

A Christening in Pascagoula

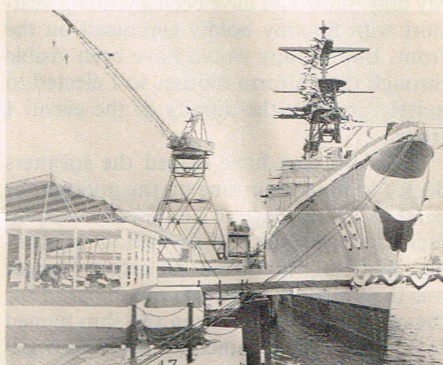
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Five years ago the last of the Spruance-class destroyers was launched in Ingalls Shipyard in Pascagoula, Miss. USS HAYLER (DD-997) was christened by two granddaughters while a third looked on. Having a ship named for your old man or grandpa doesn't exactly happen every day . . . not to every kid on the block. And since Dad had died only a year-and-a-half before, his memory was recent enough so that this was by no means an abstract event disassociated from any feeling.

My family and I had moved to the San Francisco Bay area in 1970 so we were all frequent visitors to Carmel where mother and dad made their home. During the last several years we had done our best to shore up a beloved soul against the inroads of old age. The girls: Margo, Claire, and their cousin Nicole were particularly welcome every time they visited. Even — especially — old sailors have an eye for pretty girls. So the entire family gathered for the event. It was a rare opportunity to see the past suitably tied to the future.

Margo, the co-sponsor and champagne bottle-breaker for the event, arrived at the New Orleans airport early Thursday evening, 25 March. After getting lost once or twice between New Orleans and Pascagoula, we arrived safely at the motel to find my stepson Tom already in residence with his own rental car. After trying out fresh Gulf shrimp we collapsed to recover from the trip and time-zone change.

The next morning we found that brother Bob and his family which included his son Bob and Nicole, the other co-sponsor and



USS HAYLER

champagne bottle-buster had arrived. The clan which numbered more than 20 gathered during the day and at 1400 the two sponsors and immediate family were taken to the shipyard for a dry run-through of the event. The shipyard wanted to give the two girls an opportunity to heft the bottles and brief them on the actions. The rest of us would have a chance to watch and take a tour of the ship. Since both Bob and I had spent many years in destroyers, of which HAYLER is the newest, we were particularly interested.

Unlike the older and more familiar practice of building a ship on launching ways and letting her slide down to reach the water with a splash, Ingalls assembles ships in a building yard in large modular sections which are mounted on huge dollies. As the sections are assembled, they work their way to the water where the assembled hull is gingerly pushed onto a huge pontoon which is then submerged so that the ship can float off. Since this takes the better part of a day, Ingalls has found it better to christen the ship after she is water-borne. This precludes the possibility of the sponsor having to chase the ship down the ways with an unused bottle of champagne, makes scheduling of the event easier, and the construction of the vessel more efficient.

The rehearsal was not as ridiculous as one might think. We have all seen examples on TV or in the newspapers of a little old lady in tennis shoes missing the bow of the ship, or finding that the bottle was too tough to bust. Ingalls cuts down the odds on this tragedy by giving the sponsor a chance to warm up at bat as well as by scoring the bot-

tle so that it will explode on the slightest shock under the pressure of warm champagne. In this case, since there were two young sponsors — both tennis players — one took the forehand position, one the backhand, and they had no difficulty in coordinating either in practice or the next day in the event.

After the rehearsal we were taken on a tour of the ship. Although the hull itself was completed, the fitting out had only started. The interior was a maze of wiring, portable ventilation ducts, temporary wooden ladders and cartons of equipment which had not yet been opened and installed. The ship superintendent paused in one large space. "This," he said, "is the captain's stateroom. His queen-size bed will go right here." My brother and I could only gasp. Yes, destroyers have come a long way.

My second daughter Claire, the maid of honor, had been held up by her job and was unable to be with us for the rehearsal so she was not due in New Orleans until that evening. We had planned a quiet family dinner for Dad's two younger twin sisters, assorted cousins, grandnephews and grandnieces of various ages, shapes and sizes. Bearing in mind the liberal California and college background of co-sponsors Margo and Nicole and their brothers, the dinner seemed a little tame, so Tom volunteered to take the group to pick up Claire at the New Orleans airport and give them a "short" visit to Bourbon Street on the way back to Pascagoula. This was generous, but I blessed the project with some misgivings because it occurred to me that if the Bourbon Street in-

The Hayler Clan



Bullseye



doctrination took too long the ship might be all ready to christen the next day . . . and no sponsors to do it. But mother always said that some decisions were difficult, so I consented. There was no choice, anyhow.

The family dinner may have been quiet, but it was thoroughly enjoyable. About five branches were represented, from early teenage grandnieces and nephews to Dad's two sisters. We had come from California, New England, Pennsylvania, Florida and Tennessee. Even the youngest had known Dad, but only as a distant figure representing another era. Being present gave them an appreciation of the part one of their forebearers had played in a now sometimes forgotten part of World War II, and an opportunity to see life given to an inert steel hull lying alongside the building pier. After we broke up, a check revealed that the principal actresses in tomorrow's drama had not yet returned.

The next morning Bob and I got up early for some tennis, and en route passed through the parking lot to see if our little cherubs had returned. They had. At 1000 we were all to gather in the lobby of the motel for coffee and doughnuts to await cars to take us to the ceremony. From then on, everything would be in automatic. But the girls being ready was by no means a foregone conclusion. At 0900 the phone started ringing in our motel room.

"Mummy, do you have any aspirin?"

