

# USS RANKIN NEWS

ISSUE #28 • THE NEWSLETTER OF THE USS RANKIN ASSOCIATION • MARCH 2020

## BUFFALO REUNION – 2019



**USS Rankin Shipmates in Attendance.** Seated: Dave Beeler, Skip Sander, Melvin Munch, Dale Koepp, Dave Stump. Standing: Jim Plumb, Harry Fuerstenberger, Bill Devroe, Sherrill Pittman, Ray Falker, Tex Spicer, Willie Dunning, J. Harvey McCubbin, Walt Stringer, Dr. Karl Manders.

Other reunions are dying due to decreasing attendance, but ours is thriving because we welcome like-minded sailors from other amphibious ships. This year we were joined by people from over a dozen gator ships, and the large crowd made for a great reunion. There were 160 people at the banquet.

The reunion began with an all-hands welcome reception featuring an outstanding prime rib buffet in the hotel's greenery-filled atrium. Afterwards we all adjourned to the hospitality room, with its always-impressive stock of drinks and snacks.

After a private breakfast on Friday, we boarded buses for a morning-long cruise on the Erie Canal. The evening featured a cake and ice cream social in honor of the 75th anniversary of the launching of the Rankin and a host of other gator ships.

On Saturday we visited the USS Little Rock, USS The Sullivans, and USS Croaker at the Buffalo Naval

Park. Our memorial service was held on the expansive fantail of the Little Rock.

Sunday featured a tour of scenic and historic Niagara Falls, a place on the bucket list of many who hadn't seen the falls before. The evening's formal dinner featured a photo session, a missing man table, the introduction of the three 90-year olds in attendance, and entertainment by a 20 person Barbershop Chorus.

In the morning we said our goodbyes and departed for home.

### 17th Annual Reunion

**Annapolis, MD – September 21-25, 2020**

See page 8. If we have your email address, you'll get details and a registration package by email. If we don't have it and you've attended a recent reunion, or if you call Skip Sander at 412-367-1376, you'll get them by postal mail. They are also on our website at [www.ussrankin.org](http://www.ussrankin.org)

## SHIPMATES ON PARADE



**Mike Fulton, LTJG, 1966-1968. Born 1942.**

I believe I have a unique standing among the Rankin vets—I was assigned to her for two tours of duty.

When I enrolled at Ohio State in 1960, all males, unless they were veterans or in some other way exempt from the draft, were required to take two years of ROTC. I chose the Navy. Faced with the draft, completing the training and receiving a commission with an obligation of two years active duty made sense to me. In 1963, I was assigned to the USS Rankin for my midshipman cruise.

I reported on board that summer pretty gung ho, eager to begin my Navy experience and to complete my training guides. However, the ship had just returned from an extended cruise, and everyone else was glad to simply remain at the pier for those few weeks. Let's just say it was not the most motivating experience. The captain was George Cook from Massachusetts. It was an informal requirement to watch his copy of the episode from the TV show *The Silent Service* which featured his (genuine) heroism during WWII. He also told us how "Jack" Kennedy had personally recommended the Rankin to him. Our reunion leader, Skip Sander, had left the ship by this time, but some of the other officers I remember yet. "Jake" Jacobs was in charge of the midshipmen.

I think the two experiences that stood out most from that half summer related to life in Norfolk. We four midshipmen were billeted in "boys town," located right over the laundry. You could not walk barefoot on the hot steel deck. As soon as I could, I went to a drug store and picked out some shower thongs. When I took them to the cashier, she asked why I was buying them, and when I told her, she said she could not sell them to me on Sunday. She then advised me that if I were going to the beach for recreation, that would be OK. So I lied; ironic since the "blue laws" were intended to enforce morality. The second experience was just the awakening of a Midwest boy to the

segregated South. Beginning with the bus station, I found waiting rooms and drinking fountains marked "Colored" and "White Only." Restaurants, theaters, beaches—everything, it seemed, provided second-rate, even dirty facilities for "Colored" if they provided service at all. Norfolk was in the deep South. I am happy to say that the ship, as far as I could tell, was free of this overt discrimination.

Upon college graduation, I was granted a two-year deferment to attend graduate school. In 1966, I received my orders for active duty and I couldn't believe it was right back to the USS Rankin. I was now a JG, and my assignment was as Assistant Communications Officer, an Ensign billet. I kept this assignment for the entire two years even after benefitting from an accelerated appointment to Lieutenant.

