

# USS ARLINGTONs: Past and Present

*By BILL DICKINSON*

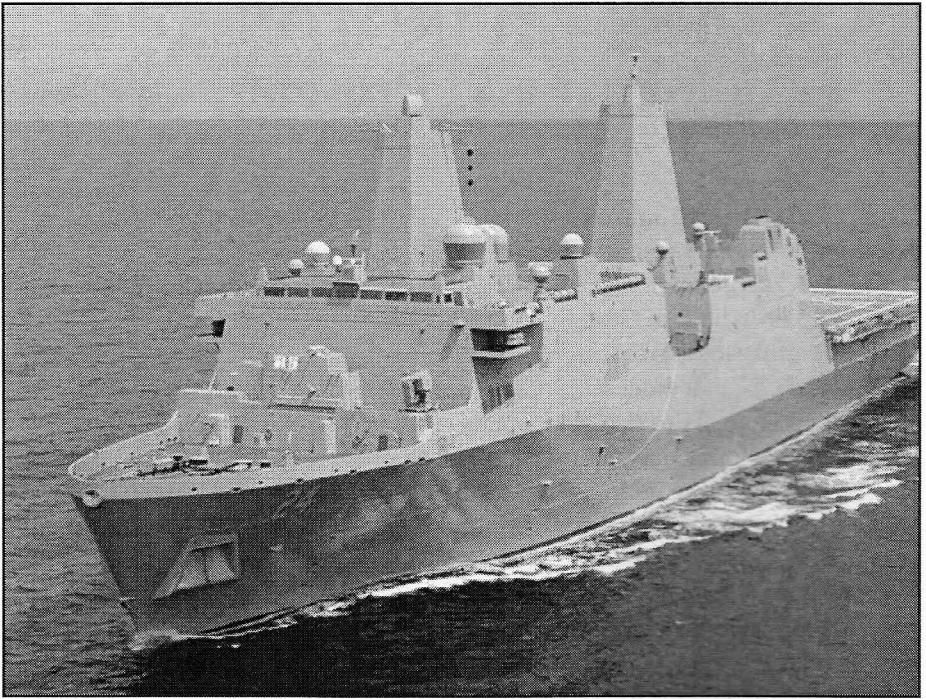
On April 6, 2013, USS ARLINGTON, the US Navy's eighth San Antonio class amphibious transport dock (or LPD), was commissioned at a ceremony in Norfolk, Virginia. It was attended by local, state and federal officials, representatives of Arlington County's first responders, businesses which contributed to the commissioning ceremonies, crew members from previous ships named ARLINGTON and, most importantly, families of the victims of the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon. The third ship named ARLINGTON, this particular ship was so named to honor the victims and heroes of the September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon, the nerve center of the US military, located in the County of Arlington. Incorporating the most modern features of warship design, she is a significant addition to the US Navy fleet and greatly augments the amphibious warfare capability of the US Marines.

Commissioning is one of the most significant events in a naval ship's projected 40+ year life. It is the occasion when the steel and equipment comprising the physical ship are joined with the crew and officers who make the ship operational as a manifestation of US National policy.

The actual moment of commissioning occurs when the ship's deck log, a written document into which entries are made chronologically recording every significant event occurring aboard that vessel until the ship's decommissioning, is begun.<sup>1</sup> The start of the ship's watch occurred on the new ARLINGTON when Radioman 1<sup>st</sup> Class, US Navy, Ken Cox, now retired, who served on a previously named USS ARLINGTON, handed the watch glass to the Officer of the Deck as the Navy directive ordering the new ARLINGTON to join the fleet was read. At that instant the ship's engines were powered up, weapon systems became operational, the ship's crew and its Marine detachment swarmed aboard to "man" the ship's rails, and the ship's commissioning pennant and US flag were unfurled. It was a thrilling site and a great day for all Arlingtonians and the nation.

This was not the first US Navy ship named ARLINGTON—in fact there had been two previous ones—both adapted from ships that had been originally constructed for different purposes, but as ARLINGTON provided unique and urgently needed functions for the Navy.

