

Navy Senior Archivist Helps Solve 57 Year Old USS Eagle 56 Mystery

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WASHINGTON (NNS) -- April 23, 1945, just two weeks before V-E Day, USS Eagle 56 was towing targets for Navy dive-bombers just off the coast of Maine.

At about noon, the ship was suddenly torn in two amidships by an unknown explosion, with only 13 of its 67-man crew surviving.

But despite the fact that several of the ships survivors claimed to have seen the uppermost portion of a submarine conning tower nearby while the ship was sinking, the Navy ultimately classified the ships loss as due to a boiler explosion.

In an article titled "Setting The Record Straight: Sinking of PE-56" by Helen O'Neill, the story of how this was changed in 2001 by Naval Historical Center (NHC) action is chronicled in the May 2003 issue of Sea Classics magazine.

Through the tireless research of lawyer, naval historian, and diver, Paul Lawton of Brockton, Mass., and the further extensive research of U.S. Navy and German records by Bernard "Cal" Cavalcante, senior archivist, NHC, it has since been confirmed that Eagle 56 was in fact sunk by U-853.

Lawton had originally heard the story of Eagle 56 from two brothers whose father was lost on the ship. Their mother had related to them of what she had been told about the sinking.

Survivors had said "that moments after the explosion, as they were diving into the frigid water, they glimpsed something dark and sinister. It rose to the surface for an instant, but they would never forget the sight - a submarine conning tower painted with a mischievous trotting red horse on a yellow shield."

After hearing this story, Lawton consulted the definitive source on U-boat sinkings, Jurgen Rohwer's book "Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945." In a footnote, it stated that Eagle 56 was probably sunk by U-853.

These differences with the official Navy determination of a boiler explosion sparked Lawton to come up with the truth. He gathered reams of documents, and even interviewed the remaining survivors and a former WAVE who was the stenographer at the Court of Inquiry.

After much bouncing around in the Navy's bureaucracy, his research ended up on the desk of Cavalcante at the NHC.

A center employee since 1960, Cavalcante had worked with Rohwer for 10 years on his book. He knew of previously classified records that Lawton did not know of. This documentation proved that U-853 was operating off Maine at the time of the sinking.

But what Cavalcante also knew was that U-853's conning tower insignia was a yellow shield with a red horse.

Based on Lawton's and his own research, in May 2001, Cavalcante sent a letter and documentation to Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. Vern Clarke. In this package, he recommended that the record be changed to reclassify Eagle 56's sinking to enemy action.

After a thorough review, the CNO concurred and passed the package on to Secretary of the Navy Gordon R. England.

After his review, England also agreed with the finding.

The Navy reclassified the sinking as a combat loss and recommended that Purple Hearts be awarded to its 49 dead and 12 survivors.

This also makes it the Navy's biggest single combat loss in New England waters.

In June 2001, at a special ceremony aboard the museum ship USS Salem (CA 139) in Quincy, Mass., the Navy awarded the Purple Heart to the three survivors and next of kin of those lost.

"This was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had working at the Naval Historical Center," said Cavalcante. "It brought closure to the families affected by this forgotten action of World War II."

As a postscript, U-853 was one of the last German U-boats to operate off the U.S. coast during World War II, and it was sunk with all hands by USS Atherton (DE 169) and USS Moberly (PF 63) south of New London, Conn., May 6, 1945.

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