

Charlie' crew visits Shipyard

By Carol Britton Meyer

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Max Sierpina of Methuen, MA tells stories from his 1 1/2 years of service on the USS Charles Lawrence. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean 9 times between May 31, 1943 and October 1944 during the Atlantic Theatre. Photo by Robin Chan

HINGHAM - It was like stepping back in time, although the scenery had changed dramatically.

In honor of the 65th anniversary of the launch of the DE 53 (USS Charles Lawrence), veterans who served on the destroyer escort during World War II recently took a tour of the Hingham Shipyard.

The DE 53, affectionately dubbed “the Charlie Lawrence” by its crew, was the third ship launched from the Hingham Shipyard during the war and received one battle star for World War II service.

The 130-acre site is now being redeveloped as a mixed-use waterfront district, scheduled to open next year.

Leslie Cohen of Shipyard developer Samuels and Associates gave an overview of the project, including a description of the historic program.

Not surprisingly, the veterans found the Shipyard the way it is now a far different place from the thriving shipbuilding yard that it was during World War II. The main reminders of that time are the ends of the sloping ways where ships were launched and the tall smokestack now used for cell phone antennae. However, they were fascinated by the changes and thrilled to learn that the Shipyard’s rich history will be reflected in the project.

As the former crewmembers looked over the Shipyard ways, the 65 years melted away and some of the crew fondly remembered the launch as if it had happened yesterday.

The fact that this final reunion of DE 53 veterans took place in Hingham is significant because of the Shipyard connection.

Learning that there will be a mix of residential, retail, and public open space where ships were once built struck the veterans as amazing.

Soon the property, which lay virtually dormant for many years after its heyday during World War II, will be thriving again in a completely different way. One of the special features will be a public walkway along the waterfront, with landscaped piers and spectacular views of the water.

During the Shipyard tour, the 48-star flag that flew over the Charles Lawrence during World War II was unfurled. The group also stopped by the LST (Landing Ship Tank) memorial and signed the guestbook.

The focus on the history of the Shipyard is in keeping with Hingham Shipyard Historical Foundation founder Mark Hirsh’s vision to commemorate the events that took place at the site during World War II and the men and women who were instrumental in building and launching LSTs during the conflict. Final work on the historical interpretation aspects is ongoing through the input of a working group of Shipyard, town, and former shipyard worker representatives.

Observing the waves at the end of Pier I during the Shipyard tour brought back memories for some of the veterans. Others noticed that the cool, overcast weather that day was similar to the weather in October, 1943, when the ship was first launched.

Following the tour the group of veterans shared some of their memories over lunch at Old Derby on Main Street.

Andrew Blackwell, the grandson of Lt. G..R. Seidlitz, a 26-year-old commanding officer of the Charles Lawrence, attended the event and shared photos of his grandfather and the ship.

Hingham resident Ann Collins, who worked at the Shipyard during the war years, recalled “watching all those ships be born and christened and sent off to war.” Her husband was stationed onboard the DE 68. Both the DE 53 and DE 68 patrolled off Okinawa, and Collins shared photos of some of the DE68 sailors with the DE 53 veterans, thinking that they might recognize some of them from wartime.

Collins also recalled that the Shipyard was built in two months. “It was a tremendous feat,” she said.

Some of the veterans shared stories about their wartime experiences. “My first thought once aboard the ship was that I wanted to sink every German submarine we could find!” said Max Sierpina, a member of the original DE 53 crew. He also recalled finding themselves on top of a minefield in Casablanca Harbor. “Another foot of water and we could have been blown away,” he said. Sierpina further noted that the ship’s top speed was eight knots, or about 10 mph.

One of the “scariest” adventures aboard the Charles Lawrence occurred at Christmastime in 1943. “That was one heck of a storm,” he said. “The waves were so high that we had to look up from the 30-foot hull to see the tops of them.”

The essence of Hingham Shipyard at the height of its glory is vividly recaptured in a 30-minute documentary, “Remembering the Hingham Shipyard.” Each veteran received a copy during the tour. The film is sponsored by the Shipyard developers and the Hingham Shipyard Historical Foundation.

The event was hosted by Shipyard developer Samuels & Associates, the Hingham Historical Society, the Hingham Shipyard Marinas, and the Hingham Shipyard Historical Foundation, which had earlier donated some Shipyard-era historical items to the Society.

To learn more about the Shipyard’s history and about the Foundation, visit www.thehinghamshipyard.net.

<http://www.wickedlocal.com/hingham/homepage/x877720079/Charlie-crew-visits-Shipyard>

Check out video from luncheon:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Airt2NAmj-Q>