

The U.S.S James E. Kyes – the Early Days

By John Deering (1945 –1946)

We had just finished our boot training at Great Lakes, had had our boot leave, and had then returned to see what was to be next in our Naval careers. The war in Europe was all but over except for our country's role in the rebuilding of the continent which would start almost immediately. It was a certainty our former boot company and several others were going to the west coast and then on to the Pacific. Within a very few days, we were on a troop train – a very long one -- going to (drum roll, please) San Francisco. I remember distinctly we were all excited about this and some were singing "San Francisco, Here We Come," a recent popular song. We soon boarded a troop train with many other sailors whom we had never before met, but they seemed as enthusiastic as we were to "get on with it" Many of us were on Pullman cars with full porter services, but many of the men were not in such accommodations, but instead were going in "troop" cars, which left a great deal to be desired when it came to creature comforts -- no air-conditioning except for the windows wide open which made it "interesting" when the train pulled by a steam locomotive -- and sometimes two -- passed through tunnels and their smoke came blowing in those open windows. It seems it took nearly a week of travelling before we finally arrived in "Frisco" in the middle of the night and found we were soon on Treasure Island.

Obviously we were eager to know future and where we were going, but it was a surprise for me when I was temporarily separated from my "boot buddies" and ended up in a scullery. For this work, I was awakened at 0400 and then off to the scullery. (Just what I had done or not done to gain this "honor," I have never been told. I'd just as soon not had it.) We worked hard all day and finally got back to the barracks at 1700 or so and told we had liberty every evening. (Liberty? I was a dog-tired 18-year old; but after a day like that, I just wanted a shower and a bunk.) Well, this went on for a week or two and finally – finally – I was sent back to my friends where we soon were told we were going to be assigned to new construction: the ***U.S.S. James E. Kyes – DD-787***. Well, we were excited about that and from that time on, we attended school after school in the "Freddie Ferdell's College of Nautical Knowledge," a play on words about the big- band leader's program, "Kay Kaiser's College of Nautical Knowledge" -- the popular radio program of the 1940s. (Bob Flynn, one of our more clever future shipmates gave it that name.) We went to gunnery school at Point Montero – at least twice – where we "studied" 20mm and 40mm anti-aircraft guns. Other "studies" included schools of navigation, signaling, firefighting, and even crane handling, a specialty every DD sailor would need. (Yea! Right!) We finally figured out that the Navy had all these teenage boys on their hands and had to do something constructive with us; so "send them to schools," someone ordered – any and all schools. Of course, someone named Kilroy was there. We knew this because he had written his name on

almost everything on Treasure Island as well as almost everywhere else in the western world. Well, in August, the war came to a sudden and abrupt end when the *Enola Gay* and *Bock's Car* dropped the atomic bombs on Japan. (For those of us who live in the middle-west, the B-29, *Bock's Car*, is on display at the Air Force Museum near Dayton, Ohio) Our officers had told us we were going to sea in our new ship in November, the month we now know was the month we and our allies were to attack the islands of Japan. Therefore with the end of the war, our commissioning was delayed and we went back to going to school. Of course, VJ Day was "something else" in San Francisco and her sister cities. WILDE! Even in at least one case, the Navy Riot Squad was called out.

Finally in February 1946, we were back on a troop train and travelling to Bremerton, Washington, and meeting our new ship and her captain, Commander Kenneth Shook. There she was at the dock and she was a beautiful sight -- sleek and trim in her WW II era dress. She was and still is in the minds of us who served on her a beautiful sight. Mrs. Kyes and a little boy named David were at the ceremonies. Many of you will remember him later because David served on the ship named for his father. Oh, we did the usual "dock trials" and other such necessities that the deck crew found annoying as they tended the lines, but finally we were going to sea in our new ship.

