

Sirago Newsletter



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August 2004

The Road to Portsmouth (1945-2005)

The Memories of some Sirago Plank Owners

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Duty Section 6164

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Duty Section 6164

This newsletter is written with all of Sirago's WWII vets in mind. I spoke with some of the Sirago plank owners because they were present and accounted for when Sirago was commissioned. I thought it would be important to not only hear their stories, but to have them written down, somewhere, as a living archive of our history and what happened then and what effect it had on them personally. Here are the memories of five of our shipmates that have reached back over some fifty-nine-plus years for their thoughts. A sixth shipmate sends his regards.

For me, to have been the recipient of their stories in their own words, I thank them, and all the WWII sub vets, for their service, dedication, and bravery. It was an honor to have followed them.

Joe Roche Editor

continued this page

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1-3** The Road to Portsmouth – Plank Owner Stories
- 3** Storekeeper's Notice
- 4** REUNION INFORMATION!
- 4** Duty Section News & Other Tidbits

Bud Miller YN1(SS):

Bud served on the old S boats where he qualified. He then reported to new construction, where he put the USS Skate (SS305) in commission and rode her to five war patrols, after which he received orders to NLON for new construction. While in NLON, he visited the dentist to have his teeth cleaned and fell head over heels for the WAVE Dental Tech that did the cleaning, after which he refused to get out of the chair unless she promised him a date. After much ado, the tech, Lil, agreed and as they say, the rest is history. They are celebrating their 59th wedding anniversary soon. In early '45, Bud received orders for the Sirago. He was the very first crewman assigned to Sirago. He went up to Portsmouth, set up an office, and waited to receive the remainder of the commissioning crew. Three months after he met Lil, they got married and the morning after their wedding had breakfast on board Sirago. He also remembers how the town of Portsmouth went wild with happiness when the war's end was announced. The town closed up and the people danced in the streets all day. He was frozen in the Navy for 2-3 months after the war's ending, even though he had the points to get out.

Bud regretfully will not be able to attend the 2005 reunion. Although blind for the past 7-8 years, he still plants and tends his garden.

Charles "Johnny" Johnson EM3(SS):

In 1944, Johnny was serving on board the S-35 home ported in Majuro (sic) in the Marshall Islands. Orders came to decommission her in Pearl Harbor. Johnny received orders for schools in NLON, when in May or June of '45 he received orders for the commissioning crew for Sirago and headed to Portsmouth. On August

continued on page 2

The Road to Portsmouth (cont.)

15, VJ Day, he too witnessed the “Dancing in the Streets of Portsmouth.”

Johnny had to re-qualify on Sirago because she was so much different then the S-class boats, “as different as a two-bit, flea-bag motel and the Ritz.”

He describes a shakedown cruise to Panama. On the trip home, someone started adding “going home turns” in maneuvering room. But someone hit the diving alarm and after they surfaced, they had to start adding the additional turns all over again. They arrived off NLON on a Saturday morning and hung out in the sound until after 12 noon, when the squadron office would be closed and no reports had to be given until Monday.

Johnny plans on attending our reunion in 2005.

LTJG Bill Donley:

Upon completion of ROTC, Bill was sent to his second choice of duty, the USS San Diego, a cruiser. His first choice, submarine school, wasn't granted because he didn't have an engineering degree or any engineering experience. While on board the San Diego, he was able to transfer to the engineering department and take a correspondence course in the engineering field--which fulfilled the required needs for submarine school--and received orders to the USS Cachalot (SS170), a school boat in NLON, and for 6-8 weeks rode the Cachalot and at the same time attended sub school. Upon completion of sub school he received orders for the commissioning crew of Sirago and arrived in Portsmouth, NH, 1 hour before Sirago was launched down the ways.

It seems Bill was quite a ball player and played for the NLON team and the Portsmouth Navy Yard team. They played one game against the old Boston Braves. Bill was too polite to say who won.

At this time, the yards was commissioning a boat every 2-3 months. Each boat whose turn was next to be commissioned received 3 slot machines, from which the profits went to the boat. The yard birds were only allowed to play them on their lunch hour. Bill remembers each machine had 30 to 40 yard workers lined up at each machine. Of course, the

officer in charge of these machines for each boat received a set of instructions and pins that allowed said officer to set a time each player could be at a machine that hardly ever paid out. The pins were then reset to pay out a more generous sum for the sailors. These machines earned Sirago enough money to pay for a Five Star Commissioning Party for the entire crew, family, and friends.

After making a trip to Albany for Armed Forces Day (the first CO, Captain Harlfinger, being from Albany), Bill was transferred to the 16th Fleet in New York City. Bill was discharged, but stayed in the reserves and retired with the rank of Captain.

Mike Monasterio EN3(SS):

Mike made 3 war patrols on the USS Narwhal (SS167). After this, she was ordered to Philadelphia to be decommissioned and, while in Philly, he received orders to new construction in Portsmouth, NH, for Sirago, and arrived in Portsmouth in April of '45. Mike said the story going around the Navy Yards on August 15th was that the Japanese surrendered because they heard “Sirago was commissioned.”

Mike made the trip to Albany, where the people really turned out for them, the CO being a local boy and all.

The following year Sirago made a 2nd trip to Albany. Mike was on Sirago for about 2- 2 ½ years.