I am glad to say my second experience on the Rankin was much better than my first one. It is hard to believe how much Norfolk changed in three years and how much better it was to be a regular part of the Rankin crew. I liked my fellow officers and respected and admired the enlisted men. As a bachelor, life on the Rankin reminded me of fraternity life, except I had a regular paycheck. After marrying my hometown sweetheart while the ship was in the yards, we formed friendships with other couples, and we still have those friendships today. I enjoyed the cruises, even though I spent my first wedding anniversary somewhere between Aruba and Panama. I learned to sail, and sailing became and remains my favorite recreation. I once sailed through the area marked by buoys off Stuart, Florida, where the Rankin now rests. I learned the value of Dramamine on the Rankin and have made use of that knowledge ever since.

I have so many sea stories my wife finds it necessary to point out I was only in the Navy for two years. My favorite stories relate to the high seas off Morehead City, in which we lost a Mike boat and suffered big-time damage to other boats and to the ship. There was also hurricane Beulah which we tried to dodge and ended up going right through its middle. Once at the O Club at Gitmo I walked out of the head with my cover on. The bartender was quick on the bell; it cost me \$20. I love to tell about the UDT member who missed his ship and rode with us to the operating zone. When we arrived, we sent the standard signal, "We have your man; send a boat." We received back in the clear, "Boat, hell!" The UDT guy donned his diving gear, went over the side with his seabag, and swam the 1000 yards to his ship.

As a young Ensign, my "stateroom" was in "boy's town" on the port side just aft of the wardroom. It may have been over the bakery, and it was very hot in port (which we usually were). I slept totally in the



nude with a fan, mopping with a towel--I think of it any time I try to sleep in a hot location. After a week or so we were encouraged to adopt a different bunk for the night. I slept in the bunk of the ship's bos'n, I believe it was. He had no duty days and slept at home at nights. I hardly knew him. Once we were getting underway early in the morning. I turned in the night before, and lights were out when the bos'n decided to stay the night on board. I don't know who was the most surprised when he climbed into his bunk.

I wrote the mid-watch verse log for January 1, 1968, although, since I didn't stand the watch, it was signed by CWO3 Oscar Baker. I very recently told a friend about my last Rankin assignment—writing a protocol to defend against the Komar missile boat. The plan mainly consisted of turning tail and making full speed. I loved conning the ship, especially maneuvering to pick up Oscar during man overboard drills.

I usually don't tell people how I once picked up the PRITAC microphone instead of the bridge phone and commanded "right standard rudder" to the entire squadron and how Captain Exum threatened to send me below if it happened again. My stories also don't tell about the trouble I got into for going ashore leaving the registered publications safe open.

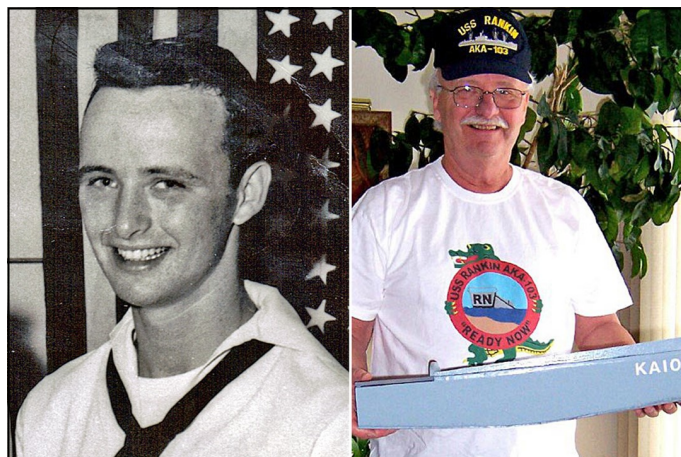
I'm afraid my service to the Rankin and the Navy was lackluster at best. When I left the ship in 1968, the Vietnam War had become pretty unpopular, and I didn't hold my tongue as well as I should have. Mustang LT Andy Anderson called me "the professor." But I can tell you now, those two years were, without qualification, two of the best years of my life.

Upon leaving the Navy, I took a job in farm marketing with a major oil company before spending seven years in R&D with Scotts, the lawn company. One day in the company lunch room I was spinning a sea story to a couple coworkers about getting underway off Vieques without lights or radar. I had turned in and was awakened by repeated 5 short blasts, the shaking of the ship at reverse full, and calls to clear the fo'c'sle. The man sitting beside me had actually been on officer on the Fort Snelling, the ship we nearly rammed, and he remembered the incident quite well.

I left Scotts in 1976 and took a faculty position with The Ohio State University where I taught Turfgrass Management to youngsters preparing to become golf course superintendents. It was never lost on me that Andy Anderson's prediction came true. I have been retired for several years now; I still

enjoy sailing as well as biking and skiing. I'm fortunate to have the same wife and a family which I am proud of, including a son who has made the Navy his career. On those occasions when someone thanks me for my service, I assure them no thanks are needed for my service on the Rankin—it was, in fact, a privilege.

## SHIPMATES ON PARADE



**Lee Lathrop, SN, 1957-1959. Born 1938.**

I joined the Navy Reserve when I was 17 years old. I told my dad I had to go sooner or later, so I might as well get it over with. I enlisted at a reserve station on the Mississippi River in St. Paul Minnesota. I went to weekly meetings there, and eventually to boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Training Center.

In 1957 I went on active duty for two years. I requested the Rankin because I had a friend aboard her, and because I knew she was headed for the Med. We left for the Med the day after I came aboard. I had never seen an ocean before, and everything was new to me. I asked myself what I had gotten into.

Fortunately I got in with a bunch of nice guys who took me under their wings, so and I learned things pretty fast.

Underway I stood lookout watches. During GQ, I was First Loader on 40mm gun #43. During ONE ALFAs, I was a bow hook on the Boat Group Commander's boat. I later became Coxswain and took the officers back and forth to the beach for liberty.

I knew every inch of that boat and what she could do. I had to handle her in some pretty rough seas. My engineer and bowhook were great. They knew their jobs very well. I can't remember their names, but we worked as a team.

I served under Captains Wendt, Harllee, and Gabbert. During that time, we earned the RED "E" and two hashmarks.

The picture on the left above was taken on my eighteenth birthday in 1958.

## DEPENDENTS CRUISE — 1965

U.S.S. RANKIN (AKA-103)  
C/O Fleet Post Office  
New York, New York

DEPENDENTS CRUISE  
23 July 1965  
SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

0815 Guests Arrive  
0830 Underway  
0845 C.O Welcome  
0900-1030 General Visiting  
ON DISPLAY

40 MM Mount working out, CHERRY GMG3  
DAMAGE CONTROL exhibit in crews lounge ENS SURBER  
SICK BAY on exhibit DR KRAUSS  
SMALL ARMS DISPLAY IN ARMORY - TRIPLETT GMG3

1030 Man overboard drill (narrated by LTJG BROWN)  
1100 Anchor off Little Creek  
1130-1300 Lunch  
1300 1 ALPHA on Hatch #3. Put LCM#12 in water (narrated by ENS  
BATES) Exercise Starboard welin davit  
Call boats alongside #3 hatch & #2 hatch  
Recover boats  
1430 Underway for NOB  
1445 Movie THE MACARTHUR STORY  
1530 Arrive FT WOOL  
1600 Moor or Anchor

\* \* \* \* \*

Ladies Rest Room - CPO Head

## USS RANKIN CRUISE BOOKS

Navy cruise books are published as souvenirs of a particular cruise, usually a long one like a Med cruise. Large ships like carriers and amphibious LPDs and LHDs have enlisted people aboard whose skills and Navy job descriptions lend themselves to producing cruise

books. Ships of the Rankin's size have to rely on volunteers to do the work. Rankin sailors published three cruise books, in 1959, 1969, and 1970. Copies have been added to our website at [www.ussrankin.org](http://www.ussrankin.org). Just go there and click on the Cruise Book links.

## THE OLD MAN AND THE SAILOR

Bob Harrison – July 22, 1997

He was old and worn and a bit forlorn as he ambled through the park,  
He spoke to me and I could see that his eyes had lost their spark.  
His gait was slow and his voice was low as he asked to sit with me,  
And I answered him with a friendly grin, "The sittin' here is free."

He gave a smile and we talked a while and his voice was rather weak,  
But his mind was strong and it wasn't long till he began to speak  
Of yesteryears and I saw the tears as the mem'ries flooded through  
For he spoke of times and other climes as old men often do.

He smiled at me and I could see as he glanced at my Navy blues  
That he'd earned his keep on the briny deep and paid his share of dues.  
I asked if he would share with me some mem'ries from his career,  
He said he might if the price was right, and the price was a can of beer!

