



Scott DeJulia/R-A

JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP — Veterans of the USS Des Moines, CA-134, gather at Paul Overly's home for their 30th reunion Friday. The festivities will continue throughout the weekend.

All hands at Overly's

Crew of USS Des Moines sets sail for Jefferson Twp.

By **SCOTT DEJULIA**
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JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP — For 30 years, men from all over the United States have been coming to Paul Overly's farm on state Route 258 to celebrate their service aboard what was, in its prime, one of the most grand ships on the water — the USS Des Moines, CA-134. The ship is gone, but the sailors and Marines recalled their days on board with fondness.

The Des Moines, affectionately nicknamed the "Daisy Mae" by her crew, sailed all over the world, and it served as the flagship of the 6th Fleet. As flagship, the admiral of the fleet was stationed onboard, and world leaders, stars and dignitaries were commonplace sights to the "Daisy Mae's" sailors and Marines.

Wally Travis, of Grand Ledge, Mich., attended every reunion since 1997 until last year, when he was involved in a car-bicycle accident shortly before the date. He broke seven ribs and suffered eight fractures, and he noted it was worse than his worst injury aboard the Des Moines. Once, while disposing trash, he slipped on an icy ladder and popped his shoulder out of place, for which he received a cortisone shot. He still had the knot in his shoulder from where the shot was administered.

Travis was a World War II veteran, and he wanted everyone to wear red on Fridays until



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JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP — Letters, pictures, newsletters and other artifacts from the USS Des Moines, nicknamed the "Daisy Mae" by her crew, decorate the wall of a trailer on Paul Overly's farm. The trailer is a museum dedicated to preserving the memory of the ship and her crew throughout her service.

the troops come home from the current conflict in Iraq to remember those who have shed their blood in service to this country.

Jim Chapman was a Marine on board the Des Moines, and his experiences were different than most of the sailors. Each Marine had an approximately 24 by 6 foot bunk, and they were stacked three high, with approximately two feet between each level.

"We had a lot of accessories to stow," said Chapman, which included their weapons, extra uniforms and other items, and each Marine had but a small silver box for all his gear.

Chapman described the Marines' duties aboard ship, which included operating the brig and leading the ship's landing party. At a moment's notice, said Chapman, all 40 Marines and two platoons of sailors, totaling 120 men, could be launched to shore to assist in any kind of crisis, including hostage situations and hostile environments.

The Des Moines went to Beirut during the 1958 crisis, and was at the U.S. Army base at Gibraltar and the British Army base at Malta, both on the Mediterranean Sea, said Chapman.

Donald Sundquist, ex-governor of Tennessee from 1995 to 2003 and possible vice presidential choice for Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain, attended this year's reunion. He served aboard the Des Moines, and is one of the approximately 2,200 Des Moines veterans signed to the current roster, according to Overly.

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DES MOINES

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Eugene H. Brown, Ozzie Sauer and Leon Bryant served aboard the Des Moines together in the 1st Division, but lost touch after leaving the service. Thirty years later, the trio found each other at the reunion, and they reminisced about the good times. Brown and Sauer were from Boston, and Bryant hailed from Elverton, Ga., the granite capital of the world, he noted.

"When I got on the ship, it was never at its home port," said Brown. Because it traveled all over the Mediterranean and other points, Brown decided to serve out the rest of his two year tour on the Des Moines, and he said the

time went quickly for him.

"It was a great experience for me," he said.

Bryant had served aboard a battleship in Korea before the Des Moines, and he said the "Daisy Mae" was a pleasure to serve aboard.

Sauer was on the USS Missouri during the Korean War, and when he boarded the Des Moines, he enjoyed the cruises throughout the Mediterranean and Med life.

After seeing all the sailors and Marines gathered, Bryant said he was ready to re-enlist.

Cecil Cunningham served from 1950 to 1957 aboard the Des Moines, and he remembered cruises to northern Europe, Spain, Canada and all over the

Mediterranean as flagship.

"We were well-liked wherever we went," said Cunningham. The "Daisy Mae" was a big hit in Europe, said Cunningham, and she carried the 6th Fleet flag all over the Med for 3½ years.

Cunningham said, "Life was super. Shell boats take a little time to get used to, but it was great once you did."

According to Cunningham, the 6th Fleet was one of the most powerful fleets in the world, and it included nuclear boats among its arsenal. He said the Des Moines entertained kings, queens and presidents, and it was the first warship to enter Barcelona, Spain, since the 1930s.

Al Kovacs and Ken Gau-

thier were plank owners — meaning they helped commission the ship in 1948 — and they were also WWII veterans. Kovacs got radiation poisoning after entering Hiroshima after the nuclear bomb was dropped on the city. He was on a mercy mission to establish a hospital for the victims of the blast, and he recalled a harrowing storm off the coast of Okinawa which broke apart other ships, but his survived because it was carrying bulldozers for construction.

Kovacs left the Navy in 1952, and Gauthier spent the rest of his four years, 10 months aboard the "Daisy Mae." Gauthier visited 52 countries, and believed he's been to every Mediterranean state.

Gauthier said the Des Moines was the first NATO ship, and recalled the sight of Naples, Italy, bombed out following WWII.

Gauthier and Kovacs were both stationed in the engine room, and they could still explain how to speed up or slow down the Des Moines' four 30,000 horsepower steam-driven engines. Kovacs had toured the USS Samuel B. Roberts, a modern guided missile frigate, and noted it took but three or four sailors in a quiet engine room to power the ship, compared to the more than 20 sailors required to get the "Daisy Mae" moving.

Of the guided missiles, Kovacs said, "They would have made a difference in World War II."

Once, while on maneuvers at Guantanamo Bay, Kovacs said the engine room was locked down, and a sailor was cranking the engine to life. Because of the 120 degree temperature in the compartment, the sailor passed out, and another had to complete the task.

The reunion, and all the stories, will continue throughout the weekend at the Overly property. Overly wanted to thank Patty Frye, head chef and cook for the event, for all her hard work.

Even after 30 years, Overly said he's ready to host again. He's already been "pressed into service" for 2009, and said, Lord willing, he will assemble the Des Moines veterans again.



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