

She relives history as a guide on the SS Jeremiah Oâ??Brien, one of the WWII Liberty ships that brought troops and cargo to Normandy beaches

Description

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Eve Maher hands out programs to visitors boarding the SS Jeremiah Oâ??Brien for a tour and memorial cruise on Armed Services Day. (All photos by Robin Evans unless otherwise indicated.)

Eve Maher stood next to a gangway atop the deck of the SS Jeremiah Oâ??Brien, a WWII Liberty ship parked at Pier 35 at Fishermanâ??s Wharf. A volunteer on the ship, she greeted visitors as they arrived for a special memorial cruise for Armed Services Day on May 18.

Petite and stylish, the native of Dublin, Ireland, 86, handed out programs to those coming onboard for a tour and four-hour cruise around San Francisco Bay as well as a service for departed military.

â??I feel like Iâ??m a part of history,â?• Maher said. â??And itâ??s like family here,â?• she added, saying hello and introducing her guests to all her fellow volunteers.

The 81-year-old ship has a colorful history of service. Although itâ??s â??not a beauty,â?• according to Maher, the cargo ship and others like it were crucial in winning WWII.



Visitors who joined the Armed Services Day tour on May 18 were served food, drink and entertainment. A special memorial service was closed to all but veterans and their families. During the cruise out to the Golden Gate Bridge and back, visitors were free to explore the ship.



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â??The Liberty ships were what won the war â?? 2,710 of them,â?• she said. â??They were either in the Atlantic or the Pacific. The Oâ??Brien made four transatlantic trips bringing troops or cargo from the U.S. to Normandyâ??s beaches and 11 trips between England and France.

Named for a Revolutionary War naval hero, the SS Jeremiah Oâ??Brien returned to Normandy in 1994 for the 50th anniversary of D-Day. President Bill Clinton and his wife Hilary Rodham Clinton visited the ship that day. It was the only shipping vessel there that was in Normandy on June 6, 1944.

Inspired by her brother

While most of the ships were eventually sold or put in reserve, the Oâ??Brien was saved for preservation and moved to San Francisco Bay. It was restored and eventually docked at Pier 35. Only two other Liberty ships are still afloat: the SS John W. Brown in Baltimore, Maryland the SS Hellas Liberty in Greece.

Maher, who has volunteered on the Oâ??Brien since 2001, was inspired to offer her services because of her brother, who worked aboard a Liberty ship in Dublin in the 1960s as a merchant marine. She said her brother solved a mechanical difficulty at sea, and the captain named him a second engineer on the spot. But he refused a chance to attend the Merchant Marine Academy.



Eve Maher at the entry to the shipâ??s museum. At 86, sheâ??s still agile enough to maneuver its tight alleyways and steep stairs.



He is now in his 90s in a Dublin nursing home. Maher traveled to Ireland to visit him right after the May 18 cruise.

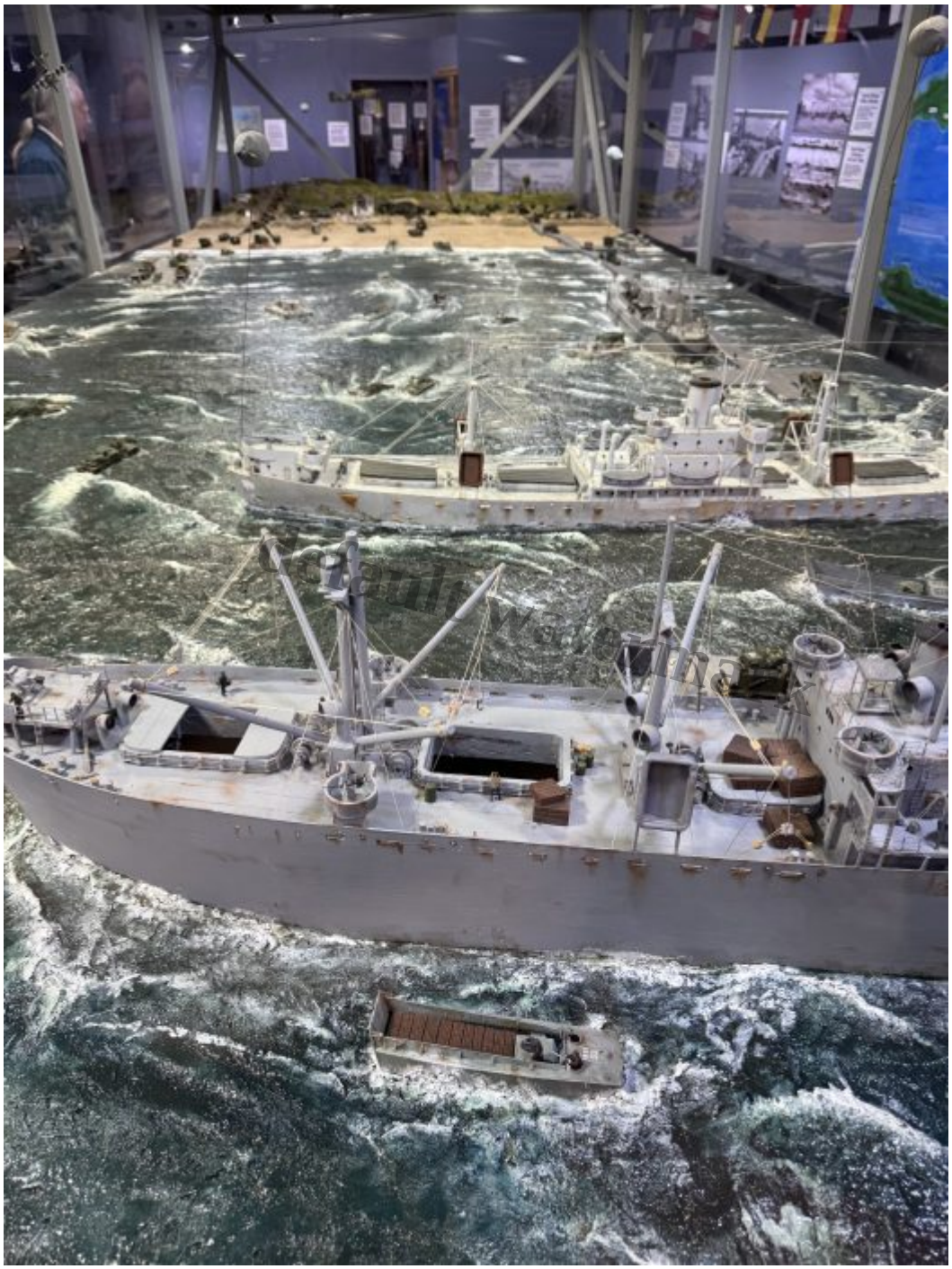
Maher worked in the insurance industry for many years before embarking on a new career of volunteerism. She said the Jeremiah Oâ??Brien mission meshes with her personality. â??Iâ??m kind of outgoing and I like to meet people,â?• she said.

