

# *Sliding to the Sea*

*A collection of stories, with a dash of the romance of shipbuilding added to some decidedly abnormal launching events at Newport News Shipbuilding ...along with an occasional, unique Sponsor's anecdote*



## ~ Introduction ~

The launching of a mighty vessel from an inclined shipway was once one of the most exciting events in the centuries-old, time-honored trade of shipbuilding. Dramatic, colorful, traditional; sliding launches were the culmination of an hours-long heavy industrial process that combined art with science, and which always also included the possibility of danger to both ships and shipbuilders alike.

The complicated procedure for safely transferring a vessel weighing many thousands of tons to its natural element is fascinating, and replete with memorable sights, sounds and smells. But it is a practice that is fast fading from the memories of aging shipbuilders. Fortunately, the launching process is detailed in numerous technical textbooks and at least one video; *I Christen Thee*, which vividly documents the procedures required for the sliding launching of a nuclear-powered cruiser at Newport News Shipbuilding in 1976.

In its 120-year history, NNS had more than its share of memorable sliding launchings before that practice became obsolete. Many world-famous ships are listed amongst the hundreds of vessels constructed on the inclined shipways at Newport News. Numerous launchings there were virtual national celebrations, such as when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt christened the liner *America* in 1939. That ship's slide to the sea, as the shipyard's Apprentice School band played *The Star Spangled Banner*, was cheered by dozens of VIPs, hundreds of invited guests and a crowd estimated at 30,000 which included thousands of proud shipbuilders and their families.

The vast majority of launchings at Newport News were conducted according to custom and strictly adhered to plan. But some of them had unusual results, or unique sponsors, and a few events did not transpire at all as planned. What follows is an admittedly incomplete collection of the uncommon, the abnormal, the unusual; events and people that, at times, made sliding launchings at Newport News exceptionally interesting – even for jaded, experienced shipbuilders who thought they had previously seen it all.

## ~ Early Years of Learning ~

The first few ship launchings at Newport News took place in the 1890s. Such events went smoothly until Memorial Day, 1896. NNS Hull 17 was a small pilot boat named *Sommers N. Smith*, for its designer – who at the time was also the shipyard’s superintendent.

Unwisely launched without her machinery installed, this small craft slipped in her cradle after sliding down the ways, then took on water through open portholes...and sank! Quickly raised, the boat was found to be undamaged, and after completion a few months later, she went on to have a career spanning four decades. This embarrassing event was never repeated at NNS.



Over the next ten years, ‘two lessons learned’ – about proper greasing of the ways – provided more embarrassment for the Virginia shipyard. In September of 1903, the cruiser *Maryland* was christened by the daughter of a Maryland state official, but the ship’s slide to the sea ended abruptly when she became stuck on the outer end of the ways. It took three days to haul NNS Hull 40 completely into the James River. Undamaged, she was commissioned in the Navy in 1905 and served the nation for 25 years.

In 1906, Hull 44, the *W.S. Porter*, the first of many tankers built by NNS, also stuck on the outer ways. This time, it took six days of progressive pushing at high tides to extricate the ship from the ways. Again, no damage was inflicted, and this ship went on to have a successful career that unfortunately ended in 1944 when she became a war loss.



As far as this author can determine, 1906 was the last time an NNS-built ship failed to slide successfully because of an insufficient amount of grease.

Over ensuing years, the prospects of freezing grease, or of grease burning because of too much pressure, or of being squeezed out from between the

sliding and the standing ways was often a concern that dictated elaborate precautionary measures. Apprehension was at its peak in December of 1959, when the first nuclear-powered submarine in the yard’s history was christened in severe winter weather. But that historic launching took place with any hesitation on the sub’s part to slide to the sea.

### ~ An Unexpectedly Early Departure ~

On at least one occasion, a problem with the launching mechanism resulted in a ship leaving a NNS shipway slightly ahead of schedule. But what could have been an embarrassment – as well as a bad omen – turned out to be a huge public relations positive.

While under construction in 1942, an Essex-class carrier was renamed *Yorktown*, following the loss of the first carrier named *Yorktown* (NNS Hull 359) during the Battle of Midway.

