

**The History & Loss of the USCG Ship USS SERPENS (AK-97) and Our Argument for Reinstating  
the Purple Heart to the Rest of the Crew**



**Presented by Douglas E. Campbell & Robert G. Breen  
To The US Coast Guard Combat Veterans Association Conference, Reno, NV, May 2023**

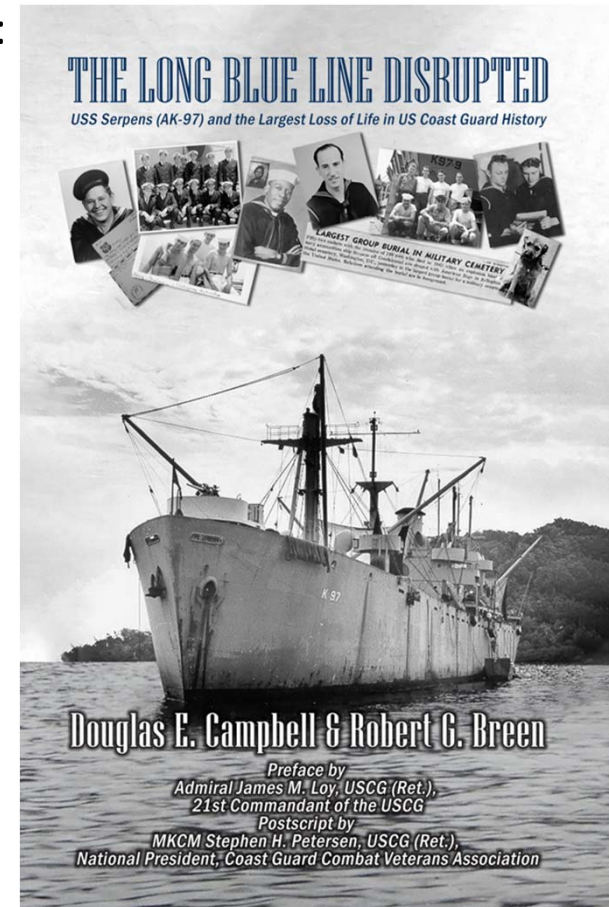
## INTRODUCTION

Bob Breen (right) – was 4 years old when his father, F2c Gerald Breen, USCGR, was lost with some 250 others in the explosion of Serpens on 29 January 1945. This was Bob's first trip to Guadalcanal to visit where his dad died. He has been fighting for years to see that all crew receive the Purple Heart which was initially awarded them.

Doug Campbell – retired US Naval Intelligence Officer; published some 42 books to date, mostly military history. Together they published:



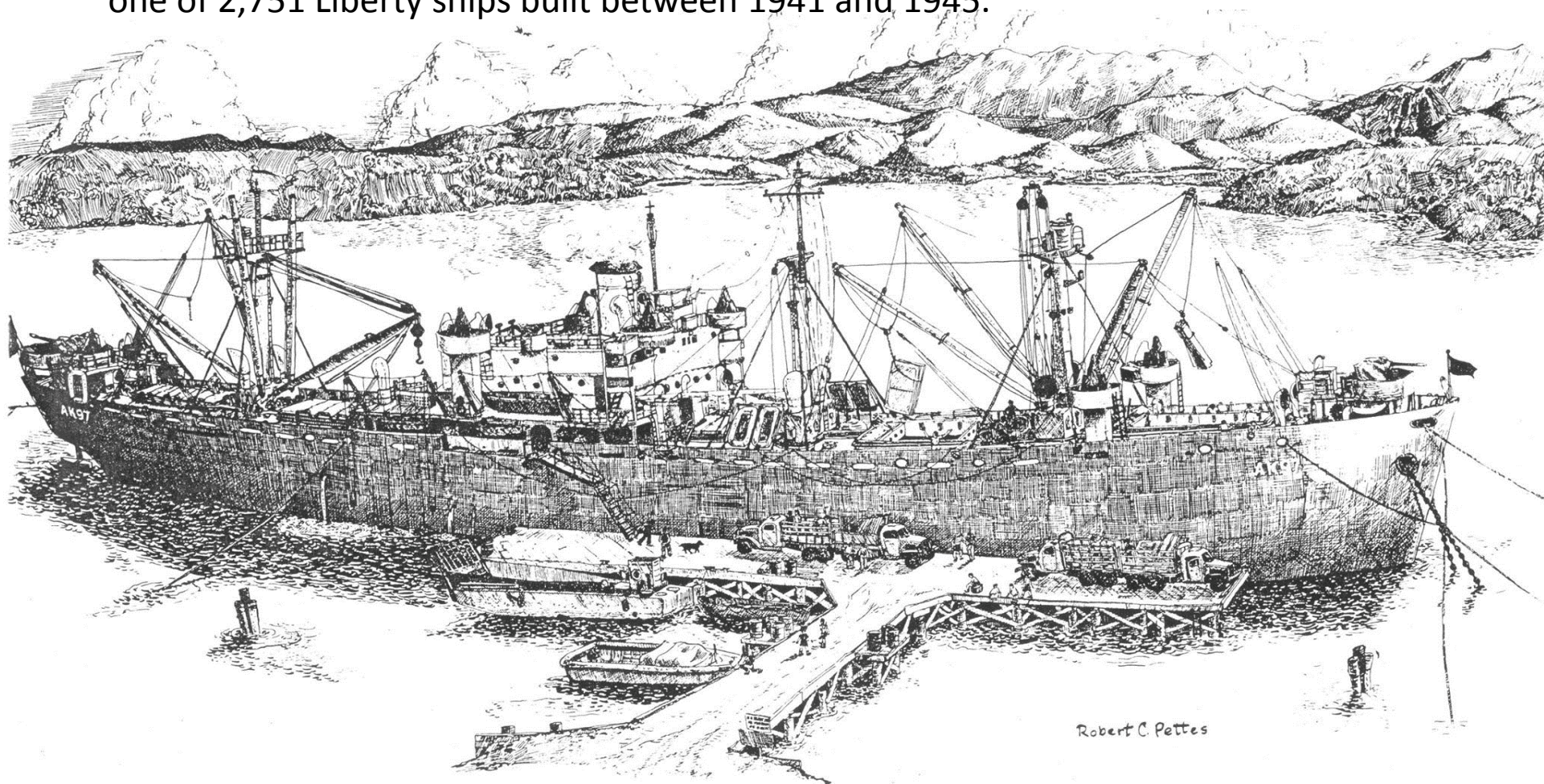
Doug Campbell and Bob Breen at Vilu War Museum, Guadalcanal w/ remains of F4F Wildcat.





