

# SILENT SERVICE

After 45 years, a sailor's Cold War-era death is finally given proper tribute

By Kara Peterson, Managing Editor, Photography by John Sterling Ruth



Wheeler and his shipmates organized a ceremony at the U.S. Navy Memorial to honor their fallen shipmate.

On Nov. 1, 2009 – just one day shy of the 45th anniversary of this death – Petty Officer Billy Carter Semones was finally given a proper memorial. Semones was 28 when he was lost at sea while serving aboard the submarine USS Henry Clay at the height of the Cold War on Nov. 2, 1964. Because of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union and the secretive nature of submarine missions – and indeed the submarines themselves – Semones' death was not announced publicly, nor did his family receive much information about how he died.

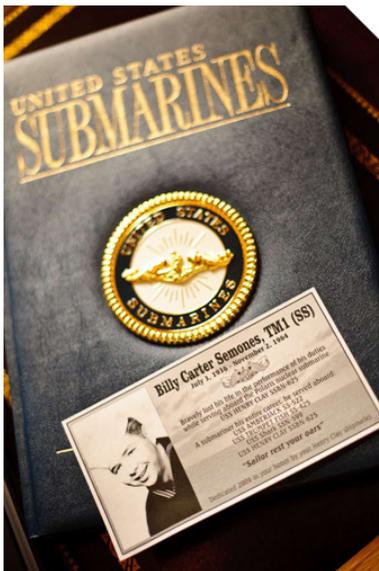
Retired Navy Petty Officer Richard “Andy” Wheeler was a fire control technician aboard Henry Clay when Semones died. Wheeler joined the Navy nuclear program at just 17, after graduation from high school.

Wheeler had a nagging feeling about Semones' death – and the lack of a proper tribute to his service – that was shared among much of the Henry Clay crew, even four decades later. So, along with six other Henry Clay shipmates, Wheeler organized a ceremony at the United States Navy Memorial in Washington, D.C., where Semones' family and his shipmates could finally seek closure.

**Kara Peterson:** Tell me a little bit about your time aboard the Henry Clay. What were your duties?

**Andy Wheeler:** I was assigned to the crew of the Polaris Missile Nuclear Submarine USS Henry Clay (SSBN 625) as it was being built in Newport News, Va. My primary duties included participating in the commissioning, testing and maintenance of the missile fire control equipment. I qualified as a missile control center supervisor. I also completed the arduous process of submarine qualification by learning the 140 systems aboard Henry Clay, which takes between 18 months and two years to complete.

To become qualified in submarines, a submariner must learn the theory, operation and location of every system component and connection. This process ends system by system with an oral exam and walk-through demonstration which must satisfy the examiner. When all systems are learned in this fashion a qualification board is convened and one must answer all questions to the satisfaction of the board. If the board votes “Qualified,” the ship's captain places a dolphin pin on the submariner's uniform and the submariner is now a member of the “Brotherhood of the Pin.” It is a lifetime badge of honor.



**KP:** How many Sailors were on board the Henry Clay? Were you close with your shipmates?

**AW:** There is room for everything aboard a submarine but a mistake. Failure was never an option. There were about 145 men aboard Henry Clay. Our patrols – totally submerged – lasted 60 to 70 days each. Our very lives depended on each other 24/7. We worked as a team and played as a team. Many of my Henry Clay shipmates are on eternal patrol now and several today have been lifelong friends. All of us are still “Brothers of the Phin.” So many of my shipmates – both officer and enlisted – went on to become captains of industry. I am very proud and humbled to stand in the midst of these moral and patriotic men of accomplishment.

**KP:** As Sailors during the Cold War, were you and your shipmates ever concerned for your safety?

**AW:** The Cold War was never cold. The race for space following the launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik [in 1957] also spurred an unprecedented development in submarine building and submarine technology in both the Russian and American navies. In a 20-year period, the Soviet Union built about 110 submarines and we built 100 or so. Cat and mouse games were the norm although concealment was the primary objective of the Polaris missile fleet. Russian trawlers loaded with sophisticated listening and communications gear were always close to our submarine bases. We did our best to avoid Russian contact using intelligence data and, at times, stealth. Billy’s death reminded us that we were not invincible and that we were in a dangerous profession.

**KP:** How did that incident occur?

**AW:** We had a mooring line locker hatch cover come loose on deck and it was banging and interfering with our ability to “see” with our forward SONAR array. And a Russian trawler was hell bent to get close to us and take sound signatures on us for future tracking and identification. We had to surface the submarine and two men suited up to go on deck from the submarine sail to tighten the hatch cover. It was an angry winter sea. Four-story waves. Billy was swept off the sail ladder before he could get to the deck and secure his safety line to the deck track.