The first<sup>2</sup> Navy ship named ARLINGTON (AP-174) was a general cargo ship delivered to the US Navy in 1943 and a year later converted to a troop



US Navy photo

#### USS ARLINGTON (LPD-24)

transport. She was commissioned on April 18, 1944. At that time the demand for ships to transport the hundreds of thousands of US military troops in both the Pacific and European theaters of war was staggering. Conversions of cargo ships and ocean liners to meet this need became necessary, since specially built troop transport ships would not be delivered and operational for many more months.

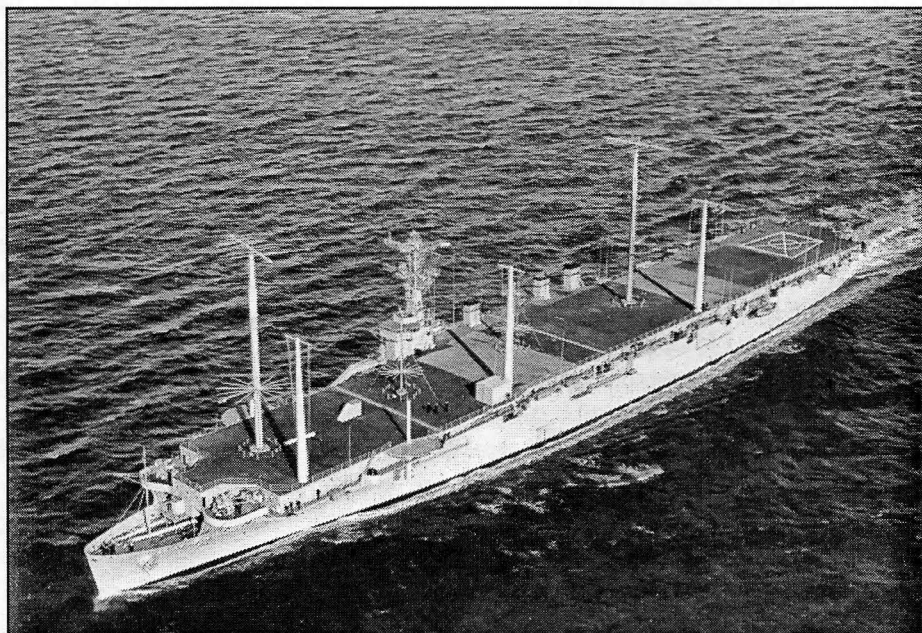
ARLINGTON (AP-174) was capable of accommodating over 1,000 troops and had a maximum speed of 15 knots. She could carry tank lighters and personnel or vehicle landing craft. She operated primarily out of Seattle, Washington and then San Francisco, California as a training vessel for ship companies destined for other US Navy transport ships then operating in the Pacific. At the end of hostilities she participated in the return of troops from the Far East to the US. Decommissioned in 1946 and held in the mothball reserve fleet for decades, she was finally scrapped in 1965.<sup>3</sup>

The second ARLINGTON was a major communications ship (AGMR-2) named in honor of Arlington County, Virginia, the site of the Naval Communications Center then located near Fort Myer.<sup>4</sup> The center was established in 1913 to provide communications from the seat of Government in nearby Washington,

DC to fleet commanders far distant from the US mainland. The center's appearance changed over the years, reflecting ever-changing radio communications technologies. In the 1920s and 1930s transmission towers as high as 600 feet marked the center's 20-acre site.<sup>5</sup>

As US military activities intensified in Southeast Asia during the early 1960s, military planners recognized there was an urgent need for a seagoing communications station capable of being positioned at any ocean global position to provide communications services to support military operations. Employing a seagoing platform for communications relay avoided the cost and vulnerability of ground based communications facilities built on foreign shores. The flat deck and ample interior space of the hanger deck of an aircraft carrier would be ideal for this purpose. The US Navy retained in its reserve fleet a number of light aircraft carriers with sound hulls and good engineering plants that were no longer suited for handling the jet aircraft then used by the Navy in military operations.

