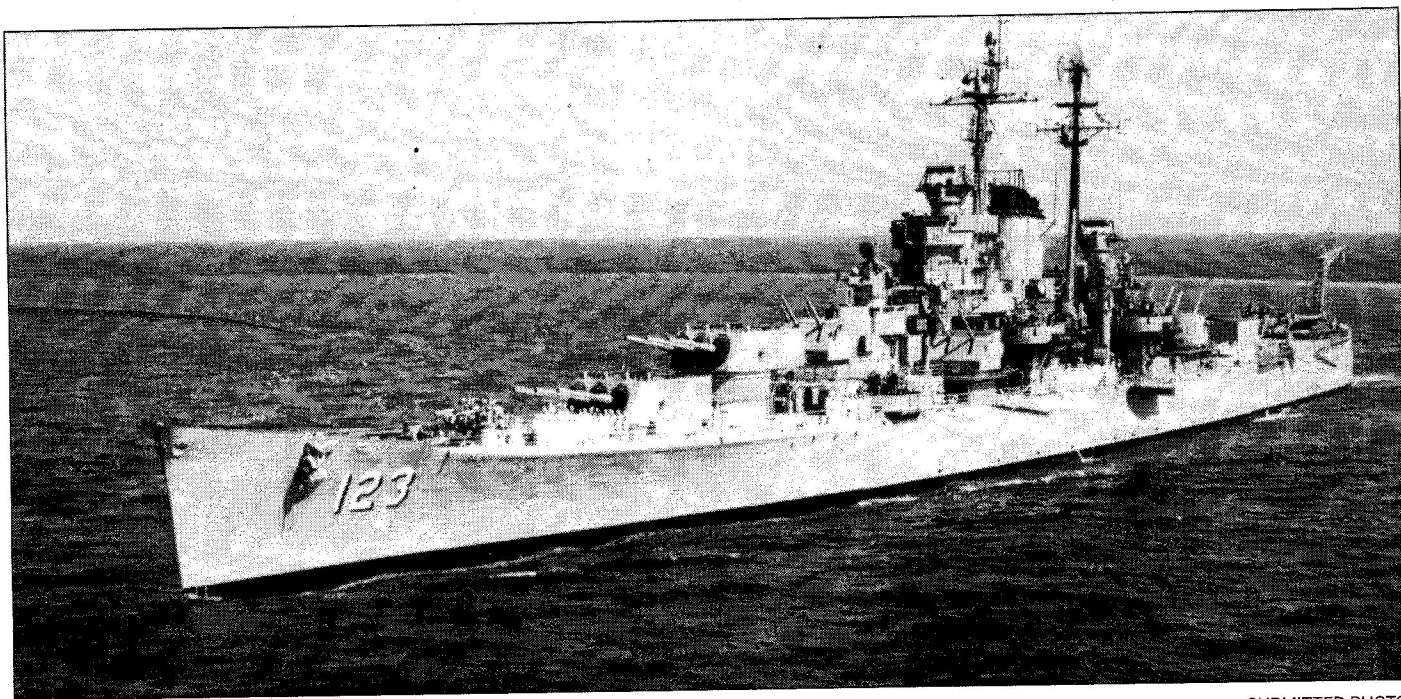


THE MONDAY AFTER

ABOARD THE ALBANY



SUBMITTED PHOTO

■ The USS Albany, carrying the hull number CA-123, is pictured on the move during her days as a heavy cruiser.

Dozens come to Canton for ship's reunion

BY GARY BROWN
Repository staff writer

Richard Zembal of Fridley, Minn., and his wife, Betty, have been to all but one of the ship's reunions for the USS Albany since the events began in the 1990s.

Last week the couple came to the reunion in Canton, one of two such gatherings held in the city over the years — the last in 1997 — under the planning of hosts John and Sandy Heitsman of Washington Township.

"It was supposed to be in Florida, but when that got canceled Sandy looked at me and said, 'I could do it,'" said Heitsman. "This is the third reunion we've hosted. We did one in Pittsburgh."