Eleanor Roosevelt, sponsor of the first carrier by that name, was logically chosen to christen Hull 393. It was a very good thing that she had multiple prior christening experiences, plus the presence of mind to react quickly when the second *Yorktown* unexpectedly began her slide to the sea some seven minutes early. Interrupting a speaker, the First Lady grabbed the champagne bottle, loudly pronounced “*I christen thee United States Ship Yorktown*” and smartly smashed the bottle against the ship’s rapidly receding bow.



Newspaper articles duly reported that the newest *Yorktown* was obviously anxious to get to sea and avenge her namesake’s loss. Not only did the second *Yorktown* have an outstanding naval career in both war and peacetime, even today she serves as inspiration for future generations in her current role as a museum ship in Charleston, SC.

### ~ Swinging Sponsors – Occasionally More Than Once ~

On a bitterly cold day in January of 1958, Pat Nixon, wife of then-Vice President Nixon, was not as fortunate or as skilled a sponsor as Mrs. Roosevelt. At the appointed instant, she took not one, but two swings at the bow of the passenger liner *Santa Paula* with the traditional bottle of champagne. But the bottle, to her dismay, only cracked, dribbling but a trace of the bubbly on the rapidly receding bow. A shipyard employee, alert at his station on the bow of the sliding ship, hauled the bottle up and finished the act of christening before NNS Hull 522 became fully waterborne.

But the record for the most swings ever at Newport News belongs to the sponsor of the *Los Angeles* (NNS Hull 600). Anne Armstrong fruitlessly hit the submarine’s bow twelve times, including two times with an assist by then-Secretary of the Navy John Warner. But the stout bottle of – ironically – California champagne refused to break. Switching to a thin-walled bottle, Anne Armstrong got lucky on her 13<sup>th</sup> swing. To those knowledgeable about such things, its downright amazing the sub was patiently restrained for what must have seemed like a very long time - or that some seasoned shipbuilder had the foresight to have a ‘back-up’ bottle handy.

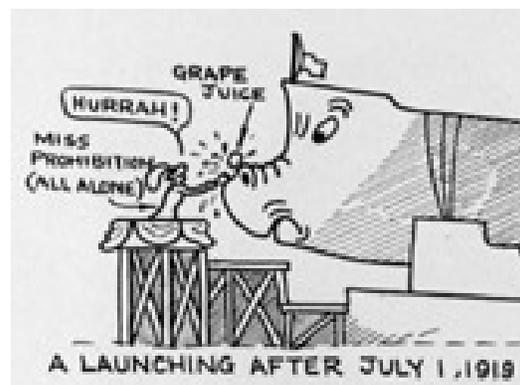
## ~ The 'Best-Launched' Ship in NNS History ~

March 24, 1898 was a big day at Mr. Huntington's young shipyard in Newport News. The first major warships to be built there, the battleships *Kearsarge* (NNS Hull 18) and *Kentucky* (Hull 19), were both launched on the same day. The christening ceremonies for the *Kearsarge* were conducted first, and while elaborate, they were conducted in the traditional manner (i.e. she was appropriately christened by breaking a bottle of champagne over her distinctive, turn of the century, ram-like bow).



Not so *Kentucky*. At the insistence of a women's temperance union, the daughter of the namesake state's governor christened the battleship with Kentucky spring water. Not only was this considered very unlucky by seafarers, it had raised the considerable ire of numerous Kentuckians when announced in advance of the event. So when the nation's newest battleship slid down the ways, after being improperly christened with just water, a veritable army of Kentucky 'Colonels' - strategically stationed along the entire side of the shipway - showered the ship with a fusillade of Kentucky whiskey in bottles of varying sizes. Never had a ship at Newport News been so well christened - either before or since.

During Prohibition, ships were launched with a wide range of 'representative' waters, and other inappropriate fluids. *Ranger* (Hull 353), the first aircraft carrier built at NNS was christened by President Herbert Hoover's wife with grape juice! This political cartoon may have inspired her use of grape juice - or vice versa - but either way the jackstaff flag shown at half-mast probably reflected the mood of many an unwillingly sober shipbuilder.



~ Multiple Christenings and Launchings ~

A surprisingly large number of multiple launchings have taken place at NNS. The first such event took place in 1895, when the gunboats *Nashville* (Hull 7) and *Wilmington* (Hull 8) were launched the same day – October 19<sup>th</sup> – which was the 114<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the British surrender at nearby Yorktown. *Nashville*, which went down the ways first, was the first warship built at NNS for the United States Navy.

