

Lieutenant Commander Claude Williams (USN Retired)

1923-2009

Claude Williams, 85, President of the USS WEST POINT Reunion Association since 2005, passed away on February 1, 2009. Through his untiring and meticulous efforts, the Association's members have enjoyed well-planned and executed annual reunions for the past several years.

In addition, he was relentless in tracking down former shipmates, and signing them up as new members. Claude never quite mastered the practice of never volunteering. He also willingly served the Reunion Association as Vice President, before 2005, and since then as corresponding secretary and treasurer. His many services to his shipmates will be sorely missed.

Mac McLain, editor of *The Pointer's Pup*, recently lamented the loss of his friend and associate, in both peace and war:

"Claude was a long-time friend and a fellow Yeoman 2/c when we were aboard the WEST POINT. He was a very capable and thorough person in whatever he attempted. We're really going to miss him. He was looking forward to the Raleigh reunion."

The numerous job titles identified above may not have been the ones Claude treasured the most. When he wrote an autobiography in 2004, which is appropriately entitled *The Wake of a Hay Baler*, Claude summarized his thirty years of service in the United States Navy by applying the following sub-title to his work:

***Sailor, Captain's Yeoman, Admiral's Writer and, perhaps,
the oldest Ensign in the United States Navy***

Former hay baler Claude Edward Williams was born November 23, 1923 on the Williams family farm near Galena, Kansas in the southeast corner of the state. In his youth he often worked with his father in the fields. Twenty days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in what he later fondly and consistently referred to as "Our Wonderful U.S. Navy". After surviving Boot Camp in San Diego, he was assigned to the cruiser ST. LOUIS, where his typing and shorthand skills obtained in high school landed him in the Executive Officer's office as a yeoman striker.

Appendicitis forced Claude to leave his first ship in San Francisco. By the time he was released from the Mare Island Naval Hospital, she had sailed back into action. So he was reassigned to the troop ship USS WEST POINT, which was in a Mare Island Navy Yard dry dock at the time. The WEST POINT had previously been the SS AMERICA, the nation's biggest, finest and fastest ocean liner.



His first duty 'station' was actually under the ship, scraping barnacles. But then he heard a fortuitous call from topside for 'anyone who can type' and Claude ended up in the Captain's office for the next three years. There he served two of the WEST POINT's three skippers as the captain's yeoman.



His WEST POINT GQ station was atop the ship's forward (dummy) funnel, and his autobiography provides a lengthy and colorful collection of sea stories concerning that unusual watch station, which he liked to call "the steel foxhole".

Claude left the WEST POINT March 2, 1945. During his stay onboard America's biggest and best troop transport, the ship traveled 327,624 nautical miles. Near the end of that experience, he married and then sought shore duty. When he faced aft and saluted the colors on the stern of AP-23 for the last time, he was barely 21 years old.

Claude was next assigned to the Port Director's Office in New York, followed by a short assignment at the Navy's salvage school in Bayonne, NJ. When his enlistment was up, Claude Williams elected to stay in the Navy. From that point until his retirement as a Lieutenant Commander, his three decades-long naval career took Claude all over the world. He did overseas tours of duty in Saipan, French Indo-China, Istanbul and Paris.

Between 1946 and 1971, there were also numerous shore duty assignments, literally all over America, plus another stint at sea. For two years, Claude was the EX Division officer in the cruiser USS NEWPORT NEWS. Claude was especially proud of his 1957/1958 shore duty. He was assigned to the staff of Admiral Arleigh Burke, then Chief of Naval Operations, where he served as the admiral's writer.



Admiral Burke encouraged Claude to apply for a commission, and then Burke himself administered the oath of office to Claude, who was fond of saying that he probably was the oldest ensign in the Navy. That undoubtedly was one of the proudest days in Claude Williams' life.

One of the happiest times, for him, was the opportunity for him and his family to sail in the SS AMERICA as pampered passengers. On his way to an assignment at SHAPE headquarters in 1962, the liner's captain gave Claude the run of the ship. He visited his former work station and berthing compartment, as well the engine room, which had been restricted during World War II.

A good indication of his world-wide travels is evidenced by the birth places of his daughter, Marianne (Istanbul) and son Patrick (Paris). Claude's navy career ended in September of 1971, when he retired after thirty years of service in "our wonderful U. S. Navy".

Some years later, Claude found a very satisfying and rewarding avocation; service to the USS WEST POINT Reunion Association. His dedication to the Association was recognized at the 2008 reunion, when Claude was surprised to receive this plaque.



It was noted, at the time: "No detail is too small for Claude. He's on top of every issue necessary to keep us focused, such as minutely detailed quarterly financial reports".

Claude Williams underwent a major operation on January 20, 2009. He never regained consciousness.

He is survived by his wife, Elsie Hensley of Yuma, Arizona; daughters Claudia Williams of Ruidoso, New Mexico, and Marianne Williams and husband Stephen Buckner of North Fork, California; and son Patrick Williams and wife Jana Williams of Madison, Wisconsin.

Contributions in his memory may be sent to the following address, c/o Mac McLain: 1313 Browne Ave., Apt. 101, Yakima, WA 98902. Checks may be made out to the *WP Reunion Association*.

Ken Johnson, past president of the USS WEST POINT Reunion Association had this to say, upon receipt of the sad news:

"We have all lost a treasure in Claude Williams' passing. I didn't know Claude aboard ship, but then, I tried to avoid the Captain's office (and Captain's Mast). Claude was dedicated to keeping our reunion association alive and keeping it on a steady course. His talent and friendship will become a void in our reunion activities. God must have needed a good sailor, and I'm sure God had a place for Claude, perhaps in his own office. May he rest in peace."

