

USS BENNINGTON SHIPMATES
“ Delivering For Their Country
One More Time ”

On Sunday morning, November 18th, the following named shipmates arrived at Bill Coughlin's home in South Attleboro, Massachusetts for the drive to Bennington, Vermont, for the beginning of what would be an experience that they would remember always- “Assisting with the delivery of the Nation's Christmas Tree” to our Nation's Capitol.

The Ship's Historian, Joe Pires from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, the Association's President, Bill Copeland from Maynard, Massachusetts, Association's Vice-President, Ralph Clark of Oroville, California, Robert Quinn (a BENNINGTON/ Korean War Veteran) from Watertown, Massachusetts made the four-hour trek to Bennington, VT. in a 36' recreational vehicle owned by the Association's Secretary, Bill Coughlin.

At around 0800 hours, the BENNINGTON Bus pulled out of South Attleboro and headed north to Bennington, Vermont. These bluejackets would meet up with two additional USS Bennington sailors (LT Mike Ponto, the Associations Treasurer, from New York and FTG2 Tom Ganse, from Lancaster, PA.) along the trip south. They would become part of a caravan of antique trucks, buses and personal vehicles under the direction of the Capitol Security Force and the U.S. Forestry Service.

The entire group, made up of some 80 individuals would be delivering some “Old Fashioned Christmas Cheer” to Veteran's Homes and V.A. Hospitals along the way to Washington, DC. The group handed out Christmas cards (made and signed by the school children from Vermont State), other items donated by local businesses and the “Boys of Bennington” would be passing out their USS Bennington Coffee Mugs.

Upon arrival in Bennington, we received our first task. It was to place strands of lights around the wrapped tree and its trailer for travel south. The 65' balsam fir was to be lit up at each stop along the way (Joe Pires worked the generator for the lights). These "ready to go sailors" got right into their project and in a mere four hours, we received our first BRAVO ZULU. Upon completion, we, along with all volunteers were instructed to proceed to the Peppermill Restaurant in downtown Bennington for a dinner & meeting concerning the upcoming events and how we'd be proceeding. This dinner meeting was held by David Zsido who was the Director of the entire project. After the meeting was over, we checked in at the Knotty Pine Motel, "Our Home Away From Home".

At 0500 hours on the 19th, it was rise and shine..... Today, the USS Bennington Shipmates were to once again assist the needs of the event Chairman as needed. In the early morning hours, we refueled the "Bennington Bus" and headed to where we were given instruction for placement within the caravan, for the trip over to the Bennington Veteran's Home. Once we arrived, we distributed gifts from the USS Bennington Association to all its veterans (within the home). We also made a formal presentation of the oil painting which was on display at our reunion in Newport, RI - to Stuart Hurd, the Manager of the Town of Bennington, VT. (He graciously accepted the original oil painting and made comment that it would hang in the Town Office Building for all to see). We also met with Senator Leahy, Congressman Peter Welch, Lt. Governor Dubie and their aides -at which time we asked for a moment of their time to discuss our ongoing efforts to get another ship named USS Bennington. The entire staff was most interested in our past and present efforts and wanted to hear more about it. They asked if we could meet up with them in Washington, DC in the Senator Leahy's Office and the Caucus Room. Our response was, "See you in DC, Sir....."

After meeting with the veterans, state & public officials, the caravan headed over to the Bennington Museum for a buffet luncheon which was sponsored by the State of Vermont. Later this evening (Nov. 19th) all vehicles were to report to a staging area where once again, we'd be forming up to travel in a caravan. This time, to downtown Bennington. The Main Street area was blocked-off and awaiting our arrival. To our surprise, everything was lit up in little white lights. Christmas decorations everywhere. There was a parade, Christmas music and even a live creche. The entire group of volunteers met at Madison's Restaurant for an evening meal (2000 hours) and once again all were informed by David Zsido, "tomorrow starts our trip south, even though we are going north first. Be on your guard, as the weather is expecting to go downhill. Snow, ice, sleet and big trucks can cause huge problems for all of us and the public. Get to bed early and get a good nights sleep - it gets busy from here on out". We then departed downtown and headed to the town barn area for the final staggng of all vehicles making the trip to Washington, DC. Everyone got rides back to their hotels, etc. and retired for the evening by 2300 hours.

