

“Baptized by Saltwater”:
Acts of Remembrance and Commemoration
Surrounding the USS Block Islands, CVE-21 & CVE-106

by
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ABSTRACT

The Second World War has been portrayed as the central event for understanding the history of America in the 20th Century. This dissertation will examine the acts of commemoration and remembrance by veterans who served on the escort carriers, *USS Block Island*, CVE-21 & CVE-106. Acts of remembrance and commemoration, in this case, refer to the authorship of memoirs, the donation of symbolic objects that represent military service to museums, and the formation of a veteran's organization, which also serves as a means of social support. I am interested in the way stories of the conflict that fall outside the dominant narratives of the Second World War, namely the famous battles of land, sea, and air, have been commemorated by the veterans who were part of them. Utilizing primary source material and oral histories, I examine how acts of remembrance and commemoration have changed over time. An analysis of the shifting meanings sheds light on how individual memories of the war have changed, in light of the history of the larger war that continues to ignore small ships and sea battles.

Dedicated to Dr. John Allen Gable for
being there at the beginning,
and Dr. Noel Stowe for being there at the end.

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I would also like to thank the Board of Directors of the Block Island Historical Society. Since 2003, when artifacts related to CVE-21 and CVE-106 were found in their collection, they have fully supported my continued interest on the subject. This project led to a summer exhibition on the ships, a permanent exhibition at the American Legion Post 36 on the island, attendance at reunions of veterans, and, finally, hosting these veterans on Block Island on May 31, 2007.

The continued support of the Board led to expanding our institution's original mission and discovering the heritage of Block Island was not limited to the terrestrial bounds of this small island.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the full support of members of the USS Block Island Association. While attending multiple annual reunions, the members, including both veterans and family members, have been nothing but fully supportive in my research interests in the heritage of the story of the USS Block Islands. Interviews conducted, both at annual meetings and at the homes of veterans, have allowed the intellectual exploration of the commemoration of the experience of losing CVE-21. More specifically, I would like to thank Bill and Judy MacInnes for their efforts in dealing with my countless emails and questions with regards to the history of both CVE-21 and CVE-106 and the past activities of the USS Block Island Association.

I also want to thank Judge Scott Stucky of the Department of Defense's U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces. In the summer of 2009, my internship with the Court allowed me to live and work in Washington D.C. This granted me extensive time for researching at the National Archives, the military library at the Army/Navy Club, and the Naval Historical Center.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for supporting me in this effort of intellectual exploration. Without their backing of my exploring new ways of thinking and looking at the world from childhood on, this document would not exist.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

World War II has been portrayed as the central event for understanding the history of America in the 20th Century. In addition to being studied by scholars, the U.S. Navy's contribution to victory has been commemorated in numerous official forms by state institutions like the military, and through popular culture. These forms of commemoration surrounding the U.S. Navy demonstrate what American society has felt is important and worth remembering by broader audiences and for future generations. Like all forms of discourse surrounding complex topics, selections and omissions must take place to produce a coherent commemorative product. The Navy and other government entities produced films and publications that focused on the large sea battles that made newspaper headlines.¹ Similarly, popular examples of commemoration, including books and films, also highlighted major battles. However, the exploits of the U.S. Navy's escort carriers involved in the conflict do not fit into the nation's grand narrative of victory on the sea.

Far from representing a nation in total control of the high seas, the escort carriers (CVEs) symbolize a nation barely provisioned for war. With only seven large carriers in the entire naval fleet at the U.S.'s entrance into the war, the CVE represents a quick fix sought by an under-prepared nation. With short production

¹ Most notably: The documentary war series *Victory at Sea*, produced by NBC in cooperation with the U.S. Navy. First broadcast on television in 1952-3, the 26 part series was released as a film in 1954.

times, these naval workhorses completed a range of missions outside the limelight of famous battles celebrated after the war. Through logistical support, aid of amphibious landings, and pursuit of enemy submarines, the CVEs earned the nickname “jeep carrier”, a reference to the hardy jeep utilized by U.S. land forces that aided the military in numerous roles.² While these vessels did receive some attention during the war, this recognition centered on the vessels becoming victims of sinkings, not inflicting victory over the enemy.³ After a number of the thinly armored first class of CVEs exploded in an amazingly violent nature as the result of a single torpedo, other names highlighting their vulnerability emerged. CVE no longer stood for “escort carrier”, but rather “Combustible, Vulnerable, and Expendable.”⁴ However, these vessels are unique in comparison with other larger vessels in the U.S. Navy in terms of christening, which greatly affected their commemoration and memorialization after the war.

² William T. Y’Blood, *The Little Giants: U.S. Escort Carriers Against Japan*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), vii-viii.

³ Most notably the Battle of Samar on October 25, 1944 in the Philippine Sea when a group composed of six escort carriers and other vessels were completely taken by surprise by the Japanese Empire fleet. While the CVEs battled bravely despite the overwhelming forces, two escort carriers were sunk during this action. The CVEs received attention in conducting a fighting retreat against a vastly more powerful force, however, this battle did not represent an epic triumph over the enemy.

⁴ Y’Blood, *The Little Giants*, vii.

The birth of a warship starts with a celebration, that of christening the vessel with a name.⁵ The U.S. Navy's policy during the World War II period included christening vessels over 10,000 tons with a name based on a location on U.S. soil.⁶ Battleships (BBs) were named after U.S. States, large aircraft carriers (CVs) were named after battlefields, and cruisers (CAs) were named for U.S. cities.⁷ During and after the war, the majority of public commemorations took place in the locations for which they vessel had been named, and continued in these locations after the vast majority of vessels were decommissioned and scrapped. The state of Arizona commemorated the ill-fated battleship that bore its name with a mast and anchor from the vessel resting in front of the state capital. Major American cities named after cruisers developed similar modes of remembrance, including the city of Houston sponsoring a Navy recruiting drive after the sinking of *USS Houston*, CA-30, during the war. However, the escort carriers represent the only exception to this rule – they were named after bodies of

⁵ The power of selecting names for vessels resides with the Secretary of the Navy. Congress granted this authority on March 3, 1819.

⁶ For World War II era CVs, there is one exception to this rule, that christening vessels after those names that hold a long-standing tradition in the U.S. Navy. For example, the *USS Wasp*, CV-18, is just one of 10 vessels to hold that name, covering a tradition from the first *Wasp* commissioned in 1775 to the modern day LHD-1.

⁷ As of 1940 these include: Battleships named *USS Maryland*, *Colorado*, and *West Virginia*; Heavy Cruisers named *USS Minneapolis*, *USS New Orleans*, and *USS Wichita*; Light Cruisers named *USS Brooklyn*, *USS Phoenix*, and *USS Boise*; and Aircraft Carriers named *USS Saratoga*, *USS Lexington*, and *USS Yorktown*.

water, such as bays or sounds, or small isolated islands.⁸ The nomenclature of escort carriers did not offer a location that could be the site of commemoration at the civic or state levels. A study of large vessels of war, such as escort carriers, that lacked a physical site that could serve as a location for commemoration, will shed light onto the development by veterans in their own forms of memorialization that differs from other large U.S. Navy vessels.

Since only exceptional stories of individual heroism are used in official and popular commemorations, most individual accounts of service are neglected. This results in the omission of the majority of experiences in the war, and thus after the war a movement by individual servicemen to self-commemorate emerged. Escort carriers that aided in the war effort, outside of the limelight of the large sea battles waged in both the Atlantic and Pacific, do not fit into the overall national commemoration of the war. Lacking a place in the larger narrative of victory, the veterans of escort carriers produced their own forms of commemoration and remembrance. Sprouting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, veteran's groups of former crewmembers of escort carriers initiated the process of grassroots commemoration.⁹ These veterans developed tactics of remembrance that filled the holes in the overall commemoration of the war, which neglected the role of the escort carriers in victory. Self-publishing the history of ships, donating

⁸ Roy Grossnick, *United States Naval Aviation; 1910-1995*. (Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1997), 427-431.

⁹ Of the eighty-one escort carriers that the U.S. Navy commissioned by March 1945, the crewmembers of seventy-five vessels formed some version of a memorial organization. Or, over 92% of escort carriers were self-commemorated by former crewmembers.

objects to museums, and authoring and sharing individual crewmember's memoirs were all tactics they employed. Of the veteran's groups devoted to the commemoration of escort carriers, the one that started the earliest remains the strongest to this day. Chartered in 1961, the USS Block Island Association (USSBIA) began the process of self-commemoration. This self-commemoration included the chartering of a nonprofit organization devoted to the remembrance of their vessels, hosting of annual reunions for crewmembers and their spouses, and the publication of a quarterly newsletter. The strength of this group mirrors the strength of the bond that binds the founding members, a bond formed as they were "baptized by saltwater." These men experienced the loss of their escort carrier, sunk off the coast of Africa, thus representing the only American aircraft carrier lost in the war in the Atlantic. The loss experienced by these sailors served as the catalyst for chartering the grassroots veteran's organization, sixteen years after the conclusion of the war, which was devoted to the neglected commemoration of their vessel.

This study first examines the national narrative of World War II and the role of aircraft carriers within it. This section will focus on the large fleet carriers, the CVs that overshadowed the two other classifications of carriers manufactured during the war, the Independence class aircraft carriers (CVLs) and CVEs. While 99 carriers were commissioned during the war, the 21 CV vessels not only grabbed the headlines during the conflict in waging the war with the Japanese Imperial fleet, but after the war the steps taken to remember the carriers also focused on the CVs and marginalized the contributions of the CVLs and CVEs. In

a host of ways, with the production of movies about the war, the dedication of airports, and the christening of new carriers built during the Cold War, in the decades after the war the national narrative of aircraft carriers during World War II would almost exclusively focus on the CVs and marginalize the CVLs and CVEs. More importantly for this study, this marginalizing of these other types of carriers also marginalized the men who manned them during the war. Thus, the veterans of the CVEs constructed their own memorial means, in both individual and collective ways, to mark their service and their vessels.

The second section of this study reconstructs the history of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21 & CVE-106, and their role in the larger narrative of the war using a variety of primary sources, including U.S. Navy deck-logs, after action reports, and official investigation documentation about the sinking of CVE-21. The CVE-21 undertook operations in the Atlantic theater including Lend-Lease, and directly took on the German U-boats in Hunter-Killer missions. The latter operation resulted in the vessel's sinking in May 1944.¹⁰ Starting in January 1945, the CVE-106 completed a range of operations in the Pacific theater including participating in the naval siege of Okinawa, surviving a typhoon, and the evacuation from the island of Formosa of POWS interned by the Japanese at the conclusion of the war. In addressing these two wartime experiences in battling two different enemies, this study holds the potential for further understanding veterans' views of both the war and the enemy in each theater. The contributions of these two escort carriers

¹⁰ CVE-21 is one of only eleven American aircraft carriers lost in World War II. See Appendix A for complete listing of carriers and dates of sinking.

and especially the experiences of those who served on them have not previously been analyzed. This dissertation thus seeks to understand what those who served on these ships experienced and how these experiences shaped veterans' understandings of the war and of their role in it.

The third section of this dissertation examines the steps taken by individuals and groups in the remembrance of both the *USS Block Islands*. These groups include the community of Block Island, Rhode Island, an international nonprofit organization devoted to commemoration,¹¹ and a truly unique veteran organization devoted to self-commemoration. In a host of ways, these groups and individuals invented methods of dealing with and commemorating the wartime experience of those who served on these two escort carriers. Their efforts differ from the commemoration of land-based battles in which a locale provided a natural site for the dedication of a monument and the hosting of commemorative events. Because neither ship survived to serve as a memorial these groups, along with individual veterans and family members, had to invent ways of remembrance. This study, while noting the impact of a number of collective modes of remembering, will focus on the organization designed, managed, and hosted by the veterans of the Block Islands.

Starting in 1961, the USS Block Island Association (USSBIA) began the process of forming a different type of self-commemorative group. While

¹¹ The international nonprofit group, Taiwan POW Memorial Camps Society, is distinct from the USSBIA. It seeks to commemorate the stories of Allied POW held by the Japanese during the war. The *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, was responsible for the evacuation of 461 of these POWs at the conclusion of the war in September 1945.

commemoration by crewmembers is common among the veterans of the U.S. Navy, the vast majority center around a single vessel. The USSBIA, despite the name, is much more than a group devoted to one or two vessels. It is unique from all other groups because it represents a group molded out of the core experience by sailors on five vessels conducting a unified military action on the high seas. On May 29, 1944, the crewmen of these five vessels experienced a singular event from different vantage points. After the escort carrier CVE-21 was attacked by torpedoes, the four destroyer escorts of the task force sprung into action at her defense. Their operations included searching for the enemy U-Boat and destroying it, then returning and picking up the survivors of the CVE-21. The experience of a sinking bound the crewmembers together, producing a unique organization of individual servicemen devoted to self-commemoration. Their activities of commemoration included the hosting of annual reunions, publishing a quarterly newsletter for the membership on aspects of each vessel's history, and donation of items related to the crewmembers' experience and service to local museums

The last portion of this study will consider the ways in which other veterans of escort carriers have remembered their service. Of the eighty-one CVEs commissioned before the end of the war, seventy-five veterans groups formed around the experience of these individual vessels. This chapter will demonstrate differences in commemoration resulting from which theater of operations the CVE fought in, the particular missions these took part in, and other actions of CVEs crewmembers that also survived a sinking. Combined with the

in-depth focus on the reaction of veterans from CVE-21 & CVE-106, this phase will address how veterans lacking an existing example of their vessel commemorate their service.¹² Moreover, this chapter focuses on vessels that were not named after a location that could serve as an easy site for commemoration. It thus examines how veterans address this challenge by inventing their own forms and places of remembrance. Combined with chapter five, this chapter will also underscore how naval personnel's commemorations of their service differ from those of servicemen who battled on land. Lastly, these activities by CVE veterans, on both the collective and individual levels, will present a case-study into the evolving meaning of World War II for service members and their family members in the decades after the war.

CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Investigation of the uniqueness of the crewmembers' experience on both *USS Block Islands*, CVE-21 & CVE-106, holds the potential for understanding how the meaning of dramatic events of wartime experience have changed for veterans over time. This case study presents an opportunity to study the first time in U.S. Naval history that the crewmembers of a lost vessel were retained as a unit on another vessel of the same name. While the renaming of lost vessels in combat represents a practice as old as the U.S. Navy itself, the original crewmembers were never previously retained as a single fighting force to serve on the second

¹² None of the 120 escort carriers produced in WWII have survived to serve as a platform for memorialization whereas ships transformed into museums include CVs [fast fleet carriers], BBs [battleships], and DEs [destroyer escorts], among others.

vessel.¹³ Beyond this first, the crewmembers of the Block had the unique experience of serving in two different theaters. This experience includes differing missions in each ocean against different enemies. These differing and contrasting experiences helped shape acts of commemoration on the individual, group, and civic levels. In addition, this study will shed light onto the more general concept of how commemoration of World War II has changed over time.

Moreover, while the battles of World War II have attracted much scholarship, the history of individual veterans groups devoted to the commemoration of their vessels is lacking. Of the studies devoted to the consideration of the memories of veterans, none have investigated the role of organizations aligned with escort carriers.¹⁴ My study explores the commemoration and memory of the escort carriers *USS Block Islands*, which include a veterans' organization, an international nonprofit group, and a range of individual responses. Combined into a single study, this contribution will address how veterans remember their naval service, and provide insight into how others who served on naval vessels commemorate the actions of these escort carriers.

Broader than contributing specifically to military scholarship, this study will also contribute to understanding the many reincarnations that vessels undergo on the seas. Most vessels, civilian and military, provide a window into human

¹³ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy: "The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict"*. (Annapolis: U.S. Navy, 1945), 21.

¹⁴ For the best example devoted to the Marine Corp experience see: Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall, *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

society that illustrates economic and societal transformations. The history of escort carriers embodies this idea. The first class of escort carriers were originally constructed as C-3 oil tanker hulls, and transformed upon U.S. entry into the war. After the war, escort carriers were converted into amphibious assault ships and aircraft transports. While the major capital vessels, including the larger carriers and battleships, were retained in the reserve or active fleets, no escort carrier escaped the scrap yard or conversion after 1957. Thus, before the movement to preserve U.S. Navy vessels from World War II commenced, the escort carriers were either sold for scrap or converted beyond their original mission.¹⁵ These conversions were not limited to military roles. Conversions included re-christening as civilian merchant vessels, a floating university, and a floating dormitory of medical students at the University of Rotterdam.¹⁶ The history of the two *Block Islands* will demonstrate the evolving lives of vessels, which for these ships includes the story of a civilian hull converted into a military craft and a military vessel transformed into a floating classroom at the U.S. Naval Academy after the war.¹⁷

An additional contribution of this dissertation is considering the impact of preserving floating examples of World War II vessels and transforming these into museums. Utilizing the term “platform of memory”, I will argue that the

¹⁵ Grossnick, *United States Naval Aviation*, 444.

¹⁶ Y’Blood, *The Little Giants*, 415.

¹⁷ U.S.S. *Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy: “The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict”*. (Annapolis: U.S. Navy, 1945), 21.

transformation of naval vessels into museums open to the general public holds the potential for shaping visitors' understanding of the overall war. Moreover, when certain vessels, such as escort carriers, are omitted from the preservation movements of adapting warships into museums, modern visitors are not exposed to these vessels' story. When the vessels' story is excluded so is that of the servicemen who served on these ships. The question of platforms of memory, however, is much more complex than simply which ships are saved and which are not. The majority of World War II vessels that serve as modern day platforms of memory served after the war for decades. Thus, the narrative of the vessel's individual history is much more than just World War II. Exhibition space must also encompass the other operations conducted from the ship and the other generations of Americans who serve on board. For this study, this is an important concept in that five World War II era carriers are now platforms of memory. However, all of these are of the CV class. In this modern form of visiting a singular place, that of a ship, to experience first hand a World War II carrier, the other two classifications, CVLs and CVEs, are marginalized with no floating platform of memory.

This study will also demonstrate that participation of veteran's groups devoted to commemorating naval experience is not limited to just veterans. The example of the USSBIA demonstrates from the very beginning the importance of family members of veterans to the organization. Family members play a key role in perpetuating the memory of the experiences of the crewmembers. Family members' role, like that of these organizations themselves, evolved over time.

Starting in the 1960s, reunions were attended not only by veterans but also by their spouses. Moving into the 1980s and 1990s, children and grandchildren also start attending. In the mid 1990s, we see children of veterans taking over leadership roles of the group. Lastly, moving into the 2000s reunions are still taking place but the veterans who experienced the events being remembered represent the minority of those in attendance. This study will challenge the notion that veterans groups and reunions are just for those that served in the war. It will demonstrate the importance of the World War II experience not only for those veterans that choose to be active members of groups devoted to memory, but also the impact of this memory on their spouses and other family members. Their experience transcends to their loved ones, it becomes part of the makeup of their lives. Also, for children and grandchildren, it becomes their personal connection to the war. It serves as a guidepost to understanding the overall American experience in World War II.

Lastly, this study seeks to add to the literature that challenges the idea that history resides within the terrestrial boundaries of the nation – that oceans do not have histories. The focus of historical investigations centered on land miss the impact of the world’s oceans on human development. The scholar Rainer F. Buschmann cautions against an over-consideration of land. He writes, “practitioners often unwittingly conceived of oceans as vast empty liquid spaces that obstructed rather than furthered human development.”¹⁸ Other recent scholars

¹⁸ Rainer F. Buschmann, *Oceans in World History*. (Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2007), 2.

in this vein address this issue in a collection of essays. In *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* the authors “take issue with the cultural myth that the ocean is outside and beyond history, that the interminable, repetitive cycle of the sea obliterates memory.”¹⁹ My study presents the opportunity to challenge the notion that history ends at the beach, or the dock from which vessels sail into the conflict. While significant attention has been paid to the large surface engagements of the war, the many other missions, undertaken by the escort carriers for example, that occurred on the ocean have been ignored. Moreover, a study centering on both *USS Block Islands* presents a case study that involves two theaters of war, two different enemies, and two different classes of escort carriers with experiences on two different oceans. More relevant to this particular study is the activity of man on the surface of the ocean.

METHODOLOGY

This study combines methodologies utilized in military history, oral history, and community/local history. My analysis focuses on oral interviews conducted with veterans who served on the *USS Block Islands*, archival documents from military operations, and museum objects and collection records. The voices of individual crewmembers provide a history of the vessel, insight into how they commemorated their escort carriers, and how these acts of remembrance changed over time. These individual interviews will provide valuable information on the experiences of crewmembers and their individual and collective

¹⁹ Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mankenthum, eds., *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

approaches to commemorating their escort carriers, one of the most neglected classes of vessel in the historical narratives of the Second World War.

My interest in this subject started in 2004. As an employee of the Block Island Historical Society, I started conducting oral interviews with crewmembers of both *USS Block Islands*. These took place at the annual meetings of the USSBIA in 2005, 2006, and 2007. With regard to this study, however, these interviews only focused on their experiences onboard the vessels and their time in the Navy. These interviews rest in the domain of the BIHS, and thus will be footnoted as such in the dissertation.

I received IRB approval from Arizona State University for this research on October 19, 2009.²⁰ My sample of interviewees has expanded in attending the annual meetings of the USSBIA in 2010 and 2011. Also, residing in Arizona has allowed me to interview individual CVE veterans, both from CVE-21 and CVE-106 and others, multiple times. This allowed for the development of a relationship over a number of interviews that does not normally take place in just a single interview session. In addition, this exchange has opened the door to phone interviews and email correspondence with others, including other CVEs veterans, spouses of veterans, and children of escort carrier veterans here in Arizona and outside the state. As my pool of interviewees has expanded, so have the topics I

²⁰ Interviews conducted by the author before attending ASU reside in the domain of the Block Island Historical Society. These will be cited as in the archives of the BIHS, while interviews conducted after receiving IRB approval will be considered original research conducted by the author as a graduate student of ASU.

discussed with them, to include questions related to memory, changing meanings, and impact of the trauma of sinking on individual veterans.

Expanding my connections with CVE veterans has allowed me to talk to those outside of the experiences of CVE-21 and CVE-106. This expanded pool of interviewees, combined with redeveloping my questions of inquiry to expand beyond just wartime experiences, forms a core area of my methodology. This has allowed me to investigate how the meaning of veterans' service changed over time. Also, I was able to investigate how the lack of even one surviving example of their class of vessel impacted the methods of recalling and remembering their vessels. Furthermore, these oral histories allowed me to chart when CVE veterans started to join commemoration-based veterans groups. More specifically, it allowed me to ask about their activities in commemorating their small aircraft carriers that are overlooked in the naval commemoration of World War II.

Investigating the role of material objects in dealing with the trauma of the war as part of the practice of remembrance also forms a core foundation of my methodology. Veterans from the sinking of CVE-21 have used objects in assigning meaning to their experience. This study will analyze the choices veterans make in saving tangible pieces of not only their wartime experience, but more specifically of the sinking of their ship. It will also examine the steps taken by veterans in transforming objects from their wartime experience into memorials to the sinking and loss of CVE-21. Also, this study will consider the importance of the donation of such objects to the collections of a range of organizations by not only veterans, but also by their spouses and other family members.

Conversely, this study will also briefly consider how these institutions have reshaped their missions in preserving objects related to escort carriers. Lastly, this study will look at the construction of art by veterans in assigning meaning to their service and the experience of the loss of CVE-21.

A research grant from the ASU Graduate and Professional Student Association has aided in this study. This provided funding for me to attend the USSBIA's 2011 annual meeting in New Orleans, which not only allowed for conducting more interviews with veterans and other attendees, but to also permitted me to witness the reaction of veterans in visiting the National World War II Museum. Combined with my newly developed research questions on escort carriers and memory, this 2011 annual meeting allowed me to expand my oral histories related to memory with veterans and family members. In addition, the GPSA research funding also allowed for a trip to Washington D.C. to conduct research at the National Archives, the Navy Historical Center, and the military library collection at the Army/Navy Club.

Conclusions drawn from this study are not limited to just the individual crewmembers. Other members, most notably younger relatives of the crewmembers, have been attending these reunions for decades. These individuals testified to past reunion activities, and relayed the stories that individual veterans who have since passed told while attending past reunions. Newsletters of the group also provided valuable information in the form of partial memoirs of the veterans, and the meaning of their service represented in the actions of commemoration of the vessels starting in the early 1960s. The USSBIA launched

a website in 1999, and then re-dedicated and launched an updated site in 2009. Similarly, other CVE groups also developed newsletters, reunions, and websites that will be of use in the last chapter of this study.

RELATED LITERATURE

The works devoted to constructing a national narrative of World War II have a number of goals, including the creation of an over-arching story designed to analyze the role of a single nation engaged in the largest war in human history. Part of my study explores the reasons motivating the creation of a national narrative with regard to escort carriers. I will address its function, specifically what it valorizes and what it excludes. I am interested in the production of the national narrative and its relationship to popular and official forms of commemoration.

These national narratives devoted to understanding the role of the U.S. started almost immediately after the conclusion of the war.²¹ Published in 1945, Henry Steele Commager's *The Story of World War II* ushered in an early version of the national narrative as a way to understand the recently ended conflict. His works emphasizes that while the conflict was costly in American lives, the victory over the forces of barbarism called for this worthy sacrifice. While his unifying approach can produce patriotism and the sense of understanding sacrifice as a cost

²¹ See Robert James Maddox, *The United States and World War II* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992); Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Vol. 14: Victory in the Pacific* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1960); David Syrett, *The Defeat of the German U-Boats: The Battle of the Atlantic* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

of the war, it comes with the price of losing the unique stories of individuals who waged the conflict. While he uses individual stories to demonstrate the human costs, many of these stories refer only to exceptional events in the conflict in which only a relatively small minority of servicemen took part. Many servicemen who served in risky, but relatively unknown operations, like the sailors and marines of the escort carriers, are only marginally noted in the nation's grand narrative devoted to understanding the events of World War II. My dissertation will investigate the reasons for excluding the escort carriers' role in the conflict. I will explore the effects of this exclusion on individual veteran's views of their service. My study adds nuance to commemorations of the war by exploring the bonds that were formed by traumatic shared experiences of servicemen that were overshadowed by more memorable events, like D-Day.

The seminal multivolume work devoted to the overall operational perspective of the U.S. Navy during the war was written by a Harvard educated Navy officer. Samuel Eliot Morison's fifteen-volume *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* took nearly twenty years to complete. With regard to the U-Boat operations in which CVE-21 took part, Morison devoted two full volumes to the Allied effort in combating the German U-boat menace in the Battle of the Atlantic. In the preface to the tenth volume he describes this campaign, "subject to constant ups and downs, and fought on three levels-on the surface of the ocean, under the sea, and in the air, a war fought by scientists, inventors, naval construction and ordinance experts, as well as by sailors and

aviators.”²² In taking the largest perspective on the naval war, Morison’s works place the role of both the *USS Block Islands* and other escort carriers into the context of the larger Allied goals in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. However, with such a large scope of the work, only the most important naval battles are discussed in detail, thus marginalizing many of the CVE accomplishments.

One official Navy publication celebrates the role of the CVEs in World War II. Made up of official images taken by the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, the large book is a photo history of CVEs in action. Images demonstrate the high seas these ships faced, the dangers of landing on the small flight decks, and the perils posed by kamikaze attacks. Published by the Department of the Navy in 1945, it was titled *The Escort Carriers in Action: The Story-in Pictures-of the Escort Carrier Force U.S. Pacific Fleet-1945*. While the work does demonstrate the accomplishments of the collective actions of the escort carriers, the efforts in the Atlantic theater are completely marginalized, as is seen in the dedication. It states, “To Our Shipmates who gave their lives for Victory in the Pacific.”²³ The multiple functions of CVEs in the Atlantic are not included in this work, which again serves as an additional example of naval actions of the Pacific theater overshadowing the Battle of the Atlantic.

²² Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume X: The Atlantic Battle Won May 1943-May 1945*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), ix.

²³ Price Gilbert, ed., *The Escort Carriers in Action: The Story-in Pictures-of the Escort Carrier Force U.S. Pacific Fleet-1945*, (Atlanta: Ruralist Press, Inc., 1945), 5.

Of the literature devoted specifically to escort carriers, nearly all the works focus on the specific missions of the vessel, or are centrally focused on weapons and tactics.²⁴ Only two existing monographs are dedicated to the human element in the story of a single CVE. The first was published in 1979 by Edwin Hoyt, titled *The Men of the Gambier Bay*, which is an account of the men on the vessel in a surface battle in which the escort carriers did receive attention. The work covers the escort carrier *USS Gambier Bay*, CVE-73, one of six escort carriers caught in a surprise encounter with the Japanese Imperial fleet on October 25, 1944 in the Battle of Samar. Hoyt highlights the actions taken by the escort carriers in delaying the advancing enemy. However, the overmatched fleet of escort carriers did not escape unscathed, with two of the escort carriers, including the *Gambier Bay*, falling victim to enemy attack. The work describes the experience of surviving the sinking of an escort carrier. Hoyt wrote work that attempted to highlight the larger role of the escort carriers in aiding victory. In closing, he notes the numerous roles the CVEs filled during the conflict and the vessels that were sunk during the conflict.²⁵ He correctly lists the five CVEs lost

²⁴ See David Polk, *Escort Carriers on the U.S. Navy: The CVE's Illustrated History* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing, 1993); Walter Edward Skeldon, *Escort Carriers in the Pacific* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 2002).

²⁵ Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Men of the Gambier Bay*. (Middlebury, VT: Paul S. Eriksson, 1979), 242.

in the Pacific,²⁶ yet overlooks the little known carrier lost in the Atlantic, the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21.

In 2004, James Noles published *Twenty-Three Minutes to Eternity*, which covers the story of the *USS Liscome Bay*, CVE-56. Noles presents the untold story of the CVEs, including the sinking of the vessel due to the horrific explosion of a single Japanese torpedo, which ignited the bomb magazine of the ship. This attack represented the single greatest loss of life onboard a U.S. aircraft carrier up to that point in the war. By weaving together oral histories, Noles brings to life the horror these sailors experienced when nearly half of their vessel was atomized and sunk in twenty minutes. This work highlights the pain and anxiety of the sinking of the *Liscome Bay*, which in a broad narrative devoted to the entire Pacific campaign, would typically be relegated to a single paragraph or even just a footnote.²⁷ While Noles's work is unique in granting individual voice to crewmembers of an escort carrier, the work marginally addresses the veteran's organization later founded by the former sailors of the *Liscome Bay*. Noles expertly utilizes the personal recollections of servicemen in a story that includes military tactics and weapons.²⁸

²⁶ These include: *USS Liscome Bay*, CVE-56, *USS Bismarck Sea*, CVE-95, *USS St. Lo*, CVE-63, *USS Ommaney Bay*, CVE-79 and *USS Gambier Bay*, CVE-73.

²⁷ William Y'Blood, *The Little Giants: U.S. Escort Carriers Against Japan* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987).

²⁸ Other examples of this include: Doug Stanton, *In Harm's Way: The Sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis and the Extraordinary Story of Its Survivors* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001); Lisle A. Rose, *The Ship That Held the Line: The U.S.S. Hornet and the First Year of the Pacific War* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1995).

Both Hoyt and Noles produce telling narratives addressing the battle-lives of two escort carriers that were destroyed during the war. These also include the personal experience of the individual crewmembers surviving the ordeals of abandoning a vessel and surviving the sinking of their temporary ocean homes. When the ship sinks and the men are rescued, the story ends. What their service meant to the veterans or their acts of remembrance are only mentioned in passing. My study will investigate the experiences of a single crew that served on two, not just one, escort carriers that includes a sinking. Moreover, this study will expand on Hoyt's and Noles's studies and include the individual and group reactions surrounding commemorating escort carriers.

Scholarship more concerned with the larger role of the CVEs in World War II is represented by William T. Y'Blood, who served in the Air Force after World War II and later served as a historian for the Air Force History office at the Pentagon. Y'Blood produced two works, the scope of each focused on the activities of CVEs in each theater of war. *Hunter-Killer* examines the CVEs taking on the German U-boats of the Atlantic and also other operations including Lend-Lease and convoy protection. Y'Blood covers the CVE operations in the Pacific in *The Little Giants: U.S. Escort Carriers against Japan*. Both works advance the thesis that these vessels provided the Allied forces with dependable and flexible platforms in taking on the Axis powers. As Y'Blood writes, "Born of necessity for aircraft transport, convoy escort, and antisubmarine operations, the

escort carriers proved to have amazing versatility and stoutness.”²⁹ With the wide scope of the CVE’s contribution in the Atlantic, the work covers the roles of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, including transporting war items under Lend-Lease, protection of convoys, and also hunting U-boats. This work devotes several pages to the sinking of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, on May 29, 1944 as the result of three German torpedoes fired from the German U-boat U-549. Filled with technical jargon and utilizing government and U.S. Navy documents and other source material, both works demonstrate the role of the CVEs in the larger war with Germany and Japan.³⁰ Due to the goals of Y’Blood’s books, individual experiences of veterans are marginalized and commemoration is completely ignored.

One work of note does include personal reflection of the events of May 29, 1944. Written by Helen Grenga and published in 2001, the work is a compilation of oral interviews from crewmembers of the *USS Barr*, DE-576. This work is in part family history, as her brother James Grenga was a crewmember of the *Barr*. This ship was also torpedoed during the attack on CVE-21, however was not lost to sinking. Oral histories bring to life the events surrounded the loss of CVE-21 and the death of crewmembers of DE-576. In this vein, this study will expand on this method of the reflections of the events from the point of view of the crewmembers of CVE-21.

²⁹ William T. Y’Blood, *Hunter-Killer: U.S. Escort Carriers in the Battle of the Atlantic*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 11.

³⁰ William T. Y’Blood, *The Little Giants: U.S. Escort Carriers Against Japan*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1987).

Two works, one published by the U.S. Navy and the other by a former officer of the *Block Island*, address the specific roles of both vessels in the war effort. In 1946, *The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy during Three Years of Conflict* was published by the U.S. Navy for crewmembers as a reminder of their vessels' operations and accomplishments. Written just one year after the close of the war, the subject of memory of the ships is seen in the first sentence of the work. The Foreword begins, "Now Hear This: This volume is prepared as a *fitting memorial to men who have served their country* in a great and terrible war."³¹ This official "memorial" from the Navy included a collection of images of events onboard the vessels including the landing and taking off of aircraft from the flight deck, bombs inflicting damage on Okinawa dropped from *Block Island* fighters, and images of all the divisions of men from the vessels. The thesis and theme of the work is summed up with the sentence, "The book is a story of a team and not a man."³²

In 1965, twenty years after the close of the war, a former naval officer who served on the *USS Block Islands*, Roy L. Swift published *The Fighting Block Island!* Filled with technical information on the daily operations of tracking submarines in the Atlantic and providing air support to marines on the ground in the Pacific, Swift details the specific operations conducted in taking on the Axis

³¹ U.S.S. *Block Island CVE-21 and CVE-106, United States Navy: "The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict"*. (San Diego: USS Block Island Association, 2004), 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

powers with detailed information on places, tactics, and weapons employed. Swift submitted the work, committed to a detailed recording of the operations of the vessels, to the Naval History Division at the Washington Navy Yard in Washington D.C.³³

Whereas both the official publication and Swift's history are valuable in understanding what took place on both vessels, a number of important aspects are completely lacking. First, neither deal with the meaning of the experience, either for the U.S. Navy or the individual veterans. Secondly, the aim of neither work is to present the experience of the average crewmember. These are both overarching works that avoid any contested narratives of the experience. This is achieved by avoiding any personal accounts. While both works serve a useful purpose, the first as a photo-history of the operations on board and the second in a study on the specific facts related to the missions completed, both ignore the use of personal accounts in conferring meaning and understanding on the sailor's individual experience. My study will incorporate the personal experiences of these veterans for a specific reason, to understand how the steps taken to remember and commemorate their ships and wartime service both reflected and shaped the meaning they gave to their experiences.

One published work includes personal accounts of one of the *USS Block Islands*. In 1985, Colonel Bruce Porter published a memoir, *Ace! A Marine Night-Fighter Pilot in World War II*, the introduction of which is written by the famous

³³ Roy L. Swift, *The Fighting Block Island!*, (San Diego: USS Block Island Association, 2004).

marine pilot Colonel Gregory “Pappy” Boyington. Porter’s work covers his exploits in the war including shooting down five enemy aircraft, reflections on the war in general, and also training on the *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, thus becoming a member of the first carrier-based night fighter contingent of the Marine Corps. Written forty years after the conflict, Porter’s work represents the only major published memoir that covers a portion of the history of one of the Block Island escort carriers. His descriptions include details of the intensive training on land of simulated carrier landings, the anxiety of carrier landings even for veterans of the Pacific air war, and also the personal pain of losing men in a training mission off the coast of California while on board the *Block Island*.³⁴

The most recent work to include the points of view of individual sailors in recalling major naval campaigns involving escort carriers (CVEs) is seen in James D. Hornfischer’s *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*. His work expands on Hoyt’s work on the *Gambier Bay* to include a personal account not only of one ship, but also of the entire task force in which they took part. Published in 2004, this narrative includes multiple points of view from a number of ships in Task-Unit 77.4.3, which is known by most sailors who fought in the battle as Taffy 3. This force included six CVEs, two of which were lost in what became the largest naval engagement of World War II at Leyte Gulf. The damage inflicted included the loss of the *USS St. Lo*, CVE -63, which was the first U.S. naval vessel sunk as the result of a suicide kamikaze attack. Hornfischer includes not just the personal

³⁴ Colonel R. Bruce Porter and Eric Hammel, *Ace! A Marine Night-Fighter Pilot in World War II* (San Francisco: Pacifica Press, 1985), 207-241.

points of view of individual sailors but also the acts of remembering the role of Taffy 3 in the Battle of Leyte Gulf. These include associations of CVEs and also the stone monument to Taffy 3 listing all those killed in the battle at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego.³⁵

While Porter's and Hornfischer's works, one in the form of a memoir and the other as a history of a battle, incorporate the personal experiences of CVEs servicemen, neither expands and explores the meaning of these experiences in relation to commemoration. My study will consider the personal experiences of the veterans of the two escort carriers *USS Block Islands*. Beyond this, the study will examine how these personal recollections have shaped commemorative and memorial actions and activities in the decades following the war.

Commemorations of warfare are as old as war itself. Commemoration can occur on the level of the individual, the community, or the nation-state. However, every act of commemoration excludes certain events in order to create a coherent synthesis of the war in question.³⁶ The dominant forms of interpreting World War II have leaned toward accounts of a patriotic and celebratory nature. One of the reasons for this positive view is the need to present a unifying position for a nation that lost over four hundred thousand young men during the conflict. However, this stressing of portions of the war that produce romantic and patriotic

³⁵ James D. Hornfischer, *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors* (New York: Bantam Books, 2004), 414-427.

³⁶ See Philip Beidler, *The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Michael Bess, *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 2006).

forms of remembering has been challenged by those that experienced the events first hand. Scholars, such as Paul Fussell, have confronted these patriotic narratives of warfare. American veterans writing of the disillusionment of their experiences in the war is exemplified in the writings Fussell, whose works about the conflict include *The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945*, *Doing Battle - The Making of a Skeptic*, and *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays*. During the war Fussell served as an infantry officer where he was injured and earned a Purple Heart. His writings criticize the de-humanizing effects of military service and the false nostalgia of American society toward the conflict. As he writes in the introduction to *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, "For the past fifty years the Allied war has been sanitized and romanticized almost beyond recognition by the sentimental, and loony patriotic, the ignorant, and the bloodthirsty. I have tried to balance the scales."³⁷ In *Wartime*, Fussell addresses a range of themes not included in most sources that perpetuate false and romanticized depictions of the war such as military cover-ups of deaths from friendly fire, the sexual exploits of servicemen overseas, and the effects of censorship by the U.S. government on the civilian perspective on the war. Fussell addresses the dehumanizing aspects of the military in the chapter "Chickenshit, An Anatomy", in which he describes the reaction of the military system in the U.S. to anyone not viewed as "normal". Jewish servicemen represented perfect targets on which officers could inflict

³⁷ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), iv.

“chickenshit³⁸”, which as Fussell points out, was experienced by Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller who both later wrote about their experiences in the military. These individual service members, who both happened to be Jewish, experienced the dehumanizing experiences of being repeatedly selected for tasks aimed at challenging their dignity.³⁹

Romanticized and incomplete accounts of World War II not only obscure the realities of military service, but also made the readjustment period back into American society more difficult for veterans. Kenneth Rose criticizes this commemorative narrative of World War II narratives, arguing that it promotes a “false nostalgia,” in *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*. Rose’s work reorients the war’s impact on American society by discussing the massive mental illnesses of servicemen that resulted from combat, the negative views held by servicemen toward American civilians, and the high divorce rates of veterans after the war. Of particular concern to Rose are acts of commemoration mixed with patriotism that provided a justification of the war after the conflict. His critical analysis challenges the notion of the “Greatest Generation”. He argues, “this generation can make one last great contribution to this country by rejecting the false nostalgia, that now envelops World War II, and to do as Sherman did: to tell Americans the truth about what

³⁸ “Chickenshit” was defined an activities of officers or the military in demeaning others. These could include enlisted personal, minorities, and anyone other deemed as an outsider.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

war is.”⁴⁰ Rose introduces the notion of looking beyond the celebratory examples of commemoration while considering what is omitted from a national narrative that stresses unification. He writes about gaps in the national narrative that center on race, class, and gender. As this dissertation demonstrates, other neglected aspects of the war include the experiences of men serving on vessels or participating in battles that do not fit into the national narrative of the war, such as escort carriers. Including the experiences of these men complicates our understanding of the war while also demonstrating the difficulties that exclusion from the major narratives of the conflict posed to veterans seeking to make sense of and remember their wartime experiences.

Thomas Childers in *Soldier From the War Returning* examines the lives of three American servicemen in order to investigate the experiences of World War II veterans facing what is termed today post-traumatic stress disorder, including their abuse of alcohol and other drugs, and the personal problems caused by readjusting to family and society. Childers calls these readjustment issues, which he correctly notes are ignored in recent popular books and movies, “the last battle of the war.”⁴¹ Not fought on the battlefields of the European or the Pacific theaters, Childers describes a battle fought “on the main streets of American towns and in big-city neighborhoods, sometimes in highly public spaces-

⁴⁰ Kenneth Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 254.

⁴¹ Thomas Childers, *Soldier From the War Returning: The Greatest Generation’s Troubled Homecoming from World War II*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 3.

hospitals and courtrooms-but more often in parlors, kitchens, and bedrooms, buried in the deepest personal privacy.”⁴² Childers moves on to a critical analysis of popular works praising these veterans and pointing out causes for what he views as this twisted view of the past centering on the nationwide effort to collect oral histories of this generation of veterans. He proposes the idea that the wrong questions are asked, in that most of the questions focus on the war experiences, and not on the issues of the war’s lasting effects. He also comments on the difficulty of asking questions related to drinking habits after the war, sexual activities during the conflict, and seeking treatment for personal problems caused by the conflict. Childers’s narrative does not seek to cast doubts on the bravery and accomplishments of the veterans, but to demonstrate the true cost of war. As he writes, “Long consigned to a dim corner of our public memory, many of the same deeply disturbing social and personal problems arising in the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were glaringly present in the aftermath of the Second World War.”⁴³ In a similar vein, this study seeks to explore meaning and memory of a group of sailors who suffered a sinking, and not only lost their ship, but also their former selves in this life-transforming collective experience.

In 2001, Mark D. Van Ells published *To Hear Only Thunder Again*, which heightened awareness of the range of problems that faced the sixteen million new American veterans at the close of the war. Van Ells opens his book with an

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 13.

introductory chapter on the difficulties facing veterans throughout history. Pre-modern European examples include negative views of veterans who caused social turmoil and revolt, spread disease as a result of living in large camps, and drank heavily. He also points out the civilian fear of large numbers of individuals with knowledge of waging war living among them. The Roman Empire addressed this concern by placing their veterans on the periphery of the Empire. As to the American view of veterans, Van Ells points to the negative views held towards revolting veterans including those who participated in Shay's Rebellion in 1787, the disgruntled Confederates who founded the Ku Klux Klan, and the World War I veterans comprising the Bonus Army that marched on Washington D.C. in 1932.⁴⁴ Van Ells research grants scholars a window in exploring the activities of veterans after the war that politically confronting the nation they formally represented on the battlefield. In this vein, this dissertation will examine some veterans who rejected the commemorative aspects of their service on escort carriers and choose not to interact in groups of service members they served with in the past.

Veterans of World War II shared similar experiences in wartime, and thus mobilized after in confronting post-war challenges. Robert Saxe in *Settling Down: World War II Veterans' Challenge to the Postwar Consensus* addresses the tactics used by returning veterans in confronting the social and economic problems they faced in readjusting to American society. One tactic utilized by returning veterans

⁴⁴ Mark D. Van Ells, *To Hear Only Thunder Again: America's World War II Veterans Come Home*, (New York: Lexington Books, 2001), 1-17.

was joining veteran's organizations. These included the well established Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion, which not only provided local posts for social aspects but also a national lobbying network for supporting veterans' issues. However, a common view held by young World War II veterans was that the leadership of these established organizations was dominated by World War I veterans who were not in touch with the issues facing the new veterans. As a result, World War II veterans joined numerous other groups including the Disabled Veterans of America, Jewish War Veterans of America, and Catholic Veterans of America. Another reaction to the established veterans' organizations was the formation of a completely new national organization aimed specifically at the needs of World War II veterans. Saxe argues that the American Veterans Committee (AVC) was formed due to the perception that younger veterans had no place in the American Legion. Saxe refers to the generational rift in his description of the AVC, "This was not going to be a group in the mold of the "Lost Generation" of World War I, but instead it was going to be a motivated group of energetic progressives ready to tackle the problems they found in postwar America."⁴⁵ Membership in the organization included Franklin Delano Roosevelt Jr., the war hero Audie Murphy, and Ronald Reagan. One event organized by the group to draw awareness to the housing problems of returning veterans included a sleep-in protest by veterans and their families in a park in Los Angeles. President Harry S. Truman and General Dwight Eisenhower sent in

⁴⁵ Robert Saxe, *Settling Down: World War II Veterans' Challenge to the Postwar Consensus*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 125.

words of support for the AVC's activities. While initially strong after the war, internal disagreements among the membership and later allegations of Communist leanings caused the group to dissolve. Saxe's analysis of the AVC stresses the unifying force of World War II veterans trying to form their own political voice in opposition to that of the larger and more conservative American Legion.

Any consideration of World War II memorial organizations must include an examination of the largest veterans' organization in the world, the American Legion. In 1990, an official history of the group was published by Thomas Rumer and titled *The American Legion: An Official History 1919-1989*. Rumer writes that the Legion's "emblem of which the organization is demonstrably proud and firmly protective has adorned countless patriotic events from the National Convention parades to small-town 4th of July color guards; has identified thousands of local posts, the first community centers for numerous towns in the 1920s."⁴⁶ Rumer stresses the grassroots basis of the early organization and, even though the organization is branded by many as conservative, the author lists specific protests led by the Legion aimed at liberalizing and expanding benefits for veterans. Rumer notes the position of veterans returning from World War I and facing a nation lacking understanding of their sacrifice and needs. As he writes of these doughboys' position, "During demobilization, the special needs of many for rehabilitation went far beyond that of the inflation-besieged sixty-dollar chit they received for a new suit of clothes, which at that point was the nation's

⁴⁶ Thomas Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History 1919-1989*, (New York: M. Evans & Company, 1990), 1.

thanks.”⁴⁷ The official history demonstrates the role of the Legion in aiding in the drafting, and later lobbying for, the G.I. Bill which became law in 1944.

However, the role of the organization as a more conservative force in the American political spectrum is apparent starting in the late 1940s and continuing into the remainder of the twentieth century.

Organizations established to craft memory are also organized by veterans on a conflict-specific basis instead of the open membership of all veterans in organizations like the American Legion. One example is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), which in the late 1970s initiated the process of establishing the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. Rick Atkinson in *The Long Gray Line* analyzes the efforts of the VVMF in drafting, lobbying, and successfully raising funds for the construction of the monument on a two-acre site on the Mall. Atkinson’s narrative traces the West Point class of 1966 from their time at the military academy, to the jungles of Vietnam, to readjusting and struggling to reenter American society following the war. Summing up their experiences Atkinson writes, “The men of ’66 had fought their war, bravely, and lost. More than a hundred of the 579 men in the class had been wounded. Several remained shattered beyond repair. The survivors had come home to heckles and, in a few instances, spittle.”⁴⁸ However, whatever the frustrations fostered by their experiences in Vietnam and their treatment after the conflict, a core group of the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ Rick Atkinson, *The Long Gray Line*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 3-4.

West Point 1966 class applied their support toward the VVMF efforts. The veterans, Atkinson argues, proved instrumental in crafting a national memory of the Vietnam conflict for the servicemen of the war represented in the form of the Wall, which in the end not only placed meaning on the war for veterans but created a space for the mourning and healing of those civilians and veterans who lost individuals as a result of the war.⁴⁹

As the example of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund demonstrates, in the construction of national meaning around a specific event selections and omissions must take place. However, in national memories addressing past wars, other specific groups also shape the national memory. Forces involved include the individual veterans, veteran groups, and the loved ones left behind from those that died in the conflict. David Blight in *Race and Reunion* takes the position that multiple memories of the same events can emerge from American wars. In this work Blight examines three distinct memories of the Civil War in American society and the social issues that created these differing versions. These three differing memories center on the reconciliationist vision in both the North and South aimed at healing the nation, the Lost Cause version focused on fostering a memory for white southerners, and the emancipationist version asserting the importance of the ending of slavery as the meaning of the war. Over time these three memories were transformed. However, their central theme of representing a

⁴⁹ Ibid., 449-480.

certain portion of the population's reference point for understanding the Civil War persisted.⁵⁰

Using the paradigm of three differing memories transforming over time, Blight highlights the complexities of memory formation. Of particular interest is Blight's analysis of the function of the reunions of Civil War veterans, especially with respect to the feelings of Union and Confederate veterans toward each other. Using the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg, Blight highlights the bonding of the veterans that resulted from this 1913 anniversary event eschewing any discussion of slavery. The highlight of the anniversary peaked with a reenactment of Pickett's Charge, complete with the shaking of hands on the battlefield of members of the Philadelphia Brigade Association and the Pickett's Division Association.⁵¹ This event represented the meeting of two veterans' groups with opposing views toward the conflict for which Pickett's Charge embodied the defining moment for each of the associations.

The author Michael Kammen explores the notion of memory over two hundred years in American society in his work *Mystic Chords of Memory*. He writes that exploring the concept of national memory, "is ideologically important because it shapes a nation's ethos and sense of identity. That explains, at least in

⁵⁰ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2-3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 389.

part, why memory is always selective and is so often contested.”⁵² Writing of the memory of groups and individuals, such as that of specific units of World War II, Kammen summarizes, “We arouse and arrange our memories as to suit our psychic needs.”⁵³ To demonstrate these observations, Kammen explores a range of examples, including the changing notion of the railroad train in American perspective and memory.

Kammen argues that the train underwent three stages in the nation’s memory. He first centered on the train bursting on the scene in the middle of the nineteenth century and representing the future of a nation and the settling of the frontier. This notion shifted with the rise of the Grange movement, and later the Progressives, with the train representing the robber barons and monopolies. Finally, after World War II and the advancement of the U.S. Interstate System, the train emerged as a symbol of nostalgia for long lost days.⁵⁴ Kammen also applies this progression of transforming views toward the train to veterans’ groups and reunions whose activities, he argues, expanded as a result of changes to late nineteenth century America. This increase was due first to the vast numbers of veterans resulting from the nation’s largest conflict. Secondly, Kammen suggests that economic growth fueled the expansion of cities allowing for veterans’ organizations to increase membership as a result of the concentration

⁵² Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, (New York: Knoff, 1991), 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

of populations. Lastly, Kammen points to the nation's rapidly expanding network of rails that allowed for easy transportation including for those who returned to Gettysburg in July of 1913 for the fiftieth anniversary of the battle.⁵⁵ My dissertation, while looking at a site on the ocean and in World War II, will also consider a singular group of veterans reconsidering and commemorating their experience in the decades after the war.

While the scope of military monuments dedicated to actions of armies and navies typically centers on the commemoration of bravery, other monuments serve as memorials to sites of death. These monuments also deserve attention in any study seeking to understand acts of remembrance. Edward T. Linenthal in *The Unfinished Bombing* explores remembering acts of mass murder by using the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 as a case study. In the introduction he notes the condensation of the time required to move from the event to the memorial as seen in the closing years of the twentieth century. For example, planning for the Oklahoma City monument commenced within two months after the attack and the construction was completed within five years. Linenthal suggests the shrinkage of time from act to monument is the result of the broadcasting of the bombing aftermath to the nation and the world within minutes of the explosion, which spread the effects of the event beyond Oklahoma. His introduction of the topic also includes examples of sites of horror that were not memorialized but rather

⁵⁵ Ibid., 106.

obliterated including the destruction of the homes of the mass murders John Wayne Gacy and Jeffery Dahmer.⁵⁶

The challenge of the memorialization of the sites involved in the Holocaust presents a range of examples that not only include where the mass killings took place, but also areas today where once stood vibrant Jewish communities once stood. The historian Martin Gilbert addresses these acts of memorialization in *Holocaust Journey: Traveling in Search of the Past*. The book covers the two-week journey of Gilbert and his class who had grappled with placing meaning and gaining understanding into the Holocaust in a seminar class at University College in London. At the close of a semester of reading historical works and diary entries on the event, a visit to the places where these former Jewish communities once existed and also the sites of the near destruction of a race of people were required in any true attempt to comprehend the amount of human suffering that surrounded these events. In concluding the work Gilbert notes Elis Wiesel's comment that only those who experienced the camps have the ability to write about the Holocaust. Gilbert concludes, "How I can understand what he meant. And a sad thought crossed my mind later in Belzec, in Sobibor, Majdanek, Treblinka and Chelmno—that these death camps, the ultimate in human suffering, are new graveyards, museums, or monumental parklands."⁵⁷

The complexities abound with commemorating acts of horror and giving meaning

⁵⁶ Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-12.

⁵⁷ Martin Gilbert, *Holocaust Journey: Traveling in Search of the Past* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 405.

to them at the sites of occurrences. However, events that hold no clear meaning in a society's national consciousness present an additional battlefield, one devoted not to killing but to commemorating.

The controversy of framing the meaning of the national memory of World War II fifty years after the conflict demonstrated the divisions in the American perspective. The editors Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt explore this notion in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and other Battles for the American Past*. Linenthal, in his essay on the Enola Gay exhibit, describes the controversy "that pitted museum curators and historians against military officials and veterans' lobbying groups, as well as much of the media and Congress."⁵⁸ Linenthal advocates the position that the disagreements in the American psyche on the use of atomic weapons did not suddenly appear by so call revisionist historians in the early 1990s, but appeared immediately after the war with cited criticism by leaders of the Catholic and Protestant faiths in the U.S. Linenthal also proposes that America's inability to come to terms with the first and only use of atomic weapons is witnessed by no clear idea surfacing on what to do with the Enola Gay, which in the late 1970s rested piecemeal and buried in a Smithsonian collections area in Maryland. The discussion on the fiftieth anniversary exhibition, Linenthal argues, forced revisiting the unfinished business of placing the atomic attacks in context with American identity. The proposed exhibition

⁵⁸ Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 2.

presented the battleground for historians and curators verses right-wing politicians and the Air Force Association over which perspectives to include in the two atomic attacks committed by the Enola Gay. As Linenthal describes this scene, “it soon became apparent that they still held a rawness startling for events so long past.”⁵⁹

Linenthal’s and Engelhardt’s strands of analysis for exploring controversy in memory and World War II are also seen in other nations involved in the conflict. In 1991, Henry Rousso in *The Vichy Syndrome* deconstructed the multifaceted view of the French memory of the conflict. Popular memory of the conflict immediately after the war focused on a complete rejection of the Vichy government collaborating with the Germans and the advancement to near sainthood of the Resistance. Further complicating French national memory were the casualties from World War II in sharp contrast with World War I when a generation of European men died on the battlefield. While wounded World War I veterans were seen on a daily basis, during World War II around two-thirds of the individuals killed simply vanished. With the majority of the vanished individuals either killed in France or shipped off to German concentration camps, a serious problem in the memorialization of the individuals occurred. In contrast to stone monuments erected for World War I deaths on battlefields and town centers, Rousso noted of the civilians who simply disappeared that, “their memory lives

⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.

on in every corner of France-but nowhere is it inscribed in stone.”⁶⁰ The suppression of the historical narrative that incorporated the Vichy government, which included the rounding up of Jews for the camps of Germany and Poland, caused generational conflicts with the coming of age of the first French post-war generation in the late 1960s. An event that exemplified this gulf of memory between the generations was the death of Charles de Gaulle in 1969. As Rousso writes of the postwar generation’s view of their parents, “The students of May did not share their memories or their historical guideposts.”⁶¹ Rousso’s probing of the national memory of World War II divided initially along the line of positions taken during the war, and then later along generational lines, explores the complex realm of the intersections between national heritage, changing memory, and generational shifts among a population.

The “historical guideposts” that Rousso describes are also interpreted differently on the American scene as revealed by Edward Linenthal in *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields*. Published in 1991, Linenthal facilitates the changing memory of American society in considering five battlefields. He describes the power of battlefields, which include the Alamo and Gettysburg, as “engendered various forms of veneration: patriotic rhetoric,

⁶⁰ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991), 22.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

monument building, physical preservation, and battle reenactment.”⁶² The prime example from the book is the section addressing the one hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Little Big Horn. The western historian Robert Utley, in the forward of the book, describes these sacred places as, “Promoters of competing ideologies....the orthodox and the heretical-enlist these sacred places in their diverse crusades.”⁶³ Linenthal’s examination does include one specific battlefield that shares many of the themes seen in remembering and commemorating U.S. Navy battlefields.

While scholars such as Rousso and Linenthal demonstrate how difficult it is for a society to agree upon a single meaning of a conflict and thus create a single means of remembrance, even within a unified institution like the National Park Service or the U.S. Navy decisions have to be made about what and how to commemorate wartime experiences. The USS Arizona Memorial Park represents not only the final resting place of a battleship successfully destroyed by the Japanese forces on December 7th 1941, but also the resting place for almost one thousand crewmembers entombed onboard. Linenthal explores the actions taken on the site during the war, including the removal of the super-structure that stood above the waterline, and after the war with the dedication of the monument in 1962. However, Linenthal suggests that the meaning of the site has expanded in American consciousness to move beyond the story of one vessel and now

⁶² Edward Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, ix.

encompasses the overall attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Pacific Theater. It has also come to represent the dawning of the nuclear age with the U.S. involvement in World War II, starting in Pearl Harbor and ending with the use of atomic weapons on Japan. Two factors play a role in this one site representing so much in the American imagination. First, the remoteness of the islands of the Pacific savagely fought over by the U.S. and Japanese forces lends itself to commemorating the events on a single site. Secondly, the problem of commemorating and marking naval battles in the open waters of the Pacific lends itself to the remembrance taking place in a physical locale where a destroyed U.S. ship from the war can be visited. This memorial, like other floating platforms of memory explored in this dissertation, has expanded its meaning over time to encompass aspects of the war that would otherwise be difficult to commemorate.

