

Families find relief in suspected discovery of lost WWII sub

SUBMARINE, From 1B

Sea off the coast of Thailand.

If confirmed, the discovery would resolve decades of unanswered questions about how Thomas Hardegree and the Lagarto's 85 other crew members perished during the final months of WWII.

"It's huge news," said Karen Duvalle of the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in Manitowoc, where about 160 family members are gathering this weekend for a special Lagarto memorial service.

"The families are very shocked," said Duvalle, the museum's events coordinator. "For most of them, it's been pretty much of a mystery."

Activities planned this weekend include a presentation by the diver who discovered the wreckage and a visit from Rear Adm. Jeffrey Cassias, commander of the U.S. Pacific submarine force, based at Pearl Harbor.

Lt. Cmdr. Jeff Davis, spokesman for the submarine force, said Cassias will tell families that the Navy plans to send its own dive team into the South China Sea next month in an attempt to verify whether the wreckage is, in fact, the Lagarto.

In accordance with longstanding practice, the Navy would leave the wreckage undisturbed as a mass burial site.

But Navy officials decided to look for themselves after examining photographs and other evidence supplied by the Lagarto dive team.

"It's very compelling," Davis said. "We have no reason to believe it's not the Lagarto."

Subs produced in Manitowoc

Assembled in Manitowoc at a shipbuilding facility that closed in the 1960s, the Lagarto was one of 28 submarines produced there for WWII. The 300-foot-long vessel was commissioned for military service in October 1944.

In an area near Thailand where U.S. ships worked to disrupt Japanese military supply routes, the Lagarto vanished on May 3, 1945 — just three months before President Truman ordered atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, setting the stage for Japan's surrender.

Lagarto family members received only cryptic notices from the military that their loved ones were missing and presumed dead.

Rae Kinn, 84, of Oconomowoc recalls struggling to remain optimistic that her husband, crew member Harold Todd, would be found alive on a remote island somewhere. She eventually gave up hope and moved on with her life.

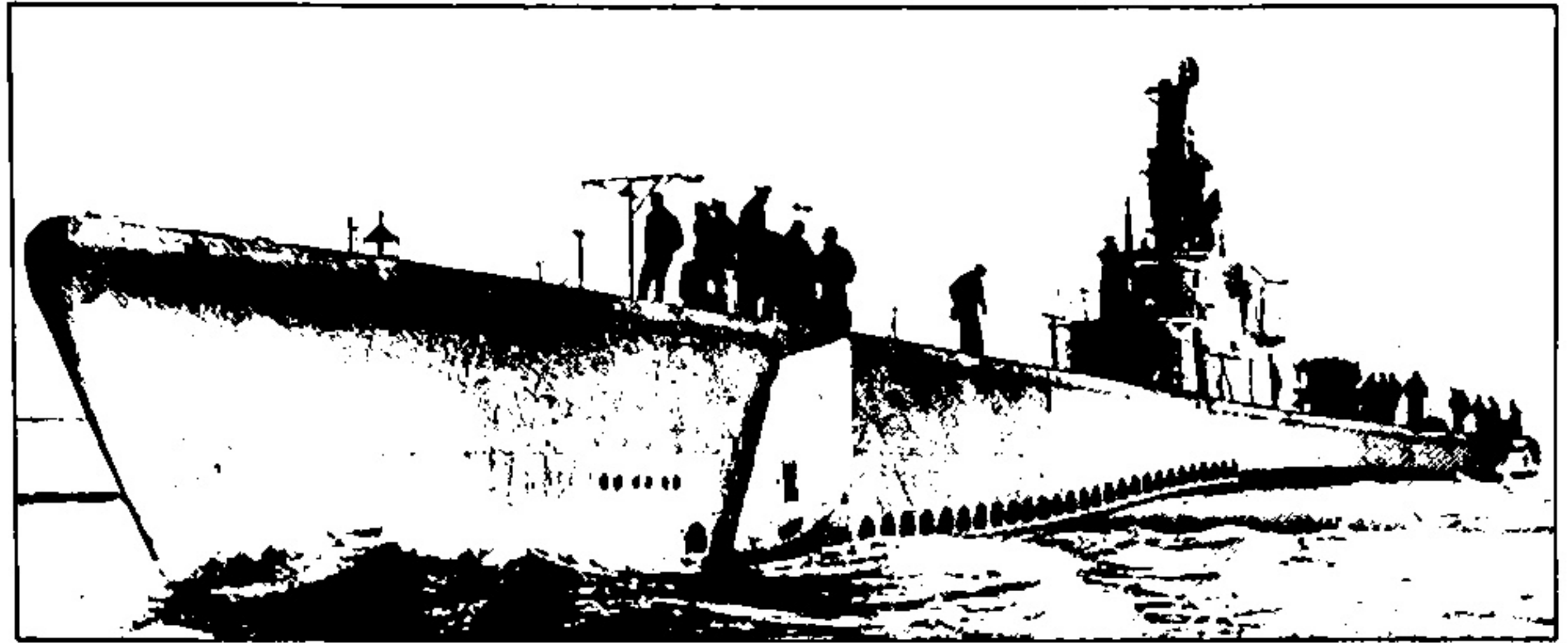


PHOTO COURTESY OF WISCONSIN MARITIME MUSEUM

The USS Lagarto submarine and its 86 crew members vanished in 1945 near Thailand.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RAE KINN

Rae Kinn lost her husband, Harold Todd.

WWII SUBMARINE VESSEL FOUND

Divers claim to have found the USS Lagarto under more than 200 feet of water off the coast of Thailand. The submarine disappeared May 3, 1945, near the end of World War II, with 86 U.S. Navy crew members on board.



RIKA KANAOKA/rkanaoka@journalsentinel.com

She had given birth to the couple's only child, a boy, after the Lagarto shipped out.

Hearing that the ship's wreckage had been located 60 years later filled Kinn with a mix of shock and gratitude.

"It was a comfort that I knew where he was," she said.

Owen Williams, commander of the Wisconsin chapter of the U.S. Submarine Veterans of WWII, said his organization long ago adopted the Lagarto as Wisconsin's official missing submarine.

Annual memorial services seldom attracted anyone with a direct connection to the lost vessel, Williams said.

"It was more make-believe, because it wasn't anybody we knew," he said of the missing crewmen. "Well, now it's totally different."

Since learning that divers in Thailand had reported finding the wreckage, members of the veterans group have been working to contact Lagarto family members and plan this weekend's gathering.

Along the way, another tragedy occurred when a key organizer, Roy Leonhardt, 58, of Eagle, died of natural causes in March.

Williams said Leonhardt was a Vietnam War-era submarine veteran and was the first to contact British diver Jamie Macleod, who operates a private shipwreck search operation in the South Pacific.

Although Macleod's diving team first located the wreckage in May 2005, word of the discovery has spread slowly among family members and others, as this weekend's gathering in Manitowoc approached.

Among those planning to attend is Michael Todd, who was 3 months old when his father, Harold, vanished. Todd will accompany his mother to the memorial.

Todd, 61, a real estate appraiser from Hartland, said the discovery of the Lagarto's final resting place would help him deal with the loss of a father he never knew.

"We always wondered what happened," Todd said. "It means a little closure, I guess, closure that I didn't have."