Today, (November 20th) everyone was up and packed by 0500 hours. After breakfast, we headed north to Rutland, VT. Along the way, stops were made in Shaftsbury, Arlington, the ORVIS Center in Manchester (where we delivered a tree, cards, cups, etc.) and a whistle stop at the Wallingford School. Greeting school children on these stops was Smoky the Bear (Don Keelan). Upon our arrival at the Diamond Run Mall in Rutland around 1200 hours, we were treated to some pizza & soda for lunch. After lunch, we checked into the hotel that we'd be staying at. We had some free time here so a few of us went over and helped the Bennington Chamber of Commerce set-up a table to pass out "treats from Bennington".

In the late afternoon, all volunteers were instructed to meet inside the mall's restaurant, The Sports Bar. David Zsido again talked about the events of the day and what would be expected of all tomorrow. Most went back to their rooms, packed, showered, shaved, etc. and made ready for another early start.

This morning (November 21st) we had breakfast at 0600 hours and departed Rutland for an extremely busy day of activities. Bringing an Old Fashioned Christmas to veterans, we headed south and made stops at the Leeds VA Hospital, Holyoke Soldiers Home (Holyoke, Ma.) and the Newington VA Hospital in Newington, CT. At each of these stops, trees and ornaments were left for the facilities. We also had the opportunity to meet and greet veterans and pass out cards, cups and other "goodies" from the Bennington Chamber of Commerce. While we were at the Newington VA Hospital, our own WWII Ray Greene showed up to say hello. Sure was nice seeing and chatting with Ray. (Philip Eastman, a friend and former classmate of Joe Pires also showed up and assisted with greeting disabled veterans). All of these stops with veterans were approximately one-half hour, as traffic was a major concern throughout the trip. We basically had a plan which was designed by David Zsido and we were all instructed to follow it, with no exceptions.... (I can honestly say that, "if you were ever in a pinch, this is the guy you'd want on your side". Totally directed, focused and team orientated, he was the perfect guy for this task.....)

During the stops on this leg of our trek south, we were approached by the gentleman who was wearing a Smokey the Bear costume (as it's tied in with the U.S. Forestry Service). As mentioned earlier, he was Don Keelan from Arlington, VT. He is a Marine Corps veteran who was assigned to the Silent Drill Team out of Washington, DC. As he was having difficulty getting into and out of this "bulky" costume, he asked, "Can an old Jar-Head utilize the USS Bennington's Land Yacht as a dressing room?" Bill Coughlin's response was, "Welcome Aboard, Smokey"! Don then mentioned to us that the entire event was being video taped as a documentary was going to be made. It was because it was the 75th year and the first time ever that old antique MACK trucks were used in getting everything to Washington, DC. (We were later informed by a member of the Chamber of Commerce that a DVD of the event would be made available sometime in February of 2008) We have made a number of contacts over these past few days and we'll be kept abreast of when and where photo's, CD's or DVD's become available.....

Arriving at our next hotel for the evening, everyone was concerned about supper as it was getting late. The evening meal behind us, everyone was off to bed.

Hey guys..... Happy Thanksgiving..... Its November 22nd and we have the day off. (Well, part of it) The Antique Truck Group had a trip planned for us today. It was off to a truck museum. (Doesn't sound to interesting?) I was totally impressed with this stop. Made an acquaintance with the owner/director of the Golden Age of Trucking Museum facility and saw vintage vehicles from many years ago. I would highly recommend this to anyone who enjoys "old trucks".

While we were there, we delivered a tree and some USS Bennington coffee mugs to them. Once this was done, those of us who went on the tour, washed "The Bennington Land Yacht"..... (This is where I'm supposed to say, "Never let a Navy LT behind the nozzle of a water hose").

This afternoon we were told that we'd be served a traditional Thanksgiving Day meal in the banquet room of the hotel. It was decided that we'd sneak in and place a USS Bennington Cup at each table setting.....

The meal was prepared for the approximately 80 individuals who volunteered their service for taking the tree to DC. A prayer of thanks was given by David Zsido. Our Association President, Bill Copeland addressed the group and explained the reason for the cups before them. After the evening meal, some got together in the hospitality suite for an "adult beverage" or two..... Exchanged business cards, telephone numbers, etc., and vowed to stay in communications with one another after we departed Washington, DC.

