

*Nuclear-propelled carrier NIMITZ (CVN-68) being towed out of her graving dock after christening, 13 May 1972.*

sensations of joy and delight.” As *Constitution* ran out, Captain Sever broke a bottle of fine old madeira over the heel of the bowsprit.

Frigate *President* had an interesting launching, 10 April 1800, at New York:

Was launched yesterday morning, at ten o'clock, in the presence of perhaps as great a concourse of people as ever assembled in this city on any occasion. At nine, captain Ten-Eyck's company of artillery . . . , accompanied by the uniform volunteer companies of the sixth regiment and the corps of riflemen, marched in procession . . . and took their station along-side the frigate.- Every thing being prepared, and the most profound silence prevailing, . . . At a given signal she glided into the waters, a sublime spectacle of gracefulness and grandeur. Immediately on touching the water federal salutes were fired from the sloop of war *Portsmouth*, the revenue cutter *Jay* . . .

and the *Aspasia*, Indiaman. These were returned by the uniform companies on shore, who fired a feu-de-joye, and marched off the ground to the battery ... and were dismissed.

As the nineteenth century progressed, we see that American ship launchings continued to be festive occasions, but with no set ritual except that the sponsor or sponsors used some “christening fluid” as the ship received her name. Sloop-of-war *Concord*, launched in 1827, was “christened by a young lady of Portsmouth.” This is the first known instance of a woman sponsoring a United States Navy vessel. Unfortunately, the contemporary account does not name this pioneer female sponsor.

The first identified woman sponsor was Miss Lavinia Fanning Watson, daughter of a prominent Philadelphian. She broke a bottle of wine and water over the bow of sloop-of-war *German-town* at Philadelphia Navy Yard on 22 August 1846.

Women as sponsors became increasingly the rule, but not universally so. As sloop-of-war *Plymouth* “glided along the inclined plane,” in 1846, “two young sailors, one stationed at each side of her head, anointed her with bottles, and named her as she left her cradle for the deep.” And as late as 1898, torpedo boat *Mackenzie* was christened by the son of the builder.

Although wine is the traditional “christening fluid,” numerous other liquids have been used. *Princeton* and *Raritan* were sent on their way in 1843 with whiskey. Seven years later, “a bottle of best brandy was broken over the bow of steam sloop *Sun Jacinto*.” Steam frigate *Merrimack*, who would earn her place in naval history as Confederate ironclad *Virginia*, was baptized with water from the Merrimack River. Admiral Farragut's famous Civil War flagship, steam sloop *Hartford*, was christened by three sponsors -two young ladies broke bottles of Connecticut River and Hartford spring water, while the third sponsor, a naval lieutenant, completed the ceremony with a bottle of sea water.

Champagne, perhaps because of its elegance as the aristocrat of wines, came into popular use as a “christening fluid” as the nineteenth century closed. A granddaughter of Secretary of the



***Nuclear-powered Polaris submarine Ulysses S. Grant (SSBN-631) is launched on 2 November 1963.***

Navy Benjamin P. Tracy wet the bow of *Maine*, the Navy's first steel battleship, with champagne at the New York Navy Yard, 18 November 1890.

The effects of national prohibition on alcoholic beverages were reflected to some extent in ship christenings. Cruisers *Pensacola* and *Houston*, for example, were christened with water; the submarine V-6 with cider. However, battleship *California* appropriately received her name with California wine in 1919. Champagne returned, but for the occasion only, in 1922 for the launch of light cruiser *Trenton*.

Rigid naval airships *Los Angeles*, *Shenandoah*, *Akron*, and *Macon*, built during the 1920s and early 1930s, were carried on the *Naval Vessel Register*, and formally commissioned.

The earliest First Lady to act as sponsor was

Mrs. Calvin Coolidge who christened dirigible *Los Angeles*. When Mrs. Herbert Hoover christened *Akron* in 1931, the customary bottle was not used. Instead, the First Lady pulled a cord which opened a hatch in the airship's towering nose to release a flock of pigeons.

Thousands of ships of every description, the concerted effort of mobilized American industry, came off the ways during World War II to be molded into the mightiest navy the world had ever seen. The historic christening-launching ceremonies continued, but travel restrictions, other wartime considerations, and sheer numbers dictated that such occasions be less elaborate than those in the years before the nation was engaged in desperate worldwide combat.

The actual physical process of launching a

*Side-launching of Connole (DE-1056) at Westwego, Louisiana, 20 July 1968.*



new ship from her building site to the water involves three principal methods. Oldest, most familiar, and most widely used is the “end-on” launch in which the vessel slides, usually stern first, down an inclined shipway. The “side launch,” whereby the ship enters the water broadside, came into nineteenth-century use on inland waters, rivers, and lakes, and was given major impetus by the World War II building program. Another method involves ships built in basins or graving docks. When ready, ships constructed in this manner are floated by admitting water into the dock.

