VIRGIL QUINN JR.

1919 – 1945, WORLD WAR II

U.S. NAVY, SHIP'S COOK SECOND CLASS

WRITTEN BY Avery Alexander, Samuel Denne, and Charles Robb
UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED by Meghan Dunn

Virgil "Harry" Quinn Jr. was born on September 24, 1919, in Lumberport, Harrison County, West Virginia, to parents Virgil and Louise Quinn. He was the youngest of five children with three sisters, Blanche, Florence, Agnes, and a brother, Paul. For most of little Harry's childhood, the family lived somewhere outside of town—Lumberport had a little over 1,000 residents—along the Shinnston-Middlebourne Turnpike

Harry's father was a coal miner when the boy was born. The elder Virgil's wages enabled the family to rent a home in northern Harrison County. However, West Virginia was one of the states hit hardest by the Great Depression. Thousands of coal mining families lost work. The Quinns may have as well, since Virgil Sr. was no longer working in the coal mines by 1930. The family moved to a rented farm. Harry also dropped out of school after eighth grade, probably to work and put food on the family's table.

New opportunities to assist his family opened up as the Depression wore on. Harry was one of three million single men between the ages of 18-25 who enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a federal program employing young men in critical forestry work on public lands from 1933 to 1942.

Within West Virginia, 67 camps operated while the CCC was active. CCC men built roads and bridges, managed timber, manned forest fire lookout stations, and developed more than 30 state and national parks or forests. Enlistees like Virgil Jr. earned $30 per month. The majority of each paycheck was mailed directly to their families. As a member of Camp 2586, Harry worked at Camp Thornwood, near Durbin, in Pocahontas County (nearly 100 miles from his home), where he planted trees, created trails, and built shelters within Monongahela National Forest.

Things were looking up for his family back in Harrison County by 1940. The Quinns bought a house. Virgil Sr. returned to the coal mines as a "tipple worker" loading coal, and made enough money to support the four grandchildren listed as living in the household when the census recorder arrived in April 1940.

Whether it was his CCC service, the growing prospect of war, or the assurance of a good, steady paycheck, Harry's interest in the military was piqued sometime the following year. All branches were boosting their numbers as part of a national defense program initiated by the Roosevelt administration in response to World War II, which was increasingly consuming Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and much of Asia.

Harry Quinn traveled to Boston, Massachusetts, and enlisted in the United States Navy Reserve on July 2, 1941. After basic training granted him the rating of seaman second class (S2C), Harry was quickly called to active duty and transferred to the receiving station in New Orleans in September. In

Memorial plaque for the crew of the USS *Eagle* (PE-56). *Historical Marker Database*

New Orleans, he boarded the USS *Gum Tree* (YN-13), which had a surprising connection to home: Quinn's new berth was made in West Virginia.

The Marietta Manufacturing Company of Point Pleasant, Mason County, had built the small, shallow-draft vessel. *Gum Tree* was an *Aloe*-class net laying ship, designed to work in shallow waters placing nets to snare submarines if they moved close to shore. The ship was brand new when Harry stepped aboard, having departed West Virginia for Louisiana on August 22. Quinn's new home was purpose-built for antisubmarine warfare, armed as it was with depth charges in addition to its nets.

Harry's first experience in the Navy came during the *Gum Tree*'s shakedown in the Gulf of Mexico as the crew tested the performance of the newly commissioned vessel. After a successful cruise, S2C Quinn and the *Gum Tree* sailed to Key West, Florida, then on to New York, Newport, Boston, and Halifax before reaching their ultimate destination of Argentia, Newfoundland, in late January 1942.

For the next 17 months, the crew diligently laid and tended antisubmarine nets around the Newfoundland coast. *Gum Tree*'s arrival in the region coincided with the 1941 United States' Leased Bases Agreement with Great Britian, granting the U.S. permission to establish military facilities in a number of United Kingdom territories in exchange for 50 aging destroyers—a shrewd deal by President Roosevelt that expanded America's network of defenses. Soon, over one hundred million American dollars were spent to build military bases in Newfoundland and Labrador.

