

Warships were converted into highly secret command ships that took the White House to sea in case of atomic attack.

AMERICA'S COLD WAR DOOMSDAY FLEET

BY CARL J. PRIEST

In the early stages of the Cold War, an impending "Doomsday" weighed heavily upon the minds of Americans. President Truman instituted the Federal Civil Defense Administration which began issuing brochures, films, and radio advertisements to prepare citizens to survive a nuclear attack. Dog tags were issued to many school children who also went through "duck-and-cover" drills as they were trained to curl up under their school desks after a nuclear bomb detonation's flash of light. Siren tests sounded at regular intervals and national and local publications ran articles about the imminent danger of nuclear war. Radios were marked with triangles at stations that would be used by CONELRAD broadcasts (*Control of Electromagnetic Radiation* was intended to prevent enemy aircraft from using commercial radio frequencies for navigational guidance. In 1963, this gave way to the Emergency Broadcast System) which would kick in as soon as all regular broadcasts ceased after the alarm sounded. Many American citizens built backyard bomb shelters while local government, as well as private corporations, established larger shelters under various buildings. Many believed the best of these efforts were hopeless in the event of a nuclear nightmare.

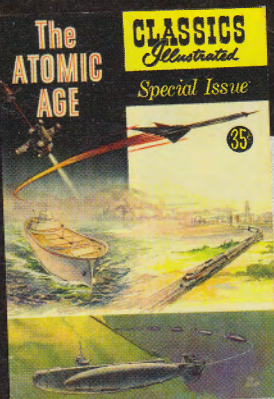
The military kept strategic bombers in the air and submarines at

sea. The subs carried ballistic missiles (SBLMs — Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles) which provided a mobile and stealthy means of carrying powerful nuclear firepower. Ballistic Missile Early Warning Systems (BMEWS) were developed to detect missile launches coming in from Russia. A DEW line (*Distant Early Warning* was a line of radar towers (resembling huge billboards) that were constructed beginning in 1954. The purpose was to detect an over-the-pole attack from long-range bombers or missiles. The line ran from Alaska, across Canada, to Greenland and

connected to similar sites running from Iceland to England. The communication system used was TROPO which included a tie-in to Europe) was established to warn against nuclear attack coming across the North Pole. Each side raced to gain nuclear superiority with Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). The United States developed Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry (MIRV) weapons. Although not an official strategy of the military, a concept that emphasized neither side would survive a nuclear war was known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

Nevertheless, the United States Government made contingency plans for Continuity of Government (COG) in the event of a nuclear attack. Several Command Posts were developed as part of a Doomsday Plan to relocate the President (with his Emergency Action Documents [EADs]), Joint Chiefs, Cabinet, Supreme Court, and Congress to secure locations. These Alternate Joint Communication Centers (AJCC) were part of the National Military Command System (NMCS). There were three factors that were crucial in determining the likelihood of AJCC success: (1) Arriving safely at the location, (2) avoiding bomb effects, and (3) attaining important communications links.

