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The Last Battleship Command

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The 13th of June 1990 was just an average day in the history of the United States Navy, but for Captain A. Lee Kaiss it was the day when a very special dream came true. On that day He took command of the USS Missouri BB-63 for the second time during his Navy career.

Captain Kaiss had been the recommissioning Commanding Officer of Missouri on May 10th 1986, and now he was back again as her CO. His first tour was cut short because of a medical problem, but events put him in the right place at the right time, and now he was back at the helm of the "Mighty Mo".

Captain John Chernesky, Missouri's third commanding officer since her recommissioning, had decided that it was time to retire and there was no planned relief in the pipeline. Captain Kaiss had been returned "fit for full duty" and fully qualified to command, consequently, the problem of a relief was resolved.

At that time, two of the four Iowa Class battleships, USS New Jersey and USS Iowa, were in the process of being decommissioned and the master plan called for Missouri to follow suit in the very near future. The "Mighty MO" was to make an around-the-world cruise, show the flag with visits to various World War II ports-of-call. Those ports included Tokyo Bay, the site of the September 2, 1945 Japanese surrender on board the USS Missouri, the formal ending of World War II.

The month of July 1990 was busy for Missouri. She participated in fleet week in San Francisco and Sea Fair in Seattle and then returned to Long Beach to prepare for her deployment and good-will cruise.

At that time, the Defense Department had announced that all four Iowa Class battleships would be retired because of budget cuts and manpower reductions. Captain Kaiss was notified by the Type Commander on Friday the 3rd of August that it was to be announced that Missouri was scheduled to be deactivated with in the next six months. He was allowed to advise the crew, so that they'd not be taken by surprise, that an official announcement would probably be made over the weekend. This was done, but unexpected world events intervened.

Captain A. Lee Kaiss on the bridge of USS Missouri.

That same day Iraq invaded Kuwait and took control of the entire country over the week end. In response to news of the invasion, the Pentagon announced that it did not have firm plans to decommission the USS Wisconsin or the USS Missouri. Their announcement coincided with Captain Kaiss' announcement of Missouri's eminent decommissioning, and resulted in headlines in the Long Beach newspaper stating that: *"The Skipper and Pentagon disagree on Mothballs for Big Mo."*

As a result of the Kuwait invasion, both battleships were destined to see action in the Persian Gulf, and the active life of the USS Missouri was extended once again.

The USS Wisconsin was immediately sent to the Gulf while the Missouri was placed on 72-hour deployment stand-by. Both battleships were once again headed into "Harms Way".

They were the perfect fit for the Gulf. Both ships carried 32 Tomahawk missiles and their 16-inch guns had a range of 26 miles. These ships were self sufficient in all respects. They carried 2 million gallons of fuel and could refuel any assigned escorts. They had large Helo decks and could support the H-53, which allowed for 24/7 logistical support for any

ships in company. Additionally the Remote Pilotless Vehicle (RPV) modification was added to both ships. This addition gave them self-controlled and directed over-the-horizon gunfire support capability.

There was only one issue to be corrected before these superb fighting platforms had it all, and that was the removal of the no-fire restriction for the 16-inch guns.

This restriction was a result of the USS Iowa's center gun explosion in turret two. The investigation had been completed but the no-fire restriction still remained in effect.

The CNO had declared that a complete recertification program was to be conducted. This meant that all 16-inch gun crew personnel had to attend specialized training and fulfill new NEC requirements that were specified for turret crew personnel.

The Iowa explosion was the result of an over-ram and a power tare layer issue, both of which were in the process of being corrected so that the guns could be used in the Gulf.

The 16-inch retraining program became a major priority and when Missouri sailed for the Gulf on 13 November 1990 all gun crews were in the final phase of recertification and the guns were authorized on a limited basis to fire. This limited use restriction was fully removed prior to the ship's arrival at Bahrain on 1 January 1991 and Missouri arrived fully combat ready. The US Navy now had two fully capable battleships on line and ready to respond for the first time since the Korean conflict.

Captain Dave Bill, the Commanding Officer of USS Wisconsin had been in the Gulf for several months prior to the arrival of Missouri. He had developed a Tomahawk strike plan and even though Missouri was the senior ship, Wisconsin became the Tomahawk Strike Commander because of her experience base and Missouri became the Shore Bombardment Commander. By this arrangement the major capabilities of both ships were evenly distributed for maximum readiness.

On the 17th of January, 1991, the United Nations' "Desert Storm" offensive began and Battleship Missouri was the first ship in the Persian Gulf to fire her Tomahawk missiles. During a seven day period she placed 28 missiles on designated targets.

