

# A TALE OF TWO HOFFMANNs

## Newport News Shipbuilding Apprentice Alumni From The Old North End of “Shipyard, Virginia”

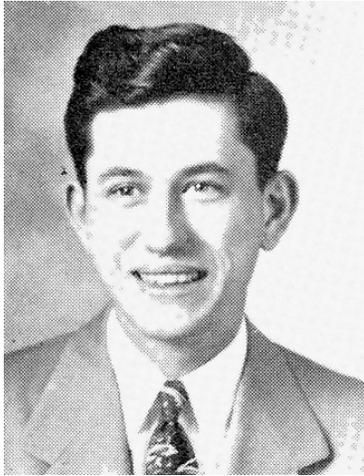
In the summer of 1940, **Felix M. Hoffmann, Jr.**, educated at Stonewall Jackson Elementary and Newport News High School, was a second year (and second generation) Apprentice in the Electricians’ trade at the Newport News shipyard. At that time, his Father (who had completed his own apprenticeship in 1898) was the shipyard’s chief estimator for machinery. No doubt, Mr. Hoffmann, Sr. had a hand in seeing that his son’s name was included on the list of builders’ trial attendees onboard the SS AMERICA that June. Junior’s skills, as a second year apprentice, were certainly suspect, when it came to meaningful participation in the rigors of a trial trip.

But AMERICA had several passenger elevators, and although the most modern of their time, they had to be manually operated. Someone had to be assigned to operate them for the benefit of the shipyard officials, vendors’ representatives and a small cadre of VIP’s that were on board for that initial voyage.

Apparently, the junior Hoffmann’s qualifications were a perfect fit, for he was a polite, well-groomed son of a shipyard executive...albeit a very low paid one! At first, he was assigned to operate the elevator that serviced the engine room, but since he was Mr. Hoffmann’s son, he wrangled a better assignment; to operate one of the first class elevators. Perhaps prodded by his Father, he even dressed the part for his very first ‘at sea’ adventure; the first of what eventually proved to be many more.



That heady experience lasted several days, starting early on June 9, 1940. Very early indeed, for it was 4 AM when the ship left her builder’s yard; returning on June 15<sup>th</sup>. During her runs over the measured mile course off the coast of Maine, young Felix and AMERICA experienced together what proved to be her fastest-ever recorded speed. A year later, as Felix continued to learn his trade, the AMERICA returned to her birthplace, was converted into a troop transport and became the USS WEST POINT.



The younger Hoffmann ‘finished his time’ in late 1943, entered the Navy and, just before the war ended, was assigned to the commissioning crew of another NNS-built vessel, the aircraft carrier BOXER.

A bonafide plank owner of that ship, as evidenced by a treasured certificate to that effect proudly displayed in his home, he never managed to acquire (legally or otherwise) an actual, physical plank (or portion thereof) from BOXER. It was the Navy’s practice, when his ship was decommissioned in 1971, to send small pieces of the wooden flight deck of World War II-era carriers to anyone that was qualified. Assuming they knew how to request such a treasured piece of memorabilia.

Felix was not aware of this courtesy at the time, plus, by 1971 he was far too busy in his postwar, very successful commercial career as an officer in a major financial services company based in Atlanta.

After retiring, Felix enjoyed many, and longer, voyages on numerous ocean liners; leaving any operational activities to others. Unfortunately, not the AMERICA, but vessels reminiscent of her bygone era, like the SS NORWAY.

On those occasions he thoroughly enjoyed dressing the part for traditional first class dining at sea. In part, because of a formal upbringing and a post-war education at the University of Virginia, where students wore coats and ties to class. According to Felix, while in school – and long after – he was “a formal ass.”



In 2003, he and I became acquainted (electronically) when he saw some of my essays about the SS AMERICA on the Internet. After becoming aware of his participation in the AMERICA’s trials, and also learning he did not have a BOXER plank; I felt it only fitting to provide him an appropriate remembrance of his all-too-brief shipyard career – and first ocean liner at-sea experience. Since I could not create a BOXER plank, I did the next best thing, and sent him an extra (shipbuilders always have extras) ‘plank’ that it had been my pleasure and privilege to present to crewmembers of the USS WEST POINT at their 2002 reunion.