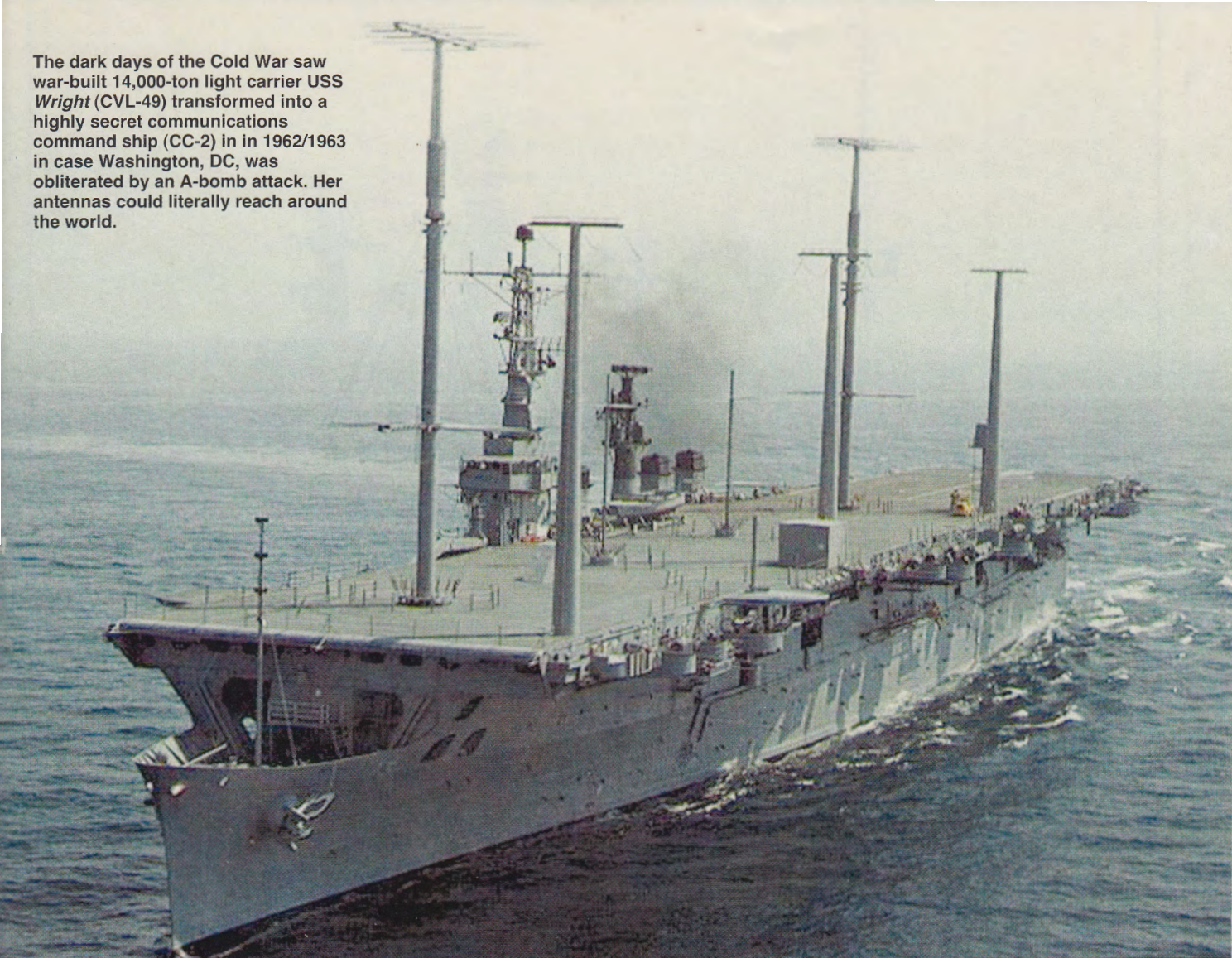
Seeking to be victorious in a potential nuclear war, authorities developed a plan for using the United



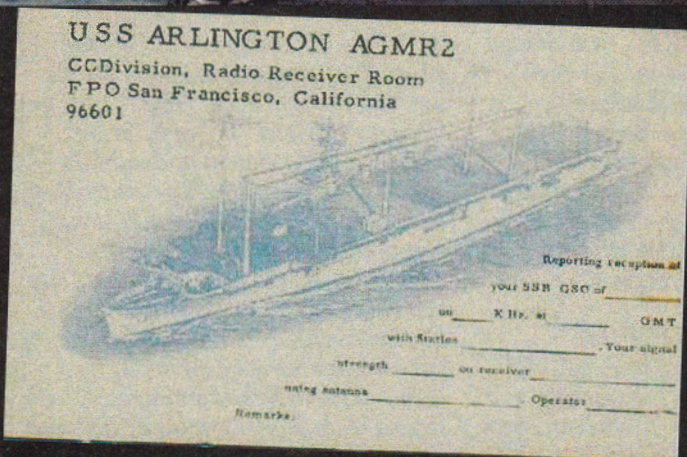
A Hotel-class Soviet sub seen from a US Navy plane off Newfoundland, 1972. (Photograph courtesy US Navy)



The dark days of the Cold War saw war-built 14,000-ton light carrier USS *Wright* (CVL-49) transformed into a highly secret communications command ship (CC-2) in 1962/1963 in case Washington, DC, was obliterated by an A-bomb attack. Her antennas could literally reach around the world.