"I've shipped on subs and oily tubs, on battleships and cruisers,  
Ten thousand mates and I can state not one of them was losers.  
LST's on foreign seas, from Solomons to Leyte,  
You name it, lad, I've been there, from Alaska down to Haiti."

"Liberty ships of paper clips, balsa wood and glue,  
I saw one break apart one time and lose her gallant crew.  
Marines, "The Corps", I took ashore at Tarawa and Truk."  
Oh what the Hell, for quite a spell, I've had my share of luck."

"One thing more," he said, "before I move along,  
There ain't no air that's quite as fair as the pipe of the boatswain's song.  
And the place to be is on the sea riding a fair sea swell,  
With mates like you in Navy blue who'll follow you straight through Hell."

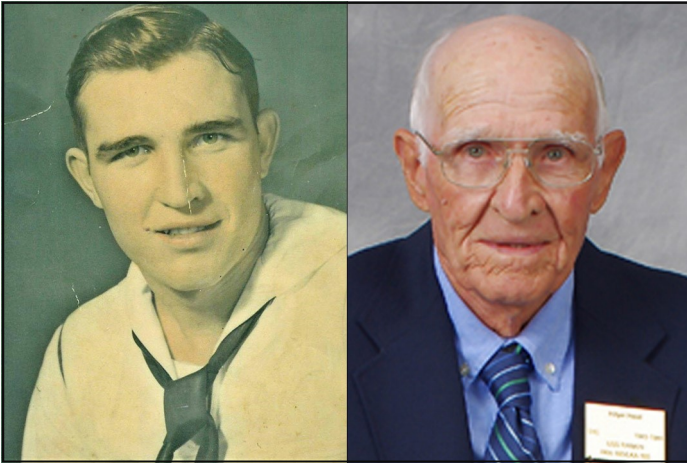
"So here's to you and your Navy crew who take our ships to sea,  
You've fought and died and never cried throughout our history.  
You're heroes all and ten feet tall and your spirits never lag,  
You're the nation's best and you never rest in defense of our country's flag!

He rose to leave and I believe that he seemed to move much faster,  
His eyes agleam like a laser beam and his skin was alabaster,  
He glowed at first then soon dispersed in a cloud of misty cotton,  
A dream at most, perhaps a ghost, but not to be forgotten.

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## A VETERAN'S STORY: FROM THE FARM TO OKINAWA



**Hillyer "Billy" Head, S2C, 1945. Born 1926.**

To ask a member of the Greatest Generation, "Where were you born?" can easily tender the name of a county instead of a city, plus recalling survival stories of dependence on a good crop. World War II veteran Hillyer Thomas Head was, and still is, a member of that farming generation. He answers to his nickname, "Billy."

When asked how "Billy" was derived from Hillyer or Thomas, he stated, "Well, Grandpa Hill Head nicknamed me Billy and the people in the old neighborhood called me Billy, so it stuck. I was in the third grade before my real name caught up with me."

Born in Morgan County, Head was raised in Walton County near the small towns of Jersey and Walnut Grove. He now resides in Newton County. "I was born into a farming family. I still own three tractors and worked up to 300 acres of soybeans until a few years ago. But at 91 years of age, I've slowed down a bit."

"There was seven of us youngins', two boys and five girls, I still have cows near Jersey. My father often paid debts in cotton and our old house is still standing. Cotton was the main crop, but we also set aside 10 acres for peanuts or milo (sorghum), or potatoes. I contacted malaria in the eighth grade, then tried to catch up on my studies, but just didn't make it. We did have other courses that were available, like blacksmith and welding, but a house builder offered me a job so I took that. Momma had a fit."

On surviving the Great Depression: "We did OK. We all contributed in some way when we became of age. My job was going to the cotton gin in Walnut Grove early in the morning. I had to get up at 4 a.m. for the 3-mile trip to be first in line. I'd go to sleep on the cotton bales, but the two mules pulling the load would go straight to the cotton gin and stop right on

the scales. One morning the gin manager woke me up right there on the scales .... I thought I'd gone to the wrong place ... my daddy would have tore me up!"

Dec. 7, 1941: "Pearl Harbor was a sad day for us. Daddy had been in World War I, and he told me, 'Son, this is awful. Our country is at war and no doubt you'll be in it.' Well, my brother was two years older than me, but he got a deferment, but they got me as soon as I was 18 years old. You know, Daddy wouldn't talk too much about World War I except with three of his buddies. One of them had been gassed while fighting in France. We had a little old radio and Daddy was listening to it, that's how we found out about Pearl Harbor."

