



# H-Gram 060: Disappearance of *Conestoga*; Wreck of *Johnston* Identified; Last Known Survivor of *Barb* Passes

20 April 2021

## Contents

- 100th Anniversary - Disappearance of Fleet Tug *Conestoga* (AT-54)
- Wreck of USS *Johnston* (DD-557) Positively Identified
- Last Known Survivor of Famed Submarine USS *Barb* Passes

This H-Gram covers the 100th anniversary of the disappearance of fleet tug *Conestoga* (AT-54), one of the greatest maritime mysteries of the 20th century, along with a short treatment of all 27 U.S. Navy ships and submarines lost with all hands due to weather and accident. Also covered is the recent positive identification of the destroyer *Johnston* (DD-557), the deepest shipwreck ever found, lost in particularly heroic action during the Battle off Samar in October 1944. In addition, the last known survivor of Eugene Fluckey's Medal of Honor crew of the valiant submarine *Barb* (SS-220) passed away.

## 100th Anniversary—Disappearance of Fleet Tug *Conestoga* (AT-54)

On 25 March 1921, the fleet tug *Conestoga* departed Mare Island, transited through the



USS *Conestoga* (AT-54) ship's company at San Diego, California, circa early 1921. (NH 71506)

Golden Gate strait and was never heard from again. She became the 21st U.S. Navy vessel lost with all hands due to accident or the elements to that date. Due to miscommunication, the U.S. Navy did not know *Conestoga* was missing until she was over two weeks overdue at Pearl Harbor. After two massive searches that revealed no confirmed traces of the tug, she was declared lost on 21 June 1921 and the 56 men aboard declared dead. Although not mentioned in standard U.S. Navy histories, the loss of *Conestoga* was a press sensation at the time, and a major embarrassment to the U.S. Navy. To add to the press frenzy, the submarine R-14 (SS-91) ran out of usable fuel while searching for *Conestoga* and made her way back to Hawaii under sails made of stitched bedding. The fate of *Conestoga* became one of the greatest mysteries of U.S. Navy history.

*In October 2015, a wreck first located by sonar in 2009 just off the Farallones was confirmed to be that of Conestoga by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOOA) and the Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC.) Although the exact cause of her loss remains unknown, she appeared to be making for a cove on southeast Farallon Island after losing her tow and becoming caught in heavy weather. She apparently sank suddenly three miles short of refuge, only about 27 miles from the Golden Gate, and a month before the U.S. Navy search even started.*

*For more on Conestoga (AT-54), please see H-060-1. For all U.S. Navy ships lost with all hands due to weather or accident, please see H-060-2.*



USS Johnston (DD-557) sliding down the building ways at the Seattle-Tacoma Shipbuilding Corporation shipyard, Seattle, Washington, 25 March 1943. (NH 63496)

### **Wreck of USS Johnston (DD-557) Positively Identified**

*On 27 March 2021, the manned deep submersible Limiting Factor, piloted by Mr. Victor Vescovo, found the forward two-thirds of the destroyer Johnston (DD-557) at a depth of 21,180 feet in the area of the Battle off Samar, which took place on 25 October 1944. The wreck site had previously been located in 2019 by Mr. Robert Kraft and his team aboard Research Vessel (R/V) Petrel. Petrel's*

*Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) identified a debris field on the edge of an underwater cliff at 20,400 feet, the extreme limit of the ROV's capability. At the time, it was the deepest shipwreck ever found. The remains of the ship were definitely a Fletcher-class destroyer, but there was nothing to positively confirm whether the wreck was Johnston or Hoel (DD-533), which was also lost in valiant action against an overwhelming Japanese force in the same battle.*

*Limiting Factor has no depth limitation and Vescovo had taken the craft to the deepest points in all five oceans. (He had served 20 years in the reserves as a naval intelligence officer.) Vescovo found that the forward part of the destroyer had slid down the cliff face into even deeper water, and although peppered with shell holes, was relatively intact and clearly identifiable by the hull number 557. Thus, he confirmed the last resting place of one of the most heroic crews in the entire history of the U.S. Navy, for which her commanding officer, Ernest Evans, was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor, the first Native American so recognized in the U.S. Navy.*

*For more on the search for Johnston, please see H-060-3. For more information on the Battle off Samar, see H-Gram 036.*



USS Barb (SS-220) battle flag used while Barb was commanded by Commander Eugene B. Fluckey, circa 1945. (NH 63789-KN)

## ***Last Known Survivor of Famed Submarine USS Barb Passes***

*On 5 March 2021, Mr. John Henry Lehman, Jr., passed away in Hagerstown, Maryland, at age 98. He was the last known survivor of the valiant World War II submarine Barb (SS-220), whose exploits under skipper Eugene Fluckey were the stuff of legend, except true. Lehman joined Barb's crew as a radar operator in early 1944 for her sixth war patrol. On that patrol, Barb bottomed out at 375 feet while under sustained Japanese attack, but survived, barely. On Barb's seventh war patrol, Lieutenant Commander Eugene Fluckey was aboard as prospective commanding officer, on his way to a Medal of Honor and four Navy Crosses. Barb's successful eighth war patrol was in the dangerous Sea of Okhotsk, where two other U.S. submarines were lost in the same period. On her ninth war patrol, Barb sank the Japanese escort carrier Unyo and a large tanker, and then rescued 14 Allied prisoners of war from a "Hell Ship" that had been sunk by other U.S. submarines. On her tenth war patrol, Barb sank a Japanese troopship, sending 490 troops and 203 crewmen to the bottom.*

*On Barb's eleventh war patrol, Fluckey boldly took the submarine right into Namkwan Harbor, China, inflicting extensive damage on a Japanese convoy during a night surface attack and then made an equally daring escape. Fluckey was awarded the Medal of Honor for this action, for which he gave all credit to his crew. On her legendary twelfth and last war patrol, Barb was equipped with rocket launchers and bombarded Japanese ports and airfields on Hokkaido and Sakhalin Island (the first-ever land bombardment by submarine-launched rockets), then put a landing team ashore and blew up a train, the only "ground combat" in the Japanese home islands during the war. The crew of Barb received a Presidential Unit Citation for her eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh war patrols, and a Navy Unit Commendation for her twelfth.*

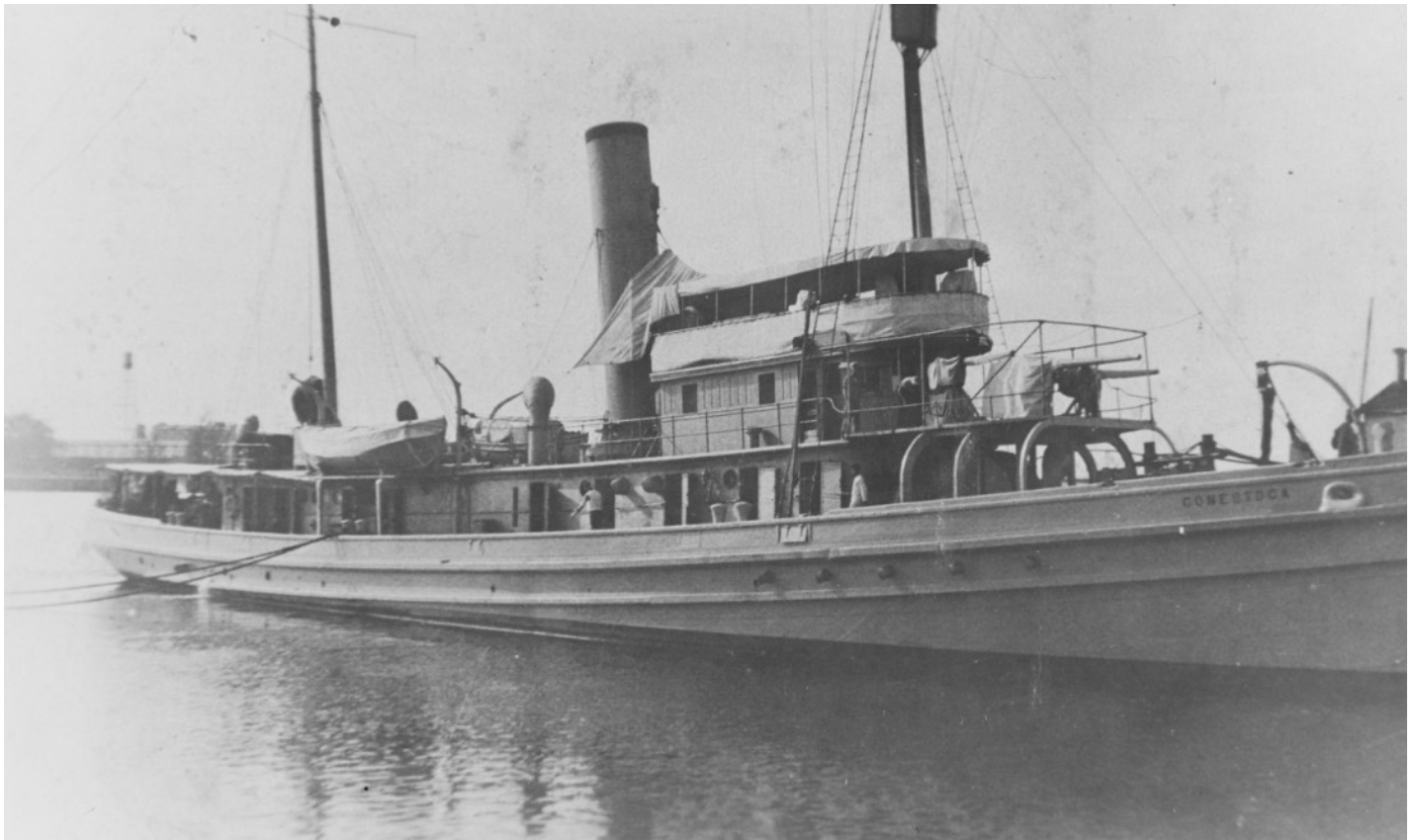
*Lehman mustered out at the end of the war and went on to work as an engineer for 43 years for*

