



D7 Drowned at Sea: Identification of a Sailor From the USS Gherardi Fifty-Two Years Later

Craig W. King, BS, William C. Rodriguez, PhD, Carna E. Meyer, MSFS, Demris Lee, MSFS, and Louis Finelli, DO, Armed Forces DNA ID Lab, 1413 Research Boulevard, Building 101, Rockville, MD 20850*

After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the usefulness of modern forensic science methodologies in identifying historic remains. Attendees will bear witness to a tragic naval event through extensive historical photos and recent forensic findings which solved a fifty-two year old mystery.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing knowledge and resolution of a historic case utilizing two scientific disciplines.

On a stormy night just after midnight on December 2, 1942, two whaleboats were returning 34 sailors from liberty. One whaleboat successfully made the four mile journey back to the destroyer, USS Gherardi. The other would meet tragedy. In the middle of the storm that threatened the USS Gherardi herself, the second whaleboat was capsized by successive waves. Only two of the seventeen sailors survived the night amid the storm and icy waters of Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island. In the morning, five bodies that had washed ashore during the night were recovered along with the two survivors. Over the next several months, seven additional bodies were recovered and identified leaving only three men unaccounted for.

In August of 1943, fishermen recovered the partial remains of a body, which two naval medical officers determined was that of a naval enlisted man associated with the USS Gherardi loss. Positive identification could not be made at that time due to the decomposed and incomplete state of the body. The remains of the sailor were buried in an unmarked grave in Island Cemetery, Newport, Rhode Island, where they became forgotten over the next fifty-two years. In 1995 a retired Marine, Mr. Ted Darcy, was conducting an unrelated historical survey of Island Cemetery when he came across a gap in the grave plots. Mr. Darcy's continued investigation revealed that the unmarked grave plot contained the remains of an unknown sailor associated with the USS Gherardi tragedy. Over the next ten years Mr. Darcy obtained a memorial marker for the grave, and was able to locate direct relatives of the three unaccounted for sailors.

The information obtained by Mr. Darcy was forwarded to the U.S. Navy for verification. Upon verification, the Navy exhumed the remains in the spring of 2006 for the purpose of renewed identification efforts based on modern scientific analyses. Forensic anthropological examination of the remains by the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System (AFMES), revealed them to be most consistent with the biological profile reported for the youngest sailor in question, Seaman First Class Raymond S. Johnson. A section of bone was removed from one of the femurs and submitted to the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL), for mitochondrial DNA testing.

Blood samples from the maternal relatives of the three unaccounted sailors were processed for the entire Control Region. The bone sample was organically extracted which yielded high quality results utilizing Primer Sets. The results of the skeletal sample showed concordance with the maternal relative of Seaman First Class Raymond S. Johnson within the targeted region with the exception of a heteroplasmic at position 152, while excluding the other two family references. As result of the DNA and forensic anthropological analyses, the remains were identified as Seaman First Class Raymond S. Johnson, putting to rest a fifty-two-year-old mystery.

Mitochondrial DNA Analysis, Historic Remains, Anthropology
