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Subject: FW: Flash Traffic #09-10-2012: WWII SubVets Dis-Band
Date: Sunday, September 23, 2012 2:13:00 PM
Attachments: [image003.png](#)
Importance: High

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Flash Traffic - 9/23/2012

#9-10/2012

World War II Submarine Veterans Forced to Disband National Group

Published September 23, 2012
Associated Press

NEW LONDON, Conn. —The submarine veterans of World War II have seen this coming for a long time. At their national convention this month, 62 veterans attended where thousands used to go. The U.S. Submarine Veterans of World War II disbanded at the end of its convention Sept. 7 in Norfolk, Va. Local chapters now must decide whether to continue operating under another name or to dissolve as well. This month in Groton, J. "Deen" Brown announced to his fellow WWII submarine veterans that the Thames River Chapter has a new name, "Eastern USA Chapter U.S. Submarine Veterans of WWII," he told members before their monthly luncheon at the U.S. Submarine Veterans clubhouse.

"We simply have to face the fact that we're all getting older and, as we do so, eventually we simply cannot remain a viable national organization," said Brown, 90, of Oakdale. Walter "Gus" Kraus, the last national president, said the veterans who wanted to keep the national group going "until the last man is gone" prevailed in a vote three years ago. Two years ago, the vote was split. By this year's convention, some of the stalwarts had died, or their friends had. Of the 1,100 members, the youngest is 86. The oldest is 102.

It was difficult for the national organization to find members able to serve as officers and to complete all of the administrative tasks. In their last roster, published 10 years ago, the pages listing the deceased members outnumbered those listing active members.

"The guys said, 'I was all for staying. My shipmate came to the convention with me. He's gone now and I don't feel like coming,'" said Kraus, 91, of Crescent Springs, Ky.

The national organization was established in 1955 to honor submarine veterans who served in World War II. Submarines were just 2 percent of the Navy's fleet then, but subs sank more than 30 percent of the Japanese navy and nearly 5 million tons of shipping. About 16,000 men served on submarine war patrols. The submarine force lost 52 boats and more than 3,500 men.

After the sixth annual reunion of the national submarine veterans group, the membership grew rapidly. Memorials were erected.

"There are memorials all over this country they've created," said retired Vice Adm. Al Konetzni, who has long been close with the World War II veterans even though he is not of that era. "These guys started in 1955 doing this for their buddies, so they would not be forgotten. It's a wonderful story of self-image. They said, 'Hey, we're going to do it, and we will do it.'"

Kraus said the sub veterans considered themselves a unique group and that uniqueness forged a strong bond. The end of the organization, he said, also represents the "end of an era where we were able to get together and blow our own horn, remembering the circumstances under which we fought."

Konetzni, who gave the keynote speech at the closing ceremony, said in an interview that the World War II veterans "lived the horror" and "lived the glory," but they do not need the administrative burdens of a federally chartered organization to preserve their memories.

"They will never be forgotten, ever, ever, ever," said Konetzni, a former deputy commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command and the U.S. Atlantic Fleet. "They gave us our traditions and our spirit. They were our leaders."

Brown, who was state commander in the national organization, said the veterans who live locally enjoy getting together and want to continue as a group.

The new name is intentionally broad, Brown said, because they expect veterans to join from other states when chapters disband.

About 120 World War II submariners live in Connecticut. After Brown announced the national organization's decision and the name change at the luncheon, Warren Wildes said, "It was time."

Wildes, 86, of Groton was eating with LeRoy Webb, 88, of Mystic.

"I hate to see them do it but the day had to come sooner or later," Webb said.

He told Wildes he had just read in "Polaris," the official magazine of the organization, that a chief on the USS Moray, one of the submarines he had served on during the war, had died.

"I used to take his girlfriend's picture and put it under my pillow," he said with a laugh at the prank he used to pull to irritate the chief.

Webb said he served on 15 submarines in his career and was away so much that when his wife was asked how long she had been married, she cut the time in half.

Both Webb and Wildes said they thought it was great that the local group would continue to meet.

"We look forward to seeing our buddies every month and swapping lies," Wildes said.

"Sometimes you hear the same stories over and over again," Webb said. "But they're still interesting."

Many of the World War II submariners are also members of the U.S. Submarine Veterans Inc., which is open to all U.S. Navy submariners. The younger ones in that group began maintaining the memorials and conducting ceremonies when the World War II veterans could no longer do it.

The local World War II veterans turned over the upkeep of the U.S. Submarine Veterans WWII National Submarine Memorial East to the Subvets Groton base and the city of Groton in 2005, said John Carcioppolo, base commander. Subvets willingly took on the responsibility.

"The World War II guys are part of our heritage," Carcioppolo said. "And it's up to us to preserve that heritage."

George Jones, 92, another World War II submariner who attended the luncheon, said it's important to him that the memorial is well taken care of because his friends' names are on its Wall of Honor.

"I lost a lot of friends during the war and I came close myself," Jones, of Waterford, said. "I hope we will continue to be remembered for many, many years to

come."

"I hope we will continue to be remembered for many, many years to come."

- George Jones, WWII submariner

Editor: You will be, George. As long as men – and women – continue to go beneath the waves.

Chuck Emmett

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