

# 1945 December 24-31

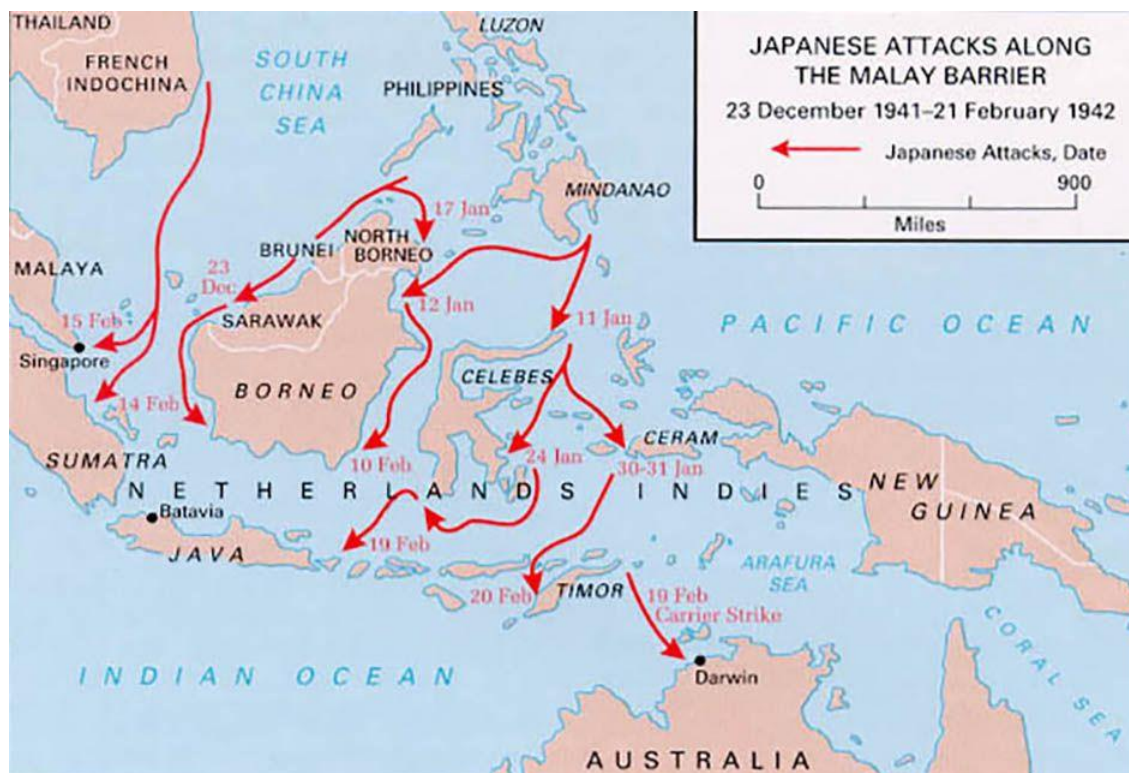
## Missing Forever

As the year 1945 drew to a close, the War Department was tidying up its books. That is a callous way of saying that the government was trying to provide closure for families of servicemen who were still missing in action. Some of them had been missing since the early months of the war.

Two men from La Crosse County, and one who had lived in the county, were declared dead in December 1945 after being listed as missing in action for over a year.

