

Historic Battleship *New Jersey* Returning Home After Half a Century of Service to U.S. Military

By SUSAN M. DYCKMAN
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times
Editor's Note: The following is the first in a two-part series on the efforts underway to bring the Battleship *New Jersey* home to the Garden State.

The Battleship *New Jersey* — the most decorated warship in naval history — is coming home.

The Iowa-class battleship has been berthed in Bremerton, Washington since it was decommissioned for the fourth time after nearly 50 years of service, which included tours of duty in World War II, the Korean Conflict and Vietnam.

Beginning in September, the *USS New Jersey* will be towed 7,000 miles from Bremerton through the Panama Canal up the east coast of the United States into the Philadelphia Navy Yard on the Delaware River to await a decision on its new home — Bayonne or Camden.

According to Joseph Azzolina, New Jersey State Assemblyman and Chairman of the USS *New Jersey* Battleship Commission, the size of the battleship allows for just one foot to spare on either side as it is moved through the canal.

"This is the first time a ship of this size will be allowed to be towed through the Panama Canal," the retired Navy captain said.

The ship, scheduled to leave Bremerton in September, would travel through the canal on or about Monday, October 18 and reach the Delaware River sometime in mid to late November.

Last summer, the cities of Bayonne, Camden and Jersey City vied for selection as the *New Jersey's* ultimate destination. Each city hosted visits from the commission's 13 members in the hopes of winning the bid for the battleship's new home as a museum and veterans' memorial.

Bayonne's two-mile long Military Ocean Terminal is the only site presently able to accommodate a ship the size and weight of the Battleship *New Jersey*. The ship was berthed there following World War II and the Korean Conflict.

The dock site, which extends 1,800 feet and is valued at more than \$12 million, has been offered by Bayonne to the Commission for \$1 per year.

The dock also offers adjacent parking for approximately 700 cars.

In August 1998, Jersey City's Mayor Brett Schundler, a former Westfield resident, presented a proposal that called for the mooring of the ship off Liberty State Park about 800 feet into the harbor between Ellis Island and New York City.

Access to the ship would be provided by a walkway. It was estimated the mooring project would cost more than \$10 million to construct, \$1 million of which would be provided by Jersey City.

This year, Mayor Schundler joined forces with Bayonne Mayor Joseph Doria to announce their shared commitment to locate the battleship at Bayonne's Military Ocean Terminal. According to the *Battleship Bulletin BB-62*, a publication of the Battleship New Jersey Foundation (founded in 1991), Assemblyman Azzolina "applauded the two Hudson waterfront mayors for putting the battleship first over their own local interests."

The Bulletin indicated the Assemblyman was "100 percent" behind the Bayonne-Jersey City agreement.

Mr. Schundler left the door open for moving the battleship to a berth at Liberty State Park if, in the future, that proved to be the location that would enable the battleship to thrive.

"The people of New Jersey have spoken since 1996. They want it (the battleship) on the Hudson waterfront," affirmed Gordon Bishop, Media Director for the Battleship New Jersey Foundation, historian, journalist and former *Star-Ledger* columnist. "The Hudson waterfront is the most visible, honorable display you could give it."

In Camden, docking facilities would be constructed at a proposed site directly across from Philadelphia, where the ship's keel was laid in 1940, and from where the hull was launched in 1942. Last summer, Camden officials pledged to provide \$1 million from the city's Empowerment Zone and \$3.2 million from the Camden County Board of Chosen Freeholders to build docking facilities for the battleship.

In addition, noted State Senator John J. Matheussen (R-4th), additional funding has been approved to support the ship's return and refurbishment regardless of its location: \$7.7 million from the state, plus a \$2 million Economic Improvement Authority loan.

"Both sites start even with that," explained Senator Matheussen. "The goal is to get the visitors' center up and running, safe environmentally and aesthetically by 2001," he added.

The Home Port Alliance for the *USS New Jersey*, co-founded by Senator Matheussen, uses the phrase "Birthplace to Berthplace" to publicize its commitment to seeing Camden selected as the battleship's home.

Among the reasons given by the alliance for choosing Camden are: the city's need for an economic boost from the battleship's presence; the area's long-standing maritime and shipbuilding tradition, and its ability to provide significant financial backing for the *New Jersey*.

According to the alliance, Camden also has an environmentally sound site (the Delaware River at Camden is fresh water, not salt); offers extensive, convenient public access to the waterfront that includes ferry linkage to Philadelphia plus a planned light rail and jitney service and aerial tram; and has a dual waterfront with Philadelphia, which, in 1997, boasted 40 million visitors to the area.

The alliance maintains it has "significant support" from across New Jersey, as well as Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland and Delaware.

Camden is pursuing its bid for the battleship with the United States Navy despite the commission's September 1998 vote in favor of Bayonne as the preferred site. The final vote among the commissioners and one liaison from the Department of Environmental Protection was eight for Bayonne, four for Jersey City, one for Camden and one abstention.

The ultimate decision rests with the Secretary of the Navy.

"We feel that putting it in the Navy's hands is a good move. It takes the politics out of it," stated Senator Matheussen. He anticipates a decision by January, 2000.

