

## ***NOT YOUR TYPICAL TEENAGE ADVENTURE***

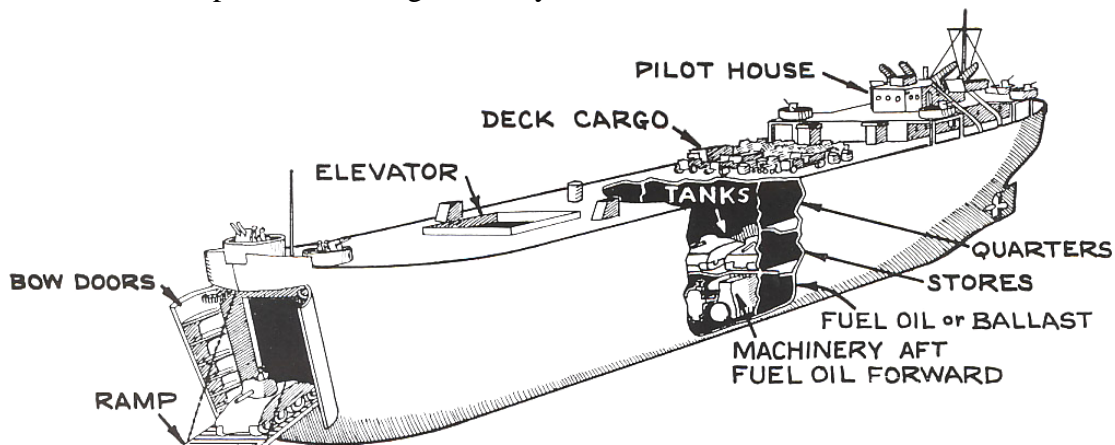
***But, then, ‘Shipyard Virginia’ wasn’t your typical home town, either***

On Monday, September 28, 1942, Pam Cole, a petite fourteen-year old was late for her freshman classes at Newport News High School. But she had a very good – and a highly unusual – excuse; she had just christened a ship! And this was not the first time, nor would it be the last when she had the honor of participating in ship launching ceremonies as her proud Poppa stood nearby.



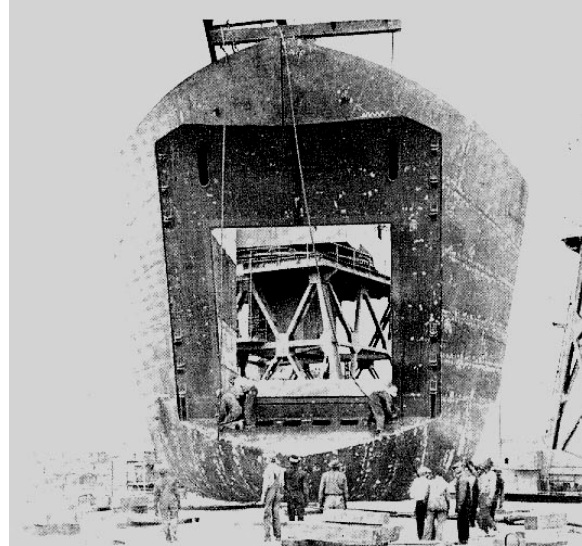
Pam Cole was the daughter of George D. Cole, Superintendent of the Hull Outfitting Division (X-30) at Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company. She and an older brother, George, Junior, lived with their parents at 325 – 56<sup>th</sup> Street; almost within sight (and certainly within earshot) of that world-famous shipbuilding plant where her Father held an important position before, during and after World War Two.

Undoubtedly, Pam’s Father had a principal role in the yard’s aggressive response to a high priority Navy request that was received in May of 1942; to add eighteen more ships to the enormous backlog of work at NNS that already included numerous aircraft carriers and cruisers. To carry the war to distant shores, the Navy had determined that they badly needed a huge fleet of uniquely designed vessels to carry out and support amphibious landings. The largest of such ships so urgently needed were the now-famous LST’s (Landing Ship, Tank). Numerous American shipyards responded, and more than 1,100 LST’s were mass produced during the war years.



