

# 'We Stick Together'

## A lasting tribute to the Sullivan Brothers

Seventy years ago this month, one of the most tragic stories of World War II took place when Tom and Alleta Sullivan of Waterloo lost all five of their sons in battle.

The story of the five Sullivan brothers has been told in a feature film, in a variety of books and articles, and even in an alternative rock song. Their memory and sacrifice has been honored in their hometown in a number of ways, including a stunning new museum in the center of town.

But it was their upbringing in northeast Iowa during the Great Depression that shaped these young men, who paid the ultimate price in the name of family and country.

A 1995 book, *We Band of Brothers: The Sullivans and World War II*, by John R. Satterfield, examines in detail the family life of George, Frank, Joe, Matt and Al Sullivan.

They were not stellar students; in fact, none of them completed high



This photo of the Sullivan brothers posing on board the USS Juneau in 1942 has become a part of naval folklore. The Waterloo boys are (from left to right) Joseph, Francis, Albert, Madison and George Sullivan.

By Jeff Stein

school. Matt had the most education, completing 10th grade at East High School before quitting. None of his brothers went that far.

They were apparently not involved in sports or extracurricular activities, and while they proudly identified themselves as Catholics, their church attendance de-

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clined as they grew up (which was no doubt a disappointment to their mother, who was a devout Catholic).

While the nickname "The Fighting Sullivans" was used to describe their joint military service, it could just as well have applied to their formative years. Interviews conducted in the 1990s with the brothers' contemporaries indicate that they were normal children of the Depression, not being afraid to fight in that survival-focused era.

But there was one distinction: classmates soon found that a fight with any Sullivan brother typically led to a clash with all five. Satterfield tells the story of one boy who got into a fight with George Sullivan, only to soon find himself "on the bottom of a pile of Sullivans in seconds".

That attitude was likely fostered at home. By all accounts, the Sullivan home was "an openly affectionate place", with heavy emphasis on family. Father Tom labored as a freight conduc-

tor on the railroad; mother Alleta raised the boys and her daughter Genevieve – always holding dear the memory of her youngest, daughter Kathleen, who died before reaching one year of age.

The brothers were the prototype of young working-class men during the lean times. The only one to ever live away from the family home was Al, who was the only brother to have married. They worked at a variety of jobs, including at the sprawling Rath Packing Plant, an ice house, and, like their father, the Illinois Central Railroad.

Then two of the brothers decided to strike out on their own by joining the U.S. Navy. In typical Sullivan fashion, George and Frank (the two oldest boys) signed up together at the recruiting station in Cedar Falls. Their uncle, Tom's brother, had served in the Navy during World War I.

On May 11, 1937, they took the oath of enlistment to serve four-year terms and departed from Des Moines to the Naval Training Station in San Diego, California. The Navy allowed the two Sullivans to serve together, which was standard policy in peacetime.

With their older two brothers gone, the three younger Sullivan brothers came into their own ...often on two wheels.

Joe Sullivan, who also answered to the nickname "Red", had an affinity for motors and engines. That led to him becoming an enthusiastic member of the local Black Hawk Motorcycle Association, made up of about 50 members, most of whom worked at the Rath plant. Joe would roar up and down Adams Street near the family home on his Harley Davidson and participate in the group's rides around northeast Iowa.

Matt and Al went along – Matt due to his love of motorcycles, like Joe; Al due to his love of the girls who also attended the hill climbs and races. At one of the hill climbs, Al met Katherine Mary Rooff and a quick courtship led to a wedding on May 11, 1940. Their son, James Thomas Sullivan, was born on February 2, 1941.

After four years of traveling around



**The U.S.S. Juneau cruiser was commissioned on Valentine's Day, 1942. Nine months later, it sunk at the Battle of Guadalcanal, killing over 600 men, including the five Sullivan brothers of Waterloo.**

the world and earning promotions (George to the rank of Gunner's Mate Third Class, Frank to Seaman First Class), the two Navy Sullivans were discharged from service in May 1941; the men, now in their mid-20s, returned to their hometown to chart their life's course.

Only a few months later, their course – and that of America – would drastically change.

Business was picking up at the Rath plant, and George and Frank joined their brothers there in the summer of 1941. On Sunday, December 7, 1941, the three older Sullivans were at the Black Hawk motorcycle clubhouse, talking about their common passion for motorcycles with a friend, Paul Hamilton. The four rode on two cycles to the Adams Street house, where they were greeted by a distraught Alleta Sullivan, who informed them of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

For George and Frank, as recent Navy servicemen, the news was especially stunning. They immediately decided to return to military service. The three younger brothers soon made up their minds to join the fight, as well.

