Mare Island fostered many stories

By Jerry Bowen

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Last March, my fellow history columnist Sabine Goerke-Shrode wrote an article on Mare Island, but I thought I would expand on it a little with a few stories about the ships and men who were part of the island's history, similar to "the rest of the story" as radio commentator Paul Harvey would say.

Mare Island Shipyard was established in 1854 after Congress purchased the Island for $83,491.

It was then that David G. Farragut took possession of Mare Island as a Navy Shipyard. In the next four years he put in motion a series of events that made Mare Island Naval Shipyard a focal point of the past.

After leaving Mare Island, Farragut went on to make his mark during the Civil War.

In 1864, Farragut was assigned the task of securing Mobile Bay, the center of Confederate blockade-running. When one of the ironclad ships, the Tecumseh, engaged a Confederate ship, she hit an underwater mine or torpedo, as they were then known. After a tremendous explosion, Tecumseh heeled over and sank rapidly with its captain and 92 crewmen still on board.

Ignoring the risks, Farragut gave the order "Damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead" as he took the lead with his flagship, the Hartford, and sailed over a double row of mines and into Mobile Bay. Although the bottom of the ship scraped several mines, none exploded, and the rest of the fleet followed to defeat the Confederate flotilla.

With the surrender of Fort Morgan, the Union was able to cut the South off from its overseas supply routes. However, the city of Mobile continued to hold out until the following spring, although the Union fleet managed to continue to blockade the bay.

Farragut later was to become the U.S. Navy's first full admiral.

The three-decked frigate, Independence, arrived at Mare Island in September 1855 and remained a very visible fixture for the next 57 years. The ship was decommissioned and converted into a station ship in 1857.

Marines, brig prisoners and the Yard Dispensary were its main occupants. In 1914 it

was sold, moved to lower San Francisco Bay and burned for the copper in her hull.

In 1859 the side-paddle-wheeled gunboat Saginaw was built at Mare Island, the first of more than 500 ships constructed there.

In 1870 the U.S. Congress appropriated $50,000 to be spent in blasting a 600-foot-wide ship channel through the reef into the lagoon at Midway Island. The USS Saginaw was detailed to carry the divers and equipment to Midway, arriving there on March 24, 1870. When funding ran out, it received orders to return to San Francisco.

On Oct. 29, disaster struck when a strong current carried the Saginaw toward Ocean Island's reef (now known as Green Island, a spit of land in Kure Atoll between Wake and the Hawaiian Islands). Driven onto the jagged coral, the Saginaw was crushed and pounded to pieces by the relentless surf.

Boats were hastily lowered, and the crew rowed across the lagoon to the beach of the uninhabited island a mile away. The departure was quick but orderly, with no casualties.

After two months of being stranded, five men set out in one of the boats in an attempt to reach help in the Hawaiian Islands 1,300 miles away. After 31 days at sea, the boat was swamped off Kauai, drowning all members except William Halford. On learning the fate of the Saginaw's crew, help was sent to Ocean Island to rescue the rest of the crew.

Halford received the Medal of Honor. He returned to Vallejo later and is buried at the Mare Island Cemetery.

In another sea tragedy, one of the ill-fated expeditions to the North Pole began its trek from Mare Island. In 1878 the Steam Yacht Jeannette was fitted out for the DeLong Expedition. It was the first ship to have electric lights installed. She sailed for the North Pole in 1879, but was frozen solid in the ice and drifted for two years before breaking up. Some of the survivors eventually were found in Siberia.

Perhaps the ship that holds the record for the longest length of time under construction is the USS Monadnock, a 3,990-ton monitor. It took 22 years from keel laying to commissioning! It was also the only warship to be started in a Vallejo shipyard, (1875) at the Continental Iron Works, and finished and commissioned at Mare Island (1896). During the next two years, she served with the Pacific Squadron along the U.S. West Coast.

In June 1898, she departed San Francisco on a two-month voyage to the Philippines,

where she was needed to provide heavy-gun support following Admiral Dewey's victory at Manila Bay. She was decommissioned in 1909, then recommissioned in 1912 as a submarine tender and target tug. Finally she was stricken for disposal in 1923 and sold for scrap.

Two ships bearing the name USS Shaw shared similar incidents, and association with Mare Island several years apart. The first USS Shaw, DD-63, was a four-stack destroyer built at Mare Island and launched in 1916. Unfortunately, she lost her entire bow when she tangled with one of the biggest ships in the Atlantic in 1918, the Aquitania, during World War I convoy duty. The captain then sailed her backward into port where she was repaired and returned to service.

The second USS Shaw, DD-373, was also a destroyer, built at Philadelphia Shipyard and commissioned in September 1936. She was transferred to the Pacific in 1938 for operations along the West Coast and in Hawaiian waters from 1939 to 1941. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor Dec. 7, 1941, Shaw was in drydock. Enemy bombs set her afire and her forward magazines exploded, severing her bow and wrecking her bridge area.

With amidships and stern portions still essentially intact and following temporary repairs at Pearl Harbor, she sailed for Mare Island Navy Yard where she received a new bow and general overhaul. When work was completed in late June 1942 she returned to the fleet and was engaged in many battles.

When the Pacific war ended in August 1945, the Shaw had just completed another overhaul, including major enhancement of her anti-aircraft armament. However, she was too old for retention. She was sent to the East Coast for inactivation, decommissioned in October 1945 and scrapped in July 1946.

One of Mare Island's record-setting ships, the USS Ward, DD-139, was also in drydock at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese struck the fleet.

During World War I, the Ward, named for Commander James Harmon Ward who was the first U.S. naval officer killed in action in the Civil War, was built and launched in just 17 1/2 days! Perhaps I should say assembled, but a record nonetheless.

The Ward began life on May 15, 1918, when her keel was laid. Using prefabricated sections of the ship built in the shops, she was launched on June 1, 1918. Following her launching, the Ward was outfitted with the remainder of her equipment, including most of her superstructures, smokestacks and weapons. Two months after her May 15 start date, the Ward was commissioned as a warship.

This record was such a momentous event that nearly the entire city of Vallejo turned out, and many visitors from the surrounding countryside filled the streets and hills opposite the Navy Yard as well.

After her christening by Dorothy Hall Ward, granddaughter of Commander James Ward, the crowds moved to the city of Vallejo where there were speeches, a parade, and dances in the streets past midnight.

On Dec. 7, 1941, the Ward made history again when, under the command of Commander William W. Outerbridge, she fired the first shot of World War II in the Pacific, sinking a midget Japanese sub off the Pearl Harbor entrance just prior to the Japanese attack.

In 1942 she was converted to an armed personnel transport, APD-16 and returned to sea, engaging in many of the furious World War II battles.

Three years after firing the first shot of the Pacific war at Leyte Gulf, a Japanese aircraft dove at what was estimated later to be 45 degrees, building up speed to become a harder target. Leveling off, the plane flew into the Ward's port side just behind the bridge.

The speed of the aircraft was so great that one engine passed completely through the ship and out the other side. Aircraft fuel sprayed inside the troop space and along the side and deck amidships, causing uncontrollable fires. The valiant Ward was abandoned and then intentionally sunk by the USS O'Brien, DD-725 by gunfire. In another amazing coincidence, the skipper of the O'Brien was none other than William W. Outerbridge, who had been skipper of the Ward the day the first shot of the Pacific war was fired.