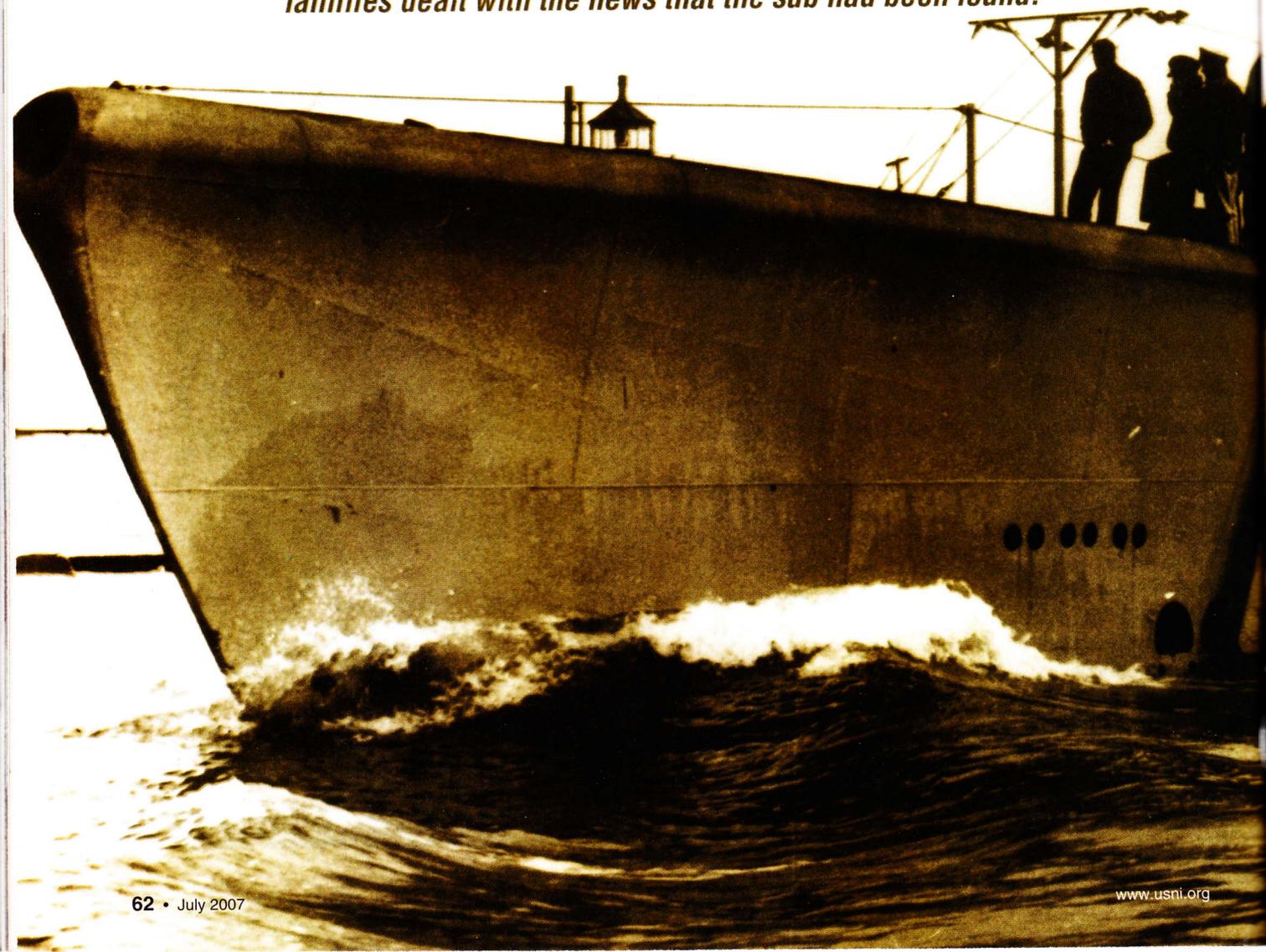


FINDING OUR *Lagarto* FATHERS

By Nancy Kenney

In 2005, British diver Jamie Macleod and his crew located the wreck of the USS Lagarto (SS-371), a World War II attack submarine sunk 60 years earlier with 86 men on board. This is the story of those men and how their families dealt with the news that the sub had been found.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

MORE THAN SHIPMATES The author's father, Bill Mabin (far left), celebrates his 26th birthday with his wife Margy along with close friend Wes Shackelford (far right) and his wife Eleanor. Mabin and Shackelford spent their last Christmas together.

