



The second USS Ponchatoula  
(Photo courtesy of Dutch Battle)

# USS Ponchatoula shipmates gather here for reunion

# USS Ponchatoula shipmates gather here for reunion

By BRYAN T. McMAHON  
Publisher & Editor

The crew of the USS Ponchatoula returned this week to the father city of two U.S. Navy ships bearing the Ponchatoula name to enjoy a rare reunion here, where it all began.

Reunion organizer P.F. Hammond told The Times on Monday he expects 64 visitors connected with the ship (36 who served on her and their spouses) to attend Thursday evening's special dinner hosted by the Ponchatoula Lions Club in their honor.

Thursday's 6:30 p.m. steak dinner prepared by Chef J.R. Bardwell and his fellow Lions is open to the public at the nominal cost of \$12.50. Tickets can be obtained at the Tangipahoa Parish Tourist Commission, at Jackson-Vaughan Insurance,

toula Times while serving aboard the ship. "They wanted to read all about the City of Ponchatoula," he told his fellow sailors.

The Ponchatoula Times on that occasion presented P.F. Hammond with full copies of the March 27 and April 3, 2003 editions of the newspaper featuring the histories of the two USS Ponchatoula ships, as well as copies of The Times editions heralding this week's reunion of the crew.

As detailed in the recent Times two-part series on the two

and at Ponchatoula City Hall. Some tickets are expected to be available at the door the night of the dinner, according to parish tourism director Betty Stewart who has worked for months on the reunion.

Hammond said that his group plans a special presentation to the city at the banquet, an event important enough to call an early end to Thursday's regular monthly meeting of the city council so members can attend. Navy veteran Mrs. Cindy Newton was set to emcee the opening ceremony before turning over the podium to Mayor Julian Dufreche.

Jackson-Vaughan Insurance agent Dutch Battle will be certain to attend the dinner, as will SLU's Ron Hepler of Hammond. Both served aboard the Ponchatoula. And Millville's Ronnie Centanni, a merchant seaman, would be a guaranteed attendee at the event, except that on Monday he was racing off to meet a departing ship.

Before leaving for his ship, Centanni stopped by Ponchatoula's new Microtel Inn to meet fellow former crew members of the USS Ponchatoula who had begun arriving for the reunion. Centanni told the reunion organizers how excited his fellow crewmen became when he began receiving his subscription to The Poncha-

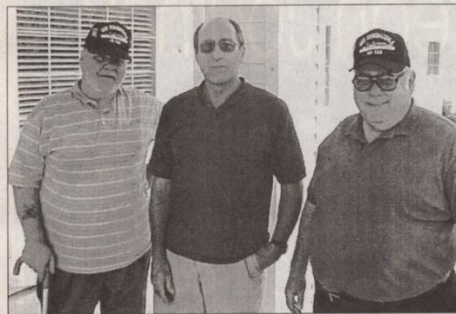
ships named Ponchatoula authored by local historian and educator Jim Perrin, a community-wide scrap metal drive orchestrated by legendary Ponchatoula High School Principal Will Ed Butler in 1942, and another in 1944, so impressed the federal government that a pursuit plane and a Navy tanker were named Ponchatoula.

The tanker saw two years of duty in World War II.

The ship aboard which most, if not all, of the visitors to the city this week saw service was the second USS Ponchatoula. Three times the size of the original tanker named Ponchatoula, the second ship to bear this city's name was launched in 1954 with a crew of 324 officers and men. In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower included the Ponchatoula in his orders to oppose Communist Chinese aggression aimed at small islands off the Chinese mainland.

Crewmen who served aboard the Ponchatoula began holding reunions every two years beginning in 1996. This week's reunion in Ponchatoula, the group's fifth such event, was scheduled only one year after the 2002 reunion that was held in Las Vegas, another indication of how special the visit to the City of Ponchatoula is to the veterans, Hammond (who served

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USS Ponchatoula sailors

These three sailors all saw service aboard the second USS Ponchatoula: (left to right) Al Siter, Ronnie Centanni, and P.F. Hammond. They were photographed Monday outside Dan and Michelle Aycock's Microtel Inn which is functioning as home base to the sailors on reunion. (Times Photo)

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# • Ponchatoula

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aboard the Ponchatoula in 1958-59) told The Times.

