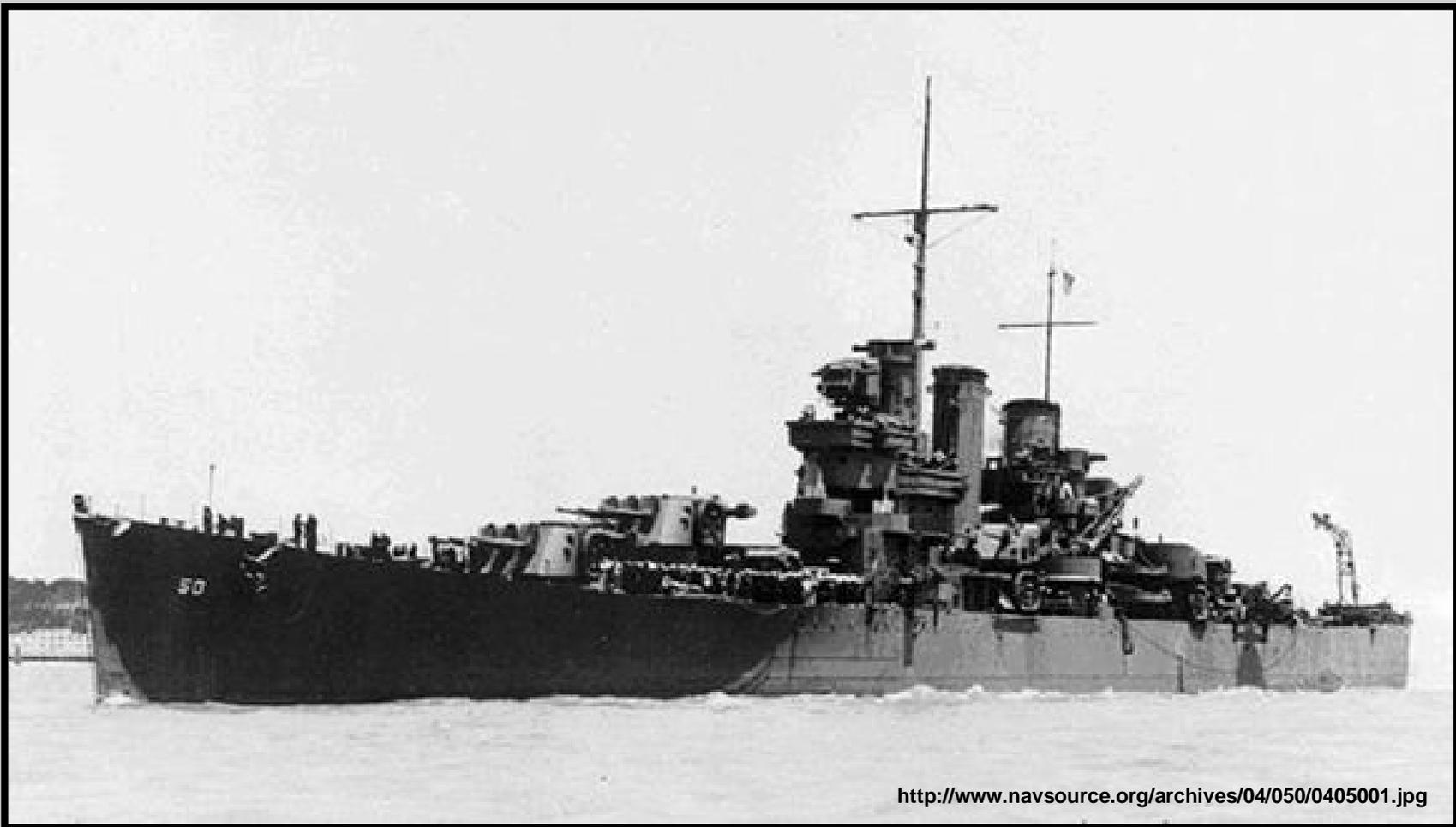


USS Helena

September 18, 1939 - March 2, 1940



<http://www.navsourc.org/archives/04/050/0405001.jpg>

The USS Helena CL 50 was built in 1939 and launched on August 27, 1939. The Navy commissioned the vessel on September 18, 1939 and Adrian was assigned to the ship that first day.

The ship was classified as a St. Louis-class light cruiser of which there were two: The USS St Louis CL 49 and the USS Helena CL 50. The CL referred to cruiser (St) Louis class. The number was the ship's hull number.



What was a light cruiser?

A light cruiser was a classification given to fast warships of medium tonnage. They had a long cruising radius but less armor and firepower than a battleship. The two St Louis class ships built in 1939 had improved armament and were the first US cruisers to be armed with twin five-inch 38-caliber guns. Two treaties, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 and the London Naval Treaty of 1930, attempted to limit the size of battleships built around the world and both treaties were signed by the USA, Britain, France, Italy and Japan. Think of it as an attempt to control an early arms race on water. According to the treaties, battleships and cruisers had specific dimensions that had to be followed in terms of size, water displacement, and armament.



**Adrian on the newly
commissioned USS Helena**



**Adrian and friend George Yellak. While in
the Navy, Adrian was nicknamed "Slim."**

When he came aboard, Adrian's rank was Sea1c (seaman first class) and he had already served almost two years of his four-year enlistment term. He was probably thrilled to have left the old USS Arkansas that was built in 1910 for a brand new, state of the art ship!