Lastly, a narrative covering the commemoration of this topic must include the selections and omissions of the U.S. Navy in commemorating itself. This includes who and what are memorialized with monuments and buildings where the future leaders of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps are made, the U.S. Naval Academy. Published in 2009, Nancy Prothro Arbuthnot's *Guiding Lights*, serves as a detailed guide to the acts of commemoration that rest on the Academy grounds. These include those to individuals, such as Halsey Field House and Dewey Field; to specific vessels, such as *USS Maine* Foremast and the Submarine Memorial; and to specific battles, including the Midway Memorial and the Tripoli Monument. Arbuthnot suggests that these monuments, seen on a daily basis by the midshipmen of the Academy, demonstrate to the students the proud tradition

they are becoming part of during their studies.⁶⁴ This type of self-commemoration by the U.S. Navy will be investigated in this study. Important means of commemoration include the selection of names of classes of war vessels, procedures of decommissioning vessels, preservation of ships bells after decommissioning, and the role of the U.S. Navy in the preservation of specific war vessels to serve as various platforms of commemoration.⁶⁵

The latitude of places to commemorate, and ways to remember, historical events are as diverse as those who seek to produce the means of not forgetting. While the complexity of creating monuments for two specific vessels from World War II is complex, the most striking challenge is that the two vessels no longer exist and the feats the crew carried out on the open sea span both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun in *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* created a collection of essays that explore the complexities of writing about, and placing in historical context, events that occur on and in the ocean. The essays challenge what the authors see as “the cultural myth that the ocean is outside and beyond history, that the interminable, repetitive cycle of the sea obliterates memory and temporality, and that a fully historicized land somehow stands diametrically opposed to an atemporal, “ahistorical” sea.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Nancy Prothro Arbuthnot, *Guiding Lights: United States Naval Academy Monuments and Memorials*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), xiv-xvi.

⁶⁵ Thirteen museums retain some affiliation with the U.S. Navy, which includes U.S Navy vessels. These include the *USS Nautilus*, the first atomic submarine, in Groton, Connecticut, and the *USS Constitution* located in Boston.

⁶⁶ Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mankenthun , eds., *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

The essays seek to challenge past understandings of the ocean by pointing out a number of human structures imposed on the history of the oceans. One land-based example points to the Cold War paradigm that divided the globe between the first, second, and third worlds. Similarly the authors suggest, “that there is no single ‘Atlantic’ culture or ‘Pacific’ experience but that both oceans are subdivided into discrete but related and inherently polymorphous sociopolitical contact zones.”⁶⁷

DESCRIPTION OF CHAPTERS

Chapter two focuses on national narratives of the U.S. Navy in World War II produced in the first forty years after the war.⁶⁸ In both official government forms and in popular culture, I explore how the role of the U.S. Navy in World War II was commemorated and remembered. The official forms I will examine include the publications of histories of sea-battles/vessels and the commemorations of the war in monuments and anniversaries. Popular culture includes the representation of naval warfare in books, plays, and movies, especially the increase of these with the twentieth anniversary of the war in the 1960s. This chapter will argue that that national understanding of carriers during the war is dominated by the exploits of the large CV fast fleet carriers. With news coverage during the war, movies made after it, and the continued manufacturing of large CVs throughout the Cold War, the CVEs were over shadowed in numerous ways. Furthermore, this chapter will examine the adaptive reuse of the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁸ This forty-year period of analysis was selected for the reason that nearly all the individual groups devoted to remembering escort carriers were formed by 1985.

World War II era CV into modern day museums, thus further marginalizing the roles and successes of the escort carriers.

The third chapter examines the construction and service of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21. Based on oral interviews with crewmembers and unpublished memoirs, I provide a historical account of the delivery of Lead-Lease supplies to Britain, confronting the German U-boats in the Atlantic with Hunter-Killer missions, and the German U-boat attack that led to the sinking of the vessel. The experience of surviving the sinking on the open seas and being safely transported to Casablanca is covered through primary source material and oral interviews.

This section will also set up the divisions that took place onboard CVE-21. These divisions would later impact the methods of commemoration implemented by individual and collective groups of veterans in recalling their service. These divisions developed between officers and enlisted service members and between those of different racial backgrounds. Most notably the segregation of African-American sailors and their being relegation to the role of stewards for officers, impacted their commemoration of their service. Lastly, this chapter examines the shared trauma in surviving the collective violent experience of losing a ship on the high seas. The range of experiences during the sinking caused searing memories and produced a wide means of coping after the war. All the individual experiences during the sinking were unique, thus the ways of dealing with, and recalling and commemorating, also are complex, with no two individuals exactly remembering this singular event in the same way. These differences impact the commemoration and remembrance decades later.

Chapter four considers the role of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-106.

Utilizing oral interviews and memoirs of individual crewmembers, this chapter will investigate the return to the second ship by the core crewmembers of the 21 and the first all-Marine fighter wing assigned to the vessel. The operations that I cover include the siege of Okinawa, and the evacuation of Japanese POWs held on the island of Formosa after the conclusion of the war. I explore crewmembers' reactions to witnessing the loss of pilots and the visceral human costs of war, expressed specifically in stories about the onboard POWs.

Beyond the differences in the experiences of the crewmembers serving on two vessels, this chapter will also take into account how they dealt with different enemies. . In the Atlantic theater, many service members were not far removed from their European cultural heritage. This included many sailors who spoke German or Italian at home before enlisting. What impact did this have on their view of the enemy? While in the Atlantic theater, members of CVE-21 witnessed first-hand, and interacted with, POWs from Germany and Italy, the experience for CVE-106 in the Pacific was much different, for two reasons. First, Japanese-Americans were not allowed to serve in the U.S. Navy. Secondly, due to the nature of the war no escort carrier crewmembers in the Pacific saw the enemy in person until the conclusion of the war. These factors of familiarity with one enemy, and unfamiliarity with the other developed in this chapter, will impact the commemoration after the war.

Chapter five examines the actions veterans have taken to commemorate their service on the CVE-21 and CVE-106 after the close of the war. These

actions include the production of unpublished memoirs, works of art, and the donation of items to cultural institutions. Additionally, I will investigate the motivations for the formation and development of groups devoted to remembering the service of these escort carriers. I will examine newsletters and reunion activities, specifically those of the USS Block Island Association.

These individual and collective actions present modes of commemorating their lost vessels and the overall wartime experience. More specifically, this chapter will highlight the modes of dealing with the trauma of surviving a sinking in wartime. The experience of losing a ship due to torpedo attack greatly impacted their service in the Navy, thus the sinking's meaning equally affected the commemorative efforts of these crewmembers. Also, this chapter will address the fact that commemoration is not limited to those who experienced the war firsthand. Others, including spouses, children, and grandchildren, also had an impact on how their veteran's past was remembered. As more veterans pass away, the role of these family members evolves and expands in commemorating the service of those on both CVE-21 and CVE-106. These actions include aiding in the launching of a website and taking over leadership positions in the groups devoted to preserving the memory of these vessels.

The concluding chapter will explore the need of individual escort carrier veterans, from all the CVEs produced during the war, to tell their version of the conflict. Overshadowed by the larger CV when it comes to remembering carriers from the war, these veterans - on the individual and collective levels - have developed modes of self-commemoration. This chapter will explore how escort

carrier veterans' commemorations of the war differ from the national strand of memory about the naval conflict. Their reactions in remembrance will shed light on the purpose of individual and group commemorations of the war. Lastly, this chapter will investigate how these reactions of remembering fit into the overall remembrance of World War II in American society.

This chapter will include accounts of CVE veterans forming memorial groups devoted to their individual ships. Also, the chapter will trace the formation of a veterans' group that sought to include all those that served on escort carriers, both during World War II and in the Korean era. This organization devoted to the overall collective memory of those who served on any of the CVEs, designed new modes of recalling their forgotten class of carriers. This chapter will explore these methods, including publishing a newsletter, advocating for a stone memorial for their vessels, and working with ship museums to grant awareness of the role of CVEs both during the Second World War and after.

My dissertation will consider acts of remembrance of a group of World War II veterans who experienced the only loss of an American aircraft carrier in the Atlantic. Overshadowed by the exploits and losses of carriers in the Pacific theater, the veterans of CVE-21 in the decades after the sinking pioneered methods of self-commemoration that evolved over the years. A study of this evolution will shed light into the methods of those lacking a terrestrial site in placing meaning in their personal and collective loss.

CHAPTER 2

THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE: COMMEMORATION OF THE U.S. NAVY AND MARINE CORPS IN WORLD WAR II IN OFFICAL FORM AND POULAR CULTURE

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the U.S. Navy radically changed tactics in waging naval warfare. The surprise Japanese attack ushered in the ascent of the aircraft carrier. While some in the U.S. Navy sought greater expansion of carrier tactics in the inter-war period, in December of 1941 the Navy persisted with the old doctrine of overreliance on the battleships.⁶⁹ The long-standing theory of naval guns ruling the seas endured within the U.S. Navy. This outdated tactic was another victim of the surprise attack. The naval scholar Clark Reynolds succinctly summed up this rapid shift from the focus on battleships to carriers. He wrote, “Pearl Harbor sank this theory—five battleships put out of action by attacking planes from six fast carriers.”⁷⁰

While none of the U.S. Navy’s aircraft carriers were docked at Pearl Harbor at the time of the Japanese attack, the nation was still desperately short of carriers. In the entire fleet, the Navy only had seven CV carriers⁷¹ and one

⁶⁹ The two best studies on the tactics of aircraft carriers in the inter-war period are: Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: Forging of an Air Navy* and Norman Polmar, *Aircraft Carriers: A Graphic History of Carrier Aviation and Its Influence on World Events*.

⁷⁰ Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: Forging of an Air Navy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), 21.

⁷¹ These vessels included the CVs: *Hornet, Ranger, Wasp, Yorktown, Enterprise, Lexington, and Saratoga*.

additional carrier, *USS Long Island*, CVE-1⁷², which was a floating experiment. A 1935 Navy report on the possibility of converting merchant hulls into small carriers noted the possibility of: “for quick action when the war emergency required the conversion of merchant type vessels into auxiliary aircraft carriers.” Half a dozen years later a “war emergency” occurred, and many CVEs filled the Navy’s gap in carriers by performing necessary auxiliary duties. From the very beginning, escort carriers symbolized America’s under preparedness for the war.

The first experiment of converting a cargo hull into a ship of war took place in the early months of 1941, and became *USS Long Island*, CVE-1. She was small and slow, had no island on the starboard side of the flight deck like the large CVs, and held just a handful of outdated aircraft. Whereas the CVs took years to construct, the *Long Island* was hastily converted in just 3 months.⁷³ While she certainly was no fleet carrier in terms of speed, armament, or looks, she was the answer to a naval service that was completely unprepared for the logistics of implementing the new tactics of carrier use, which included duties of aircraft transport and escorting convoys.

In May 1942, the *Washington Post* reported this shift in policy to the American public in an article titled “Aircraft Carrier Is Navy’s New Queen of the

⁷² While naval designations changed, the *USS Long Island* was the first carrier converted from a cargo hull in what later in the war would be termed a CVE, or escort carrier. For simplicity all these converted vessels will be referred to the final classification of the U.S. Navy-escort carrier (CVE).

⁷³ Norman Polmar, *Aircraft Carriers: A Graphic History of Carrier Aviation and Its Influence on World Events*, (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 136-140.

Seas.”⁷⁴ It stated, “For it is now generally accepted naval doctrine that the carrier has supplanted the battleship as the chief ‘punch’ of the sea.”⁷⁵ The article outlined the plan of constructing 18 large CV carriers. Added to the six CVs already in the fleet, these vessels would take the war to the Japanese Navy. It stated, “The bigger, faster craft, protected by cruisers and destroyers, will be in the forefront of the battle.” The piece also reported that the U.S. Navy was in such short supply of carriers, and so far behind in the logistics of manufacturing new ones, that a desperate measure was required. As reported, “Many [carriers] will be slower, smaller vessels, probably something like the U.S.S. Long Island, [a] former cargo ship.”⁷⁶ The piece stated that the CV represented the future, but also that they were too costly in construction costs and required years to build. Smaller carriers, refitted from cargo hulls, would fill a desperate void in shuttling aircraft, escorting convoys, and other auxiliary duties.

In 1942, with many of these CVEs hastily under construction, the secondary role of these vessels was evident. The *Washington Post* wrote, “Such carriers, however, cannot go within range of enemy bombers or warships without running serious risk of being sunk.”⁷⁷ The article also stated, “The slower, more

⁷⁴ John Norris, “Aircraft Carrier Is Navy’s New Queen of the Seas,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1942, B1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ John Norris, “Aircraft Carrier Is Navy’s New Queen of the Seas,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1942, B1.

vulnerable carriers... will remain a considerable distance from the scene of operations.”⁷⁸ From the very beginning, these smaller carriers, and their theorized missions, were marginalized from the larger CV fast fleet carriers. These smaller carriers were not something to be celebrated. They did not represent a nation or Navy fully organized for the war in which the carriers were the dominating weapons. Rather, escort carriers symbolized a nation that not only suffered the devastating attack of Pearl Harbor, but also was in the beginning stages of the construction of an aircraft carrier fleet and only starting to explore the tactics in utilizing this newly recognized naval power.

In 1943, the *Washington Post* reported on the actions of an escort carrier that completed a task well beyond its intended support role. She was the first one to take on enemy ground forces at the front lines. She launched aircraft and struck Japanese positions in the Aleutian Islands. While the piece noted the success of the mission and the expanded role of escort carriers, their secondary rank to the large CVs was clearly explained to the readers. Terms used in describing these ships included “baby flat-tops”, “pocket carriers” and “auxiliary carriers.”⁷⁹ Whereas this particular vessel successfully took on the enemy on invaded territory in North America, their overall status in relation to their larger sisters was made quite clear. These were not the majestic fleet carriers designed to take on the Japanese Navy in the open ocean. While this particular escort carrier took the war

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ John G. Norris, “U.S. Navy Bombards Kiska Forts Again,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 1943, M8.

directly to the Japanese ground forces, reporting on it reminded readers that the CVEs were “auxiliary” in nature.

This chapter will argue that a national narrative of aircraft carriers started during World War II and continued into the post war period. This narrative celebrated the accomplishments of the large CVs and marginalized the escort carriers. Coverage during the war of CVs illustrated the U.S. Navy’s efforts in seeking righteous revenge on the Japanese Navy. Escort carriers, however, as converted cargo hulls refitted with an improvised flight deck, symbolized a nation caught by surprise in the rapidly transformed naval tactics of World War II.

This national narrative of carriers functioned during the war in highlighting the CVs, which were designed, constructed, and utilized for the single purpose of waging war upon the enemy. Coverage of escort carriers was limited, and when it did occur their marginalized status was made quite clear. Escort carriers were rapidly put together adaptations, hastily manufactured quick fixes, to the drastic situation the U.S. Navy found itself in after Pearl Harbor. The Japanese attack in Hawaii, led by an aircraft carrier force, changed the game of naval warfare. The escort carriers aided in filling the dire gap of carriers for the U.S. Navy. In accomplishing this, however, they were marginalized, since in filling this void the CVEs illustrated the shortfall of the U.S. Navy’s carrier construction in the interwar period.

At the war’s conclusion, the purpose of the CVEs – the U.S. Navy’s drastically needed solution to the desperate lack of carriers, also ended. As a result, escort carriers under construction at the close of the war were canceled and

scrapped. CVEs that fought in the war were placed in the mothball fleet, decommissioned and converted, or sent to the scrap yards. The national narrative in commemorating all carriers after World War II followed a similar pattern. Movies, books, and other forms of popular culture were drawn to large CV carriers. The CV carriers functioned in illustrating a nation brought into the war by a surprise attack and righteously taking their crusade of vengeance to the Japanese enemy. During the war the CVs fought in the engagements that made the headlines at the Battles of Coral Sea and Midway. These CVs and battles were tailor made for screenwriters in the production of movies on the war, with the U.S. Navy carriers overcoming the Japanese Navy. Directors utilizing the CVs could produce films with the themes of righteous vengeance and national unity in facing a dastardly enemy.

While throughout the war the escort carriers aided in numerous ways, these hastily converted merchant hulls with around twenty aircraft did not illustrate a nation fully provisioned for war. Rather, the CVs', or aircraft carriers' nearly one thousand feet in length holding eighty aircraft, granted those producing popular culture on carriers not only the storyline of winning the war, but vessels that also looked the part. In the films commemorating World War II carriers, Hollywood placed Charlton Heston fighting and flying from the platform of a fast fleet carrier, not a CVE with a converted cargo hull originally designed to transport bananas.

Beyond the wartime coverage and popular culture depictions of naval warfare, this chapter will also explore an additional factor in perpetuating the

national narrative of the carrier that marginalized the escort carriers. While the escort carriers fulfilled their designed role, that role ended with the advanced weaponry of the Cold War. The few that survived into the 1950s were garnered obsolete with the advent of jet aircraft operating from carriers, which required complex catapult systems and a longer deck for conducting operations. Conversely, the role of the CV expanded, with larger, more complex vessels, operating into the 21st century. These modern day warships trace their heritage to the World War II CVs. The national narrative of carriers in the Cold War focused on this weapon system defending the nation on the high seas. This stemmed from the proud heritage of the CV carriers fighting and winning in the Pacific. However, the other smaller sister carriers of World War II, whose usefulness ended with the conclusion of the conflict, have been marginalized in the history of the carriers in the U.S. Navy.

This chapter will also explore the perpetuation of the national narrative concerning carriers by analyzing the movements that constructed memorials and commemoration of World War II. The accomplishments of CVs, and those who served onboard, served as examples of a nation fighting a righteous war.

Numerous films depicted the bravery of the crews and the toughness of these vessels. The city of Chicago rechristened two airports with names that contained strong links to CVs. In addition, while CVE construction ended after the end of the war, the CVs continued to be constructed. These future CVs produced after the war served as memorials linking their service in WWII to the history of both the U.S. Navy and the larger American story. New CVs were commissioned and

named for deceased U.S. Presidents and replaced World War II era CVs with the same name. The national narrative of carriers that celebrated the CVs was not only impacted by the production of movies and memorials about World War II, but also the future development and construction of CVs into the Cold War era.

Lastly, this chapter will argue that a national urge to remember the U.S. Navy in World War II took place starting in the 1970s. Beginning with the Navy's 200th Birthday in 1975 and Bicentennial events, a re-remembering commenced of the role of the service in World War II. With regard to the scope of this chapter, the transformation of World War II vessels into floating platforms of memory greatly affected the national understanding of which weapons were involved. The practices of the Navy destroying vessels past their usefulness greatly affected which vessels became platforms of memory and which did not. For those, like escort carriers with no floating example, their story would be omitted from this new way of remembering the war that surfaced in the 1970s.

The noted anthropologist of material culture Nicholas J. Saunders addressed the issue of weapons serving as testaments to conflicts. According to him, "The passage of time and generations creates different interpretations of, and responses to, the materials of war as they journey through social, geographical, and symbolic space."⁸⁰ While Saunders theorized on the function of weapons from the Great War, his strand of analysis applies to the next war. With regard to large vessels, such as aircraft carriers, after the conflict these hold the potential for

⁸⁰ Nicholas J. Saunders, "Material Culture and Conflict: The Great War, 1914-2003," in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6.

the construction of a number of interpretations, including those focused on the individual vessel, the great understanding of the overall war, and the individual sailor assigned to such a warship. For the generations born after World War II, these floating platforms of memory, whether large CV, battleships, or cruisers, serve as real-life examples of the war. For the visitors, floating platforms of memory formed from carriers not only highlight the vessel itself, but also memorialize the aircraft that operated off the vessel, and commemorate the crews who manned them.

For many vessels, no single example lasted until the urge to protect them developed, thus, no floating platform of memory exists. Today, escort carriers are only remembered by those who served on them decades ago. The CVs overshadowed the CVEs during the war, and floating platforms of memory preserved and expanded their myth moving forward; the CVEs, however, run the danger of being forgotten once those who served on them and preserve the living memory of the ships, are gone.

MYTH MAKING

Before investigating the national narrative that created omissions, it is important to understand that neglecting aspects in the construction of a narrative is not unique to the American experience in World War II. Moreover, the process of constructing an overarching tale is a story as old as mankind. The French philosopher and historian, Mircea Eliade, in his work *Cosmos and History, The Myth of the Eternal Return*, investigates the construction of myths in what he terms “archaic” societies. He argues that these early societies faced difficulty in

holding onto specific facts, like actual names and events, for more than a few centuries. Faced with the inability to remember specific events and individuals, these societies utilized myths. As he writes, “The historical personage is assimilated to his mythical model (hero, etc.), while the event is identified with the category of mythical actions (fight with a monster, enemy brothers, etc.).”⁸¹ Eliade theorizes that myths function as a means of making sense of events that normally face oblivion as a result of a society forgetting all the specific details of the event overtime. He suggests that while the construction of myth marginalizes many specific details on a particular topic, the myth functions in streamlining the narrative and thus preserving the general concept of importance. However, the development of the nation-state transformed the construction of a narrative passed to succeeding generations.

The historian Joseph Amato, in his work *Guilt and Gratitude: A Study of the Origins of Contemporary Conscience*, traces humanity’s relationship with a number of governing authorities, including tribal groups and religious states. Amato theories that central to any society’s order is the group’s collective experience, which for nearly all groups embraces the passing on of tales and myths. Many of these myths deliver meaning to individuals who did not experience the story first-hand, either as the result of geography or because the event occurred long in the past. With the rise of nation-states, however, Amato argues that a shift in understanding the world takes place for these new citizens.

⁸¹ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History, The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 43.

He writes, “Events, therefore, for contemporary man are the landmarks of his existence.”⁸² As nation-states expanded in size and influence, the very events, which form the basis of the identity of the majority of citizens, may be experienced by only a handful of citizens. Amato argues that while the practice is not new, the scale imposed by the nation-state in myth making greatly transforms the construction of the myth. As Amato writes, “To a large degree, national societies exist by virtue of having a mentality formed out of events experienced and valued collectively. In this manner, the citizens of a nation continue to live the experiences of the past long after they have happened.”⁸³ For nation-states in the 20th century the collective memory around events that very few citizens witnessed firsthand is intensified with the scale of global conflict. The crafting of narratives about loyalty to the nation-state requires the expansion of omissions in dealing with world war. Thus, encapsulating myth into a national story necessitates the purging of most individual experiences and memories.

While the scale of the global conflict increased the number of omissions required in the production of a national narrative, an additional factor of the 20th century also impacted the means by which individual citizens learned of the war. For the civilian population the war was presented, both during and after the conflict, by new technological methods that included radio broadcasts, numerous newspapers, and showing selected scenes of the war in movie theaters. These

⁸² Joseph A. Amato, *Guilt and Gratitude: A Study of the Origins of Contemporary Conscience* (London: Greenwood Press, 1982), 8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

aspects of modernity shaping national remembering greatly affected American society and its recalling of World War II. The scholar Alison Landsberg addresses the impact of mass culture in transforming national understanding. According to her, “This new form of memory, which I call prosthetic memory, emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experimental site such as a movie theater or museum.”⁸⁴ Building on the theory of both Nova and Kammen, that the 19th century witnessed the construction of monuments to build national memories, Landsberg expands this to include products of mass culture in the 20th century. She writes, “Through the technologies of mass culture, it became possible for these memories to be acquired by anyone, regardless of skin color, ethnic background, or biology.”⁸⁵ Landsberg’s suggestion, that transferability of memory can overcome the gap of race, can also be applied to different generations of citizens. Mass culture holds the potential for transporting a national memory of World War II to those that did not experience it by being born after the conflict.

CVE CONTRIBUTIONS

When the Empire of Japan surrendered on August 14, 1945, the U.S. Navy retained a total of 99 commissioned aircraft carriers. Of these vessels, 28 were classified as fast carriers and included the two specific vessels types, CVs and

⁸⁴ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

CVLs. The other 71 carriers were classified as escort carriers.⁸⁶ Despite representing over 70% of the carriers in the entire U.S. Navy fleet, in the years following the war the escort carriers were nearly completely forgotten in the national narrative surrounding the naval conflict. Their faster and larger sisters completed what the Navy termed the “blue water” fighting, taking on the Japanese enemy in the open ocean. In summarizing all conflicts, omission must take place. A general overview of an amazingly complex conflict such as World War II often requires the use of major engagements as milestones. While reflecting on the U.S. Navy’s role in the conflict, the nation remembers the big ships that won the big surface engagements with the Japanese Navy. As a result, the role of the 71 CVEs is neglected, and thus, forgotten.

Myths need a starting point, a spark to ignite the imagination. For mythmakers of World War II, whether newspaper writers during the war, or directors of movies after the war, the massive sea battles in which the large CVs partook proved fertile for the development of the apotheosis of the carrier. One major factor in the CVEs omission from the national narrative is that their major collective contribution during the war, the Battle of the Atlantic, does not consist of one major engagement historically affiliated with these milestones of remembering. The longest continuous battle of the entire war, which raged on and under the Atlantic for six years, produced no single event to grab the attention of American remembrance. As stated in a history of the Tenth Fleet:

⁸⁶ “U.S. Navy Active Ship Force Levels, 1886-present,” Naval History and Heritage Command, accessed June 29, 2011, <http://www.history.navy.mil/branches/org9-4.htm#1986>.

The peculiar nature of the U-Boat war, or the Battle of the Atlantic, does not lend itself readily to the stirring descriptions which may mark the history of a series of major fleet engagements. It is not an impressive succession of majors but an attrition of minors.....An engagement, which goes on so long, is so devoid of spectators and correspondents, and is so far to the rear of the battle lines is apt to recede in memory with the passage of time, for it lacks the classical unities of the drama, being neither one in place nor in time nor the action.⁸⁷

In a number of ways the U.S. Navy supported these modes of memory, from allowing the usage of real combat footage to loaning military equipment and personnel in the filming of movies. This support not only took place during the war years, but in the decades following the conflict. While the scope of these products of memory is diverse, ranging from those seeking to place meaning on individual accomplishments during the war to specific battles with a host of vessels and scores of planes, one fact is clear. The CVEs are overlooked in the construction of the superstructure of overall national memory in recalling the role of the U.S. Navy in World War II. Vessels large and small are recalled, individual servicemen ranging from individual sailors to Admirals guiding overall strategy are remembered, but the escort carriers are omitted. This is true not only because no CVEs survived past 1977 to serve as a platform of memory, but also in the national understanding of the conflict they were continually overshadowed by their larger-faster sister CVs.

The advance of technology not only affected the weapons used in the war, but also how the nation-state understood the war. John Bodnar recently wrote of the U.S. Navy's relationship with Hollywood before the war in producing films on naval topics, noting that the Navy aided in the filming of naval scenes. This

⁸⁷ Y'Blood, *Hunter-Killer*, vii.

cooperation expanded to all the branches of the military once the war commenced. Bodnar wrote, “The alliance gave the armed forces a chance to enhance their reputation, attract recruits, and even boost the morale of those already in uniform.”⁸⁸ Footage from the actual war, and fictional movies based on the war, contributed to a national understanding of the war. The historian Philip D. Beidler argues that taken as a whole these films produced a “truly heightened sense of collective moral enterprise.”⁸⁹ As Beidler writes, “history and memory had finally intersected with commodity on a scale commensurate with the long national love affair with creative self-mythologizing.”⁹⁰ This mythology centered on certain aspects of the war, such as large battles, important leaders, and massive ships, at the expense of other portions of the war. Films shaping the national narrative gave audiences storylines that drowned out many aspects of the war, including smaller vessels, lesser known battles, and points of view of servicemen not in the major engagements which constituted the milestones of American memory of the war.

One film produced during the war stands out as a prime example of the U.S. Navy offering its support in the filming of a movie noting the role of an individual aircraft carrier. Like many movies about the war, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* was initially a book. Written by Ted Lawson, who participated in the raid

⁸⁸ John Bodnar, *The “Good War” in American Memory*, (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 136.

⁸⁹ Philip D. Beidler, *“The Good War’s Greatest Hits” World War II and American Remembering* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

as a member of the U.S. Army Air Corp, the book represented a colorful account of Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle's raid of B-25 Air Army Corp bombers improvising an attack on the Japanese homelands by launching these land-based aircraft from a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier.⁹¹ The film, released in 1944, highlighted the action of volunteers who gave the U.S. a huge propaganda victory in bombing the mainland of Japan in the months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. However, the film, both during the war and after, started the movement of remembering certain aspects of naval warfare and omitting other important factors.

The film highlighted the individual role of James Doolittle in seeking volunteers to strike back at the Japanese after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The film stressed the military's lack of inter-service rivalry with the U.S. Army Air Corp working in unison with the U.S. Navy. However, the movie reinforces the notion that a one large CV, the *USS Hornet*, CV-8, single-handedly launched the mission. No attention is paid to other vessels involved in screening the CV in the operations.⁹² Only the men in the B-25s and the *Hornet* are highlighted.⁹³ Thus, the focus on operations from the decks of the CVs started with the film's release in 1944. The entire mission, involving thousands of service members and sixteen ships, was encapsulated to focus on the bomber crews and the *Hornet's*

⁹¹ Ted W. Lawson, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Inc., 1943).

⁹² Sixteen vessels were involved in the operation including fast-fleet carriers, heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, destroyers, and two oilers.

⁹³ *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*. DVD. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. 1944: Los Angeles, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1999.

flight deck. While this simplified screenplay allows the viewer to better digest a complicated and secret mission, this comes at the expense of marginalizing the other fifteen naval vessels involved in the operation. Further adding to the film's impact for the wartime viewers was the censorship during the war, which suppressed many of the specific details about the operation until after the conflict. This film perpetuated national narrative of the CV carriers, which continued into the decades following the conflict.

The U.S. Navy understood that film was not the only medium available for portraying its role in the war. In 1943, the Navy learned that the successful cartoonist Roy Crane was developing a Sunday cartoon strip, to be called *Buz Sawyer*, about a carrier pilot. The Navy arranged for Crane to be stationed on an escort carrier for a week to gather information on life onboard. His weeklong cruise took place on the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, where Crane saw flight operations, spoke with members of the crew, and even submitted a cartoon for the vessel's newspaper. As the vessel's paper reported to the crew, "But the genuine flavor of the Navy, the actual color of ship-board life are the objectives of the illustrator."⁹⁴ However, once *Buz Sawyer* became a weekly addition in many national newspapers he did not fly off the deck of escort carriers. Sawyer's carrier, seen by the American public on a weekly basis, was a large CV.

Crane reflected on his strip twenty years later in a 1964 interview. He stated, "It was during World War II, so I decided to make Buz a Navy pilot. It

⁹⁴ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 25, No. 1, February 2011, 5.

promised lots of action, and I also felt that I would be making a contribution to the war effort.”⁹⁵ His promotion of aircraft carriers, and the men who flew off of them, centered on the large CV carriers that were taking the war directly to the Japanese Empire in pitched battles against Japanese naval aircraft. The cartoons that show Sawyer’s vessel include the massive flight deck and tall super-structure of a CV.⁹⁶ The inspiration of Sawyer, the experiences of Crane while on a small escort carrier, were neglected by the artist when he portrayed the naval war of the U.S. Navy. While the U.S. Navy assisted and supported Crane’s cartoon promoting the naval aviators of World War II, this was a relatively minor contribution compared with other actions of support by the U.S. Navy.

While the big naval battles featuring CVs were exciting to portray in a movie or documentary, other smaller vessels did receive attention. However, the escort carriers did not illustrate the themes that Hollywood, or the Navy, wished to be highlighted. A number of films produced during the war and in the first years after the conflict centered on the U.S. Navy’s smaller craft. In considering smaller vessels, however, the framers of products of memory chose to tell the tale by compiling a range of fantastic feats into one specific vessel. As a collective group, these vessels actually performed many of the actions seen on the big screen. However, the contributions of the collective vessels were placed onto one vessel, thus allowing the narrative of the movie to flow more freely and not jump

⁹⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁶ Nick Norwood, ed., *Buz Sawyer: The War in the Pacific Vol.1* (Seattle: Frantagraphic Books, 2011).

from vessel to vessel. The prime example of the use of this technique in films produced during the war centered on the U.S. Navy's PT Boats.⁹⁷ However, for one PT Boat to complete all of these actions on the screen required a larger than life personality, that of John Wayne.

In December 1945, the director John Ford released the film *They Were Expendable*, which was adapted from the book with the same title by William L. White. Both summarized the actions of Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 3, a group of six PT boats involved in defending the weakly prepared U.S. positions in the Philippines in the weeks following Pearl Harbor.⁹⁸ Both the book, and Ford's adaptation, present a narrative that utilizes a real PT boat unit, that of Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 3. However, not all the actions attributed to the particular unit actually occurred during the war.

In the film John Wayne plays Lt. 'Rusty' Ryan, who at the beginning of the film seeks a transfer from the small PT boat to a larger naval vessel in the hopes of finding glory fighting the enemy on a capital ship of the U.S. Navy. However, before this transfer can take place, the Japanese launch their surprise attack on both Pearl Harbor and other locations in the Pacific. Rusty assists in efforts aiding the fragile U.S. position in the Philippines, including the evacuation

⁹⁷ Torpedo Patrol, PT-Boats, were small craft built from plywood and aluminum. A number of classifications were built, but all had large powerful engines allowing for patrolling of coastal areas. Up to eighty feet in length, the crew was around fifteen men and armament including machine guns and a small number of torpedoes.

⁹⁸ William L. White, *They Were Expendable* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942).

of General Douglas MacArthur and pressing their attacks against the vastly superior Japanese naval forces until all the unit's PT Boats are destroyed. At the end of the film the surviving PT boat crewmembers continue the fight by taking up arms with the remaining U.S. Army forces and Filipino guerillas in the jungles.⁹⁹

Ford's work received the full support of the Department of the Navy. The Navy loaned a unit of PT boats for the shooting of the film, which took place near Key Biscayne, Florida. In the depiction of PT boats fighting Japanese aircraft, the Navy also painted aircraft to look like those of the Japanese enemy, which during filming produced realistic battle-scenes. Ford's movie demonstrated that individual and collective bravery of the U.S. Navy was also seen in smaller vessels.¹⁰⁰ Certain vessels illustrated the U.S. Navy's seeking vengeance against the Japanese empire on the silver screen, however, these films marginalized many other vessels. The majority of duties in the U.S. Navy, however, like many of the types of vessels, did not fit into this scaffold of depicting amazing feats of heroism. Escort carrier duties such as transporting aircraft to the front, shuttling lend-lease supplies, and training young pilots in the operations on carriers, did not visually illustrate carriers actively taking the war to the enemy. While these logistical duties proved extremely important in carrying out the war, when

⁹⁹ *They Were Expendable*. DVD. Directed by John Ford. 1945. Los Angeles: Warner Brothers, 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Lawrence Suid, *Sailing on the Silver Screen: Hollywood and the U.S. Navy*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 80.

depicting the heroism of the naval war the Navy and Hollywood sought other ships in demonstrate victory.

The Navy supported cultural efforts that gave it positive coverage during the war. The organization also promoted itself, without the assistance of directors, actors, or cartoonists, at the conclusion of the war. An example of this was the nation-wide events on Navy Day, October 27, 1945, organized by the U.S. Navy in order to present their branch of the service to the American public. A range of ships of war from the U.S. Navy poured into the ports of San Francisco, New Orleans, and Baltimore. Interior cites were also included, with smaller Navy vessels sailing up the Mississippi river to St. Louis and Dubuque, Iowa.¹⁰¹ However, the major event was in New York City. An estimated one million people gathered in Central Park to hear a speech from President Truman; 47 vessels were on display on the Hudson, and 1,200 planes flew overhead in a single formation.¹⁰² Before these grand events took place, however, a single ceremony kicked off to the day's events, the dedication of a monument to the late President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

When President Truman's motorcade entered the Brooklyn Naval Yard, ten thousand people waited on the deck of the soon to be commissioned aircraft carrier. Those gathered included the new ship's band, the honor guard, and a group of sailors who carried out a two hundred pound cake. The cake was a

¹⁰¹ "Army & Navy," *Time*, October 29, 1945, 26.

¹⁰² "National Affairs," *Time*, November 5, 1945, 19-20.

replica of the ship; the newest in the series of CV aircraft carriers. The President would officially commission this new monument, this floating platform of memory, to the deceased President Roosevelt.

In his speech dedicating the 45,000-ton carrier, the *U.S.S. Franklin D. Roosevelt*, CV-42¹⁰³, the President spoke in glowing terms of President Roosevelt's relationship with the U.S. Navy. He stated, "His name is engraved on this great carrier, as it is in the hearts of men and women of goodwill the world over—Franklin D. Roosevelt."¹⁰⁴ Truman stated that this new carrier symbolized "our commitment to the United Nations Organization to reach out anywhere in the world and to help peace-loving nations of the world stop any international gangster."¹⁰⁵ He closed his verbal tribute by speaking of the challenges facing America in the postwar era. He stated, "But we approach them in the spirit of Franklin D. Roosevelt whose words are inscribed in bronze on this vessel: "We Can, we will, we must!"¹⁰⁶ The commissioning ceremony included 125 Navy planes flying in formation spelling out three letters, FDR. In honoring the President who led the nation through the Great Depression and to victory in

¹⁰³ The *U.S.S. Franklin D. Roosevelt* would undergo a number of reclassifications, including CVB/CVA/CV-42, however its name never changed. She served as an active vessel, in a range of missions throughout the Cold War, for over twenty years, and was finally decommissioned in September 1977.

¹⁰⁴ Alexander Feinberg, "Mighty Carrier Roosevelt Commissioned by Truman," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1945, 1 & 34.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

World War II, the monument selected within six months of his death was a single weapon of war. The CV series of aircraft carriers not only encapsulated in a singular vessel the victory of the U.S. Navy during the war; it also served as a platform of memory for honoring the deceased President.

As the Navy accepted this new CV into the fleet, the service was in the midst of fighting for its post-war existence. With the last war ending as the result of atomic blasts in the immediate postwar period considerable anxiety rested in the upper levels of the services of the U.S. military. The Navy was especially concerned about its postwar role. With the ability of one atomic weapon to create unprecedented damage in a concentrated area, the very idea of assembling a massive number of vessels into a single fleet was in danger. Some even seriously doubted whether any nation would need a Navy in a world of atomic weapons.¹⁰⁷

In the years after the war, President Truman drastically cut spending on defense. In 1948, he announced that the 1950 fiscal year defense budget was \$14.4 billion dollars. Battling post-war inflation, these cuts aimed at righting the American economy by reducing government spending and avoiding increasing the deficit. The budget announced by the President required massive cuts in conventional methods of containing any possible Soviet aggression. As one historian wrote, “The president’s continuing refusal to budget adequate conventional alternatives thus made the United States virtually dependent on the

¹⁰⁷ “Big Boom at Bikini: Experiment Will Determine Future of the Navy’s Weapons and Tactics,” *All Hands*, March 1946, 55.

atomic bomb.”¹⁰⁸ The inter-service jockeying within the U.S. military focused on developing methods of using atomic weapons.

On July 26, 1947, Truman signed the National Security Act that created the independent Air Force. Combined with a shirking military allotment of funding, the U.S. Navy felt considerable concern for its post-war future with a newly formed Air Force stressing their role in the delivery of atomic weapons using strategic bombers. As a result, the Navy looked to the development of a new super carrier that would provide their service a role in the delivery of atomic weapons, thus securing a role for their continuing service. On April 23, 1949, the Navy’s worst fears were realized when Secretary of Defense, Louis Johnson, cancelled the construction of the proposed super carrier *USS United States*, CVA-58.¹⁰⁹ The crisis that followed caused massive protest in the upper levels of the U.S. Navy and became known as “The Revolt of the Admirals.”¹¹⁰

Dr. Keith McFarland wrote of the impact this super carrier represented for the Navy concerned about its future role. He wrote, “Probably nothing else he (Johnson) could have done would have been more demoralizing to the Navy, for

¹⁰⁸ David Alan Rosenberg, “American Atomic Strategy and the Hydrogen Bomb Decision,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (1979), 69.

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey G. Barlow, “Naval Aviation’s Most Serious Crisis?,” *Naval History Magazine*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (2011), 8-11.

¹¹⁰ The best single work on this topic is Jeffrey G. Barlow, *Revolt of the Admiral: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950*, (Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1994).

that craft was the symbol and hope of its future.”¹¹¹ More specifically, the proposed *USS United States*, CVA-58 was the Navy’s only hope of gaining the use of atomic weapons. As McFarland wrote, “the Navy believed that the prototype vessel would assure its place in that regard and, with that, a greater share of the shirking defense pie.” While the invasion of South Korea by North Korea in June of 1950 saved the concept of the conventional use of aircraft from an aircraft carrier, in the immediate years after World War II the Navy was fearful of its carrier fleet, and thus its institutional existence.

While the debate over the continued existence of the Navy is outside the scope of this study, efforts taken by the Navy to prepare for atomic warfare had an impact on the possibilities for remembering the role of naval vessels in World War II because the U.S. Navy made some of its most historic vessels targets for atomic weapons testing. Thus, when the urge to remember World War II with specific ships materialized decades later, very few remained.

Just one year after the close of the war, Operation Crossroads took place on the Bikini atoll in the central Pacific. This joint exercise with the Army and Navy consisted of three atomic blasts to test the impact of atomic weapons on conventional sea vessels and ground forces. The Army placed tanks and planes on the islands of the atoll, while the Navy moored vessels from its World War II fleet as well as captured German and Japanese vessels. The U.S. Navy vessels, dubbed “guinea pigs,” represented a great deal of history of the service. They included the

¹¹¹ Keith D. McFarland, “The 1949 Revolt of the Admirals,” *Parameters, Journal of the US Army War College*, Vol. XI, No. 2 (1980), 56.

USS Arkansas, BB-33, a battleship that served in both world wars, *USS Nevada*, BB-36, the only capital ship to get underway during the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the *USS Pennsylvania*, BB-38, that aided in 13 amphibious invasions.

Large CVs did not escape this purging of history. Two vessels anchored off the atoll were large carriers, including the *USS Independence*, CVL-22. Winning fame during the past war in the development of night fighter operations, her crew named her the “Mighty I.”¹¹² The other carrier, *USS Saratoga*, CV-3, truly represented in a single large vessel the impact of the CV in the Pacific war. She served in the war from the beginning to the end, and was involved in so many battles with the Japanese fleet that they mistakenly reported her sunk seven times during the war. What the Japanese were never able to do, the atomic tests of Operation Crossroads did, turning these symbols of Navy victory into smoking, melted, and radiated mutations of their former selves. However, the urge to keep these ships as testaments to victory had developed already by the time of these tests. For early preservationists, the tests were not a destruction of a ship in a series of atomic explosions, but a bombing of history.

The state of New York had serious interest in the preservation of her namesake, the battleship *USS New York*, BB-34 before the attack. As was reported before the tests in *All Hands*, “There’s the battleship *New York* which the State of New York wishes to (and may still get to if it survives the atomic blast)

¹¹² Ibid. 9-12 & 55.

enshrine.”¹¹³ BB-34 did survive the atomic tests and was towed to Pearl Harbor, where for two years the Navy studied the long term affects of the blasts on surface ships. After this, she was towed 40 miles off of Pearl Harbor and used once again as a target. Newly developed weapons for fighter aircraft were tested on her hull and superstructure. After this piece of naval history received direct hits with 500-pound bombs and other weapons, she finally succumbed. As one observer recalled, “the tired old battlewagon rolled over and sank.”¹¹⁴ The state of New York would not get this platform of memory.

EARLY PLATFORM OF MEMORY

While the city of New York was denied a chance to turn the battleship named for its state into a museum, toward the end of the war it did receive a floating ship that represented the naval war in a unique role. The heavily damaged vessel, the *USS Franklin*, CV-13, was within 50 miles of the mainland of Japan when an undetected enemy fighter dropped two bombs on the vessel. The explosions, and later fires and other interior explosions, resulted in the deaths of 724 crewmembers. While the damage threatened the existence of the vessel, she was saved and with assistance returned to Pearl Harbor for repairs, which allowed her to return to the mainland U.S. under her own power for further repairs.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Ibid. 10.

¹¹⁴ “Planes Sink Battleships,” *Naval Aviation News*, October 1948, 11.

¹¹⁵ “USS Franklin (CV-13) “The Ship That Wouldn’t Die,” USS Franklin (CV-13), accessed November 14, 2011, <http://www.ussfranklin.org/>.

However, the Navy had another role for her before complete restoration took place.

The *Franklin*, named by the crew as “The Ship That Wouldn’t Die” served as an early platform of memory for the American public.¹¹⁶ The scholar Alison Landsberg wrote of the power of museums to affect the perspective of those who had no first-hand knowledge of a particular experience. She wrote, “The museum, like the comic book, raises questions about what it means to own or inhabit a memory of an event through which one did not live.”¹¹⁷ The American public had followed the Pacific war through a number of forms including newspapers reports, radio reports, and their loved ones’ experiences in the conflict. These reports included the costs of war, men who did not return home alive, ships lost, and planes shot down. However, seeing the costs of war, such as a violently damaged ship, was limited, for the most part, to images or movie clips. Seeing the actual damage to a large CV carrier floating in the harbor of New York brought the war home in a visual way outside of the movie screen or printed media.

After arriving in New York on April 28, 1945, she was docked in Brooklyn, and her heavily damaged condition brought the Pacific war home. As a report described the *Franklin* with, “her main mast leaning at a sharp angle, her foremast a jagged stump, her steel plates buckled and torn and her flight deck completely destroyed,” she served as a reminder of the cost of the naval war in the

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 129.

Pacific¹¹⁸ She was opened to the public on both the Navy Day celebrations of 1945 and 1946, until she was placed in the reserve fleet in February of 1947.¹¹⁹

Her charred hull and heavily damaged superstructure and flight deck brought the Pacific naval war home. The damage witnessed by these non-crewmembers of the *Franklin* symbolized more than just twisted metal; it also brought to mind, the 724 sailors who perished during the attack. However, the damage also showed the resilience of the U.S. Navy, as an issue of *All Hands* noted for its armed service readers. It stated that the ship offered, “A tribute to the spirit of the officers and bluejackets who man the Navy’s fighting ships, this “Fighting Lady” stayed afloat as others have similarly survived thought the heroism of those who manned them.”¹²⁰ She served as an early platform of memory, a floating testament to the Pacific War and to the large CVs that waged the Navy war against the Empire of Japan. This twisted vessel nullified distance, in terms of both geography and experience. For American civilians, walking on this testament of the Pacific war transported them to the headlines in which they read of the U.S. Navy’s experience of war.

TASK FORCE

In 1944, Warner Brothers conceived of a film project to highlight the challenges faced by the proponents of naval airpower before World War II and

¹¹⁸ “The Big Ben Comes Home,” *All Hands*, June 1945, Number 339, 20.

¹¹⁹ “USS Franklin (CV-13) “The Ship That Wouldn’t Die,” USS Franklin (CV-13), accessed November 14, 2011, <http://www.ussfranklin.org/>.

¹²⁰ *All Hands*, June 1945, 20.

glorify the massive role aircraft carriers played in battling the Japanese Navy during the war. The U.S. Navy offered its full support for *Task Force*, which appeared in 1948 and was the first postwar film that benefited from large-scale aid from the U.S. military, including Navy combat footage.¹²¹ While the film was originally designed to promote naval aviation during the war, it also served another purpose in the budgetary battles waging within the newly configured Department of Defense in the postwar years. More specifically, the film responded to the rumor of the Navy losing control of her aircraft to the newly commissioned Air Force, which in 1947 became its own branch of the service. This film, made with considerable assistance from the Navy, not only demonstrated the use of the CV during the war, but also highlighted the dangers of ignoring the future role of the large carrier in confronting the Soviet Union. As a reviewer wrote, “The coincidence of this picture at a time when the Navy is again fighting a battle for its aircraft could lend it a pertinence which may make it all the more sizzling for those who are in the ‘know’.”¹²²

Gary Cooper played the fierce advocate for naval aviation. He and a small team of pilots push for naval airpower in the 1920s and 1930s and as a result are overlooked for promotion.¹²³ The film included not only war scenes, but also the

¹²¹ Suid, *Sailing the Silver Screen*, 86.

¹²² Bosley Crowther, “Warner’s ‘Task Force,’ Story of Growth and Exploits of the Navy’s Air Arm,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1949, 15.

¹²³ The character Gary Cooper played in the film is fictional, but he is based on the experiences of naval aviators during both the inner war period and fighting in World War II.

battles for the appropriation of funding for carrier aviation. In one scene Cooper argued with a U.S. Army General supporting land-based bombers and not carriers. Cooper responds, “The General is right-if we have to take every Pacific Island enroute to Japan. But two dozen carriers are worth more than 200 enemy-held islands, anchored in one spot! Our carriers won’t be anchored, they’ll be fast moving islands from which we can launch fighters and bombers against the enemy wherever we choose!”¹²⁴ While showing the struggles within the military during World War II, this film released in 1948 sided with the Navy on the question of what strategy to follow in taking on the Soviet Union. This battle pitted the newly developed Air Force, which supported long-range land based bombers, against the U.S. Navy, which wished to highlight and celebrate the role of the large fast carriers in the last war and promote their future use in confronting the Soviet Union. This film not only demonstrated the U.S. Navy and Hollywood working together to promote the role of carrier-based airpower, but also suggested the legitimate future role of the carrier moving into the Cold War.

A reviewer described the film with, “scenes of aircraft launching and recoveries on the windy decks, of ready-room waiting, flag-plot sweating and business in the C.I.C. (combat intelligence center) down in the bowels of the ship are full of exciting fascination and superlative imagery.”¹²⁵ The film used combat

¹²⁴ *Tack Force*. DVD. Directed by Delmer Daves. 1949. Los Angeles: Warner Brothers, 2008.

¹²⁵ Bosley Crowther, “Warner’s ‘Task Force,’ Story of Growth and Exploits of the Navy’s Air Arm,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1949, 15.

footage from the war and filmed for three weeks on the *USS Antietam*, CV-36. This single carrier provided the setting for the fictional naval aviators flying off the CVs *Saratoga*, *Yorktown*, and *Franklin*. Filming also took place on an escort carrier, however, the scene filmed did not depict the operations of CVEs during the war. Rather, the flight deck of the CVE depicted a pre-war scene, the pioneer days of naval aviation in the inter-war period. The small deck of the escort carrier allowed the movie to depict the early days of naval aviation in the 1920s, when only a small group of pilots envisioned the aircraft carrier replacing the battleship.¹²⁶ The irony is considerable. When the CVE finally makes the big screen of fictional movies about the war, it served as a platform for highlighting the primitive state of naval aviation in the 1920s instead of its role in aiding the victory in the largest war fought on the high seas.

With large-scale aid in the production of war movies, Hollywood learned that movies about World War II did not have to end with the closing of the war. The production companies in Hollywood saw the success of this film and continued the practice in the years to come. This practice continued after the war with the theme of demonstrating victory over the enemy. This meant that films involving the Navy continued to fall back upon the vessels that took the war directly to the enemy. Whether a CV carrier, submarine, or PT boat, these vessels represented in the films made during the post war era encapsulated the U.S. fighting and defeating the enemy. Other auxiliary duties, or other vessels that also

¹²⁶ Suid, *Sailing on the Silver Screen*, 86.

engaged in the enemy on occasion, were marginalized. Thus, the national narrative of carriers continued to ignore the accomplishments of the escort carriers.

Task Force, and other movies depicting the U.S. Navy in World War II, made use of combat footage. These were raw images of men actually trying to kill one another. Although not footage of hand-to-hand fighting, but rather of men shooting at planes or dropping bombs on ships, the footage hints at the human cost of warfare, as human beings flew these planes and manned these vessels. The use of combat footage in these films represented a conscious choice to give the audience the real deal, to show, for example, American pilots on the tail of a Japanese fighter and shooting at it until it explodes. Or, more troubling, footage of a Japanese kamikaze pilot slamming his plane into a U.S. Navy surface ship, which over the course of the war resulted in thousands of deaths of sailors. Placed into a fictional account, this combat footage blurred the lines between reality and film. It also represents the transportability of memory. American veterans experienced such real life scenes captured on film during the war, then after the war fictional films incorporated such footage into their storylines producing an additional memory for the audience members. Allison Landsberg argued that films possess an amazing potential for the creation of memories, which she terms “prosthetic memoirs”. She wrote, “Prosthetic memories are adopted as the result of a person’s experience with a mass cultural technology of memory that

dramatizes or recreates a history he or she did not live.”¹²⁷ Memories are not relegated to just those that experienced the events firsthand; with combat footage these memories were created anew for American audiences.

While the movies about carrier warfare surfaced in the immediate years after the war, so to did acts of creating memorials, in the form of infrastructure, devoted to naval aviation and CVs. A chief example of this was the city of Chicago, which in 1949 rechristened not one, but two major airports. These two names both commemorated naval aviation. The first commemorated a naval battle, with the renaming of Chicago’s Municipal Airport to that of Midway International Airport.¹²⁸ The second honored an individual warrior, Chicago’s famed naval aviator Lt. Commander Edward H. “Butch” O’Hare. Both of these names served as reminders to the nation of the role of the large carriers in the war.

The site that would become O’Hare was originally a location for aircraft manufacturing during World War II. Originally called Orchard Field, in 1949 the City Council of Chicago voted to rename the field in honor of O’Hare.¹²⁹ Serving as a naval aviator in early 1942, he detected a group of Japanese bombers on course to destroy the carrier of his squadron, the *USS Lexington*, CV-2. O’Hare single-handedly shot down five of these bombers, and in doing so saved his ship,

¹²⁷ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 28.

¹²⁸ “Battle of Midway Heroes Honored a Chicago Midway Airport,” Chicago Department of Aviation, accessed October 14, 2011, <http://www.ohare.com/About/Midway/BattleOfMidway.aspx>.

¹²⁹ “History of O’Hare International Airport,” Chicago Department of Aviation, accessed October 14, 2011, <http://www.ohare.com/About/History/Default.aspx>.

became the first U.S. Navy ace, and later was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Roosevelt.¹³⁰ While the Council's actions in 1949 made the name official, dedication did not take place until 1963. The dedication ceremony included the laying of a wreath in front of a monument to O'Hare by President John F. Kennedy and remarks by the Commander and Chief who also served in the Navy during the war. Kennedy stated, "His courageous action not only provided a bright spot in the dark days of the Pacific theater, it also helped initiate new techniques of aerial warfare."¹³¹ Noting O'Hare's death later in the war, the President concluded by stating, "but his name lives on in the great international airport we dedicate here today."¹³²

SUBMARINES AND MARINE AVIATORS

While a range of films about the aircraft carrier were produced in the war and postwar years, one other vessel also received attention, the submarine.¹³³ The prime example of a film dedicated to the service of World War II submarines is *Operation Pacific*, which, when it was released in 1951, started a trend that produced nearly one film per year devoted to subs. This film again stars John

¹³⁰ John B. Lundstrom, *Fateful Rendezvous: The Life of Butch O'Hare* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 1-2.

¹³¹ "Remarks at O'Hare International Airport Dedication, Chicago, Illinois, 23 March 1963," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed October 14, 2011, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-043-024.aspx>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Suid, *Sailing the Silver Screen*, 132-133.

Wayne as the second in command of the submarine *USS Thunderfish*. The script utilized a real event from the war, that of the commanding officer being wounded while the submarine surfaced. During the actual war, Commander Howard W. Gilmore of the *USS Growler*, SS-215, was mortally wounded while on the surface. To save his crew and ship, he ordered the vessel to submerge in order to escape further damage from the Japanese enemy. The naval scholar Samuel Eliot Morison described the action. He wrote, "Gilmore, badly wounded, ordered the bridge cleared and shouted, "Take her down!" *Growler* submerged with the skipper and two others still on deck."¹³⁴ In sacrificing himself, Gilmore posthumously earned the Medal of Honor.¹³⁵ In the film, the Commanding officer does the same as Gilmore, and then Wayne's character Duke Gifford, took over as commanding officer.

The *Thunderfish* serves as a testament to all the U.S. Navy submarines in the Pacific during the war, for it included accomplishments based on actual events. In the film the submarine evaded the enemy, single-handedly inflicted heavy damage on the Japanese surface fleet, and rammed and sank an armed enemy freighter. The movie served as a summary of all submarine operations consolidated into one vessel. However, the opening scene dedication reminds viewers that a fleet of submarines served in the war:

¹³⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. 4, Coral Sea, Midway, and Submarine Actions* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1949), 229.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

When the Pacific Fleet was destroyed by the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, it remained for the submarines to carry the war to the enemy. In the four years that followed, our undersea craft sank six million tons of Japanese shipping including some of the proudest ships of the Imperial Navy. Fifty-two of our submarines and thirty-five hundred officers and men were lost. It is to these men and the entire silent service that this picture is humbly dedicated.¹³⁶

In 1951 another film with John Wayne appeared, *The Flying Leathernecks*.

The film served as a piece supporting the role of the U.S. Marine Corps, which at the time was threatened with losing not only funding but its institutional existence. Two allies from an early movie in support of the Marines, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, participated in the film: the director Nicholas Ray and leading actor John Wayne. By highlighting the role of U.S. Marine naval aviators in ground support during the Pacific theater, the film showed the adaptability of the Marine Corps in taking on a new enemy in the islands of the Pacific. However, in doing so the film cannot avoid the role of the CV. Combat footage from the war shows Marine aircraft taking off from a large CV to get to the small airfields in the area of operations. The film also used combat footage of Marines during the war being supported by their fellow Marines in the air with the dropping of bombs and firing rounds into groups of the Japanese enemy. The conclusion of the film required Wayne and his fellow aviators to come to the rescue of endangered CVs from kamikaze attack. His unit fights off the attackers.¹³⁷ As a reviewer wrote these scenes, “are so fast, furious and picturesque and so adroitly spliced in with

¹³⁶ *Operation Pacific*. DVD. Directed by George Waggner. 1951. Los Angeles: Warner Brothers, 2003.

¹³⁷ *The Flying Leathernecks*. DVD. Directed by Nicholas Ray. 1951. Atlanta: Turner Home Ent., 2004.

spectacular newsreel footage that any combat-hardened Marine pilot should justifiably tingle with pride.”¹³⁸ The picture demonstrated for the viewers the importance of the large carriers. While based on the island airfields for ground support, the squadron’s original mission was superseded and changed to protecting the CVs at all costs.