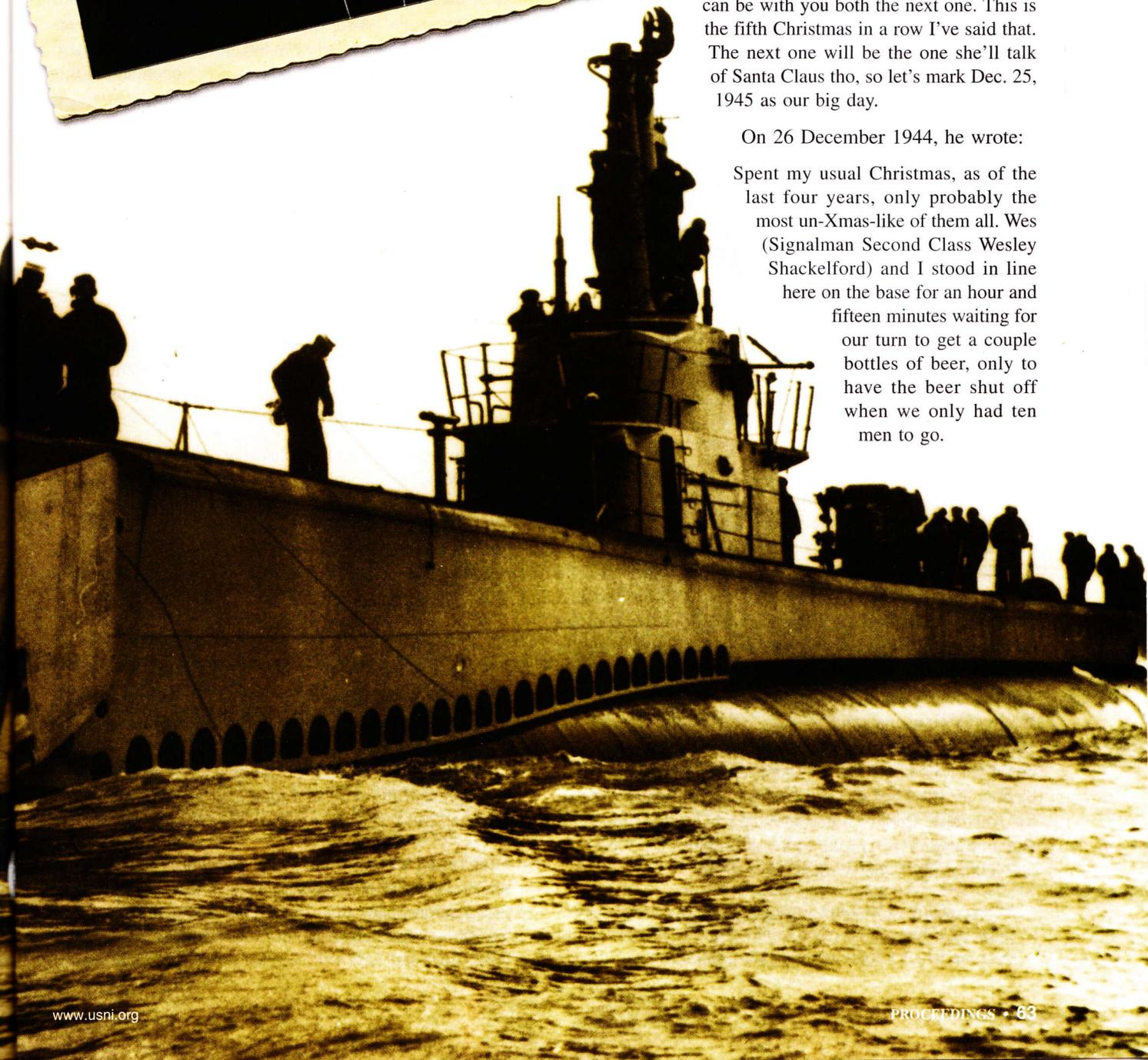


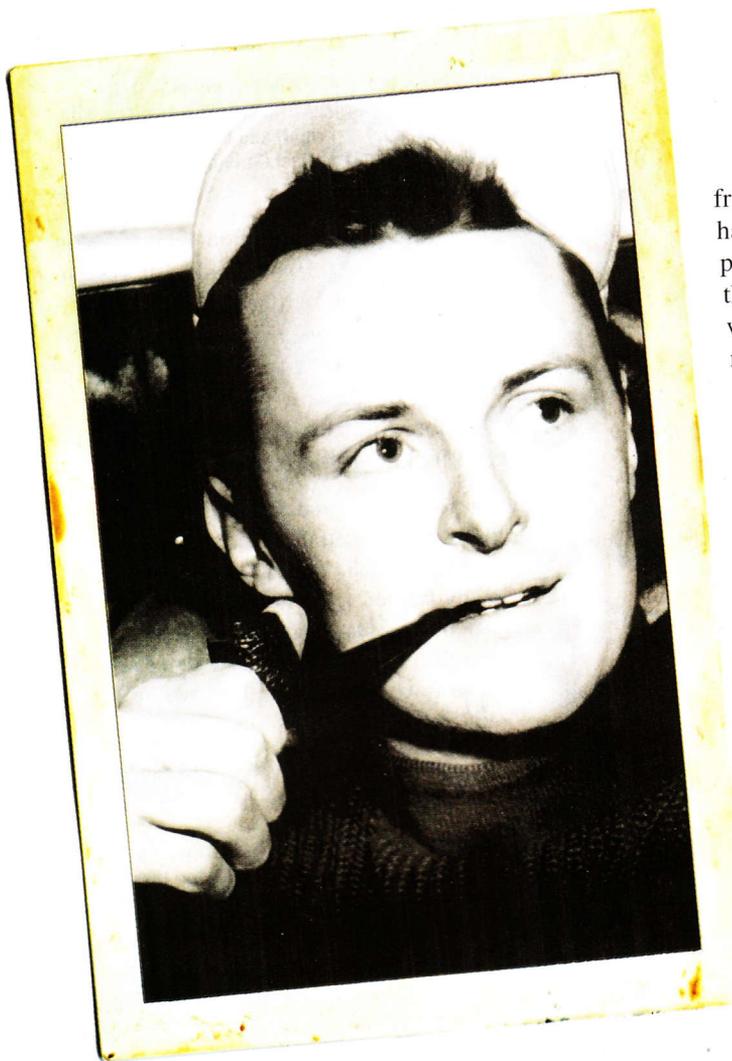
The *Lagarto* reached Pearl Harbor on Christmas Day 1944, ready for action. The letters of her crew reflected the men's war-weariness but also their optimism that the war would soon be over. Just prior to his arrival in Hawaii, my father, *Lagarto* crew member Signalman First Class William Tucker Mabin, wrote to my mother:

I want you to send me an itemized list of everything Nance gets for Christmas, with her reaction to each. This was the Christmas I really wanted to be home. I pray to God I can be with you both the next one. This is the fifth Christmas in a row I've said that. The next one will be the one she'll talk of Santa Claus tho, so let's mark Dec. 25, 1945 as our big day.

On 26 December 1944, he wrote:

Spent my usual Christmas, as of the last four years, only probably the most un-Xmas-like of them all. Wes (Signalman Second Class Wesley Shackelford) and I stood in line here on the base for an hour and fifteen minutes waiting for our turn to get a couple bottles of beer, only to have the beer shut off when we only had ten men to go.





HOPING FOR MIRACLES Some crew members' wives continued to write to their husbands after the sub was reported missing. Rae Todd wrote to her husband Hal (above): "Oh darling Buddy—if I only knew something."

The *Lagarto* departed Pearl Harbor on 24 January 1945 and formed a wolfpack of three submarines, what became known as Latta's Lancers (after the *Lagarto*'s commanding officer, Commander Frank Devere Latta). Unknown to the families, the *Lagarto* and her partners *Haddock* (SS-231) and *Sennet* (SS-408) were on their way to participate in Operation Detachment, a submarine sweep to clear the carrier route of Japanese picket boats in preparation for the invasion of Iwo Jima. Most *Lagarto* families had no idea that the submarine was to be part of that historic invasion. It was her first mission.

In spring 1945, the war in the Pacific was winding down, and the *Lagarto* was operating in the Gulf of Siam, having finished her second wartime patrol, ready to head for Australia. Letters home included plans for the future and anticipation of getting to know children. In one of his last letters, my father wrote:

Nancy seems to become so much more of a little girl instead of a baby. I so often wonder how she'll react and treat me when I come home again. I hope she really feels

I'm her father and not just a strange man that seems to come and go. Undoubtedly, my connection will be vague to her but I pray I'll someday become her favorite father.