Between September 18, 1939 and December 21, 1939, the Helena was involved with signing on its crew of about 900 men and taking short runs to test out the new ship. During this time the Helena, with Adrian aboard, accomplished the following:

9

Name FORTINBERRY, Adrian Woodrow
(Name in full, surname to the left.)

No. 274 32 33 Rate Sealc (A.A. / P.A.)

Date reported 23 August, 1939

Ship RECEIVING SHIP AT NEW YORK
or
Station U.S.S. ARKANSAS
From

Transferred this date to the USS Helena for duty. Auth: Captain of the Yard, NYNY ltr. of 14 September, 1939.

Date transferred 18 September, 1939

To U.S.S. Helena

C.H. Ramsdell, Lt. Cdr., USN (ADM)
Signature and rank of Commanding Officer.

Date received 18 September, 1939

Ship U.S.S. Helena
or
Station Receiving Ship At New York
From

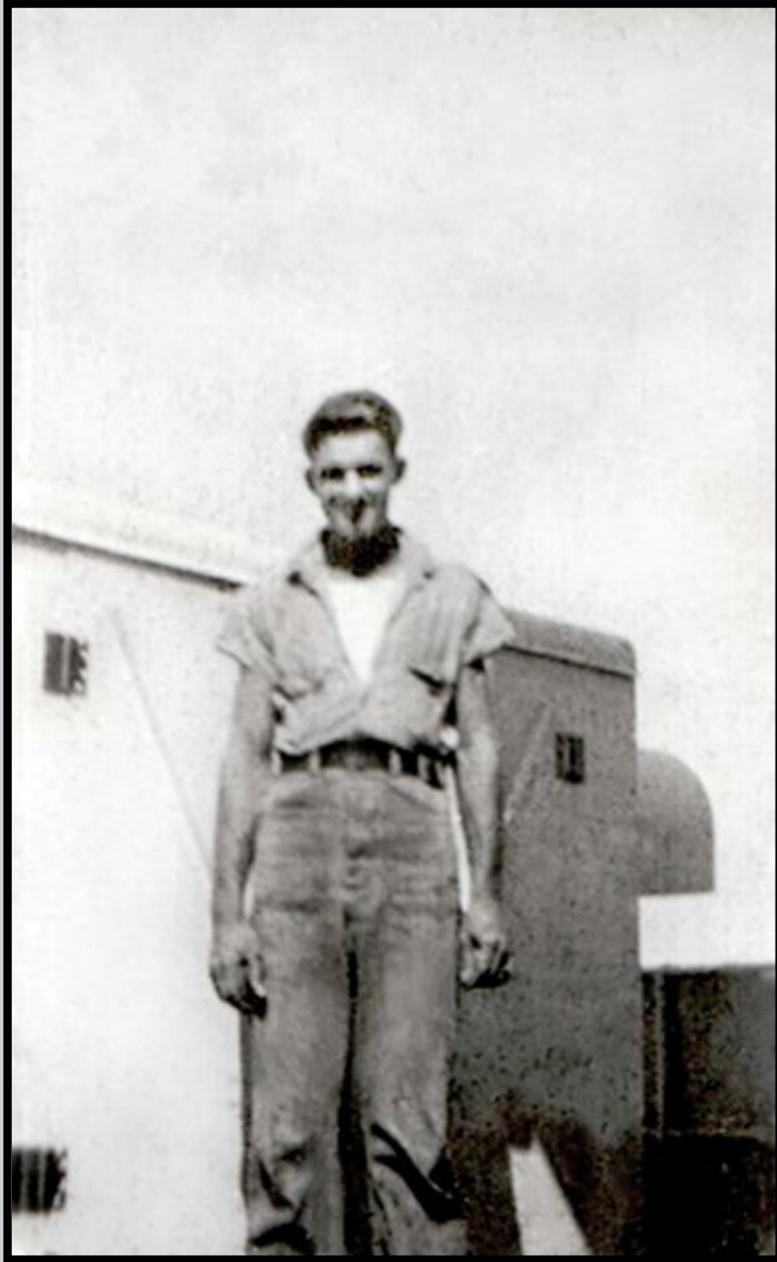
G. Richardson, Comd., USN
Signature and rank of Commanding Officer. 4-4111

1. The ship took a short "Builder's Trial" sail to check out equipment. During this trip, mechanics and yard workers were on board to run tests and make repairs.
2. They sailed to Newport, Rhode Island for tests at the Naval Torpedo Station. The Helena was one of the first US ships to have a degaussing belt to deflect magnetic mines. The ship made multiple runs while the station fired dummy torpedoes. The results were never disclosed.
3. This was followed by a weekend of liberty while docked in Boston, Massachusetts.
4. On Tuesday, November 7, 1939, the Helena was in Rockland, Maine. Here the Helena used a one mile course set up off shore to test their top speed. This would allow them to make a calibration chart of turns versus speed which would correlate the number of revolutions of the screw to a particular speed.