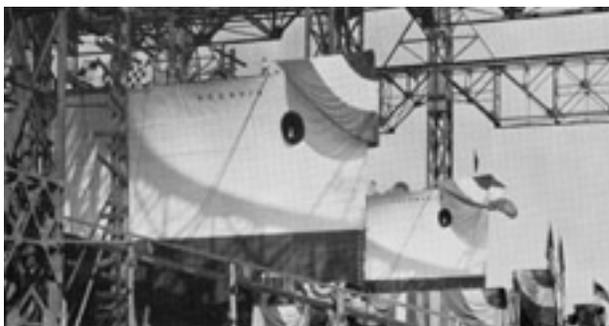


Just three years later, this diminutive naval vessel enjoyed another first – firing the initial shot in the Spanish-American War. Surviving that war without harm, *Nashville* served for many more years, both as a warship and later as a commercial craft, until 1957.



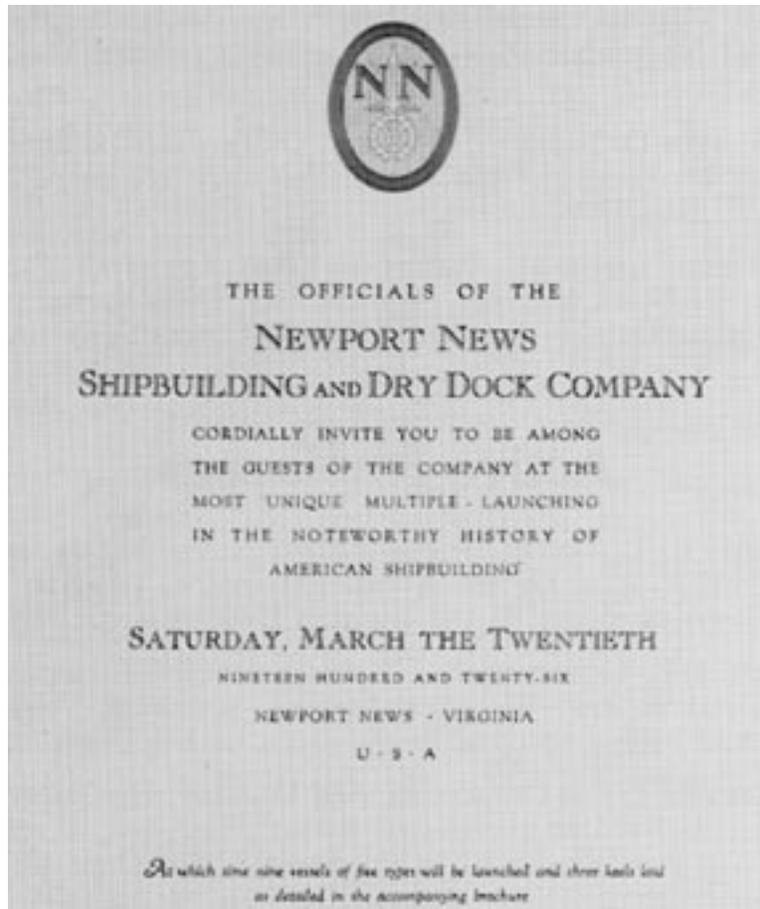
More dual launchings followed; in 1896, 1898, 1911 and 1915. On July 4, 1918, thousands attending an elaborate, patriotic event - “Liberty Launching Day” - saw three destroyers (NNS Hulls 224, 225 and 226) christened and launched.

The 1911 dual launching event was also unique in further ways. The small steamers *Carolina* and *Virginia* (Hulls 150 and 151, respectively) were not only launched on the same day, and from the same shipway, but by the same sponsor: little Miss Mary Dillard (perhaps the youngest and most precocious of them all).



Two decades later, but before her infamous *Ranger*/grape juice incident, Mrs. Hoover christened two straight-stemmed vessels on the same day using blends of waters from Central American rivers in lieu of champagne. Her ‘victims’, this time, were the passenger and fruit cargo ships *Segovia* (Hull 345) and *Talamanca* (Hull 344). Dire predictions of disaster soon came true.

While at her outfitting pier and nearly complete, *Segovia* became engulfed in a fire that could have destroyed her. The amount of water that had to be used to quench the flames resulted in an unstable condition, and she capsized. Eventually righted and rebuilt as NNS Hull 354 – and with a new name – *Peten*, she enjoyed a long, productive career.