The light aircraft carrier GILBERT ISLAND (CVE-107) was such a ship and was converted to be a communications relay ship. She was commissioned USS ANNAPOLIS (AGMR-1) on 7 March 1964 and named in honor of the Naval Communication Center, Annapolis,<sup>6</sup> located across the Severn River from



US Navy photo

USS ARLINGTON (AGMR-2)

the US Naval Academy. Equipped with the latest communications technologies, she was deployed to the eastern Pacific, spending her ensuing five years of service near the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) off Vietnam providing reliable communications to and from central command in Washington DC.<sup>7</sup> It was soon recognized by naval planners that ANNAPOLIS's unique and effective capabilities needed to be augmented by a second AGMR. That ship would be USS ARLINGTON (AGMR-2).

She was converted from USS SAIPAN (CVL-48),<sup>8</sup> an aircraft carrier that was commissioned in 1946 shortly after the end of World War II. Built for propeller aircraft, she provided training for naval aviators at the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida. In 1948 she was utilized to develop operational techniques for the jet aircraft (e.g. FH-1 PHANTOM) that were just entering use in the US Navy. She had an illustrious career in both the Atlantic and Pacific, including ferrying aircraft used by the French fighting at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the closing days of the First Indochina War. Decommissioned in 1957, she was "mothballed" and placed in reserve. Her construction was based on the hull and machinery of Baltimore class cruisers. This provided the ship with an extremely reliable and efficient propulsion system, allowing an expected speed of 33 knots.

In March 1963, SAIPAN was brought out of reserve and turned over to Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding in Mobile, Alabama for conversion to a command ship similar in configuration to her sister ship USS WRIGHT (CC-2). In the midst of the conversion it was directed that SAIPAN be renamed ARLINGTON and its classification be changed to AGMR-2 to reflect her new mission as a major communications relay ship.<sup>9</sup> She was to serve "...as an operations communications headquarters for the Fleet...equipped with a specially designed antenna system...capable of operating for protracted periods...underway or at an advance or remote location...in augmentation of existing shore type communications or in an area where shore-based communications do not exist. ARLINGTON will be capable of supplying shore vital communications services in any area of the world."<sup>10</sup>

While the ship was in Mobile undergoing conversion, a pre-commissioning detail was formed. One section was located in Norfolk, Virginia where the prospective crew was assembled and receiving training in the various skills needed when aboard ARLINGTON. A smaller group, composed primarily of junior and several senior officers under the command of the prospective commanding officer, Captain Charles A. Darrah, USN, was located in Mobile to oversee the conversion and ready the ship for commissioning.

Captain Darrah was a graduate of Vanderbilt University and had served on destroyers in combat during the US retreat from the Philippines in the early stages of World War II in the Pacific. He commanded USS BRISTOL (DD-857)

during the Korean Conflict and held a variety of staff positions both afloat and onshore afterwards. ARLINGTON was his first major command. The continual need to accommodate rapidly changing communications technologies being installed on the ship, and challenging relationships between the US Navy and the yard performing the conversion all contributed to protracted delays and frustration. According the *Mobile Press* of August 12, 1965, the cost of ARLINGTON's conversion was about \$27 million, an unbelievably low price that presumably did not include the cost of communications and other technical equipment installed both in Mobile and later in the Norfolk Navy Yard.



US Navy photo

Walter Tejada, Chairman of the Arlington County Board, presenting to Commander Darren Nelson, Captain of the USS ARLINGTON (LPD-24) the engraved candelabra originally presented to USS ARLINGTON (AGMR-2).

After passing sea trials in the Gulf of Mexico, ARLINGTON arrived at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard on August 15, 1966 for installation of additional equipment leading up to its commissioning on August 27, 1966. Mr. Leo Urbanske, Chairman of the Arlington, Virginia County Board, accompanied by Ms. Barer Jackson, then the current Miss Arlington, participated in the rather modest commissioning ceremony relative to the one held for ARLINGTON (LPD-24) 47 years later. The county presented a silver candelabra to the ship.