5. Next, they went back to the New York Navy Yard until just before Christmas, 1939.
NOTE: Adrian and Wanda were married on November 19, 1939, so while the ship was in port, they obviously got together with the realization that the shakedown cruise was imminent and Adrian would be gone for two months. Ah, young love! Adrian was 20, soon to be 21 and Wanda was 18. A marriage record has never been located for them. They most likely married in the chapel on the Navy base.
6. The final Builder's Trial sail occurred from December 11 to 13, 1939 to work out any problems before leaving for the extended shakedown cruise.

Adrian and Wanda had about a month between getting married and Adrian leaving for two months. No stories from this time period are known by the family. One could guess that a Southern Baptist boy did not really fit in well with an "English as a second language," Polish, Catholic family. Not only were the language and religion foreign to Adrian but so was the food. His new in-laws barely spoke English and Adrian's Southern Mississippi dialect was probably incomprehensible to them!





Shakedown Cruise

December 21, 1939 - February 27, 1940

A shakedown cruise is a trip during which the performance of a ship is tested and the ship's crew becomes familiar with its operation. The Helena's shakedown cruise was scheduled to visit several ports on the eastern coast of South America. Reminder: The world was not a stable place. Britain and France had declared war on Germany September 3, 1939.

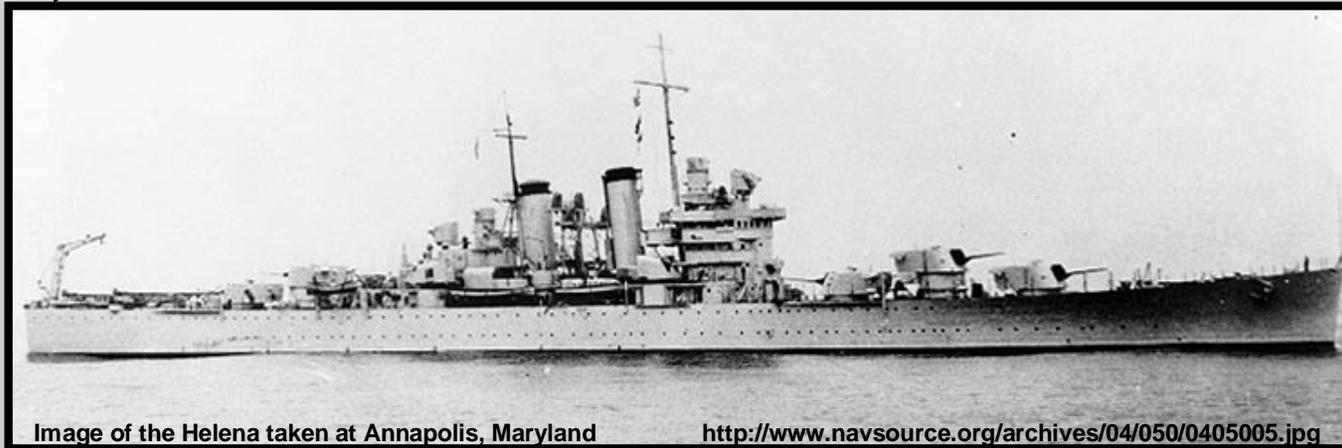


Image of the Helena taken at Annapolis, Maryland

<http://www.navsource.org/archives/04/050/0405005.jpg>

21 December 1939: The Helena left New York for Annapolis, Maryland and when reaching Annapolis, anchored in the Chesapeake Bay during a sleet storm. The Navy provided chartered buses to be used by anyone wishing to return to New York for the holidays. You can bet that Adrian was with the group since he had just been married the previous month. Evidently there was a problem lowering the boats to go to shore and the sailors had to wait for hours in their dress blues. They finally made it to shore and the buses arrived in New York City in the early hours of the morning. I would assume that Adrian and Wanda stayed with her parents in the Polish neighborhood of Brooklyn not far from the Navy shipyard he had just left! The Helena left Annapolis on December 27, 1939. This would have been Adrian's first experience with the many Polish Catholic Christmas traditions!

