

Historic Ships on a Lee Shore

BATTLESHIP *NEW JERSEY*

by Jack Willard



The Home Port Alliance for the USS New Jersey, Inc. began in 1998 as a coalition of individuals, organizations, and government entities representing the New Jersey and Pennsylvania sides of the Delaware River, with the goal of returning the decommissioned Battleship *New Jersey* to its namesake state. At stake was the 45,000-ton veteran of World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the most decorated battleship in American history. Guided by its maxim “Birthplace to Berthplace,” this broad-based group worked to bring the ship home with the same fervor shown by the 20,000 men and women who built it at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard more than 60 years ago.

The *New Jersey* was decommissioned in 1991 after 48 years of service. In 1995, the ship was stricken from the Navy Register to await its final disposition. In 1999, the Home Port Alliance formally submitted its Donation Application for the Battleship ex-*New Jersey* (BB-62) to the Secretary of the Navy. The two-volume application reflected fourteen months of detailed planning designed to meet US Navy Donation Office criteria, and included financial, technical, curatorial, organizational, mooring and berthing, shoreside facility, maintenance, security, towing, and environmental impact studies.

An outpouring of official public commitments made it possible to secure funding for a \$25 million permanent mooring pier with handicapped-accessible elevators and a shoreside Visitor’s Center and to complete \$5 million in onboard projects to restore the ship to its 1990 configuration—the ship’s last full year of commissioned service. Fifty thousand onlookers lined the banks of the Delaware River on Veteran’s Day 1999 to welcome the Battleship *New Jersey* home after a four-month tow from Washington State through the Panama Canal to Philadelphia. Following extensive



restoration efforts, the Battleship *New Jersey* opened to the public in fall 2001. The Battleship *New Jersey* Museum and Memorial (BNJMM) floats today just two miles from her birthplace at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. In January, the BNJMM was officially listed on the State of New Jersey Historical Register.

When the BNJMM opened to the public, two professionally-designed museum exhibitions also opened. *Battleship Sailor: Life Aboard the “Big J”* surveys a sailor’s daily life and includes videotaped oral histories of former crewmembers. *“The Big J”: America’s Most Decorated Battleship* covers the extensive history of the ship and her decades of service. In 2003, a third exhibition opened, *Keepers of the Sea: International Battleship Development*, detailing the evolution of battleships around the world.

New classroom materials for teachers have also been developed and field-tested. The BNJMM’s Teacher’s CD-ROM includes a Teacher’s Handbook, already in its third edition. The CD-ROM and other custom-designed classroom materials are mailed—at no cost—to teachers preparing their students for field trips to the BNJMM. A four-evening teachers’ workshop, offered in partnership with Camden County College, is held onboard three times a year.

The Battleship *New Jersey* is a self-supported, non-profit museum and memorial with no assistance from the state or federal government. Admissions, group sales, overnight encampment and special events have generated income to maintain operations. BNJMM also receives assistance from Battleship *New Jersey* license plate sales, state income tax returns, and contributions made by local agencies, private organizations, and corporate partnerships. Currently, legislators in New Jersey are working to get support from the state to assist in the maintenance of the ship and its educational programs.

The Home Port Alliance demonstrates how planning and public interest can serve both the ship and the public. Nonetheless, the ship and its programs are wholly dependent on continued interest. For more information contact Jack Willard, Battleship New Jersey, 62 Battleship Place, Camden NJ 08103; ph. 856 966-1652 ext. 144; e-mail: j.willard@battleshipnewjersey.org; web site: www.battleshipnewjersey.org. ⚓