

TAMPA: THE FIRST YEAR

December 19, 1984 marked the first anniversary of the commissioning of the Coast Guard Cutter TAMPA. The ship achieved a remarkable record its first year, and many gave much to accomplish all that we did. This book is dedicated to the families who saw their ship home for only 27 of its first 365 days, and whose loving support was in great measure responsible for the ship's success.

We commissioned TAMPA in Seattle, but our story began much earlier with about twelve people crowded around four chairs, one desk and one telephone in an eight by ten foot cubicle in building L-98 at the Norfolk Naval Station. On the first of June, 1983, the crew, now sixty strong, moved into spacious accommodations in Yorktown Hall, a building virtually untouched by time, most notably in the areas of air conditioning and dirt removal. We made do, and it wasn't long before our offices and open bay berthing area were recognized as the standard for the entire base. Thus, we shouldered the load and set ourselves to the seemingly endless tasks presented in completing pipeline training, school of the ship, and the infamous Milestone (affectionately termed "Milestone") Lists. And so we waited for Tacoma Boat to give us our ship, and we waited, and finally, it was ready.

Pearl Harbor Day, Norfolk International Airport was filled with women and children saying goodbye to their men as they boarded a United L1011 for Seattle. The first wave of the crew, which had flown out months earlier to set up basic housekeeping and learn ship's systems welcomed the wide eyed group of weary travellers to their new home, and together we got busy about the job of unloading tractor trailers full of parts and stowing them where they might one day actually be found again and used. December and January were long months full of days that seemed longer. We trained and we worked, and we trained some more until TAMPA was ready for sea, and the long trip home.

In San Diego the crew showed its mettle. We arrived at Shakedown Training looking like the green crew on an unproven ship that we were. Two weeks later the ship riders expressed disbelief that this was the same group that had started training. And we weren't, we were beginning to become a team.

We learned about giving during our visits to Puntarenas, Costa Rica and Veraguas, Panama. Rather than launch the traditional assault of rowdy liberty-crazed mobs, most of ship's company gave its time in these ports to helping residents clean up a neglected schoolyard, paint a public hall, construct concrete bleachers at a city stadium, install electrical wiring, lay building foundations, and build a church. No liberty party ever had a better time on foreign soil, than TAMPA's crew did as it received the generous outpouring of loving gratitude from the people we worked alongside.

Channel fever started to set in as we entered into the solemn "Order of the Ditch" and left Pacific's blue waters astern. We headed for Tampa, Florida, the formal commissioning ceremony, and reunions with loved ones who made the trip south from Virginia.

The city took us to its heart and showed almost excessive hospitality. The crew enjoyed a barbecue, an evening in the exclusive Tampa Club, and a large commissioning ceremony attended by the Commandant, Senator Chiles, and U.S. Representative Gibbons. We also took an opportunity to show off our ship to our families before saying goodbye to them for another, much shorter separation.

On March 21, 1984 TAMPA arrived home for the first time. The district sponsored a welcoming ceremony, and each family organized its own, less formal events. It was so good to be home, and, of course the respite sped past. On April 9, we sailed to Baltimore to watch the painful process of the Yard dismanning our ship, and the long task of putting it back together again. For eight months of weekends U.S. highway 17 was crowded with TAMPA sailors driving nine hours each week to see their families before returning once again to work, assuring them each time, against all odds, that the yard period wouldn't last forever. It didn't.

The new and Curtis Bay improved TAMPA came home just in time to close out its first year. No book could tell the story of each of the hundred or so men who sailed on TAMPA that year, but one thread runs common on a ship whose history is so strong: the end of the first year is but the beginning of a brilliant career.

