

## **HISTORY OF THE USS PONCHATOULA SHIPMATES ASSOCIATION**

(The following is a synopsis created by PF Hammond and Rosie Smith of interesting activities that took place since our formation in 1998.)

**1996 Richard ‘RP’ Miller, of Mequon, WI** is the “**Founder**” of what has evolved into the USS Ponchatoula Shipmates Association. He arranged the first reunion in St. Louis, MO (1996), and the second one in Las Vegas, NV (1998).

Richard RP Miller’s recollection of how the first event came to be:

IT’S A LONG STORY , BUT NOT REALLY. Back in 1993 or 94 I happened upon Darl Spafford’s phone number. He said he had rolls of microfiche of the ships company for the years of 56, 57 and 58. I took the rolls to the library and copied the pages. He also mentioned Earl Meyers in PA was interested in some kind of get together. So I started to think about how to start. I got 2 phone DVD’s and tried to call people who, at their time aboard, were from specific areas. I didn’t get far, but I found a company in St Louis that would help with a reunion. They took my copied ship’s company lists, sent them to the Nat’l Archives offices. I got deluged with pages and pages of men who in many cases had the correct name but the list was 3 pages for one guy. So all I could do was send a post card to the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 and find out if any were shipmates. From the results of the post card mailings and close look at some of the lists, a working event list was made. An invite to St Louis was sent out and we held the first event at a Holiday Inn in downtown St Louis. My guess is, we had 10 shipmates and perhaps 8 wives. This was held August 4, 1996. I think we only stayed 2-3 days and did not have any formal side tours.

### **1998 – LAS VEGAS**

**President – Joe Thomas, Annapolis, MD**

**Secretary/Treasurer/ Reunion Coordinator - PF Hammond, Vallejo, CA**

The second reunion was again organized by Richard ‘RP’ Miller. This time at the Golden Nugget in downtown Las Vegas. Forty four shipmates and guests attended. The USS Ponchatoula Shipmates Association was officially adopted as the name of our organization. With PF at the podium he walked the shipmates through the process of creating some By-Laws, establishing \$10.00 annual membership dues and opening the floor for nominations for President and Secretary/Treasurer. Joe Thomas was nominated from the floor for the office of President. With no other nominations, a motion was made and passed to close the nominations. When PF asked for Joe Thomas to stand up, he was informed that Joe was in the head, but he had left word if he was nominated for an office he would serve. A vote was called for and a unanimous vote was received. Upon his return he was informed that he had been elected President. In reality, the shipmates that had just nominated “railroaded” Joe into the office of President were all officers that had served under him when he was Executive Officer on the Ponchatoula. Joe made the following comment, “I will never leave the room again when my shipmates are voting on anything.” RP declined the nomination to become Secretary/Treasurer, and PF was

elected with a unanimous vote. Later PF assumed the position of Reunion Coordinator also.

## **2000 – SAN FRANCISCO, CA**

**President – Joe McGarvey, Ooltewah, TN**

**Secretary/Treasurer/ Reunion Coordinator - PF Hammond, Vallejo, CA**

This reunion was held at the Marine Memorial Club. Fourteen shipmates and guests attended for a total of twenty five. I scheduled no activities at this reunion everyone could visit many of the sights etc, in the Bay Area. All of the shipmates that attended joined the Marine Memorial Club for one year. This resulted in a \$100.00 plus savings on the room rate. I pointed this fact out to the shipmates so they could provide their wives with some extra money for shopping. A good time was had by all who attended. One evening ten of us fit into a limo and we went to a restaurant for some of the best Italian food I have ever tasted. Change made to the By-Laws: All future reunions will be held in Las Vegas, NV. (The reason – cheaper airfare, hotel rooms, food etc

## **2002 – LAS VEGAS, NV**

**President – Bill Lounsbury, Manchester, WA**

**Secretary/Treasurer/ Reunion Coordinator - PF Hammond, Vallejo, CA**

**Public Affairs Officer – Bob Collins, Las Vegas, NV**

**Web Master – Dave Schneider, Des Plaines, IL**

Imperial Palace was the site for 42 shipmates and guests to total 76. Bob Collins appointed as first Public Affairs Officer to assist in Reunion Planning. Bill Lounsbury elected President and PF Hammond continues as Secretary/Treasurer. The reunion was dedicated to the memory of Shipmate Charles G. Costello QM3 who served in the Ponchatoula from 1975 to 1977. Charles was killed in the Twin Towers in New York City on 9-11-2001. We were pleased that Charles's father and sister were able to join us to remember Charles. His sister, a recently retired Yeoman, spoke on behalf of the family and there wasn't a dry eye in the room.

