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The COBIA's Toughest Battle

By Larry L. Legge

(Larry Legge, from Barboursville, is a longtime member of the West Virginia Historical Society's Executive Board and a frequent contributor to the *Quarterly*.)

Many things happened in the twentieth century that affected West Virginians and unfortunately some of the most foremost were the world conflicts fought to preserve freedom for others or for our own country. The greatest of these was what we now call World War II. Nearly 234,000 West Virginians served in World War II and over 5800 of them died or are still missing in action in that conflict. Many fell on the

battlefield, many were shot from the skies, many died in prisoner-of-war camps and many went to their deaths in the depths of the ocean. The honored dead were brought back to family cemeteries while some were interred in American National cemeteries abroad. By necessity, some were buried at sea. Some are still missing in action.

Actions on land and in the air resulted in dozens of deaths within an hour or more. Naval battles resulted in scores of lives lost even if the ship involved was not sunk. When a ship did sink, it was not unusual for hundreds from that ship to perish. When a submarine was sunk by enemy action, most generally, the entire crew was lost. The United States Navy lost 3,505 submariners and 38 of these were from West Virginia. Fifty-two American submarines were lost during World War II. This story is about a submarine that survived and about a West Virginian who did not.

Her keel was laid at the Electric Boat Company, Groton, Connecticut, on March 17, 1943 and she was launched November 28 of the same year. In a ceremony on March 29, 1944, the United States Navy commissioned her the USS COBIA (SS-245). After completing sea trials and torpedo trials in the operating area of Newport, Rhode Island, she sailed for the Pacific on May 6, 1944. She arrived at Pearl Harbor and commenced additional training in the Hawaii area before getting underway for her first war patrol to the Bonin Islands. A second and third war patrol followed. Her third war patrol terminated at Fremantle, Western Australia, where the officers and crew enjoyed deserved rest and relaxation and the boat was readied for her next patrol.¹

On Sunday, February 18, 1945, the COBIA slipped her moorings and departed Fremantle.² Aboard were 9 officers and 71 crew. Commander Albert L. Becker had taken command of the COBIA on March 29, 1944, at New London, Connecticut, and had been skipper for the three previous patrols.³ Becker was heading now for the South China Sea but three days out of Fremantle the COBIA was in trouble. While securing No. 1 engine from charge, someone inadvertently closed the outboard exhaust valve on No. 2 engine that was running at the time, lifting the relief valves and filling the room with exhaust gases. The throttleman on duty in the threatened engine room attempted to correct the problem but the fumes overcame him. By the courageous actions of other

crewmembers, the man was removed, the trouble remedied and the boat was vented of fumes. The submariner was placed on oxygen and kept on it through the night but showed no improvement by morning of the next day. Captain Becker, concerned about the sailor's condition, reversed course at full speed for Exmouth Gulf on the northwestern coast of Australia. Arriving at Exmouth Gulf February 23, fellow crewmen transferred the injured man to the USS COUCAL and after taking on fuel and repairing No. 2 engine, COBIA resumed her patrol.⁴

Days later, the alert lookouts aboard the COBIA sighted a 300-ton sea truck at a range of 16,000 yards. The eighth ship sighted since the patrol began, the sea truck was pitching violently in the rough seas. The vessel was too small to waste a torpedo and it appeared to have little armament. Becker took the COBIA to battle stations and put four engines on line.⁵



Ralph Clark Huston Jr. (1943)

As the gun crews started topside, the officer of the deck passed the word for all members of the gun crews to come topside with foul weather jackets as the sea was very rough and the crews would need the added protection. Those who did not already have the jacket with them bolted back to their quarters to obtain it. As Ralph Huston passed him, Herbert “Doc” Starmer, Pharmacist’s Mate First Class, told Huston to take his jacket to avoid the time it would take Huston to obtain his own. Starmer watched Huston slip into the jacket and continue his journey to the action unfolding on deck. Starmer had become good friends with the young Huston and considered him a

