

ANCHORS AWAY

By

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Originally spelled “Anchors Aweigh” in the 1906 Version of the song by Charles A. Zimmermann which gradually became the fight song of the United States Naval Academy.

When I was a slip of a girl of nine or ten, I distinctly remember seeing my first United States Navy man. I was in Downtown Chicago on a summer day. I was with my Mother who always took me Downtown to see the sights. I asked “who were those fellows”? Mother said they were sailors! I was taken by their striking uniforms, their navy blue tops with the white piping, their bell bottom pants and their terrific white sailor hats. Always being a hat lover, I thought their hats were particularly nifty. Gosh! I will never forget that moment!

Over the years, I would see Navy men in a military parade or often walking along State Street on leave. I had heard about the Naval Air Station in Glenview but never asked what the Navy had to do with flying.

This was my first exposure to the Navy. Little did I know it was the beginning of my connections to the United States Navy over many decades.

When I was interviewing with President Andrew Boemi at the Madison Bank and Trust Company to head the Marketing and Public Relations Department, I glanced at an oil painting of a ship hanging in a prominent position on the north wall of his office. I did not pay particular attention to it at the time.

Madison Bank would become the Madison Financial Corporation, the first bank holding company in Illinois and would become deeply

imbedded in community and civic affairs. I often said, we were a small Bank with big ideas!

A few weeks after I was hired, a bank officer arrived at my desk carrying what looked like some accounting books and a giant three on a page check book and register. The bank officer declared that President Boemi had just appointed me the unofficial Treasurer of the Navy League of Chicago. Thank heavens, I thought, for my years of keeping books back to the time of my Sunday school classes to keeping the books and daily cash register records in my Mother's art gallery in Oak Park and for carefully keeping my own bank account records. Yes, I had definitely learned how to keep financial records. Somehow, being the "keeper" of the Navy League books seemed a bit more onerous! Once a month, President Boemi would ask for the reconciliations and the check book for the monthly meeting of the Navy League of Chicago where he was the official Treasurer. I am proud to say, I had a flawless record.

I also came to find out that at the Bank I was surrounded by former Navy men. Andy Boemi and Marv Strunk, Senior V.P. had both served in the Navy. Later, a teller named Jim, enlisted in the Navy and was told by Boemi, "When you have completed your Navy tour of duty, come back to the Bank you will always have a job here" Jim did come back twenty years later after retiring from the Navy and, yes, he did get a very good job at the Bank.

As for the oil painting on President Boemi's wall, it was a picture of the famous air craft carrier the Nimitz built in 1968 and is to this day the super carrier and the lead ship of her class and is now the oldest air craft carrier in service.

In 1984, the phone rang in my office. It was a "three ringer" which meant "get up to the President's office ASAP". Andy and Marv were waiting for me. "Deen" Andy said, "Governor Thompson just called and

he is putting together a Committee for the Commissioning of the air craft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln and would like you and Marv to be on the Committee. Marv is to be Chairman of the Committee. The Committee will be in charge of fundraising events, donor dinners and a gala”.

Marv said there was one caveat, “Yolanda---you have to be in charge of all the events “or, more accurately put, he said “You’ll have to do all of the work!”

I had organized a tremendous number of events over the years for the Bank. Perhaps, the most important was the first outdoor band concert ever given in City of Chicago. It was held on the plaza of the Chicago Daily News Building where the Bank was located, featuring John Phillips Souza’s military music, (yes, I have always had a patriot bent. We generated a lot of press in the Chicago papers. Consequently, Mayor Daley had asked the Bank to send me to Washington to see Lady Bird Johnson and suggest she incorporate patriot band concerts into her American the Beautiful program. And, I had organized dozens and dozens of events for shareholders, bank customers and community organization in which I participated.

The Commissioning Committee was right up my alley! Boemi asked “Shall I call the Governor and tell him you and Marv are on board? We can’t do this without you” he said to me, “if not, Marv will not be Chairman---it’s up to you!” Without blinking an eye, my answer was a resounding “Yes”. Another Navy assignment!

