



# SAILORS UNITED

*They hung up their dress whites decades ago, but the veterans of the Tin Can Sailors Association aren't ready to leave their ships behind.*

BY MATT CHANDLER

Standing on the deck of USS *The Sullivans*, the Fletcher-class destroyer bathed in early morning sunlight, Navy veteran Tony Kowalski is nearly five decades removed from active service. But as his eyes scan the length of the ship, it's as though he has stepped back in time to 1963, into the body of his 20-year-old self. His eyes are wide and his voice brims with excitement as he recounts the story of serving on *The Sullivans* as the ship steamed toward open waters off Cape Cod, Mass. It was April 1963, and Kowalski and his shipmates were working as part of a training school for destroyers when disaster struck. USS *Thresher*, a nuclear-powered attack submarine, was lost at sea.

“I was in the log room and the engineering officer ran in and said to me, ‘We got a big problem ... we’re going to sea,’” he says.

*The Sullivans* was one of the first ships to reach the site where *Thresher* had lost radio contact during a training exercise, but it was too late. *Thresher*, with a crew of 129 men on board, was lost that day, and it is that kind of experience – being on the front lines of both history and tragedy – that led Kowalski and thousands of other Navy veterans who served aboard destroyers to join a group affectionately known as the Tin Can Sailors.

The organization, which has more than 16,000 members nationwide, celebrates the unique experiences of the men who served aboard the Navy’s small destroyers. The Tin Can Sailors organize regional and national events meant to share stories, educate future generations and preserve the history of an often forgotten class of ship in the naval fleet.

On this particular day, Kowalski has traveled more than 400 miles from his home in New Haven, Conn., to Buffalo, N.Y., where he is taking part in one of the group’s most treasured events: Field Day. He is joined by between 30 and 40 other veterans who have returned to *The Sullivans* – now housed in the Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park, overlooking the Canadian shoreline from the U.S. side of the Niagara River. They will spend the weekend retelling tales from the high seas and bonding with other veterans aboard the ship they once called home.

Make no mistake about it, the men are here to swap stories and connect with other veterans, but these weekends are also about work. Kowalski spends much of Field Day laboring in the ship’s fire room, where he served as a boiler man more than a half-century ago.

“Being on it 50 years later is amazing,” he says, a smile spreading across his face as he offers a tour of the cramped quarters below deck. “I’m working in the aft fire room where I worked back in ’63, and it is like the smells are still there, the feeling is still there. You can almost hear the voices.”

The Tin Can Sailors clean, paint and repair these destroyers as a sort of cathartic experience and to help preserve them for future generations. They play a key role in the restoration of nine of these “museum ships” around the country, including *The Sullivans*.

Terry Miller, who has served as the executive director of the Tin Can Sailors since 2001, says the preservation of these pieces of U.S. naval history is especially important.



Bob Davis of Rumson, N.J., served aboard *The Sullivans* from 1960 to 1964. In August, he made his fourth trip to the Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park, to be part of an annual Field Day aboard the destroyer. Photo by Matthew Chandler

“The average veteran begins to feel nostalgic about his naval service quite a few years after he has served, and there is a desire to talk about old times,” Miller says. “We provide that outlet.”

He says the bond these Tin Can veterans have – though many meet each other for the first time during Field Days – is unique to this particular class of ship.

“This kind of bond is something you find on the smaller ships, the destroyers and the submarines. You won’t find it on the bigger ships,” Miller says. “They (aircraft carriers) were like floating cities with 6,000 people on board. But with the destroyers, you had 250 to 300 people, and you felt like it was home and this was your family.”

That sentiment is echoed by 71-year-old Bob Davis, who served aboard *The Sullivans* from 1960 to 1964 as a machinist mate in the forward engine room. He boarded the ship with several of the veterans who have returned to Buffalo for Field Days, including Kowalski. Though he lives in Rumson, N.J., this is Davis’s fourth trip to Buffalo to visit the ship that was his home away from home during a tense moment in U.S. naval history.

## Why 'Tin Can Sailors'?

There is some debate over the origins of the nickname given to these beloved Navy destroyers. But most sailors say it's because the hull of the ship was made so thin, it was like a floating tin can.

### The floating museum ships

The Tin Can Sailors Association supports many museum ships across the country, including:

*Cassin Young* DD 793, Boston

*Edson* DD 946, Bay City, Mich.

*Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.* DD 850, Battleship Cove, Fall River, Mass.

*Kidd* DD 661, USS *Kidd* Veterans Memorial Museum, Baton Rouge, La.

*Laffey* DD 724, Patriots Point, Charleston Harbor, S.C.

*Orleck* DD 886, Lake Charles, La.

*Slater* DE 766, Destroyer Escort Historical Museum, Albany, N.Y.

*Stewart* DE 238, Seawolf Park, Galveston, Texas

*The Sullivans* DD 537, Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park, Buffalo, N.Y.

*Turner Joy* DD 951, Bremerton Historic Ships Association, Bremerton, Wash.

### Want to join?

Learn more about the Tin Can Sailors:

[www.destroyers.org](http://www.destroyers.org)

1-800 223-5535.

Davis was barely out of his teens when he, Kowalski and their shipmates got the call: *The Sullivans* was tapped to be part of the fleet headed to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as part of the naval blockade ordered by President John F. Kennedy.

As the world watched and waited – nuclear war seeming a very real possibility – life aboard the ship was business as usual.

“You are so focused on the job, you don’t even know that much about what is going on,” he says. “We had no idea, really, about the nuclear stuff. We just knew we weren’t going to lose that base to anybody.”

Looking back, Davis and the other Tin Can Sailors who shared the experience have a quiet modesty about the mission that, in the eyes of many, prevented all-out nuclear war.