“very sharp, intelligent young man.” Huston was one of those who came aboard the COBIA, his first submarine, on February 12. The crew quickly made the friendly young man welcome in the boat.⁶ Ralph was born in Parkersburg, West Virginia, on September 27, 1925, the son of Ralph Clark Huston Sr. and Myrtle Huston and graduated from Parkersburg High School in May 1943. Huston (pronounced “Houston”) entered the Navy in September 1943 and received his boot camp training at Great Lakes Naval Training Center. He then went on to complete torpedo school at Newport, Rhode Island, and had volunteered for submarine duty. With submarine school at New London, Connecticut, now behind him, he was happy with this new assignment to the COBIA.

As the COBIA closed on the sea truck, a careful observation through the periscope discovered that there were two vessels instead of one. The heaving ocean had permitted the second target to hide in the troughs and it was only with the periscope raised to the maximum height that the vessel was discovered.⁷ The breaking seas required Becker to secure the gun crews while chasing to prevent the pounding sea from washing his men overboard⁸ and, as the COBIA closed the range, the second vessel turned her bow slowly toward the approaching submarine.

The COBIA approached and at a range of 2500 yards, Becker ordered 40mm fire directed at the first vessel. The gun quickly jammed and the sea truck began to return 30mm rounds but

the fire was wild and the COBIA took no hits. Closing to 2000 yards, the submarine's 4" deck gun opened fire and the sea truck took hits immediately. The COBIA then turned to parallel the enemy craft. The 4" hits, coupled with additional 40mm and 50 caliber, soon set the sea truck afire and the truck sank, leaving about 20 survivors in the water.⁹

The course was changed and the second target taken under fire at a range of 2500 yards. The second shot of the 4" gun made the first hit and all subsequent rounds found their target. The truck began returning fire from the sub's gun crews and this fire was at most times erratic but as the range closed, the sea truck's gunners put the COBIA's 20mm gun out of action temporarily with a solid burst into her magazine from their 30 caliber guns. With the number of 4" hits made on the sea truck, the craft should have sunk, but the target continued to ride the surface and continued to return the sub's fire.

While using the 4" deck gun on the target, the COBIA moved dangerously close to the enemy vessel, so close that the enemy's 50 caliber rounds began to penetrate the armor plate of the sub's superstructure and the enemy gunners could be seen clearly enough to note that one was wearing a striped "T" shirt.¹⁰ Then at 6:22 p.m., the enemy gunner's 50-caliber burst raked the forward deck and began moving past the deck gun and up the superstructure toward the bridge. At the 20mm gun position, young Ralph Huston collapsed limply in his harness, seriously wounded by one shell in his

upper left arm and another in his left rib cage that lodged in the lower right quadrant of his abdomen. Tom Brotchie, Fireman Third Class, was slightly wounded in his upper arm with a later burst from the enemy's guns. Becker ordered the gun crews to take cover behind the conning tower and the COBIA increased the distance between the two combatants, after which the COBIA then took the truck under fire with her 4" deck gun, sinking her at 6:47 p.m.¹¹

While the sub moved away from the sea truck's fire, the officer of the deck, Lieutenant Junior Grade Dan Pelton, and Charles Stewart, S1/c, carried Huston into the protection of the conning tower, their clothing drenched in Huston's blood.¹² Captain Becker then ordered a thorough inspection of the submarine to determine any damage. This inspection revealed that the enemy fire had penetrated the SJ radar mast. This would prevent the submarine from submerging until repairs to the mast were completed.¹³

The word was passed to those below that men had been wounded on the deck above so "Doc" Starmer was waiting in the control room for the wounded to be passed below. As he was carried past Starmer, young Huston saw Doc and was alert enough at the time to call Starmer's attention to the torn and bloodied sleeve of his borrowed jacket.¹⁴

Huston was in bad condition. Other than the words to Starmer about his torn and blood-soaked jacket, Huston had said little more but Doc could tell by the massive injuries that with only

the limited facilities and supplies aboard the COBIA, Huston could not survive. Huston had been carried to the after battery and, with scissors, his clothing was cut from him. His left arm, dangling by only a small amount of tissue, was laid gently alongside his body. The tissue was gently cut, the artery tied off and the arm removed. Examination showed that after breaking the bone of his arm, the projectile had entered his chest and exited above the hip in the rear of his body, causing internal hemorrhaging. Starmer could do nothing more for Huston than to provide drugs to relieve the pain, oxygen to help him breathe and blood plasma.¹⁵ Occasionally, Huston requested water and was always polite to thank those who provided it.¹⁶ Brotchie, also brought to the battery room, was placed in a bunk near Huston. His wounds, which were minor, were also dressed. He remembers that as he lay there, “the entire crew, led by the captain, prayed” for improvement in Ralph’s condition.¹⁷ Captain Becker evaluated the situation, made the decision and issued the command to return to Australia in hope that Huston could be saved with the provision of better medical resources.¹⁸

Giving constant care, Starmer stayed by Huston’s side even though Huston was not aware of his presence. At 5:34 a.m., February 27, 1945, some 11 hours after being wounded, Doc Starmer wearily rose from Huston’s bedside and walked forward to inform Captain Becker that Ralph Clark Huston, Jr., S1/c, USNR, age 19, had died. The announcement had great emotional effect upon those within the submarine,

and those who were present in the after battery drifted silently to other compartments.¹⁹

Captain Becker had to make a decision with consideration given to the boat’s location and condition. The boat had not been able to dive because repairs to the holed SJ radar mast were not yet complete. However, at 5:46 a.m., the repairs were complete with only minimal leaks, the diving alarm sounded and the COBIA submerged.²⁰ As the cold waters enveloped the submarine, Starmer started the preparations for burial at sea. Seaman First Class Bob Gast volunteered to help Starmer with the solemn task and Starmer was grateful for his assistance. Firebricks, obtained from the galley, were lashed to the lower legs and feet of the body. The body was reverently shrouded in several mattress covers and 21 thread was used to lash the shroud against the body. There was a discussion as to what to use as a platform on which to place the body. After discussion and agreement, crewmen decided to remove the door from the crew’s “head”, or toilet, for this purpose.²¹

The submerged submarine, with a leaking radar mast, transited Lombok Strait, with Bali off the starboard beam, at two-thirds speed and at a depth of 125 feet. At noon, the submarine was four miles south of Lombok Strait and at 2:05 p.m., the boat surfaced and moved southward on three engines.²²

At 6:00 p.m., Becker ordered the boat slowed to one-third speed. Huston’s body was carried upward through the

hatch and down to the port side of the main deck near the 4" deck gun mount. The head door was placed in position and the body was laid gently upon it, with two men abreast each side. Selected members of the crew slowly unfolded an American flag and spread it carefully over the shrouded remains. The four men selected as a rifle squad took their places forward of the deck gun and Captain Becker, hatless, took a position just aft of the pallbearers.²³ Someone on the bridge, perhaps ordered to do so by Captain Becker, had brought a camera topside.²⁴

Only a few members of the crew could be topside for the committal ceremony. The service was broadcast below deck through the submarine's loudspeaker system.²⁵ The lookouts in the periscope shears scanned the sky and horizon for any sign of approaching danger.²⁶ There appears to be no accurate count of those topside, but Doc Starmer was not one of them. Weary from the constant bedside care of Huston from the time he had been wounded to the time of the completion of the preparations for his burial, and haunted by the thought that he was unable to do more to save Huston, he chose to remain below and soon collapsed into his bunk in complete exhaustion.²⁷

The actual elements of the ritual ceremony are not recorded, but participants stated that the ceremony was very moving and helped them immensely through the days and years and to this present day.²⁸ It is possible that the Navy ritual of burial at sea was followed as close as time and circumstances permitted and, if so,

Captain Becker, reading from the open book before him, could have read the words so often spoken at similar times during the greatest conflict ever experienced during the history of the world:

*I am the resurrection and the life saith the Lord: he that believeth on me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.....
I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day.....and though this body may be destroyed, yet shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger.....²⁹*

Following these words on that Tuesday evening of February 27, 1945, Captain Becker gave the command and at that command, the riflemen brought their weapons to "Present Arms" as those present topside brought their right hand up in a farewell salute to their fallen comrade. With a nod from Captain Becker, the pallbearers lifted the inboard end of the door³⁰ and the body of Ralph C. Huston Jr., shrouded in the flag of the country for which he died, slipped into the blue waters of the Indian Ocean at Latitude 10-02.5S/Longitude 115-41.0E,³¹ as the captain read:

Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our comrade departed, and we commit his body to the deep; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose

coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the sea shall give up her dead; and the corruptible body of those who sleep in Him shall be changed and made like unto His glorious body.....³²

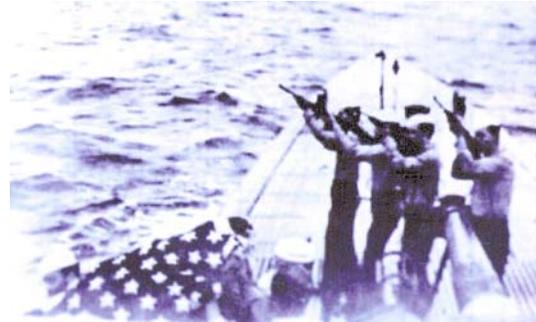
At a signal from Captain Becker, the four men of the rifle squad raised their rifles to “Order Arms” and on command presented the gun salute.³³ Without the benefit of a Navy band found on a larger surface vessel, a recording of *TAPS* rose over the sounds of the muffled engines and the lapping of the waves against the steel of the submarine’s hull. The young man from far-a-way Parkersburg, West Virginia, had been committed to his rest.

The Officer of the Deck ordered the submarine to three engine speed and the COBIA went on with her task of war.³⁴

Back home in Parkersburg, Ralph’s father had moved to Olean, New York, for employment. His mother and his sister, Mary, had followed later. Ora Kellar, another sister, had moved with her husband, Lawrence, into the family residence at Parkersburg, and it was Ora who received the telegram from the Navy. Opening it, she read the message reporting that Ralph had been killed in action. She then placed the call to Olean and shared the sad news with her parents and sister.³⁵

Shortly after Ralph’s death, COBIA’s executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Joseph Sibley, sat down

and wrote Ralph’s parents to give his condolences and to provide a few additional details of Ralph’s death.³⁶ Several members of the crew did likewise, including Doc Starmer.³⁷



**Burial of Ralph C. Huston Jr.,
February 27, 1945**

After the war ended, the men of the COBIA did not forget Ralph. As the years passed, Starmer and Captain Becker, among others, made extensive attempts to locate the Huston family. Starmer made trips to Olean and to Parkersburg without any success in locating any family member.³⁸ The COBIA eventually became a memorial boat and was moored at Manitowoc, Wisconsin, where she floats proudly today.³⁹ The former officers and crew met for reunions aboard the boat, and Starmer had a plaque made and fastened to the superstructure of the boat in memory of Ralph Huston.⁴⁰

The Department of the Navy awarded Ralph C. Huston Jr., posthumously, the Purple Heart Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three bronze stars, the World War II Victory Medal and the Philippine Liberation Ribbon.⁴¹

After much effort, Ralph's widowed sister, Ora Kellar, was finally located in December 1998, living in a rural area outside of Parkersburg. She expressed her gratitude that Ralph's fellow submariners had not forgotten Ralph, or "Junior" as his family normally called him. She was surprised that the military never scrapped the COBIA and the boat was moored presently at Manitowoc, Wisconsin.⁴²

Herbert "Doc" Starmer was elated when he learned that some of Ralph's relations had been located. "Doc" and Ora talked by telephone on several occasions. Captain Becker died in 1992 and never learned that the search was over.⁴³

