

SHIP'S HERE!

THE USS IOWA ARRIVES CARRYING WITH IT THE HOPES
AND DREAMS OF A PROSPEROUS FUTURE FOR SAN PEDRO

by Megan Barnes



Wednesday, June 20, 2012 - The USS Iowa sits in its permanent location at Berth 87 in the Port of L.A. The battleship officially opens to the public on July 7. (photo by John Mattera)

Robert Kent stands with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on the eleventh level atop the USS Iowa as it makes its final journey down San Pedro's Main Channel. On shore, thousands of cheering spectators line Harbor Blvd. for a view of the ship's arrival; it's a proud day for the community that rallied together for a piece of military history. The WWII era battleship is finally making its home at Berth 87 in the Port of Los Angeles, where it will open as a museum ship this month.

Only two short years ago, Kent was pulling together every resource he could to convince the Port to reconsider making room for a battleship. "It's real satisfaction," he says, "We're home. Our mission was accomplished."

Veterans, dignitaries and community leaders roam the ship's lower levels, getting a sneak peek before the ship opens to the public on July 7.

On the main deck, Yolanda Valle-Sedillo shows off a photo album of her older brother Charlie on the Iowa during the Korean War. He is among many veterans on board today wearing hats identifying their ships of service. "I remember seeing him in uniform coming up Sixth Street," Valle-Sedillo says. "I thought, 'Oh there's my brother, he's so handsome!'"

Charlie points down at the decks he hasn't stood on for years. "They didn't look like that!" he laughs. "We had a lot of fun out here. We had movies and you could even get a malt or a sundae. We had our own laundromat. This thing was a floating hotel!"

He and other Iowa veterans will be back in early July for a reunion. They'll have access to the ship before it's opened for public tours.

"We've created a tour called Tour Alpha, which is basically a trek around the ship all the way from the main deck, up to the flying bridge," says Kent, President of the nonprofit Pacific Battleship Center, which runs the museum. "You get to see pretty much everything on the outside of the ship and then we're allowing people to go inside into the main bridge, to the captain's cabin and the officers boardroom."

He's crossing his fingers that the tour will also get to cover the crew's galley.

Tour goers are strongly encouraged to buy tickets online ahead of time since space is limited. Four additional tours are also in the works, but each costs about a million dollars to put on. Kent hopes the next general tour will be open by next summer.

Half a Century of Service

Built in Brooklyn in 1940 for a cost of \$110 million (it would cost \$2.5 billion in today's dollars to replace it), the USS Iowa was the lead ship of its class of fast battleships; so advanced that it was used for more than 50 years. The more than 15-story, 887 ft. long battleship was the fastest and most powerful of its time, nicknamed "The Big Stick."

The ship earned 11 battle stars for its service, beginning in the Pacific Theater in WWII. It saw action again in the Korean War and was recommissioned for use in the Cold War. In 1989, a turret explosion killed 47 crewmen on the ship off the coast of Puerto Rico.

The Iowa hosted more U.S. presidents than any other battleship, beginning in 1943, when it transported President Franklin D. Roosevelt to a secret meeting in Tehran with Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin and Chiang Kaishek. A special bathtub was added to accommodate Roosevelt, who suffered from polio.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan boarded the Iowa to celebrate the restoration and centenary of the Statue of Liberty. President George H.W. Bush went on the ship twice, first for its recommissioning in 1984 and again for the memorial service for the crewmen who perished in 1989.

From Mothball Fleet to Museum

By 2001, the Iowa had joined other mothballed vessels on reserve in the Suisun Bay near San Francisco. Four years later, it was struck from the Naval Registry, becoming the last remaining battleship available for donation to become a naval museum. Groups in Stockton, San Francisco and Vallejo took interest.

Kent, who had successfully helped find homes for other decommissioned warships, originally worked with the group in Vallejo. But its bid was denied in 2007 over concerns



Left - Saturday, June 2, 2012: The USS Iowa is towed past Angel's Gate Lighthouse and into the Port of L.A. for the first time. (photo by John Mattera)

Below - Saturday, June 9, 2012: (Left) More than 800 specially invited guests board the USS Iowa for its final voyage into the Main Channel. (Right) Robert Kent, president of the Pacific Battleship Center stands with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (photos by Joshua Stecker)

about fundraising needed for a massive dredging project. Kent decided Los Angeles was the best bet to save the Iowa from being scrapped. In 2009, he formed the Pacific Battleship Center and began looking for fundraising and real estate in the Port of Los Angeles.

