

Living History

By Philip Schreier

Permission to come aboard?



Living History on the USS Olympia

At the intersection of Philadelphia's South Street and the Delaware River sits in neglected glory, one of America's national treasures, Admiral Dewey's flagship from the 1898 Battle of Manila Bay, the USS Olympia. The protected cruiser settled at her present berth in 1957 alongside the USS Becuna, a submarine from the World War II period. Today she stands as a memorial to the officers and men who

served aboard her during her 30 years of active service.

On a number of weekends during the calendar year, the Olympia springs to life with the aid of a living history crew who demonstrate life as it was aboard the ship in 1898. Comprised of nearly 30 crewmen, and officially known as the Living History Crew of the USFS (US Flag Ship) Olympia, the crew strives to display numerous aspects of how it was to live as a crew-



The Olympia today sits at Philadelphia's Penn's Landing in a slip on the Delaware River, just opposite from the newly berthed USS New Jersey.



Though the Olympia's keel was laid in 1891 and she entered into service in 1895, the original ship's bell bears the date 1893, a reference to the date of her launching.

man in the age of the old steam navy. From cooking, 5-inch gun drill, sword practice and signaling, the crew makes life for both the visitor, and the crewmen themselves, as close as anyone might come to experiencing things as they once were.

The USS Olympia is the oldest steel hulled naval vessel in the United States. Her keel was laid by the Union Iron works of San Francisco, California in 1891 and she was commissioned into service in 1895. She was serving in the Asiatic Squadron when war clouds developed between the United States and Spain in January of 1898. Commodore George Dewey joined the ships company that month and made her his flag ship as commander of the squadron.

On 16 February, 1898, Dewey, aboard the Olympia, learned of the destruction of the USS Maine in Havana harbor on the evening before. In the afternoon of February 25th he received the following cable from the Navy Department in Washington D.C.

Dewey, Hong Kong: ORDER THE SQUADRON, ... TO HONG KONG. KEEP FULL OF COAL. IN THE EVENT OF DECLARATION OF WAR SPAIN, YOUR DUTY WILL BE TO SEE THAT THE SPANISH SQUADRON DOES NOT LEAVE THE ASIATIC COAST, AND THEN OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS IN PHILIPPINE ISLANDS. KEEP OLYMPIA UNTIL FURTHER ORDERS.

The cable was not signed by the Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, he

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trained in all the disciplines but those that have special talents or background in any area are often asked to concentrate on the areas of their expertise. The entire crew fills in on some of the major areas like gun drill where original 5-inch and 6 pound guns are actually fired with blank rounds. (The ships guns are fired from the seaward or port side so as not to disturb the residents of Philadelphia's nearby hotels and condos. The port side offers a clear view of the newly berthed USS New Jersey in Camden, NJ).

Navy life aboard the Olympia is a special aspect of the living history program. Crew members actually sleep in the hammock bays or in the Junior Officers cabins in the stern of the ship. The ship lacks all the comforts of home such as lavatories, running water, heat or air conditioning. I was quite surprised to learn on my first crew visit that the Olympia was originally outfitted with electric lights and an ice making machine, which would have certainly been the first time many original crew members ever encountered such modern luxuries. One night in a hammock will certainly give you an appreciation for a soft mattress and the chiropractor.

