

# PassageMaker™

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# Excellence Is A Four-Letter Word

Burr Yacht Sales staffers pose in the cockpit of the new Fleming 75 with Art and Marilyn Burr on the swim platform. That brawny Brit with the blue shirt and white baseball cap is Tony Fleming.

## *Burr Legacy Is His Commitment To Quality*

*By Peter Swanson • Photos by Bill Parlatore*

RAY CURREY OF BURR YACHT SALES WAS EITHER overcome by emotion that early evening in July or he had been trained as a Shakespearean actor. And the latter, I doubt. Currey was speaking to Fleming yacht owners attending a rendezvous in St. Michaels, Maryland. He was testifying about the relations between Burr employees and Arthur Burr himself, absent in Florida recuperating from surgery.

Choking back his emotion, Currey described Burr and his wife Marilyn as "the most caring people we'd ever met." When someone describes a company as being like family, I become immediately suspicious. Not this time. Currey's words had a ring of truth. "They (the Burrs) gave us jobs when we were kids. They

saw us get married and they saw us have kids of our own. They gave us careers," he said.

Unlike most of the marine industry, which recycles employees faster than you can say Dr. Pepper, Burr's Edgewater, Maryland, facility has managed to hold onto to many of the same people who were with Burr in the 1970s. That's why I believe Ray Currey.

The conventional wisdom about Burr, which handles the Fleming's East Coast sales, is that the company succeeds because it is a dedicated, well-knit, hard working team. Unlike most sales organizations, it does not operate on commission, but profit sharing. Sales are backed up by quality technical service.

This is Arthur Burr's legacy, though Currey and Pat Flaherty now direct day-to-day operations.

As often is the case, Art Burr's passion for boating was handed down from father to son, in this case on the southern shore of Long Island in the 1940s. Burr went on to graduate with a degree in Naval Architecture from New York's Webb Institute in 1954. For his graduate thesis, Webb tank-tested several trawler models he had made for a Webb technical publication.

As competition against the Soviet Union intensified, Webb's role as a strategic resource was recognized by the legendary Cold Warrior, Admiral Hyman Rickover. And Burr went off to join the Navy—Rickover's nuclear navy. Rickover, son of Russian Jewish refugees, was a quirky perfectionist, known to mentally and emotionally torture subordinates in pursuit of his goal, to build a weapon—a submarine



force—which could checkmate the Soviets. Rickover terrified the men beneath him, and the results terrified the Kremlin.

Burr calls the eight years he spent with Rickover the most important in his career. He helped develop pressure containment vessels for sub reactors and even spent a week sailing aboard the *USS Nautilus*.

Retired Admiral James D. Wadkins once explained the effect Rickover had on those who survived his regimen, and how they, too, passed along those values:

“Thousands of people in America today think differently, because they brushed the coattails of this one man. Each one of them, because of this man, was pushed a little bit harder, made to think a little bit deeper, forced to develop a little bit better sense of responsibility to improve society as a whole. The cadre of people so affected still range from a lonely seaman to a president of the United States, including their wives, husbands, and children. They continue to affect how this country feels, acts, and thinks.”

To this day, Ray Currey quotes Burr, quoting Rickover. Never tell Rickover something couldn't be done. How long it would take, and how much it would cost—that's the only answer Rickover would countenance.

In the 1960s, Burr got out of the Navy and into the boat business, building a reputation. He worked with Donzi and Formula before coming to rest as a Bertram dealership in 1968. Here it is worth quoting from a short autobiography Burr once wrote in which he refers to himself in the third person:

“Over the years...Burr Yacht Sales delivered many, many millions of dollars worth of new Bertrams to customers all over the world. One of the best and most respected customers was the late King Hussein of Jordan, who had 54- and 60-foot Bertrams as well as a fleet of 10 31-foot Bertrams. To Mr. Burr, however, of even greater importance were the many customers of modest means who were willing to make sacrifices to own a Bertram because they really appreciated the quality and the performance that had made Bertram famous.”

In 1990, Burr's relationship with Bertram ended when the company adopted practices which Burr said were “inconsistent with the traditions and philosophies” of his dealership. When that door closed, another one opened. In walked Tony Fleming, late of Grand Banks, now building a cruising yacht of his own design. Burr's staff was used to the go-fast Bertrams and thought the boss had “lost his marbles,” but soon became believers in Fleming and his wonderful 55.



“The first experience I had on a Fleming after being a Bertram dealer for almost 30 years was coming into a wave and having the boat stay still while the wave rolled past it, a wave that would have bounced a Bertram,” Burr recalled recently in interview from his Florida home, where he lives in semi-retirement.

Burr calls Fleming one of the most talented figures in the marine industry today, and one of the hardest working. “He has an artist's eye. He has fantastic attention to detail. Bertram has eight people doing what Tony does. Consequently he doesn't have the usual communications problems. He just runs himself ragged,” Burr said.

Burr and Fleming do not always agree, but both share the same dedication to customer and product. If something needed improving, Burr said, Fleming would see to it immediately, none of that we'll-catch-it-on-the-next-pass philosophy. “When you're dealing with big companies—the primary one for us was Bertram—they've got models and model years. You find a problem on the boat, they don't even want to talk about it because they're dealing with next year's,” he said.

To date, 50 new Flemings have passed through Burr Yacht Sales and 30 pre-owned. I got to meet several of those owners at the July rendezvous and was impressed by their total lack of pretence. According to Burr, their quest is not for status but excellence. “The guy who owns a Fleming is a guy who could buy a 145-footer with a captain, if that's what he wanted. But what he wants is a boat he and mom can run by themselves.”

What about the new Fleming 75? Chuck Hovey of Newport Beach, California, sold the first ones, but the word has now spread to the East Coast. Burr said most 75 owners came from 55s and have found the 75 just as easy for a wife-husband team. “The tendency today is to go ‘lighter tech,’ but with it you get the cork syndrome, as I call it, more affected by wind and waves,” Burr said. “The 75 is just such a heavy boat, it doesn't get blown around.”

And so it is with Burr Yacht Sales, plowing steadily through trend and tempest, into the future.

**The Fleming 55 at left is dwarfed by its new sibling the 75 at Burr Yacht Sales in Edgewater, Maryland.**