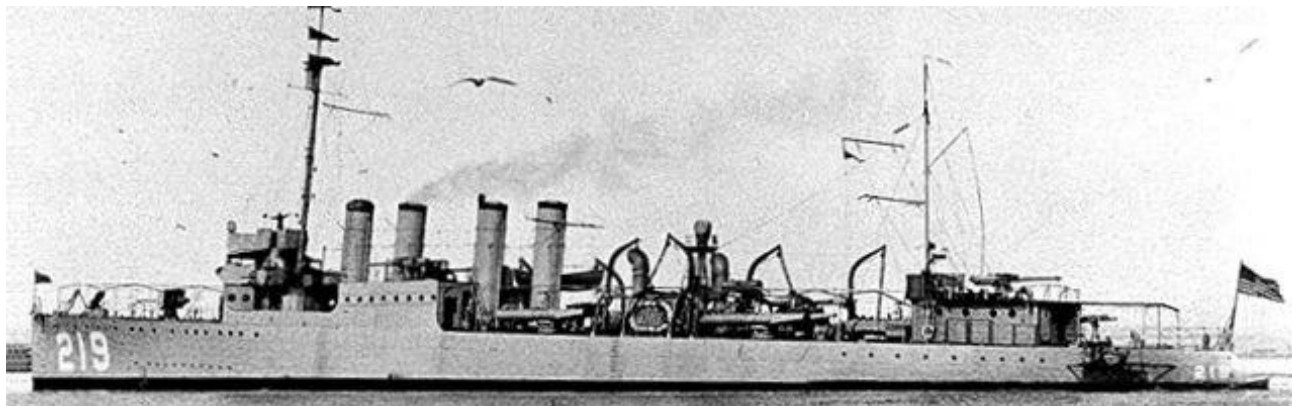
Two of them vanished in the Java Sea on two different ships that were trying to escape from a region of the Far East that was being overrun by strong Japanese invasion forces in early 1942.

In the [Battle of Java Sea](#) on February 27-29, 1942, a combined force of American, British, Dutch, and Australian ships, commanded by a Dutch admiral, consisting of five cruisers and ten destroyers, engaged a Japanese naval task force accompanying almost 100 transports heading toward Java. In the [Makassar Strait](#), the Allied force lost eleven of their fifteen ships: five cruisers, including the American [U.S.S. Houston](#) and six destroyers (four British, one American, and one Dutch) while sinking only two Japanese transport ships. Within a week of this naval victory, the Japanese had conquered Java and Sumatra.<sup>1</sup>



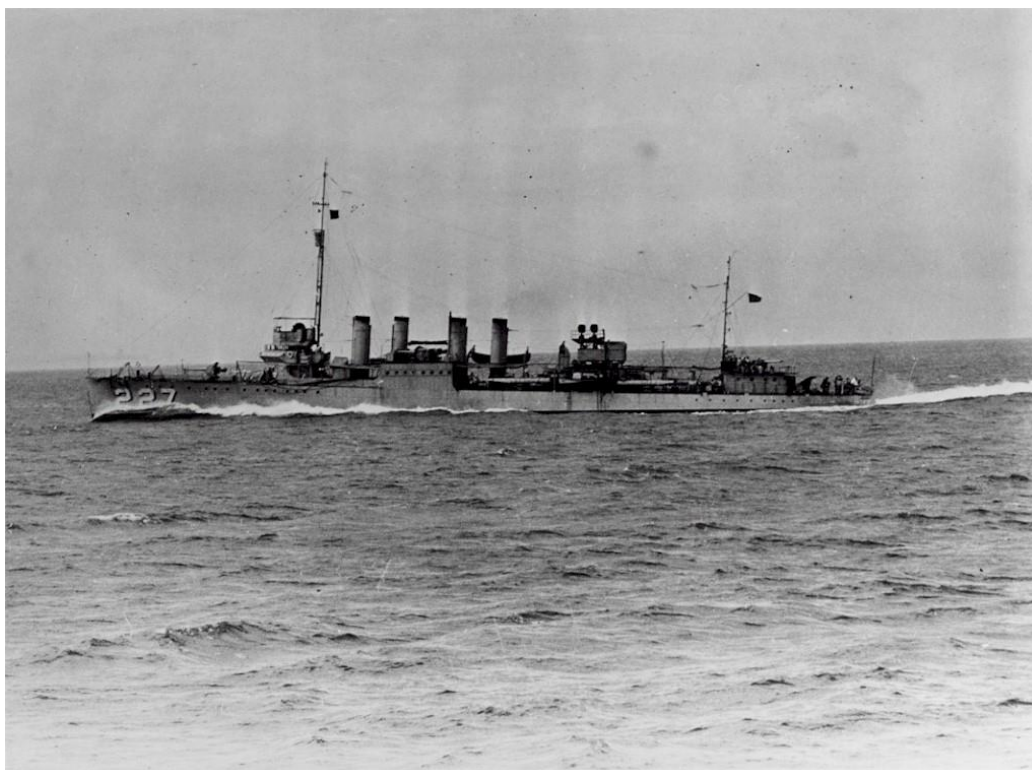
([Thoughtco.com](http://Thoughtco.com))

Because it was evident that the Allied naval forces in the area were no match for the Japanese at this point in the war, the remaining ships were ordered on March 1, 1942, to sail to Australia to regroup.<sup>2</sup> Two of those ships were the destroyers [U.S.S. Pillsbury](#) and [U.S.S. Edsall](#). Neither ship made it to Australia, and neither ship was ever heard from again.