**KP:** Was any recognition given on board for Billy?

**AW:** Yes, because we were on a pre-patrol shakedown cruise – they usually last three to four days – we returned to the submarine base at Rota, Spain. A chaplain from the Submarine Tender USS Holland conducted a service aboard the Henry Clay.

**KP:** What information did Billy’s family and the American public receive about Billy’s death?

**AW:** The American public received nothing. Billy’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. George L. Semones, received a personal letter from our captain, which simply informed them that their son was lost at sea while in the performance of his duties. The letter was not processed through the normal system and was hand-typed by the captain and so mailed. Later the family received a letter from the Holland chaplain, the squadron commander, the Commander of Submarines Atlantic Fleet and the Secretary of the Navy. These letters – I have copies of each of them – conveyed condolences without any detail.

My take is that the Navy did not want to do anything which might give or confirm to the Russians the identity of Henry Clay.

**KP:** Why did you decide it was time to properly honor and memorialize Billy?

**AW:** The (SS) adjacent to a submariners rank demonstrates that that person has qualified in submarines and it means Submarine Service. But more commonly it means “Silent Service.” We were not allowed to talk about submarine operations. They were secret, period. And while it may have been militarily correct, appropriate and conducive to the safety of the Henry Clay crew [to keep Billy’s death quiet], there was never real closure for any of us – Billy’s family included. Billy was lost at sea. No body to bury; no parade of colors; no family members to talk to; no one to express grief

with at losing a really great guy and friend. We departed on patrol after the service and the incident was left unspoken. The family never received a complete story of what happened.

While attending a Henry Clay reunion 40 years after we lost Billy I suggested that we honor his service in some manner. I should have picked up the ball then as the Henry Clay had long been decommissioned and scrapped. Time kept marching and my shipmate Bob Smith from Raytown, Mo., telephoned me last Memorial Day and asked me to lead the effort to honor Billy. So I picked up the ball and ran with it. As I located Henry Clay crew members and enlisted their financial help I learned that I was not alone in the need for closure. We – his Henry Clay Brothers – all carried an open wound that needed healing.



**KP:** What was the process like to track down Billy's family?

**AW:** I had an old address from his on-board memorial program and I used a people search on the Internet which listed his father and mother still at the same address in Versailles, Ky. I wrote them a letter not knowing they had both passed. Fortunately, Billy's only sibling, Betty Sue Whittaker, had moved into the homestead after her father died and received the letter I wrote.

Billy's family visited him in Key West, Fla., in 1958 while he was serving aboard the submarine USS Amberjack. Billy introduced his sister to his best friend aboard the Amberjack, Ronald Whittaker. "Whit" and Betty Sue have been married 49 years.

**KP:** Can you tell me a little bit about the memorial? Who attended and what do you think it meant to those in attendance?

**AW:** All six of us that were with Billy when he gave his life for his country participated in the formal ceremony [held Nov. 1, 2009 at the United States Navy Memorial in Washington, D.C.]. About 45 people attended. The ceremony produced many tears and much satisfaction. We truly attained a measure of closure for all. We then gathered at Old Ebbit Grill near the White House for dinner. No one wanted to leave.

**KP:** What does it mean to you to know that – even so many years after his death – Billy has finally received a proper memorial?

**AW:** I hugged his sister and brother-in-law. They shared tears with me and with my Henry Clay brothers. They are now family. They now know what happened and how dangerous it was when we lost Billy. They know he had two families who cared.

A veteran – whether active, discharged, retired or reserve – is someone who at one point in time made out a check payable to the United States of America for an amount up to and including his life. All paid some. Billy paid all.

His plaque on the Commemorative Wall at the United States Navy Memorial and the record of his service is now preserved in perpetuity. We also established a scholarship in his name with the United States Submarine Veterans Inc. charitable trust.

**KP:** Anything else you'd like to add?

**AW:** I was on active duty from 1961 to 1968 while Vietnam was raging. When I left the Navy to work at an engineering firm we did not talk about our military service. No one welcomed us home and said thank you. We were treated badly. It was a long time before I went to the Vietnam Memorial and when I did I wept openly. I don't ever miss an opportunity to thank our veterans today. These young men and women serving our country today are the finest ever and they deserve our best efforts to honor their service.

After discharge from the Navy in 1968, Wheeler joined the Navy Reserve. He also began pursuing a professional engineering career in Silver Spring, Md., and continued his education at Montgomery College and the University of Maryland. Prior to his retirement from the Reserve in 1982, he participated in the conduct of NATO exercises involving submarines and held a top-secret U.S. security clearance. After 30 years at Bechtel Power Corporation, Wheeler retired in 2003 to pursue civic, public service and philanthropic goals. He lives with his wife, Helen, in Mechanicsburg, Pa. They have three daughters and five granddaughters.