At the deaths of her parents, Ora became the keeper of family mementos of Ralph's life and his death. She removed the treasured box from its safe place and refreshed her memory of those days long ago. There were official letters from the Navy to her parents conveying sympathy and instructions to assist them in closing the affairs of Ralph's service. There were post cards from Ralph to his mother after his induction into the Navy and a certificate of completion of torpedo school at Newport, Rhode Island. A wealth of memories and information was in that box. Among these items were those letters written to the family by members of the crew; letters from Joseph Sibley, Jim Marion, Arthur Murphy, Herb Starmer and Tom Brotchie. With Brotchie's letter, there were photographs; one with Ralph alone and one with several other crewmembers

taken topside at Exmouth Gulf, three days before Ralph's death. Among the others, there were four slightly brown and aged photographs taken with that camera that someone took to the bridge when Ralph was committed to the sea. These photographs are now reported to be the only photographs taken of a burial at sea from a submarine of a submariner during wartime. The box was a treasure chest.⁴⁴

The 1999 reunion of the former officers and crew of the USS COBIA, conducted July 15-18 in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, was a little different than other reunions. The attendance was good that weekend for, by special invitation, there were some who had not attended before. Ralph's sisters, Ora and Mary, Ora's two daughters and one son-in-law, had made the trip from West Virginia and from Ohio to attend this reunion. They were able to see the boat in which Ralph had served, the position where he had fought and had been wounded, to see the after battery room where he had died and to meet his many shipmates who had survived when he had not. Ora's only disappointment was that Doc Starmer had undergone eye surgery and was not able to attend.

In the years following World War II, the remains of many of those who had died in the conflict were brought home to rest. Ralph did not come home. However, a memorial service was conducted in Phelps Memorial Methodist Church on Broad Street in Parkersburg⁴⁵ and later, in Mt. Olivet Cemetery off 23rd. Street in Parkersburg, his family placed a

marker in the family plot at the base of a spreading oak tree to remember the smiling 19 year-old West Virginia sailor who went to war and never returned.

¹ History of USS COBIA (SS-245), Navy Department, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Ship's History Section, undated.

² Fourth War Patrol Report of the USS COBIA, April 16, 1945, the National Archives. (FWPR)

³ History of USS COBIA (SS-245), Navy Department, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Ship's History Section, undated.

⁴ FWPR

⁵ FWPR

⁶ Telephone interview, Herbert L. "Doc" Starmer (DOC) to Larry L. Legge (LLL), January 8, 1999.

⁷ FWPR

⁸ Telephone interview, Dan Pelton to LLL, February 2, 1999.

⁹ FWPR

¹⁰ Email, Harold Knapp, via Joe Knapp, to LLL, September 22, 1998.

¹¹ FWPR

¹² Telephone interview, Dan Pelton to LLL, February 2, 1999.

¹³ FWPR

¹⁴ Correspondence from DOC to LLL, January 11, 1999.

¹⁵ Correspondence from DOC to LLL, January 11, 1999.

¹⁶ Letter from Lieutenant Commander Joseph Sibley, USNR, to Mrs. Myrtle Huston, May 2, 1945.

¹⁷ Letter from Tom Brotchie to Mr. and Mrs. Ralph C. Huston Sr., March 4, 1945.

¹⁸ FWPR

¹⁹ Telephone interview, DOC to LLL, January 8, 1999.

²⁰ FWPR

²¹ Tape transcription, DOC to Darrell Boomgaarden, February 15, 1992.

²² FWPR

²³ Photograph, Mrs. Ora Kellar to LLL.

²⁴ Tape transcription, DOC to Darrell E. Boomgaarden, February 15, 1992.

²⁵ Letter from Lieutenant Commander Joseph Sibley, USNR, to Mrs. Myrtle Huston, May 2, 1945.

²⁶ Email, Harold Knapp, via Joe Knapp, to LLL, September 22, 1998.

