

# ST. JOHN'S HISTORIC CEMETERY ASSOCIATION

## SPRING 2024 NEWSLETTER

### ST. JOHN'S CEMETERY HAPPENINGS

We are pleased to report the long-awaited and long-needed maintenance on the 29 live oak trees surrounding the cemetery, has been completed at a cost of \$25,000. This work was necessary to preserve and protect the 170-year-old oaks from hurricane damage. Louisiana Tree Service was contracted to trim, remove damaged limbs and dead wood, as well as lift the canopy over streets and buildings. All the debris was chipped and spread as mulch around the trees.

At a cost of \$5,800, Extreme Painting, LLC, was contracted to pressure wash, then paint the 110-year-old wrought iron fences surrounding the cemetery. This work provided a much-needed facelift and has made a tremendous difference in the appearance of the fence.

The next Cemetery Association Annual meeting has been set for 6:00 p.m., March 11, in the St. John's Parish Hall library.

We are happy to report that Dr. Lloyd Chiasson Jr. has agreed to become editor for this publication. A former communications professor at Nicholls State University, he was an editor and writer of five academic books, as well as two novels.

### 2023 DONORS TO THE CEMETERY ASSOCIATION

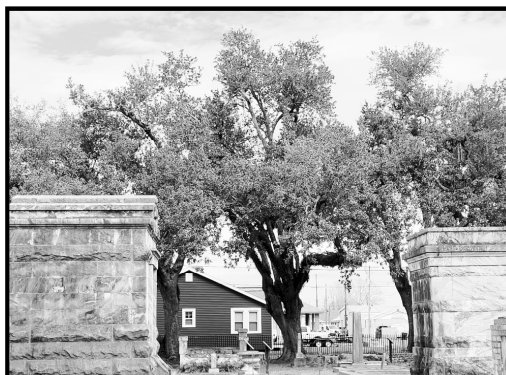
Your support in 2023 was outstanding. Having a broad base of support is so important in our effort to help St. John's maintain, repair, and publicize a sacred space. Thanks to YOU ALL!

**Angels:** Richard Bourgeois, M/M Paul Due', M/M Robert Ells, II, Marion Lifsey, M/M David Plater, Lawrence Pugh, The Peltier Foundation, Kristi Smith, Dianne Frost

**Cherubs:** The Levert Foundation, M/M Willard Hitch Jr, Mark Eidman, Olivia Ann Gresham

**Spirits:** Lorriane Wise, M/M Harold Block, Agnes Esteve, Drs Leo & Carolyn Hebert, Martin-Albemarle, LLC, Alice Walther, M/M Mitch Bourgeois, Virginia Casse, Caroline W. Goddard, Alice Strausser, M/M Ed Blackburn, M/M James Koontz, Dr/M Allen Alexander, William Borskey, James Bourgeois, M/M David Cassard, Juanita Caudill, M/M Charles Clayton, Dr Susan Crawford, Angela deGravelles, Dr/M Jonathan Durocher, Mickey Guillory, John Heller III, Judge/M Walter Lanier Jr, M/M Malcolm Mackenzie, Dr/M Wes Magee III, Dr/M David Middleton, M/M Nathan Musso, Emile Robinson, Stevia Walther

**Friends:** Janice Crisp, M/M EJ Grabert, M/M Olie Adams, Irma Arceneaux, Phillip Darce, Karen Foust, Patricia A. Hoching, Mary Anne Hoffmann, Addie Joy Kearns, Ann McDonald, Dr Miki Pfeffer, Eugene Roth, Mary Martin, Justin Hardecker, Henry Brownlee, John McInerney, M/M David Reso, Judy Weimer



# RANALD F. GRAHAM: WORLD WAR II NAVAL AVIATOR

Two modest bronze plaques in the church cemetery mark the final resting places of Mr. and Mrs. Ranald F. Graham, longtime parishioners of St. John's Episcopal Church. But as you will discover, Ranald Grahams's contributions to World War II were anything but modest. Ranald was born on May 1, 1923, in Kansas, the son of Harry and Gertrude Graham, and grew up in Muskogee, Oklahoma. He graduated from Central High School in Muskogee, where he was a member of the school band. After graduation, he worked at the plant of the Atlas Supply Company in Muskogee.

Ranald registered for the military draft on June 29, 1942. However, he chose to voluntarily enlist later in the U. S. Navy's Air Corps. In March of 1943, Naval Aviation Cadet Graham reported to Memphis, Tennessee, for primary aviation training. He received his advance flying training at Corpus Christi, Texas, and was commissioned as Ensign on October 6, 1943. A few days later, on October 9, 1943, Ensign Graham married Mary Jo Siegal, a native of Oktaha, Oklahoma.

Ensign Graham was assigned as the pilot of a PB4Y-1 Liberator bomber, a naval variant of the B-24 Liberator used by the Army Air Corps. (The PB4Y-1 had a ball turret with twin machine guns in the nose, rather than the Plexiglas nose cone of the standard B-24.) His squadron was Navy Patrol Bombing Squadron 103, or VB-103 (later designated as VPB-103). VB-103 was the first Navy Patrol Bomber squadron to be equipped with the new APS-15 high-resolution radar, the LORAN long-range-navigation system, sonar acoustic tracking buoys, and had the ability to carry the M-24 FIDO acoustic homing torpedo, nicknamed the "Zombie."