Various accounts have quoted George Sullivan, the eldest, as saying, "Well, I guess our minds are made up, aren't they fellows? And when we go in, we want to go in together. If the worse comes to worst, why, we'll all have gone down together."

They did not know it at the time, but a childhood friend, Bill Ball, was one of

those killed on the battleship Arizona that day. The news led them to be even more committed to enlist.

Soon after the new year 1942 began, the five Sullivan brothers were among fifty men from the Waterloo area who joined the Navy within a month of the Pearl Harbor attack. But their enlistment carried with it conditions.

The five brothers insisted that they serve together. Al Sullivan, as a husband and father, would have been eligible for a draft deferment; in fact, the Navy would normally have rejected his enlistment. But after some delays, including verification that Al's wife permitted her husband to join the service, the brothers were allowed to enlist on their terms.

An article in a 1944 issue of *American Magazine* quoted Alleta Sullivan as saying, "Usually, when several brothers are in the service, the Navy puts them on separate ships. But my boys wanted to be together ... They said, 'We have always fought for each other; and now we want to continue to fight side by side.'"

The crisis facing America altered military training. In 1937, when George and Frank first enlisted, they spent four months in boot camp; now, with war raging on two fronts, boot camp lasted less than four weeks.

The Waterloo brothers were assigned to serve on a new light cruiser, the USS Juneau. It was an anti-aircraft ship, designed for quick sailing and maneuverability. It had thin armor plating, which would not prove very effective

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against Japanese torpedoes, but it was capable of top speeds and had the ability to outrun enemy submarines.

After several training runs, the USS Juneau was sent to the battle zone in the South Pacific. On November 13, 1942, it was engaged in one of the most fierce sea battles of all time, the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal. The cruiser was struck by a Japanese torpedo and withdrew from the battle; but as it was leaving it was hit by another Japanese torpedo. This time the ship exploded and quickly sank.

“Men on nearby ships who witnessed the fireball never forgot it,” says the book *Left To Die: The Tragedy of the USS Juneau*. “In one horrific instant, the Juneau all but disintegrated in an inferno of blood, fire and fear.”

Those on the ships in the area believed the presence of additional Japanese crafts would make looking for survivors too risky, and departed. Days later, headquarters staff members realized that no search had ever been mounted. While 100 crew members did survive, their numbers were reduced due to exposure to the elements and shark attacks.

Frank, Joe, and Matt Sullivan were among the 600 men on board who were killed right away. Al survived the ship’s explosion, but drowned the next day. George – the oldest of the brothers – survived for four or five days. He was said to have suffered from delirium as a result of hypernatremia and went over the side of the life raft he was on, never to be seen again.

Others on the scene said he was “driven insane with grief” at the loss of his brothers, frequently calling out their names in an attempt to find them after the explosion.

Back home in Waterloo, Tom and Alleta Sullivan were not aware of the Juneau’s sinking. Security required that the Navy not reveal the loss of the ship, to avoid providing information to the enemy.



This movie was released in 1944 and was hugely popular all across the nation. Originally entitled “The Sullivans”, it was quickly renamed “The Fighting Sullivans” and became a rallying cry for the war effort.

On January 5, 1943, a neighbor received a letter from her son, who was also serving in the Navy in the Pacific. He wrote, “Isn’t it too bad about the Sullivan boys? I hear that their ship was sunk.” The neighbor shared the news with Alleta, who did not believe it.

But the five brothers had regularly sent letters home to their family and friends. When the letters suddenly stopped coming, the family feared something terrible had happened. The neighbor’s letter led to Alleta having nightmares, similar to those which plagued her following the death of her infant daughter more than a decade before.

Alleta Sullivan wrote a letter to the Bureau of Naval Personnel “in regards to a rumor going around that my five sons were killed in action in November” and referencing the neighbor’s letter. “If it is so, please let me know the truth,” she wrote.

In the letter, she mentioned that she had been asked to christen a new ship the

following month in Portland, Oregon. “If anything has happened to my five sons, I will still christen the ship as it was their wish that I do so. I hated to bother you, but it has worried me so that I wanted to know if it was true. So please tell me.”

The following Monday morning, January 11, Tom Sullivan was making breakfast after telling his wife that she should remain in bed and rest. He heard a car pull up outside their home. He looked out to see three official-looking men dressed in black come to the door. He invited them into the living room.

Lieutenant Commander Truman Jones from the Des Moines recruiting center was given the unenviable task, one he later called the saddest and most disagreeable of his naval career. Normally, such news was delivered by telegram. This, however, was a different situation.

“I have some news for you about your boys,” Jones told Sullivan.

“Which one?” Tom Sullivan asked.

“I’m sorry. All five,” Jones replied.