Newport News Shipbuilding was the next to last yard to begin building LST’s, but the first to deliver one. A total of 16 such vessels were completed by the end of 1942. Ten of those 16 were built at Newport News. Between their contract date (May 21, 1942) and delivery date for the last NNS-built LST (January 7, 1943), eighteen of what were then commonly called ‘tank lighters’ were completed at Newport News Shipbuilding. These were records unsurpassed by any other yard building this class of ships.

The secret to this success was the yard's ability to quickly plan and create huge subassemblies on adjacent platens, and then rapidly build the LST's – six at a time – in one of the yard's then-new submerged shipways.



So urgent was the Navy's need, an aircraft carrier's keel was removed from Shipway #11 to make room for what amounted to a production line of LST's. In late November, the last NNS-built LST's were christened and floated out. Then, the keel for the USS FRANKLIN, (CV 13) was laid in that shipway. Appropriately, on December 7, 1942.

LST's didn't have names, just numbers. In addition, 'tank lighter' was somewhat of a misnomer; as these were not small landing craft. Each LST was 328 feet long, with a beam of 50 feet and a displacement of 3,776 tons. Powered by twin diesels that developed 1800 HP, they could transit any of the world's oceans. But their top speed of only 10-1/2 knots led to a less-than-flattering nickname: LST = Large Slow Target.

When it was time to float the first six LST's built at Newport News out of their common building facility, naval tradition – in spite of the war – prevailed, and each vessel was properly christened, one right after the other, by daughters of several shipyard executives.

NEWPORT NEWS SHIPBUILDING AND DRY DOCK COMPANY  
NEWPORT NEWS, VIRGINIA

September 12 1942

Dear Pamela:

I take pleasure in advising that you have been designated as Sponsor for LST 383, our Hull No 413, under construction at this plant for the U S Navy.

This vessel will be floated from submerged Shipway No 11 at about 8:00 A M Monday, September 29, 1942.

I hope that you will be able to officiate as Sponsor.

Mr Parker of this office will communicate with your Father as to detailed plans.

Sincerely yours,

*J B Woodward Jr*  
J B Woodward Jr  
V P and Gen Mgr

Miss Pamela Cole  
c/o Mr Geo D Cole  
Newport News Va

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The identity of the originator of the idea for local lasses to christen these vessels, along with how the participants were selected (and by whom) is lost in history. What is known is that there was ample precedent at the time for daughters of shipyard officials to serve as ship sponsors, dating back to the 1890s.

In early September, six unsuspecting young ladies received essentially identical letters like this one from the yard's General Manager. Pam Cole quickly provided written acceptance of this invitation and received, in return, a letter from the Commanding Officer of the Navy's Supervisor of Shipbuilding office at NNS. Rear Admiral O. L. Cox formally acknowledged her acceptance, and confirmed the date and time of the event.

However, Admiral Cox had also sternly cautioned her not to disclose these plans for several days (apparently to allow the Navy time to prepare and issue a press release). By then, she knew that not only was she going to be a ship sponsor, she was also going to christen the very first NNS-built LST. All of which left Pam, only fourteen years old, and a freshman in high school, with the biggest and most exciting story of her short lifetime; but with no ability whatsoever to share, outside of her immediate family!

Her dilemma was resolved a few days later, on September 22, 1942, when this brief item appeared in the local afternoon newspaper.

By that time, of course, her attention (and that of her Mother) were being directed to a much more urgent matter...*what to wear!*

Further instructions were provided via internal NNS Memo, dated September 25, 1942 (which was addressed to the Fathers of the six sponsors):

## Local Girls To Sponsor Tank Lighters

Launching exercises for six tank lighters constructed at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock company will be held Monday at 8 in the morning. Sponsors for the exercises will be daughters of shipyard officials. Miss Adele Fitzhugh, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Mayo M. Fitzhugh of River road, Brandon Heights; Miss Pam Cole, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. George D. Cole of Fifty-sixth street; Miss Alice Decker Palen, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Charles B. Palen of Warwick-on-the-James, and a student this winter at Columbia university.

Also Miss Mary Randolph Scott, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Randolph P. Scott of Warwick county, and a student at Georgetown Visitation convent, Washington, D. C.; Miss Barbara Anne Besse, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Summers B. Besse of Hilton Village, and Miss Janet Peebles, niece of Mr. and Mrs. H. Kenneth Peebles of Chesapeake avenue, Boulevard.