USS ARLINGTON AGMR-2
CC Division, Radio Receiver Room
FPO San Francisco, California
96601



States nuclear arsenal and designated it the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP). Goals of the Domsday Plan (a gruesome term that included SIOP, COG, and various sub-strategies) were to make sure order was preserved in society, the economy was not destroyed, food was rationed, and cultural artifacts (such as the Declaration of Independence) were rescued. There were nuclear flash sensors placed around the country. Code words were provided for selected

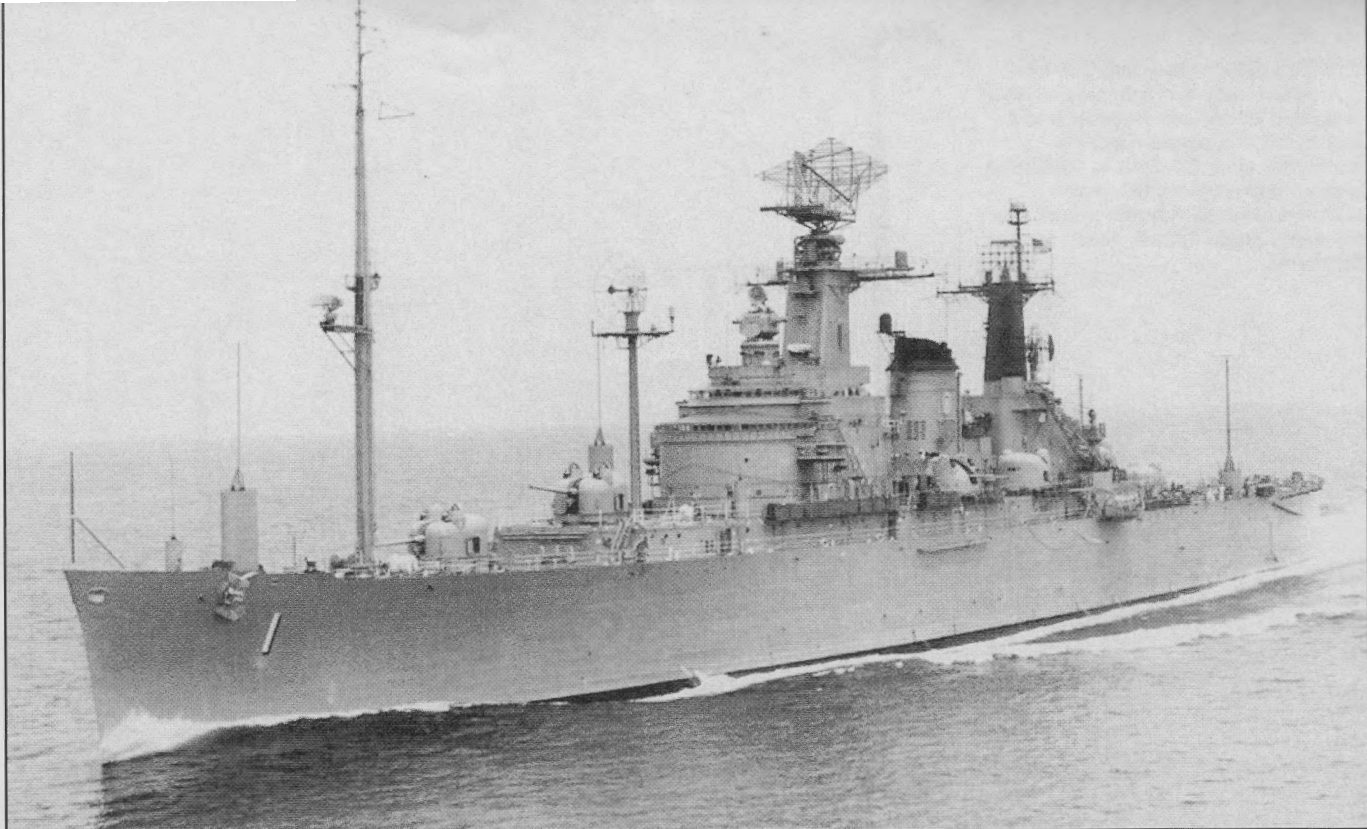
officials and phone numbers were given that bypassed the normal phone systems. A broadcasting center was set up under the name Wartime Information Security Program (WISP) to control what information went to the public, including pre-recorded messages from the President. However, the ultimate goal was to make sure government survived and was able to maintain adequate information for decision making based on surveillance and analysis of world events. To do that, it was necessary to establish communications between the President and commanders of military forces as well as with leaders of Allied and enemy governments.

