

Circle Line "Nine"

When we moved into our present clubhouse in 1996 about half of the membership had joined within the previous ten years. That figure has grown since, and I presume that now most members are less familiar with our recent history than before. With that in mind, I wish to remark on an event that occurred this spring that is worthy of passing historical reflection.

That event was razing Elsie to her maindeck. We never knew her as Elsie. That was her maiden name. We called her the Circle Line, sometimes the Circleliner. She was an important part of the club in the early 1970s to 1990s. Now that her superstructure is gone, new members no longer see what she looked like, and discerning visitors may not guess her provenance. She was, in fact, a 65-year-old lady who supported our troops in World War II, guided tourists in peacetime, guarded our marina from the elements and served as our clubhouse for 25 years. The following article was published in the Masthead to celebrate her service to us when we moved into our present clubhouse. It is recast and expanded here to inform the newer members of her remarkable service and interesting history.

---Bill Sparacin

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Many of our older members fondly remember the Circle Line as a cozy clubhouse, with much character and a spirit of her own. She entered Shattemuc's service in the Fall of 1971 to serve as a breakwater and was re-fitted shortly thereafter as an auxiliary clubhouse. When our old clubhouse burned to the ground the following year, she became our real clubhouse

for the next 25 years. She habitually leaned to port, like the old three-story clubhouse did, and gently rolled athwartships during storms. Not too many years ago a nor'wester blew strongly during a party. Dancers were startled, as one by one, they realized the old girl was rocking in the wind along with the music.

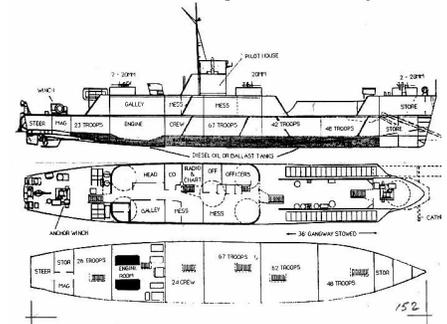
The Circle Line was in grand shape when we fitted her up as our clubhouse almost 40 years ago. Twenty years later, her paint was rusting and her hull had numerous holes at the waterline. Her topsides were taken down this spring. Yet, the Circle Line still guards the marina from the sea and remains an historic landmark, a mute sentinel with an unspoken past.

We never knew the Circle Line's maiden name or her origins, nor thought to enquire. At her out-of-commission party, Commodore Richard Leins recounted her known facts, and various members retold stories of her outfitting. It was a gay and sad party with remembrances of good times past and tributes to the Circle Line's service. None, however, could remark on her earliest years, which were a mystery. Had they been known, the old girl would have been celebrated in a different way.

Wartime Service. Her maiden name was Elsie, Elsie Item 766. She was built in 1944 for the Navy by the Willamette Iron and Steel Company in Portland, Oregon as a Landing Craft Infantry, or LCI (rendered over the radio in WW II code as "Elsie Item"). The LCI's were 152-foot long sea going transports designed to ferry combat troops from sea to beachhead, with a net cargo capacity of 190 tons. Each ship was capable of taking 250 troops and averaged about 180. They were organized in 36-ship flotillas that could reach a capacity of 8000 troops under wartime conditions. They had flat bottoms to run up on beaches and four GM ("Jimmy") diesel motors coupled to twin screws producing 1320 hp to push them ashore. Two bow ramps could be lowered over the sides to discharge troops,

and a powerful winch was used to kedge off and return to sea. She had a cruising speed of 12 knots, and a top speed of 15 knots. She could ride out a hurricane at sea, which she did when weathering the infamous typhoon that hit the fleet at Okinawa.

Her armaments were relatively light -- four 20 mm guns and a 40 mm gun, which were mostly used to protect



her troops during landings. She was no match for kamikazes, who could successfully penetrate the firepower of an aircraft carrier, or submarines that could stand off at sea and shell her with their 5 inch guns. Her defense against the latter was to sail in battle groups of six and ram any hostile sub that surfaced with the intent of shelling her with their deck gun, as she was immune to their torpedoes due to her shallow draft.

