

A Short Synopsis of the USS Piedmont Reunion Group

By Ruth and John Geraghty and Bill Kastens

In 1982, my wife Ruth and I were invited to attend the Decommissioning of the USS Piedmont in Norfolk, Va. along with many of our former shipmates and their wives. We were a small group of the original crew that they were able to get in touch with. All in attendance had a great time and felt that we should form a Reunion Association and continue to get together on a yearly basis. However, no one seemed to be able to coordinate any effort to get it going. There was a politician in Philadelphia who was a member of the Piedmont crew, Harry Fox, who tried to get a reunion together at that time and was able to obtain a few of the shipmates addresses. He soon found his political duties, etc. precluded him being able to get it going.

In 1986 I retired from the Jersey City Police Dept. as a Captain after completing 39 years of service. I noticed an ad in the VFW Magazine stating the Marriott Hotel would help Vets plan a reunion group. I took advantage of their expertise and got things in place for our first reunion in Tampa, Florida, which I chose because that was where the Piedmont was built and commissioned in 1944.

The rest, as they say, is history. Ruth says she will never forget the faces of the old shipmates who responded to our letters and joined the first reunion in November 1989 in Tampa. She says there were smiles and tears and "Do you remembers". The ladies easily became friends and we like to think we have all remained so all of these years later even though we have lost a good many of those friends.

We tried to move around the country to as many interesting places as we could think of and which the members voted on. We did a lot of traveling at that time and were able to research the places before we went there. We made a few blunders to be sure and even though there were age and time differences, old 'Doc' was the glue that held us all together.

Tampa 1989 was our first reunion and in 1990 we stayed at the Marriott in Nashville, TN; 1991 was Quality Inn, Charleston, SC; Holiday Inn, Crystal

City Wash. DC in 1992; and 1993 found us at the Radisson Hotel in Clayton, a section of St. Louis, MO. 1994 was Doc's 40th anniversary and the group elected to return to Tampa to celebrate again at the original Marriott Hotel. In 1995, we went out to the west coast for the first time to Holiday Inn Bayside, San Diego where we had so many people show up for the dinner there was "No Room at the Inn Dining Hall". The hotel people had to set up the buffet table in a separate hall area and we had to go through the garden area to get our food and walk down the hotel hall to get back to our table. No one complained too loud and we learned another lesson in planning. No last minute dinner reservations. 1996 found us in the Norfolk, Va. Area at Holiday Inn Executive Center. San Antonio, TX Radisson Market Square was 1997 and back to California, San Francisco Clarion Hotel in 1998. Asheville, NC in 1999 at the Radisson is where we had a great time, but almost another disaster. The hotel was undergoing reservations a year earlier when we booked it and they assured us it would be finished in time. NOT SO!! Just two nights before we were assured it would be finished!! When we arrived the lobby was a construction nightmare, not to mention other difficulties, but our Piedmont Sailors were great and our trip to the top of the mountain was fantastic. In 2000, we found a lot of new faces and the group again chose DC, the Hyatt Hotel, Crystal City.

<p>The next reunion in 2001 was handled by Lou Vann for us and he chose Oxnard, CA, his home town. That was when disaster hit here on 9/11 and so we cancelled 2001, but the Radisson gave him the same deal for 2002 so that's where we headed and Oxnard was a great success. In Oxnard the group chose Philadelphia for 2003 but Bill Kastens had made arrangements for Kansas City and so that was our destination at the Doubletree Hotel, KC, KS. We were unable to attend but it was another great success. Ken Werth suggested Chicago for 2004 if someone would help him and Maynard Johnson stepped right up. They recruited Ken Chernich and Alex and Loretta Saputa as local people to help and another great success at the Radisson in Rosemont, a suburb of north Chicago. We were again unable to attend the reunion in Chicago. My health is not what I would like it to be, nor is my energy level and so we have turned over the reins to a younger generation to keep it going. NOTE: John Geraghty PhM '44 -'46 passed away in Sept. 2006 but Ruth remains as Reunion Sec./Treas.

<p>Ken Werth accepted the Reunion Assoc. President's job and we moved to Baltimore in 2005. Ret. Adm. John Parker (former Piedmont CO) was a

gracious host for a visit to Annapolis and the Naval Academy. In 2006, we were in King of Prussia, PA (suburb of Philadelphia) and enjoyed all of the historical sights of our founding fathers as well as a visit to the USS New Jersey BB-62.