## QUICK STATS

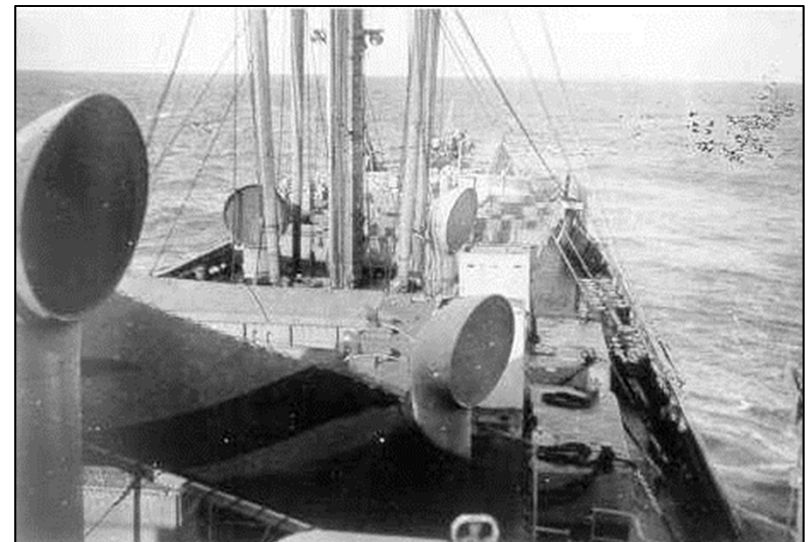
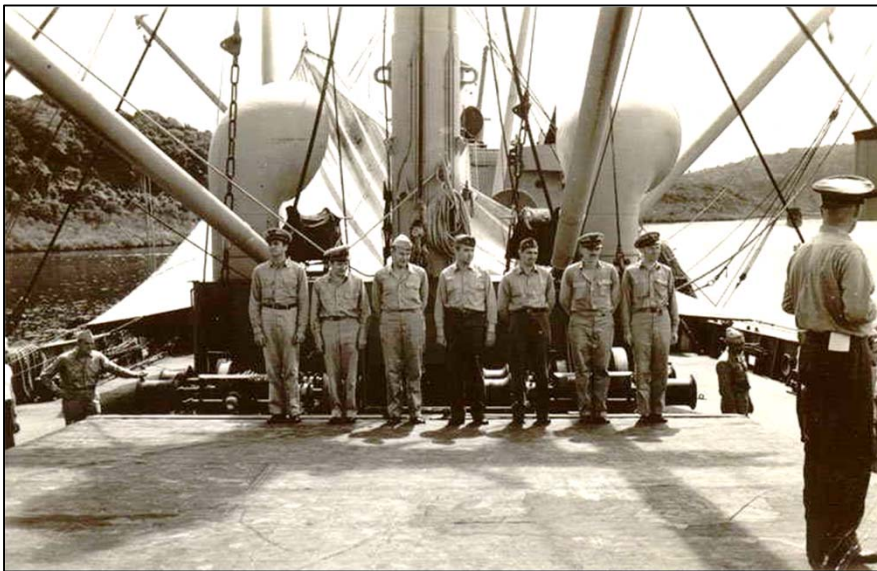
- Keel laid at Los Angeles on 10 March 1943; launched 5 April 1943 (26 days!); commissioned at San Diego on 28 May 1943.
- The builder, California Shipbuilding Corp., or Calship, used 3,425 tons of steel for the hull, 2,725 tons of steel plate, and 700 tons of metal walls and bulkheads. SERPENS was one of 2,751 Liberty ships built between 1941 and 1945.





## QUICK STATS

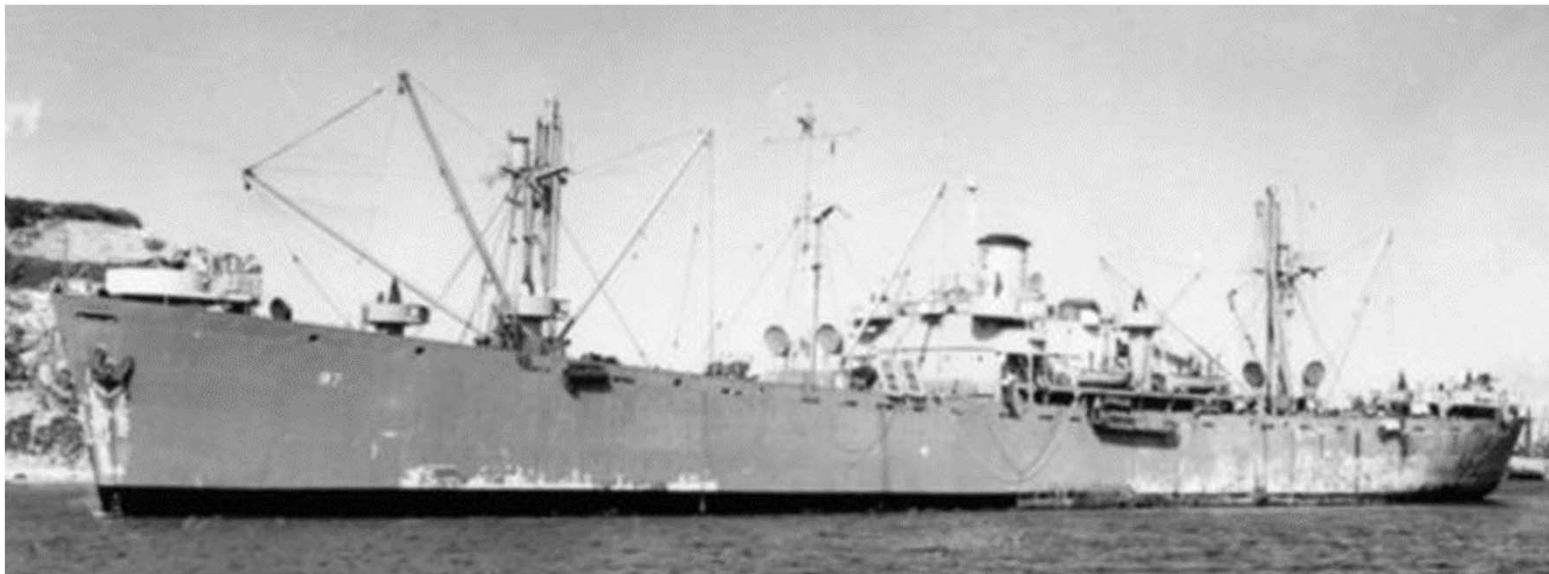
- Got underway from San Diego for the Pacific via San Francisco on 8 June 1943; departed San Francisco on 24 June 1943 headed for the South Pacific. She averaged 11.5 knots zig-zagging across the Pacific. First stop was the Tonga Islands on 12 July 1943. On 25 July 1943 she arrived Noumea, New Caledonia. On 3 August 1943 she arrived at Port Nicholson, New Zealand. Between New Caledonia and New Zealand until October 1943.