In early 2010, he made a proposal to the Port to provide a berthing site for the battleship, but it was struck down, citing interference with waterfront redevelopment.

A few months later, the Navy put out another call for bids. With a deadline in sight, Kent turned to the community to rally support for his proposal. It would take a lot of convincing to get the Port to reconsider; a museum ship wouldn't be a moneymaker for the Port as much as it would be for San Pedro.

"Once the Port said no, I went to the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council and they passed a vote to support this project. Then right after that we were invited to the other neighborhood councils and it was pretty much unanimous support," Kent recalls.

The response from not only San Pedro, but the entire Harbor Community was overwhelmingly supportive. Soon residents were collecting hundreds of petition signatures to sway the Port. Mayor Villaraigosa pledged his support and then-Councilwoman Janice Hahn got the L.A. City Council to pass a resolution backing the proposal. Endorsements even came from President George H.W. Bush and FDR's grandson, H. Delano Roosevelt.

"At that point, the Harbor Commission was on notice that this really was a City and community-based supported project and they needed to listen," Kent says. "And they did."

In summer 2010, the Port decided to conduct a study on the financial feasibility of berthing the battleship. There were a few wrinkles to iron out, but on November 18, 2010, the Board of Harbor Commissioners unanimously voted to make room for the ship. The decision came in the nick of time, just days before the deadline for bids. Kent overnights the Pacific Battleship Center's application to the Navy. The only other bidder was Vallejo.

On September 6, 2011, the Iowa was officially awarded to L.A. by the U.S. Secretary of the Navy. "Without the community support for this project, this ship would not be sitting here right now and that is the absolute truth," Kent says.

Former San Pedro Chamber of Commerce President/CEO Camilla Townsend, who was first approached by Kent three years ago, agrees. "I think the community had a big voice on this one, which was nice. It's a good feeling for the community to be heard," she says. "The credit really goes to Robert Kent. He's worked tirelessly for eight years to make this happen."

The Iowa underwent refurbishments in Richmond, Calif., before being towed to L.A. in late May of this year, passing under the Golden Gate Bridge on its 75th anniversary.

A Part of Pedro

USS Iowa fever swept San Pedro long before the ship's arrival. A street party is set to take place on July 6 in downtown San Pedro to welcome the ship before its ribbon cutting the next day.

Business owners and community leaders have been important players in the push to bring the ship to the waterfront. "It's a really big deal for us to have this ship, so we're really excited both as business owners and as residents," says Mona Sutton, owner of the Omelette & Waffle Shop. "We finally have a good cornerstone attraction and a big piece of history."

"I think our community is really happy and excited because it's a good thing and we've

been needing to see a positive thing happen in all of our revitalization," says Townsend. "It's going to be a beautiful sight here on the waterfront."

The USS Iowa is now the premier surface warship museum on the west coast (the other two are aircraft carriers), making it a hot spot for veterans of not only battleships, but cruisers and destroyers.

Television production companies have already been calling asking when the ship will be available for filming. There is even a virtual reality experience in the works with a video game developer that will recreate some of the attacks the Iowa saw in WWII.

For many, the USS Iowa is more than a sorely needed tourist attraction, but a symbol of San Pedro's own Naval history. "The Port of L.A. has a rich Navy history going back to the early part of the 20th century, where it used to house the city battle fleet," says USS Los Angeles veteran Jim Whitt, who got to ride on the Iowa the day it settled at Berth 87. "There's a very rich history, but all that has just about disappeared, so it's nice to get some of that back." Efforts to turn the USS Los Angeles into a museum ship never saw fruition and it was eventually scrapped. "This is kind of a second chance for us," Whitt says.

Preventing the same fate for the USS Iowa, the world's last remaining battleship, was a big part of Kent's motivation.

"People ask me why I've been working 18 hour days, seven days a week pretty much for no pay for the last two years, living off my savings and putting in \$250,000 of my own money for the project," Kent says. "Well, I met a lot of crewmen along the way whose hopes were dashed so many times when each group that tried before failed. I was determined not to let the Pacific Battleship Center fail. I wanted these crewmen to finally get the satisfaction that their ship was going to be saved and be home again." [spt](#)