The Commissioning was to be held November 11, 1989 at the Naval Base in Norfolk, Virginia. This was where the USS Abraham Lincoln would be Commissioned being christened at the Newport News Shipbuilding Yard.

I was totally unaware of Lincoln's deep interest in the American Navy. I had some vague recollection of reading a well-illustrated book on the history of the Civil War with President Lincoln standing on a rampart looking out to sea through a long spy glass. I have tried to find this reference in my home library but was unable to do so. I had to do some real digging to learn about the connection of Lincoln to the U.S. Navy.

Many of us, do not think of Lincoln in a naval context except for Civil War buffs (such as our fellow Chicago Literary Club member, David Zucker, who is a Civil War expert). We mostly think of Lincoln, the great orator; Lincoln the prairie lawyer; Lincoln the storyteller; Lincoln the great emancipator, Lincoln who led us to the Union victory —these attributes were all brilliantly chronicled by Lincoln scholar Greg Weiner in his writings entitled "Old Wigs" but barely a mention of Lincoln as building the Union Navy. Nor, was there hardly any reference to Lincoln's leadership of building the Navy even in any of Carl Sandburg's volumes on Lincoln. In Sandburg's book "Abraham Lincoln, The War Years" there is scant mention of Lincoln and his involvement in the Navy which was reduced to a short summary.

I went to the huge 830 page book "Mary Chestnut's Civil War" told from the Confederate viewpoint through the eyes of diarist Mary Chestnut, the wife of former U.S. Senator who resigned his office and joined the Confederacy as an important member of the Confederate government. In this profound recounting of the Civil War, I found only a few of footnotes about Navy involvement except for a short reference to the Confederate battleship, the Virginia. Not a word about the many great Naval battles between the North and the South.

Finally, in the book "Portrait for Posterity" by Benjamin Platt Thomas, I found an extensive record of Lincoln's interest in the Union Navy. Make no mistake, Lincoln had a remarkable "hands on interest" in the Navy.

At the time of Lincoln's inauguration, the U.S. Navy consisted of exactly 90 old wooden sailing vessels. Before Lincoln was President, he was Lincoln the patent attorney and had created several small inventions among which was a device to lift vessels over shoals. Upon becoming President, Lincoln quickly took interest in and recognized the need to block the Confederate ports and rivers. Often, Lincoln visited the Washington Naval Yard occasionally accompanied by Mary Todd Lincoln. Imagine that!

When the Civil war began, one goal of the Confederate forces was to seize the important Union Naval Yards. Lincoln clearly understood this goal and decided a strong Union Navy had to be built from the bottom up. The South knew the peace time American fleet was spare and possessed only a very few ships that could be employed as war ships. The Union was virtually unprepared for war on the water. A disaster in the making.

Prior to Lincoln's Presidency, the American leadership was not willing to build a strong fleet. Thus, at the start of the war, old Union Navy ships stood helplessly off shore and were unable to land supplies to Fort Sumter which was, consequently, battered into submission by the Confederates,

After Sumter fell, Lincoln proclaimed a blockade of 3,500 miles of southern coast---but had only three ships ready to enforce it. The old wooden sailing ships were virtually obsolete. It was said that "Uncle Abe" has gone into the business of building the navy and delivering mortars. The Navy had to be transformed into an iron clad steam propelled modern force. The Navy needed deep water blockade vessel and flotilla to operate on the great rivers , the Chickahominy, the Rappahannock, the Rapidan and the East and West branches of the Potomac which were the highways into West Virginia and the South. To

accomplish this, the Union converted steamboats into hastily built ironclad gunboats. The Navy was pulling out of its earlier humiliation at Fort Sumter and was “coming alive”.

Lincoln had his hand in every aspect of building the Navy and its weapons. On his first visit to the Washington Naval Yard, Lincoln asked for a demonstration firing of an eleven inch gun named the Dahlgren after its inventor. The President was delighted when three of the shells hit its target 1,300 yards away. Lincoln himself then tested weapons and fired them with amazing accuracy. He had his hands in everything. No one approved of Lincoln testing new weapons but no one could stop him.

As the war progressed, critical Norfolk was a major battlefield for control. At the time, the Confederacy occupied Norfolk. They had rebuilt the captured Union ship the Merrimack, transformed it into an iron clad and re-named it the Virginia. Mary Chestnut received word by land courier that the ship was renamed. She was against the renaming and thought the ship should retain the name of the Merrimack. No wonder, Mary was a Southern lady who was a complete paradox. She had been anti-slavery since she was a young woman and had divided feelings about the war and about her role as a wife.

The Virginia was armed with thick iron plates and a cast iron prow weighing 1,500 pounds. She steamed out of Norfolk looking like a huge half submerged crocodile and immediately destroyed two Union Navy ships. Washington was in a panic imagining that this terrifying ship might move northward to Washington. However, the Virginia encountered the Union’s ship, the Monitor, whose design had been presented to and approved by Lincoln. It had only two guns and the Virginia had twelve. But the Monitor had two revolving turrets which the Virginia did not

have. After an epic three hour battle on March 9, 1862, the Virginia was driven back to its own port.

Two months later, the Union forces were ready to deal a death blow to Norfolk. Lincoln, Secretary Chase and Secretary of War Stanton proceeded by boat in the still of the night to Fort Monroe, Virginia. Chase scouted what he thought was a good landing point. But, Lincoln studied the charts and identified what he thought was a better landing point. Sailors rowed Lincoln to shore where he stood on Confederate soil. It was a moonlit night. Lincoln's cabinet officers were incredulous. Perhaps, this was the very spot where Lincoln had stood studying the coast with his long spyglass. I care to think so!

The very next day, the Union Army landed on the exact ground where Lincoln had scouted and Norfolk was taken for the Union. The Virginia was run aground. Secretary Chase had contended that if Mr. Lincoln had not gone to Virginia, Norfolk would still have been in the hands of the enemy and the Merrimac cum the Virginia, a grim and frightening vessel, would have remained a threat to Washington.

The advent of the modern Navy and the air craft carrier was born during this time---crude as it was. The Confederacy had been quite inventive. They created the first combat submarine, the ill-fated "Hunley" which was itself sunk while testing and sinking a Union ship. Most interestingly, the Southerners created the world's second air craft carrier, the Teaser. It was captured in 1862 while carrying an observation balloon made from silk dresses donated by patriotic Richmond ladies.

The first air craft carrier, however, was a Union vessel proposed by Thaddeus Lowe which was equipped with observation balloons. Twice Lincoln sent Lowe to see General-in-Chief Winfield Scott. Scott sent him away thinking this was a foolish dream. But, not, Lincoln! He then

personally accompanied Lowe to see General Scott. Lowe ended up organizing, of all things, a Balloon Corps. Lincoln's air craft carrier, as it were, was purchased for the Navy for \$150 to serve as a coal barge and observation balloon carrier. The idea of an air craft carrier vanquished over time. It was not until 50 years later until interest in air flight from ships was renewed. It was not until 1910, seven years after the Kitty Hawk flight, that naval interest in air flight from ships was sparked again.

In 1865, Lincoln arrived at General Ulysses S. Grant's headquarters in City Point, Virginia and met with Generals Grant and Sherman about how to end the war. Lincoln announced he was going to Richmond the next day aboard a Navy ironclad. This was ten days before his assassination. When Lincoln died, the United States had the strongest Navy in the world. A modern navy owed in part to Lincoln who was fascinated by discoveries and inventions. Lincoln, who had poked into every aspect of naval affairs.