On being drafted: "I went down for induction at Fort McPherson and they asked me which branch of the military I wanted, but I told them it didn't matter. So, they put me and eight other fellows in the Navy. We shipped out that night for Camp Perry, Va., ... it was the first time I'd ever left Georgia. I was tickled about the train ride, but my Daddy was real sad, sad that his son was going to war."

His first impression of boot camp: "During the first week I thought they were crazy, telling us when to eat, when to sleep, what to do and how to do it, always having to be on time ... I stopped on the way to chow one day to play horseshoes and was late, so I missed lunch. Last time that happened! I guess it was sort of like a business, things needed to run efficiently. An old Navy chief was tough on us, but after about three weeks we knew he was teaching us good."

Advanced training: "I was sent to Fort Pierce, Fla., for training on landing craft, invasion equipment, amphibious craft, that took about six weeks. Then I boarded the Rankin, and stayed on it for the rest of the war."

Head continued: "Daddy and Momma came to visit me before we sailed. I got permission to show them the ship; Mom came aboard, but Daddy didn't. He just turned his head away. When I went home on leave, he told me, 'Son, you won't be home for a long, long time,' then walked away towards the barn for a shot of whiskey. He always had a shot of whiskey when he was worried about something."

Going to war: "We went through the Panama Canal, then steamed up to San Francisco, got loaded, then set sail for Hawaii. At Pearl we took on 5,000 tons of ammo for use in the Okinawa Invasion. We were armed with a 5-inch, 40mm Bofors, and 20mm guns. Once anchored off Okinawa, I was assigned an

amphibious boat. If it went ashore, so did I; behind a .50 caliber machine gun.”

On the Kamikaze raids: “I shot the 20mm quite a bit, but our escorts and beach defenses shot down most of the enemy planes. We’d sit behind the guns all night long. There were a lot of ships on station and we had to wait our turn to unload our cargo. A tug would come out and take us in to unload. Army DUKWs (colloquially called “ducks”) would haul the ammo inland, brand new DUKWs, they’d come back full of bullet holes. Fighting went on all night long, flares going off everywhere, and bullets hitting the ship.”

The old Chief: “We had a salty old Chief on our ship. He’d been in the Navy his whole life. We were standing there talking when a bullet hit the ship ... well, this kid standing there with us hit the deck. The Chief said, “No need to duck, son, you’ll never hear the bullet that gets you.” Lots of shells came at us. I was a cook, but I manned a 20mm. I was a good shot and got the best position on a 20mm.”

“We went through two attacks our first night... they liked to come at night, and we’re sitting there with our holds full of ammo, black powder, TNT, but we never got bothered until we made the bay to unload. We only stuck up out of the water about 4 feet...heavy load.”

On Tokyo Rose: “The Japanese propaganda queen, Tokyo Rose, knew about our ship before we dropped anchor. She knew our cargo, what tonnage we carried, where we were .... she really spooked some of the guys. It was rougher in the bay, raids came one after the other.”

A shoot down: “We spotted one high up, circling, the search lights had him lit up like a Christmas tree. About the time he started his dive, the guns from the shore batteries blew him out of the sky. Blowing a plane out of the sky means the parts start falling to earth. The plane’s engine hit the side of the ship, then tumbled into one of the smaller boats tied up next to us. And there was the old Chief saying, ‘you won’t hear the one that gets you,’.... I didn’t care, I found something to hide behind.”

On manning the 20mm: “I stayed on the 20mm, but I really wanted to man a twin 40mm Bofors. Awesome weapon, looked like fun. I know we hit two or three planes, but they usually got shot down before reaching as far as we were. We never got bombed. I remember our own airplanes flying over real low, loaded down with bombs. They’d pull up, drop the belly bombs, then the wing bombs. We were always worried that one of those bombs would fall on us.”

Other dangers: “It was really dangerous when a

Japanese plane came in real low. That’s when friendly fire could hit our own ships. Anyway, we stayed there 17 days, made a few other stops, then went back home to load up for the upcoming Invasion of Japan. Thank the Lord, we didn’t have to invade Japan ... those two atomic bombs saved millions of lives, American and Japanese.”