She enjoys giving the tour, which includes minutiae like the details of a diorama below decks that illustrates the Normandy beaches just after the D-Day invasion, to the fact that the engine room was filmed for James Cameronâ??s classic 1997 film â??Titanic.â?•

The Jeremiah Oâ??Brienâ??s most exciting event each year is Fleet Week in October when the Blue Angels fly over the ship to the delight of the crew and visitors. â??They do their acrobatics over the ship in the bay and itâ??s very, very exciting,â?• said Maher. â??I just love that part of it. People come from all over the world, and I get an opportunity to explain about it the best I can.â?•



The diorama depicting Liberty Ships off-loading supplies after D-Day, housed below-decks of the SS Jeremiah Oâ??Brien, was a gift from France for the U.S. role in its liberation from the Nazis. Below, the Jeremiah Oâ??Brien is in the foreground, a Normandy beach at the far back.



Maher lives in Noe Valley, owns a Victorian, leases part of it, and has a red-haired cat named Branwell. Never married with no children, she arrived in the United States in 1958 when she was 20. She came to visit her sister in Virginia and decided to settle there.

Pairing off with someone was never part of her agenda.

â??I was never in love long enough to even think about getting married. Iâ??m one of a large family and always wanted my own apartment. I never wanted to share. I donâ??t miss it in the slightest.â?•

Maher worked for GEICO, then known as the Government Employees Insurance Company. After a few years as a clerk, she was promoted. â??They told me they were opening their underwriting department to women, and would I be interested? I said yes. I didnâ??t even know what underwriting was.â?•

A life of volunteering

Four years later she moved to Denver with the company. In 1963, Maher was named the queen of the local Irish parade. She remembered being atop a float in 50 mph winds as well as meeting Coloradoâ??s governor. â??Geico got a lot of publicity, and they were happy since they were new to the city.â?•

Three years later, GEICO moved her to San Francisco, at her request.

â??I fell in love with the Victorians,â?? she said, subsequently purchasing one. She attended City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State University. Maher then traveled back to Dublin to take part in a two-year international literature and poetry course at Trinity College. Then, she added, â??I ran out of money.â?•

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Eve Maher below decks with materials showing the extent of her volunteerism, which is not limited to the Oâ??Brien.

She vowed never to go back to the insurance industry. She was bored, but â??thatâ??s what my training was, and thatâ??s where the money was.â?• When she returned to San Francisco a head-hunter contacted her and presented a â??very attractiveâ?• offer with Royal Insurance, complete with a company car and an expense account.



Former Colorado Governor John Love signs a declaration making Maher the 1963 Queen of the Irish Fellowship Club, a community service organization. (Photo courtesy of Eva Maher)

Maher was hired on, spent two more years here, then was shuffled off to Sacramento, back to San Francisco, and then to Tampa, Florida. Royal then wanted to move her to Syracuse, New York, but she declined and returned to San Francisco.

Some of Maherâ??s volunteer experiences over the years might not be as electrifying as the Blue Angels, but, she said, theyâ??re no less important. For 17 years, she worked for the elections department, hosting a precinct in her garage and later at her neighborâ??s.

â??Theyâ??d set up the tables and Iâ??d put a bowl of water out for the dogs. Sometimes Iâ??d put out a bowl of candy on the day of the elections,â?• she said. Her friends helped her at the polling place, making tea and pastries. She was used to the visits of postal inspectors on election day, making sure â??everything was on the up and up.â?•

â??It requires having a lot of knowledge that you only use for one day,â?• said Maher. â??You had to make sure (voters) sign on the right line. All the little stalls would be set up. We opened up on the button of 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. we shut down the garage door. You had about half an hour to account for every ballot, then the supervisor would pick up the ballots.â?•



Maher with a voter in her garage, which served as a a polling place in San Francisco for many years. (Photo courtesy of Eva Maher)

She volunteered at the Conservatory of Flowers for 17 years and at the Botanical Gardens. Beginning in 1999, she joined the Experience Corps to tutor kids who couldnâ??t keep up in the classroom.

Maher tutored a boy individually whom she met in the Sunset Youth Services program for about a year and a half. â??It was very heart-breaking because he didnâ??t have any support at home,â?• Maher said.

â??He couldnâ??t read. I got him reading â?? he wrote me a letter. It was just to thank me for the help I gave him reading and writing.â?•

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