VICTORY AT SEA

Arguably the largest impact on the understanding of the U.S. Navy’s role in World War II in the first twenty years following the war’s conclusion was a series of documentaries. The man in charge of the production of this series covering America’s naval war was a naval veteran. Henry Saloman served during the war as a research assistant to Samuel Eliot Morison, who during and after the war completed his 15-volume *History of United States Naval Operations*. In 1951, Saloman gained approval from NBC to start the documentary project. Granted a budget of half a million dollars, a team of researchers gathered footage of the war from all over the world, producing a collection of over sixty million feet of film. After final production, the 13-hour documentary consisted of just 61,000 feet of film.¹³⁹

The series was first shown as twenty-six half hour episodes appearing on NBC on Sunday afternoons from October 26, 1952 to May 3, 1953. Utilizing real

¹³⁸ “New Drama of War in the Air,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1951, 37.

¹³⁹ Peter C. Rollins, "Victory at Sea: Cold War Epic," in: Gary R. Edgerton/Peter C Rollins (eds.), *Television Histories. Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 103–122.

footage from the war, combined with music by Broadway musical composer Richard Rogers, the series produced an exciting account of the war for its viewers.¹⁴⁰ The episodes covered nearly all aspects of the naval war and these twenty-six episodes included titles such as *Mediterranean Mosaic*, *D-Day*, *Target Suribachi*, and *Design for Peace*. The project's impact was multifaceted. The series earned an Emmy and a Peabody award, was transformed into a movie in 1954, and was rebroadcast several times by NBC in the 1960s.

A reviewer of the series wrote, "'Victory at Sea,' containing an original musical score by Richard Rodgers, utilizes the documentary technique but is designed further as a living historical flashback purposefully aimed at stirring the emotions of viewers."¹⁴¹ In the review the producer Saloman summed up the entire project. He stated, "Our job has been to select and edit the film in such a way that the essence of various naval events is captured."¹⁴² Considering the depiction of escort carriers in the documentary sheds light into how these vessels were marginalized from the national understanding of World War II. Brief shots of CVEs were scattered throughout the documentary series, as are many other vessel types. Episode 11, titled *Magnetic North*, is the first to show an escort carrier at length. This section covers two portions of the war normally marginalized by other aspects of the conflict, the Allies transporting supplies to

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Val Adams, "Naval History: 'Victory at Sea': N.B.C. Film Series is Best of 60,000,000 Feet of Records," *New York Times*, October 26, 1952, 11.

¹⁴² Ibid.

the Russian forces using the Arctic Ocean and the defense of Alaska. While the narrator explained the background on both these campaigns, three shots of CVEs battling the northern oceans are used in highlighting the dangers of these waters.

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Only two of the twenty-six episodes mention the term ‘escort carrier.’ However, in both of these instances, the series utilized rare and extraordinary circumstances. These examples, one from each theater of operations, demonstrated the exception and not the rule of the CVEs operations. The first, Episode 16, *Killers and the Killed: Victory in the Atlantic*, noted the Allied battles for control of the seas against the German U-Boats. The episode summarized escort carriers and their role in clearing the Atlantic of the enemy. One specific action noted was the capture of U-505 by *USS Guadalcanal*, CVE-60.¹⁴⁴ The mention of this operation for the general American viewing public was a first, as this capture was censored during the war from the public to prevent the Germans from becoming aware of the action. Film footage of planes taking off from their short decks is utilized in mentioning the tactics. However, this thirty minute episode, needing to dissect an amazingly complex topic, also noted other tactics

¹⁴³ *Victory at Sea: The Magnetic North*, Episode 11. DVD. Directed by M. Clay Adams. 1952. New York: NBC News, 2004.

¹⁴⁴ After the war, in 1954, *U-505*, was put on display at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, Illinois.

used in the war against the U-Boats including that of Destroyer Escorts (DEs.) and the breaking of the German Enigma code.¹⁴⁵

Episode 19, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, is the second and final mention of the CVEs, and the unique experience of a group of CVEs and DEs designated as Taffy 3. This episode covered four separate engagements that constituted the largest naval engagement in naval history. One of these was a retreating battle of Taffy 3 from a vastly superior Japanese fleet. Known as the Battle of Samar, an overmatched American task force fought a group of Japanese vessels including the *Yamato*, the largest battleship produced during the war by the Japanese Navy. The narrator noted the bravery of the jeep carrier pilots. Described as, “only trained to help ground forces,” these airmen attacked the superior Japanese force with enough violence to convince the enemy to retreat because of the thought they were attacking the main portion of the U.S. fleet, including her large CVs. This episode was the largest coverage of the CVEs in the documentary.¹⁴⁶ However, in doing so the documentary highlighted the most extreme examples of the escort carrier’s experience, and omitted the other many roles these vessels fulfilled during the war. Also, the CVEs were shown as stepping outside their normal role and directly taking on the Japanese surface fleet

¹⁴⁵ *Victory at Sea: Killers and the Killed*, Episode 16. DVD. Directed by M. Clay Adams. 1952. New York: NBC News, 2004.

¹⁴⁶ *Victory at Sea: Battle of Leyte Gulf*, Episode 19. DVD. Directed by M. Clay Adams. 1952. New York: NBC News, 2004.

While the thirteen-hour documentary summarizing the war on the seas did incorporate the escort carriers, again their secondary status was reinforced. The large carriers continued to be highlighted for their participation in the major battles that clearly demonstrated victory over the Japanese Navy. Furthermore, when noting CVEs, the series focused on the exceptional episodes. The major contribution of the CVEs in logistical duties such as shuttling aircraft, training squadrons for carrier operations, and close group support, were marginalized.

NOSTALGIA FOR CVs

As the war receded more than ten years into the past, carrier films were still funded, produced, and shown. Even after the production of a 13-hour documentary on the experience of the U.S. Navy in World War II, there still existed an appetite for stories about carriers from the war. This hints to the taking hold of nostalgia toward the topic. While many scholars have addressed nostalgia's effect on public perception, Dominick La Capra in *History and Memory After Auschwitz* clearing summed this issue up. He wrote, "One particular dubious phenomenon is the nostalgic, sentimental turn to a partly fictionalized past that is conveyed in congenially ingratiating, safely conventionalized narrative form."¹⁴⁷ The nostalgic look back on carriers in World War II focused on the CV taking the war to the enemy and excluded the role of the CVEs. The escort carriers, as swiftly converted cargo hulls, symbolized the under preparedness of the nation going into the war. The simplified version of

¹⁴⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1998), 8.

carriers after the war embraced the CVs taking vengeance for the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and shunned the escort carriers that demonstrated America's lack of understanding of evolving tactics that allowed for the Japanese attack on the Hawaiian Islands. Films continued their focus on CVs. This seems to have become a habit, however, for as the tenth anniversary of the war's conclusion, Hollywood kept producing carrier films that were partially based on fact, used combat footage, and continued the mythologizing of the CVs. These films also hinted at the future use of carriers.

One of the more realistic depictions of carrier life on the silver screen was *The Eternal Sea*. Released in 1955, the film shows the real dangers facing crews of carriers during the war. The main character, pilot John Hoskins, suffered the loss of a leg during the devastating Japanese attack on the carrier the *USS Princeton*.¹⁴⁸ While Hoskins recovers from his massive wound, he faced the emotional trauma of returning to the civilian world missing a leg. However, the movie placed this actor in a Philadelphia hospital, overlooking the Navy Yard in which a replacement *USS Princeton* was under-construction. Utilizing a loophole that stated that the Navy cannot force out a handicapped service member if he was wounded while on active service, Hopkins returns to active duty and later commands the *Princeton*. The film includes the postwar years, in which Hoskins

¹⁴⁸ The real *USS Princeton*, CVL-23, was attacked and sunk as the result a Japanese aircraft dropping a single well-placed bomb on the flight deck. This bomb and later explosions on board caused the *Princeton's* demise on October 20, 1944. A replaced vessel, the fifth one to be named the *Princeton*, was commissioned in November 1945.

proved that jet aircraft were capable of carrier operations as the Navy moves into the Cold War.¹⁴⁹ This film, in realistically depicting the physical and emotional pain of a World War II service member due to the loss of a leg, also promoted the resilience of aircraft carriers in the commissioning of a second *USS Princeton* and also their future role in the jet era.

A second movie depicted the death and harm inflicted on crewmembers of large carriers was *Battle Stations*. Released in 1956, the movie follows the fate of a doomed large carrier that, in the final months of the war, takes a direct hit from a bomb released from a Japanese bomber igniting many of her own cache of bombs. While the ship received massive damage, with assistance from other vessels it was rescued and later makes the journey back home to the Brooklyn Naval Yards.¹⁵⁰ The film used actual combat footage in depicting the amazingly brave actions of the sailors in attempting to save their fellow crewmembers and vessel. This actual footage included the *Franklin* being hit by a Japanese bomb. This footage was also used in the film *Task Force* and in the documentary series *Victory at Sea*.¹⁵¹ *Battle Stations* also highlighted the many activities on board the ship utilizing the point of view of a Chaplain who witnesses many of the duties on board, in contrast to films that only focused on the choices of Admirals or the

¹⁴⁹ *The Eternal Sea*, DVD. Directed by John H. Auer, 1955. New York; Viacom, 2002.

¹⁵⁰ While the vessel is not named, the script follows the story of the *USS Franklin*, CV-13.

¹⁵¹ Suid, *Sailing on the Silver Screen*, 143-4.

decisions of naval aviators in combat. While multiple points of view were added with this film, again the dominance of the CVs is reinforced with the film introducing many men and jobs on board a floating city. Thus, when the ship is attacked, and the crew is fighting for survival, the viewer was aware that hundreds of men are affected.¹⁵² While the film ignores foreshadowing about the future role of carriers after the conflict, it does highlight this singular event involving the near destruction of an individual CV-class aircraft carrier.

In 1957 the U.S. Navy officially gave up on the classification of the CVE. Any of these vessels that rested in the mothball fleet were transformed to other classifications, including that of Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH).¹⁵³ It is ironic that this year also saw a major feature film about World War II that gives some credit to the escort carrier. Director John Ford's 1957 classic *The Wings of Eagles* presented a narrative of resilience for naval aviation and carrier operations. This film used the foil of an individual naval aviator in the depiction of carrier history with a screenplay based on the life of a close friend of Ford's, Commander Frank "Spig" Wead. John Wayne plays Wead, whose life allows the audience to experience a near complete history of carrier aviation, from the interwar period to World War II.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² *Battle Stations*, DVD. Directed by Lewis Seiler, 1956. New York: Viacom, 1999.

¹⁵³ Norman Polmar, *Aircraft Carriers: A Graphic History of Carrier Aviation and Its Influence on World Events* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 736-741.

¹⁵⁴ Suid, *Sailing on the Silver Screen*, 144.

The film opens with an Army cavalry officer, with riding boots and spurs, poking fun at the early naval floatplanes that pioneered naval aviation. Wayne not only confronts this officer, but also attacks Congress in the interwar period about the lack of funding for carriers. In doing this, Wead foreshadowed to the attack on Pearl Harbor to come. As Wead, he stated, “And now we are losing carriers and the planes to fly from them. Someday we may lose something bigger than that.”¹⁵⁵ He commands one of the first squadrons in the Navy and goes on to hold five records for naval aviation, until a freak household accident leaves him partially paralyzed and bed ridden. Wayne’s character, true to Wead’s life, started a writing career that includes screenwriting, and also returned to active duty during World War II.¹⁵⁶

Once back in uniform, Wead was charged with addressing the shortage of large carriers in the Pacific. Partially based on fact, Wead suggested the utilization of jeep carriers in backing up the large carriers with replacements for lost planes and aviators. In selling his idea, Wayne tells the high command that the large CV still represents the “spear point of battle. But, now we have the jeep carriers backing them up with planes and crews.”¹⁵⁷ During the final action scene, Wead was successful in the implementation of the plan. However, the narrator is clear

¹⁵⁵ *Wings of Eagles*. DVD. Directed by John Ford 1957. Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2006.

¹⁵⁶ Wead authored the story or screenplay of *Hall Divers*, *Ceiling Zero*, and *They Were Expendable*.

¹⁵⁷ *Wings of Eagles*. DVD. Directed by John Ford. 1957. Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2006.

that the role of the escort carriers is that of an auxiliary, and not directly taking on the enemy in the Pacific. He states, “Because the big carriers are it Sailor! High, Low, Jack of the game.”¹⁵⁸ Moreover, and to the point of addressing the audience of the mid-1950s, the film points out that the real battle of carriers is not within the Navy Department, but with funding from Congress. As one character stated, they needed to harness “the public on our side. Getting them to help us out with the money men in Congress.”¹⁵⁹ Ford’s movie was not only a tribute to his real-life friend, but also a movie demonstrating the superiority of the large CV carrier during World War II and the power of the platform of a large CV moving forward into the defense of the nation. While the escort carriers received credit for their actions during the Pacific as supporting actor, the limelight remained with those large CVs taking on the Japanese naval fleet.

THE ELECTION OF 1960

The Presidential election of 1960, John F. Kennedy verses Richard M. Nixon, pitted two World War II naval veterans against one another. Both were stationed in the South Pacific, both were officers, both witnessed death first-hand, and both used their status as veterans in postwar American to enter Congress in 1946. Kennedy, however, possessed one advantage over Nixon in highlighting his service, that of a vessel’s name encapsulating and symbolizing his service. Nixon served on both Green Island and Bougainville, had his tent destroyed in an air

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

raid, and was well liked by the men under his command. He and his men witnessed a wounded B-29 attempting to land and then explode, which he noted in a letter home. He wrote, “I can still see the wedding ring on the charred hand of one of the crewmen when I carried his body from the twisted wreckage.”¹⁶⁰ Despite his service, for which he earned two battle stars, Nixon lacked a crystal clear emblem that summed up his service. Kennedy did with PT-109.

In the inaugural parade for Kennedy, a plywood PT-109 was pulled down Pennsylvania Avenue. Veterans from the ship waved at their former commanding officer, the newly sworn-in President.¹⁶¹ This combination of two letters and three numbers served as a powerful pictogram for his service. It summed up the actions of August 2, 1943, when PT-109, with Kennedy at command, was sliced in half by a Japanese destroyer, which killed two of the crewmembers. The World War II naval career of JFK shaped the national understanding of the conflict. His rise to the Presidency allowed for a reconsideration of the U.S. Navy in World War II. His experience demonstrated that bravery and honor were not limited only to large vessels engaged in massive battles.

In 1961, Robert J. Donovan published *PT 109: John F. Kenney in World War II*, which covered the striking and sinking of the vessel. In early 1963, a film based on the book was released by Warner Brothers, which starred Cliff

¹⁶⁰ Lance Marrow, *The Best Year of Their Lives: Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon in 1948* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 18.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

Robertson as Kennedy.¹⁶² JFK's story demonstrated a national understanding evolving and reconsidering a vessel whose crew consisted of just 15 men. A reviewer wrote, "In 'PT 109' we see a man assailed by hunger, heat, cold, discouragement and danger rising, without dramatics or pasturing, to greatness."¹⁶³ The reviewer believed the story, however, was not limited to JFK. He continued, "The significance is that he was only one of many, only one of a great band of heroes. Our history is bright with those who have risen to the occasion."¹⁶⁴ However, while Kennedy's naval experience helped define his past, and recreational sailing off the coast of New England in a sailboat was his family's love affair, when the U.S. Navy sought a memorial for him, they shunned a small vessel. In April of 1964, the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered the Navy to proceed with the plans for CVA-67, which would be named for the murdered President.¹⁶⁵ In memorializing the fallen President McNamara sought the vessel that symbolized U.S. dominance on the high seas.

The front page of the *New York Times* on May 27, 1967, contained an image of the 9-year-old Caroline Kennedy striking a bottle of champagne on the bow of the vessel named for her late father. With her mother and younger brother

¹⁶² Robert J. Donovan, *PT 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II*, (Fawcett Publications, 1961).

¹⁶³ John Toland, "A Profile in Courage, a Background of War," *New York Times*, November 19, 1961, BR3.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Polmar, *Aircraft Carriers*, 665.

watching, Caroline declared, “I christen thee John F. Kennedy!”¹⁶⁶ With this century’s old act, the 88,000 ton monument for the lost President was pushed back into Chesapeake Bay. President Lyndon Johnson addressed the crowd gathered for the ceremony. His short address left no doubt about the meaning of this floating memorial. He stated, “Let this ship we christen in his name be a testament that his countrymen have not forgotten.”¹⁶⁷ This event on Memorial Day weekend named the vessel, but its formal acceptance into the fleet took place the next year.

Again, on the front page of the *New York Times*, Caroline Kennedy is shown presenting the new Captain of the *USS John F. Kennedy*, CVA-67, with a gift of remembrance.¹⁶⁸ She is shown on September 8, 1968, in front of a plaque of a profile of her father.¹⁶⁹ This action demonstrates that the remembrance of a nation was more than simply naming a vessel after a fallen leader. The acceptance and the display of objects related to the 35th President demonstrates the role the large carriers played in perpetuating the memory of those for whom they are named. While after World War II the Navy outlawed the use of wood on any U.S. Navy vessel in the name of fire suppression, an exception was made for CVA-67.

¹⁶⁶ Max Frankel, “Family of Late President and Johnson at Ceremony,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1967, 1.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Her designation changed later to CV-67, nicknamed by her crew “Big John,” she for formally decommissioned on August 1, 2007.

¹⁶⁹ B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., “Carrier Kennedy Is Handed Over to Navy by Caroline,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, 1.

The in-port cabin was designed by Jacqueline Kennedy and used wood paneling to honor her husband's love of sailing. In this room was a framed photograph of Kennedy and his daughter Carline sailing together. While Kennedy served on a vessel whose maximum weight capacity was just over 50 tons, the U.S. Navy remembered him with a large carrier whose compliment of men consisted of nearly 5,000 sailors. In an act of remembrance for the first President who was a World War II veteran only the dominant force in the fleet was an adequate memorial.

URGE TO REMEMBER

The Bicentennial provided the U.S. a platform for reorientation with its past. A vast range of events transpired during the celebration of America's two hundredth birthday; the Department of Treasury issued Bicentennial coins, NASA officially debuted the Space Shuttle, and the Smithsonian opened a number of special exhibitions. The historian John Bodnar wrote that the Bicentennial gave Americans a chance to move away from the divisive decade of the 1960s. He wrote, "For many Americans the weekend celebration surrounding July 4, 1976, marked an end to a period of social unrest and dissent and a renewal of American consensus and patriotism."¹⁷⁰ Television also played a role in this celebration with millions witnessing the same programs. Of this, Bodnar wrote, "Millions of

¹⁷⁰ John Bodnar, *Remaking of America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 227.

citizens were exposed to rituals and symbols in common.”¹⁷¹ Feature films also gave millions of Americans a chance to experience another aspect of the American past, which included revisiting the aircraft carriers of World War II.

World War II held a unique place in American memory for it did not represent division, but unity. The nostalgia surrounding World War II increased with the civic breakdown of the 1960s. As Philip Beidler wrote, “[T]he glow of 1945 persists as a kind of beacon, a moment in which American’s attitudes toward themselves and their relations to the world at least once seem to have been filled with a clarity and purpose.”¹⁷² In comparison with other aspects of the American past, such as slavery, Indian removal, and suppression of women’s rights, World War II held the possibility to be framed in the light of a high collective moral task.

For the American public, the Second World War for the most part contained none of the moral and ambiguous questions raised in the 1960s. Joe Amato described the thinking of the American public about their nation before the revolts over race, gender, and Vietnam. He wrote, “America, it was officially claimed, deserved gratitude, not accusation; its gifts should never be forgotten. The majority, especially the veterans, wholeheartedly agreed.”¹⁷³ The topic of World War II gave those seeking to craft a narrative of national unity an amazing

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Beidler, *The Good War’s Greatest Hits*, 3.

¹⁷³ Amato, *Guilt and Gratitude*, 149.

opportunity. All Americans who lived it, whether servicemen, civilian, or child, were impacted. The experience transcended race, gender, and economic status.¹⁷⁴ In the mid 1970s, in comparison with the complicated and still heated discords of recent history, World War II held the potential for a celebration along the lines of shared sacrifice and national unity. Paul Boyer, in a chapter of *History Wars*, argued that World War II is remembered as a time where no contestation existed between the American population and its government. He wrote, “Americans looked back nostalgically to the 1941-45 period as a time when the nation’s aims were clear and just, a time when nearly all citizens had rallied behind the government.”¹⁷⁵

In comparison with the struggles of the 1960s, and from the perspective of nostalgia, World War II shone as a time of clear moral choice for the Americans who lived through it. Closer examination, however, revealed problems. The internment of Japanese-American citizens, racial segregation in the armed forces and the country at large, the firebombing of German civilians, and the atomizing of two cities at the close of the war were events that presented a minefield of issues for those seeking to celebrate the Bicentennial.

A hint of the contested nature of these issues was seen in the fall of 1976, when Paul Tibbets, who flew and commanded the Enola Gay that dropped the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 100.

¹⁷⁵ Paul Boyer, “Whose History Is It Anyway?,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles For the American Past*, ed. Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 118.

atomic bomb on Hiroshima, reenacted the bombing at an air show in Harlingen, Texas. Over 40,000 people watched as Tibbets flew overhead in a restored B-29. The U.S. Army placed explosives on the ground that produced a mushroom-shaped cloud when Tibbets flew over.¹⁷⁶ The stunt was performed to raise funds for the Confederate Air Force¹⁷⁷, a group devoted to the preservation of historic World War II era aircraft. An article on the event was titled, “Hiroshima Bomb Dropped Again: 40,000 Watch Holocaust Re-Enactment.”¹⁷⁸ The reaction to the stunt was immediate and criticism of the “reenactment” surfaced in both the U.S. and Japan. Four days after the event, the U.S. Embassy in Japan issued an apology.¹⁷⁹ This event illustrates that in the year of the Bicentennial, numerous topics from World War II were problematic at best. Many, like the use of the atomic bombs, were too sensitive to be officially included in the year’s worth of celebrations.

One topic that met all the goals of a clear moral delineation between good and evil, and avoided the issue of civilians interned or killed, was the carrier battle of Midway. The noted military historian John Keegan wrote how the battle served

¹⁷⁶ “Too Soon? The Hiroshima Reenactment Incident,” Conelrad Adjacemnt, accessed on February 17, 2012, <http://conelrad.blogspot.com/2010/08/too-soon-hiroshima-reenactment-incident.html>.

¹⁷⁷ This group later, after pressure over their name, changed their official name to the Commemorative Air Force.

¹⁷⁸ “40,000 Watch Holocaust Re-Enactment,” *Big Springs Herald*, October 11, 1976, 3-A.

¹⁷⁹ “U.S. Apologizes to Japan for Show That Re-enacted Hiroshima Attack,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1976, 10.

as a wonderful topic for future mythmaking. He wrote, “Midway, the turning-point battle of the Pacific War, was a contest between American and Japanese maritime technology, expressed in numbers and quality of carriers and carrier aircraft deployed.”¹⁸⁰ This epic tide-turning sea battle as a topic of celebration required an equally powerful medium for the American audience of the Bicentennial.

This feature film not only included the biggest vessels yet shown on film, but also the greatest and most dramatic victory of the war in the Pacific. The film *Midway*, released in 1976, included a cast of major stars such as Charlton Heston, Glenn Ford, and Henry Fonda and depicted the carrier battle of World War II that turned the tide of the war. However, even this cast of stars and a screenplay about a major sea victory was not big enough. The film also required the placement of special speakers in the movie theaters, for it was only one of four films in which the soundtrack utilized Sensurround. This allowed for the segregation of sounds for the audience, thus highlighting the noises of individual crashes, explosions, and aircraft engines.

The producer of the film, Walter Mirisch, sought to develop a film about the Battle of Midway for the Bicentennial. The film presented a much easier story to tell the American audience in 1976 when compared with the use of atomic weapons. This account focused on turning back the advancing enemy and the tide of the war, instead of depicting a successful surprise enemy attack on an

¹⁸⁰ John Keegan, *The Battle for History: Re-Fighting World War II* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 66.

unsuspecting fleet in Hawaii. Mirsch, realizing he needed U.S. Navy assistance in the production of the film, in late 1974 sent a draft of the script to the U.S. Navy. A communication within the Navy demonstrated their take on the possibilities of the film for their branch of the service. As a communiqué to the Navy's Chief of Information stated, "(film) could be useful in recruiting efforts as part of the Bicentennial and as an adjunct to the Sea-Air Operations Hall of the new Air and Space Museum which will focus on carriers."¹⁸¹ The Navy thus offered the services of a World War II era carrier, the *USS Lexington*, CV-16. Filming took place onboard in the Gulf of Mexico where the *Lexington* served for screen shots depicting the decks of both American and Japanese carriers.¹⁸²

The film's overall narrative focused on the power of carriers. The Japanese demonstrated the major shift in tactics with the ascent of the carrier over the battleship with its surprise carrier based attack on Pearl Harbor. The film depicted the vulnerability of the U.S. Navy in early 1942. The theme of the film is that brave naval aviators and bold decisions by admirals brought about the destruction of four Japanese carriers.¹⁸³ When a major film recalled the naval war of World War II, in a year celebrating the Bicentennial of the nation, the Battle of Midway, and the CVs that won it, were introduced to a new, younger American audience. When the noted military movie historian Lawrence Suid interviewed

¹⁸¹ Navy memorandum, December 19, 1974; *Lexington to Cnaira*, Corps Christi, Texas, December 26, 1974, (DoD).

¹⁸² Suid, *Sailing the Silver Screen*, 194.

¹⁸³ *Midway*. DVD. Directed by Jack Smight. 1976. Los Angeles: Universal, 1996.

the producer Mirsch about the meaning of the film released in 1976, he rejected the concept of trying to forget Vietnam and the turmoil of the 1960s. Suid wrote, for Mirsch, “*Midway* simply helped young people learn about World War II and the major turning point in the war against Japan.”¹⁸⁴

A reviewer in the *New York Times* praised the film for bringing this story of World War II to modern viewers. It stated, “It was the turning point of the war against the Japanese who lost four carriers and never again seriously threatened American sea power in the central Pacific.”¹⁸⁵ The reviewer was critical of some portions of the film, including certain adaptations in the script, and he urged those interested in a more accurate account to read Samuel Eliot Morison’s works. This aside, he still praised the movie for it showed “the battle that established beyond doubt the leading role that carriers were to play in the Pacific war.”¹⁸⁶ For the viewers of the film, this history lesson not only highlighted the role of the CVs, but also gave no indication that other carriers aided in the war effort. For the audience of 1976, “aircraft carrier” meant the CVs. This film followed the trend of excluding the roles of the CVEs and CVLs.

PLATFORM OF MEMORY

When *Midway* was released in 1976, just a handful of World War II era aircraft carriers existed in any form. All the CVEs, after 1957, were either

¹⁸⁴ Suid, *Sailing On the Silver Screen*, 196.

¹⁸⁵ Vincent Canby, “On Film, the Battle of ‘Midway’ is Lost,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1976, 11.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

scrapped or converted. For example at the time of the movie's release, the former hull of the *USS Long Island*, CVE-1, rested in a Rotterdam harbor functioning as a floating dormitory for medical students at the University of Rotterdam.¹⁸⁷ Of the nine CVLs constructed before the end of the war, by 1976 just one remained, and this flew the flag of another country. *USS Cabot*, CVL-28, was transferred to the Spanish Navy in 1967, and re-commissioned as the *SNS Dedalo*, R-01.¹⁸⁸ Of the 23 large CVs commissioned before the close of the war, just 6 remained, in some form, by 1976.

The first half of the 1970s proved especially hard on the American aircraft carriers that were commissioned before the close of the war. In 1971, the *USS Boxer*, CV-21, was scrapped, the following year, the *USS Lake Champlain*, CV-39. The purging of 1973 included the loss of *USS Bunker Hill*, CV-17, *USS Wasp*, CV-18, and the *USS Antietam*, CV-36. The year the film *Midway* was filmed, in 1975, three more carriers were cut up, including the *USS Essex*, CV-9, *USS Ticonderoga*, CV-14, and the *USS Randolph*, CV-15. The Bicentennial year, the *USS Hancock*, CV-19, was lost.¹⁸⁹ The first portion of the 1970s saw nine carriers sold for the only thing they possessed of value from the U.S. Navy's point of view, the metal that formed them. This purging, however, would catch the

¹⁸⁷ Y'Blood, *The Little Giants*, 415.

¹⁸⁸ Andrew Faltum, *The Independence Light Aircraft Carriers*, (Charleston, SC: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 2002), 113.

¹⁸⁹ "The Carriers-The List," Official Website of the United States Navy, accessed on November 16, 2011, <http://www.navy.mil/navydata/ships/carriers/cv-list.asp>.

attention of those supporting movements to save floating examples of the carrier war and World War II. For the escort carriers, the movement was too late. However, for their larger sisters, this preservation movement would construct platforms of memory.

The objects left from the war four decades after the conflict played a role in how the war was remembered. As the noted anthropologist Nicholas Saunders wrote in his study of World War I, “objects survive as expressions of ‘war beyond conflict’, revitalizing meanings and creating new engagements between people and things.”¹⁹⁰ These ships held the potential of morphing and encapsulating a number of meanings that included the individual vessel, the overall wars in which it took part, and the men who served on these ships. Only 7 World War II era aircraft carriers existed when this urge to remember World War II surfaced, one a museum, one in the Spanish Navy, and five still in the realm of the U.S. Navy. However, like many preservation movements, whether those aimed at saving a historic neighborhood or an endangered landscape, preservation efforts only commence once the loss of a particular entity is recognized. Once faced with the true prospect of losing history, the danger was addressed in a collective way.

A window into this preservationist collective effort is seen in the recent refurbishment of the USS Intrepid museum. This two-year process had the floating museum towed from Manhattan Island to Station Island, where her exterior was repainted and she was provided with interactive exhibitions. This

¹⁹⁰ Saunders, *Matters of Conflict*, 6.

was a collective enterprise comprised of naval veterans from World War II through Vietnam, naval history buffs, and the institution of the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum. Once completed in 2007, the vessel was towed back to Pier 86 in New York City, on the anniversary of D-Day.

Over four hundred people attended the return of the ship, which included a ceremony commemorating D-Day sixty-three years earlier. One veteran, who supported his old ship's restoration, on seeing her, was deeply impacted. He stated, "I nearly broke down in tears when I saw her."¹⁹¹ He continued, "Her bottom has been scraped of barnacles and she looks just like she did way back when."¹⁹² Another said, "It's like running into an old girlfriend who had a facelift."¹⁹³ One other sailor said, "This ship is a part of me and I'm a part of her."¹⁹⁴

This preservationist effort was a mixture of private and public funding totaling some \$70 million, which included the city of New York paying for the rebuilding of Pier 86 that would house the newly overhauled Intrepid. Attending the event to honor the ship and commemorate D-Day was an ex-police officer from New York. Art Roffi, who served on the ship during the Vietnam War, told a reporter that he would not have missed seeing his ship returning to port for the

¹⁹¹ Pat Milton, "USS Intrepid aircraft carrier-turned-museum returns to NYC on D-Day," *The Associated Press*, June 6, 2007.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

world. The meaning of this ship to these individual veterans sheds light into the complexities of meaning this particular CV took on. While the ship returned to Pier 86 to honor D-Day, when the invasion of Europe actually occurred in 1944, the Intrepid was docked at Alameda Naval Air Station in California. From here she served in the Pacific.¹⁹⁵ She had no tactical connection to the operations of D-Day. However, sixty-three years later, thanks to the preservationist efforts of veterans and others, this CV symbolized a complex form of meaning of the entire conflict of World War II, including D-Day. However, for the CVEs, the preservation movement that allowed the meaning of these ships to morph into representing much more than just the individual vessel was 20 years too late, and the CVLs had just one example flying the flag of Spain.

The first, *USS Yorktown*, CV-10, was decommissioned out of the U.S. Navy in 1970 and a preservationist movement transformed her into a museum in 1975. This ship became the centerpiece of Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum located in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁹⁶ This vessel, and four other museums formed around large World War II era carriers, function as platforms of memory. The vast majority of the visitors to these museums had no living memory of World War II. Thus, these vessels hold enormous power of shaping visitors' perspectives on World War II. The scholar Alison Landsberg

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ The four other carrier museums are the following: USS Midway Museum (*USS Midway*, CVB-41), Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum Complex (*USS Intrepid*, CV-11), USS Lexington Museum on the Bay (*USS Lexington*, CV-16), and the USS Hornet Museum (*USS Hornet*, CV-12).

argued that visitors to such sites produce a memory for themselves on certain subjects. She writes, “A practice of memory then, relies-metaphorically and metonymically-on the objects that remain.”¹⁹⁷ With CV based museums, this process takes place in a number of ways. The USS Lexington docked in Corpus Christi Bay, TX has ship-based programs that are 24 hours long. Cub scouts not only learn about the history of the ship and World War II with lectures and exhibitions, they eat off Navy-issued plates, sleep in berthing compartments onboard, and talk with veterans who served in the U.S. Navy.¹⁹⁸ These young boys are encapsulated in a ship that served in the war, and hear from its participants, for a full day. While Landsberg’s analysis focuses on the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., this theory can also apply to those visiting CV based museums. Boarding these platforms of memory, viewing the environs of the exhibitions, and participating in the education programs, contains the power of shaping visitors’ perspectives on the U.S. Navy in World War II. The power of informing is not limited to the exhibitions, but to the very vessel itself. This is especially so for individual veterans who served on these particular ships. As one museum volunteer stated, “I’ve taken guys back to their bunks and they just sit there and cry.”¹⁹⁹ These CVs interpreting carriers for the U.S. Navy, in their very form of a large carrier, demonstrate to the visitor a sense of what a carrier looks

¹⁹⁷ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 119.

¹⁹⁸ Lynn Brezosky, “Visitors Drawn to USS Lexington Aircraft Carrier Museum,” *The Associated Press*, November 8, 2001.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

like. Thus, other examples of carriers, such as CVEs, are drowned out when no floating example remains.

The transformation of a ship of war into a platform of memory comes at a cost. The vessel designed to cruise over three-fourths of the world's surface is confined. The engines no longer hum. Aircraft no longer fly from her deck. The original residents, thousands of crewmembers going about their wartime duties on a floating city, are replaced by tourists seeking an experience from the past. These individuals not only want to see artifacts from the past of the U.S. Navy, but require bathrooms, places to rest, and food. This transformation for some veterans is troubling.

The classic work by World War II veteran Alvin Kernan, *Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket's World War II*, covers the enlisted man's point of view of serving on a massive carrier. On closing the work he considers the meaning of his service as a World War II veteran. This includes the chance he had to donate to the cause of saving his vessel by transforming it into a floating platform of memory. He rejected this notion. He wrote:

Many years after the war in which the Enterprise became the most famous of American warships, she was about to be broken up, and there was a national campaign to raise money to save her as a museum. I thought about it but decided not to contribute because I couldn't bear to think of her sitting around in some backwater, being exploited in unworthy ways, invaded by hordes of tourists with no sense of her greatness. Better by far, I thought, to leave her to memory of those who had served on her...²⁰⁰

Kernan rejected supporting the effort to save his vessel. However, five preservation movements garnered enough support for the conversation of CVs

²⁰⁰ Alvin Kernan, *Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket's World War II Odyssey* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 22.

into floating platforms of memory. Major transitions occurred in these efforts for the individual vessels. The vessels, designed to cruise the oceans in upwards of 30 knots, remained at rest. One factor that did not change was the number of activities on board. In their first lives, the crews of the CVs maintained aircraft, served mountains of food, cleaned tons of laundry, and waged war. Juggling multiple agendas continued when the ship was a gateway to the past. The flight deck and hangar decks displayed a range of aircraft. Exhibition space paid tribute to the men and women who served on the vessel in the U.S. Navy. Visitors purchased snacks and drinks and rested in the original galley. Groups of boy scouts came onboard with their sleeping bags for overnight excursions. Multiple zones of occupation, including honoring, educating, and recreating, occupied the same particular space.²⁰¹ Negotiating these realms on a single ship on these platforms of memory can be problematic, especially so for the individual veterans who served on the original ships.

LAST CHANCE

The 1990s saw the last and only effort to preserve a carrier outside of the large CVs. This effort would have nuanced the story of American carriers from World War II. The CVEs were long gone. Of the hulls of former CVEs that took on additional useful roles, none survived to see the 1980s. However, one example of an American carrier outside of the celebrated CV was still afloat. Flying a Spanish flag, and surviving her second nation for 22 years, the *SNS Dedalo*, R-01

²⁰¹ Lynn Brezosky, "Visitors Drawn to USS Lexington Aircraft Carrier Museum," *The Associated Press*, November 8, 2001.

was decommissioned on August 5, 1989. The ceremony leaving the Spanish Navy occurred in this ship's original homeland, in the United States, in the city of New Orleans. The ship was received by a preservationist organization called *Cabot/Dedalo* Foundation.²⁰² This group was composed of a number of veteran's and preservationist organizations.

The story of the preservation effort was one of stalled efforts and increasing debts. One success was her listing on the National Historic Register. However, as wharfage fees increased in New Orleans, in 1997 she was towed to Port Isabel, Texas. Again the effort stalled and in 1999 she was scrapped in Brownsville, Texas. The frustration for those who fought the good fight in seeking to save her was seen in a quote from the past president of the USS *Cabot* Association. He stated, "When you get an obsolete ship, as far as your navy is concerned, you scrap it....We've done that with airplanes and ships to the point that we have a very few historic ones (left)."²⁰³

In the dissection of the *Cabot* a token piece of the carrier was saved as a testament to her former self. The future use of this artifact blurred the lines between commemoration, education, and recreation. The piece saved was an anti-aircraft gun on the flight deck of the *Cabot*. This piece of the war rests at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida. The west wing of this museum contains a replica of the flight deck, outlined on the floor in full scale.

²⁰² Faltum, *The Independence Light Aircraft Carriers*, 113.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 114.

On the flight deck starboard side rests a recreated superstructure. Visitors are welcomed to walk on this recreated wooden flight deck, on which rests a number of World War II aircraft. This simulated platform of memory includes an interactive option with the original artifact from the CVL-28, the anti-aircraft gun. This gives visitors a choice of partaking in an activity that obscures the lines between the commemorating of this class of ship, imagining the wartime conditions, and tourist entertainment. As the official website states, “This exhibition also houses an anti-aircraft gun from the *USS Cabot*; climb in, take aim, and defend the ship!”²⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

The *Cabot* was not saved. Thus, the only floating platforms of memory honoring World War II carriers are CVs. The mythology surrounding the CVs continues to evolve for all the new visitors. This continuum is nothing new. The large CVs made great headlines during the war. While they represented just a fraction of the total 99 commissioned carriers from the war, their deeds overshadowed their smaller sister carriers, the CVLs and CVEs. The modes of memory manufactured around the CVs, produced during and after the war, gave birth to a symbolic space these vessels took on in American memory of the conflict. Over time, new carriers constructed after the war served as fitting memorials of deceased presidents. Actions such as these transformed the meaning

²⁰⁴ “USS Cabot Flight Deck,” National Naval Aviation Museum, accessed on November 19, 2011, http://www.navalaviationmuseum.org/ExhibitsAndCollections/Online-Exhibits/WWII_Carriers/USSCabot.aspx.

of the term “aircraft carrier” for the American public. The term came to mean the large CVs that took the war in the blue water fighting against the Japanese Empire Navy, served as a platform of waging war in both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, and the Space race.

For the crewmembers of the 71 escort carriers, their story was excluded from the national memory of the war for a unique reason. The national narrative celebrated the CVs, thus creating a narrative excluding the classification that represented the vast majority of the aircraft carriers from World War II. The veterans of CVEs would take their memorialization into their own hands. They constructed their own ways to remember that were both collective and individually based. Even when the only remains of the escort carriers were in the minds of the men who served on them these veterans developed multiform methods of commemoration.

The complexities of commemoration for veterans of CVs, however, were also challenging. While movies and documentaries highlighted their role, and these CVs were commemorated in a host of ways, from cartoons to names of airports, all these acts of remembrance were in some way simplifications of very complex individual experiences. This theme is still seen today with the five floating examples that remain. Remembrance centered on the rare experiences of the war, the one major engagement, the one pilot that saved his ship, or the one decision made by an Admiral. The daily life and struggles of the average crewmembers were drowned out in the development of myth.

Possessing platforms of memory, five in fact, did not produce a clear route to honoring their service. These former warships were converted into museums, requiring a host of functions. Floating platforms of memory were not simply ambassadors to the past with no changes occurring since their retirement from the Navy. Nor were these temples to their former crewmembers for quiet visitors to respectfully visit in bowed silence. These are noisy environs, full of exhibitions and educational activities. These floating platforms blur the lines between honoring veterans, explaining past U.S. military involvements, and functioning as retreats for boy scouts.

CHAPTER 3

THE 'JEEP' OF THE ATLANTIC: THE STORY OF THE CREWMEMBER OF THE USS BLOCK ISLAND, CVE-21'S, MULTIPLE MISSIONS OF TEAMWORK

On the morning of December 7th 1941, Captain Logan Ramsey received a shock working as the chief of staff to the Commander Patrol Wings for the Hawaiian Islands. Working from Ford Island at Pearl Harbor, the surprise came from a patrolling aircraft stating they attacked and destroyed a submerged enemy submarine just one mile from the entrance to the harbor. In his attempt to confirm this report, Ramsey witnessed what he thought was a young American pilot “flathatting,” a term for flying too low and fast in a reckless manor. Ramsey and his staff officer could not identify the number on the aircraft, and thus its violating pilot. Concerned with this breach of safety, Ramsey watched as the unidentified aircraft pulled away and saw the delayed explosion from a bomb it dropped. Ramsey ran into the headquarters radio room and ordered a statement to be read in plain English and on all frequencies, “Air raid, Pearl Harbor. This is no drill!”²⁰⁵

For Ramsey, this attack was personal, as the *USS Texas*, BB-35, which lay in ruins, was his first assignment after graduating from the Naval Academy in 1918. More importantly for Ramsey, his wife and daughter were also on Ford

²⁰⁵ *Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), Part 32, 444.

Island during the attack.²⁰⁶ Ramsey, from his position on Ford Island adjacent to Battleship Row witnessed the destruction the Japanese armed forces wreaked on the unprepared American military, including eight of the nine U.S. battleships in the Pacific fleet destroyed or damaged. Other injured naval vessels included three destroyers and three light cruisers. Seventy-five percent of the aircraft based at Pearl Harbor, some 164 planes, also lay destroyed. Fortunately for the U.S. Navy, the three large fleet aircraft carriers (CVs) in the Pacific fleet were out to sea during the attack.²⁰⁷ Fortunately indeed, for at the time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's radio address to sixty million Americans on December 8th, they represented nearly half of America's carrier strength, between the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets. The Navy had only seven large fleet carriers.²⁰⁸

They, not the battleships, were the true capital ships of the U.S. Navy. *USS Yorktown*, CV-5, exemplified these massive vessels, with its displacement of over 19,000 tons, its crew of almost 1,900 sailors, and space to store and launch 96 aircraft. *Yorktown*, charged with bringing lethal U.S. Navy airpower to the enemy, cruised at over thirty knots, as fast as any ship in the fleet. These sleek hulls sliced through the ocean, creating their own flying weather, for even in perfectly calm weather, the powerful vessels could produce enough speed to create the required

²⁰⁶ Mary Anne Ramsey, "Only Yesteryear", *Naval History*, Winter 1991, 26.

²⁰⁷ Geoffrey C. Ward, *The War: An Intimate History 1941-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 1-5.

²⁰⁸ Jim Noles, *Twenty-Three Minutes to Eternity: The Final Voyage of the Escort Carrier USS Liscome Bay* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 3.

lift for aircraft to get airborne.²⁰⁹ These vessels did not worry about aiding in auxiliary roles--they sought to destroy the enemy in the open ocean--or what was termed “blue-water fighting.”²¹⁰ However, the *Yorktown* and her six sister ships required many years and many millions of dollars to construct, years and resources that America did not have in the face of immediate Japanese onslaught.

The days after December 7th, Americans, glued to their radios, learned the full details surrounding the simultaneous Japanese attacks in Asia including those on U.S. forces in the Philippines, Guam, and Wake Island. Three days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S.²¹¹ A solution to this desperate problem required a weapon barely off the drawing boards in December 1941- the escort carrier, or CVE. These yet-unborn vessels required commanding officers; Capt. Logan Ramsey would serve as the first Commanding officer on one of the earliest produced escort carriers. Ramsey’s leadership would be challenged in transforming new members of the Navy, most of whom had never seen an aircraft carrier much less fought on one, into a cohesive fighting unit.

The story of one CVE, *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, is of particular interest in bearing witness to the first portion of the conflict in the Atlantic Ocean against

²⁰⁹ Roger Chesneau, *Aircraft Carriers of the World, 1914 to the Present* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 206.

²¹⁰ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), 5.

²¹¹ Ward, 5, 13.

the feared German U-boats.²¹² The exploits of *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, also tell of a nation moving rapidly from a strong isolationism to one fully engulfed in warfare. Her men trained for carrier operations, and conducted the early phase of Lend-Lease efforts in protecting Great Britain from German invasion. Later, the crew participated in Hunter-Killer missions searching for the German U-boats that threatened the lifeline of the convey routes from the U.S. to the U.K. Finally, the ship itself became a victim of one of these U-boats, and thus represented the only U.S aircraft carrier lost in the Atlantic during World War II. The new weapon of the CVE serves as a prime example of American ingenuity in quickly designing, developing and creating new vessels to address a deficiency. Examining this vessel and her crew will demonstrate the U.S. Navy's venture into correcting its dangerous shortage of aircraft carriers in the first phase of the war, the nature of the Lend-Lease operation in aiding the British, the ships' use as a platform in experimenting with new weapons, and details the experiences in carrying the war directly to the U-boats that threatened Allied war and merchant vessels.

This very adaptability of the escort carriers produced a unique conundrum for naval veterans decades later in constructing ways of remembering and commemorating their service. While the large vessels designed and constructed

²¹² A previous vessel was listed as *USS Block Island*. As a report draft on April 4th 1946 by the U.S. Navy and archived at the Naval History and Heritage Command notes, "AVG-8, acquired from the Maritime Commission (MC HULL 161) had been assigned the name BLOCK ISLAND but was turned over to the British before being commissioned in the U.S. Navy, so this vessel does not count." This vessel, given to the British under Lend-Lease would go on to be the *HMS Hunter*, D-80.

with a singular purpose, such as battleships and the large fleet carriers, remained in service decades after the war, no escort carriers existed after July 1, 1957.²¹³ While certainly battleships, larger carriers, and other vessels were decommissioned and scrapped in the decades after the war, individual examples did survive that could later become platforms of memory. These platforms of memory, while situated on a single floating vessel representing the past, contain a host of functions. Like the very ships, with compartmentalized rooms for a range of functions from conducting war to accommodating daily life, these platforms of memory allowed for a range of activities focusing on the past. Generations after the war experience they served as exhibitions on naval conflicts, a gathering point for former veterans, and memorials to servicemen lost on the individual vessel and the war as a whole.

For the escort carriers, the year 1957 represents the moment when the U.S. Navy changed their name, thus their role, to a different one. These former escort carriers in the years to come faced a range of fates, including the scrap-yard, serving as a floating university, and transporting equipment and supplies during the Vietnam War.²¹⁴ However, none of these vessels exist today to serve as platforms of memory such as those that other Navy veterans of larger vessels now enjoy decades later. Considering the veterans who served on the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21 and CVE-106, presents an interesting story of veterans struggling

²¹³ Grossnick, *United States Naval Aviation, 1910-1955*, 444.

²¹⁴ William Y'Blood, *The Little Giants: U.S. Escort Carriers Against Japan*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 415.

to remember two escort carriers. The first lost in enemy action on the high seas, the second to the scrap yards of Japan.

THE BEGINNING

The U.S. government had designed, built, launched, and deployed 86 escort carriers, 32 of which were transferred to the Royal Navy under Lend-Lease.²¹⁵ A study of these ships not only illustrates the entire U.S. naval experience in World War II, but also the amazing transformation of the United States from a nation completely unprepared for war to one of the dominant military might as its conclusion.²¹⁶ In addition, the role of the escort carriers also sheds light onto the vast demobilization of the U.S Navy at the conclusion of the conflict. The escort carriers paid a high price in being scrapped or converted before an example could be saved for prosperity.

Weapons, like other human inventions, are a series of experiments. Thus, most weapons undergo a number of modifications that produce different classifications from the original design. The first series of the CVEs, the *Bogue* class, converted from C-3 cargo hulls, equaled about half the size of their 'big sister' fast aircraft carriers (CVs). Where the CVs hulls, based on those of cruisers, sliced through the water at speeds in excess of 30 knots, the hulls of the

²¹⁵ The two most important works on this subject include, Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Vol. 10: The Atlantic Battle Won*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956. and Sir Richard Clarke, *Anglo-American Economic Collaboration in War and Peace, 1942-1949*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

²¹⁶ Roy A. Grossnick, *United States Naval Aviation, 1910-1955*, (Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1996), 427.

Bogue class, designed with commercial trade in mind, plowed through the ocean at 18 knots transporting massive amounts of cargo. The *Bogue* class had a wooden flight deck of just over 450 feet long, and carried an air wing of only 28 aircraft. The disparity in size earned these ships the nickname “Baby Flattops”. Over time, however, the name “Jeep Carrier” arose and stuck, conveying the varied and flexible roles the CVEs played in both theaters of the conflict. Importantly, escort carriers construction time was far less, and the escort carriers presented a smaller risk to the Navy compared to the sinking of a CV. While the CVs served in the dangerous role of seeking out the enemy surface fleet, the CVEs participated in a host of tasks each with a unique threat to the vessel and crew.²¹⁷

Within the U.S. Navy during the interwar period, there was some support for the construction of small aircraft carriers. Thus in 1927, Lieutenant Commander Bruce G. Leighton wrote a report for the Navy Department titled “*Light Aircraft Carriers, A Study of Their Possible Uses in So-Called ‘Cruiser Operations’*”. Leighton’s report called for the use of these vessels in a range of operations, including attacks on enemy shore emplacements and anti-submarine activities.²¹⁸ While this report proved useful later, the idea and report rested in the Navy Department files before the concept resurfaced over a decade later.

In 1939, Captain John S. McCain expanded on Leighton’s work, proposing the construction of eight “pocket size” carriers rated at cruiser speed.

²¹⁷ Chesneau, 216.

²¹⁸ Noles, 4.

The next year, the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Construction and Repair initiated the drawing of plans for these ships, to be constructed from converted passenger vessels. Soon this proposal caught the eye of the best sponsor one could hope for - former Assistant Secretary of the Navy and current President, Franklin D. Roosevelt.²¹⁹ The renowned naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that in private conversations with him FDR used the term "my Navy."²²⁰

In 1940, working with a naval aid, Roosevelt called for the conversion of a merchant vessel to carry auto-gyros in taking on the German U-boats.²²¹ In January 1941, the Navy implemented the plans with the conversion of the merchant ship *Mormacmail* into the *USS Long Island*, AVG-1, which was completed in just three months. While these vessels are known today as escort carriers (CVEs), this represents the final wartime designation. The first was AVG, for aircraft tender, which was followed by ACV, for auxiliary aircraft carrier.²²² This first-of-a-kind warship had a crew of 900 officers and men, a compliment of 16 planes, and a flight deck of over 350 feet.²²³

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 583.

²²¹ Auto-Gyros, first flow in 1923, were airplanes with a large helicopter like blades above the fuselage, which would have allowed for landings on short decks traveling at slow speeds.

²²² While the Navy's designation for the first *USS Block Island* changed, for simplicity this work was refer to her as CVE-21.

²²³ Noles, 4-5.

This conversion proved an important experiment for the U.S. Navy in the days following Pearl Harbor. Within three weeks of the America's entry in the war, the Secretary of the Navy approved the conversion of 24 C3 cargo tanker hulls into escort carriers. The Navy foresaw the dangers in the Atlantic due to the U-boat menace, which quickly materialized: U-boats off the east coast of the United States decimated the unprepared U.S. Navy and merchant ships, sending four hundred vessels--over two million tons of shipping--to the Atlantic floor during the first six months after Pearl Harbor. Morison called this loss as, "much a national disaster as if saboteurs had destroyed half a dozen of our biggest war plants."²²⁴ The simple execution of a blackout order along the east coast would have prevented much of this damage close to shore, however the protests from Florida to New Jersey loudly claimed the "tourist season would be ruined."²²⁵ Allied intelligence reported after the war that the U.S. East Coast was for the Germans "the greenest pastures the war was ever to offer."²²⁶ In 1942, the most dangerous shipping lane in the world was from Jacksonville, Florida to Galveston, Texas. One seasoned merchant commented, "The only safe run is from St. Louis to Cincinnati."²²⁷

²²⁴ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 109.

²²⁵ Ibid. 109.

²²⁶ William Y'Blood, *Hunter-Killer: U.S. Escort Carriers in the Battle of the Atlantic* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 5-6.

²²⁷ Ward, 22.

While the shipping lanes off the East Coast of America provided valuable targets for the German U-boats, the U.S. Navy worked on an ad hoc basis in developing weapons and strategies to address the problem of protecting the Allied convoys of merchant vessels providing Europe with a link to American production. One of these new weapons, the escort carrier, did not yet exist outside of the blueprints and the single experiment of the *USS Long Island*, CVE-1. The C-3 transportation hulls became, at this point, the future CVEs. Ship-workers climbed over these hulls practicing an ancient tactic of naval warfare, adaptability. The hulls were designed to carry cargo and underwent the treatment of transformation and conversion into a new weapon to take back the Atlantic waters.

The Navy needed a range of vessels to fight the war against the Axis forces, and the men to operate and fight from. Under the guidance of the Navy, private companies produced the weapons. However, the Navy produced the men to fill these hulls. At the time of Pearl Harbor, the Navy was an amazingly small organization in terms of personnel compared the massive organization it would become at the close of the war. The men that joined the Navy started their journey by undergoing Boot Camp, also known as “Boots.” Four of these Boot Camps existed at the beginning of the U.S. entry into the war, in San Diego, CA, Bainbridge, MD, Newport, RI, and Great Lakes, IL. Entering “Boots” these men started their military lives and also the world that was the U.S. Navy, which included its own clothing, signs of status, method of keeping time with a 24 hour clock, and language.

One sailor recalled the first portion of “Boots” as a series of events in a row, including “physicals, haircuts, inoculations, dental examinations, uniform issues.”²²⁸ A range of new experiences included taking a shower naked with other men, watching educational films including “She May Look Safe, But...” and seeing and experiencing new foods including shrimp.²²⁹ They learned the meanings of markings on uniforms, which one sailor recalled as “(a)n entire symbology of hierarchy and skill.”²³⁰ In the terminology of this new world dinner was called “supper”, bathroom was the “head”, and hammocks were termed “fart sacks.”²³¹ This world was also run by officers, which were recalled as “strange and distant creatures.”²³² The vast majority of these class members were training for vessels that did not exist when American entered the war. These young enlisted men in the years to come made up the bulk of the population on U.S. Navy vessels during the war. These men officially started their careers once they were assigned to their first vessel. This is where the men turned their training into reality and where the bonds of war would be formed.

USS BLOCK ISLAND, CVE-21

²²⁸ Floyd Beaver, *Sailor from Oklahoma: One Men’s Two-Ocean War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 19-20.

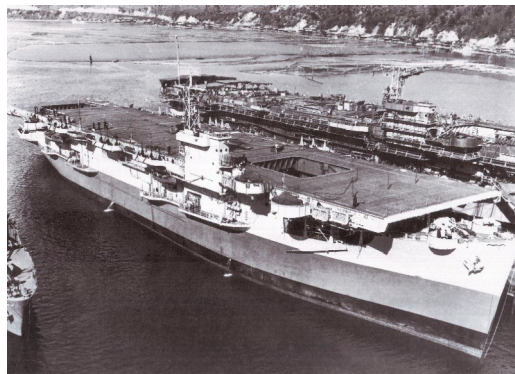
²²⁹ Samuel Hynes, *Flights of Passage: Reflections of a World War II Aviator* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 35 and Beaver, 17 & 22.

²³⁰ Alvin Kernan, *Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket’s World War II Odyssey* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 15.

²³¹ Beaver, 17, 20-21.

²³² Kernan, xiii.

Sailor Walter Cyr grew up in Walpole, Massachusetts just a short train ride from Boston Harbor where, in 1942, vessels pulling out into the Atlantic entered the waters controlled by the German U-boats. After completing Boots Cyr received his orders for the *USS Block Island, CVE-21*, under construction in Washington at the Seattle-Tacoma Shipyard of the Todd Shipyards Corporation. During the war, this company like shipyards across the country, represented a beehive of activity in building, converting, and outfitting ships that included Liberty ships, tankers, destroyers, and landing craft. However, arguably Todd's largest contribution was producing 56 escort carriers during the conflict.²³³



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Image 1: *USS Block Island, CVE-21*, under construction at Todd Shipyards in Bremerton, Washington. Courtesy of the *USS Block Island Association*.

When Cyr arrived in the shipyards, he saw the evidence of the attack at Pearl Harbor over a year earlier. Docked in the shipyards rested the battleship the *USS Texas*, BB-35, still under repair after the Japanese attack. While U.S. states

²³³ C. Bradford Mitchell, *Every Kind of Shipwork: A History of Todd Shipyards Corporation: 1916-1981*, (New York: Todd Shipyards Corp., 1981), 137-139.

²³⁴ “*USS Block Island, CVE-21 under Construction*”, Photograph, *USS Block Island Association Collection*, San Diego CA.

served as inspiration in naming battleships in the U.S. Navy fleet, the CVEs took their names from bodies of water or battlefields. In Cyr's ship's case, the specific body of water of the Block Island Sound located off the coast of Rhode Island and Long Island, New York, provided the CVE-21 with its more familiar name, the *USS Block Island*.²³⁵

Cyr's orders called for him to wait for the completion of the *Block Island*. The conversion process called for construction of a hangar deck to store not only the fighter aircraft, but also facilities for daily life of the over 900 crewmembers. Watching the welders work daily transforming the oil-tanker hull into an aircraft carrier, Cyr asked about helping out. After some persuasion the welders agreed, but if Cyr worked below the decks, he was required to wear a harness. These welders did not fear that Cyr would fall, but rather that he would get disoriented in the unlit compartmentalized warship and become lost.²³⁶ As the future crew gathered in the final months of 1942, the men and women of Todd's, assisted by some of the crew, labored in the transformation of a merchant vessel into a ship of war.

²³⁵ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, Vol. I (Washington D.C.: Navy Department, 1959), 131.

²³⁶ Walter Cyr, interview by Ben Hruska, December 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.



Image 2: The USS Block Island CVE-21. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.

