



# WOMPATUCK NEWS

## 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Depot Tragedy

By Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian



Isidore Bertone holding his WWII photo.



USS Zircon



USS YF-415

May 11 is the 75th anniversary of the sinking of the USS YF-415 ammunition ship in Boston Harbor that claimed 17 of the ship's 30 crew members. The ship was operating out of the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot at the time. The Navy weather ship USS Zircon rescued the remaining survivors.

The following story on page two describing the tragedy is a reprint from the scuba diving newsletter "The Lookout." It was first printed in 2013. The article was sent to FOW by Lisa Bertone of New York two years ago. The story was printed in issue 44 and since updated.

Lisa's father Isidore "Teddy" Bertone of the USS Zircon participated in the rescue of the YF-415 crew. He will be 94 in September and is one of two remaining crew members of the USS Zircon.

The other member is Richard Garrison. He is also 94 and can't recall much of the details of the tragedy. But, he does remember the fierce storms in the North Atlantic that gave the USS Zircon a rough ride in German U-boat territory.

Bertone's crewmate John Power received the Navy and Marine Corps

Medal for the rescue operation. His son Patrick has provided FOW with vital information of the sinking plus contact numbers.

The Bertones wanted to meet J.B. Mills, formerly of Whitman, who was stationed at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot at the time of the tragedy. Mills knew all the Hingham detachment of sailors that perished.

The Bertones read about Mills experiences at the ammunition depot in past newsletters. Unfortunately, the Bertones were one year too late. Mills passed away on June 18, 2016.

Mills was featured in many past Wompatuck News newsletters and also in the Patriot Ledger. He discussed his life at the depot, relating his good times with world great jazz musicians assigned there, such as John Coltrane and Al Grey, and the bad times, the YF-415 tragedy and racial discrimination in the military. Mills and the Hingham USS YF-415 sailors were all Afro-Americans.

Mills always resented the way Blacks were treated as second class citizens in the service. Black sailors were assigned

menial jobs like stewards and dangerous duty like loading ammunition.

He was especially upset over the Port Chicago disaster in California on July 17, 1944 that killed over 300 sailors loading ammunition. Most of them were Black.

During World War II, Mills was refused entry to the USO club in Boston because he was Black. He was told to go to the one in Roxbury instead.

He also fumed that German POWs from Fort McKay in South Boston were treated better than the Black servicemen. Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot refused Black marines to be stationed there up until 1950 when the Korean War pressed for more manpower.



J.B. Mills

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Isidore Bertone also witnessed the same prejudice in the military when predominately Southern white sailors refused to be billeted with Black sailors in the same barracks. Bertone and his fellow crewmates, “the boys from NYC” as he would say, stuck up for the Blacks and spoke as one. In consequence, the commander overruled and reprimanded the white sailors.

In 2004, Senator Ted Kennedy paid tribute to the victims of the USS YF-415 on the 60th anniversary of the sinking at the WW II memorial in Washington, D.C.

In 2012, Mills paid over \$3,000 of his own money for an etched stone memorializing the crew at Bare Cove Park in Hingham. The monument may be seen in front of the Dock House facing the Back River.



*USS YF-415 memorial donated by Mills*

Joan Pinkham, daughter of the commander of the USS YF-415, Louis Tremblay, has also provided her memories of the event. Her father received a commendation letter from President John F. Kennedy for his rescue heroism. She e-mailed:

“May 11, 1944 Marblehead, Massachusetts. After an early breakfast, my dad, Louis B. Tremblay, in full dress Navy uniform, left for Hingham, his crew and the Navy 'lighter' he was to command as skipper.

“I was at the high school and the windows rattled at about noon. Not completely sure of the time.

“Neither had I any idea that my dad's

vessel had blown up 14 nautical miles from Nahant.