While Harry was aboard the *Gum Tree*, Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, brought the United States into World War II. Not only was the U.S. now at war with Japan

At Left:
USS *Gum Tree*, a West Virginia-manufactured antisubmarine netlaying ship, and Virgil Quinn Jr.'s home for much of the war.
Naval History & Heritage Command

Opposite:
Excerpt from an article about the USS *Eagle*'s fate in the *Daily American Public*, of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, 27 January 2003.

in the Pacific, but Japan's ally Nazi Germany declared war as well. American ships were fair game for Germany's huge submarine fleet, maritime life on the Atlantic coast became instantly more dangerous

After 11 months in the Navy, Harry received a promotion in rank to seaman first class, and another promotion to ship's cook third class several months later. Around this time in mid-1943, *Gum Tree* returned to the United States for overhaul. While his ship was refitted, the Navy transferred Quinn to the U.S. Naval Hospital in Chelsea, Massachusetts—making the most of personnel who would otherwise be idle.

Virgil reboarded *Gum Tree* in August 1943. The ship remained in its home port of Portland, Maine, for the rest of World War II, tending harbor defenses and staying alert for German U-boats. While off the coast of Maine, Harry received yet another increase in rank to ship's cook second class on January 1, 1944.

Advancing to a second-class rating meant calculating and ordering enough food to keep the men fed without creating overages or spoilage. At this stage in his cook's career, Quinn also learned how to inspect food products that came aboard for quality and dietary value. The Navy had its own system of food rationing which measured not only caloric intake, but cost factors as well, in order to create a balanced meal system that could be quickly prepared on 60-89 cents per day, per man. Monitoring potable water, and controlling waste material in the kitchen were also essential tasks in Harry's expanded role.

Although Quinn's ships stayed close to Maine's shores, the waters were dangerous. With 171 American vessels torpedoed off the East Coast in 1942, and at no point during the war could patrol vessels afford to relax their guard. The Navy installed submarine detection equipment on the floor of Maine's Casco Bay, and Navy ships like *Gum Tree* picketed the harbors and coastlines, working hand in hand with the U.S. Coast Guard.

After spending a large portion of his naval career aboard *Gum Tree*, Quinn was transferred to the USS *Eagle* (PE-56) in January 1945. The *Eagle* was a patrol boat built by Henry Ford in his Detroit plant in 1919, just a little too late for service in World War I. Such vessels were obsolete by the time of World War II, but were pressed into service anyway so newer vessels could be engaged elsewhere.

The transfer was to have tragic consequences for Harry only a few months later. During a training activity on April 23, 1945, the *Eagle* was towing targets for Navy bombers three miles off Maine's Cape Elizabeth, when the ship suddenly exploded. Out of the 62 crewmen aboard, Quinn was one of the 49 who lost his life. Also lost in the blast was a second West Virginian, Chief Gunner's Mate James Orval Brown, a career Navy man with 24 years of service. *Eagle*'s destruction was the Navy's greatest loss of life in New England waters during all of World War II. At the time, the ship's official cause of sinking was listed as a boiler explosion.

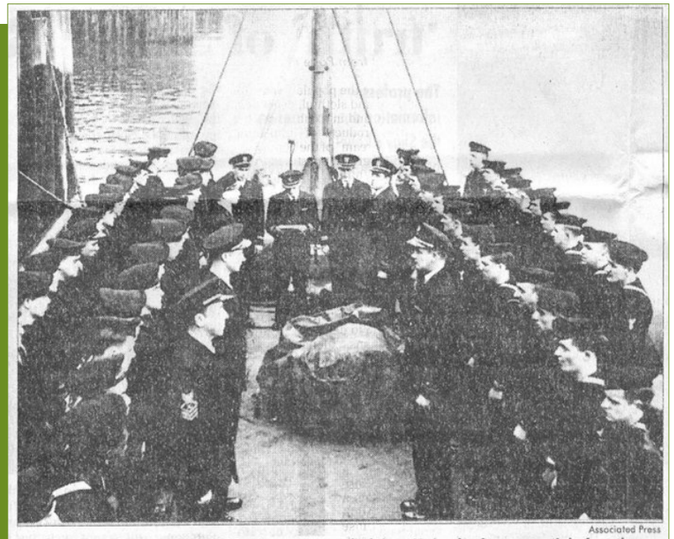
Lingering doubts remained about the cause of *Eagle*'s demise, however. A West Virginia newspaper called the event "mysterious." Crewmen who survived described what resembled a torpedo explosion, and some claimed they saw a submarine's conning tower breach the waves as they jumped into the cold Atlantic waters. This was not implausible. Despite the elaborate antisubmarine defenses in Casco Bay, German attacks were still possible. The U.S. Navy worked hard to limit civilian knowledge over how close U-boats were to Maine's coast throughout the war.