### *Fitting Out and Commissioning*

Christening and launching are the inseparable elements which endow a ship hull with her identity. Yet, just as many developmental milestones must be passed before one takes his place in society, so too must the newly-launched vessel pass such milestones before she is completed and considered ready to be designated a commissioned ship of the United States Navy. The engineering plant, weapon and electronic systems, galley, and multitudinous other equipment required to transform the new hull into an operating and habitable warship are installed and tested. The prospective commanding officer, ship’s officers, the petty officers, and seamen who will form the crew report for training and intensive familiarization with their new ship. Crew and ship must function in total unison if full potential and maximum effectiveness are to be realized. The most modern naval vessel embodying every advantage of advanced technology is only as good as those who man her.

Prior to commissioning, the new ship undergoes sea trials during which deficiencies needing correction are uncovered. The preparation and readiness time between christening-launching and commissioning may be as much as three years for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to as brief as twenty days for a World War II landing ship. *Monitor*, of Civil War fame, was commissioned less than three weeks after launch.

Commissioning in the early United States Navy under sail was attended by no ceremony. An officer designated to command a new ship

*Missilefrigate Halsey (DLG-23) fits out at San Francisco, 1962.*



received orders similar to those issued to Captain Thomas Truxtun in 1798:

Sir, I have it in command from the president of the United States, to direct you to repair with all due speed on board the ship *Constellation* lying at Baltimore.

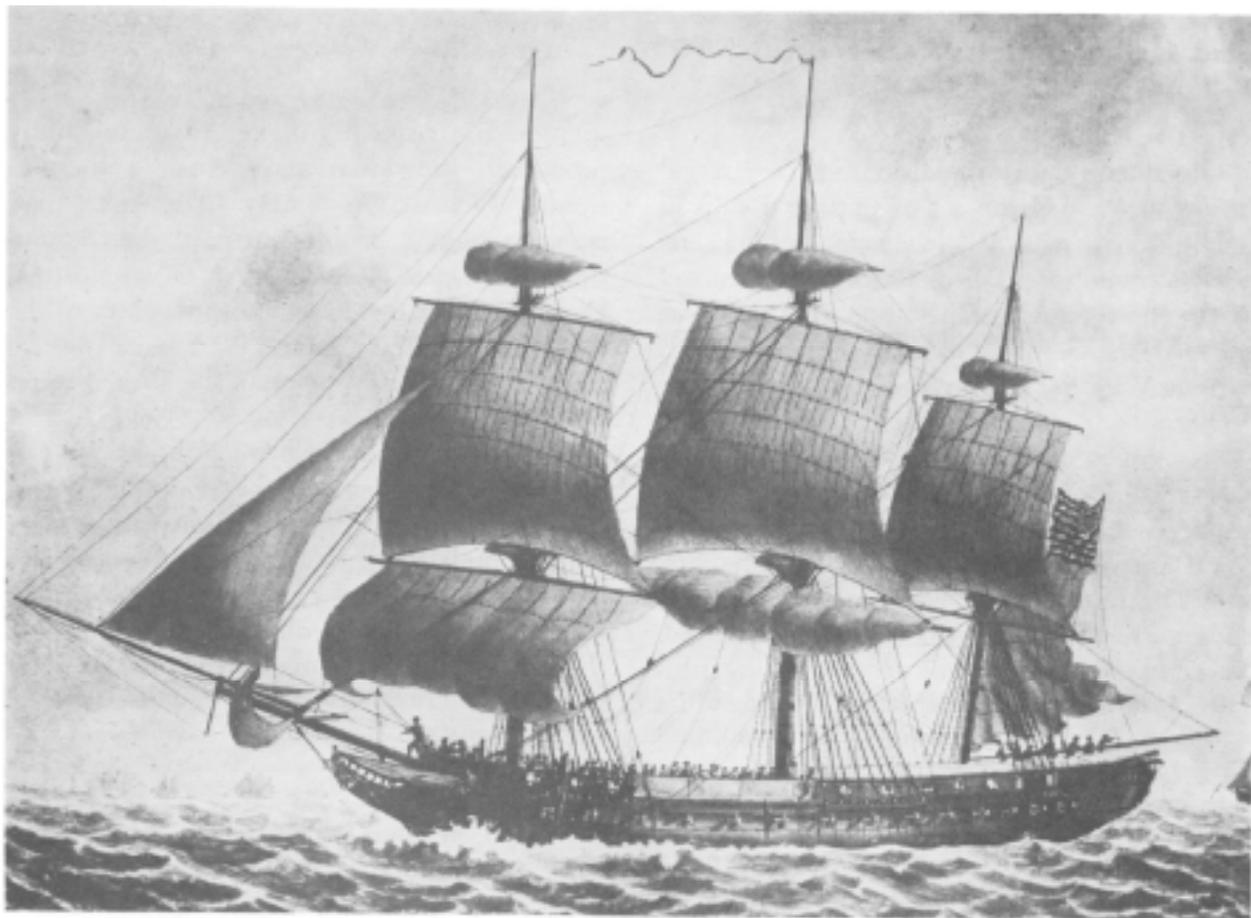
It is required that no Time be lost in carrying the Ship into deep water, taking on board her Cannon, Ammunition, Water, Provisions & Stores of every kind-completing what work is yet to be done shipping her Complement of Seamen and Marines, and preparing her in every respect for Sea . . . It is the President's express Orders, that you employ the most vigorous Exertions, to accomplish these several Objects and to put your Ship as speedily as possible in a situation to sail at the shortest notice.

