

## The USS Oak Ridge (ARDM-1) crewmember's reunion in Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 28, 2022)

A special group of people came to Oak Ridge on October 21-22, 2022. They were the crewmembers and families of the crew who were assigned to a ship – the USS Oak Ridge. They have formed a close connection with Oak Ridge over the past several years.

I was honored to be invited to the reception at the Comfort Inn sponsored by Mayor Warren Gooch and his wife, Judy. Katy Watt and Explore Oak Ridge coordinated the event and arranged for other things to help the visitors enjoy their visit to Oak Ridge.

The crewmembers welcomed our mayor with a hearty hoorah and salute upon his arrival. They took a photo with him and presented him with a framed picture of the USS Oak Ridge.

Here is the first page of a book presented to Mayor Gooch: "Could we have imagined almost 50 years ago, a blossoming bond that would continue to grow. Four special years in a place called Spain, many special memories that still remain. The crew worked tirelessly and gained much fame, yes Oak Ridge ... everyone knew the name. The ship had a long history of serving so well, think of all of the stories the proud girl could tell. Years passed and the crew gathered again, meeting in Oak Ridge, every now and then. The ties are strong we can attest, especially with the Mayor – simply the best. A heartfelt thanks for all you beget, something the crew will never forget!"

The book was also presented to the crewmembers. While it is a small book it is filled with photographs of the USS Oak Ridge. It also includes newspaper articles noting the presentation of a brass bell commemorating the ship that was presented to the city of Oak Ridge.

The bell is on display in the entrance lobby of the Municipal Building. But it has a long and involved history of getting there. I was able to meet Bob (Lee) Rawls on Saturday at the Friendship Bell during the ceremony to recall those crewmembers who have passed away. He was a delight to meet.

He told me of how the original bell was taken from the ship years ago. Jack Ring bought the bell we now have in a Jacksonville Florida scrap yard. It was in bad shape. Jack said he scrubbed on that thing for at least two months. He then kept the bell in his garage for 30 years.

Getting the bell engraved and mounted resulted when the group decided to visit Oak Ridge for one of their reunions. They realized that we did not know the history of the ship with the Oak Ridge namesake. So, they decided to do something to help commemorate that history. The bell was the key to telling the story in a tangible way. The top nut was found in the St. John's River. Billy Hope had the 1-inch bolt. Thomas Fort engraved it. It was a team effort to create the special commemorative bell.

What I found most amazing about the story of the bell is that there is a paper note telling who all was involved in the effort to create the commemorative bell. This note is hidden as a time capsule inside the bell. It is secured and cannot be removed without dismantling the entire assembly. Bob wanted to assure me that his intent was to document the people involved to create the commemorative bell. What a neat thing to do.

Now I would like to help us understand the history of the locations of the USS Oak Ridge. It was built by the Pacific Bridge Company in 1943/44 and commissioned as ARD-19 in March 1944. Attacked by Japanese Kamikaze in November 1944. Assigned to the Pacific Reserve Fleet in October 1948. Decommissioned and assigned to Atlantic Reserve Fleet in September 1949. Converted to support forward deployed submarines in September 1962.

Recommissioned as USS Oak Ridge (ARDM-1) in October 1963. Towed to homeport of Rota, Spain in June 1964. Towed to homeport of Kings Bay, GA, in June 1979. Decommissioned and struck from Naval register in August 2001. Transferred to US Coast Guard for service at Curtis Bay Yard, MD, in February 2002. Towed to Norfolk, VA, after final government service in December 2018.

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The ship was a floating dry dock for ballistic missile submarines. However, it was first intended for destroyers, submarines, and landing craft. In 1962, her length was extended to 536 feet and her displacement to 9,700 tons, becoming the first such dry dock ship capable of servicing Polaris submarines. The years the ship was stationed at Rota, Spain, are the most memorable for the crewmembers.

The relationship between the crewmembers and their families with Oak Ridge is special. The reunions are such a treat to see. The ceremony at the Friendship Bell was a beautiful thing to experience. The ringing of the bell for each departed crewmember was a somber and meaningful remembrance.

Katy Watt said, "Explore Oak Ridge was happy to help coordinate the visit of the USS Oak Ridge crew members and families and are already working with them for their next planned visit. They plan to join us for The Secret City Festival on August 26 - 27, 2023, for their next official crew reunion!"

I believe this was the seventh reunion for the USS Oak Ridge crewmembers and their families. Four have been in Oak Ridge prior to this year's reunion. We hope they will come back many more times. What a great connection between a city and a ship!



Bell engraved and mounted to commemorate the USS Oak Ridge and encourage Oak Ridge to better understand the history of the ship and the appreciate the crew's relationship to the city of Oak Ridge

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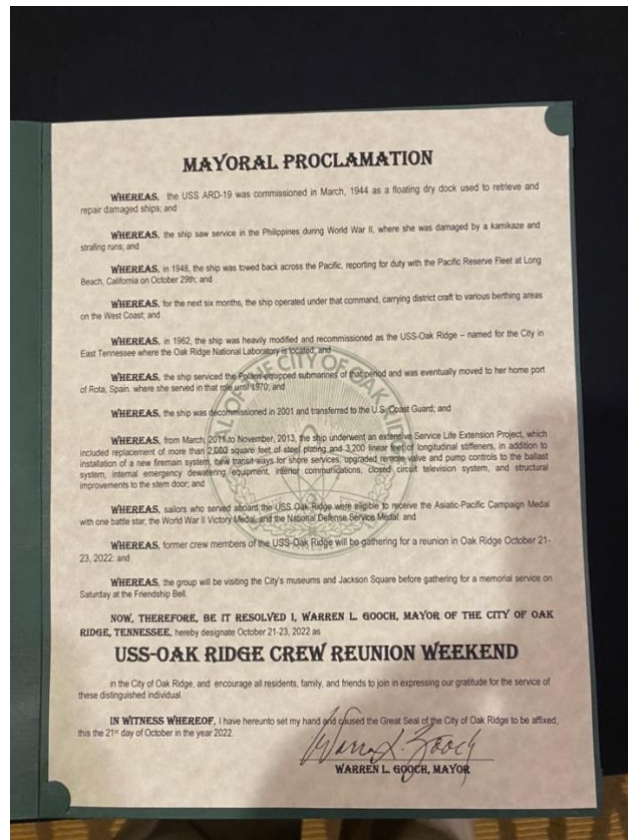
USS Oak Ridge ARDM-1 Floating Dry Dock ship



Reception sponsored by Mayor Warren Gooch and Judy Gooch



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City of Oak Ridge Mayoral Proclamation



Memorial Ceremony at the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell