

**Amongst the innumerable traditions of Newport News Shipbuilding...**

**...one of the most improbable of them all is what has become legendary...**

***THE ANNUAL JOHN YOHO GOING AWAY PARTY***



The official history of Newport News Shipbuilding, after 125 years of existence, becomes even more meaningful and humanized when it is augmented by glimpses at what innovative shipbuilders accomplished. Not just by designing and building the world's best ships, but what they created after hours...or when their supervisors weren't looking!

This is one of those tales; one that spans and extended and totally unanticipated period of time, and eventually took on a life of its own before it finally faded away and became a part of the shipyard's rich folklore. Without further ado, here's the rest of the story.

It all began innocently enough. 45 years ago...in 1966. And lasted over four decades.

John Yoho was a 24-year-old piping designer at Newport News Shipbuilding when, in late spring or early summer of 1966, he announced he was leaving to take a job in Pittsburgh. Normally, back then, when someone left the yard, they usually were feted to a two-dollar steak plus a beer or two by a few co-workers at the original Sammy's Steakhouse on Washington Avenue.

Instead, Henry McBurney, a friend and fellow piping designer organized a more expansive going away party for John. The weather was nice that time of year, and a large number of John's associates wanted to wish him well. So Henry made plans for everyone to gather after work on a Friday in a picnic area at the Mariners' Museum Park.

Then...John announced that he was not going to leave after all!

Turned out, John realized that if he left the shipyard he'd lose his draft deferment. That, plus the enticement of a raise was all it took for him to stay. When Henry McBurney learned of his friend's change of heart, a sizable amount had already been collected from a number of individuals. More importantly, most of it had been sent on refreshments.

Unable to refund the money, the party was on...never mind John's decision to stay. The all-male attendees were mostly young. That was fortunate, for there were no restrooms in area where the event was held. A grove of trees screened the party from being seen by passer-bys on Warwick Boulevard...and provided a convenient repository for used beer.

Near the end of that initial event, Apprentice alumnus Gordon Pullen (Designer, Piping - 1943), a senior member of the piping designers present made a pronouncement. Gordon was not known to drink beer, but he had a couple that day. According to those that were present, he swayed atop a picnic table and proclaimed: "I want to welcome you to the first annual John Yoho going away party."

And thus, *The Annual John Yoho Going Away Party* tradition was started.

Apprentice alumnus Ashton Haywood (Designer, Piping - 1962) recently provided a simple explanation: "John was a very likable guy. He could get along with anyone. He was just one of the guys". John Yoho added: "There were 60-80 guys at that first gathering. Most, probably all of whom worked in what was called Piping A; the drawing room that was responsible for the design of machinery spaces on NNS-built ships. For the first few years, no women were allowed. We were too young and rambunctious."

The parties continued and grew in size over the next few years. Over time, numerous members of shipyard management attended, including at least two Apprentice alumni who served, sequentially, as the department head of Piping A; Gene Stephenson (Designer, Piping - 1935) and Kent Plemmons (Designer, Piping - 1960). Designers from other shipyard departments began to join in as word of the annual, fun-filled event spread. At one point, said John, the crowd that gathered exceeded two hundred.

During the first decade of these parties, strenuous activities like softball and volleyball were included. There was also horseshoes for the less active, and of course the opportunity to drink beer, gossip, drink beer, renew acquaintances, drink beer, embellish oft-told shipyard stories, and...of course...to drink beer. Food was also provided.

After years of gathering in the park, the site was switched to the grounds of the Warwick Yacht Club, where restroom facilities were readily available. By then, female co-workers were included, and the occasional wife or girl friend.



John Yoho left the shipyard for good in 1974 to take another job. Nevertheless, after that year's 'for real' going away party, the tradition continued unabated until 2006...an additional and astounding thirty-two more years! Not one to ever be left out of a good time, John returned, year after year, to participate.

The 1996 gathering commemorated thirty years of parties. John made what had become his annual pilgrimage from Florida back to the Virginia Peninsula. Numerous other former shipbuilders came from both near and far, joining former comrades that were either still working at NNS or had retired and stayed in the Newport News area.