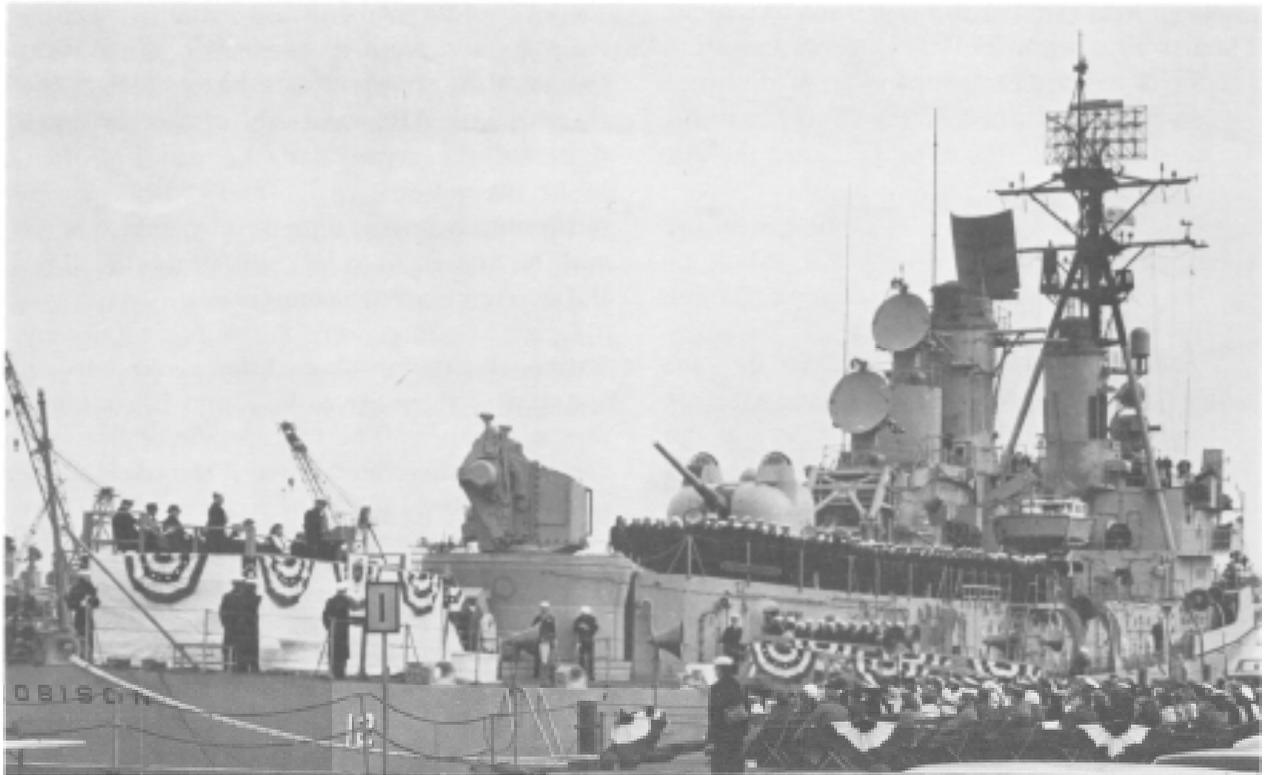
Captain Truxtun's orders reveal that a prospective commanding officer had responsibility

for overseeing construction details, outfitting the ship, and recruiting his crew. When a captain of this period in our history determined that his new ship was ready to take to sea, he mustered the crew on deck, read his orders, broke the national ensign and distinctive commissioning pennant, caused the watch to be set, and the first entry to be made in the log. Thus, the ship was placed in commission.

