The Derelict Hull

Description

I fear the object of my post my now have become history as a result of Hurricane Katrina, but, then again, maybe notÃ¢â‚¬Â¦.

For those who have spent some time in the BB&G in Pascagoula, MS, you will know of the old wooden hull grounded in the mud on the east bank of the Pascagoula River. For the rest of you, know this is a â€œsea story,â€• and therefore, is truth.

The USS SPRUANCE (DD-963) was built in (then) Ingalls Shipbuilding and Drydock on the gulf coast of Mississippi. It was commissioned in 1975, and the first of 31 (30 were originally planned, then the one more was added to the procurement) destroyers of the class. I was a â€œplank ownerâ€• (initially assigned crewmember) on the 22nd hull of the class, USS LEFTWICH (DD-984) and was first â€œexposedâ€• to the industrial shipyard lifestyle of a new ship in July 1979. While there, I learned of a new tradition that had begun during the days of the SPRUANCE Class building.

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As you travel west on Hiway 90 through Pascagoula towards Gautier, you eye caught a old fishing boat hull imbedded in the mud, stern in, bow out towards the river, just a few yards north of the bridge. The decks had long since caved in, but the mast was still standing skyward. The wooden hull was a disgusting brown tone, showing the inattention given to the boat as a whole. As you got abreast of the vessel, there was a white set of numbers on a haze grey rectangle painted near the stem, in the approximate position that would mimic a set of hull numbers painted on a US Navy warship. The paint for these numbers was generally pretty bright, as it was renewed about once a month for the Ã¢â‚¬Å“traditionÃ¢â‚¬Â• that had grown in the local area, as a good natured joke between shipÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s crews.

During the rapid building of the SPRUANCE Class, there was generally a number of sailors and officers present for several of the ships. Obviously, the closer to commissioning, the larger the crew assigned. While I was there for two months prior to the commissioning of the LEFTWICH, the full crew of the JOHN ROGERS (DD-983), a better part of the CUSHINGÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s (DD-985) crew was around, and then the core of the HARRY W HILLÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s (DD-985) where there. The ships were being commissioned about a month apart, so it was a busy time.

When I arrived in July, the wooden hull was marked with â€œ983.â€• ROGERS would be the next ship commissioned. The night before commissioning of the NICHOLSON (DD-982), that crew had made off with some government issue white and haze grey paint and sent a detail out to honor the ROGERS by painting their hull number up on this derelict hull. A few days after my arrival, the ROGERS commissioned, and lo and behold, when we went to work from our barracks the next morning, the numbers Ã¢â‚¬Å“984Ã¢â‚¬Â• had replaced the â€œ983.â€• It was the local traditionÃ¢â‚¬Â¦.

One the night before our commissioning, who were we to break the pattern? A small detail did their job and put up the CUSHINGâ€™s â€œ985.â€• The day after our commissioning, we sailed south west towards the Panama Canal, as Hurricanes Daniel and Frederick churned towards the Gulf of Mexico,

our time at Ingalls over for the next few months.

In late January 80, we sailed to Pascagoula from our homeport of San Diego for both warranty work (a standard yard period after the ship had been operated for about 6 months), to be followed by a several month shipyard restricted availability (SRA), where we would have upgrades of radars and weapons installed. Since our departure from Pacagoula the prior August, several more SPRUANCE Class destroyers had joined the fleet. The expectation was there certainly should have been something like the hull number of the FIFE or the FLETCHER on the derelict hull by then, but that was not the case.

I actually knew before the rest of the crew, having driven ahead of the ship to be the liaison between the shipyard and SUPSHIP reps and our crew. I arrived about a week before the ship did. I crossed the bridge heading east into town and looked at the boat, only to see a not so brightly white â€œ984â€• adorning the unseaworthy hull. As it turned out, the Commanding Officer of the CUSHING had waited until after we sailed for our home port and sent his crew out to paint over 985 with our hull number. Subsequently, no other crew felt the inclination to poke fun at the hulls behind them in the commissioning sequence, hence the fact the white paint of our hull number was no longer so fresh.

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At some point after the ship arrived, some of our sailors went out one night to undo the â€œhonorâ€• bestowed on us. I can claim that the LEFTWICH had her hull number on display longer than any of the other SPRUANCEs and most likely longer than any ship built at Ingalls.

In 1984, I flew to Pascagoula in preparation for the overhaul my ship, USS CONOLLY (DD-979) would soon be going through. I was happy to note that there was a â€œ5â€• painted on the derelictÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s bow for the USS PELELIU (LHA-5), which was finishing up construction at the time.

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