



*The Friends of the PNSM
The Wheelhouse*

Volume 4, No 3

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July 1, 2025

**Welcome to the
The Wheelhouse,**
a Newsletter published
quarterly by **The
Friends of the
Portsmouth Naval
Shipyard Museum.**

Please visit the
Museum and see our
website for additional
information.

<https://www.friendsofportsmouthnsm.org/>

In this issue we bring
you:

President's Message from
Gary Bahena,
Treasurer Report,
History Column from
Steve Milner, Review of
the latest Speaker Series,
Annual Meeting Wrap-Up
and more

**Editor (interim)
Gary Bahena**

**The Friends of the
Portsmouth Naval
Shipyard Museum**
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President's Message

Greeting Friends. In this issue of *The Wheelhouse*, we bring you Steve Milner's instructive piece on the conversion of the *USS Florida* from a ballistic missile sub to a guided missile sub, a recap of our Speakers event "250 Years of the US Marines", news from NNSY that, after a long hiatus, it has once again appointed an official Liaison to The Friends' Board and a peek at some rare photos from the Marshall Butt collection. As always, thank you for your continued support.

Treasurer Report

As of June 30, 2025,

The Friends have \$115,718.88 in cash and liquid investments. During this fiscal year we continue funding the Oral History Project.

**Become a
Member
of the
Friends.
Apply online!**

www.friendsofportsmouthnsm.org/join-donate

THE FRIENDS OF THE PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD MUSEUM

NNSY Again Hosts a Contractor to Meet National Defense Objectives – The Conversion of the *USS Florida*

By: Steve Milner, Former Public Affairs Officer at
Norfolk Naval Shipyard

A year-and-a-half after Norfolk Naval Shipyard opened its aircraft carrier dock to Newport News Shipyard's *USS Enterprise* (CVN 65) availability, the Portsmouth naval facility was again at the forefront of another major contractor's project: This time it was conversion of the ballistic submarine, *USS Florida* (SSBN 728), into a guided missile vessel, *USS Florida* (SSGN 728), in cooperation with General Dynamics Electric Boat of Groton, Connecticut.

I wrote about *USS Enterprise's* successful availability at NNSY in our Friends of Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum's quarterly newsletter, *The Wheelhouse*, in January 2025. Newport News Shipyard needed NNSY's drydock when its comparable facility was unavailable to meet national defense scheduling.

Due to the reduction in the authorized number of ballistic submarines brought about in 1992 by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II) signed by US President George HW Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the United States effectively agreed to decommission four ballistic (boomer) Ohio-Class submarines.

(USS Florida, continued on p.2)

Upcoming 2025 Events

**5th Annual Portsmouth Paddle Battle and
Inaugural Portsmouth Junior Paddle Battle:**
Saturday, September 6

Speaker Series: October 11, 250 Years of Navy
Medicine, Andre Sobocinski, US Navy Bureau
of Medicine and Surgery



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(USS Florida, continued from p.1)

Instead of fully scrapping the submarines, however, the Navy wisely decided to convert its four oldest ballistic subs into cruise missile submarines (SSGNs) while still meeting treaty obligations. The other submarine conversions included *USS Georgia* (SSGN 729) at NNSY; *USS Ohio* (SSGN 726) at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard; and *USS Michigan* (SSGN 727) at Puget Sound.

USS Florida entered NNSY's Drydock No. 4 on July 8, 2003, at the start of Electric Boat's three-year overhaul and conversion project.

During this conversion, 24 missile tubes were refitted to accommodate 154 long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles.



NNSY and Electric Boat personnel remove a ballistic missile tube from USS Florida during conversion. US Navy photo.

In addition, added space was provided to store special forces operational equipment for their covert missions.

As told in an article written by Michael Brayshaw of NNSY's Public Affairs Staff in the April 21, 2006, NNSY employee newspaper, *Service to the Fleet*, NNSY personnel helped Electric Boat "expand living and training spaces, including more bunk capacity and enhanced physical training area."

