

"Little Beavers" remember

Some recollections of serving in Pacific with Arleigh Burke during World War II.

Story by LCDR Jim Harnar, photos by JOCS(SW) James R. Giusti

Among the 12,000 people who gathered in Bath, Maine to observe the launching of a new guided missile destroyer this September were dozens of former Navy men. They said their lives were forever changed by the leadership displayed over an intense five-month period nearly a half-century ago by the living legend after whom the new ship is named.

The living legend is retired ADM Arleigh "31-Knot" Burke, World War II hero, former three-term Chief of Naval Operations and, to those who attended the colorful ship launching ceremony to salute him, one of the U.S. Navy's most inspirational leaders.

"Arleigh Burke had a tremendously positive impact on my life," said oil-

man Ed David, who traveled to the ceremony from his home in Casper, Wyo., to pay tribute to Burke. "In fact, I believe the example he set and the leadership he displayed influenced the lives of hundreds of men who served with him in the war. That's why so many of us came to Maine for the launching of the ship that will carry his name."

David was just 16, the youngest sailor aboard Burke's flagship *Charles Ausburne* (DD 570) when he first met Burke in the South Pacific in the fall of 1943. He and more than 100 other former *Charles Ausburne* sailors, now in their 60s, 70s and 80s, scheduled their ship's reunion to coincide with the *Burke* launching.

Many of them vividly recall the 20 weeks Burke was embarked aboard their ship as Commander, Destroyer Squadron 23. The squadron, known as the "Little Beavers," fought nearly two dozen battles during that time. In a single month, at the battles of Cape St. George and Empress Augusta Bay, DesRon 23 ships under Burke's command dealt the Japanese navy a horrible blow, sinking a cruiser, nine destroyers, one submarine and downing some 30 airplanes.

This former crewman of USS *Charles Ausburne* served aboard "31-Knot" Burke's flagship during the Battle of Cape St. George.



"Little Beavers"

But whenever DesRon 23 sailors talk of the combat they saw in the Solomons, the conversation turns to one man — Arleigh Burke. They talk of Burke's contagious enthusiasm, his positive attitude, his intense, aggressive style and his keen intelligence. They also talk of his personal modesty and his legendary rapport with his men — a rapport that permitted even the most junior enlisted men to be perfectly at ease speaking with him.

Burke's name has gone down in the history books as World War II's most famous destroyerman and as a tacti-

cian credited by the Naval War College with leading "an almost perfect action" at the Battle of Cape St. George. However, he is remembered most by those aboard the ships of his squadron as a "born leader" who had a remarkable influence on so many of the lives he touched.

Burke touched Ed David's life, even though as a seaman first class assigned to *Charles Ausburne's* first division he had little direct contact with then-Captain Burke. But David remembers many encounters with Burke and the times Burke would meet with the crew on the ship's fantail to solicit ideas from enlisted men and officers alike about how the ship and the destroyer squadron might be more effective in combat. He and others remember being deeply awed by Burke's energy and "gung-ho" spirit.

For David, who never resumed his education after quitting high school to join the Navy, Burke's leadership style served as a lifelong model that helped him build his own successful oil company.

"There have been many times dur-

ing my life when things were going pretty rough," said David, "and I would think of Arleigh Burke and what he might do in a similar situation. That often was all it took to get me pointed in the right direction."

Retired RADM Luther K. "Luke" Reynolds was the skipper of *Charles Ausburne* when Burke was embarked as DesRon 23. Reynolds, now 84 and living in New York City, says his experience fighting alongside Burke nearly 50 years ago had a profound effect on the rest of his life. He was among those who eagerly accepted an invitation to attend the launching of the ship named in honor of Arleigh Burke.

"I became more positive thinking, more aggressive in carrying out certain orders after I served with Admiral Burke," Reynolds said.

"He had incredible enthusiasm and a will to win in everything he did. I think it rubbed off on a lot of people. It certainly did on me."

Reynolds remembers the effect Burke's extraordinary drive had on his crew and on the rest of DesRon 23. "I'm still amazed at just how quickly

