

# The Washington Post

## Aboard the old Reina Mercedes ship again, at least in their minds

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For a ship that ceased to exist 54 years ago, the Reina Mercedes is still berthed in a lot of people's memories.

You will recall [from a previous column](#) that the Reina Mercedes was a cruiser captured in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and used as a station ship - an office building cum apartment building - at the Naval Academy from 1912 to 1957.

*Howard Benson* of Silver Spring has good reason to remember the ship. It was his home from 1938 to 1941, when his father commanded it. The Benson family's quarters consisted of the main deck aft of the mainmast, the poop deck and a deckhouse above the poop deck.

"It was fantastic, especially as a young kid," Howard recalled. He fished and crabbed off the ship's deck, and movies were shown to Navy personnel on the deck just above his room. "I used to sneak out instead of doing my homework," he said. "That didn't help my marks any."

When they moved aboard, Howard's sister *Mary* had just turned 16, a fact that made her extremely popular with the midshipmen. When she had a "tea fight" - academy lingo for a party - dozens of plebes would attend. She ended up marrying a middie. Another benefit: A cook, a steward and two mess attendants were at the family's disposal. When Howard's parents met friends at a football game, his mother, *Elizabeth*, would call at halftime and request dinner for her guests.

"The rudder came up through the dining room, but even so, you could feed 12 people at a big dining room table," Howard said.

The Reina Mercedes was known as "the fastest ship in the Navy" because of the way it was held fast to the dock by its mooring lines - and the barnacles that encrusted its hull. But it did move occasionally. "The ship went down to Norfolk every 12 years to get the bottom scraped," Howard recalled, and he tagged along when it was towed there in 1939.

Because so many jokes had been made about its immovable state, the crew decided to play a joke of its own. The tug towing the vessel was ordered to slow down, letting the towrope go slack and disappear into the water. A smoke bomb was detonated in the funnel of the ship, and a photo was taken from an airplane. It looked as if the old Spanish warship was steaming under its own power.

*Charlie Hall* also saw the Reina Mercedes at sea, though in a more desperate state. He was a midshipman in the fall of 1954, when Hurricane Hazel passed up the East Coast. The academy's smaller boats were pulled from the water, but the bigger ones had to weather the storm with their lines doubled and tripled. Charlie and some classmates watched as one of the academy's sailing ships, a beautiful yacht called the Vamarie, slipped its lines and was dashed to bits against the seawall.

It looked as if a similar fate would befall the Reina Mercedes. Her lines broke, and the storm pushed her toward the low stone bridge that carried Route 450 over the Severn River just upstream from the academy. "The stone bridge was a sturdy structure and it seemed likely to us midshipmen watchers that the outcome was going to be about the same as Humpty Dumpty and the ground below his wall," Charlie wrote.

But the officer on duty had rallied his crew. Two great wooden anchors - "to the casual eye more decorations than anything else," Charlie said - were dropped over the side. The lines were tightened, and the 280-foot ship came to a halt. "A minor miracle in many ways," Charlie wrote.

*Jim Perry* served aboard the Reina Mercedes in the 1940s when he was part of the academy's Marine Corps detachment. "Our quarters were in a small compartment in the bowels of the old Spanish cruiser," he wrote. "I can still remember the foul smell."

Jim wondered what happened to another station ship moored nearby. The Cumberland was home to dozens of African American sailors who worked in the academy's dining hall. Launched in 1904 and detailed to the academy in 1919, the Cumberland was scrapped in 1947.

Finally, there's a piece of the Reina Mercedes at the [National Museum of the U.S. Navy](#) at the Navy Yard: a crest from the ship. It's apparently different from the crest *Answer Man* wrote about last month, which is in the Naval Academy's possession.

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