*C&P Telephone (now Verizon) before crossing the Atlantic in a 36-foot sailboat. His obituary quoted him as saying, "Our country asked us to do a job, so we did, and came back to our ordinary lives." An understatement if there ever was one.*

*For more on the Barb, see H-Gram 041-2.*

*As always, you are welcome to forward H-grams to spread these stories of U.S. Navy valor and sacrifice. Prior issues of H-Grams, enhanced with photos, can be found here [<https://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams.html>]...plus lots of other cool stuff on Naval History and Heritage Command's website.*





The crew of *Conestoga*, at San Diego, California, 1921. (NH 71503)

## **H-Gram 060-1: USS *Conestoga* (AT-54) Vanishes—25 March 1921**

*Samuel J. Cox, Director, Naval History and Heritage Command*

For 95 years, the loss of the U.S. Navy fleet tug *Conestoga* (AT-54) and her 56 crewmen would remain one of the greatest unsolved maritime mysteries, particularly since it occurred in the era of wireless radio communications. It was a major embarrassment that the U.S. Navy tried to forget, and there were lessons not learned.

The tug *Conestoga* was built in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1904 for commercial service towing

coal barges. She was acquired by the U.S. Navy on 14 September 1917 for use as a fleet tender and minesweeper, designated SP. 1128, but retaining her commercial name. She was initially

assigned to the submarine force and underwent modifications for service overseas. During World War I, she performed towing services along the eastern coast of the United States. She escorted convoys to Bermuda and the Azores, and served with the American patrol detachment in the Azores. She finished the war attached to Naval Base No. 13 (Azores). After the war, she was assigned harbor tug duty at Norfolk. As part of the Navy-wide ship classification and hull-numbering scheme change, she was designated AT-54 on 17 July 1920.

*Conestoga* then received orders to sail to American Samoa to serve as station ship at Tutuila. She departed Norfolk towing U.S. Navy coal barge YC-658 on 18 November 1920,

arriving at San Diego via the Panama Canal on 7 January 1921. She then proceeded to Mare Island for voyage repairs, including work on her faulty bilge pump system.

On 25 March 1921 at 0900, *Conestoga* departed Mare Island bound for American Samoa via Pearl Harbor, under the command of Lieutenant Ernest Larkin Jones. Aboard were three other officers and 52 crewmen. She was probably towing U.S. Navy coal barge YC-478, but this is not 100 percent certain. Some accounts also claim the barge was carrying a secret cargo of sea mines, but this is also unconfirmed. The weather conditions were clear, but the seas were heavy and winds picked up speed to gale force as the day went on.

*Conestoga* should have arrived at Pearl Harbor about 5 April, but did not. A message sent in error on 6 April indicated a safe arrival. As a result, neither naval authorities in Pearl Harbor nor San Francisco realized *Conestoga* was missing until 26 April and commenced what became the largest air-sea search in history until Amelia Earhart went missing in 1937. Over 60 U.S. Navy ships and 15 aircraft were involved in the search, including all destroyers and submarines based at Pearl Harbor. The initial search was concentrated around Hawaii. Although a life-jacket marked as belonging to *Conestoga* washed ashore near San Francisco, Navy authorities assumed it had fallen off *Conestoga* either just before her arrival or just after her departure from Mare Island. The commandant of the 14th Naval District (Hawaii) reported that there was no trace of *Conestoga* and her loss was probable.

During the search, the Pearl Harbor-based submarine *R-14* (SS-91) ran out of usable fuel (some fuel had become contaminated) and went adrift about 100 nautical miles southeast of the Big Island of Hawaii. *R-14* was a small diesel-electric coastal and harbor defense submarine with a crew of two officers and 27 enlisted men, under the acting command of Lieutenant

Alexander Dean Douglas. The radio malfunctioned, the battery had insufficient capacity to reach Hawaii, and the sub only had rations for five days. *R-14*'s engineering officer, Lieutenant Roy Trent Gallemore, devised a way to rig a foresail made of eight hammocks using the torpedo-loading crane. This gave the sub a speed of about one knot and steerage way. Additional bedding was sewn together and rigged to the radio mast as a mainsail, and then more bedding was used to rig a mizzen mast. The sub then sailed for 64 hours at about three knots to Hilo, and was able to enter port on battery power. Lieutenant Douglas received a letter of commendation for the resourcefulness of his crew from the submarine division commander, Commander Chester W. Nimitz.

Although Nimitz may have appreciated their resourcefulness, *R-14* was treated by the press as a laughing stock at the Navy's expense. In fact, the press coverage of the loss and search for *Conestoga* was extensive, nation-wide, sensationalized, and generally very negative, running along the lines of—with the technology of 1921 (i.e., radio)—how could the Navy completely lose a ship and 56 men? U.S. Navy standing with the public had taken a precipitous drop after the end of World War I as the country quickly turned isolationist in response to the bloodbath of the conflict. Some considered that the primary cause of the terrible war was the naval arms race between the British and the Germans. Calls for the elimination of submarines, battleships, and even entire navies became more vociferous and would lead to the Washington Naval Conference later in 1921, with massive naval force cuts over the U.S. Navy's objections. The very public mudslinging match between Vice Admiral William S. Sims (Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Operating in Europe, 1917–19) and Josephus Daniels (Secretary of the Navy, 1913–21) over how prepared the Navy was (or wasn't) for the war didn't help public perception. (Daniels is most commonly known—and blamed—for ending the Navy's rum ration, although he instituted

numerous positive reforms. He also energetically instituted segregation, in alignment with the policy of the Wilson administration, in what had previously been an integrated U.S. Navy at the enlisted ranks. He was among the most outspoken segregationists to hold the office of the Secretary of the Navy, and his role in the Wilmington Massacre of 1898 was particularly appalling.) The loss of *Conestoga* also resulted in one of the more unseemly episodes of attempted blame-shifting between senior U.S. Navy admirals. In short, it was a public relations disaster.

As the first search began to wind down, the steamship *Senator* reported finding a derelict and barnacle-encrusted lifeboat with the letter "C" on the bow about 650 nautical miles west of Manzanillo, Mexico, and about 30 nautical miles from Clarion Island on 17 May 1921. This prompted another massive and fruitless search. *Senator* did not recover the boat, but found an identification number, M5535 B, which, however, matched no Navy records. *Senator* did keep the "C." After finding nothing during the second search, the Navy officially declared that *Conestoga* and her entire crew were lost on 30 June 1921; the fate of the crew unknown, but presumed dead.

In 2009, the fishing vessel *Pacific Star* was conducting a systematic scientific survey, using side-scan sonar for seabed mapping, in the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary off San Francisco Bay under the auspices of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Office of Coast Survey. Although over 400 ships have been lost in the area dating back to the 1500s, the sonar detected a vessel on the bottom in 189 feet of water where none was reported to have sunk. The location was 3.1 nautical miles southeast of Farallon Island, about 27 nautical miles from Golden Gate.

In 2014, the research vessel *Fulmar* returned to the site for a more detailed survey. Using a remotely-operated vehicle (ROV), the wreck was

determined to be a 170-foot steel-hulled steam tug sitting upright on the bottom oriented as if trying to reach Fisherman's Cove, an anchorage near the lighthouse and U.S. Navy radio direction finding station (1905 to late 1930s). The superstructure had collapsed into the hull. The most distinguishing feature was a single 3-inch/50-caliber deck gun on the collapsed foredeck. With the imagery and data, NOAA then conducted extensive archival research, concluding that the only possible candidate for this wreck was *Conestoga*. After reviewing NOAA's data, NHHC confirmed that the wreck was *Conestoga*.

Another detailed survey was conducted by NOAA in October 2015, with a smaller ROV that could reach interior spaces. Besides the NOAA team, NHHC Underwater Archaeologist Alexis Catsambis and Rear Admiral Markham Rich (Navy Region Southwest) were also aboard. Commander Third Fleet Vice Admiral Nora Tyson also visited the ship. The intent of this mission was to gather as much data as possible in an attempt to determine the exact cause of loss. The exact cause actually could not be determined; however, evidence suggested a most plausible scenario.

