

The Commander and members of the crew of the USS Montana visit

Crew members from the USS Montana were in Helena this week to mingle with the public and leave behind a little something to help folks remember there is a nuclear-powered submarine prowling the ocean bearing the state's name.

Commanding Officer Jon Quimby and a handful of crew members visited the Treasure State with the USS Montana Committee serving as their hosts.

While in Helena on Thursday they had a lunch at Fort Harrison at a lunch sponsored by the Helena Area Chamber of Commerce, the Helena Naval Reserve Center and the USS Montana Committee.

At 7 a.m. they said hello and fielded questions from attendees of Hometown Helena and left for a radio interview. At 5 p.m. they met with Lt. Gov. Kristen Juras and other state officials, including Senate President Jason Ellsworth, R-Hamilton, in the old Supreme Court chambers of the state Capitol to present the commissioning pennant from the ship.

"May this pennant be a permanent symbol of our dedication to protecting our nation and the dedication of our crew members to always be connected to and represent the people of Big Sky country," Quimby said, noting earlier that Montana, like the pennant, has been with the submarine "every step of the way."

State officials said the governor has already determined a place where the banner will be displayed.

"What a celebration," Juras said. "I am just so proud of Montana and the journey through this."

"Can you tell that when we get involved in Montana we go all in?" she said to Quimby.

USS Montana was commissioned June 25 during a ceremony at a shipyard in Norfolk, Virginia, making it the first Navy ship named after the Treasure State in more than 100 years. There were nearly 100 Montanans in attendance that day as the ship was christened by former secretary of the interior Sally Jewell.

The \$2.6 billion Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarine known as USS Montana SSN 794 will add the next generation of stealth, surveillance and special warfare capabilities to the Navy fleet, officials said.

It's 377-feet long and has a crew of about 140, Quimby said.

Quimby said earlier in the day that the significance of the commissioning pennant is a naval tradition that goes back to the 16th and 17th centuries, where all the ships of the fleet were sailing ships and it was difficult to tell apart. Warships began flying pennants from the main mast.

"We continue that tradition and we have a commissioning pennant for every ship in the Navy," he said.

Quimby said he has visited Montana before on behalf of the submarine and received an "outstanding" reception from the public both times.

He said the Montana went on a sea trial in February 2022 and has been operational since then.

He said the submarine went into the shipyards in January for "post shakedown availability" in which all the bugs will be worked out. It will be redelivered to the Navy later this year and Montana will become part of the fleet and dock at Pearl Harbor.

Among those visiting with Quimby was Lt. Cody Popelka of Montana.

"I love being on my home state boat," he said, asked to be assigned to the Montana. "It's probably the coolest thing I've ever done."

He said he is officer of the deck and monitors the ship's operations and talks with the captain. He said he's the one most directly driving the boat.

He's asked if he had trouble adjusting to a submarine after spending time in a big sky state.

"It's a lot of small spaces but I really don't think about it," he said.

Popelka said his father was a submariner and lived in Billings, Townsend and Cut Bank. He said he graduated from Montana State University.

However, he's no longer the only Montanan onboard as the governor made all the crew members "honorary Montanans." And in honor of the Treasure State's past of vigilante justice in the 19th century, the crew has adopted the nickname "The vigilantes of the deep."

Bill Whitsitt, chair of the USS Montana Committee, said the committee is sponsoring a USS Montana license plate and \$20 a year will go to their programs. The committee is dedicated to supporting the submarine during its lifetime.

The ship is decorated with a Montana theme with state rooms named after Montana cities. Passageways are named for Montana rivers. The crew mess area, called the Big Sky Saloon, includes a Glacier Park panorama requested by Quimby.

The previous USS Montana, also called "Armored Cruiser No. 13," was commissioned in 1908 and was among the final class of armored cruisers to be built for the US Navy. She spent her active career in the Atlantic fleet and was decommissioned in 1921.

In addition to visiting Montana governmental offices, the USS MONTANA officers and crew were hosted to a lunch event at the Helena Armed Forces Reserve Center (HAFRC) at Fort Harrison, MT. Following the lunch and discussion with the current Leadership Helena class, the group made a presentation at the Montana Military Museum.

To know more on the USS Montana Committee or to support the USS Montana, go to:

<https://ussmontanacommittee.us/>

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