A great one for statistics, Hammond calculated that the sailors attending the reunion here represented a total of 89 years of service. He said that the entire membership of the organization represented a total of 326 years of service.

Joining Centanni, The Times, and the reunion organizers Monday at the Microtel were: Mrs. Newton, who stays active in veterans affairs locally; Phil Alexander, representing the Ponchatoula Lions Club; and Mrs. Stewart, representing the parish tourist commission.

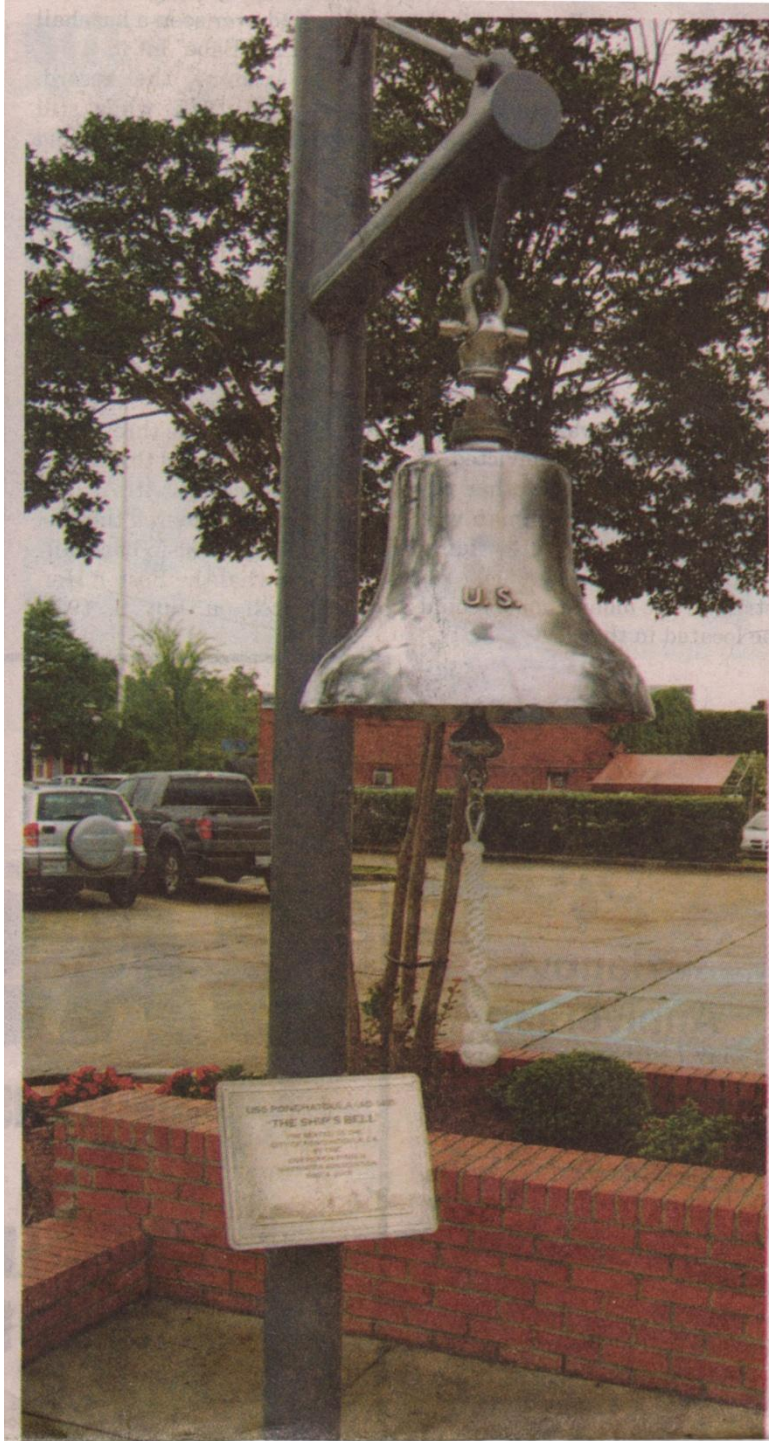
Organizers on Monday were awaiting the arrival of their group's president, Captain Bill

Lounsvery (Ret.), head of the 131 member group of shipmates, 43 percent of whom are now retired and, according to Hammond, 27 percent of whom will be in Ponchatoula this week at the reunion.