*Conestoga* most likely ran into serious trouble not long after crossing the San Francisco Bar in the increasingly heavy seas. The towing wire on the winch suggests a tow was lost, but was not the cause of *Conestoga*'s loss, as the end of the line is professionally tied down. Navy records indicate coal barge YC-478 was lost en route Pearl Harbor in 1921, but there is no date or cause to confirm this was *Conestoga*'s tow. *Conestoga* may have been taking on water due to her bilge pump system not working correctly (which had just been repaired) or was just taking on more water than the pumps could handle. Faced with going down in the open ocean, the commanding officer attempted to make it to a cove in the lee of Farallon Islands. This would have been an act of desperation as the site was the location of five other shipwrecks between 1858 and 1907. It is

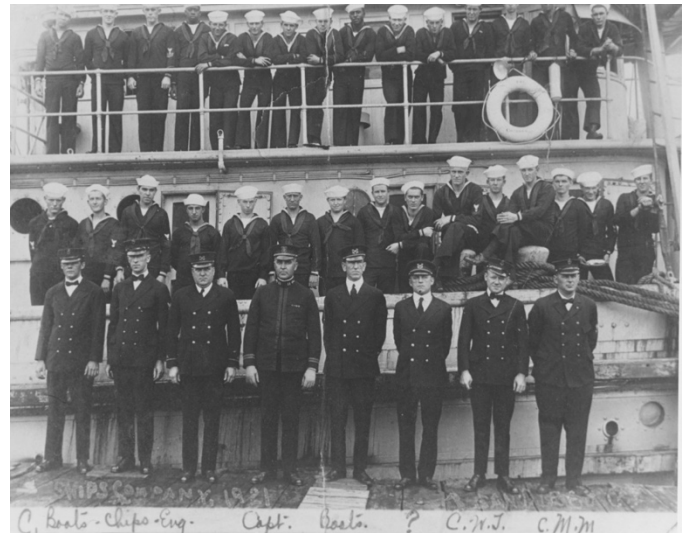
possible *Conestoga* lost her ability to steer as both rudders are hard over outside their normal range, although that may also be a function of hitting the bottom stern first. The *Conestoga* appears to have been swamped and sank quickly, hitting the bottom upright, about three miles short of the anchorage, and probably at night due to lack of witnesses. None of her crew survived the sinking, regardless of how long they might have lasted in the water. The sad fact is that both Navy searches were over 2,000 miles away and a month later than the actual location and time of the sinking.

One mystery that remains unresolved is whether or not *Conestoga* made a distress call. On 13 May 1921, *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that *Conestoga* made a garbled radio transmission on 8 April that she was battling a severe storm and the tow was possibly lost. The article does not state who received the transmission. This certainly does not fit with the date of her probable loss. It is possible the paper just got the date wrong, or the report was relayed by another ship or station very time late. It would have occurred before it was known she was missing. The possibility of a hoax transmission is low, although the paper's later source could have been a hoax. The current assessment is that *Conestoga* probably did make a radio distress call the night of 25-26 March 1921, but no one in a position to do anything about it received it, or took action on it.

It also possible the lifeboat found west of Mexico could have drifted from the site of the sinking, although the description provided by steamship *Senator* suggested the boat had been in the water a lot longer. Interestingly though, photos of *Conestoga* show a lifeboat with the letter "C" affixed to the bow (which leaves me with the question, I wonder whatever happened to the "C?").

In March 2016, NOAA and NHHHC made a joint announcement of solving the 95-year-old mystery of the loss of the *Conestoga* at a ceremony

attended by family members of those crewmen lost with the ship. As the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Energy, Installations and Environment (ASN EI&E), Vice Admiral (retired) Dennis V. McGinn, stated at the ceremony, "In remembering the loss of the *Conestoga*, we pay tribute to her crew and their families and remember that, even in peacetime, the sea is an unforgiving environment."



The crew of *Conestoga*, at San Diego, California, 1921. (NH 71503)

The wreck of *Conestoga* is protected as a military grave under the Sunken Military Craft Act (for which NHHHC is the Federal Executive Agent) and by the National Maritime Sanctuaries Act (for which NOAA is the Federal Executive Agent).

For more on other U.S. Navy ships lost with all-hands due to weather and accident please see attachment H-060-2.

### Sources:

*Conestoga* II (S. P. 1128) (DANFS, NHHHC)

"95-Year-Old Lost US Navy Ship Mystery Solved" (24 March 2016, NHHHC)

"USS *Conestoga* (AT-54) Wreck Site (1921): A Navy Tug Sunk off the Coast of San Francisco" (NHHHC)

"USS *Conestoga* – 100 Years Since Departure."  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric  
Administration (NOAA) – National Marine  
Sanctuaries.

Marx, Deborah E., Robert V. Schwemmer, and  
James P. Delgado. "USS *Conestoga* (shipwreck  
and remains)."National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form. National Park Service.



# H-060-2: Lost With All Hands

*Samuel J. Cox, Director, Naval History and Heritage Command*

It is often said that from the moment a ship is launched the sea is trying to sink it. Sometimes the sea succeeds. In an 1850 report to Congress, the U.S. Navy reported that 29 ships had been lost up to that date. Of those, seven were “never heard of” after sailing, which also meant none of their crews survived. In 1934, the Navy Department Library (now part of NHHHC) reported in the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings that 19 U.S. Navy ships had “vanished” up to that point. Counting gunboats and submarines, by my count, at least 27 U.S. Navy vessels have been lost with all hands due to weather and accidents since 1781. A few of these ships have subsequently been located, or were located at the time of their loss, and are not technically “vanished.” Numerous other ships have been lost with large loss of life or with only a handful of survivors. The bottom line is that the sea is always a very dangerous place, even in the absence of enemy fire. (Some of the 52 submarines lost during World War II may have been lost with all hands due to accident, although officially the cause of loss is unknown for 15 of them.)

The following U.S. Navy ships were lost with all hands (not including ships lost in combat):

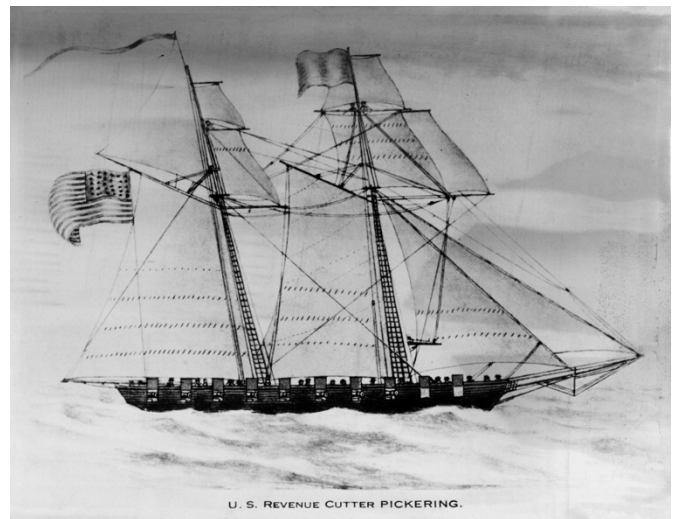
**1781. *Saratoga*—Continental Navy sloop, commanded by Captain John Young**



Drawing of Continental 18-gun sloop-of-war *Saratoga*. (NH 108647)

On 18 March 1781, *Saratoga* was escorting a convoy of French and American merchant ships from Haiti when she detached from the convoy to pursue and capture a British vessel, which surrendered without a fight. After the prize crew was aboard, a wind of “fearful velocity” nearly capsized the prize. When the prize crew then attempted to join with *Saratoga*, no trace of the sloop could be found and 86 of *Saratoga*’s crew perished (minus the unknown number in the prize crew).

**1800. *Pickering*—topsail schooner, commanded by Master Commandant Benjamin Hiller**



Drawing of USRC *Pickering*, later renamed USS *Pickering*. (NH 85146)

*Pickering* notably defeated a more heavily armed French privateer (*L'Egypte Conquise*) after a nine-hour battle on 18 October 1799 during the Quasi-War with France, in addition to recapturing 13 American ships and four more French ships. *Pickering* departed New Castle, Delaware, on 20 August 1800 to join Commodore Thomas Truxtun's squadron on the Guadalupe Station in the West Indies. *Pickering* and her crew of 105 were never heard from again. The ship was presumably lost in a hurricane that struck the West Indies in late September, but she left no trace. *Pickering* originally served in the Revenue Cutter Service (a forerunner of the U.S. Coast Guard), but served as a U.S. Navy ship during the Quasi-War.

#### **1800. *Insurgent*—frigate, commanded by Captain Patrick Fletcher**



USS *Constellation* chasing the French ship *L'Insurgente* on 9 February 1799. (NH 56893)

Originally the 40-gun French frigate *L'Insurgente* was considered one of the fastest frigates in the world. She was engaged by *Constellation* (under the command of Captain Thomas Truxtun) and captured on 9 February 1799, losing 70 of her crew of 409, while *Constellation* lost only three men. First Lieutenant John Rogers and Midshipman David Porter led the prize crew. (Rogers would later fire the first shot of the War of 1812 from his flagship, the frigate *President*. Porter gained fame as captain of the

frigate *Essex* during the War of 1812, and was adoptive father to future Admiral David Glasgow "damn the torpedoes" Farragut.) This was the first U.S. victory against a foreign naval vessel since the end of the American Revolution in 1783. After incorporation into the U.S. Navy as *Insurgent*, she departed Hampton Roads on 8 August 1800 en route to the West Indies and vanished without a trace with her approximately 340-man crew.

*Insurgent* was assessed to have been lost in a severe hurricane that struck the West Indies on 20 September 1800, which may have also sunk *Pickering* and almost sank the cutter *Scammel* (which survived by jettisoning guns and anchors). *Insurgent* suffered the largest loss of life on a single ship due to the elements in U.S. Navy history. Combined with *Pickering*, the loss of about 455 men was the worst loss of life from natural causes until 18 December 1944, when Typhoon Cobra sank three destroyers—*Hull* (DD-350), *Monaghan* (DD-354), and *Spence* (DD-512)—and killed approximately 790 men. The loss of *Insurgent* and *Pickering* resulted in the worst loss of life in the U.S. Navy from any cause until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.

