

## Memory of a Plank Owner

USS Ponchatoula (AO-148)

By: John J. Bury, MR1, USN/retired

I was not a green sailor when I was assigned duty aboard the Ponchatoula. I was a Naval reservist with two years under my belt. I had been on two ships (for training purposes) prior to going active duty. I was an FN (E-3). As for going to sea, I had some experience. I knew what it was like to ride high seas and even a fierce storm.

I was a Philadelphian, so knew my way around. I reported in October 1955 to the Philadelphia Naval Base. I had no clue where I was to be assigned. After a couple days, the personnel office handed me a set of order to report to the USS Ponchatoula (AO-148) commissioning crew. There was a barracks all set up for the crew. At the reserve center prior to departing for active duty, a seasoned petty officer told me to see the petty officer who would be assigning crew to divisions. Well I knew where I wanted to be on that ship. What I wanted to be is a Machinery Repairman, that meant getting assigned to 'A' division. I saw this First Class MM, his name was Norrington. Boldly I go up to him, announce who I am and that I want to be assigned to 'A' division. He asked me why? Told him I wanted to be an MR. He looked over his roster, said we have an MR3 assigned. My heart sank for a moment. Told him I have experience as a civilian machinist. He said ok in case of a need for back-up. Wee, I got what I wanted so far. After having been assigned mess cook duty and compartment cleaner duty and voyage across the great pond out of Long Beach, Calif. The MR3 took sick and was hospitalized, I was then assigned to the machine shop. After returning to our home port, Long Beach, I made MR3, the shop was all mine.

No one called this new ship the Ponchatoula, she was simply the "Ponch". I remember the first time I saw the Ponch, WoW she was big, I figured she would not ride like the two DD's I was on for reserve training. Then I saw all the supplies on the pier, working parties were formed to bring aboard all those supplies. I hauled 50 pound bags of potatoes and cases of canned goods until my back would break. At some point in time we were divided up into groups for ships orientation, touring the ship, every compartment. I was fascinated by how this giant of a ship was built.

Since I knew my way around the City, I made some friends for liberty call. We would steam out into the City and some of the neighborhoods.

Then soon came the day we have all been waiting for. The official commissioning of the Ponch, January 12, 1956. I never saw so much Brass onboard for the ceremony. It was a proud day, January 12<sup>th</sup> when we all made our first salute as the colors were raised. I remember seeing the Commissioning Pennant being hoisted. It wasn't until we were entering The Chesapeake Bay when Captain Wilson ordered a new clean pennant hoisted. I was skylarking up on the signal bridge, a seaman, Bob Collins hauled down the soot covered Original Commissioning Pennant and hoisted a new clean one. I asked Bob what was he going to do with the old pennant., he handed it to me. I rolled it up put it in my locker. Some of you guys remember those aluminum

suite case we bought in Japan for about \$3. That is where that pennant stayed for about 45 years. One day I framed it, kept it on my memorabilia wall along with pictures, awards, certificates of promotion and medals during my 22 years of Naval service. I met up with the Ponch again in waters of Vietnam. I was a crew member of the USS Sacramento (AOE-1), we would off load her fuel and a few supplies keep us on the line. Once I saw the Ponch in port Olongapo, PI, I went aboard, saw my old shop, talked to the MR of the shop, checked out my old sleeping compartment. She brought back so many memories that day I paid her a visit. She was still the tough old girl as I remembered her, showing her age of wear and tear, nonetheless tough and proud.

I remember the first Ponch reunion I went to in Ponchatoula, La. I brought that framed pennant with me to show my shipmates the original pennant was still alive and preserved for posterity. That pennant had traveled the world over with me in my aluminum suit case. It had even seen war in Vietnam. Another reunion, I think it was Washington, D.C, I framed an 8"x10" picture of the pennant for an auction we were having there. The bid started off with \$10. Tom Botwinski, YN3 was the highest bidder at \$275. He sure did want that picture.

Later we had another reunion in Ponchatoula, La. After much searching, The Ponch's bell was found. Congressman Joe Setack, Vice Admiral, USN/retired (D-7<sup>th</sup> Pa.) located the bell for us. PF Hammond, PN3 made arrangements through another shipmate to have the bell crated and shipped to the City of Ponchatoula and the City prepared a fitting location for the bell's display. It was at that time I decided the Original Commissioning pennant should be with the bell. I wrote a brief story about how I acquired the pennant and Bob Collins, SMCM and myself signed a document to certify the pennant. The pennant, its story and certification was then presented in ceremony to the Mayor of the City of Ponchatoula as witness in honor of our ship, "The Ponch".