When mentioning the idea for my paper to a friend some months ago, he asked exactly what I had asked." What connection could Lincoln have had with the aircraft carrier to be named the USS Abraham Lincoln?" After doing the research, now I knew! I was greatly motivated then and honored to be one the Commissioning Committee of the USS Abraham Lincoln for this truly historic occasion.

The goal of the Committee included raising over \$250,000 to equip the ship with library books about Lincoln, to provide personal computers for the crew to use, to buy additional equipment for the exercise room and to purchase sixty portraits of Lincoln that would be placed throughout the ship to remind the crew of the heritage of the ship. The budget did not include luxuries such as these for the 6,000 crew members who would eventually be on board.

The building of the USS Abraham Lincoln began in 1984 after the ship's keel was laid in the Newport News Shipbuilding Yard. During the five year long building, the Commissioning Committee would work diligently to inform Illinoisans about the ship. A 13 minute video tape was produced entitled "Shall Not Perish" which was shown throughout Illinois as a public service.

One of my favorite fund raising activities was the reproduction of the table china chosen by Mary Todd Lincoln for the White House. You might have seen several of the original pieces on loan and on display last year at the Union League Club of Chicago.

Working with the U.S. Historical Society, 5000 sets of this china were made by Haviland of France, the originator of this White House China. Of the 5000 sets, 25 sets were given to the ship to use when entertaining dignitaries and guests. The rest were sold as part of the fund raising effort. One Lincoln devotee from Los Angeles purchased 200 sets, many Plank owners bought sets. Ralph Newman of the Abraham Lincoln Bookstore in Chicago purchased numerous sets. I bought four complete sets. Later, I thought, knowing my predilection for buying things I love in multiples--why on earth had I only purchased four sets??

Not to be thwarted, after some lively negotiation with Ralph Newman's spouse, I was able to buy four additional large dinner plates which I use as cover plates with my four sets. Often these grace my dining table on special occasions. I can only imagine Mary Todd Lincoln relishing dinner at one of my dinner parties set with the Lincoln china. This china is thought to be the most beautiful dinner service in the White House.

No wonder my great enjoyment for my next two major assignments on the Committee. The first was to organize and Chair a fundraising "coming out" party as the Chicago Tribune called it on July 24, 1988.

The event was held at the end of Navy Pier on the second deck walkway. The Tribune called it an elegant dinner with the room festooned with red, white and blue flowers and decor. But, the real attraction was the former Presidential yacht, the Sequoia, which was tied up at the end of the pier a short walk to our dinner venue. Two hundred guests were able to tour the Sequoia during the cocktail hour. When I first saw the Sequoia, I remember thinking how rather small it was---but it was immensely fascinating to be walking on this restored historic yacht which served eight Presidents from 1933 to 1977. No matter the size, the next opportunity to tour an historic vessel would be to walk on the immense aircraft carrier the USS Abraham Lincoln.

My next assignment was to organize a Commissioning gala on the evening of November 10, 1989 in Norfolk. More of a feat, I recall, because I would be making preparations from Chicago. This occasion called for a genuine connection to Virginia history. It was the prelude to the Commissioning ceremony the following day. Guests would come from all over the United States.

I challenged myself! How would the historic connection be depicted? The event was held at the Marriot Hotel in Norfolk with a formal dinner, a program and dancing afterwards. Hmm, dancing I thought. Visions of dancers from the 1860's swirled in my imagination.

I decided to call the Virginia Historical Society and ask if there was some volunteer group of Virginians who liked to depict citizens of the Civil War era, who would attend our dinner but, with one requirement---they must be in costumes of the period. To my delight, there was such a group who would appear on historic occasions and for a reasonable donation to the Virginia Historical Society and would be available to attend our dinner. My plans grew! Why not feature them in the ballroom during dinner!

I was to arrive two days before the Commissioning of the USS Abraham Lincoln. The Navy Department assigned a Naval officer to act as my escort for the three days. I wondered how I would have felt about that when I was a ten year old girl seeing my first sailor.