“Later that afternoon, I was working in the front garden when a station wagon marked ‘U.S. Navy’ rolled up to the wall. My dad stepped out and so did the driver. Dad was dressed in ill-fit khakis and a Navy sweatshirt. As is usual in Marblehead if you came home in different clothes than when you left, you obviously got dumped in the water so I said ‘Hi dad, did you go overboard.’ My father just laughed but his driver was horrified and put his fingers to his lips in a shut it mode. I attempted to follow them into the house but was told in no uncertain terms to stay outside. They went in to talk to my mother. Not long after, the driver left saying only ‘bye’. I went in and my father told me what happened. I was shocked.

“The Boston Globe newspaper was dropped at the door screaming ‘RESCUER GREETNS NAVY HERO,’ and a long story about the accident. The next morning, dad's picture showed him shaking hands with the captain of the ship that rescued him and the other men. Dad was the last man to leave his ship after getting what men he could out of the water. He found William J. Bradley, machinist 1st class, of Newport, R.I. in the water after he jumped. Bradley was badly burned and dad, an excellent swimmer, got a hold of him and swam to the rescue boat. Bradley later died of his wounds.



*Boston Globe photo of skipper (left) Lt. Douglas Bird of the USS Zircon praising Louis Tremblay for his rescue heroism.*

“Dad also tried to save the Chinese cook, but he drowned in the shower.

“Another driver drove dad's car home.

He got out of the car and talked with me. I asked, ‘What happened?’ He said, ‘Your father will tell you.’

“The loss of his men had a profound effect on my dad. He went through the Inquiry for days and was exhausted. The Navy in its infinite wisdom sent him to Long Island to rest and train for overseas duty. He did go overseas shortly after.

“Sometime before he went, one of the men on the ship came to visit. He brought me a gift of a leather autograph book that was hand made by Indians. I treasured it and filled it with known celebrities I met. I don't know what happened to the book.”

### **A New Perspective on the YF-415 Sinking: The USS Zircon** *By North Atlantic Dive Expeditions*

More than 10 years after its discovery and first dives on July 20, 2003, the story of the USS YF-415 continues to intrigue. It is always amazing to observe history firsthand through diving, and to research the recorded history. Sometimes this leads to meeting living people connected to the event, bringing to light forgotten or never-told stories. In doing so, on occasion there is the opportunity to contribute to recorded history.

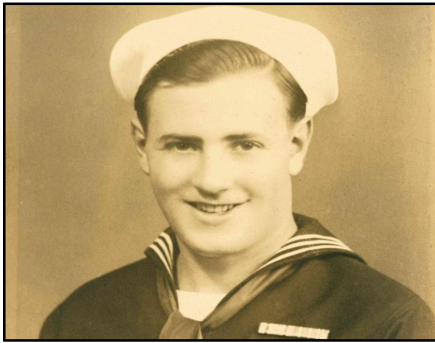
In July 2013, we were contacted by Lisa Bertone, daughter of Isidore “Teddy” Bertone, a sailor aboard the USS Zircon, the first vessel to respond to aid the sinking YF-415 on May 11, 1944. He, and his best friend Anthony Sussino, wanted to tell their memories of the events on that day and correct inaccurate reports about the role of the Zircon. Almost 70 years after the sinking of the YF-415, the story of the USS Zircon has reemerged and given yet another perspective on this tragic accident.

### **A Review of the USS YF-415 Accident**

On May 10, 1944 the YF-415 departed for the naval ammunition depot in Hingham, MA under the command of

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Chief Boatswain's Mate Louis B. Tremblay of Marblehead, MA. The ship's orders were to proceed to Hingham and load ammunition to be disposed of in deep water off Boston.



*Isidore Bertone official WWII photo.*

For this trip the ship was loaded with approximately 150 tons of ammunition, which included obsolete pyrotechnics, black powder, and 50-caliber bullets, projectiles ranging from 3" to 5" in shell size, and other miscellaneous ordnance.

The YF-415 was loaded to its maximum draft, though some claimed the ship was further weighted down to its gunwales.

