

USS RENSHAW

The last reunion



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In 2013 my wife and I went to my ship's reunion in San Diego, CA, but due to conflicting responsibilities, I missed the one in 2014. Soon after the 2014 reunion, the committee sent out a note saying that due to declining attendance, future reunions would be canceled, and that the remaining reunion fund would be donated to a charity.

I can understand this, but it hurt not being able to say a final "goodbye" to my shipmates.

Renshaw

The ship, the USS *Renshaw* (DD/DDE 499) was a Fletcher-class destroyer, commissioned in December 1942. She was engaged in many WWII Pacific battles, including the Solomons, New Britain and the Marianas, until she was torpedoed off the Philippines by a Japanese submarine in February 1945, where

19 of her crew were killed.

In October 1945, President Harry S. Truman rode aboard on Navy Day as he reviewed the fleet in New York Harbor. The pictures of Truman and the 499 were in all the magazines and newspapers. She was decommissioned in 1946, recommissioned by my Korean War crew on 1 June 1950, and finally decommissioned and sent to the breakers in 1970.

Reunions

The WWII crew started the reunions soon after the war and as the years went by and the WWII crew became fewer, they opened the reunion to those who had served aboard her after WWII.

My cousin Paul, a career Air Force sergeant, who was a ball turret gunner on a B-17 shot down over Germany in December 1944, was

The battleship USS Missouri (BB-63) dwarfs the destroyer USS Renshaw (DD-499) during the 1945 Navy Day ceremonies on the Hudson River in New York City. Official U.S. Navy photo

stationed at Hickam Field while I was on the 499 in Pearl Harbor. Some evenings he would drive over to the ship in his jeep with his wife and son to watch our fantail movies when we were tied up at the submarine base dock.

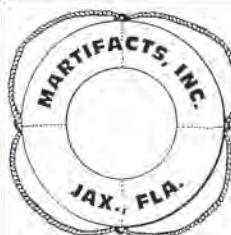
In 1990, having gotten to know many of our crew, he sent me a clipping from a military news magazine that told of the 499's coming reunion in Wilmington, North Carolina.

I went, without my wife, since I wasn't sure how a Korean War sailor would be received by a WWII group. As I was going through the bar area of the reunion hotel, having half made up my mind that "This wasn't for me," a heavyset man approached me. From the neck down he was a stranger, but from the neck up, it was Johnny Collard, a damage controlman on the 499. Johnny, the guy who would always swing by our Fire Control Plotting Room with an empty coffee cup since we always had a coffee pot going.

I loudly called out, "Johnny? Johnny Collard?"

He looked up and asked, "Mac? Is that you?"

His face was identical to the picture of him in my scrapbook, taken



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on an "M-Boat" on our way to Fleet Landing in Yokosuka in 1951.

Through the day we gradually picked up another half dozen of our bunch, finally ending up late at night in a hotel room talking about the 499, our involvement in the Special Ops retrieval of a downed MiG-15 from the mouth of the Yalu River, and especially our attack on a submarine contact a week later that left a non-moving target on the bottom and a five-mile-long oil slick on the surface, in July 1951 in the Yellow Sea.

Reminiscing

As the years went by and our wives became involved, the reunions became a focus of our year's activities. We became close to Dick Wenzel who owned a bar on the East Coast; he was a sonarman when she was torpedoed. I would kid Dick about them seeing the submarine periscope, which they did, and thinking it was a floating broomstick.

There was gunner's mate Dick Post, who walked the high steel in New York City after the war as an ironworker, and who had brought up shipmate's bodies from below after the torpedoing. And who, after his wife had died of cancer, married a widow with children and grandchildren. Tough Dick, who was named "Giggles" by the grandchildren, accepted it with good humor.

We got a kick out of Machinist's Mate "Queenie," who we marveled how, at age 70 (it doesn't seem so old now), was jitterbugging with a much younger woman in the reunion ballroom.

There was Mr. Outten, retired Captain Outten, who was our ever-demanding gunnery officer and was continuously irritated by Billy and I and our haphazard way of operating the Mk. 56 gun director while tracking aircraft, and whose wife had attended a Catholic high school in my Chicago neighborhood.

There was our third skipper, Captain Lodwick Alford, who was gunnery officer on the Asiatic Fleet destroyer USS *Stewart* (DD 224) when she was fighting the Japanese in Java in 1942.

There were the between-wars shipmates who enjoyed island duty,

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Dick Post, WWII Gunner's Mate, dedicating the U.S.S. Renshaw's plaque at the Nimitz Naval Museum in Fredericksburg, TX, during the 2012 reunion.

which our bunch didn't. During the Korean War we always seemed to be steaming somewhere, off the Hawaiian islands or off Korea.

In December 1961, they recovered the nose cone of the American optical reconnaissance satellite Discover 36. In the crew was Glen Barbee, who worked part-time in Yokosuka bars and played country-western music on his guitar, and who married a lovely Japanese woman.

There was a solid group of Viet Nam crew, who told about rescuing a downed pilot off Viet Nam and operating on Yankee Station in Tonkin Gulf.

Around the country

Every year in September we would meet in cities in every part of this country, trying to give all crewmembers, wherever they lived, a chance to participate. One year we were in a hurricane in Tampa, FL. Another year we were in Buffalo, NY, climbing through the hull of the USS *The Sullivans* (DD 537), another Fletcher-class, where our wives, in walking through the berthing compartments, asked how we lived in such tight, poorly vented spaces.

We went to Baltimore, MD, and visited the U.S. Naval Academy and were impressed not just with the school, but with the quality of men and women in attendance who would be future leaders of the fleet.

In 2001 we were in Norfolk, VA, not long after the Towers went down. We were not allowed on the base due to heightened security, so we had to make do with the Portsmouth Navy Yard's museum that had the 499's bell hanging adjacent to the entrance door.

In 2013 we went to San Diego, CA, and took a harbor cruise where we could view the in-port fleet. It was then that I accepted that our Korean War Navy was no more. It had gone the way of wooden ships and sails. A current, single Arleigh Burke-class destroyer has more fighting ability than a WWII task force.

Through the years we, and our wives, all got older and less desirous to travel. And people died, shipmates and their wives, until there were just a few of us left. Like I said at the beginning, there will be no more reunions, but, as long as we breathe and remember, the 499 is in commission and still steaming. 