

BECAUSE HE WAS OUR BROTHER

Recently, an event occurred that supports and demonstrates the comradery that we proudly share as submariners. The event occurred as follows:

During the summer of last year an unidentified man walked unannounced into the VFW Post in Wildwood, NJ and placed a sealed urn on the bar which contained the ashes of an individual that he described only as those of a submariner. He told the bartender "vets will know what to do with the ashes" and departed without further explanation as to how or why he was in possession of the urn/ashes.

The commander of the VFW contacted me, as commander of the nearest submarine veterans base (Egg Harbor New Jersey Base), explained the unusual event and asked if our base would see to the proper disposition of the ashes. Our base retrieved the ashes from the VFW and began the process of trying to properly identify the remains of the individual in question and also ascertain if in fact the person was a submarine veteran. We researched identifiers on the urn and were ultimately able to identify the funeral home that performed the cremation of the individual. The funeral director confirmed that he performed the cremation on October 28, 2014 and identified the remains as those of Harry Edward Harris, DOB February 26, 1920. The funeral director advised that to the best of his knowledge there were no known relatives or family members of Mr. Harris. He further explained that he had no records or knowledge of how or why the urn was in the possession of the unidentified person who left it at the VFW.

Our base researched navy military records for Harry Edward Harris, DOB February 26, 1920 and learned that Mr. Harris was a US Navy veteran and was in fact a submarine veteran. He was awarded the Pacific Theater Ribbon with three stars, the American Theater Ribbon, the Victory Medal, Submarine Combat Pin and Submarine Qualification Pin. His military records revealed that he served as a Yeoman Third Class YN3(SS) aboard the USS Balao (SS285) during the period 15 March 1944 through 7 March 1946.

Our base made numerous inquiries in an effort to locate any living relatives of YN3 (SS) Harris but were unable to find any information that would be helpful. Therefore, our base concluded that it would be our privilege to give YN3 (SS) Harris a proper military funeral that would be commensurate with his military service. Associate base members Robert Frolow (Veteran Affairs Coordinator/American Legion Post 352 Commander), James Donahue and Frederick Vineyard (AMVETS Post 911) were asked for their assistance with the burial of YN3(SS) Harris. Commander Frolow was instrumental in securing a burial site and requesting a US Navy burial detail be present at grave side. As a result the navy provided a burial detail, flag bearers and bugler. AMVETS Post 911 provided a color guard and American Legion Post 352 provided side boys. Submarine Veterans Egg Harbor Base Chaplain John Pucci provided a moving eulogy and base sub-vet members served as pall bearers, and interment facilitators.

During the service it was noted that a woman who was passing by the site stopped to observe the burial of YN3(SS) Harris and the military protocol that was being shown to him. She stayed until the conclusion of the service and then approached a group of our sub base members that were gathered by the grave site. The woman approached us and offered her condolences. She stated that the service was very impressive, explained that she had never observed a military service before and found it to be very moving and emotional. She then inquired as to whom the burial was for. We told her of the unusual circumstances under which we obtained the ashes and ultimately arranged for the burial service. She was a little surprised by our explanation and stated "you mean you did all this for someone you are not related to or never met?" Yes, ma'am was the response. Noting the confusion that seemed to come over her, John Kill (Base COB) came forward with the following explanation: "You see, Ma'am, it's like this, Yeoman Harris was a veteran, a submarine veteran, therefore he was a brother to all of us. What happened here today was that brothers buried their brother." The woman paused for a moment with her mouth slightly ajar as if trying to comprehend what she had just heard. She then stated, "that is the most amazing thing I have ever heard. Thank God that our country has men and women like you to protect it. God Bless you all and thank you for your service." Thank you, Ma'am, was our response.