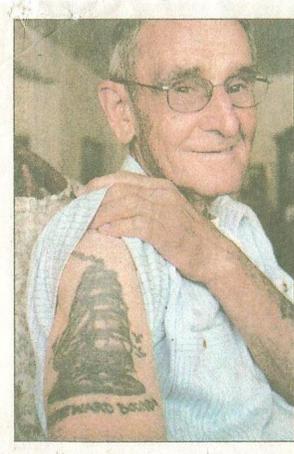


Sailor's lost peacoat resurfaces 65 years later—random search on Goggle reveals surprise treasure

by Mike Cassidy - In My Opinion (Mercury News 6/6/06)



Tony Gellepis remembers the last time he saw his Navy-issue peacoat. More or less remembers. See, he had a drink. OK, a few. And it was 65 years ago. March 1941. Shore leave SF. "SF was a great liberty port," Gellepis, 85, says, sitting in his Santa Clara duplex. "That called for hoisting a few. I mean, you didn't want to go to the library." No. He was a 20 year old sailor who wanted to go to the Tenderloin gin mills where sailors went in 1941. And at first he was wearing his classic Navy winter jacket—dark blue and double-breasted with two rows of large, black buttons. But as the evening progressed, Gellepis hoisted a few at Michael's and then went on to the Pirate's Cove. By the time he hit Bradley's ("big schooners of beer and little bowls of beans"), he felt a warm glow. So, off with the woolen garment. Gellepis was back at the USS Vega before he realized his peacoat was gone. "That was the last I'd ever seen of it." Until Google. Everything comes back to Google, doesn't it? "I, from time to time get on Google," says Jim Gellepis, Tony's 58-year old son, who lives in Tallahassee, Fla. "Once in a while, I'll put our last name in there."

Like early this year. "I was just flabbergasted," Jim Gellepis says. There it was. A link to a World War II peacoat on eBay. Size 38. "Marked on the inside with T. J. Gellepis," the posting said. Jim Gellepis wrote to his dad, said he hoped he was sitting down. "Holy Christ. Sutter's gold," was Tony Gellepis' reaction. "I almost dropped out of my shoes." This was a man familiar with fate—how a moment, a movement, the most mundane event can change everything. As we sat talking about his coat, Tony Gellepis and I talked about his Navy life, too. Enlisted in 1940. Served on a supply ship. In late 1941, it loaded up in Washington state and headed out for Midway Island. The Vega broke down at sea and limped into Honolulu Harbor for repairs - on Dec. 6, 1941. "The next morning," Gellepis says, "you know what happened." Yes, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. More than 2,400 killed. Gellepis and his crew mates survived, being a small supply ship. "They wanted to get the big boys," he says. "We were an afterthought." Gellepis went on to marry Toula Pastrokas, and together they just celebrated their 61st anniversary. He became a truck driver and a teamster, then a union official. Had two kids, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. The peacoat's life story is less clear. It landed on eBay as part of a legal fight and the liquidation of Orange County's Museum of World Wars and Military History. None of those affiliated with the defunct museum that I located knew how the coat ended up there. Life can be a game of inches--disaster averted or glory denied by moments or days or weeks. It's true in war and on eBay. It seems Gellepis' peacoat already had been sold by the time Jim Gellepis spotted it along with the buyer's contact information. "Turns out he was in Belgium," Jim Gellepis says. Tony Gellepis and Danny DeBlock, the Belgium buyer, have traded emails. DeBlock is expanding a World War II museum in Lokeren and plans to display the coat as part of a full Navy uniform. He asked Gellepis to send his war story and a photo to include in the exhibit. "It's one of the most interesting pieces, because it has a history," DeBlock says by phone from Western Europe. Gellepis says he loves that his coat is in a museum. What? You don't want it back? I ask. "I haven't had it for 65 years. What the hell am I going to do with it?" Gellepis doesn't need the coat he's got the memories. Meanwhile, he's asked DeBlock to send pictures once the new exhibit is finished. It could be the fall before that happens. Gellepis says he can wait. After all, he's waited this long.