When sailors hear the term ‘aircraft carrier’ visions of the ‘big sisters’ came to mind. For men fresh from “Boots”, the beautiful lines of the large fleet carriers that appear on recruiting posters must have come to mind. The reaction of sailors seeing their first escort carrier included comments such as, “this little tub”, “unattractive old waddler”, and a “stopgap ships.”²³⁸ For long time sailors, who had worked on the ‘big sisters’ before and during the war, produced even harsher criticism. The conversion of a merchant hull, lacking the armor of a warship built from the keel up, “seemed ludicrously small and dangerous.”²³⁹ Lacking the safe storage space for torpedoes below decks, as on big carriers, the CVEs improvised with racking them up on the inside of the hangar deck. Besides, the short deck and slow speed required that a catapult, at times, was needed just get her aircraft aloft.²⁴⁰ Another sailor displayed his lack of satisfaction with, “We were not very

²³⁷ “USS Block Island, CVE-21 on Cruise,” Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

²³⁸ Kernan, *Crossing the Line*, 83, 84, 133.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

proud of her at first.”²⁴¹ The lines of the ship shocked him most, expecting an impressive warship to aggressively take on the German U-Boats he concluded his initially reaction. “For, indeed, she hardly looked like a ship at all.”²⁴²

With the aid of sailors like Cyr, the construction was completed and the U.S. formally accepted the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21 on March 8, 1943. The 465-foot vessel sailed out of Puget Sound with a skeleton crew and no warplanes or flight crew personnel. For the majority of the men like Cyr, as the *Block Island* cruised south this represented their first experience on a boat and the first time they sailed the open ocean.²⁴³ This included seasickness and vomiting by many of the crew. As most of men grew accustomed to the movement and earned their “sea legs,” the first Chaplain assigned to the carrier did not and experienced violent illness on the entire cruise to San Diego.²⁴⁴ One sailor recalled his experience on an escort carrier as one of a “luminous metallic underworld.”²⁴⁵ This world of pipes, metal, and light bulbs completed the function of a small

²⁴¹ F. D. Ommanney, *Flat-top: The Story of an Escort Carrier* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1945), 7.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ Roy Swift, *The Fighting Block Island!* (Washington D.C.: Naval History Division, 1968), 1, 4.

²⁴⁴ “Stories About Chaplain, Lt. G. A. MacInnes USNR: Who Served on Both the *USS Block Island* Ships,” USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA.

²⁴⁵ Ommanney, 8.

town, producing meals, providing laundry and showering facilities, and sleeping quarters.

The men experienced the noises involved in a modern warship at sea, the humming of pumps, the pipes creaking as steam pressure ebbed and flowed, and the motions of the hull interacting with the Pacific.²⁴⁶ Smells included tobacco burning, the cooks breaking in their new kitchens, and that of new paint on the ship. For first-time sailors, they learned of the compartmentalized nature of war vessels. The interiors of the ships were a series of rooms with watertight doors, called hatches, which during drills and in action were closed and dogged down. This prevented the spreading of water beyond the single compartment if the hull was breached and ocean water poured into the exposed area. Navigating these barriers produced bruised and bloody shins in the first days. Stairways to other levels of the vessel, called in the Navy “ladders”, also produced injuries called “ladder chancres.”²⁴⁷ The sailors became acquainted with their ship, learning the location of daily life onboard, and the men around them. For the men on their first mission at sea, this first cruise seemed like a massive amount of movement and activity. Men and machines turned this vessel into an active aircraft carrier. However, the vessel was not up to capacity yet, it lacked the air group, thus the reason the *Block Island* cruised south to San Diego.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

²⁴⁷ Beaver, 122, 160.

In 1943, factories and assembly lines produced the weapons to win the war, but not the personnel to operate these machines. As the nation fought a war on two fronts simultaneously, the young sailors, soldiers, and airmen were lightly and hurriedly trained. This was the case for *Block Island's* crew and its composite aircraft squadron, which was embarked on April 9, 1943. VC-25's personnel were also "green" -- with the navy aviators and their FM-2 Wildcats and TBF Avengers having completed just a few token landings on a carrier. Roy Swift, an intelligence officer on the vessel, wrote that the first days of practice "were catastrophic to material and harrowing to the fliers as well as the ship's company."²⁴⁸ The small size of the carrier greatly added to the difficulty of landing. As one pilot explained, "Looking down on a CV, you had the feeling you were going to land on a shingle. Looking down on a baby flat-top, you had the feeling you were going to land on a playing card-and it was probably a joker, at that."²⁴⁹

Watching carrier landing also produced stress, as the famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle found out. As a reporter Pyle gained attention for reporting the story of enlisted men, not the generals and admirals that made the major strategic decisions. Attracted to the stories of those not receiving attention back home in the newspaper headlines, Pyle was assigned to "Light Carriers (CVL)", similar to the CVE in that it was a expedient carrier. Pyle wrote, "the

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁴⁹ Theodore Roscoe, *Unites States Destroyer Operations in World War II* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1953), 287.

smaller carriers have had very little credit and almost no glory, and I've always had a sort of yen for poor little ships that have been neglected."²⁵⁰ Pyle visited and gathered the tales of those onboard. Walking the passageways of the carrier Pyle found two libraries, a daily newspaper, two dentists, and a Chaplain. However, the one place that captivated his attention was the flight deck.

Watching the landings he wrote, the "first time you see a plane land on a carrier you almost die."²⁵¹ The excitement mingled with nervousness of witnessing the ordeal not only affected his imagination but his body. Tensed up watching the controlled crashes left his muscles sore. His awe for the action of placing a plane safely on the deck knew no limit. His tribute to the operations on the carrier included writing, "For landing on a deck of a small carrier in a rough sea is just about like landing on half a block of Main Street while a combination hurricane and earthquake is going on."²⁵² While Pyle watched planes land on a "Main Street" of over 550 feet, the street on the *Block Island* was just over 450.²⁵³

While the flight deck held the activity of major excitement, many other happenings took place around the clock below the flight deck. Men worked on planes, cleaned and painted portions of the vessel, and labored in the engine

²⁵⁰ Ernie Pyle, *Last Chapter*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1946), 57.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* 62.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁵³ Andrew Faltum, *The Independence Light Aircraft Carriers*, (Charleston, South Carolina: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 2002), 117.

rooms, activities that all required energy for the sailors. The amount of human energy required also grants a view into the scale of the floating operation. The 1944 edition of *The Cookbook of the U.S. Navy* includes a recipe for Knickerbocker Bean Soup. Served as the first course of one-meal onboard U.S. Navy vessels, one thousand eight-ounce servings required for this escort carrier would include sixty-three pounds of dried Navy beans, six pounds of cubed salt pork, forty-nine pounds of potatoes, and fifty-seven pounds of tomatoes.²⁵⁴ A single soup course gives another measure of the scope of the vessel that produced over 3,000 meals daily. Energy on board not only included aviation fuel and oil for the vessel's engines, but the four million calories required daily for the crew at sea conducting a range of activities including landing airplanes, washing dishes, packing parachutes, and navigating the escort carrier.

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC 1943

Renowned naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison described the Battle of the Atlantic as “second to none in its influence on the outcome of the war.”²⁵⁵ In his *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Vol. 1: The Battle of the Atlantic September 1939-1943*, he also writes about the complexity of the operations that made it “exceedingly difficult to relate in an acceptable

²⁵⁴ “Knickerbocker Bean Soup,” *The Cook Book of the United States Navy*, ed. 1944, accessed February 28, 2011, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ref/CookBook/index.html>.

²⁵⁵ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Vol. 1: The Battle of the Atlantic September 1939-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947), xi.

literary form.”²⁵⁶ The dimensions evolved in this chessboard of battle added to the difficulty of writing. Surface vessels cruised the oceans, enemy submarines cruised on and under the seas, and airplanes also participated in the skies. The suddenness of battle also complicated the work of the historian. Most of the engagements involved the enemy blindly attacking, either with a sudden torpedo attack from a U-Boat on a merchant vessel or Allied war vessel. The Allied attacks on the German U-Boats included depth-charge attacks by surface vessels or rocket attacks from aircraft. Lastly, the unpredictable weather patterns in the North Atlantic produced boisterous seas that all involved battled. The battle represented the longest and most complex naval operation in human history -- hundreds of wreckages of Allied vessels and German U-boats rest on the Atlantic’s bottom, as do thousands of sailors on both sides.

After six weeks of training operations off the coast of California, in which the crew learned to handle their duties, the *Block Island* set sail for the Panama Canal and the Atlantic. When *Block Island* entered the fray in May 1943, the Battle of the Atlantic had reached a turning point. Two months earlier, the U-boats achieved their peak of success in closing off supply routes to both Britain and Russia, with 108 merchant ships sunk and the loss of just 14 U-boats. However, in May the number of Allied ships lost was reduced to only 50 and the German U-boat losses increased to 40.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

In the late spring and early summer of 1943, the CVEs *USS Bogue*, CVE-9, and *USS Card*, CVE-11, pioneered the “hunter-killer” missions, which entailed their operating with a contingent of other vessels and aircraft in the offensive action of tracking and destroying enemy U-boats. Utilizing the CVE in directly taking on the German U-boats, “these two put an entire new face on the potential of small task groups operating under the command of a CVE.”²⁵⁸ The turning of the tide allowed for the transport of American arms and military personnel to Great Britain in order to take the war directly to Germany.²⁵⁹ The *Block Island* played a key role in this first wave of the transportation of supplies.

Gunner’s Mate Third Class Irv Biron grew up in Oakland, California and had never been more than 150 miles from home before signing up for the Navy. As *Block Island* sailed through the Panama Canal, Biron stood on the deck watching the vessel enter the Atlantic waters to begin her first mission beyond training.²⁶⁰ Her first task took her to Staten Island, NY and consisted of receiving the newly produced U.S. fighter planes for the European theater of operations.

As *Block Island* pulled out of New York Harbor on July 8, 1943, with her flight and hangar decks stuffed with newly produced P-47 Thunderbolts, U.S. Army Corps aircraft needed for the European theater of operations in escorting

²⁵⁸ Swift, 1.

²⁵⁹ David Syrett, *The Defeat of the German U-Boats: The Battle of the Atlantic* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), ix-x.

²⁶⁰ Irv Biron, interview by Ben Hruska, June 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

bombers to the Continent. She and eight other ships, including U.S. Army troop transports, set sail for Belfast Harbor, to deliver the first wave of these American aircraft to Great Britain. After arriving safely, the P-47s were unloaded and flew on to southern England and into the air war in Europe. *Block Island* then commenced its journey back across the Atlantic to New York.



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Image 3: The *USS Block Island* docking in Belfast Harbor loaded with P-47 fighter planes. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.

Returning to Staten Island, the *Block Island* returned to Belfast with another delivery of P-47s. On this mission, the carrier maneuvered in thick fog, thus giving the officers and crew their first lesson in the value of radar. Many questions surrounded this new operating system, but this event “convinced the topside officers of the value of a ‘gadget’ they hitherto had viewed with considerable skepticism.”²⁶² Confronting the ravages of the North Atlantic seas, thick fog was just one symptom of the *Block Island* would encounter in these two missions. Morison described the North Atlantic seas almost as deadly as the

²⁶¹ “Entering Belfast Harbor,” Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

²⁶² Swift, 5.

German U-Boats. He wrote, “Winds of gale force, mountainous seas, biting cold, body-piercing fog and blinding snow squalls were the rule rather than the exception.”²⁶³ In the five months between November 1942 and March 1943, 92 merchant vessels sank due to weather alone.²⁶⁴ Battling these seas, the *Block Island* returned to the States after this second mission of transporting war material to Belfast. After the crew earned its sea legs in two Lend-Lease missions, the *Block Island* changed from avoiding U-boats while delivering weapons to actively tracking down this enemy.

Experiencing these storms together, the crewmembers formed bonds with one another. As the sailors of the vessel went about their daily lives, they learned of the backgrounds of those around them. While the vessel did have many aspects to it, privacy was not one of these. They came from small farming communities and large urban centers, Western states and the Commonwealths of the East, and the plains of the Midwest to the bayous of the South. One sailor described his ship with, “(w)e were a small, floating United Nations.”²⁶⁵ In just the 36 men of the Radio Gang on CVE-21, names included DeVanna, Maslanka, Cousineau, Connolly, and Boudreaux.²⁶⁶ The ethnic diversity not only included a range of

²⁶³ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 37.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁶⁵ Harlen, 34.

⁶¹ “CVE 21 Radio Gang (1943/1944)”, Photograph, USS Block Island Collection, San Diego, CA.

surnames in the ships manifest, but also tangible evidence of the recent migrations to the U.S. Many of the men of the *Block Island* grew up in bilingual households, including German and Italian homes, at a time when the U.S. was at war with both Germany and Italy.²⁶⁷

However, while the mixing of many ethnic backgrounds took place on board, not all barriers were breached. The officers and enlisted men ate separately. Also, the officers had stewards who served them and took care of their other needs including laundry. Due to the Navy's policy at the time, stewards were African-Americans and Filipinos. The enlisted men noted they hardly ever saw these men on board.²⁶⁸ They worked and resided in what was termed "Officer's Country", and thus was off limits to enlisted personnel outside of the stewards.²⁶⁹

"THE LORD LOOKS OUT FOR DRUNKS, SMALL CHILDREN, AND CVEs."

The American output of weapons after its strong isolationist sentiments during the interwar period was remarkable, but did come with a high price for those on the CVEs. The Kaiser Corporation won a government contract to produce 50 CVEs, of the Casablanca class, in January 1942. However, in the period working up to drafting the contract between the Kaiser Corporation and the U.S Navy, one of the early versions of the first CVEs was transferred to the Royal

⁶² Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 15, 2009, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

²⁶⁹ Jernigan, 37.

Navy under Lend-Lease and befell a tragedy that brought into question the construction practices used for these vessels.

Off the coast of Gibraltar in November of 1942, the *HMS Avenger*, D-14, took one torpedo hit from a German U-boat, detonating the entire bomb holding facility and breaking the *Avenger* in half. The military historian James Noles writes, “The remnants of the broken ship sank beneath the waves in less than three minutes.”²⁷⁰ More than 500 crewmembers were lost and only a dozen survived. The news of the horrific loss of an aircraft carrier, as the result of a single torpedo, resulted in American designers working overtime to alleviate this vulnerability. The story of this explosion not only affected the designers and engineers of these ships, but also rippled down to the men being assigned to these vessels.

More unsettling news for the crews of the CVEs soon followed, this time from one of the first models of the Casablanca class produced by Kaiser. *USS Liscome Bay*, CVE-56, launched from the Kaiser shipping yards a month after *Block Island*, was struck by a Japanese torpedo just before dawn on November 24th. The historian Noles writes, “A split second later, a blast of almost unimaginable size followed as fragments from the torpedo ripped through the walls shielding the carrier’s bomb magazine and detonated its contents. A pillar of orange flame, speckled and dotted with burning pieces of white-hot metal, shot

²⁷⁰ Noles, 7-8.

into the air a thousand feet.”²⁷¹ The explosion was visible to those on the battleship *USS Pennsylvania*, BB-38, 16 miles away.

The battleship *USS New Mexico*, BB-40, cruised only 1,500 yards away, just under a mile, at the time of the impact. In his action report, Captain Zacharias wrote that “Oil particles and burning and extinguished fragments, deck splinters up to three feet in length, metal fragments in great numbers—mostly small but as large as one pound in weight—molten drops of metal, bits of clothing, dungarees, overshoes... and several pieces of human flesh” carpeted downward on the deck of his battleship.²⁷²

The stories of these massive explosions from just one torpedo strike caused much fear and anxiety for the crews of the CVEs, especially for those like the *Block Island* charged with taking on the U-boat menace. Rumors and nicknames about the CVEs passed quickly among new crewmembers. These included the CVE standing for “combustible-vulnerable-expendable,” “Kaiser coffins,” and “two-torpedo carriers.” The latter meant, “One torpedo, the sailors reasoned derisively, would be the one that would sink it, and the second would simply pass over the sinking ship’s flight deck.”²⁷³ These factors highlighted an irony of modern naval warfare, while one faced the danger of drowning in a vessel, the very real cause of death was burning -- either from explosions in the

²⁷¹ Ibid., 113.

²⁷² Ibid., 113-116.

²⁷³ Ibid., 8.

forms of enemy bombs and torpedoes, or steam pipes onboard exploding during battle. Burning to death in the bellows of the vessel was a very real fear and possibility.²⁷⁴ With these images in their minds, in the autumn of 1943 the crew of *Block Island* set out on hunter-killer missions armed with a contingent of fighters to take the war directly to the U-boat enemy.

Thoughts of going into war produced fears and considerations about lives ending short. The Navy addressed these issues with having a Chaplain on larger vessels. In the case of the *Block Island* this was Lt. Gordon A. MacInnes. One of the biggest challenges for MacInnes, as an officer, was breaking the ice in talking with enlisted men. MacInnes carried a pocketful of peanuts, and grabbed a handful and used these as a means of starting a conversation with sailors. The enlisted men developed a nickname for him, “Peanut”. As the only man of faith on the ship, his assignment called for a very ecumenical approach. Trained in the Presbyterian faith, he approached French Catholics and gave them rosaries and prayer books. He also sought out men of unique faiths in 1940s America. Patrick Chan served as a barber onboard, and as a Chinese-American practiced Confucianism. Often these two from very different backgrounds, shared lunch and held lively discussions on the comparison of faiths.²⁷⁵ With faith on many of the

²⁷⁴ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 586.

²⁷⁵ “Stories About Chaplain, Lt. G. A. MacInnes USNR: Who Served on Both the *USS Block Island* Ships,” USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA.

men's minds, the *Block Island* changed roles in the Atlantic from avoiding the U-boats in convoy duties to seeking these vessels out.

HUNTER-KILLER

Growing up in Oakland, California, Irv Biron had only seen snow once, in the mountains in the distance. However, Biron received his fill of cold weather in battling the North Atlantic seas in the winter of 1943 and 1944, with his battle station on the deck manning a 40 mm gun, he wore three layers of clothing to survive the cold and snow.²⁷⁶ The hunting took place in the central Atlantic, called the "Black Pit", unreachable for Allied land-based aircraft.²⁷⁷ On this new mission, Biron watched *Block Island's* fighter planes take off and hunt the elusive enemy lurking below the waves of the Atlantic. Working in concert with the *Block Island's* warplanes, destroyer escorts (DEs) worked in packs to locate and destroy the German U-boats.

The military historian Theodore Roscoe wrote of this tactic, "So the U-boat skipper saw aircraft winging across the No-Man's-Land sky of mid-ocean where only Lindbergh and a few others had previously flown."²⁷⁸ Previously, U-boats were free to surface at will when out of the range of land-based aircraft. These newly spotted aircraft did not represent the entire threat to the U-boats, but hinted at the rest of the forces in the area. Roscoe writes of this threat with the

²⁷⁶ Irv Biron, interview by Ben Hruska, June 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

²⁷⁷ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 240.

²⁷⁸ Roscoe, 287.

analogy, “The CVE was quarterback of a team, a destroyer group devoted solely to the enterprise of sinking Nazi submarines.”²⁷⁹ The CVE coached the Task Force team by calling the plays for the fighter planes and destroyer escorts (DE) in locating and eliminating the U-boat threat. While not the first such ‘quarterback’, *Block Island* played a critical role in probing the ‘Black Pit’. This mission placed Captain Ramsey in a unique position, that of almost total freedom in hunting the enemy. Unlike those Pacific operations where a new Captain was just one part of a massive operation involving hundreds of ships. Ramsey took over the freedom of command unique in modern warfare. As Morison wrote, “These orders were a joy to the young escort carrier commanders, making them feel as free sounding as John Paul Jones or Lord Nelson.”²⁸⁰

Armed with the VC-1 flight group’s Wildcats and Avengers in her hangar deck, the Task Force headed for the hunting grounds of U-boats north of the Azores Islands. On arrival, *Block Island’s* planes explored the open ocean for signs of the enemy. Once a sighting occurred, the pilot radioed back to the carrier, where the captain decided the course of action. Depending on a range of factors, either the planes or the DEs could attack. Within just two weeks of hunting, the *Block Island* scored its first success.

On October 28th 1943, a Wildcat and an Avenger took off from the flight deck. Just 20 miles away, the team spotted two U-boats on the surface and

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 366.

commenced attack on both U-256 and U-220 with machine gun fire and depth-charge attack. The larger of the two U-boats, U-256, unleashed heavy anti-aircraft fire at both planes before submerging. But as U-220 submerged, the pilots scored a depth charge hit. The U-boat's radio transmission to headquarters suddenly stopped, caused by the submarine imploding. *Block Island* had her first confirmed kill.²⁸¹

While the *Block Island* represented a platform of taking the war to the German U-Boats, it also served as a platform of science and experimentation in weaponry. In the straight-laced environment of the military, any civilian scientist involved in tinkering with weapons was viewed as an anomaly. A common term used was a "long haired scientists."²⁸² Russell Lewis traveled the world during World War II working for the Navy Underwater Sound Laboratory, under the larger National Defense Research Committee (NDRC).²⁸³ Lewis served his country as a scientist that included two missions aboard the *Block Island*. Issued an officer's uniform with no signs of rank, Lewis came to the vessel with sonobuoys, which at the time represented "the most up-to-date radio test equipment then in existence."²⁸⁴ His task was to demonstrate to the crew of three-man Avengers how this equipment worked. Lewis's presentations took place not

²⁸¹ Ibid., 1-9.

²⁸² Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 126.

²⁸³ Russell V. Lewis, *A Civilian at War: A Unique WWII Experience*, (Self-Published, 2001), iii.

²⁸⁴ Lewis, 78.

only with the crews on the *Block Island*, but while on operations in the air over the Atlantic. Thus, Lewis experienced the taking off and landing with the crews from the small flight deck on the large ocean.

In a suspected area of a U-Boat, five buoys were dropped in a pattern similar to that of the five-side of a dice. Before the invention of the transistor, the buoys -- utilizing glass vacuum tubes -- allowed the current to flow through the bouy, which allowed the noises detected to be relayed over an FM signal. The crew in the plane circling above listened to each individual buoy, and if sounds were detected they would triangulate the sounds to gather a possible bearing on an enemy submarine.²⁸⁵

Eases-dropping in the ocean was an early science, and thus ran into problems in detecting noises in the ocean, for much more lurked in the oceans than U-Boats. Morison noted early problems included, “(s)napping shrimps on the ocean bottoms made a curious crackling noise that disturbed sound listeners.”²⁸⁶ Lewis’s training of the crewmembers of the vessel aided in the use of new scientific devices in tracking the enemy. Devices like these allowed the entire task force working in unison, to search almost 3,000 square miles of ocean in a single hour.²⁸⁷ However, these task force operations took many gallons of fuel and

²⁸⁵ Lewis, 90.

²⁸⁶ Morison, 124.

²⁸⁷ Lewis, 87.

provisions for the crewmembers. After weeks of hunting, and earning her first official kill, the *Block Island* then sailed to Casablanca for resupply.

Casablanca, on the North African Coast, provided a safe port for the *Block Island* to resupply the vessel with weapons and supplies for the men. It also gave the men a chance to get off the vessel and enjoy some time on land. For the young Americans, this called for beer (which could not legally be consumed onboard) and baseball games. Before this could take place, Italian prisoners of war captured by Allied forces in North Africa came onboard in the form of work parties. These men hauled the cases of beer from the escort carrier to smaller craft, which then transported the beverages to the nearby baseball diamonds.²⁸⁸

During this process, Hector Verneti struck up a conversation with an Italian who happened to know his dialect. The conversation turned into a chance to swap items, in which Verneti received a cap from the Italian. In the course of the conversation, another *Block Island* sailor from New York City overheard their chatting. He asked this Italian if he knew of a particular man from Italy. The Italian confirmed that he knew the gentlemen in question, and in fact pointed him out among the work party onboard. This young sailor from New York walked over and introduced himself to this prisoner, his uncle. Here on the *Block Island*, this young American sailor met his mother's brother for the first time.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 15, 2009, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

²⁸⁹ Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 15, 2009, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

While resupply took place at Casablanca on the east side of the Atlantic, the homeport on the western side of the ocean was Norfolk. At the mouth of the entrance into the Chesapeake Bay rests Norfolk, representing the largest naval base on the entire Eastern seaboard, thus home for many of the U.S. Navy's vessels battling in the Atlantic. Not only were the docks massive in number to hold the range of vessels, but the city itself represented the largest town most of the sailors had ever visited. One sailor recalled in his memoirs not only the size, but also an important factor for young men at sea for weeks, beer. He wrote, "Beer gardens in Norfolk were easier to find than a traffic light."²⁹⁰ However, less glamorous aspects of Norfolk also produced memories years later, including the negative view of sailors by the civilian population. This included the homes of Norfolk's neighborhoods that had signs in the front yards, stating: "Sailors and dogs - keep of the grass."²⁹¹ The young men returning after weeks on the ocean in the war did not particularly approve of these signs. Fueled with beer from the local beer joints, many of these yards were urinated on or vandalized in other ways.²⁹²

SECOND MISSION

²⁹⁰ Emory J. Jernigan, *Tin Can Man*, (Arlington, VA: Vandamere Press, 1993), 28.

²⁹¹ John Suprey, interview by Ben Hruska, December 4, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

²⁹² Jernigan, 30.

The *Block Island's* second hunter-killer mission began on December 15th 1943. This mission included the air group, VC-58, replacing VC-1. For many of the crew this was their first holiday season away from home, and Christmas consisted of seventy-two hours straight of General Quarters while hunting and tracking U-boats. January 11th 1944, proved an eventful day for the *Block Island*. The ship lost her first crewmember, a pilot, when his Wildcat crashed into the ocean during take-off. Neither the pilot, nor the plane, were recovered. Hours later, two Avengers off the *Block Island* flew off searching for U-boats with the normal machine guns and Mark 47 depth charges, but each of the planes also carried eight Model 5 3.5-inch rockets. Detecting a surfaced U-boat, the planes fired their rockets, initiating the first rocket attack from a CVE-based aircraft.

When the rockets missed their target the pilots followed this attack with machine gun fire and later depth charges and the pilots believed they destroyed the U-boat. However, the U-boat did escape.²⁹³ Later, an intercepted radio transmission reported the U-758 had been damaged and was “Returning to base.”²⁹⁴ However, within days the crew of the *Block Island* witnessed in person the enemy they had feared and hunted for months. In this Battle of the Atlantic, one rarely saw the enemy in the flesh. With advances in weapons, seeing the

²⁹³ Y’Blood, 132.

²⁹⁴ Swift, 12.

enemy was unusual. One scholar termed it “a cold, long-distance business.”²⁹⁵

Furthermore, he concluded, “Naval warfare became thoroughly depersonalized.”²⁹⁶

On January 14th, an Avenger from *Block Island* spotted debris on the ocean while scouting for U-boats. Captain Ramsey, ordered two of the task force’s DEs to investigate. Just 41 miles from the ship, this debris turned out to be 11 life rafts full of men. Upon arriving, the sailors on the DEs discovered that the rafts held 43 Germans, including the captain of the U-boat U-231. The previous day, planes of a British Squadron had attacked and sunk their vessel. Once onboard, the DEs then headed for a rendezvous with *Block Island*.



Image 4: German Prisoners of War Onboard CVE-21. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.

²⁹⁵ James D. Hornfischer, *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors: The Extraordinary World War II Story of the U.S. Navy’s Finest Hour*, (New York: Random House, 2004), 306.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ “POW Enlisted Officers from U-66 aboard CVE21,” Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

A breeches buoy device permitted the transfer of personnel between ships in the open sea without stopping, utilizing a series of ropes and canvas sacks. Intelligence Officer Roy Swift wrote in his history, on *Block Island* the “topside and hangar deck were festooned by curious sailors to watch the bedraggled Germans come swinging over in the canvas sacks.”²⁹⁸ For the crew, this was their first actual sighting of the German enemy that had appeared in hometown newspapers since 1939 and that the U.S. had been fighting since 1941. For years, these young Americans had read and heard about the damage inflicted to Allied shipping by the German U-Boats. One of the sailors struggling for a view of these men was Hector Verneti. He recalled, “Guys were hanging from all over just trying to get a look and see what them people looked like.” These German supermen, superior in all ways physically and intellectually according to the Nazis looked eerily familiar. “They were just like us. Blond and blue eyes, just kids.”²⁹⁹

Once on the ship they were placed in T-shirts with the letters “P W” in large black letters on the front, designating them as prisoners of war. For Irv Biron, these Germans proved a curiosity. With Biron’s parents from Italy, they might not have seemed that much different than himself. Biron took pictures of them and enjoyed hearing their perspective on the war. One German had studied at a university in the U.S. Another asked of reported damage done to American cities on the eastern seaboard by German forces. A third stated he wished to go to

²⁹⁸ Swift, 12-13.

²⁹⁹ Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 15, 2009, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

America.³⁰⁰ While these Germans provided a unique break in the boredom that the majority of the time was naval warfare, the crewmembers developed their own forms of entertainment in line with a long tradition of the U.S. Navy, gambling.

At a USO show, a female performer ask Bob Hope, “I meant to ask you, Bob....are there any sharks around San Diego?” Hope replied with, “Did you ever meet a Marine with a pair of dice?”³⁰¹ All good jokes are based in some resemblance of fact, and this comment is no exception. Military life included the aspect of gambling in all services, especially so for the U.S. Navy. Hector Vernetti was not a gambler himself, but he partook in the illegal-communal activities onboard. Many of these events, which took place in their sleeping quarters, relied on Vernetti’s connections with other crewmembers. From a cook, Vernetti received fresh eggs and vegetables and snuck these into their room. As alcohol could not be legally consumed onboard without prescription from the medical ward, Vernetti acquired some from a pharmacist mate and mixed these with bottles of coke. A table covered in cloth made a gambling table, combined with an extended light hanging above the table in a darkened room. Vernetti used a hot plate in making Denver omelet sandwiches. As the card games continued, Vernetti played host in producing sandwiches for the players and enjoying rum and cokes. The only point of danger of exposing their make-shift gambling joint

³⁰⁰ Irv Biron interview by Ben Hruska, June 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

³⁰¹ Kenneth Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 178.

was going to the bathroom, all members needed to make appearance of sobriety as they walked to the head as the vessel plowed forward in a range of sea conditions.³⁰²

U-BOAT TACTICS CHANGE

The task forces of teams of CVEs and DEs working in concert in patrolling the open ocean of the Atlantic took away the safe haven for the German U-boat wolf packs. The air patrols and subsequent fighter plane and DE attacks broke up the use of packs of U-boats. As a result, locating the U-boats became more difficult. As the historian Roscoe noted in his destroyer history, “So the U.S. Navy’s new CVE-DD(DE) teams had to beat the bushes for game. And beat the bushes they did, driving deep into the U-boats mid-Atlantic territory.”³⁰³

Also, the German tactic of sending out large U-boats, dubbed “milk cows,” to refuel and re-supply small U-boats was compromised. Roscoe notes, “No longer could the ‘tanker submarines’ browse around the Azores in bucolic peace.”³⁰⁴

The air attacks from CVE based aircraft resulted in German Commander-in-Chief Doenitz recalling the U-boats in the middle of 1943 to add anti-aircraft weaponry and radar equipment to the vessels. However, the sudden attacks from the air, produced serious shock to the morale of the U-boat high command. In

³⁰² Hector Vernetti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 15, 2009, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

³⁰³ Roscoe, 287.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

April of 1943, Doenitz reported to Hitler, “I fear that the submarine war will be a failure if we do not sink more ships than the enemy is able to build.”³⁰⁵

Air attacks from task forces of CVEs and DEs brought an end to the U-boat tactic of using packs to hunt and destroy Allied ships; they were forced to work solo to carry on the war. The threat of air attack also caused U-boats to remain submerged during the day and allowed only to safely surface at night. This caused the CVEs to run flight operations at night in search of the vulnerable surfaced U-boats. These night operations included the use of high-frequency radio direction finders (HF/DF). Radar facilities located on both sides of the Atlantic and on small islands allowed for the tracking of surfaced vessels. This information would then be passed on to the CVEs and her pilots running night operations. The ‘Black Pit’ was being compressed.³⁰⁶

FBI: “THE FIGHTING BLOCK ISLAND”

All ships in the Navy over time develop a personality. Events transpired on the seas, and when the men were in port, that crystallized the group into a cohesive unit. All events add to the growing history of the vessel, and the men who served on it.³⁰⁷ This lore of the vessel produces a name. For the *21*, this produced the nickname the “F.B.I”, or “*Fighting Block Island*.” This name

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy: “The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict”*. Annapolis: U.S. Navy, 1945, 12-14.

³⁰⁷ Beaver, 149.

developed in the taking the fight to the U-boats, which included not only having planes aloft during the daylight hours. But, pioneering night operations where planes from the FBI searched the dark skies above the seas when U-boats that had risked surfacing and were running diesel engines to charge depleted battery power. These operations took men to fly them.

Norman Dowty grew up in Alexander, Louisiana. He attended college at Northwestern State University and was dismissed for riding in a car with a female student. During the Depression, Dowty spent a year riding the rails with hoboes. In 1941, he returned to college and joined the Navy.³⁰⁸ In the dark pre-dawn hours of March 19th 1944, he prepared his Avenger to take off on a night patrol. Once in the air he received the location of a HF/DF radar hit. Teamed with the *USS Corry*, DE-463, they headed for the coordinates.

Dowty focused on the radar screen in his Avenger and honed in on the blip located by the device. His radioman, Edgar Burton, spotted the surfaced submarine less than a mile away as it submerged. Knowing the sub's location, they circled the night sky hoping for another sighting. An hour later, spotting the feathering of a periscope, Dowty dropped a mine onto this location. At the same time, the *Corry* knocked down radar decoy balloons sent aloft by U-801 to distract her pursuers.

With the dawn came the visible dark oil trail in the blue waters below indicating an injured U-boat. Running low on fuel, Dowty returned to *Block*

³⁰⁸ Letter to from daughter of Norman Taylor Dowty, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA.

Island, but was relieved by pilot Lt. Theodore Elefter who continued to circle the area in search of the U-boat. With the U-boat wounded, *USS Bronstein*, DE-189, joined forces with *USS Corry*. After several hours of tracking the U-boat's oil trail, the *Corry* made sound contact. Honing in on the sound, the *Corry* dropped a deep 10 depth-charge pattern. After further damage to his vessel, the German commander decided to surface. Torpedo tubes loaded as the U-boat neared the surface, the commander hoped for a shot at her attackers on the *Corry* and *Bronstein*.

Block Island and her screening ships, the *USS Thomas*, DE-102 and *USS Breeman*, DE-104, watched this battle from seven miles distance. With almost no control of the surfaced U-boat, the vessel proved defenseless to the three and five inch guns of the *Corry* and *Bronstein*. The German commander issued the order to abandon ship and the first man on the bridge was killed almost immediately. As the remaining German sailors abandoned ship, the beating of their vessel continued. As Swift wrote in the *Block Island's* history, "the *Block Island* crew thronged the carrier's deck and cheered them on, *Corry* and *Bronstein* circling their quarry, methodically reducing U-801 to the hulk in seven minutes."³⁰⁹ For the men of the *Block Island*, this represented a rare instance where they saw the battle actually raging before their eyes in a war they had been involved with for over a year. The civilian scientist Russell Lewis recalled the shock on the faces of the *FBI* sailors in seeing the enemy in person for the first time: "Suddenly PEOPLE

³⁰⁹ Swift, 17-18.

poured out of the hatches of the submarine and flung themselves into the sea. Up until this time nobody thought about people being involved.”³¹⁰ Forty-two of these Germans survived the ordeal, and after being picked up by the task force’s DE, they were transferred to the *21*. The Captain of the doomed sub was 24 years old, the crew consisted of boys as young as 14.³¹¹

This represented just one of the successes of this cruise. Loaded with the picked-up Germans, the *21* headed for Norfolk. This war consisted of not only killing the enemy, but also gathering information, and along this vein, keeping information from the enemy. Thus, the success of the FBI was to be kept secret. In route home, the crew was mustered and the Captain spoke of the seriousness of not letting information out to the American public. One witness wrote, “CAPT Hughes cautioned all hands against saying anything to anyone about what had been accomplished on our cruise.”³¹² While Hughes could control those on his vessel, he could not stop the reaction of those in the Navy on the mainland.

Docking at Pier Seven in Norfolk Naval Base, the crew of *Block Island* was greeted with a huge banner reading “Welcome Home, Champ!”³¹³ Standing on the dock was a greeting committee, accompanied by a Navy band loudly welcoming the crew and congratulating their accomplishments against the

³¹⁰ Lewis, 99.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Lewis, 102.

³¹³ Swift, 1-3.

enemy.³¹⁴ By the middle of May 1944, *Block Island* ranked number two in CVEs participating in hunter-killer missions. Her command of the task force's fighter planes and DEs earned six confirmed kills of enemy U-boats. However, on her fourth mission leaving Casablanca after re-supplying on May 23rd 1944, her fate changed along with that of her crew.³¹⁵ This hunter would become prey. While the crew of *Block Island* continued the Battle of the Atlantic, the Allies during this time were in the final stages of taking the war on German ground forces to France.

Toward the end of May 1944, in the south of England, men from numerous Allied nations gathered and waited for the word to launch the largest amphibious invasion in history. The vast majority of the supplies and most of the servicemen were transported to England by ship. Clearing out the shipping lanes of German U-boats allowed this achievement. While the tide of the Battle of the Atlantic changed in the Allies' favor in the first portion of 1943, the dangers were still very real for Allied sailors, which the men of *Block Island* were soon to experience first hand.

“BIG MOM”

Henry Jones grew up outside of Boston and was 27 years old when the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. On May 29th 1944, he served on a destroyer escort, the *USS Elmore*, DE-686, part of Task Force 21.11 headed by the *USS Block*

³¹⁴ Lewis, 102.

³¹⁵ Roscoe, 307.

Island. For two days, the task force actively tracked the U-549. In the latter portion of that afternoon, the task force was much closer to the enemy than they realized. Carriers are designed to be a platform many miles away from the enemy, allowing for time to launch the deadly planes to strike the enemy. One Captain wrote a colorful phrase after the war of the predicament the *Block Island* would soon find itself. He wrote, “A carrier right smack at the scene of a sound contact is like an old lady in a barroom brawl. She has no business there, and can do nothing but get out of the way.”³¹⁶

Jones and the crew of *Elmore* viewed *Block Island* as “Big Mom.” When “Big Mom” pinpointed locations for U-boats, she issued orders for the DEs. She refueled her DE ‘kids’ not only with oil, but also with food for the sailors.

Without request, the food passed over to the *Elmore* included such treats as ice cream. *Block Island* truly represented the heart of the task force. On May 29th, Jones was on the bridge of the *Elmore* near the captain only 2,000 yards from the *Block Island* when the first explosion occurred. The *Elmore* immediately went into General Quarters and tracked the U-boat that did the damage to “Big Mom.”

³¹⁷ While the sailors of the DEs instantly moved to search for the U-boat, the men of *Block Island* experienced firsthand what their enemy inflicted on Allied ships for years in the Battle of the Atlantic.

³¹⁶ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 375-6.

³¹⁷ Henry Jones, interviewed by Ben Hruska, December 4, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.



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Image 5: View of “Big Mom” listing from one of her DE “kids”. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.

Bill “Slick” Connolly was serving as supervisor of the radio room on *Block Island* in the late afternoon of May 29th. Connolly had firsthand knowledge of surviving a sinking as he and a core group of the radiomen on *Block Island* first served on the large fast-fleet carrier, the *USS Lexington, CV-2*, lost in the Battle of Coral Sea. When the first two torpedoes struck *Block Island* Connolly the men and equipment in the radio room were thrown around violently. With all the papers scattered around, Connolly stated the radio room, “looked like a snowstorm.”³¹⁹

For the 957 sailors on board, the two German torpedoes with 660 pounds of explosives slamming into *Block Island* caught them in a range of activities including showering, cooking meals, and doing laundry. Captain Hughes reported the two explosives hit three seconds apart. Heading for the bridge he noticed the first visible damage to his vessel: “Enroute I noticed the port side of the flight

³¹⁸ “The Block Island Mortally Wounded,” Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

³¹⁹ Bill Connolly, interview by Ben Hruska, December 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

deck curled back about ten feet and the forward part of the flight deck covered with oily water.”³²⁰ This damage caused by the first hit to the bow, created a 20 by 26 foot hole on the starboard side of the ship. Two lookouts manning the bow portion of the ship were killed. The second torpedo struck in the more dangerous position, striking the aftermost oil tank on board. Luckily for the crewmembers, this was empty and no explosion or fire resulted from either torpedo.³²¹ However, for Hughes and the men on *Block Island*, the very real threat of another torpedo hit lingered due to the thousands of gallons of fuel and weapons aboard.

Damage caused by the two torpedoes hits included the engine room taking on water, a jammed rudder, and the “ship settled nine feet by the stern.”³²² After coming to a stop in the water, Hughes later wrote, “I felt certain that we were going to get hit again any minute. The word was passed for all hands who did not have particular jobs to go topside.”³²³ Central to Hughes’ thinking was the bomb magazine of *Block Island* with its 142 depth charges and 65,000 gallons of aviation fuel aboard. Dead in the water, his men faced the very real danger of one torpedo blowing the ship in half similar to the damage inflicted on the *Liscome*

³²⁰ Commander Officer F. M. Hughes, *Action Report of Commanding Officer, U.S.S. Block Island concerning the loss by enemy action of that vessel on 29 May 1944*, 6.

³²¹ *U.S.S. Block Island (CVE21), War Damage Report No. 49*. U.S. Hydrographic Office, November 20, 1944, 6-8.

³²² Hughes 6.

³²³ Hughes 6.

Bay. Once on the deck, Hughes issued orders to prepare to abandon ship.

Hughes's order for the men to move topside proved wise in the minutes ahead.

A third torpedo exploded ten minutes after the first hits and ripped a 35-foot hole up and into the hangar deck. This explosion tested a modification in making the CVEs less vulnerable to a torpedo strike such as the strikes that caused a violent explosion of the bomb magazine that destroyed the *HMS Avenger* and *USS Liscome Bay*. The reports after the sinking attested, "Recently authorized alterations to protect the bomb stowage had been accomplished and there was no bomb magazine explosion."³²⁴ However, the damage still proved deadly for the crew.

The explosion caused the immediate death of two men and another crewmember was mortally wounded. However, Hughes's order greatly reduced the number killed in this explosion. The third torpedo also knocked out all communication and lighting on the ship so orders were reduced to word of mouth. By now, the ship was rapidly settling by the stern. From the flight deck, the men watched the DE *USS Barr*, DE-576, within a mile of the ship race for an attack on the submerged U-boat. As men watched the *Barr*, "A big cloud of water and smoke suddenly appeared off her stern."³²⁵ The men, thinking the *Barr* was launching a depth-charge attack, cheered in mistaken support for their fellow

³²⁴ *U.S.S. Block Island (CVE21), War Damage Report No. 49*. U.S. Hydrographic Office, November 20, 1944, 4.

³²⁵ Hughes, 7.

vessel. The *Barr*, struck by a torpedo in the stern lost 17 men and sat dead in the water.

Miraculously, no fires started from the three hits to *Block Island*. However, the sinking of the vessel's stern threatened to break the ship in two. With this threat to his crew, Hughes gave the order to abandon ship less than half an hour after the first torpedo strike. For the crew, the order to leave the ship, their only protection against the habitat of the ocean, caused waves of fear in the crew. One recalled, "This was a shock to hear. Nothing before this meant as much as hearing this. My visions of disasters at sea now became a reality."³²⁶ Avoiding the 18-inch gap in the flight deck, the men entered the Atlantic waters, which were covered in almost a foot of oil from the wounded *Block Island*. With the sun setting, only 45 minutes of daylight remained. Hughes, reduced to communicating with the task forces DEs by signaling with a flashlight, commanded *USS Ahrens*, DE-575, to prepare to pick up his crew.³²⁷

The *Loss of Action Report* noted that most of the men abandoned ship within 17 minutes after the third torpedo hit.³²⁸ Walter Cyr, taking a shower when the first torpedo struck, climbed down sixty feet of knotted rope into the oily water, which luckily was not on fire. Cyr and the others swam away from *Block Island* in a variety of lifeboats and floating nets. Others just swam in the oily

³²⁶ *USS Block Island History*, 95.

³²⁷ Hughes 6-7.

³²⁸ *U.S.S. Block Island (CVE21), War Damage Report No. 49*. U.S. Hydrographic Office, November 20, 1944, 7.

water wearing life jackets. From Cyr's vantage point of the very low horizon, it looked as if the Task Force's DEs were leaving the scene, but, they were actively searching for the U-boat. The cornered U-boat posed a grave danger to the remaining DEs of the Task Force. Before the DEs could stop dead in the water, and pick up the crewmembers of *Block Island*, the U-Boat had to be successfully destroyed.

The range of emotions for the crewmembers was as diverse as their backgrounds, which ranged from small midwestern towns to larger cities. Some prayed and made their peace with their maker, others called out to fellow sailors, and others yelled at the Nazis for sinking their ship. Swimming in the ocean, sailor Joe Booi focused his emotions on a happy notion: "Hallelujah, I'm gonna get 30 days survivor's leave!"³²⁹ However, no matter what their emotions were on the surface, from their training all the men realized the transformation in the relationship with the *Block Island*. It had served as their home and safe platform of operation in battling the Germans and the Atlantic sea. Now, the ship posed a grave danger to her former crewmembers. Massive holes from the torpedoes were sucking in water, she was full of explosives designed to kill ships of war underwater, and lastly leaking a range of combustible fuel. The mens' training told them to get away from the vessel, as the sinking *Block Island* posed a threat

³²⁹ Mike Dunham, *Anchorage Daily News*, May 25, 1997.

not only to the men in the water but also to any DE attempting to pick them up. So the men continued swimming away from the stricken ship.³³⁰

In the rush to get off the *Block Island*, a group of sailors exited the vessel from ropes on the windward side. This caused them to be pushed toward the sinking vessel once in the water. A small liberty boat from the vessel witnessed their distress and tossed a rope. They were pulled to safety. However, Hector Vernetti noticed that the wind was pushing them back, so, he took off swimming in the rough seas. Soon he was completely alone.

In the rough Atlantic waters, when one is floating with a lifejacket one's horizon ends at one's nose. Just under an hour ago, Vernetti was one of almost a thousand members of the *Fighting Block Island*, now he bobbed alone in a vast ocean with the sun fast setting. Then he heard some talking. He immediately yelled, "Hey, you guys wait for me!" A thankful reply came back from an unseen source. "Is that you Vernetti?"³³¹

As the men swam away from the sinking vessel and the oil gathered on the surface, some of them encountered an exotic and painful resident of this part of the Atlantic. The sight of these organisms probably caused more fear than dangers from stinging. The Portuguese Man O' War is in fact not one organism, but what in biology is termed a "colonial organism". A series of organisms working in compartmentalized fashion to achieve the goal of survival. This includes venom

³³⁰ Hector Vernetti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 15, 2009, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

filled tentacles designed to paralyze fish, which can reach 50 feet in length. Most obvious is the clear bladder full of air, which keeps the Man O' War afloat and also acts as a sail in allowing the ocean winds to propel it in the open seas. This last characteristic accounts for its name, after the 16th Century English naval term for a particular class of war ship.³³² As the men viewed the air-filled bladders in the waters around them, advice came from an experienced seaman.

Sailor Jack Ward had planned to watch a movie in the hangar deck that evening, now he and his swimming mates encountered the Man O' War sails. Soon a Chief Warrant Officer, known to the men by the nickname of 'Old Ironsides', swam by with his cap still in place. He yelled, "Swim on your backs, men."³³³ This position protected them from any underwater explosions from the wounded *FBI*. The orders from a familiar source overcame the shock of seeing the alien bladders full of air around them. However, these Man O' War still produced stings. Ward wrote, "Anyone who was foolish enough to remove their shirt and/or pants was in for a very painful surprise."³³⁴ As the men navigated through of the ocean surface full of Mother Nature's Man O' War, the DEs of the task force continued to search for the U-Boat.

³³² "Portuguese Man-of-Wars," National Geographic, accessed February 28, 2011, <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/invertebrates/portuguese-man-of-war.html>.

³³³ *USS Block Island History*, 97.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

Searching for the cornered U-Boat proved a dangerous affair; *Elmore* dodged a near hit of a torpedo first from U-549. Continuing their search, the *Ahrens* made a sound contact with U-549. Radioing this information to *Elmore*, which was closest to the sound contact, the *Elmore* proceeded to close in on the sonar signal. Three minutes later, the *Elmore* launched a hedgehog salvo and scored a hit. Four minutes after the launch, the soundman on the *Elmore* “heard the crackly, tearing noises and harsh rumble that mean a submarine is breaking up like a crushed bushel basket.”³³⁵ U-549 was successfully destroyed, which killed all the 57 members of her crew.³³⁶

Further explosions caused fear among the crewmembers of the *Block Island* that the *Ahrens* had been struck. However, these explosions erupted from *Block Island* itself. With her stern sinking, the flight deck reached a 60-degree angle and the planes loaded with depth charges slipped into the water. With the suddenness of the attack, these weapons were armed to explode at a certain depth as they sank into the Atlantic. After two minutes, the charges exploded. Captain Hughes wrote that these charges, “were the coup de grace for the *Block Island* for the bow remained completely vertical for a few moments and then slowly disappeared from sight at 2155.”³³⁷

³³⁵ Roscoe, 308.

³³⁶ “U-Boat Battles,” USS Block Island Association, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.ussblockisland.org/Beta/U-Boats_p2.html.

³³⁷ Hughes 9-10.

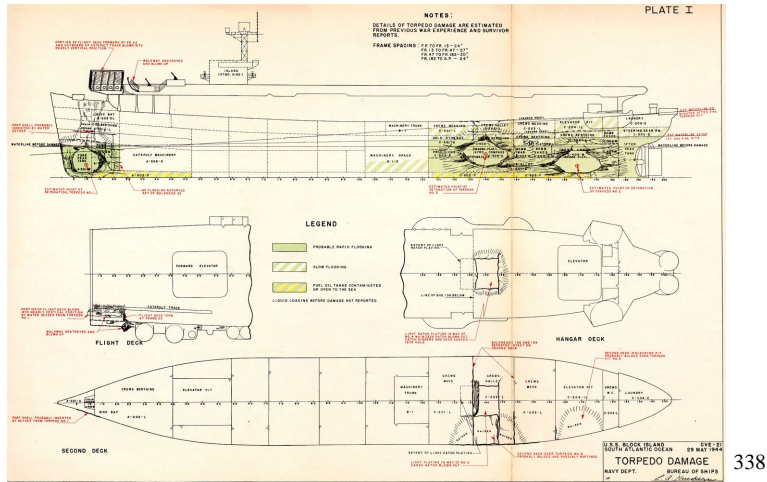


Image 6: U.S. Navy Department drawing of the damage inflicted from the three torpedoes. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.

The scholar James D. Hornfischer describes how the site of a sinking differs dramatically from that of land-based battles. He writes, “When a ship sinks, the battlefield goes away.”³³⁹ While in the water watching the 21, survivor Radioman John “Joe” Browne recalled floating in the oily water and looking where the ship had slipped under the waves. He wrote, “Finally everything was smooth again and where there had been a 10,000 ton carrier just a short time ago there was now nothing.”³⁴⁰ As darkness fell, all that remained in giving a clue that a ship had been there were the men in the water, and debris from the ship floating around them. However, as the 21 sank into the deep she still posed a threat to the men. Explosions from weapons on board periodically continued to detonate. The

³³⁸ “Drawings of Damage to CVE-21”, Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

³³⁹ Hornfischer, 359.

³⁴⁰ Joe Browne, “Experience of the Sinking of the USS Block Island”, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA., 4.

men remembered their training, and if they were not in a raft, lay on their backs in the water to reduce the exposure to these weapons. This training paid off, for a number of horrific explosions took place, which were the result of large portions of the weapons onboard detonating in unison. Browne recalled that one explosion proved so powerful, “it knocked out both engine rooms of the approaching DE some three miles now from the carrier.”³⁴¹ This particular explosion proved so violent it forced Browne upward and completely out of the water.

With U-549 successfully destroyed, the DEs stopped in the water and plucked the survivors out of the oily sea. Brown estimated that his group of men struggled in the water for two hours and fifteen minutes.³⁴² The experience proved exhausting for these young men, and because they lacked strength the DE sailors dragged them aboard. Once onboard, many could not walk. Smoking cigarettes and consuming medical brandy, the men of the *Block Island* contemplated their ordeal. Walter Cyr was so tired he could not move his arms to adjust his cigarette.³⁴³ Hector Verneti drank a hardy portion of brandy.³⁴⁴ For the next several hours the DEs circled the site of the sinking, waiting for daylight to continue the search for survivors. The morning light revealed the remains of the

³⁴¹ Browne, 4.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ Walter Cyr, interview by Ben Hruska, December 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

³⁴⁴ Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 15, 2009, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

battlefield. Browne recalled, “The sea for miles around was just covered with life rafts and other debris.”³⁴⁵ With the final check for survivors completed, the ships left the site. This represented the final goodbye for these sailors with the defining experience in the Navy. As a noted scholar calls the ocean as a battlefield, “On the sea there is no place to anchor a memorial flagpole or a headstone. It is a vanishing graveyard.”³⁴⁶

The DEs transported the crew of *Block Island* in cramped corners. USS *Ahrens* and USS *Paine* crews consisted of roughly 150 men, now the *Paine* added 277 and the *Ahrens* an additional 674 survivors.³⁴⁷ The kitchens worked overtime in brewing coffee and making sandwiches for the suddenly expanded population of the ship. The *Ahrens* was so overloaded that it implemented a system of dividing the survivors into groups of thirds. These groups rotated in shifts, one slept on the deck, one stood, and the final group sat on tables and chairs onboard. Every two hours the groups switched. The ships became an enormous mess with hundreds of survivors still covered in their oil-drenched clothing, including hair and skin. Added to the muddle was the fact of having to ration the limited amount of food.³⁴⁸ Also, the crew of the 21 were used to the motions of their large carrier, and not the small DE. Thus, many were seasick as a result of the increased

³⁴⁵ Browne, 5.

³⁴⁶ Hornfischer, 359.

³⁴⁷ *USS Block Island History*, 100.

³⁴⁸ Lewis, 124, 125.

movement.³⁴⁹ However, emotional stress of surviving the sinking could also be seen.

For civilian Russell Lewis, this mental stress manifested after an unexpected noise. While taking his turn on the deck sleeping, where he used his oil-covered life jacket as a pillow, he awoke. A loud crash occurred from an undisclosed source. He recalled, “as a result of the noise I started shaking violently and uncontrollably.”³⁵⁰ Witnessing his stress, a crewmember told him, “Easy buddy, you’ve got yourself a case of shellshock.”³⁵¹ His thoughts immediately returned to his boyhood home in Indiana and a World War I veteran who shook all the time. The next day a similar incident occurred. Years later Lewis wrote, “I resolved to get myself under control and become the person I was before the first torpedo struck the Block Island.”³⁵² The first step for all the survivors toward returning to a sense of normalcy took place after four days when the DEs reached Casablanca.

In Casablanca, the men exited the vessels. Here the Navy conducted a headcount. Then the survivors were led into a chapel, formerly a camel barn. A service was led by an Episcopalian Chaplain, during which thanks was offered for

³⁴⁹ *USS Block Island History*, 98.

³⁵⁰ Lewis, 125.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 126.

the survivors and prayers given for those crewmembers who did not survive.³⁵³ During the service, the Navy hymn was sung. The sailors' reaction to the song gave new meaning to their ordeal, especially the lines: "*Oh hear us when we cry to Thee, For those in peril on the sea.*"

From the chapel, the oil covered crew lined up in the front of a nearby warehouse. Inside they found Army personnel standing behind tables stacked with survival kits. These included, "towels, wash cloths, soap, razors, shaving cream, cigarettes, khaki underwear, and uniforms intended for army privates."³⁵⁴ The men's appearance in their oily clothes was very un-Navy like. They had not bathed since the sinking, so facial hair also added to their unique appearance. After showering and dressed in their Army clothes, they slept in Army cots. In waiting for their orders, the men passed the time playing baseball and drinking cases of beer.

"WELL AND SAFE"

The Navy told the men of the *Block Island* they could cable home once news of the sinking reached the American public in newspapers. However, the news of the Allied landings in France overshadowed any detailed accounts of the sinking of the lonely carrier. Officer Roy Swift wrote, "With the invasion absorbing major attention, scant newspaper space was given a brief release two

³⁵³ Six men dead from the vessel's crew died as a result of the sinking. Of the V-55 pilots, 6 were aloft at the time of the sinking. Only two of these naval aviators successfully were able to reach islands under Portuguese control. Fifteen men were physically injured, and were taken to the Naval Base hospital in Casablanca.

³⁵⁴ Lewis, 126.

days later, announcing the loss of the Block Island ‘the first American carrier lost in the Atlantic,’ with only the word that ‘casualties were light.’”³⁵⁵ Other news for families stateside included telegrams from the Navy reporting their loved one was “Missing in Action.” From Casablanca, the sailors were able to cable home messages. They were able to select from a number of short statements already drafted by the Navy. Walter Cyr cabled two messages, one to his parents and the other to his girlfriend, that simply read, “Well and safe.”³⁵⁶ After their experience in Casablanca, the crew of the *Block Island* returned to the U.S. in the familiar setting of CVEs.



Image 7: The crew of the 21 in Casablanca after the sinking. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.

CVEs HOME

The survivors, like those of all sinkings in the U.S. Navy, were due to receive 30-days survivors leave. However, before this could happen they needed

³⁵⁵ Swift, 29.

³⁵⁶ Walter Cyr, interview by Ben Hruska, December 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

³⁵⁷ “Survivors in Casablanca”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

to return Stateside. The Navy designated three CVEs, *USS Mission Bay*, CVE-59, *USS Kasaan Bay*, CVE-69, and *USS Tulagi*, CVE-72, to return the survivors home to Norfolk. The men had just survived a sinking, and the thought of returning home on the Atlantic must have been worrisome. Also, these three CVEs were manufactured by the Kaiser Corporation -- which built the doomed *Liscome Bay* -- and earned this class of carriers the nickname, "Kaiser Coffins." Boarding these vessels, Joe Booi remembered, "(N)one of us were too crazy about being onboard one of the Kaiser's Coffins."³⁵⁸ The sail across the middle portion of the ocean was uneventful. Men passed the time by gambling in the hangar deck. Wooden crates, full of engines that needed overhauling, served as card tables. However, the mental weight of the sinking persisted. Nearing the end of their journey and the American coast, Joe Booi remembered seeing fifty card games in progress. Then an expected lurch took place, like that of a torpedo hit. Booi recalled, "Fifty decks of cards went flying into the air and everybody ran up onto the flight deck. When I looked out a short way, there was a tugboat with the biggest anchor I ever saw on a small boat. I commented about it and one sailor there said, 'Hell that's our anchor hanging on the side of the tug, our anchor chain broke.'"³⁵⁹ Joe's ship had come in contact with a tugboat.