In 1926, nine vessels were launched at NNS on the same day. Over a remarkably short period of time (little more than two hours), a dredge, three house barges, a car float, three yachts and the passenger & cargo vessel *Dorchester* (NNS Hull 289) were sequentially christened and launched; all from Shipways 8 and 9. The *Dorchester* slid; the rest simply were floated off the outboard ends of the semi-submerged shipways.

Grandly billed as “The Most Unique Multiple-Launching in the Noteworthy History of American Shipbuilding”, the day’s events also included keel laying ceremonies for three more vessels. All three were ‘freight and passenger steamers’ and the largest (unnamed, when her keel was laid near the inboard end of Shipway 8) was the *California* (Hull 315), at the time the largest commercial vessel ever built in the United States.

And if that were not enough excitement for the crowd of several thousand in attendance, the day’s events were climaxed when the three house barges, launched only an hour earlier, were delivered to their owner – the C&O Railway Company.

Multiple launchings of that magnitude at Newport News did not occur again until 1942. That year, between June and December, eighteen Landing Ship Tank (LSTs) were rapidly built, launched and delivered, thanks to the innovative practice, perfected at NNS, of constructing very large subassemblies in parallel. The sponsors of the LSTs were all teen-aged daughters of shipyard officials, who proudly watched them serve as sponsors. The girls' names read like a who's-who at NNS in 1942; Misses Blewett, Sorenson, Palen, Cole, Giese and Besse...and a dozen more easily recognizable to shipbuilders of that era.



The first 'fleet' of six LSTs (Hulls 413-418) was built on a level plane in Shipway 11; the first vessels constructed in this significant wartime addition to the shipyard's production facilities. These craft had such a high priority that a carrier's keel was removed from the submerged shipway to facilitate their rapid construction. Given no names, just navy numbers, these vessels were 'inboard christened' (i.e., the sponsors stood on the bows of the LSTs and broke beribboned bottles against the vessels' jackstuffs). Then, the six LSTs were 'launched by floatation'; a term familiar to today's shipbuilders but new and novel in the 1940's.

These 'assembly line' ceremonies were followed by a second sextet of LSTs (Hulls 419-424), which were built on inclined shipways and more traditionally launched by sliding, two at a time. Keels for the final six (Hulls 425-430), which sailors nicknamed "Large Slow Targets", were laid in Shipway 11 the same day the initial six were floated out.

### ~ Launching Oddities ~

There have been some fairly odd launchings at NNS in its six score years of operation. For example, the side wheel steamer *Margaret* (Hull 20) was launched from the very same shipway – and on the very same day in 1896 when the *Sommers N. Smith* had preceded her down the ways – and capsized!

Talk about confident shipbuilders...

And if that was not odd enough, shortly after launching, the *Margaret* was hauled back onto the shipway and lengthened some forty feet. There is no known record of a second launching ceremony, or what such a late change in design might have cost the owner.

The tanker *Salinas* was virtually complete when launched in 1920. The ship was started before construction of her building site (Shipway 9) was completed. Delays in finishing the shipway resulted in the *Salinas* being nearly complete by her launch date. In addition to all structures, most of her outfitting work, normally accomplished after becoming waterborne, had also been accomplished.

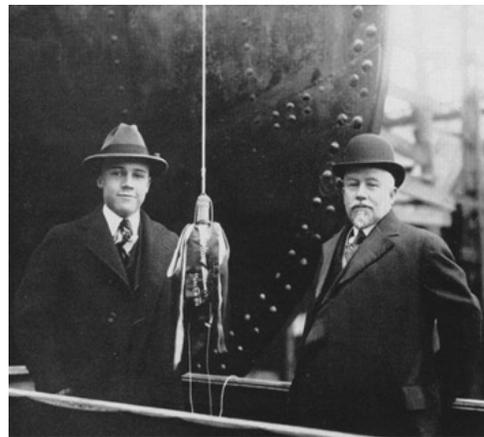


When she slid into the James River, NNS Hull 251 even had such things as her lifeboats in place. All of which allowed this vessel to be delivered just eight days after being launched.



This particular ship's launching party was unusually large – and unusually young. The sponsor was Isabel Ferguson, the ten-year-old daughter of then-shipyard president Homer L. Ferguson. The time of launch was set at 3 PM so as not to interfere with the grammar school schedule of Miss Ferguson and some 250 of her classmates who attended the ceremony.