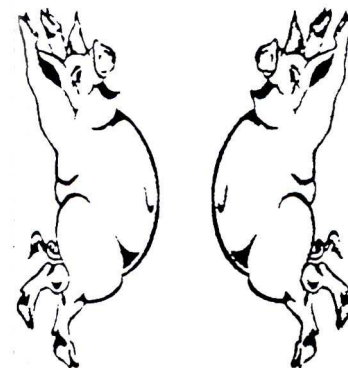
By that thirty-year mark, things had gotten so well organized that there even was a one-page newsletter; probably clandestinely reproduced and then distributed to prior attendees and future hopefuls!



Beneath this banner was provided a summary of the John Yoho tradition. Plus the when, the where, the cost, organizer contact info and...the illustrated menu depicted on the right; complete with a bit of pretty typical shipyard-social commentary!

By the time the event was held, there was even a commemorative t-shirt available for sale. This logo adorned the upper left portion of the front of the shirt. The back featured the illustration that appears at the top-right of the first page of this story.

- MENU:**  
**BARBECUE**  
**BAKED BEANS**  
**COLE SLAW**  
**POTATO SALAD**  
**SOFT DRINKS**  
**BEER**



*I can think of a few people who could have posed for this picture*

In the last few years the parties were held, the more physical of activities disappeared completely. Eventually, they were followed into limbo by even the horseshoe contests. At the end of the annual event's long run, eating, drinking and exchanging happy memories amongst a sedate gathering predominated. Two kegs of beer proved to be more than ample. From time to time, the venue changed.



As the annual event moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the crowd became noticeably smaller and noticeably older. Not necessarily more mature; just older. The last few parties were held at the Knights of Columbus' outdoor picnic facilities. In 2006, the 40<sup>th</sup> year after the tradition started, the organizers called a halt.

Jim Bohlken, a retiree from Piping A and one of the organizers of the recent years' events said: "We just decided 40 years was a good time to retire it." The innocent instigator of it all, Henry McBurney, whimsically added: "At one time we had five or six kegs of beer. It was a real rock-'em, sock-'em thing." Kent Smith put a final editorial touch to it all: "We used to talk about cars and women. Now we talk about retirement and surgery."

The guest of honor came up from Florida for his last 'going away' hurrah in 2006. "They used me as an excuse to party. Didn't matter if I was here or not." John said, "I've probably missed being here only about four times." But he was there with his wife and kids, and his 85-year-old father, Jack Yoho, for the final event.

Several generations were represented at the last party. Included in this multi-generational mix were some shipyard employees that were not even born when the Yoho tradition was started.

They could not have picked John Yoho out of the crowd, even if they had wanted to...



~ *POSTSCRIPT* ~

It was my pleasure to attend a few Yoho events in the late 60's/early 70's. After leaving Newport News at the end of 1983, I pretty much forgot about them. Then, in 1996, my close friend, John Castleman, one of the original party-goers, called. He said the thirty-year celebration was going to be a big one; a good time to gather together some former associates from our design days at NNS. It was. It also was the last time I saw John Castleman, before he passed away far too young just five years later.

In this 1996, slightly out-of-focus photo...perhaps appropriately so...appear, left to right: Johnny Barefoot (Designer, Atomic: 1966), Cal Forest (Designer, Atomic: 1972), John Castleman, Lenny Burns, myself and Ronnie Spears. John, Lenny and Ronnie were in Piping A and attended the very first Yoho event. In the late 1960's they all were assigned to the NIMITZ propulsion plant mock-up design team which I once ran.



Numerous definitions of 'folklore' exist. Here's one I favor: "The traditional beliefs, practices, customs, stories, jokes, songs, etc. of a people, handed down orally or behaviorally from individual to individual. Unlike literature, the folklore of a society is rarely written down or published except by those who collect and study it."

*That's my job; that's what I do.*

*Bill Lee*  
November 2011

DISCLAIMER

Some quotes that appear in this story were 'borrowed' from media interviews conducted in 1993 and 2006 with veteran party-goers. Additional information and quotes were also gathered more recently from a few of the original participants, including, of course, John Yoho. Some minor factual disconnects were noted when comparing their most recent reminiscences, as time played tricks on beer-soaked memories.

What is related in this story is believed to be the most plausible version. Besides I have never let the absolute truth, substantiated or not, get in the way of a good story...

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