#### **1805. *Gunboat No. 7*—commanded by Lieutenant Peter S. Ogilvie**

Jeffersonian gunboats were not one of President Thomas Jefferson's better ideas. Appalled by the \$302,000 cost of a frigate like *Constitution*, Jefferson viewed gunboats as a cheaper way to defend the country at \$5,000 each (although cost overruns ran the average price to \$10,000—some things never change). The problem was that a frigate had 40 times the firepower of a gunboat, which with their low freeboard were already close to sinking. The result was predictable in the War of 1812 with the British defeat of American gunboats on the Chesapeake and the subsequent burning of Washington, D.C.

Although the small gunboats (two 32-pound long cannons) were designed for coastal defense, ten

of them were ordered to sail across the Atlantic in 1805 to assist Commodore John Rogers' fight with Barbary pirates. *Gunboat No. 7* departed New York on 14 May, sprang her mast on 20 May, and returned to New York, whereupon all but three of her crew deserted. After the challenging recruitment of another crew, *Gunboat No. 7* sailed from New York on 20 June with a crew of about 20 and was never seen again. The other gunboats made the crossing with great difficulty and some were almost lost. Many years later, Secretary of the Navy John Lehman would say, "There is a place for little boats—in the Libyan Navy."

#### **1810. *Gunboat No. 159***

On 11 September, *Gunboat No. 159* was lost in the Chesapeake Bay with all 13 hands.

#### **1811. *Gunboat No. 2***

On 5 October, *Gunboat No. 2* was lost in a gale on the Chesapeake Bay with all 40 hands. (Some accounts say the gunboat was lost off St. Mary's, Georgia, but the location is possibly St. Mary's, Maryland. Gunboats did operate out of St. Mary's, Georgia, so the Chesapeake Bay might be incorrect.)

#### **1814. *Wasp*—22-gun sloop-of-war, commanded by Master Commandant Johnston Blakeley**



*The Wasp's Engagement with the Reindeer on June 28 1814. Print; By Carlton T Chapman; 1896.(83-045-DS (Detail))*

One of the most successful U.S. Navy ships during the War of 1812, *Wasp* captured seven ships and burned most of them during her first voyage. *Wasp* also defeated the 18-gun brig-sloop HMS *Reindeer* in a brutal alongside battle in which British boarding teams were repeatedly repulsed before an American boarding team took *Reindeer*. The captain of *Reindeer* and 24 of his men were killed and 42 wounded. *Wasp* set fire to *Reindeer*, which blew up.

On her second raiding voyage, *Wasp* snatched the brig *Mary* out of a ten-ship convoy under the protection of 74-gun ship-of-the-line HMS *Armada*. *Wasp* burned *Mary* and went for another ship before *Armada* finally drove her off. *Wasp* captured and burned more ships before engaging and defeating 18-gun brig HMS *Avon* in another deadly sea battle. Although *Wasp* was driven off by the arrival of additional British warships, *Avon* subsequently sank as a result of her damage. On 21 September, *Wasp* captured the armed merchant brig *Atalanta* (8-guns) and put a prize crew aboard under the command of Midshipman David Geisinger.

*Wasp* encountered the Swedish brig *Adonis* on 9 October 1814 and was never seen again. *Wasp* had a crew of about 173 (minus the prize crew on *Atalanta*). Rumors about *Wasp's* fate swirled for years. One story originating in 1824 was that the crew of *Wasp* ended up shipwrecked ashore in North Africa, during which Arabs claimed "hundreds" of sailors thought to be British, who were all killed in battle with local Arabs. Theodore Roosevelt recounted this story in his *The Naval War of 1812*, but it has never been verified and Roosevelt concluded, "How she perished no one ever knew."

**1815. *Epervier*—18-gun brig, commanded by Lieutenant John T. Shubrick**



Sketch of *Epervier* by artist William Lewis, who was lost when the ship went missing in 1815. (NH 54244)

The 18-gun brig HMS *Epervier* was captured by the 22-gun sloop-of-war *Peacock* on 14 April 1814. Despite extensive damage, the ship was repaired and commissioned in the U.S. Navy as *Epervier*. During the Second Barbary War, *Epervier* joined Commodore Stephen Decatur's squadron in the Mediterranean and participated in the capture of the Algerian frigate *Meshuda* and brig-of-war *Estedio*. Following the surrender of the Dey of Algiers, Decatur ordered *Epervier* to return to the United States with a copy of the treaty and captured battle flags. *Epervier* transited the Straits of Gibraltar on 14 July 1815. Neither the ship nor her crew of three officers, 132 Sailors, and two Marines were ever seen again. She was possibly lost in an Atlantic hurricane around 9 August 1815.

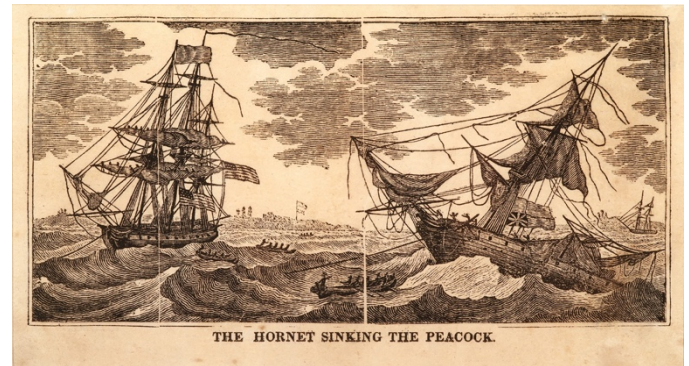
**1820. *Lynx*—6-gun Baltimore Clipper rigged schooner, commanded by Lieutenant John Ripley Madison**

Following operations in the Gulf of Mexico, during which she captured two pirate schooners and three boats filled with pirates and booty, *Lynx* departed St. Mary's, Georgia, on 11 January bound for Kingston, Jamaica, to resume antipiracy operations. *Lynx* and her crew of 50 disappeared without a trace.

**1824. *Wildcat*—schooner, under the temporary command of Midshipman L. M. Booth (normal commander was Lieutenant James E. Legare)**

Serving with the West Indies Squadron suppressing piracy, *Wildcat* carried urgent dispatches from the West Indies to Washington, D.C. On 28 October, *Wildcat* was lost in a gale while transiting between Cuba and Thompson's Island (now Key West and then the base of operations for the West Indies Squadron). All 31 aboard were lost.

**1829. *Hornet*—20-gun sloop-of-war, commanded by Captain Hensley**



The *Hornet* Sinking the *Peacock*. Engraving Print; By Abel Bowen, after Michel Felice Corne; 1818. (38-002-A)

During the War of 1812, *Hornet* was the first U.S. Navy ship to capture a British privateer, and on 24 February 1813, she engaged and sank the British sloop-of-war HMS *Peacock*. On 23 March 1815, *Hornet* captured British sloop-of-war HMS *Penguin* near Tristan du Cunha in the far South Atlantic. (Technically the war was over, but many ships hadn't received the word.) On 27 April 1815, *Hornet* engaged what she thought was a large merchant ship but which was actually the 74-gun British ship-of-the-line HMS *Cornwallis*. *Hornet* escaped by essentially throwing everything over the side. After the war, *Hornet* operated mostly in the West Indies, suppressing piracy and the slave trade. *Hornet* departed Pensacola on 4 March 1829 en route to the Mexican coast and was never seen again. A report of unknown accuracy indicated she was

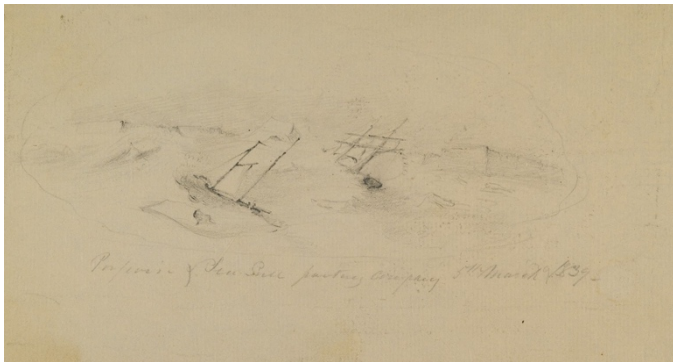


dismasted in a gale off Tampico, Mexico, and foundered. Her entire complement of 145 men was lost.

### 1831. *Sylph*—schooner, commanded by Lieutenant H. E. V. Robinson

Commissioned in May 1831, *Sylph*'s mission was to protect stands of live oak, extensively used in shipbuilding but increasingly rare. *Sylph* and her crew of 13 departed Pensacola in August and were never heard from again. She was possibly a vessel sighted in distress in a severe storm near the mouth of the Mississippi River.