AGMR-2 had a draft of 28 feet, length of 684 feet, a crew of about 1,000 men and officers, and was equipped with four 3"/50 rapid fire twin mounts located on the four corners of the ship's flight deck. Communications was the function of the ship and its large transmission towers located on the flight deck were the ships main "battery." The Communications Department, under the leadership of then Commander James A. Madigan, a highly respected naval frequency management expert,<sup>11</sup> was composed of 174 highly skilled men, 8 officers and 6 Chief Petty Officers. This was clearly the largest department on the ship. The transmission, cryptographic, and other communications surveillance and secure relay equipment was located in the large hanger decks of the old SAIPAN in a "locked high security box." Access was restricted to only certain crew members and officers.

During the following five months, ARLINGTON became a fixture in the Norfolk area as she was being outfitted with additional communications equipment. On January 3, 1966, ARLINGTON underwent shakedown training

and testing prior to joining the fleet at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. It was on this occasion when she conducted a speed race with USS BOSTON, a Baltimore class cruiser possessing the same engineering plant as ARLINGTON. Not carrying the heavy gun turrets and barbettes of the BOSTON, ARLINGTON outpaced her rival by several knots, making her one of the fastest ships in the US fleet. Captain Thomas Utegaard, ARLINGTON's Commanding officer beginning in

June 1967, nicknamed AGMR-2 "Road Runner" and had the crew develop a Road Runner flag which was raised when the ship entered port or pulled alongside another ship for refueling or to provide assistance. He also had the cartoon character's theme music played through the ship's sound system when the flag was displayed.<sup>12</sup> It was claimed that the top recorded speed for ARLINGTON was 35 knots, although this could not be corroborated against official records. Another term of endearment for the ship was "The Big A."

Beginning in February 1967, ARLINGTON participated in a NATO naval exercise and undertook her first overseas trip, visiting ports in Portugal, Germany, and Norway. It was during this trip that ARLINGTON experienced several violent storms resulting in significant damage to the ship, one of which was recalled by the crew as the "Storm of the century!" Captain Whynn Eliason, USN (Ret), a Lt (j.g.) and communications officer when on ARLINGTON, remembers 60-foot waves resulting in damage to the ship's antenna deck near the bow of the ship. While in the midst of one of the storms a message was intercepted from a merchant ship (ARLINGTON was very good at intercepts) indicating a very big ship with huge masts (but without sails) was sighted foundering in the North Atlantic and did not appear to have any life onboard.<sup>13</sup> That ship was ARLINGTON!

On May 3, 1967 Captain Darrah, in the midst of a violent storm, suffered a heart attack and was relieved of command by Commander Robert A. Wheeler, the ship's Executive Officer. On arrival in Norfolk, Captain Darrah was transferred to Portsmouth Naval Hospital. The ship was repaired and made ready for assignment to the Pacific Fleet with the home port assignment of Long Beach, California.<sup>14</sup>

Less than two months later, Captain Thomas F. Utegaard, USN, assumed command of the ship. A graduate of the US Naval Academy, Utegaard had seen

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**In Portugal, Germany, and Norway the ARLINGTON experienced several violent storms resulting in significant damage to the ship, one of which was the "Storm of the century!" —Captain Whynn Eliason, USN (Ret)**

wartime service aboard a light cruiser during World War II. Afterwards he commanded destroyer escorts. Highly respected for his piloting skills and leadership qualities, he was co-author of the 10<sup>th</sup> (1958) edition of *Dutton's Navigation and Piloting*, the classic reference for navigators worldwide.

