

The Sullivan Brothers

Fifty-eight years ago, November 15, 1942, the event which led the five Sullivan brothers to become the poster boys for the American war effort in World War II took place. Tragically, they had to give up their lives to rise from the anonymity of an Irish-American family in Waterloo , Iowa to icons of the bravery and sacrifice which today we attribute to the "Greatest Generation."

The Sullivan Brothers (L-R): Joseph, Francis, Albert, Madison, George



The monument in Waterloo , Iowa to the Sullivans has the names of the five brothers-- George, Francis, Joseph, Madison and Albert-- radiating out from a circle enclosing a shamrock. They were small town American boys of their time, with a Cork born paternal grandfather. A childhood incident, when by staying together they helped one another when a row boat sank, probably had something to do with their insisting on serving aboard ship together

when they enlisted in the Navy after the bombing of Pearl Harbor even when the Navy preferred to separate family members. Albert, the youngest (b. 1922), married at seventeen and the father of a son, could have gotten a deferment from military service but chose to defend his country and keep the Sullivan boys together. Like many of their peers, none of the Sullivan males graduated from high school-- Genevieve, their sister, did. They took to boxing after their father bought a pair of boxing gloves and told them about the great Irish boxer of their name, John L. Sullivan. In fact, George, the eldest (b. 1914), was nicknamed "John L." when he won the welterweight championship of his ship the USS *Hovey* on which he served before Pearl Harbor. They worked in factories and George and Frank (b. 1916) joined the Navy together in 1937, being discharged just six months before the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor . And, judging from the Sullivans singing "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" on the only audio tape available of their voices, the Sullivan brothers were proud of their Irish roots.

Less than a month had elapsed from "The Day of Infamy," Japan's attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, before the five Sullivans enlisted in the Navy. On January 2, 1942 they were sent to Great Lakes Naval Training Station, Illinois for boot camp and one month later were transferred to the Brooklyn Navy Yard to be a part of the first crew of the light cruiser, the USS *Juneau*. The *Juneau*, a lightly armored anti-aircraft cruiser, was not built for the kind of action it would see in the South Pacific. Captain Lyman Knut Swensen, commander of the *Juneau* , expressed concern about the vessel's light armor, the inexperience of the crew, and the seven sets of siblings -- besides the Sullivans, there were four Rogers brothers aboard-- who were in the crew. Although it was accepted Navy policy to separate family members, there was no regulation then, nor is there now, requiring siblings to be separated. The Academy Award winning movie *Saving Private Ryan* reminded all of us that multiple casualties in a family is a highly sensitive issue for military officials. In fact, two of the Rogers boys were transferred from the *Juneau* before the tragedy of November 15, 1942.

In August 1942, the Sullivans and the *Juneau* were sent to the South Pacific as part of a major Navy offensive against the Japanese at Guadalcanal . The Americans wanted to seize an air base on Guadalcanal to facilitate its march to Japan . On August 7, 1942, before the arrival of the *Juneau* , the U.S. Marines conducted the first amphibious landing of the war on Guadalcanal , surprising the Japanese, who retreated. The Americans began to expand the air base, now named Henderson Field after the air field destroyed by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor , but the battle immortalized in the film *Guadalcanal Diary* was yet to be fought. The Japanese were determined

to retake the field, as they felt that control of the South Pacific was at stake.

On September 11, 1942, the *Juneau* joined a twenty-one ship task force that was to bring fresh Marines of the First Marine Division to reinforce the American position on Guadalcanal . The landing was fiercely resisted by the Japanese. The *Juneau* helped to suppress Japanese air power and took on board 1900 survivors of the carrier *Wasp* which had been torpedoed by the enemy. If a carrier can be sunk by a torpedo, how can the thinly clad *Juneau* endure a torpedo, Capt. Swensen wondered. More examples of the effectiveness of Japanese torpedos were found in the *Juneau* 's next action at the battle of Santa Cruz . The Japanese sank the carrier *Hornet*, three other war ships, and damaged the carrier *Enterprise* . The *Juneau* was credited with downing eighteen planes and helping to disable two enemy carriers while, supporting the *Hornet* and the *Enterprise* .



The fateful month of November 1942 arrived with Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the "Together" Japanese Naval Commander, well along with his plan to retake Guadalcanal . He planned to land 60,000 troops and supplies to last twenty days and to destroy the air field with naval guns. Yamamoto's counterpart, Admiral William Halsey, well aware of the enemy's build-up, ordered every available ship, damaged or sea worthy, into the area. Of course, the undamaged but thin-skinned *Juneau* was to be a part of the force to repel the Japanese.