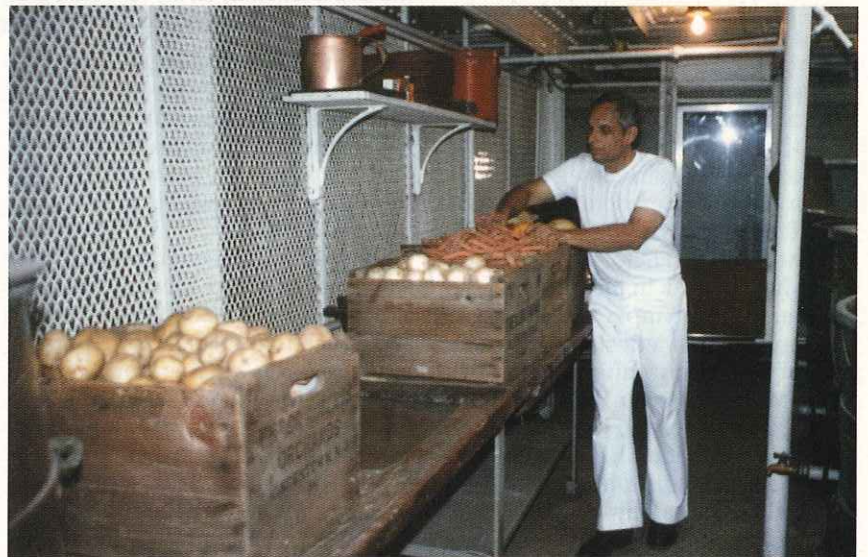
The present crew is directed by the



Rob Kinney in the uniform of one of the ship's company of U.S. Marines. Photographed in the junior officers cabins, this berth is small but comfortable.



The first living history crew on the Olympia in 1996 was a re-creation of the ship's band. Though still active today, crew members participate in numerous activities other than music.



Crewman Michael Borsuk begins to prepare the ships galley for a weekend of feeding aboard the Olympia. Mike passed away in 2000, and the ship's crew established a memorial fund in his honor to help in the Olympia's restoration.



The fluorescent lights and the large clock in the background are the only signs that this isn't a period photograph taken in the ship's engine room.

had left the office early that afternoon due to a bout of insomnia, one that began the night the Maine blew up. The cable bore the signature authority of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt. In an instant the United States was 'mobilizing' for war under the authority of an absent cabinet member. Long was warned by one wag that if he ever left Theodore alone in the office again, it was likely that he would declare war all on his own. The Olympia became the object of international attention once news of the cable became public and Dewey was the man on the spot, the tip of the sword. The U.S. declared war on April 25 and Dewey immediately set off to contain the Spanish fleet, known to be in Manila Bay, Philippine Islands.

The first taste of blood for the U.S. came on May 1 when the U.S. Asiatic Squadron, led by the Flagship Olympia, steamed into Manila Bay and, after a sharp engagement following the famous command "You may fire when ready Gridley," sunk the Spanish Fleet in quick order, establishing an American presence there that would last nearly 100 years. Dewey became a national hero, was promoted to the highest rank in the history of the Navy and the Olympia was treated to the equivalent of a ticker tape parade in every port she visited during her return voyage home in 1899.

She later served the first part of the 20th Century in the Carribean, Atlantic and Mediterranean. In 1916 she was named flagship of the Atlantic Fleet and participated in the Great War, eventually participating in the



The ship's company on the forward 8-inch gun turret. Uniform for the day is "working whites" one of the most comfortable living history impressions available.

Murmansk expedition. In 1921 her last noteworthy cruise made world headlines as she bore the remains of the Unknown American Soldier from the Great War home to the Washington Navy Yard for interment at Arlington Cemetery.

She served as a training vessel at various times for the U.S. Naval Academy and today her mission is still training and education. Owned and operated by the Independence Seaport Museum at Penn's Landing in Philadelphia she has been host for various living history crews since the mid-1980's. In January of 1996 the present living history crew was established by the museum to demonstrate and interpret life aboard the historic artifact. Today's prospec-

tive crew member is literally trained in various aspects of navy life before they are passed to serve before the public. Among the various disciplines are:

- 5-inch gun drill
- 6 Pounder gun drill
- "Single stick" (cutlass) drill
- French foil fencing
- Small arms drill
- Signaling (both Myer and International Code of Signals)
- Navigation
- Engine Room operations discussion
- Chanty singing
- Knot-tying and rope work

Most crew members are cross



Olympia's crew during a few moments of relaxation. Crew members hand make each of the hammocks, and the musical instruments are original to the late 1890's.



Crewman Peter Tuttle on the forward 8-inch twin turret guns. The original guns were removed and the current guns are hollow cast replicas.