Docking in Norfolk, the men were processed and received their 30-day survivors leave. Crewmembers said good-bye to one another. Traditionally, the

³⁵⁸ Joe Booi, "Remembering the Sinking of the Block Island CVE 21," USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

surviving crews of vessels were broken up. Survivor Bill “Slick” Connelly received his second survivors leave, after surviving his first sinking of the *USS Lexington*, CV-2, in 1942, he received orders to report to the *Block Island*.³⁶⁰ Life in the Navy was one of rotating crews, men, air-groups, and commanding officers, who came and went. Sinkings only added to this cycle, producing men lucky enough to survive but with no work place. The loss of vessels gave the Navy men with a range of skills, who needed an assignment, an opportunity for a possible advancement or change of duty. Rotation became a way of life. One sailor summed up his experience as feeling part of a game of chess. He wrote, that an unknown force “decides one day to pick you up between finger and thumb like a pawn on a chess-board and move you to a different square.”³⁶¹

While the Navy would at times rechristen a new vessel for one lost in combat, it was not the policy to retain the original crew. As the men left the Navy Yard of Norfolk, they had no idea what their duties would be once they returned to the Navy in a month’s time. While the men returned to their hometowns, a force they did know lobbied for an unprecedented action in the history of the U.S. Navy. Captain Hughes, the last commanding officer of *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, was not only pushing for the commissioning of a second *USS Block Island*, he also sought to retain the original crew. Stressing the importance of keeping the

³⁶⁰ Bill Connolly, interview by Ben Hruska, December 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

³⁶¹ Ommanney, 62.

crew of the *Fighting Block Island* together, Hughes once back in Norfolk pushed for this goal with the high command of the Navy.³⁶²

As Hughes attempted to make Navy history, the crewmembers traveled home. Sailor John Suprey headed to Lowell, Massachusetts. Suprey, with the use of his father's signature, signed up for the Navy at the age of 16. The war was unkind to his family with one brother killed and another held as a POW. His parents read of the *Block Island's* demise in the Lowell paper and received no other information. The first word they heard from him was Suprey's voice on the phone from Norfolk stating he was coming home for thirty days. After getting off the train, his father told him to put his bags in the car, his father then walked his 17-year-old son into a bar and bought him a drink.

While on leave, Suprey, like the majority of the crewmembers, received orders to assemble in Bremerton, Washington.³⁶³ Here, awaiting its crew was a new Commencement Bay class ship, constructed from the keel up and named the *USS Block Island, CVE-106*. The story of the crew of *Block Island* did not end with the sinking of the CVE-21. The crew's story proved unique in the annals of U.S. Navy history with a vessel carrying not only the tradition of the name of a lost vessel, but also the crew from the very same lost vessel. Their story would continue with a new ship and a new mission in the Pacific theater of operations. However, the one theme of teamwork remained. The CVE-106 would carry the

³⁶² Swift, 29.

³⁶³ John Suprey, interview by Ben Hruska, December 4, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

first all Marine fighter squadron assigned to a Navy vessel, participate in the largest naval siege in military history at Okinawa, and aid in the liberation of over four hundred Allied prisoners of war held by the Japanese from the island of Formosa at the close of the war. Through these two amazing missions, the crew of the *Block Island*, CVE-21 & 106, remained dedicated to their mission of teamwork.

TRAIN TO THE OCEAN

For the crewmembers of *Block Island*, the America they returned home to in the summer of 1944 contrasted sharply with the America they left. The 30 days survivors' leave granted them time to witness this transformation on the home front first hand with friends off fighting in the war and other vast changes to American society. This included the manufacturing capacity of the country devoted to the war effort, which caused major shifts in populations going to urban centers to work in building the weapons for the war. They noticed the rationing of foodstuffs while returning to dining with their families. They saw their sisters and female friends leaving their homes in the morning to work in jobs dominated by men before the war.

Once their 30 days were up, crewmembers along the eastern seaboard gathered in Norfolk, Virginia. This group included three sailors from Massachusetts; Walter Cyr from Walpole, John Suprey of Lowell, and Bill 'Slick' Connolly of Natick. Boarding a train, they headed west for another mission. As the train inched toward Seattle, the crewmembers lived and slept in the cattle cars loaded with bunks. Pulled along by a coal-burning engine, the crewmembers

watched America flash by outside over the seven-day journey.³⁶⁴ Much had changed in the first few years of World War II for the United States that affected social, political, and military considerations. However, the war still waged on and the crewmembers of *Block Island* moved on to a new ship, with new tactics, and a new enemy, that same enemy that caused entry of the U.S. into the war with its attack on Pearl Harbor.

³⁶⁴ John Suprey, Walter Cyr, Bill Connolly, interviews by Ben Hruska, December 4, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

CHAPTER 4

VESSEL IN TRANSITION: USS BLOCK ISLAND, CVE-106, NUMEROUS ROLES IN THE PACIFIC DURING WORLD WAR II AND INTO POST-WAR COLD-WAR AMERICA

Following the sinking of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, Captain Francis Massie Hughes showed determination in keeping his crew together. Throughout his time in the U.S. Navy Hughes demonstrated tenacity. As a cadet at the Naval Academy, his tenacity earned him athletic records for the position of quarterback of the football team.³⁶⁵ At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor he led a squadron of PBY flying boats. Scrambling to his aircraft wearing pajamas he was the first of his squadron in the air on the 1,500-mile patrol flights scouting for the position of the Japanese enemy. After two days of scouting, Hughes finally took off his pajamas.³⁶⁶ Hughes applied this determination in holding his crew together on a new *Block Island*.

While Hughes' determination in retaining the crew proved significant, it was only representative of the greater determination witnessed throughout the story of both vessels and the crewmembers. Examining the story of the *USS Block*

³⁶⁵ *Lucky Bag*, Yearbook the U.S. Naval Academy, 1922, 145. Collection of the Army/Navy Club Military Library, Washington, D.C.

³⁶⁶ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy: "The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict"*, 5.

Island, CVE-106,³⁶⁷ also grants a window into the greater determination of the American men and women that waged World War II. From the construction of the second vessel, the operations that took place on board during the war and later in the Cold War, to the formation of a veteran's group dedicated to the memory of the vessel, determination surrounds this story. While the story of the 106 is unique in specifics related to World War II and the Korean era, it is representative of greater story of the U.S. Navy in World War II in ordering, utilizing, and adapting the vessel's use after the war, and mothballing and then finally scrapping vessels. The tale also provides insight into the determination of crewmembers perpetuating the memory of their vessel once the U.S. Navy disposed of their maritime home.

The *Tacoma News Tribune* reported on November 17th 1944 that the Tacoma's Todd-Pacific Shipyard's produced a second escort carrier, *USS Block Island*. The piece noted the accomplishments of the first *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, in the Atlantic also built in Tacoma. After the sinking of the vessel the paper reported that Captain Hughes stated to his officers and men, "We'll get another ship and stay together! This is too fine a crew to be broken up!"³⁶⁸ While the renaming of vessels after those lost in battle represents a tradition far older than

³⁶⁷ CVE 106 was launched on 10 June 1944 as *Sunset Bay* by Todd-Pacific Shipyards, Inc. Tacoma, WA, sponsored by Mrs. E. J. (Grace) Hallenbeck mother of Major Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, then a POW of the Japanese and commissioned as *Block Island* on 30 December 1944, Captain F. M. Hughes in command.

³⁶⁸ "Crew of Lost Block Island to Man Giant New Carrier of Same Name," *The Tacoma News Tribune*, November 17, 1944.

the U.S. Navy, the story of the christening of the second *USS Block Island* does rank among the annals of naval history. As the *Tribune* explained, “For, while it has long been a custom of the U.S. Navy to pass the names of veteran ships lost in action on to their successors, these namesake ships hitherto have carried different crews.”³⁶⁹ When this issue was published for the residences of Tacoma the crewmembers of the first *USS Block Island* waited to board the second *Block Island*. However, the determined crew is not the first chapter of the 106, the men and women who molded metal into a vessel deserve this honor.

EVOLUTION

The beginning stage of the escort carrier experiment evolved from the conversion and commissioning of the *USS Long Island*, CVE-1. The evolution is seen in the differing classes of escort carriers, which affected construction practices and physical aspects of the vessels. The Navy’s view of the vessels’ role in the war also evolved, which is seen in the three naval classifications. The Navy first designated the *Long Island*, AVG-1, as an “aircraft escort vessel”. In August of 1942 the nomenclature changed to ACV-1, noting the Navy’s view of the vessels as “auxiliary aircraft carriers”. Then in July 1943 the Navy issued a reclassification, which marked the change from a vessel in a support role to one actively engaged in battle. Thus, the *Long Island* became CVE-1, for “escort carrier” noting the warship designation these vessels deserved in engaging the

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

Japanese and German forces in a number of ways.³⁷⁰ As one military scholar wrote of the changing designations, “each change mark[ed] a step up the ladder of respectability.”³⁷¹

The 106 represented the end stage of evolution for the escort carriers. The Commencement Bay class embodied the evolution of escort carriers that included the classes of the Archer, Avenger, Sangamon, Bogue, Prince William, and Casablanca classifications.³⁷² The second *Block Island* represented one of nine Commencement Bay vessels completed and commissioned before the conclusion of the war. Of these nine vessels one naval scholar wrote, “They incorporated all the lessons learned since the *Long Island* was commissioned.”³⁷³

While the blueprints in producing escort carriers changed over time, so did the workers who breathed life into the steel and produced the vessels. The complexity of producing an escort carrier of the Commencement Bay series equated to placing together a fifty-story skyscraper that floated. While welding was utilized in the constructing of small vessels, most notably Liberty Ships, rivets were used in the piecing together of larger Navy vessels, such as carriers, cruisers, and battleships. However, the Commencement Bay class of CVE in

³⁷⁰ Scot MacDonald, “Evolution of Aircraft Carriers: Emergence of the Escort Carrier,” *Naval Aviation News*, December, 1962, 51.

³⁷¹ Henry M. Dater, “Development of the Escort Carrier,” *Military Affairs* 12 (1948): 81.

³⁷² Escort Carrier Notes, “U.S. Escort Carrier Notes,” accessed October 5, 2011, <http://www.ww2pacific.com/notecve.html>.

³⁷³ MacDonald., 52

order to decrease construction time used welding, and thus was the largest all-welded vessel classification of the conflict.³⁷⁴

Ship Fitter James Cole and his four daughters aided in the fabrication of the CVE-106. His 18-year-old daughter Florabelle worked as a burner, while Fannie, age 23, labored as an electrician's helper. His other two daughters worked with explosive gases, which when combined and ignited molded the vessel together. Mary, age 22, and Ruby, age 29, served as welders. All five members of the Cole family labored in transforming the materials that arrived at the Todd's Pacific shipyard into a war vessel. After the completion of what the Todd workers classified as another "big one", the Navy accepted the ship.³⁷⁵ While Todd-Pacific shipyards produced a replacement for the stricken CVE-21, the psychological damage to the crew surviving the sinking was not so easily identified and repaired as the missing escort carrier.

SQUIRREL ROBBERS

As the men reported to Bremerton, Washington in July 1944, the effects of their baptism were not far from their minds. Sailor Irv Biron recalled the psychological damage inflicted on a close friend of his as a result of the sinking, which manifested itself as uncontrolled shaking. He stated, "Thirty days after the sinking he could not hold a glass of water."³⁷⁶ Walter Cyr recalled that Navy

³⁷⁴ *Chips Off the Old Block*. Vol. 2, No. 1., 4.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ Irv Biron, interview by Ben Hruska, June 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

psychologists interviewed members of the crew seeking to identify those suffering from the lasting mental effects of the experience. Navy slang termed these doctors, “squirrel robbers.”³⁷⁷ Questions posed to Cyr by today’s standards seem odd, with many questions focusing on his sexuality. Among those questions fielded by Cry included whether he considered dating his sister and if he liked to date girls.³⁷⁸ These inquiries highlight the deficient understanding of the U.S. military in the manifestations of psychological problems resulting from combat, especially a sinking.

The lack of military preparation for mental illness is evident in the fact that the entire Army Medical Corp at the entry of the war possessed a total of only thirty-five doctors practicing psychiatry. The rapid need for doctors by 1943 witnessed the establishment of twenty-two hospitals just for the most seriously mentally ill. The horrific conditions faced by servicemen, including that of sinking, was the primary reason for mental strain. As one Brigadier General of the Medical Corps wrote of the new weapons used in this war, “Bombing, more powerful artillery, tanks, flame-throwers, rockets, suicidal attacks, and other devices intensified the strains of war a hundred fold...All these increased the psychological stress.”³⁷⁹ For those surviving a sinking on the high seas, a number

³⁷⁷ Beaver, 284.

³⁷⁸ Walter Cyr, interview by Ben Hruska, December 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

³⁷⁹ Brig. Gen. William C. Menninger, “Psychiatry and the War,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1945, 108-9.

of experiences held the possibility of producing mental strain after the event. This included hearing the exploding torpedoes, abandoning ship, experiencing underwater explosions while in the water, and nighttime conditions when rescue finally arrived.

THE COMMISSIONING

On December 30th 1944 a thousand guests, including city officials from Tacoma, Washington, gathered with the crew in the hangar deck of CVE-106. At 1521, the colors ran up the flagpole for the first time and Captain Hughes took command of the vessel.³⁸⁰ The news of the commissioning event caused the Town Council of Block Island, Rhode Island, the vessel's namesake, to send a message via telegram. It concluded with, "We pray for the safety of you, your crew and the new *Block Island*. That you may carry on to greater achievements is our most sincere wish and hope. Bon voyage and sock'em often."³⁸¹ The event also included the presentation of a bronze plaque to the crew by the people who built her, that bore the inscription, THE FIGHTING BLOCK ISLAND. The commissioning program noted this plaque would hang inside the new Fighting Block Island. The program also stated the plaque was, "Indicative of the good will existing between those that build the ships and those who sail them."³⁸²

³⁸⁰ Public Data Section, U.S. Navy, *Composite History of USS Block Island (CVE-21) and USS Block Island (CVE-106)*, (Navy Department: Office of Public Relations, 1948), 6 & 11.

³⁸¹ Robert M. Downey, "Block Island's Pair of Aircraft Carriers" *Block Island Times*, May 29, 1993.

³⁸² *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 4.

Present at the commissioning were the core crew reporting to this new vessel, 660 men and 52 officers from the first *Block Island*. The second ship was not an emergency conversion of an oil tanker hull like the Bogue class of the escort carriers including the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21. As a Commencement Bay class escort carrier, the 106 displaced 12,000 tons, had a length of 557 feet, and a top speed of over 18 knots.³⁸³ Her flight deck boasted two elevators, two catapults for launching aircraft, and thirteen arresting wires in the landing of aircraft. The compliment of aircraft included up to thirty-four planes and 1,066 men. Fully loaded the vessel doubled in weight, up to 24,275 tons. After the first of the year on January 10th, she set sail into Puget Sound and the crew of the *Block Island* started their second mission.³⁸⁴

There is more than one way to gather a sense of the size of the new vessel besides dry facts in regard to the cold steel. Another way to measure a more human level of the scope of the vessel is considering the duty of Machinist's Mate 1st Class Cleveland T. Martin. Raised in Jackson County, Kansas, Martin survived the sinking of the first vessel and was part of the core crew on the second vessel. Martin's duties onboard included close contact with the cooks in maintaining the

³⁸³ Public Data Section, U.S. Navy, *Composite History of USS Block Island (CVE-21) and USS Block Island (CVE-106)*, (Navy Department: Office of Public Relations, 1948), 6 & 11.

³⁸⁴ Roy L. Swift and Robert J. Cressman, "The Tale of Two Block Islands," *The CVE 'Piper'*, May/June 1996, 16.

refrigerators and freezers that keep food fresh for up to months at a time.³⁸⁵

Considering the food consumed in fueling the men of the ship grants a window into the scale of the operations onboard.

In the weeks before the vessel departed into the Pacific, the kitchen staff loaded up on supplies. While in port, the Navy took advantage of the fresh products in the area including fifty gallons of milk delivered by the Medowsweet Dairy. Other local products included 2,250 dozen eggs, 40 gallons of oysters, 350 pounds of salmon, and 250 pounds of sole. This fresh food produced meals for the men who were preparing the vessel to be at sea for weeks at a time. Other commodities moved onboard the vessel included \$250,000 from the Tacoma branch of the Bank of California, to serve as payroll for the men. Liquid power for the ship gathered in port included 218,000 gallons of “navy special fuel oil” onboard, to power the vessel in her future mission in the Pacific.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵Washburn University Alumni, “Cleveland T. Martin Jr. U.S. Navy service, WWII, U.S.S. Block Island,” Washburn University, accessed on March 5, 2011, <http://www.washburn.edu/cas/art/cyoho/archive/OurFamily/Martins/JackMartin/index.html>.

³⁸⁶ *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, Deck Log, January 9-10, 1945.

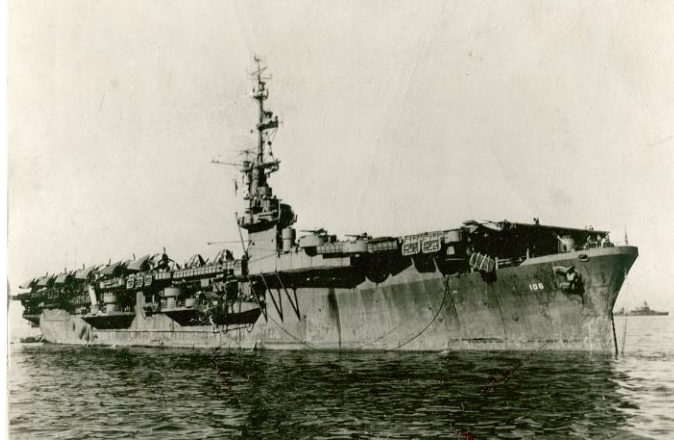


Image 8: *USS Block Island*, CVE-106 at anchor with aft portion of flight deck filled with aircraft. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.³⁸⁷

As the second *Block Island* sailed south along the Pacific coast her crew's experience in the Navy contrasted sharply with the first time the crew headed out of Puget Sound. As the *Composite History* of the ships noted on the first vessel, "Among those officers standing watches on the bridge were a Philadelphia lawyer, an accountant, a New York stock broker and a geologist."³⁸⁸ Not only was the crew well experienced in the workings of an aircraft carrier, but their passage south to San Diego to pick up two Marine squadrons would make U.S. Navy and Marine Corp history. As the vessel plowed south, the thoughts of returning to war were not far for the crew. The vessel proceeded south in an irregular zig zagging pattern to avoid possible enemy submarines. Orders for drills screamed over the ship's intercom system, including that of abandoning ship. As the men rushed to the flight deck in these drills, they looked up and witnessed another measure of

³⁸⁷ "USS Block Island, CVE-106", Photograph, USS Block Island Collection. San Diego, CA.

³⁸⁸ Public Data Section, 1.

protection against submarines. Above the carrier a U.S. Navy blimp floated escorting the vessel on its journey.³⁸⁹

As the vessel cruised down the California coast, she turned eastward toward San Francisco. Pulling into the harbor, the Sailors cruised under the Golden Gate Bridge at nine in the morning en route to the Alameda Naval Air Station. The new *FBI's* empty flight and hangar decks would not go to waste, as seven damaged planes and five picket boats, each weighing 13 tons, were hoisted onboard bound for San Diego. Also loaded onboard were 100,000 gallons of aviation fuel and 8,000 gallons of aviation lube. While these operations took place, the men were given shore leave to visit the bay area.³⁹⁰

Patrick Chan, a barber on-board the vessel, visited Oakland. Chan stood out in his Navy uniform for he was of Chinese descent. While Japanese-Americans were not allowed to serve in the U.S. Navy, it did accept Chinese-Americans. Chan, as barber, knew many of the fellow crewmembers from his work. He survived the sinking with them in the Atlantic, and with the rest of the crew was soon headed into the Pacific. While in Oakland, he walked the streets with his full Navy uniform and decided to get a haircut. Chan's experience in the

³⁸⁹ *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, Deck Log, January 20, 1945.

³⁹⁰ *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, Deck Log, January 22, 1945.

Oakland barbershop would make a lasting impression on him, as he was refused a haircut because of his ethnicity.³⁹¹

SEMPER FIDELIS

Like the testing of weaponry conducted from the deck of the 21, the U.S. Navy selected the 106 to serve in the role of another experiment. She would represent the first U.S. Navy vessel to house an all-Marine fighter-wing. In San Diego both the Marine Fighting Squadron VMF 511 and Marine Torpedo Bombing Squadron, VMTB 233, along with thirteen officers and 216 enlisted men, joined the *Block Island*. While Marine squadrons had made their mark in the Pacific campaign during the war, these consisted of land-based units unaccustomed to fueling, arming, and launching planes from the confines of an aircraft carrier. Learning these skills took time and once leaving San Diego, the vessel cruised west to train off the California coast.³⁹²

While the second *Block Island* was in the final stages of commissioning into the U.S. Navy, Marine Aviators practiced on land-based airfields--what the Marines termed “simulated carrier landings.”³⁹³ However, the real event of landing on an aircraft carrier, and an escort carrier at that, was much more difficult. One escort carrier Sailor described observing these landings. He wrote,

³⁹¹ “Stories About Chaplain, Lt. G. A. MacInnes USNR: Who Served on Both the *USS Block Island* Ships,” USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA.

³⁹² Swift, 30-31.

³⁹³ Col. R. Bruce Porter and Eric Hemmel, *Ace! A Marine Night-Fighter Pilot in World War II*, (Pacifica, California: Pacifica Press, 1985), 217.

“Watching aircraft landing on held a kind of macabre fascination.”³⁹⁴ One of the first to attempt to land on the new wooden flight deck was veteran Marine Aviator, Major R. Bruce Porter, who made three confirmed air victories against Japanese pilots. He described his feelings that with many “simulated carrier landings” under their belt, “every one of us well knew that we had been landing on solid, unmoving earth.”³⁹⁵

Porter was a man who controlled his nervousness well. As an athlete at USC before a match he learned the signs of nerves that he described in his autobiography as “anxiety, tightness in the stomach, perspiring hands, dry throat, shortness of breath, pounding heart, momentary lightheadedness.”³⁹⁶ In the spring of 1945, these same feelings returned as he looked out of the cockpit of his fighter aircraft 10,000 feet above the Pacific. Out his window the nearly six hundred foot long vessel looked amazingly small in the vast Pacific. Porter’s first thought on seeing the vessel he recalled forty years later “was that the flight deck looked to be about the size of a postage stamp.”³⁹⁷ Nearing the escort carrier on final approach the *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, did increase in size. However, from

³⁹⁴ Ommanney, 41.

³⁹⁵ Porter, 218.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

Porter's perspective it was "never bigger than a mere cork bobbing in a huge swell."³⁹⁸

Approaching the vessel, Porter's eyes focused on the Landing Signal Officer (LSO), who guided the pilot in landing on the deck. If the aircraft's direction and speed were true, the LSO signaled that the engine be cut. Two things surprised Porter upon landing. First, the speed with which his Grumman Hellcat came to a stop. Secondly, the furious activity surrounding his plane of other Marines involved in unhooking the aircraft from the arrester wires and also clearing the plane from the deck to allow other aircraft to quickly land.³⁹⁹ However, these Marines did not learn these skills of operating in the cramped quarters of a flight deck on the job and needed help from the U.S. Navy.

The transition from the field to the platform-based operations took more than time; it required help from the core group of *Block Island* veterans. While most of the Navy aircrew personnel were not on the vessel, a handful remained behind in easing the transition of Marine ground crew personnel moving from the airfields on the Pacific islands to that of an escort carrier. One such crewmember that possessed a special skill that no Marine had experienced was Jack Greer, who served on the 21 and survived the sinking. Jack retained the skill set of operating what was termed in the hangar deck as the 'big green board.' This large chalkboard represented the up-to-the-minute summary of all the aircraft in both

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 219.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 222.

squadrons. One glance at the board showed which aircraft were aloft, on the flight deck, or undergoing a range of maintenance, including refueling or rearming. Greer worked with the Marines in the transition period off of San Diego in getting these Marines up to speed on the inner workings of storing, maneuvering, and launching and landing aircraft on the flight and hangar decks of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-106.⁴⁰⁰

On February 4, 1945, the *Block Island* launched its first aircraft a F-4U Corsair, piloted by Lt. Col. John F. Dobbin. Dobbin's experience included serving as a Marine Aviator at the battle of Guadalcanal and becoming a fighter ace, meaning over the course of the war he shot down five enemy aircraft. Over the next ten days, the *Block Island* docked in San Diego and picked up more Marines of the air group and continued practicing its air operations. However, on the 14th, the men of the *Block Island* witnessed that training during war could quickly turn deadly.⁴⁰¹

In the late afternoon on the 14th, the 106, near the San Clemente and San Nicolas Islands off the coast of California, prepared to continue three days of training missions of launching and later retrieving aircraft. With threatening weather building in the distance, nine aircraft lifted off the deck into the Pacific sky. Within an hour, the weather deteriorated so quickly that only one aircraft was able to get aboard. The remaining aircraft received orders to attempt to land on

⁴⁰⁰ Jack Greer, Interview by Ben Hruska, March 29, 2007, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁴⁰¹ Swift, 31.

San Nicolas Island or on the aircraft carrier the *USS Ranger*, CV-4, in the vicinity. Three aircraft crashed on San Nicolas, resulting in the death of five. One other plane unable to land on the island attempted to reach the nearest field on the mainland of Bakersfield, resulting in a crash short of the field and the death of three more crew. The three remaining aircraft successfully ditched their planes near Santa Barbara Island, the crew, floating in the water was later rescued. In total, the day resulted in the deaths of eight Marines.⁴⁰² These training deaths due to freakish weather stunned the entire crew and a memorial service was held on the wooden flight deck. This same flight deck catapulted and retrieved aircraft for four more weeks before the vessel headed west and into the Pacific theater of operations.⁴⁰³

THE PACIFIC WAR

The last day the crew of the *Block Island* cruised the ocean actively seeking the enemy was the day their first vessel, CVE-21, received three German torpedoes. Nine months later, entering the central Pacific, the Allied forces occupied all of France and within six weeks Germany would surrender. In the Pacific Theater since the day the first *Block Island* sank much had occurred. The Pacific island hopping campaign pushed closer to the home islands of Japan, including landings in retaking the Philippines. The continued war with Japan

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy: "The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict" ., 24.*

produced massive casualties for Sailors in the U.S. Navy, including former crewmembers of the first '*Fighting Block Island*'.

With the Marine fighter wing assigned to the new 106, crewmembers of the air wing who survived the sinking in May of 1944 were transferred to other vessels. This included the fast carrier the *USS Franklin*, CV-13.⁴⁰⁴ At dawn on March 19th 1945, just off the coast of Japan's home islands, an unnoticed Japanese aircraft came within striking distance of the massive carrier. Two 550-pound bombs hit the flight deck filled with aircraft loaded down with fuel and weapons. The massive fire and subsequent explosions not only cost the lives of 724 Sailors, but also produced the most heavily damaged American carrier to survive the war. Stories of these losses caused from two bomb hits on an aircraft carrier caused serious anxiety for the Sailors on Navy vessels, doubly more so for the crewmembers of the *Block Island* who lost shipmates from their first vessel onboard the *Franklin*.⁴⁰⁵ However, another weapon besides the traditional bomb or torpedo hit also caused rumors and discussion.

KAMIKAZE

The crew of the *Block Island*, including the experienced Marine air-group onboard, entered a Pacific war in its end game. As the Japanese empire became ever more desperate so did her tactics, which included the use of suicide pilots

⁴⁰⁴ John Suprey, Interview by Ben Hruska, December 4, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁴⁰⁵ John Suprey, Interview by Ben Hruska, December 4, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

flying aircraft filled with bombs into Allied war vessels. One reason for this tactic was, ironically, that the use of anti-aircraft by U.S. Navy surface vessels proved dangerously successful against traditional Japanese fighter planes trying to drop bombs or torpedoes on U.S. vessels. Thus, this new tactic aimed to cause as much damage as possible to slow the war and possibly save the home islands from Allied invasion. The escort carriers operating in the Pacific proved amazingly attractive targets; they operated many times near islands that U.S. forces were attempting to invade. These escort carriers providing close ground support to Americans on these small islands required closeness to enemy forces, thus were targets of opportunity for kamikaze pilots.⁴⁰⁶

The first large scale use of kamikaze pilots was in late October 1944, in the Philippines at the Battle of Leyte Gulf. These Japanese pilots took off from airfields in the Philippine islands and looked for the nearest enemy surface vessel. Naturally the largest target of opportunity was selected. The largest aircraft carriers of the CV class were normally operating in the open seas, and the escort carriers hugged nearby pieces of land that Allied forces were invading to provide air support, thus the CVE proved a frequent target for kamikazes. As the Leyte ground invasion advanced, two kamikazes slammed into nearby CVEs. *USS St.*

⁴⁰⁶ Patrick Degan, *Flattops Fighting in World War II: The Battles Between American and Japanese Aircraft Carriers*, (London: McFarland & Company, 2003), 221.

Lo, CVE-63, sustained a kamikaze hit sinking the vessel, while the *USS Santee*, CVE-29, took enough damage to cause her to retire from the operation.⁴⁰⁷

As the Philippine campaign continued with the ground invasion of Luzon in early 1945, the escort carriers carried on in ground support activities and remained likely targets for kamikazes. Three days before the initial ground operations on January 6th, a single kamikaze inflicted massive damage on the *USS Ommaney Bay*, CVE-79. Efforts to save the ship lasted until the crew was forced to abandon ship the next day. The attack not only cost the U.S. Navy a ship, but also over one hundred members of the crew. Over the next ten days of kamikaze attacks, thirty-nine vessels were struck, four of which sank. In terms of personnel, the attacks killed 738 Navy personnel and wounded over 1,400.⁴⁰⁸ These desperate attacks which seemed unimaginable to western eyes added one more source of anxiety to the crew members, especially to those of escort carriers aiding in the support of ground operations in the island-hopping campaign slowly closing in on the home islands of Japan.

After six days of sailing the *Block Island* entered Pearl Harbor on March 26th 1945. In Pearl, an officer with a unique skill set was brought on board, a man whose training warranted his flying in from Chicago to join the 106 on its missions to the west. Marine Officer Joe Zook, first trained as a Naval Aviator. However, Zook was fearful of the fact that the Navy had too many pilots in

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 223.

training and that he may miss the war. However, Zook learned that the Navy was lacking abundance of Land Signal Officer (LSO) and volunteered.⁴⁰⁹ One observer described LSOs: “His job always seemed to me to resemble that of the conductor of an orchestra.”⁴¹⁰ Standing on the aft end of a shifting flight deck and directing approaching aircraft safely landing on the teak deck of a carrier is harrowing enough, however, Zook preformed this task in the dark. Wearing a suit with fluorescent strips, and holding paddles that were also illuminated, Zook officially assisted in the landing the aircraft. All pilots were under orders to follow the LSO’s commands of cut the engine to land, or power away if not lined up correctly. Even in daylight, most propeller-powered aircraft did not grant the field of view to clearly see the flight deck, thus producing the necessity of the LSO. The lack of the pilot’s correct prospective on the fast approaching deck was only exacerbated at night.⁴¹¹ While Zook directed the night landings, Captain Hughes also requested another officer, Chaplain MacInnes, a specific duty of being on the bridge to witness these dangerous landings.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Joe Zook, interviewed by Ben Hruska, April 18, 2010, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁴¹⁰ Ommanney, 47.

⁴¹¹ Joe Zook, interviewed by Ben Hruska, April 18, 2010, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁴¹² “Stories About Chaplain, Lt. G. A. MacInnes USNR: Who Served on Both the *USS Block Island Ships*,” USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA.

For three weeks the *Block Island* sailed in the vicinity of the Hawaiian Islands conducting intensive air operations with another escort carrier *USS Shipley Bay*, CVE-85. Day and night training operations took place, which meant the flight deck never stopped launching and retrieving aircraft. After extensive training, the *Block Island* was deemed ready for the Pacific theater. After docking one last time at Pearl Harbor on April 11th she began her first war cruise. The next day, the President, whom for the youngest Sailors was the only one they had known--Franklin Roosevelt--died in Warm Springs, Georgia.⁴¹³ However, the war continued on and the *Block Island* “weighted down with bombs, shells, rockets and fuel” cruised west on April 17th.⁴¹⁴

Three days after leaving Pearl, the 106 crossed the 180th meridian and the International Date Line. On the 29th of April, the *Block Island* anchored off the small island of Mog Mog, a tiny island part of the Ulithi Islands. This allowed for liberty on shore for the crewmembers.⁴¹⁵ While the escort carriers did house a general store, five barbers, and two libraries, the Sailors once in war operations rarely left the vessel. Certain comforts existed, including a daily newspaper on board and nightly movies shown in a portion of the hangar deck; however, the monotony combined with the isolation inflicted its toll. Ernie Pyle, writing of crews of carriers in the Pacific in comparison to the infantrymen of Africa and

⁴¹³ Porter, 239-240.

⁴¹⁴ *Composite History*, 6.

⁴¹⁵ “*Log of USS Block Island CVE-106*,” Smiley Burnette Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

Europe, said the Sailors had, “nothing to look forward to. They never saw anybody but themselves. They sailed and sailed, and never arrived anywhere.”⁴¹⁶ The visit to the small island offered time to sit under a palm tree, play baseball, and drink several cans of beer.⁴¹⁷

On this tiny island, visited for the purpose of relaxation, officers and enlisted men were segregated. All offloaded men walked the same trail inland and encountered a sign that read, “Officers Left, Enlisted Personnel Right.”⁴¹⁸ The officers relaxed in an impromptu officer’s club, outfitted with choices of beer and spirits and a swimming pool. The enlisted men walked into a fenced in area, to keep them away from the local population.⁴¹⁹ Cases of warm beer stood piled under palm trees; many fistfights broke out. Officers from the *Block Island* were assigned to contain the worst of the brawls. Many men did not drink, thus allowing larger portions for those who liked the warm beer. After a few hours, many men full of beer and awaiting a ride back to the 106, grew impatient and fights broke out. Officer Joe Zook recalled that about 20 men got into it; luckily for him most of the men could not stand. Those men unable to walk were loaded into cargo nets and hoisted into the auxiliary craft which carried them back to the

⁴¹⁶ Pyle, 59, 67.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴¹⁸ Kernan, 142.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

106.⁴²⁰ After a few short hours on solid earth for the men, *Block Island* weighed anchor and sailed toward an ongoing battle that in the annals of human conflict represents the largest naval siege in military history. This site of this battle was the island called Okinawa.

BATTLE OF OKINAWA

A crescent pattern of 140 volcanic islands stretches from Japan's most southern island of Kyushu toward the southwest pointing to Formosa and Mainland China. Combined, these islands constitute a land area just bigger than the State of Rhode Island. In the middle portion of the island chain is an island that makes up one quarter of this total area, Okinawa. Of particular importance to military strategists were the island's two airfields and two bays.⁴²¹

Allied military planners estimated the island contained 77,000 Japanese forces, which they believed required over 200,000 U.S. Marines and Army forces to dislodge. Military planners called for CV fast carrier groups and escort carrier groups to provide air support for these ground forces. However, the fast carrier groups over this period of operation also carried out attacks on airfields in the home island of Japan. Thus, once the invasion began on April 6, 1945, the CVEs

⁴²⁰ Joe Zook, interviewed by Ben Hruska, April 18, 2010, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁴²¹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Vol. 14: Victory in the Pacific*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 79-80.

represented a constant source of fighter aircraft over the invasion area aiding in ground support of the Marines and Army forces.⁴²²

ESCORT CARRIERS OFF OKINAWA

With the Japanese empire pressed against its traditional boundaries the kamikaze attacks were launched on a massive scale in order to prevent the home islands from invasion. For U.S. Navy vessels off shore, these waters represented unprecedented danger. During the course of the battle over 1,900 kamikaze attacks occurred on surface vessels, killing 3,389 men on board these vessels. The damage inflicted to the fleet included thirty-six vessels sunk and over 350 suffering severe damage.⁴²³ Nearing these waters, in the days approaching Okinawa, the thought of these new tactics were on the *Block Island* men's minds.

On April 28th, as the *Block Island* cruised west, an unidentified plane was spotted by crewmembers topside. The aircraft approached the vessel dead on. The very day before this the crew of the 40mm anti-aircraft batteries conducted training that consisted of shooting at drone aircraft pulled in the air by friendly aircraft. Now the next day these men on their guns witnessed this unidentified aircraft headed straight toward their vessel. The battle report lists that, "Order to open fire was given, where upon the 40mm quads on the forecastle threw up a

⁴²² Ibid., 90-2.

⁴²³ Michael Bess, *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 2006), 195.

heavy barrage which straddled the approaching plane.”⁴²⁴ The aircraft veered away and shortly thereafter two Hellcats scrambled off the deck to investigate. After a few minutes two aircraft then approached the 106 from starboard, causing the batteries of 40mm to open fire. Quickly, the “cease fire” was issued once the planes were seen as friendly.⁴²⁵ While the *Block Island* did not experience a kamikaze attack, these two incidents demonstrates the pressure these battery crews experienced in their mission in keeping their exposed vessels falling victim to suicide planes slamming into their home.

On May 3rd, *Block Island* gathered with a group of other escort carriers to form a task force aimed at providing air cover and group support for American fighting forces battling the Japanese on Okinawa.⁴²⁶ One of these vessels, the *USS Santee*, CVE-29, represented the first vessel struck by a kamikaze.⁴²⁷ The threat of this new weapon loomed heavily on the minds of the men on these escort carriers. The likelihood of this weapon being used was increasing due to a more and more desperate enemy pushing closer to the home islands of the Empire of Japan.

⁴²⁴ *War Diary from the U.S.S Block Island (CVE-106)*, Walter ‘Smiley’ Burnette U.S.S. Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁶ Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II*, (Baltimore, The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1987), 395.

⁴²⁷ James D. Hornfischer, *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*, (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 351.

Operations on the deck of the *Block Island* started immediately on May 3rd, along with the three other escort carriers in what the Composite History of the 106 termed a “kamikaze-hot neighborhood.”⁴²⁸ The Marines of the air group never stopped activity on the hangar and flight decks, with each pilot flying four missions a day. With her twelve F4U gull-winged Corsair fighters, ten F6F Hellcats flying night operations, and twelve TBM *Avenger* torpedo/bombers; these thirty-four aircraft represented a daily total of 136 missions, each requiring a take-off and landing, refueling and rearming, and non-stop maintenance in keeping their Marine Aviators in the air. Screaming over the skies of Okinawa “*Block Island’s* Marine Aviators bombed, rocketed and strafed in support of the half million U.S. troops fighting to capture the island.”⁴²⁹

For the average Sailor and Marine on board their experience contrasted sharply from the Marines and Army infantrymen fighting on the ground. During the spring of 1945, U.S. Army personnel advanced into new French and German towns and witnessed a tangible danger that they saw and heard. Similarly, Marines on Okinawa saw first hand the horrors of war, and with weapons in their hands, individually fought back. For the Sailors on *Block Island*, the two greatest fears for the Sailor—a fire onboard or the sinking of the vessel—could be just one torpedo strike or kamikaze attack away. This unseen enemy possibly lurking in the waters below or ready to plunge from the skies on a suicide mission created

⁴²⁸ Composite History, 6.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

anxiety that differed from those battling on the ground. Together, day after day as their ship cruised off Okinawa launching aircraft attacking some place over the horizon, one Sailor summed up this feeling, “islands attacked but never seen.”⁴³⁰ The 106 crew completed daily tasks trusting in each other in case another sudden explosion rocked the vessel like that one on an early evening off the coast of Africa. However, soon after their first mission, returning damaged aircraft from Japanese anti-aircraft fire showed tangible signs of the battle raging over Okinawa.

On May 15th First Lt. Edward Wallof landed his fighter on the flight deck on the 106. While this represented just one of thousands of landings on the vessel, this landing proved amazing. The canopy covering his cockpit took a direct hit from a Japanese 20mm shell. This explosion produced plastic shrapnel, which “slashed his left eye, leaving his eyeball hanging partially out on his cheek.”⁴³¹ After sustaining this wound, Wallof continued his rocket attack on an enemy position, then a fellow Marine Aviator talked Wallof, with blood streaming down his face, the one hundred miles back to the *Block Island* and more amazingly onto her moving deck.⁴³²

While the naval aviators and the aircrews were exposed to dangers above the skies of Okinawa, the work environs of the vessel also proved hazardous. In one week during these operations, a plane on landing slammed into parked

⁴³⁰ Kernan, 35-6.

⁴³¹ Swift, 35.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

aircraft on the forward portion of the flight deck, injuring one deck hand. The unfolding of a compressed wing severely wounded the face of another. Lastly, in the hangar deck three rounds from an aircraft's machine gun accidentally fired. Rounds designed to rip aircraft apart while in flight amazingly only injured one person.⁴³³ These ongoing missions not only produced stress on aircraft, but on the men flying the machines and the crews keeping them aloft.



Image 9: Dropping so many weapons depleted the bomb storage onboard. Thus, required taking on weapons and ammunition off of the island of Kerama Retto in May 1945. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁴³⁴

'Fighting Block Island' fought in the last 43 days of the 83-day naval siege of Okinawa, the longest in military history. However, one particular date held a special meaning for the crew. May 29th, 1945 marked the one-year anniversary of the sinking of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, and the crew recognized the date by taking the war to the enemy in a unique way. While the bakers in the vessel's kitchen produced a cake in memorial of the lost ship, the

⁴³³ *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, Deck Log, May 24-28, 1945.

⁴³⁴ "Resupply at Kerama Retto," Photograph, Roy Swift Collection, USS Block Island Collection. San Diego, CA.

ship's history described, "what was more important and made that day a special day in the air operations, all bombs and rockets were marked as memorials."⁴³⁵ Bombs inscribed with messages to the Axis and those commemorating the lost vessel on the one-year anniversary lifted into the Pacific skies. On this day, the *Block Island* fighters fired 10,000 rounds of ammunition and 161 five-inch Holy Moses rockets along with 19,000 pounds of bombs against Japanese positions. On the surface of these bombs crewmembers chalked messages for the enemy in remembrance of their vessel lost to the German U-boat and to those Sailors who did not survive the attack. However, these crewmembers on this May 29th experienced loss once again.⁴³⁶

A TBM Avenger flown by Second Lieutenant Jack Marconi in the afternoon attacked Ishigaki airbase. On the second attack, over the target, his port wing sustained anti-aircraft fire and was ripped off. Other Marine Aviators reported that Marconi's Avenger crashed and immediately ignited. The Senior Medical Officer onboard the 106, Commander J.L. Custer, filled out the required form noting the deaths of not only Marconi, but also two other crewmembers onboard, Staff Sergeant Joe Surovy and Ben Cannan, Jr. All three names were followed by, "Killed in Action, body not recovered."⁴³⁷ This sentence summed up the deaths the crewmembers dealt with, not witnessing the deaths of their

⁴³⁵ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy*, 26.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26, 31.

⁴³⁷ Commander J. L. Custer, *Report of Casualties*, June 1, 1945. Naval Historical Center, Washington D.C.

comrades in arms and unable to see the bodies later. While a handful of other Aviators viewed a plane falling out of the sky, the vast majority of the crew of the 106 only learned that one plane did not return. Somewhere on board three foot lockers held the possessions of dead men. One Navy Aviator summed up losing a fellow Aviator over the skies of Okinawa. He wrote, “There was no body, no grave, and no funeral, no one, it seemed, to mourn for.”⁴³⁸



Image 10: Off of Kerama Retto in June 1945. The crew working in rainstorm desperately to load ammunition during the storm, because of expected Japanese air attack. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁴³⁹

In missions flown from the *Block Island* from May 4th to June 16th, 1202 sorties were completed. The Marines piloting these aircraft dropped over 400,000 pounds of bombs, launched over 2,200 five-inch rockets, and nearly expended 300,000 rounds of ammunition. The ship’s history noted that the average operating area of the vessel was eighty miles off the southwest of Okinawa. This

⁴³⁸ Hayes, 206.

⁴³⁹ “Arming Aircraft Off to Okinawa,” Photograph, Roy Swift Collection, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

area of operation in the Pacific included distances that were 320 miles from Formosa and 920 from Tokyo. These dry statistics were followed by, “The shortest line from the *Block Island* to New York City, we knew, was by the way of Tokyo.”⁴⁴⁰ The war continued after Okinawa fell to U.S. forces, and the “*Fighting Block Island*” continued taking the war to the enemy.

Having completed the last attacks on Okinawa on the morning of the 16th, the *Block Island* set a course for the Philippines. Entering Leyte Gulf three days later, she anchored with other Allied vessels in what was the largest concentration of vessels in the history of man. This allowed time for liberty parties to visit the island of Samar. These visits took place in wire-enclosed areas aimed at keeping the Sailors and Marines of the armada from interacting with the native Filipinos. The men were issued two cans of beer each, and baseball games and swimming commenced. The wire did little to deter trading with the Filipinos for local goods and trinkets. While the men enjoyed their brief time off ship, sealed orders arrived on board for new operations further to the south.⁴⁴¹

On the 29th, the 106 cruised south out of Leyte Gulf and for the Straights of Makassar. Entering this straight symbolized the collapsing Japanese Empire; the F.B.I. was the first U.S. Navy first line ship in these waters since early 1942. A magnificent blue hue, one Sailor described the waters of the straight like “blue

⁴⁴⁰ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy, 26-27.*

⁴⁴¹ Swift, 36. Crossing the equator includes the ceremony of a visit to the ship of Neptune Rex, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Jello.”⁴⁴² Leaving the Straights of Makassar and entering the Celebes Sea marked a rite of passage, a rite in naval tradition much older than the U.S. Navy.

Traveling south, the men earned the distinction of crossing the equator. Naval heritage called for a hazing ritual. However, in hostile areas of operation the centuries old fraternal activities that normally occur with this event were postponed for the re-crossing back into the northern hemisphere.⁴⁴³

By the 1st of July, the *Block Island* gathered as part of Task Force 78.4, sixty miles off of Balikpapan, Borneo. Task Force 78.4, under the overall command of General Douglas MacArthur on the *USS Phoenix*, CL-46, had orders to aid in what was the last major amphibious landing of World War II. As Australian forces poured onto the beaches, planes from *Block Island* provided air support. In three days of missions, the Marines from the deck of the 106 aided in the easy taking of Balikpapan and did so without losing any aircraft or Marine Aviators.⁴⁴⁴ The largest attack occurred on July 2nd, with twenty-two aircraft concentrating on Japanese troop facilities four miles inland from the invasion beaches. The fighters attacked these positions with 170 passes over the targets, fired over eighty rockets and dropped 11 tons of bombs.⁴⁴⁵ Relieved by Army Air

⁴⁴² *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy*, 36.

⁴⁴³ Swift, 36.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ *Composite History*, 8.

Corp aircraft of duties related to the invasion, the *Block Island* cruised north and re-crossed the equator and entered the realm of Neptunus Rex.

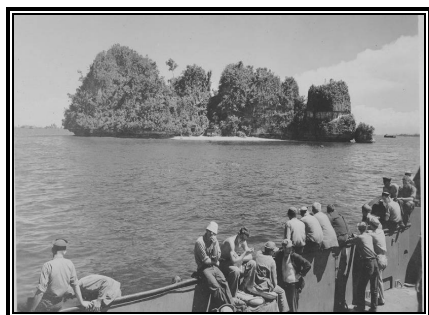
NEPTUNUS REX

Naval tradition held that the crossing of the equator was a milestone in a seafarer's career. As those on their first crossing entered the realm of Neptunus Rex they witnessed his ceremonial visit to the vessel. The event temporarily erased the hierarchy U.S. Navy. As the scholar James D. Hornfischer describes, "Apart from usual divisions of rating and rank, men aboard warships fall into two classifications: so called "shellbacks" who have crossed the equator before; "pollywogs" who have not."⁴⁴⁶ While the *Block Island* core group of Sailor's seafaring resume included battling north Atlantic storms, taking on German U-boats, and even a "baptism" in surviving a sinking of their vessel, the majority held pollywog status, as the first *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, never crossed the equator. This meant a large pollywog contingent that needed to pass muster with Neptunus Rex's Royal Court.

The Royal visit not only changed the hierarchy of the men, but the vessel as a whole. The skull and cross bones of the Jolly Roger flew above the bridge of the escort carrier. On the flight deck crewmembers dressed as Neptunus Rex and his Royal Court, including his Queen, barber, and undertaker, and prepared for inspection of the pollywogs. Shellbacks of the crew of the '*Fighting Block Island*' dressed as pirates and carried paddles. The class of pollywogs stood on the flight

⁴⁴⁶ Hornfischer, 38.

deck in shorts and socks and awaited their meeting with the Royal Court. They crawled on all fours toward Neptunus Rex as shellbacks prodded them with paddles.⁴⁴⁷ Once in front of Rex the pollywog was judged on his worthiness and then the judgment was rendered. Punishment included a visit to the Royal Barber; or kissing of the Royal Baby, however, all at the end of judgment, ran the gauntlet.⁴⁴⁸ This consisted of crawling through grease, after which, they were baptized by shellbacks in the swimming pool and then placed on the forward elevator of the flight deck. After the event, King Neptunus Rex informed Captain Hughes of his approval of the crew of the *Block Island* and he welcomed them back to his realm on a future visit.⁴⁴⁹ As the day's activities returned to normal with the Royal Court's departure, the entire crew of shellbacks onboard returned to the Pacific war with the Japanese.



Images 11 &12: Images of recreation party visiting a small island in Leyte Gulf in the Philippines for beer and games. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy*, 38-40.

⁴⁴⁸ Hornfischer, 41.

⁴⁴⁹ *U.S.S. Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy*, 38.

⁴⁵⁰ "Approaching Recreation Island," and "Landing on the Beach," Photographs, Roy Swift Collection, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

Block Island anchored once again in Leyte Gulf and awaited orders. On the 23rd of July, along with the destroyer *USS Peiffer*, DE-588, traveled east to Apra Harbor off Guam. While at anchor on August 1st, Captain Hughes was relieved of command by Captain Wallace M. Beakley. Born in 1903, Wallace graduated from the Academy in 1924. Like many of the crew of the *Block Island*, he was also 'baptized' with surviving a sinking. In 1942 he commanded the air group on the *USS Wasp*, CV-7, which was struck and sunk by a torpedo fired from a Japanese submarine while supporting the Allied landing at Guadalcanal. In the first week in August, the 106 underwent modifications to the landing equipment onboard. However, the group of men on the communication watch in the early morning hours received a message that Hiroshima had been hit with an atomic bomb. Received two days after the bombing, rumors flew of the war's end, including surrender. While rumors abounded, no official word surfaced. Five days later on the 13th, the '*Fighting Block Island*' along with five other vessels, steamed west toward what the crew hoped represented the end game of World War II.⁴⁵¹

World War II is ironic in that civilians at home often knew more of the conflict than those battling in it. As the world celebrated the ending of the war, and Alfred Eisenstaedt snapped his iconic photo in Time's Square of the Sailor kissing a nurse in uniform on August 14th, the *Block Island* cruised. When the morning sun first shed light on the streets of New York full of confetti, and the

⁴⁵¹ Swift, 37.

residents were sleeping off their hangovers, the crew of the FBI got the news. While en route to the Philippines at 1630 on August 15th, the *Block Island* received a message announcing the surrender of Japanese forces and a termination of offensive actions. Most of the crew learned this information over the loud-speakers onboard.⁴⁵² Shortly afterward, a message from the new Captain, Wallace M. Beakley, came over the loud-speakers asking all hands to report to the flight deck. Drinking in the U.S. Navy was not officially allowed on vessels, outside of medical purposes. This contrasted with the Royal Navy that allowed a daily rum ratio. However, on special celebratory occasions the Royal Navy allotted more rum than the normal ratio. “Splicing the Main Brace”, an outdated term from the days of masted warships, served as the term of these celebratory events.⁴⁵³ Since drinking onboard a U.S. Navy vessel was officially against regulations, the commanding officer in a sense issued a “splicing the main brace” in providing alcoholic beverages for the men in surviving the war. Captain Beakley ordered that cases of beer, normally reserved for brief visits to small islands, be hauled up to the flight deck. The Pacific sky held summer thunderstorms and rain fell heavy on mess hall tables heaving with bottled beer. Men drank beer and gathered around others who played trombones and saxophones in the downpour.⁴⁵⁴ While

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Beaver, 206.

⁴⁵⁴ Bill Connolly, Jr., Interview by Ben Hruska, December 3, 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

rain poured on the enlisted men nothing dampened their spirits of surviving the war.

While the flight deck contained the celebrations for most of the men, a small group held their own celebration. A small cohort on the vessel, the Naval Aviators, celebrated in the Ready Room. Just one deck below in the aft portion of the vessel, during the war the ready-room served as a classroom for upcoming missions and a place to relax. One pilot called it “our environment, our club, our sanctuary.”⁴⁵⁵ LSO Joe Zook remembered a large bowl with ice placed in the middle of the room. Locker doors opened and Airmen pulled out illegally-owned bottles of booze, which they poured over the ice. The men lifted Zook on their shoulders, raising the man in the air who brought them down from the skies safely.⁴⁵⁶ The war was over, but much remained undone in operations taking hold of occupied areas by the Japanese. These postwar operations for the men of the *Block Island* provided an experience that demonstrated to them the true cost of this war.

⁴⁵⁵ Hynes, 131.

⁴⁵⁶ Joe Zook, interviewed by Ben Hruska, April 18, 2010, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.



Image 13: Celebrating the end of the war, and lifting Zook in the vessel's Ready Room. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁴⁵⁷

THE REAL KAMIKAZE

Laying anchor in Leyte Gulf in the Philippines on August 17th, the *Block Island* waited for all the members of Task Force 77.1 to materialize. As flag ship of this task force of two escort carriers and three destroyer escorts, their mission centered on aiding in Allied landings of troops in the Keijo area of Korea. Her group was to provide air cover and aid in the minesweeping operations into Jinsen Harbor to allow the Allied occupation of post war Korea to begin. On the 29th of August the group sailed north from the Philippines toward the Yellow Sea.⁴⁵⁸ However, while in route an old Japanese ally intervened.

While cruising northwest to the Korean peninsula the Task Force encountered a force that saved the Japanese home islands from invasion in the 13th Century. Facing almost certain destruction from the Mongols in 1281, divine assistance in the form of a typhoon eliminated most of the Mongol fleet and

⁴⁵⁷ "Marines Celebrating in the Ready Room," Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

⁴⁵⁸ Swift, 38.

secured the home islands. The legend of the Divine Wind “kamikaze” was born.⁴⁵⁹ This typhoon moved in from the east blocking Task Force 77.1 from the entrance into the Yellow Sea. From September 1-3 the vessels skirted the storm by retreating southeast toward Formosa. Although they avoided the heart of the storm the men still experienced what Lt. Roy Swift, Intelligence Officer, described as being “buffeted by monstrous winds and seas.”⁴⁶⁰ The storm not only delayed the operations of the Allied landings in Korea, but also caused the *Block Island* and her Task Force to receive from the Allied command more pressing orders. On the island of Formosa rested an estimated 30,000 Allied prisoners of war held by the Japanese. While the conflict was over the true costs of the war in the Pacific remained unknown. The crew of the 106 in the days ahead would witness firsthand the atrocities committed by the Japanese.

CECIL CLAKE

When word of the attack on Pearl Harbor reached Cecil Clarke he was onboard a troop steamer rounding the Horn of Africa. Raised in England, he was as a member of the Royal Army Engineers, part of the British 18th Division, headed to fight the Japanese. Landing in Singapore, a few weeks before the fall of the island, Clarke and his fellow troops marched to take on the enemy that in the past weeks had not only attacked Hawaii, but also launched coordinated attacks on numerous locations in Southeast Asia. These offensive actions resulted in

⁴⁵⁹ Degan, 220.

⁴⁶⁰ Swift, 38.

Clarke's unit surrendering and being taken prisoner in early 1942. Transported to Formosa, he and others worked as slaves in the island's copper mines. The brutal conditions took their toll with Cecil dropping from 150 pounds to that of under 80 pounds by the end of the war. Other POWs lost their lives, and Clarke remembered seeing his fellow POWs lose the will to live, and death visiting them soon after. As the war progressed, the Japanese informed the POWs of the Empire's successes against the Allies. However, as the weeks passed in 1945, Clarke and his fellow POWs were forced to run for cover due to Allied fighter attacks. While these certainly proved unpleasant, they served as messages to the Allied prisoners cut off from the outside world for over three years that indeed the tide of the war had shifted in the Allies favor.⁴⁶¹

“AN ERRAND OF MERCY”

With the sudden ending of the war many military planners were caught off guard, and none more so than those charged with the logistics of getting the Allied servicemen home. However, on the top of logistical tasks facing Allied planners rested the recovery of POWs held by the Japanese. The escort carriers' spacious hangar decks proved an effective stage for the recovering of these POWs, in a military operation called Recovery of Allied Military Personnel (RAMP). Two of the first escort carriers assigned to these new missions were the *USS Block Island* and *USS Santee*. Working in concert, these vessels transformed

⁴⁶¹ Cecil Clarke, Interview by Ben Hruska, June 3, 2007, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

from the traditional role of launching and recovering aircraft to that of serving as a floating haven for the first leg of POWs' route home.⁴⁶²

As dawn broke on the morning of September 5th planes from the *Block Island*, loaded with instructions for the Japanese command, took off and headed toward Formosa. Messages floating down on parachutes informed the Japanese command that two U.S. destroyer escorts, the *USS Thomas J. Gary*, DE-326, and *USS Kretchmer*, DE-329, were stationed off the port of Kiirun.⁴⁶³ They also asked for a tug to escort both ships into the heavily mined harbor. Once docked, thirty-two Marines and members of the *Block Island* medical team exited the vessel in preparing for the needs of the POWs. While this action secured the needed port for transferring the POWs to the escort carriers, another action sought to bring immediate aid to the prisoners scattered in a number of camps.

In the minutes after ten in the morning Marine Aviator Captain Dick Johnson took off in an Avenger from the *Block Island's* flight deck. Along with Johnson was staff intelligence officer Major Peter Folger. Their plane was the first Allied plane to land on Formosa at the Matsuyama Airport. Folger was transported by the Japanese command to a number of the prisoner of war camps to quickly determine how to complete the most good in the shortest amount of time. His determination was radioed to Hellcat fighters hovering over the airport, then one of the fighters headed back to the 106 with the information. Food and medical

⁴⁶² William T. Y'Blood, *The Little Giants: U.S. Escort Carriers Against Japan* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 413-4.