Initially scheduled to sail to WESTPAC [Author's note: WESTPAC is Navy slang for deployment to the Western Pacific Ocean and beyond. To Navy personnel, it means a long time away from home port and visits to exotic places] via the Mediterranean, Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean, ARLINGTON's departure was delayed because of repairs to the damage sustained in the Atlantic storms and the need to replace the ship's captain. This delay forced her, in June 1967, to be rerouted westward through the Panama Canal because of the outbreak of the 1967 Israeli-Egyptian Six-Day War and the Israeli attack on USS LIBERTY (AGTR-5), a US Navy technical research ship. It was recognized that the necessary passage through the canal would be tight, but there was no alternative but to try.

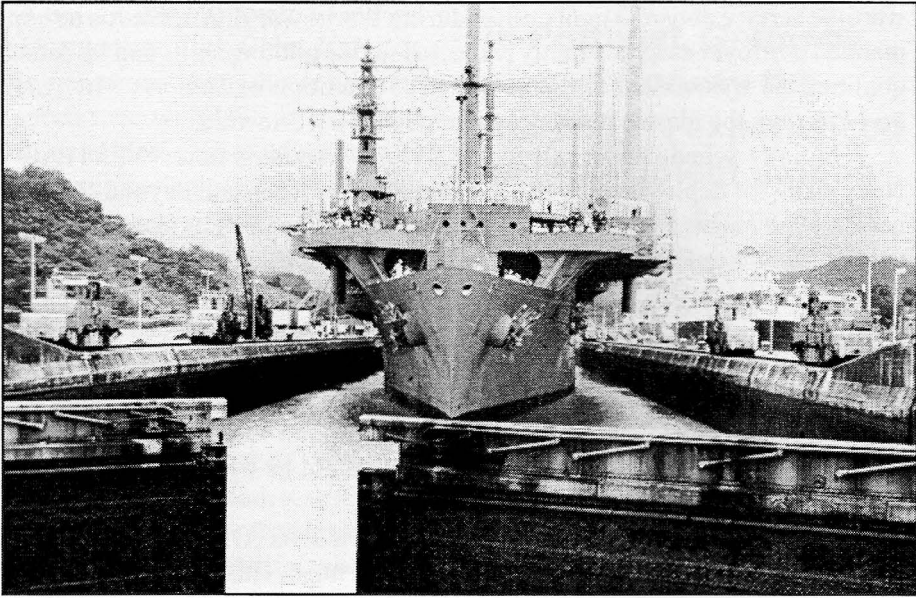
During her passage through the canal, ARLINGTON sustained damage to the stanchions holding some of the ship's antennas. This necessitated repairs at Pearl Harbor, an unexpected and idyllic port call thoroughly enjoyed by the ship's officers and crew. She then proceeded to Yokosuka, Japan and was placed under the Commander of the Seventh Fleet. She arrived in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 23, 1967, where she alternated with USS ANNAPOLIS in providing on-scene communications support to naval forces conducting combat operations in the Gulf of Tonkin and off the coast of Vietnam.

Typically ARLINGTON would be on station for a period of 45 days and then enjoy relief for a port visit and necessary yard repairs at Subic Bay, Philippines; Hong Kong; Taiwan; Yokosuka, Japan; and one time to Sydney, Australia. In September 1967 a satellite communications terminal was installed on ARLINGTON as it had been on her sister ship ANNAPOLIS. Satellites used a frequency spectrum not subject to the disruption of propagation interference inherent in high frequency radio. The increased use of satellites for military communications was a harbinger of ARLINGTON's rapidly approaching obsolescence.

While on station in the Gulf of Tonkin, encounters with Soviet flagged "trawlers" were not uncommon. US Navy ships tended to give ARLINGTON a wide berth because of the powerful signals she generated and the possibility of interference with their own shipboard electronics.

Captain Utegaard left ARLINGTON on December 31, 1967, relinquishing command to Commander Robert A. Wheeler, USN, the ship's Executive Officer.