Then, with Phase One complete it was time to bring the 16-inch guns into action. On the 5th of February Missouri's main batteries went into action, firing her 16-inch guns in support of the US Marines on the border between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

In a surprise move she placed 16-inch rounds on concrete bunkers used as defensive positions by the Iraqis. The gun-fire was very effective and large numbers of Iraqis troops surrendered to US Marines the next morning. This action became front page news in *USA Today* the following day.

Missouri then proceeded to join up with the Task Group to conduct the assault on Fayakah Island and Kuwait City. During the transit to the assault area the USS Tripoli and the USS Princeton hit mines and were damaged. Missouri utilized her flight deck to support the USS Tripoli's H-53 helos so they could continue there mine sweeping mission. This allowed the operation to continue after a minimum delay. Missouri then brought her 16-inch guns into action against targets on Fayakah Island and after several days of bombardment the Marines were in full control.

Next came the fake amphibious landing on the coast of Kuwait. During this operation Missouri placed several hundred 16-inch rounds on coast targets, holding two Iraqi Divisions out of action as they waited for the amphibious assault that never came.

During this period of the war Missouri fired over 800 16-inch rounds, blew up 12 mines, fired 28 Tomahawk missiles and was attacked by an enemy Silkworm missile that was, fortunately, destroyed in flight by HMS Gloucester.

The "Mighty Mo" had once again proven her self in war and the crew of the USS Missouri returned home to a rousing hero's welcome at Long Beach on the 13th of May after being deployed for 6 months - to the day.

After their return home, the long anticipated word came down that Wisconsin and Missouri were to be decommissioned . The Defense Department wanted to reduce costs and the Battleships were expensive assets. But the President of the United States had a different plan for Missouri.

President George Bush gave the Mighty Mo one last reprieve, wanting Missouri to be part of the 50th Anniversary commemoration of the December 7th 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

By Presidential direction, Missouri was to remain in commission while all other Battleships were to be placed in retirement. History was repeating itself. President Harry Truman overrode plans for Missouri's decommissioning after WWII, keeping Missouri in commission when all others were mothballed. Now President George Bush gave the Mighty Mo one last reprieve, wanting Missouri to be

part of the 50th Anniversary commemoration of the December 7th 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

As a consequence, she would once again be the "Lone Warrior" in the battleship world and Missouri would host the President and the official party during the event, recognized as the site and symbol of the formal ending of World War II.

Being selected for this role was a moment of great pride for every member of the crew. There could be no better way to display this magnificent ship to the nation and the world than as centerpiece for this historic moment and as a sign of respect for all those who gave their lives for their country on December 7th 1941.

Planning and preparation for this commemoration took several months and every member of the 1584-member crew felt that they were part of the event. As the only battleship sailors left in the world, they knew they were special and that Missouri had to shine during this event. Her sailors felt that they stood six inches taller than any others in the fleet and they were always ready to prove it.

While preparations were well on their way to completion, the transit to Pearl Harbor was anything but routine. The first day out of Long Beach Missouri encountered heavy seas. They were coming out of the west and there was no way to avoid them and still make the arrival date in Pearl.

The second day brought seas that boasted waves well over 20-feet high, resulting in Missouri taking water over turret two. These large waves caused damage to the fixtures on the main deck but the really bad news was two of her boats were lifted out of the davits and severely damaged. The boats and topside area that had always been a show piece were now a shambles.

The fourth day brought sunshine and calm seas and Missouri was only one day out of Pearl. The crew under the direction of the Chief Petty Officers rose to the occasion, and within 24 hours you could not tell that the ship had experienced heavy weather. There was no way this crew would allow Missouri to arrive in Pearl Harbor as the Presidential Flag Ship and not outshine all other ships in port. The battleship spirit and pride carried the day.

Editor's NOTE: The two damaged 26' utility boats were removed from the ship by floating crane and left in a field near Dry-dock #4 at the entrance to the harbor. These boats were later rediscovered and ownership transferred to the USS Missouri Memorial Association. But it wasn't until 2008, during conversation with Captain Kaiss, that it was realized they were in fact, Missouri's boats.

The morning of December 7th 1991 in Pearl Harbor opened with a ceremony on board the USS Arizona Memorial. The President spoke and his remarks reflected the courage and spirit of the American people on this day fifty years earlier, and he assured those watching and listening that the world would never forget the sacrifice and courage of all those who gave their lives.

The ceremony concluded with the President and First Lady each placing a lei on the waters above the watery grave site of the sailors entombed in the USS Arizona. The silver trays used to hold the leis for this event were borrowed from the presentation silver on board Missouri.

During the events on the USS Arizona Memorial, Missouri was utilized as an over-flow platform for dignitaries who could not be accommodated at the presentation site. Missouri was host to state governors, senators and congressional delegates about 200 dignitaries in all.