Another oddity also involved a youthful sponsor, but in this case the fifteen-year-old son of the namesake. The President of the Luckenbach Steamship Company not only named the cargo vessel *Edgar F. Luckenbach* after himself, but also chose his son to be the sponsor for NNS Hull 190. And on the appointed day, they proudly posed together on the launching stand. Unusual by modern standards, thousands of vessels have been christened over the centuries by male sponsors. Lewis Luckenbach was one of only two official male sponsors of ships that had sliding launchings at NNS.



Not counting, of course, the male shipbuilder who completed the job for Pat Nixon.

The other NNS-built ship that had a male sponsor was the *John Twohy, Jr.* This small tug also has the distinction of being the only wooden vessel ever built at NNS which was anointed with a hull number (118). Launched and delivered in 1909, this little vessel was also unique in that its propulsion machinery was removed from an older tug. Nevertheless, old equipment and wood hull notwithstanding, she served her multiple owners until the mid-1960s.

The oddest 'launchings' at NNS involved incomplete vessels. A number of ship sections, mostly midbody replacements for jumbolized tankers, were built on inclined shipways in the years following World War II. These sections of ships were usually slid into the James with, at best, scant ceremony and eventually mated up with older bow and stern sections in one of the yard's several dry docks. At times, several parts of several ships could be found at NNS, as comically depicted in a 1940s vintage *Shipyards Bulletin*.



### ~ Sponsor-less Ships at NNS ~

On at least two occasions, multiple vessels constructed at NNS were completed and delivered without benefit of christening ceremonies. The first submarines built at NNS were very small craft, primitive by today's standards. Hulls 51-55 were built in the shipyard's old Beam Shed. Built in two sections, only one of them was christened, launched - or even given a name! Hull 53 was joined together on a shipway and launched conventionally. Named after the inventor and private owner of these curious craft, *Simon Lake X* was christened by his daughter.

After successful trials in local waters, NNS Hull 53 and her four unnamed sister ships (the latter still in two sections) were loaded on barges and secretly delivered to their ultimate owner – the Imperial Russian Navy! Final assembly took place at a Russian arsenal on the Baltic, and the subs were then moved to Vladivostok by rail.

Much less dramatic, but still uncommon, is the story of the last two tugs built at NNS. Ordered by the C&O during a boom in the coal exporting business at their Newport News terminal, the railroad specified that they be coal-burners. This at a time when tugs were either being built with diesel engines, or being back-fitted with such modern machinery.

Dusting off plans used a decade before, accommodating shipbuilders constructed the *R. J. Bowman* and the *A.T. Lowmaster* (Hulls 467 and 468, respectively), side by side, at the outboard end of Shipway 8. In February 1948, the two tugs were floated off the shipway without ceremony. Very strange, indeed, for their names honored retired C&O executives, including a former president of the railroad.



### ~ Single Ships; Multiple Sponsors ~

Three NNS-built ships were christened by more than one sponsor. The first occasion for this happening at Newport News was a result of the Navy's practice of naming the many cruisers built during World War II after cities. The light cruiser *Portsmouth* (Hull 409) was dual christened by the wives of the mayors of Portsmouth, VA and Portsmouth, NH.

In more recent times, a few nuclear subs have had multiple sponsors at Newport News Shipbuilding. The *Sam Rayburn* (Hull 568) was christened by two sisters of the vessel's namesake. In similar fashion, two daughters of the late Congressman Rivers performed similar honors for NNS Hull 597, the *L. Mendel Rivers*.

### ~ A Somewhat Sideways Slide to the Sea ~

The construction of the aircraft carrier *John F. Kennedy* (Hull 577) was started on inclined Shipway 8 because the only submerged shipways capable of handling a large carrier - or even the midbody of one - were otherwise occupied. By starting construction of this ship in October 1964, it was possible to save several months of construction time.

By May 1965, Shipway 11 was available. Plans were made to slide *JFK's* 260-foot long, 4,000-ton subassembly into the river, then tow it upstream to be completed. There was no sponsor, no ceremonies for this launching. Tal Hardy, Apprentice School classmate and close friend of this author was stationed at the outboard end of the semi-submerged shipway to observe and time the event for the Hull Technical Department.

Little more than a large steel box, once waterborne, an unexpected gust of wind caused it to rapidly drift to one side. And before the now-fully floating mass could completely clear the shipway, it made glancing contact with the wooden staging still in place on the north side of the shipway.