On August 17, 1943, VB-103 was the first U.S. Navy Patrol Bomber squadron assigned to the British Royal Air Force airfield at St. Eval, England. While at St. Eval, the crews received specialized training in anti-submarine warfare. At the end of August, the squadron transferred to the Royal Air Force airfield in Dunkeswell in Devonshire. (Ensign Graham's name was listed on the back of a photograph of an air crew of Squadron VB-103 taken at Dunkeswell in 1944. The photograph has not been located as of this writing.) The Navy bomber squadrons eventually took over the submarine hunting role from the Army Air Corps bombers.

During the peak of the Normandy Invasion in June 1944, Ensign Graham's bomber squadron and others patrolled the southern approach to the English Channel to prevent German submarines from approaching the Allied fleet. The operation, code named Operation Cork, was highly successful. Aircraft continuously patrolled the area, leaving at 30-minute intervals. VB-103 conducted seven sorties a day during Operation Cork. Without the patrol bombers' efforts, the invasion's success would certainly have been delayed, if not doomed.

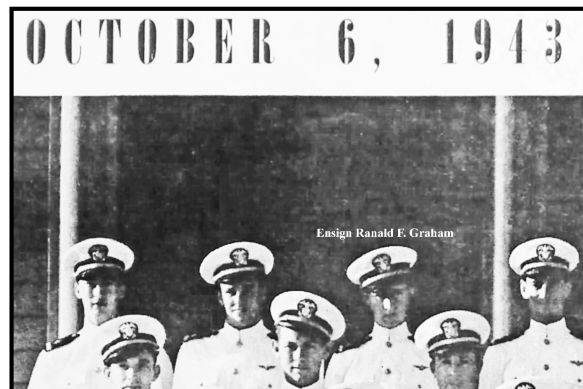
In October 1944, VB-103 was re-designated as VPB-103. After D-Day, the squadron's most dangerous work began. The B4Y-1 bombers were capable of long-range missions and were assigned to locate and neutralize the German submarine fleet operating out of the Bay of Biscay off the Atlantic coast of France. Fortunately, the German Enigma code machine and others had been deciphered by the Allied "Ultra" program, which gathered intelligence on the German submarines' assignments and routes. The bombers used both depth charges and the M-24 "Zombie" torpedoes to destroy or disable German submarines. But at the same time they hunted the submarines, the bombers were often threatened by German Ju-88 heavy fighters. The submarines also had anti-aircraft cannons mounted on their turrets or deck platforms, capable of hitting the bombers while the submarines were on the surface.

Lieut. (j.g.) Graham's final mission was on February 15, 1945. That month, he and 21 other squadron members were officially detached from the command, having completed enough combat missions to exempt them from that hazardous duty. In an official notice originally classified as "Secret," they were individually cited by number of missions completed and date of final mission. Of the 22 officers and men of his squadron cited for that "special commendation," Lieut. Graham had completed the most (59) combat missions in the Bay of Biscay. During the Bay of Biscay Offensive, the U. S. Navy patrol bomber squadrons lost 16 planes and 157 crewmen. But their unsung sacrifices and determination effectively defeated the German U-boat threat off the Atlantic coast of Europe.

On March 22, 1945, the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* published a personals item, announcing that Lieut. Graham was visiting his wife and parents after a year's service as "a first pilot on a B-24 Liberator in the European theater of the war." He was not yet 22 years old. As demonstrated here, that brief description of his distinguished service belies its actual importance.

On July 1, 1954, Lieutenant Graham was promoted to Line Lieutenant Commander. He continued his service in the U. S. Navy before retiring in the 1960s. (There are accounts of his being involved in clandestine military intelligence activities in the Far East following World War II.) After retiring from the Navy, Ranald was very active as a leader in the Boy Scouts of America, which led to him and Mary Jo relocating to Thibodaux. During his time in Thibodaux, Ranald worked at various times for Merrill Utley and Sam Jones's oilfield service company. (Utley was also a WWII Navy veteran involved in hunting German submarines in the Gulf of Mexico, and Jones's father had a Navy career, so it was probably not a coincidence that they and Ranald connected.)

After the death of his beloved wife Mary Jo in 2015, Ranald remained a resident of St. Joseph Manor in Thibodaux. Friends, visitors, and caregivers remember him as a kind, intelligent, and friendly man. He gave a gold coin as a gift to one, and he told her that he did so upon gaining every new friend. Ranald passed away in 2021 at age 97.



*Ranald F. Graham at his Navy commissioning ceremony.*



*A PB4Y-1 Liberator bomber of U. S. Navy Navy Patrol Bombing Squadron 103, with its distinctive marine camouflage color scheme.*



*Original leather unit patch adopted and worn by U. S. Navy Patrol Bomber Squadron 103. The patch features the Warner Brothers cartoon character Bugs Bunny wearing a helmet and seated on a caricature of an M-24 "Zombie" torpedo with a shark's face.*