<p>For 2007, we moved back to San Diego, CA at the Zoo area Holiday Inn Hotel and the highlight was spending time on the Museum ship USS Midway CV-41. In 2008, newly elected President Bill Kastens and Robert “Willie” Williams hosted the group at the Biltmore Hotel in Oklahoma City. The group of over 100 sailors, spouses and friends found out what real “Okie” Hospitality” was like. The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum along with the historic OKC Stockyards emphasized the importance of the livestock industry in the economy.

<p>For 2009, Piedmont Sailors voted for Phoenix, AZ where Peter Souris approved the local arrangements at the Lexington Hotel in downtown Phoenix. The only surviving Titan Missile Silo (now decommissioned) was viewed south of Tucson along with the “airplane bone yard” nearby. The group voted to meet in Atlanta, GA in 2010 and Assoc. VP “Willie” Williams is making arrangements for a great time.

<p>The Atlanta Reunion was held Oct. 13-17, 2010 and more than 100 sailors and spouses/friends attended the Sat. night banquet. The Quality Hotel and Conference Center went all out to welcome us and the service and lodging were great. VP Robert “Willie” Williams did a great job of scouting the local facilities and arranged two very interesting bus tours that took us to Callaway Gardens, Warm Springs (FDR’s Little White House), The Aquarium and the Atlanta Cyclorama, showing the Civil War Battle of Atlanta. The 2011 location will be in the Norfolk/Virginia Beach, VA area.

<p>Piedmont sailors gathered in Norfolk, VA Oct. 12-16, 2011 at the Holiday Inn Select Hotel near the Norfolk airport. Hotel management and employees were extremely accommodating and greeted us upon our return from Friday’s bus tour with a patriotic, flag-waving, hand-clapping lineup in the hotel lobby shouting their thanks for our service to the country. Free buffet breakfasts were included everyday.

<p>There were bus tours on Thursday and Friday to local points of interest. The reunion culminated with the Saturday night banquet attended by 80 sailors, spouses and friends. Retired VICE ADM. Ted Parker (CO 1973-75) was the principal speaker.

<p>The 2012 reunion was in Omaha, NE Sept. 26-30 at the Comfort Inn & Suites where we had free breakfast included in the very good room rate of \$68. There were bus tours on Thursday & Friday and the most popular stop was a 2 hour Pipe Organ performance of military and 40's & 50's music. The Sat. evening banquet was enjoyed by 81 people and the highlight was CDM. Harold Henkel (Supply Corp 1952-53) reviewing his Navy career. The 2013 reunion will be in the Northwest, Sea-Tac, WA, Sept. 25-29.

<p>The 2013 reunion was in Sea-Tac, WA Sept. 25-29 at the Sea-Tac Airport Comfort Inn & Suites. A free breakfast was included in the room rate of \$70. We had 74 sailors and friends attending some or all of the activities. There were bus tours on Thursday & Friday to Bremerton and Seattle areas. Catered meals were provided at the hotel Wed., Thurs. & Fri. nights and the Sat. night banquet was held at a nearby Spaghetti Factory. Bob Massey, Asst. Repair Officer, 1972-74, was the principal speaker. CDM Harold Henkel defended his honor of being the oldest Sailor at the reunion, 95 years old. We will meet in Rapid City, SD for 2014.

<p>The 2014 reunion was in Rapid City, SD, heart of the Black Hills region, at the Rapid City Ramada Inn, Sept. 10-14. We had 100 attendees at some of our functions. There were bus tours on Thursday, Sept. 11; Friday, Sept. 12; and Sat., Sept. 13. We visited all areas of the western half of South Dakota. Hotel dinners were offered Wed., Thurs., and Fri. nights. The Sat. night banquet was at Mt. Rushmore Memorial and all sailors assembled on stage and introduced themselves to the crowd. CDM Harold Henkel, 96 years, again took honors for oldest sailor present. We voted to meet in Albany, New York in Sept. 2015.

<p>If you attend a reunion, I am sure you will enjoy the comradeship of shipmates who served on 'Doc' Piedmont as you share your memories with each other.

<p>Bill Kastens, ET '51-'54, President

<p>USS Piedmont AD-17 Reunion Assoc.