## **2003 – PONCHATOULA, LA**

This special visit was held in Ponchatoula, LA the namesake of our beloved ship. Of the 64 attendees, 34 were shipmates. We were there to present Mayor Julian Dufreche and the City of Ponchatoula an artists rendering, in oil, of a portrait of the USS Ponchatoula originally photographed by our Webmaster Dave Schneider back in 1963. The painting was done by Doug Huntzinger of Paramount, CA. We were treated like royalty by the citizens of Ponchatoula. Their hospitality was overwhelming. It included lunch at the Kiwanis Club, a walking tour in the old part of Ponchatoula lead by their historian, a half day tour of the bayou on private party boats, raising of the city's flag (the largest flag in the state of Louisiana). They asked if they could arrange the banquet and of course we said yes. We expected dinner and a speech or two. When we walked into the Lions Club that evening we were greeted to patriotic music, played by the high school band! Before

sitting down to dinner they played the National Anthem and the high school Jr. ROTC presented the colors. We were stunned! And as if all that were not enough, after dinner they brought in a zydeco band for an evening of music and dancing. We made ourselves a promise to one day return to this fair city.

## **2004 - LAS VEGAS, NV**

**President – Dave Schneider, Des Plaines, IL**

**Secretary/Treasurer/ Reunion Coordinator - PF Hammond, Vallejo, CA**

**Public Affairs Officer – Bob Collins, Las Vegas, NV**

**Staff Photographer – Barry Litchfield, Garland, TX**

**Web Master – Dave Schneider, Des Plaines, IL**

Back to Las Vegas, Stratosphere Hotel for 30 shipmates and guests to total 55. The Reunion Coordinator had it easy in Las Vegas. There were so many different venues available in Las Vegas that we did not have to do much scheduling of events. The one thing he had to insure was the Hospitality Room. The following changes were made to our By-Laws at this reunion: We will now meet every year rather than every other year, and the locations will float around the country. The Life Membership was eliminated. The six Life Members we have will remain life members. The Reunion Coordinator requested that the Association select the location of a reunion always be two years in advance. This allows him to start the reunion process as soon as possible. There was a favorable vote on these issues.

## **2005 – BRANSON, MO**

Branson, live music show capital of the world. A total of 74 attendees including 41 shipmates attended this reunion. It was the largest attendance we have had since the reunion in Ponchatoula, LA in 2003. Here again the Reunion Coordinator had it easy. There are so many venues taking place that he let everyone select what they wanted to see. He did however, schedule the Shoju Tabuchi Show with 51 people attending and a golf outing. Where in the world will you see more opulence in the rest rooms than was on display there? This was the only place I recommended that all attending, be sure to visit the “head” before leaving.

We had a new shipmate attend this reunion. His name was Larry Norris, BM3, Sep67 to Aug69. I announced that Larry had stated that if the shipmates wanted to visit him, he could accommodate all of us and would take advantage of our experience with a “swab.” Larry’s business card reads – Larry B. Norris, Director, Department of Corrections, State of Arkansas. For some strange reason none of his shipmates took him up on his very accommodating offer.

## **OTHER ACTIVITY’S IN 2015**

Another activity that some of our shipmates attended this year was to board the SS Jeremiah O’Brien at Pier 45 in San Francisco, CA and sail up the Carquinez

Straits to the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet in Benicia, CA. Anchored in this nest was USS Ponchatoula along with the Kawishiwi, Hassayampa and the USS IOWA (BB-61). It was our intention to sail up and down the rows and pass by the aforementioned ships. Unbeknown to all involved, the US Coast Guard had issued a regulation stating that the waters within 500 feet were RESTRICTED. Oh well, we sailed anyway.

