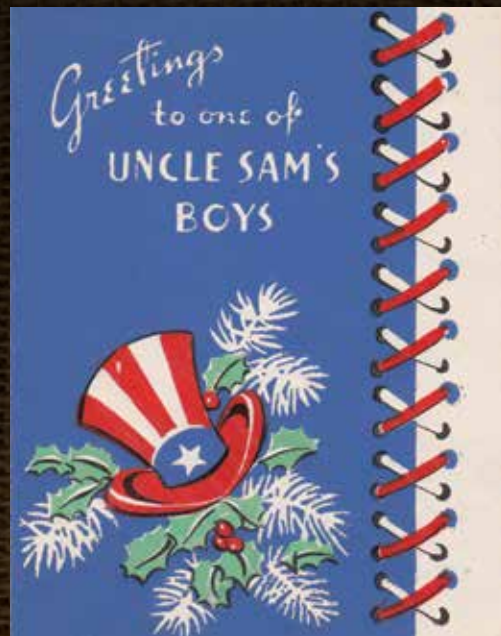


The warship that bears our state's name arrived here in 1961, and has been docked across the Cape Fear River from Wilmington ever since.

A Gift From Across the Globe

WRITTEN BY SUSAN STAFFORD KELLY PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRYAN REGAN

For USS North Carolina crewmen in the middle of World War II, Christmas came wrapped in a filmstrip.



The USS North Carolina was commissioned on April 9, 1941; was hit by a torpedo in 1942; rescued 10 Navy aviators in 1944; destroyed 24 enemy planes; was rumored by the Japanese to have been sunk six times; and traveled more than 300,000 miles. Along the way, its sailors spent several Christmases at sea, yearning for the normalcy of holiday traditions at the height of World War II.



You're north of the Tropic of Capricorn and east of the continent of Australia, with the Coral Sea on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other. Nearby places have names like Maewo and Nguna and Mount Tabwemasana.

It's summer in the Southern Hemisphere, and you're here for some R & R after 30 days at sea. But it's December, and it seems like it should be winter, not warm. Still, what can you do? Your country is at war, in conflicts that stretch across the world. You're a patriot and a sailor in the United States Navy, or maybe a Marine, and orders are orders, even in the New Hebrides islands, even aboard the USS *North Carolina*.

Even on Christmas Eve 1943.

AT ANY GIVEN TIME, 2,339 SERVICEMEN MANNED the "showcase" battleship that had steamed into Pearl Harbor — and raised morale — 18 months earlier. Many members of the crew were husbands and fathers who would be spending the holiday thousands of miles away from their wives and children. And they couldn't even have a peaceful Christmas Day with a planned church service; orders had come in that the USS *North Carolina* would ship out Christmas morning to provide support for a carrier attack.

BING CROSBY HAD RECORDED "I'LL BE HOME FOR Christmas" just a few months earlier, in October. And like the last line says, you knew you'd only be home for Christmas in your dreams. But there'd been a show, after all, and what's not to love about a burlesque? Good old Chaplain Everett Wuebbens had arranged it all, with skits and dances, comedy bits, and a strip tease (!). The biggest laughs, and

applause, went to the guys who dressed in drag. (Six years later, actors would do the same thing in *South Pacific* on Broadway, and they'd win a Pulitzer Prize. Because what's sexier or more award-worthy than a wig made out of manila roping?)

But — wha? Nobody mentioned a movie. There's that familiar flapping, as a dropped filmstrip flutters around before catching, the brief burning smell as the projector light heats. If it's a training or recon film, somebody sure got their timing wrong. Talk about your Christmas anticlimax.

The movie starts, and — wait, isn't that Frank's wife? Hold on. That's Nancy, all right, with their son Tommy, and he's opening a present ... a cap pistol — and that's Badger's boy Mark, now, unwrapping what looks like a board game — Parcheesi? And there's ... that's — oh God, that's your Janie. With Ben. The kids. Your Laurie.

SHIP CHAPLAIN E. P. WUEBBENS HAD DONE MORE than orchestrate Christmas entertainment. Months earlier, in August, he'd collected \$5 from the crew dads, for a grand total of \$2,404.25, and had written to Macy's department store, enclosing the funds and requesting that Christmas presents — Wuebbens suggested a \$3 limit for each gift — be purchased and mailed to the 729 sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters of those men on the ship. Whether a football, a Raggedy Ann, a stuffed panda, or a baseball bat, the attached gift card was to say, simply, that the gift was from a



The effect of that flickering black-and-white newsreel, in a darkened hold of a ship the length of two and a half football fields, on a Christmas Eve, is hard to picture.

loved one and his shipmates on the USS *North Carolina*. Wuebbens goes on to type, “We realize that we are asking a great deal, but ... you will be adding greatly to the happiness of our children and to our own Christmas joy out here in one of the war zones. Incidentally we hope that a bit of that joy will reflect on you and your staff of workers.”