On Friday morning (November 23rd) we departed the Maron Hotel in Danbury, CT. And headed for our next destination, Roger's Park in downtown Danbury for a ceremony in which a tree was donated to the local officials. Again, we had the opportunity to meet and greet veterans from the local community that were present for the event. After the ceremony was over, we headed west to Matamoras, PA. It was estimated that our arrival time would be approximately 1300 hours. As usual, David Zsido kept us right on time..... Better than any airline I can think of - considering we had a caravan of vehicles that was about a half mile in length..... (photos to prove it as well)

Arriving at the hotel, we registered and unpacked for the night. Following that, we had a lunch prepared for us by the hotel, boarded the Bennington Chamber of Commerce bus and departed for Milford, PA. Upon our arrival in downtown Milford, we were all greeted by hundreds of locals (the largest crowd to date). We participated in the events of the evening including the discussion of our ship and its historical ties to Bennington, VT. (As we were asked why we were involved with this project) Much later in the evening we sat down to dinner at the Laurel Villa Country Inn. After dinner it was back to the hotel for the night.

This morning (24 November) we depart Matamoras, PA and are off to a War Museum in Belvedere, NJ. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by veterans and given coffee and donuts. This museum wasn't what was expected. It was basically a shop used to restore old jeeps, etc. What I did find exciting about this stop was that on the walls of the garage, a huge poster had what appeared to be a carrier bridge and it had Japanese flags on it. It came from a retired judge who resided across the street from the museum. He was aboard the carrier USS FRANKLIN. We talked at length about the FRANKLIN & BENNINGTON during WWII. (as Bobby Quinn would say, "Joe would talk to a statue, if it would talk back to him") While we were chatting, one of the antique trucks got stuck in the mud and it had to be removed. Turned out to be a difficult task but we moved on to our next destination....

In the early afternoon, we arrived in Hamburg, PA at the headquarters of Cabela's. This is by far, the largest store I've ever been in. Again, we dropped off another tree and some ornaments at the entrance to this facility. Afterwards, Tom Ganse and I looked for Bill Coughlin to no avail. This place was so big you could get lost and no one could find you..... Little did we know that he was over purchasing a "fishing pole"..... Not sure what he plans on catching in Yuma, Arizona (is there any water there?) when he retires. Following another buffet, we headed across the street to our hotel for the evening. Tonight, I had the pleasure of meeting and chatting with Vermont State Representative Mary Morrissey. We discussed the BENNINGTON and why we were present. She was very interested in our efforts and knew about our participating in the Bennington Battle Days festivities during August of every year. She also mentioned for me to contact a young lady named Lisa who was with Bennington's local cable television access channel, as she wanted to interview me. We exchanged business cards and then we each retired to our rooms for the night. Earlier in the day, David Zsido informed all that we would not be having breakfast at the hotel as we needed to be on the road. Breakfast would come somewhere along the trip south tomorrow morning...

Today, November 25th the caravan departed the hotel and headed for a fuel stop for all vehicles in the caravan. This stop was at the Frystown Truck Stop. Upon completion of fueling all vehicles we had a quick breakfast and another update by David Zsido concerning our drive to and the stop at the Lebanon, PA. Veterans Hospital.

We arrived and were greeted by the staff of the VA Hospital along with some 250 patients. Again, a tree, cards, Bennington, VT goodies, USS Bennington coffee mugs were passed out to the veterans. We had the opportunity to speak with disabled veterans from all wars/conflicts. Wishing them a Merry Christmas and a most joyous New Year (as well as thanking them for their service to our country) we departed for our next two stops, Walter Reed Army Hospital and the Old Soldiers & Sailors Retirement Home.

When we arrived at Walter Reed Army Hospital, we were greeted by a Army Captain who gave us instruction on the procedures for meeting and chatting with recently returned disabled veterans. After his instructions, we were all asked to wash our hands with a "special" antibacterial lotion, just prior to entering the veterans room. We had a rather large group of individuals wanting to hand out cards, etc. so they authorized 5 individuals per room.

I must say that this was the most difficult part of the trip for all of us. I knew it was going to be difficult from what we were told by the Captain as we approached each room. The first veteran I spoke to was a young lady who was from Indiana. Her vehicle was hit by an IED (improvised explosive device). It left her blind in one eye, minus one-leg and three fingers on one hand, with many other wounds that could be seen. She greeted us and said "thank you for coming Sir. Its great knowing that people really do care. Hey, are you a Vietnam Veteran? I see you were aboard a Navy ship..... Thank you for your service". Needless to say, I got chocked up and she told me not to worry, that she'd be ok.