## QUICK STATS

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- On 19 October 1943 SERPENS moored at Bora Bora in the Society Islands and on 28 October was in the Cook Islands. On 1 November she was in the Tonga Islands and on 9 November was back in Noumea, New Caledonia. On 2 December 1943 they weighed anchor and proceeded, for the first time, to Lunga Point, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, arriving 7 December.
- 1944 saw them at Russell Islands, Bougainville, Guadalcanal, Espiritu Santo, Noumea, Auckland and Wellington (New Zealand), New Hebrides, Florida Island, Tulagi, and New Georgia Islands. Serpens was nicknamed “The Bougainville Express” for the number of times she had been there loading and unloading supplies. The last day of 1944 found them in Auckland, having their holds converted to carrying explosives.







**Russell Islands**

**Solomon Islands**

**New Georgia Islands**

**Espiritu Santo**

**New Caledonia**

**Tonga Islands**

**Bora Bora**

**New Zealand (Auckland)**

**New Zealand (Wellington)**

Scale: 1:36,000,000 at 30°S  
Mercator Projection  
0 500 Kilometers  
0 500 Miles

## LUNGA POINT, GUADALCANAL, SOLOMON ISLANDS AREA IN JANUARY 1945

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- Serpens' January 1945 War Diary was lost in the explosion. We know they departed Auckland with a full load of provisions on 6-7 January and arrived at Guadalcanal on 15 January, then to Russell Islands and back to Guadalcanal on 24 January.
- From 29 January 1945 War Diary of USS GENDREAU (DE-639), anchored 2000 yards from Serpens in Lunga Point: "At 2314 felt and observed **two heavy explosions** astern followed by brilliant flame like flashes and a column of heavy gray smoke several hundred feet high."
- From the War Diary of USS FOND DU LAC (APA-166): "29 January 1945. At 2315 observed **two bright flashes** off our port bow which were later identified as the explosion of USS SERPENS off Guadalcanal, some 100 miles distance."
- From the War Diary of USS APc-30: "On 29 January a tremendous **double explosion** occurred in the vicinity of Lunga Point, Guadalcanal.
- "I felt and saw **two flashes** after which only the bow of the ship was visible. The rest had disintegrated and the bow sank soon afterwards." – Coast Guard LCDR Peery Stinson, USS Serpens commanding officer.
- John Millhorn, Signalman aboard USS MINTAKA (AK-94) anchored near SERPENS on 29 January: "I was at my post when that terrific explosion occurred. DEFINITELY it was torpedoed by what they called a miniature Japanese submarine. I've been in combat long enough to be able to differentiate between an explosion caused by an accident and that caused by a direct hit."

## WHY DO PEOPLE MENTION TWO FLASHES/TWO EXPLOSIONS?

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- Could it have been an after-image like seeing spots after a flash camera goes off? NO, the large flash was from the second explosion. The sound from the second explosion was not an echo off the mountains either.
- Could it have been from an explosion inside the hold carrying the bombs? NO.

In an oral interview with “Buck” Sergeant (E-4) Daniel T. Mihuta: “My outfit was called the 492nd Port Battalion, and I was in a group called 231st Port Company. Basically, we were trained on how to load and unload cargo ships. I was in charge of weights and measures (how to load a ship). I was ordered to load one ship called the USS Serpens. I closed the ship up at noon [on 29 January 1945, buttoning up Hold #4], and about 2:00 in the afternoon they said they found some more ammunition that they needed to load in the ship, and they went and did that [Hold No. 5, finishing at 6 pm]. At midnight, that ship blew up and 250 fellows were killed.”

- They mention two flashes because there were two flashes. The first smaller flash was an external explosion – possibly from an exploding torpedo or something placed against the outside hull or something exploding on a barge.
- By noon all 600 tons of bombs had been loaded and the hatch to Hold #4 secured. At the time of the explosion the 492nd Port Battalion was loading other holds - 14 crates of outer wing panels into Hold #3, amphibious vehicles, photographic equipment and other non-explosive equipment, etc. No acids or other liquids in developing film were with the photo equipment.





11 July 1943. The ammunition Liberty ship SS Robert Rowan erupts in a spectacular explosion after being hit by a bomb from Luftwaffe Ju-88 bombers during the American landing operations off the coast of Gela, Sicily. All 421 men on board safely evacuated the ship and were picked up by PT boats and transferred to nearby destroyers.

## HAD IT HAPPENED BEFORE AT LUNGA POINT?



US Navy cargo ship *Alchiba* (AKA-6) aground and afire off Lunga Point, Guadalcanal, after being torpedoed by the Japanese submarine I-16 on 28 November 1942. *Alchiba* was torpedoed again on 7 December, 1942 this time by midget submarine Ha-38 (launched from I-24).