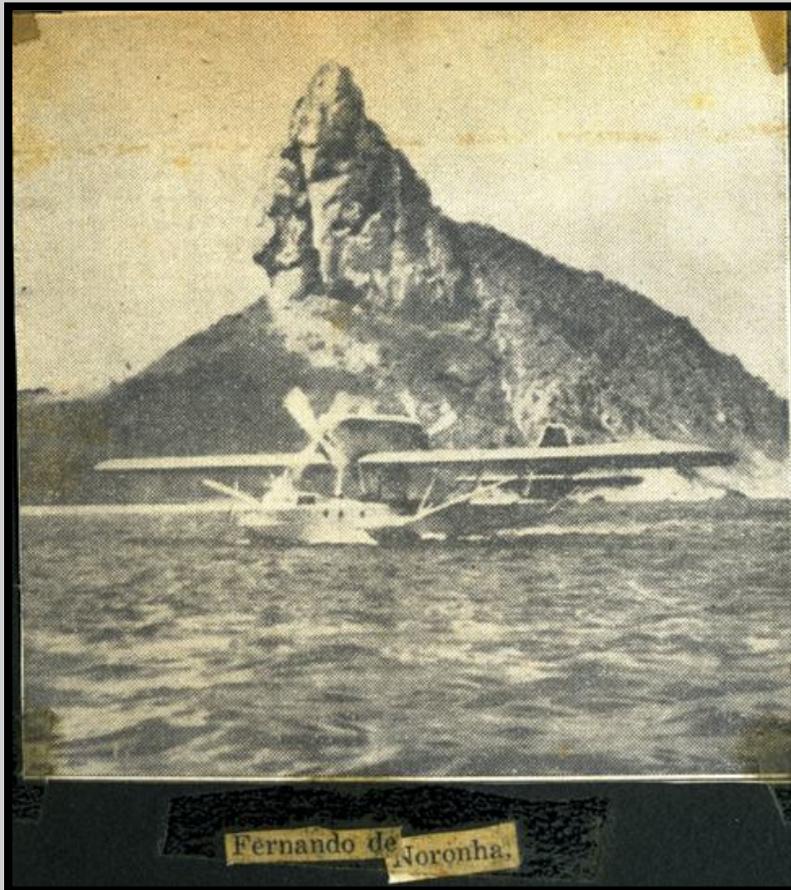
27 December, 1939 – 3 January, 1940: On December 27, the ship returned south, this time to the Naval Station at Norfolk, Virginia. Norfolk was designated as the Helena's home port. In all likelihood, Wanda made the trip down from Brooklyn to be with Adrian. We have an old, very dark picture that was probably taken at this time. Wanda is knitting or crocheting while sitting on a bed. Evidently, they rented a trailer in Portsmouth, Virginia for a few days. Below were the words written by Wanda on the back of the picture. The clock reads 7:30 so her note about staying up late is confusing!

*Our trailer remember?
What were we doing
staying up that late?
Portsmouth Va.*



6 January 1940 – 7 January 1940: The Helena spent two days in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. While off the coast of Cuba, they test fired the guns.

13 January 1940: Adrian experienced his first crossing of the equator. In the Navy, this has always been a big event for sailors. Adrian was considered a “pollywog” since it was his first trip to the southern hemisphere. Later in his career, he would cross the equator again but as a “shellback.” There will be more discussion on this topic on his second crossing since we have memorabilia that Adrian saved when he crossed the equator while on the USS Melville.



Fernando de Noronha: On their way to Buenos Aires, Argentina, the ship stopped at an island off the coast of Brazil called Fernando de Noronha. The Helena had heard a rumor that the island harbored a German submarine base. There were no real docks, so the Helena anchored off shore and sent a group by boat to check with the local authorities. The rumor proved to be false, so they proceeded to Buenos Aires. Adrian thought enough of the event that he taped a picture in his album and labeled it as you can see on the left. Until doing this research, no one knew why the picture was even in the album or important to him.

Admiral Graf Spee - German pocket battleship: As the Helena entered the mouth of the Rio de la Plata on their way to Buenos Aires, the Helena passed through the area where the month before (December 13, 1939) a now famous sea battle occurred. This was a battle fought between three British cruisers and the Graf Spee (sister ship to the Bismarck). Essentially, the British ships had the German ship trapped so that it could not maneuver into open ocean to escape. The Graf Spee was damaged by a torpedo and made its way to the neutral port of Montevideo, Uruguay. More about this ship later.

Photo # NH 80973 German armored ship Admiral Graf Spee in the English Channel, 1939



http://www.militaryfactory.com/ships/imgs/kms-admiral-graf-spee_3.jpg



Picture taken January 22, 1940 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Adrian is on the far left in the line with his hat cocked forward as identified in the insert to the right.



U.S.S. HELENA
BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA
JANUARY 22, 1940
SHAKE DOWN CRUISE

<http://www.usshelena.org/cl50-19.jpg>



Adrian purchased this tray for Wanda while in Argentina between January 22 and 28, 1940. The tray is made of wood, glass, and butterfly wings. Close-ups on the next two slides.

U.S.S. HELENA



Top of tray



WANDA

BUENOS AIRES.

1940

bottom of tray

22 January 1940 – 28 January 1940: While in Buenos Aires, the citizens made the American sailors welcome. While ashore, the crew ate lots of beef. In fact, three meat packing companies (Armour, Swift, and Wilson) invited the Helena crew to an asado (barbecue). One half of the crew went the first day (starboard watch) and the other half was to attend the next day. Due to rain, the second group did not attend. The ship departed before the party could be rescheduled. We do know that Adrian made it to the Argentine party.