More than 130 people attended the reunion last week, staying at the McKinley Grand hotel, said Heitsman. The person who traveled the farthest was John Laughlin of Seal Beach, Calif., who served aboard the ship from 1950 to 1955, sailing aboard it in the Mediterranean when the heavy cruiser was numbered the CA-123.

"A lot of these guys were on it when it was the CG-10," said Heitsman, "when they converted her to a guided missile cruiser."

SHIP'S HISTORY

The Albany name actually has been on five ships.

gun, power-driven sloop-of-war.

"Originally christened the USS Contoocook, her name was changed to Albany in 1869," according to the history account on the website, which notes that the ship was decommissioned in 1900.

The third Albany, a cruiser, originally was constructed for Brazil, said the website history, but was purchased by the United States in 1898. It was commissioned in 1900. The ship served as an escort for 11 convoys during World War I. She was decommissioned in 1929.

In 1946, the fourth Albany — CA-123 — was commissioned in the Boston Navy Yard as a heavy cruiser, sailing for a dozen years in the Atlantic, Caribbean and Mediterranean. In 1958, the ship was converted to the world's first guided missile cruiser and her hull classification and number changed to CG-10. That ship was decommissioned in 1980.

"We tried to save her for a museum," said Heitsman, who added that although the efforts were not successful the name Albany lived on in 1990. "A submarine was given the name Albany, so the Albany is still at sea."

REUNION SPAWNS MEMORIES

That submarine may be on a voyage, but memories of the USS Albany were based in Canton last week. Reunions tend to spur men's minds to recall their days aboard the cruiser.

"That's what we do every year, tell stories," said Dick

on ship like they were yesterday."

"The facts (in the stories) get changed a little bit," acknowledged Jim Naughton of St. Petersburg, Fla., who was aboard the Albany from 1952 to 1956.

Naughton, who has attended about 15 reunions, calls the camaraderie of the crew members the most enjoyable part of coming together with the other Albany sailors.

"Some of us knew each other because we served aboard ship together," explained Desrochers. "But others, even though you served on the Albany at the same time, you might not know (until a reunion). The crew was 1,200 people and you didn't get to know everybody."

REASONS FOR COMING

It was a renewal of acquaintances that brought John Huggard of Raleigh, N.C., to his first reunion last week. In the Navy from 1964 to 2005, reaching the rank of a captain, he had served on the Albany from 1965 to 1967.

"I was just looking through some material I got from the (USS Albany) Association and I saw some pictures of guys I served with," said Huggard. "I thought I'd show up and say hi to them. I haven't seen them in almost 50 years."

Others were maintaining friendships that were made through the reunion. Shirley Hutchins of near Boston, Mass., attended reunions with her husband until he died three years ago. She continues to attend in his absence.

Steve Johnson of Jamestown N.Y., a Marine detached to the Albany late in the 1960s, played the bagpipes for the service.

"Just before the service, the sun started to come up behind us and just lit the place up," said Johnson. "It was something to see."

MANY ACTIVITIES

The memorial service was among a multitude of activities that the men and women coming to Canton got a chance to engage in during the reunion. Albany sailors and their wives visited Amish country, the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Wm. McKinley Presidential Library & Museum, MAPS Air Museum, Harry London candy company, and the David Warther Carvings museum in Sugarcreek.

"One day we took the ladies across the street to the (National) First Ladies' Library and after that we took them up to lunch at Canton Woman's Club," said Sandy Heitsman.

At the beginning of the reunion Sept. 22, the McKinley Grand and the Canton/Stark County Convention & Visitors Bureau treated the sailors and their guests to a welcome reception. As the reunion concluded, Canton Cabaret Musical Dinner Theater put on a Bob Hope-style USO show, with music and humor.

Part of the fun of being host of a reunion, John Heitsman said, is "getting the chance to highlight your city and state." Next up is the reunion in Boston, an appropriate venue, said Desrochers.