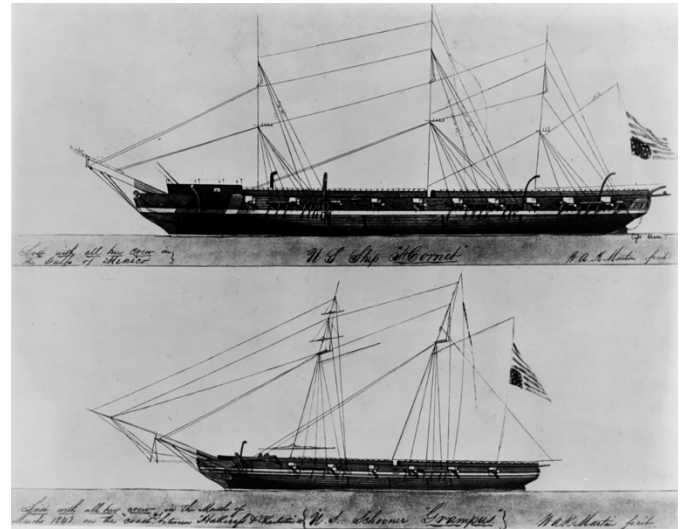
### 1839. *Sea Gull*—schooner, commanded by Passed Midshipman James W. E. Reid



*USS Porpoise and USS Sea Gull Parting Company*, a sketch by Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, 1840. (NHHHC 98-089-AA)

Acquired by the U.S. Navy in 1838, *Sea Gull* was one of six ships in the U.S. Exploring Expedition (U.S. Ex. Ex.), commanded by Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, to survey parts of Antarctica and the Pacific Islands (and which discovered that Antarctica is actually a continent). On 17 April, Wilkes departed Antarctica for Valparaíso, Chile, leaving *Sea Gull* and schooner *Flying Fish* behind to await arrival of supply ship *Relief* and then to proceed to Valparaíso. On 19 May, *Flying Fish* arrived at Valparaíso but *Sea Gull* never did. She was last seen waiting out a gale near Cape Horn; 15 men were lost. (Of note, an additional two officers and 24 Sailors and Marines died during the expedition, a number in armed conflict with Pacific Islanders in the Gilberts, Fiji, and near Samoa.)

### 1843. *Grampus*—schooner



Schooner *Grampus* pictured on the bottom in this sketch of hulls and rigging by William A. K. Martin, 1843. (NH 86236)

Built at the Washington Navy Yard in 1821 during the first U.S. construction program after the War of 1812, *Grampus* served on antipiracy and slave-trade suppression duties in the West Indies and West Africa. She had a small role in the Amistad affair in February 1841 (one of the most legally complex and consequential legal cases regarding the international slave trade). Operating with the Home Squadron out of Norfolk, she was last seen off St. Augustine, Florida, on 15 March 1843, and was subsequently lost with at least 25 men aboard.

### 1854. *Porpoise*—brig



Drawing of *Porpoise* in a gale attributed to G. M. Totten, c. 1840. (98-089-AC)



*Porpoise* was commissioned in 1836 and participated in the Wilkes Expedition to Antarctica and the South Pacific. She also took part in antislavery patrols off West Africa and service off Tampico and Vera Cruz, Mexico, during the war with Mexico in 1845–46. She participated in the North Pacific Exploring and Surveying Expedition in 1853 as flagship for Commander Cadwalader Ringgold. During the summer of 1854, Ringgold was relieved of command for being “insane” by Commodore Matthew Perry, who was on his own expedition to the Far East to open Japan to U.S. trade. *Porpoise* detached from the rest of the group on 21 September 1854 between Formosa and China and was lost without a trace of her 62-man crew. She was possibly lost in a typhoon in the area a few days later.

**1854. *Albany*—22-gun sloop-of-war, commanded by Commander James Thompson Gerry**



Black and white photograph of oil painting of *Albany* by Rear Admiral John W. Schmidt, Retired. (NH 57597-KN)

Commissioned on 6 November 1846, *Albany* was one of the last sail-powered sloops constructed. She saw extensive service in the Mexican-American War during 1846–1848. Her last patrol was along the coast of New Granada (now Columbia and Venezuela). *Albany* departed Aspinwall (now Colon, Panama) on 29 September 1854 en route to New York and was never seen

again. Among the 193 men lost were Commander James T. Gerry, youngest son of former Vice President of the U.S. Elbridge Gerry, and Lieutenant John Quincy Adams, grandson of President John Adams and nephew of President John Quincy Adams.

**1860. *Levant*—22-gun second-class sloop-of-war, commanded by Commander William E. Hun**

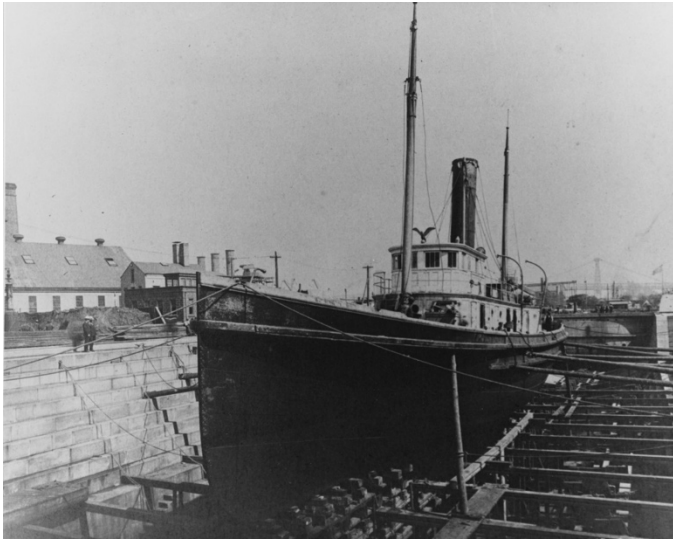


Action at the Canton Barrier Forts, China, 21 November 1856. Painting of the bombardment by USS *Levant* and USS *Portsmouth*, in support of U.S. forces landing to assault the forts. Oil painting was donated by William Macomb, Philadelphia, from the collection of his father, Captain William Macomb, Executive Officer of *Portsmouth* at the time of this action. (NH 42915)

*Levant* was commissioned in March 1838 and provided part of the landing force that claimed California from Mexico in July 1846. She then deployed to the Mediterranean followed by the Far East. Under the command of future Civil War hero Commander Andrew H. Foote, she participated in the Battle of the Pearl River Forts, destroying four Chinese forts by putting a landing party ashore and turning one fort’s cannons against the others. During the battle, *Levant* was hit in the hull and rigging 22 times by Chinese cannon fire, suffering one dead and six wounded. On a later deployment, *Levant* hosted a state visit in Honolulu by Hawaiian King Kamehameha IV. She departed Hilo, Hawaii, on 18 September 1860 and neither the ship nor her crew of 155 were seen again. Four U.S. Naval Academy graduates were among those lost. A mast and part of a lower yardarm washed ashore near Hilo, with some indication of an attempt to make them into a raft. A severe hurricane reported in the area may have been the cause. In July 1861 a bottle washed ashore on Cape Sable Island, Nova Scotia; the mostly unreadable message was reportedly from

the last three survivors in a boat from *Levant* and contained the words "God forgive us."

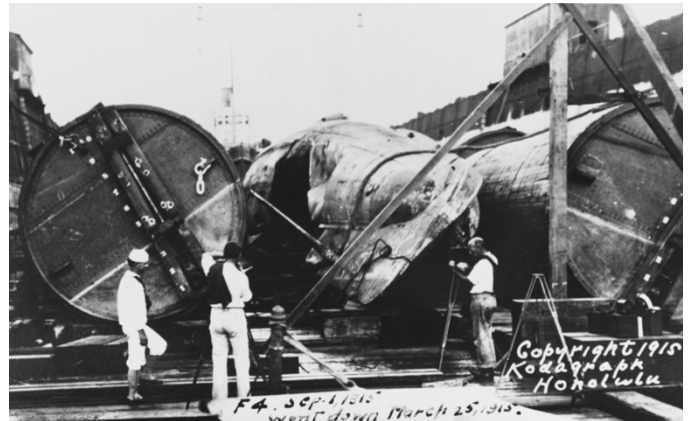
#### 1910. *Nina*—fourth-rate iron-hulled steamer



Tug *Nina* prior to undocking at the New York Navy Yard, 19 August 1905. (NH 44705)

Commissioned on 6 January 1866, *Nina* served in a variety of capacities as a tug, torpedo boat, salvage vessel, tugboat again, torpedo boat tender, supply ship, and then as a submarine tender for the fledgling U.S. submarine force. On 6 February 1910, *Nina* departed Norfolk en route to Boston and was last sighted off the Chesapeake Capes in a gale. The 33 men aboard were declared lost. The wreck of *Nina* was located by divers in 1978, 11 nautical miles northeast of Ocean City, Maryland.

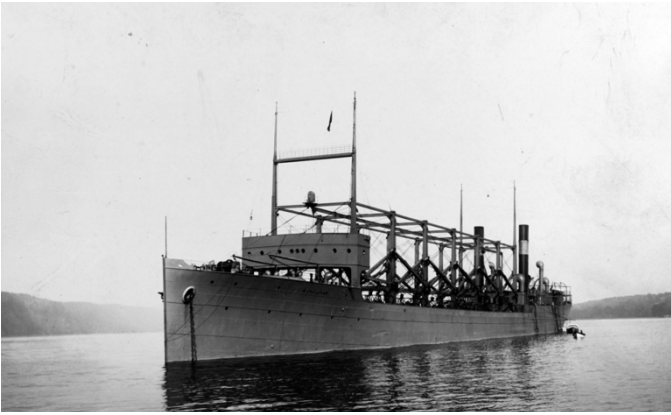
#### 1915. *F-4* (SS-23)—F-class submarine, commanded by Lieutenant (junior grade) Alfred Louis Ede



*F-4* in drydock at Honolulu, Hawaii, after being raised from over 300 feet of water and towed to port, 1 September 1915. (NH 74733)

Commissioned on 3 May 1913, *F-4* transferred to the Pacific as part of the First Submarine Group, Pacific Submarine Flotilla. While conducting exercises off Honolulu, Hawaii, on 25 March 1915, *F-4* submerged in 306 feet of water but did not resurface. Extensive efforts to locate the submarine in time to save the crew of 21 were unsuccessful. *F-4* was subsequently raised on 29 August 1915. One of the divers involved in the salvage was John Henry Turpin, among the first African Americans to qualify as a Navy Master Diver. (Turpin survived two catastrophic explosions; he was a mess attendant on *Maine* when she blew up in Havana harbor in 1898 and one of 90 survivors of 350 aboard. He was assigned to the gunboat *Bennington* (PG-4) when, on 21 July 1905 in San Diego, a boiler explosion on the ship killed 66 of 102 aboard.) The investigating board concluded that corrosion of lead lining in the battery tank was what caused *F-4*'s loss, but as is the norm in submarine sinkings, others have second-guessed the board, blaming an unreliable magnetic reducer or problems in air supply lines to the ballast tanks. In November 1915, *F-4* settled to the bottom of Magazine Loch, until in 1940 she was reburied in a trench below Submarine Base Mooring S14 in Pearl Harbor. (For more on U.S. submarine losses due to accident please see H-Gram 019/H-019-3.)

