

## Finding Joe Finch

One warm summer afternoon in 1941, eighty years ago, my parents took me out on a lake in a canoe, and I fell out. A young man paddling toward us with his fiancée instantly jumped into the water, even before my father could react, and he saved me. His name was Joe Finch. He was an officer in the U.S. Navy, home on furlough just before being shipped overseas. I was three years old and have no recollection of any of this.

Twelve years later, in June 1953, my buddies and I celebrated our graduation from Hanley Junior High by riding our bicycles to St. Louis's Forest Park and canoeing on that same lake. When I shared this adventure with my dad the next day he told me, for the first time, the startling story of Joe Finch rescuing me, and how he and Mom then became friendly with Joe's parents who lived in University City, the same St. Louis suburb where we lived. Dad then added that eighteen months after Joe rescued me, my folks learned from Joe's parents that their son was killed when his ship, the *USS Laffey*, was sunk by the Japanese during the Naval Battle for Guadalcanal, in November 1942.

Only three months after I learned of Joe rescuing me, I began my sophomore year at University City Senior High School (UCHS) where I soon first saw the plaque listing the names of all 28 of those UCHS boys who were killed in WW II. Unexpectedly seeing Joe Finch's name, I felt a burst of mixed feelings of veneration, gratitude and pride in my association with him. The plaque on the wall, immediately next to the entry to the school auditorium, was in plain sight in the front hallway of the school. I walked past that plaque almost every day during my three years at UCHS, and I often paused for a moment to look at Joe's name. Now, in retrospect, I see that I hero-worshiped his memory.

For many years I hazily wished to know more about Joe, but it took sixty years, until I retired, before I began my search for Joe Finch in earnest. My search was inspired, of course, because he saved me from drowning, but also because, in 1937, he graduated from my high school, University City Senior High School. I graduated in 1956.

After my initial inquiry, and repeated efforts, to the Department of the Navy had gone unanswered, my Senator, The Honorable James Inhofe, secured a reply from the Navy indicating that Joe Finch's military personnel record was in the custody of the National Archives and

Records Administration--- right in my hometown, St. Louis.

I read in Joe's military file the baleful correspondence between Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, and Joe's father. After Joe's death, Secretary Knox wrote a personal letter to Joe's parents: "It is hoped that you might find comfort in the thought that he gave his life for his country, upholding the highest traditions of the Navy, while participating in the historic victory of the Solomon Islands." I was moved by the contents of Knox's letter; but it was chiefly the soulful reply by Mr. Finch in his sweeping and beauteous calligraphic handwriting that brought the exchange between the two men to life. Mr. Finch concluded by writing about his son, "He was a fine boy."

From UCHS I received the page from the 1937 yearbook with Joe's photo. He was a good-looking young man in coat and tie, with wavy dark hair and a smile that looked as if he knew an inside joke. I read that Joe was the 1937 Missouri state champion in the 120 yard high hurdles, and his fellow-athletes elected Joe president of the UCHS lettermen's club.

Four years later, Joe graduated with an engineering degree from Northwestern University in 1941. From Scott Hammer, Associate

Director of Athletics Communications at Northwestern, I learned that Joe's teammates elected him captain of the track team, and he placed third in the Big Ten high hurdles race in 1941. He was also selected as the outstanding cadet in his Naval ROTC class. Joe graduated in June, six months before Pearl Harbor, and he received his commission as an ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserves. He must have been home on furlough when he saved me from drowning, just before he shipped out on the *Laffey*.

I found on the internet that in August, 1943, a new destroyer was first launched at Orange, Texas. This ship honored the memory and sacrifice of Joseph Warren Finch, Jr. when named, *USS Finch DE-328*.

I was especially eager to learn *why* a ship was named for Joe. Many junior officers were killed in battle; what heroic action did Joe perform to merit that honor? My internet searches turned up nothing until I found a document titled, "USN Ship Naming," on the website of the "Naval History & Heritage Command Home." On this website I read the following:

*On 3 March, 1819 an act of Congress finally placed the responsibility for assigning names to the Navy's ships in the hands of the Secretary of the Navy, a prerogative which he still exercises. ...The secretary can rely on*

*many sources to help him reach his decision. ...the ship's sponsor--the person who will christen the ship--is also selected by the Secretary. In the case of ships named for individuals, an effort is made to identify the eldest living direct female descendent of that individual to perform the role of ship's sponsor. ...From the 1880s on, cruisers were named for cities while destroyers...came to be named for American naval leaders and heroes, as today's destroyers are still named.*

This document explained how a dear one was chosen to sponsor the ship, but failed to answer my question, *why* this ship was named for Joe.

In May, 2015 my wife, Sandy, and I visited our son Bill and his family in Rockville, Maryland. On May 8, the 70th anniversary of V-E Day, Bill and I took the Metro into Washington on this warm and sunny afternoon to join thousands of people on the National Mall to observe the celebration of the anniversary of Germany's surrender, ending WW II in Europe. We all stood and watched many vintage WW II aircraft fly over the Mall.

We arrived early, so before walking the short distance to the Mall, we visited the nearby Navy Memorial and Museum on Pennsylvania Ave. where I spoke to a museum guide about my interest in Joe Finch and finding more about him. The young man advised Bill and me to visit the historic Washington Navy Yard, on M Street, adjacent to the Potomac River. From the Mall we took a taxi to the Navy Yard, and

there a helpful young woman in uniform pointed our way to the building which housed the Naval History and Heritage Command.

