

The "PönEx"-Crews of the German Naval Museum: A Force to be reckoned with

Twice a year, Navy veterans gather in the German Naval Museum for a so called "PönEx". This neologism consists of the navy terms "Pönen" (to paint) and "Exercise". The core of the group, which tends the former guided-missile-destroyer D 186 "Mölders", consists mainly out of the crew that put the ship into service in 1969. They are joined by later crewmembers of the "Mölders" and their sisterships "Rommel" and "Lütjens", but also by their wives or girlfriends (no women actually served on the "Mölders").

The Museum relies heavily on this kind of veteran work, as they know 'their' ship, but also because of the sheer amount of working hours required which the museum's staff cannot provide themselves. However, it is a constant process of negotiation between the museum and its veterans on how things must be preserved, or which contents should be presented or highlighted. The "Mölders" is a striking example for veterans experiencing and simultaneously shaping the commemoration of their own history. Since the "PönExes" take place during regular opening hours, visitors have the unique possibility of experiencing how to take care of a ship and getting in touch with its former crew. Like this, the veterans stay visible for the public, but also for the museum as a party that wants to be consulted in decisions concerning 'their' ship.

In my talk I will highlight the special role, veteran associations have for the German Naval Museum. I will also talk about the inner structure of those groups and the motivations to spend one's vacations or (increasingly) one's retirement to tending a former warship, on which one has served perhaps only for a couple of years. Hinting on the current process of the museum's process of renewal, I will also point out, which part the collective memory of "our" veteran groups will play in it.