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Although government certainly consisted of several entities, the President was probably the top priority of COG for obvious political and symbolic reasons. Therefore, the President needed to be transported safely to a location that had maximum bomb avoidance and communication capabilities. Logically more than one option was made available.

Obviously, a Presidential "bomb shelter" was a necessity. Code-named "Site R," and built deep under Raven Rock mountain, a Deep Underground Communication Center (DUCC) was coordinated by the Army from Ft. Ritchie near the Maryland-Pennsylvania border a few miles from Camp David. To disperse other governmental leaders and functions, other bunkers were located at Berryville, Virginia, under Mt. Weather (code-named "High Point"); Culpepper, Virginia ("Mt. Pony"); and White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, under the Greenbrier Resort (code-named "Casper").

Some of the underground



Dubbed the "Floating White House," the 13,700-ton former cruiser *Northampton* (CA-125) became the doomsday seaborne companion to the USS *Wright* (CC-2). Replacing the heavy cruiser of the same name lost in WWII, CA-125 was incomplete when the war ended and all work stopped on her. She was later modified into a Command ship and commissioned as CLC-1 in March 1953. After her very sophisticated electronics array was proven at sea, she became a strike force flagship that served until 1970.

Command Posts had several hundred full-time 24-hr support personnel and a capacity for maintaining about 3000 "guests." The bunkers had thick walls of steel-reinforced concrete and some had barbed wire and armed guards with dogs. Besides communications activities, the centers had individual priorities that included Federal Reserve computers, billions of dollars in currency, and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) national emergency coordinating equipment. There were sleeping quarters, war rooms, amphitheaters, kitchens, dining areas, infirmaries, brigs, psychiatric cells, barbershops, storage rooms, sewage treatment facilities, body storage/disposal areas, gun ranges, and decontamination showers. These were located in buildings up to four-stories high. There were detailed plans in place for every conceivable scenario including keeping a current database of medications for members of Congress.

Regarding the relocation of the President, a weakness of the DUCC was the vulnerability of the antennas needed for communication. Also, there was the danger of sabotage (including attacks upon officials attempting to enter the bunkers) from enemy agents already inside the country. Since the projects were so monumental when

they were constructed, many people had some knowledge about the sites.

Another variable to increase the odds of the President surviving Doomsday was a moveable location which made targeting more difficult. The National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP), code-named "Night Watch," consisted of several shielded and specially configured Boeing airplanes (stationed at Andrews Air Force Base near DC) with at least one plane ready for take-off within 15-min after an attack alert. When the president traveled on Air Force One, a NEACP plane often flew to a nearby location.

Weaknesses of NEACP, for presidential relocation, were getting off the ground in time, jet intakes getting fouled, and the limited amount of time the planes could stay in flight.

A National Mobile Land Command Post (NMLCP) was proposed at one point. Declassified documents indicate it was not recommended for implementation, but the documents found by this writer do not say why. A submarine Command Post was also planned, but there were problems, at that time, with getting evacuated personnel aboard and having good communications abilities.