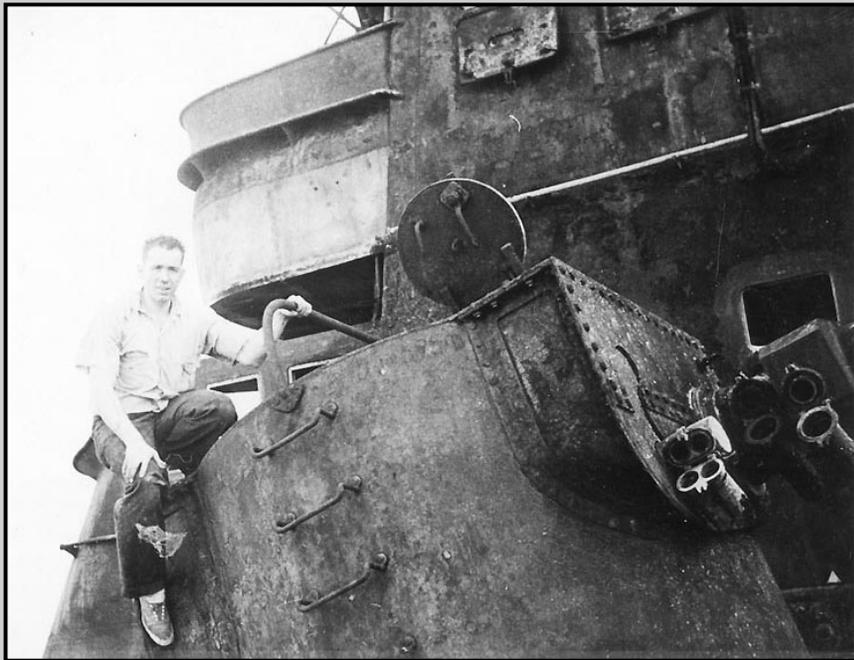


The photo is very poor quality. Adrian is on the left holding a pitcher. On the back he wrote: “Adrian and Jake Sader at the osadio Buenos Aires Argentina

29 January 1940 – 3 February 1940: The Helena sailed from Buenos Aires to Montevideo, Uruguay. As you can see from the map below, that was not very far. Now back to the story of the Graf Spee seen here. Because the Graf Spee was damaged in the battle, by international law it was given 24 hours to repair and leave the neutral port of Montevideo. The German government was given two extensions but due to pressure from the US, France, and England, Uruguay was forced to ask the ship to leave. Because it could not leave port without being captured by the waiting British ships, the captain supposedly made a call to Hitler. Hitler ordered him to scuttle the ship to prevent capture. The captain had the sailors leave everything on board, took the ship further out in the harbor, set charges, and “sank” the ship. Since the ship was in relatively shallow water, it did not really sink. Due to the fuel on board, it burned for several days. Not long after that, the captain of the Graf Spee committed suicide in his hotel room in Montevideo.

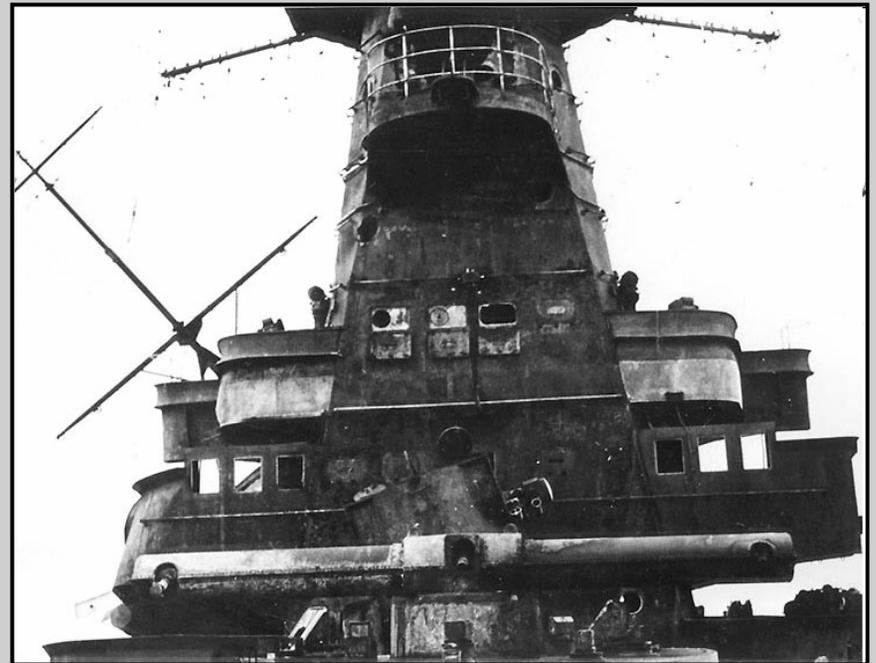


Rumors were that the ship had state of the art equipment. Because some of the ship was still above water when the Helena crew arrived in late January, some of the sailors went on board to explore. It is not likely that Adrian was a part of this group, but it is interesting history. He did meet some of the German sailors from the Graf Spee. Evidently, the war was over for those sailors and while in port, British, U.S., and German sailors were often seen together.