## EVIDENCE OF AN ENEMY SUBMARINE IN THE VICINITY

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- On 22 January 1945 USS Tutuila (ARG-4), moored at Tulagi reports: “The Commander, Naval Base, Tulagi, (Florida Island) ordered the net guarding Purvis Bay closed on receipt of warning that a **possible enemy submarine** was sighted in waters south of Songonangona Island.”
- From 24 January 1945 War Diary of USS GENDREAU (DE-639): “**Submarine periscope** reported sighted off Florida Island.”
- Navy Department Communique no 582, March 1, 1945: “The USS Serpens manned by Coast Guard personnel, has been lost in the South Pacific Area as the result of enemy action.”
- Excerpt from the 10 April 1945 letter which went out to all families of the missing Serpens crew from the Chief, USCG Military Morale Division: “A Board of Investigation was convened to inquire into the loss of the vessel when she was **torpedoed by the enemy**. After careful consideration a determination has been made that the death of your son occurred at the time of the action.”
- One of the two survivors aboard Serpens at the time of the explosion, Kelsie Kemp, said “The USS Serpens fell victim to a **Japanese submarine**. Our ship’s radar had picked up a submarine following the same course as Serpens sometime before the explosion.”

## EXCERPTS FROM THE COURT OF INQUIRY

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- A report was made by Colonel T. L. Dunn to the Board. In it Dunn states, “It is believed that the original blast was caused by enemy action, probably by an **enemy submarine**, since Tokyo radio [Tokyo Rose] boasted of the explosion before they possibly could have learned about it from us.”
- From CDR Perry Stinson, CO: “it is not improbable that this vessel was torpedoed. There have been numerous reports of **submarine** sightings and contacts in this part of the world for the past three weeks to my knowledge.”
- LTJG Paul R. Thompson, USNR, CO of SC 1039, when asked “Were you maintaining a watch on your sound gear for submarine or any other enemy craft?” His reply: “Yes, we keep a constant sound watch while patrolling the sector. That night [29 January 1945] we had three contacts on the sound gear. The first of which took place at 2100.” The other two contacts were after the explosion.”
- He continues: “At 0159 [30 January] we received a radio message from the Gendreau to sweep Sealark Channel at each end. At 0250 we picked up another contact at Sealark Channel. One of the men on the bridge had reported a **periscope**, and about five minutes later we picked up this contact. We carried out an attack on the strength of the information and circled for a re-attack in conformance with prescribed doctrine. And at 0253 we lost contact. While carrying out our retiring search plan to regain contact we ran aground on **Sealark Reef** at 0315.”



# SEALARK REEF



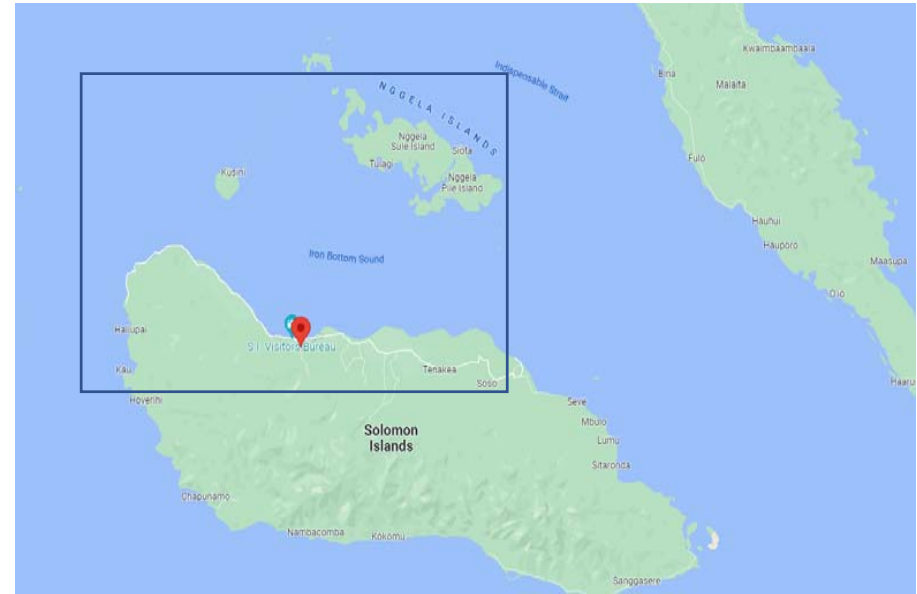
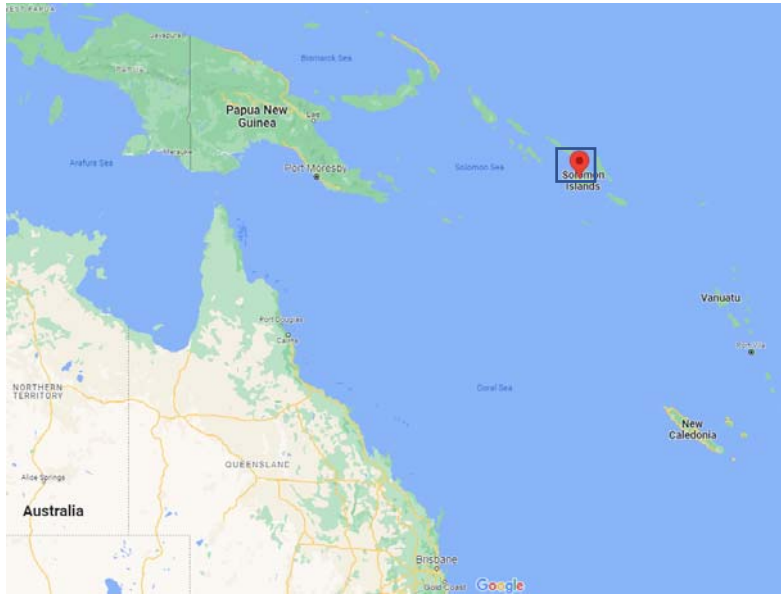
## MORE EXCERPTS FROM THE COURT OF INQUIRY

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- LTJG Thompson continues answering questions from the Board: Q. How did you evaluate your contact at 2340? LTJG Thompson: “The best evaluation I could give to that is that it was a **probable submarine.**”
- Q. What about the one at 0250? A. “As well, I think that is the best answer I could give to that too, **probable submarine.**”
- From Russell Ireland, soundman third class, U.S.S. SC 1039: “We had what I term, at the time, a ‘good contact.’ It seemed a **submarine** was going dead away from us. We heard a double echo right on the stern. We had a double echo and a lot of propeller noises like a stern contact would be.”
- From LT John M. McConnell, USNR, attached to and serving with CNB SoSols Operations Office, when asked by the Board: “During the past month the **submarine activity** in the vicinity of Bougainville, Solomon Islands, New Hebrides and surrounding territory has shown an increase, has it not?” His reply was: “I believe the reports in the last month have shown an **increase** from the previous month.”
- From LTJG William Robert Laughton, USNR, XO of U.S.S. SC 1039, when asked by the Board: “.What would be your evaluation of the contact at 2340?” His reply: “I would say it was a very good contact and due to the fact that we had strong propeller beats I would term that as **probable submarine.**”