Beginning in late-1950, there was a special unit of helicopter teams (code-

named "Outpost Mission") stationed at Olmstead Air Force Base in Pennsylvania. Their duty was to fly to the White House and relocate the President to one of the sites briefly described above or to a National Emergency Command Post Afloat (NECPA). Although the DUCC and NEACP options still exist (2006), as the "Doomsday Clock" (*The "Doomsday Clock" is symbolic for nuclear destruction at midnight. It was originated in 1947 by scientists at the University of Chicago and set at seven-minutes before midnight. Depending on the world situation, the clock was moved forward or backward. In 1968, it was moved from twelve-minutes until midnight to seven-minutes before midnight. It was moved back three-minutes in 1969 due to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and in 1972, with the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) the clock was moved back to twelve-minutes until midnight*) moved closer to midnight during the highly volatile 1960s, the NECPA ship was very likely the most workable choice for assurance of Presidential survival had the United States been the target of a nuclear attack.

Two ships were uniquely configured and assigned the NECPA duties (*The USS Saipan [CVL-48] was*

begun as CC-3, but was changed to a Communication Major Relay ship [AGMR-2] and renamed the Arlington). The NECPA ships had to have good maneuverability to assure safe arrival, a reasonable probability of bomb effect avoidance, and were capable of state-of-the-art communications. The sister ships USS *Northampton* (CC-1) (*Command Communications 1*) and USS *Wright* (CC-2) alternated the alert duty every two-weeks as a potential floating White House/Pentagon. The NECPA strategy was to keep one of the ships somewhere off the East Coast. With only the customary Naval acknowledgements, just outside of Norfolk, the ships would silently sail past each other as the alert ship was relieved in order to enter port for replenishing and much needed rest and recreation for the crew.

Both the *Wright* and the *Northampton* had a huge dish-like structure used for Troposphere Scatter Communications (TROPO) (TROPO communication was an alternative for use along with short-wave and trans-Atlantic cables. The technique was to beam a signal above the horizon where the earth's curvature would allow the signal to reach the troposphere where the signal would scatter downward beyond the horizon). There were land-based TROPO dish sites located in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Delaware (These facilities were Otis Air Force Base at Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Cedar Island, North Carolina [operated by an officer and about twelve enlisted men]; and — the largest — at Lewes, Delaware. The Lewes site was at Ft. Miles on Cape Henlopen). The alert ship usually operated within a few hundred miles of one of those land sites. The gyro-stabilized TROPO equipment provided the capability for access to commercial and military telephone networks. To maintain operational security, the ships took steps to decrease radio direction finding activities from hostile sources attempting to trace the location of the alert ship. The TROPO system provided difficult-to-zero-in-on telephone, teletype, and data circuits with top priority for the Command Posts. The NECPA ships used voice radio call signs "Zenith" (*Wright*) and "Sea Ruler" (*Northampton*) during communication with other ships, aircraft and shore stations.

