

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