Dave Schneider was a house guest of PF and Bobbi Hammond during the visit to San Francisco. We received a phone call from Shipmate Steve Van Meter informing us that Katrina had just ripped thru the golf coast and he thought we should do something to help our friends in Ponchatoula. As President and Secretary/Treasurer/Reunion Coordinator we made a “management” decision to donate \$500.00 from the Association. In my next newsletter I appealed to the membership to contribute to this fund. You can imagine our surprise when the dust settled we had received an additional \$3,000.00 from our shipmates. On October 26th I flew to Ponchatoula, LA and asked a local shipmate Orrin “Dutch” Battle to assist me on behalf of the USS Ponchatoula Shipmates Association in presenting a check for \$3,500.00 to the Mayor of Ponchatoula, Bob Zabbia. Subsequently the Association received a very nice thank you letter from the Mayor plus he sent personal letters of thanks to all the donors.

## **2006 – CARIBBEAN CRUISE**

Underway for Western Caribbean Cruise on Royal Caribbean, Enchantment of the Seas sailing from Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Even though this was the lowest number of attendees, 9 shipmates and spouses for total of 17, we managed to laugh a lot. For some, it was their maiden voyage on a leisure cruise ship. Karaoke was a highlight with our own Phillip Jones participating! Well to say that we had fun is a gross understatement. I believe I laughed more during that cruise than any other time in my life. Everyone had a very enjoyable time. Our esteemed President Dave Schneider had never been on a cruise ship before and was told that there was a formal night on the cruise and this required the men to wear a tuxedo or a suit to attend. He was overheard saying “You mean to tell me, I wore this tuxedo just to meet the Captain?” I explained to Dave that the sailors had to be in dress uniform to meet the Captain on the PONCH, albeit at Captain’s Mast. So here, he had an invitation with no disciplinary results pending and the drinks were free. However, Dave and all of us that had booked our cruise through Personal Touch Travel Agency in Vallejo, were hosted by the owner of that Agency to a very elegant dinner on the ship the same evening as the Captain’s Reception. By the time we all had finished dinner, the reception was over and poor Dave never did get to meet the Captain. I know he was disappointed, Dave that is, not the Captain.

Of the most “austere” group, we had a couple attending their first Ponchatoula Reunion; James and Marilyn Temple. They also celebrated their anniversary, and Marilyn’s birthday on the cruise. In making his reservation for the cruise, Jim indicated that they would be celebrating their anniversary and a birthday. You should have seen the way their cabin was decorated to recognize both events. You would have thought that they were “royalty or something”; well, at least Marilyn was.

Comments from the President (Dave Schneider) “The Ponchatoula Vacation Club has done it again. To tell the truth I had some misgivings about taking a cruise. I had never been on one, (except for the big one we were all on so many years ago.) When Maureen and I got to our cabin I still couldn’t see how we could have a reunion with 2000 other people in the way. Well, I could not have been more wrong! We were all together each night for dinner, saw one another at breakfast and saved seats for each other at the evening theater. It turned out to be a splendid reunion, comparable to the beautiful time we had in Ponchatoula, LA back in 2003. A small group of great shipmates and their lovely wives, combined with the magnificent ship that PF booked us on, resulted in the best vacation Maureen and I have ever taken!”

## **2007 – BREMERTON, WA**

**President – PF Hammond, Vallejo, CA**

**Vice President – Rodger Smith, Bethesda, MD (Reunion Coordinator)**

**Secretary/Staff Photographer – Barry Litchfield, Garland, TX**

**Treasurer – Phil Rehlander, Rockwall, TX**

**Web Master – Dave Schneider, Des Plaines, IL**

I had mentioned to the Association at a previous reunion that I would not be running for the offices of Secretary, Treasurer and Reunion Coordinator again. When I took over the job from “RP” Miller in 1998 we had 24 shipmates. We now have over 135 members and doing what is required for all three offices was becoming more a chore than a labor of love. Our outgoing President Dave Schneider twisted my arm, and I agreed to accept a nomination for President. The shipmates quickly applied the “Peter Principle” and promoted me to my level of incompetence. The election of three additional officers allowed me to attend to the duties of the President -- preside at all meetings. By-laws changes to include four officers; President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. Terms to expire 2010; thereafter every four years with elections every other even year. New officers; President, PF Hammond; Vice-President (duties of Reunion Coordinator), Rodger Smith; Secretary, Barry Litchfield; and Treasurer, Phil Rehlander.