Frank Alexander F1c(SS):

Frank had turned down another deferment from the government and joined the Navy in 1943, even though his wife just had just given birth to a baby girl. After boot camp in Great Lakes, he got orders for LCT training and while there, volunteered for PT boats and sub school. He was sent to diesel school and then sub school. After reporting aboard Sirago, the COB, Chief Atkins, sent him and two other shipmates to sonar school in San Diego. They went cross-country via the railroad and return to NLON the same way. His wife and daughter moved

The Road to Portsmouth (cont.)

to New Hampshire to be with him during the construction of Sirago. When the end of the war was announced, Frank could only say "how wonderful it felt for it to be finally over," though there was a feeling that they wanted to be part of the war, but were nevertheless glad it was over. Of course, he remembers the notorious Chief Spritz, who ran the sub base and school with an iron fist. He said you never wanted to run afoul of him.

On one of Sirago's training runs, the crew was at battle stations running on the surface when she dove. Frank was manning the headphones in the after engine room, when the forward torpedo room watch very quietly announced into the sound-powered phone system,

"There's water coming into the forward torpedo room."

Someone said, "What'd ya say?" Again quietly,

"There's water coming into the forward torpedo room."

With that, one of the other phone men hollered, "Flooding in the forward torpedo room." When the word was announced over the 1MC, all hell broke loose. A chief in the forward battery slammed and dogged the hatch leading into the forward torpedo room. And despite some of the crew telling him there are men in there, he refused to allow the hatch to be opened. So it sounded like the watch in the torpedo room was a new man, and the chief probably had some war patrols behind him. They surfaced okay, but had quite a bit of water in the room.

Frank mentions the time Sirago went to Albany for Navy Day. On the way, they stopped at Poughkeepsie, NY, which was the home of Vassar College, which was a women's school, and invited them down to the boat. Frank said they stole everything they could get their hands on as souvenirs. They reciprocated and invited the Sirago crew that night to their campus. Frank had duty that night, but remembers many of the crew trying to get back to Sirago from the campus, which was high atop a hill. Some of the men had a bit too much to drink and had trouble staying on their feet on this steep hill. Sirago was making a trip to Panama and Captain Harlfinger asked him if he wanted to go as far as Key West. Franks responded with a resounding, "No Sir!" So, prior to the Panama trip, Frank left Sirago in NLO and received orders to NYC to be discharged on

February 11, 1946.

Frank and his wife just celebrated sixty-nine years of marriage.

Jim Gavigan YN2(SS):

Jim just recently suffered a stroke last February, but spoke with me a bit. I am extending his best wishes to the crew of Sirago.



Storekeeper's Notice

Many of you know that "Wally" Walraven died (see last page and also Family Gram). Because of this, I have temporarily taken over the job until elections at our next reunion. If you have access to the Internet, review our website at **WWW.SIRAGO.COM** and in the PHOTO ALBUM, you will see an album called "Items for Sale". Each item is shown and the description tells you the price and how many we have left. This number is quite accurate. For those of you who do NOT have access to the Internet, I will tell you that we have some Video Tapes (Tench Class Boat training films) that feature the Sirago as a fleet boat and go through main systems, for \$20.00 each. We have some wonderful "double decks" of Cards with one deck showing the Commissioning of the USS Sirago in 1945 and the other showing Sirago just before she was Decommissioned in 1972. These are going for \$12.00 per double deck if you only order one double deck and no other items. However, if you order multiple sets OR with any other item, they cost \$10.00 per double deck. If you are an e-mailer, just e-mail me (RMBICKEL@STUPP.COM) what you want and simultaneously send a check for the proper amount made out to USS Sirago and mail to Garry Goetschisu / 3620 Locust Circle East / Prospect, KY 40059-9020. If you are NOT an e-mailer, then you should probably CALL me (636) 225-7528 to get the latest on what's in stock and what the prices are, etc. I can then give you instructions.

We have NO shirts or hats in stock as they are always sold out every reunion. We will be offering these closer to the reunion, however. ◆

REUNION NOTICE!

Mike Bickel (RMBICKEL@STUPP.COM)

Our next reunion will take place in Portsmouth, NH, on August 11-14th, 2005. I mentioned in the last newsletter that I would have more schedules, prices, etc., but I am still negotiating certain rates so no signup sheet is included in this newsletter (plan on seeing that in the November newsletter). We have 131 crewmembers planning to come and I'm sure we'll have more than 150 when it's all said and done. **If you haven't already told me that you are planning to come, please do so.**

There will be less "pre-paid" activities this time with more time for you to enjoy the Portsmouth area, do shopping, do some dining / drinking with your buddies without a schedule. However, there ARE a few PLANNED events and this is what I can tell you right now:

Hotel reception – Thursday evening. Friday evening dinner cruise. Saturday mid-morning – mid afternoon (with packed picnic lunch) tours of base, museum. Saturday evening, Banquet -dinner & dancing with "big band" music (live brass band). Banquet will have the big program, memorials, and our usual stuff. ♦

Joe Roche
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Pearl River, NY 10965-1707

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

DUTY SECTION NEWS

Recently Deceased Sirago Crewmembers:

(Please – also refer to the Family Gram Insert)

Bruce Boutillette (S1/c, 45-45 died 6/23/2004)

"Wally" Walraven (TM2, 51-59 died 5/11/2004)

Harry Yockey (LCDR, 59-62, 65-66 died 6/16/2004)

-----*Sailor, rest your oar*

Duty Section (F)ound/ (D)eceased/ (S)eeking:

DS4548: (F) 72, (D) 104, (S) 93

DS4952: (F) 57, (D) 75, (S) 65

DS5356: (F) 70, (D) 54, (S) 57

DS5760: (F) 100, (D) 51, (S) 70

DS6164: (F) 140, (D) 42, (S) 105

DS6568: (F) 152, (D) 37, (S) 69

DS6972: (F) 141 (D) 14, (S) 45

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