

The PONCHATOULA & Me - Submitted by "PF" Hammond

I can't remember a time when I was a young boy growing up that I was not fascinated with the Navy and its' ships. I could not wait until I was old enough to join. My naval career started in January 1956 at the age of 17. I came on board the Ponchatoula as a PNSN in a swap from the USS Mispillion (AO-105) in January 1958. Some members of the Ships Office on the Ponchatoula didn't want to change homeport from Long Beach to Hawaii. I was 19 at the time and ready to "see the world".

It was during my tour on the Ponchatoula that I discovered I loved being at sea. There is nothing like seeing the water as smooth as a piece of glass, with the propellers of the ship churning up a pure white wake against the deep royal blue water. Riding out a storm at sea can be a very uncomfortable experience unless you are aboard a vessel with a deep draft like a tanker. I think at one time or another I was in every space on the ship. I was curious as to what the "snipes" did down in their hot holes. I learned how to go up and down the ladders below decks, only occasionally touching the hot handrails. Besides working in the Ship's Office, I stood watch on the Signal Bridge. I had learned Morse code and semaphore from a Quartermaster friend on my first ship. During underway replenishment operations you can always use another Signalman on the Signal Bridge due to the tremendous amount of message traffic being sent and received visually. In addition, being on the Signal Bridge you had a better view of the entire refueling operation that the OOD did because you could see what was going on both port and starboard sides at once. Watching every man on deck doing his part during an underway replenishment was exciting to me, even after seeing it hundreds of times.

When I was not busy in the Ship's Office or on the Signal Bridge I used to hang out in CIC. Ralph Bryant said to me one day, "If you are going to spend so much time here you had better make yourself useful." I asked him if I could learn to set the surface search radarscope? RP Miller said he would see to it that I learn how. So after learning what the job required in other than General Quarters conditions, I enjoyed relieving the Radarman sitting the scope every chance I got.

One of the reasons RP lost so much hair on the Ponchatoula is because of me. One evening I was setting the radar screen with the sound powered phones on. All of a sudden over my phones comes "Fantail Combat, the BT is in the water". Now being the sharp Personnelman that I was, I knew that a BT was a Boilertender and apparently one of them had just fallen overboard. When I announced to everyone in CIC that we had a man overboard on the stern, there was a BT in the water, RP turned white. He shouted to everyone "**Do not pass that word to the Bridge;** it's the bathythermograph, not a person." Not being part of the regular crew in CIC I had not been privy to the briefing the Radarman had received concerning this instrument and its use. Someone had failed to inform me that the "BT" was going in the water on that watch. Fortunately for all of us in CIC that night, RP's quick response prevented an erroneous man-over-board report getting to the OOD. Needless to say, the very next day I made it a point to be present when the BT was used, and I was shown how the smoked glass went into it and how it made a record of the water temperature, depth and some other information as I recall.

In November 1958 I was promoted to PN3. Here I am now a supervisor at age 20. The only experience I had in managing the activities of others was the baby sitting of my younger brothers and sisters when I was growing up. Even then I somehow knew the ultimate responsibility rested with my parents. It wasn't until I made third class I learned you can delegate authority, but not responsibility. I am especially thankful to two shipmates who had a big influence on my life that continues to this day. They were Elmer Thielke, YNC and Wayne Burris, SM1 (recently deceased). I learned from both Elmer and Wayne how to be a supervisor and how to encourage the very best from your "troops". Shortly after my promotion to Third Class I was appointed to the job of Postal Clerk for the ship. That is the job I held until my "kiddy cruise" discharge in July 1959. I returned to Active Naval service in 1961 and retired in January 1977 at age 38 with 21 years service.

I look back on my naval career and my life and realize that I owe a lot of what I have accomplished in the past 40 years to my shipmates on the Ponchatoula. By the example they set they helped an

impressionable young kid get his life together and set his sights on making the Navy a career. Working as a Personnelman in the Ship's Office and as the Postal Clerk I came in contact with almost every member of the ships crew on a daily basis. I am sure that I learned something from each and everyone of the 200+ crew members but, those who stick out in my mind for having taught me about the Navy and life in general are members of our Association. In addition to Elmer Thielke and Wayne Burris they are Ralph Bryant RD1, PR Miller, RD2 and Walter Wisnewski, ET1. It is because of them and others like them that influenced me later on in my career, that I have a wonderful family, and am now happily retired.