A calendar of events leading up to Thursday's banquet includes swamp and river excursions with the mayor, shopping trips in "America's Antique City," and at least one large meal hosted at C'est Bon Restaurant.

So what ever became of the second U.S.S. Ponchatoula?

Historian Perrin reported that she was transferred to the reserve fleet in 1999. Hammond, now a citizen of California, brought with him the rest of the story. "The U.S.S. Ponchatoula is now in "the mothball fleet" in Venetia, California," he told The Times.



### **New downtown monument**

The polished bell from the USS Ponchatoula in its new housing at City Hall was unveiled Tuesday by the organization of shipmates who served on the Navy vessel from World War II to the Vietnam War. The ship was named for the city after schoolchildren and their parents collected tons of scrap metal to aid the war effort, as documented in The Times by local historian Jim Perrin. (Times Photo)

# Shipmates of the USS Ponchatoula witness ship's bell unveiling

By BRYAN T. McMAHON

A moving patriotic day of well-planned events on Tuesday brought the surviving USS Ponchatoula Shipmates back to the city whose students and adults mounted a legendary scrap metal drive in the 1940's to support the war effort, resulting in the U.S. Navy naming two successive warships in this city's honor.

The highlight of the day was the unveiling of the ship's bell from the USS Ponchatoula, which is now mounted on a special stand outside City Hall that is made to look like the original mast on the warship where the bell summoned sailors to the fight.

It was constructed under the direction of Ronnie Perrin by Airport Welding.



**Nan Simmons**

Following speeches and the exchange of gifts and some serious ship honors between the shipmate organization's leader P.F. Hammond and Mayor Bob Zabbia, representing the City of Ponchatoula, the Minutemen raised Ponchatoula's giant 40x70 foot American Flag (donated by members of the Leonard Drude family, the original 30x50 hand-sewn flag is now under the protection of Collinswood Museum).

The visiting shipmates posed with the banner.

Then at a sumptuous feast prepared by the chefs of Rockefeller's Restaurant, Ponchatoula historian and regular The Ponchatoula Times columnist Jim Perrin shared his research on the ship, a story first enjoyed by Times readers in a recent Perrin-authored newspaper series.

Shipmates then enjoyed a huge strawberry cake baked by Cheryl Ragan Hoover and deco-

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# • Shipmates

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rated with the ship's crest and bell by her daughter Nicholas Culinary Arts graduate Miss Dayna Hoover, carrying on the work of legendary baker Vera Ragan.

Among those honored at the meal were those same students from the 1940's who worked so hard to help America win World War II by collecting scrap metal, including Nan Simmons who as a fifth grader, with the help of her father, collected more than any other student.

The Rev. Glynn Fendlason offered prayers at City Hall and sang the national anthem at the flag raising.

A nicely-designed souvenir program listed the names of the visiting shipmates, some of whom came from as far a Hawaii to attend. Sponsors of

the special day, including The Ponchatoula Times, were also listed.



**Local historian Jim Perrin, keynote speaker**

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# USS PONCHATOULA



Photos by Don Ellzey

**SPECIAL MOMENT** — Mayor Bob Zabbia, in the white shirt, poses with sailors from the Navy Recruiting District of New Orleans as the American flag is raised Tuesday in Ponchatoula.

## Ship's bell dedicated

By **DON ELLZEY**  
Daily Star Staff Writer

First Mate Kenneth Lawson jerked the rope on the bell that once hung from the mast of the World War II ship USS Ponchatoula, sending the ringing sound reverberating over 66 years to unite the ship forever with its city namesake.

