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Last parts of tanker return 'home'

USS Ponchatoula remnants on display at memorial

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PONCHATOULA — Bits and pieces of a ship that saw action during the Vietnam War and was involved in the recovery of the Apollo and Gemini capsules as part of the nation's space program are on display in the town that gave the vessel its name.

Several dozen sailors who once served on her decks, along with a large crowd of residents, watched Saturday as the last remnants of the USS Ponchatoula AO-148, a tanker and replenishment vessel that served in two wars and participated in other historic events, were enshrined in the heart of Ponchatoula.

Members of the Ponchatoula Shipmates Association, a group of former U.S. Navy personnel who sailed the seas of the world on the vessel they fondly called "the Ponch," managed to salvage a capstan, deck rails, chocks, bits and the fantail flagpole of the USS Ponchatoula just before the ship was to be broken up into scrap last year in Brownsville, Texas.

Those remnants of the ship have been installed in a display next to the Collinswood Museum on Ponchatoula's main thoroughfare, Pine Street, near the Canadian Northern Railroad tracks. The memorial, set on a concrete slab, is surrounded by the ship's original handrails. The other ship's fittings are appropriately displayed with the fantail flagpole facing to the north as the most dramatic piece in the memorial.

Two metal benches fashioned from scrap taken from the Ponchatoula are set in the memorial area. The captain's chair and other artifacts are on display inside the museum.

"The USS Ponchatoula has come home to its namesake city of Ponchatoula," said Jay Rosenstein, secretary of the Ponchatoula Shipmates Association. "She has come home after serving in war and in peace. Her stories will be told here forevermore. You will see her fantail where many good sailors gathered for fun and fellowship. We praise the city of Ponchatoula for welcoming this great old ship back home again."

At the climax of the morning's ceremony, a flag that had flown over the USS Blue Ridge, flagship of the U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet, was hoisted by a group of former sailors who had served on the USS Ponchatoula. For much of her career, the Ponchatoula served in the 7th fleet.

John Hearn, treasurer of the association and the moving force behind the monument to the USS Ponchatoula, said it was only appropriate that the "scraps" of the ship be returned to Ponchatoula because the story of the tanker began with scrap metal.

As the U.S. entered World War II, national leaders realized that a tremendous amount of scrap iron was needed to manufacture war vehicles, ships, planes and guns. Ponchatoula residents, under the leadership of local teacher Julia Welles Hawkins, began a scrap drive in 1942. Hawkins, now 99, mobilized Ponchatoula youth and a huge scrap metal drive was launched.

The students collected 475 tons of scrap metal, or 633 pounds for each of the 1,500 students in the Ponchatoula school system. In 1944, an additional 95 tons of scrap metal was collected, and it is said that 50 U.S. Army trucks were needed to move the metal to the railroad for transportation to factories elsewhere. Hawkins carried much of the scrap metal in the rumble seat of her Ford, a vehicle still in the family's possession.

One of the dedication's highlights came when Hawkins was presented with a special plaque. At the plaque's center was a neatly formed piece of scrap metal attached to the plaque by magnets.

To show its gratitude to the residents of Ponchatoula, the Navy named a tanker built in 1944 after the city. That original USS Ponchatoula served until the end of World War II and was then scrapped.

However, when the Navy began building a new, much larger fleet of tankers, it was decided to name a second ship the USS Ponchatoula. That vessel was launched into the Delaware River at Camden, New Jersey, in March 1954.

The second USS Ponchatoula displaced 38,000 tons, was heavily armed and could accommodate 324 officers and men. It was this ship that would go on to serve for more than 40 years. The USS Ponchatoula's major contribution came during the Vietnam War when the ship almost constantly refueled naval fighting vessels and brought aviation fuel for the planes flying off the decks of aircraft carriers. The USS Ponchatoula won 12 distinguished campaign ribbons for service in Vietnamese waters.

The USS Ponchatoula was involved in the recovery of the Apollo and Gemini capsules as part of the nation's space program and saw service in conflicts in the Middle East.

Hearn, a resident of Conroe, Texas, was in Ponchatoula for about a month assisting in the final installation of the monument and planning the dedication ceremonies.

"This ship was our home," Hearn said in an interview. "Sailors develop a lasting affection for the ships on which they serve ... this was our shelter, our work station, the place where we grew into men, where lifelong friendships were born. Men develop a sense of pride in the ships on which they serve and the feeling never goes away."

Richard Zimmerman, another Texan, said he spent four years and four months on the USS Ponchatoula.

"She was a great ship," Zimmerman said. "I still take a great deal of pride in knowing that I served on this ship. This was my home. For one tour, we were at sea for 10 months, and I never regret that time. It was a wonderful experience."

Hector Lopez, who calls Katy, Texas, home, was on the ship for almost three years. Lopez said the men of "the Ponch" developed a very special relationship that has held the group together.

"The crew of other ships have not done what we are doing here today. This is a very special day and it's just wonderful that we have all stayed together for so long. We worked hard and we did our jobs well and I think that's why we are still so proud of what we did in the Navy," he said.

The only native of Ponchatoula to have served on the city's namesake vessel was the late Dutch Battle, a local civic leader who died several years ago in a motorcycle crash. Hearn said that Jerry Mouton, of Mermentau, also served on the USS Ponchatoula and was active in the association.

Ponchatoula Mayor Bobby Zabbia thanked Hearn and members of the Ponchatoula Shipmates Association for pursuing the dream of having the ship's monument located in Ponchatoula.

"We are preserving a piece of history that others can enjoy. This monument will be here when we are long gone, but it will still tell the story of a great ship and the unselfish, dedicated men who served her so well," Zabbia said.