

# In Search Of A Rare Bird

by Ed Fournier

At the young age of seventeen with a rating of Fireman 1/c I walked up the gangplank of a not so shiny new minesweeper, she was a 220 ft armed minesweeper, diesel electric drive, with a 3 inch fifty forward mount, 1 hedgehog fwd. a pair of single 40 mm guns aft, several 20mm guns, 2 depth charge racks and 2 K depth charge units. It was November 1944 and we were docked at the builders yard, American Shipbuilding Company in Lorain, Ohio on Lake Erie,

Bitter cold when we left for Chelsea Yards in Boston, Mass., to be fitted out and painted, including the bottom, no heat on this trip of twenty eight days as the ships boiler was not connected. I was assigned to the Aft Engine room for the 12 to 4 watch and that's where I stayed, sleeping on the starboard main engine to keep warm.

From Chelsea to Little Creek, on to Charleston, to Cuba and on to Pearl for assignment to the Pacific Fleet and the War and the invasion Okinawa, and then to Shanghai China. And that is where we parted company.

Many, many years later I found a web page for the Surfbird AM 383, and found that She had continued to make a name for Herself, and this made me wonder what ever happened to Her. After checking BuShips and other registries I found that she had been decommissioned and stricken in February 1976 then transferred to DRMS a division of the Govt. that markets items it no longer needs. It was then sold to a company in Alaska and renamed Helenka B. Sounds simple so far, wrong.

The Surfbird was sold to Brice Industries in Fairbanks Alaska, who completely changed the appearance by removing the bow and replacing it with the front of a landing craft ramp and doors, the deck house was removed and reconstructed, her engines were removed and replaced with a more economical drive system, in other words she was made into a work ship to aid in diving salvage. She was renamed the Helenka B (callsign WAH5520) after Sam Brice's wife. Not long after this transformation she was sold to a company by the name of Wel-Aska in Valdez, Alaska.

When I contacted Wel-Aska and described the vessel I was looking for, they told me that they had a ship named Helenka-B but it did not fit the design I spoke about. Back to square 1, I then contacted many leads and numerous shipyards on the Northwest coast, everything kept coming up with Sam Brice's name, so I called him. The following conversation ensued: Sam, I'm looking for 220 ft armed minesweeper, diesel electric drive. His reply was: You wouldn't be looking for the Surfbird by chance would you? I think my heart skipped a beat, YES I said what can you tell me? Well, he said I am looking at a picture of her over my desk, but you would not recognize her now with all the work we did to her, and preceded to tell me all that I have described to you.

As a civilian ship She continues to be worthy of Her heritage, by helping in the cleanup of the Valdez oil spill and just recently involved in the salvaging of a sunken fishing vessel.

The Surfbird was my home, and my mentor for a time in my life when serious changes were taking place, she protected me and my shipmates guided me. What more could a sailor ask for.

At the present time I am working with Mr. Brice to see if we can get the ships name plate and possibly Her bell. I will keep you posted on the website.