

# America's Largest Port Home to Mighty Surface Warship USS Iowa



Fireworks over the Battleship Iowa during fleet week in Los Angeles. Port of Los Angeles

The Port of Los Angeles waterfront in San Pedro is home to the Pacific Battleship Center (PBC) and Battleship Iowa (BB 61) Museum. With its 16-inch guns, Tomahawk missiles and other weapons, the 45,000-ton Iowa was once a forceful and imposing instrument of “battleship diplomacy.” Even moored as a museum, Iowa still conveys a powerful message about the importance of the U.S. Navy today and into the future.

**Check out the digital edition of the February/March Seapower magazine [here](#).**

Located

next to the Port of Long Beach, the Port of Los Angeles is one of the busiest

in the world with 270 berths, 17 marinas with 3,800 boat slips, 20-plus cargo

terminals, and 75 container cranes and a cruise ship terminal that moves more

than a million cruise passengers each year. While the Iowa is a magnet there to

veterans and naval buffs, it also serves a wider audience. The ship educates

the public on why the Navy and maritime commerce are so important.

“We’ve

worked hard to change our audience from those with a natural affinity, such as

veterans and history buffs, into public engagement,” said

Jonathan Williams, president and CEO of Pacific Battleship Center, the nonprofit organization tasked to operate the Battleship Iowa Museum.

While history at the museum is important, the relevancy of the surface Navy to the public is probably the most important component.

“Surface warriors understand the importance of their own community and their contribution to the Navy and the nation. But a museum’s purpose is to educate the public, and we see our role expanding to educate the public on the importance of the role of the surface Navy,” Williams said.

“A large percentage of the general public has no idea of the breadth of the surface Navy’s role and how it affects the average person’s life. In my opinion, there’s no better place to do that than right here in the largest port in the United States, because our Navy helps maintain safe and secure sea lanes to ensure the passage of all that wonderful cargo that we enjoy as American consumers and the exports and humanitarian assistance that we send overseas and all of those different things that make our country what it is.”

Despite the size of the port, most Los Angeles residents have never been inside it. “There

are young people who live 5 miles from here who have never been on a ship or even seen one up close,” Williams said.

“Earlier this year, we announced plans to become the National Museum of the Surface Navy at Battleship Iowa. We’re in the final design process of our capital campaign package to raise the necessary funds,” Williams added.

*“We’ve worked hard to change our audience from those with a natural affinity, such as veterans and history buffs, into public engagement.”*

*Jonathan Williams, president and CEO, Pacific Battleship Center*

“This transition will have a tremendous impact locally and regionally and, ultimately, will raise awareness about the relevancy of the surface Navy today. As we develop the National Museum of the Surface Navy concept, our capital campaign package discusses each one of the components of the surface Navy and why they’re important – not only reflecting on the past in the historical context of ‘look at this artifact,’ or ‘look at this historical story,’ but why that component is a relevant aspect of maintaining the future of our country and international relations.”

Williams said the focus is on the basics.

“We

realized that only ship lovers like us really care to go inside to see the nuts and bolts of a ship. The majority of the general public is more interested in the human connection versus technical facts, which drives a broader level of storytelling. We have worked really hard to change our audience over the past seven years from the natural affinity audience of veterans and history buffs to more of a public engaging audience.”

According

to Williams, the National Museum of the Surface Navy will be more than a museum. “We want to become the place where we can have conversations about international trade, safe and secure commerce at sea, disaster response, and important facets of the surface Navy’s impact to society. We have our wardroom and our CP0 [chief petty officer] mess and our fantail available for meetings, presentations and seminars. The ship itself can serve to stimulate these discussions.”

**Home**

**to Exhibits – and a Connection to Active-Duty Sailors**

Iowa

is not just a Navy museum – it showcases other maritime themes as well. One 5,000-square-foot former berthing compartment is now Robert Ballard’s “Lost at Sea” exhibit. The formula seems to be working. According to TripAdvisor, the

Battleship Iowa Museum is the fourth most popular museum of 131 and the sixth most popular of 623 tourist attractions in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

*"We announce the arrival of every veteran who walks aboard."*

*JONATHAN WILLIAMS*

In fact, the Battleship Iowa Museum already hosts junior naval officers attending the basic division officer course at Surface Warfare Officers School who come up from San Diego for instruction in the history and heritage of the surface Navy. CP0 selects come to the ship from Port Hueneme and San Diego each year for indoctrination. "We do a lot of enlistments, re-enlistments, retirements and promotion ceremonies. We also have Army, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard coming here," Williams said. "It's not just Navy."

The ship has become a home to various organizations. American Legion Post 61 transferred from Sacramento to San Pedro and is based aboard the Iowa. The U.S. Naval Sea Cadets Battleship Iowa Division holds its meetings on the ship, and there is a weekly amateur radio club. The new Battleship Iowa Surface Navy Association Chapter held its first meeting in the wardroom recently, with more than half of its membership in attendance.

