

USS Winston S. Churchill Participates in Crossing-the-Line Ceremony



(The Royal Party enters during Churchill's Crossing-the-Line Ceremony.)

By Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class
(SW) Aaron Chase, USS Winston S. Churchill
(DDG 81) Public Affairs

USS WINSTON CHURCHILL, At Sea (NNS) -- One hundred twenty six Sailors aboard the guided-missile destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG 81) joined the hallowed ranks of U.S. Navy "Shellbacks" during a crossing-the-line ceremony Oct. 15.

This time-honored tradition came about from centuries past when ships crossed the 13th parallel and tested new Sailors to determine whether or not the novices on their first cruise could endure the hardships of life at sea. The culmination of the trials changed the new Sailor, or "pollywog", into a "trusty shellback".

Now, the ceremony refers to when ships pass from one side of the Equator to the other. The modern Navy attempts to honor the traditions of old while addressing current concerns about hazing and safety.

"We managed to make this ceremony fun and respectful of traditional crossing-the-line events while also making it respectful to our Sailors," said Chief Warrant Officer Ronald E. Stewart, who served as the ceremony coordinator. "Safety was paramount. Every Sailor was treated with dignity

and everyone who wanted to participate had a great time."

In the scripted plot, King Neptune, the mythological god of the seas, detects an infestation of 'pollywogs' and deems it necessary to take control of the ship to rid it of this plagued condition. King Neptune is represented by the most senior Shellback aboard, usually a senior officer or chief petty officer who became a Shellback many years earlier.

The ceremony marks the second time Churchill has crossed the equator in two years. The second chance gave many veteran Churchill Sailors the chance to introduce new members of the crew to the tradition and reinforce its unique history for the crew.

"You can't really know where you're going unless you know where you've come from," said Senior Chief Gas Turbine System Technician (SW) Henry Johnson. "This ceremony introduces young Sailors to some of the history of our naval customs."

Johnson served as "Davy Jones" the herald of King Neptune, "proudly for the second time" aboard Churchill.

He first crossed the equator in 1992 aboard the USS Blue Ridge.

"It's always a lot of fun (to be Davy Jones)," said Johnson. "It's a chance to dress up in pirate garb, a chance to initiate and end the ceremony."

"I'm the first voice and last voice they hear during it. Hopefully, they have a greater sense of Navy pride after participating."

While some Sailors have the opportunity to participate during their first deployment, others may not have the opportunity for over a decade, as many East Coast ships only cross the equator a handful of times during their service lives due to deployment schedules and movements.

Churchill's senior pollywog was its executive officer, Cmdr. Christine O'Connell. "It was a relief (to cross the line)," said O'Connell.

"I'm glad to finally join the Order of Trusty Shellbacks alongside so many other great Sailors aboard this great ship."