Subject: LAUNCHING L.S.T. Nos. 383-388 – Hulls 413-418

All Sponsors to assemble at 7:45 AM, Monday, September 28, 1942, at east end of Shipway No.11. Navy Officer will be there to escort each Sponsor to the vessel to be christened. Invocation will be given at this time by Navy Chaplain Captain Clement A. Siwinski, USN.

Sponsors will return after launching to same location where group picture of all Sponsors will be taken, and at this time Mr. J B Woodward, Jr, Vice President and General Manager, will present each Sponsor a memento.

The Supervisor of Shipbuilding has arranged for Signal Officer at elevated point about midships of Shipways, South Side, to signal Sponsor when christening and breaking of bottle is to occur.

In order to permit a picture of Sponsor breaking bottle, this will follow in sequence on each vessel.

Sketch is attached showing location of vessels and access afforded.

(signed) *Geo A Parker*, Assistant to the President

Pam recently recalled: *“Accompanied by my parents, I was led to the head of the shipway that morning. It was sunny, and cool, as I recall. I wore a brand-new, gold wool suit, along with a close-fitting, youthful hat (modified pillbox, I believe) and dark gloves to match. And very dressy shoes – with heels as high as my Mother would allow – which was not very high. Plus rayon stockings, since silk was not available during the war.*

*"I received a huge bouquet of red roses, and then Admiral Cox escorted me onto the bow of the ship I had been chosen to christen. A bottle of champagne was suspended there on a hook. With little fanfare, but when instructed to do so, I pulled the bottle back and let it swing. It easily smashed against the ship's structure, and splashed (and ruined) my dress.*



*"In the excitement of the moment, I forgot to say: 'I christen thee, LST 383', and Admiral Cox quickly scolded: 'Well, say it, damn it, and say it now!' Unaware, then, of naval traditions and superstitions, I later asked my Father why the Admiral was so upset, and he explained that navy men are very suspicious about doing such things right; otherwise a ship might have bad luck.*

*"Fortunately, LST 383 had a very useful navy career; participating in amphibious landings in Sicily and Italy in 1943, and in the 1944 D-Day invasion. She was never damaged by enemy fire during those events, and I fondly think of her as 'my' LST.*



*"After each of the other sponsors performed similar duties, we all posed, with our Fathers, at the head of the shipway for a photo. Then, we were all presented with similar gifts, beautiful gold bracelets, each of which was uniquely and suitably engraved. I still wear it proudly today.*

*"On the inside of the back of this treasure of mine is the following inscription:*

*Pamela Cole  
Sponsor LST 383 USN Hull 413  
September 28, 1942  
N.N.S. & D.D. Co.*



*“And then, it was all over. I headed back home and changed into my normal school girl attire: saddle shoes, bobby sox, skirt and sweater, and – always – pearls. Then, I made a late appearance at Newport News High School where I told my envious friends all about what happened that memorable morning.”*

Although that was Pam’s first of two experiences as a ship sponsor, she had served as somewhat of a “sponsors’ apprenticeship” a few months earlier. On May 31, 1942, Pam Cole was a youthful launching platform attendant when a friend of hers, Frances Robeson, christened a Liberty ship at NNS’ subsidiary yard in Wilmington, North Carolina. Unlike the ‘static’ ceremony associated with LST 383, the Liberty ship dramatically slid into the Cape Fear River, once properly christened.



Frances’ Father was Edward J. Robeson, Jr., a Director of the North Carolina Shipbuilding Corporation at the time (as well as a Newport News Shipbuilding Vice President and the Company’s Personnel Manager). George Cole and Ed Robeson were longtime friends, dating back to when they grew up in Waynesville, North Carolina. Consequently, their families were close, and, not unexpectedly, their daughters were also friends.



Frances Robeson, in turn, served as an attendant when Pam Cole christened another ship on December 28, 1944; the USS SEMINOLE. Started at the Wilmington yard as a C-2 cargo vessel for the Maritime Commission, NCSB’s Hull Number 194 was completed as a combat cargo vessel for the Navy.

