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Evelyn Switzer: A girl in her early 20s when her fiance died — she never married.

Woodward: A wartime mystery, a lifelong love — Evelyn Switzer's story

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Edition Date: 03/19/08

Evelyn Switzer was a vibrant figure on the Downtown scene until well into her 70s.

"She worked as a greeter at the Brick Oven Bistro," her niece, Pat Larson, said. "In a way the job was beneath her because she'd been a director of a performing arts center, but she really enjoyed it. She enjoyed the people she met and liked working with the young people there."

Larson described her aunt as an intelligent, strong-willed woman who loved people, especially children. What most people who knew her didn't know about her was that she lived most of her life with a broken heart. She was part of the unique story - and family - of the U.S.S. Grunion.

The Grunion was a submarine deployed to Alaska's Aleutian Islands in 1942. Most Americans don't think of Alaska as a World War II battleground, but the islands were. The Grunion's job

was to patrol routes between the Aleutians and Japan, a mission it accomplished by sinking a number of Japanese ships.

On July 30 of that year, all contact with the Grunion ended. It was declared missing on Aug. 16, but the cause of its disappearance remained a mystery for years. The Japanese reported no submarine sinkings. Decades passed before information surfaced that the Grunion apparently sank after being fired upon by a Japanese submarine chaser.

One of the 70 sailors who died on the Grunion was Motor Machinist's Mate Sylvester Joseph Kennedy of Long Island, N.Y. He was Switzer's fiance.

She wasn't told when his submarine went down. In fact, she went years without knowing what happened to him.

"All the families ever were told was that the crew was missing," her longtime friend Kitty Fleischman said. "They thought they might be prisoners of war and would be released when the war ended."

The result was a unique "family" of survivors - wives, lovers, siblings, parents and children who never gave up hope.

"I've heard that more than half of the widows never remarried," Fleischman said. "A woman whose father was aboard told me that all her life she thought the next knock on the door would be her Dad coming home."

The Grunion's commanding officer, Lt. Cmdr. Mannert L. Abele, had three young sons waiting for him to come home. Not knowing what actually happened dogged them and other survivors for decades.

"After awhile you realize they're not coming home," Larson said, "but there's always still that deep little twinge within you.

"My aunt knew even less than the others because she and Ken (Switzer's nickname for Kennedy) never got married and the Navy didn't consider her family. They gave Ken's Purple Heart to his father. She didn't know about it. She waited and waited for Ken to come home. She didn't even know for sure that the sub had sunk until about 1990. Someone at her church had had a high command in the Navy, and he looked it up for her."

Sixty years after it went down, Abele's sons launched a search for the Grunion. It was found and positively identified last summer, nearly a mile down off of the Aleutian island of Kiska.

For Switzer, it was too late. She'd died of congestive heart failure a year and a half earlier, just short of her 86th birthday.

A girl in her early 20s when her fiance died, she never married.

In 1996 she went to the place - or as close to it as she could get - where her beloved Ken had died.

"My husband and I were going to Alaska and asked her if she wanted to go with us," Fleischman said. "She leaped at the chance.

"We found the old submarine dock, which would have been the last place Ken set foot on land. She'd brought a little pair of wooden shoes with her that he'd bought for her in Holland. They

were one of her cherished possessions. She also had a poem she'd written about him and a clipping of his obituary. She put them all in a little box and put it out to sea. That night, she said it was the first time she'd felt closure in over 50 years."

It wasn't Switzer's style to play the grieving spinster. She dated and knew how to have a good time. But no one ever measured up to Ken.

"She'd built up such a fantasy about their life together that no flesh-and-blood person could match it," Fleischman said. "She didn't talk about it a whole lot, but she never forgot him. She'd talk about people reminding her of him."

The Grunion's loss affected hundreds of family members. Mary Bentz of Bethesda, Md., lost an uncle when it went down. She's been working to notify the families of its discovery and publicize the story.

Switzer's story touched her deeply.

"Here she was, just a girl when it happened and she went her whole life without ever getting married," Bentz said. "There was never anyone who could take his place. He was truly the love of her life."

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