Lawson, of Honolulu, a Navy veteran and former USS Ponchatoula shipmate, was the first person to ring the large, shiny, chrome-plated bell after its dedication Tuesday morning in front of Ponchatoula City Hall.

There it will remain on display for visitors to view, ring and meditate on a bygone era.

Lawson was among 50 USS Ponchatoula shipmates attending their annual reunion, this year in Ponchatoula for the specific purpose

of bequeathing the former ship's bell to the city and its citizens. Along with the bell, they donated several ship-related historical and sentimental items to the people of Ponchatoula.

A large crowd of veterans, spouses and friends, and local officials and citizens attended the dedication ceremony under clear blue skies. The streets approaching city hall were blocked, with Ponchatoula police officers and auxiliary, assisted by the Tangipahoa Parish Sheriff's Office Motorcycle Division, directing traffic.

The U.S. government named the World War II tanker for the city after school students and citizens collected over 500 tons of scrap metal for the war effort. The first USS Ponchatoula was decommissioned in 1946, but a

See **SHIP**, 6A



**UNFORGETTABLE SOUND** — First Mate Kenneth Lawson of Honolulu, Hawaii, is the first person to ring the bell from the USS Ponchatoula after its unveiling in front of Ponchatoula City Hall Tuesday morning.

# SHIP

Continued from page 1A

second and larger ship was commissioned Jan. 12, 1956, and served until it was sent to the U.S. Reserve Fleet in 1999.

Second only to the veterans in attracting attention Tuesday was probably Julia Welles Hawkins, 94, the 1942 Ponchatoula Grammar School fifth-grade teacher whose class won the grammar school contest for collecting the most scrap metal.

Hawkins is venerated in the community, especially among the older citizens, for her personal effort in the scrap iron drive. She drove her Model A Ford from house to house, loading whatever metal was available and taking it back to the school grounds.

Several former students from the World War II era were present Tuesday.

P.F. Hammond of Vallejo, Calif., president of the Shipmates' Association, told the crowd that the bell is a

prize possession when a ship is decommissioned. Hammond said ships' bells were used to identify sunken vessels, signal the change of watches and for other purposes aboard the ship.

"The sound of a ship's bell is one of many memories of those who have sailed," he said.

Three members of the crew of the first USS Ponchatoula were recognized during the ceremony. They are Robert E. Luedtke of Oskosh, Wis.; Dr. Robert L. Mandstager of Marshalltown, Iowa, and Adam Snyder of Masontown, Pa.

Mayor Bob Zabbia presented the group with proclamations from the city, and Gov. Bobby Jindal. Zabbia thanked Betty Stewart, executive director of the Tangipahoa Parish Visitors and Convention Bureau, for her help in arranging the ceremony.

Three sailors from the U.S. Navy Recruiting District of New Orleans raised the flag in front of city hall. Glynn Fendlason

gave the invocation.

After the dedication, the veterans and visitors went to the large flag pole in front of the Ponchatoula Country Market for the raising of the 40-by-70 foot American flag. Scores of visitors with cameras took pictures of the veterans in front of the huge flag.

Zabbia described the morning's events as "absolutely impressive." He said it was a privilege for the city to host the USS Ponchatoula veterans.

Along with the bell, the veterans donated gifts from the ships that will be treasures for the city and its citizens for years, he said.



SAILORS' WIVES WATCH AS THE FLAG IS RAISED

The ship's bell was stored in the Navy Archives building in Washington, D.C. It was shipped to Ponchatoula at no cost by Fed Ex.

Tuesday morning was a special moment in Ponchatoula's long history,

one that will be remembered in years to come as possibly the final embrace between the city and most of the USS Ponchatoula veterans, Zabbia said. But he said the veterans leave in their wake special memo-

ries, a special place in the hearts of the people of the community, and the bell, which he said will always connect them with the City of Ponchatoula.

**THURSDAY:** Julia Welles Hawkins' memories.

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Thanks again, Betty

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