The YF-415 departed Hingham with four officers, ten men comprising regular crew and an additional work crew of sixteen African-American men from the Hingham ammunition depot for a total of thirty men. While underway, the crew prepared the ordnance for disposal. At approximately 11:30 am on May 11, the YF-415 arrived in the disposal area where the crew proceeded to uneventfully dump nearly two-thirds of the cargo, including much of the black powder and projectiles.

According to testimony and reports from the naval inquiry, the rockets intended for disposal were normally buoyant and required special preparation to sink. The Bureau of Ordnance procedures required puncture of the rocket storage containers and removal of the package of matches provided to ignite the rockets. However, the men were instructed by the YF-415 officers to load the containers with projectile shells and crush the containers to keep the rockets and projectiles from falling out. At no

time did any officer, whether at the Hingham Ammunition Depot, or on board the YF-415, inspect the rocket containers to ensure the matches had been removed. The YF-415 successfully conducted two similar disposal runs without incident.

At approximately 11:30, the crew began dumping the ordnance. The relatively inexperienced enlisted African-American men from Hingham were charged with disposing the rockets. The disposal process proceeded as planned and without incident. However, according to testimony by Chief Boatswain's Mate Tremblay who observed the disposal operation, at about 12:30 pm there was a "terrific whoosh" – a fire from an explosion of rockets, which set off a chain reaction of explosions, quickly engulfing the port side of the ship, spreading from amidships to the entire main deck. The highly flammable, special use matches had not been removed from the containers, and when the containers were struck to crush them, an explosion resulted.

The fire aboard the YF-415 raged uncontrollably and attempts to man firefighting equipment were unsuccessful. Many were temporarily trapped in the crews quarters, located in the forward part of the ship, as intense flames and heat seared the YF-415. One crewman, William J. Bradley, managed to escape from the engine room but suffered third degree burns over 76% of his body and later died. Most men drowned in the water awaiting rescue. One sailor, Seaman second-class Yeo Jin was reported to have jumped into a shower during the panic in an attempt to shield himself from the fire on deck. He would not leave the crew's quarters despite the efforts of his fellow sailors. They were eventually forced to leave to save themselves. They did not see Jin alive again.

Numerous ships and vessels operating in the area were dispatched to conduct search and rescue operations. The USS Zircon, a nearby weather-observing vessel, was the first to arrive on scene.

**Rescue Operation: The USS Zircon**  
The USS Zircon (PY-16) was a private yacht procured by the Navy and converted into a weather observing vessel upon completion in 1943. The USS YF-415 would be lost in a tragic accident less than one year later. On the day of the YF-415 sinking, the Zircon was on convoy duty under the command of Captain Douglas C. Bird, looking for U-boats and making weather observations in preparation for the June 1944 invasion of Normandy. The crew of the Zircon was made up by men mostly from New York, some of who were from the same neighborhoods and during their time on the Zircon, formed close bonds that carried forth throughout their lives. Such is the story of Isidore Bertone and Anthony Sussino.

According to Bertone and Sussino, when the Zircon got the call to proceed to the YF-415, it was on a day with fog and limited visibility. Upon arriving on the scene, some of men were below decks finishing lunch, while others were on deck. When the general quarters alarm sounded, the men jumped to action and began looking for survivors. At first it was thought the YF-415 may have been torpedoed, but when shrapnel began striking the Zircon, they suspected it was something else.

It is here where reports differ. News reports published suggested the Zircon was unable to get very close to the YF-415, but that was inaccurate according to Bertone and Sussino. The men of the Zircon took great risks to rescue as many men as possible. As they approached the YF-415, they were struck with shrapnel and threatened by explosions aboard the YF-415. They observed debris, including men's limbs, floating in the water. Still, they pressed on to rescue survivors. Sailor Johnny Power took to the water in a motor boat, coming right up to the YF-415 to rescue men. He was later awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his heroic efforts.

