

The Future of the Battleship *Texas*

by Donald H. Fischer

The times have never been brighter for restoring the Battleship *Texas*. While numerous men and women, whether associated with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) or First Texas Volunteers (FTV), have had a hand in developing this critical activity during the past twenty years, it has only been in the past four or five years that this part of the ship's operational progress has come together with such strength and promise for the future. Today, visitors will find TPWD staff and FTV volunteers hard at work on approved restoration projects, working hand-in-hand, returning compartments and their contents to their 1945 glory. There has been no epiphany. This reflects the accumulation of manpower, organization, lean yet adequate funds, and individual and organizational dedication.

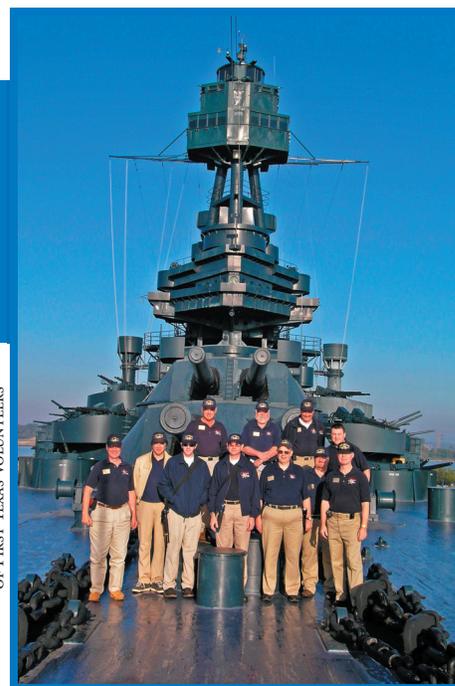
The Origin

Between 1948, when the Battleship *Texas* was presented to the State of Texas, and 1983, when TPWD assumed responsibility for her, there were great expectations for the ship. We expected her to be a dramatic symbol of—and a great way to teach about—the struggle that was World War II. We expected her to be a lasting memorial to those who fought in that great struggle for generations to come. The Battleship *Texas* was essentially the first “modern” ship—and the first battleship—to be designated as a memorial in the United States. No one within the state government, or the newly designated Battleship *Texas* Commission, knew much about the “care and feeding” of a 30,000-ton vessel.

It must have seemed conceivable that, with carefully thought-out care-giving operations, a massive, solid structure such as this would be indestructible. Just keep a good coat of paint on all exposed surfaces and she should last indefinitely. Right? Well, of course, the reality is that cracks and gaps in coated surfaces occur over time, water intrudes, and steel begins to deteriorate. Even without the water intrusion, which has continued to grow over the years, the humidity of the Texas Gulf Coast inexorably worked its destructive ways. Paint in interior spaces began to crack, then flake, exposing metal surfaces underneath, which began to rust. Pipes open to the sea ultimately failed, flooding various voids and bunkers. And the funding produced by the Battleship *Texas* Commission was not up to the task of maintaining the ship. It became obvious that something had to be done, or the ship would be lost.

Transfer to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

When the state legislature transferred the ship to the custody of TPWD in 1983, a giant step was taken toward repairing and restoring many areas of deferred maintenance and serious deterioration. The ship was inspected, and a plan was developed to restore watertight integrity of the hull and the main deck, the structural integrity of the superstructure and masts, and the reinstallation of the previously removed wood deck. As part of this plan, serious consideration was given to protecting sensitive fabrics



ALL PHOTOS: DENNIS MITCHELL
OF FIRST TEXAS VOLUNTEERS

Several First Texas Volunteers pose prior to leading tours

and restoring the interior of the ship. Funding for this task was obtained from the state, the U.S. Navy, and grants and donations from the public.

Between 1988 and 1990, the ship was in dry dock, away from her slip at San Jacinto, undergoing these critical repairs. Workers replaced more than 375,000 pounds of steel on her hull, made sound the superstructure and masts, and reinstalled her armored defensive positions and medium anti-aircraft gunnery suit. Since returning to her San Jacinto slip in 1990, members of the ship's staff and volunteers have moved forward with restoring the interior spaces. The process began slowly, but has gained momentum, thanks to the planning process, the critical examination of the ship, the recognition of lessons learned from early projects, the adherence to sound historical and curatorial practices, and the sincere and dedicated commitment of the workers to saving this priceless artifact.

Priorities and the Master Plan

In 1998, a master plan was drafted to provide the framework for the preservation, interpretation and development of the Battleship *Texas*. Its goals are:

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Upper left: General Store Keepers Office (the ship's supply officer) prior to restoration.

Center: Restoration underway in "Officer's Country".

Right: The General Store Keepers Office following restoration.

Left: Work underway on newly acquired 26 Foot motor whale boat.