Before the actual christening took place, the launching party posed, traditionally, on a patriotically decorated stand. First row, left to right: Martha Robeson, Frances Robeson (attendant), Pam Cole (sponsor), Mary Dame Stubbs (attendant) and Mrs. E.J. Robeson. Second row, left to right: Jeanne Craig a (friend of Pam’s), Pam’s Mother, Mrs. G.D. Cole, Betsy Minnigerode (another friend of Pam’s) and Pam’s Father, George Cole. Third row, left to right: Mr. W. S. McMahan, Mr. P. F. Halsey (both NCSB executives), and Ed Robeson. Although she doesn’t know exactly why, after all these years, Pam does remember that the fella to the right of the launching stand – peeking out from beneath the ship’s bow - was Luther Hodges, a friend of Frances Robeson.

By 1944 a skilled and experienced sponsor, 'Sweet Sixteen' Pam Cole flawlessly performed her duties, sending the new ship grandly sliding down the ways. This time, Pam remembered her 'one line', and SEMINOLE enjoyed a long and useful service career in the United States Navy.



At a luncheon afterwards, at Wrightsville Beach, Pam was presented with another sponsor's gift to commemorate the occasion; a diamond studded watch. The back of her watch is engraved as follows:

*P. C.*  
*U.S.S. SEMINOLE*  
*12 - 28 - 44*

According to Pam: *"It still runs, and I still wear it, on very special occasions."*



This watch is a tangible reminder of what most shipbuilders from the World War Two era, now long retired, wistfully recall as being the most exciting events in an otherwise hard and gritty vocation; sliding launchings.

Every one of the 243 of the ships produced in the Wilmington yard were built on inclined ways, and slid down the ways on an amazing average of one per week! The sliding launchings at Newport News, while fewer in number, were no less exciting. Much larger and more complex warships, especially aircraft carriers, attracted famous personages as sponsors, such as the Nation's First Lady.

Although not as dramatic, or – technically speaking – actually being launchings per se; the multiple christenings of the first group of six LST's were an important part of a historic event for Newport News Shipbuilding. Their construction marked the largest number of ships ever built at the same time in a submerged shipway at Newport News. More importantly, they were the first ships ever floated, instead of being launched by sliding at NNS. And finally, "Pam's LST" – and five sister ships - were the first vessels to be built in Shipway #11.

LST's had a role in initiating a host of new ideas that quickly became the norm in shipbuilding. Things like the repetitive utilization of proven designs, all-welded hulls, large subassemblies, mega-ton lifts, and efficient and accurate construction on even keels.

In a sense, then, “Pam’s LST” was the forerunner of the much larger and vastly more complex nuclear-powered warships that are the present-day pride of Newport News’ shipbuilders.



~ *Postscript* ~

Pamela Cole received her high school diploma in February 1946. After going to Newport News Business School for a few months, she attended Randolph Macon Woman’s College for four years, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in History.

She married Steve Peaslee in 1950 and moved to Connecticut. Pam and Steve had five children in all. Steve passed away in 1996.

Pam’s Father retired from NNS in the mid-1950s, thus ending the Coles’ close connections with ships and their christenings.

Currently, Pam and her husband spend the winters in Virginia, and the summers in Connecticut. While in Virginia, she often visits with her closest friend, Mary Dame Broad (nee Stubbs). Mary Dame, who served as an attendant at the 1944 christening, is well known in Tidewater; she is the widow of famed Virginia Pilot Doug Broad, and a sister-in-law of the late Dick Broad, Apprentice School graduate and former NNS Vice President of Nuclear Operations.

Recently, Pam and her husband, Sam Hunter, were in a Steamship Historical Society of America group that had the rare opportunity to tour the Nuclear Ship SAVANNAH; currently tied up in Newport News. In that somewhat appropriate setting, we met, and she told me of her non-typical teenage experience. I immediately started planning to write this article, and deluged her with questions and illustration requests.

I’m not sure who has enjoyed more the numerous exchanges of correspondence – Pam or me. But the end result has been the development of a new friendship...and the creation of this trip down memory lane for her...and for the enjoyment those who share our mutual fond memories of those times when a ship’s first move was a dramatic slide to the sea...

*Bill Lee*  
September 2007