

Recalling USS California's tumultuous history

By Jerry Bowen

Monday, December 11, 2000

Mare Island built 513 ships before construction was stopped after the dockside sinking of the submarine Guitaro, and the ultimate closure of the shipyard. But this story is not about Mare Island, nor the Guitaro.

The USS California has been discussed, analyzed, dissected and for the most part remembered as the ship that tried to sail up Georgia Street in Vallejo.

The keel was laid on Oct. 25, 1916, with great fanfare and construction progressed at a rapid pace until World War I was declared in April 1917.

Work on the California was abandoned so the shipyard could concentrate efforts on building smaller, more urgently needed vessels.

She languished on the building ways until the Armistice in 1918, when work was resumed.

On Nov. 20, 1919, thousands of spectators lined the waterfront on the Vallejo side of the channel to watch the long-awaited launching. It was during this event the California became a subject of popular folklore.

The chains attached to the braking system failed as she began her descent down the building ways. Spectators lining the waterfront in Vallejo scattered as the "huge mountain of steel" sailed unfettered across the channel, splintering about 25 feet of the ferry landing before coming to a stop. No, it didn't land on Georgia Street but it sure looked as if it would!

In spite of its ignoble beginning, the California would earn its rightful place in history as a magnificent battleship. For the next 20 years she patrolled the world's oceans in relative peace. Then the demon of war reared its ugly head and she became a catastrophic entry in the pages of American history.

Moored on the south-end of "Battleship Row" in Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, she shared company with other battleships, Nevada, Arizona, Tennessee, West Virginia, Maryland and Oklahoma.

Expecting nothing out of the ordinary, thoughts of Christmas filled the minds of the crew

members of the Pacific Fleet. Most of the men of the California were at breakfast at about a quarter to seven when the old destroyer, Ward, patrolling the entrance to Pearl Harbor reported they had sunk a small submarine with gunfire and depth charges.

At 7:03 on that fateful Sunday morning, Captain Outerbridge on the Ward spotted a second submarine and immediately sank it with depth charges. Messages were sent to headquarters, but officers in charge at Pearl Harbor didn't get the word until 7:40 a.m.

At the Halekulani Hotel in Waikiki, Captain J. W. Bunkley of the California was in the process of taking a pre-breakfast dip in the pool. Preparations to raise the flags on all the ships were under way when Pharmacist's Mate William Lynch on the California heard a shipmate comment, "Here come some planes with a red ball showing clearly." The first bomb fell just before 8 o'clock and the infamous sneak attack on Pearl Harbor erupted in a mass of flames, shredded metal, the dead and dying, and sinking ships.

Admiral Pye's chief of staff was sure the alarm had been set off by mistake. Disbelief that an actual attack was in progress vanished in an avalanche of shattering metal. Bombs fell, torpedoes slashed at the ship's sides, machine gun fire tore into flesh and metal alike as the attack built in fury.

The California caught her first torpedo at 8:05. Yeoman Durrell Conner watched helpless from his station in the flag communications office and slammed the porthole shut as the deadly weapon struck the ship directly beneath him. Another found its mark further aft and as the sea rushed in unabated, the California struggled to stay afloat.

As burning oil drifted down the harbor from the Arizona, it engulfed the stern of the California, Captain Bunkley gave the order at 10:02 a.m. to abandon ship. When the wind changed direction and blew the burning oil clear by 10:15, he ordered everyone back on board to fight the fires.

Gallant sailors manned the guns as ammunition was passed by hand from the bunkers in the bowels of the ship. Courageous attempts to save the vessel were made but the crew was losing the battle to keep the badly listing battleship afloat. Realizing the situation was hopeless, the hapless crew decided they could at least keep her in an upright position by utilizing planned flooding. The vessel gently settled to the bottom of the harbor.

Three months later, the California was raised, repaired, and sent to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Washington to be completely modernized.

At Puget, She became affectionately known throughout the fleet as the "Prune Barge," reflecting the prune industry of California.

Rising up like a Phoenix from the first ashes of war, the California went on to participate fully in the Pacific Ocean battles. She was involved in the capture and occupation of Saipan, saw action in the Philippines and the historic battle at Surigao Straits, where an entire arm of the Japanese Fleet was destroyed.

The California was credited with sinking a Japanese battleship in that battle. Unfortunately, before it was all over, the valiant ship was targeted by a Japanese kamikaze pilot who flew his plane into the aft control tower, killing 52 crewmen and injuring 153 others.

The California also participated in other historic sea battles at Guam, Tinian, and Leyte Gulf before the end of WWII. In 1946 she was retired to the Reserve Fleet at Philadelphia, and in 1959 sold for \$859,999, towed to Baltimore and unceremoniously scrapped. It was a dismal ending for a valorous lady. Unfortunately, as time passes, so does the memory of her grand and glorious past along with the brave men that served on her decks so many years ago.

But there is one remaining tangible relic from the California, it is the ship's bell. Presented to the people of California on Navy Day, 1949, it can be seen today in Capitol Park, Sacramento.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/48>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/48/>