

Annual USS Des Moines reunion keeps memories alive and well

By ERIC KLAMUT
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JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP — If it wasn't for their gray hair, one might think that Paul Overly's back yard was full of a group of young U.S. Navy sailors on Friday by the sound of their feisty conversations and roaring laughter.

Overly, of Lake Road, hosted the 29th annual reunion for former crew members of the USS Des Moines (CA-134) at his farm. The reunion spans the weekend and has been a yearly routine for many veterans of the Cold War-era heavy cruiser.

A gunner's mate, Overly served aboard the Des Moines, or the "Daisy Mae," as she is affectionately called by her former crews, from

1951 to 1955 and fired the ship's 8-inch 55's that could hit inland from 20 miles out at sea.

"These guys that come here are the best there is," he said while sipping a cold beer.

"A lot of people said that if I ever quit they'll never go to another (reunion). They like the casual atmosphere."

If you ask Overly about his time on the ship, a sense of appreciation for the sea fills his voice.

"Being over the water and seeing the sunset — it's just beautiful," he said. "It's one of God's great creations."

Scheduled over the weekend, the reunion includes food, a DJ, dancing and a fireworks display.

"Charles de Gaulle kicked us out of France in 1958. But we were tougher than them and didn't leave."

— *Ronald Mirezzi of Shirley, Mass., on the USS Des Moines*

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JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP — Former radiomen of the USS Des Moines pose for a photo Friday afternoon during the crew members' 29th annual reunion at Paul Overly's farm on Lake Road. From left: Jim McCann of Palm Harbor, Fla., Ronald Mirezzi of Shirley, Mass., Tom MacFarlane of Cocoa, Fla., Jack Evans of Knoxville, Tenn., and Chris Spano of Long Island, N.Y.

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But the most important function of the event is the camaraderie of the former ship mates of the Des Moines.

Seated at a table shaded by a tent to combat the glaring afternoon sun, a group of former radiomen who served together from the late 50s until 1961 laughed and reminisced about their times together.

They also discussed the Daisy Mae's recent demise as she was dismantled over the past year and scrapped.

Chris Spano of Long Island, N.Y., said that a group of the former sailors attempted to save the ship and have her preserved as a floating museum, but the overall costs proved to be too high for the group.

"We tried for about 10 years to save the ship," Tom MacFarlane of Cocoa, Fla., said. "It would have cost about \$20 million total."

Richard Kleebauer of Texas, a former radar operator who served from 1956 to 1960 and has been attending the reunion for 18 years, said he was saddened when he heard the ship was to be dismantled.

"I would have loved to see her go somewhere," he said. "It was probably the most disciplined ship you could serve on. It was a big family and it's still a big family."

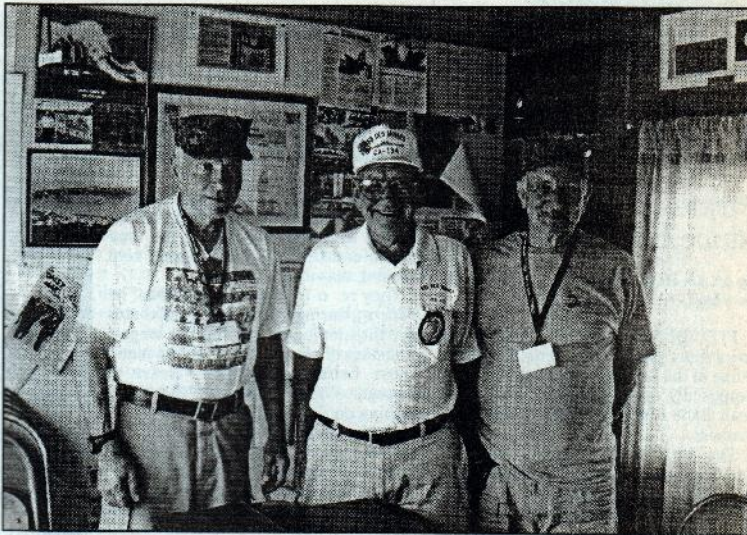
However, there are the memories. Spano recalled being stationed in the Des Moines' home port of Villefranche, in southeastern France.

"It was like we died and went to Heaven," he laughed. "We had some great times. We were 18, 19, 20 years-old. I tell people the government sponsored my three-year cruise."

Spano said he first began attending the reunions in 1988, but over the past 12 years he has faithfully attended every event.

The reunions began in 1978 at Overly's farm with six crew members. One of these crewmen was also Overly's brother, who served with him on the Des Moines.

The five former radiomen



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JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP — Paul Overly, center, poses for a picture with former U.S. Marines Jim Chapman, left, and Bob Storm, right, Friday afternoon at Overly's farm on Lake Road. In the background are various pieces of memorabilia and literature related to the USS Des Moines.

talked of a few hairy situations they experienced on board the ship while serving. These included a fire while at sea and a hurricane.

The USS Des Moines served as flag ship for the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean and North Atlantic. The result of a culmination of World War II-era advancements, she was launched in 1946 and commissioned in 1948.

The first of four Des Moines class heavy cruisers, the Daisy Mae was equipped with rapid firing 8-inch guns to outrange Japanese cruisers that carried smaller 6-inch guns.

Being the fleet's flag ship had its perks. Ronald Mirezzi of Shirley, Mass., an attendee at the reunions since 1991, said that in addition to carrying the fleet's admiral, the Des Moines hosted many dignitaries and even movie stars such as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Princess Grace of Monaco, John Wayne, and Frank Sinatra.

Besides being top dogs in the fleet, he said the crew was tough.

"Charles de Gaulle kicked us out of France in 1958," Mirezzi laughed. "But we were tougher than them and didn't leave."

Being radio operators, Morse code was a second language to the men. Jack Evans of Knoxville, Tenn., said the radio crews of the Des Moines were excellent communicators given the technology of the day.

"We were the best communicators in the world," he said. "We only had Morse code — and we even kept contact with submarines in the Arctic. I could still use Morse code today if necessary."

With the advancements in naval technology, Morse code became an extinct language in the 1960s, Mirezzi said.

"It was the end of an era," he said. "We are all members of that defunct capability called Morse code."

In addition to the former sailors, there were a handful of former U.S. Marines at the reunion. Regular attendees for the past three years, the leathernecks were part of the ship's landing party and in

charge of guarding the admiral in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Jim Chapman of Marion, Pa., a former U.S. Marine on the Des Moines who went on to serve 24 years in the corps attaining the rank of major, said he fondly remembers his time on the ship.

"Nowadays, you don't have Marines on ships," he said. "We saw a lot of dignitaries, carried the admiral, and kept peace in the Mediterranean."

Overly and Chapman kidded each other about whose branch of service is better — an ongoing saga between the two military branches.

Although the Des Moines was not in a "hot" war, Chapman said it is important to keep in mind that during the Cold War-era, the ship was ready to deploy and fight at a moment's notice.

Overly said Friday he expected more former crew members to keep coming throughout the weekend. Last year, about 350 members of the Daisy Mae's former crew turned out for the reunion.