

WWII Grunion crew recalled

Local veteran searched for his friend

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It has been 66 years, but George Herold remembers attempts to contact the USS Grunion around the time the submarine disappeared following a confrontation with a Japanese freighter.

The Grunion remained missing in action until last year, when confirmation came that a sonar image taken in 2006 on the bottom of the Bering Sea was the Grunion.

Herold has vivid memories of his close friend, crewmember Albert Ullmann, during the months before the submarine went down with its crew of 70 near the Aleutian Island during World War II.

On Oct. 10, more than 130 family members of the crew will gather in Cleveland, Ohio, for a memorial to those lost on the USS Grunion.

"I remember him as clear as if he were sitting here today," said 84-year-old Herold of West Melbourne.

Ullmann was one of five seamen, included Herold, who became close friends when they attended submarine school together in New London, Conn. The five were Ullmann, "Red" Stanton, Renato Bertoli, and Tommy Reilly and Herold.

"I looked up to these guys," Herold said. "Especially Ullmann. He was about 20. I was only 17. I remember on weekends we'd go into town and have beer and pizza. I couldn't have beer, but they'd pour me a glass."

When Herold joined the Navy, he requested submarine school, where he met Ullmann and the others.

The men grew close, but the start of the war soon separated them and contacts were lost.

"I was sent to signal school," Herold said. "The Grunion was still in Groton being built."

He was later sent to Hawaii and was at Pearl Harbor during the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack. He did not know that Ullmann eventually went on the USS Grunion, or where the others were assigned.

At the time the United States was drawn into the war, Herold was assigned the S-27 submarine and Ullmann was aboard the Grunion. Both submarines patrolled the Aleutian Islands.

"I never saw the Grunion, but we were always 40 or 50 miles away," Herold said.

In the early morning of July 31, 1942, about 10 miles northeast of a Japanese-occupied island at the far tip of the Aleutians, there was a confrontation between the USS Grunion and a Japanese freighter. The submarine was never heard from again.

They were listed as "missing in action, cause unknown."

On Aug. 4, 1942, Herold said the S-27 was told to try to make contact with the Grunion.

"We broadcast a message to the Grunion," he said. "We received no answer."

Little was know of the whereabouts of Grunion Capt. Mannert "Jim" Abele and his crew. Family members hoped and prayed that they'd come home or be found.

Only 12-years old at the time, Bruce Abele and his brothers John and Brad waited.

"I used to shoot baskets," Bruce Abele said. "I used to say if I get five in a row, my dad would come back."

He never got five in a row, he said. His dad never came home.

With the help of a Japanese historian, in 2006 a sonar image of what appeared to be a submarine was found in the far reaches of the Bering Sea. During another expedition, the find was confirmed in August 2007 that the submarine was the Grunion.

Bruce Abele talks about the find with the enthusiasm as if it had been today.

"It's unbelievable," he said. "Unless you've gone through it, it's hard to explain."

The find set off a search for family members and friends of all the crewmembers.

Among the crew was Lt. Samuel Reed Dighton Jr. of Sanford.

Ullmann's cousin Joseph Ullmann and his wife, Sue, live in Philadelphia.

"They remember the uniform and him coming to visit," Sue Ullmann said of her husband and his sister. "I wish my father-in-law were alive to hear all this."

When Mary Bentz saw reports that the submarine had been found, she knew she had to do something. Her uncle Carmine Parziale was one of the crewmembers lost on the Grunion. She contacted Bruce Abele and went to work helping to find family members.

"Looking at all these young men, I felt this deep feeling that I had to do something," Bentz said. "Suddenly it became personal."

Bentz, of Bethesda, Md., joined Rhonda Raye of Cartersville, Ga. and Vickie Rodgers of Mayfield, Ky., in months of research to locate and contact family members of all 70 men on the Grunion.

"We found all the families, she said.