**1918. *Cyclops* (AC-4)–Proteus-class collier, commanded by Lieutenant Commander George W. Worley**



*Cyclops* anchored in the Hudson River, 3 October 1911. (NH 55549)

On 22 February 1918, *Cyclops* departed Salvador, Brazil, bound for Baltimore with a cargo of manganese ore picked up in Rio de Janeiro. Following a brief stop at Barbados on 4 March 1918 with 306 on board (250 crew and 56 passengers—these numbers vary in different sources), *Cyclops* was never seen again and no trace has ever been found. Although her disappearance occurred during time of war, there is no evidence enemy action had anything to do with her loss. The loss of *Cyclops* was later incorporated into the mythology of the Bermuda Triangle. Of note *Cyclops* had three sisters. *Proteus* (AC-9) was later sold into commercial service and vanished without a trace in the Bermuda Triangle with a cargo of ore (vice coal) [AESCNI] [EKACN2] in March 1941. *Nereus* (AC-10) was also sold into commercial service and vanished without a trace in the Bermuda Triangle with a cargo of bauxite ore in February 1941. Neither ship was lost due to enemy action. The fourth sister, *Jupiter* (AC-3) was converted into the U.S. Navy's first aircraft carrier, *Langley* (CV-1) in 1922. (For more on the loss of *Cyclops* please see H-Gram 016/H-016-4.)

**1921. *Conestoga* (AT-54)–fleet tug, commanded by Lieutenant Ernest Larkin Jones**

Commissioned on 10 November 1917, *Conestoga* conducted towing and escort duties along the U.S. East Coast and near the Azores in WWI. *Conestoga* departed Mare Island, California, on 25 March 1921 bound for Samoa via Pearl Harbor and disappeared. Due to a breakdown in communications, no one knew she was missing until she was two weeks overdue at Pearl Harbor. Although the search was immense, no confirmed trace of the ship or crew was found. The wreck of an unidentified ship was found just off the Farallon Islands (off the entrance to San Francisco Bay) in 2009. A joint National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC) mission in 2015 confirmed the wreck was *Conestoga*. This also confirmed *Conestoga* had not gone very far; the search was not initiated until almost a month after her loss and was conducted in the wrong places. The location of the ship suggested she was trying to reach the comparative safety of a cove in the Farallones as a result of heavy seas and high winds noted the day she left San Francisco Bay. (Please see H-060-1 for more images and detail on *Conestoga*.)

**1928. *S-4* (SS-109)–S-class submarine, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Roy H. Jones**



*S-4* in dry dock at the Boston Navy Yard, Charlestown, after salvage, 19 March 1928. (NH 41826)

S-4 was commissioned on 19 November 1919. Commencing on 18 November 1920, S-4 transited with Submarine Divisions 12 and 18 on what was then the longest transit by U.S. submarines, from Newport, Rhode Island, to Cavite, Philippines, via the Panama Canal and Pearl Harbor. On 17 December 1927, while surfacing near Provincetown, Massachusetts, S-4 was accidentally rammed and sunk by Coast Guard destroyer *Paulding* (CG-17, formerly USN DD-22) on Rum Patrol. Six crewmen survived the sinking but were trapped in the submarine at a depth of 110 feet. Although the survivors communicated with rescuers on the surface by tapping on the hull in Morse code, foul weather thwarted heroic rescue attempts (diver Chief Gunner's Mate Thomas Eadie was awarded a Medal of Honor) and all six survivors perished with the 34 other crewmen. S-4 was subsequently raised on 17 March 1928 by an effort led by (future Chief of Naval Operations) Captain Ernest J. King. S-4 was repaired and recommissioned on 16 October 1928. Decommissioned in April 1933, she was subsequently deliberately sunk on 15 May 1933.

**1941. O-9 (SS-70)–O-class submarine, commanded by Lieutenant Howard Joseph Abbott**



O-9 afloat after launching at the Fore River Shipbuilding Company shipyard, Quincy, Massachusetts, 27 January 1918. (NH 44555)

First commissioned in 1918 and decommissioned in 1931, O-9 was recommissioned on 14 April 1941 along with seven other O-class boats to serve as training vessels in anticipation of the Second World War. O-9 was prone to mechanical problems even after extensive repairs. On 19 June 1941, O-9 along with O-6 (SS-67) and O-10 (SS-71) departed New London, Connecticut, for the test depth training area off Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 450 feet of water. On the morning of 20 June, O-6 and O-10 made successful dives. O-9 then submerged and never came up. Rescue attempts immediately commenced with limited prospect of success as O-9's crush depth was 212 feet. Divers reached the sub on 21 and 22 June, setting depth and endurance records, but the submarine's hull had been completely crushed aft of the conning tower and there was no chance that any of her 33 crewmen had survived.

**1944. S-28 (SS-133)–S-class submarine, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Jack Gordon Campbell**



S-28 underway. (NH 42689)

Commissioned in 1923, S-28 survived seven war patrols during WWII, mostly in the Aleutian and Kuril Islands of the North Pacific. In October 1943, she commenced training duty out of Pearl Harbor. On 4 July 1944, S-28 was engaged in antisubmarine warfare training with U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Reliance* (WSC-150). As the exercise concluded, contact between the two vessels

became sporadic until 1820, when contact was lost. An extensive search eventually located an oil slick in the area of her loss, but the depth exceeded the equipment of the time. The submarine and her crew of 42 were declared lost, and a court of inquiry was unable to determine a cause. Although this occurred in wartime, there was no evidence of enemy action. The remains of S-28 were found in 2017 at a depth of 8,500 feet by Tim Taylor of the Lost 52 Project, and identity of the submarine was confirmed by NHHC.

**1944. *Mount Hood* (AE-11)–*Mount Hood*-class ammunition ship, commanded by Commander Harold Agnew Turner**



Smoke cloud expanding immediately after *Mount Hood* exploded in Seeadler harbor, 10 November 1944. (NH 65604)

Although 18 crewmen survived because they were ashore, everyone who was actually aboard *Mount Hood* was obliterated when the 3,800 tons of ammunition aboard blew up by accident in Seeadler harbor, Manus Island, Admiralty Islands, Papua New Guinea, on 10 November 1944. Of 350 men aboard *Mount Hood* or alongside in small boats, no human remains were found. Everyone topside on the nearby repair ship *Mindanao* (ARG-3) were killed along with more inside the ship for a total of 82 dead. The blast sank or damaged beyond repair 22 small boats

and amphibious craft, and damaged numerous other ships in the harbor, wounding another 371 personnel. The Board of Inquiry concluded that the most likely cause of the explosion was “careless handling of ammunition aboard ship.” (For more on the *Mount Hood* disaster please see H-Gram 039/H-039-5.)

**1963. *Thresher* (SSN-593)–*Thresher*-class nuclear fast attack submarine, commanded by Lieutenant Commander John Wesley Harvey**



*Thresher* enters the water for the first time during launching ceremonies at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, Kittery, Maine, 9 July 1960. (NH 97552)

Commissioned on 3 August 1961, *Thresher* was lost on 10 April 1963 during deep dive trials off Portsmouth, New Hampshire. *Thresher* was the first nuclear submarine lost at sea. Lost with the submarine were 129 personnel (112 crew and 17 shipyard personnel), making *Thresher*’s loss the second-deadliest submarine accident. (130 men were lost aboard French submarine *Surcouf*, which disappeared on 18 February 1942, possibly after a collision with a U.S. merchant ship.)



