

A little grayer and fatter, 'Albany' hands reunite

By Mark J. McGuire

Staff writer

COLONIE — Their hair was gray, at least what was left of it. Paunches hung low over belts. But with the name USS *Albany* emblazoned on their chests, the former crewmen from the Navy cruiser reuniting for the first time stood tall, pride softening some of the effects of the years.

More than 200 people, 125 of them former crewmen, gathered at the Holiday Turf Inn this weekend for a reunion of shipmates of the *Albany*, which sailed from 1946 to 1980.

Though their pride was intact, other changes among the former sailors from across the country was readily evident.

"It's been a while," said Joseph Hoag of South Glens Falls, hitching up his belt. "A lot of fat has been put on us."

While they needed name tags to help identify each other, their devotion to the ship on which they served had not wavered through the decades.

Wayne Van Amburgh of Castleton, a former storekeeper on the *Albany* who organized the inaugural reunion, said that connection with the vessel led to the large turnout.

"It's dedication to a ship they loved," he said. "The *Albany* was their life, their home."

Unfortunately for these men, the *Albany* was sold for scrap last month. Following its deactivation in 1980, efforts were made to have it docked in the city that gave it its name.

"It's a sad thing for a lot of sailors here," said Stanley Knapik of Albany, who by coincidence got to serve on his "hometown" ship after it was commissioned in 1946.

‘It's dedication to a ship they loved. The Albany was their life, their home’

**— Wayne Van Amburgh,
former *Albany* crewman**

In another coincidence at the reunion, Knapik went through photos of the ship's christening and found pictures of his parents in the crowd.

While most conversation involved the *Albany* as friendships were rekindled and started, the former sailors were keenly aware of what their successors in the Navy were facing as tensions in the Persian Gulf with Iraq continue to build.

"I hope it doesn't come to shooting," Hoag said. "But if it does, we should clean their clock. Let's not make another Vietnam out of it."

Albany shipmates were so impressed with the turnout for the gathering that plans already are in the works for a second reunion next year in Florida.

"It's plain nostalgia. Breathtaking," said Eugene Contini of Melbourne, Fla., chairman for next year's meeting. "I've been waiting for this for 20 years."

The reunion ends today, with activities that include a 9 a.m. memorial service at the hotel.

Until next year, the former crewmen of the USS *Albany* said they will follow the message of signal flags hung by the hotel's pool area: maintain present course and speed.