Upon completion of the ceremony onboard the USS Arizona Memorial, the President and official party departed for USS Missouri.

Hearing the announcement: "United States arriving" was like an electrical current passing through the ship. The moment had arrived, the sailors of the "Mighty Mo" were hosting the Commander-in-Chief and all of their preparations were about to pay off.

Captain Kaiss was the senior naval military officer present by request of the President. This helped to focus the visitors on the true attributes of this magnificent platform and her superb crew. Security was tight but the President did not have any problem being exposed to the crew, and they were appreciative of this gesture.

The President addressed the nation on national television from the Surrender Deck and then toured selected areas of the ship. His favorite place onboard was the 04 level bridge. He tried the Captain's chair, waved to the sailors on the main deck and commented on the size of the gun barrels on turret one and two.

The visit lasted several hours and when departure time came the President and Mrs. Bush paused at the Surrender Deck a last time.

While the President was aboard, the flag of the President of The United States flew from the main mast for the third time in the history of the battleship. Every crew member came topside to view the flag and reflect on the special feeling of the moment.

This honor fully reflected what battleships and there sailors are all about. It was a fitting tribute to a historic moment and a historic ship - the last of her kind. All 1584 crew members will never forget that special feeling of pride.

As this moment passed, it was time to prepare for the journey home. Departure from Pearl Harbor was a joyous and sad event all rolled into one. The pride of a job well done was felt by all but everyone knew that

completion of the transit back to the mainland would also bring the end of Missouri's days at sea.

En route, Captain Kaiss sat in his chair on the bridge and reflected on the fact that he and Missouri were at sea for the last time as part of the active fleet and that retirement was the next step. What better way to end our careers, he thought. They had fought and helped win the war in the Gulf, and then stood in full view of the world, joined together with the President of the United States, to remember the heroes of 7 December 1941 fifty years after the event. This would be a tough act to follow.

The decommissioning was the only milestone left in the active life of the last dreadnaught in the world. On March 31st 1992, seven thousand-plus people gathered on the pier at the Long Beach Naval Station to bid a final farewell to their historic and beloved Battleship Missouri. Crew members who had been detached from service after their return from Pearl Harbor paid their own way back to California just to stand as part of the crew during this final ceremony and for the honor of being recognized as part of this ship's proud history.

The Marine Detachment that had so proudly served as part of the crew returned to carry the colors one last time and to reflect the pride that the United States Marine Corps had in being part of the battleship era.

A part of the lives of those who served on these decks was being rolled into history and this great ship would not live to fight again another day.

Hundreds of Missouri veterans from three wars returned for the final farewell and the air was charged with the electricity of fond memories, of reuniting with old ship mates and with the pride of a job well done, and, with sadness for the day that had finally come.

The guest speaker was Missouri Congressman Ike Skelton. He had always been supportive of Missouri and had been present at her recommissioning to wish her well. It was only fitting therefore that a representative of the great state of Missouri would be given this final honor.

The speeches that day reflected the spotless war record of the ship and the flawless performance of her crew throughout the years. The speech-givers tried to capture the feeling of the moment but if they were not crew members during her proud life-at-sea then it

Missouri's Marine Detachment show their respect for the Nation's flag.

was impossible for them to understand what was happening or to truly capture the feeling of the moment. A part of the lives of those who served on these decks was being rolled into history and this great ship would not live to fight again another day. It was time for the final curtain to fall.

Finally, Captain Kaiss turned and addressed the Executive Officer, Captain Ken Jordon: "XO, haul down the commissioning pennant and the colors, upon completion, march off the crew". "Aye aye sir" was the reply. Captain Kaiss then positioned himself so that he could observe every crew member as they departed the ship. They were the heart and soul of this ship and he wanted to remember every face.

When the final march-off was completed, Captain Kaiss turned to Lieutenant Commander Wes Cary, the Officer of the Deck, and said: "secure the quarterdeck watch". The reply once again was "Aye, aye sir". Wes Cary then signed the Deck Log and he, along with the Petty Officer of-the-Watch and the messenger departed the ship for the last time. This left only one person remaining on board, Captain A. Lee Kaiss, USN.

Captain Kaiss, with the commissioning pennant held firmly in his left hand, took one final look around the main deck and then proceeded down the gangway. When he reached the bottom of the gangway and stepped onto the pier he became the last active duty battleship sailor. At that moment, 11:32, 31 March, 1992, the era of the Battleship ended. History would record the USS Missouri BB-63 as the last active-duty battleship in the world and Captain A. Lee Kaiss had been her last Commander.

The LUCKY BAG is produced by the Curatorial staff of the Battleship Missouri Memorial