Our LCI(L) 766 was commissioned on June 19, 1944. She sailed down the Columbia River, underwent sea trials, went to San Diego for training as a landing craft, and then to Pearl Harbor. Her L (=landing) designation was changed to R (=rocket) at that point, and she was outfitted with rocket launchers and radar jamming devices. She was loaded with 1500 5-inch rockets and became a "spitting dragon ready to take on the enemy". She then sailed with her sister ship, the "765", to Guadalcanal where they joined LCI(R) Flotilla 16. The Flotilla participated in landing and support operations on Angar, Palau, Solomon, Iwo Jima and Okinawa islands. A contemporary

description of an island invasion gives some flavor to Elsie's role in the Pacific theater:

"From the bridge of our cruiser flagship, we watched them [LCI(R)'s] marching bravely in company front up to the Japs' front stoop.... Just short of the foam-crested reef, these invasion leaders slowed their pace and finally stopped. Then, at exactly 8:21 o'clock, they touched off a spectacular fireworks display, which, even in broad daylight was a riot of brilliance. There was a rapid series of blinding flashes, each accompanied by a deep suction sound as a giant cork being pulled from a fifty-gallon bottle. Hundreds of rockets hissing like huge snakes took off over the bows of the strange craft, angling high into the air to describe a graceful arc at the top of their flight.

"They showered down -- like the end of the world -- upon the entire beachhead area where the first assault troops were to hit solid ground nine minutes later. Then came roar after roar as succeeding waves of these fireborn arrows formed a roof of projectiles extending from ship to shore.

"Reversing course, the rocket ships then headed back toward the open sea and on the way opened up with their 20 and 40 mm guns at positions flanking the landing areas to counter any attempt at enfilading fire [from] hidden gun positions. Then, their guns quiet for the moment, the crew watched follow-up waves of landing craft pass them going ashore. Maritimes in these barges and ducks and amphtracks raised fingers in V-for-Victory salutes and clasped hands over their heads. It was their way of telling the sweating crews of the bazooka boats they had done a swell job."

After Iwo, Elsie 766 supported the Okinawa invasion and then went to the Philippines to prepare for the coming invasion of Japan. To the deep sadness of the Japanese, and great relief of our soldiers, the bomb ended the war and brought VJ Day in August 1945. Our Pacific fleet was spared the final ordeal. Flotilla 16 returned to the Philippines and later "spent several months along the coast of North China playing tag with Mao's communist revolutionaries".

Tour Boat. After her post-war service, Elsie was laid up as Navy Surplus and

awaited the ultimate fate of many such vessels. Instead, she was purchased 1957 by the Day Line and began a second career on the East Coast. She was rebuilt as a sightseeing cruiser to circle Manhattan Island, and was considered their best boat. Her shallow draft and large capacity made an ideal combination for ferrying sightseers along Hudson and Harlem rivers and beneath the City's many bridges. Day Line christened her "Knickerbocker VII" and later "Day Line VII". She could reportedly carry 500 passengers and was easily recognized by her uniquely shaped pilothouse.

Circle Line Sightseeing Yachts acquired Elsie in 1962 and re-christened her Circle Line IX (the second of their fleet to carry that name). She continued her round-Manhattan Island lecture service. The "Nine" continued running until 1970 when she was retired to Mill Basin, Jamaica NY, where her original engines and mechanical equipment were removed. She sat there, waiting an uncertain fate as labor costs for cutting her up exceeded the salvage value of her steel.

Breakwater. In 1970 Shattemuc began looking for a steel hull to reconstruct their breakwater. A decade earlier the club had placed a line of old wooden grain barges along the breakwater line, but the barges were deteriorating and beginning to shed flotsam into the river. Looking at the prospect of possible collapse during a storm, the club began looking for more substantial hulls made of steel.

A committee located a hull in Staten Island. Bill Fanning, the fleet captain, and Wally Stevenson, the treasurer, went to look at it. Wally took a hammer to sound the hull and in the first blow put a hole right through a rusted area. They promptly rejected the barge.

It was at this place they heard of two old Circle Lines that could be had for scrap at Mill Basin. The propellers, machinery, and rest room fixtures in



A Happy Crew on the Circle Line, Dec. 1971
From left to right: Alan Hochman, Commodore
Donald Carret, Wallace Stevenson, Fleet Captain
Bill Fanning