# OUR VISIT TO THE WRECKAGE OF USS SERPENS



# OUR VISIT TO THE WRECKAGE OF USS SERPENS





# OUR VISIT TO THE WRECKAGE OF USS SERPENS

## *Wreckage and Monuments Exist All Around the Island*





# OUR VISIT TO THE WRECKAGE OF USS SERPENS

*Wreckage and Monuments Exist All Around the Solomon Islands*





## OUR VISIT TO THE WRECKAGE OF USS SERPENS



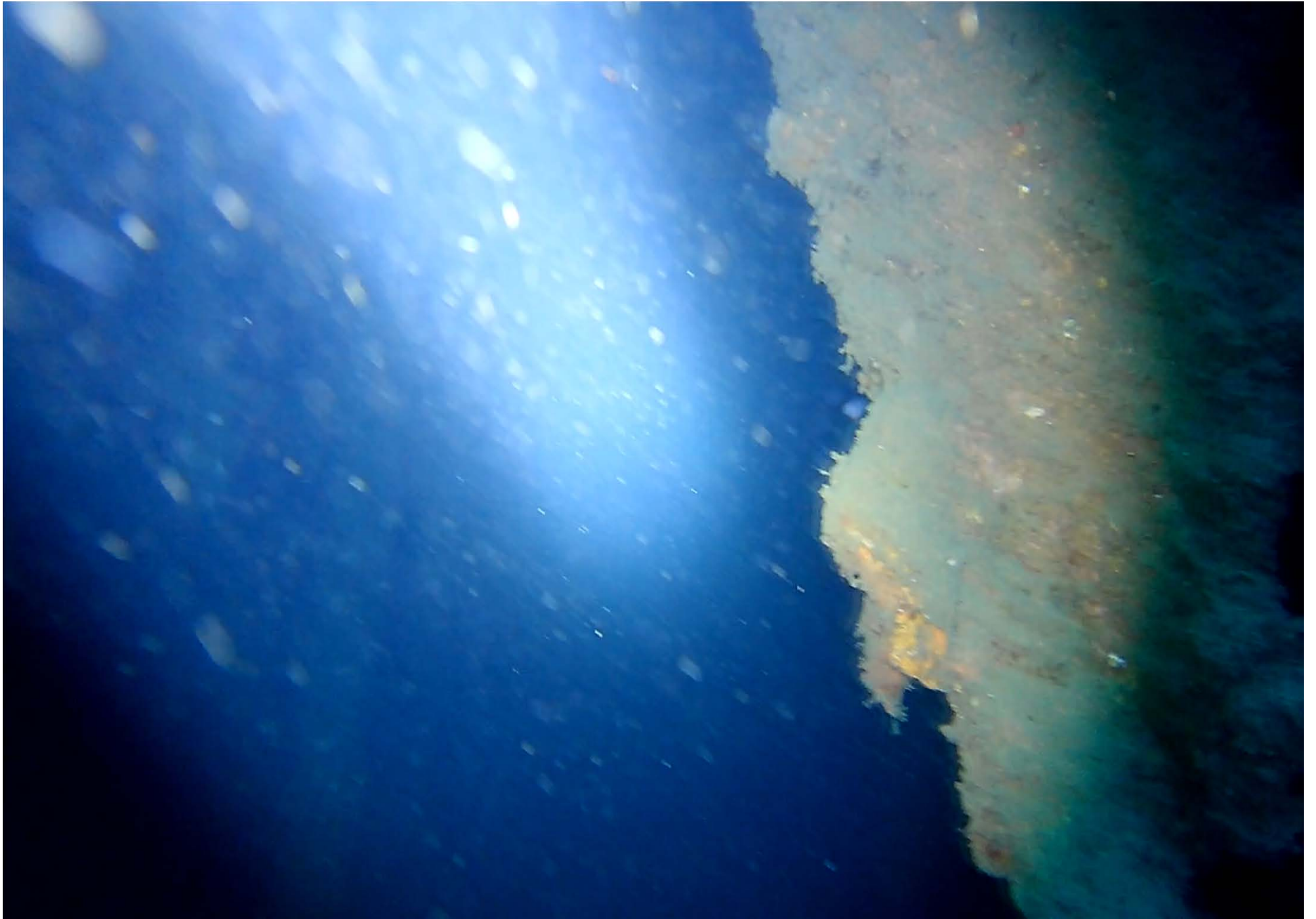
Our Wreath and Coin





*Laying the Ceremonial Wreath, 4 Sept. 2019*





*Hole in the Bow, 4 Sept. 2019*

## WHAT DOES THE REQUIREMENT STATE ABOUT AWARDING THE PURPLE HEART?

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- First of all, one is not “recommended” for the Purple Heart by anyone – he or she is **entitled** to it by meeting certain criteria. One criteria is being wounded or killed by direct or indirect result of enemy action. One must also take into account the circumstances.
- The circumstances are this: SERPENS was clearly in a war zone and while there is anecdotal evidence for various scenarios it can never be proven or disproven that any singular action resulted in the loss of SERPENS and its crew – be it a torpedo from an enemy submarine, a faulty depth charge exploding prematurely and detonating the rest of the depth charges in the hold, sabotage by someone in a boat next to the hull, or some other scenario.
- The bottom line is that taking into account the circumstances and the various scenarios, the decision to award the Purple Heart must be made in favor of the individual as the majority report so stated.



## THE SERPENS CREW PHYSICALLY AWARDED THE PURPLE HEART



The two survivors from the ship were S1c Kelsie K. Kemp and S1c George S. Kennedy. They were awarded their Purple Hearts by RADM L. T. Chalker, Asst. Commandant, USCG.



Kelsie Kemp prior to attending the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the loss of Serpens at Arlington National Cemetery. You can see his Purple Heart framed and hanging on the wall. He brought the framed medals with him to the ceremony.