In late January 1968, ARLINGTON was directed to the Sea of Japan to provide communications support for US Naval forces then assembling in response



US Navy photo

**USS ARLINGTON attempting to squeeze through the Panama Canal.**

to the January 23, 1968 capture of USS PUEBLO (AGER-2) (PUEBLO was officially known as a technical research ship, but in reality a naval intelligence ship) that had been captured by North Korean military forces. During the ship's transit of the Tsushima Strait<sup>15</sup> en route to the Sea of Japan, ARLINGTON was "escorted" by a Soviet Riga class destroyer and buzzed by two Soviet Badger bombers.

On January 30, 1968, Commander R.J. Atkinson relieved Commander Wheeler as Commanding Officer. In May 1968 the ship visited Sydney, Australia, representing the US Navy at a commemoration of the Battle of the Coral Sea, a major WW II sea battle between the Imperial Japanese Navy and naval and air forces of the US and Australia. The battle is often credited as saving Australia and turning the tide of the Japanese offensive. It was a liberty port experience to be long remembered by the officers and crew of ARLINGTON!

Afterwards ARLINGTON continued her support duties off Vietnam through the end of 1968, when she served as primary area communications ship for the recovery of Apollo 8. This was the first manned spacecraft to leave Earth orbit, reach the Moon, orbit it and return safely to Earth.<sup>26</sup> In May she participated in the recovery of Apollo 10, a dress rehearsal including testing of components for Apollo 11, and later in July 1969 she assisted in the recovery of



Apollo 11, the spaceflight that landed the first humans on the Moon. Between assisting NASA and its spaceflight program, ARLINGTON provided support to President Nixon as he conferred with the President of South Vietnam, including hosting President Nixon on board overnight.

Afterwards she sailed back to the US where she was decommissioned on January 14, 1970. During her short four years of service she earned seven campaign stars and lived up to the Latin motto on her seal "Ubi Actio Est" or "Where there is action." She was stricken from the Navy list on August 15, 1975 and sold as scrap in May 1976 for \$1,240,582.

ARLINGTON, like her sister ship ANNAPOLIS, was made obsolete by rapidly changing communications technology after several short but eventful years of service. She was a proud and generally happy ship, as evidenced by the number of former crew members now affiliated with the USS Arlington Association; many of these attended both the christening of ARLINGTON (LPD-24) at Northrup Grumman Shipbuilding, Pascagoula, Mississippi in March 2010 and her commissioning in April 2013. The Association's "skipper," Ken Cox, reports about 500 ARLINGTON (AGMR-2) alumni have been located, a remarkable accomplishment given that only about 2,000 different men ever saw service on the ship. More importantly, members of the Association, along with the Arlington County Police and Fire Departments, have created great friendships with the captain and crew of the new USS ARLINGTON. This promises a sustained relationship between the county, the ship's crew, and their predecessors who proudly served on a ship of the same name, as they cooperate to support ARLINGTON in the years to come.

The starting of the watch on ARLINGTON (LPD-24) by Radioman 1<sup>st</sup> Class Ken Cox, USN, (Ret) is symbolic of that future and promising relationship.

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A former Lieutenant in the US Navy Reserve, Bill Dickinson served as a supply officer on USS EDISTO (AGB-2)—an icebreaker transferred to the US Coast Guard—and was then transferred to the commissioning detail, located in Mobile, Alabama, of USS ARLINGTON (AGMR-2). He served on ARLINGTON through November 1967, at which time he returned to graduate school.

He was honored to serve on the committee formed by the County of Arlington for the commissioning of the new USS ARLINGTON (LPD-24), representing the crew and officers who served on ARLINGTON (AGMR-2). That committee, ably co-chaired by Jim Pebley and Frank O'Leary of Arlington County, was composed of representatives from the local business community, the families of those killed in the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon and the police and

fire first responders. This committee laid the ground work for what promises to be a sustained and positive relationship between the new ARLINGTON and the community for which she is named. Thanks also go to Bill's old ship mate Whynn Eliason, who provided input to this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Deck logs from all US Navy ships are retained permanently at the National Archives. See [www.archives.gov/research/military/logbooks/navy.html](http://www.archives.gov/research/military/logbooks/navy.html).