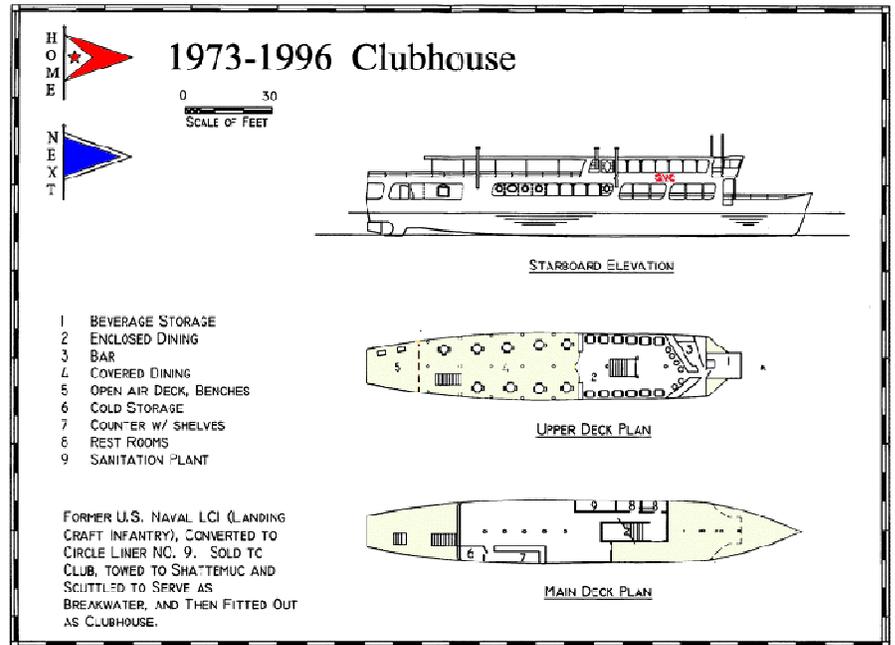


one of the boats were gone. Only the life jackets and two donut lifeboats remained. She cost \$1. The other boat was not stripped and cost \$100,000. Their attention turned to the less expensive choice. The price was right, but Bill thought the Circle Line was too short for the intended purpose. Wally thought the boat would do just fine. After an hour or so of friendly deliberations, Bill came around and they decided to purchase it. A few days later the club made the dollar payment.

Bringing the ship to Shattemuc was next. Ray Phelps, a local marine contractor, was hired to tow her to the club for a fee of \$1,000. Ray put pumps on the Circle Line to keep her afloat because she took on water through her propeller shafts, which were sealed, but not watertight.

Ray brought her from Jamaica Bay, past the Narrows and up the Hudson to Ossining with Bill Fanning aboard the tug keeping a tow watch. Once they arrived at the club, the Circle Line was temporarily moored against the north bulkhead and the pumps were kept running to keep her afloat. Ray used his crane to knock the sides of the grain barges over, into the barges' hulls. On a still Sunday morning the club members worked the Circle Line to her present position, over the remains of the grain barges, using a few motorboats. The seacocks of the Circle Line were then opened, and she slowly settled to the bottom. Nylon lines were attached to the seacocks to find them again if any one wanted to raise the boat and move her.

The present breakwater consists of the Empress Bay, an oil barge, the Circle Line and two old grain barges under fill. The oil barge was acquired through connections by Bill Fanning and brought up river as the last in a line of barges. The barges arrived on a wet, cold evening. As they neared Croton Point the last barge was slipped from her tow and given over to a flotilla of three small motorboats from the club. Our men attached lines to the barge and pulled her home, where she was fitted into place and later scuttled.



The Empress Bay was added last. She was the bow half of a lighter that reportedly exploded in the East River.

Auxiliary Clubhouse. The Circle Line was remodeled as a social area, making it an auxiliary clubhouse. Wally Stevenson, Commodore Don Carret, and a few others did much of the work. Wally set up his table saw on the Circle Line and through connections acquired plywood for paneling and much other donated material: 1/4" steel plates to cover numerous holes made to remove the engines and other gear; Plexiglas panels cut to size for the windows; and so forth. The decks were smoothed with a topping of concrete. Rugs were laid down. The electrical work was put in at cost by Frank Turner. The bar was built by Bill Dunn, and later extended by another club member. The Circle Line opened on June 10, 1972 with a barbeque dinner.

A plan of the Circle Line, above, indicates how she looked when rebuilt. Members entered by a gangway from the end of the north breakwater to the main deck, just under the pilothouse. There was a covered area at this location making a cozy gathering space for small talk, a fine view of the river and watching club races in Croton Bay. The main social area was on the second level, which was reached by a wide

stairway to the upper deck. The stairs opened into an enclosed dining room. This was where social functions, board meetings, race committee activities and similar functions were held. It had tables and seating along both sides of the room, and a bar at the front. Just aft was additional, moveable seating and tables in a covered, but open air, deck. That area felt like a piazza, overlooking and just above the water. Boats would sometimes sail close by, within hailing distance, to greet the members. The stern was open to the sky, providing a wonderful place to feel the sun and see the clouds overhead.