But the store’s “staff of workers” had gone much further than selecting, wrapping, and shipping: With the addresses of the recipients in hand, Macy’s invited all of the children and mothers who were able to come, and filmed them opening their gifts and telling — and in some cases, singing — their missing husbands and fathers hello, and Merry Christmas. The effect of that flickering black-and-white newsreel — the high, excited voices and sweet laughter of youngsters, the loving smiles and longing eyes of a spouse — in a darkened hold of

a ship the length of two and a half football fields, on a Christmas Eve, is hard to picture. A longing too deep to describe, a homesickness too great to express, a surprise too joyous to ever forget.

THE NUMBER OF LIVING WORLD WAR II VETERANS gets smaller every year. Today, few of the sailors aboard the ship that memorable night are still alive. Lloyd Glick refers to its events in a letter: “On Christmas morning a small group of the band played Christmas carols over the P.A. system. At 1000 the ship got underway. We had a big Christmas dinner at sea.” Wrote Bill Taylor: “I don’t believe there were many dry eyes that night.”

Duty called, because the enemy never sleeps, and the warship that would earn 15 battle stars headed forward to places unknown by its crew. But, thanks to Macy’s, for fathers, husbands, and brothers aboard the USS *North Carolina*, the sights and sounds of Christmas had been closer, sweeter, and merrier than they could have ever imagined.

THE BATTLESHIP ARRIVED IN WILMINGTON IN October 1961, and was dedicated as a memorial in April 1962. Shortly after, the USS *North Carolina* Battleship Association was formed. By 1968, 7,243 servicemen’s names had been located. Every year, the battleship association holds an annual reunion, and although fewer and fewer crew members are able to attend, the surviving families come in their stead, to share stories, to visit — and make — friends, and to preserve memories and the bonds made aboard a beloved ship. For these folks, who’ve recorded oral histories, donated funds, and given thousands of artifacts, we are grateful.

And for those rugged souls who were there in December ’43, who watched and wept at the images on a screen, who waited for war’s end, and survived to return to their families, we salute you. And we thank you with full, rejoicing hearts.

Merry Christmas, from decades hence. *Os*

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USS NORTH CAROLINA
1 Battleship Road Northeast
Wilmington, NC 28401
(910) 251-5797
battleshipnc.com



In 1944, Marines, sailors, and Santa (left) celebrated Christmas in the Philippines. Today, a reenactor shows what life was like at the controls of the USS *North Carolina*.



JOIN *OUR STATE* IN
SENDING SEASON'S
GREETINGS TO
NORTH CAROLINA'S
VETERANS WITH
THE ATTACHED
POSTCARD.

★ SEND A
★ VETERAN
★ A CARD



Messages run the gamut, from a 5-year-old's scribbled drawing to an 80-year-old's heartbreaking scrawl. But each one — of some 9,000 in the course of a year — bears the same sentiment: gratitude.

For years, schools and visitors to the battleship created homemade Christmas cards that were sent to North Carolina's four VA medical centers, in Durham, Fayetteville, Salisbury, and Asheville. At the USS *North Carolina*, "It's all about the men who served. We honor the military," says battleship curator Mary Ames Booker. In an interactive exhibit that opened last year, visitors to the battleship's museum can say thank you all year round with V-mail postcards and a post office box that came right off the mighty ship that's anchored mere feet away.

Each month, Booker boxes and mails the cards to the medical centers. There are so many cards now that our state's veterans can enjoy them throughout the year. Though the cards come from one place — the museum — their writers come from all over, and from every stage and walk of life: From current soldiers, retired members of the military, people who are about to go into service. From those who've lost a friend, a father, a family member. From entire families, as parents recognize an opportunity for teaching and remembering: Say thank you to someone who served your country. The notes don't just come from Americans: "You saved us," a South Korean citizen wrote. "Thank you."

"Only connect," writer E.M. Forster advised. "Never forget," we say so often now. Personal postcards from the USS *North Carolina* create a connection with our veterans, and ensure that their honor, service, valor, and sacrifice are not forgotten. — S.S.K.

This vintage mailbox at the USS *North Carolina* Visitor Center still works: Drop in a postcard, and your message will find its way to those who served.