

Remembering the USS Tulip, a Civil War icon

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St. Inigoes, MD - It's been 152 years since the November night when the USS Tulip, serving in the American Civil War—among other things patrolling the Potomac River in search of blockade runners—headed up the river for boiler repairs.

The ship never made it to the Anacosta Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.

Just off Piney Point in St. Mary's County and Raggedy Point in Virginia, the boiler blew Nov. 11, 1864. The ensuing explosion ripped the ship apart, claiming 49 lives in the process.

On a crisp morning in St. Inigoes Friday, Nov. 4, the U.S. Navy paid tribute to those lost in the disaster.

Executive Officer Capt. Jason Hammond, said he was overwhelmed to learn that seven generations later, family members of those lost on the chilly Potomac in 1864 still remember and come to honor their ancestors.

"It's amazing," Hammond told the descendants. "Thank you for being here."

Originally named Chi Kiang, the USS Tulip was intended for duty with China's military in 1863. The little steam-screw gunboat and its sister-ship, USS Fuchsia, were constructed in the winter of 1862 by master shipwright James C. Jewett out of New York City. In 1863, the U.S. Navy purchased Tulip for \$30,000 and moved it to the New York Navy Yard where its superstructure was modified for a lower profile. Designated as a fourth-rate gunboat, Tulip was assigned to the Potomac Flotilla Base, where it served until its boiler exploded.

George Kennett, from a longstanding St. Mary's County family and chief of the Naval Air Station Patuxent River Fire Department, approached the commanding officer at NAX Patuxent River 10 years ago about doing a ceremony to commemorate the historic event.

Webster Field adopted the site and the ceremony has been held ever since.

"These men exemplified the Navy principles of honor, courage and commitment," Hammond asserted. "Off Piney Point, the ship blew up and sank. Only 10 were saved and two of those later died. Eight of the dead were buried on this site."

Jamie Jackson, descendant of James Jackson who died in the explosion, journeyed with her father from Pennsylvania.

Her ancestor was an anomaly in the Civil War, a resident of Deltasville, Va. who fought as a member of the Union Navy.

Not too many Virginians fought for the north.

She said that she and her father Albert Jackson made the three-and-a-half hour journey from Pennsylvania to Southern Maryland for the commemoration.

"My dad is here every year," she said. "Some of these folks have been coming for 10 years."

The Maryland Maritime Archaeology Program and several volunteers located the Tulip wreck in May of 1994 and dove on the vessel in June of that year. The following August, the crew returned to the site under a Department of Defense Legacy Resource Management Program grant, which evolved into planning of a full-scale remote sensing and video taping of the site in 1996. Recovered artifacts included armament, military uniforms, navigation equipment, kitchen items, toiletry items, medicinal bottles, ship's hardware, along with tools and engine room items.

"That the families of these men come out here, it is inspiring to me," Hammonds said.

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