

A PLANK OWNER'S ADVENTURE

BY DONALD DUDERSTADT, SH1 RETIRED

I Joined the Navy July 7, 1955 and was assigned to boot camp company 360. After boot camp at RTC Bainbridge, Maryland, Jessie Swearinger and I were assigned to this magnificent brand new oiler, the USS Ponchatoula AO 148. It was named after a river in Louisiana. There were five other new oiler sister ships. The USS Neosho AO 143, USS Mississinewa AO- 144, Hassayampa AO 145, Kawishiwi AO 146, Truckee ao-147. She was well armed for an auxiliary vessel. She had two 5-38 caliber surface fire deck guns, one on her bow and one on her stern. She also had six rapid fire 3-50 caliber anti- aircraft twin guns, two forward and four aft. She was an awesome beauty to behold, immense in size with a beautiful bridge and superstructure. She could do 21 knots flank speed and had air conditioned compartments, a smoke screen generator, and huge twin propellers.

I was a rookie having never been on a ship before. I was assigned to the deck department second division where I began to learn seamanship from Hunter BM2 and the other seasoned experienced sailors. My shipmate and buddy Fazio was in second division with me. We were seamen apprentices, E2. After the commissioning ceremony I remember my first seasickness off Cape Hateras.

Then they transferred the ship to Long Beach, California. This was our first home port. It wasn't just a job, but an adventure as the Ponchatoula descended through the Gatun locks going thru the Panama Canal. It was so cool seeing the jungle on each side of the ship and seeing a crocodile on the shore and hearing monkeys, parrots and other birds.

As we were leaving port in Long Beach, just beyond the breakwater on a shakedown cruise when hit a merchant vessel, the David E. Day approaching us from the right or starboard side. The Quartermaster CPO told Captain Wilson that she had the right of way and he should reverse engines. He ordered the engine room all ahead 2/3 speed and we collided with her. We had to go into dry dock for repairs. Needless to say after a naval board of inquiry, Captain Wilson was relieved of command the very next day.

Our new commanding officer was Captain Harvey Headland. He had 23 years of active service. During the Korean conflict he commanded a destroyer.

They changed our home port again. This time to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Several of my buddies were from Ohio. Lyn Kemp and James Hodges were from Cincinnati and Fitzwater was from Springfield and Steiner was from Cleveland Ohio. We remember Subic Bay and Olangapo for liberty and Sasebo, Japan and Yokosuka, Japan.

We rescued a Panamanian freighter named Venus that had lost her propeller at sea. Rigging the towline and towing her was an incredible feat which we accomplished.

While we were refueling at sea we had a high ranking visitor we high lined from the cruiser USS Helena. It was Admiral Arleigh Burke, CNO.

I got an introduction to the huge black oil compartments when I had to butterworth the tanks. Washing the black oil down to the bottom with sea water after we emptied them out refueling and going through the degaussing range to rid the ship of the magnetic forces it had picked up.

I made E3 SHSN and was aboard the Ponchatoula for three years. I bid a fond farewell to the Ponchatoula on December 11, 1958 in Yokosuka, Japan. I came home on an APA Amphibious Personnel Attack ship. It took over a week. I arrived in San Diego, California. I had just turned 21 years old.