My escort was in for a surprise because on arrival my goal was to get to work to make the dinner an occasion to remember complete with historical pomp. He was ready to take me to lunch and drive to Williamsburg for a tour. Instead I wanted to visit the finest antique shop in Norfolk with the purpose of finding antique glassware for---you guessed it--- the dinner table for the Virginia Historical Society players that would be set with the Lincoln china, beautiful stemware on a lace table cloth and flowers to compliment the marvelous purplish, white and gold china with the American eagle in its center and a rainbow in the background. The table was to be placed on a platform in the middle of the ballroom.

The dinner menu included lobster bisque, salmon filets and All-American cheesecake. (You might have noticed the menu for our Chicago Literary dinner tonight included Chef Victor's lobster bisque, salmon filets and American Cheesecake along with our traditional Cliff Dweller pies!

The ballroom buzzed with delight at the appearance of the historical players dressed in full formal 1860's dress seated at a separate table.

After dinner, a film "The Lincoln Legend" was shown and remarks were made by Navy Ordnanceman David Balsitis on behalf of the ships' crew, by Captain William B. Hayden, the first Commander of the USS Abraham Lincoln, the Honorable James R. Thompson, Governor of Illinois, Marvin Strunk as Chairman of the Commissioning Committee. The Master of Ceremonies was Norman Ross of Channel 2, Chicago.

The dinner program included the name of the Honorary Plank Owners and Committee members. I was proud to be one. The evening program seemed to be concluding---but wait! The Norfolk Naval Band struck up the dance music. The historic players, three couples in full formal dress, stepped down from their platform onto the dance floor and lead the dancing followed by the two hundred dinner quests who took to the floor. Who knows, perhaps, in the shadows the ghosts of Mary Todd Lincoln and Abraham Lincoln joined in the dancing.

Saturday, November 11, 1989 was a brilliant sunny day in Norfolk. Five hundred seats were arranged next to the deck side for honorary guests. Some 17,000 other people gathered nearby who witnessed the occasion of the Commissioning ceremony. At the time, the USS Abraham Lincoln would become the fifth of seven nuclear powered ships of the Nimitz Class carriers named the Intruder, the Hawkeye, the Prowler, the Tomcat, the Hornet, the Viking and the Sea King.

When you saw this great ship before your very eyes, you realized it was not only a day of celebration but a solemn occasion as well. There it was, costing billions of dollars, longer than three football fields, weighing 96,000 tons, a flight deck area of 4.5 acres, built on a no-frills budget by 30,000 Newport News employees over five years of construction and 40 million work hours. It would eventually carry 3,000 to 6,000 crewmen. The average age of the crew member was 19 years old. The ships logo "Shall Not Perish" was taken from President Lincoln's famous Gettysburg address. Each crewman was given a name tag with the 1972 Lincoln penny affixed to it---pennies collected by the Dunbar-Erwin Middle School at Newport News.

After the keynote speech by Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, it was time now! First, a fly over by navy jets and navy propeller air craft while the Navy military band played the Star Spangled Banner and

Anchors Aweigh. It was Captain Hayden who called out the order “Bring the Ship to Life” With that, hundreds of crew men ran in opposite directions across the ships bow. The decks of the USS Abraham Lincoln had finally “Come Alive”. There were wild cheers and applause. The ship’s radar antenna was spinning like a top! What a joyous moment to etch in your memory.

And, there was even more to come! Not until the guests were invited to come aboard the ship, virtually a floating airport, that the gravity of the event, came to me. I walked virtually alone from bow to stern and then back to the ship’s Command Center where Captain Hayden talked with guests about the workings of the ship’s navigation system.

But, it was not until I stood next to one of the Navy fighter planes sitting on the deck that I realized the tremendous feats of courage it took to be at sea, to launch a plane off of this runway into the sky, perhaps, on a dangerous mission or on a test run, and then to turn around and land safely on the main deck. It captured my imagination and, also, brought a real sense of reality to the skill and daring it took to operate this nuclear powered ship and its planes.