**1968. *Scorpion* (SSN-589)–Skipjack-class nuclear fast-attack submarine, commanded by Commander Francis Atwood Slattery**



*Scorpion* ties up alongside SS *Tallahatchie County* (AVB-2) outside Claywall Harbor, Naples, Italy, 10 April 1968. *Scorpion* was lost with all hands while returning from this Mediterranean deployment. (NH 70308)

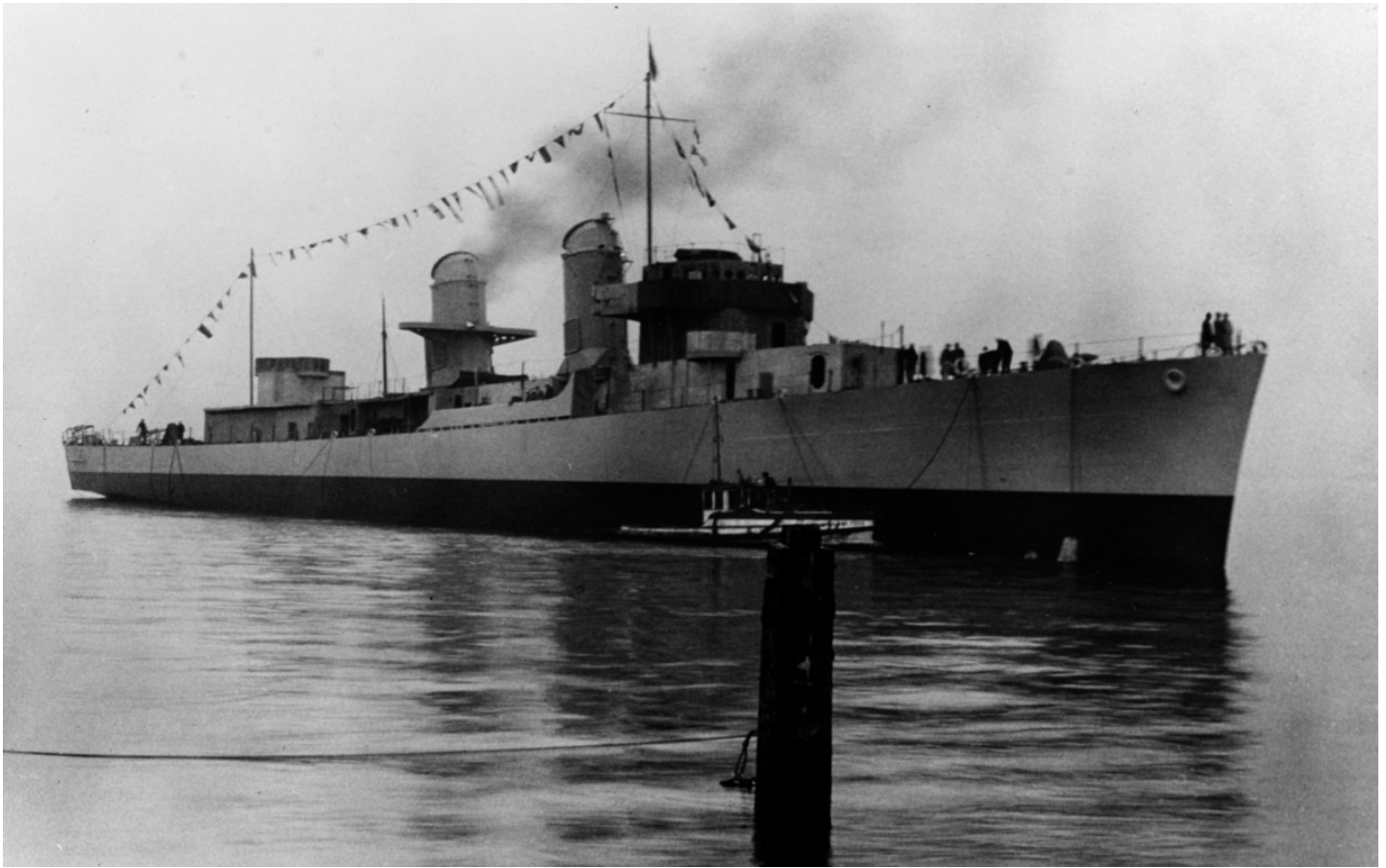
"U.S. Navy Ships Lost in Selected Storm/Weather Related Incidents." (NHHHC)

"Missing and Presumed Lost," by James P. Delgado in *Naval History Magazine*, Vol. 30, No. 4, August 2016.

Commissioned on 29 July 1960, *Scorpion* was lost with all 99 of her crew on 22 May 1968 about 400 nautical miles southwest of the Azores while returning from a Mediterranean deployment. Debate about the cause of her loss still rages on the internet along with conspiracy theories. The chance that she was sunk by the Soviets is about zero. She was one of four submarines that disappeared in 1968. That same year, Soviet Golf-II diesel-electric ballistic missile submarine *K-129* went missing in the Pacific and its wreck was located by *Halibut* (SSN-587), followed by a partially successful top secret (at the time) recovery of the submarine by the *Glomar Explorer* (Project Azorian). Also in 1968, Israeli submarine *Ins Dakar* disappeared in the Mediterranean (wreckage located in 1999), and French submarine *Minerve* (S-647) went missing near the Port of Toulon (wreckage located in 2019).

**Sources:**

"Casualties: U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Personnel Killed and Injured in Selected Accidents and Other Incidents Not Directly the Result of Enemy Action." (NHHHC)

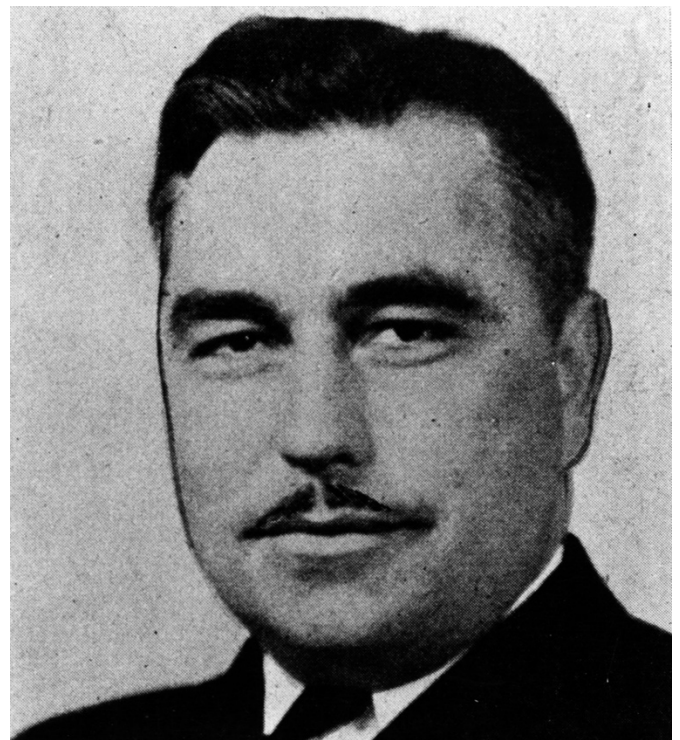


*Johnston* (DD-557) after its launch on 25 March 1943 (NH 63497).

## H-060-3 The Search for *USS Johnston* (DD-557)

*Samuel J. Cox, Director, Naval History and Heritage Command*

In January 2019, I was aboard the research vessel (R/V) *Petrel* in Ironbottom Sound off Guadalcanal after finding the sunken carrier *Wasp* (CV-7) (see H-Gram 027) when the ship's mission director, Mr. Robert Kraft, asked me, "If we could find any ship in the world you wanted, what would it be?" I answered without hesitation, "the *Johnston*." Rob whistled through his teeth and said, "Really deep." I answered, "Really deep." And we both knew that in the chaotic Battle off Samar, Philippines, on 25 October 1944, the likelihood that anyone was taking very accurate fixes was pretty low. We had learned in the search for the *Wasp* that open-ocean fixes on where a ship went down could be 10-20 nautical miles (NM) off.



Commander Ernest Evans, who received the Medal of Honor for his command of *Johnston* during the Battle off Samar, 25 October 1944 (NH 92320).

Finding the ship commanded by Commander Ernest Evans, the first Native American awarded a Medal of Honor in the U.S. Navy, in one of the most valiant actions in the annals of naval history would be a tall order. Nevertheless, Rob took me up on the challenge, and later, in 2019, found a wreck off Samar in 20,400 feet of water (the deepest shipwreck ever located, at that time) that we believed was almost certainly *Johnston* (DD-557) based on her relative position. The debris field was perched at the top of an undersea cliff. The depth was at the extreme limit of *Petrel's* Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) capability. The wreck was without doubt a *Fletcher*-class destroyer. The problem with certain identification was that the *Hoel* (DD-532) went down in the same battle, also in incredibly heroic action against overwhelming odds. No features could be seen (such as a hull number) that would positively identify the wreck.

In analyzing the data provided to the U.S. Navy pro bono by the *Petrel's* parent company, Vulcan, Inc., NHHC underwater archaeologists determined that most of the debris field came from the after end of the ship, although the foremast was also in the debris field. The analysts could identify features in the debris field known to be on *Hoel*, but uncertain as to whether they were on *Johnston*. Modifications to the foremast were one potential means of discrimination, but in the few photos of *Johnston* that exist, none were clear enough to determine any difference from *Hoel*.

Another potentially distinguishing feature in the debris was the gun captain's shield on what was probably 5-inch gun mount 55. *Fletcher*-class destroyers had five single 5-inch gun turrets, two superimposed forward (mounts 51 and 52), two superimposed aft (mounts 54 and 55), and one forward-facing mount (53) just forward of mount 54, with a 40-mm antiaircraft gun in between. The gun captain's shields were installed on the top of lower 5-inch gun mounts to protect the gun captain, if he had his head outside the hatch, from the muzzle blast of any gun overhead.

Some *Fletcher*-class destroyers were constructed with these shields and some had them added later. Configurations also varied. They were most common on mounts 51 and 55 (which had 5-inch gun mounts above them, 52 and 54). Some *Fletcher*-class destroyers also had the shields on mounts 53 and 54 to protect the gun captains from the 40 mm anti-aircraft gun on the after deck house above the aft 5-inch guns. These shields are readily apparent in photographs of *Hoel*. In the few photos of *Johnston*, these shields are either absent or obscured. These shields would have been post-construction add-ons in the case of *Johnston*, so their absence did not conclusively prove the wreck was not *Johnston*. We felt confident enough to concur with Vulcan's announcement in October 2019 that they had found a wreck believed to be *Johnston*.