To justify that action, I offer the following rationale:

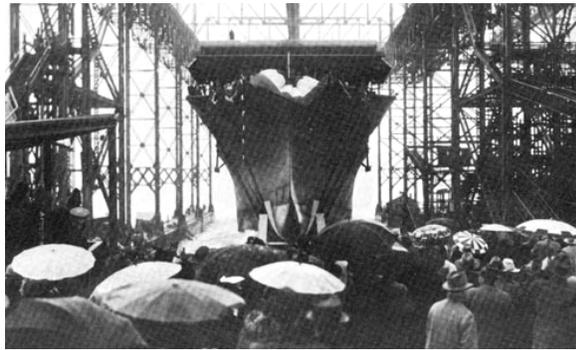
- He was, then, the only known, living member of the AMERICA’s trial trip gang.
- As such, I believe he deserved to become an honorary plank owner.
- What I did was unilateral and unorthodox – the mark of a true shipbuilder!

I am sure the WEST POINT crew will forgive me. Well, pretty sure...

But that's not the end of his story; in fact it's just the real beginning of this tale of two Hoffmanns. Young Felix, like many others in 1943, faced the possibility of being drafted by the Army. So he sought other options upon completing his apprenticeship in December of that year. Parlaying his electrical experience, he took a navy exam for operation of a then-secret technology – radar. Felix easily passed this test, and was rewarded by this pre-planning on his part by being assigned to the navy upon induction.

In due course, Electrician Apprentice Graduate Hoffmann, NNS became Seaman Apprentice Hoffmann, USN. Sometime in either late 1944 or early 1945, he was assigned to the pre-commissioning unit of a spanking new aircraft carrier – so new in fact that it was still nearing completion at its builder's yard; the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company!

Months earlier, in September of 1943, the keel for NNS Hull #410 was laid on Shipway #8 – the very same shipway where AMERICA was built. By December of 1944, another mighty unit of the famous ESSEX-class of aircraft carriers was ready for launching. On December 14, 1944, the USS BOXER (CV-21) was duly christened, and slid uneventfully into the James River.



Taken to one of the yard's southside piers, BOXER was swarmed over daily by hundreds of skilled craftsmen, many of whom were former shipbuilding associates and instructors of young Felix. As their work neared completion, members of the initial navy crew began to arrive to take charge of the nation's newest aircraft carrier. Felix Hoffmann, now a Radarman, 2<sup>nd</sup> Class in Uncle Sam's navy, was one of them.

His 'salary' then probably wasn't much more than it was in 1939, when he worked on the AMERICA as an electrician's helper for 46 cents per hour. Or, later, when he became an apprentice and was 'rewarded' by having his hourly wages reduced to just 38 cents per hour. Although he was billeted in a nearby navy compound, he was able to spend most evenings with his family, who lived in the 4900 block of Huntington Avenue in the North End of Newport News.

On an initially dismal day in mid-April of 1945, BOXER steamed under her own power the few miles across Hampton Roads to Norfolk to be delivered to the Navy; an event climaxed by her commissioning ceremony. This was, uncharacteristically for a major warship, her very first voyage. BOXER, like several other well-built naval vessels that came off the 'assembly line' at Newport News during World War II, did not undergo the traditional builder's (or acceptance) sea trials.

Those trials were officially waived, and tests normally run were conducted later during her shakedown cruise to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Such was the Navy's confidence in her creators. Plus there was an urgent need for more carriers in the Pacific, as kamikazes were appearing in increasing numbers; frequently targeting BOXER's sister ships.

By mid-afternoon on April 16, 1945, the weather had greatly improved, and at 1500 hours, under sunny skies, the commissioning ceremony began. The proceedings, due to the unrelenting pressures of wartime, were short and sweet, and in less than an hour Felix M. Hoffmann, Jr. became a plank owner of a commissioned United States Naval Vessel.

But, as Radarman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Hoffmann proudly stood in the long ranks of sailors in their dress blues on BOXER's wood-sheathed Flight Deck, his thoughts – and glances – were perhaps more directed towards a small group of invited guests, seated directly in front of the speakers' stand. For amongst the relatively few dignitaries present from the shipyard was none other than **Felix M. Hoffmann, Sr.**



Mister Hoffmann (as he was known throughout the yard) was not just Felix's proud Father; he was an equally proud shipbuilder. Mr. Hoffmann, Sr. was a graduate of the Newport News shipyard's famed Apprentice School, Class of 1898, and was just the 39<sup>th</sup> man to complete an apprenticeship there. Even before he entered the Apprentice School, he worked as a messenger boy, starting in December of 1891. The yard itself had only been in existence for a scant five years when he started a lifetime of work there.



By 1945, the senior Hoffmann had been a NNS employee for over 53 years, and was the Chief Machinery Estimator for the yard's very busy – especially in time of war - Ship Repair Division. Eventually, this soft-spoken shipbuilder would chalk up 55-1/2 years of service; believed to be longest employee service period in the history of NNS.