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Anthony Sussino recalled the YF-415 as it sank. He described the YF-415 sinking stern first, which was a surprising piece of information given that the YF-415 sits on the ocean floor with its bow buried in the mud, and its stern raised. When asked about this and if he was certain, Sussino described how he witnessed a man clinging to the bow anchor of the YF-415 as it sank stern first, and he would never forget that.

Both Isidore Bertone and Anthony Sussino described horrific scenes of attempting to rescue men so severely burned their flesh was coming off. One man brought aboard the Zircon was so severely burned not even the doctor aboard the vessel could help him and he died on deck. For young men in their late teens and early 20s, it is difficult to appreciate the impact this has on a person throughout their life; however, nearly 70 years later, both men describe the events as if they occurred yesterday, with great conviction, passion and emotion.

Following the rescue, the USS Zircon was ordered to return to Boston, where Bertone stated they were denied liberty and not permitted to go ashore or speak with reporters. The negligence that led to the YF-415 accident was largely brushed away and the story was quickly pushed out of view. The men of the Zircon felt as though they did not receive the credit they deserved for their heroic acts that resulted in thirteen men surviving the disaster. Sadly, the missing sixteen men's bodies were never recovered.



*Sussino sitting left, front row. Power standing in back row, far right.*



*Bertone is second from right, kneeling.*

Although there was a US Naval inquiry and some news coverage of the accident, the story largely ended there until the wreck's discovery in 230 feet of water in July 2003. This story of the USS Zircon and the heroism displayed by these young men was largely unknown until recently.

Isidore Bertone and Anthony Sussino highlight another chapter in the continuing story of the USS YF-415. It is this aspect of shipwreck exploration that is the most rewarding. The ability to uncover history and to bring to light forgotten or never-told stories that matter to people is a corner stone of shipwreck exploration.

When we called Anthony Sussino and introduced ourselves, stating we were calling about the YF-415, he responded, "You're calling 70 years too late!" Nevertheless, a generation later, the story has been told, and hopefully this story helps to bring closure to those involved, while reminding us to be grateful for the sacrifices of those who serve our nation.

It is our hope that with the coming 75th anniversary, a larger review of the story will be covered by a national newspaper, truly honoring those that were part of the USS YF-415 rescue.

### **USS YF-415 Memorial Service**

In 2004, a funeral service was conducted on the USS Trenton (LPD-14) to commemorate the sinking of the USS YF-415.

List of USS YF-415 deaths:

William John Bradley  
Adell Braxton  
Joseph Francis Burke  
Raymond Navarro Carr

Truman Sterling Chittick  
George Mitchell Cook  
James N. Cox, Jr.  
Freddie Edwards, Jr.  
Frank Emil Federle  
James Stanley Griffin  
Charles Reed Harris  
Raymond Lester Henry  
Julian Jackson  
Yee Ming Jin  
Mike Peschunka  
Vernon Warren Smith  
James Buster Turner

Patrick Power adds:

"With regard to Ted Kennedy's recognition of the disaster, it was the culmination of a great deal of effort by the son of Joseph Francis Burke, who died in the disaster. Joseph, Jr. was (I believe) not even a year old when the incident happened, so he never knew his father. Joseph, Jr. died a few years ago as well. He was also responsible for the Navy to perform a military funeral service seen here:"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-r7ldVP8Ts&t=419s>

### **Editor's Note:**

My father, James S. Rose, also participated in dumping ordnance in those waters after the war. He was a supervisor at the ammunition depot. His buddy, quality control inspector William Handrahan, said in a past issue of the tragedy and race relations:

"I recall when I was a G.I. during World War II; Black soldiers were usually relegated to low ranking service jobs like food prep, stewards, transportation and ammunition handling. They were the ones who lugged up food and ammo on the front lines during the Battle of the Bulge.

"After the war when I worked at the depot in the 50s, we did have Black sailors, Marines and civilian workers. We got along just fine.

"I also dumped ammo off Boston Harbor. We dumped all kinds of stuff such as bombs, rockets, shells, powder...you name it. We never had any mishaps. There was always an officer on board who closely supervised the operation. Plus, we were well trained."