



STEVE JACOBS/TIMES UNION

IDENTICAL TWINS Normand, left, and Raymond Ferwerda, both 75 and from Grand Rapids, Mich., tour the USS Slater at the Snow Dock in Albany with a World War II Navy reunion group from the USS Emery DE 28.

REUNION ON DECK SCORES OF WWII NAVY VETERANS ARE SWARMING ALBANY FOR A TOUR OF THE USS 'SLATER'

BY PAUL GRONDAHL

Staff writer



VOLUNTEERS FROM the Michigan chapter of the Destroyer Escort Sailors Association (DESA) spent a week painting and restoring the USS Slater, a major attraction for World War II destroyer escort reunion groups and a strong niche tourism market for Albany County.

ALBANY -- First, the crew of the USS Emery Destroyer Escort 28 ran into a bunch of sailors last Thursday from the USS Micka DE 176 at their hotel, The Quality Inn.

Next, the Emery's World War II-era Navy reunion group took a tour of the USS Slater DE 766 on Friday afternoon, and there they met members of similar reunion groups from the USS Laning DE 159 and the USS Weaver DE 741.

Not to mention the group of volunteers from the Michigan chapter of the Destroyer Escort Sailors Association, who were wrapping up a week spent painting and cleaning the Slater.

For the old destroyer escort crowd, Albany has become the place to gather.

The Emery veterans were among a total of 21 Navy reunion groups who will meet in Albany, tour the Slater, stay in local hotels and do some sightseeing in the region during September and October. (With nearly 1,100 visitors, this niche tourism market is projected to have an economic impact in Albany county of more than \$750,000 during the two-month period.)

“This is a hot market segment for us right now,” said Gina Mintzer, director of sales for the Albany County Convention & Visitors Bureau. “The Slater is the No. 1 attraction for them, and word has gotten out about it in the DE reunion group network.”

Navy attraction

In fact, the Slater -- a 306-foot DE-class ship that hunted German U-boats in World War II -- is one of just three that remain of 565 that were built, and it is the only DE still in its original wartime configuration. The Slater's uniqueness is helping Albany lure the reunion group business away from competing cities with Navy attractions, such as Norfolk, Va., and San Diego.

“We've heard that other cities figure ‘Why bother with a bunch of old geezers,’ Mintzer said.

Mintzer's strategy was to target that market aggressively and to offer personal service for the septuagenarian tourists.

As a result, in just two years, the market has grown from a handful of reunion groups to 21 this September and October alone. As many as six different reunion groups will tour the Slater on the same weekend this fall.

“These groups need a lot of hand-holding, but it's worth it because one group tells the other that they take care of you in Albany,” Mintzer said.

“Everyone has been extremely helpful,” said Harold Stonerock, 74, of Muncie, Ind., who was an electrician aboard the Emery. Stonerock organized the ship's reunion group, whose 34 attendees came from as far away as California and Montana.

The Emery folks gathered in Seattle last year, and Stonerock was pushing for Branson, Mo., this year, but his members outvoted him and chose Albany. Their four-day stay included a fairly typical itinerary: tour of the Slater, Hudson River cruise on the Dutch Apple, a trolley bus tour of downtown Albany and a banquet dinner.

“The rest of the time we like to just hang around the hotel and reminisce. We call it scuttlebutt time,” Stonerock said. Scuttlebutt is the name of the Emery's newsletter, too.

Affordable

Stonerock said his priority in planning the Albany visit was to keep it affordable.

“These groups are very budget-conscious,” Mintzer said. “Most are on fixed incomes.” The reunion groups request hotel rooms under \$100 and try to get a hospitality room at the hotel thrown in for free, if possible.

“The hospitality room is the thing they're most interested in,” Mintzer said. “They spend a lot of time in there, just talking about the past.”

Along the Hudson River waterfront on Friday, knots of World War II veterans and their wives, distinguished by name tags and baseball caps with their ships' names, milled around and the years melted away.

Twin memories

In their minds, it was 1943. Men like Raymond Ferwerda and Normand Ferwerda, 75-year-old identical twins from Grand Rapids, Mich., who joined the Navy together as teenagers 56 years ago and live across the street from each other today, relived their WWII memories.

