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Eldridge crew amused by "Philadelphia Experiment" [news]

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March 26, 1999

Ship's myth keeps reappearing

The legend says the Eldridge vanished briefly in 1943.

By Lacy McCrary
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

ATLANTIC CITY -- The truth is out here. It is in a hospitality room of a boardwalk hotel, with some old salts sitting around white-clothed tables laughing at reports that their ship was involved in a top-secret World War II experiment.

Sailors who served on the USS Eldridge, the ship that legend says vanished briefly in 1943 at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, met here this week for their first reunion in 53 years and spent part of their time joking about the so-called Philadelphia Experiment.

The Eldridge, they said yesterday, may well have been invisible to Philadelphia because it was never in Philadelphia.

The ship's log and several veterans who were on the ship from its launching on July 25, 1943, at Port Newark, N.J., say it called on many East Coast ports, but never Philadelphia.

Two movies, two books and several Web sites have kept the myth about the Eldridge alive. As the story goes, the destroyer escort was surrounded by a greenish fog, disappeared for a few minutes, then reappeared.

But none of the veterans believes it.

"I think it's somebody's pipe dream," said Ed Wise, 74, of Salem, Ind.

Ted Davis, 72, of Grand Island, Neb., was more emphatic. "It never happened," he said.

Bill Van Allen, 84, who was executive officer and then captain of the Eldridge in 1943 and 1944, said he never saw any sign of experiments aboard the ship. "I have not the slightest idea how these stories got started," said Van Allen of Charlotte, N.C.

These former sailors said they sometimes had fun pretending the experiment actually occurred. "When people would ask me about it, I would play along with them and tell them I disappeared. After a while they realized I was pulling their legs," said Ray Perrino, 72, of Cranston, R.I.

None of the 15 at the reunion could explain why writers picked their ship, out of the thousands that sailed in the war, as the site of invisibility experiments.

Frankly, some are tired of being asked about it.

"We can't wait to put it to rest. We can't because it keeps coming up," Davis said. "I'm still asked about it now, mostly by younger people."

"I have a Pennsylvania auto license DE-173 [the designation and number of the Eldridge] , and every once in a while somebody will stop and ask me if it was really true," said Mike Perlstein, 72, of Warminster.

"I tell them I know nothing about it. I've seen the movie, and it's a good movie, but there's no truth to it," Perlstein said.

The Navy said it had received so many inquiries through the years about the Philadelphia Experiment -- the title of a 1984 movie, a 1993 sequel and two books -- that it prepared and sends out a fact sheet.

The Navy said the myth dated to 1955 with the publication of The Case for UFO's by the late Morris K. Jessup. It said Jessup later received letters from a Carlos Miguel Allende, who gave a New Kensington, Pa., address, and claimed he witnessed the ship becoming invisible from another vessel. Allende also said the ship was "teleported" to and from Norfolk, Va., in a few minutes with some terrible aftereffects for crew members.

Questions about the experiment probably arose from "quite routine" research at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard during the war, according to the Navy fact sheet.

"It was believed the foundation for the apocryphal stories arose from degaussing [demagnetizing] experiments which have the effect of making a ship undetectable or 'invisible' to magnetic mines," the Navy said.

But the Navy said it had never conducted invisibility experiments, either in 1943 or at any other time.

The legend says the ship became invisible on July 22, 1943, but ship records and the veterans say it was not launched until July 25. The second experiment, in which the Eldridge was sent to Norfolk and back to Philadelphia, was supposed to have occurred on Oct. 28, 1943. The ship's log says it was at the Brooklyn Navy Yard on that date, but did spend two days in the Norfolk Navy Yard in November 1943.

The gray-haired men, some wearing baseball caps with "USS Eldridge" printed on them, chuckled as they ribbed one another about the mental problems the crew supposedly suffered from the experiments.

"The only part of the book I think is true is the part about the crew being a little crazy," said Ed Tempany, 75, of Carteret, N.J. He referred to The Philadelphia Experiment: Project Invisibility by William L. Moore in consultation with Charles Berlitz.

"When I get home I'm going to apply for disability," Perrino said, with a smile.

"Beam me up, Scotty," said Tempany.

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RELEVANCE OF THIS MESSAGE: Government conspiracy

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