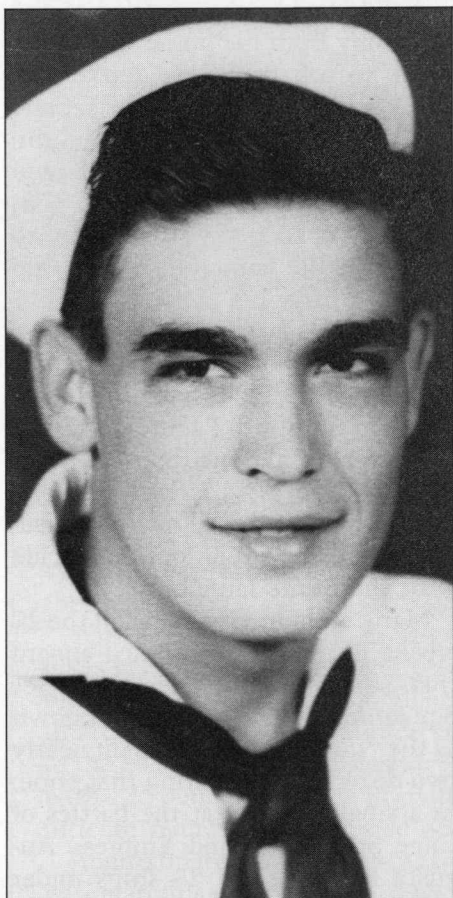
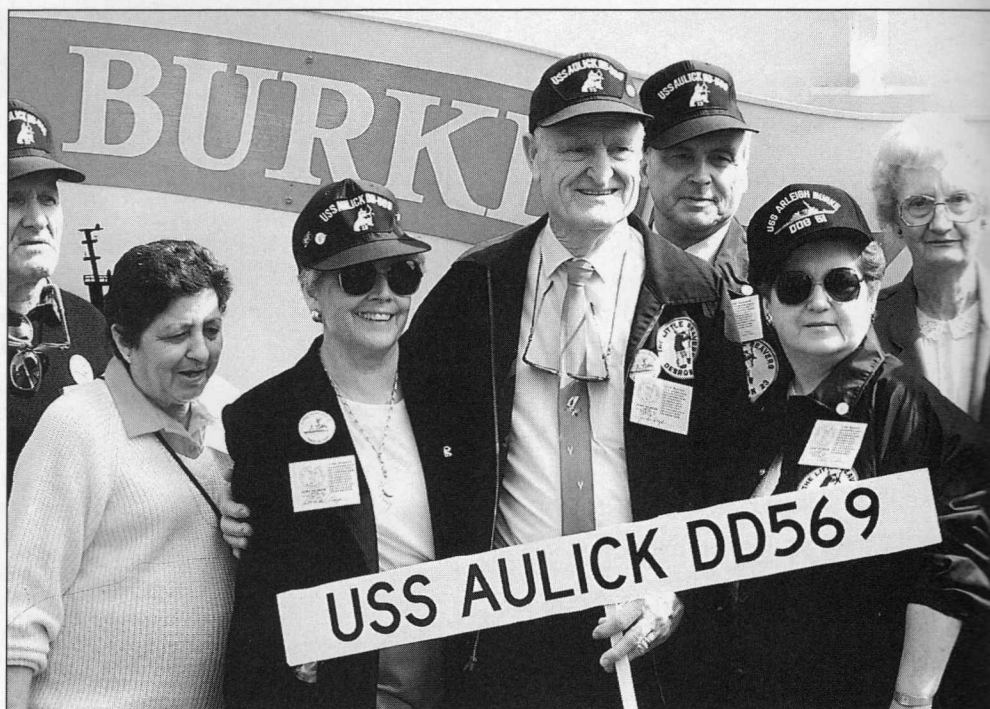


Photo courtesy of Ed David

Above: A portrait of Ed David as he looked in 1943. Right: Former "Little Beavers" pose with their spouses in front of Arleigh Burke.





Arleigh Burke (DDG 51) slides into the Kennebec River as tugs prepare to maneuver her pier-side.

Burke turned the squadron into such a first-rate outfit," he said. "In just weeks we made a 180 degree turn-around from being a squadron that avoided skirmishes to one that actually sought them out. That aggressive leadership got things going."

Reynolds, who went on to flag rank and retired as Deputy Commander of the Western Sea Frontier in San Francisco in 1957, also credits Burke with being an excellent communicator. He says Burke always took the time to ensure his people knew precisely what was expected of them in combat. And DesRon 23 saw plenty of action. During much of the period that Burke was squadron commander, his ships were responsible for screening the cruisers of Task Force 39 against air and submarine attacks following the invasion of Guadalcanal.

"There was something happening every day and every night," Reynolds recalled. "Admiral Burke made it clear that if a ship was crippled during combat, the others would stand by until it could get help. That meant a lot to the crew and they knew he was as good as his word. I guess many of the men still remember that."

Although Burke was with DesRon

23 a short time, he felt a strong allegiance to the unit and its sailors. Even after leaving the "Little Beavers" to become VADM Marc Mitchner's chief of staff at Task Force 58, Burke often returned to *Charles Ausburne* and other DesRon 23 ships for dinner if the ships were operating nearby. He kept in close touch with dozens of squadron members since the war.

"He never forgot us," Reynolds said.

One young ensign assigned to a DesRon 23 ship was Raymond Peet, who went on to a distinguished Navy career and retired as a vice admiral. "The squadron would have gone anywhere with that man," Peet once wrote of Burke. "If he were going to take us to Japan, we were all ready to go. He was that kind of leader.

"DesRon 23 was truly a red-hot outfit," Peet wrote. "Everywhere we went, we went at high speed, and that was important to the officers and crews of those ships. They knew they were a bunch of hotshots who weren't afraid to go in harm's way. They knew they had a good team, that they could protect each other, that they could shoot accurately and that they had good damage control

teams. All that was a part of Captain Burke's plan."

Burke's ability to lead his squadron in spectacular dashes at high speed helped earn him the nickname "31-Knot Burke." His ability to lead men earned him the respect of many sailors everywhere.

Perhaps the highest compliments of ADM Arleigh Burke were offered by a former crewman aboard Burke's DesRon 23 flagship who now lives in Nebraska and said he will never forget Admiral Burke's leadership, and by Burke's wife of 66 years, Roberta "Bobbie" Burke, at the launching of *Arleigh Burke*.

Mrs. Burke, speaking just before smashing the traditional bottle of champagne against the ship's bow to christen the destroyer in her husband's name, told the largest crowd ever to witness a launching at Maine's Bath Iron Works, "I have always thought Arleigh Burke was bigger than life. And you have proven me right." □

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