

People Who Build Ships

By Ernest D. Wichels

Sunday, May 17, 1964

Mare Island is again on the threshold of decision. Sometime this year, we are told, the administration will determine a cutback in the number of naval shipyards. Eleven yards are too many, it is stated, for the present size of United States naval forces afloat. Many considerations will enter into such a decision. But this is not the first time that Mare Island has been in competition.

The first test came in 1850. Secretary of the Navy Wm. A. Graham sent a commission from New York to San Francisco, via Nicaragua, to survey the Bay and select a site for a navy yard. The commission was headed by Commodore John Drake Sloat. After months of study Sloat's commission selected Mare Island—writing his report to Secretary Graham from his desk aboard the Army Brig MAJOR EASTLAND, which was anchored in Mare Island Straits. Shortly after the commission's return to the East Coast a new Secretary of the Navy, John P. Kennedy, accepted the report and Mare Island was purchased for some \$83,000. Then came the memorable day of September 16, 1854, when Commander David G. Farragut arrived to begin the building of this great west coast shipyard. He built well but, most important, he brought together a team of artisans—recruited from the established yards on the East Coast and from the famous shipyards of England and Scotland—whose pride of workmanship is the “hallmark” of Mare Island quality to this day.

FIRST MAJOR ATTACK

Mare Island's first acid test came with the report of a Commission on Navy Yards which was submitted to the Congress on December 1, 1883. This commission, headed by Commodore S. B. Luce, USN, surveyed all existing navy yards, listed their advantages and disadvantages, and made certain recommendations. The entire report consumed some 75 pages, but a few extracts are interesting. It said:

“There are two great ends to be secured by the maintenance of a naval establishment. The first and most important is the preservation of peace without a sacrifice of rights, principles, or dignity; the second is that we may be prepared for war. But the probabilities of attaining the first end are in direct proportion to our readiness for maintaining our rights; hence, the determination of the character and extent of permanent works, such as the number and size of navy yards, must be based upon a condition of war. All of them need not necessarily be kept in active operation during peace. On the contrary, it would be better, for many reasons, to concentrate the work in

a few; but the calculations for extent and plant must be made on a war basis.”

Some of the advantages which the commission cited for Mare Island are: “It is far enough removed from the sea to be beyond the reach of guns of the longest range, or any possibility of being captured. The adjacent harbor is good and perfectly secure in all weathers. The channel is deep and never obstructed by ice. The climate is even and slubrious the year round. The yard is convenient to railroad communications.” The final conclusion on Mare Island was: “Your commissioners recommend the retention of this yard. As it . . . fulfills most of the requirements of a perfect site, they do not consider the question of its sale open to discussion.”

THE ‘SECOND CLASS’ DECISION

About 1911 Secretary of the Navy von Meyer established “first class” and “second class” yards, placing Mare Island in the second category. Within a year the new secretary, Josephus Daniels, cancelled this order and even went so far as to give Mare Island mechanics the job of building the Navy’s first two oil tankers—KANAWHA and MAUMEE. So successfully did these men do the job, in cost, quality and time, that a third oiler, the CUYAMA, was awarded. Then followed Mare Island’s first three destroyer contracts, SHAW, FAIRFAX and CALDWELL, topped by the cream of the crop—the Battleship CALIFORNIA.

After WW-1, about 1920, another commission took a look at Mare Island and decided that Alameda should be the site of a new naval base. Thanks to Vallejo’s representative Dr. James J. Hogan and staunch friends in Washington, and never forgetting the influence of the Sacramento Bee, the recommended move was stymied. The Mare Island team was again given its opportunity to prove its worth and, although the Disarmament Conference scrapped the dreadnaught MONTANA on Ways No. 1, the team proceeded to show its skill on the heavy cruiser CHICAGO and its first submarine, the NAUTILUS, both of which launched before the end of 1930.

TODAY’S CHALLENGE

Many factors enter into a comparison of shipyards—private or public. They do not stop at bids or paper costs. They involve quality, time of completion, performance, training for the complex weapons systems of today, morale, not only of the ships’ complements but of their families—because this affects the re-enlistment rate and this in turn affects the cost to the American taxpayer. But here in Mare Island we have something else which has grown with the 110 years of its existence; with the 506 craft that have been fashioned here. This is the “know-how” of its people, coupled with a team spirit—the will to do and to exceed.

This is the yard with a remarkable percentage of career employees. Nowhere is there such dedication and loyalty to the job in hand and to the quality of product.

It has been truly said that no shipyard ever built a ship; no ship ever fought a battle. It is people who build ships, people who fight ships. And, as RADM Edward J. Fahy, USN, Mare Island shipyard commander, said last week to a Vallejo audience:

“We have the people!”

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/740>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/740/>