Said Jim Stevens, NNSY's Deputy Operations Officer and SSN/SSGN Program Manager: "The conversion presented a huge challenge for all of us involved." He noted that nearly 600 NNSY employees, 350 Electric Boat employees and 250 others worked on this huge project. "But all the employees working together at Norfolk Naval Shipyard just did a fantastic job. The Navy's really getting its money's worth out of this overhaul," he explained.

Electric Boat Site Manager Dexter White said it was remarkable to deliver the *Florida* conversion on time and within budget with "such a very brief period between design and delivery. We were thankful the platform was very amenable to the conversion." White also said the *Florida* team also gained

important perspective on the process from Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, which completed the *USS Ohio* (SSGN 726) conversion returning this submarine to the Fleet a month earlier.



USS Florida leaves NNSY on sea trials March 25, 2006 after completing its 32-month overhaul and conversion. US Navy photo by Steve Milner.

Buddy Bennett, of NNSY's Operation Department, said *Florida's* 12-day sea trials tested all of the submarine's systems under some of the most extreme conditions it would face in the Fleet. "The fact that very few minor discrepancies were noted is a testament to the high quality of work performed by all the craftsmen who worked on the submarine during the 32 months; so our hats are off to everyone of you," he added.

(USS Florida, continued on p.3)



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(USS Florida, continued from p.2)

Then NNSY's Commanding Officer, Captain Joseph Campbell, wrote in his monthly employee newspaper column that the Virginia shipyard "...devoted an astounding 466,000 mandays to the *Florida* project. These mandays were well spent."



Captain Joseph Campbell, commanding officer of NNSY when it helped Electric Boat personnel convert USS Florida. U.S. Navy photo.

Captain Campbell said *USS Florida's* converted missile tubes were capable of launching multiple Tomahawk missiles. "In parallel with the conversion work, the other hull, mechanical and electrical equipment was also overhauled. *Florida* returned to the Fleet in great material condition and ready to execute new missions."



While undersea, USS Florida launches a Tomahawk missile. U.S. Navy photo.

After completing its availability at NNSY, *USS Florida* returned to its homeport at Kings Bay, Georgia, and left on a 727-day deployment involving five rotated crews. During these deployments, *USS Florida* traveled more than 60,000 miles undetected and made port calls in Greece, Guam, Diego Garcia and the United Kingdom.

Originally commissioned in 1983, *USS Florida* is scheduled to be decommissioned in 2026.

The other three cold-war relics are scheduled to be decommissioned by 2028.

The *USS Florida* continues her service.

[Source – Wikipedia]

The *USS Florida* has enjoyed an active life as a SSGN.

On March 19, 2011, joining with Royal Navy and other US Navy warships and submarines, *Florida* fired scores of Tomahawk missiles at Libyan air defense targets as part of Operation Odyssey Dawn. The Tomahawk missile strikes allowed British, French and allied warplanes to begin enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya preventing Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi from using his air force to attack rebels in his country. This was the first combat action for the *Florida* or any other converted *Ohio*-class SSGN. During Operation Odyssey Dawn, *Florida* launched 93 Tomahawk missiles.

On 28 June 2010, *Florida* was one of three *Ohio*-class submarines involved in a US response to Chinese missile testing in the contested East China Sea. *Florida*, *Ohio* and *Michigan* all surfaced simultaneously in the waters of the British Indian Ocean Territory, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea respectively.

More recently, in 2023, *Florida* was sent to the Persian Gulf during the Israeli-Hamas war.



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Letters to the Editor

The *Wheelhouse* welcomes Letters to the Editor. Please feel free to submit letters as an e-mail to gbahena@sprintmail.com.

Speaker Series Events

Unless otherwise noted, all Speaker events are held on **Saturday, from 2-3 pm**, in the **Police Auditorium** at the **Visitor's Center** on the corner of **Middle and High Streets**.

"250 Years of the United States Marines"

Part 2 of the 4 Part 2025 Series: "250 Years of US Navy History"

By Keith Abernathy

On Saturday, June 7, 2025, The Friends welcomed Dr. Shawn Callahan, Director of the Marine Corps History Division, as our featured speaker for the second event in our 2025 Speakers Series.



