

No Rain on *California's* Parade

Commissioning Stays Dry in Helo Hangar

USS *California* (SSN 781), the Navy's newest attack submarine, joined the fleet Oct. 29 in a ceremony at Naval Station Norfolk in Norfolk, Va. *California* is the eighth boat of the *Virginia* class and seventh Navy ship to carry the name of the "Golden State." California Congressman Howard P. "Buck" McKeon, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, was the keynote speaker. Donna Willard, *California's* sponsor and wife of Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, Adm. Robert F. Willard, gave the traditional order, "Man our ship and bring her to life!"

Unfortunately, the crew couldn't actually man the ship. Frigid temperatures and rain moved the commissioning inside the warm and dry hangar of Helicopter Mine Counter-Measure Squadron 15, where over 1,500 distinguished guests, family and friends welcomed *California*. But the *California* family did not let the weather ruin their day. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert even joked that the audience might think the missing sub was just the Navy's way of taking stealth to a whole different level.

California began construction on Feb. 16, 2010. Her keel was laid on May 1, 2009, and her christening occurred on Nov. 6, 2010. The Navy accepted delivery of *California* on Aug. 7, 2011, nearly nine months earlier than her scheduled contract delivery date. "Not only was the ship early, under budget, and more



Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Shannon E. Renfroe

complete than her predecessors," said Rear Adm. David Johnson, Program Executive Officer for Submarines, "She was also more deployment-ready right out of new construction, a testament to the capability resident in our world's best Navy-industry team."

The Navy-industry team proved their capabilities again in September 2011, when construction began on the 13th *Virginia*-class submarine, the unnamed SSN 787, marking the first time in 22 years that two submarines of the same class have started construction in the same year. "The com-

missioning of PCU *California* (SSN 781) represents a tipping point, as the *Virginia*-class will now comprise 15 percent of our attack submarine force," said Commander, Submarine Group Two, Rear Adm. Rick Breckenridge, in a blog post prior to the commissioning. "The highly successful *Virginia*-class shipbuilding program ... has become the model for the rest of the Navy."

Although *California* was built across the country from her namesake state, her connections to the state are strong. During the commissioning, Dr. Joseph Cox, a California native for over 75 years, was given the privilege of passing the ceremonial "long glass" to *California's* first officer of the deck to signify the start of the first watch. Dr. Cox is a World War II veteran who served aboard USS *Batfish* (SS 310) and a former national president of the U.S. Submarine Veterans Organization.

Twelve crewmembers from California are assigned to the submarine, including Petty Officer 3rd Class Tariq Sharif, from Los Angeles, who originally chose a submarine billet hoping he would end up in California. While Sharif's assignment did not exactly go as hoped, he is proud to be a part of *California's* crew: "Well if I can't be home, at least I'll be attached to a boat that has my home name."

The *California* crew held a competition in 2009 to design the boat's logo. *California* Petty Officer 1st Class David Henley notified



Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Eric C. Tretter



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(Opposite, top) *California* Sailors rush to symbolically “man their ship and bring her to life.” (Opposite, bottom) Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert greets a Sailor aboard *California* after the commissioning ceremony. (Above, left) *California* Commanding Officer Cmdr. Dana Nelson, sponsor Donna Willard, and Chief of the Boat Master Chief Kevin Bond. (Above, right) Rep. Howard “Buck” McKeon delivers remarks during the commissioning ceremony. (Below) *California*’s logo, designed by Ken Henley, father of a *California* Sailor. (Bottom) World War II submarine veteran Dr. Joseph Cox passes the long glass to set *California*’s first watch.

his father, Ken Henley, of the contest. Henley, who lives near Nashville, Tenn., had the winning design. “Seven stars represent the seven previous vessels named after California,” said Henley, and “the Grizzly Bear is the state animal that shows strength.” He also included the state’s colors, blue and gold, representing the sunny blue sky for which it is famous and the 1849 gold rush. Also on the crest is *California*’s motto, “Silentium Est Aureum,” Latin for “Silence is Golden.”

The commissioning was anything but silent, as attendees erupted in applause and rose to their feet on several occasions in recognition of *California*, her crew, and her sponsor, Donna Willard. “She has been very hands on, to say the least, and not just for these ceremonial events,” said Matt Mulherin, Newport News Shipbuilding president. “She has visited our shipyard numerous times to keep tabs on ‘her boat.’ In fact, she has her very own hard hat and steel-toed shoes that we keep at the ready.” Turning to Mrs. Willard, Mulherin added, “Many of us were expecting to see you underway on sea trials.”

Rep. McKeon commended the crew in his speech. “This wonderful vessel is a feat of American engineering and innovation,” he said. “But without you men, it is simply a lump of wire and steel. A submarine does not have courage, or cunning, or determination; it’s the crew that will be *California*’s brain,



Photo by Olivia Logan

muscle, and life blood. You are the soul of this vessel.”

Cmdr. Dana Nelson, *California*’s commanding officer, praised his crew for a job well done. “As you can probably tell, I’m proud of my great ship,” said Cmdr. Nelson. “But at least to me, she pales in comparison to the 136 young men standing in front of me. Team, your performance over the last 36 months has been spectacular. Talented, hard-working, resilient, you are shining examples of all that is right with America.”

Rear Adm. Breckenridge ended his blog post with some insight on *California*’s future. “‘Silence is Golden’ is a fitting motto to the *California* and her crew, as they are tasked to slip behind enemy lines and employ the most advanced stealth, sensors, and ship control systems known to man,” said Adm. Breckenridge. “But it will be *California*’s ‘grizzly growl’ —her lethal weapons and advanced payloads—that will deter aggression and promote regional stability.”

California spent most of November and December 2011 underway for training and building operational proficiency. In January 2012, she traveled to her homeport of Groton, Conn., for a post-shakedown availability. *California* will be ready for her first operational deployment in 2014.

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