"Dad, can you bring down some coffee?"

"Mummy, can you iron my blouse again? Margot got it wet when she got out of the shower."

"Come down and see the lovely orchids that were just delivered."

"Mummy, do you have any extra panty hose? I just got a run."

If the above glimpses convey something less than the impression of a smoothly functioning organization, you get the picture. At the end of this operation the room may have looked like a wreck, but the girls appeared — clear-eyed, immaculately turned out, and gorgeous. Ah, youth . . .

The rest of the day including the christening itself is best described as a kaleidoscope of impressions in which the memory occasionally focuses on one impression or image. To begin with, the planning for the launching and everything connected with it was meticulous. Nothing was left to chance. There were no slip ups. A motorcade complete with motorcycle escort took the guests and dignitaries to the shipyard. This was the first time I have ever heard police sirens without having to pull over, and I could not stop looking over my shoulder to make sure that I wasn't the culprit about to get a ticket.

Since I'm not planning an elaborate funeral I don't expect to be in this position again. The route was so well patrolled that the thought occurred that if someone was planning a bank robbery in Pascagoula, timing it to coincide with a launching would insure that no one would discover the blown safe or missing payroll until the following

Monday morning. The town is not large, and the police were fully occupied with the launching.

My next impression is of the unexpectedly bitter cold which still makes me shiver. The Gulf Coast is normally warm in the Springtime, but not this day. The Navy's uniform was summer whites with choker collars. Although Bob and I are long retired from the Navy, and could have worn checkered suits and porkpie hats, we decided that in deference to Dad's memory we would turn out in the uniform of the day. We had not expected to turn into icicles. Bob, as usual, was a little smarter than I because he had a tennis sweater to wear underneath his blouse. My only out would have been a yellow sweat-shirt with Snoopy boldly embossed on the front. But Snoopy would have been visible through the uniform blouse, so I elected to quietly preserve the dignity of the event. I froze.

The cold may have helped the speakers decide to limit their time on the podium, or perhaps my own age or interest in the event increased my ability to sit without squirming. But it was no time at all before Margot was thanking the Navy and the shipyard for the opportunity to christen the ship named for "Pops." The launching party then adjourned to the platform built around the stem of the ship. The girls made a simultaneous bullseye and shattered the bottles with professional ease. Then we were off to the reception and a chance to thaw out.

The high point of the reception and luncheon was meeting RAdm. Chauncey Moore, the exec of Dad's cruiser HONOLULU during two years of World War II. Chauncey also appeared in his whites although his had evidently been stowed even farther towards the bottom of his seabag and for longer than Bob's or mine. They were yellow! He could have doubled as Davey Jones. But when he was given a chance to speak at the end of the luncheon, all conversation stopped. No one even whispered. He was an accomplished speaker, and he recreated a few moments of the night cruiser battles in which he and Dad had been together.

"I was watching when HELENA was torpedoed. We later picked up her survivors.

"Our bow was blown off up to No. 1 turret. At the same time another torpedo ran up our wake and punched a hole in the stern. Fortunately it was a dud and didn't blow up."

RAdm. Moore had an appreciative audience. The young Navy present had probably never heard a first-hand account like this before. When he started to speak there were doubtless some, including the author, who worried that he would never stop. But when he sat down we urged him to keep on.

Several years ago while playing golf near his home, Chauncey slipped his anchor and went quietly out to sea. But none of those present for the christening of the ship named for his WWII skipper will ever forget him.

In the early evening the phone rang in our

room. This time it was a voice from the very Deep South who identified himself as the motel manager.

"Missus Hayler, do you have a daughter, Margaret? I don't know how to tell you this. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

"The best thing is to come right straight out and tell you. Your daughter Margaret is in the hot tub without any clothes on."

This new development was fraught with trauma. Dad's sisters were billeted in a room a scant 50 feet away from the hot tub.

Toni said she would look into the situation. By this time it was dark, and the rain, which had held off during the day, was coming down in buckets. She put on her raincoat and went down to investigate. The manager's report was exaggerated, but his concern from the viewpoint of one steeped in the traditions of the Bible Belt was easy to understand. The Bourbon Street group had reconvened in the hot tub where they were continuing their refreshments — both liquid and otherwise. When I heard about this, any shred of doubt I might have had that the next generation would ever forget the christening of HAYLER was removed. I also had the distinct feeling that could my father have been present, he would have wanted to be in the hot tub, too.

The final chapter of this story was written at the New Orleans airport when Margot was checking her luggage and endeavoring to pass through the metal detector before boarding the plane. As the sponsor she had been given the champagne bottle which she had used to christen the ship as well as a plaque with a scale model of the bow of the ship projecting from it. Both were in handsome wooden boxes. But she also had with her an embarrassing souvenir of Bourbon Street which she was determined not to surrender.

It was a handhole plate from one of the gas street lamps, clearly marked "Property of New Orleans Gas Co." It would certainly cause any self-respecting metal detector to go bananas. She first opened the bottle and plaque cases for the inspectors. They were properly impressed and appreciative when she told them that she had used the bottle to christen a ship, and had been given the plaque as a memento of the occasion. She added, "I also have a piece of the ship to keep. The sponsor is always given a small hunk of the keel. It's right here in my tote bag." The mesmerized inspectors allowed her to pass without further examination.

Five years have now passed since we all gathered in Pascagoula. We'll never be the same again, but as a family we are a lot closer. We helped preside at the birth of a ship for the Navy of the 1980s and beyond. In whatever part of the world, ocean or seaport she may be, our hearts will always be with her.

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