

# For old time's sake

## Local man plans Florida reunion of WWII Navy crew

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There's no real reason why, for 14 consecutive years, the surviving members of George Kern's U.S. Navy crew get together.

Except perhaps to party, said the 75-year-old Kern, a Farmington resident who is organizing this month's Florida reunion of the U.S. Navy Landing Craft Infantry Gunboat 450.

"It's just a little get-together," Kern said, puffing on a cigarette in his kitchen last week. "I think the women look forward to it more than we do. We have a good time at these (the reunions) every year."

But more-telling answers are found with just a little bit of questioning.

The ranks of the LCIG-450 dwindle each year. Nobody knows how long they'll be able to travel from all over the country to enjoy camaraderie, trade war stories and just have a merry cel-

bration.

"There aren't too many of us left," said Kern, who will travel with his wife, Betty, to Ft. Myers, Fla., for the Nov. 18-21 reunion.

Kern mentioned that the crew loses someone every year. The captain of the LCIG-450, Wally Brady, died this summer.

Brady began the tradition of holding annual reunions all over the United States, including Texas and Maine. The first reunion was in 1986.

"The one next year was supposed to be in Wisconsin, hosted by the captain," Kern said. "But he died. So we don't know where we're going to be yet."

Then, Kern shook his head and grinned. "We've been thinking of buying a half-gallon of Scotch and the last one alive can drink it."

Among highlights for this year's party-goers will be a Nov. 20 barbecue at the home of the Kerns' oldest daughter, Cathy Witt, an alumna of Our Lady of Sorrows. All six of the Kern's children attended Sorrows. Several eight-seeing trips and restaurant junkets also are planned.

About 20 members of the crew of what Kern described as the heaviest armed ship of its size in the Pacific will be in Florida.

Originally there were 12 members on the crew, and "then we added 40 or 45 when it became a gunboat."



Model citizen: Farmington's George Kern holds up a replica model of the Landing Craft Infantry Gunboat 450, which he described as the heaviest armed ship of its size in the Pacific during World War II. About 20 members of the crew are expected to attend this week's reunion in Ft. Myers, Fla., where Kern's daughter Cathy Witt (formerly of Farmington) lives.

STAFF PHOTOS BY BELL HICKLER

"Some of the guys who joined after I left were officers," Kern said with a slight tone of sarcasm in his gravelly voice.

"And they still think they're officers." For the Ft. Myers shindig, many LCIG-450 survivors will bring their wives along, and other family members might make the trip.

"Maybe it (the reunion) is something that's boring to you," said Kern. "But to us, it's great. And you have people from all walks of life."

They went on to work in factories and offices. But all apparently have something special in common.

"It's kind of a special club," he said. "It's hard to get into, of

course. You can't get into it now."

Tall tales

Kern served in that so-called club from 1942 until February 1946, making stops at "every island in the Pacific."

That experience made lifelong friends for those who served on the gunboat. But other than

that, "I wouldn't want to do it again."

"We can't do what we used to," said Kern, who in 1968 founded Kern Industries Inc., a Novi-based tool and die company. "But the stories do get a little better every year."



Ready to party: The reuniting members of the LCIG-450 will wear hats and jackets donated to the cause by Farmington's George Kern.

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