

Flyers 2, Bruins 0, 2nd period

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# **‘She was like a mother to all of the sailors’: Navy vets honor ‘Mom Germaine’ in Quincy**

By [Felicia Gans](#) Globe Staff, November 9, 2019, 7:14 p.m.



Veterans helped dedicate a plaque Saturday in front of the anchor of the USS Des Moines, which was built in Quincy. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

QUINCY — In the 1950s, young American sailors were sent thousands of miles away to serve in Europe, leaving behind their families and all that was familiar. But some who docked in the French seaside village of Villefranche-sur-Mer found a surrogate family with a woman who took them in as her own.

Germaine Brau became a second mother to countless young men, many of whom were just teenagers when they enlisted in the Navy, filled with dreams of serving their country. Brau died in 1959, but she left behind a generation of men — many now with children and grandchildren of their own — who say she gave them a “home away from home.”

On Saturday morning, 60 years after her death, many of the veterans who spent time with “Mom Germaine,” as they called her, gathered with friends and family to honor her and dedicate two plaques for the USS Des Moines, which was dismantled long ago. The ship’s anchor, which was built at the Fore River Shipyard in Quincy, sits in the Quincy Rotary.

“Everyone had a relationship with her,” said Joseph Loch, 80, who traveled from Bel Air, Md., for the dedication. When Brau died, Loch marched in the honor guard in her funeral procession. “She was like a mother to all of the sailors . . . We all grew up over there.”





Germaine Brau with sailors from the US Navy's Sixth Fleet. US NAVY

Loch said anyone who spent time with Brau has stories about the lengths she went to make them feel comfortable in France.

The maternal duties she was said to take on ranged from small — making American snacks for homesick sailors — to lifesaving, from loaning them money to giving marital advice. One summer day in 1956, as a Marine colonel was undergoing emergency surgery and needed an antibiotic, she rushed to Nice and persuaded a pharmacy clerk to give

her the medication. The dramatic story was one of many in an article featuring her in U.S. Lady, a former magazine for military wives.

“I only do what the heart tells me,” she told the magazine in 1959.

In Villefranche-sur-Mer, the home dock for the US Navy’s Sixth Fleet, Brau owned and operated La Mère Germaine, a seafood restaurant on the waterfront. The restaurant, which is still owned and operated by her family today, became a culinary base for the sailors.

Valérie Blouin, Brau’s granddaughter, attended Saturday’s plaque dedications, visiting from Nice, just west of Villefranche-sur-Mer. She thanked the sailors who have helped keep Brau’s memory alive.

“You know how much Mom Germaine loved her boys, and they give it back to her twofold,” she told the veterans and their families at one of the plaque dedications, which took place on the nearby USS Salem, a sister ship to the USS Des Moines. “Thanks to you all, Mom Germaine will once again be with her boys here in Quincy.”

Blouin, 53, was born after her grandmother died, but she’s made it her mission to carry Blau’s legacy forward. In 2014, Blouin launched “Les Américains et la 6e Flotte à Villefranche-sur-Mer,” or “The Americans and the Sixth Fleet in Villefranche-sur-Mer,” to share stories with future generations about the American sailors who found their second home in Villefranche-sur-Mer.

“A lot of people ask me, ‘Why do you do this? You never met your grandmother,’ ” Blouin said. “But it’s something that’s part of my history.”



Germaine Brau's granddaughter, Valérie Blouin, attended a ceremony in Brau's honor in Quincy on Saturday. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

In addition to the dedication of the plaque on the USS Salem, Saturday's ceremony also included a dedication at the anchor in the Quincy Rotary. Both plaques honor the USS Des Moines, commissioned in 1948 and decommissioned in 1961.

Philip Roberts, who spent two years on the ship and was editor of the ship's newspaper, said he was helping to restore the anchor's paint recently and noticed people acknowledging the work as they drove by — but guessed that they probably didn't know the history of the anchor.

“As people would drive around the rotary, when we were doing this, they would occasionally honk their horn or wave their hand for encouragement, and it felt great, but I wondered whether they really knew what the anchor was,” said Roberts, 84, after the ceremony. “It was at that point that I decided that we needed to do something about that and get a plaque and get some way to identify that this as an anchor from the USS Des Moines.”

Quincy Mayor Thomas P. Koch, who attended the dedication at the anchor Saturday, thanked the veterans and pointed out the nearby shipyard that he called “one of the most productive” during World War I and II. He said it's one more way in which Quincy has built its “rich tradition” around supporting the military.

“We had incredible people that were dedicated to serve other ships but we also had incredible talent in the building the ships here in Quincy Point for those men,” he said. “Any time I'm with a group of veterans, it's always humbling.”



Former US Des Moines Navy crewmember Louis Lockwood held up a photograph of the USS Des Moines that he keeps in his wallet. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

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