

# LAST VOYAGE

*When Lynn Kershner's longtime friend and next-door neighbor passed away a few years ago, his friends and family members decided to scatter his ashes offshore, near Chincoteague, VA. Kershner remembers, "Once the ceremony began, I understood why John would have wanted a service like this. He was a wildlife artist who spent a majority of his time on or near these waters. He was happiest here when he was alive, and this is where he'd want to be now."*

Another BoatU.S. member recalls his close family friend's sea service much the same way. "The service was very touching and appropriate for someone so free-spirited. Not only did the service fit his personality, it also helped us find closure with his loss."

Although having one's ashes scattered offshore or a burial at sea may seem a bit unconventional to some, it's actually becoming quite popular. Many notable people have reportedly chosen cremation scattering services at sea, including, John F. Kennedy Jr., Vincent Price, Ingrid Bergman, and Robert Mitchum. Celebrity or not, thousands of people are choosing sea burials as their "way to go."

Burial at sea has been an accepted funerary rite for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians were known to send their dead off to sea floating in some type of watercraft, but perhaps the most familiar culture associated with burials at sea are the Vikings. Many a movie has depicted deceased Viking warriors being sent off in their burning boats. However, archaeologists have uncovered solid evidence of numerous Viking ships throughout Scandinavia and other Viking-occupied territories that were buried on land with their owners.

From large 100-foot-plus ships to small

boats, depending on the social status of the deceased, they symbolize the great importance vessels and the ocean had on these civilizations and how they hoped to reach Valhalla, the afterlife. According to one expert, a special ship burial existed in the Viking society in which a body was cremated and buried inside a ring of stones shaped like a boat. The deceased's spirit immediately went to Valhalla.

Fast forward several centuries. While the concept of burial at sea is still with us, the traditions surrounding how it's done, at least in modern-day America, have changed significantly. Today, funerals at sea can be performed in various ways through a variety of companies that cater to just about every possible way one can think of to be laid to rest in the world's waters.

The Neptune Society, a well-established 60,000 member organization arranging low cost cremation services since 1973, offers a variety of services from simple cremation and scattering at sea to private memorial services for family and friends on board a boat prior to scattering. The formal sea ceremony provides arrangements for five to 25 guests aboard the service boat, and includes flowers and a memorial plaque, with the latitude and longitude coordinates, which is presented to the family. Although scattering at sea is not required of Neptune Society's members, it is the most common choice. "Our Los Angeles location has at least one, and sometimes two, boat trips per day for a scattering service at sea," said Doug Irving, Neptune Society's Chief Operating Officer.

Other smaller outfits providing cremation sea services can be found all over the East and West coasts. Sea Services, based out of Long Island, New York, offers a

Captain's Service, which includes a sea ceremony performed by a licensed captain without the family present, or a Family Service, providing a boat and crew to take friends and family along for the water ceremony.

Family services range in price depending on the time of year, the time on the water, and the number of guests aboard. Along with traditional scattering, Sea Services also offers biodegradable ocean urns for burial at sea. "Our seashell urns descend to the ocean floor, and degrade after several



Photos by Eternal Reefs

An artificial reef, from Eternal Reefs, is lowered into the water (top). After three years, the reef has become home to marine life (bottom).

minutes providing a respectful means of depositing one's remains in the water," said Bruce Sweet, a licensed captain with the company. "The Catholic Church prohibits surface scattering, and this offers an alternative for those who want to be laid to rest at sea."

A few unconventional companies offer their customers some quite creative methods of depositing ashes at sea. Eternal Reefs, based in Georgia, combines cremated remains with a cement mixture used to create artificial reefs in various locations along the east coast and Texas. Eternal Reefs has three different sizes of reef balls; the larger ones are a good option for loved ones who want to be buried together. Several reef structures are lowered into the water in each

ceremony to keep the memorial reefs constantly growing. Soon, corals, sponges, fish and other sea life make the reef their home in this unique method of sea burial for the environmentally conscious.

Celebrate Life!, a company based in Lakeside, California, offers a fireworks display ceremony with fireworks made from the deceased's cremated remains. They offer a marine celebration service, complete with song accompaniment. Prices vary depending on ceremony location, length of display, and permit costs for the fireworks.

The military also offers burial at sea services for active duty and retired members, honorably discharged veterans, and their family members. The privilege of a naval sea service is also extended to some civilians who have served the country in a notable way, and are deemed eligible by the Chief of Naval Operations. Military sea services are provided for cremated remains and casketed remains.

But are these various ceremonies at sea, from the "conventional" scattering at sea from a boat to ashes being blasted in a colorful pyrotechnic display over water, representative of a growing trend in cremations overall? Absolutely, says Jack Springer, Executive Director for Cremation Association of North America (CANA). "In 1982, cremations only represented about 12% of deaths in the U.S., but our latest figures for 2000 show that number has gone up to nearly 26%," Springer said.

One main reason, says Springer, is people are dying older, and they look at cremation as a simpler alternative to in-ground burials. Services can be held at a later date, at a time convenient for friends and family to attend.

Another source, the Wirthlin Report, developed by an independent research company, shows the primary reason people choose cremation is the lower cost. Sea Services, for example, offers sea ceremonies starting at \$195, and Celebrate Life! marine packages start at \$3,250, which is considerably less than in-ground burials which can range in cost from the low thousands to more than \$10,000.

So why choose a service at sea? Could it be because of the peace and serenity so many associate with water? As one BoatU.S. member put it, "A sea service is perfect for people who love the water."

One thing that probably will not change with time are the various restrictions in place for burials at sea within the United States. Federal law requires that all cremated and casketed burials be performed three nautical miles offshore; casketed funerals

must also be performed at a depth of 600 feet or more. And though casketed burials at sea are legal in the U.S., there are many restrictions and requirements, and the cost is generally much more than a cremation sea service.

Any individual wanting to perform such services themselves must comply with all applicable laws and regulations and must also have all permits required to carry out a sea service. Professional sea service companies have the necessary permits for performing such services. All burials within U.S. waters must be reported within 30 days to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regional office from the region in which the vessel carrying the remains departed.

California is the only state with a defined law allowing cremation scatterings at least 500 yards off the shoreline. Other states do not have laws either allowing or disallowing scattering ashes within state waters, according to CANA.

Whether it's a spiritual, emotional, or another type of connection you have to the sea, if a sea burial sounds right for you, you might want to start looking into it now. Almost every company specializing in such services offers pre-arranged plans so you can choose exactly what you want, down to the very last detail. Times are changing, and there's no telling what types of funerary services may be offered 50 years from now. But the tradition of sea burial has lasted thousands of years, and will most likely continue as a tradition for some time to come. ■

— By Meredith Fitzpatrick

Neptune Society Headquarters  
Sherman Oaks, CA  
Toll Free: (888) 637-8863  
[www.neptunesociety.com](http://www.neptunesociety.com)

Sea Services  
Long Island, NY  
Toll Free: (888)551-1277  
[www.seaservices.com](http://www.seaservices.com)

Eternal Reefs  
Decatur, GA  
Toll Free: (888)423-7333  
[www.eternalreefs.com](http://www.eternalreefs.com)

Celebrate Life!, Inc.  
Lakeside, CA  
Toll Free: (888)883-7060  
[www.celebratelife.net](http://www.celebratelife.net)

Casualty Assistance Branch  
Naval Personnel Command (NPC-621)  
5720 Integrity Drive  
Millington, TN 38055-6210  
Toll Free: (800)368-3202

Cremation Association of North America  
Chicago, IL  
[www.cremationassociation.org](http://www.cremationassociation.org)