⁴⁶³ Composite History, 9.

supplies, replacing rockets and bombs, were packed onto *Block Island* fighters, which took off and landed at the Matsuyama airfield on the first leg of the journey to reach the POWs.⁴⁶⁴

In the afternoon hours the flight decks of the *Block Island* and the *Santee* launched nearly 10,000 pounds of supplies. One flight included Pharmacist Mate First Class Ben Owens, who was to provide immediate medical aid for the prisoners. Landing at the airfield, the Japanese transported Owens and the other medical staff and supplies in a 1936 Desoto to the camp containing the POWs. Pulling into the gate of the camp, Owens and the team were greeted by over 1,200 POWs, many of whom were in ill health due to their internment. Owens, used to treating just a handful of individuals on the ship on a daily basis, not faced an endless supply of those who needed treatment. With less than 24 hours to prepare before moving out the men to the American vessels, Owens wrote years later “I have never worked so hard in my life as we did to prepare these men for transport to the DE’s and then to the Carriers.”⁴⁶⁵ Laboring through the night, the medical team’s work was only interrupted with the arrival of Marines and more supplies from the *Block Island*.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Chips, October 2009, Vol. 23. No. 3 USS Block Island Association, 2-3.

⁴⁶⁵ Ben Owen, *World War II, Lest We Forget*. Memoir Essay by Ben Owen, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*



Image 14: *Block Island* Avenger lands at Formosa and awaits transport by the Japanese forces to Allied prisoners of war. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁴⁶⁷

The *Block Island* Marines “broke out white bread and real butter and watched with tears in their eyes as their Allied comrades dived into the first decent food they had tasted in more than three years.”⁴⁶⁸ Malnutrition had taken its toll with most of the POWs. Over the past two years, they woke up at dawn, walked four miles to the copper mines where they worked naked due to the heat, then walked back four miles at dark, all on a daily diet of “one meal of boiled sweet potato vines.”⁴⁶⁹ For many edema swelled up their legs and most weighed less than eighty pounds.

⁴⁶⁷ “FBI Avenger on Formosa,” Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

⁴⁶⁸ Swift, 39.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*



Image 15: Former POWs posing in camp awaiting transport to the escort carriers *USS Block Island* and *USS Santee*. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁴⁷⁰

The prisoners hailed from a number of nations. British servicemen included those that fought in the battles raging down the Malayan Peninsula in 1942 and were finally captured with the fall of Singapore. Eight-nine men were Americans, including some who survived the Bataan Death March, and Dutch and Chinese prisoners also were included in the three camps first visited by this first mission of RAMP.⁴⁷¹ The prisoners healthy enough to be moved were first transported by truck, then train, to the destroyer escorts *Kretchmer* and *Gary*. Swift's history reported that the crews of these vessels "watched in awe as the redeemed prisoners made their way painfully up the gangplank. The same awe and respect gripped the silent men on the two carriers when the DE's came alongside late that afternoon."⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ "POWs Awaiting Transport to CVEs," Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

⁴⁷¹ Composite History, 9.

⁴⁷² Swift, 40.

The author James Hornfischer made the claim that World War II naval engagements lacked close personal contact with the enemy, writing, “Sea warfare became thoroughly depersonalized.”⁴⁷³ Nothing exemplified this notion more than the Battle of Coral Sea in May of 1942, in which the enemy fleets never saw one another. Except for the enemy planes attacking each other’s fleets, the average Sailor never saw the enemy in human form. For the men of the *Block Island* waging war in the Pacific, except for the Marine pilots none had seen the Japanese enemy. While the very real danger existed of submarine attack or a plummeting kamikaze onto their vessel, these dangers centered on not seeing the enemy personally threatening you but with a sudden explosion of an enemy torpedo or plane slamming into the vessel. However, the true realities of the cost of war on the human level were about to walk aboard.

“YANKS ARE ON THEIR WAY!”

One of the men walking onboard the *USS Block Island, CVE-106*, was Maurice A. Rooney. His body looked foreign to the crewmembers with no buttocks and sharp hips bones protruding from skin. Captured in Singapore in February 1942, the Englishman’s body was a product of the Japanese treatment. Waking in the morning everyday, they crossed a mountain range, entered a tunnel and walked a mile underground, then descended into their workstations. Laboring naked in temperatures up to 130 degrees, the prisoners were issued one rice ball to eat and inadequate tools to work with. As the conditions of their internment broke

⁴⁷³ Hornfischer, 306.

down their British-issued Army clothing, in a sense they lost their last tangible connections to Britain. However, while clothing deteriorated in the tropical climate, their identity as Britons did not. British culture was not lost with their ragged uniforms, they retained their culture and sense of self while working in the caves with songs. These men relied on singing to keep any hope of survival alive. Having been ordered to surrender by the British government, one such song ended with the line, “Yanks are on Their Way!”⁴⁷⁴ After three years and most losing half their pre-war weight, the POWs songs about the Americans had finally come true.

RUM AND COKE-COLA

The *Block Island* orchestra awaited their new passengers. Once boarding occurred, they played songs for the former prisoners. These British, Dutch, Chinese, and Americans were welcomed with renditions of “God Save the King” and “Rum and Coke-Cola”. Stripped of their ragged clothing these newly liberated soldiers showered, received haircuts, and were issued Navy clothing. Those in the weakest state, carried onboard in stretchers, received medical treatment from the crewmembers and some finally succumbed to their mistreatment on the first leg home. Meals were devoured and they slept with clean white sheets in cots placed inside the hangar deck. Divine services took place, during which many POWs continued to vomit as a result of their stomachs adjusting to the first solid food in years. The night before the POWs exited the *Block Island* at Manila, the crew put on a variety show. Two favorites of the

⁴⁷⁴ Maurice A. Rooney, self interviewed, unknown date, USS Block Island Collection, San Diego, CA.

British servicemen were renditions of *Darktown Strutters' Ball* and *St. Louis Blues*. With Commander Gilman playing in the band, all joined in singing *Auld Lang Syne*. The lyrics of a poem of Scotsman Robert Burns written in 1788, the song is most known for being sung on New Year's. Crewmembers and former prisoners joining hands sang this song in closing their time together. One Sailor recalled to a letter to his mother, "It was impressive-our strong arms interlocking with some that looked like toothpicks. But the faces of those liberated men were those of people who had discovered peace beyond any that we will every know in this world..."⁴⁷⁵



Image 16 & 17: POWs boarding and finding new clothing and clean sheets on cots in the Block Island hangar deck. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁴⁷⁶

These men from four different nations taking the first leg of their journeys home witnessed much of the history of the entire conflict. Eight-nine Americans taken onboard were part of the Bataan Death March and had experienced Japanese mistreatment since December 1941. Some of the English soldiers had

⁴⁷⁵ "Letters Not to the Editors", *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 12, 1946, 54.

⁴⁷⁶ "POWS in the Hanger Deck," and "POWS Boarding the 106," Photographs, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

first fought in France, witnessed Hitler's blitzkrieg in 1940 and escaped from Dunkirk, then were sent to Southeast Asia to defend the Empire.⁴⁷⁷ Now in the hangar deck of the *Block Island* they left their captivity behind them.

The crew of the *Block Island* that served on both ships experienced a great deal of the war. Although they survived a sinking of their first vessel, lost pilots in training and in air operations over both oceans, the crew found the rescue of these former POWs weighing under a hundred pounds the most powerful. Irv Biron had experienced all these things. He recalled a very painful memory of a burial at sea of two Sailors off the first *Block Island*. However, speaking of the POWs that boarded in September of 1945 Biron said, "till this day it still hurts...what they went through."⁴⁷⁸ This event brought the true realities of the cost of war to the crewmembers on the most human level. Roy Swift summed up the experience for the men; it provided "a sobering insight to the nature of the harrowing conditions ashore which they had been so energetically seeking to bring to an end."⁴⁷⁹

OPERATION MAGIC CARPET

While the war was over, and millions of American servicemen awaited the return to home, they all faced the logistical challenge of the U.S. military getting them stateside. The *Block Island* intimately joined the effort of rescuing Allied

⁴⁷⁷ U.S.S. *Block Island CVE 21 and CVE 106, United States Navy, 44-46. & Composite History, 9.*

⁴⁷⁸ Irv Biron. Interview by Ben Hruska, June 3, 2006, USS *Block Island* Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁴⁷⁹ Swift, 41.

POWs and also transporting U.S. servicemen home. The 106 united with other U.S. Navy vessels in the logical nightmare facing the U.S. with the war over and sixteen million men in uniform scattered all over the planet.

After dispatching the rescued POWs to Manila in the Philippines, the 106 traveled to Okinawa. In the middle of October the vessel received orders to aid in covering the 70th Chinese Infantry Army in the taking of Formosa.⁴⁸⁰ As part of a show of force in support of the Nationalist Chinese in retaking the island from the Japanese forces stationed there, the *Block Island* sailed near the island where a month before she served in the evacuation of the Allied POWs. After her three-day mission there, she traveled to Saipan for a month between October 23rd-November 23rd.⁴⁸¹ She then served in what one naval scholar termed “history’s greatest sealift.”⁴⁸²

The closing of the conflict witnessed demobilization of the U.S. Armed Forces on an unprecedented scale. By the beginning of 1946 the U.S. Army discharged eight million men and the U.S. Navy would shrink from over three million Sailors in 1945 to under half a million by 1947. Army General George C. Marshall described this dropping of numbers in the Armed Forces as, “It was not a demobilization, it was a rout!”⁴⁸³ The demobilization included not only

⁴⁸⁰ The CVE ‘Piper’, July/August 1996, 19.

⁴⁸¹ Composite History, 10.

⁴⁸² Owen Gault, “Operation Magic Carpet”, *Sea Classics*, September, 2005.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*

discharging these men in theaters of war in both the Atlantic and Pacific, but also getting these men home. The CVEs played a significant role in bring these men back to the States. Forty-six participated in Operation Magic Carpet, including the *USS Block Island*.⁴⁸⁴

Many armed forces personnel found themselves hitching a States-bound ride in the cramped quarters of U.S. Navy destroyers or even Liberty ships. The journey crossing the Pacific in a slow-going Liberty ship on the way to the U.S., which normally included incremental stops on Pacific islands, could take up to a month. The CVEs and larger aircraft carriers provided ideal platforms in the transportation of men home. The hangar decks unloaded of aircraft provided ample room for the placing of cots. Also, in comparison to the confines of smaller vessels, these carriers had showings of films at night, ship's stores stocked with items for purchase, three hot meals a day, and more ice cream than could be eaten. For those ground forces, including Marines and Army troops, a homebound cruise on an aircraft carrier represented a giant step forward from the months living in a tent.⁴⁸⁵

The *Block Island's* role in Magic Carpet included arriving at Guam on November 24th 1945. On the small Pacific island armed forces personnel and aircraft were loaded onboard. Leaving the same day the 106 headed east toward Pearl Harbor. Docking at Pearl eight days later on December 2nd, she rested there

⁴⁸⁴ Y'Blood, *The Little Giants*, 413.

⁴⁸⁵ Owen Gault, "Operation Magic Carpet", *Sea Classics*, September, 2005.

three days before pushing off on the final leg of the journey home to San Diego. She docked back in the continental United States at the Naval Station in San Diego on December 11th.⁴⁸⁶ For many of the crewmembers of the *Block Island*, this last six days of cruising the Pacific between Pearl Harbor and the California coast represented the final days of their military carriers. Once docked in San Diego many packed their bags and walked off the *Block Island* with one obligation remaining in their World War II service, to receive their discharge orders and return home.

Like all ships in the Navy, rotation was a part of life on the *Block Islands*. Air groups were assigned for a mission and taken off, commanding officers served for periods of time, and enlisted crewmembers came and went as the powers in the Admiralty deemed their worth in winning the war. No matter the length of service, bonds were formed. One Sailor wrote, “You live for many months with the same faces and the same voices. They become part of your life.”⁴⁸⁷ However, for the survivors of the sinking of the 21, this bond was forged by more than serving in war together. These men, “baptized by saltwater” shared a bond that transcended the aspects of friendship, such as knowing each other’s nicknames and hometowns. Due to the compartmentalized nature of the ship, separating assigned rooms with assigned duties from other rooms and duties, the men were also compartmentalized in their relationships with one another.

⁴⁸⁶ Composite History, 10.

⁴⁸⁷ Ommanney, 62.

However, an experience transcended the metal walls that hampered a formal friendship. Men, who did not know each other in the informal sense, were brothers of a sinking.

An escort Sailor from the Royal Navy writing in a memoir noted the experience of leaving his vessel. Boarding a small whaler to depart he wrote, “A space of oily water widens between the drifter and the grey-blue camouflaged shape you know so well.”⁴⁸⁸ Seeing his shipmates waving he concluded, “In a few minutes they will have gone for ever out of your life in to the gulf of memory and time.”⁴⁸⁹ While this last sentiment proved true for the majority of U.S. Naval personal as well, the bonds of the *Fighting Block Island* years later bridged this “gulf of memory and time”. Their bond proved stronger than those of other vessels. Forged by a ‘baptism of saltwater’, which transcended the loss of the first vessel, their relationship did not end with the issuing of discharge papers.

Receiving their discharges the men of the *Block Island* headed home for the holidays and into the postwar world. Cleveland Martin disembarked from the *Block Island* and the Navy. His time over the past year included working on refrigeration units on the vessel in the mostly tropical climates of the South Pacific. Packing away his Navy uniform and heading home to Kansas wearing civilian clothes on the train, Martin remembered seating priority was given to servicemen in uniform, so he had to stand near the doorway in the train car. As

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

the train moved closer to his native Kansas the temperature outside dropped and discomfort increased for the Sailor used to the environs of the South Pacific. Finally in Oklahoma City, enough passengers departed for Martin to sit for the rest of the journey to Topeka. His parents waited for him in the -6 degree Kansas weather. On this Christmas Eve 1945 the three Martins, two parents and the newly made veteran rode in the family's pickup truck to their Jackson County farm.⁴⁹⁰

BLOCK ISLAND CARRIES ON

In many ways the researching of a naval vessel mirrors that of a college campus with many influxes and departures of new shipmates. Arriving in San Diego in December in 1945, the *Block Island* said good-bye to the crew with the longest time in the war. As a result, most of those that survived the sinking earned their discharge papers in San Diego. Like the graduation of a large class of seniors, the vessel moved forward in a number of adoptive uses into the post-war era and into the early stages of the Cold War. This transition started with the 106 departing the largest U.S. Navy base in the west coast of San Diego and cruising to the largest Navy base on the east coast, Norfolk, VA. Traveling through the Panama Canal, the 106 arrived in Norfolk on January 20th 1946. In the months of

⁴⁹⁰ Washburn University Alumni, "Cleveland T. Martin Jr. U.S. Navy service, WWII, U.S.S. Block Island," Washburn University, accessed on March 5, 2011, <http://www.washburn.edu/cas/art/cyoho/archive/OurFamily/Martins/JackMartin/index.html>.

March and April she anchored in the York River off of Camp Perry, VA and served as a recruit-training vessel.⁴⁹¹

The role of the *Block Island* transformed in May of 1946, with her decommissioning from the roll of active vessels in the U.S. Navy and placement in the status of “In Service, In Reserve”.⁴⁹² On June 7th, under the command of Frank Slater the *Block Island* floated in the Severn River. Slater completed his assignment in reporting to the Superintendent of the Naval Academy. Her mission changed to serving as a base of training for Naval Cadets in what was termed “a floating school-ship.”⁴⁹³ Mud extracted from the bed of the Severn River, opposite the grounds of the Academy, provided a resting place for the 106 in the training of midshipmen for the Cold War.⁴⁹⁴ After the outbreak of the Korean War her status of “stuck in the mud” transformed once again. Refloated from resting in the riverbed, she underwent an overhaul, including new engines and new flight deck. Re-commissioned on April 28th 1951, she entered the Atlantic fleet and served in maneuvers in the Atlantic.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹¹ Swift, 41.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Roger Chesneau, *Aircraft Carriers of the World, 1914 to the Present: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Annapolis: Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 249.

⁴⁹⁴ Swift, 41.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 41-42.

Under the command of Captain Arthur S. Hill, she participated in a number of training missions during which she operated off the Virginia coast.⁴⁹⁶ Her new mission focused on Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), defined as “to deprive the enemy of the effective use of his submarines.”⁴⁹⁷ These operations proved familiar to the path-breaking missions carried out by the previous *Block Island* at the height of the U-Boat war against the Germans. These operations took place with four missions to the Caribbean and one European cruise, which included operations off of the United Kingdom, France, and Italy.⁴⁹⁸ However, the technology, weapons, and the enemy in this non-shooting war had also transformed.

Over four missions in the Atlantic, the 106 housed two ASW squadrons including VS-22 and VS-30. The workhorse in tracking enemy submarines was the Grumman Guardian. With a wingspan of over sixty feet, the plane could carry up to four crewmembers. As the largest single-engine plane powered by piston, this aircraft allowed for the carrying of arms that included a four thousand pound bomb load and wing mounted rockets. The squadron also included a twin tandem rotor Piasecki HUP helicopter. With a range of over three hundred miles and able

⁴⁹⁶ The CVE ‘Piper’, July/August 1996, 19.

⁴⁹⁷ *Welcome Aboard: This is a Hunter-Killer Group 81.2* (Norfolk: U.S. Navy Fifth Naval District Publications and Printing Office), Walter ‘Smiley’ Burnette U.S.S. Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.,13.

⁴⁹⁸ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Vol. 1*, Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Division, Navy Department, 1959, 132.

to carry up to six people, the craft proved very effective in the rescue of pilots and crew from the ocean.⁴⁹⁹ Her aircraft combed the deeps of the Atlantic in the beginning stages of the Cold War. However, with the ending of the Korean conflict, she was decommissioned once again and placed in the mothball fleet.⁵⁰⁰ She entered the bureaucratic limbo of the U.S. Navy. The ever changing circumstances of the Cold War produced transforming notions of the Navy's role, which can be seen in the treatment of the CVEs. However, this shuffle resulted in the demise of the 106 in the summer of 1960.

No escort carrier officially existed after July 1, 1957. The Navy designated most escort carriers at this time, including CVE-106 resting in the mothball fleet, as Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH).⁵⁰¹ However, for the 106, this official reclassification did not go beyond simply transforming the classification, she still awaited a future role in the Navy's Cold War strategy. When the Navy cancelled the LPH classification, the paper classification of the 106 became Cargo Ship and Aircraft Ferry (AKV). While some AKVs classification did go forward in the actual conversion of former CVEs, the 106 did not see conversion.⁵⁰² For the CVEs that the Navy selected for reincarnation their latter lives were diverse.

⁴⁹⁹ USS Block Island Association, "Aircraft," accessed on March, 7, 2012, <http://www.usblockisland.org/Beta/Aircraft.html>.

⁵⁰⁰ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, Vol. 1, 132.

⁵⁰¹ Norman Polmar, *Aircraft Carrier: A Graphic History of Carrier Aviation and Its Influence on World Events*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 740.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*

These roles included, in the early 1960s, the transportation of military aircraft to Vietnam.⁵⁰³ Ironically, one of the last CVE to exist in some form was the first CVE, the *USS Long Island*, CVE-1. Surviving the war, she saw conversion into the passenger ship the *Nelly* and transported immigrants fleeing Europe to Canada in the immediate Post War period. In 1953, converted once more, she lived as the *Seven Seas*, serving as a floating university transporting studying students around the world as they learned. Worn down, in 1966 she was purchased by the University of Rotterdam as housing for medical students. Not under power, she floated and housed students for over a decade, before being scrapped in Belgium in 1977.⁵⁰⁴ Her loss represented one of the final acts of purging of all that remained of the material connection to an escort carrier.



Image 18: *USS Block Island*, CVE-106 in the Korean era with the deck full of Grumman Guardians. Courtesy of the USS Block Island Association.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 740-1.

⁵⁰⁴ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Vol. IV*, Washington D.C.: Naval Historical Division, Navy Department, 1969, 139.

⁵⁰⁵ “The 106 in the Korean Era,” Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

STRICKEN FROM THE RECORD

The events in the birth of a ship include an amazing amount of activity. Hundreds of workers labored in the construction of the 106. Commissioning events included dignitaries and guests to witness the formal transfer of ownership of the vessel from the Todd's Pacific Shipyards to the U.S. Navy. This contrasted sharply as she rested as a member of the "mothball fleet", no human activity took place onboard. Also, the people involved in her fate were military and political staff devoted to U.S. Cold War policy on the high seas, far away from the docks that held these exiled vessels. Possible outcomes debated included conversions to suit differing roles as the U.S. Navy's activities in the Cold War progressed. However, her fate was sealed on July 1st 1959 with her removal from the U.S. Navy, termed as "stricken from the record."⁵⁰⁶

SAYING GOODBYE

If any adage about human life would apply to the thousands of vessels scrapped by the U.S. Navy it is "We all die alone". In Philadelphia in early 1960, John Suprey drove a tractor trailer north toward a truck terminal in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Suprey, a veteran of both *USS Block Islands*, was finishing a run from Baltimore that day. Looking out his windshield he spotted an old escort carrier docked with the number "106" on the side of the bridge. Pulling into his

⁵⁰⁶ Log of the USS Block Island CVE-106, Walter 'Smiley' Burnette U.S.S. Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

company's truck terminal he spoke with the dispatch personnel. They informed him she was just recently sold for scrap to a company in Japan.⁵⁰⁷

Roy Swift wrote his history of both vessels in 1965. As the former intelligence officer onboard he wrote of the transfer of the vessel. "Stricken from the Navy list 1 July 1959, she was sold in New York, 23 February 1960 for \$250,078 to Kowa Koeki Col., Ltd., Mitsubishi Naka, of Chiyoda-Ku, Tokyo, Japan."⁵⁰⁸ The Philadelphia newspaper *The Evening Bulletin* reported on April 19th 1960, "The once-mighty 12,000 ton escort carrier *Block Island*, powerless and without steering, floated down the Delaware River last week on a 10,000 mile trip to Japan."⁵⁰⁹ In the exit from the American river two vessels accompanied the escort carrier, the ocean-going Dutch tug the *Clyde* and a river tug. Reaching the end of the Delaware River the *Bulletin* reported, "When open waters were reached the river tug tooted good-by and left."⁵¹⁰

The *Clyde* held a crew of 33 and traveled south for the Panama Canal. While the Commencement Bay class vessel encapsulated four large boilers and delivered 16,000 horsepower to her two screws allowing a cruising speed up to 19 knots, the *Clyde* only dragged the *Block Island* at 8 knots. The 10,000-mile two-

⁵⁰⁷ John Suprey, Interview by Ben Hruska, December 4 , 2006, USS Block Island Oral History Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁵⁰⁸ Swift, 42.

⁵⁰⁹ William A. Forsythe, "Carrier Block Island Starts Long Trip to Japan-In Tow," *The Evening Bulletin*, April 19, 1960, 12.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

month trip was predicted as uneventful. As the tug's skipper, Captain Peter L. Kalkman, told the interviewer of this routine journey, the writer concluded his article with, "The sturdy, weatherbeaten seaman said he anticipates no difficulty during the trip. It's just an ordinary towing job to him."⁵¹¹ However, one aspect of the '*Fighting Block Island*' story, seen in the narrative of both vessels, is unpredictably. Her flight decks aided in the development of new weapons systems and pioneered new tactics. Her missions ranged from escorting convoys of supplies to Britain to rescuing British POWs at the end of the war in the Pacific. As the *Clyde* pulled her lifeless hull across the Pacific and toward the Hawaiian Islands the largest recorded earthquake in history took place. A magnitude 9.5 quake rocked Chile on May 22nd 1960.⁵¹² More importantly for those in the Pacific at the time, the tsunami attacked vessels all over the Pacific. This included the lifeless hull of the *Block Island* on the slow voyage to Japan. While this earthquake caused a delay, the ultimate arrival in Japan did not stop. Arriving in Nagasaki on June 20th 1960, the \$33 million vessel completed in 1945 was completely broken up for scrap by the end of August.⁵¹³

⁵¹¹ William A. Forsythe, "Carrier Block Island Starts Long Trip to Japan-In Tow," *The Evening Bulletin*, April 19, 1960, 12.

⁵¹² USGS: Science for a Changing World, "Earthquake Hazards Program," accessed in February 15, 2011, <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/learn/facts.php>.

⁵¹³ Swift, 28,42.

PLATFORM OF MEMORY

The fate of the second *Block Island*, that of scrapping, represented a similar fate for the majority of U.S. Navy vessels that served in World War II. While the expensive CVs and BBs conditioned in the Navy's service into the 1980s with upgraded weapon systems, most vessels did not survive. The majority of vessels of all classes that aided in the war effort faced destruction. One form included the testing of advanced torpedoes. Others, anchored in the Pacific, served as sacrificial targets in learning of the blast affects of atomic weapons on surface fleets.⁵¹⁴ Some vessels escaped immediate destruction in weapons tests and were liquidated to other nations, thus continuing in their designed capacities under a different flag. Examples of transferring vessels include two light carriers, CVLs, given to the French Navy, which the *USS Langley*, CVL-27, becoming La Fayette and the *USS Belleau Wood*, CVL-24, metamorphosing into the Bois Belleau.⁵¹⁵

Only a small fraction of the vessels that served in the U.S. Navy in World War II existed into the 1980s, when the preservation movement to save examples picked up steam. These few remaining floating examples came to symbolize much more than just a single ship, they took on the role of platforms of memory, a symbol for the entire class of vessel to which they belonged. In addition, these

⁵¹⁴ Andrew Faltum, *The Independence Light Aircraft Carriers*, Charleston, South Carolina: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 2002, 104-5.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 110-1.

vessels serve as platforms for memory of the entire U.S. Navy's experience in World War II. Furthermore, as most of these floating examples served into the 1980s, they also incorporated the history of U.S. Navy operations in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. While the visitor today can visit a range of platforms of memory, none of these are escort carriers.⁵¹⁶ Thus, the CVEs veterans lacking a platform of memory, developed tactics of commemorating their service in which other naval veterans with floating examples did not. Lacking a stationary place to serve as a testament of movement on the seas in the service of their country, escort carrier servicemen manufactured ways of recalling their past without a tradition place offered to veterans of battleships, CV aircraft carriers, submarines, and cruisers.

“QUITE INDEPENDENT OF PLACE”

The historian Stephen Pyne, in writing of the nature of ships, wrote a short passage that sums up the fundamental difficulty of understanding the history of a particular vessel. He writes that ships are “quite independent of place.”⁵¹⁷ This short sentence underlines the challenge in understanding, in the context of a single place, a massive manmade object that in its very nature is kinetic, never stationary, besides periodic stops in faraway ports. While man builds many

⁵¹⁶ Battleship Cove, located in Fall River, Massachusetts, contains a number of floating examples of warships from the U.S. Navy. These include the *USS Massachusetts*, BB-59, *USS Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.*, DD-850, and *USS Lionfish*, SS-298.

⁵¹⁷ Stephen Pyne, *Voyager: Seeking Newer Worlds in the Third Great Age of Discovery*, New York: Viking Press, 2010, 166.

massive inventions, most of these that measure in the hundreds of feet long, such as churches and stadiums, are stationary, thus, quite connected to a particular place. The U.S. government called for the construction of thousands of vessels during World War II, ranging from the massive Essex class aircraft carriers with a crew approaching two thousand to the PT-Boat with a crew under twenty. From war vessels designed to take on the enemy, to Liberty Ships constructed in hauling the logistical supplies to assure victory, the missions centered on movement. However, for the escort carriers Pyne's adage goes further than just understanding a vessel that is designed to move on the seas. Most of the CVEs were named after bodies of water, thus even in name, they had no tangle land-based local. Furthermore, constructed as a wartime expedient to win the war, once the victory arrived their existence was in question. For those that reached 1960 without seeing the scrap yards, their future lives depended on shedding their war identity and changing to the meet the demands of the world that came after World War II.

However, of those few vessels reaching the 1960s, that in past lives were called CVEs, the conversion was complete. Their appearance and roles represented the world of the post-war period, one that required no escort carriers. Thus, for the veteran's who served on CVEs, when the preservation movement started in saving floating examples of the U.S. Navy's role in World War II, these Sailors and Marines had no tangible example to rally around and save. When the urge to remember the war in a new way, with actual ships, surfaced, no old rusting and floating example called for preservation. Other classifications of large

ships, that of over 10,000 tons, would have a single example, or multiple examples, to serve as a testament to the entire class of warships, and thus, the men who served on them. However, the men of the CVEs possessed no example, no platform of memory.

CHAPTER 5
RECLAIMING THEIR SERVICE:
INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP REACTIONS
TO THE EXPERIENCES OF THE USS BLOCK ISLAND,
CVE-21 & CVE-106

Few feelings create a bond between humans as does fear. Fear as the result of violence holds the power to bind individuals, whether on a ship, in an animal attack, or in a mass killing of innocent civilians. Laurence Kirmayer addresses the issue of group bonding resulting from violence. He writes, “Trauma shared by a whole community creates a potential public space for retelling.”⁵¹⁸ This collective sharing of a traumatic event can result in a host of actions of collective memory: memorial markers, commemorative events, museums, or non-profit institutions. Trauma has a long lasting impact. Recently, the scholar Katharine Schramm addressed the longevity of the reactions to painful events. According to her, “Violence leaves traces. Be it habitually remembered or consciously evoked, it has profound effects on individual consciousness as well as collective identifications.”⁵¹⁹ For the veterans of CVE-21, the collective violence experienced was the torpedoing of their vessel, death of crewmates, and entering

⁵¹⁸ Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation,” in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds. *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 189.

⁵¹⁹ Katherine Schramm, “Landscapes of Violence: Memory and Sacred Space,” *History and Memory* Vol. 23, No.1 (2011): 5.

the Atlantic waters. This cause produced many effects, such as individual memoirs, reunions, and other forms of self and collective healing.

Schramm addresses how pain creates commemorative reactions. She writes, “If we consider trauma as the endless repetition of a violent experience, it is necessarily opposed to any idea of closure.”⁵²⁰ This is an important point in the consideration of collective memory resulting from violence. Actions of groups devoted to a collective memory continue over time because the experience still lives with the victims. The invention of reactions, such as gatherings of victims, artwork, or commemorative events is not the result of individuals hoping to successfully place the trauma into the realm of the past. Rather, these actions take place because the memory of the event is constant. The original experience is always relived and never reaches a conclusion.⁵²¹

Studies of collective memory must explore the relationship between history and memory. These two words are often used interchangeably, without carefully defining of the true meaning of each. The scholar Pierre Nora’s article “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire” argues that these words differ in a number of important ways. He writes, “Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition.”⁵²² By this, Nora argues that history is a construction of the past attempting to sum up all that took

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* No.26 (1989): 8.

place in a given frame of reference. This construction of history is required to purge variety from individual and group stories in order to produce a single narrative giving meaning to a certain group, state, or nation. He writes, “History’s goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place.”⁵²³ These constructions of history discard many memories to manufacture an over-arching narrative.

Pierre Nora writes on the experience of memory for the individual who undergoes it. He writes, “Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present.”⁵²⁴ The act of memory does not occur in the past, but the present. This argument that memory takes place in the present, forces the scholar to consider the effects of later events on memory. These memories develop and transform over time as the actual event producing the memory recedes into the past. The complexities of this notion are compounded for collective memory. As years pass, not only will the collective memories change, but so too will the ways of recalling the memories. Memorial activities and groups devoted to the collective memory are not stagnant entities; they transform and develop over time as they drift further into the future from the event that created them.

Nora specifically describes the role of collective memory and veteran’s groups. He describes these groups as being, “dedicated to preserving an

⁵²³ Ibid., 9.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 8.

incommunicable experience that would disappear along with those who shared it.”⁵²⁵ Collective memories, Nora argues, are all endangered, no matter the number of individuals involved. He also suggests that the longevity of history over memory is partially the result of each term’s point of reference. According to him, “Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events.”⁵²⁶ If his suggestion is true, that memory is attached to sites, how does this affect collective memories formed devoid of land? If collective memories develop in a place that can not be visited in a traditional sense, such as in the air, on the sea, or under water, what manifestations occur? The collective memories will develop in places that will not allow the placing of a stone marker, the laying of a wreath, a speech given by a dignitary. While collective memories can recall the missing ‘site’, other methods and techniques of communal remembering must be developed.

In an analysis of collective memory formed in the absence of a particular land-based site, it must be noted that commemoration became more common in the United States starting in the eighteenth century. Many of these commemorations formed around the construction of a national narrative in the early decades of the country. Michael Kammen, in his seminal work on American myth and tradition *Mystic Chords of Memory*, explores early efforts at commemoration. He writes, “Erecting public monuments to celebrate events,

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 22.

ideas, or heroes began on a broad scale late in the eighteenth century when nationalism and political ideology started.”⁵²⁷ He argues that many of these subjects of monuments formed around national ideals, or an entire conflict, which was not easily placed at a particular site. Thus, an adopted site was reached, allowing visitation by large numbers of people.

According to Kammen, “Public monuments honoring sundry military heroes for their successes in war had essentially been unknown before the French Revolution.”⁵²⁸ Veterans groups were important in the creation of many nation-building monuments focused on military subjects. Kammen notes that in the nineteenth century groups formed around a diversity of collective memories that encompassed individual units, regiments, and whole armies. Civil War veterans of the Union Army formed the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), and successfully lobbied for the observance of Memorial Day in 1868. The United Confederate Veterans supported the memorialization of their lost cause. Kammen’s analysis of the commemorative actions of Civil War veterans includes reunions, such as the first U.S. Volunteer Cavalry gathering in 1895, marking the death of their leader Major S. Pierre Remington.⁵²⁹

Kammen exhibits the breadth and depth of veterans’ actions to express collective memory during the nineteenth century using the vignette of the nation’s

⁵²⁷ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 33.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 105-6.

birthday--July 4, 1888 in New York City. A range of events occurred. The city hosted Civil War veterans conducting exercises in Battery Park. Veterans from the War of 1812 gathered for their annual meeting and lunch. Other groups formed around collective memory paraded in the streets, including Veterans Zouaves, individual posts of the G.A.R., and Sons of Veterans. Veterans and thousands of other citizens visited Grant's Tomb. He wrote, "All in all, the day had become a *mélange* of memories, which perhaps helped to render the chords more mystic."⁵³⁰ Differing veterans groups, highlighting their collective memories on that summer day in New York, demonstrate the differing layers of remembering American conflicts by the individual servicemen. They illustrate how veterans came together to commemorate and remember the traumas of wartime.

This chapter focuses on one particular story, and a subsequent group devoted to the memory of it. In so doing, it demonstrates the diversity of acts of memory related to a specific trauma inflicted on a group of servicemen. The loss of *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, on May 29, 1944 produced a range of reactions from a number of entities and individuals, which included the U.S. Navy, the community of Block Island, Rhode Island, those that experienced the sinking, and lastly the family members and friends of these survivors. Far from a group devoted to just remembering the nostalgic and idealized aspects of World War II, the acts of memory created from this "baptism of saltwater" demonstrate the

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

complexity of the memory of World War II. Just as the complexity of the war does not allow for a single memory of a nation to adequately summarize the war, examining just one small aspect of the war produces no one clear product of memory. There is no single memory of a particular ship in the U.S. Navy of World War II. Thus, when an individual vessel is sunk, no one memory or product of memory can completely commemorate the specific event.

CVE-106

The Navy's response in remembering the loss of CVE-21 came from an old tradition, that of re-christening another *USS Block Island*. At the time of the sinking of CVE-21, methods of mass-production allowed for the construction of new classes of escort carriers. Todd-Pacific Shipyards, which constructed the 21, was building the first CVEs of the last classification, and the most advanced of escort carriers. Numerous CVEs lay in shipyards in various stages of completion and the Navy held the option of naming one of these carriers the second *Block Island*. Captain Hughes, who commanded CVE-21 at the time of the sinking, lobbied with those in the Navy for redemption.⁵³¹

Pressure from Hughes resulted in the vessel under construction that was to be named the *USS Sunset Bay*, CVE-106, being named the second *Block Island* carrier. It thus served as a monument for his lost vessel. The commissioning took place on December 30, 1944, an event held in the hangar deck and attended by more than a thousand people. Hughes, in his acceptance of the vessel from Todd-

⁵³¹ *U.S.S. Block Island: CVE-21 and CVE-106 United States Navy*, 12.

Pacific, spoke of the meaning of the second *Block Island*. He concluded his remarks with, “(W)e have a more solemn obligation, for on us has fallen a very singular and solemn heritage - that is to perpetuate the name ‘Block Island.’ This is indeed a big responsibility and one I know we shall accept with a determination that will not let us fail.”⁵³²

A gift, at the commissioning, was also presented to the crew. Given by the laborers of Todd-Pacific who constructed the lost 21 and the new 106, this gift symbolized their feelings toward the loss of the ship they built over many months. These men and women, who labored in the same shipyard to produce this second *Block Island*, presented of a memorial plaque to be housed forever in CVE-106. This broze plaque, bearing an image of the lost CVE-21, was the workers’ act of remembering the fallen vessel, and thus their connection to the crew and the new CVE-106.⁵³³ Four of the words on the plaque displayed, at least in the eyes of the workers, that a very real transition of heritage was taking place with the commissioning ceremony. These words, located near the broze image of the CVE-21, stated, “The Fighting Block Island.”⁵³⁴

BELL FROM THE 106

Before the 106 was towed to Japan to be scrapped in 1960, the U.S. Navy removed the ship’s bell from the vessel. In maritime history, the bell of vessels

⁵³² *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 1, December 30, 1944, 3.

⁵³³ “To Commission Block Island,” *The Tacoma Times*, December 29, 1944, 16.

⁵³⁴ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 1, December 30, 1944, 4.

symbolizes the essence of the ship. This centuries old naval tool performs a number of functions including serving to mark time, the changing of the watch, and alerting crewmembers to danger. Ceremonial purposes for the ships' bells include signalling the transition of command of the vessel. The importance of each ship's bell as a symbol is reflected by the U.S. Navy retaining the ship's bells of all commissioned ships, even after these vessels are discarded and scrapped. As the official website for the Navy states, "The bell remains with the ship while in service and with the Department of the Navy after decommissioning."⁵³⁵ While the bells can be loaned to sites related to a past vessel, such as another vessel named after it or a museum, the bells remain in the domain of the Department of the Navy. The purpose of this loaning is "to inspire and to remind our naval forces and personnel of their honor, courage, and commitment to the defense of our nation."⁵³⁶

The bell from the 106, once taken from the ship, was stored at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyards. In the early 1970s, the community of Block Island, RI was interested in acquiring the bell. Island historian and resident, Maizie Lewis, sought the help of Rhode Island Senator Claiborne Pell. With his help, the bell was brought to Block Island, and placed in front of Legion Park. This triangular piece of land, located adjacent to the island's cemetery, holds the American

⁵³⁵ "Ship's Bells," Naval History and Heritage Command, accessed May 18, 2011, <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq83-1.htm>.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

Legion Post 36. The bell was dedicated on Memorial Day, May 31, 1971.⁵³⁷ For the residents of this island community, this bell symbolized more than just a piece of the aircraft carrier. It became a memorial for all the servicemen from Block Island, Rhode Island. It symbolized all the island veterans who served in conflicts from the French and Indian War through the Vietnam conflict.

In her dedication of the bell, Lewis spoke of this new meaning of the bell. Tolling it three times, she spoke to the gathered crowd. "This bell will be symbolic of more than three centuries of our history...it will reverberate across our hills, and its echoes resound across our waters, ever in tribute to those island men who gave their lives for our country."⁵³⁸ For forty years, this bell has been utilized in memorial services performed by Post 36. The bell tolls as island veteran's funeral processions pass the Legion Park on their way to the island cemetery.

SOUVENIR BOOK

One of the first actions taken to record the legacy of the Fighting Block Island after the war was the publication of a book. Notice of the publication for ex-personnel of the Navy and Marine Corps appeared in the naval magazine All Hands. The June 1946 periodical promoted the publication of histories covering four vessels. The small article served as a notice to recently discharged crewmembers. It stated, "The book covers activities of both the old and the new

⁵³⁷ Robert M. Downey, "Block Island's Pair of Aircraft Carriers," *Providence Journal*, May 15, 1989.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

Block Islands (CVEs 21 and 106). Distribution is free to naval and marine personnel who served aboard either ship.”⁵³⁹ Readers were asked to “pass the word to former shipmates who will be interested.”⁵⁴⁰ The *All Hands* notice explained, “The work includes a short narrative of the war-record of both vessels.”⁵⁴¹

This publication, *U.S.S. Block Island, CVE-21 and CVE-106, United States Navy: The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict*” was large, fourteen inches high and eleven wide, with a blue cover. On the cover was the insignia that for a time served as a tail-marking on the rudders of the FBI aircraft, a solid white box with an “T” in the middle. Like the very vessels it chronicles, the book earned a nickname, derived from the cover. It became known as the “Big Blue Book.” In a way, it mirrors a high school yearbook, with many pictures of men at work and of their division. Also, the work includes a blank page in the rear for the gathering of autographs.⁵⁴²

The very first sentence of the book denotes the purpose. It states, “This volume is prepared as a fitting memorial to men who have served their country in

⁵³⁹ “Souvenir Books,” *All Hands*, June 1946, 39.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴² *U.S.S. Block Island: CVE-21 and CVE-106 United States Navy. “The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict”*. Annapolis: U.S. Navy, 1945.

a great and terrible war.”⁵⁴³ While the work is short on detailed narratives of specific operations, the large pages of the “Big Blue Book” present an excellent photo essay of activities onboard. Images include actions shots of the FBI aircraft attacking German U-Boats and positions over Okinawa. Pictures include a wide range of people at work, including cooking meals, cutting hair, and playing sports. Other images include the mortally wounded CVE-21, shots of the hazing during the visit of Neptune Rex, and the former Allied POWS lying in cots in the hangar deck of the 106. At the end of the book is an index, which listed all the personnel who served on the vessels. An asterisk near the name marks those service members who served on both vessels.

SWIFT’S HISTORY

In 1965, Roy L. Swift, who served as an Intelligence Officer on both *USS Block Islands*, published a history covering both vessels. From his position during the war, Swift had detailed knowledge of the events on board the vessel about which the average enlisted personnel would only hear rumors, including the interrogation of German crewmembers of U-Boats taken onboard. In fact, these interrogations sparked a friendship with a German officer held on board the 21. A correspondence with this man after the war provided Swift with detailed knowledge of the experience of the enemy U-Boats, thus adding to the information available to Swift in writing his history.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁴⁴ Letter from Wolf Loch to Roy Swift, January 24, 1948, given to author by Roy Ann Carney.

Swift borrowed a portion of the title from the 'Big Blue Book', however, he modified the title. He named his work, *The Fighting Block Island: The Story of Two Escort Carriers Who Carried the War to the Enemy During Three Years of Conflict*. Swift's work of eighty pages served as a summary of the operations the two vessels experienced in both theaters. He included charts in the back, which provided detailed drawings recreating the events of the sinking of the 21. This included a drawing noting the location of the 21 when the first torpedoes struck and the approximate location of the sinking as the ocean currents pushed the lifeless hull to the south.⁵⁴⁵ After completing the work, Swift personally delivered a copy to the archives of the Navy Department in Washington D.C.⁵⁴⁶ This history would be later published by the USS Block Island Association (USSBIA), to serve as a catalyst for many veterans to learn of specific details of the complex operations they were involved in decades later.

USSBIA

Starting in the immediate years after the war, many crewmembers remained in contact with each other. Most of these connections mirrored their time on board, that of close contact with those in their division. These connections included small get-togethers of a handful of veterans, many of which centered on visiting each other on vacations. Hector Verneti, who returned to his native Arizona after the war, gathered with two other members of his unit in Las Vegas

⁵⁴⁵ Swift, 81.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., ii.

around 1960. Their wives joined them, and became acquainted with one another. One shipmate flew in from New Jersey, and Verneti took him to Arizona and toured the Apache Trail and visited his hometown of Globe.⁵⁴⁷ Small gatherings such as these occurred across the country with FBI veterans.⁵⁴⁸ However, a shift occurred in the early 1960s.

A core group of veterans in the Boston region held a particular strong bond, as many were in the armament division during the war. However, over time this was more than simply a group of veterans coming together from a single ship. Veterans from a number of ships gathered, the common bond being that they all participated in the action that took place on May 29, 1944. Some survived the sinking on the 21, others were from DEs involved in sinking U-549 and picking the men up from their baptism. Their small gatherings resulted in the first official reunions, with the charting of the USS Block Island Association in 1963. These first reunions consisted of gatherings for just one evening, centered on dinner and drinks with veterans and their wives. Held in Dedham, Massachusetts, these reunions took place in 1962, 1963, and 1965. Those that traveled from out of state for the event, stayed in the Boston area for a few days. These events, held twenty

⁵⁴⁷ Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, March 3, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁵⁴⁸ Other gatherings of members took place in the Boston area. This included these members visiting Block Island, Rhode Island in 1961 when the island celebrated its 300th year since European settlement in 1661.

years after the war, laid the foundation for the organization to grow rapidly when the national urge to remember the war commenced decades later.⁵⁴⁹

While after 1965 no formal reunions took place for nearly twenty years, the informal communications of FBI veterans continued. However, this dormant period soon gave way to an ever-increasing amount of activity, starting in the 1980s. This expansion was two fold. First, reunions on an annual basis were held. Secondly, the organization started the publication of a quarterly newsletter. Considering these two acts of remembering sheds light onto the changing way that these naval veterans remembered their service.

In 1982, this organization held its first modern reunion, again in Massachusetts. This year those gathered also agreed upon the launching of the newsletter, which was first published in 1983. The first issue stated the purpose of the group “is to locate and communicate with as many of the Ships Company as possible.”⁵⁵⁰ This reunion and subsequent issues of the newsletter, laid the foundation for an organization that is still meeting today. The reunions were to be held around Memorial Day weekend, marking both the national weekend of remembering the sacrifices of veterans and the loss of CVE-21 on May 29, 1944. This first issue of the newsletter, included a summary of the 1982 reunion, which 88 people attended. It also noted the intention of the group to host annual reunions starting with the 40th anniversary of the sinking of the 21 in 1984. Lastly, it

⁵⁴⁹ “Reunions,” USS Block Island Association, accessed April 28, 2011, <http://www.USSBlockIsland.org/Beta/V2-Reunion/Reunion.html>.

⁵⁵⁰ *Chips Off the Old Block Island*, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 1983, 1.

included the complete listing of all known shipmates, with mailing addresses and phone numbers to facilitate communicate.⁵⁵¹

REUNIONS

These reunions were different from the small informal gatherings in Dedham, in large part because of the age of the attendees. These were not veterans in their 30s and 40s coming together, most were either retirement age, or retired. Thus, these meetings lasted for days, and were held in revolving cities at a central hotel with a hospitality room and banquet facilities. Tours allowed those that wanted to see the local sites to do so, and because these events were held all over the country, many for the first time witnessed firsthand sites of national significances. Over the years, tours were given of iconic sites as the Hoover Dam, Jefferson's Monticello, and the Kennedy Space Center.

Many of these side trips were related to the history of the U.S. Navy. Tours included the *USS Constitution* in Boston, the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, and the Admiral Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas. While these sites represented aspects of U.S. Navy history on the national level, the veterans' experiences was a story omitted from the national narrative. Thus, they self-commemorated in a number of ways. Starting in 1984, the reunion commemorating the 40th anniversary of the sinking brought together expanding numbers of veterans who gathered and remembered their service in diverse and interesting ways. These gatherings, changed over time, thus serve as an insight

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

into how World War II veterans remembered their service once they entered their 60s and beyond.

WHO PARTICIPATES

The members that learned about the group, and decided to participate, were proud of their service and experience.⁵⁵² Many were active in other veteran organizations, such as the leadership of the local American Legions and Veterans of Foreign Wars post.⁵⁵³ Others join groups based on the experience of a particular vessel, such as the *USS Lexington, CV-2*, and *USS New Orleans, CA-32*. One member, Otis Long, was active in the Veterans of Underage Military Service (VUMS) for those servicemen who joined the military under age.⁵⁵⁴ However, an early aspect of the USSBIA allowed for expanded membership. From the early part of the 1980s moving forward, the USSBIA took an ecumenical approach to its membership. This organization was more than just a group dedicated to the experience of two ships named the Block Island.

In the fall of 1983, the group voted for the inclusion of Korean era veterans who served on the 106.⁵⁵⁵ This allowed those Navy veterans who were part of the crew of the 106 on its Atlantic cruises from 1951-1953 to be active

⁵⁵² Appendix B-List explaining sample of interviews with veterans who attended reunions and were active members in the 1980s.

⁵⁵³ Bob Mathis, interviewed by Ben Hruska, May 28, 2010, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁵⁵⁴ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 17, No. 1, July 2003, 10.

⁵⁵⁵ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1983, 1.

members of the organization. Expansion continued to be a theme in 1985, when the membership voted to allow the DEs that were part of Task Force 21.11, to join the group. These DEs experienced the sinking on May 29, 1944, albeit in a different vantage point. The *USS Barr*, also took a torpedo in the attack, which resulted in the death of 17 crewmembers. The *USS Ahrens*, *Elmore*, and *Paine*, participated in sinking the U-Boat, and later rescuing the crew of the lost 21. As *Chips* described the vote, “After all we shared one hell of an experience together.”⁵⁵⁶ Thus, the group continued to expand its mission to that of remembering all those that experienced the sinking and those that served on the 106 in the Cold War.

While not by design, the organization is mostly composed of enlisted personnel and not officers. Much of this is derived from the very small number of officers onboard, in comparison with the larger number of enlisted men. The complete roster from the World War II period from both the 21 and 106 lists 1554 enlisted crewmembers and just 220 officers. This breaks down to the officers consisting of just over 14% of the total individuals serving on either ship. However, as the men during the war relaxed and let off steam with their cohorts this further expanded the divide between enlisted men and officers. Shore leave during the war centered on bursts of activity on land with those of your rank. The same pattern was seen after the war in remembering it. While some officers did attend the reunions, they also held their own. These relatively small gatherings, of

⁵⁵⁶ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer Issue 1985, 4.

officers and their wives, took place over a number of years in the 1980s.⁵⁵⁷ One image of an officer's reunion from the period contains just ten individuals, five former officers with ties to the 21 and 106, and five spouses. Thus the barrier between enlisted and officers, was maintained when it came time to remember the war.

The issue of race also impacted commemoration of the war. Participants included a range of racial backgrounds. Many veterans who grew up in migrant first generation households, where a range of European languages were spoken, participated in the assimilation processes of the American experience, including serving in World War II and commemorating their service decades later. However, one minority group on board the vessels, African-Americans, was noticeably absent during the reunions and in the membership in general.

One African-American enlisted sailor in his memoir wrote of his perspective in the Navy during World War II. He wrote, "I found out that whenever someone speaks of the "crew" of a Navy ship, he is not speaking of the mess attendants or steward's mates. They are not considered to be part of the crew and are classified as the lowest things in the Navy."⁵⁵⁸ Enlisted crewmembers of the FBI stated that while they were aware of the stewards on board, they were not seen for they worked strictly in "Officer's County". The only times enlisted personnel saw these stewards were in times of water rationing onboard, when the

⁵⁵⁷ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 1986, 6.

⁵⁵⁸ Adolph D. Newton, *Better than Good: A Black Sailor's War 1943-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 40.

stewards showered in the enlisted men's area.⁵⁵⁹ The almost complete segregation of white and black enlisted men produced a barrier to any chance at interpersonal communication. Thus, the friendships made between enlisted men from a range of backgrounds which formed the basis of the USSBIA, did not develop with these African American sailors.

One important aspect for the individual veteran, beyond which particular vessel or experience they encountered, is their view of their service. A reporter from Anchorage, Alaska asked Joe Booi about those who attend the reunions. He noted that most were "enthusiastic." These were men, who if they were survivors of the sinking, looked at their experience as not losing something, but as gaining bonus time to their lives. While the sinking may have produced a memory that would not go away, overall, forty years after the sinking they focused on the fact they did survive. Thus, they wished to attend the reunions and be with those that also experienced the same transformative event. Enthusiastic is a good term, for as the reunions continued, many of these men and their spouses on crutches and even wheelchairs traveled across the country to take part.⁵⁶⁰

While the numbers of the organization increased, some chose not to participate. These individuals looked back on their past and rejected gathering with those that also experienced the sinking. Possibly the memory of the sinking proved too powerful, and was something that could not be escaped. Thus, further

⁵⁵⁹ Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, March 3, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁵⁶⁰ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 22, No. 2, June 2008, 14.

stimulation would only exacerbate their discomfort. A glimpse into this point of view is seen in a letter from a member to the organization. While he wished to be a dues paying member of the group, he asked that the dispatch of the newsletter *Chips* be discontinued. He wrote that World War II only represented “bad memories.”⁵⁶¹ Therefore, he asked that these reminders of the past not be mailed to him.

Other veterans completely rejected all participation with the organization. Phillip Drake survived the sinking as a 19 year old Quarter Master/Second Class. While he agreed to be interviewed about his experience during the sinking for a local paper covering Memorial Day, he chose not to attend the reunions. Drake explained the psychological impact of the sinking, which included losing friends among those killed. The article stated, “Today’s observance of Memorial Day is an annual reminder of the fate that befell his friends, but he doesn’t need a reminder. He never forgets.”⁵⁶² This open rejection of gathering with those who also experienced the same trauma grants a view into the many ways that veterans deal with a painful past, including dealing with the pain of the past in isolation.

CHIPS

The name of the newsletter is a reference to the past, for this was the name of the newspapers on-board both *USS Block Islands*. The name is derived from the expression ‘Chip off the old block.’ This second incarnation of *Chips* mirrored

⁵⁶¹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 5. Fall 1987, 8.

⁵⁶² John Clayton, “He Remembers Every Day”, *New Hampshire Union Leader*, May 28, 2007, 1 & 12.

the reunions, in that these also changed over time. The early issues of the periodical focused on the dissemination of information on the group and also the expansion of the list of found crewmembers. The first issues highlighted upcoming events, talked about new members discovered, and also included an updated and complete listing of all known members with their contact information. This last aspect allowed for communication between lost crewmembers. As the word spread, the list of known crewmembers grew. Sadly, these inquires also produced information on those crewmembers who died before the early 1980s, and this information was also passed on. The theme of tracking down crewmembers is seen in one of the first new issues. It simply stated, “Keep in touch, let’s not lose each other again.”⁵⁶³

1984 REUNION

The meeting in Cambridge, MA, marked the 40th anniversary of the sinking of CVE-21. With 111 people attending, it also represented the largest single CVE based reunion that year.⁵⁶⁴ At the business meeting, the group made a fundamental vote. The membership voted against incorporating the organization into with the larger CESA, a group composed of veterans who served on all CVEs, not just one particular vessel. One wrote, “The general response seemed to favor remaining as our own small group.”⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶³ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 1982, 3.

⁵⁶⁴ “Annual Meeting,” USS Block Island Association, accessed April 22, 2011, <http://www.USSBlockIsland.org/Beta/V2-Reunion/Reunion.html>.

⁵⁶⁵ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 2, November 1984, 1-3.

The gathering laid the pattern for future reunions, with daily tours of nearby sites, a business meeting, and dinner and dance. Veterans and their spouses interacted at these events. Stories were exchanged. One member recalled an employee of the hotel staff asking about the amazing time these men and women in their 60s, from all over the country, were having together. He wrote, “I couldn’t describe it to them in a way they could understand. Only those of us were part of the FBI can really know what it was all about.”⁵⁶⁶

The members also used this event to find lost shipmates, as veterans placed a notice of the reunion in 62 newspapers across the country. This tactic resulted in tracking down 70 more members, which took the total to 207 living shipmates. However, again these gatherings produced the knowledge of crewmembers, or spouses of them, that had died. The names of deceased, listed in *Chips* under the section “Taps”, included their name, date of death, and where cards could be sent to surviving family members.⁵⁶⁷

LIBERTY

In a sense these reunions held annually in May mirrored the experience of veterans in the Navy. For those on CVE-21 in the Battle of the Atlantic, weeks would go by with no changes. Planes flew off the deck, training drills were conducted, tasks were completed, however, their view would not change. Nothing but ocean around them, no different cultures encountered, the same duties

⁵⁶⁶ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 1984, 4.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

performed on a daily basis. One CVE sailor in a diary wrote of the concept of cruising in circles. He wrote, “Undoubtedly, there is some reason for doing this, but I can’t figure it out.”⁵⁶⁸ He continued with, “this sea duty gets monotonous.”⁵⁶⁹ He summed up the average daily experience, once the novelty of the vessel wore off with the following: “Our ninth day at sea and still nowhere and it doesn’t seem as if we’re going anywhere.”⁵⁷⁰ Outside of the highlights that produced searing memories, such as seeing enemy POWS or the sinking, the vast majority of sea duty was boring.

Boredom setting in, highlighted by high moments of tension, was not just relegated to life on CVEs. As the historian Michael Bess addresses in his writings about memory and the war, he writes, “We also must remember that 90 percent of the deeds done in World War II were themselves far from glamorous in nature.”⁵⁷¹ On the FBIs, for every hour spent flying from the carrier deck in search of the enemy, hundreds of other crew hours were spent working on engines, cooking food, and cleaning toilets. The only break from this pattern was Liberty in port. For a set number of days, the men had free rein in Norfolk, Belfast, or Casablanca. Weeks worth of excitement and activities were crammed into these few hours. As with the reunions forty years later, action packed days

⁵⁶⁸ Diary of Louis Delhomme, Jr., property of his son David L. Delhomme, emailed to the author on September 15, 2009.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Bess, 342.

included seeing the sites, breaking from the normal routine, and drinking “torpedo juice.”

These fast-moving hours on shore during the war were mirrored decades later at reunions. Veterans were once again around old friends and away from their daily routine. One group of veterans recalled a friend flying late into Las Vegas, arriving at the hotel just before midnight. The men talked and shared beverages till four in the morning. After a few hours of sleep, wasting no time like forty years earlier, they were up with coffee and conversation getting ready for the day’s events.⁵⁷² Reunions were busy; tours were organized, general meeting to attending, dinner and dance to dress up for, and memorial service to hold for those lost comrades.

“TO RENEW OLD STORIES”

One of the primary activities of the reunions throughout the years was conversation between veterans. Many different memories surround the story of the FBI, because men experienced the same military actions in very different ways. These differences are the result of duties onboard the vessel, time served in the Navy or Marine Corps, or in the case of this unique group, what individual ship they served on. One veteran wrote that conversation provided his reason for attending the reunions. He wrote, “[to] recall different experiences, to be more rewarding than anything.”⁵⁷³ Another recalling the meaning of the group wrote,

⁵⁷² *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer 1985, 2.

⁵⁷³ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1995, 2.

the “chatter of old friends greeting each other was continuous.”⁵⁷⁴ One member summed up these conversations. He wrote, “to renew old stories.”⁵⁷⁵ During reunions one place held a great deal of this conversation, the hospitality room of the hotel hosting the event.