Dr. Shawn P. Callahan

Dr. Callahan delivered a compelling and insightful presentation titled "250 Years of the United States Marines," tracing the Corps' remarkable

journey from its founding at Tun Tavern in 1775 to its modern role in today's global defense. With depth, clarity and passion, he explored the enduring values of honor, courage and commitment that have defined the Marine Corps for two and a half centuries.

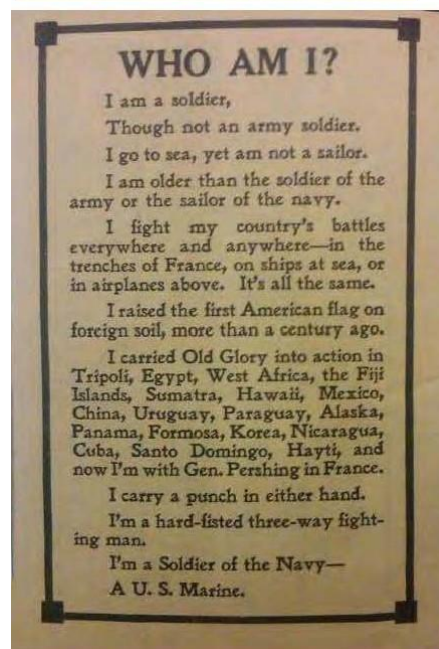
From the earliest battles of the American Revolution to the wars of the 21st century, Dr. Callahan highlighted the Marine Corps' unwavering role in shaping and defending the Nation — both at sea and ashore. His talk brought to life the legacy of the Few and the Proud, and reminded us all of the extraordinary men and women who have stood the watch across generations.

Thank you to everyone who joined us for this special occasion, and to Dr. Callahan for helping us honor the 250th birthday year of the United States Marine Corps.

Semper Fidelis!

Editor's Note: A central thesis to Dr. Callahan's presentation was the historical push-and-pull of the Marines serving as an independent force, on the one hand, and serving on ships and as a subordinate part of the Navy. And sometimes fending off efforts by the Army trying to swallow them. Yet always Marines. Thank you Dr. Callahan

for a thought provoking and different take on the history of the Corps. The following slide from Dr. Callahan's presentation, showing a Marine recruiting poster from 1917-1918, best illustrates this tension.



(250 Years of the US Marines,
continued on p.5)



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(250 Years of the US Marines, continued from p.4)

Dr. Callahan was introduced by Brigadier General Michael E. McWilliams, Commander, Joint Enabling Capabilities Command, United States Transportation Command, Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia. Thank you Gen. McWilliams.

Did you know ...

By Gary Bahena

Interesting factoids from Dr. Callahan's presentation.

Do you know where the phrase "a few good men" comes from? When trying to outfit the Continental ship *Providence* with a Marine contingent, ship Capt. William Jones advertised in the *Providence Gazette* on March 20, 1779, that "[t]he Continental ship *Providence* ... is bound on a short cruise, immediately; a few good men are wanted to make up her complement".

Did you know that the Corps actually has **two birthdays**? Nationally we celebrate November 10, when the Second Continental Congress created the *Continental* Marines, and this is the day the Marines hold their Marine Corps Ball. Who doesn't love a good party. However, the official birthday of the current U.S. Marine Corps is July 11, 1798.

Do you know where the lines "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" come from in the Marine Corps Hymn? The "shores of Tripoli" refer to the first independent foreign mission by the Marines in the Battle of Derna in Tripoli during the First Barbary War and the "halls of Montezuma" refer to capture by the Marines of Chapultepec Castle (aka the Halls of Montezuma) in the Mexican War of 1846-68.

It is amazing what you can learn during a Friends lecture event.

City Livestreams Lecture

Thank you of the City of Portsmouth Marketing & Communications Department, and to Aaron Cohen and Greg Gadberry, for livestreaming the Marine lecture, complete with the Q&A session, **nationally**. This marked the first time the City livestreamed any lecture event by any group.