Of equal historical note, he was the leader in the shipyard's successful effort to win the bidding for the conversion of the German Liner VATERLAND (a war prize). When delivered (and renamed SS LEVIATHAN) in 1923, this major project had kept half of the yard's workforce employed for over a year and is largely credited with keeping NNS in business during the lean shipbuilding years immediately following World War I.

Before the BOXER's commissioning ceremony began, the junior Felix took his Father on an unauthorized tour of the carrier – including an impromptu excursion into the restricted machinery spaces (where the Master-at-Arms found them and 'strongly suggested' they leave). After the ceremony, both members of the Hoffmann clan rode in grand style back to Newport News in a shipyard limo. One can only hope that the Master-at-Arms witnessed that as well!

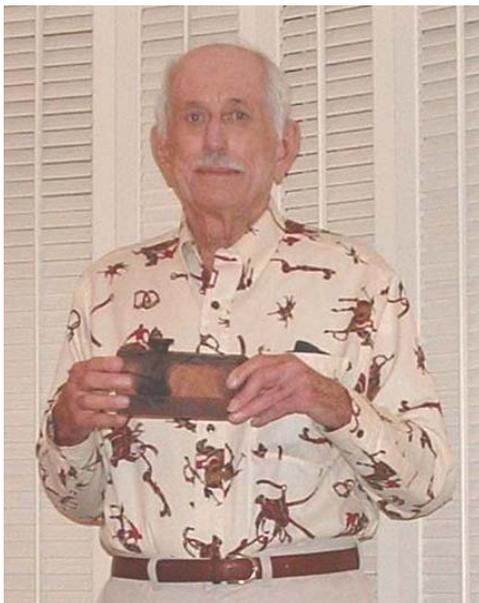
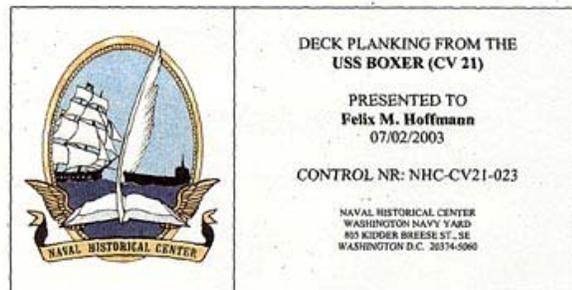
A few days later, BOXER and Felix, the sailor, left port, destined for the Pacific, but they got there too late to participate in the hostilities. Perhaps a disappointment to young Felix, but undoubtedly a great relief to his parents. Shortly after war's end, Felix, Junior came home, and, in time (and in coat and tie) graduated from the University of Virginia. Years later he was designated a distinguished alumnus of that institution, making his fortune far from where he was raised and had served an apprenticeship.

Retiring in 1947, Mister Hoffmann enjoyed a decade of well-deserved rest – living out the remaining years of his life within a few city blocks of the sight, sound and smell of the shipyard that consumed so much of his energies and benefited so greatly from his talents. As for BOXER, she served our nation for over a quarter of a century, finally being stricken from the navy's list of ships and sold for scrap in 1971.

But, while Felix had a certificate certifying him as a plankowner, he never got a promised actual plank from the BOXER. Until 2003, that is, when I learned of this situation.

With my encouragement and the results of a little on-the-side investigative work on my part, Felix made contact anew with the Navy, belatedly seeking 'his' plank. While I didn't think it likely any planks were left from a ship scrapped over three decades ago; I repeatedly encouraged him to persist. For one never knows for sure unless one asks. And, our government so often does move in mysterious ways...

But I digress – from the obvious. In due course, accompanied by more than one gentle reminder from Felix (and his submission of documentation that he was – in fact – a qualified BOXER plankowner),– the Navy sent him a five inch long by three inch thick section of the BOXER's Flight Deck, along with an appropriate label plate.



His plank even has a rusty bolt that once was attached to a structural support member.

Felix M. Hoffmann, Jr., shipbuilder and sailor, was understandably proud of this long-desired treasure; especially after waiting so many years.

I like to think it's one of the planks he stood on that April day in 1945.

Or, better yet, that it's one of the planks that supported his Father's chair for the event that qualified his son as a BOXER plankowner.

For we shipbuilders are a sentimental lot.

**My electronic pen pal appreciated and thoroughly enjoyed this tale of two Hoffmanns, when it was first created in 2004; happily sharing it with family and friends.**

**Less than a year later, Felix unexpectedly slipped his cable and joined his Father, and all the other apprentices who are no longer with us.**

*Bill Lee*  
January, 2009