

USS NEWPORT NEWS (CA-148)

By Paul Stillwell

I first saw her on a beautiful October morning in 1967. As the sun rose, the smooth water of Subic Bay reflected the low-hanging clouds it had painted pink. Silhouetted against the morning light was the sleek, graceful outline of one of the U.S. Navy's last two cruisers. The **USS Newport News (CA-148)** had just come around from the Atlantic to take part in the Vietnam War. During her preliminary stop in the Philippines, she struck me that morning as the most beautiful ship I had ever seen. I still recall the broadside view of her towering superstructure, her gun turrets, and the vestigial aircraft crane at the stern.

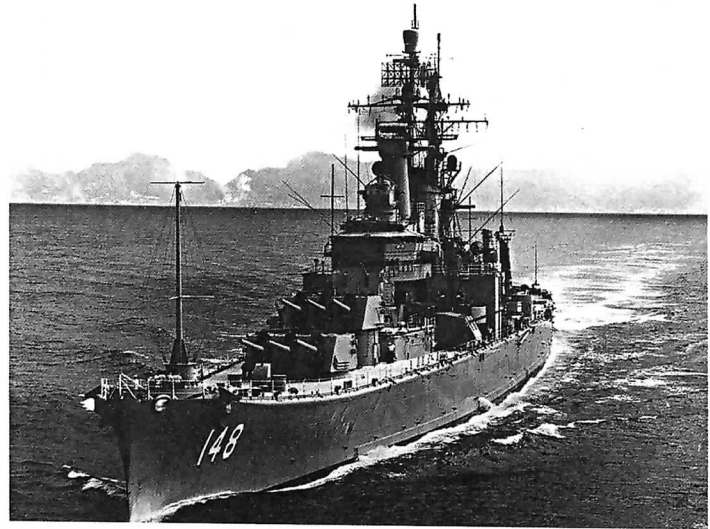
A few days later, we were in Vietnam, and in the space of a few minutes, steamed past the last two 8-inch cruisers, the **Newport News** and the **Saint Paul (CA-73)**. I had the feeling that a pair of majestic ladies was going by. Still later, I recall a time when the **Newport News** was in Da Nang harbor, firing into the tree-clad hills above. Those of us on board other ships watched as she methodically spit out projectiles; first we saw the orange ball of fire erupting from her gun muzzles, then the cloud of dark smoke, and finally we heard the booming sound after it had traveled across the water. Her nickname was "Thunder," and it fit her well.

The memory lingered, and so it was that I responded enthusiastically when the opportunity came to make a four-week Naval Reserve cruise on board the ship in late Winter 1974. The Yom Kipper War between Arabs and Israelis had resulted in an oil embargo and long lines at gasoline pumps. Another consequence was that the South American cruise planned for the **Newport News** was curtailed to a trip to Florida and the Caribbean. Even so, it was a great ride. Since I had previously seen the ship only from afar, it was much more enjoyable to live on board, sharing a room with a bearded lieutenant from the engineering department. (Yes, that was the old Navy in those days.)

During the cruise, I was officially assigned to the staff of Vice Admiral John Finneran, who had his Second Fleet flag in the **Newport News**. The ship had a large war room (if that is the best term), outfitted with charts, status boards, and plots. In turn, each division of the staff sent forth a representative to provide the admiral with a morning briefing on the previous day's events in operations, logistics, intelligence, weather, and so forth. My own contribution was in the area of daily news, summarizing dispatches that came in from the press. Among other things, I reported on daily development in the kidnapping of Patty Hearst by the Symbioses Liberation Army, and I told of the latest manifestations of a bizarre, fortunately short-lived case known as "streaking" in which otherwise sane individuals made public appearances in the nude.

When not in the briefing room or standing watch, I roamed the ship. Particularly dramatic was the experiences of being topside during shore bombardment exercises. One night I was high in the superstructure, watching the firing of number-one turret. This time the flames were yellow. The guns were so close that the delay in hearing the thunder was far less than it had been in Vietnam; the guns were also much louder at close range. Turret two was not firing during that exercise because a projectile had exploded in its center barrel during shore bombardment in Vietnam in 1972. A year-and-a-half later, the blackened interior

was sickening to behold, as was the thought that good men had died there.



USS NEWPORT NEWS (CA-148) shortly after completion.

On a bright, shiny day in 1975, I was at Norfolk for the decommissioning of this, the Navy's last heavy cruiser. The crew was arrayed in crisp white uniforms, and the ship gleaming haze gray, garnished with colorful bunting. At the ceremony, I felt shivers of emotion, as if this creature of steel were animated by some sort of soul.

The crew left, the crowd left, and the attention faded quickly. Then the demise set in. In succeeding years I saw the old dowager waste away at her mothball-fleet berth in the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. During my periodic trips to that city, she looked bleaker and bleaker as the gray exterior grew faded and mottled. Rust crept insidiously. The hull number was painted over, as was the name on her stern. The name **Newport News** had now been bestowed on a new submarine. And then came the final indignity as the barrels of those 8-inch guns were lopped off at the breech ends. Plans had been under way to preserve the heavy cruiser **Newport News** as a memorial in the upper Midwest. But somehow, they went awry, and she was instead towed to New Orleans earlier this year to be cut up for scrap. The old warship deserved better.

Taken from NAVY HISTORY, December 1993 and submitted by Robert S. Kaplan.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Did I read that sign right?

TOILET OUT OF ORDER, PLEASE USE FLOOR BELOW

In a Laundromat:

AUTOMATIC WASHING MACHINES: PLEASE REMOVE ALL YOUR CLOTHES WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OFF.

In a Memphis department store:

BARGAIN BASEMENT UPSTAIR

In an office:

WOULD THE PERSON WHO TOOK THE STEP LADDER YESTERDAY PLEASE BRING IT BACK OR FURTHER STEPS WILL BE TAKEN