On 3 May, the *Lagarto* responded to a call for help from the USS *Baya* (SS-318), which had just survived a harrowing attack from a Japanese convoy. Using megaphones, the two captains laid out their plans for attacking that formation. Years later, in an emotional conversation with Commander Latta's son, Michael, Lieutenant Commander B. C. Jarvis, captain of the *Baya* during the war, said that Commander Latta was calm and confident. The two skippers agreed that the *Lagarto* would dive on the convoy's track at 1400, with the *Baya* taking station 10 to 15 miles farther along the track from the *Lagarto*.

A Glow on the Horizon

Commander Jarvis told Mike Latta that several hours after the two boats parted, the *Baya*'s bridge watch heard explosions and saw a glow on the horizon in the direction of the *Lagarto*'s likely location near the Japanese convoy's estimated position. It is now apparent that this bridge watch witnessed the sinking of the *Lagarto*. At the time, however, things weren't so clear.

Japanese war records reported that the minelayer *Hatsutaka* had attacked a submarine in the Gulf of Siam. But they did not conclude that the vessel had been sunk. In *United States Submarine Operations in World War II*, well-known naval historian Theodore Roscoe wrote, "If *Lagarto* went down to a minelayer, she must have suffered a freakish direct hit or a phenomenally violent barrage."

When the *Lagarto* failed to arrive at her destination in Australia, the crew's families received telegrams, such as this one to the family of Motor Machinist's Mate First Class Dick Fisher on 23 June 1945:

I deeply regret to inform you that your brother Richard Louis Fisher Motor Machinist's Mate First Class USN is missing in action in the service of his country. Your great anxiety is appreciated and you will be furnished details when received. To prevent possible aid to our enemies and to safeguard the lives of other personnel please do not divulge the name of the ship or station or discuss publicly the fact that he is missing.

Vice Admiral Randall Jacobs,
Chief of Naval Personnel

The *Lagarto* families were frantic for more information. In the weeks and months following the boat's disappearance, heart-breaking letters were exchanged between families. Holly Latta, wife of the boat's skipper, wrote to my mother and the wife of Lieutenant Harold Todd.

To Mrs. Todd, she wrote:

I don't want to raise useless hopes for you, Rae, but I myself do hold a very great deal of hope, miracles have happened before many times in submarines, and Frank and I have long been known as the Lucky Lattas. Perhaps our love, belief and faith will help the miracle of their return.

To my mother, she wrote:

One of my hopes is in the fact that the waters thru which they were in operation were mainly shallow. That would give the crew so very much more opportunity to escape if the ship was sunk; and a submarine does not give up easily.

Hoping for a miracle, some wives continued to write their husbands. Rae Todd wrote the following to her husband, expressing the feelings of all the *Lagarto* families:

Oh darling Buddy—if I only knew something. At first I thought maybe you had to go in hiding or something, or had run aground, but that theory sort of went by the board. Then I thought maybe you'd been taken prisoner, and as gruesome as that thought was, at least it would mean you were alive. Every day I kept looking for a telegram or some word that you'd been liberated from a prison camp.

As the months wore on with no word, the *Lagarto* families' hopes began to dim. The letters show support for each other, but reflect an understanding that the survivors' lives would never be the same. On 3 December 1945, Mrs. Latta wrote to my mother:

I've dreaded the thought of finding and holding a job but your letter has done much to help me know that that is the happiest solution. Right now I'm working on the prelude to work—a strict regimen of weight and strength gaining. And succeeding at long last. The lean and haunted look may be fascinating in *Vogue* but it soon must pall on friends and offspring.

Final word came in May 1946 with an official letter from Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, who expressed his sincere regrets that the crew of the *Lagarto* was still missing and presumed dead. Except for the place in the hearts of their families and friends, the crew was gone forever.

Lagarto Found

Fast forward to 5 June 2005. On a sunny Sunday afternoon, my son John called with astounding news. My father's submarine had just been found in the Gulf of Thailand. He had learned of this from surfing the Internet. My life was turned upside down in a wonderful way. I knew where my father was!

Over the years, I occasionally wondered how I would feel if my father's submarine were ever found. That thought was quickly dismissed; it would never happen, I thought. Then the impossible took place, and I was overwhelmed by emotions. I grieved. As I was only two years old when my father died, I didn't experience the ritual supports of a wake or funeral. I grew up with my father just gone.

