

In Quest of the Bennington Bell

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Lee K. Strobel, ex-BM³₃ of the U. S.S. Bennington, is a dedicated man. Now 85 and perhaps the only survivor of that tragedy of 1905, his singular dedication is to the idea that the bell from that pathetic little gunboat is somewhere -- if only he could determine where -- and that its proper place is over the graves of her dead, in the Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery on Point Loma.

Until a stroke slowed him down a year or so ago he travelled many miles in search of the bell, and frequently visited that cemetery, to stand uncovered at the foot of the Bennington Monument and to lay flowers on one of the graves of his three-score shipmates; the grave is that of L. J. Gauthier, CBM, who was unhurt by the initial explosion but gave his life that the stricken Bennington would not go down.

It was during the forenoon of ~~July~~ 21 July 1905 that a boiler explosion ended the gunboat's active career. Ruptured sea-connections let in the waters of San Diego Bay, and amid the uproar and confusion the little steam tug Santa Fe came alongside the already settling Bennington with the idea of beaching her. The anchor, of course, was down, and with all power on the windlass gone, the only thing left to do was for someone to go through the steam-filled ship, down into the chain-locker, and cut away the lashing at the bitter end of the chain. Gauthier grabbed a fire axe, plunged below and did the job. Then he crawled back on deck coughing steam; the Bennington was successfully beached -- and the next morning Gauthier was dead.

Strobel, after a long stay in the hospital at Mare Island, was surveyed out and drifted about from job to job, finally becoming an expert