Well, 'glancing contact' is somewhat of an understatement. As the supposedly immovable object (the staging) met the truly irresistible force (the midbody moving obliquely to its intended path), heavy wooden stage boards flew everywhere, as their supports - telephone pole size - toppled. Tal remembers that it was very much like a movie scene, in which Roman galleys ran close to enemy vessels, deliberately raking away their opponent's oars. But on a far larger - and accidental - scale.



No one was injured, but Tal and others nearby were shaken by this close call. The carrier's midbody section completed its unrelenting journey into the James, suffering no major damage. When it was all over, the flooded outboard end of Shipway 8 was filled with splintered wood.

That was the last time an aircraft carrier was ever started on a sliding shipway.

## ~ The End of an Era ~

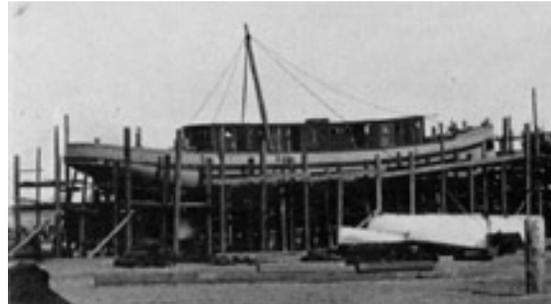
With the launching of the *Albany* in 1987, the last of 42 nuclear-powered subs built on inclined ways at Newport News, sliding launchings became a thing of the past. Beginning in 1890, the majority of ships constructed at NNS were built on inclined platforms. But that started to change at the beginning of WW II, when two fully submerged shipways provided a new capability. These massive facilities were usually referred to as shipways (or submerged ways) or sometimes as dry docks, depending on their usage at the time.

Numerous large subassemblies could be rapidly constructed somewhat in parallel on adjacent, spacious platens and positioned in these huge, submerged docks like so many building blocks. Which is exactly what they were. Built on an even keel, instead of an incline, ships constructed in these shipways were easier to build for the thousands of unskilled people who flocked to NNS during those years to become shipbuilders.

What was thus gained in efficiency and schedule came at a price; always-dynamic launchings became somewhat static christenings. A small price to pay, because aircraft carriers' construction times during WW II were reduced from over 24 to less than 14 months by the application of subassembly erection techniques in Shipways 10 & 11.

Later, as this practice became the norm, a gigantic new submerged shipway and a land-level facility for building of submarines made the yard's inclined shipways totally obsolete. When *Albany* (NNS Hull 629) made her slide to the sea, everything went happily according to plan. But that plan included what is believed to be a first – but most certainly a last – for a sliding launching at Newport News. Ed Campbell, President of NNS at the time, participated in the beginning of the ceremonies and then was hoisted aboard the sub to ride her down the ways.

A total of 639 vessels constructed by Newport News shipbuilders began with a classic slide to sea, starting with a world famous icon of Newport News – *Dorothy* – NNS Hull No. 1. Appropriately, she was built on NNS Shipway 1, which once stood where Dry Dock 2 is located today.

