

(Originally Published in *Acadiana LifeStyle* November 2003)

A Sailor's Story

"We cannot undo the past...but we can ensure...that these men shall be respected and honored forever." Vice Admiral Merlin O'Neill, Commander U.S. Coast Guard, November 16, 1950, at the dedication of the USS Serpens Memorial

Warren Granger, age 21 left his family and life he loved in July 1942 to join the United States Coast Guard and defend his country in the largest armed conflict the world has ever known, World War II. On January 29, 1945 while serving on the USS Serpens as an SC3, he gave his life to that cause.

Sixty years have not dulled Alfred "Benny" Granger, Jr.'s memories of the loss of his closer than close brother. "We were very close. We were brothers but we were also best friends," says Granger, groping for words adequate to capture the depth of his feelings. "He was only 19-20 months older than me. We did everything together and he taught me everything I knew. Milking the cow, driving the car, we grew up together."

Granger (Benny) who followed his brother into the Coast Guard in October, 1942, recalls happy times shared by the two brothers while World War II raged in the distance. "We were both stationed in Florida about 95 miles apart and we got to visit," he says/ "I was sent to California in 1944 and he followed me there. We had a chance to be together there for a while before he caught his ship in September, 1944"

The Ship

The ship that Warren Granger caught was the USS Serpens. The Serpens was a 416 foot, 10,000 ton ex-Liberty ship known as an Auxiliary Cargo Ship, called AK97 for short. The Serpens was a sea-going moving van. In her own quiet, lumbering way the AK-97 performed one of the most important World War II jobs. Her job was to keep the supply lines- the life line for the soldiers, sailors and pilots slugging it out with the Japanese- running through the vast expanses of the war in the Pacific. The USS Serpens had no regular, pre-determined runs and went where needed to transport whatever was needed. A visit to the AK 97 would have revealed a typical cargo of gasoline, explosives and general supplies, over fifty jeeps and trucks and often over 200 Seabees and Marines. Providing relief from the grim business of war, the Serpens was occasionally called on to transport nurses. The Serpens and others like were often in considerable danger. They regularly carried, 2,000 tons of bombs into hotly disputed territory at a speed of only 9.5 knots per hour. Any hit from a bomb or torpedo would have resulted in total destruction.

Ironically, it was the Serpens' cargo that did her in, but not in a manner or in a place where extreme danger was expected.

The Place

Guadalcanal conjures up images of Marines like “Chesty” Puller and “Red Mike” Edson, places like “Bloody Ridge” and the Tenaru River, the “Tokyo Express” and the “Cactus Air Force.” From August 7, 1942 to January 3, 1943, U.S. Marines and Japanese forces struggled for control of the island in the first pivotal battle of the World War II Pacific Theatre. Foreshadowing the increasingly brutal and bloody battles to come in the Pacific, the Japanese suffered over 25,000 dead; the Americans 1,600 on the land and more on the sea. By January, 1945, the battle had moved to the Philippines and the names Iwo Jima and Okinawa were about to burn themselves into the pages of history. The Japanese were reeling and their surrender was only eight months away. Guadalcanal should have been a relatively safe staging area at that time.

The End

At approximately 11:15 p.m. on January 29, 1945, the *Serpens* was loading depth bomb fuses, airplane wings, airplane engines, airplane belly tanks and depth bombs off Lunga Beach when an explosion rocked Guadalcanal. Lieutenant Commander Perry L. Stinson, commanding officer of the *Serpens*, was on shore at the time and recorded the incident in his official report. “I felt a shock and asked if it was an earthquake. Immediately following there was a great glare in the sky followed by a tremendous explosion,” he wrote. Stinson immediately set out for the dock and, to his horror, found his ship destroyed.

An eyewitness account of the destruction Stinson saw brings home the reality of war. “As we headed our boat shoreward the sound and concussion of the explosion suddenly reached us, and, as we turned, we witnessed the awe-inspiring death drama unfolding before us. As the report of screeching shells filled the air and flash of tracers, continued, the water splashed throughout the harbor as the shells hit. We headed our boat in the direction of the smoke and, as we came into closer view of what had once been a ship, the water was filled only with floating debris, dead fish, torn life jackets, lumber and other unidentifiable objects. The smell of death, and fire, and gasoline and oil was evident and nauseating. This was sudden death, and horror, unwanted and unasked for, but complete.”