We entered the library and from behind a counter at the center of the work area we were greeted by Glenn Helm, the library director. He looked about sixty, of medium height, mildly overweight, with thinning white hair and a thin white mustache. Glenn wore a plain white dress shirt, without a tie. Shelves and counters piled high with books surrounded him and Mary, his young assistant who sat at a desk behind the counter.

I introduced Bill and myself and briefly told Glenn about Joe Finch. Immediately, Glenn was enthusiastic and I noticed that no sooner than I mentioned Joe's name, Mary typed his name and the *Laffey* into the computer, and while she searched for a specific book for me, Glenn eagerly responded to my questions about himself.

The reader may wonder if the following narrative of my encounter with Glenn is necessary to the story about Joe, but remember, the title of this story is *Finding Joe Finch*. Emphasizing the importance of the dedicated archivists and historians crucial to my search, and grasping what drives them, are essential to understand how I was able to "find"

Joe Finch.

Glenn studied history at the University of Arizona, then earned his master's degree in library science at Arizona State. His Master's thesis examined the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam. He had visited Vietnam, and Glenn proudly told me how, many years later, he was called to give a briefing about the Tet Offensive at the CIA.

Glenn had worked in the Naval History and Heritage Command Center for 24 years. Throughout our conversation it was clear that he enjoyed his job, and when I asked him what he found so appealing about it, Glenn replied how he felt proud of his vital work for our country.

Later, when I asked my son what he thought of Glenn, Bill expressed his observation that some might think him "eccentric." I responded, "Hey, I was really interested in what Glenn had to say, so I must be eccentric in the same way." Bill added that Glenn was very enthusiastic, and Bill also sensed that Glenn appreciated that he had a very willing audience in me, and that made me wonder how many people come into what seemed to be an out-of-the-way library and, especially, how many express an interest in Glenn himself?

After a few minutes, Mary fetched a book, *The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, night action, 13 November 1942*, authored by James W.

Grace, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland. She copied the few pages describing the sinking of the *Laffey*, and also the brief comments on Lieut. Finch's death; Joe's death was reported on page 102:

*During the night of Friday, November 13, 1942, The Laffey found itself in the crossfire of three Japanese warships which trained a searchlight on her and the Laffey took multiple direct hits. One five-inch shell exploded in the Laffey's chart room and plunged the compartment into darkness. Ens. Pat McGann and Ens. Joe Finch were flattened. Getting to his feet, McGann turned on his flashlight and saw that Finch had been directly in line with the hit....*

Joe was killed instantly. Mercifully, he never knew what hit him, and he did not linger and suffer. Now, I wonder if Joe's parents ever learned of this.

Finally, Glenn gave us directions to Building #200, where he thought I might find more information about the naming of the *Finch*.

Upon entering Building #200 an enlisted man directed us to the office of Joe Gordon, a civilian archivist, about fifty. Joe left us for a couple minutes, then quickly returned with two large cardboard boxes which contained many manila folders, filed alphabetically by ship. All the folders in these boxes referred to information about the sponsors and christening of ships, and I was overjoyed at what I found. Joe Gordon allowed me to review and copy the letters and documents



related to naming the *Finch*.

We've become so dependant on the Internet that some folks forget that many important and revealing historical documents are stored in the basements and closets of churches, filed away in federal and state office buildings, private attics--- and in this case, cardboard boxes in the Washington Navy Yard. These documents have never been scanned. I wonder if anyone ever before requested the paper trail of Joe Finch's military service and all the correspondence related to his memory being honored by the naming of *USS Finch DE-328*.

Here is a summary of the four letters and memoranda I copied from the "Finch Folder."

1. The July 9, 1943 memorandum from the Chief of Naval Personnel to the supervisor of shipbuilding in Orange, Texas regarding Joe's mother, Mrs. Ida Finch, invited to sponsor the *Finch* at the launching on August 28.
2. The handwritten July 19 letter from Joe's father, Joseph W. Finch Sr., informing Mr. James Forrestal, Acting Secretary of the Navy, that Mrs. Finch "prefers that Miss Grace Cushing be granted the honor of sponsor." Grace was Joe's fiancée.

3. The July 27 letter from Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy, to Miss Cushing, expressing his "...great pleasure to designate you as sponsor for the vessel named in honor of the late Lieutenant (jg) Finch."

4. The fourth letter, which stirred an intense feeling of pathos within me, was handwritten on Grace Cushing's pale blue personal stationary to Secretary Knox, dated August 5. Here, Grace expressed her pride to sponsor the vessel named for "Lieutenant (jg) Finch," and she thanked the Navy "for the privilege." Then she signed the letter, "Yours faithfully, Grace E. Cushing."

*Yours faithfully*---eighty years later, I feel her sorrow.

Still, none of these documents described *why* Joe Finch deserved this honor. Finally, Joe Gordon, calling on his personal experience, explained to me that often he cannot find a written record of why some ships are named for a specific individual.

Later that day I reflected that Glenn Helm, Joe Gordon, and all these historians and archivists love their work and find much satisfaction in the research and their knowledge about United States Navy history. For them, their service is not about money or power or recognition. The

active duty men and women we encountered are proud of their service to our country and so are the archivists and historians. They enjoyed talking about these historic events and sharing their knowledge.

These men and women are the keepers of the flame. They are the stewards of our past and illumine our path as Americans.

And I have a sense of satisfaction that the heroic service of Joe Finch's brief life can be representative of all the courageous young American warriors lost in the dim mist of history. Joe saved me from drowning. Now, eighty years later, I can honor him by bringing his story to life.