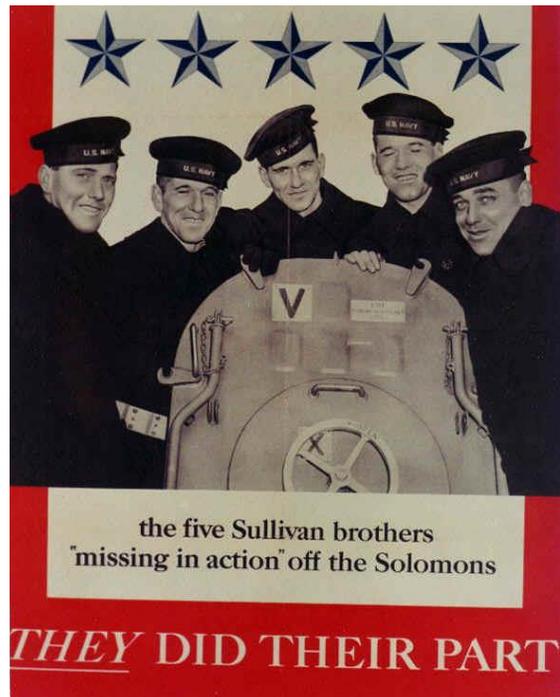
The American armada of thirteen ships was pitted against seventeen Japanese vessels, including battleships, twenty-five torpedo planes and six Zero fighter planes. Only one plane was to escape the American planes and guns. Yamamoto sought an advantage in a surprise night engagement on the night of November 13. A chaotic battle ensued with large navy vessels firing point blank at one another, locating positions by the light of muzzle blasts. Ships fired on their own navy's ships in what one observer called "a deadly ballroom brawl after the lights were turned out." The *Juneau* , small compared with the ships in this battle, escaped surface fire but was blasted by a torpedo which knocked out its power supply. George Sullivan, on duty on deck, sustained a back injury while his brothers, below deck, escaped this explosion unharmed. Ironically, George's seemingly vulnerable position on deck was later to make him a temporary survivor of the *Juneau* 's sinking while his brothers' "safer" positions below deck were to make

the *Juneau* their coffin. The *Juneau* stayed in the battle, exchanging fire with a battleship, but was crippled and defenseless after the fierce battle for Guadalcanal, which lasted only thirty minutes, was over. The Japanese had sunk seven American ships with a loss of five of its own, but Henderson Field remained usable and Guadalcanal was still under the control of the Marines. Admiral Halsey thought that the Battle of Guadalcanal would be the turning point of the war in the Pacific.

The Sullivans and their comrades aboard the *Juneau* had helped to turn the war in the Pacific in America's favor, but their war was soon to be over. As the *Juneau* and five other damaged ships limped toward the American base at Espiritu Santo 200 miles away, on November 15 a Japanese submarine fired two torpedos at the crippled vessels, one striking the *Juneau* with such force that it blew a forty ton, 5-inch gun more than a mile over open water. One hundred of the crew, those on deck, were hurled into the water, George Sullivan, one of them. Frank, Joseph, Madison and Albert Sullivan and about 600 of the crew of the *Juneau* went down with the ship.

The senior officer of the flotilla of injured ships did not mount a search for survivors. The *Juneau*, struck in its munitions section, had broken in half and sunk immediately, so the prospect for survivors was slim. Also complicating the scene was the presence of the killer sub among the remaining and weakened ships. But there were survivors, George Sullivan and about one hundred shipmates. A survivor of the *Juneau*'s sinking reports that he saw George swimming from raft to raft, wiping oil off sailors' faces trying to find his brothers. A rescue effort was finally mounted and ten of the crew of the *Juneau* made it home, but George joined his brothers in death after having helped to turn the tide of the war.

The Sullivan family first heard rumors of the tragedy three months after the fact. Owing to the ongoing struggle in the South Pacific, the Navy was reluctant to reveal battle related information. It was not until August 1943 that the Navy confirmed to the Sullivans the loss of their five sons at sea. The nation mourned and President Roosevelt wrote, "The entire nation shares your sorrow." Still early in a brutal war, America had learned that triumph would come at a great cost.



The American government asked Thomas and Alleta Sullivan, the grieving parents, to tour the country in a recruiting drive. They did, and their sons were, indeed, poster boys for the American war effort.

The loss of American sailors off the coast of Yemen on the USS *Cole* in October 2000 is a reminder of the men and women who put themselves in harm's way to protect others. Sadly, their story will fade shortly from our memories, but the uniqueness of the story of five Sullivan brothers has made it an enduring part of American folklore. When the Sullivans' story is replayed, perhaps we will remember not only the Sullivans but also the anonymous multitudes who gave their lives for all of us.

Further Study: *We Band of Brothers* by Jack Satterfield
Left to Die: The Tragedy of the USS Juneau by Dan Kurzman

(Written by Joseph McCormack, November 2000)

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