

The Death and Afterlife of Alexander Biggs Keegan by Jack H. Schick

On May 23, 1939, the U.S. Navy's newest "pigboat" (submarine), the *Squalus* (SS-192), partially flooded and sank to the bottom in 240 feet of water off the coast of New Hampshire. At the time, twenty-three-year-old Seaman First Class Alexander Biggs Keegan of Quakertown was among 56 crewmen and three civilians onboard. Over the next 39 hours, using new and untested rescue equipment, 33 survivors were brought to the surface alive. The eyes of the militarized world were on the *Squalus* and the efforts to save her crew. It is still called the "greatest submarine rescue in history". Unfortunately, Alex Keegan did not survive. His body was eventually recovered and he is interred in St. Isadore's Cemetery in Quakertown.

The *Squalus*'s sinking and the ensuing rescue attempt was world-wide news, followed hour by hour on radio. The nation's hearts and minds were focused on the trapped men, especially in crewmembers' hometowns, like Quakertown. Up to that time, twenty feet was greatest depth from which crewmen had been rescued from a sunken submarine. It was assumed that all those aboard were doomed to a frigid, suffocating death.

However, the Navy had been inspired to develop new rescue equipment and techniques by the sinking of S-51 (SS-162) in 1925, and S-4 (SS-109) in 1927, when, during the second disaster, rescuers could do nothing as crewmen tapped out code for long hours before all fell silent. This time there was a chance. Lt. Commander 'Swede' Momsen, inventor of the oxygen saving re-breather masks now carried on all subs, was put in charge of the all-out rescue effort.

The sunken *Squalus*'s exact location was uncertain due to garbled 'last location' coordinates but she was soon found and communicated with by her sister sub, *Sculpin*. *Falcon*, a converted mine-sweeper, now submarine rescue ship, was on site within 24 hours. An improved but untested diving bell, the Submarine Rescue Chamber invented by Lt. Commander Alan McCann, was employed. The SRC was lowered and attached to the *Squalus*'s escape hatch by divers. Survivors were brought to the surface seven at a time. Four Medals of Honor were awarded to the rescue team.

On that voyage, the *Squalus*'s skipper, Lt. Oliver Naquin, was determined to improve his ship's performance in an emergency battle-dive to periscope depth (50ft), test. He'd missed the one-minute target by five seconds on the previous attempt. At 8:30am, Naquin ordered the dive. All control panel lights showed green but, when the sub reached the prescribed depth (in 61 seconds), a frantic message came from the engine room. It was flooding. [Investigations found that the main air intake valve failed or had remained open]. A rapid securing of bulkheads saved only the control room and forward torpedo room. Power was lost and they sank, stern first.

There are two versions of Alex Keegan's death. The Navy's official report said Keegan stayed at his post and warned others. He consequently was sealed off and drowned. However, in his book *The Terrible Hours*, [a study of the *Squalus* incident] Peter Maas said Keegan and Roland Blanchard were on mess duty helping assistant cook Will Isaacs prepare meatballs for the noon spaghetti meal. Cooking put on hold during the dive, Keegan left to visit the crew's toilet across the passageway from the galley and was never seen again. Blanchard and Isaacs survived.

Perhaps no one but his family mourned Alex Keegan's death more than did my aunt, Joan Elizabeth Hinkel. Aunt Joanie was born dangerously premature in 1927. In the absence of an incubator, she was wrapped in cotton, laid in a roasting pan, and placed in the kitchen oven on Warm. Joanie survived, but she was moderately retarded. She was twelve years old when the *Squalus* went down.

The Keegans were neighbors and Joanie remembered Alex sitting on his front porch. He always said 'hello' and was kind to her when many others were not. She was engrossed in the media frenzy surrounding the sinking and rescue. She saved newspaper clippings and photographs about the *Squalus* and Alex Keegan. Her fascination grew into a fantasy relationship with him. Joanie's parents (Ellen Thatcher and Tobias Hinkel), thought the 'entering puberty' retarded girl's fixation on Keegan was unhealthy. They confiscated her scrapbook and insisted that she stop talking about him.

Joanie lived out her life with her parents, then my mother (her sister), then with me and my family. After breaking her hip, she retired to a UCC Church Home where she died in 1998. During the years she lived with me, over half a century after his death she still spoke of Alexander Biggs Keegan—she usually used his full name.

Once, Aunt Joanie was upset about something my kids said or did and went to bed angry. The next morning, she told me that she felt much better because, during the night, Alexander had talked to her. She said that for her entire life he had been 'coming to' her and calming her down whenever she was upset. She said he was not a ghost, just a spirit. She could not see him but held in her memory the image of him, alive, sitting on his front porch. She could 'call on him' when she felt alone, frightened or angry and he was always there to help her feel better about things and about herself. As a spiritual man, myself, I didn't question her. Achieving peace through faith is a private, personal endeavor.

Alexander Biggs Keegan was the first of many military men from Quakertown to die prematurely over the next few years. Many young souls were lost. But, can a soul be lost if it is loved? Is love not eternal and of God? My Aunt Joanie loved Alexander Keegan and he lived on in her heart and mind. If there truly is an Other Side, surely Alex and Joanie are there together.

[The *Squalus* was re-floated, repaired and renamed *Sailfish*. She served in WWII]



Seaman 1st Class, Alexander B. Keegan

