

A Big Man on Samar

We exchanged a few e-mails, Fran and I, and that was certainly something I never expected to do with a PT boat veteran from World War II.

Fran's first e-mail came in response to the small ad I had placed in the PT vets newsletter in the fall of 2010. I had been informed by Alyce Guthrie, the Executive VP of PT Boats, Inc., that ads placed in the "Looking For" section of *All Hands* would generate the most attention.

"Keep the ad under 100 words," Alyce advised, and include your contact information. Don't forget to put your e-mail address in there, too."

And so I did, assuming it was for those of my generation and younger. Receiving an e-mail from Fran Hart was just one more stunning moment along my journey of discovery as I probed my father's military career in WWII.

My goal was to make contact with men who had known my father in 1945 and, in all likelihood, had not been in contact with him since VJ Day. The last interaction between these men and my father had probably occurred five years before I was conceived.

The youngest of my father's contemporaries would be in their mid-eighties. The state of their health and cognitive abilities were an open question. Of the very few things of which I was certain, one was that too much time had elapsed.

But there in my inbox on October 18, 2010 was an e-mail from a sailor who had been in my father's first PT squadron (15) based in the Mediterranean in 1944.

Like my father, Fran Hart of Massachusetts had been a radioman. Assigned to PT 208 of Squadron (or Ron) 15, he had participated in the major actions that highlighted the work of the PT boats in the Mediterranean—the invasions of Elba and Southern France as well as the battle for Anzio on the Italian mainland.

Fran's e-mail was short. It contained some words that I barely took note of: "...and there was a Stahley who operated the MARS radio station. We were all able to talk to people back home then. Hope this helps."

At the time I heard from Fran, my research efforts were focused entirely on my father's first posting as a PT sailor in Ron 15. I was consumed with the need to know if he had been assigned to a PT boat in that squadron. Was he involved in the invasion of Elba when PT boats ferried French and French Colonial and English commandoes to the island that was the site of Napoleon's first exile? Was he operating a radio on a boat when the PTs supported the invasion of Southern France? If not, what was his job on base?

When Fran and I spoke by phone in late November, all my questions were about Ron 15. I was hungry for any information about what my father was doing in the

Mediterranean. All Fran wanted to talk about was Samar in the Philippines and what my father was doing with MARS (Military Auxiliary Radio System).

“Weren’t you and my father together in Ron 15?” I asked.

“Yeah, we were in the same squadron but I didn’t know him then. There were probably over 150 of us in the squadron. You mainly got to know the guys on your boat, maybe a few more,” he said.

“Were you in his squadron in the South Pacific, Ron 27?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, “I was in Ron 22 but the two PT squadrons were based in Samar.”

“So how was it you got to know him then?”

“On Samar, your father operated the MARS radio and through that he was able to connect us to our families back home,” he said. “Didn’t your father ever tell you about that?”

“No,” I said, “not a word.”

“Don’t you know what that was like for us?” he asked.

“No clue,” I said.

“Your father was able to work that radio and connect with other radio operators on islands strung across the Pacific. One operator would work with another until they had made a connection all the way back to the west coast,” he said. “And once that

connection was made, he could then connect with other radio operators anywhere in the country.”

“So he would work his radio, work with other operators, and they’d form a signal chain across the Pacific?”

“That’s right,” he said. “Your father would patiently work that radio until he had made the links. When he did, he’d send someone to get me.”

His voice began to waver with emotion. I made some affirmative sounds and he continued.

“Go get Hart,” your father would say to a runner, and then I’d run back and I’d be in the radio tent next to your father and he’d say “Over” and hand the headphones and microphone over to me. And when I put the headphones on, I’d hear click, click, click. And then after about seven or eight clicks, there would be a voice on the other end of the line and the voice would say “Over.”

He paused. He seemed to be catching his breath. I listened in silence.

“And after that voice said “Over,” the next voice I heard was my mother. It was her voice through the headphones into my ears.” He was sobbing now. “Do you know what that was like to hear her voice from back in Springfield, Mass?”

“Wow,” I said. “That must have been something.”

“I was so homesick,” he said. “And your father knew how homesick I was when we were on Samar. And every time he could get through on the MARS radio, he would send someone running to get me.”

“Are you *sure* that it was George Stahley?

Short guy, round face, reddish complexion?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “that’s him.”

“Your father was a big man on Samar,” he said. “Even the Marines wanted to see him and get connected to the folks back home.”

“The Marines? My father had the Marines wanting to see him?”

“You bet,” he said, “but your father, he made them Marines wait in line. It was PT boys first for your father, always the PT boys first.”

“So my father was making the Marines wait in line, what do you know about that?” I said, almost more to myself than to Fran.

“He sure did, it was the PT boys first. And he always sent someone running to get me when he made the connection back to the States,” he said.

My search for a boat assignment and an account of combat engagements in the Mediterranean was overshadowed now by an element of my father’s WWII service for which I had no reference. Using his radio training and technical skills, my old man was spending his free time on base connecting his buddies with their families back home. I had no idea; not even a glimmer of an idea.

I was lost momentarily in some reverie, picturing my father youthful and generous, bossing the Marines around on Samar while he provided long distance

access to his fellow PT boaters so they could talk with their families back in Massachusetts, Virginia, Michigan, or wherever the hell they were from.

Had I learned that my father worked the anti-aircraft gun on the deck of a PT boat and singlehandedly brought down a squadron of enemy fighter planes, I could not have been more surprised than I was to learn of his work with the MARS radio and his gift for connecting lonely sailors and Marines with their families back home. This was information for which I had no context.

“I am so sorry that your dad passed away,” Fran said, abruptly bringing me back to our long distance phone conversation. “Your notice in the newsletter said he died in 1999. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry...”

“Thank you,” I said, “he had a peaceful death, he...”

“No, I’m so sorry that I didn’t take the time to get in touch with him after the war to let him know how much it meant to me. When he made contact with the radio operators stateside, he’d always send someone, he’d say “Go get Hart, go get Hart,” and someone came running, and I...”

He was unable to continue, he was sobbing too hard.

And my emotions, too, were beginning to swirl, the way wind does in the high trees when a storm is brewing in the late summer as the leaves are beginning to grow crisp in anticipation of the approaching autumn. And this was a strange sensation, unlike any I could name or even remember in reference to that complex, highly textured set of feelings I have toward my father.

“You’re *sure* it was George Stahley, PT Ron 27, who was operating the MARS radio on Samar and put you in touch with your folks?”

“Tell you what,” Fran said. “Scan some photos of your dad and send them to me through e-mail? That way we can be certain.”

“Sure, sure, we have lots of photos,” I said. “I can do that.”

And so, within a week or two, I sent the scanned photos of my father via e-mail to a man whose name I didn’t even know two before.

Within an hour of pushing the send button, there was a return e-mail.

“That’s him.” Fran wrote. “That’s George Stahley. That’s the man I remember on Samar.”

Stephen J. Stahley

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