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Ahoy! USS Nicholas battleship memories relived for weekend

By JOHN MAINES
Clarion-Ledger Staff Writer

When the USS Nicholas was launched in 1942, it was the first of the Fletcher class destroyers, heavier and more powerful than its predecessors.

The 376-foot ship lived up to its image of bigger brother, fighting more World War II battles than any other ship in the U.S. Navy.

Having earned 16 battle stars during World War II, sinking several Japanese ships and surviving four kamikazi suicide attacks, the Nicholas was dubbed the "fightingest ship in the Navy" by Admiral William Halsey. He ordered that it be the first American ship to steam into Tokyo harbor for surrender ceremonies with Japan in 1945.

Beginning today, some 125 former members of the crew of the Nicholas — including Vietnam veterans — will hold a reunion through the weekend at the Sun-N-Sand Motor Hotel to rekindle old friendships and relive the memories.

"I talked 'em into coming to Mississippi," said Jack Stuart of Morton, who said he is the only Mississippian known to have served on the Nicholas.

The destroyer, which displaced 2,100 tons and carried a crew of 249, earned 14 more battle stars during its commission — nine during the Korean War and five more in Vietnam. A battle star is awarded to ships engaged in specific battles; each battle could involve several confrontations with the enemy, Stuart said.

Stuart was a "plank owner" of the Nicholas, meaning he was on board when she was commissioned June 4, 1942. He served on the ship 16 months.

This weekend's reunion is the ninth for the Nicholas crew, which now meets every two years, Stuart said. "I've got people coming from 40 states," from as far away as Washington and Maine, he said. Live music and entertainment is in store for the group, which will be making trips to the Vicksburg National Military Park and taking a riverboat ride on the Mississippi, as well as touring Jackson.

The Nicholas, which was sold to Italy for scrap in 1973, was named after Samuel Nicholas, who was commissioned a captain of the Marines by the Continental Congress. He commanded the nation's first Marine amphibious landing in 1776 by leading 300 marines in the capture of Fort Montague at New Providence in the Bahamas.

Stuart said Nicholas, the ship, was as notorious as Nicholas, the captain, for aggressiveness.

"We had a five-inch gun blow up," he said. "Another ship had a new gun, but they put the new gun on the Nicholas and sent the other ship back to port. In a war you want the ship that's been in battle. You want the experience."

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• October 2, 1986 ■ THURSDAY

Former crew rehashes 'tin can' tales

By JOHN MAINES
Clarion-Ledger Staff Writer

The 73 men who registered Wednesday at Jackson's Sun-N-Sand Motel were brought together by mutual love for a tin can.

Make that a "tin can," the Navy nickname for a destroyer, a small but fast warship. On Wednesday, the ninth reunion of the crew of the USS Nicholas began with war stories and recollections of the days spent aboard the 376-foot vessel.

"It was a damned good ship. It had good engineers, a first-rate crew, a lot of firepower. And a hell of a lot of luck," said Robert Matthews, 72, a former lieutenant who served 1½ years as damage control officer on the Nicholas.

The 73 men, many with their wives, traveled to Mississippi from 40 states for four days of sightseeing and partying. To them, the Nicholas is a special ship, having served America long enough to do battle with Japan in the 1940s, blast Korean locomotives with sea-to-shore artillery fire in the 1950s, and refuel rescue helicopters in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam War.

"It was the fightin' est ship in the Navy," said Michael Carroll of Battleground, Wash., who served on the Nicholas between 1966-67. "It had enough generating power to light Guam."

The 2,100-ton, Fletcher class destroyer was commissioned in 1942. The ship, powered by two 30,000-horsepower engines, had a maximum speed of 38.2 knots and four five-inch diameter guns that fired 60-pound shells.

But for many, the loyalty of being a shipmate formed a lasting bond.

"I named my first son Nicholas," said Edwin Hock of Lincoln, Neb. Hock was assigned to the Nicholas from 1943 to the end of World War II, and was on board on Sept. 2, 1945, when the ship helped

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— Michael Carroll of Battleground, Wash., former Nicholas crew member

lucky, too." He credited a lot of the luck to the dedication of the crew.

"I was on top seeing everything happen. But there were men down below, who heard the water boiling around them from explosions of the bombs, but who couldn't get up to see if they were being sunk. They stayed by the throttles, they loaded the magazines, and gave us the ability to fight the Japs."

"These were the things that make us all proud of each other," he said.

The ship earned 30 battle stars during three wars and was awarded a presidential citation for rescuing 291 crew members of the USS Helena who were forced to abandon ship during a battle in Kula Gulf in the South Pacific.

The Nicholas was the second named after Samuel Nicholas, who was commissioned by the Continental Congress in 1775 as the first commander of America's naval forces.

The first USS Nicholas, also a destroyer, served in World War I but sank with six other ships in 1923 when experimental night navigational gear failed and the ships piled up on shore near Santa Barbara, Calif.

The third USS Nicholas, a missile frigate, was commissioned in 1984. The ship is powered by twin jet engines and can reach full power in 30 seconds at the push of a button, said William B. Hooffstetter, a former ship captain.

"It used to take us four hours to go to full speed," he said. Hooffstetter, who lives in a suburb of Charleston, S.C., was captain of the second Nicholas during the Vietnam War.

Hooffstetter asked this trivia question: Who was the biggest buyer of ships made of pre-World War II steel?

The Japanese?

"No," he said. "Gillette. For razor blades. I saw them buy two ships in Boston." After the war began, he said, automobiles and other scrap metal with impurities was used to make ship steel, and the product was not suitable for razor blades.

A few versions of the fate of the World War II-era Nicholas were told Wednesday. Some said it was sold to Taiwan; others said Italy; and others said it was scrapped in the United States.

But according to a spokesman for the Department of the Navy's history section, it was decommissioned in 1970 and sold to Zidel Exploration Inc. of Portland, Ore.

"It sounds like some oceanographic firm, but it's not," a Navy spokesman said. "It's a scrapyard. The Nicholas became razorblades."

Former crew member Carroll said it didn't matter: "She's got a successor. She lives on, in spirit."