

# U.S.S. POINT CRUZ **NEWS** CVE 119

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## Baby-san on board

‘The Navy’s baby’ shares story of unlikely journey to U.S.

**STEPHANIE DANIELS**

Price County (Wis.) Review  
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**H**e looked up from his improvised crib set snugly in the center of an apple crate with eyes as blue as the Pacific waves that lay out before him, in the process clinching his continued place onboard the USS Point Cruz and his future a world away in America.

Those eyes have since deepened to a wood-burned brown with the face around them taking on the faint etchings of time.

Yes, the Navy’s baby is 61 years old.

At a reunion of USS Point Cruz members held September 8-11 in Phillips, Wis., it’s clear that the “baby,” though all grown up, still holds a beloved place in the hearts of these men, many of whom weren’t even on the ship when its youngest passenger took his place on board.

“The bond, what connects us, is the ship,” said Dan Keenan, the name that lucky infant was given at the time of his adoption by a Navy family based in Spokane, Wash.

The wee Point Cruz passenger started his journey from Korea to the U.S. on a steamy July night in 1953. That’s when



**OFFICIAL US NAVY PHOTO**

Hugh and Genevieve Keenan hold Dan ‘Baby-san’ Keenan, now 61.

an infant Keenan, probably no more than a month old and looking frail and ill, was found swaddled in dirty rags outside the corpsman’s building at ASCOM (Army Service Command Post) City.

Marine Corpsman Lyle Van Meter, who made that living discovery, washed and fed the infant with the help of a few friends.

See **BABY-SAN** inside

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**2015 REUNION HOST:**

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## PRAYER CALL

Shipmates: Your thoughts and prayers would be appreciated for Dick Arrington in Humboldt, Neb. His daughter Annie reports her father is experiencing problems and may need a pacemaker. He does plan on seeing everyone in Branson. Thank you!



John and Norine Shonder host a barbecue at their rustic cabin on the south fork of the Flambeau River in September 2014 at the 23rd annual Point Cruz Reunion in Lugerville, Wis.



Reunion attendees pose for a group photo with barbecue chef Mitch Surman and his son Diego, who was made an honorary member of the USS Point Cruz.



Norine Shonder holds up a placement donated by Fred and Dee Johnson.

## BABY-SAN

Come morning, the men heeded their instructions to bring baby Keenan, initially bestowed the name George ASCOM, to Sister Philomena de la Croix at the Star of the Sea Orphanage in Inchon, South Korea.

Keenan explained that given racial attitudes defining life in the country at the time, none of the Korean orderlies went out of their way to take care of him.

"They didn't want anything to do with me. I was something of an outcast," Keenan said.

Beyond those life-threatening cultural barriers, the orphanage was chronically low on food and medical supplies.

Sister Philomena reached out to the USS Point Cruz, concerned with what kind of a future the young boy would have in Korea.

Under the skipper's direction, Chaplain Lt. Edward O. Riley, a longtime friend of Sister Philomena, headed to the orphanage along with the ship's doctor to look into the situation.

Both Sister Philomena and Father Riley knew that an American baby would be unlikely to survive long there under the circumstances, Keenan said.

And so Father Riley returned to the USS Point Cruz and brought up the direness of the situation in conference with his skipper, Chick Hayward. The skipper in turn ordered that Father Riley bring the baby on board the USS Point Cruz, "breaking every military regulation in the books," as Keenan explained.

At the time, "George ASCOM," or "Baby-san," as the ship's men nicknamed him, was still malnourished and in need of medical attention with reddened patches flaring up on his skin.

Crewmen responded to the news of that special passenger's arrival enthusiastically, creating a nursery and selection of rattles and other toys to entertain the youngest member of their family away from home.

"So, they have this baby on board," Keenan said, adding that to his knowledge, no other Navy ship before or ever since has had an infant passenger.

One reunion attendant, Bob Day of West Long Branch, N.J., was on the USS Point Cruz at the same time as Keenan, though for the most part, he spent his days working up on the signal bridge at the top of the ship and didn't see much of the baby.

He does, however, recall the stream of diapers, crafted from cut-up sheets, hanging out to dry in the same place they'd raise signal flags.

Perplexed, other ships would send messages asking what they meant by the signal, Day explained.

Their response was always "Baby-san on board," Keenan said.

Day told his then-sweetheart, who would later become his wife, Joan, about the diaper signal in their correspondence.

"I thought that was just great," Joan said.

Those men whose posts brought them closer to "Baby-san's" place on the ship lovingly cared for him, helping to boost the youngster's weight and bring smiles to his face. On a daily basis, the baby would make an appearance on deck in a bomb cart converted for use as a carriage. With the announcement of his presence up there, the men who had been following news of Baby-san's improving condition gathered around to catch up with the youngster so many had come to embrace as their own.

In the beginning, an infant Keenan moved between the USS Point Cruz and orphanage, depending on where orders took the ship.

One fateful day in the baby's time back at the orphanage, a young Naval surgeon by the name of Lt. Hugh Keenan visited the nursery to deliver supplies while on shore leave.

Sister Philomena, who was "really a sweet talker," served as

something of a matchmaker between infant and future father, the younger Keenan said.