<sup>2</sup> Several sources indicate the first USS ARLINGTON was a Haskell-class troop transport whose keel was laid in May 1944. During her construction it is alleged she was renamed USS MARVIN H. MCINTYRE (APA-129) in honor of Marvin McIntyre (1878-1943), President Franklin Roosevelt's personal secretary. According to Stephen S. Roberts, the creator and operator of the meticulously researched web-site [www.shipscribe.com](http://www.shipscribe.com), it is possible the name USS ARLINGTON was proposed for a Haskell class troop transport but never officially recommended by the Chief of Naval operations nor approved by the Secretary of the Navy. Haskell class APA's were often named for counties. An example is USS ARENAC (APA 128), named after Arenac County, Michigan. February 7, 2014 email communication with Steven Roberts.

<sup>3</sup> [www.navsource.org/archives/09/22/22174.htm](http://www.navsource.org/archives/09/22/22174.htm).

<sup>4</sup> For an exploration of the Arlington Naval Radio Station see pp. 162–164, Arlington County, Virginia: A History by Cornelia Bruére Rose (Port City Press, 1976). See also article in BuShips Journal for January 1957 found at [www.virhistory.com/navy/commsta/arlington/journal-5701-naa.pdf](http://www.virhistory.com/navy/commsta/arlington/journal-5701-naa.pdf). The official file of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Naval History Division (OP-09B9) indicates AGMR-2 is named for "...Arlington County, Virginia, one of the Navy's first sites for wireless test stations."

<sup>5</sup> According to the book by Rose, these particular towers were dismantled in 1941 as a menace to aviation approaching the new Washington National Airport and replaced with a shorter tower.

<sup>6</sup> For further information about the Navy Communications Center, Annapolis, see [www.virhistory.com/navy/commsta/chelt.htm](http://www.virhistory.com/navy/commsta/chelt.htm).

<sup>7</sup> For further information on USS ANNAPOLIS, see <http://www.uss-annapolis.org>.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about USS SAIPAN see [www.saipan48.org/history](http://www.saipan48.org/history). Also see [www.history.navy.mil/photos/usnshtp/cv/cv148cl.htm](http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/usnshtp/cv/cv148cl.htm).

<sup>9</sup> See SECNAV Directive 5030. OP-09B9, Se 1263 of April 8, 1965.

<sup>10</sup> Navy Department, Ship's History Division, History of USS ARLINGTON (AGMR-2).

<sup>11</sup> James Alonzo Madigan Sr. retired from the US Navy in Feb 1980 as a Captain. A resident of Vienna VA, he was a highly regarded communications expert and an authority on radio frequency management for the Navy. After enlisting in the Navy, he received a fleet appointment to the US Naval Academy from which he graduated in 1951. He then earned graduate degrees in communications and electrical engineering. He died at age 51, seven month after retirement. Washington Post, August 1980; email of January 5, 2003 from his wife, Geri Madigan, to Ken Cox, Skipper USS ARLINGTON (AGMR-2) Association.

<sup>12</sup> Wile E. Coyote and The Road Runner are a duo of cartoon characters popular in the 1960s, as seen in the Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wile\\_E.\\_Coyote\\_and\\_The\\_Road\\_Runner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wile_E._Coyote_and_The_Road_Runner).

<sup>13</sup> Recollections of Captain Whynn Eliason, USN (Ret) as shared with Chuck Oldham, Fairmount Media

Group, 2012.

<sup>14</sup>Assigned to Long Beach as her home, she never visited the port, although she was towed past on the way to the breakers in 1976.

<sup>15</sup>The Tsushima Strait is the eastern channel of the larger Korea Strait, which lies between Korea and Japan and connects the Sea of Japan (also known as the East Sea) and the East China Sea.

<sup>16</sup>See [www.lpi.usra.edu/lunar/missions/apollo/apollo\\_8](http://www.lpi.usra.edu/lunar/missions/apollo/apollo_8).