

A Plank owner's memory

By Robert Collins SMCM (SW) Retired

On January 3, 1956 the brand new crew of the USS Ponchatoula (AO-148) was lined up in front of the Receiving Center in Philadelphia PA. We were heading over to the pier where the ship was tied up. She had just recently completed her sea trials and was now ready for her initial load of food and supplies.

None of us (unrated enlisted men) had as yet seen her. I can still remember the moment I first laid eyes on her as we turned the corner of the street leading directly to the pier. There she was all 650 ft. with her bow pointed high in the air. She was huge, much bigger than I had anticipated.

We spent the next nine days loading stacks and stacks of food and supplies lining the dock for almost the entire length of the ship. For several days trucks continued bringing supplies. It seemed like they would never quit, but then the Ponchatoula was a pretty big ship to fill.

During those nine days we became oriented to the ship and shipboard routine. Getting all of us prepared for shipboard life was quite a task for the seasoned sailors and officers onboard because at least 60% of us were Reservists who had volunteered for two years of service and had never set foot aboard ship.

The third day we each got assigned to a department and division. For example; I and a friend of mine, Jim Flannigan volunteered for the Operations Department where we were assigned as Quartermaster Strikers.

Commissioning Day

January 12, 1956 was a bitter cold morning. A light snow had fallen during the night covering the area that had been set up next to the main mast for guests to sit. It had to be swept and de-iced along with the chairs that had been set up for the guests and dignitaries.

An hour before the ceremony the dignitaries and guests began to arrive. Among the dignitaries were: The Honorable James H. Morrison, US Congressman from Louisiana, Mrs. I. N. Kiland who was the Ponchatoula's sponsor and had officiated at the launching, and Rear Admiral E. H. von Heimburg, USN, Commandant of the Fourth Naval District.

After the National Anthem and opening ceremonies the Rear Admiral read the order initiating the Ponchatoula as an official ship of the United States Navy. As he turned the ship over to her new Captain, W. R. Wilson, I had the privilege of hoisting the Commissioning pennant to the top of the main mast. In just a few days we would be underway for the West Coast and her home port of Long Beach. For me and all my shipmates this was the beginning of a new exciting adventure and a great learning experience aboard a great ship.

I remember the day I departed the Ponchatoula for the last time, eighteen months later. As the liberty launch pulled away from the gangway and headed toward the Naval Base I looked back and experienced mixed feelings about leaving her and all the friends I had made and the fun we'd had during that time. At the same time I knew I'd never see her again, but I've thought about her many times since then.