

The Future of the Surface Navy Depends on Public Awareness and the National Museum of the Surface Navy

BY JONATHAN WILLIAMS

Little did I know that, 18 years ago, my life would drastically change with a simple visit to an iconic Surface Navy ship with my grandfather, Ernest Thompson. In 1937, my grandfather joined the U.S. Navy after growing up in Americus, GA during the Great Depression. The Navy gave him opportunity and a future, something that didn't exist for many Americans in the 30's. He served aboard the USS Tennessee and left the Navy in 1941 to settle down in the Los Angeles area. After World War II broke out, he finished his duties for the local power authority and rejoined the Navy as a Water Tender First Class. His assignment was the newly built USS Missouri located at the New York Naval Shipyard. He served aboard the Battleship MISSOURI through the end of WWII and had enough points to return to Los Angeles to live out the rest of his life.

Experiencing the impact on my grandfather's life first hand with a simple visit to "his" ship in 2000 forever changed my perception on service and the Surface Navy. At the time, I was working on building a little ".com" company and was desperately searching for balance in life through volunteering. It was not too long after returning from this life-altering experience that I heard that the USS Iowa was moving to the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet. I found my calling when fate led me to volunteer to save the Battleship IOWA for her veterans and their families, so they could experience what I did with my grandfather.

After 11 years of working on the San Francisco, Mare Island, and Los Angeles efforts, the Navy awarded the IOWA to our group in Los Angeles. In a wonderful coincidence, she was placed in the Port of Los Angeles, the same port that my grandfather called home aboard the USS Tennessee and where he met my grandmother prior to the war. In the final years of his life, he became a museum crew member aboard IOWA. We built a connection as friends and I will forever be grateful for being able to spend 16 precious years of his life as "shipmates". I experienced service through his sailor stories; most importantly he taught me why our Surface Navy mattered to the future of our country and the world.

Unfortunately, over the past years, public awareness of the sea services has slipped away into a dark abyss. World War II to today's generations has become the Civil War to our generations. At age 43, I may be one of the youngest leaders of a museum ship in the Historic Naval Ships Association and quite possibly the Fleet Week community. This greatly concerns me, as we will see historic ships head to the scrapyards, military recruiting becomes more difficult, and our sea services' capabilities to respond diminish.

Why does this all matter? A large percentage of our population doesn't understand why our Surface Navy and sea services are critically important to the future of our country. Existing awareness platforms tend to communicate internally vs. externally or, quite simply, the Navy community is great at communicating with themselves. The reality is that the Surface Navy is vital to the future of American society to protect free trade, provide humanitarian assistance, and maintain international relations. These are critical components to society as we know it and all of society is touched in one way or

another by these three critical benefits of the Surface Navy.

Public awareness matters to the Surface Navy and sea services community for two major reasons.

1. Congressional Support. Historic naval ships and related events educate taxpayers and their congressional representatives on the importance of our sea services to maintain international trade and provide support in the event of a major humanitarian crisis such as the hurricanes that devastated Puerto Rico, Houston, and, most recently, the Florida Panhandle. Of note, the Gallup survey at the first Fleet Week in Los Angeles in 2016 found that an eye-opening 90% of the hundreds of thousands of visitors would support more funding for the Navy because of their experiences at LA Fleet Week.
2. Recruiting and the "Legacy Cycle". This topic is multi-dimensional and requires an in-depth and honest conversation on how to diversify the recruiting pool. More and more, recruits are legacies that have a close family member who served in the military. Clearly, it is critically important to educate the public on the role of the Surface Navy to increase the interest and desire to serve in the sea services. Notably, in the same Gallup survey in 2016, 80% of LA Fleet Week visitors were more likely to recommend serving in the Navy to someone they knew.

As the CEO of the Battleship IOWA Museum and the President of LA Fleet Week, I passionately believe in providing a conduit between the Navy and civilian communities to build public awareness. This is why we at the Battleship IOWA Museum are preparing to transition into the National Museum of the Surface Navy. It is the right thing to do for a ship museum that is a "Top



Six years ago, the USS IOWA proudly arrived at her new home, the Port of Los Angeles. Credit: Michael Justice

10" regional attraction, ranked in TripAdvisor as the 5th most popular museum out of 135 and the 6th most popular attraction out of 555 in Los Angeles. There is no better venue for the Surface Navy than an iconic battleship located at the busiest Port complex in the United States and in a city known as a year-round tourism destination. The IOWA has become the centerpiece of a rapidly redeveloping LA waterfront. It is a location that gives the Surface Navy an opportunity to connect to the public and is within a 2-hour drive of the Navy's largest fleet concentration. Already, the IOWA has hosted numerous Surface Navy outings and events aboard the ship.

The National Museum of the Surface Navy at the Battleship IOWA will be much more than just a ship museum, it will be a community-oriented museum focused on raising awareness on the importance of the Surface Navy's role in international relations and American culture. The IOWA herself will be the most important artifact in the national museum. Plans for the new national museum aboard and ashore include exhibits highlighting the past and future role of the Surface Navy, education programs using Next Generation Science Standards, and a "Veterans Center" to provide programs and services which lead to a successful civilian transition for military service members.

It is time for the Surface Navy community to finally be represented for their important role to our country and the world. Now more than ever, the Navy needs the story of the Surface Navy to be told to the American people. The Battleship IOWA in the Port of Los

Angeles provides the perfect platform for the National Museum of the Surface Navy.

Jonathan Williams is President & CEO, Battleship IOWA Museum; President, LA Fleet Week and President, Historic Naval Ships Association



More than 35,000 student participate in STEM programs aboard the Battleship IOWA Museum.



The Battleship IOWA Museum is now a community anchor and is driving redevelopment on the LA waterfront.



Jonathan Williams and ocean explorer Dr Robert Ballard open his extraordinary "Lost at Sea" exhibit in November 2018.



Jonathan Williams and Ernest Thompson remember the 65th anniversary of the end of WWII aboard USS Missouri.



IOWA Chairman Mike Shatynski admires artist Ben Jackel's sculptures representing the span of the Surface Navy's Age of Steel in the IOWA's Alpha Romeo Tango gallery .