Mr. Bishop indicated the effort by Camden "cost us" about 12 to 18 months in getting the *New Jersey* home.

The imminent return of the Battleship is an exciting prospect for the people who have worked tirelessly for many years to ensure the *New Jersey's* return to its namesake state. Mr. Azzolina, alone, is credited with devoting nearly 20 years to bring the ship home.

Grassroots players in the movement to bring back the *New Jersey* are people like retired United States Navy Colonel William W. Sheppard

and his wife, Carol, who got involved in the foundation's campaign about three years ago.

The Sheppards manage the foundation's merchandising effort from their Fanwood home. A Web site, www.battleshipnj.org, has expanded their reach around the globe.

They were drawn into the project by their daughter Lauren's work with the Flags Across America program. There are 24 American flags which were manufactured and donated by the Annnin Flag Company of Verona on behalf of the Battleship *New Jersey*.

These flags have traveled across the state and country, being flown at special events to promote awareness of the battleship effort. According to Mr. Sheppard, they are traditionally flown with the New Jersey state flag and the POW/MIA flag.

The flags have flown off the *USS Intrepid* on Veteran's Day, and at Liberty State Park on the anniversary of the ship's launch. The flags have flown from the State Capitol in Trenton on the anniversary of the ship's christening, and off the *USS Olympia*, which brought home the remains of the Unknown Soldier from World War I. They have flown off the *USS North Carolina*, the captain of which is a former crew member of the *USS New Jersey*. At each occasion, the exact time and date are recorded.

"When we fly the flags, everybody stops," said Mrs. Sheppard. "There's a tremendous amount of pride that accompanies the hoisting of the American flag."

By flying the flags, the Sheppards and volunteers like them (some veterans, some not), offer an educational opportunity "to raise awareness that the battleship is coming home," she added.

Their effort to "involve all kinds of people" in the movement has led the couple across New Jersey to events like a county fair in Colts Neck, where they were asked to hold a patriotic opening ceremony, something which had never been done before.

They called on members of the Ceremonial Guard of the Air Force Junior ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) from Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School to help, and someone from the audience sang "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"It was very inspiring," said Mrs. Sheppard.

This weekend, on July 3 and 4, the state's official sailing ship, *The Meerwald*, will be docked at the marina in Liberty State Park. Offering two sails per day, *The Meerwald* visit was booked as a highly visible fundraiser for the *New Jersey*.

Police Officer's Death Believed to be a Suicide

By KIM KINTER
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — A 40-year-old Scotch Plains Township patrolman was found dead in his home Monday of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, Scotch Plains police said.

A family member found Christopher O'Neil in the basement of his Monica Place home in Scotch Plains at about 9:30 a.m., stated Police Chief Thomas O'Brien.

His service revolver was found at the scene, he added. Officer O'Neil was a three-year veteran of the Scotch Plains Police Department. He also had worked as a sheriff's officer for the Union County Sheriff's Office from May, 1995 to October, 1996, the Sheriff's Office confirmed.

He was the husband of Carole Flinn O'Neil and the father of two young boys, Connor and Cooper (Please see related obituary on Page 9).

"The entire department is saddened by the untimely death of this officer who had made a lasting impression on those that had the privilege to work alongside him," Chief O'Brien said in a prepared statement. "He will be deeply missed."

Officer O'Neil was also the son of Westfield Zoning Officer Jeremiah P. O'Neil.

Westfield Mayor Thomas C. Jardim made a brief statement at the start of Tuesday's Town Council meeting.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with Jerry and his family," said Mayor Jardim. Chief O'Brien added that department staff had no indication that the officer was experiencing any difficulties. The Union County Prosecutor's Office is conducting an investigation.



WE HAVE A WINNER...Union County Freeholder Vice Chairman Daniel P. Sullivan judges the pie-eating contest at the first Kids Kingdom Traveling Jubilee held at Warinanco Park last month.

Kids Jubilee Kicks Off Summer Fun in County

ELIZABETH — Nine-year-old Nakeerah Hood dove right into her strawberry cream pie and kept eating until Union County Freeholder Vice Chairman Daniel Sullivan called out her name as winner of the pie eating contest at the Kids Kingdom Traveling Jubilee held in Warinanco Park on June 13.

Still trying to swallow the last mouthful of whipped cream, she thanked Mr. Sullivan for the \$25 gift certificate before running off to share her triumph with family and friends.

"We are happy to provide Union County residents an opportunity where they don't have to drive far or spend a fortune to have a fun-filled day," he said.

The event featured entertainment such as the Mystic Vision Players School House Rock Program, pie-eating contests, M'Zume and the Mardi Gras Parade and an arts and crafts tent where children made their own musical instruments. In addition, there were clowns, jugglers and court jesters, pony rides, a hole-in-one golf challenge, a nature center scavenger hunt, temporary tattoos, yo-yo demonstrations, amusement rides and refreshments.

Two more Kids Kingdom Traveling Jubilees are scheduled for this summer. One will take place on Sunday, July 18, in Rahway Park and the final one will take place on Wednesday, August 18, in the Watchung Reservation, according to County Freeholder Chairman Nicholas P. Scutari.

For more information on the Kids Kingdom Traveling Jubilee, please call (908) 436-2900.

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