- to provide a comprehensive plan to preserve, restore and reclaim the historic fabric of the ship;
- to provide a comprehensive program to interpret the ship and the American naval experience in World War II;
- to establish an identity for the Battleship *Texas* as a premier historical ship museum;
- to maximize the ship's financial stability and success;
- to establish a planning framework for management decisions; and
- to provide a healthy and safe environment for visitors and staff.

TPWD developed a project list for the first two elements of the plan—to preserve and interpret the ship—assigning priorities and estimating costs with an eye toward interpreting compartments and functions of the greatest interest. The first concerns were areas that would transfer the most knowledge and variety to the visiting public. Over the past eight years, staff and FTV volunteers alike have spent thousands of man-hours in restoring these compartments.

The World of Restoration

The world of restoration aboard the Battleship *Texas* can be a busy and in-

tense one. Today, FTV volunteers—as individuals and as teams—can be found working alongside TPWD staff to prepare work orders to restore various compartments along with their equipment, fixtures and furnishings. This says a lot about the teamwork between our volunteers and the TPWD employees they support. These people are committed to saving and preserving this valuable asset for posterity. FTV volunteers bring a wealth of knowledge and know-how to the job, but at the same time, the efforts of the Battleship *Texas* Foundation and the Friends of San Jacinto Battleground must be heralded as well. Without them, and their success in capturing grants and funding to pay the bills, none of this could be possible.

The Restoration Process, Studies and Work Orders

Prior to starting any project, TPWD and FTV investigate a compartment and write its history. Without following restorative procedures, valuable knowledge can be lost. What was a compartment's function during various phases of the ship's operational history? Was it modified over the years? A review of the various layers of paint provides the colors the compartment was painted over the years. Additionally, hidden graphics may be disclosed, opening new areas for questions. What of the graffiti on the bulkhead, or those posters or photos left behind? These tell us that someone walked these decks, slept, and

worked here, made this vessel home. It is through the restoration process that we learn about the human element, just as we learn about the hardware itself.

The team then prepares a detailed space plan describing the existing equipment and furnishings, followed by a written work order to detail the scope of work. The work order gives specific instructions on safeguarding and preparing critical finishes and delicate parts.

Restoration

Restoration includes an entire spectrum of activities, from removing rust and old lead-based paint, to prepping and painting to the correct color with modern approved paint, to uncovering brass or first generation plastic plaques and fittings of various forms and functions and preserving its natural finish. New parts may be fabricated, such as bunk stanchions and hooks, ventilation ducts, and rifle racks. Equipment such as original electrical switches, panels, fixtures and speakers are preserved and restored. Some of these activities take great skill by individuals who work within these trades, but there is much that can be done by non-tradesmen. In fact, most jobs, except electrical, plumbing, welding or steel cutting, can be done by any volunteer. The critical aspect of the restoration process is to ensure that all work meets strict curatorial standards. This preservation of the historical fabric of each compartment and its equipment is extremely important.

Safety

The safety of all workers is also very important. Staff and volunteers alike follow manufacturer's guidelines for using all equipment and OSHA standards for handling hazardous material. Workers are briefed on equipment and taught the "do's and don'ts" about mechanical tools and safety equipment. Purposely, critical skill work, such as steel cutting and welding or electrical repairs, are performed only by licensed tradesmen within our—or the TPWD staff's—ranks.

Results to Date

So, where are we today? Beginning with the return of the Battleship *Texas* to San Jacinto in 1990, restoration has been performed by the regular staff and volunteers on the following compartments:

- Aft Starboard Crew's Head
- 3rd Deck Carpenter's Space
- Ship's Brig
- Ship's Laundry
- Tailor Shop
- Medical Department
- Crew's Barber Shop
- Post Office
- Marines' Space
- Marine 1st Sgt's Office
- Pilot House
- Chart House
- Casemate 6
- Casemate 10
- Auxiliary Radar Room
- Crew Space/Library
- Wardroom Officer's Head
- General Store Keeper's Office
- Starboard Officer's Stateroom

Smaller restorations give visitors a more rewarding experience. For several examples, the MC (public address system), a five-inch ammunition hoist, sound powered phones, status lights for the five-inch guns, fourteen-inch powder bags, and signal lights have all been activated.

Currently, we are working on the ship's wardroom pantry, which is scheduled to be completed in mid-2007. Besides being a fabulous exhibit, the pantry will give great insight into the social fabric of the Navy and American society during the ship's active years.

The Future

Much work remains to be done. Each job helps tell the story of the Battleship *Texas* to the thousands of people who visit her each year. By following the master plan, while retaining flexibility to take advantage of occasional windfalls, a full range of the ship's active operations and history can be presented to the public. On behalf of the entire regular and volunteer staffs, we welcome you to see for yourself the efforts underway for the benefit of all—and volunteer as well! ✧



Pilot house following restoration.

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