The

museum offers two STEM programs to encourage students to learn about science, technology, engineering and math. One is called "Day of Discovery" with Los Angeles Unified School District – the second largest school district in the country. The other is called "STEM at Sea" for any other school district in Los Angeles or Orange County. "We currently focus on 4th through 6th grades," Williams said. "We have trained volunteer tour guides that help us deliver the program."



Sailors aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Spruance render honors to the Iowa while transiting through the Port of Los Angeles during fleet week last year. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Hector Carrera

The emphasis on educating the public doesn't mean veterans are forgotten. The USS Iowa association holds its reunion on the ship every four years and meets at other locations around the country on the other three years.

"We announce the arrival of every veteran who walks aboard," Williams said.

Rear

Adm. Mike Shatynski, the chairman of the PBC's board of directors, said veterans are still an important part of the Iowa family. "The Iowa would be razor blades now if not for veterans. As a veteran that has found a home aboard Iowa, I can

speak for my shipmates that it fills that hole in our lives that we have had since we left active duty. Without exaggeration, I can tell you that Iowa has changed and saved many lives.”

Serving aboard Iowa today is serving as a nexus between the military and the civilian world for transitioning service members.

“One of the things we didn’t realize is the organic nature of the ship and how being part of the crew here today has helped vets and civilians alike bridge that gap and provide a comfortable environment to be part of something greater than themselves,” Williams said. “Veterans have always found in service to one’s country something that’s greater than themselves, feeling like they’re part of something bigger.

USS Iowa passes under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco in 2012 during its final voyage to Los Angeles.

“And today the ship and this organization continues that experience by organically helping veterans’ transition into the civilian world – we’re integrating both civilians and vets aboard a ship platform versus walking into a building or a workforce development center. We’re hosting a lot of seminars and programs to build on this unique environment, and we are working with partners like Reboot out of San Diego, LA County Department of Mental Health, the

Wounded Warrior

Project as well, and we've received some funding from Philadelphia Gear and the Johnny Carson Foundation to make this happen."

According

to Dave Way, the museum's curator, the Pacific Battleship Center employs 16

full-time employees, with 390 part-timers and several contract personnel who

run the concessions. And there are several hundred volunteers, who Way

described as "incredible beyond words."

In

addition to grants and corporate sponsorships, the PBC receives revenue from

ticket sales, hosting events and receptions, sleepovers by Boy Scouts and other

groups participating in Camp Battleship, which has 210 original berths, and

even filming by Hollywood production companies.

The

ship has both contractor and volunteers to help maintain the ship in a

condition "satisfactory to the Secretary of the Navy." The original teak decks,

for example, have been a challenge to maintain. Way said it's difficult to find

enough quality teak and the oakum caulking needed to make the decks watertight,

so new planking is being installed using Douglas Fir and is being bolted to the

deck.

A

significant donation came from the state of Iowa to keep their



namesake ship in good material condition. It's no surprise that a big ship in a saltwater environment needs plenty of upkeep, and the Iowa team takes maintenance seriously. For example, the active anti-corrosion system uses an electrical current to protect the hull.

Williams said that raising money for any historic ship is a challenge, but he is encouraged by the fact that the organization already has a large donor list of about 36,000 people who have supported the Iowa, many of which have already shown interest in the National Museum of the Surface Navy transition. Surprisingly, Williams said the supporters don't mind being asked again for donations.

"I tend to find that we will actually turn off a donor if we don't ask them to support the programs or maintain the ship condition. Donors like to make an impact and involving them in the organization allows them to become a part of something greater than themselves."

## **Other Historic Navy Ships Find Access Becoming a Challenge**

Other large historic Navy ships open to visitors find similar challenges as well as opportunities.

Norfolk

is well-known as a Navy town, but it's not as easy to get on base to take a tour and see the ships as it once was. According to Stephen Kirkland is the director of Nauticus National Maritime Center and the Battleship Wisconsin at Waterside in Norfolk, for many people who come to visit Williamsburg and Virginia Beach, this is as close as they're going to get.

Kirkland said he and his staff have two kinds of visitors. There are the aficionados who are passionate about the Navy and its ships, especially battleships. "They're going to come to see us. We get visitors who have been aboard all four of the Iowa class ships."

But, Kirkland said, "The majority of our guests have no conception. It's our job and privilege to give them a better understanding."

It's not just about telling the story of the USS Wisconsin, Kirkland said. "How can we use this ship to tell the story of the U.S. Navy, and why it's so important to our nation and the world?"

Kirkland said his team is trying different ways to get people aboard the ship, such as concerts or holiday-themed events such as Halloween, to appeal to a wider audience. He said Wisconsin is the first battleship to offer an "escape room," where people must solve a series of problems and figure out how to get out of the room.

"We did it to reach those people who might not come aboard for any other reason than that. But once we get them on the ship, they will immediately have an understanding of how impressive it is. And with that comes more eyeballs and more funding. That's important, because we've got to make sure the ship is in good shape for years to come," he said.