

The Story of Lieutenant(jg) Francis Weiler's U.S. Naval Academy Class Ring

Lt.(jg) Francis Weiler, USNA Class of 1939, was a crew member of the USS Houston CA-30. He was also my first cousin. As a young boy in 1940, I can remember Fran and his brother Jim, USNA Class of 1931, coming to our house while on leave. The fact that they were in uniform made a strong impression on me.

When the USS Houston went down on March 1, 1942, Fran made it to shore, although he was badly wounded. He was finally put in a hospital on March 15th, but he died of his wounds on March 26, 1942, as a POW. In March of 1943, Fran's Academy class ring worked its way back to his parents in Germantown, PA. I can remember hearing bits and pieces of the ring story for the next few years. Now I feel I am finally able to put it all together.

At a 1998 meeting with a U.S. Naval Academy graduate (Class of 1942), the tale of the ring came up. My wife Pat and I then decided to research this as fully as possible. The following is what we were able to ascertain from talking to individuals involved, reading letters received by Fran's mother (my aunt) and reading through materials that Val Roberts-Poss now has in the Houston Survivors Association – Next Generation collection.

Before Lt.(jg) Weiler died in the hospital in Pandeglang, he expressed concern about his class ring. He gave the ring to a Dutch nurse in the hope that she could contact a U.S. Naval Officer and give it to him. She apparently gave it to a Dutch doctor instead who either willingly or otherwise gave it to a Japanese officer. As stated earlier, Lt.(jg) Weiler died of his wounds on March 26, 1942. His gravesite is unknown.

In early November 1942, Gordon Gayle, USNA Class of 1939, then a Marine Captain, was involved in a firefight on Guadalcanal. Four Marine stretcher bearers paused nearby, and one of the Marines, knowing that Capt. Gayle was a graduate of the Academy, handed him a ring which he said he had taken off of a dead Japanese soldier up on the lines. Capt. Gayle put the ring in his pocket and did not look at it until there came a break in the action. When he did examine it, he was surprised to note that it was his own class and next, that it belonged to Francis Weiler, whom he remember was chairman of the class ring committee. It should be noted here that in about eight months, Lt.(jg) Weiler's ring traveled from Pandeglang, Java, to Guadalcanal, a good 3,000 miles.

Capt. Gayle thought of sending the ring back by mail but then felt his chances of survival were marginal, so he chose to send it back through official channels. In the Command Post with Capt. Gayle was a Capt. Swisher from Artillery, who was about to return to his unit back in Henderson Field. Capt. Gayle gave Capt. Swisher the ring and asked him to get it to the Division Quartermaster, which would be the usual staff agency to send such items back to the United States.

Capt. Swisher never got back to his unit at Henderson Field. The 164th U.S. Army Inf. Regt. was nearby and apparently, they desperately needed some forward observers, so Capt. Swisher was ordered to report to the 164th. An hour later, he was killed by a mortar. I talked to a Col. O'Donnell, USMC, who was with Capt. Swisher when he took a direct hit from a mortar.

I believe that when Capt. Swisher's orders were changed, he gave the ring to a Pvt. Charles Stimmel, who was a radio specialist with HQ CO, of the 164th. On November 23, 1942, Pvt. Stimmel was mortally wounded by shell fragments and died within an hour. His best friend was with him when he was hit, and he asked his friend to get his personal effects back to his family in North Dakota. Among the personal effects was Lt.(jg) Weiler's USNA class ring.

I have a copy of a letter that Pvt. Stimmel's father wrote to Dr. George Weiler on March 1, 1943, a year to the day that the USS Houston went down. In this letter, he explains how he came into possession of Fran's ring. The ring then was returned to George and Florence Weiler at their home in Germantown, PA. I believe it was returned via the USNA because I distinctly remember my father saying a U.S. Marine came to their house with the ring.

In 1961, after George and Florence Weiler had passed on, Rear Admiral James B. Weiler, USN Ret., donated his brother's class ring to the Naval Academy. It is currently on display in a cabinet in the Alumni House.

This search took us only one year because so many people helped us, and I wish to thank them here:

1. Gavin Campbell, survivor of the H.M.S. Perth. Sub-Lieut. Campbell was in the prison hospital at Pandeglang with Lt.(jg) Weiler when he died. I have corresponded with Gavin several times.
2. Vic Campbell of Grade A Productions. Vic introduced us to Otto and Trudy Schwarz, as well as supplying us with important materials.
3. Katherine Fox and Patricia Bozeman, Special Collections Librarians, University of Houston. They sent us copies of many important letters that filled in many gaps.
4. Frank "Ned" Gallagher, USMC Ret. Col. Gallagher was Lt.(jg) Weiler's roommate aboard the USS Houston.
5. Gordon Gayle, USNA Class of 1939, USMC Brig. Gen. Ret. General Gayle, besides playing a key role, constantly encouraged us to pursue this ring adventure to its conclusion.

6. Joe Kollmyer. Joe's uncle, Ens. Ken Kollmyer, was a classmate of my cousin Fran. His grandparents and my aunt and uncle corresponded after the Houston was sunk. Joe gave me copies of treasured letters that his grandparents received from Florence Weiler. He also gave us many pictures, as well as a 50th Anniversary Yearbook of the Class of 1939. This story never could have been written without all the help we received from Joe.

7. Gary LaValley, USNA Archivist. Mr. LaValley supplied us with information that was invaluable on both Weiler brothers.

8. Val Roberts-Poss, USS Houston Survivors Association – Next Generation, for all her help in researched official ship records.

9. Otto and Trudy Schwarz, USS Houston Survivors Association. They supplied us with all the names and addresses we needed to get started and also gave us their unending help and encouragement.

10. Carl Swenson, USNA Class of 1942. It all began at his home when he showed us Fran's picture in the 1939 yearbook.

11. Last but certainly not least, thanks to my brother Jim, his wife Laurie and my wife Pat for their help and continuous support.

Although they were not involved in the story of the ring, I would like to thank and acknowledge two other survivors: Charles "Jack" Fowler, F2C, and John Wisecup, Pvt. USMC. These two men were on the life raft with my cousin Fran, and both remember him for his courage and bravery. John Wisecup wrote a "Tribute to Ensign Weiler," which appeared in a 1990 issue of the Blue Bonnet, the USS Houston newsletter. Many men did not realize that Fran had been promoted to Lt.(jg) just a few days before the ship was sunk. Jack Fowler paid tribute to my cousin in W.G. Winslow's book The Ghost that Died at Sunda Strait. Jack carried Fran to shore from the life raft where they had spent two nights and three days. Both of these survivors are very special to me.

So ends the story of Lt.(jg) Weiler's ring. Fran was always a hero to me as a young boy because he gave his life for his country. During the past year, I have discovered the great respect that many enlisted men (survivors I have talked to) had for this fine sailor. I am very proud of my cousin Lt.(jg) Francis Weiler and feel fortunate to be a blood relative of his. I only wish I could tell him this.

Jack Weiler Mintzer