Next Speakers Event

250 Years of Navy Medicine,
Andre Sobocinski, US Navy
Bureau of Medicine and Surgery,
Part 3 of the 4 Part 2025 Series:
"250 Years of US Navy History"



2025 Speakers Series
IN CELEBRATION OF THE
250TH BIRTHDAY
OF U.S. NAVY MEDICINE
Presents

250 Years of United States Navy Medicine Featuring- André Sobocinski



**Renowned Historian- U.S. Navy
Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
Saturday, October 11, 2025, 2 - 3 PM**



Location -
Police Administration
Building Auditorium
Portsmouth Welcome Center
206 High Street, Portsmouth, VA



FREE

Open to the Public

FREE

Plan Ahead!

**2025 Speakers Series
Presents**

250 Years of U.S. Navy History Part 3

Saturday, October 11, 2025, 2 - 3 pm
250 Years of **U.S. Navy Medicine**
Speaker: **André Sobocinski**
Renowned Historian – U.S. Navy
Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

Part 4

Saturday, November 1, 2025, 2 - 3 pm
250 Years of **Service to the U.S. Navy**
Speaker: **Marcus Robbins**
Norfolk Naval Shipyard
Command Historian & Archivist



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2025 Annual Meeting -- NNSY Re-Engages and Appoints First Official Liaison in Many Years, PLUS Help Reimagine The Friends

The 62nd Annual Meeting of The Friends occurred on May 20, 2025. The following **Directors and Officers** were elected: Gary Bahena, Director/President; Tom Butt, Director/1st Vice President/Interim Treasurer; Brooks Britt, Director/2nd Vice President; Jeannie McCoy, Director/Secretary; Lavern Harrell, Director; Danielle "Dane" Larrew, Director. A **Budget** was adopted authorizing \$26,540 in expenses and projecting \$26,850 in revenue.

We have a NNSY Liaison! For many years, The Friends had an official Shipyard Liaison appointed by the Commanding Officer of the Shipyard. That position used to be in The Friends' Bylaws. The Shipyard has once again decided to appoint an official liaison – Dane Larrew (a new Director, see above). Welcome aboard Dane. Dane will serve as a Director until we can amend the Bylaws to recreate the Liaison position after which she will shift to Liaison and we will seek a new replacement Director.

Stay tuned for a special meeting by Proxy to amend the Bylaws.

The general meeting was followed by an extensive discussion on The Friends' relationship with the City's Museums Department as regards the future of the Shipyard Museum and the Lightship Museum.

By way of background, at the 2021 Annual Meeting (well-attended despite COVID), and during an extensive post-meeting discussion, the membership and Board expressed dismay at the growing shift in the Shipyard Museum's focus toward being a general history museum and away from its prior focus on the history of its namesake Shipyard and its relationship with the history of Portsmouth. This concern extended to unhappiness with The Friends' growing funding of Shipyard Museum projects with no connection to the Shipyard. The discussion led the Board to vote to limit future financial support of the Shipyard Museum to projects with a more direct tie to the Shipyard and its role in Portsmouth history (including related Portsmouth history outside of the Shipyard walls).

This discussion became part of the genesis for the **Oral History Project**.

The prior Museum administration respected The Friends' shift and was supportive of the Oral History Project. They participated in Project planning and taping sessions although they remained noncommittal to creating a permanent Museum Exhibit from the nascent Oral History Project until they saw the results.

Although the current Museums Administration came in with even higher levels of support, lauding the Oral History Project as a future Museum Exhibit at The Friends' 2022 Annual Meeting, and working closely with The Friends and Colonna's Shipyard in a Friends-led effort to piece together a \$1,000,000 matching Federal grant request to restore the Lightship -- with the Feds putting up \$500,000, the City putting up \$250,000 and The Friends committing to raise \$250,000 – the Museums Department subsequently abandoned that effort and other work with The Friends.

The Friends' Board has determined to call a special meeting of the Membership of The Friends to discuss just how and where the Membership believes things should proceed.

*(Annual Meeting, continued on
p.7)*



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*(Annual Meeting, continued
from p.6)*

The Friends, through its predecessor, founded the Shipyard Museum and remain committed to the Museum, to the Shipyard and to telling the stories of the Shipyard, the City of Portsmouth and how the two are inextricably connected.