We sailed *smoothly* into Puget Sound and then on into the North Pacific where shortly we encountered the "storm of the Century," as we called it. I was the bridge talker; so I got to be up there watching the captain, XO Bill Robie, and the other officers of the deck, and the helmsmen handle the ship – and it took some handling because it was a serious storm for a brand-new captain, officers, and crew, and I was seeing the worst of that storm first-hand. I must admit for an 18-year old it was quite exciting. I kept my balance only by holding onto the two conduits above my head – whistle and horn. The bow was under water time after time, but fortunately it consistently rose each time; along with this, we rolled over until it appeared the Pacific was just outside the doorway to the bridge. We were told not to go onto the weather decks because we could have been swept overboard quite easily. (Fortunately the *Gearing*-class destroyers had the inside passageways that made it feasible to move fore and aft safely. The *Fletcher*-class did not have that "convenience.") We tossed and jumped for that which seemed an eternity, but finally we outran the storm and headed more easily for San Diego. (I think it is easy to observe this about that storm; yes, it was a terrible one, but I have noticed at our first reunions that storm was unique: it got progressively worse and worse at every reunion.)

Well, we arrived at San Diego and we began our "shake-down" duties in earnest. Tom Johns another "O" Division seaman and I were responsible for all the 20mm anti-aircraft guns. We were under the supervision of GM 1/C "Pappy" Lee, whom all of us respected highly. He

had seen much of the worst of Pacific warfare. By this time, ships had been returning from the South Pacific and it seemed to us it was shore-to-shore destroyers – all of which had a broom attached to the masts meaning the Navy had made a “clean sweep” of the enemy. There were other ships, of course, but we had our destroyer and we were proud of her. Obviously we had the best one of the other “bests.” We went to sea for exercises and stayed out for a few days and then we were back in and waiting to go again. We shot star shells at night, fired torpedoes at some imaginary targets, recovered the torpedoes, and placed them on the weather decks where they lay safely until the torpedo men prepared them again. The crews of the motor-whale boat were constantly chasing torpedoes.

During our first cruise, some of us passed the tests for advancement. However, one of the “thrills” I had while on the day watch on the bridge was the speed-run. Captain Shook ordered flank speed and off we went “skimming” along for a long time. We reached a speed of 36 knots. I don’t remember just how long we stayed at this speed, but it was a long time. Finally the captain said, “Reverse all engines!” (Yes, he said “Reverse!”) You talk about shaking. The ship shook literally from stem to stern and (you might not believe this, but it happened!) our beautiful ship was stopped dead in the water in (drum roll, please) in one minute – and it survived intact. Yes, it was only one minute -- from 36 knots to dead in the water in 60 seconds. Captain Shook was absolutely elated. Then we began backing down. For fear of losing a rudder, the captain told the helmsman not to move the wheel, but just let her do whatever she would do. Well, the stern zigzagged to the right and then to the left over and over. Later I learned the stern was literally under water some of the time, but she kept on for some length of time when finally the captain said to “stop all engines.” We had accomplished the task of the speed run. (Parenthetically, I thought I remembered the one-minute time, but later at a reunion I asked XO Robie about it and he verified the time.)

Oh, there were other tests: the gunnery, the radar, and a multitude of others but the well-earned name ***Jumpin’ Jimmy*** was firmly fixed forever after. Finally, though, it was time to pass Point Loma for one last time and head back to Bremerton. (By this time, the storm was over – we hoped.) There we began cleaning her up from top to bottom. I went on leave and missed seeing her out of the water in the dry dock, but the men who were fortunate enough to stay with her got to scrape her bottom. (I was really sorry to have missed that! Yea!)

After the Bremerton repairs and adjustments, we returned to San Diego and learned the ship was to go to some atomic-bomb tests in the South Pacific, but we who were reserve were not going to get to go; instead we were assigned to the ***U.S.S. Oakland***, an anti-aircraft light cruiser. Going from the relative informality of our destroyer to the formality of a cruiser was a kind of cultural shock. Fortunately we were only aboard her for ten days, and that was enough. From her we went to another destroyer, the ***U.S.S. CHEVALIER***, which we called a Chevrolet.

We took her to San Francisco, were aboard a short while when we reserves were sent to Great Lakes for our honorable discharges. We were home in time for many of us to enroll in our colleges.

The memories of being on a destroyer remain wonderful and an experience I shall carry with me forever. The ***Kyes Association*** and my association with other men who were aboard our ship has been a high-light of my life as I imagine it has been for all of us. We became friends forever.