The occupation of Japan: “We went to Japan but couldn’t make port until all the mines were cleared. We did get ashore at Yokohama, and I remember all the kids were afraid of us. I bought some things for my momma and sent them home. You know, sometimes a soldier knows his general location, but we never did. It was always ‘somewhere in the Pacific,’ on our letters home. Infuriated Momma.”

After the war, Head worked at the Bibb Plant in Porterdales for about a year before returning to the life he knew ... farming. “I met a girl from Atlanta that I really liked. She moved into the area, and, well, I really fell for her. We married in 1947. She passed on nine years ago, and I’ve been living by myself ever since. Folks say, ‘remarry’, I was even asked to go on a double-date, but I couldn’t ... I loved my wife. No, I couldn’t replace her.”

Head returned to farming acreage about six miles from Monroe. In time he gave up the cash crop for cash cows. He said, “It got big, too, good business, but now it’s in a much smaller way, seven cows and 40 acres.”

Final thoughts: “I enjoyed my time in the Navy. But you know, during the first three days off Okinawa we saw bodies floating by, and I still see that. Don’t even know what bodies they were, Japanese or maybe American, all I know to say is the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor and we hit them right back. The country united, we wanted to serve, but now I don’t think the country could do that again. Young people need to do something, to serve at something, like the old Chief said, ‘I can’t make you do a darn thing, but I can make you wish you had!’ I believe that’s real good advice.”

NOTE: The fight against the Japanese Kamikaze attacks pitted men who wanted to live against men who wanted to die. At sea, the human and material loss was staggering: Roughly 4,900 sailors killed or missing. At least 34 ships sunk, another 368 damaged. Americans lost 763 aircraft; the Japanese 3,500.

Surprisingly, the exact figures are hard to come by. Estimates are the best information offered. What can be said, the men who wanted to live, won.

*Reprinted by permission of The Rockdale Citizen, serving Rockdale and Newton Counties, Georgia. Written by Pete Mecca, this story originally appeared on May 21, 2017.*

## 2020 REUNION: ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND



The USS Rankin Association's Seventeenth Annual Reunion will be held at the Crowne Plaza Annapolis Hotel from Monday through Friday, September 21-25, 2020. The room rate is \$125 per night. Make your reservation through our website. Arrive at the hotel on Monday, September 21 and check in after 4:00 pm. The first reunion event is a welcome reception & buffet at 6:00 pm that evening. The last is the banquet at 6:00 pm on Thursday. Most people will check out of the hotel after the free group breakfast on Friday, September 25. Further details about tours, meals, and prices will be posted at [www.ussrankin.org/reunion2020](http://www.ussrankin.org/reunion2020)

In addition to Rankin sailors and guests, there will be people there from USS Bexar, USS Cambria, USS Chilton, USS Pickaway, USS Telfair, USS Yancey and other AKAs, APAs, and LSDs. All these people have experiences in common – boot camp, landing craft, heavy weather, ONE AL-FAs, difficult and dirty work, and more. You'll like them.

### U. S. S. RANKIN (AKA-103)

CARE OF FLEET POST OFFICE  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 09501

AKA103/00:W  
1650  
8 August 1966

From: Commanding Officer, USS Rankin (AKA-103)  
To: LCDR Howard A. WELTNER, USNR, 544810/1107  
Subj: Superior Performance of Duty

1. During the past twelve months, USS RANKIN (AKA-103) has won 14 departmental awards and the Battle Efficiency Award. This is every military award that an AKA can win.
2. Recognizing that such an accomplishment can only be accomplished by a team effort and continued emphasis on training, operations and administration, I take note of this occasion to take note of your performance.
3. Your diligent attention to duty at all times has been a significant factor in this achievement. I commend your performance as Executive Officer.

Thomas C. Hurst, III

Copy to:  
BUPERS

## CAPTAIN T. C. HURST

Thomas C. Hurst III graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1943. By 1965, he had become the Rankin's C.O. He wrote the commendation at the left below.

We recently acquired the 5/8" solid gold "sweetheart pin" that he gave to his girl back in 1943. The girl's son contacted us and said it had belonged to his mother, who had **not** married Midshipman Hurst. (He had been known at the Academy as "quite a ladies' man.")

The son with the pin wanted to give it to Midshipman Hurst's descendants. Former Captain Hurst's daughter is on our mailing list, and when we contacted her, she felt the pin should end up with the USS Rankin. Its owner sent it to us the next day. Here it is, enlarged:



### USS RANKIN NEWS

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