I asked Catherine if she was receiving proper care as the news reports were not at all impressive concerning Walter Reed. Catherine stated that the entire news piece was way out of line. "These doctors, nurses and their staffs are doing a wonderful job. It appears the media picked up on a piece about a section in one wing of the hospital that is in need of some repair. Please, people - don't believe everything you see and read". All this coming from someone who had to be no more than 21 years old. Brought tears to my eyes!

Departing Walter Reed, we headed to our final stop, the Old Soldiers & Sailors Retirement Home. This was a totally different scene. Everyone was so happy to see us. We actually arrived during their evening meal. It was like 80 of us wandering through the building seeking out and communicating with everyone we could. We thanked them for their service to our country, passed out Christmas cards and made small talk of when and where they served. These elderly men and women truly had a wonderful time and thanked us for stopping by for a visit.

After meeting with the vets, we boarded the bus and headed back to the hotel in downtown Washington, DC. Everyone got a chance to clean up a bit before we sat down for the final meal together.

David Zsido addressed us all for the final time. He thanked everyone for their efforts and support in making this event come to fruition. David said, "along the way, we've all made new friends. We've made it here safely even though we had a few minor problems. Our goal was to get the tree here and in one piece. That we've accomplished. Tomorrow we turn the tree over to the Capitol Security Team and its arborists." He then went on to tell us about what would happen in the morning. Everyone turned in early as we had to walk four-blocks to the Capitol Building (West Lawn) at 0830 hours.

Upon our arrival at the Capitol Building, we all decided this was going to be the place for our photo's to be taken. Everyone broke up into small groups. Flashes could be seen everywhere. Pictures taken, hands shaking and the passing around of business cards was at an all time high. But before to long, the Washington DC Security Team was leading in the three trucks with the trees that were to be delivered to the Capitol Building, the Senate and the House Offices. As these trucks were placed into the positions, an announcement was made that Senator Leahy, his wife and staff were arriving and would be awaiting our presence at the Russell Building (Caucus Room). As it was going to take about three hours to remove the tree from the trailer and get it placed into the open and awaiting hole in the Capitol's Lawn, we decided to walk over to the Caucus Room for some refreshments provided by Senator Leahy.

Getting into the Russell Building, we had to go through all types of security. One of the inspectors at one of the x-ray machines commented on money we were carrying around in our pockets.... Now, how did he know the denominations? What else could they see? Sorry, Bobby (Quinn) - that's the curse of the Irish !!!!

As we entered the Caucus Room, Senator Leahy greeted each and everyone of us. He also introduced his lovely wife and explained how he met her. (A trophy wife for sure - as she didn't speak). After some small talk, we began to chat about the USS BENNINGTON LHA-6. I asked him if he remembered his comments in Bennington, VT concerning a get together to discuss another ship. He stated yes and that he could speak with two from the BENNINGTON Association. I departed the Russell Building and headed back to the setting of the tree. As I left, I saw Association President Bill Copeland and Association Treasurer LT Mike Ponto heading to the Senator's Office. Bill & LT Ponto later explained that the meeting was basically a strategy planning meeting on the correct procedures for moving forward with our efforts to get another ship named BENNINGTON. It appears as though it was a positive meeting with Senator Leahy stating that we have his attention and support.

With the meeting over and everyone back on the Bennington Bus, we departed our Nation's Capitol with the hopes that our efforts would not be in vain. In any event, this is by far the closest our group has come in the effort to see USS BENNINGTON on the stern of another United States Navy Ship.

Some final thoughts on this mission.....

I'm deeply honored to have been part of an organization that was invited to participate in this most historic event. The USS Bennington Association is now viewed in a totally different light. Everyone within the State of Vermont now knows what we are all about. I heard many individuals speak to the fact that they thought we were a "bunch of beer drinking sailors looking for a good time". It was told to my face, we were wrong and we're sorry! They all want to make the yearly trek to Bennington Battle Days to be with us now..... That speaks volumes.....

As for the Christmas Tree Caravan to DC, well, seeing the faces of the children as we passed them on the Main Streets of America, visiting with the recently returning veterans who were wounded in Iraq, making new friendships and being part of this historic team is what its all about. David Zsido asked us to "get the job done" - As one of the representatives (from the USS Bennington Association) that was invited to participate, I gave it my best effort.

You should all know that our group of 7 shipmates (ambassadors) made a lasting impression on the minds of those we traveled with. For me personally, I couldn't be more proud of what we've accomplished within a short period time, (as a team) working to make things better for our organization.

Fraternally yours,
SK3 Joseph L. Pires
USS Bennington Historian