

World War II POW, Submarine Remembered

By Kevin Copeland, Commander, Submarine Force Atlantic Public Affairs, March 7, 2011

NORFOLK, Va. (NNS) -- The life of a World War II submariner and POW was celebrated and remembered during a funeral in Virginia Beach, Va., March 5.

Marion "Turk" Turner passed away Feb. 28 after a lengthy illness. He was a retired submariner who survived three and half years in a Japanese prisoner of war (POW) camp during World War II.

A long time resident of Virginia Beach, Va., Turner was born in Moultrie, Ga., on April 22, 1918.

Turner enlisted in the Navy October 12, 1939 and elected to serve on submarines as an Electrician's Mate. He served aboard submarine tender USS Canopus, the submarine USS Sealion, and the Porpoise-class submarine USS Perch (SS 176).

It was during his assignment aboard Perch that he was captured by the Japanese.

While surfaced 30 miles northwest of Soerabaja, Java, March 1, 1942, Perch was attacked by Japanese destroyers. Driven down with a string of depth charges to a depth of 135-feet, and enduring several more depth charges, Turner and the men of Perch repaired the submarine and they were able to resurface early the next morning.

They were attacked again and again, forced to submerge. Convinced that they had finished off the submarine by the oil loss and the air from damaged ballast tanks, the enemy left Perch and went hunting for other targets. That allowed Perch to again surface and conduct repairs.

On a dive to test those repairs, the submarine was forced to resurface, and was engaged for what would be the final time by two enemy cruisers and three destroyers.

The commanding officer, Lt. Cmdr. David A. Hurt, ordered the ship to be abandoned and the submarine was scuttled.

In later years, Turner related the following passage concerning the event to friends Jeanine and Lorie Allen.

"... as we were given the order to 'abandon the boat' when Perch was going down, our captain, Lt. Cmdr. David Hurt, was the last man off the conning tower. We were in the water for awhile before the Japanese came by to rescue our crew. We did not know if they were going to shoot us or abandon us to the sea. Hurt was having difficulty treading water as the Japanese ship was rescuing the crew using a rickety ladder."

The captain told Turner he "wasn't going to make it," and said, "Just leave me Turk, I no longer have the strength to go on, save yourself ... leave me."

"I wasn't going to listen to that, so I dove down and came up right under him, and I pushed him right up the ladder with him still protesting," Turner told the Allens.

While the entire crew of 60 officers and enlisted Sailors survived that day, six later died in Japanese POW camps. The survivors were later repatriated and were able to enjoy the victory over the Japanese in World War II from home.

After surviving cruel beatings, starvation and tropical diseases at the POW camp on the island of Makassar Celebes, Turner was repatriated Oct. 17, 1945 and remained in the Navy until his retirement Dec. 1, 1959.

Nearly seven decades after receiving his injuries while in captivity, Turner was presented the Purple Heart Medal, Jan. 2 during a ceremony held at King's Grant Baptist Church in Virginia Beach. He was also awarded the Korean Service Medal for his service during that conflict.

Retired U.S. Navy Rear. Adm. Fred Metz awarded Turner the medals.

"If you think about what he had to endure, or anyone in the prisoner of war camps, a Purple Heart does not really signify what they had to go through," said Metz. "But it's one way this country honors the people who lived through those perils."

Turner was known by family and friends as a strong-willed veteran with an equally strong conviction for his country, but he always had a kind word for all. He was particularly fond of sharing his time and sea stories with fellow veterans.

"Turk showed us all courage and humility during and after facing the enormous struggle of a POW," said Capt. Stephen T. Koehler, who pinned the medals on Turner and is currently commanding officer of amphibious assault ship USS Bataan (LHD 5). "He gave us perspective when we thought we were having a bad day. It only takes a thought of him with his struggle over 60 years ago, and the way he handled it with a positive attitude to shed light on our current day-to-day problems.

"He became a friend and inspiration to both me and the crew of Bataan with this positive attitude and his zest for life," Koehler continued. He spent a lot of his time with my young Sailors telling stories and relating his time in submarines and as a POW, for which I am grateful. He was truly a great influence on Bataan Sailors in our quest to keep Bataan Heritage part of our ship."

Ernest Plantz, one of Turner's shipmates on Perch and his cellmate while both were prisoners of war, personalized his convictions.

"Turk was my mentor and best buddy," said Plantz, a friend of Turner's for 69 years and the only surviving Sailor from Perch. "He tutored me for my seaman qualifications and my submarine qualifications. He continued being an outstanding teacher through his life, and relaying his experiences in the Navy. Turk loved people with only good words for everyone.

His deep faith saw him through many trials, and the love of his family helped him along the way. Turk will be remembered as one of the unsung heroes of his generation who served in the submarine force with honor and dignity.

"I loved you shipmate and treasured the friendship that we shared," explained Plantz.

Ted Davis, a retired U.S. Navy captain and former commanding officer of the Tench-class diesel submarine USS Grenadier (SS 525), concurred with Plantz.

"There is nothing Turk wouldn't do or has not already done for his country, his service, his friends, and his family," said Davis, a long-time friend and member of the Hampton Roads Chapter of the U.S. Submarine Veterans, Inc. "Turk showed us the way a hero walks, softy with love in his heart. He may have spent many tours in Hell, but he served God and country for life."

Turner went on eternal patrol at the age of 92, Feb. 28, 2011.

He will be cremated and his remains scattered at sea during a future ceremony.

For more information on the submarine force, visit the Submarine Force Atlantic web site at: www.sublant.navy.mil.