Seeing this very handsome Naval surgeon who had a family back at home, Sister Philomena jumped at the chance to introduce Lt. Keenan to Baby-san, who would steal the man's heart with a glance from those sparkling blue eyes.

In her strong Irish accent, Sister Philomena asked Lt. Keenan if he'd care to feed the baby, responding as though it were a miracle at the sight of the youngster taking the bottle from him.

Keenan acknowledged that by this point, he was so hungry he probably would have accepted a bottle from anyone with a hand fit to prop it up.

It was then that Lt. Keenan decided he'd try to adopt the boy, and Baby-san returned to the USS Point Cruz full time until everything was in place for his arrival in the U.S.

Lt. Keenan reached out to his wife, Genevieve, by telegraph, asking whether she'd want to welcome a new baby into the family that December. Her response was an unflinching YES.

Keenan said that his mother, RH-negative, had lost a few baby boys to the then-untreatable blood factor incompatibility since having the couple's oldest daughter.

Father Riley worked to secure the immigration visa needed to get George ASCOM into his new home before the ship docked back on U.S. shores December 1. The first step was obtaining a Korean passport for the boy; ultimately, Father Riley scored Keenan that first piece of necessary documentation via a card game. Even with the passport in place, the U.S. Consul declined to issue the baby's visa.

In the end, it was actually then Vice President Richard Nixon who pulled the strings necessary to secure Keenan that all-important visa; on tour in Korea, Nixon learned of Baby-san's story

through Hayward and passed along word of the document snag to the proper party, getting results in a matter of 24 hours.

With necessary paperwork at long last in order, the baby made his way from Japan to Seattle on the transport ship General Gaffey. His new mother, Genevieve, waited with open arms at their U.S. destination.

Fast forward a few decades and Keenan would go on to graduate from Washington State University with a BA in communications. From there, he moved on to a lengthy stint as a sports editor for newspapers in Washington and Idaho. About 10 years ago, Keenan transitioned to a career in the social field working as a case manager with a mental health organization in Spokane, WA.

The USS Point Cruz has been holding annual reunions since about 1992 at sites across the country. The most recent get-together drew out former crewmembers and family from all different states, including Wisconsin, Mississippi, Missouri, Oregon, Nebraska, Washington State, Texas and Wyoming.

This is the second reunion locals John and Norine Shonder have taken a lead role in organizing; the first of those events was in Natchez, Miss. Norine said that they thought they should bring the event to Phillips this time around, "because we love the Northwoods."

Keenan, a staple at the vast majority of reunions, recalls how a veteran was moved to tears upon seeing him at a past meeting.

He reflected on the significance of his place on the USS Point Cruz and the impact the presence of that baby left on ship crewmembers.

"During the war, there was a tremendous amount of death and devastation. Out of this terrible war, something good happened. That this ship, every crew member rallied around this little baby to save this baby's life," Keenan said. "I literally owe my life to the crew members of the USS Point Cruz."



# 2015 USS POINT CRUZ REUNION SEPTEMBER 14-17 BRANSON, MO

## PRICING & REGISTRATION

PER PERSON, BASED ON ADULT OCCUPANCY

Single: \$498.42    Double: \$289.17    Triple: \$234.30    Quad: \$206.87  
 1 GUEST/2 BEDS    2 GUESTS/2 BEDS    3 GUESTS/2 BEDS    4 GUESTS/2 BEDS

**REUNION REGISTRATION: \$40/attendee**

Make checks payable to "Pt. Cruz Assn." and mail to:  
 Sharon Lindley, Treasurer, 6828 41st Ave. NE, Lacey, WA 98503

## REGISTRATION DEADLINE AUG. 1, 2015

Total package reservations and fees are the responsibility of each Pt. Cruz member and must be made at 1-800-268-4014 between 8 a.m.-5 p.m. and/or mailed to:

Branson Tourism Center  
 Attn: Pt. Cruz Group Department #22039  
 220 Branson Hills Parkway  
 Branson, MO 65616

Identify yourself as a Pt. Cruz attendee and make check payable to:

Branson Tourism Center

### TRAVEL TIP

Contact your ground transportation or shuttle provider as soon as you confirm your arrival time.

### AIRLINES:

To Springfield, MO: American, Delta  
 To Branson, MO: Frontier

### GROUND:

Airport Transportation Service: (417) 331-1316  
 Ridewith US: (417) 336-2625  
 Several car rental companies at Springfield airport

## FOUR NIGHTS LODGING AT

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1984 State Highway 165  
 Branson, MO 65616

- \* Full hot breakfast bar daily
- \* Refrigerator in rooms
- \* Indoor/outdoor water playground
- \* Indoor/outdoor hot tubs
- \* Indoor/outdoor pool
- \* Modern fitness center
- \* Game room
- \* Miniature golf
- \* Playground
- \* 24-hour guest assistance
- \* Guest laundry
- \* Business services
- \* Free Wi-Fi
- \* In-room dining
- \* Full-service restaurant
- \* Lounge/bar
- \* On-site live theatre
- \* Ample free parking
- \* Bellman service available
- \* Hospitality room with bar

ARRIVE 9/14/15, DEPART 9/18/15

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, 9/16/15:  
 Sight and Sound Theatre presents Jonah  
 6 p.m. Thursday, 9/17/15:  
 Banquet dinner at hotel