*U.S.S. Edsall, DD219*

([Destroyer History Foundation](#))



*U.S.S. Pillsbury, DD227, in 1930*

([NavSource Naval History](#))

Both were old "fourpiper," flush-deck destroyers built in the last years of World War I and shortly after. Fifty of these ships were part of the Lend-Lease program with Great Britain and Canada that exchanged ships for bases overseas.<sup>3</sup> Another thirteen of them constituted [Destroyer Squadron 29](#) in the Far East. The commander of the United States Asiatic Fleet, [Admiral Thomas C. Hart](#), said the "fourpiper" destroyers were "old enough to vote." He characterized them as "not only inadequately armed for the warfare of the day but sadly in need of overhaul."<sup>4</sup>

Paul Raymond Gund, son of Barbara Gund of La Crosse, graduated from Aquinas High School. He volunteered for the Navy on October 14, 1940, and had his basic training at Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Chicago. He was a crewman on the *Pillsbury*.<sup>5</sup>

## **Believe Gund Died At Bali**

### **Navy Sends Letter About Local Sailor**

*(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 December 10, page 1)*

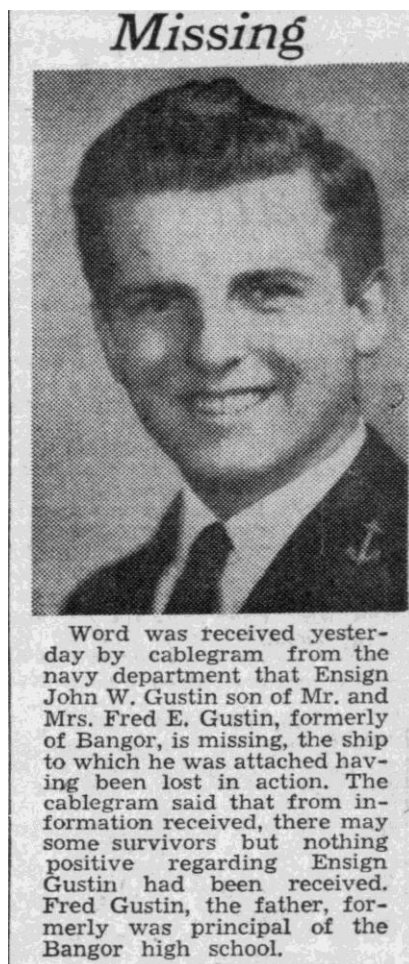


Paul Raymond Gund

(Ancestry.com)

Gund was survived by his mother, four sisters, and two brothers.<sup>6</sup> Paul Gund was one of 32 La Crosse Aquinas graduates killed in World War II.<sup>7</sup> The Gund family lived at 1925 Loomis Street. His brothers, twins James and Joseph, enlisted in the Navy in June 1943 at the age of 17.<sup>8</sup> The twins had been sophomores in high school when their father died, and they had been juniors in high when their brother went missing. Their mother, who had already lost her husband and a son, pleaded with her twin sons to never serve on the same ship. They did not because one of them was sent to the Pacific while the other one was serving in the Atlantic.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the crew of the *U.S.S. Edsall* was Ensign John Gustin, formerly of Bangor.