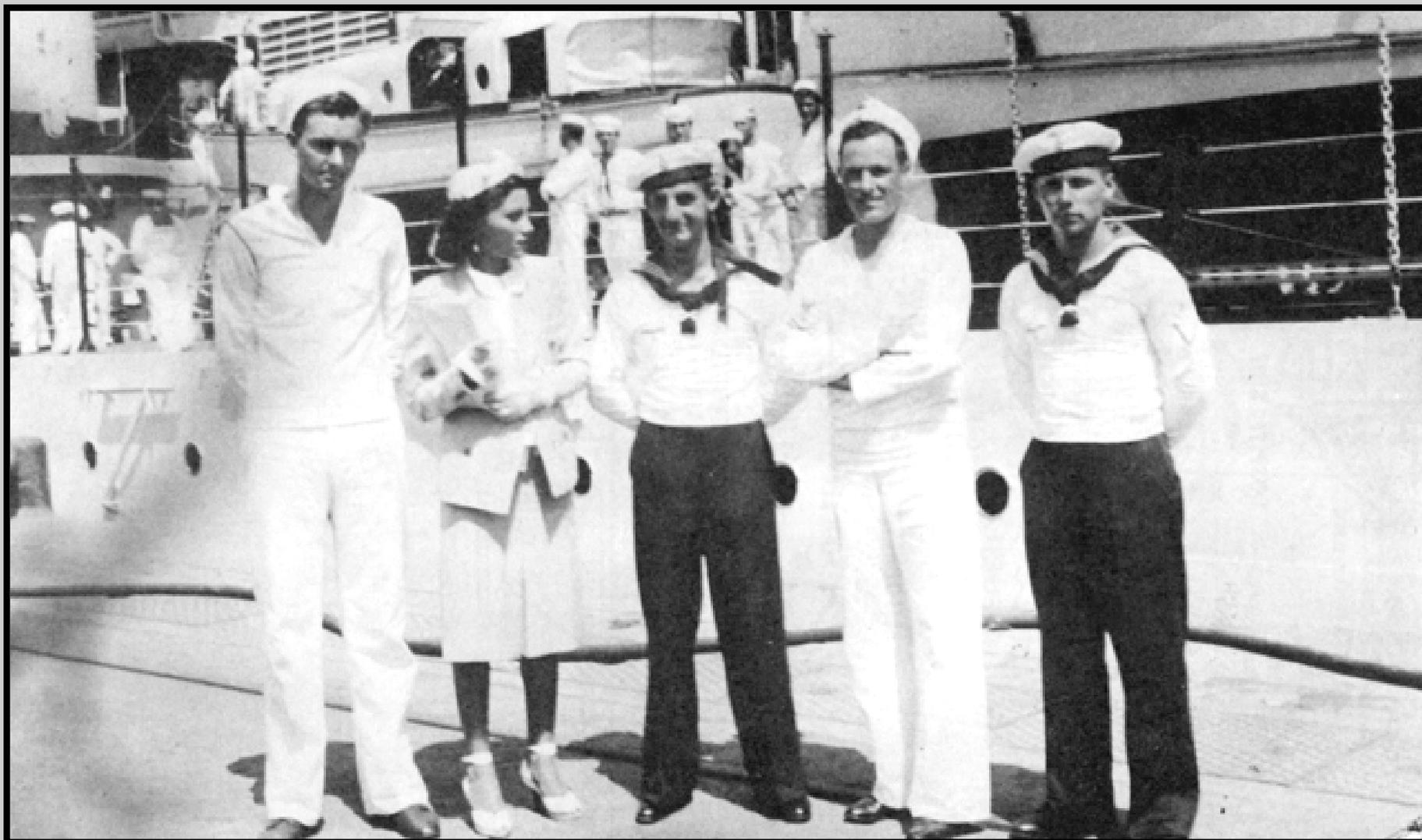
<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/OnlineLibrary/photos/images/h51000/h51982a.jpg>

Photographed on 2 February 1940 by Ensign Richard D. Sampson, USN, for an intelligence report prepared by USS *Helena* (CL-50) during her shakedown cruise to South America.



<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/OnlineLibrary/photos/images/h51000/h51981at.jpg>

Admiral Graf Spee's forward superstructure, looking aft, with the conning tower rangefinder in the foreground and the mainmast partially collapsed in the left background, 2 Feb 1940. Photo taken by a Ensign Richard D. Sampson.



It is easy to identify Adrian on the left. He is standing with two German sailors from the Graf Spee, one of their girlfriends, and a shipmate named Thomas Powell. Powell wrote a book called "White Hat, Gold Braid and Marine Green" that Barbara ordered for us one Christmas. This picture is from that book. Adrian most likely never saw this photo.

Powell, Thomas. *White Hat, Gold Braid and Marine Green: The Naval Career of Lieutenant Commander Thomas J. Powell, USN (Ret), 1932-1958*. San Antonio, TX: Burke Pub., 2000. 177. Print.

5 February 1940 – 10 February 1940: The Helena stopped at Santos, Brazil southwest of Rio de Janeiro. Many of the crew went ashore to visit the Carnival going on in Sao Paulo as part of a pre-Lent celebration (think New Orleans Mardi Gras).



Sao Paulo circa 1940

Thomas Powell wrote: “People ran around in weird costumes. There were parades, and girls in the streets sprayed strong-scented cologne on boys who interested them. The whole crew of the Helena stunk, as did the crews’ living compartments.”¹

Adrian, being only 21, was probably amazed at his experiences in South America and most likely soaked in perfume!

1. Powell, Thomas. *White Hat, Gold Braid and Marine Green: The Naval Career of Lieutenant Commander Thomas J. Powell, USN (Ret), 1932-1958.* San Antonio, TX: Burke Pub., 2000. 60. Print.