Stay tuned for a Meeting date and details.



Opening Day at the Shipyard Museum

Inaugural Junior Paddle Battle and 5th Annual Portsmouth Paddle Battle

The inaugural Junior Paddle will kick off on Saturday, September 7, from Noon to 5 PM, at High Street Basin in Olde Towne. The Junior Paddle Battle will offer free kayak lessons to Portsmouth youth ages 8-14. The event includes both on-land and in-water kayak lessons thanks to a number of wonderful partnerships: Hoffer Creek Wildlife Preserve and VB Surf

Sessions are providing the needed kayaks and loaning us their lead youth kayaking instructors and Hampton Roads Transit is loaning us the required kids' life vests. Thank you also to the Portsmouth Redevelopment and Housing Authority for helping us to reach out to Portsmouth kids who would not normally be able to participate in an event such as this and to the Portsmouth YMCA for providing free swim lessons to those kids so that they can participate.

Free Tandem Kayak Lesson.



For kids ages 8-14

Learn how to paddle a tandem kayak.



Join us Sept. 6, 2025, 12 p.m.
at High Street Basin/Landing

Space is limited, sign up early!
Go to [friendsofportsmouthnavalsm.org/junior-paddle-battle](https://www.friendsofportsmouthnavalsm.org/junior-paddle-battle)
for more information.



But even with those fabulous partnerships **we need volunteers to help staff the event and to instruct the kids on kayaking.**

To Register for free kayak lessons, or to volunteer, go to

<https://www.friendsofportsmouthnavalsm.org/junior-paddle-battle>

But before we do the Junior Paddle Battle, we need to put on the **5th Annual Portsmouth Paddle Battle**. The Paddle Battle, put on by The Friends, has become a trademark Portsmouth waterfront event. This year's Paddle Battle will run on September 6, from 8 AM to Noon, in High Street Basin just before the Junior Paddle Battle. The Paddle Battle involves kayak and SUP racing on the Elizabeth, from High Street Basin to the Hammerhead Crane and back, and is open to beginner, intermediate and advanced racers ages 16-70+. The Race also involves a bragging rights Challenge Cup race between active duty Navy and Coast Guard personnel.

Racers and volunteers are needed. Go to

<https://www.friendsofportsmouthnavalsm.org/paddle-battle>

to register to race or to sign up to volunteer.

If you have not seen a Paddle Battle before, we also offer free music, corn hole toss, free children's activities (including face painting), free children's educational activities and more.

Come check it out! Come Race or Volunteer!



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In Search of *Wheelhouse* Editor, Photographer and Treasurer

Newsletter Editor Wanted – Bring *The Wheelhouse* to Life!

Do you love writing, organizing and adding a creative touch? The Friends are looking for a **Newsletter Editor** to help craft *The Wheelhouse*! Assemble a **4-6 page newsletter** each quarter (we provide the main article). Add your creative flair to keep readers informed and engaged. Work with a great team and enjoy the appreciation of history lovers. If you have an eye for detail, and a few hours to spare each quarter, we'd love to have you on board! Contact Gary at gbahena@sprintmail.com.

Volunteer Photographer Wanted – Help Us Tell Our Story!

Are you handy with a camera? The Friends are looking for a **volunteer photographer** to help capture the moments that matter. We need someone to:

photograph our **Speaker Series** (one Saturday each quarter), cover the **Portsmouth Paddle Battle and Junior Paddle Battle** (one Saturday in the Fall) and film occasional interviews for our **Oral History Project** (~18-24 hours per year total [your time commitment is flexible]). We'll provide an easy to learn **Sony Alpha-7 IV** camera – you provide your time, creativity and enthusiasm. This is a fantastic opportunity to sharpen your skills, use top-tier equipment and be part of a warm, history-loving community. Whether you're a seasoned photographer or a serious hobbyist, if you enjoy being appreciated and making a difference, we'd love to hear from you! Contact Gary at gbahena@sprintmail.com.

Treasurer Wanted – Join Our Leadership Team!

