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First Person: Tim Taylor

As told to Jeremy Taylor

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Underwater explorer Tim Taylor bought a \$500,000 submersible to search for a USS R-12 that sank in 1943

The US navy didn't give names to submarines during the second world war. So when the USS R-12 sank during a training exercise on June 12 1943, it was an especially impersonal grave for the 42 men who went down with her. According to official records, the forward battery compartment had flooded, leaving crew no time to shut the hatches. It sank in about 15 seconds, off the coast of Florida but no one knew precisely where.

I'm 50 years old and have been an underwater explorer all my life. The story of the R-12 always fascinated me. There is a special bond between mariners that can be hard to understand. Although I had no connection with the men on board, like me they lived their lives on the sea. There was also the personal challenge of discovering something important that had eluded other searchers for decades.

The US navy had a rough idea of where the R-12 disappeared, 11 miles out from the port of Key West. The site was designated a war grave, although nobody had been able to pinpoint the exact location. So in October 2010 I set out with a robotic submersible to begin an underwater survey of the area. The sonar equipment eventually detected a large object on the sea floor that was the same shape and size as the R-12.

It was an incredibly exciting moment but I knew it was just the start. Somehow I had to find the equipment to photograph whatever was down there and confirm it was the R-12. That kind of gear is expensive, so instead of buying a new house, my wife and I bought a \$500,000 submersible – we called it Otis – that could take images 600ft below the surface.

In August 2012 I returned to the location and launched the new vehicle, equipped with HD cameras and powerful lights. By then, I had tracked down and met many relatives of the lost crew. They were no longer a list of names. They were 42 faces on photographs, with families that had never been able to visit the spot where they perished. For me, the R-12 was no longer an adventure but a responsibility.

The first image I saw from Otis showed a complete submarine, measuring 186ft from bow to stern. There was damage to the front end, where it had hit the seabed, but otherwise it was intact. I remember a feeling of elation and then sadness because there were 42 men inside who died in the most horrific circumstances. Some of them were only teenagers but they were doomed from the moment the sea started pouring in.



Tim Taylor, who bought a \$500,000 submersible for his search, at the Explorers Club in New York

The R-12 now looked like a squeezed toothpaste tube. It was built in 1918 to a very old design; all I could think was that the metal hull had been riveted together in an extremely basic fashion. It was essentially a tin can.

I am planning to go back to the site of the wreck later this summer to take video footage of the R-12 for the first time. I think that there is a good chance the navy will recover the bodies and give them a proper burial, although it will be expensive. It's interesting that out of the 52 US submarines that were lost during the war, only five have ever been found.

Now I want to go one step further and find out exactly what happened. Five sailors survived when they were swept off the conning tower but the official report suggests a crewman below may have inadvertently opened a torpedo hatch. It puts the blame on the crew yet we don't actually know who or what was to blame. This could be the first opportunity in 70 years to put the record straight.

The only positive story from the sinking of the R-12 surrounds a navy yeoman, Robert England. He had gone ashore to complete some paperwork on the morning it sank. We found him living in Inverness, Florida, aged 89. When I showed him our photographs, he finally got some form of closure to a sad moment in US navy history.

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