Starting in 1984, the hospitality room of these events was the central focus of reunions. One veteran called this “the focal point.”⁵⁷⁶ Volunteers worked in shifts throughout the day in manning these rooms. All things inside stimulated conversation. In the morning hours coffee was served. Tables and chairs allowed members to sit together and recall their experiences and hear stories of ships they were not on, such as the DEs. In the afternoon, rotating bartenders handed out cold beers and mixed cocktails for those that chose to have a drink while telling and hearing stories. Of the time in these rooms, one veteran wrote, “I enjoy it most just sitting in the hospitality room.”⁵⁷⁷ While the hospitality rooms emptied out during the tours, General Meeting, or the Dinner and Dance, they again filled up in the nighttime hours. As was reported in 1999, “The diehards returned to the hospitality room for a few more drinks and a few more sea stories.”⁵⁷⁸

OBJECTS

⁵⁷⁴ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 1986, 1.

⁵⁷⁵ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vo. 11, No. 3, July 1996, 1.

⁵⁷⁶ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July 1998, 1.

⁵⁷⁷ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1995, 2.

⁵⁷⁸ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 14, No. 3, July 1999, 2.

However, there was more than coffee or beer to aid in the recalling of memories. Tables displayed objects and photographs that members wished to exhibit. Later small panels highlighting the history of the organization and the vessels would be on display in the hospitality room. Veterans also brought in photographs from operations on-board and while on liberty in various ports around the world. One veteran brought in a model he constructed of CVE-21, allowing those to see the reproduction of their lost ship.⁵⁷⁹ All these objects and images added in ‘renewing old stories.’ However, objects demonstrating the significance of the past were not limited to those decades old.

The organization, from its very beginning sought ways to symbolize itself. In 1983, a patch designed to symbolize the USSBIA, which could be sewn onto a shirt or hat, was for sale.⁵⁸⁰ Soon after, hats and shirts also were produced and sold at the reunions, with proceeds going back to the organization. Worn by the veterans, these hats and shirts designated membership in the organization. One veteran recalled a Memorial Day parade the group witnessed in Las Vegas, which included a float commemorating the battleship *USS Nevada*, BB-36. Looking over the crowd, he saw all the members of the organization standing in the mass of people around him and across the street wearing their USSBIA material.⁵⁸¹ These items not only designated them as World War II or Korean era veterans, but also

⁵⁷⁹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 10-12.

⁵⁸⁰ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1983, 1.

⁵⁸¹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer 1985, 3.

highlighted their specific organization focused on remembering the loss of CVE-21.

GENERAL MEETING

The general meeting allowed the membership to attend to the business of the organization. In the beginning years volunteers organized the reunions and put together the newsletter *Chips*. These early meetings included a report on the costs of the reunion, the number of paid members in the group, and a report on finances. However, as the organization lengthened its membership list, and reunions expanded in attendance, a clear delegation of duties was needed. As a result, in 1990 the meeting in St. Louis witnessed some changes. A motion was passed for the formation of a leadership board of five members, which included the positions of President, Treasurer, Secretary and two other Board Members.⁵⁸² This shift in leadership demonstrated an ever-growing organization that needed a clear chain of command in facilitating future meetings and writing and printing the newsletter.

ECUMENICAL APPROACH

The first set of official by-laws demonstrates the growth of the organization as a result of the openness of the group. Germinating from a core group of individual crewmembers in the armament division in the 1960s, the USSBIA has flourished by welcoming others associated with the story of the FBI to participate as well. Section B of the first draft of By-Laws listed the men

⁵⁸² *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 6. No. 2, Summer 1990, 3.

welcome to the group. As written, “Membership shall be comprised of any person who ever served with any of the following ships; naval and marine personnel.”⁵⁸³ These include both the 21 and 106, five DEs including the *Ahrens*, *Barr*, *Buckley*, *Elmore*, and *Paine*, and four air squadrons.⁵⁸⁴ Many of these other groups consisted of DEs or air squadrons, with a much smaller compliment of men, who on their own would only have been able to gather a handful of men. Gathering with the FBI men, these individuals brought their own memories and perspectives of the operations into the collective memory of the group. Thus, these men brought valuable stories for the FBI men, and vise-versa, in understanding the multipart operations they experienced decades ago.

Expanding the membership of the organization transformed the group’s collective memory, it also expanded into overlapping realms of memory. Some men served on just one of the carriers, many served on both. Others were crewmembers of the DEs in the hunter-killer task forces the 21 led in the Atlantic. Most members experienced the sinking from some vantage point, some not. For just as there was no one memory of any particular vessel, no one single memory summed up the collective memory of the combined operations. With the ecumenical approach, the membership grew and the collective memory expanded

⁵⁸³ “Constitution and By-Laws of the *USS Block Island* Association.” Drafted 1990 and amended in 1992 and 2004, USS Block Island Collection, San Diego, CA.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

to include multiple perspectives. The collective memory would even transcend the veterans themselves and include their spouses, and family members, and friends.

SEMINAR

These meetings also allowed for the expansion of knowledge about the war, and specifically the experience of these veterans during the conflict. During the war, the average enlisted servicemen knew surprising little of the actual battle in which they were engulfed. Daily newspapers, full of basic information on the general strategy of the war effort were not available. One World War II veteran's memoir recalled looking back on how little he understood of the overall scene of the war. He wrote that he was, "woefully ignorant of the strategy and geopolitics of the war. The folks back home actually had a clearer view than we on the scene."⁵⁸⁵ He concluded, "I knew war in a way no civilian could, but I had no synoptic view of it such as I might have gained from reading the daily papers."⁵⁸⁶ The early USSBIA meetings invited guest speakers that helped veterans contextualize their experience during the conflict. More specifically, these seminars granted veterans access to information on the experience of the Battle of the Atlantic and information on the sinking.

In 1989, the reunion in Reno, Nevada, coincided with the 45th anniversary of the sinking of CVE-21. It hosted a speaker with a unique perspective into the events around the demise of the 21. The Commanding Officer, Captain George L.

⁵⁸⁵Louis Harlan, *All at Sea: Coming of Age in World War II*, (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 122.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Conkey, of the *USS Elmore*, DE 686, spoke of leading in the destruction for the U-Boat, U-549, that sank CVE-21 and also damaged the *USS Barr*. He recounted a “blow by blow description of the battle”⁵⁸⁷ with the cornered U-Boat. What Conkey lectured about, the tracking and destruction of U-549, most of the members know almost nothing about for they were either on the wounded 21 or in the water. As was noted in *Chips* later, “(t)here were many things that your Editor did not know about that unforgettable night.”⁵⁸⁸ His speech granted a window into the experience of the sinking on May 29, 1944, a window that gave background information on their personal experience of this complex battle involving U-549 and the FBI Task Force.

For his efforts in destroying U-549, which allowed the Task Force to fully concentrate on picking up the survivors of CVE-21, Conkey earned the Navy Cross. At the close of his speech, the banquet hall was filled with “a deafening cheer from the men of the *Elmore*, and rightly so, he was well liked and respected by his men.”⁵⁸⁹ He was mobbed by all the veterans, both from the DEs and the FBI, seeking a handshake and a thank you for eliminating the U-Boat. This lecture on the past, allowed for information, unknown to most, on the events of May 29th 1944, and a demonstration of gratitude to an officer who proved instrumental in the saving of many lives that night in the Atlantic.

⁵⁸⁷ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 6. No. 3, September 1989, 2.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Conkey's speech was an example of the group expanding their collective memory of the sinking. Most of the attendees who experienced the sinking were enlisted, meaning the majority of their duties called for reacting to previous training and taking orders from officers. Also, most veterans in the audience were in the position of experiencing the sinking as a member of CVE-21, not one of the DEs. Conkey's talk changed the memory for these men. They heard the point of view of a commanding officer of one of the DEs of the task force. They learned of the DEs experience in taking on U-549 and successfully destroying her. The men of the 21 did not witness either of these events during the war. They were floating in the Atlantic, while the actions Conkey described took place over their horizon on that confusing late evening. Speeches and conversations such as these helped veterans contextualize the overall experience of the complex operations of May 29, 1944. Expanding their knowledge helped them place a more over-arching perspective on their individual experiences.

DINNER AND DANCE/MEMORIAL

All the modern reunions concluded with a banquet. These early reunions included a dance with a live band. However, at the early reunions an act of memorial was held before the festivities commenced. The 1985 reunion was typical of these early reunions. The night began with a Master of Ceremonies calling the gathering of 260 veterans and their spouses to attention. Then a color guard, at this reunion an ROTC group, marched into the room and placed the flags before the membership. The names of those killed on May 29, 1944 were read aloud. This included the six members from CVE-21, the four pilots aloft at the

time that were unable to find land and disappeared, and the seventeen men from the *USS Barr*. Also read were the names of Marine Corps personnel killed on, or from, CVE-106. Later one veteran wrote about hearing the names of those lost during the war. He wrote, "I think most of us realized for a moment that these heroes were deprived of the 40 some odd years of life that we have enjoyed."⁵⁹⁰

A prayer followed showing thankfulness for their shipmates surviving the war, for the membership gathered there, and their safe return home after the reunion. Then a meal was eaten, as all members sat around large tables in groups of 8 to 10 people. After dinner the reunion hosts were presented a plaque, acknowledging them for all their hard work in planning the reunion events. Then the dance commenced. At the 1987 reunion in Seattle a chorale group named Sweet Adelines preformed. Groups of this sort sang songs from the 1940s and 1950s. This allowed those gathered to sing along with, or dance to, the tunes of their youth.⁵⁹¹ Once the music stopped, members said their goodbyes, and many flew home the next morning. A few returned to the hospitality room for another beer, or some more conversation before departing and hoping to come together again at the next reunion.

In addition to companionship and celebration, the USSBIA provided an avenue for better mental health. Veteran Hector Verneti found attending the reunions and talking about his experience helpful. He thinks that many of the

⁵⁹⁰ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer 1985, 3.

⁵⁹¹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 1987, 3.

problems World War II and Vietnam veterans had in returning to civilian life derived from not talking about their experiences. He recalls, "I've seen death,"⁵⁹² referring to their shipmate James O'Neil Franks, who during the attack of the 21 on May 29, 1944 stood as a lookout on the bow. When the first explosion occurred, the mangled metal peeling upward closed around one of his legs, pinning him to the doomed ship. Hector witnessed the ordeal of crewmen attempting to free their shipmate, first with a metal cutting torch. Once it became obvious that time was too limited for this, the doctor cut his leg to free his body. However, blood loss took his life. Verneti witnessed his body being taken to the hangar deck; he would be buried at sea with the 21.

For Verneti, the USSBIA, with reunions and *Chips*, gave him a platform for recalling these painful memories. He feels talking about these events, not letting them bottle up inside, has helped him over the years. Verneti notes that many veterans do not discuss their painful experiences, adding "To keep it in your system. To go crazy."⁵⁹³ Verneti represents someone who discussed these painful experiences from the war throughout his adult life, but many veterans did not. However, the *Chips* newsletter provided a platform for those reluctant to recall their experiences after decades. These disturbing memories, for the most part center on two experiences, the first, the sinking of the 21, and the second, the evacuation of POWs from Taiwan in September of 1945.

⁵⁹² Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, March 3, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

50TH ANNIVERSARY SHIFT

As the approach of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II drew near, a shift in remembering the war is seen with the USSBIA. This is not the result of one event, but rather a number of changes seen in the newsletter and reunions that hint to a transformation. This shift in ways of recalling the past sheds light onto the changing notions of veterans remembering their service. It also reflects on these ex-servicemen and their spouses advancing into the ages of their 70s and 80s.

The 1994 reunion in San Diego marked the fiftieth anniversary of the sinking. The previous year's reunion marked the largest gathering, with 326 members traveling to Memphis. However, the 1994 reunion began the slow decline in attendance with almost one hundred fewer members able to make the reunion.⁵⁹⁴ The 232 people gathered still represented a large meeting, but even those survivors of the sinking who lied about their age and were 15 and 16 at the time of enlistment were in their late 60s. Time was taking its toll on the membership with members dying or not able to travel due to ill health. The members were faced with the question of whether their story would be remembered after their deaths. At one memorial service was the "discussion on teaching our young people our past history."⁵⁹⁵ With the passing way of members, interest increased on objects whose lives would transcend their deaths.

⁵⁹⁴ "Annual Reunions," USS Block Island Association, accessed on May 5, 2011, <http://www.USSBlockIsland.org/Beta/V2-Reunion/Reunion.html>.

⁵⁹⁵ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 9, No. 3, July 1994, 6.

In 1995, information related to obtaining campaign medals was included in issues of *Chips*. These medals could be sought from both the governments of U.S. and Great Britain. Information included contact information, costs, and required documentation proofing time of service for the acquisition of these tangible symbols of their past service. This included for those who served on CVE-21, the Atlantic Commendation Badge from the U.K., and for those on CVE-106, toward the end of the conflict, the Philippine Liberation Medal.⁵⁹⁶ However, another object for remembrance sadly was also on the minds of these individuals advancing in age.

An issue of *Chips* in 1996 included information for veterans on obtaining their own personal monument, that of the military gravestones from the U.S. Government noting their service.⁵⁹⁷ With the passing of more and more veterans, the USSBIA started disseminating information for their members to gain these markers that would record their service in their final resting place. However, the passing of members of the USSBIA, starting in 1996, was also noted in a new way at the reunions. The organization witnessed more and more deaths of its members, including both veterans and spouses. These members had been gathering at modern reunions for over ten years and new friendships had been

⁵⁹⁶ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1995, 3.

⁵⁹⁷ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 11, No. 3, July 1996, 2.

made with individuals who understood their experience. One spouse called these friendships, which were renewed annually, their other “great big family.”⁵⁹⁸

The 1996 memorial expanded to include the presentation of a flower, a red carnation, for each member who had passed away since the last reunion. This addition to the memorial included an empty vase in the front of the room: as each individual name was read, an individual member brought a red carnation forward.⁵⁹⁹ These names included spouses and veterans, and later even the children of veterans. Individuals close to the deceased brought the flower forward, a husband for his wife, a shipmate from a DE for a fellow DE sailor, an FBI sailor for a fellow FBI sailor in the same division of ship. As a group composed of members all over the nation, they were not able to attend each other’s funerals. However, in this manner their deceased members were remembered.

SELF-COMMEMORATION

Many of the veterans that survived the sinking spoke in oral interviews of items lost on board. These included tangible objects that marked their time in the Navy and souvenirs gathered in seeing other parts of the world. While in Casablanca, many sailors traded with the locals for captured items from the German army such as helmets, pistols, and military metals. Tucked in their foot-lookers for the voyage, these objects would be mailed home once stateside. Others talked about losing objects such as photos of the German POWs held on board,

⁵⁹⁸ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 14, No. 3, July 1999, 2.

⁵⁹⁹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 11, No. 3, July 1996, 2.

poker winnings, and a lighter given to all the crewmembers by Captain Ramsey on Christmas 1943. The sinking took all these things away, removing tangible proof of their wartime experience.

Abandoning ship, all they took with them was what they were wearing. For some, this proved remarkably little as they were in the act of showering. Even those fully clothed found their clothing destroyed as a result of the oil. These soiled garments were discarded once on the rescuing DEs and replaced with donated clothing from the crew of the DEs. However, a few crewmembers sought to keep a piece of their experience with them in the water. For many of these veterans these tangible pieces from the war served as a means of their wartime experience. As a way to document their loss, some of these men constructed symbols of their experience during the sinking. These served as more than a way to recall the past, but to manufacture a memorial to the event.

The scholar Kristin Ann Hass argues these types of memorials made by, and for, veterans demonstrate the rich and diverse ways of remembering trauma and conflict. In her work, *Carried to the Wall*, Hass analyzes the placement of objects at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. She suggests that the Wall only represents half the monument. The other half of the memorial are the objects left by visitors, which take the form of coins, playing cards, a slim jim, and cans of beer. She writes, “[t]hese intensely individuated public memorials forge a richly textured memory of the war and its legacies.”⁶⁰⁰ While Hass’s work centered on a

⁶⁰⁰ Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2.

war that produced deep political and cultural divisions in American society, and a national memorial symbolizing an entire war, similar acts of memorial were constructed by veterans of CVE-21. Some remained in their personal residence, only viewed by family and friends. Others were brought and shared with veterans and their families at reunions. The action of self-commemoration gave veterans a way to express the loss they experienced with the sinking of CVE-21.

Hector Verneti retained two items from the sinking, the belt and the shoes he was wearing. After the war, Verneti heard of a veteran, who served in the U.S. Army during the war, bronzing the boots he wore walking across Europe. He decided to bronze his shoes. Placing plaster of Paris inside the shoes, he then painted these shoes gold. Serving as a monument to surviving the sinking, and the loss of the 21, the shoes also serve a useful purpose, as a pair of doorstops in his home in Scottsdale.⁶⁰¹

Another example of self-commemoration is witnessed in the creation of art constructed to bring meaning to the sinking. Rudy Bowling's duty onboard CVE-21 centered on airplanes, more specifically adjusting and lining up the bomb sites of aircraft that pressed their attacks on U-Boats.⁶⁰² In remembering the sinking, Bowling made a sketch drawing depicting their ordeal. The center showed the bow of the Block Island high in the air and under the marking of the 21 is the massive hole from a torpedo strike. The ship is sinking fast, with the

⁶⁰¹ Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, December 12, 2010, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁶⁰² Bill MacInnes, email message to the author, June 26, 2011.

U.S. flag just ready to touch the water. In the sea around the vessel, tiny figures swim away from the site of the sinking. On the horizon, a DE searches for the enemy U-Boat. Lastly, in the sky above blended with the clouds rests a roped Jesus Christ. His large figure has a bowed head, either watching over those in danger in the water, or possibly sharing in their suffering. Bowling shared his work with others who also experienced the event he depicts in the drawing.⁶⁰³ This self-commemoration demonstrates another aspect of remembering the sinking, that of the use of faith in illustrating, and thus attempting to understand, this remarkable event from their shared past.

BLOCK ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Block Island Historical Society (BIHS), located on Block Island, Rhode Island, was formed as the result of the death of a prominent citizen. In 1941, Lucretia Mott Ball, decreed in her will, that her collection of artifacts related to the history of the island be donated to a museum to preserve her family's legacy of hotel ownership and other business activities. The island community possessed no museum and the residents, fearful the items would be donated to a museum on the mainland, formed their own organization in 1942. Thus, this collection of island history stayed on the island and formed the nucleus

⁶⁰³ Document Number 06.74.01, USS Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, Rhode Island.

of the collection. The collection focused on preserving evidence of the farming and fishing history of the island, which declined rapidly in the 20th Century.⁶⁰⁴

While most of the donations to the BIHS were from individuals with a connection to the island community, either living on the island full-time or part-time, overtime other donations arrived from those without a traditional connection to Block Island. These donations from individuals in Alaska, California, and New Hampshire did not pertain to the traditional mission of the BIHS, that of preserving and protecting the history of the island. However, these donations did possess a strong Block Island connection. Those items sent in, unsolicited on the part of the BIHS, centered on the history of the two CVEs, *USS Block Islands*, CVE-21 & CVE-106.

The absence of a land-based site did not eliminate the veterans' wish to locate a central gathering point for their objects from their wartime experience. In fact, the lack of a specific site increased their desire for a location to preserve and protect their material culture. The adoption of the BIHS's mission to have their story preserved and protected by this island-based institution met this need. Seeking out the BIHS demonstrated the power these objects held for these veterans and their families. The anthropologist Nicholas J. Saunders, writing about material wartime culture of World War I, investigated the symbolic significance of objects from the Great War. According to Saunders, objects "posses a 'sense of the sacred' which is underscored by an ambiguous tension

⁶⁰⁴ Ethel Colt Ritchie, *Block Island Lore and Legends* (North Haven, CT: Van Dyck/Columbia Printing Company, 1955), 25.

between their associations with death and their continued life as memory-evoking objects for the living.”⁶⁰⁵ CVE-21 survivors, losing a ship and many personal objects during the sinking, retained powerful bonds with those objects from the war, and more importantly those from the sinking. The veterans sought a permanent home for these objects representing their war experiences.

These former crewmembers, seeking the preservation of their personal material related to their experience on the ships, willingly donated this material to complete strangers. For the most part, many of these items were mailed in, to a place they had never visited in person. However, for them, a museum dedicated to the history of Block Island, RI, seemed an ideal place to receive their material related to their ships and their wartime experience. Seeking a place to serve as a home for their military experience, these veterans boxed up their experience onboard CVE-21 and CVE-106 and mailed these artifacts to their ship’s namesake. These veterans trusted their physical connection to their ships, that of artifacts from their experience in the Navy, to the preservation mission of the BIHS.⁶⁰⁶

While the accessioning practices on incoming donations of the BIHS in the 1970s and 1980s did not include the full detail that a future researcher would wish for, important information can still be gleaned about the donations. Mailing

⁶⁰⁵ Nicholas J. Saunders, “Material culture and conflict: the Great War, 1914-2003,” in *Matters of Conflict: Material culture, memory and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

⁶⁰⁶ Douglas Gasner, interviewed by Ben Hruska, June 25, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

labels on boxes record the date of the donation and the return address listed the name of the donor. Unfortunately, some of the artifacts do not have any of this basic information. However, this combined collection of artifacts demonstrates the need of former crewmembers to have their ships and experience remembered and preserved.

Items donated include photographs of individual crewmembers, aircraft, and both the *USS Block Islands*. Additional paper ephemera included a holiday menu from the ship, listing the Christmas meal that was prepared for the sailors. Other items included clothing, documents related to the history of the vessel, and personal items.⁶⁰⁷ As a collection, this gathering of images, documents, and objects demonstrates veterans' need for a location of depositary of their tangible connection to their experience on one, or both, *USS Block Islands*.

HAT AS MEMORIAL

One of the objects donated to the BIHS was handmade as a memorial to a lost ship, however, not one from the U.S. Navy. This hat was manufactured by a crewmember of a lost U-Boat, a survivor that was held prisoner on the *Block Island*. Made of white cloth, the hat is in the fashion of what is termed an "overseas hat." The hat includes a tassel. On one side, in black ink, shows a surfaced U-Boat. Near the U-Boat is a swastika. The opposite side has the date of the sinking of this particular U-Boat, U-801, March 17th 1944. Situated near the

⁶⁰⁷ In 2005, the BIHS formally accessioned all this material under the title USS Block Island Collection, which is today housed on the 3rd floor of the BIHS on Block Island, RI.

date, are the names Schulz, Toller, Helbig, and Neubauer. These represent lost comrades that perished with the destruction of their vessel.⁶⁰⁸

CVE-21 on Hunter-Killer missions in the Atlantic served as the head of a task force, which was made up of smaller DDs and DEs. In the course of destroying U-Boats, German survivors at times would be recovered by these smaller vessels. With operations lasting upwards of a month long, surviving U-Boat crews were transferred to the larger CVE-21. This allowed for the Intelligence Officer onboard to interview these crewmembers for any valuable information on their particular vessel, or the nature of the Atlantic war in general. Until the task force resupplied, in either Casablanca or Norfolk, these Germans POWS resided on the ship.⁶⁰⁹

The make-up of the crews sheds light into the nature of the conflict. In January of 1944, CVE-21 received prisoners from U-231. The groups brought on board were segregated into officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted men to prevent communication between these groups and the hopes of improving the information gathered from interrogations. Most of the officers could speak English at an intermediate, and some at a higher, level. One of first requests of the Commanding Officer of U-231, Captain Wenzel, was to remember his lost crew.

⁶⁰⁸ Object Number 06.05.2005, USS Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, Rhode Island.

⁶⁰⁹ “Top Secret Report on German Prisoners Taken Aboard the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21, January 14, 1944 From U-231”, U.S. Navy, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego, CA, 1-6.

During interrogation he asked in English, “I wonder if it would be possible for us to have a memorial service for our departed comrades.”⁶¹⁰

USS Block Island Chaplain, Lieutenant MacInnes, held three separate services, each for the three segregated units. The services included, “a short opening prayer, a portion of the usual verses from the Bible, which are read at funerals, and longer, final prayer.”⁶¹¹ MacInnes spoke in English, and a junior grade officer on the 21 translated the statements into German. With no bodies of their former comrades to mourn over, this was the nearest form of closure for the German saying goodbye to their dead shipmates and the U-231. However, the Germans also developed other means of recalling the doomed U-231 and lost crewmembers.

Hector Verneti served as a parachute rigger onboard CVE-21. His position included the packing and repairing of parachutes, thus including working with cloth, silk, thread, and sewing equipment. While at work one day, someone showed up with orders from the Commanding officer of the ship to gather supplies -- colored pencils, material, and nettle and thread -- to be given to the POWs held on board. With spare time on their hands, these prisoners hand made memorials to their lost comrades and ships. Some of these were given to crewmembers of CVE-21. Verneti received one of these hats, as a gift for providing the supplies. This memento of the war produced by the Germans was in

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 6.

Verneti's footlocker, waiting to be mailed home once stateside, at the time of the sinking. In recalling the loss of his vessel, Verneti first spoke of this hat locked in this footlocker for safekeeping which sank beneath the waves.⁶¹²

The loss of a ship, and the death of crewmates, and other actions of war produce strong feelings. Many of these the victims may not be able to express their experience in a verbal form. The anthropologist Fabio Gygi explores the experiences of World War I veterans recalling their experience with the use of war objects. According to Gygi, "We give meaning to our experiences not only through language but also by putting them into some order, whose origin is a spatially constructed model of reality."⁶¹³ Like Verneti, other veterans, in recalling the sinking, discussed objects lost and not individual feelings. They speak of a wallet with money left on a table, images with buddies while in port, and letters from home. These objects take on a symbolic power of their wartime experience.

The hat donated to the BIHS lacks the original accession information, which would note the giver, date of the donation, and contact information of the giver. While this information critical to understand further the meaning of the donation is not available, the item still represents a dual act of remembering. First, the object demonstrates the construction of a memorial by German POWS

⁶¹² Hector Verneti, interviewed by Ben Hruska, December 12, 2010, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁶¹³ Fabio Gygi, "Shattered Experiences-Recycled Relics," in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75.

struggling to deal with the loss of their vessel and crewmembers. Secondly, the donation of this object demonstrates the action of preservation for this piece of history related to the story of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-21. Whether the donation was from a veteran, or a family member of a veteran, this action of seeking a home for the object in perpetuity demonstrates the giver's need of placing this artifact from the experience of the CVE-21 into the larger understanding of the war. This action shifted the object from the domain of the individual to that of the BIHS, an organization devoted to the history of Block Island, RI.

Donations to a small local museum anchored these veterans' artifacts to a specific place. They adopted a local museum, rather than a large national or regional institution, to serve as a safe harbor for their memories and objects. Joseph Amato theorizes on the meaning of local history to a community, and in this case a community of veterans scattered across a country. He writes, "Local history satisfies an innate human need to be connected to a place. It feeds our hunger to experience life directly and on intimate terms."⁶¹⁴ For an expanded community of veterans lacking a specific land-based location or a floating example of their class of ship, the avenue of local history for their ship's namesake was selected for the preservation of not only their memories, but also their material culture related to their service.

BOOI'S SKIVVIES

⁶¹⁴ Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 4.

After the sinking and once on the DEs, some men immediately sought tangible evidence of their ordeal. Joe Booi kept his skivvies, which is Navy slang for underwear. Booi brought these to reunions to show his fellow shipmates and others attending the annual gatherings. When the BIHS reached out to the USSBIA in 2005 about serving as a depository for the history of both ships, members, including Joe Booi, started giving items.

The skivvies represent a very private donation, not only in the function of the garment, but in the donation of an object that the survivor wore during their ‘baptism of saltwater.’ Booi’s last name and first initial are on the top of the garment. Even after 70 years, when one touches Booi’s skivvies oil and fuel comes off onto the holder’s hands. Besides serving as a visual testament to the ordeal, the object also affects the sense of smell. Oil and fuel from the sinking strikes the nose, giving a hint as to the conditions of the seas for the survivors in departing CVE-21 and seeking safety away from their stricken vessel.⁶¹⁵ Booi first sought to keep his skivvies as proof of his ordeal. Later, he brought these to reunions for others to see and gain access into the conditions decades ago. Finally, nearing the end of his life and battling cancer, Booi donated the skivvies to the BIHS and they became part of the larger USS Block Island Collection seeking to preserve the story of CVE-21.

UNIFORM

⁶¹⁵ Object Number 06.10.2007, USS Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, Rhode Island.

Donators of artifacts given to the BIHS include those of family members of veterans. Ken Vachon from New Hampshire donated his father's dress blues to the Society in 2007. His father, Kenneth E. Vachon, had passed away before this donation. This uniform was issued to his father when he joined the Navy, and his father retained the uniform after his time in the war serving on the *Block Island*. The uniform represented his service in a number of ways, including his ranking located on the sleeve. The slenderness of the uniform, demonstrated the original wearer of the piece was a young man, not fully grown into adulthood.⁶¹⁶

Vachon decided to include his father's uniform after hearing the news of an upcoming exhibit on the ships. In making the donation, Vachon noted the trimness of the uniform issued to his 17-year-old father.⁶¹⁷ However, Vachon's action represented more than allowing the display of this item from his family's past. He donated the uniform to be part of the USS Block Island Collection. He thus entrusted his deceased father's tangible connection to his military service to a larger collection of material related to the story of both FBIs. As Vachon wrote, "Our family would be pleased and honored to donate them, in his memory to the Block Island Museum."⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁶ Object Number 06.12.2007, USS Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, Rhode Island.

⁶¹⁷ Ken Vachon, interviewed by Ben Hruska, May 29, 2007, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁶¹⁸ Letter to the BIHS from Ken Vachon, March 28, 2007, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

The donation by a son of a veteran's tangible connection to his World War II service highlights the family members of a deceased veteran taking over the role of commemoration. The BIHS gave the Vachon family a chance to include the uniform in the already established collection related to the two vessels. The author Joseph Amato argues that these personnel items, such as a service uniform, are better suited for local history as opposed to those telling a national story. He writes, "Only local and regional history satisfies the need to remember the most intimate matters, the things of childhood."⁶¹⁹ As the younger Vachon grew up, this uniform symbolized his father's service in World War II and surviving the sinking. Thus, the adoption of the local history museum on Block Island by the veterans and their family members provided them with a platform for remembering the experiences for the two vessels named for the island community.

MONUMENT ONLINE

Jack Greer served on both vessels, and had friends involved in the USSBIA. Greer was always a busy man, and never much of a drinker, and as a result his friends never told him about the organization or the annual reunions. When Greer learned of the group, he was unable to travel due to poor legs and hips. However, never one to spend his life just sitting around he still sought a way to be involved in the organization.

In the late 1990s, Greer started what would become a major asset to the organization moving into the 21st Century, a website. In a sense, his creation was

⁶¹⁹ Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 3.

a monument that simulated the site of the sinking. The ocean's surface covers over seventy percent of the planet's surface, but a picture taken of it has no clues to its location. Greer's digital monument, of a website devoted to the group and the history of the vessels, mirrors this relationship. For a website is everywhere, but at the same time nowhere.

With the help of his son, Greer started the process of creating a website. His site would include a history of each vessel, include images from the war, and list the names of these comrades lost in the sinking. Dedicated, and launched, in 1999, the site represented a shift for the organization. It ushered in the use of computers for its members in recalling their service. It allowed World War II and Korean era veterans from the ships to explore aspects of the history from their own home. The digital narrative and images jarred old memories that had long been dormant to those members unaware of the existence of the USSBIA.

The shift in communication for the group was significant. In the immediate post war years communication between crewmembers was limited to close friendships with those met on-board. This expanded first in the 1960s with the reunions, and then exploded in the 1980s with reunions and *Chips*. The impact of the website was almost immediate. New members, children of veterans, and those interested in the history of CVEs in general, utilized this site. In 2000, the President of the USSBIA, Walter (Smiley) Burnette, wrote to the membership about the site, and the importance of expanding it. He wrote, "the Site belongs to all of us and we need to have all of our members search through their personal

photographs....for consideration to adding to the Website.”⁶²⁰ Lastly, it allowed for crewmembers, not aware of the USSBIA to discover the organization and become a member.

Interestingly, many of the discoveries of the website were not made by the former crewmembers, but by members of their family. Most of these family members were children and grandchildren, who as they investigated the history of the *Block Island* ship or any mention of their loved one’s service on the ships found the site, and thus a memorial to the ships was accessible from any computer at anytime. One such discovery was by a granddaughter of William Byrd Jr., a veteran for both *Block Islands*. Byrd had no idea about the group’s existence. His granddaughter purchased her grandfather a membership to the group and the recreated “Big Blue Book” as holiday gifts.⁶²¹

NEXT GENERATION

A shift in membership started in the 1990s. Instead of the group composed of just veterans and their spouses, family members started to join and attend the reunions. Children, grandchildren, and other young relations became active in the organization, which included the leadership of the organization. One example of this is Bill MacInnes and his wife Judy. Bill MacInnes is a veteran of the Vietnam War. His connection to the story of the FBI is through his uncle, Rev. Gordon MacInnes, who served as Chaplain on both vessels. Gordon was active in

⁶²⁰ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 15, No. 2, July 2000, 5.

⁶²¹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 24, No. 1, October 2010, 17.

attending the reunions the officers held, but never attended the USSBIA reunions. Pressed by his nephew Bill to attend, Gordon did not think anyone would remember him, an officer about twenty years older than the average enlisted man. However, Bill and Judy, once they started attending the reunions in 1994 found out that nearly all the crewmembers remembered Gordon, and welcomed Bill into the group with his connection through his uncle.⁶²²

Bill and Judy took over the role of editors of *Chips* in 2003, which marked a change in the focus of the newsletter. The periodical shifted to serve as a platform for veterans recalling events, stories, and recollections related to the ships.⁶²³ It also served as a conduit to the past for the generation of Americans with a connection to the FBI story but who were not actually veterans of World War II. These two aspects represent a fundamental shift for the organization, and once again transformed its role in the face of changing needs of its membership, which over time was made up of fewer and fewer veterans.

THANK YOU FOR ASKING

The new editors of *Chips* sought veterans for specific stories related to the FBI story, including the sinking and the rescue of POWS off of Formosa (now called Taiwan). For many of these veterans this was the first time they wrote a short narrative about their experience. Nearly 60 years after the war, these veterans were asked for their personal perspective on recalling the war. For many,

⁶²² Bill MacInnes, interviewed by Ben Hruska, May 24, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁶²³ Ibid.

this outlet represented the very first time they shared their experience outside the circle of fellow veterans. One such member was Arlie (Buster) Lapeyrolerie. He had attended every reunion with his wife since 1984; even his children came to the reunions. However, it was not until the late 2000s, nearly 65 years after the sinking that he ever talked about it with anyone outside of his fellow shipmates.⁶²⁴

One veteran, in his reply to *Chips* about his story, wrote “Thank you for asking.”⁶²⁵ This request for individual memoirs gave veterans a platform for not only writing about memories, but also to present these to the membership. The short memoirs written about the evacuation of POWs from Formosa in September of 1945 give a window on the range of individual reactions and memories surrounding this single event. One sailor recalled witnessing a POW from Scotland struggling up the ladder onboard ship, and refusing assistance, as he defiantly played the bagpipes that he retained since his capture. Others stated, after seeing the condition of the POWs, hating the Japanese for the first time.⁶²⁶ While these stories produced strong recollections for nearly all that experienced them, other individual memories and memoirs also surfaced in these new editions of *Chips*.

These memoirs on individual subjects produced a contested narrative of the war. This is especially true with powerful memories: the sinking and the

⁶²⁴ Judy MacInnes, email message to the author, June 8, 2010.

⁶²⁵ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2004, 4.

⁶²⁶ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 23, No. 3, October 2009, 4.

rescue of POWs from Formosa. Debates over the sinking include the number of torpedoes hit by CVE-21, the fate of their airmen flying above the scene without a place to land, and the timeframe of the events of abandoning ship and later rescue. The rescue operation of POWs from Formosa also produced conflicting memories, which the editors of *Chips* addressed in a special issue devoted to the event. They wrote, “The following memories by BI Members may have conflicting facts. It doesn’t matter-this is how they remember the rescue of the POWs at Formosa, September 1945.”⁶²⁷ These individual memoirs by veterans demonstrate the numerous points of view of the rescue of POWs, which produced differing memoirs. While a number of specific facts in the memoirs reflect the contested nature of recalling the experience, the overall collection reflects the collective memory of the group.

“ HE NEVER MENTIONED IT TO ME”

As *Chips* sought to expand the information on topics by seeking inquiries from veterans, like a two way street, inquiries came into *Chips*, many via email, from those seeking information about the past. Many of these inquiries were from relatives, especially children of deceased veterans, seeking information on their loved one’s service. They sought to better understand his experiences decades after the events, and even decades after the death of the family member. One such adult child, whose father died in 1974, inquired three decades after the death of his father. He wrote, “(I) never had a chance to sit and talk with him about what

⁶²⁷ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 23, No. 3, October 2009, 2.

he must have gone through. He never mentioned it to me.”⁶²⁸ The USSBIA provided information on the history of the ships, and on the activities their veterans would have experienced depending on their time served. However, other inquiries were submitted to *Chips* about deceased veterans, which produced memoirs from living veterans who knew and remembered the deceased veteran.

In this unique role, the USSBIA truly served as a conduit to the past for those born decades after the war seeking specific details on relatives. One such individual was Annie McGillicuddy, who in 2004 contacted the organization about her uncle, Bill Roddy, who was killed on the *USS Barr* on May 29, 1944. She discovered the USSBIA website, which included the digital memorial listing all those killed on the *Barr*. She wrote, “Just visited your fine website. It is very moving to see my late Uncle’s name, William A. Roddy.”⁶²⁹ She reported she know very little about him. As, “(i)t was too painful for my parents to talk about and now the next generation is anxious to know about him.”⁶³⁰ The USSBIA provided information on the events of May 29th relating to the *Barr* taking a torpedo while seeking to locate and destroy the cornered U-Boat. However, the group went another step further and placed a notice in *Chips* on this specific inquiry from a niece about her uncle she never knew.

⁶²⁸ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 20, No. 1, February 2006, 6.

⁶²⁹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2004, 2.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

Shipmate James “Ed” Ware contacted McGillicuddy and shared with her observations he made in his journal from the war about Roddy. This included that her uncle was a very religious person, and as a Catholic wore a medal of St. Christopher on his belt at all times. Over the course of a correspondence, Ware shared more personal information on the death of Roddy. He related that after the aft portion of the *Barr* took a massive torpedo explosion, his thoughts went to those shipmates assigned to this part of the ship, including her uncle Roddy.⁶³¹ The explosion was much more than a single torpedo strike, for the explosion striking the aft end of the vessel also detonated the *Barr*’s depth-charges that were designed to destroy submerged U-Boats. Two men were mortally wounded and three bodies were found, these five men were buried at sea the next day, May 30th 1944, which was also Memorial Day. However, the crew lost more than five men. The explosion was so violent it claimed 12 other victims, however, no trace of these men was ever found.⁶³² Roddy was one of those that simply disappeared. However, Ware in examining the wreckage in the vessel’s aft, saw something small and familiar. He wrote, “It was here that I found the medal. The medal was tucked away following the war.”⁶³³

This particular St. Christopher medal underwent a number of transformations in meaning. For a Catholic like Roddy, it represented a religious

⁶³¹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 20, No. 3, October 2006, 10.

⁶³² Bill MacInnes, email message to the author, June 12, 2011.

⁶³³ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 20, No. 3, October 2006, 10.

pendant for protecting travelers. After the torpedo explosion that killed Roddy, once Ware found it and preserved it, the meaning certainly changed. For Ware, it could have represented the lost shipmates, the events of May 29, 1944 in the Atlantic, or the individual death of Roddy. However, certainly Ware's meaning of the medal transformed in 2004, when he mailed it to McGillicuddy. As he wrote, "When I read about the niece of Bill's (Roddy) joining the USS Block Island Association, I wrote her and sent her the medal."⁶³⁴

SICK BAY

In the Navy, the term for the hospital is called 'sick bay'. When the modern newsletter started in 1983, members were informed of which members, both veterans and spouses, were ill and listed addresses for get well cards. As this generation aged, the listing in *Chips* of illnesses increased. Cards would come in from old shipmates, some of whom they knew personally since the war, others with whom they had served but only met decades later. When members passed away, letters of sympathy also came in. As was written in 2006 in *Chips*, "Sandy wrote a note to express the family's appreciation to all BI shipmates that contacted Al during his illness and kept him in their prayers."⁶³⁵ One son wrote, "Dad was so proud of his Navy service and your organization. He was so looking forward to attending the 2005 reunion and talked about it until the very end."⁶³⁶

⁶³⁴ Ibid.

⁶³⁵ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 20, No. 1, February 2006, 5.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 4.

KEEPING THE STORY ALIVE

As the anniversaries of the sinking took place, and reunions were held, over the years more and more veterans were dying. Notices of death were listed in the newsletter. These names would be read at the next reunion. Widows were active members of the group. They attended reunions and their membership dues were still paid and *Chips* received and read.

Widows wrote in their thanks for receiving *Chips* and the meaning of reading about the history of the vessels their husbands were a part of. One wrote, "I can't tell you how much the Chips means to me."⁶³⁷ Another, wrote, "Bless you all for keeping the Block Island two ships alive in our hearts by printing Chips."⁶³⁸ Letters of thanks did not only come from widows, but also from children of veterans. One son wrote, "Your efforts brought back a lot of memories of him, as well as providing details he never mentioned."⁶³⁹ Another, "Without you and the organization, I would not have known what my Dad had been through."⁶⁴⁰ In this role, the USSBIA's mission shifted in preserving the history of the group for the individual veteran themselves, who lived the experience, to provide a forum for collective memory for those related to the deceased veteran.

SINCERE SORROW

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶³⁸ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 2007, 16.

⁶³⁹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 20, No. 1, February 2006, 6.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

The website not only produced a platform for sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, to find information on the vessel on which their relatives served, it also provided information for family members of the enemy. An email came in from Bob Kastens, whose uncle Adolph Kastens was a crewmember on the German U-Boat, U-549, which fired the three torpedoes into CVE-21 and also an additional torpedo into the *USS Barr*. His uncle was killed, with the rest of the crew of U-549, when the *USS Elmore* successfully tracked and destroyed the U-Boat in a depth-charge attack. Bob Kastens' email is of interest for two reasons. First, it provides insight into the complicated alliances for German-Americans. Secondly, it demonstrates the sense of guilt, and not pride, that some family members feel toward their relation's service.

Bob Kastens' father, Henry, left Germany in 1930. However, two of his brothers remained, one served on the Russian front and was killed and the other, Adolph, was a member of U-549. Bob in his message to the group noted his service in the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam, and that his sister, who was conducting some family genealogy, found out about their uncle Adolph's death. Over the course of this research, he found the USSBIA website. Bob wrote, "I would like to express my sincere sorrow for the sailors lost on the *Block Island* and the *Barr*."⁶⁴¹ Bob's message highlights the conundrum for many Americans descended from recent immigrants from Europe. His father immigrated to the U.S., and then found his new country at war with his birth nation, a nation in

⁶⁴¹ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 22, No. 2, June 2008, 19.

which his brothers were serving in arms. However, from Bob Kastens' point of view, as a veteran himself of the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam, an expression of sorrow for these lost American sailors to a group of complete strangers via an email was required. This email was printed in *Chips* for the membership.

“EERIE FEELING”

The legacy of the sinking extended not only to the children and nieces and nephews of those veterans affected by the sinking, but also to the grandchildren. James Bates grandfather, William R. Guifoile, was part of the crew of CVE-21 and survived the sinking. In September of 2008, Bates was serving as a Lieutenant Commander of a Squadron of F-18 fighter jets stationed on the nuclear powered aircraft carrier the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, CVN-71. As the vessel was in route in the Atlantic to participate in Operation Enduring Freedom, it took an unexpected turn. Instead of cruising straight into the Mediterranean to utilize the Suez Canal, once the vessel neared the Azores Island it cruised south toward the Horn of Africa to enter its area of operation. This unique change in course presented Bates with an opportunity to visit the site of the “baptism by saltwater.”

Of the experience, Bates wrote, “It was an eerie feeling to stand on the flight deck of a modern aircraft carrier and think of the remains of CVE-21 and U-549 sitting on the bottom as we passed over.”⁶⁴² His thoughts centered on the experience of his grandfather at this location 64 years previously with the demise of CVE-21. However, as a member of the U.S. Navy serving his country, he also

⁶⁴² CDR J.S. “Goat Boy” Bates, email message to author, May 26, 2011.

considered others who experienced loss at the site, but were not of the U.S. Navy. As he wrote, “I also reflected on the crew of U-549 who are interned in their boat. They were sailors serving their country just like my Grandfather, but they gave the ultimate sacrifice.”⁶⁴³ This consideration in remembering the enemy represents a change in commemorating this saltwater-based location. With the retreat of the sinking into history, so to, does the anger toward the enemy decrease. As time advances, the young Germans manning the U-Boats change from those attacking Allied ships to that of young men serving their country just like those in the U.S. Navy.

The stories of both Bates and Kastens reveal the inclusion of the enemy in recalling the sinking of CVE-21. One in the form of an email, highlights the point of view of a U.S. Vietnam veteran expressing his sorrow over the loss of CVE-21 by U-549, a U-boat that his late uncle served on. The latter is an example of a grandson, while serving in the U.S. Navy, cruising over the site of the sinking. Bates, in reflecting on his grandfather’s experience, considers the young Germans who also died in the service of their country. Both of these stories reflect trans-generational commemoration, Kastens recalling an uncle he never knew, and Bates reflecting on the service of his deceased grandfather. The generations removed from World War II take over the collective memory of the sinking once their veteran passes away. When they recall their relative’s service, the anger toward the enemy diminishes.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Variations in remembering the story of the *USS Block Islands* demonstrate the diverse commemorative actions surrounding any particular topic of World War II. More specifically, the sinking of CVE-21 was a life-changing event, but the individual and collective efforts of those seeking to recall, reflect, and remember the action were hindered by the absence of a tangible land-based site to serve as a focal point. This lack of an easily identifiable site that could be visited is not unique to the CVE-21, as is seen in the service of many American veterans, including other Navy personnel and Army Air Corps units.⁶⁴⁴ However, while many veterans lack a tangible land-based location to reflect on their service, a sinking of a vessel was an event that men from hundreds of vessels throughout the war dealt with. Nearly two thousand people experienced the sinking of the CVE-21. Whether one of the 951 men in the water from CVE-21, or the four DEs with a compliment of nearly two hundred men, the loss of the 21 produced a searing memory. Like the ripples on a calm ocean, the reactions were diverse and long lasting.

This need to commemorate overcame the obstacle of having no fixed point for gathering. Like other American veterans from the war, including those of bomber and fighter squadrons, they invented unique ways of commemorating outside of the traditional central gathering point for the erection of a stone

⁶⁴⁴ This could include Marine units who invaded small isolated islands in the Pacific, massive sea battles between fleets on the open ocean, or the operations of fighter and bomber squadrons.

monument or hosting of a ceremonial event. These means of commemoration were complex and multiform, individual and collective. They included embracing a local history museum in order to anchor the artifacts related to their experiences. The commemoration transcended the individual veterans to include spouses, children, and grandchildren. As a result of different points of view while in the war, contradictions became evident, thus demonstrating the contested nature of remembering all conflicts. The differing means of commemorating just this small slice of the war hints to the major issues in remembering larger portions of it, such as that of fleets, entire navies, or even nations.

Remembrances include major tributes, such as the construction of another aircraft carrier, to small ones such as the self-commemoration in the production of a piece of art. Veterans marked their service with individual actions and also gathered collectively with those that experienced the sinking. These gatherings also change over time, from those of a handful of 30-year-old veterans in the 1960s meeting for a night, to hundreds gathering 40 years after the war. Lastly, the experiences has transcended the veterans themselves and become part of the family history of the veterans and local history of Block Island, RI. The heritage of the sinking of the 21 has expanded to include children and grandchildren seeking to remember, and thus reflect, on those “baptized by saltwater

CHAPTER 6

FINDING THEIR PLACE: ESCORT CARRIER VETERAN'S

SELF-COMMEMORATION

The experiences of serving in close quarters on a Navy vessel created familiarity among the crewmen. As part of a team at sea, these men trained, fought, ate, and slept in the same space. However, familiarity was not limited to humans. Whether on a relatively small Destroyer-Escort (DE) or the largest carrier, these men became familiar with the space they resided in for weeks at a time. Even if they did not visit every compartment, or did not understand how portions of the ship operated, this was their home while at sea. For those on larger vessels, this included sharing this space with men who they would never meet, for hundreds of men lived on board at any given time. A bond existed since they each understood the ship in a way no outside person could. Collectively these men knew their ship, and in an act of ownership they often invented a nickname for her. In the decades after the war, these men created multiform and complex ways of remembering their ships and the men they served with, even those they never formally met.

This concluding chapter argues that veterans of escort carriers collectively devised ways of self-commemoration. Many groups formed around all kinds of classes of ships; however, the methods employed by CVE veterans included a unique aspect. More than just simply commemorating one particular vessel, the groups sought methods to collectively remember the escort carriers. Fearing their

story was under represented in the national understanding of the war, these service members sought to bring attention to their classification of ship.

Veterans who served on the over seventy commissioned CVEs joined together to draw attention to the escort carriers who in their view had been overshadowed by their larger sister CVs. Similar to the way veterans from one ship gathered with those they did not ever know formally during the war, the veterans of escort carriers sought each other out in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The bond they shared was not from serving on the same ship, but rather, from their carriers being marginalized in the decades following the war. Seeing their classification of carrier overshadowed by the CVs on the national level, these veterans acted collectively. Starting in the 1980s, these CVE veterans developed methods of leaving behind testimonials to their class of carriers. These CVE based veterans groups, both those who served on individual ships and those representing CVEs as a whole, pursued methods of connecting their class of vessel to the national narrative of carriers and the U.S. Navy.

The historian Kristin Ann Hass addressed collective memory for both servicemen and civilians of the Vietnam War in *Carried to the Wall*. Hass argued that while an attempt was made to construct a single national monument that consolidated all the meanings of the war into a single location, individuals constructed their own memorials and acts of remembrance and brought these to the site of national meaning. As Hass wrote, “The restive memory of the war changed American public commemoration because the memory could not be expressed by or contained in Maya Lin’s powerful and suggestive design

alone.”⁶⁴⁵ Individuals filled with their own memories and meanings about the conflict manufactured their own memorials. Of these memorials, Hass writes, “These intensely individuated public memorials forge a richly textured memory of the war and its legacies.”⁶⁴⁶ While the Wall sought to produce a single national memorial, other individuals who experienced the war first-hand, as well as those who did not, also contributed to actively remembering the conflict. By the leaving of objects at the Wall, these individuals sought to memorialize the conflict in their own ways.

With regard to cultural memory, the scholars Suzanne Falgout, Lin Poyer, and Laurence M. Carucci, in their recent book *Memories of War: Micronesians in the Pacific War*, examine the means by which these indigenous inhabitants of Micronesia remember World War II. The group, composed of a diverse population representing a number of different languages in a range of Pacific Islands, experienced the war with waves of invasions from Japanese and American forces. The authors note the complex practice of passing on this cultural history through oral traditions, dance, and songs to those who did not experience the war firsthand. As they wrote, “(I)t is an ongoing process of social interaction and cultural creation through which people tell themselves, and others,

⁶⁴⁵ Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

stories about their past.”⁶⁴⁷ The authors emphasize that cultural memory in passing information on to future generations is multifaceted.

Moreover, the authors suggest the fragile nature of these forms of memory. They theorize this point by writing, “That is why we often hear the phrase “lest we forget” and why we raise markers, observe anniversaries of important events, and engage in other memorial activities.”⁶⁴⁸ They agree with the scholar Pierre Nora, when they note that if memory was not frail, sites of remembrance such as memorials and museums would not be needed. As Nora wrote, “We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them.”⁶⁴⁹ The author’s study, in drawing on the experience of the Micronesians, demonstrates the diversity of tactics utilized in preserving the memory for later generations who may have a very hard time understanding. Similarly, veterans who served on the CVEs sought to preserve their memories through diverse means so that future generations could know about and understand their experiences.

Finally, this chapter will include the use of collective memory in addressing the issue of mourning for individuals whose bodies were lost at sea. The chapter will analyze how veterans of three escort carriers sunk during the war with men onboard sought to commemorate not only their lost ship, but also the

⁶⁴⁷ Suzanne Falgout, Lin Poyer, and Laurence M. Carucci, *Memories of War: Micronesians in the Pacific War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 3.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁴⁹ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 12.

deaths of their fellow crewmembers. The Australian public historian Beth Gibbings addresses the issue of commemoration of those lost at sea. Gibbings's article, which focuses on the loss of the vessel the *SIEV X* while attempting to reach Australia with fleeing refugees, sets the theoretical stage for memorialization and mourning for those lost at sea. She wrote, "This story deals particularly with the question of how deaths can be remembered and mourned without bodies after a tragedy at sea."⁶⁵⁰ Furthermore, Gibbings argues that closure could be reached through imaginative means; the lack of the victim's bodies can be transcended. She writes, "The absence of bodies has not stood in the way of commemoration, but the status of the lives that were lost-both personally and symbolically-has been important in shaping the memorials."⁶⁵¹ With regard to veterans, for those who survive the loss of a ship, the call to memorialize their deceased comrades in arms and bring closure is just as important as for a tragedy on land. The collective memory of those who experienced loss on the seas can invent ways of filling the emotional void of not holding a funeral in a traditional sense.

COMMEMORATE CHALLENGE

In the epilogue of *Little Giants*, William Y'Blood wrote of the hulls that once served as escort carriers surviving cancellation of the classification of CVE. Their adapted use granted these hulls a few more years of service. Y'Blood wrote,

⁶⁵⁰ Beth Gibbings, "Remembering the SIEV X: Who Care for the Bodies of the Stateless, Lost at Sea?." *The Public Historian* Vol. 32 No. 1. (2010), 15.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

“Now the CVEs are just a memory, but to their crews that memory is still fresh. Each year men of the “jeeps” gather at various reunions to remember-to remember the kamikazes, the typhoons, the good COs, the bad COs, the good sailors, the bad sailors, and those they shared these times with.”⁶⁵² While it was not possible to commemorate the escort carriers with a floating example to serve as a platform of memory, other tactics and methods of remembrance were developed through individual and collective modes.

One of the oldest forms of commemorating the heritage of a ship was not the actual preservation of the vessel, but the rechristening of an additional vessel. The fighting heritage of the ship, and the men who waged war from her, was passed onto this second vessel. Thus, for the large CV classification of carriers, the loss of an individual vessel did not result in the termination of the heritage of the vessel. In fact, some of the large carriers held a name that linked them to a heritage stretching back to the founding of the Navy in 1775. The CV carriers, such as the *USS Hornet*, CV-8, and *USS Wasp*, CV-7, represented a link in the chain of heritage of nomenclature of the U.S. Navy. Both these ships were lost due to Japanese submarine attacks in 1942. The year 1943 saw the re-commissioning of two more CVs to replace them, these being the *USS Hornet*, CV-12 and *USS Wasp*, CV-18.⁶⁵³ Thus, when a large CV sank in World War II the lost vessel retained the possibility of memorialization not available to the

⁶⁵² Ibid., 416.

⁶⁵³ Polmar, *Aircraft Carriers*, 732.

escort carriers, that of the rechristening of another vessel to carry on the tradition.⁶⁵⁴

The first *USS Wasp*, purchased as a merchant schooner by the U.S. Navy in 1775, entered service the following year, along with the first *USS Hornet*, in the war against the British Navy.⁶⁵⁵ Subsequent U.S. Navy ships held the name and retained the heritage of the first *Wasp* fighting in the Revolutionary War. With the loss of *USS Wasp*, CV-7, the Navy immediately made plans to continue this proud name. Fletcher Pratt, a naval commentator, wrote of this transfer of heritage while the war was still waging. He wrote, “So the *Wasp* is gone, and now there is a new *Wasp* under construction.”⁶⁵⁶ He stressed the heritage and the transference of meaning from the old *Wasp* to the new. He concluded with, “She will be a dangerous ship, but more dangerous to the enemy than to those aboard, and those who served on the old *Wasp* are eager to be on the new.”⁶⁵⁷ With the one unique exception of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, the escort carrier sailors who lost their vessel as a result of a sinking during the war took up the duty of preserving the heritage that the Navy neglected. While the Navy can officially mark the loss of a vessel with a replacement, for the men who experienced the violence

⁶⁵⁴ The one and only exception being of course *USS Block Island*, CVE-106.

⁶⁵⁵ Fletcher Pratt, *The Navy's War*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1943), 184.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

firsthand, dealing with the loss is much more personal. While the Navy lost a vessel, they lost fellow crewmembers.

The scholar Dominick LaCapra, in *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, addressed the emotional impact victims undergo from experiencing massive mental trauma. Whereas LaCapra explored this notion while dealing with civilians who experienced the Holocaust, his research is applicable to victims of sinkings. These sailors underwent a series of mental and physical strains, including the realization that their ship was in danger, followed by attempts to get off the ship, and finally, if successful, finding themselves adrift at sea. About experiences such as these LaCapra wrote, “Especially for victims, trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question to the point of shattering it.”⁶⁵⁸ For those who survived the loss of escort carriers on the high seas, massive emotional damage was inflicted. As seen with the loss of CVE-21, veterans invented their own forms of coping. The same is true for the other sailors who abandoned ship and had their CVE sink below them.

PHILIPPINE PILGRIMAGE

The most famous engagement of World War II in which escort carriers took part was the Battle of Samar on October 25, 1944. In the Philippine Sea, a task force named Taffy 3, composed of six escort carriers and other smaller vessels, was taken by surprise by a massive Japanese fleet that included four

⁶⁵⁸ LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 9.

battleships, six heavy cruisers, and eleven destroyers. The lightly armored CVEs faced an amazing amount of firepower from Japanese fleet's heavy guns, and they bravely fought a retreating battle. Planes from the CVEs attacked the Japanese vessels while the CVEs attempted to stay out of range of the massive Japanese guns. The crews of the CVEs, and of the other vessels of Taffy 3, showed amazing courage, which was chronicled by the historian Samuel Eliot Morison, noted in volume XII of his history of the Navy. He wrote, "In no engagement of its entire history has the United States Navy shown more gallantry, guts and gumption that in those two morning hours between 0730 and 930 off Samar."⁶⁵⁹ This battle came with major costs, including the loss of two CVEs. The *USS St. Lo*, CVE-63, was sunk by a single kamikaze hit while the *USS Gambier Bay*, CVE-73, earned a unique footnote in naval history. With her thinly armored hull, the massive Japanese shells tore the vessel apart, and she became the only carrier lost to naval gunfire during the entire war.