The mission of the two ships was to handle communications and

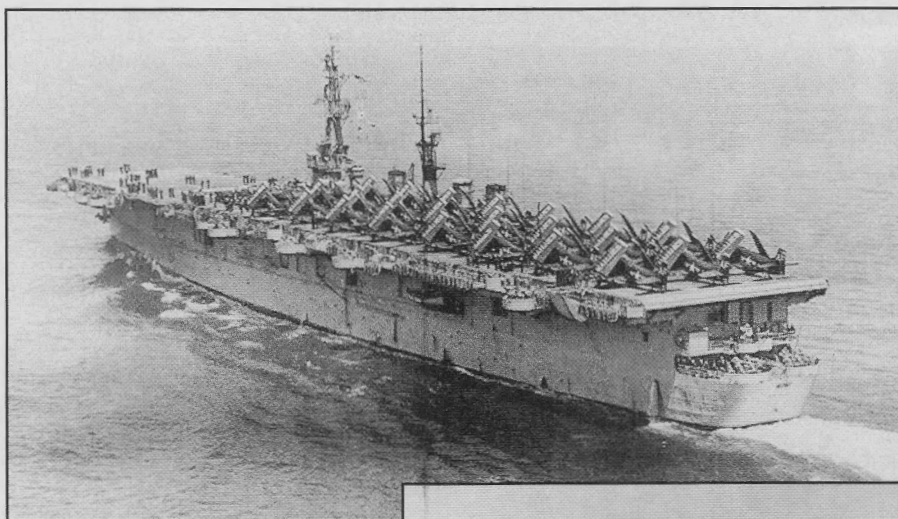
command data for the strategic direction of military operations worldwide. The ships, operated under the SIOP, and were always ready for the President (with special Presidential quarters). Both ships had access to White House Situation Room classified information. If a nuclear war had erupted, the alert ship was third in line behind the Strategic Air Command (SAC) (*In case the SAC Command Center was somehow disabled, the back-up plan was to keep a plane in the air which could mirror the SAC ground functions. This program was known as "Looking Glass" and operated 24/7 year round from 1961 until 1990 when the planes were placed on ground alert*) and the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD), for full command to maintain Continuity of Government and control of the United States Armed Forces and nuclear weapons.

The *Wright* and *Northampton* had

tracks which could be rolled into view. One entire space was filled with teletype printers. The crew totaled over 1200 with 200 of those with duties just to operate and maintain the communications equipment.

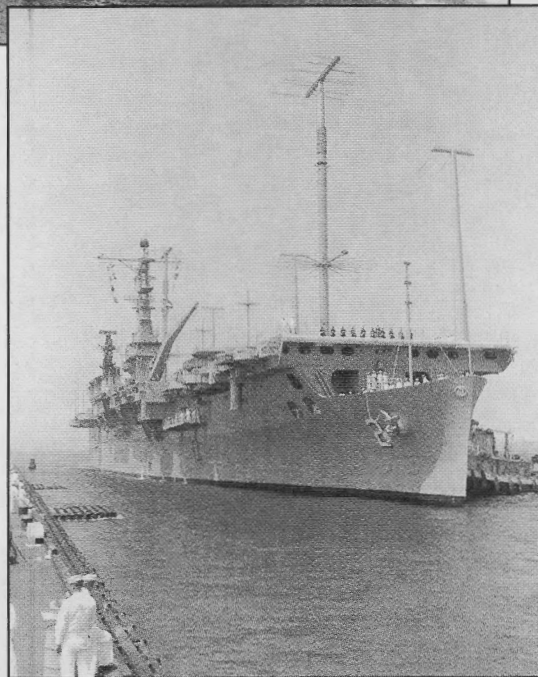
Life aboard ship was tedious and stressful, mixed with friendship and macho mischief. There were highly restricted areas where only those with appropriate security clearances were allowed to enter. Men from each branch of the military service, as well as CIA personnel, were assigned to both *Wright* and *Northampton*. Also, many government officials and high-ranking military officers from all branches of service frequently visited each ship. The command ships were kept "spit-shined" from stem to stern, but the crews enjoyed excellent chow since the cooks requisitioned the same supplies to prepare meals for all of the ship's company and guests. In 1968, the *Wright* received the prestigious

(continued on page 67)



USS *Wright* (CVL-49) seen ferrying a deckload of USMC Ad Skyraiders during the early 1950s. Plans to convert her sister-ship USS *Saipan* (CVL-48) into a second CC Command ship were cancelled and she was converted into Command and Control ship instead. Both were stricken from the register in the mid-1970s.

interior spaces capable of pressurization to prevent contamination from nuclear fallout. The *Northampton* had an exterior salt-water wash down system. Each ship had a smaller replica of the Pentagon's War Room. The *Wright's* command compartments had projection equipment with large screens and a wall of status boards and maps mounted on



DOOMSDAY FLEET

(continued from page 15)

Ney Award for the best Large Mess Afloat for the entire fleet worldwide.