The fact is that many war orphans have never properly grieved their lost fathers, and all their lives they feel a certain kind of sadness about this loss. It is difficult to describe how it feels to mourn a father who died 60 years earlier. After a week of grieving, I swung into action. What should I do for those other *Lagarto* sailors and their families?

The Lagarto Goes Down Fighting

In preparation for making a *Lagarto* documentary, internationally known Shadow Divers Richie Kohler and John Chatterton met Jamie Macleod and the MV *Trident* crew in March 2007 to make another dive on the submarine. The divers wanted to determine what specifically caused the vessel to go down. They found that the *Lagarto's* stern planes are in the dive position, as are the bow planes, indicating that no survivors had tried to raise the boat. The rudder is left full, indicating a hard port turn. The only apparent damage, which is on the port side, does not appear to breach the hull. The shape and size of the damage is exactly what would be expected from a depth-charge.



IN THEIR MEMORY A wreath awaits placement over the resting site of the *Lagarto* during a memorial at sea on board the salvage ship *USS Salvor (ARS-52)* in June 2006.

The *Lagarto* had fired a torpedo. The outer door of the Number 4 torpedo tube is open, showing it empty. The periscopes are still in place, in the retracted position (and an American flag still flies from them). All hatches are closed and appear secured.

The divers concluded the following: The *Lagarto* went down fighting. She was on the surface and in very close proximity to the enemy. After firing a torpedo at her attacker, she turned hard to port and dove. Before the outer torpedo tube door could be closed, she was struck by a depth charge on the port side and sank. It all happened very fast. In the words of Richie Kohler, "The diving planes, rudder, and torpedo tube are frozen in that moment in time."

This is critically important information for the families. In many candid conversations with family members, there was a common thread of anxiety. Did the crew suffer? This must be the anguish of every family that has lost someone in a submarine. We now know that the *Lagarto's* crew died bravely and quickly—not only in the performance of their duty, but also in going to the aid of another submarine.

—Nancy Kenney

Spreading the Word

Karen Duvalle—a dedicated professional with Manitowoc's Wisconsin Maritime Museum—and I became partners. We quickly agreed it was important to inform as many *Lagarto* families as possible of the news. Starting with only a few in June 2005, we have found 68 families of the 86 crew members. As I spoke with the families, we began to reach a consensus of what should be done. Without exception, each family called for a memorial service, with full military honors. In addition, we wanted the Navy to officially acknowledge the *Lagarto's* discovery.

The process of informing families was tricky. I had to remember that the person I was calling might be elderly or in poor health; at the very least, they would be shocked. When hearing the news, many family members became so emotional they could hardly speak. Over the phone, I could hear tears of joy and relief. Everyone wanted to know more.

One particularly dicey situation occurred when I received a return call from Nancy Mendenhall Ford, daughter of the *Lagarto's* executive officer, Lieutenant William

comfortable). We shared stories of our fathers and ended up crying. Nancy told me how she still treasures the baby blanket her father sent home from Australia after he learned of her birth. Sadly, she has no photos of herself with her father; he was never able to hold his baby daughter in his arms. Nancy thinks I'm lucky to have such photos, and she is right.

Good Press

When Karen and I felt we had exhausted this direct approach, we turned to the hometown newspapers of the crewmen. Reporters from all over the country were fascinated and wrote beautiful stories of *Lagarto* Sailors who had once lived in their communities. Those reporters found families of 20 crew members. Later press reports added at least another dozen. The crew of 86 were from 33 states; the *Lagarto's* discovery became a national story.

On 6 May 2006 a beautiful Memorial Service took place in the charming city of Manitowoc (where the sub was built) at the site of the Wisconsin Maritime Museum. The *Lagarto* had come home. At the ceremony, Rear Admiral Jeffrey Cassias, Commander Submarine Forces Pacific, addressed the families and presented each with an American flag that had flown over the Pearl Harbor submarine base. The *Lagarto's* families met Lieutenant Commander Jeff A. Davis, Admiral Cassias' public affairs officer, who was very helpful in putting together this solemn but joyful event. Diver Jamie Macleod came from Thailand for the occasion and met the families whose lives he had changed. The maritime museum, especially Executive Director Norma Bishop, and Wisconsin SubVets organizations, particularly Owen Williams, were extremely gracious hosts.