“We saw a lot of action and received four battle stars,” recalled Raymond Ferwerda, who set the sights for the No. 2 gun and fired the hedgehogs aboard the Emery. “The hedgehogs were the best thing against subs. We were in the fight at Iwo Jima and our ship made it in Life magazine from that battle.”

The Ferwerda twins were both initially stationed aboard the USS Salamonie for 16 months, until a new Navy rule forced them to separate to different ships following multiple deaths of brothers on the same vessel. Normand stayed on the Salamonie; Raymond moved to the Emery.

Raymond was one of those who pushed for the Albany visit. He carries a membership card of the Slater in his wallet.

“It's a real nice city,” Raymond said.

“Yup, real nice city,” said Normand, who has a habit of repeating the replies of his twin, who is 30 minutes older. They both turn 76 on Oct. 2.

Making improvements

They had an ulterior motive. Aboard the Slater, the twins chatted with buddies from the Michigan chapter of Destroyer Escort Sailors Association. The Michigan crew comes twice a year as volunteers to paint and make repairs aboard the ship.



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A GROUP of retired Navy men from the USS Slater at the Open House at the Hudson River waterfront.

"I see a tremendous improvement in the past six months, but we've got a lot of work left to do," said Bill Kramer, 66, of Livonia, Mich., an electronics technician aboard USS Cockrell DE 366 during the Korean War.

Kramer was part of the 14-man Michigan contingent who spent a week aboard the Slater. They drove to Albany in car pools, lived on the ship for free and pitched in \$40 apiece for the week's groceries. Kramer's job was to cook.

"We come here to joke, laugh, recall the past and to work hard," said Steve Borovich, 68, of Westland, Mich., a Korean War veteran aboard USS Tweety DE 532. "This is all about memory and camaraderie. Those are things you don't get much of today."

In fact, Mintzer has seen reunion groups take up a collection to pay for an indigent shipmate's airfare, hotel and related costs so that the old shipmate could attend an Albany gathering.

Reunion group sailors' spouses felt that sense of camaraderie, too. "I think it's delightful getting everyone together, and we have a lot of fun," said Dorris Williams, of Seven Lakes, N.C., who came with her husband, Hank, 75, who was a seaman first-class aboard the Emery.

"Albany's a real nice city. It looks bigger than 100,000 people, though," said Ginny Mick of Philadelphia, who joined her husband, George Mick, an Emery veteran.

Dwindling numbers

Jim Everin didn't have to travel far for the reunion. The 76-year-old Colonie man, who served aboard the Emery from 1943 to 1945, joined his shipmates for the festivities. He's toured the Slater numerous times.

"We've got a good group," Everin said of his Emery shipmates.

Everin lamented that the Emery's numbers dwindle a bit each year.

"I end up talking to a lot of widows," said Stonerock, who had located 69 Emery veterans a decade ago. About half of that number are still alive, he said.

During wartime, the destroyer escorts were home to a crew of 216 -- 201 enlisted men and 15 officers.

Mintzer realizes that WWII reunion groups are not a growth market.

"When I work with a reunion group organizer, they always give me a backup person in case they die within the year," Mintzer said.

Still, with a data base of 900 Navy reunion groups she's soliciting, Mintzer hopes the niche market continues to expand.

Already, Mintzer has booked the national DESA group's annual convention in Albany for September 2000. About 550 people are expected to attend.

The reunion groups have one criticism of the hard-charging marketeer, though. "They tell me I need to slow down because I talk too fast," Mintzer said.

FACTS:U.S.S. Slater DE 766

Commissioned May 1944

Length 306 feet

Beam 36 feet

Displacement 1240 tons

Crew 216

Top speed 21 knots

Propulsion diesel-electric

Screws Two, 6-foot diameter

Three-inch guns Three

40mm guns Three twins

20mm guns Nine twins

Depth charge guns Eight

Depth charge racks Two

Source: Destroyer Escort Historical Foundation

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*New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs: Times Union, Life and Leisure Page, Reunion on deck
posted: 1 November 1999 (mjs)*

URL: <http://www.dmna.state.ny.us/slater/signals/newspapr/tu-reuni.html>