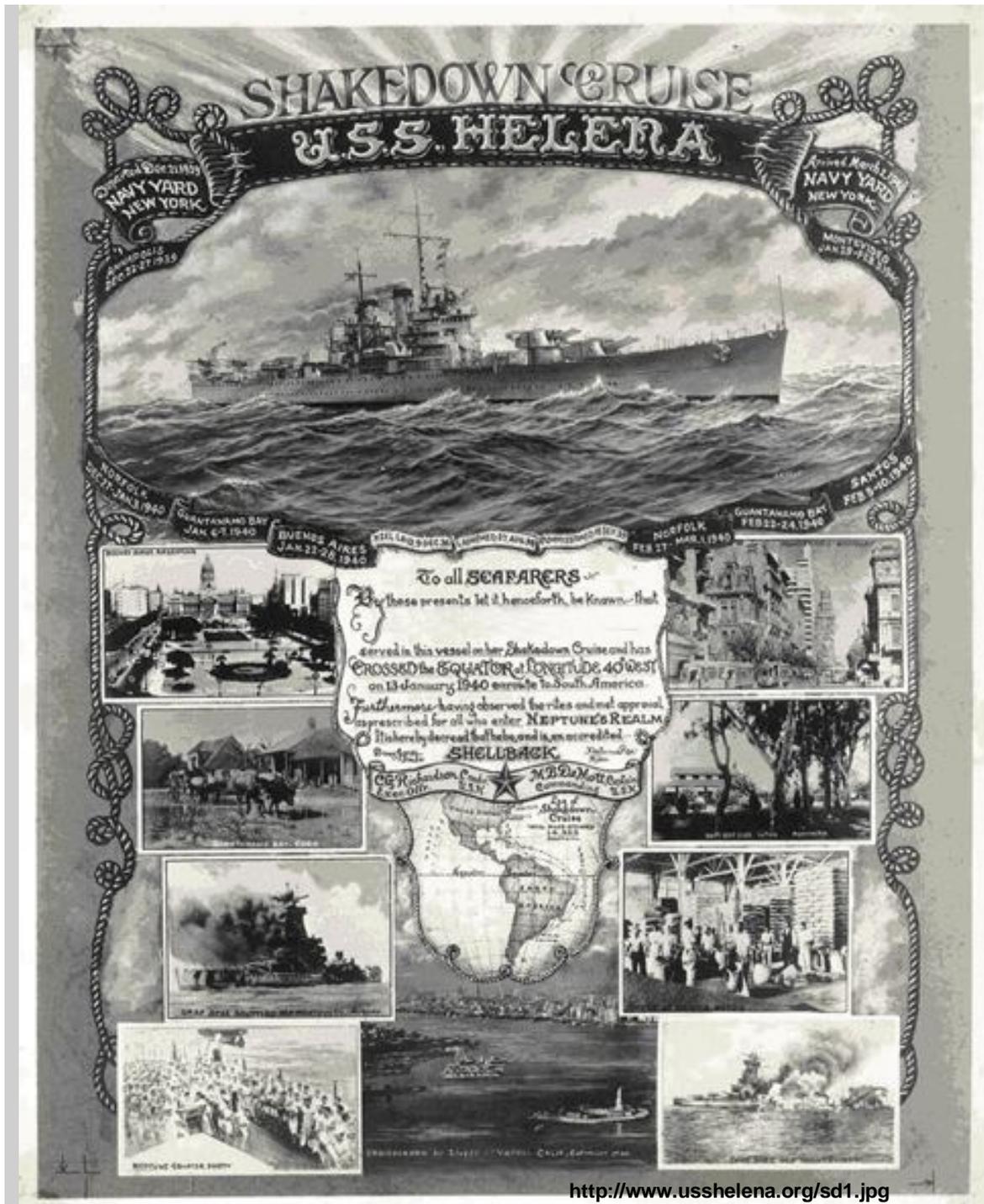
<http://sampa.sp.2004.fotoblog.uol.com.br/images/photo20080302125436.jpg>

It was time to head back to North America! On the return trip, they once again stopped at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba February 22-24, 1940.

From there, they stopped at the Norfolk Navy Base from February 27 to March 1, 1940. The cruise ended on March 2, 1940 back in New York. I am sure Wanda Werbicki (now Fortenberry) was standing at the dock when he stepped off the ship!