The main deck, below, provided useful workspace. The center section offered a cold storage room for food, cabinets, a work counter, shelving for other supplies and rest rooms. The rest rooms utilized a self-contained and ecologically friendly treatment plant. The fantail was closed off to members and not used.

The Circle Line was a big success from the outset, and became more and more the preferred social setting for club meetings. She supplemented the main clubhouse, enclosed the marina and expanded the club's facilities. It was a good investment for a dollar.

Fire! Acquiring the Circle Line appeared all the more fortuitous the following year, when the main clubhouse was destroyed by fire. By all accounts it was a spectacular fire, visible for miles. The fire was reported in the early morning of November 30 1973. By the time the firemen arrived, at about 4 AM, flames were shooting some 50 feet above the roof and “the inferno was so hot [the firemen] couldn’t get very close with their hoses. The intense heat melted one fire truck’s taillight lenses.”

Between 175 to 200 firemen responded in the pre-dawn hours. They strung thousands of feet of hose from a fire hydrant near the bridge over the railroad. Spotlights powered by generators plus the fire itself provided light for the operation.



Little could be done except control the fire. The second and third floors collapsed during the blaze and the fire was contained by 5:30 am. By that time the site was mostly a pile of smoldering rubble within a two-story skeleton frame. Only a corner of the building was still flaming. Firemen focused hoses on that and any other areas where the flames tried to start up again.



The frame was still smoking later that morning as railroad commuters passed on their way to work. Some trains were delayed half an hour when power was temporarily cut off after the fire ignited a power line and parts of a utility pole and a power tower.

Later that morning the frame was razed by a bulldozer and the rubble was repeatedly turned over and doused with water.

A small propane tank, between the club and the railroad tracks also caught fire. However the flame burned itself out as a safety valve on the tank reacted to the heat and allowed the gas to burn off slowly, instead of exploding all at once.

Ironically, the club had no fire alarm system that week. The system never had worked satisfactorily and was out for repairs. It was due to be reinstalled the following week. The cause of fire was never determined.

Rust! The Circle Line served so well as a social meeting area in the year or so before the fire, that no effort was made to rebuild the Clubhouse after it burned to the ground. The Circle Line just became the new clubhouse, and although there were a number of studies commissioned by the club to investigate building a new clubhouse, none were pursued until it became clear that the Circle Line itself would no longer be available.

Unlike our earlier clubhouses, which were destroyed by fire, the Circle Line was built of steel, making her less vulnerable to that peril, but more prone to gradual decay by rust. The club periodically monitored her condition and kept her in repair. She was professionally surveyed in 1980 by Toran Claim Service and found to be in good condition. Her paint was holding up and her plating was estimated to stand for the next 30 years. Meyerrose and Co. surveyed her ten years later. They estimated a shorter life expectancy. They felt she was deteriorating “at a faster rate than have developed through the past ten years”. At that time her plating in the tidal zone was found to be seriously deteriorating. The report noted the hull was “mostly appearing like Swiss cheese, and ranging from intact (no holes) to Swiss cheese (about 50% holing) to fully holed through a height of about 3 inches

to 1 foot”. In contrast to the 1980 survey, the hull was given only 5 more years until “that shell plating will be fully missing around the hull at the low tide and wind wave area.” Additional rust areas, holing through of some of the superstructure, deterioration of some frames and buckling of the concrete flooring were also noted.

The club was advised that strengthening the ship was “economically or legally unfeasible” and it was recommended the club “remove the structure down to the main deck, for safety regarding keeping people off the hull”. The club asked Meyerrose to resurvey her the following year to determine a safe occupancy capacity. The surveyors felt she could safely support 150 people at that time, but recommended use of the Circle Line be discontinued at the end of 1992 in recognition of her rapid rate of deterioration. The club investigated ways to strengthen the Circle Line but was advised that bracing of internal hull structural members and bulkheads would not “effectively extend and provide safe occupancy for more than five years”.

In view of these findings, the Circle Line was declared off limits and the Board made plans for the present clubhouse. Its design and financing presented important and sometimes contentious challenges. But that is another story.

Waves. Today, the Circle Line guards the northwest corner of our marina from wind, waves and ice. For many years she stood as an intact ship, but is now a rude hull. Think kindly of her, then, the next time you pass. For as she guards our marina now, so she once guarded our national shores in more trying times. Her topsides were not beautiful then, and they are gone today. But she has served us well all these years, and though her superstructure has been razed, her hull continues to rock to the music of the waves.