²⁷ Tape transcription, DOC to Darrell E. Boomgaarden, February 15, 1992.

²⁸ Letter from DOC to Mr. and Mrs. Ralph C. Huston Sr., February 28, 1945.

²⁹ Destroyer Squadron 23 Ken Jones, Chilton Publishing Company, 1959.

³⁰ Photograph, Mrs. Ora Kellar to LLL.

³¹ USS COBIA Deck Log Summary compiled by Darrell E. Boomgaarden, date unknown.

³² Destroyer Squadron 23 Ken Jones, Chilton Publishing Company, 1959.

³³ Photograph, Mrs. Ora Kellar to LLL.

³⁴ FWPR

³⁵ Telephone interview, Mrs. Ora Kellar to LLL, January 9, 1999.

³⁶ Letters from Lieutenant Commander Joseph Sibley, USNR, to Mrs. Myrtle Huston, April 19 and May 2, 1945.

³⁷ Letters to Mr. and Mrs. Ralph C. Huston Sr. from Thomas Brotchie, Arthur C. Murphy, Herbert Starmer and

Jim Marion.

³⁸ Tape transcription, DOC to Darrell E. Boomgarden, February 15, 1992.

³⁹ Email, Joe Knapp, to LLL, September 22, 1998.

⁴⁰ Telephone interview, DOC to LLL, January 8, 1999.

⁴¹ Letter, Navy Department, Bureau of Naval Personnel, to Mrs. Myrtle Huston, January 5, 1948.

⁴² Telephone interview, Mrs. Ora Kellar to LLL, December 23, 1998.

⁴³ Telephone interview, DOC to LLL, January 8, 1999.

⁴⁴ Personal visit and interview with Mrs. Ora Kellar by LLL, February, 1999.

⁴⁵ Telephone interview, Mrs. Ora Kellar to LLL, December 23, 1998.

Charles and Elinor Aurand

Former West Virginia Historical Society President and long time treasurer, the Reverend Charles W. Aurand and his wife, Elinor Aurand, are leaving Huntington, West Virginia for Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Reverend Aurand is retired from service as the pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Huntington and Elinor is a retired elementary school teacher in Cabell County. The Aurands have three children, two of whom are also ministers. Reverend Charles T. Aurand lives in Newberry, South Carolina and Reverend Anne Aurand-Keating of New Britain Connecticut. Their daughter Susan Burgess lives in Plano, Texas. Charles and Elinor were familiar faces at WVHS annual meetings over the years and he served for more than 30 years in various positions, on the executive board, as President and as Treasurer. Reverend Aurand also was an adjunct professor for Marshall University, teaching for 39 years at the school. He is an avid train enthusiast and member of the Collis P. Huntington Railroad Historical Society, Inc. The WVHS wishes the Aurands all the best in their new home, the Gettysburg Lutheran Retirement Village, and they can be assured that while their presence will be missed they will remain in our thoughts.

Wheeling Area Historical Society Hears Program on Carl G. Bachmann

Michael Wilson, who wrote the excellent article about Carl G. Bachmann which was published in the last issue of the *Quarterly*, made a presentation on the former Congressman to the Wheeling Area Historical Society. WVHS member Margaret Brennan reported that the presentation was not only well received, but two of Congressman Bachmann's daughters were in attendance. The Wheeling Area Historical Society has encouraged Mr. Wilson to expand on his article with an eye toward another publication in the future. Mr. Wilson is Senior Historian/Historical Services Unit Leader for the West Virginia Department of Transportation.

ARCHIVES AND HISTORY NOTES

The Staff at the Department of Archives and History are continuing to provide excellent service for researchers. They are open from 9:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. In addition they are open on many holidays when other state offices are closed to the public. The staff continues to provide helpful, courteous and expert help to all who come through their door. WVHS members are encouraged to take advantage of this unique historical collection when they are in Charleston.

If you can not travel to Charleston, check out the Department of Archives and History web pages for an amazing array of information available on the net. Their website is www.wvculture.org.