“We were just lucky, all of us, in that no shots were fired,” he says. “We backed Russia down, really, because we had a navy and they didn’t.”

**THINGS YOU DON'T FORGET** Today, those memories are the foundation of an unbreakable

bond that draws the veterans back every year to serve again on the ships where, for many, their naval careers began.

The Tin Can Sailors Association was founded in 1976, just 11 years after Joseph Fugalli was part of the last crew to serve aboard *The Sullivans* before it was decommissioned. Now 72, he has been “jumping from ship to ship” to volunteer as a member of the Tin Can Sailors, beginning with USS *Edson* and culminating in this, his 16th year working aboard *The Sullivans*.

Upon hearing that the destroyer would be displayed in Buffalo, Fugalli – who lives in Queens, N.Y. – made the trek to western New York with his wife to revisit his military past. It was 1997, and though more than 30 years had passed since he last set foot on the destroyer, one thing hadn’t changed.

“I wanted to show my wife my bunk, and she said, ‘How do you know that’s where you slept?’” Fugalli recalls. “I told her, ‘There are certain things you just don’t forget.’” He found the bunk, flipped up the lid on the storage locker below and, sure enough, there was a worn nameplate with “Joe Fugalli” etched on it.

Though *The Sullivans* has been converted into a floating naval museum, Fugalli and his mates say the ship is just like they remember it from their tours of duty in the 1960s.

“Very little has changed,” he says as he surveys the ship, its deck buzzing with activity as sailors from his own era – men mostly in their 70s – scrub, screw, hammer, chisel and paint, breathing new life back into the destroyer that was such an intimate part of their early lives.

Fugalli says people who have never served in the Navy may not understand the deep respect and admiration these sailors have for each other.

“I don’t care where I am, if I’m wearing that uniform, walking on the street, people will stop me and say, ‘Hey, I was in the Navy – instant buddies,” he says with a grin. It’s a camaraderie that is strengthened thanks to his involvement with the Tin Can Sailors and Field Day weekends.

“Hanging out on the ship with 40 or 50 guys and sharing stories, that’s what it’s all about. You’ve got 1,000 sea stories and you laugh and it makes it all worth it.”

Beyond the stories, the Tin Can Sailors tackle restoration projects because each man says he wants to make sure this vital part of U.S. history isn’t lost to the ages as the decades pass. They see the preservation of these ships as a sort of living history lesson for future generations.



Joe Fugalli of Queens, N.Y., served in the Navy from 1960 to 1968, including time aboard *The Sullivans*, which was named for the five Sullivan brothers who lost their lives when their own ship, *USS Juneau*, was sunk by a Japanese submarine during the Battle of Guadalcanal in 1942. Fugalli worked in the engine room, and was part of the last crew that served aboard the destroyer before its decommissioning. For 16 years, Fugalli has traveled to Buffalo to participate in Field Days with other Tin Can Sailors. Photo by Matthew Chandler

Hal Burke spent 1964 aboard *The Sullivans* and organizes regional events like this Field Day. Watching a group of schoolchildren board the ship, the oldest no more than 15, he says, “Those kids are the other reason we do what we do.”

Burke is so passionate about educating young people about Navy history that he has brought along his 8-year-old grandson, Joey, to work alongside him. It’s a chance to pass along his knowledge and, he hopes, instill some awareness of the sacrifices his generation made to preserve and protect freedom.

“People want to know,” says Burke, describing the public’s interest in these floating museums (more than 60,000 visitors each year tour *The Sullivans* in Buffalo). “I think all these guys coming together to honor these ships, and then people being able to tour the ships, feeds that interest in learning more about American history.”

Miller agrees, saying that the Tin Can Sailors have raised nearly \$2 million through its membership, given in grants to the destroyer museums across the country to aid in the maintenance and preservation of the ships.

“There are history books in high school that cover World War II in two paragraphs and Vietnam in two sentences,” Miller says. “So it’s frustrating to see the lack of understanding today, and it is why preserving these ships is critical.”

Patrick Cunningham is the longtime executive director of the Buffalo park, which is also home to *USS Little Rock*, a Cleveland-class light cruiser, and *USS Croaker*, a Gato-class submarine. For 20 years, he’s watched Tin Can Sailors come to Buffalo to keep their ship in pristine condition. While he appreciates the group’s physical work, he sees the

greatest value in the firsthand knowledge and experience they possess. He says the retired *Sullivans* sailors offer “an educational and inspirational experience” for the visitors and staff at the naval park.

“It teaches these kids a little bit, and I’ve had them say to me, ‘Now I know what my grandfather was talking about when he talked about life aboard a ship,’” Cunningham says.

Taking a break from cutting away a gun mount as part of this year’s restoration work, Fugalli wipes the sweat from his brow, replaces his well-worn *Sullivans* cap and explains why, after 16 years of volunteering for the annual Field Day, he has no plans to slow down.

“I was told by World War II veterans who came into service a generation before me, ‘You’ve got to carry our memory because we are going to be dead and gone,’” he says. “I am absolutely amazed that when people come aboard, they have no idea when the second world war was fought. They don’t know who the participants were. Very little history has been carried forward, and I don’t know if I can make up for that.”

But he says he isn’t going to quit trying, and he sees the Tin Can Sailors’ work as a vital part of that effort.

“It seems to me that the world wants to forget,” Fugalli says, taking a long pause and casting his gaze out over the calm, early morning waters of the Niagara River before finishing his thought. “And that ... is really my fear.” 🍷

*Matt Chandler is a freelance writer from New York. He is the author of seven books for children, including his latest, “Dangerous Times! History’s Most Troubled Eras.”*