's mother began to search. When she died, Sanborn continued asking questions. A chance encounter at a church put him in touch with a submarine archivist who sent him pictures of the Grunion.

The children of John Stewart Clift's birth siblings also were asking questions.

"He was always one of these tragic figures in my dad's family," said Lois Rehn, a niece of Clift living in California. Her father, Lambert Stewart, was 7 when John was born and their mother died.

Rehn happened to find a Web site a few years ago about the Grunion and learned of the search for the submarine.

She supplied the only known photo of Clift, a newspaper clipping from when the sub disappeared.

"I have such emotional feelings about this man I never knew," Rehn said. "He was such a part of our family."

Obsessed with search

In Bethesda, Md., Mary Bentz let her search grow into an obsession. She wanted to know about her uncle, Carmine Parziale of Weedville, Pa. He was a torpedoman's mate, third class, and would have been standing next to John Stewart Clift on board the Grunion.

She wanted to know about every man on board the Grunion. Who were they? How did they live?

"My uncle died two years before I was born," Bentz said. "Growing up, I always thought he was somebody who lived far away. I knew so much about him. My family talked about him all the time. It never hit me until I was an adult, the significance and finality of his death. This boat went down and nobody knew where. There were no answers."

As she researched, she developed connections with the crew's surviving family members.

She looks at these families as an extension of her own.

She calls the crew the "Grunion sons."

Finding the wreck

Bruce Abele was 12 on Sept. 30, 1942, the day the Western Union telegram arrived at his home. He and his two younger brothers, Brad, 7, and John, 5, were playing football in the yard when their mother called them into the house.

Their father, Mannert Lincoln "Jim" Abele was the Grunion's commanding officer. The telegram said the Grunion had not been heard from and was presumed lost.

As the commander's wife, their mother wrote letters to each of the crew's next of kin.

For decades, no one knew exactly how the sub disappeared.

The brothers searched, and one even wrote a book. But discovery of the sub came down to what Bruce Abele calls "a stream of improbabilities."

In 1995, retired Air Force officer Richard Lane happened to see in a Colorado Springs antique shop a document identified as a "Wiring diagram of Deck Winch on Kana-Maru."

He paid \$1 for it.

In 2001, Lane mentioned his finding on a Web site for military historians.

In Japan, history buff Yutaka Iwasaki responded with a story about a battle between the Kano-Marui, a Japanese ship, and the Grunion. He had read a 1963 story published in Japan about the two vessels and their confrontation.

The Abele brothers read the information on the Web site. It was enough for them to pinpoint the site the Grunion might have gone down.

One evening, the youngest Abele -- John, who had founded a Boston medical company and became a billionaire -- happened to meet Robert Ballard, the man who located the Titanic in 1985.

He told Abele who might be good to hire and what equipment they needed. The brothers hired Williamson & Associates of Seattle to conduct the search, armed with maps that were part of Iwasaki's findings.

They had to search in August, when the Bering Sea was most calm.

Last year, on Aug. 14, the 62nd anniversary of Victory over Japan Day, the brothers found the wreckage.

A final goodbye

The descendants of the Grunion's crew will meet Oct. 10-12 in Cleveland, Ohio, where the sister ship of the Grunion, the USS Cod, is docked.

The submarine's bell, long considered the soul of the ship, will be rung in memory of the crew members. Left on shore by the Grunion crew as part of tradition, it was found in a military scrap pile during the Korean War.

For the family members of John Stewart Clift, the memorial is a chance to say goodbye.

"This is the final closure," said Diana Doren, Newport News, Va., whose grandmother was Clift's big sister, Olive. "The crew can now rest in peace. We know what happened. We know this is where they are at. This was the piece of the puzzle that was missing."

For Mary Bentz, the gathering will be a chance for the families to meet and share what they have in common. She remembers what the Japanese history buff, Yutaka Iwasaki, once told her:

"It's as though the men of the Grunion were crying to be found."