More was to come. In June 2006, as part of the Navy's Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises, the crew of the USS *Salvor* (ARS-52) surveyed the wreck believed to be the *Lagarto*. After scraping 61 years of sea growth off the propellers and other parts of the submarine's hull, the Navy found the irrefutable evidence it needed to identify the wreck. This, along with other historical data and physical evidence, verified the discovery. The Naval Historical Center announced that the *Lagarto*—gravesite of 86 American Sailors—had been located. She was the 50th of the 52 U.S. submarines lost in World War II.



SOMETHING IN COMMON The author (left) attends a service in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, with Nancy Mendenhall Ford, daughter of the *Lagarto's* executive officer, William Mendenhall. Fortunately, Ms. Ford pulled her car over when the author broke the news of the sub's discovery to her over her cell phone.

H. Mendenhall. In leaving a message for her, I had only said that I (a complete stranger) had something important to tell her. Nancy called back from her cell phone, and I could tell that she was driving down an expressway. First I asked her if she was a good driver (she must have thought I was crazy). When she politely assured me that she was, I told her that we had something in common. Our fathers had served together in the *Lagarto*. Then I told her the submarine had been found, and she was stunned.

As we discussed this astounding news, I could tell she had pulled out of traffic (which made me much more

The *Salvor* divers also found that the American flag, tied to the shears by the British divers a year earlier, was still rippling in the clear currents. The flag was a gift to the submarine from Elizabeth Kenney Augustine, granddaughter of crew member Bill Mabin. Beth and her brother, John Kenney, had traveled from Chicago to accompany the British divers on their second expedition in July 2005. When asked to describe her feelings of being at the site of the *Lagarto*, Beth said, "I felt like I was holding my grandfather's hand."

After 61 years of waiting, the submarine's families knew for certain where their loved ones rested. Had it not been for an e-mail inquiry from Wisconsin submarine veteran Roy Leonhardt to Steve Burton, owner of Thai Wreck Divers who found the boat, the *Lagarto* would undoubtedly still be missing. Roy's message was passed on to Jamie Macleod, who with his crew dove to the wreck, and the rest is literally history.

Lives Changed Forever

Many *Lagarto* families have told me her loss changed their lives forever. Parents grieved their lost sons until the day they themselves died. The fact that the *Lagarto* was lost after executing her last assigned mission so close to the end of the war must have made it particularly painful for the families. But the discovery of the sunken ship also had a profound impact on the families.

The 81-year-old brother and 79-year-old sister of Torpedoman's Mate Second Class Ralph Simmerman were reunited after a 20-year estrangement. Wayne Simmerman passed away three months later, knowing his long-lost brother's fate and having his sister's support in the last months of his life.

Terry Clouse, who was nine days old when his father, Torpedoman's Mate Second Class George Clouse, went down with the ship, has gotten to know his good-looking father, and the hole in his heart is a little smaller. Terry likes to think that his father was one of the crew who loaded the last torpedo.

We *Lagarto* children have found new brothers and sisters with whom we can share our life-long feelings of loss. In finding the *Lagarto*, we have also found each other. *Lagarto* widows and siblings and friends have finally gained some peace in knowing where their beloved Sailors rest. No one has forgotten these men; they will be loved always. Some say that we must have found closure. The opposite is true. Nothing has been closed for us. The discovery of the *Lagarto* was a beginning, not an end.

Of course, our dads were perfect. Old photographs show their handsome faces—strong and intelligent—and young. Our fathers, forever in their 20s, have 60-year-old children and grandchildren older than they were at their deaths. In one of his last letters to my mother, Bill Mabin wrote:



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

A CHERISHED PHOTO Bill Mabin holds his 15-month-old daughter, who went on to write this article, 62 years after his death. Nancy Ford "has no photos of herself with her father," the author writes. "Nancy thinks I'm lucky to have such photos, and she is right."

Nancy's progress seems quite remarkable in so short a time. God! How I'd love to hear her little voice or feel one of those little kisses of hers, to say nothing of yours. It's very flattering to hear from you the small ways Nancy seems to remember her daddy, but I'm 'fraid she'll soon forget she has one.

I haven't forgotten my dad, nor have the other *Lagarto* children forgotten theirs. We have found ourselves in a strange and magical time machine. We have received an extraordinary blessing. In finding our fathers, they've found us, too. ☀

Ms. Kenney is the daughter of Signalman First Class William Tucker Mabin from the USS *Lagarto*. The letters of Rae Todd were used by permission of the Wisconsin Maritime Museum. Ms. Kenney welcomes any correspondence regarding the submarine. Her e-mail addresses are: n.kenney@worldnet.att.net and nancykenney11@yahoo.com.