The tragedy and mystery of the *Eagle*'s violent end was compounded by the fact that war in Europe ended only two weeks later. Nazi Germany surrendered unconditionally on May 7, 1945, and the victory in Europe overshadowed the loss of the patrol craft's crew. Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding the *Eagle*, particularly for families of the crew, remained shrouded in doubt for decades.

The truth about the *Eagle* finally emerged 55 years later when an independent historian, Paul Lawton, and Bernard Cavalcante, senior archivist at the Naval Historical Center, conducted extensive research proving the explosion was caused by a torpedo from the German submarine *U-853*.

Lawton's journey to unravel the *Eagle*'s mystery began with a story he heard from Bob and Paul Westerlund, whose father was killed in the explosion. Their mother Phillis Westerlund insisted survivors saw their attacker moments before the explosion: "a submarine conning tower painted with a mischievous red horse trotting on a yellow shield." This detail set Lawton on a search for more survivors to corroborate the story.

By combing through records received through Freedom of Information requests (including ship's logs from the USS *Selfridge*, which rescued survivors) and posting notices in the *Boston Globe*, Lawton slowly built his case. The historian's



Associated Press
The officers and crew of the USS Eagle muster on deck in a Maine harbor a month before the submarine chaser was sunk by a German U-boat in the closing days of World War II.

requests for a formal inquiry eventually landed on Cavalcante's desk at the Naval Historical Center. Coincidentally, Cavalcante had already compiled relevant records with the aid of a German historian.

Cavalcante's materials, when combined with Lawton's research, crafted a compelling new narative. The *Eagle*, in fact, did appear in German classified material as an unnamed vessel whose coordinates fell directly in the path of *U-853*, as it prowled the Maine coastline. The U-boat had indisputably been in *Eagle*'s vicinity on the day of the sinking. Harry Quinn's ship, burdened by the practice targets she was towing for training exercises, never stood a chance.

The Naval Historical Center reclassified the sinking as a combat loss and posthumously bestowed Purple Hearts upon Virgil Quinn Jr. and his fellow crewmembers. Decades after their deaths, the sailors of the *Eagle* finally achieved recognition for their sacrifices in one of the bloodiest World War II combat sinkings so close to America's shores.

Quinn himself received a marker in West Virginia National Cemetery in 1998 at the request of his family. In addition to his memorial in Pruntytown, Virgil Quinn Jr.'s name appears on the Tablets of the Missing on the East Coast Memorial in New York City's Battery Park. Seventy-five years after his death, divers located the wreckage of the *Eagle*, providing another chapter of closure to the tragic story of Quinn and his crewmates.

PLACE OF INTERMENT:
West Virginia National Cemetery
SECTION MA
SITE 75

Above: A handful of survivors are rescued from the *Eagle*. *National Archives*

Opposite: USS *Eagle* (PE-56). *Historical Marker Database*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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As home to one of the nation's first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

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Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301
wvhuman@wvhumanities.org
www.wvhumanities.org
304.346.8500

WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

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SOURCES AND COPYRIGHT

For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers' Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a "living bibliography" of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project's webpage under the "Programs" tab at **www.wvhumanities.org**.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit **www.vlm.cem.va.gov**.

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