

The Old Gray Lady By: Bob Summers

They come each year, like the Swallows to Capistrano, they come perhaps weary from their long journeys, but nevertheless anxious to rejoin their flocks.

From their homes throughout the United States come former US Navy sailors with their wives and family members once again to enjoy their annual visits with former shipmates and other sailors that served on their respective ships, perhaps at different times. There are old ones and older ones. They are the surviving veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and all of the periods of service in between conflicts. Some were heroes and some were not, but they all served.

These reunion associations come to cities all over the United States for their annual gatherings. They even have been known to book passage on cruise ships for their confabs.

They share with each other stories of their past aboard ship and stories of their lives after naval service. Pictures are shared and passed around the meeting rooms. Smiles and even sadness are part of their 'plan-of-the-day'.

Some ex-sailors belong to several reunion associations and attend several reunions each year. These sailors served on several ships during their naval service. Many of these proud veterans were 'lifers', that is, they served for as much as 20 to 30 years or more to enjoy naval retirement. Others went home after serving their enlistment period to resume civilian life.

US naval ships are almost universally painted 'battleship gray' and are referred to in the female context, as in 'She was a great ship'. Coincidentally there is a lot of gray hair in the

reunion groups. Physiques are no longer trim, but reflect years of good old home cooking and perhaps a lack of exercise that once defined their way of life. For most of these proud veterans certainly the thought of climbing back into their uniforms is merely a fantasy; however some small few still can.

There are big ones and small. There

Photo # K-67405 USS Frank Knox underway near Hawaii, January 1969



are former enlisted men sitting alongside of former officers. Even old commanding officers attend. Politically they are as diverse as any group anywhere. There are Republicans, Democrats and independents among them and sometimes there are discussions that become quite passionate. Spirited talks abound. As with family settings they are reminded to avoid discussions of politics and religion. But make no mistake about it; these folks have very definite ideas about how things should be conducted. There is no shortage of opinions here.

Some have been very successful in their lives after the Navy, and others have been less so. Their success has nothing to do with their membership in the reunion association other than having the ease of resources to fund the cross country pilgrimages each

year. These are our heroes of lots of yesterdays gone by who are anxious to be with each other once again.

They speak proudly of their grandchildren. They talk of 'back home'. They share photographs and speak of those things of different times. Some are pleasant and some not so.

There is something very interesting about these veterans and their associ-

ations that bind them so uniquely. In my case, my ship, USS Frank Knox DD-742, a vintage WWII destroyer, was commissioned in December 1944, four years before I was born. The ship served the US fleet until 1971 when it was sold to the Greek Navy. The ship was in service to America for 26 years. I served on her for a mere 25 months. I have been to 8 annual reunions. How could such a brief life experience compel men to gather so regularly? The men with whom I served are very close to me and a handful are like the brothers I never had. There are veterans that served on my ship before me and with whom I am also very close.

I have made valuable friendships with those with whom I knew in college and my professional life. Some of my neighbors I value greatly. The personal linkage to my shipmates is far different than relationships I have in other parts of my life. I have very important relationships with those in my post Navy life. Perhaps there is a missing ingredient with my non-veteran relationships.

The relationships with my shipmates are powerfully different. I see them differently than friends and colleagues I share in my civilian life. It's not a case of more or less, but one of difference. There is a special quality with my shipmates. We did everything together. We ate, we slept, we

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worked, we fought and yes, we served together. Some served more honorably and bravely, but we all served. There is an unabashed sense of pride when I walk into a room with my shipmates.

I remember my first reunion that just so happened to be held in my home town of San Francisco. A couple of my old shipmates with whom I had maintained contact over the years stayed at my home and we attended the banquet together. We elected to go stag, without wives or significant others only because they would know no one. Later we came home to report we should have included our better halves, because the women at the reunion seemed to enjoy the whole affair as much as the old salts.

It is said that members of the military are fighting for their country. Yes, they are. Ask any combat veteran what was their motivation in conflict

and they report they are fighting for their buddies. They don't want to ever let them down. Heroic acts occur because of that very motivation. The combat veteran relies on the specific training the military has provided them to carry the day. From the first day of basic training sailors learn to devalue self and value the group. They learn the company is only as strong as the weakest link. No one wants to be the weakest link in the company and people will dial-up their individual performances. They are then a group, a cadre.

What then is the glue that binds these old sailors together within their reunion groups? It's a bit of esprit de corps and also to visit old friends and reminisce, but I have come to learn, without question, it is that 'old gray lady' herself---their ships. She provided for us and carried us over the seas and oceans

and into combat as well as some pretty exotic destinations. We cared for her and she relied on us who served aboard her. At these reunions I have learned, we honor her.

Over time our memories seem to protect us. We have seemed to forget the negative and permit us to focus on the better times. Looking back we are pleased with our service aboard our 'Gray Ladies'.

USS Frank Knox no longer serves in a military way, but she lies in the depths somewhere in Greek waters where a reef will grow around her on the cold ocean floor to provide vast ecological benefits to the oceanic environment. She probably no longer wears her hull number, but 742 is, and will forever be, ingrained in my memory.

Good night, dear lady.