At first, a Japanese torpedo was thought to have caused the explosion but, by 1949, it was determined not to have been the result of enemy action. The actual cause of the explosion was never determined and, in the end, does not matter.

Hammer Blows

Death came suddenly for the *Serpens* crew, but Granger vividly recalls the long emotional roller coaster ride suffered by countless families who worried and prayed for loved ones fighting a war in distant places with strange names.

He was not home in Loreauville when word came but describes the heart freezing moment that the news was delivered to Alfred, SR. and Sidonia Granger that one of their children was missing in action.

“Mama was taking a bath when an officer we now know was a Catholic Chaplain came to the door,” Granger relates. “Papa invited him and he told papa that Warren was reported missing inaction. Mama came out of the bathroom while they were still talking,” he continues, “when she saw the Chaplain, she asked ‘Which one?’ and Papa told her it was Warren.”

Benny Granger did not receive the news for two weeks and, not knowing there was no one there to receive the, wrote letters dated February 1, 4, 7 and 13, 1945.

“I was due to come home on leave in early February so the folds decided not to tell me,” he says. “I came home expecting to go partying and having a good time and on the ride home from the station Walter (older brother) told me Warren was missing in action.”

The letters, filled with optimism that the war would soon be over and looking forward to good times together, were eventually returned and remain in Granger’s possession. The fog and chaos of war plus the desire of the military to be accurate kept the Grangers clinging to slim hope for over two months while Warren Granger’s status remained Missing in Action. “Warren was given a position called Jack of the Dust,” says Granger. “When the ship was sunk I clung to the hope that he might have been on shore because we heard that there were some on shore at the time. The Jack of the Dust often went on shore to get supplies.”

Granger recalls the final hammer blow on a day unforgettable to the World War II generation, April 12, 1945. “I had been on liberty and was going back to my base in Santa Barbara (California) when the news came out that FDR had died. Everybody was so down,” he recalls. “When I arrived at the base about 9:00 p.m. there was a message to call the Red Cross office. I called and a gentleman said he was sorry to have to tell me that my brother had been confirmed killed in action.”

Although all hope that life would continue as before was extinguished on April 12, 1945, Granger still clings to another kind of hope. “I always hoped and believed that he was sleeping at the time of the explosion and that he never knew what happened,” he says.

The Aftermath

The loss of the Serpens was the largest single disaster suffered by the U.S. Coast Guard in World War II as 196 Coast Guard sailors, 56 Army soldiers and one U.S. Public Health Surgeon were lost. Only two of the crew members on board at the time of the explosion survived. The remains of Serpens crew members were originally buried at the

Army, Navy and Marine Cemetery in Guadalcanal but were repatriated under the program for the return of World War II dead in 1949.

They were recommitted in 52 caskets in 28 graves in Arlington National Cemetery and two gravesites were reserved for the USS Serpens Monument which was dedicated on November 16, 1950. About 1500 people attended the re-internment service on June 15, 1949. A U.S. Marine Corps band played Pasternak's arrangement of Taps and a bugler echoed Taps in the distance. A Gold Star Mother escorted by an American Legionnaire placed a white carnation on each casket. Granger attended the re-internment service in 1949 but recalls little except the emotion of the experience. "I went to Washington and a Marine escort met us at the hotel. They took us to the cemetery and had a service," he says. "All I really remember is that they played Taps and I can't listen to it to this day."

What Might Have Been

Warren Granger loved baseball, animals, the land and his Catholic faith.

"I believe that had he lived he would have done something outdoors with animals and the land," says Benny. "He possible would have taken over Papa's farm operation. He was very active in the Church and loved his faith," he continues. "In the service, he assisted the Chaplain."

Warren Granger was one of approximately 300,000 Americans whose life was unmercifully cut short by World War II. He died at the age of 24 without ever returning home to receive the thanks of a grateful nation, develop his love of the land and animals, and resume life with his parents and nine siblings. He never had a chance to marry and see his children's children. "Warren didn't hit the beach at Guadalcanal or do anything like that," Granger says. "He was just a boy that volunteered to do his job and he went and did it. He gave his life."

(Writer's note: Warren Granger's family sorely missed his presence as son, brother and uncle. As one of his 23 nieces and nephews who barely knew him or never knew him at all, I know we missed something special. Although we never or barely knew him in the flesh, his service to our country and ultimate sacrifice has undoubtedly enriched our lives. Rest in peace, Uncle Warren, We know...and we remember.)