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1942 March 22, page 7)

John Gustin was born in Pine Grove, Wisconsin, on April 7, 1917. His father, Fred E. Gustin, was a high school principal. When he was three years old, his family moved to Hancock, Wisconsin. In about 1924, Fred Gustin became the principal at Bangor High School, where they lived for eleven years before Fred Gustin took a similar position in Mosinee.<sup>10</sup> John Gustin earned Eagle Scout status when he was living in Bangor.<sup>11</sup>

After graduating from Bangor High School, He attended La Crosse State Teacher's College for one year, then the University of Wisconsin for another year. He was a senior at [Antioch College](#) in Yellow Springs,



Ohio, majoring in chemical engineering, when he enlisted in the Navy in August 1940. After reserve officers' training in New York City, Gustin was commissioned as an ensign in February 1941. He left for the Pacific in March 1941 and served on the *Edsall*. His brother, James, a graduate of the [United States Naval Academy](#), was in the same squadron, and the brothers saw each other frequently.

John's ship was stationed in the Philippines before sailing to the Dutch East Indies. The *Edsall* picked up survivors from the [U.S.S. Langley](#), sunk near Java on February 27, 1942. After transferring those survivors to another ship, the *Edsall* proceeded toward Java and was never heard from after that.<sup>12</sup>

Gustin was also declared dead in late December 1945.<sup>13</sup>

To prevent the escape of Allied ships to Australia, a Japanese force of four battleships, five cruisers, an aircraft carrier, and numerous destroyers patrolled the seas south of Java. The *Edsall* ran into two Japanese battleships and was sunk on March 1, 1942.<sup>14</sup> This was a mismatch akin to throwing a teenage boy into a boxing ring with two professional heavyweight boxers in a fight to the death. The *Edsall* never had a chance. Three Japanese cruisers and two destroyers ganged up on the *Pillsbury* and the gunboat [U.S.S. Asheville](#) one night in another one-sided fight and sank them both. The Japanese withdrew without bothering to search for survivors. If there were any Americans in the water after the battles, they succumbed in the days following.<sup>15</sup> The Japanese did pick up one survivor out of the approximately 170 men from the *Asheville*, but he died in a POW camp in 1945.<sup>16</sup> There were no survivors out of the approximately 230 men on the *Edsall* and *Pillsbury*.<sup>17</sup>



The last moments of the *U.S.S. Edsall*, recorded by a Japanese sailor

([NavSource Naval History](#))

The third La Crosse County serviceman declared dead in December 1945 was Army Pfc. Leonard Nieland.

## Pfc. Nieland Declared Dead

Mr. and Mrs. Frank F. Nieland, 1212 Kane street, have received word from the war department that their son, Pfc. Leonard F. Nieland, missing in action since Dec. 14, 1944, has been declared dead.

Nieland entered service April 7, 1943. He trained at Ft. Sheridan, Ill., Camp McCoy, Wis., Camp Wolters, Tex., Camp Shelby, Miss., and Ft. Meade, Md.



(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 December 26, page 1)

Leonard Nieland graduated from Logan High School in February 1943. After completion of his training in the United States, he was sent to Italy in July 1944. When he was transferred to France, Nieland was in the [36th Division](#) of the [7th Army](#). His company was in defensive positions near [Mittelwihr, France](#), on December 13 when his unit was cut off from the rest of his battalion. He was never heard from again.<sup>18</sup>

These are just three cases out of the approximately 79,000 Americans "unaccounted for" at the end of World War II. That included those buried as unknowns, buried at sea, lost at sea, and missing in action. Even after an intensive search by about 13,000 military personnel from 1945 to 1951, and hundreds of discoveries after that, there are still more than 72,000 [Americans unaccounted for from World War II](#).<sup>19</sup>

That number may be surprising to some, but consider the scope and length of the war. Combine that with all the places and ways a person could die. Oceans and seas swallowed up ships without leaving a trace; airplanes crashed into bodies of water and impenetrable places on land; modern weaponry devoured human flesh and bone and spit it out in tiny chunks that made identification impossible in the days before DNA testing. "Blown to bits" is not just an expression.

At the end of the war, there were about 22,000 missing Americans in the Western European theater alone. Almost half of those were crewmen on aircraft that never returned from their missions.<sup>20</sup>

Remains of fighting men and machines have occasionally turned up in the decades since the end of World War II .