Commissionings were not public affairs and, unlike christening-launching ceremonies, no accounts of them are to be found in contemporary newspapers. The first specific references to commissioning located in naval records is a letter of 5 November 1863 from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles to all navy yards and stations. The Secretary directed: "Hereafter the commandants of navy yards and stations will inform the Department, by special report of the date when each vessel preparing for sea service at their

*Frigate United States flies her commissioning pennant at the mainmast head,*





*Guided-missile destroyer Robison (DDG-12) is placed in commission, 9 December 1961.*

respective commands, is placed in commission.”

Subsequently, various editions of *Navy Regulations* mentioned the act of putting a ship in commission, but details of a commissioning ceremony were not prescribed. Through custom and usage, however, a fairly standard practice emerged, the essentials of which are outlined in current *Navy Regulations*.

Officers and crew members of the new ship are assembled on the quarterdeck or other suitable area. Formal transfer of the ship to the prospective commanding officer is done by the Naval District Commandant or his representative. The transferring officer reads the commissioning directive, the national anthem is played, the ensign is hoisted, and commissioning pennant broken. The prospective commanding officer reads his orders, assumes command, and the first watch is set.\*

In recent years, commissionings have come to be public occasions more than heretofore had been the practice. Guests, including the ship's

sponsor, are frequently invited to attend, and a prominent individual may deliver a commissioning address. On 3 May 1975, more than twenty thousand people witnessed the commissioning of U.S.S. *Nimitz* (CVAN-68) at Norfolk, Virginia. The carrier's sponsor, daughter of the late Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, was introduced, and the President of the United States was the principal speaker.

Whether for a massive nuclear aircraft carrier, destroyer, submarine, or amphibious type, the brief but impressive commissioning ceremony completes the cycle from christening and launching to full status as a ship of the United States Navy. Now, regardless of size and mission, the vessel and her crew stand ready to take their place in America's historic heritage of the sea.

\* Craft assigned to Naval Districts and shore bases for local use, such as harbor tugs and floating drydocks, are not usually placed "in commission" but are in an "in service" status. They do fly the national ensign, but not a commissioning pennant.

## PROGRAM

- **NATIONAL ANTHEM**  
U.S. Coast Guard Band
- **INVOCATION**  
The Reverend John O'Brian  
Indianapolis, Indiana
- **WELCOME**  
Joseph D. Pierce  
General Manager, Electric Boat Division  
Vice President, General Dynamics
- **REMARKS**  
David S. Lewis  
Chairman of the Board  
General Dynamics
- **INTRODUCTION OF  
SECRETARY OF THE NAVY**  
J. WILLIAM MIDDENDORF, II  
Mr. Lewis
- **INTRODUCTION OF  
PRINCIPAL SPEAKER**  
Mr. Middendorf
- **ADDRESS**  
The Honorable Hugh Scott  
United States Senator from Pennsylvania
- **INTRODUCTION OF ADMIRAL RICKOVER**  
Mr. Lewis
- **INTRODUCTION OF SPONSOR**  
Admiral H.G. Rickover, USN  
Director, Naval Nuclear Propulsion  
Program
- **CHRISTENING**  
Mrs. Hugh Scott

*Representative schedules of events for christening and commissioning ceremonies.*

## U. S. S. ROBISON (DDG-12) **Commissioning Ceremony**

Band Selections <i>Boston Naval Base Band</i>
★
Invocation <i>Commander James J. Callinan, CHC, USNR</i>
★
Welcoming Remarks <i>Rear Admiral William A. Brackett, USN Commander, Boston Naval Shipyard</i>
★
Introduction of <i>Rear Admiral Carl F. Espe, USN Commandant, First Naval District Rear Admiral William A. Brackett, USN</i>
★
Remarks and Introduction of <i>Rear Admiral Paul D. Stroop, USN Chief, Bureau of Naval Weapons Rear Admiral Carl F. Espe, USN</i>
★
Address <i>Rear Admiral Paul D. Stroop, USN</i>
★
Reading of Navy Department Orders to Commission <i>USS ROBISON (DDG-12) Rear Admiral Carl F. Espe, USN</i>

Ensign, Jack and Commission Pennant are hoisted as the band plays the National Anthem. The ship is now in commission.

☪
Reading of Commanding Officer's Orders <i>Commander Donald Vance Cox, USN</i>
☪
Commanding Officer Assumes Command
☪
First Watch is set by Executive Officer <i>Lieutenant Commander William F. Regan</i>
☪
Commanding Officer gives the order for the personal flag of Commandant of the First Naval District to be broken at the truck. Ruffles and Flourishes, Admiral's March
☪
Remarks <i>Commander Donald Vance Cox, USN</i>
☪
Benediction <i>Lieutenant John C. Frederickson, CHC, USNR</i>
☪
Band Selections <i>Boston Naval Base Band</i>