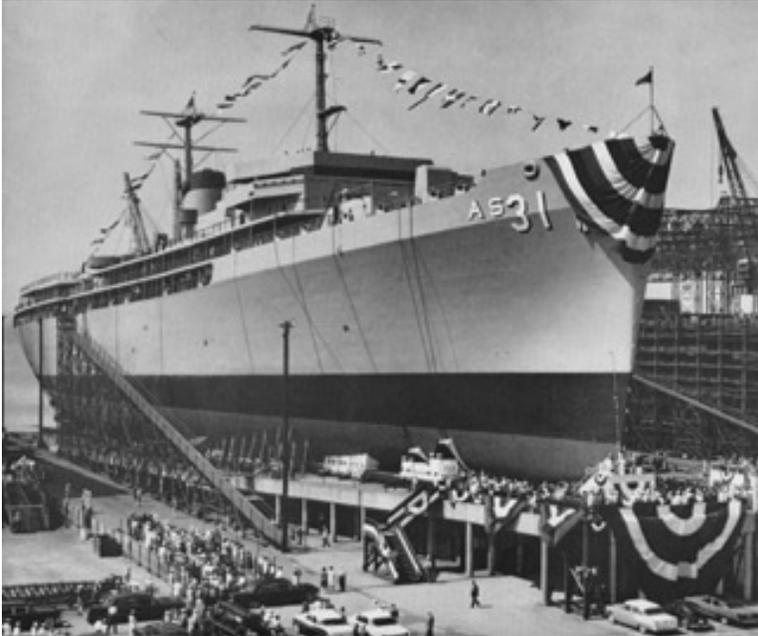


Newport News' subsidiary operation in Wilmington, NC was responsible for 243 of NNS' 600-plus launchings; all between the end of 1941 and the spring of 1946. Building mostly Liberty-class vessels on nine inclined shipways, the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company lived up to its motto – "*To Build Good Ships Quickly*" – by launching a ship every week there, on average, during that yard's short five year existence.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all the shipways in Wilmington were long gone. Most of these once-invaluable assets at Newport News have been demolished – to make way for modern day facilities. The only things tangible that remain are the records, the pictures and the memorabilia. And the memories...

~ Christening is Ceremony; Launching the Act; Becoming Waterborne the Climax ~

The head understands and appreciates all that comes with progress, but the heart still yearns to see excited crowds gathered around a freshly painted ship that rises high – and seemingly precariously – above them.



To hear the riggers' chants and other noises of last-minute preparations beneath such a vessel, to wonder anew if everything would go according to plan.

To see the bunting and flags brighten an otherwise pretty drab industrial complex, to see crewmembers assemble on the newly constructed decks of a still incomplete United States' naval vessel.

To witness, to strive to understand the all-too-visible feelings of veterans present to witness the name

of an NNS-built vessel ship in which they served bestowed upon another mighty warship.

To hear the music, the speeches, and to wait impatiently for the two siren calls that were the sponsor's cue. To see her prepare, and then – as an honored retiree in the trigger pit and a high ranking shipyard official perform their final coordinated duties - to pronounce:

*“I Christen Thee...”*

To witness the sponsor's successful and satisfying swing and see the resultant splash; to somehow feel - before actually seeing - a mighty mass of inert steel start to move. To marvel at the coordination of the release of hundreds of red, white and blue balloons; to see the vessel's bow bunting fill with air like a giant balloon itself.



To smell the acrid, but immensely satisfying odor of burning lubricant and perhaps to see the resultant wisps of smoke. To then feel a rumbling of the very ground, as another vessel starts her unstoppable slide to the sea on greased wooden ways.

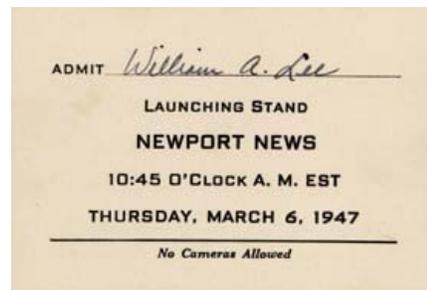
To join the crowd – and the workers - in cheering as *she*, no longer just a hull number, accelerates, rotates and – once waterborne - becomes virtually a living thing.



~ Postscript ~

Over five decades, I was lucky enough to witness dozens of launchings and christenings. Please note that I fiercely differentiate between sliding *launchings* and *christenings* of ships already afloat. My first experience of this nature came in 1939, when thousands attended the launching of the *SS America*. Although I don't remember that event (being only three then), I do remember numerous others, as well as the satisfaction of learning all about the technical and practical intricacies associated with launching a ship in the Apprentice School's shipbuilding course.

The first such event that I can vividly recall attending was in 1947, when the cruiser *Newport News* was christened. Imagine how impressed I was – at age 10-1/2 – to have my own personal pass! I remember it as being a very cold day, being bored by all the speeches; and then being disappointed when NNS Hull 456 didn't slide to the sea, but was just towed out of Shipway 10 after christening.



In later years, similar events that involved the several aircraft carriers I helped design were also memorable. But, for me, none of these 'launching by floatation' events were ever as impressive as the sliding launching of even the most modest of ships. All an inseparable part of the romance of shipbuilding that I well remember and cherish...now that I don't have to get cold (or hot) or dirty (or deafened) anymore on the waterfront of NNS.

I cannot help but feel a bit sorry for today's young, talented shipbuilders, robbed by the technical advancements of their trade from witnessing the most dramatic of all shipbuilding events - their creations' slide to the sea.

*Bill Lee*  
February 2006