My one great regret was that a year later, I was invited to go on a two day cruise aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln to commemorate its first anniversary. It was stationed in the Port of Los Angeles. Much to my disappointment, I was on deadline producing the 1991 Annual Report for the Madison Financial Corporation. President Boemi could not go on the cruise either because of his work but Marv Strunk was able to go. I consoled myself when Marv and some other Chicago Plank Owners reported back they had to sleep on a tiny bunk beds in claustrophobic quarters and had to climb and climb the many, many decks. But, I still have my memories that will always be with me. And, I have cherished

photos of the Commissioning day and of myself standing next to a Navy fighter plane on the deck!

My Navy experience has been somewhat curtailed since Madison Bank was purchased by Corus Bank in 1995. At that time, I had the opportunity to purchase the 48 star flag that stood near my office.

Since then my patriotic bent has been exercised by attending the formal Mess Night dinner given by the University Club of Chicago which was started in 2017 to honor the U.S. Marines. What you say, have I jumped ship to join a Marine celebration? Not to worry, the U.S. Navy Reserve Band in Chicago provides the music for this incredible event. I have loved every minute of those evenings. However, I promise to save the Mess Night stories for another time!

Over the years, I have wondered where the USS Abraham Lincoln has been deployed. In what distant sea does it command its attending Naval ships acting as the nucleus of a carrier battle group of guided missile cruisers, destroyers, frigates and submarines!

In over 28 years I have never read or heard of any specific reference to any “on the seas” location of the USS Abraham Lincoln. Until on September 22, 2019 as I was having my read of the Sunday New York Times, there it was, a full page story a story and photo of the great ship ready to move with an advance group of ships to launch an attack against Iran at 9 p.m. Washington time on June 20, 2019. This as a consequence of our American drone, the Global Hawk, being shot down by Iran. The story covered in detail the decision of that crisis.

In the situation room, President Trump weighed retaliation on Iran over and over again meeting with top advisors and congressional leaders from both sides of the aisle including Mr. Pompeo, Mr. Bolton, Speaker Pelosi and several Generals on the phones. Most of them

leaned toward retaliation. The attack was to be aimed at one of the Iranian boats that the United States had been tracking in the Gulf of Oman. First, there was to be a warning to the Iranians to evacuate the vessel and then sink the boat with a bomb or a missile strike.

President Trump ruminated over his decision for a week and then at the last minute, worried about stumbling into a broader conflict, alone in the White House after the advisory group had left for the evening and much to their surprise, Trump called the Pentagon and called off the attack.

10,000 sailors and airmen had been poised for the battle over the North Arabian Sea. In the Command Center of the USS Abraham Lincoln, Rear Admiral Michael E. Boyle was waiting for the attack order. The order did not come. President Trump later tweeted he had been “locked and loaded “for the strike, but, then called the strike off.

I shall not speculate on the reason for this decision. When it did come, the imminent attack was halted. The Tomahawk missiles stood down. The attack planes poised on the runway of the ship were called back by Rear Admiral Boyle from the Command Center of the USS Abraham Lincoln.

As I read the story, I vividly remembered standing in that very Command Center of the ship with the first Commander of the ship Captain William Hayden on the day of the Commissioning in 1989.

No question about it, when I read the story in the New York Times, I suddenly felt that same rush of pride and emotion that I had when I stood next to the F-14 Tomcat poised on the main deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln on November 11, 1989.

Make no mistake, President Lincoln’s “name sake” ship is ready to do us proud if called into a war. Today a naval war would be a solemn,

dangerous and bold endeavor just as President Lincoln knew it was during the Civil War.

I thought about those 6,000 sailors on the seas ready to do battle for us---heaven only knows on what international sea. God bless them where 'ere they may be and God bless the USS Abraham Lincoln!

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