In one widely-publicized case, a B-24 Liberator bomber missing for 16 years was discovered in North Africa by an oil exploration crew. The [\*Lady Be Good\*](#) had been on its first mission to bomb Italy on April 4, 1943. The mission had to be aborted because of mechanical failures in the squadron and weather. On the return trip, the pilot and navigator overshot their base at Benghazi, Libya, and continued flying into the desert. With fuel running out, the crew bailed out, and the aircraft made an unassisted crash landing with nobody on board. The men tried to walk out of the desert, but exhaustion, heat, and lack of water killed them one by one. The plane was discovered remarkably intact in November 1958. In February 1960, searchers found the remains of eight of the nine crewmen and a diary that told the story.<sup>21</sup>

There was a somewhat similar case in 1960 with a local connection.



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1960 July 30, page 1)

Twenty-seven-year-old Lt. Fish was on one of two bombers flying a training mission when they disappeared during a storm on December 6, 1943. Ellis Fish was born in Soldiers Grove on July 12, 1916. The family moved to La Crosse and lived at 2421 Wood Street. Ellis Fish was an assistant manager at the A & P store at 4th and Jay streets in La Crosse. He joined the Army Air Force in 1942.<sup>22</sup> The wreckage of his plane was found in [Kings Canyon National Park](#) near Fresno, California. After crashing into a 12,500-foot mountain, the plane's debris had washed into a lake.<sup>23</sup> At the time, the remains of only one member of the plane's crew could be identified. The other remains were scattered and commingled in the lake, so they were buried in a common grave, with the customary joint headstone, in Arlington National Cemetery.<sup>24</sup>



Arlington National Cemetery, photo by John Evans<sup>25</sup>

([Findagrave.com](http://Findagrave.com))

The crash site of an Army Air Force P-47 Thunderbolt was discovered in the jungle of New Guinea in 1996. The pilot was taking an Army WAC for a ride when it went down on May 12, 1945.<sup>26</sup>

The remains of seven crewmen and their Navy Ventura bomber were found in 2000 on a mountain in far eastern Russia. Based in the Aleutian Islands, the plane had flown into a snowstorm on [March 25, 1944](#), on a bombing mission against northern Japan.<sup>27</sup>

In 2012, the St. Lawrence River yielded the remains of a U.S. Army [PBY-5A Catalina](#) amphibious plane that had gone down in the river, with five of its nine crewmen, on November 2, 1942.<sup>28</sup>

The work goes on as long as remains are found and can possibly be identified.

The family of George Naegle of La Crosse knew he died on the battleship [U.S.S. Oklahoma](#) in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was not until 2018 that his remains were positively identified by DNA analysis after being exhumed from the [National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific](#). Naegle, a 1938 graduate of La Crosse Central High School, was just 22 years old when he died.<sup>29</sup> The following year, his remains were returned to La Crosse for burial.<sup>30</sup> His funeral was on Saturday, May 18, 2019, at the



Cathedral of St. Joseph the Workman, and entombment was at St. Joseph Mausoleum in the Catholic Cemetery on Losey Boulevard in La Crosse.<sup>31</sup>



George Naegle in 1940

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 2019 March 31, page A1)

The Fish and Naegle families were afforded the closure that was not possible for the Gund and Gustin families.

World War II was one of humanity's greatest failures, but defeating the forces of militarist imperialism and fascist genocide was also one of humanity's greatest triumphs. The material and human expenditure of that triumph was staggering and horrific. Jubilation at the end of the war was followed by relief that the killing was over, and then it was tempered by the somber realization that so many people who had made the victory ultimately possible were no longer alive to celebrate it.

When the war ended, T5 Donald H. Gautsch of La Crosse wrote, "As I sit here I am on the verge of tears when I realize what this day has cost us---not in terms of money or energy, but the lives of some of my dearest friends; the pain, suffering, lonesomeness, boredom, heartaches and sacrifices that we all made."<sup>32</sup>

The suffering did not end when the guns fell silent because there were so many bodies and souls, as well as families, that would never be whole again. They could never forget the pieces that were missing forever.