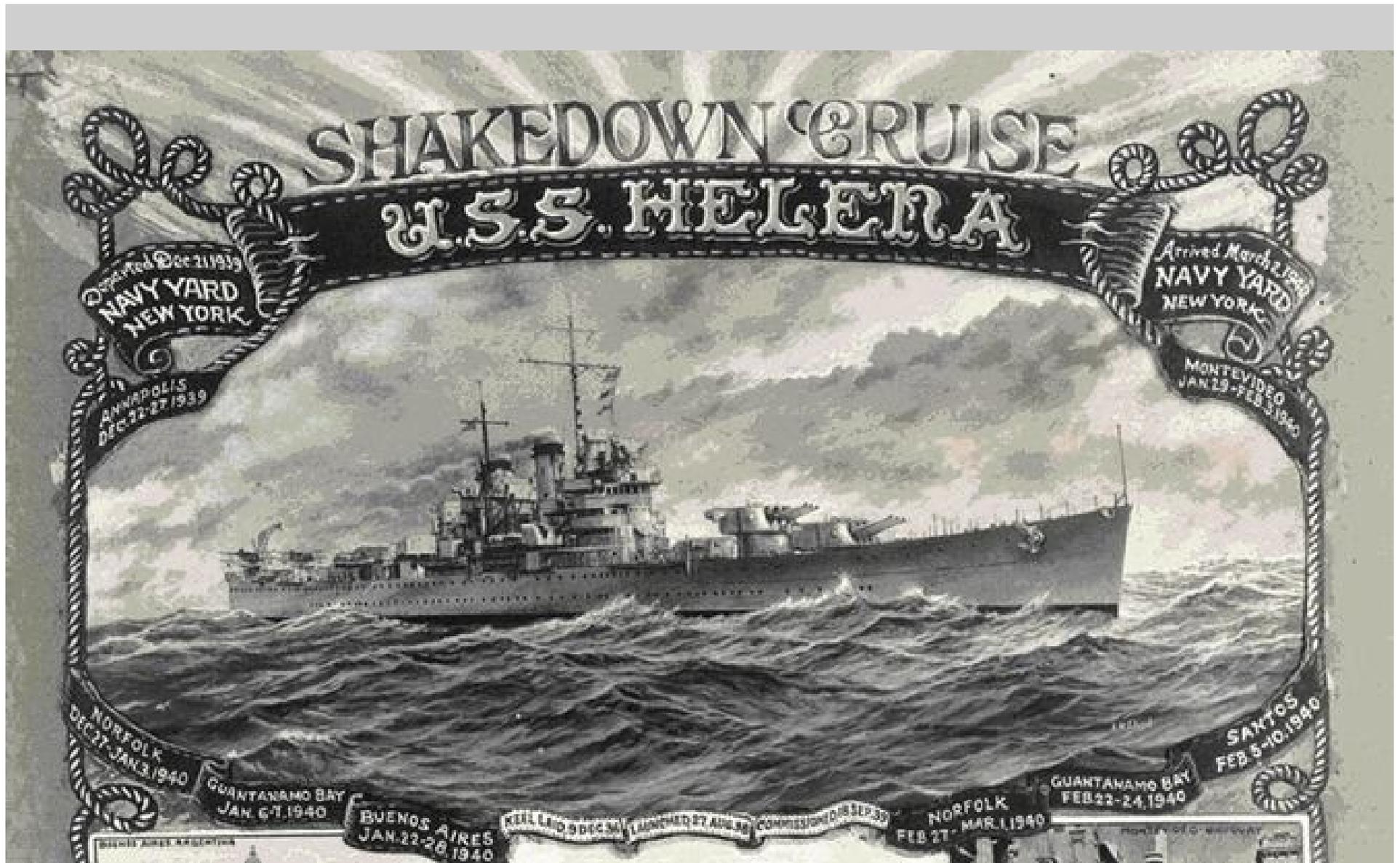
This picture is great because it has the Brooklyn Navy Yard in the foreground. The bridge that is visible is the Williamsburg Bridge. The Polish part of Brooklyn where our family lived is on the right side in this picture. The red star indicates the location of Wanda's parents' home. About 1/3 mile north of the bridge.



USS Helena Shakedown cruise Certificate

Adrian's certificate was evidently lost long ago. This is one from a website about the USS Helena CL 50. Please see: <http://www.usshelena.org/>

You will see close-ups of the certificate on the next two slides.



<http://www.usshelena.org/sd1.jpg>

You can read the dates the Helena was in at various ports during the cruise.



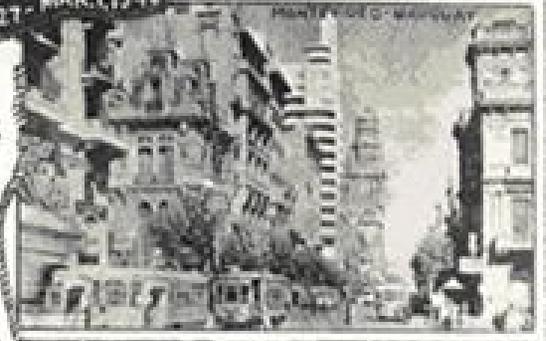
JAN 22-26 / RES 1940

U.S. DEC. 31, 1940

FEB 27 MAR 1940

MONTPELIER - MONTPELIER

To all SEAFARERS
By these presents let it henceforth be known that
I served in this vessel on her Shakedown Cruise and has
CROSSED the EQUATOR of LONGITUDE 40° WEST
on 13 January 1940 enroute to South America.
Furthermore having observed the rites and met approval
as prescribed for all who enter NEPTUNE'S REALM
It is hereby decreed that she, and is, an accredited
Shellback.
C.G. Richardson, Comdr. U.S.N.
M.B. DeMott, Comdr. U.S.N.



<http://www.usshelena.org/sd1.jpg>

There is a great article from “Our Navy” magazine about the Helena’s shakedown cruise. Please visit this site:

<http://www.usshelena.org/cl50shakedown.html>

Also, you should try to locate a copy of White Hat, Gold Braid and Marine Green. It is still available through Amazon. The copies Barbara gave us were signed by the author. Mine says “With best wishes to Adrienne Criminger daughter of my shipmate Adrian Fortinberry Thomas Powell” THANKS BARBARA! Without this book, we would know a whole lot less about Daddy’s time on the USS Helena!

