

Baby is Christened in Ship's Bell at Yokohama

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For a 4-month-old, little Nicole Elizabeth Tucker recently made a big splash. Continuing a Navy tradition, Nicole became the first baby christened in a ship's bell at the North Dock facility in Yokohama.

Though North Dock is home to Military Sealift Command (MSC) Far East, none of its ships claim the port as home base. Hence, no bells have been around to be used in a service...until now.

The upturned bell from which the holy water was poured isn't just any brass relic. It was donated to the base last year by a retired sailor and is rumored to be from the USS PUEBLO, captured by North Korea in 1968 on its maiden voyage from Yokosuka.

But for the Tucker family, the bell's history is inconsequential. What was important, they said, was sharing a family moment with the people they consider extended relatives.

"I've been in the Navy for 21 years, so I consider these people an extension of my immediate family," said Lt. Ronald Tucker, Nicole's father and MSC Force Protection Officer. "We wanted both families to be a part of the ceremony."

Neither Tucker nor his wife, Kathleen, knew it was the first time in the base's 50-year history a baby would be christened in a ship's bell. And until people started talking about it, they didn't know the significance of the bell.

"We're just learning about this now. We had no idea she was the first," said Kathleen moments before the ceremony, which took place in the commanding officer's office. "My husband had heard about how the christening ceremony was traditionally done in the Navy, so we asked if we could use the bell."

The centuries-old tradition of christening babies in a ship's bell dates to the early merchant ships of Great Britain. Citizenship was granted only to those born or baptized in Great Britain. Colonists in the Americas and other areas would wait for an official ship of the realm to visit, and then board the vessel with their children to have them baptized.

As the ships were considered sovereign territory, the christening granted citizenship to whomever was baptized aboard. The names of the baptized were engraved inside the ship's bell as official proof that they were baptized on British soil.

Today's Navy continues the tradition of baptizing and inscribing babies' names inside a ship's bell. North Dock officials say little Nicole's

name will be inscribed inside their bell. Her name will certainly not be the last, they said.

"This doesn't have the same legal or practical purpose as it once had, but it binds us to the past," said CAPT Doug Harris, commander of MSC Far East. "It's been said that the Navy is a tradition-based service, and of course, this is one of the best of those traditions."