Coast Guardsman George S. Kennedy, seaman first class, of San Marcos, who survived the sinking of the coast guard-manned supply ship USS Serpens off Guadalcanal last January, was recently awarded the Purple Heart. Laden with ammunition, the vessel exploded when hit. More than 200 coast guardsmen lost their lives in the tragedy.

*The Austin American*  
13 June 1945



## THE SERPENS CREW PHYSICALLY AWARDED THE PURPLE HEART



LT John G. Aiken, III –  
the ship's Executive  
Officer



Public Health Service physician,  
Dr. Harry M. Levin.



GM3c Woodward  
Solomon Babcock,  
USCGR. His father  
was a Vice  
President of  
General Motors at  
the time of his  
son's death.

### Raymond C.J. Maroder

Raymond C.J. Maroder, 74, a resident of Wheaton for 30 years, died Thursday at the DuPage Convalescent Center in Wheaton. Mr. Maroder served in World War II in the Coast Guard on the U.S.S. Serpens in the South Pacific. He was awarded a Purple Heart. Survivors include two daughters, Patricia Williams and Judith Kotelensky; a son, David; three grandchildren; and a brother. Funeral services will be Saturday

Chicago Tribune, Sept. 27, 1997.  
Questionable as it sounds like he  
was a survivor of the Serpens  
explosion. Purple Heart awarded  
probably an injury from elsewhere.



Watertender First  
Class Harry Edward  
Aro

**All crewmembers of Serpens as well as the Army's 231st Port Company stevedores who were killed aboard Serpens were initially awarded the Purple Heart after it was decided their loss was due to enemy action; a few physically received the medal, many did not. When the Navy changed their mind and rescinded the PH in 1948, they never asked for them back.**

# LEST WE FORGET





# LEST WE FORGET

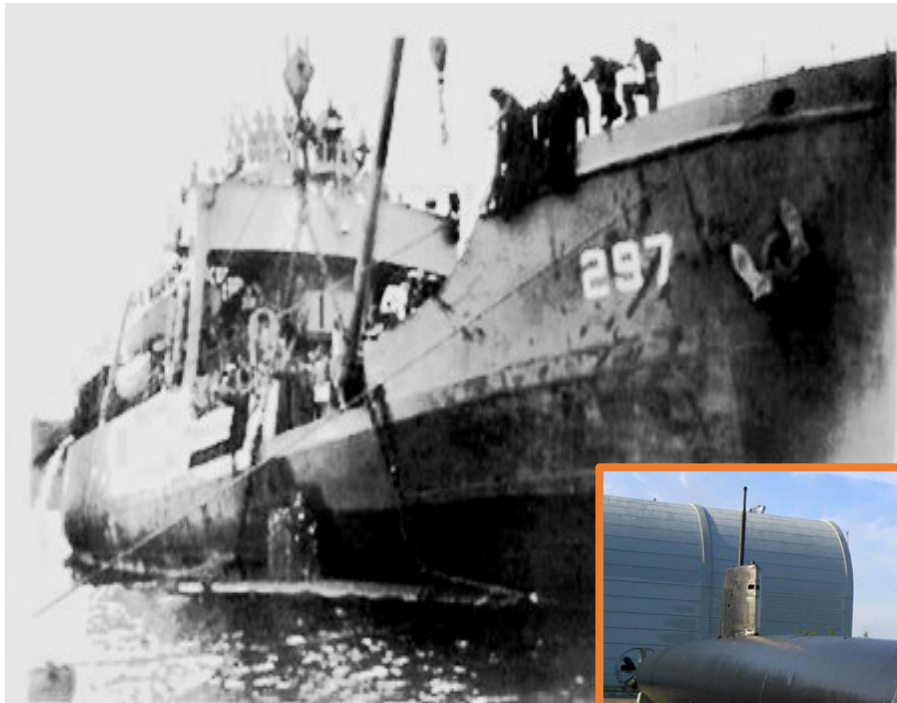


Visit [www.ak97.org](http://www.ak97.org) run by Michael Zumbach



## SIGNIFICANT EVENTS SINCE JANUARY 1945

- 4 January 1945 - US Coast Guard cutter *Ironwood* (W-297) begins operations to raise an unidentified Japanese two-man midget submarine from about 30 feet of water off north coast of Guadalcanal.
- 20 January 1945 - *Ironwood* secures it alongside and tows it to Florida Island, Solomons. The next day, *Ironwood* moves to a new anchorage where the midget submarine is transferred to an unidentified USN crane barge. The submarine is now on display at the Nautilus Memorial Submarine Force Library and Museum in Groton, CT.



***Could this have been a catalyst for an act of sabotage against the USCG?***

## SIGNIFICANT EVENTS SINCE JANUARY 1945 (Cont.)

- 29 January 1945 – USS Serpens (AK-97) explodes at Lunga Point off Guadalcanal
- 30 January 1945 – Court of Inquiry convenes
- 7 February 1945 – Court of Inquiry concludes with majority and minority court findings
- 1 March 1945 - Navy Department Communique #582, “Serpens has been lost as the result of enemy action.”
- 6 April 1945 – Commandant USCG officially declares all missing to be dead, says “sinking was the result of an enemy torpedo.”
- 10 April 1945 – “Serpens was torpedoed by the enemy” - Chief, USCG Military Morale Division
- 1 May 1945 – JAG Opinion – “Death and injury not as a result of misconduct”
- May 1945 – Two surviving Serpens crewmembers formally awarded PH by USCG Asst. Commandant





## SIGNIFICANT EVENTS SINCE JANUARY 1945 (Cont.)

- 3 November 1948 – USCG requests eligibility for award of PH
- 22 November 1948 – Navy Board of Decorations and Medals – “Subject personnel not eligible for award of the Purple Heart” (See next slide)
- 10 June 1949 – Missing investigation report by the Navy now sided with the minority decision that the explosion was “intrinsic to the loading process.”
- 15 June 1949 - Remains were reinterred from Guadalcanal to Section 34 at Arlington National Cemetery
- 16 November 1950 - The USS Serpens Memorial was dedicated at Arlington
- 1956 – Kemp finally receives the physical PH awarded him in 1945
- 22 September 1957 – LCDR Peery Stinson, CO of Serpens, dies and is also buried at Arlington National Cemetery



## NAVY BOARD OF DECORATIONS AND MEDALS

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22 November 1948: “Commander Naval Forces, Far East, indicated that no operational movement was carried out by any of the Japanese Naval Operational Units in the vicinity of Guadalcanal on 29 January 1945. Therefore, subject personnel not eligible for award of the Purple Heart.”