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Tom Sullivan asked them to wait in the living room. He summoned his wife, his daughter Genevieve, and Al's wife Katherine, who brought their son Jimmy. Dressed in robes and slippers, they all filed downstairs to hear the dreaded news that all five were listed as missing in action.

As Alleta recalled a year later, Tom handled his grief by leaving for work soon after, as his train was set to leave to deliver war freight. "Holding up the train might mean that other boys would die; that other mothers might have to face such grief needlessly," she recalled.

Later that day, Naval officials issued a statement, saying the "loss of the five Sullivan brothers ranks as the greatest single blow suffered by any one family ... probably, in American naval history."

"Presence of the five Sullivans aboard the USS Juneau was at the insistence of the brothers themselves in contradiction to the repeated recommendations of the ship's executive office," the statement noted. "Serving together had been one condition of their enlistment."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote Tom and Alleta Sullivan a letter on January 13, 1943. He offered condolences and gratitude.

"I am sure that we all take heart in the knowledge that they fought side by side. As one of your sons wrote, 'We will make a team together that can't be beat.' It is this spirit which in the end must triumph," Roosevelt wrote. "I send you my deepest sympathy in your hour of trial and pray that in Almighty God you will find the comfort and help that only He can bring."

The Sullivans were not the only

brother sailors on board the Juneau. There were at least nine sets of brothers on board, including the four Rogers brothers from New Haven, Connecticut. However, before the ship sank, two of the Rogers boys had transferred to other duties.

Contrary to popular belief, the death of the five brothers did not lead to enact-

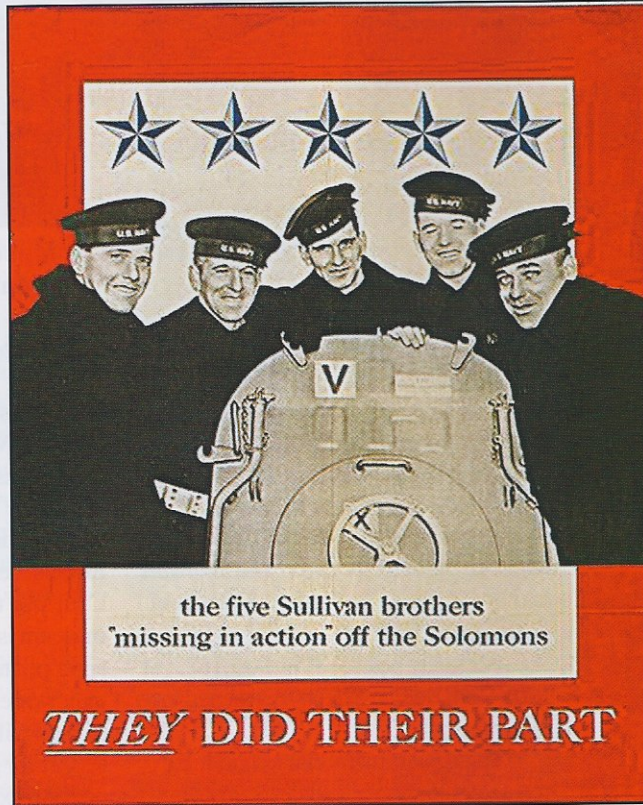
First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was followed by tours of production plants in Baltimore and Philadelphia, among other cities. They promoted the sale of war bonds, and daughter Genevieve joined the WAVES. Some criticized the family for "enjoying" the national attention, but the family claimed its efforts were directed at making sure the five brothers did not die in vain.

In April 1943, the Navy launched a destroyer named USS The Sullivans, which became the first U.S. Navy ship to be named for multiple persons. Al Sullivan's son James served on board the ship after joining the Navy as a teenager. The original USS The Sullivans served through the Korean War and now is located in Buffalo, New York, as a tribute to the brothers. A second USS The Sullivans was launched on August 12, 1995, and is still in service.

In 1944, a movie entitled "The Fighting Sullivans" packed theaters across the land. The ending showed four of the Sullivan brothers walking off into the clouds, with young Al running behind, shouting for them to wait for him. They turned and waited.

"We stick together," George Sullivan reportedly told Navy officials who tried to talk the five brothers out of serving together as a condition of their enlistment. It became the motto of their service, and the motto of both ships which have carried the Sullivan name.

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**Following the death of the brothers at sea, the military used the Sullivan family's sacrifice in a war recruiting effort. Their photo was used on this national poster and still crops up on ebay from time to time.**

ment of regulations or laws prohibiting family members from serving on the same ship. The service continues to recommend against it, but will honor the wishes of those serving.

In moves that divided people back home, the Sullivan parents began touring the country on behalf of the war effort soon after receiving word that their sons were missing in action. A meeting with