USS WILLARD KEITH 2016 REUNION: BRANSON MISSOURI !! PLAN OF THE DAY.

The twenty-sixth annual reunion of the crew of the USS Willard Keith convened on Wednesday, May 11, 2016, far from their historic home port at Norfolk, VA. We mustered on the midwestern shore of the White River, at Branson, MO. It is nestled in southern Missouri, between the dammed expanses at Table Rock Lake and Bull Shoals Lake, Leaving Branson, the river snakes and descends to the southeast back to Arkansas to the Mississippi River. Branson is one of the most successful family entertainment meccas in the USA, putting special emphasis on honoring America veterans. This Ozark city of 10,000 inhabitants hosts about eight million visitors per year. During the week of our reunion, we could have attended any of 85 different shows, including the Baldknobbers who are among the original acts who started entertaining folks back in the day when visitors were tenting by Table Rock Lake. We tented at the magnificent Radisson. But, do not attempt to drive a vehicle in this place in the summer time, unless you like lots of company.

The “all hands to quarters for muster, inspection and instruction” was down a bit from the previous Keith docking at Branson: in 2005, there were 104 in attendance; in 2016, there were 16 present of which only 8 are former shipmates. Though this liberty party could barely fill a motor whaleboat, those hitting the beach did not lack for enthusiasm.

We convened on Wednesday, 11 May, to meet shipmates, set up displays in the hospitality room, and turn in items for the Chinese auction. Everyone made it except the Petersons who got some flight delay in Chicago because of bad weather. Most went for dinner at the nearby Grand Buffet, while others had tickets for local shows, Baldknobbbers included. Then, “Taps, taps, lights out. All hand turn into your racks. Maintain silence about the decks. The smoking lamp is out in all berthing spaces. Now, taps.”

Branson proved to be a place with too many choices: country, broadway, family, movies, religious, rock, pop, theme park, water sport, camping, restaurants, shops, caves, resorts, the Titanic, ad infinitum. But if you want to gamble, you’ll have to find another town.

Thursday, the first event was arranged by our local Gatherings Plus tour coordinator who chose the Clay Cooper Country Express, “we’re just real people...havin’ a REAL Good Time”. If you ever get to this City, this show is a must. Cooper has had his show for nearly 30 years, and has his own theatre. He arrived on a cable slide over the heads of the audience - kind of like our high line transfer of yore. He gave special recognition to the Keith veterans and one other similar group in attendance. Wonderful show, and very upbeat. One of the best lines was that the Government had to cancel the Nativity Display at the Nation’s Capitol because they couldn’t find 3 wise men. They get to use that one again in 2017. Cooper showed up in the lobby after the show, and stayed there until he signed autographs for everyone who wanted one. After lunch at the Pickin Porch Deli [delicious chicken salad] at the Branson Craft Mall, we had a group photo taken with eight sailors, and an equal number of good-looking ladies.

Later that afternoon at 1500, the annual Chinese auction was conducted by Jerry and Louise Hansen. This is always a highlight of the Reunion, more so by two people who seemed to make a huge haul. Congrats to Wheeler and Debbie. There were the usual “sea stories”, normally starting with “...this is no s\_\_\_, now...”. One was about a certain member of the Supply Department smuggling Noritake dinnerware back from Japan to gain the favor of his wife-to-be. No wonder they could never find any spare parts - tea cups had displaced them! Not to be outdone, a certain FT [fire control technician, the educated elite] was switching contraband between radar equipment spaces on the main deck and the 01 level to avoid inspections. This is the ingenuity that won the war!!

By 1800, all hands were assembled for dinner [“supper for the crew”]. The shipmates in attendance were: Dave Kutzfar, Richard Cook, Wheeler Gill, Cecil Peterson, Bob Freidhaber, Don Hempstead, Jerry Hansen, and Joe Mitchell. No SOS [s\_\_\_ on a shingle] - all is well. The mess deck had only two tables, but the morale was high. No “heavy rolls” were felt or eaten.

On Friday the 13th, we singled up, then cast off all lines for another morning show, one of about 85 that were playing at various locations during our time in town. There is too much to do here! Some of these performers are in the cast of 2 or 3 shows at the same time. The show this morning was Jersey Boys, a lively rendition of music from the Four Seasons group. Many of us were stumped by the MC’s question of what was their first hit? Who can remember much from 1962 unless it involved cars or girls?

It was lunch on our own, and many of us went to the Hard Luck Diner, or hung out in the Hospitality Room at this very fine hotel, aptly named the Patriot Room. If you didn’t want to hang around the Radisson, there was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see Moses who was featured at the enormous Shepard of the Hills Theatre.

At about 1600, we convened on our mess deck for the annual business meeting - always a spirited event. Paul Goldberg had prepared an excellent Treasurer’s Report that showed us $9,624.99 in the black. Of this sum, we discussed what to do with the generous gift of $1,000.00 from our beloved shipmate Ed Campbell. It was suggested and approved to put it toward the cost of one of the meals for the 2017 reunion. The big discussion among we 8 attendees was how to get more people to the next one. We went over all the reasons that we had heard from friends who could not be here: family gatherings, weddings, graduations, location, preference for driving / not flying, etc. It seemed to most that we ought to try the Fall, even though we might not get the great hotel rate that the Radisson was giving this year. Many alternate sites were tossed about such as Charleston, Newport News, San Antonio, Annapolis, and Nashville. To give the most central location at a time of least conflict for family issues, it was chosen to be the home of the Grand Ole Opry in the Fall. Mike McHenry [who got us the tour of the destroyer USS Mason at Norfolk in 2015] has been taking the helm on this one.

By 1900 on Friday evening, we all gathered for the Memorial Service and Banquet. The empty table for the POW / MIA was recognized, as was the list of recently departed sailors of the Willard Keith who have gotten underway for naval Valhalla. Don Hempstead got us through the ceremonies with dignity and grace. The final meal was excellent, followed by striking the Hospitality Room displays and securing the ship’s store.

We were most pleased and honored to be joined at the Banquet by the two gals who had escorted us around Branson for the past two days: Jodie the guide and Peggy the driver. They gave us lots of great advice, including maybe avoiding Branson in the middle of summer when the traffic is congested and the lines are long. For us in the middle of May, the temperature was in the 70's and we were treated to up front seating at the shows.

Special thank yous are given to Jane and Don Hempstead for picking such a magnificent location, and organizing our activities.