YET

LT John M. McConnell, USNR, attached to and serving with Commander Naval Bases (CNB) South Solomons Sub-Area Operations Office, when asked by the Board of Inquiry: “During the past month the submarine activity in the vicinity of Bougainville, Solomon Islands, New Hebrides and surrounding territory has shown an increase, has it not?” His reply was: “I believe the reports in the last month have shown an increase from the previous month.”



### SIDE NOTE:

Japanese midget subs. Fifty of this model were built. No.19 was launched by I-24 at Pearl Harbor. Most of the other fifty are unaccounted for, although three were captured in Sydney (Australia), and others in Guam, Guadalcanal, and Kiska Island, accounting for some of the other hull numbers.



## SOME QUICK FACTS ABOUT JAPANESE SUBMARINES

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- During the Second World War, there were 56 submarines larger than 3,000 tons in the entire world, and 52 of these were Japanese.
- Japan built 65 submarines with ranges exceeding 20,000 miles at ten knots, while the Allies had no submarine capable of this feat.
- By 1945, Japan had built all 39 of the world's diesel-electric submarines with more than 10,000 horsepower, and all 57 of the world's diesel-electric submarines capable of 23+ knots surface speed.
- During WWII the Japanese navy built at least 800 midgets in 7 classes. Of these, 78 midget submarines were capable of running 18.5 to 19 knots submerged, and 110 others were capable of 16 knots. The Japanese Navy Japanese submarines employed the best torpedoes available during WWII. The Type 95 torpedo used pure oxygen to burn kerosene, instead of the compressed air and alcohol used in our torpedoes. This gave them about three times the range of their Allied counterparts, and also reduced their wake.
- Japan also developed and used an electric torpedo, the Type 92. This weapon had modest performance compared to the Type 95, but emitted no exhaust and also left no wake.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP – SIGN THE PETITION

### Huge "Powder Keg"

By a peculiar technicality, none of the 197 victims was deemed eligible for posthumous Purple Heart medals or other awards. The Navy Department board of decorations and medals ruled that the loss of the Serpens was not a result of enemy action and that the crew was not in action with the enemy.

Victory medals and the Asiatic Pacific Campaign medals, however, were posthumously sent the families of the dead men.

From the Boston Globe, June 10, 1949



World War II  
Victory Medal



Asiatic-Pacific  
Campaign Medal



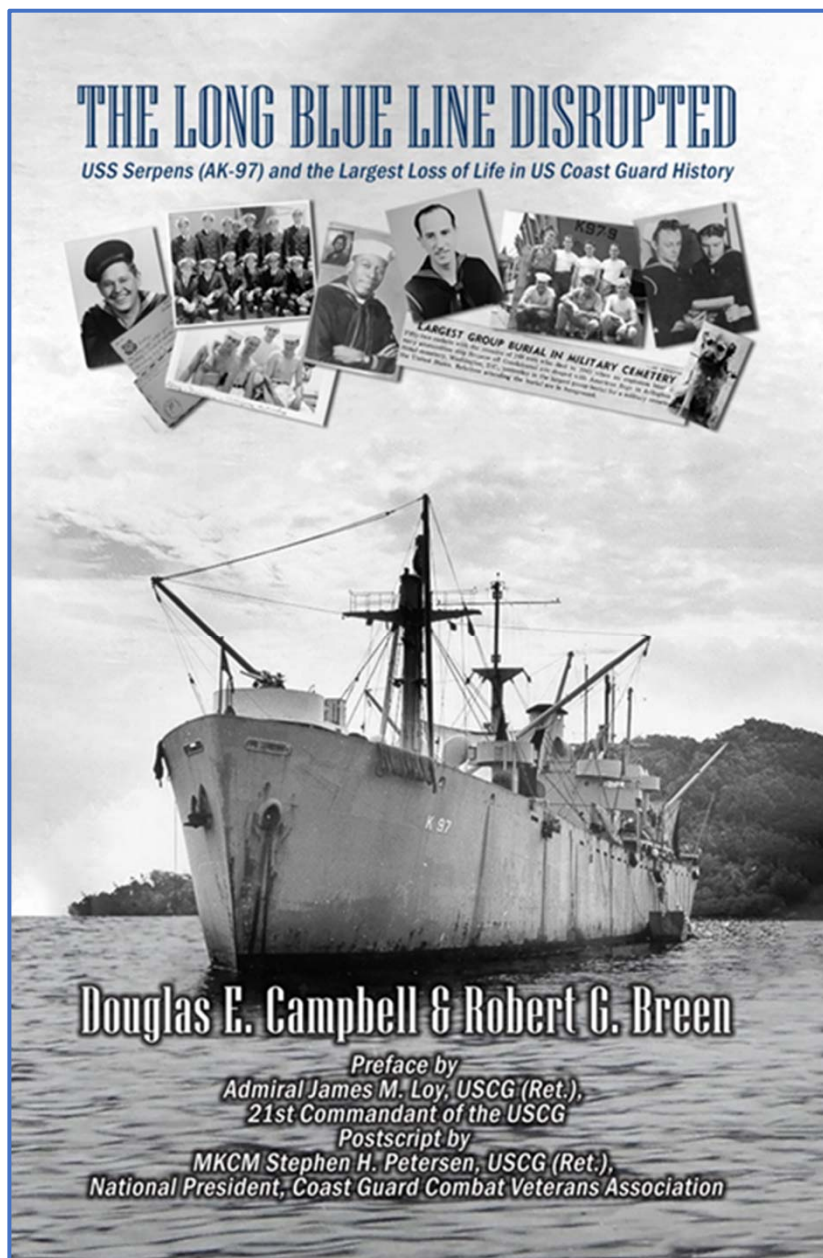
American Campaign  
Medal

*First, Did All Families Receive These?*

As proud members of the USCG and as Combat Veterans, support the effort to see that your fellow members of the Long Blue Line finally get back what they deserved in the first place – their Purple Heart. Sign the petition.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP – PURCHASE OUR BOOK



- 274 pp. All the photos seen in this presentation plus dozens more.
- Complete information from existing War Diaries.
- Info gleaned from more than 200 personal crew letters collected and put in book (see photo below).
- Hundreds of hours of research on the ship, crewmembers, etc.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP - VISIT A LIBERTY SHIP

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To get a sense of the size and layout of the Liberty ship *Serpens*, consider visiting one of her two existing sister ships saved as floating museums in the United States:



**SS John W. Brown** is a Liberty ship operated as a merchant ship of the United States Merchant Marine during World War II. Now preserved, she is a museum ship and cruise ship berthed at Pier 13 in Baltimore Harbor in Maryland.