I want to give special recognition to Bill and Janice Lounsbery for all the help they gave me in setting up this reunion. They live in the Bremerton area and were familiar with the naval bases and other interesting things to see.

As part of the information I received from the Lounsbery’s they provided me with the name and phone number of the Public Affairs Officer at the Kitsap Naval Base. His name is Tom “Mad Dog” Danaher and he held the rank of LCDR, and served as the Engineering Officer on the Ponchatoula from 1976 to 1978. During his assignment the Ponch received an Engineering E, the Areligh A. Burke Award and was know as the “Proud Pumper from Paradise”. He retired in 1996 with the rank of Captain. He volunteered to assist me in setting up the first day of our reunion June 4; he provided the transportation for and recommended we call it “Navy Day”. As a group we had no problem being admitted to the local naval bases with a retired Captain as our Tour Guide. At the end of the day, the Association presented Tom with a photograph of the ship and an application for membership.

## **2008 – WASHINGTON, DC**

Washington, DC, the nation's capital and location for some incredible tours including Annapolis, Arlington National Cemetery and the very memorable Wreath Laying Service at the Navy Memorial remembering USS Ponchatoula shipmates. We were honored to have two shipmates present that served during WWII on the first USS Ponchatoula (AOG-38). Dr. Robert Mandsager, EM3/c, and Adam Snyder, Y1/c. Adam showed up in whites – well almost dress whites. The Association Officers held a uniform inspection on him and found the following discrepancies: White hat on backwards, neckerchief missing (he said his wife Vi used it as a dust rag some years ago), pressed creases in uniform not up to regulation, his shoes were black – that is all we could say about them. We informed him that we were placing him on report and he was to report to his wife upon returning home for disciplinary action as she sees fit. We were having fun with Adam at his expense. Adam did however honor the shipmates from his era on the Ponchatoula with a speech on what duty was like on the AOG-38. He told us that the white uniform he had on was the same uniform he had worn some 60 plus years ago. I told him that was a feat he could be proud of. Very few of us could get into our uniforms today, and we wore them more recently than 60 years ago.

I tip my hat to Rodger and Rosie Smith for the excellent reunion they put on in Washington, DC. From many years of experience I can say, it takes two to do the job they did.

One of the highpoints was the wreath laying at the Navy Memorial. Speaking at the ceremony was **Taylor Kiland**, a former Naval Officer who now works at the Memorial as their Vice President of Marketing and Communications. She is also the **granddaughter of the Ponchatoula's sponsor**, Mrs. I.N. Kiland, who actually broke the champagne bottle across Ponchatoula's bow to christen her at the launching ceremony into the Delaware River, July 9, 1955 at Camden, NJ. We were able to see the photos of the launching, breaking of the champagne bottle, and the programs from the actual ceremony. At the banquet, we made Taylor an Associate Member of our association.

Our Shipmate John Bury served on the election committee of his representative from the State of Pennsylvania when the Honorable Joe Sestak, Vice Admiral, US Navy Retired was elected to the House of Representatives in Washington, DC. Another highpoint of our reunion was that Representative Sestak extended an invitation to the members of the Association to visit his office, and his staff would show them around the House of Representatives. During our reunion in Washington, DC Congressman Sestak had an entry made in the Congressional Record in the Proceeding and Debates of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, Second Session Honoring the USS Ponchatoula Shipmates Association.

This was the first reunion that we used Reunion Planners. Except for the air conditioning on the bus they seemed to do a good job. We had 35 shipmates and guests for a total of 69.