It was also clear from *Petrel's* extensive search of areas her systems could reach that escort carrier *Gambier Bay* (CVE-73), destroyer escort *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413), and the probable *Hoel* were still unlocated, almost certainly in even deeper water than *Johnston*. During the search off Samar, *Petrel* found the escort carrier *St. Lo* (CVE-63), a survivor of the Battle off Samar, only to become the first ship sunk by a kamikaze a couple hours later. *Petrel* also found the Japanese heavy cruiser *Chokai*, one of three Japanese heavy cruisers lost in the Battle off Samar or finished off by U.S. air attacks immediately afterward. At the time, I was resigned to the probability that it would be a very long time before we ever found the other ships or could positively confirm the *Fletcher*-class destroyer as *Johnston*.

In 2020, Mr. Victor Vescovo approached me with a plan to dive on the "*Johnston*" wreck site in his deep submersible *Limiting Factor*, which, despite the name, has no depth limit and has been to the deepest point in all five oceans. (Victor has also climbed Mount Everest and the highest peaks on all six other continents.) NHHC underwater archaeologists were a bit dubious at first, as Victor is not an archaeologist. However, as he is a retired

naval officer, I was confident that Victor would treat the wreck with all appropriate respect as a war gravesite, and archaeologist or not; there was still much to be learned and a story of U.S. Navy heroism to be told.

U.S. Navy wrecks are legally protected from disturbance by customary maritime law (unlike merchant ships subject to the right of salvage, warships remain sovereign property in perpetuity) and further by the Sunken Military Craft Act (SMCA). NHHC is the Federal Executive Agent for SMCA. As a general rule, NHHC prefers for U.S. Navy wrecks to be left alone, as many are war graves, as well as being fragile archaeological sites. Nevertheless, under SMCA, NHHC has authority to grant permits for intrusive exploration of a U.S. Navy wreck with sufficient justification for educational, research, environmental, or other official government purpose, although this is granted only rarely. However, under SMCA, anyone can dive on a U.S. Navy wreck without a permit, so long as there is no intent to disturb the wreck. Victor made clear that he had no intention of disturbing the wreck. So, as a private citizen, he technically did not need a permit, nor the Navy's permission, to dive on the wreck. However, as a retired naval officer, he sought to be as transparent and collaborative with the Navy as possible, which was deeply appreciated.

NHHC has very productive collaborative relationships with reputable privately-funded wreck exploration groups, such as Mr. Robert Kraft, whose research ship *Petrel* (funded by Microsoft co-founder, the late Mr. Paul Allen) has found the carriers *Lexington* (CV-2), *Wasp* (CV-7), *Hornet* (CV-8), *St. Lo* (CVE-63), cruisers *Indianapolis* (CA-35), *Juneau* (CL-52), *Helena* (CL-50), and destroyers *Ward* (APD-16, ex-DD-139), *Cooper* (DD-695), *Strong* (DD-467), and *Johnston* (DD-557), as well as Japanese carriers *Akagi* and *Kaga*, battleships *Fuso*, *Yamashiro*, *Hiei*, and other Japanese cruisers and destroyers, among other discoveries. Another productive relationship is with Mr. Tim Taylor and the "Lost 52 Project,"

which has located seven U.S. submarines lost during WWII. Another excellent relationship is with the Maritime Heritage Office in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which solved the 95-year-old mystery of the disappearance of the fleet tug *Conestoga* (AT-54) and her 56-man crew, among other discoveries. In each case, these groups have provided their data to the U.S. Navy gratis, and, in turn, NHHC has provided research support for searches and post mission analysis and identification confirmation. This would be the first time working with Victor.

Although the wreck site of what we believed to be *Johnston* had already been discovered, I considered Victor's plan worthwhile for several reasons. Although the wreck site had been thoroughly surveyed by *Petrel*, there was no identifiable hull structure, and it just seemed to me that a significant amount of the ship was missing, and was likely over the edge of the cliff. Second, although my command is very protective of our hallowed wreck sites, NHHC also has a mission to tell an accurate story of U.S. Navy history to as many people as we can possibly reach. There is no better story of Navy heroism to tell the American people than the actions of *Johnston* and the entire task group of six escort carriers, three destroyers, and four destroyer escorts (radio call sign Taffy 3) in valiant action against an overwhelming Japanese force of four battleships, six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and eleven destroyers.

As naval historian Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison said in his comprehensive *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, "in no action in its entire history has the U.S. Navy shown more gallantry, guts and gumption than in the hours 0730 to 0930 off Samar" on 25 October 1944. My dad had the entire 15-volume set of Morison's history (and a library of other naval history books and *Jane's Fighting Ships*) and I was looking at the pictures before I could read. From a very young age, I knew the story of the *Johnston*. While other

kids had sports heroes, my childhood hero was Ernest Evans, skipper of the *Johnston* at Samar. I joined the Navy because I wanted to part of his legacy and others like him.

My interest in Evans continued throughout my career. As a flag officer, I devoted my required diversity outreach efforts to Native American organizations. In 2011, I was given an opening night plenary session speaking spot at the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) convention and I told the story of Ernest Evans, who was half Cherokee and a quarter Creek. Almost no one in the audience of 700 Native American college students and 300 engineering professionals had heard the story. When I was done, the roar from the standing ovation about brought the roof down, tears streaming down kids' faces, the works. One of my goals as Director of NHHC is to convince a Secretary of the Navy to name a destroyer USS *Ernest Evans*.

In short, the story of Ernest Evans and *Johnston* is one I don't think can be told too often. It is a story the American people need to hear, both from the perspective of the valor of the U.S. Navy and the contributions of Native Americans to the U.S. Navy. The percentage of Native Americans serving in the U.S. Navy is greater than the percentage of Native Americans in the population of the United States (and the same is true in the other services). I reasoned that if Victor reached the wreck, it would be the deepest wreck dive in history, which would result in more than the usual media attention. I found Victor's plan to be reasonable, of benefit to the U.S. Navy, and I gave Victor my strongest wish for success, as well as much help as NHHC could legally provide.

Victor and his team conducted extensive preparation for the expedition, both in technical upgrades to his equipment (particularly sonar search capability) and research using all available U.S. and Japanese sources. The research was so thorough that their lead analyst, retired U.S. Navy

Lieutenant Commander Parks Stephenson, was able to cross-correlate damage described in *Hoel's* after-action report with wreckage observed in the publically released video obtained by *Petrel's* ROV. The result of the analysis actually confirmed the wreck was *Johnston* even before the dive (*Hoel's* aftermost 5-inch gun barrel took a direct hit, damage that was not visible in the wreck, but would have been if it were *Hoel*). Nevertheless, everyone knew the "holy grail" was to find "557" or "532" on the hull. We had learned from previous deep dives on *Wasp*, *Hornet*, and *St.Lo*, at 16 to 17,000 feet that hull numbers would be plainly visible due to the preservation at those depths, unless they had been burned off by fire.

Although the *Limiting Factor* has no depth limitation, it is limited in the time it can remain on the bottom and the size of the area that can be searched on each dive. The support vessel, *Pressure Drop*, does not have an Autonomous Underwater Vehicle (AUV) comparable to *Petrel's* broad area search capability (although even that is a relative term, in a huge ocean, even *Petrel* has to be pretty close to the wreck before commencing a search). As a result, Victor's first two eight-hour dives were a "miss." Near the end of the third dive, Victor was able to follow a trail of debris down a furrow in the cliff to find the forward two-thirds of a *Fletcher*-class destroyer almost a thousand feet further down than the original wreck site. The hull number "557" was plainly visible. Victor sent the photo of the hull number to me by e-mail shortly after surfacing. It didn't take a whole lot of sophisticated analysis to confirm the ship as the *Johnston*.

A fourth dive was devoted to an extensive video and photographic survey of the wreck, all of which is being provided to the U.S. Navy gratis with no restrictions, along with some sophisticated 3-D modeling of the wreck. NHHC underwater archaeologists will be busy for a while analyzing the data. We do not expect the analysis to significantly change the overall understanding of the battle, but there are indications that will



change our understanding to a degree of the last gallant hours of *Johnston's* life.

As is the case with previous deep-water dives on U.S. Navy wrecks, no human remains were expected to be seen and none were. In some previous wrecks, shoes and helmets were the only evidence of the crew. In this case, no clothing was seen. Nevertheless, the *Johnston* is a hallowed site; the last resting place of courageous American Sailors, deserving of as much respect as Arlington National Cemetery. It is legally a war grave. In most cases, the law is the only protection for Navy wreck sites. In this case, the great depths add additional protection. To add even more protection, Mr. Vescovo will not publically reveal the exact coordinates of the wreck, in keeping with NHHHC practice to deter pilfering, scavenging, and outright salvaging that has befallen the wrecks of other nations in the Java Sea and South China Sea, and elsewhere.

Following the last dive, the support ship *Pressure Drop* heaved to, sounded the ship's whistle, and the ship's crew laid a wreath over *Johnston's* location as a gesture of respect and honor for the Sailors who made the ultimate sacrifice. Mr. Vescovo said, "As a U.S. Navy officer, I'm proud to have helped bring clarity and closure to the *Johnston*, her crew, and the families of those who fell there."

*Johnston* lost 184 of 329 men during the Battle off Samar and in two days in the ocean afterwards. As of today, there is only one survivor of *Johnston* still alive, so it is incumbent on us to ensure the memory of ship and crew lives on.

For more on the Battle off Samar, Please see H-Gram 036.

**Additional Reading:**

"Wreckage confirmed as heroic USS *Johnston* (DD 557)" (1 April 2020, NHHHC)