**SS Jeremiah O'Brien** is a Liberty ship built during World War II and now based in San Francisco at Pier 45. She is a rare survivor of the 6,939-ship 6 June 1944 D-Day armada off the coast of Normandy, France.



## VISITING THE LIBERTY SHIP JOHN W. BROWN





## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP – ATTEND THE SERPENS CEREMONY

Every year around 29 January there is a ceremony at the Serpens Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery, complete with guest speakers, Honor Guard and military band. Attendance is minimal and dwindling every year. The host for the annual ceremony is the USCG CPO Association. If you can, please attend and show your support. We do not want to forget this story.



THE LONG  
BLUE LINE

*The  
Coast Guard's  
greatest loss*





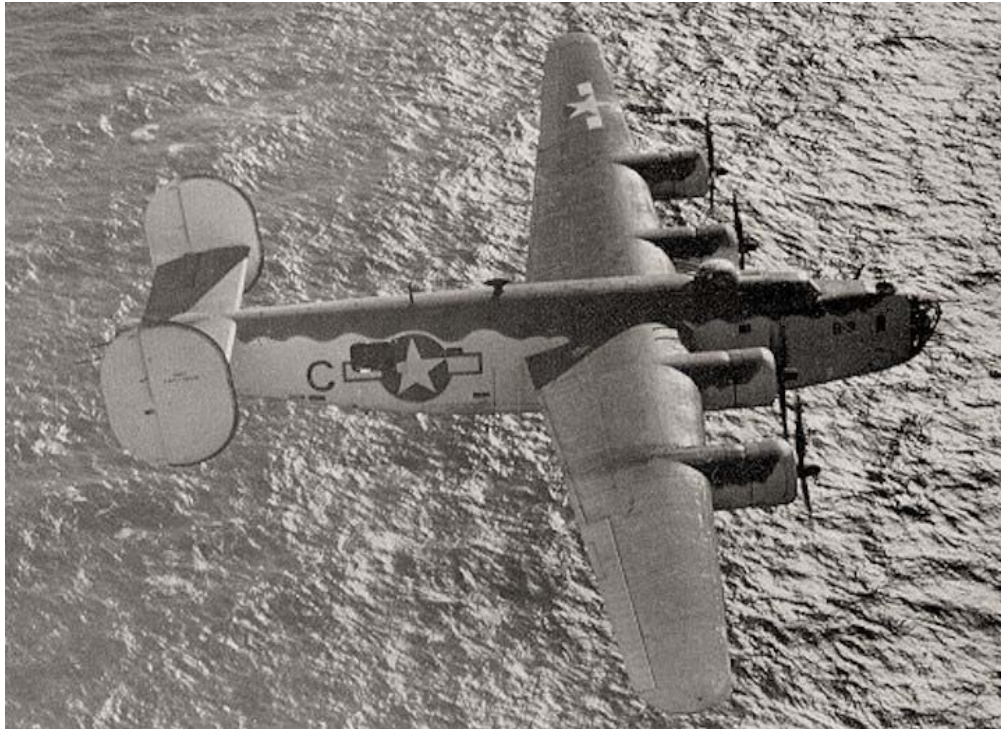


***Any Questions?***

**EXTRA SLIDES**

## HE GOT A PURPLE HEART FOR THAT?

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LT Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., the older brother of John F. Kennedy, was killed with his co-pilot in a mid-air explosion after taking off from England in a PB4Y-1 from Special Attack Unit One (SAU-1). Following manual takeoff, they were supposed to parachute out over the English Channel while the radio-controlled explosive-filled drone proceeded to attack a German V-2 missile-launching site. Possible causes include faulty wiring or FM signals from a nearby transmitter. 12 August 1944.

***LTs Joe Kennedy and co-pilot Wilford Willy were both posthumously awarded the Navy Cross, the Air Medal, and the Purple Heart Medal.***





## A PURPLE HEART FOR FROSTBITE BUT NOT FOR SERPENS?

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Frostbite, and the related condition trench foot, have a complicated history among injuries sustained during wartime. Most veterans who experienced either type of injury do not qualify for the honor of a Purple Heart, the military decoration awarded to those killed or wounded while serving. The injuries are seen as preventable and caused by a soldier's neglect. But there are exceptions.

**Those who suffered severe frostbite requiring hospitalization between December 1941 and August 1951 are eligible to receive a Purple Heart.**



Frostbite casualties of the embattled 1st Marine Division and 7th Infantry Division in the Chosin Reservoir area of Korea wait to be picked up by U.S. Air Force planes.

## MARITIME EDUCATION & RESEARCH SOCIETY (MERS)

- Was instrumental in getting the Purple Heart awarded to the crew of WWII Submarine USS DORADO (SS-248) lost in the Caribbean. Killed or wounded by friendly fire now a criteria for the award.
- Partially funded the research and trip to Solomon Islands to bring people the story of USS Serpens.
- Supported research on the health of the world's second largest coral reef structure in the world off Yucatan Peninsula in the Caribbean
- Publishes all research in various MERS Research Products (MRPs)



- **MRP 001 – USS Dorado**
- **MRP 002 – Yucatan Coral Reef**
- **MRP 003 – Pensacola FL Shipwrecks**
- **MRP 004 – CAP in WWII**
- **MRP 005 – SB2C Helldivers**
- **MRP 006 – PB2Y Coronados**
- **MRP 007 – Martin Mars**
- **MRP 008 – SB2U Kingfishers**

- Has a 36-foot Mainship trawler located in Woodbridge, VA, used as a teaching vessel for youngsters interested in a career in anything nautical (Sea Cadets, etc.)
- [www.MERSFoundation.org](http://www.MERSFoundation.org)