The Friends are seeking a **Treasurer** to step into this key Board leadership role as our current Treasurer transitions to another Board position. Experience with **QuickBooks** (or a willingness to learn) is ideal (alternatively, familiarity with **Quicken** or similar financial software will ease learning QuickBooks). Must be **fiscally responsible** and comfortable working with a dedicated, all-

volunteer Board. This role requires just a **few hours per month** but makes a big impact! If you're organized, detail-oriented and enjoy working with a great team, we'd love to have you on board. Contact Gary at gbahena@sprintmail.com.



Friends Go Facebook

Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Keith Abernathy, The Friends are now on Facebook. **Check us out at** www.facebook.com/groups/1188863612579594.

Like us. Follow us. Join the 386 followers who are already subscribers to The Friends' Facebook page and stay current with our happenings, comings and goings.

Want to be a Movie Star?

The Friends are looking for people to be interviewed for the Oral History Project. Are you a long-time (20 years) or retired Shipyarder? Are you part of a



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family of Shipyarders? Did you grow up in Portsmouth?

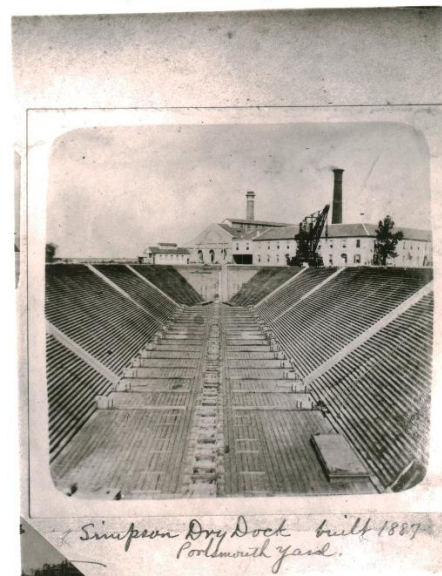
The Friends are looking for folks with a Shipyard background to be interviewed as part of our Oral History Project. You will need to complete a short Questionnaire, do a 30-minute telephone interview and then sit for a 50-60 minute taped interview.

Don't just read about history – become a part of history!

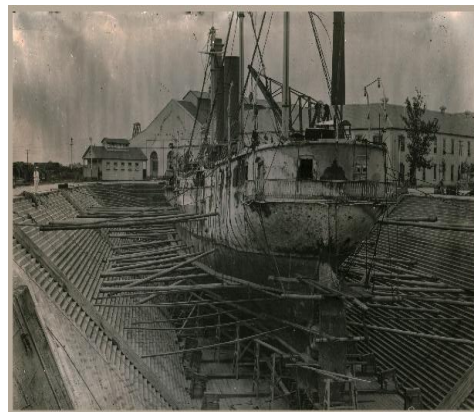
Photos from the Marshall Butt Collection

As some of you may be aware, when originally founded the Shipyard Museum was staffed by volunteers from The Friends and its predecessor. And this is the way the Museum happily ran until 1972. But the vision for the Museum came from Marshall Butt Sr., the first City-appointed Curator and Director for the Museum. Tom Butt, 1st Vice President of The Friends and grandson of Marshall Butt, has been kind enough to donate to The Friends some photos from his late grandfather's collection. Here are a few. More to follow.

Shown here are a photo of Dry Dock 2 and a photo of the *Reina Mercedes* in Dry Dock 2. *Reina Mercedes*, was launched in 1887 at Cartagena, Spain as a Spanish naval cruiser. She was captured in Cuba in 1898 by the US Navy during the Spanish–American War. From 1912-1957, she served as the station ship at the US Naval Academy with the exception of brief periods in when she was towed to NNSY for docking and overhaul. Until 1940 it was customary for Naval Academy midshipmen serving punishment to live and take their meals on board the ship for up to two months at a time. She was never formally considered a “brig”, as some midshipmen remembered her, since the midshipmen continued to attend all drills and recitations afloat and ashore but were required to sleep in hammocks on the ship and to take their meals on board. This practice was abolished in 1940. [Source: US Naval Institute]



Dry Dock 2



Reina Mercedes in Dry Dock 2