## **2009 – WASHINGTON, DC – USS Ponchatoula (AO-148) Plaque Dedication**

A little history here. During our 2008 reunion the Association met Taylor Baldwin Kiland (See notes from 2008 reunion). We also became aware of the many naval ships

that had a plaque on display at the US Navy Memorial in Washington, DC. The cost of each plaque was \$3,000.00. Initially the officers of the Association were apprehensive about obtaining one for the Ponch because of the cost. Taylor issued the Association a challenge. The challenge was for the Association to raise \$1,500.00 toward the \$3,000.00 and her family would donate the additional \$1,500.00 needed for the purchase of the plaque. Well, needless to say the shipmates came through, and the plaque was purchased.

On December 3, 2009 several members of the shipmates association and their wives attended the USS Ponchatoula plaque dedication. The plaque which honors all three Ponchatoula's AOG-38, AO-148 & TAO-148 was placed on the Wall of Honor at the US Navy Memorial in Washington, DC where it will remain in perpetuity.

For this ceremony I asked two of our shipmates if they would wear their dress blues for the occasion. Adam Snyder wore his WW2 blues with the flat hat and Phillip Jones wore his uniform representing present day uniforms. Both of them should receive some type of commendation for staying fit and trim enough to get back into those uniforms after all of these years. It was a very nice dedication ceremony and included a great wine and cheese reception afterward.

You may view a YouTube slide show of the plaque dedication by going to this website link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xFarmYPGzw>

### **2010 – PONCHATOULA, LA**

Here we come, 95 strong and 52 shipmates. Again, an incredible visit to our namesake city. The citizens outdid themselves in hosting us at our second Ponchatoula reunion. All the members of the Executive Committee worked very hard this year in creating the presentations the Association made to the City of Ponchatoula. We made it a point to keep several of the presentations secret so they would be a surprise to all when presented. Our efforts generated the effect we were looking for – complete surprise.

The highlight of our ceremony was the presentation of the ship's bell from our beloved ship to the Mayor and the citizens of Ponchatoula. I must give our Treasurer Phil Rehlander a big pat on the back. He has been a driver for FedEx National LTL for many years, and thru his efforts FedEx picked up the bell at the Naval History Center in Washington, DC and delivered it to Ponchatoula, LA at no expense to our Association or the City of Ponchatoula. The cost for transportation of the bell would have been quite expensive. This was FedEx's way of supporting local communities and the men and women of the Armed Forces.

The Bell Ceremony was kicked off with a police escort from our hotel in Hammond to City Hall in Ponchatoula. A special tribute was given to Robert Luedtke, Robert Mandsager and Adam Snyder our WW2 shipmates who sailed in the USS Ponchatoula (AOG-38). CWO4 Ray Brown was recognized for his long and distinguished career. The bell which had been mounted on a stand was officially presented to the City of Ponchatoula by our President, PF Hammond. He gave a few remarks concerning the use

of the “ship’s bell” on a naval vessel. He asked Shipmate BMC, Kenneth “Smiley” Lawson, to demonstrate the ringing of the bell to tell time. Upon officially receiving the ships bell Mayor Bob Zabbia explained why it was mounted outside City Hall. It was there for the citizens of Ponchatoula to view and ring anytime they wanted. He also presented us with a certificate from the Governor of Louisiana acknowledging our service and one from the City of Ponchatoula for the same.

The largest flag in the State of Louisiana 40’ X 70’ was raised while we watched. The one raised by the Shipmates in 2003 was 30’ X 60’ Following the flag raising we attended a luncheon at Rockefeller’s Restaurant in Ponchatoula which was hosted by several businesses in the town.

This reunion was dedicated to our departed Shipmate SM3, Orrin “Dutch” Battle July 1970 to April 1972. His family Susan Battle, Reagan Battle Johnson, and Lindsay Battle Lirette were guests of the Association at the banquet.

Whoever is credited with the quote “You can never go back” referring to revisiting a particular place, has obviously never visited the City of Ponchatoula, LA. The wonderful citizens of Ponchatoula blew that quote out of the water and then some.

