

For more than 50 years, Mike Porcellini's mother wondered how her brother died. A *Companion* article helped answer that question.

A MYSTERY SOLVED

BOB SMIETANA

Sometimes when you write about matters of faith, you get to be part of something extraordinary.

We heard recently from Mike Porcellini of South Philadelphia who told us about the impact a *Companion* article had on his life. Here's some background.

When Mike was two years old, his mother would read him the letters she got from her brother, Vince "Jimmy" Frucelli, who was serving in the Army during WWII. While she read the letters, little Mickey (as Mike was known), played with the envelopes, doodling and poking holes in them with his pencil. Jimmy ended each letter with, "Kiss Mickey for me."

Then in January 1943, the last letter came. Jimmy was sailing for Greenland with his unit aboard the USAT *Dorchester*, a troop carrier. On February 3, 1943, the *Dorchester* was torpedoed by a U-boat off the coast of Greenland. There were 902 soldiers and crew aboard. Only 230 survived.

For the next sixty years, Mike Porcellini and his family would wonder about Uncle's Jimmy's last few days and how he died.

"All we knew was that he was lost at sea. Period," says Mike. "No one knew anything about it."

Mike, who'll turn sixty-four in July, lives about a half-mile from the neighborhood where his uncle grew up in South Philadelphia. Even today, when he visits the old neighborhood, people remember his Uncle Jimmy.

Mike's mother took the loss of her brother hard. For a year after the *Dor-*



Vince "Jimmy" Frucelli

chester sank, she wrote to military hospitals, asking if anyone had seen him. She'd include a picture of Jimmy—perhaps he had been so badly wounded that he couldn't remember who he was, or wasn't able to communicate.

"She never gave up hope," Mike says, of his mother, who died five years ago. She still had all of Jimmy's letters, along with newspaper clippings about the sinking of the *Dorchester*, in her hope chest. Mike found them about two months ago. He'd grown up hearing the story of the *Dorchester*, which was made famous because of the actions of four army chaplains aboard her—a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and two Protestant ministers. When the ship was hit, their job was to hand out life vests. When the vests ran out, they gave away their own, linked arms, and prayed together as the ship sank into the North Atlantic.

Last year, we decided to do a story on the chaplains for the *Companion*. And that's how I met Ben Epstein, one of the *Dorchester* survivors. Ben is now eight-two, and lives in Delray Beach, Florida. When I called him last year, he told me about his buddy Vince Frucelli, Mike's uncle. Ben and Vince had met in basic training and become fast friends.

Just before the *Dorchester* went down, Ben and Vince stood on the rail. Below them was a life raft, still connected to the ship by a rope.

"I'll jump over the railing and grab the rope," Ben told Vince. He jumped, grabbed the rope, and slid down to the raft. Vince never made it. Whether Vince jumped or not, Ben doesn't know. All he knows is that he never saw Vince again.

"Not a day goes by when I don't think about him," he said.

The article ran in the May 2003 *Companion*. A few months later I got an email from Mike Porcellini. He's not a Covenanter, doesn't know any Covenanters. But a relative of his (his cousin's daughter-in-law, to be exact) had come across the *Companion* article and wondered if the Vince Frucelli in the article was related to her husband, who has the same last name. The only thing was, her husband had never mentioned an Uncle Vince.

She called a few relatives and eventually connected with Mike. He's not exactly computer literate, he admits, but he asked her to email him the article. And then he emailed the *Companion*. We put him in touch with Ben.

Every winter Mike takes a vacation to a spot in Florida near Ben's home.

For Mike, meeting Ben meant he could finally answer the questions his mother had about her brother's death. . . .
 "Now we know," he says.
 "I met someone who was there."

So in early February, sixty-one years (and a few days) after the *Dorchester* sank, Mike met up with his uncle's old buddy. He spent two and a half hours talking with Ben and his wife, Miriam. Mike brought along some of the letters his mother had saved, and Ben showed him a photo of Vince that he'd kept in his wallet all these years. Mike brought Ben an 8x10 copy of the same photo as a gift.



Miriam and Ben Epstein and Mike Porcellini had an opportunity to meet this past February.

The meeting brought tears of sorrow and joy to both men, says Mike. For Mike, meeting Ben meant he could finally answer the questions his mother had about her brother's death.

all around him.

Then, he says, "It dawned on me that if we survivors don't talk about it, how will anyone in the world know about what happened that fateful morning."

Now he's happy to tell his story, and the story of the chaplains to anyone who asks. And he still can't believe that after all these years he's been able to connect with his old friend's family.

"We got along famously," Ben says. "We told Mike we've already adopted him as another son. After sixty-one years—my head is still shaking. I was as close to his uncle

Vince as anyone could be."

"I cannot express how deeply grateful and indebted I am to you for having afforded me the opportunity to meet Ben," Mike told me in an email afterwards. "It is a memory I will cherish forever."

So will we. □



This May 2003 *Companion* article led Mike Porcellini to his uncle's friend, Ben Epstein, and the truth about his uncle's final hours on the *Dorchester*.

"She was something special," he says, "so I was very happy to do this for her—to find out what happened to her brother."

"Now we know," he says. "I met someone who was there, who could tell me how he died. That's better than just, 'The ship got torpedoed.'"

For years, Ben was reluctant to talk about his experience. He wanted to forget some of the terrible memories of that day—the icy cold of the North Atlantic, the sailors freezing to death

Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*. The May 2003 article about the chaplains, "If We Can Die Together, Can't We Live Together?" is available at www.covchurch.org in the *Companion* section.

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