Jeff Rand  
 Adult Services Librarian  
 La Crosse Public Library  
[jrand@lacrosselibrary.org](mailto:jrand@lacrosselibrary.org)

Written: 2020 December 26

Revised: 2021 January 5

## Sources & Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Louis Snyder, *Louis Snyder's Historical Guide to World War II* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 354.
- <sup>2</sup> "Believe Gund Died At Bali," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 December 10, page 1.
- <sup>3</sup> "Wickes and Clemson Classes," *Destroyer History Foundation*, accessed 2020 December 26, <https://destroyerhistory.org/flushdeck/wickesclass/>.
- <sup>4</sup> "Destroyer Squadron 29," *Destroyer History Foundation*, accessed 2020 December 26, <http://destroyerhistory.org/flushdeck/desron29/>.
- <sup>5</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 10.
- <sup>6</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 10.
- <sup>7</sup> "Dedicate New Aquinas Organ To Graduates Killed In War," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1948 November 17, page 18.
- <sup>8</sup> "Seven Young Men Enlisted By Navy," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 June 18, page 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Alberta Gund, telephone conversation with the author, 2021 January 4. One of the twin Gund brothers would become her husband. She said the twins were confused for each other several times when they were in the Navy.
- <sup>10</sup> "Long Missing, Naval Officer Declared Dead," *La Crosse County Record*, Onalaska, Wisconsin, 1945 December 27, page 8.
- <sup>11</sup> "Bangor," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1933 February 2, page 2.
- <sup>12</sup> *La Crosse County Record*, 1945 December 27.
- <sup>13</sup> *La Crosse County Record*, 1945 December 27.
- <sup>14</sup> "USS Edsall," *Destroyer History Foundation*, accessed 2020 December 26, <https://destroyerhistory.org/flushdeck/ussedsall/>.
- <sup>15</sup> "USS Pillsbury," *Destroyer History Foundation*, accessed 2020 December 26, <https://destroyerhistory.org/flushdeck/usspillsbury/>.
- <sup>16</sup> "Asheville (PG 21)," *NavSource Naval History*, accessed 2020 December 26, <http://www.navsource.org/archives/12/09021.htm>.
- <sup>17</sup> "USS Edsall (DD-219)," *NavSource Naval History*, accessed 2020 December 26, <http://www.navsource.org/archives/05/219.htm>. "Pillsbury I (DD-227)," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, accessed 2020 December 26, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/p/pillsbury-i.html>.
- <sup>18</sup> "Pfc. Nieland Declared Dead," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 December 26, page 1. Nieland's name is not on the [official list of unaccounted for](#), so his remains must have been recovered and identified some time after the war.
- <sup>19</sup> "World War II," Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, accessed 2020 December 26, <https://www.dpaa.mil/Our-Missing/World-War-II/#:~:text=At%20the%20end%20of%20the,remain%20unaccounted%20for%20from%20WWII.>
- <sup>20</sup> "Trace Bodies Of Unknown Yank Soldiers," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 November 9, page 2.
- <sup>21</sup> Steve Birdsall, *Log of the Liberators: An Illustrated History of the B-24* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1973), 1-5.
- <sup>22</sup> "Plane Missing Since 1943 Found In Lake," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1960 July 30.
- <sup>23</sup> "World War II Plane Found," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1960 August 1, page 1.
- <sup>24</sup> "Airman To Be Buried In Arlington," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1960 September 7, page 25.

---

<sup>25</sup> The gravestone shows Fish from Minnesota because his mother was living in Minneapolis in 1960. (*La Crosse Tribune*, 1960 July 30)

<sup>26</sup> "Papua New Guinean villagers find remains of two WW II MIAs," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1997 August 9, page 13.

<sup>27</sup> "U.S. WWII bomber found by team in Russia," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2000 August 12, page 3.

<sup>28</sup> "Apparent remains of WWII airmen recovered," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2012 July 13, page A2.

<sup>29</sup> Steve Cahalan, "La Crosse sailor's remains are finally coming home," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2018 September 14, page A1.

<sup>30</sup> Steve Cahalan, "At long last, a proper burial," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2019 March 31, page A1.

<sup>31</sup> Steve Cahalan, "Coming home at last," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2019 May 15, page A1. See also: Steve Cahalan, "Local sailor finally home," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2019 May 19, page A1.

<sup>32</sup> "Serious Mood of Realization Among Troops Over Armistice," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 September 11, page 5.