### **2012; San Antonio, TX**

First stop is Ponchatoula, LA for the Strawberry Festival. The original plan was a ride on a float for the shipmates. That plan fell through and the 9 shipmates and guests probably had more fun catching beads than throwing them. John and Woody Hearn arranged a special presentation of the Captain’s Gig Life Ring to the City of Ponchatoula. Seems John and Jim Schmerse were in a bidding battle for the Life Ring at the auction in the 2010 reunion. With Jim’s passing in 2011, John and Woody decided to present the Life Ring to Ponchatoula in Jim’s memory. Betty Schmerse, Jim’s wife and her family of daughters, sons, and daughters-in-law were with us to share this memorable event. After enjoying the Strawberry Festival, we were off to the Holiday Inn in San Antonio. San Antonio offered incredible tours to Mission San Jose, the Alamo and National Museum of the Pacific War as well as relaxing visits to Riverwalk. At the Banquet Dinner, PF and Bobbi Hammond were honored and thanked for their many years of commitment to successful reunions for the Association. Welcome to new Officers; President, Phil Rehlander and Treasurer, John Hearn. Again, a successful auction thanks to the many donations and Phil Rehlander’s auctioneer skills. Attendance was 63 with 35 being shipmates.

### **2013; Gettysburg, PA**

Gettysburg for a mini-reunion organized by RP Miller that brought 14 shipmates and guests for total of 26. Farthest traveled award probably went to Richard and Veronica Zimmerman of Texas. Gettysburg is an incredible city for American history and Ghost Tours.

### **2014; San Diego, CA**

We stayed at the Crowne Plaza in Mission Valley. Attendance was 36 shipmates and 27 guests. The temperate weather that San Diego is so well known for was not to be enjoyed during our Reunion week. Temps were in the 90’s most of the week and with enough water, we managed to enjoy our tours to the USS Midway, City Tour with a stop at the USS Recruit, and the San Diego Zoo. A new feature to our Banquet was a Guest Speaker. Stu Lantz shared his experiences as

color analyst for the Los Angeles Lakers broadcasts. Again, another successful auction with a \$500 contribution to Ponchatoula High School Jr ROTC Program. Welcome to new Officer; Secretary, Jay Rosenstein.

### **2015; USS Ponchatoula AO-148 Memorial Dedication in Ponchatoula, LA**

The City of Ponchatoula has a museum right in the center of town. We were able to give them many artifacts from the ship that they have displayed with pride. We also acquired some of the heavy hardware from the ship's fantail, bits, chocks, capstan, railings, lights and most of all, the flagstaff. The City has installed on the museum grounds a 15'x 30' concrete deck with one rounded end. The hardware has been installed on the deck much as it was on the Ponchatoula, giving it the appearance of actually being on the ship's fantail. It is a remarkable thing to see.

A dedication ceremony was held and of course the City went all out. They put up a tent in case of rain, blocked part of a street and brought out the high school band. About 200 people attended and who do you suppose the guest of honor was? Believe it or not, Mrs. Julia Welles Hawkins, the school teacher who started it all in 1942! Mrs. Hawkins is 99 years old!

A hearty Thank You to John Hearn and Jerry Mouton. None of this would have happened if it were not for their dogged determination and colossal effort. John said it best in his report "There is not another memorial to a fleet oiler in the country. Now they are all gone; there will not be another fleet oiler, and the USS Ponchatoula is forever enshrined in Ponchatoula, Louisiana."

### **2016; Warwick, Rhode Island**

It was time to go east. The first reunion to be held in the fall of the year. We had 30 shipmates and 27 guests and stayed at a lovely Crown Plaza in Warwick. Tours included the Brakers, former summer home of the Vanderbilts. The battleship USS Massachusetts museum and the USS Nautilus SSN 571. An enjoyable afternoon was also spent at Mystic Sea Port. Mystic Sea Port is a nineteenth century museum village and sea port.

Our guest speaker at the banquet was someone special. James Holmes is an instructor at the US Naval War College. Mr. Holmes spoke to us about the problem of trying to maintain a strong military presence in any one place when our military is spread out over much of the world.

It was a wonderful reunion and the members decided our next one will be in Kansas City.