The USS *Wright* was the newer of the two ships, both of which had been converted from previous designations (*Northampton* from CLC-1, cruiser, in 1961 and *Wright* from CVL-49, aircraft carrier, in 1963). She had, for that era, the most elaborate and powerful communications equipment ever installed aboard a ship. Her "voice of command" could reach any ship, aircraft, or station in the world. Two antenna masts were 114-ft tall (156-ft above the water) and able to withstand 100-mph winds. The *Wright* had satellite communications (SATCOM) and carried a specially designed helicopter that pulled a wire cable nearly 2-mi high to serve as an antenna for SVLF (Very Low Frequency) communication with submarines (*The experimental helicopter was a Kaman QH-43. The Wright also carried a general purpose UH-2A helicopter*). A Battle "E" was awarded to the *Wright* in 1968 for highest scores in her Atlantic Fleet cruiser-destroyer force squadron competition.

Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson went aboard the *Northampton* before the *Wright* was commissioned. In April 1967, the *Wright* accompanied President Johnson to the Latin America Summit Conference held in Uruguay. In January 1968, the *Wright* was urgently called back from the Florida area and placed on high alert when the USS *Pueblo* was captured by North Korea (see author's end note). President Johnson traveled to Central America in July of 1968 for a meeting of the Presidents of Central American Republics. The *Wright* was in the shipyards and was unable to get underway. With short notice, the *Northampton* left port at about 0200, traversed the Panama Canal, and lay off the Pacific Coast of Latin America while President Johnson met with the leaders of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala.

The NECPA ship, which was on alert, often sat just off the East Coast of the United States while running helicopter and communications operations. Coastal residents would go to bed with nothing on the horizon and awaken to see a dark, strangely shaped ship silhouette materialize through the morning fog. The ship



USS *Northampton* as the Cold War's CLC-1. Her armament was gradually reduced from her original four 5-in/54-cal guns.

would be there for a day or so and then "disappear" out to sea leaving an empty horizon. This experience probably had the aura of a mysterious, even ghostly, occurrence. Although it was rumored that a submarine shadowed the alert ship, as far as the eye could tell, the NECPA ship cruised all alone. At the top of each daily Deck Log for the duty ship was this entry: "00-04 *Wright* is alert ship NECPA operating independently in accordance with COMCRUDESANT (*Commander, Cruiser-Destroyer Force, US Atlantic Fleet*) message 171840Z of Feb 1968 (*The reference number and date differed at times. The ship name would be the one on alert*)."

The NECPA mission was a vital part of the Cold War for 10-ys. The men who served aboard the NECPA ships served their country well and contributed to keeping the world from a nuclear holocaust. The USS *Northampton* and the USS *Wright* were decommissioned a few weeks apart in the spring of 1970 when communication capabilities became more sophisticated. The NECPA ships also became susceptible to satellite surveillance and Soviet aircraft based in Cuba. Additionally, Soviet submarines had become more improved and numerous in the Atlantic. Both the *Wright* and *Northampton* were scrapped long before the United States won the Cold War in 1991. Now, only memories remain of the East Coast "Ghost Ships" that waited for a Doomsday that did not happen on their watch.

ADDENDUM

- Two officers, aboard each ship, had orders to be present if the top-secret authentication codes for nuclear war orders were handled or transferred in any way. The codes were secured with two combination locks and each officer knew one combination.

- A large section of the ship was a powerful VLF transmitter, with vacuum tubes taller than an average man. Each stage of the transmitter was contained in a separate compartment with posted designations such as "Pi Network Room."

- In 1960, the USS *Triton* traveled around the globe completely submerged. When the sub returned to America, the sub surfaced off the coast of Delaware and a helicopter picked up the captain and flew him to the White House. Along with specially configured surface ships, the *Triton* became one of the submarines used to extend the DEW line across the oceans. In the early-1960s, these radar-picket vessels became obsolete due to advances in technology. There is some speculation that the *Triton* became an alternate national command post.

- The National Military Command System (NMCS) was part of the Worldwide Military Command and Control System (WWMCCS). Because of the crucial communication and intelligence requirements, the NMCS had to "be the most responsive, reliable, and survivable system" that could be provided.

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