While the majority of the crew of the *Gambier Bay* abandoned ship and survived, they floated for two days in shark-infested waters. The loss of their ship and crewmembers had a massive emotional impact. One veteran recalled how he made a pledge to himself while in the water watching his stricken vessel. He wrote, "While swimming away from my sinking ship, I made a vow to some day return to the site where the USS Gambier Bay lies at the bottom of the Philippine

⁶⁵⁹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume XII: Leyte, June 1944-January 1945*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1963), 275.

Trench. This trip would be to honor our Killed in Action with a religious and military memorial service.”⁶⁶⁰ Where the circumstances of the battle did not permit a funeral for those fellow crewmembers who died on board, in the decades after the war the men of the *Gambier Bay* mobilized in a collective act of holding a fitting memorial. While it took over thirty years to come to fruition, this action of returning to the site of the sinking demonstrates the determination of CVE veterans in remember their lost comrades.

In 1968, a veterans group of *Gambier Bay* servicemen formed in the house of a former crewmember, and the first official reunion took place the following year in St. Louis. A core goal of the group was to complete the pilgrimage to the site of the sinking, to visit the site where their ship slipped under the waters, and to pay tribute to their dead comrades entombed inside. Or as one organizer wrote, “The pledge was to return to bury the dead with prayers to God and their souls and to afford a military burial with full honors.”⁶⁶¹ Over the course of reunions, the plans were developed for the visitation to the location of the sinking on the anniversary of the loss.

In October of 1977, the return trip to the Philippines took place. While their trip included two weeks of events, and many visits to sites of American and Filipino military victory over the Japanese, the reason for coming was the funeral for lost shipmates thirty-three years after their deaths. The trip could not have

⁶⁶⁰ Tony Potochniak, *Return to the Philippines* (USS Gambier Bay Association, 2005), 1.

⁶⁶¹ Potochniak, *Return to the Philippines*, 8.

taken place without the support of a driven personality, that of the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos. He aided in numerous ways, but the most critical was the loaning of his personal yacht to visit the sinking site off the island of Samar. Marcos' gift allowed the roughly 100 people in attendance to be on a single vessel for the service. On October 25, 1977, the ship, loaded with veterans, family members, and a Filipino honor guard, came to rest on the site of the sinking for the ceremony. Silence enveloped the vessel when the engines quieted, and the ocean's large swells rocked the yacht full of people preparing for the service. The silence was broken by a former crewmember. He spoke aloud: "They're telling us that they know we're here and they appreciate that we have come to keep our vow. Now they can rest in peace. They're kicking up the sea from below."⁶⁶²

The former Chaplain of the *Gambier Bay* led the service, which included reciting the Lord's Prayer and singing religious hymns. The names of all those lost were read aloud, after which two events occurred to mark the death of each individual sailor. First, a female spouse from the veterans group placed a red carnation in the water, and second, one member of the Filipino Honor Guard, dressed in white, fired his rifle. These actions mirrored traditional military funerals that transpire on land, whether the family members have the deceased body or not. However, an additional component of the memorial service reflected

⁶⁶² Ibid., 29.

an adaptation made for holding a service for crewmembers who rested in a ship almost seven miles below them in the Philippine trench.

Before the service, a round capsule was filled with offerings. On the sides of the metal tube was the name of the ship, "USS Gambier Bay." Items to be transported down by the capsule included personal objects from shipmates and family members. American flags were also given by CVE-73 crewmembers' veterans' organizations from the States, including the Disabled American Veterans Chapter 60 of Binghamton, New York. Also, in a symbol of the alliance between the U.S. and Filipinos during the war, an American and a Filipino flag were folded together and sealed into the capsule with the other objects before being dropped over board and onto the site of whatever remained of the *Gambier Bay*.

Before concluding, the service allowed for individual veterans to speak of their personal reflections. One veteran stood up and noted that 33 years ago on this very day, on this very spot, he lost his best friend. His short account noted that while on this spot his friend lost his life, they were finally reunited by him returning to the site of the sinking. He also wanted his friend to know that he was not forgotten, that he still lived in his memory. He said to those gathered, "We want you to know Joe we still remember you."⁶⁶³ On this fluid body of water, the ceremony included the placing of a wreath in remembrance of the shipmates lost on this site. One veteran wrote of the meaning of returning to the site. He wrote,

⁶⁶³ Barrett Tillman, interviewed by Ben Hruska, June 9, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

“A sacred vow was kept. The men of the Gambier Bay and VC-10, who sleep within her hull, can now rest in peace.”⁶⁶⁴

An additional sinking of a CVE in the Pacific was memorialized in an official manner by the U.S. Navy and in a grassroots method by her crewmembers. The *USS Liscome Bay*, CVE-56, sank on November 24, 1943, the result of a horrific internal explosion in the bomb magazine caused by a single Japanese torpedo. Of the total crew of 916 men, only 272 survived the event. 53 officers and 591 enlisted men were killed as the vessel exploded and subsequently sank.

The U.S. Navy remembered one individual onboard whose life was lost, Doris Miller, an African-American who served on the ship in a non-combat role.⁶⁶⁵ Miller’s body, like that of the vast majority of the victims, was never recovered. Before being assigned to the doomed escort carrier as a Ship’s Cook Third Class, Miller was a crewmember of the *USS West Virginia*, BB- 48. On the morning of December 7, 1941, Miller was collecting laundry when the Japanese attack occurred. Over the course of the attack, Miller, with no training in handling heavy weapons, bravely manned a Browning .50 caliber anti-aircraft gun and

⁶⁶⁴ Potochniak, *Return to the Philippines*, 35.

⁶⁶⁵ At the start of the war African-Americans in the U.S. Navy were limited to the positions of Mess Attendants. As the war advanced, however, small steps were made to improve African Americans status in the opening up of other enlisted positions and in 1944 the service accepting the first African-Americans as commissioned officers into the branch of the service.

fired at the enemy aircraft until he ran out of bullets. For his actions in defending his ship, he received the Navy Cross.

His family commemorated Miller's life in a host of ways. On December 7, 1943, his parents were informed of his death two years to the day after Miller bravely fought with a weapon for which he had not been trained. The family conducted a memorial service in April of 1944. In 1947, the Doris Miller Foundation was formed and initiated the process of giving awards recognizing those individuals and groups aiding in improving race relations. Three decades after his death an official memorial from the U.S. Navy occurred. While the Navy had a long history of re-christening lost vessels due to enemy action, this policy did not apply to the escort carriers.⁶⁶⁶ While the Navy did not re-christen a *Liscome Bay* of any classification of vessel, it did name a vessel that marked the death of Doris Miller. In 1973, the U.S. Navy commissioned the *USS Miller*, FF-1091, which was a Knox-class frigate. It served as a floating testament to Miller, who won the Navy Cross at Pearl Harbor and gave his life serving on CVE-56.

While the U.S. Navy commemorated the life of Miller with a frigate, the men who survived the massive explosion of CVE-56 selected a grassroots method of remembering their lost vessel. These veterans' commemorative reactions were rather limited in comparison with others who also experienced the loss of CVE due to sinking. This is the result of two factors. First, the ship was lost on its very

⁶⁶⁶ The one exception of re-christening a new CVE to replace a lost escort carrier took place the next year with the *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, replacing the stricken CVE-21.

first mission. Thus, the traditional turnover of multiple crews serving on a single vessel never took place. Secondly, due to the horrific nature of the internal explosion, only 272 survived out of the crew of 916 men.⁶⁶⁷ Both these factors resulted in a relatively small number of men who possessed a connection to the sinking.

These survivors seeking to remember their lost ship and crewmembers selected the tactic of the dedication of a memorial plaque at the National Museum of the Pacific War. Their experience took place in the Pacific theater of operations, where thousands of American service members died. The National Museum of the Pacific War is located in Fredericksburg, Texas, the location of the boyhood home of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, who was in charge of all Naval operations in the Pacific during the war. The museum has become a location for Navy veterans to remember their service. Its mission statement highlights its role in, “perpetuating the memory of the Pacific Theater of WWII in order that the sacrifices of those who contributed to our victory may never be forgotten.”⁶⁶⁸

This institution houses exhibitions on many aspects of the U.S. military Pacific experience in World War II, including the island hopping campaigns, the role of submarines, and naval aviation. In addition, veterans are able to purchase and dedicate plaques that are located in an outside courtyard. Plaques honor ships,

⁶⁶⁷ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 298.

⁶⁶⁸ “Home,” National Museum of the Pacific War, accessed on February 7, 2012, <http://www.pacificwarmuseum.org/Index.asp>.

individual service members, and land units of the Marines and Army. The Liscome Bay Association, made up of CVE-56 veterans, selected this method in remembering their sinking. Their plaque includes an image of their former ship. The top of the plaque states, “Dedicated to the officers and men of the Liscome Bay and Squadron VC-39 who placed their lives in harm’s way in the name of freedom.”⁶⁶⁹ It concludes with, “You are not forgotten.”⁶⁷⁰ In this courtyard, in which individuals and groups are granted the ability to memorialize any aspect of the Pacific war of their choosing, the men of CVE-56 collectively marked the sinking and lost comrades.

The men of the Liscome Bay and Gambier Bay devised methods of mourning their lost crewmembers. The veterans that survived the sinkings in the decades after the war felt a pressing need for closure with the experience. Both groups honored their deceased comrades, one in the form of a funeral held at the site of the sinking and the other with the dedication of a plaque. Both methods illustrate the importance to these CVEs veterans of attempting to find closure concerning the violent loss of their ship.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF CVEs

These actions in remembering the sinking of a CVE, while certainly extraordinary in nature, are characteristic of efforts to commemorate the escort

⁶⁶⁹ “Search Memorial Plaques,” National Museum of the Pacific War, accessed on February 7, 2012, <http://www.pacificwarmuseum.org/SearchPlaques.asp?LastLetter=l>.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

carriers before the 1990s. The efforts used in commemorating the CVEs were as fractured as the veterans' groups, and thus their memories centered on individual ships. This splintered memory is illustrated by the fact that of the eight-one escort carriers commissioned by the U.S. Navy before the war, by the mid 1980s seventy-five veterans groups had been formed consisting of those who served on a single escort carrier. These groups were only concerned with their ship and shipmates. While some did seek greater recognition of CVEs in general, this was accomplished while also noting their individual experience. Their collective memory surrounding all who experienced life on a CVE was just budding. This fracturing of memory occurred even in relation to a single ship, as diverse shipboard populations commemorated the experience of their group alone, rather than that of all the crewmembers.

As part of their mission to seek out the enemy, CVEs were assigned an air-group. Made up of both officers and enlisted service members, these squadrons were moved onto and off of vessels with regularity. Therefore, those who served in a squadron for any length of time could be based on a number of ships and land air bases. While sailor's collective memory centered on the ships they served on, these squadron members focused on the one consistent factor during the war, the men that made up their group.⁶⁷¹

An early example of these groups is the former officers of VC-55. During World War II, this squadron served on a number of vessels, including the *USS*

⁶⁷¹ Denny Moller, interviewed by Ben Hruska, May 30, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

Block Island, CVE-21. The reunion of this squadron demonstrates the division during the war between officers and enlisted service members. All the reunions consisted of former officers and their spouses. The first meeting took place in the 1960s and was hosted in Chicago. Gatherings lasted for 3-4 days, consisted of 20-30 former officers and many spouses, and were held every three years. However, when members who attended regularly started passing away, in the 1980s the meetings increased to every two years. However, with most of the members deceased by 2000, the reunions were cancelled. Long time attendee, and former pilot Denny Moller, is only aware today of four officers with any connection to VC-55 who are still alive.⁶⁷²

The urge to remember World War II initiated the rapid expansion of reunion based groups formed around the veterans' experiences on a particular escort carrier. This process was fueled in part by most veterans reaching retirement age. While most held relatively small gatherings in comparison with the Gambier Bay Association and the USSBIA, these groups completed the same tasks. Annual reunions were organized and held. However, while the USSBIA expanded in scope and size with every reunion, most of these groups leveled off and even declined in number by the early 1990s. These groups underwent a reorientation with regard to the formation and preservation of memory as they reconsidered who shared their collective experience. With gatherings getting smaller and smaller, the concept developed of creating an umbrella organization

⁶⁷² Ibid.

open to any CVE veteran. Thus, the fractured memory of the collective experience of the crewmembers of the CVEs started to coalesce. While many of the stronger CVE based groups retained their own reunions, their members also joined and attended the ECSAA annual meetings where the effort to construct one group around all CVE memories commenced.

This organization, called the Escort Carrier Sailors and Airmen Association, Inc. (ECSAA), was formed 1991 and held its first reunion in 1991. Membership was open to all veterans of CVEs or any air group that served on a CVE. This included service members from World War II and the Korean era as such openness allowed for larger meetings. With fewer and fewer veterans able to attend reunions of groups based on individual CVEs, the ECSAA created a space for veterans to gather with others who served on the same class of vessel. While veterans of specific ships continued to meet and commemorate their experiences, this group's gatherings had a different purpose. Collectively they met to perpetuate the memory of the CVEs.

One advantage of the ECSAA was its benefit for smaller CVE ship-based reunion groups. These groups, with gatherings that were relatively small compared to other conference functions at hotels, struggled in the duties of lining up lodging contracts, finding tours to take, and obtaining discounts that larger groups acquired because of their size. One such group was formed around the *USS Sangamon*, CVE-26. As an organization that did not get off the ground until the 1980s, its leadership confronted the annual challenge of an organization with a small number of attendees coming to the annual meeting. CVE-26 crewmember

Ralph Magerburth stated that combining with the ECSAA in the early 1990s made institutional sense. It formed what he termed a “backbone.”⁶⁷³ The ECSAA’s Board of Directors, made up of members from a number of CVEs, could focus on the next year’s annual meeting. Also, the added benefit of nearly all the CVE based groups joining increased the size of the annual meeting, resulting in discounts in lining up host cities, tours, and hotels. These logistical issues aside, these meetings allowed for these veterans to focus on the group’s mission, that of not seeking the commemoration of a single vessel, but that of their underrepresented class of vessel.

More importantly, in terms of goals, this consolidation of memory was shaped out of a unifying mission. This group sought to bestir the national memory of carriers. These members felt their entire class of vessel, not just the one on which they individually served, was excluded from the term “World War II carrier” and lobbied for inclusion in the national narrative of the naval war. They developed methods of bridging the gap between the national understanding of World War II carriers and the experience of the CVEs. The ECSAA challenged the notion of the remembrance of the large CVs as the only vessels that mattered in World War II.

This mission became evident at one of their first reunions held in 1996 in Charleston, SC. Gatherings took place over Labor Day and the highlight of this

⁶⁷³ Roger Magerkurth, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 17, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

reunion was visiting a floating platform of memory, the *USS Yorktown*, CV-10.⁶⁷⁴ Beyond visiting this large carrier, one group of sailors from the ECSAA sought to make a donation to the curator that ran the ship's museum, the Patriots Point: Home of the USS Yorktown. Crewmembers of *USS Bogue*, CVE-9, made donations to the museum of items commemorating their wartime experience. Donated objects included the ship's bell, which was saved before decommissioning and scrapping, a model built of the ship, and other items related to the service of this CVE. In making this donation, the personnel from CVE-9 not only sought out an institution to preserve these artifacts into perpetuity, but also to shape what visitors to this platform of memory would be exposed to on their visit.

The newsletter of the ECSAA fully supported the efforts of the veterans of CVE-9 in drawing attention to the larger role of escort carriers. It asked all members who were on the tour of the ship to attend the program in which these items would be transferred from the domain of these veterans to that of the museum. The urgency evident in the newsletter's statement follows the theme of the need to right the historic wrong of the underrepresentation of the CVEs. It stated, "All attendees are urged to make this trip and extend your congratulations to our CVE ship and squadron mates from USS Bogue for a job well done."⁶⁷⁵ It continued, "We must support our own-the rest of the country seems not to know

⁶⁷⁴ Clyde Smith, "Now's the time to make reunion reservations," *The CVE 'Piper'*, May 1996, 1.

⁶⁷⁵ Clyde Smith, "Ship memorabilia donated," *The CVE 'Piper'*, May 1996, 2.

or not to care about the cost we all paid for the freedom we all enjoy today.”⁶⁷⁶ By making this donation, the collective memory of CVE veterans, with objects serving as testaments to their ship, was bestowed onto a floating platform of memory devoted to preserving a World War II era CV.

CONSTRUCTING MEMORIALS

The anthropologist Nicholas J. Saunders, in his study of memory and World War I, wrote of the holistic approach individual veterans employed in dealing with trauma from the war. Utilizing objects from the war, such as shells, bullets, and uniforms, veterans constructed memorials to their pain and to lost comrades. Some of these objects required constant attention, such as memorials made of brass shells, which quickly tarnished. Saunders paid attention to this fact of the ritual of cleaning the brass. He wrote, “Perhaps reinforced by the sensory dimension of the smell of brass polish, cleaning these objects may have been transformed from a banal chore to a sacred act, bridging the gap between the living and the dead.”⁶⁷⁷ The hours spent in constructing and maintaining these memorials provided veterans an outlet for dealing with their wartime experiences.

For naval veterans, the construction of personal memorials held the potential for bridging the gap between their wartime service and their post war lives. Once out of the service and residing on land, building models of their ships not only served as a reminder of their service, but also aided in producing a non-

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁷ Nicholas J. Saunders, *Matters of Conflict*, 15.

verbal summation of their time in the Navy for those closest to them. The models provided a window into their individual experience. However, for the veterans of CVEs, the construction of models of their ships also served as a testament to their forgotten class of carriers.

Joe Macchia served on the escort carrier the *USS Card*, CVE-11. His involvement in the heritage of his ship is extensive. He organized the first reunion for crewmembers of the *Card*. In speaking of ways of remembering the *Card* he first talked about building a model.⁶⁷⁸ A model company in the 1980s issued a 1/700 scale of the escort carrier *USS Bogue*, CVE-9. This particular ship was one of eleven of the first series of CVEs, also called the Bogue class. The veterans who served on a Bogue class of CVE, such as the *Card* and the first *Block Island*, were granted a chance to reconstruct their wartime ship. Each model was detailed with individual plastic pieces including antiaircraft guns and individual aircraft. The model builder was given a great deal of control with the selection of which number to place on the hull of the CVE, which could be changed to fit their individual vessel. Also, builders controlled the number of planes on the flight deck, and could choose the color and paint schemes of the ship. The one major irony of this self-memorial construction by individual CVE crewmembers was the company that manufactured the model kit was the Tamiya company of Japan.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁸ Joe Macchia, interviewed by Ben Hruska, October 17, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

⁶⁷⁹ “CVE-9 Bogue USN Escort Carrier: Tamiya 1/700,” Welcome to SMML online, accessed December 7, 2011, <http://smmlonline.com/reviews/models/bogue/bogue.html>.

While crewmembers could spend hours piecing together a testament to their past service, the plastic components making up the memorial were made by their former enemy.

These models of escort carriers played a role beyond memorializing by individual crewmembers of CVEs. The ECSAA website proudly boasts that eight museums devoted to maritime history host exhibitions that include display models of escort carriers. Three of these institutions are large CV vessels converted into floating museums. The *USS Lexington*, *USS Midway* and the *USS Hornet* all contain models of their smaller sister classification of aircraft carriers.⁶⁸⁰ In the many roles these floating platforms of memory take on, including exhibitions, public programs, and addressing the individual vessels' entire career in the U.S. Navy, these CVs also display models of their forgotten small sister carriers. In this role, these floating platforms of memory also include plastic memorials that give some credence to the 71 escort carriers that served alongside the CVs in the U.S. Navy's victory in World War II.

The symbolic power of ships for World War II naval veterans was not a new phenomenon. For millennia, those cultures that retained strong connections to maritime exploration and trade utilized ships as symbolic metaphors. As the archeologist Chris Ballard wrote, "Representations of boats appear in rituals associated with transitions in the lives of individuals, such as initiation, marriage,

⁶⁸⁰ "Escort Carrier Display," ECSAA Website, accessed December 7, 2011, <http://www.escortcarriers.com/museums.html>.

and death.”⁶⁸¹ In his comparative study in examining the rock art of the maritime cultures of the Scandinavian Bronze-Age and the same period for Southeast Asia, Ballard argued that the symbolic power of ships was multiform. He wrote that a ship was the “expression(s) of corporate identity and communal unity, and a critical symbol in rituals that mark major transitions in the lifecycle.”⁶⁸²

Depictions of ships in rock art held symbolic power. They transcended both regions of the world and centuries of time in denoting major events that called for preservation through works of art. In the twentieth century, escort carrier veterans harnessed this long tradition of preservation, and thus maintained their wartime experiences for future remembrance.

USS St. Lo, CVE-63, was sunk in the same action that led to the demise of the escort carrier *USS Gambier Bay*. Where the *Gambier Bay* sank as the result of naval gunfire at the Battle of Samar, *St. Lo* took a direct hit from a bomb-loaded kamikaze. The impact into the flight deck ignited a fire that initiated further explosions and fires that claimed the life of the vessel. Her men abandoned ship in the same waters as those of the *Gambier Bay* sailors on October 25, 1944.⁶⁸³

⁶⁸¹ Chris Ballard, et al., “The ship as symbol in the prehistory of Scandinavia and Southeast Asia,” *World Archeology* Vol. 35, No. 3 (2003): 390.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 390.

⁶⁸³ Hornfischer, *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*, 352-4.

Veterans of the *St. Lo* started the process of holding reunions in the early 1980s.⁶⁸⁴ In seeking to construct a testament to their lost ship and crewmembers, the Board of Directors of the *USS St. Lo* Association at their 1989 annual meeting voted for an investigation into the commission of a painting of their vessel. A commission was given to the naval artist Richard C. Moore, who completed the artwork by the time of the 1990 annual meeting. Moore had personal contact with forty people who experienced the kamikaze attack and subsequent sinking. He titled his work “The End of a Fighting Ship: The Last Moments of the USS *St. Lo*.”⁶⁸⁵ The work showed the CVE with black smoke billowing into a Pacific sky. While men are seen sliding down lines on the bow, an explosion is rocking the aft portion of the ship. This painting was a testament not only to the crewmen and vessel lost as a result of the sinking, but also to the veterans who survived this trial.

For the veterans, this artwork showing the demise of their ship symbolized a number of themes. These included their wartime experience on their particular CVE. Like the rock art from hundreds of years before, it also symbolized lifecycles. It functioned as a testament to the fighting death of both the ship and the men who died defending her in the Battle of Samar. However, the selection for the display of the piece of art also needs consideration. The painting depicting

⁶⁸⁴ “Ship History,” USS *St. Lo* Association, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://www.usstlo.com/contentPage.cfm?ID=455>.

⁶⁸⁵ “The End of a Fighting Ship,” USS *St. Lo* Association, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://www.usstlo.com/contentPage.cfm?ID=414>.

the fighting death of the *St. Lo* was donated to the National Museum of Naval Aviation located in Pensacola, Florida.⁶⁸⁶ This gift of art, which serves as a testament to the *St. Lo*, demonstrates these particular CVE veterans' tactics in seeking to save their ship and experience from the oblivion of forgotten actions of mankind. An institution dedicated to preserving the greater scope of U.S. naval aviation was selected to retain and preserve this testament to their loss. Collectively, the veterans of CVE-63 produced a visual testament to their sinking and then located an institution that would house it into perpetuity.

The construction of memorials was not limited to private individuals building plastic models of their former vessels or the commissioning of a work of art. Collective efforts took place in commemorating not a specific carrier, but all of them that spanned the technological gulf from the pioneer *USS Langley*, CV-1, to the modern nuclear-powered *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, CVN-71. This concept of memorializing all carriers, not just singling out one, developed in the early 1990s and led to the formation of the organization called the Aircraft Carrier Memorial Association.⁶⁸⁷ The movement to remember collectively, in the form of a stone monument, germinated when many of the crewmembers of the early carriers began dying in large numbers. This, of course, included all the World War II era service members, whether they served on CVs, CVLs, or CVEs. No

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁷ Jeanne F. Brooks, "Carrier Sailors of Past Mark Dedication: Memorial on Harbor Drive Honors Seagoing Veterans," *San Diego Tribune*, September 7, 1996, 9.

matter which specific carrier they served on, the veterans recognized that only 5 of the 99 vessels commissioned during the war remained. Very little tangible material existed to serve as a testament to their carrier's existence. Thus, this Association was dedicated to the collective effort to leave behind a stone monument to all carriers and to the former crewmembers who were dying at an increasing rate.

The Naval Aircraft Carrier Memorial is located in San Diego. The site, on the waterfront between the Navy Pier and G Street, has symbolic meaning for crewmembers of these ships. This space overlooks the homeport of the modern day Pacific fleet, which also has been the center of carrier aviation from the beginning. Also, near the Navy Pier, many of the 164 carriers named at the stone memorial, while in service, docked nearby and off loaded crewmembers heading home. Combined, these two aspects added meaning to this particular space. As a promotional brochure for the site noted, "From its vantage point, visitors can gaze across San Diego Bay and see today's mighty flattops at North Island, preparing for future missions in support of peace and freedom all over the world."⁶⁸⁸ While the vast majority of decommissioned carriers listed on the stone memorial no longer existed to serve as a testament to the veterans, this marker's location linked these veterans' past experience with the modern day heritage of carrier operations.

The memorial itself consists of three parts. First, the black stone obelisk standing nine feet in height lists all the carriers commissioned by the U.S. Navy,

⁶⁸⁸ "Naval Aircraft Carrier Memorial," from brochure of Cabrillo Lighthouse Tours of San Diego, CA, May 29, 2003, 3.

from the first *USS Langley*, CV-1, to the modern day *USS Harry S. Truman*, CVN-75.⁶⁸⁹ Adding a human component to the memorial are two bronze sculptures, one of a sailor standing with his sea bag, and the other a naval aviator who is on one knee, holding his helmet. While three sides of the obelisk list the individual carriers, text marking the meaning of the carriers fills the fourth. In part, it states, “Powered by the human soul, these ships changed the course of history.”⁶⁹⁰

The dedication of the final part of the memorial, the bronze naval aviator, took place in September 1996. In attendance was John Finn, who won the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions on the ground during the attack on Pearl Harbor and later served on the *USS Hancock*, CV-19. Besides attending the dedication, Finn donated money for the \$135,000 memorial. A reporter asked Finn about the meaning of the memorial. He stated, “It’s easy for guys to sit around in a bar and tell lies.”⁶⁹¹ The talk Finn spoke of, that of veterans speaking of their wartime experiences in expanded feats of daring, was in danger due to deaths of veterans. As he noted, “All the officers and men I knew and served with

⁶⁸⁹ At the dedication, all 164 carriers that served in the U.S. Navy were listed, ranging from the first *USS Langley*, CV-1 to the nuclear-powered *USS Harry Truman*, CVN-75. Subsequent commissioned carriers will be added to the memorial. For example, in 2003 the Navy commissioned *USS Ronald Reagan*, CVN-76.

⁶⁹⁰ “Aircraft Carrier Memorial,” USS Shipley Bay, CVE-85, accessed on February 1, 2012, <http://www.shipleybay.com/memorialacc.htm>.

⁶⁹¹ Jeanne F. Brooks, “Carrier Sailors of Past Mark Dedication: Memorial on Harbor Drive Honors Seagoing Veterans,” *San Diego Tribune*, September 7, 1996, 9.

are gone like a covey of quail.”⁶⁹² What died with this generation of veterans was the oral method of remembering what the carriers had accomplished. However, the memorial to the carriers transcended the deaths of both the ships it honored and the rapidly decreasing number of crewmen who served on them. As Finn stated, “A person comes along and looks at this and maybe you don’t even give a dang. But maybe you read the words.”⁶⁹³

The memorial represents a summary constructed to symbolize all the aircraft carriers ever commissioned by the U.S. Navy. The anthropologist Fabio Gygi theorized on this topic in writing about monuments to the Great War. He wrote, “To work, they must reduce the complex outside world into some kind of order.”⁶⁹⁴ The Naval Aircraft Carrier Monument, with an obelisk, and statue of a sailor and pilot, accomplished this goal of reducing the experiences of 164 carriers into a single space. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Gygi suggests that an additional benefit of a monument is that it outlives those who dedicate it. He wrote, “The fact that material things remain, that they outlive their creators and possessors seems to prolong the life of those they actually leave behind.”⁶⁹⁵ For World War II veterans such as Finn, providing financial support

⁶⁹² Ibid.

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ Fabio Gygi, “Shattered Experiences-Recycled Relics: Strategies of representation and the legacy of the Great War,” in *Matters of Conflict: Material culture, memory, and the First World War*, ed. Nickolas J. Saunders et. Al. (London: Routledge, 2004), 73.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

for the construction of the monument, and attending the dedication of the memorial gave him a chance to leave a marker behind. Their ships were gone, but not their memories. In addition, this space connected those carriers, and the crews that served on them, with the modern day carrier operations of the U.S. Navy as well as with the larger carrier heritage of the Navy. Lastly, in the form of stone it created a space to which these sailors could claim a link to the present as their monument overlooked the modern day carrier force providing an additional link to the Navy's long heritage dating back to 1775.

NATIONAL CONNECTIONS

As the remembrance of the naval war in World War II started to shift in the late 1970s and early 1980s, one escort carrier group pursued national recognition not only for their particular ship, but also for all the CVEs. The members of the veterans group the USS Gambier Bay (CVE-71) & Composite Squadron VC-10 was one of the strongest CVE based veterans group. Organized in 1969, the group's efforts included holding a memorial event at the site where their vessel was lost and also sponsoring the publication of a book about their wartime experiences.⁶⁹⁶ In the early 1980s members also sought a meeting with a newly sworn-in President who stressed American exceptionalism, Ronald Reagan.

The historian Douglas Brinkley argued that the savage debates about the Vietnam War captured the national attention for all World War II veterans. He correctly noted that on the local and state levels memorials honored the veterans

⁶⁹⁶ This book was authored by Edwin Hoyt and was titled *The Men of the Gambier Bay*.

of World War II but on the national level they had been neglected. Brinkley wrote, “(S)omewhat the media had not focused on the uncommon valor of World War II fighting men since the tumultuous days when Ernie Pyle was firing off urgent dispatches.”⁶⁹⁷ However, a shift occurred in the 1980s. As Brinkley wrote, “Reagan’s election in 1980 had ushered in a new climate ripe for World War II remembrance. The New Patriotism was not just in the air, it was part of Reagan’s DNA.”⁶⁹⁸

With the assistance of those connected to Ronald Reagan from his days in office in California, a small group of CVE-71 veterans met the President in the Oval Office on July 28, 1981. The veterans used their meeting with the President to give him gifts. As the elected leader of the nation, these gifts in a sense were not so much for the man, but rather for the nation he represented. These offerings called attention to the loss of their crewmembers and ship as part of the famed Taffy 3⁶⁹⁹ and included the book commissioned on their wartime experience and a painting depicting the *Gambier Bay* under fire in the battle in which she was lost. In addition, Reagan was presented with a ball cap with the name of the veteran’s

⁶⁹⁷ Douglas Brinkley, *The Boys of Pointe de Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion* (New York: Harper, 2005), 149.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁹ Taffy 3 refers to the group of CVEs and other vessels caught by surprise on October 25, 1944 at the Battle of Samar. A detailed footnote of this can be found in Chapter 1.

organization.⁷⁰⁰ However, an additional action by the group sought remembrance not just for their lost ship, but also for all the escort carriers that had been overlooked in the national remembrance of the conflict.

The veterans drafted a declaration for the President. While this document noted the exceptional experiences of the survivors of the sinking of the *Gambier Bay*, it also sought to call attention to the role of their class of ship in World War II. It opened this theme by stating, “These unheralded ships—some seventy built by war’s end—the global span of their operations, the diverse nature of their tasks accomplished, the extent of their losses sustained—six lost to enemy action—and the significance of their contribution to final victory, attest the full measure of recognition earned.”⁷⁰¹ The nine veterans from the ship present at the meeting as well as Reagan signed the document during the meeting. Thus, forty years after the war, the President officially recognized the role of the CVEs in World War II. As the decree concluded, “Therefore, the Men of the *Gambier Bay* do invoke the high privilege of presenting this Remembrance in the name of all escort carriers: the *Casablanca*-class, the *Long Islands*, the *Bogues*, and the *Commencement Bays*, as an enduring source of pride for those who may follow and, if need be, themselves add to their heritage of valor.”⁷⁰² With ambition these veterans of

⁷⁰⁰ “President Ronald Reagan at the White House,” USS *Gambier Bay* (CVE-73) & Composite Squadron VC-10, accessed January 22, 2012, <http://www.ussgambierbay-vc10.com/whiteHouse.php>.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

⁷⁰² Ibid.

CVE-73 completed an amazing list of tasks for a grassroots ship-based group devoted to the memory of their lost ship and crewmembers. Feeling that the collective identity that all CVEs was forgotten just forty years after the conflict started, they organized a meeting with the President and had him sign a decree attesting to the greater role of CVEs during the war.

SEEKING MEMORIALS

Whereas building models of escort carriers gave veterans the means of recalling and reconstructing their naval experiences, another means of memorial existed. Veterans of carriers learned through word of mouth what steps should be taken to obtain pieces of decommissioned carriers that the Navy had preserved. As with all Navy vessels, the bells from the carriers were saved before the ships were sold for scrapping or conversion. An additional step was also taken with most carriers, that of saving small cuttings from the wooden flight decks, whether these were fleet carriers (CVs), CVLs, or CVEs.⁷⁰³

The cuttings were in the shape of blocks and of the approximate size of six by six by four inches. These cuttings rested in the domain of the Naval Historical Center in Washington D.C. The Korean era veteran, Kenneth Bruce, who served on both the escort carrier *USS Block Island*, CVE-106, and the fast-fleet carrier *USS Wasp*, CV-18, contacted the Naval Historical Center about possible cuttings from CVE-106. As a result of his inquiry, he not only found that this preservation

⁷⁰³ Of the 99 commissioned carriers from World War II, all had a wooden flight deck. After the war this practice would be stopped and flight decks were replaced with metal.

practice did take place before the 106 was decommissioned from the Navy, but also that the Center was willing to de-accession these blocks to the domain of the USSBIA. This presented the veteran's group with real tangible pieces of their former ship, which had been cut up over forty years before. It also gave those members fortunate enough to get a block a choice as to how these blocks would serve as testaments to their ship.⁷⁰⁴ The Center's donation of the blocks included a certificate noting the authenticity of this piece of naval history. Given to the group before the 2005 meeting in Branson, these blocks became one of the highlights of that year's reunion.

Bruce was one of the veterans to obtain a 106 block which, in an act of remembrance, he donated to a museum. He donated the wooden piece of his former ship, along with the certificate from the Navy, to the USS Hornet Museum located in Alameda, CA. This floating platform of memory was converted from its first role as a fast fleet World War II carrier into a museum. Bruce donated the object to a specific exhibition on the Hornet which covered the neglected escort carriers. With the donation, the museum requested photos of CVE-106 to be included for the public display.⁷⁰⁵ In a compartment of this CV carrier museum, the organization sought to expand the story to include the role of all classes of aircraft carriers from World War II. The irony is significant. Whereas the mythology surrounding the CVs, both during the war and after it, greatly

⁷⁰⁴ Ken Bruce, interviewed by Ben Hruska, May 28, 2005, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁷⁰⁵ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 20, No.1, February, 2006, 6.

marginalized the roles of the CVEs, fifty years after the war the few CVs left as floating examples could serve as a museum highlighting the role of the escort carriers cut up decades earlier.

INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION

Not all efforts to remember the escort carriers were self-promotional. The prime example of this was the effort of one dedicated individual, Michael Hurst, whose volunteer based grassroots efforts in reclaiming a forgotten past earned him the Order of the British Empire. Hurst, born in Canada, immigrated to Taiwan in the 1980s. As a baby-boomer, Hurst's connection to World War II included his uncle who was a Japanese prisoner of war. His interest in this family history turned into a dedicated hobby recalling the Japanese POW camps on the island of Taiwan during World War II. Hurst's effort was more than simply reviving a forgotten aspect of the island's past, it also involved physically reclaiming many of the camp sites from the jungles that had swallowed them. Once located, Hurst's mission included marking the former camps with stone monuments to recognize the ordeal that the Allied POWs experienced while interred by the Japanese.

Hurst's method in reclaiming the past of the island, which during the war was known as Formosa, involved the establishment of a non-profit organization. Called the Taiwan POW Memorial Camp Society, it first sought out POWs who survived this ordeal in his native Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Conducting oral interviews with them allowed him to gather information on their individual experience as well as information on all the camps on Formosa during

the war. Hurst also lobbied for the dedication of stone markers at the sites of these POW camps. Many times, if possible, former POWs traveled many miles to attend the ceremonies not only marking the sites, but also paying tribute to their fellow POWs who perished during their imprisonment. Furthermore, Hurst's careful attention to all aspects of the POW's experience included seeking to remember those who rescued these POWs at the conclusion of the war. This brought attention to a number of U.S. Navy vessels that, in September of 1945, conducted an operation on Formosa. Their mission was complex. They were charged with first locating the POWs on the island and then bringing in medical personnel to treat the most famished. Other men worked on the logistics of transporting them by rail to the coast and then ferrying these Allied soldiers away from Formosa. This mission included two U.S. escort carriers.

With the launching of a website, the organization sought to expand the story of the POWs before they were all deceased. This story included the safe transport from Formosa to the Philippines on the escort carriers, *USS Santee*, CVE-29, and *USS Block Island*, CVE-106. Beyond this, Hurst reached out to former crewmembers of these CVEs for recollections of their first-hand experiences in the evacuation.

Former crewmembers of the USSBIA donated artifacts related to the mission for the growing Society's collection. CVE-106 veteran Harvey Murdock was onboard when the evacuation took place. During the POWs' short time on the vessel a Scottish POW gave Murdock a gift marking his experience, a kilt that he somehow preserved during his internment. Murdock read of Hurst's efforts in

preserving the memory of what the POWs experienced on Taiwan during the war in the newsletters of the USSBIA. Murdock decided to return the kilt to Taiwan. With his donation, Murdock wrote, “It is with warm thoughts and pride, I donate this Gordon Highlander Kilt, remembering the hardships of the UK prisoners liberated by the crew of the *USS Block Island*, CVE-106 in September of 1945.”⁷⁰⁶ Murdock’s gift illustrates individual veterans donating items to place meaning on their painful experience of seeing the poor conditions of the POWs. However, the organization of the USSBIA as a whole also voted to make a donation.

At the 2005 USSBIA annual meeting crewmember Smiley Burnette received a piece of the wooden flight deck of CVE-106. With Burnette’s death in 2009, he willed the piece of the flight deck back to the USSBIA and it was given to Board member Bill MacInnes. While the 10,000 ton CVE-106 no longer existed, this small piece of wood from the flight deck took on symbolic meaning. For the veterans, this piece of wood symbolized their collective experience on two vessels that no longer existed. However, a deeper meaning surrounded this object for those POWs who sailed on the 106 from Formosa on their first leg of their homebound journey. Realizing this, MacInnes donated the block of the wooden flight deck to the Taiwan based group.

Hurst announced this donation to the membership in the group’s newsletter. He wrote, “Bill immediately thought of us and how wonderful it

⁷⁰⁶ *Chips Off the Old Block*, Vol. 24, No. 1, February 2010, 14.

would be if a piece of that ship would be on display here once again in Taiwan after so many years and in memory of the BI crew members.”⁷⁰⁷ The power of this donation demonstrated the USSBIA’s realization of the multiple meanings surrounding this piece of wood. For the crewmembers, the block symbolized their long experience serving on a ship, or in this case two ships of the same name, for many months. For the Allied POWs, however, this block represented their very short relationship with CVE-106. The duration of time connected to the actual ship did not impact the powerful emotions connected with this object. For the POWs this block symbolized their first days of freedom after years of imprisonment.

Hurst described the meaning of both the kilt and the block for the Society. He wrote the author, “These two items will form a focal point in the display we hope to create on the evacuation of the POWs from Taiwan, along with photos and other materials we have collected. These items represent a real part of the POWs’ story and it is so fitting that they should be back here again and put on permanent display.”⁷⁰⁸ With fewer and fewer POWs still living, and the landscape of Taiwan dramatically transformed after the war, these objects hold symbolic power in reclaiming the internment and pain suffered by these Allied POWs. They also bring attention to a small part of the story of two escort carriers whose missions did not end with the Japanese surrender.

⁷⁰⁷ Michael Hurst, “A Piece of the USS Block Island Comes Home,” *Never Forgotten*, Vol.12, Number 1, Spring-Summer 2011, 9.

⁷⁰⁸ Michael Hurst, e-mail message to author, December 26, 2011.

TRAVELING TO SITES

Escort carrier veterans sought multiple ways to leave evidence of their service behind after their passing. Objects were donated to museums, models constructed, and memoirs were written. However, more participatory forms of commemoration also took place. For decades CVE veterans had formed grassroots veteran's organizations and attended reunions all over the country. Beyond these annual gatherings of shipmates, CVE veterans also sought out and attended events that placed their experience into the greater national understanding of World War II and the legacy of the U.S. Navy. Realizing the approaching end of their lives within the foreseeable future and while they could still travel, they ventured to special events that in different ways paid homage to the escort carriers. This was their last chance to travel and connect their experience to the long history of the U.S. Navy and the United States.

The men of the *USS Gambier Bay*, CVE-73, accomplished a range of feats for remembering their lost ship and crewmembers, including holding a meeting with President Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office. In the early 1990s another opportunity presented itself. While the escort carriers were not of the class of ships whose names would be rechristened onto another U.S. Navy vessel⁷⁰⁹, CVE-73 came as close as any escort carrier would in receiving this honor. On July 4, 1992, the U.S. Navy was hosting the commissioning of her newest nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Christened the *USS George Washington*, in honor of the

⁷⁰⁹ The one exception was *USS Block Island*, CVE-106. However, when this vessel was decommissioned no U.S. Navy ship was christened to replace it.

nation's first President, the connection for the veterans of the *Gambier Bay* was the hull number. Whereas their escort carrier was CVE-73, the new carrier with a flight deck of over four acres in area was CVN-73.

The historian Efraim Sicher, in writing about post-memory and the Holocaust, theorized about the construction of collective memory. In his discussion, he wrote, "identity needs to be anchored in a time and place."⁷¹⁰ For the CVE-73 veterans, the commissioning of CVN-73 granted them the opportunity to morph their experiences into the U.S. Navy and the larger traditions of the aircraft carrier. While this particular place was a 90,000-ton carrier, and was not stationary, it did represent the permanence this group of CVE veterans sought.

Their wartime experience was un-anchored; they lacked a ship and a terrestrial based location for the dedication of a memorial to their experience. As the first Captain of CVN-73 wrote in welcoming those attending the commissioning, "*George Washington* will serve our country for 50 years as a roving ambassador and symbol of American technological, industrial, and military strength."⁷¹¹ In attending the commissioning, these veterans presented a tangible gift to the crew of the new carrier, one that symbolized their connection

⁷¹⁰ Efraim Sicher, "The Future of the Past: Counteremory and Postmemory in Contemporary American Post-Holocaust Narratives," *History and Memory* Vol. 12 No. 2, (2000): 70.

⁷¹¹ "Welcome to the Commissioning of USS *George Washington*, CVN-73," USS *Gambier Bay* (CVE-73), accessed January 26, 2012, <http://www.ussgambierbay-vc10.com/geoWashington.php>.

to this new carrier. Housed within the vessel this gift would remind those on board of the long tradition of the aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy.

The veterans of CVE-73 had previously commissioned a painting of their vessel showing the *Gambier Bay* in its final action, with Japanese shells slamming into her under-armed hull and also throwing up geysers of salt water. The artwork also depicts this murderous scene in showing the men abandoning their ship. This painting commemorated an experience that up until then had only existed in memory. In an adaptation of meaning, the CVE-73 veterans group commissioned the same artist, R. C. Moore, to depict the newest carrier in the fleet of the U.S. Navy. Moore's painting shows the *USS George Washington*, CVN-73 rolling into large seas with modern F-18 Hornet fighters strapped to her deck.⁷¹² This gift from the crewmembers of one carrier to those of another who shared the same hull number spanned the nearly fifty years between the vessels. While CVE-73 did not receive commemoration in the form of the Navy christening a new vessel, in this modified form these CVEs veterans experienced a commemoration of their vessel by its connection to this newly christened carrier. Through this they retained a link to the present U.S. Navy and the modern day carrier force.

The USSBIA obtained a tangible land-based site of remembrance of sorts with their 2007 reunion. The "re-discovery" by the BIHS of the original artifacts sent to the organization by the former crewmembers of CVE-21 and CVE-106 sparked interest in the topic of the carriers. This awareness in turn expanded by

⁷¹² Ibid.

contacting the local American Legion Post 36 on Block Island about the concept of inviting and hosting the USSBIA annual meeting on Block Island, Rhode Island.⁷¹³ While this idea was floated for a while, in working with the USSBIA it quickly became clear that the required hotel needs of the group did not exist on the island. With most members in their 70s and 80s, one single hotel was required with handicap accessibility, a large banquet room, and elevators. With Block Island hotels mostly all designed in the late nineteenth century, no single hotel could host the entire reunion. However, the option for a day trip to the island, with the main reunion occurring on the mainland, was possible.

At the 2006 annual meeting in San Antonio, the USSBIA voted on the bid presented by the BIHS and Post 36 to hold the reunion in Providence, Rhode Island. This called for day visits to Block Island and also to Battleship Cove in Fall River, Massachusetts.⁷¹⁴ The museum moors a number of floating platforms of memory, which including the battleship *USS Massachusetts*, BB-59. This site anchors the largest floating tonnage of any remaining group of World War II era vessels.⁷¹⁵ The membership voted to accept the bid for the following year's reunion.

⁷¹³ Gloria Rodlich, "Island Honors USS Block Island Veterans," *Block Island Times*, June 8, 2007, 12.

⁷¹⁴ Dan Millea, interviewed by Ben Hruska, June 30, 2008, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, RI.

⁷¹⁵ "Exhibitions at Battleship Cove," Battleship Cove, accessed on February 6, 2012, <http://www.battleshipcove.org/index.htm>.

At this meeting, the members also agreed to an additional idea of the loaning, or outright donation, of artifacts related to their service during their visit to Block Island. These items were added to an expanded exhibition already located inside the Legion Hall building at Post 36. Items on display for the May 2007 meeting included a watch worn by a crewmember at the time of the sinking. The seawater broke the watch, thus marking on the face of the watch the time the men abandoned ship. Another veteran, unable to attend due to ill health, donated an extensive collection of images he took on CVE-21 while as a photographer for the Navy. These were scanned and shown on a revolving slideshow on a computer screen. While this exhibition deeply affected many of the veterans, the ceremony during the reunion which marked the sinking of CVE-21 proved the most powerful.

On May 31, 2007, 165 members of the USSBIA boarded a high-speed ferry for Block Island. Exiting the vessel on the island, they were greeted by island residents including young school children and members of the American Legion. Buses transported the members to Legion Park, where the bell from CVE-106 rests. A simple ceremony was held on the Legion grounds which included remembering the victims of the sinking on May 29, 1944. After each name was read for those CVE-21 crewmembers lost, the bell from CVE-106 was tolled.⁷¹⁶ This service bridged the 63 years since the event of the sinking. It presented for those who came, both survivors of the sinking, as well as spouses, children and

⁷¹⁶ Gloria Rodlich, "Island Honors USS Block Island Veterans," *Block Island Times*, June 8, 2007, 13-16.

grandchildren, the chance to remember collectively the singular event that constructed the bond these members experienced on May 29, 1944. It allowed them to say goodbye to those who did not survive the “baptism by saltwater.”

The action of connecting their CVE experience to the national story of World War II was not limited only to those events requiring veterans to travel. Like all groups devoted to those who served in World War II, the numbers of those able to attend steadily dropped from the 1990s onward. Illness and deaths were taking their toll. With many reaching the end of their lives, the membership of the ECSAA began a new effort in preserving the memory of their vessels. Their plan, launched in 2009, was to reach out to the floating platforms of memory made from adapted CVs.

The historian Shameem Black, in writing of commemorating the Holocaust, composed a simple and poignant sentence. She wrote, “To commemorate is not the same as to remember.”⁷¹⁷ Commemoration involves action, organization, and some form of trust. The ESCAA lobbying with CV based museums resulted in three organizations agreeing to devote areas of their ships specifically to the display and interpretation of the CVEs.⁷¹⁸ Once given this space, the group announced to its membership the need for artifacts to fill this space. On their website, it asked for donated items that included ship’s

⁷¹⁷ Shameem Black, “Commemoration from a Distance: On Metamemorial Fiction,” *History & Memory*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2011): 60.

⁷¹⁸ These three museums are located on the ships *USS Lexington*, *USS Midway*, and *USS Hornet*.

newspapers, flight suits, hammocks, cups, and silverware. As the site pleaded, “These ships have set aside compartments in which only CVE displays and memorabilia will be exhibited.”⁷¹⁹ The empowerment the group felt with this space, in which they could tell their own story, was clearly evident. It continued, “Our “museums” on these ships will be visited by millions of people each year, and it is up to us to send these museums our “stuff” to display.”⁷²⁰

Instead of these objects from the war remaining with the individual veteran, and with their family after their deaths, this group sought the display of these objects in ship-based museums. While the overall mission of these platforms of memory was to commemorate the individual history of the particular CV, other stories were also told. Like these massive ships during the war hosting a range of compartmentalized functions for baking bread, working on planes, and housing the sailors, so to as museums they house multiple commemorative tasks taking place simultaneously. These CVs included a space for commemorating the sister carriers who had been overshadowed during and after the war.

In these three unique ways, CVE veterans obtained long-lasting connections with an entity bigger than their individual story. In a sense, this was a transference of their escort carrier heritage. With diverse connections that included a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, a small island community, and floating platforms of memory, these CVE veterans found avenues for

⁷¹⁹ “ESCAA Museum Information,” ESCAA website, accessed on February 1, 2012, <http://escortcarriers.com/museums.html>.

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

commemorating their service and their individual vessel. They sought out and found ways of uniting with assorted organizations in preserving their heritage. Thus, they accomplished their goals of bestirring the myth that “carrier in World War” simply meant their larger sister fleet carriers.

THE NEXT GENERATION’S LEGACY

The scholars Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall, in their study *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero*, use the battle of Iwo Jima in illustrating the life stages myths undergo in American battles. From the actual battle, to the contested discussions on how and who will remember it, these scholars give students a myth and memory of a true gift of scholarship. However, the authors miss an opportunity in their study by not taking seriously the reunions of World War II veterans. As they dismissively wrote, “Reunions of World War II veterans were curious affairs from the beginning, part clubbish sociability among men who had shared a common set of rules and experiences-like college grads or fraternity brothers-and part self-congratulatory myth.”⁷²¹ In their dismissal, the overlook a key aspect of monuments and memory, that of how the story will continue in the families of the men once they pass away.

An under appreciated aspect of these veteran’s groups formed around the memory of a ship are the benefits not only for the veterans, but also for the children and other relations who seek information about their family member’s experiences on board. While these groups may seem on the surface as self-

⁷²¹ Marling and Wetenhall, *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero*, 237.

congratulatory and devoted to myth making, they also function as a bridge to the past. This extends well beyond veterans talking with other veterans, discussing and reclaiming their own past experiences. As time advanced, these groups functioned more and more as windows into their collective memory, thus allowing intergenerational connections to the ship. Children of veterans sought out these groups and their members in seeking to make their personal connection to a ship through their father's or uncle's service. Hence, these groups functioned as a vehicle to understand family history. Children used these groups for connecting their family's history to that of the American World War II experience.

The wartime service of servicemen is shelved into family history. The scholar Joseph Amato addressed this issue in this recent book aimed at rethinking the writing of family history. He wrote, "Woven of fad and fancy, commerce and technology, war and revolution, freedom and necessity, our individual histories testify to the singular but crooked paths along which we traveled to the present."⁷²² On this theme, family members of veterans can utilize their experiences in serving in the American armed forces and connect them to the greater history of the nation. Whether battling the British in the American Revolution, or serving in the American Civil War, families utilized this service in connecting to the nation-state. For the amazingly complex Second World War, the personal histories of these individual servicemen, each just one of sixteen million

⁷²² Joseph A. Amato, *Jacob's Well :A Case for Rethinking Family History*, (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), xiii.

men and women to serve in the U.S. armed forces during the conflict, connects them to nationally recognized generals, admirals, ships, and battles. However, on an additional level, if the serviceman died during the war, the family lore takes on a further meaning.

Timothy Kendall grew up without a father, as his father was killed on the *USS Bunker Hill*, CV-17, months after his birth. His father was a pilot, and was killed in May 1945 when a series of kamikaze attacks struck his ship.⁷²³ Kendall's father and a number of other pilots were killed in the Ready-Room with a direct hit. Many of his thoughts about the father he never knew centered on his service as a pilot. Also, his thoughts centered on the ship on which his father was killed, which was scrapped after the war. He read the general histories of the war, which covered the overarching operations in the final months of the war with Japan. Thus, he connected his father's service and death with the larger story of the U.S. victory over the Japanese.

In the 1990s, Kendall learned of reunions of *Bunker Hill* crewmembers. In search of more information on this father, he attended a number of reunions. Sadly, although he inquired about his father, no veterans remembered him. The main reason for this was the division between officers and enlisted men. With his father being an officer and a pilot, he had little or no contact with most of the

⁷²³ Two separate kamikazes struck CV-17 on May 11, 1945, which 346 sailors and airmen. Forty-three of these men's bodies were never recovered.

attendees of the reunions, who were mostly enlisted men.⁷²⁴ However, Kendall's investigation resulted in finding a pilot who was a member of his father's squadron. His name was Wilton "Hoot" Hutt and when contacted, and stating he would speak to Kendall in person about his remembrances of his father, Kendall flew across the continent to Seattle to hear about his father's experiences on the *Bunker Hill*.

This conversation gave Kendall a chance to hear about his father firsthand from someone who served with him. He heard small details about his father. Also, speaking with the pilot of his experiences on board, Kendall learned what life as a pilot on a large carrier included, such as daily routines and conducting operations from a flight deck. All this information, from the exciting to the dull, presented Kendall with a chance to hear firsthand about the father he never knew. This conversation connected him not only to his father, but also to his family's World War II link. However, the most important and personal information from this pilot did not come during the interview, but in a letter from him addressed to Kendall after his visit. This contained the most personal details, which Hoot feared to share in person.

The letter contained details about his father's death. As Kendall wrote in an email, "Hoot said later that he didn't have the courage to tell me when I was there, but that he had been assigned to help carry the bodies of the dead to the

⁷²⁴ Timothy Kendall, interviewed by Ben Hruska, July 16, 2011, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

deck for burial at sea and that he had carried my father's body."⁷²⁵ The letter also gave details of his father's funeral, which was a burial at sea with many other fellow crewmembers of the *Bunker Hill* who died in the attack. This letter, filled with personal reflections of a former pilot, helped fill the void for the Kendall family. As Kendall wrote of the relationship with Hoot, "Of course this encounter between us brought the end of my father's life into sharp focus."⁷²⁶ This included information not only on the attack on the ship, but also what happened to the deceased Kendall. Most importantly, this bridged the gap of memory between father and son. The Kendall family history on their loved one who did not return was enriched with precious details about the end of his life and burial at sea.

A son finding meaning in the World War II service of his father illustrates the transference of heritage from the individual veteran to his family. Joseph Amato, in *Jacob's Well*, theorizes about family history and the complexities involved in a thoughtful study of one's family. With regard to veterans of World War II, their personal experiences are their family's link to the national story of the war. Amato wrote, "Any family history that spans multiple generations can only be considered as a complex, constantly mutating, and ongoing historical creation."⁷²⁷ With the twenty-first century on a daily basis witnessing both an eroding of living memory of the war due to deaths and the rapid expanse of social

⁷²⁵ Timothy Kendall, email message to author, January 5, 2012.

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Amato, *Jacob's Well*, 241.

media, new and evolving forms of digital commemorations and connections are taking place. Those with a CVE connection, which includes those descended from CVE veterans, are finding one another virtually.

An example of a son taking up the heritage of his father's CVE service is Jack Sprague, whose father served on *USS Block Island*, CVE-21. Jack learned of the USSBIA after his father's death, and along with his sister, attended one of the reunions. Sprague stated his reason for going as, "First it was to honor our father, second it was to learn more about the ships and the roles they played in WWII."⁷²⁸ This first reunion started a family tradition of attending additional reunions. He wrote, "It seems like we get more out of every reunion, a chance to meet other families and learn even more about the USS Block Island story."⁷²⁹ However, Jack's role with the group increased when the original webmaster of the organization, which was launched in 1999, passed away.

Jack updated the website to include visual images from the ships, updated the history of the vessels, and added to the website the ability to download documents about the ships.⁷³⁰ The goal was to increase the knowledge of CVE-21 and CVE-106 for those interested. Of the mission of his website, Sprague wrote, "With digital media served from an Internet website we can honor their work and

⁷²⁸ Jack Sprague, email message to author, January 31, 2012.

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

⁷³⁰ "The Story of Two Block Island Escort Carriers," USS Block Island (CVE 21/CVE 106), accessed on January 31, 2012, <http://www.usblockisland.org/Beta/Welcome.html>.

share it with people all over the globe.”⁷³¹ Many of those who find the site the most helpful are not the veterans themselves, but the children seeking information on their connection to World War II, via their father’s time serving on the escort carrier. In addition, emails are also received from those living in the United Kingdom and Australia seeking information with regard to the POW experience on Formosa. Sprague had taken the mantle of showcasing the heritage of these veterans with his digital creation. He finds a great deal of pride in being able to disseminate information on the escort carriers. As he emailed the author, “The greatest reward comes when a descendant of a shipmate or POW sends an email thanking the Association for putting the website together and stating they now understand what their relative went through in WWII.”⁷³²

Beyond a son producing a digital memorial to bring attention to the role of CVEs in World War II, social media used by millions of people also has a presence in the collective memory of the servicemen of the escort carriers. The ECSAA, like many other CVE groups, established a website to expand its membership, find crewmembers, and also promote the role of their vessel. However, the ECSAA has taken one step further in promoting the CVEs in forming a “group” on the social media site Facebook. This development certainly follows Amato’s suggestion that family history is “a complex, constantly

⁷³¹ Jack Sprague, email message to author, January 31, 2012.

⁷³² Ibid.

mutating, and ongoing historical creation.”⁷³³ The one billion members of Facebook can join this group, and thus interact in a blog about CVEs. Some of the posted statements come from actual veterans; however, the majority were from those seeking information on a deceased loved one’s wartime experience on a CVE.

One son wrote a testament about this father’s life. He wrote, “My Father served on the Escort Carrier Manila Bay in the Philippines. After building our family, he died of natural causes at age 39.”⁷³⁴ Another son wrote about his father’s wartime service. He wrote, “He was on board (CVE-84) during the battle of Okinawa and actually entered Tokyo Bay after the surrender.”⁷³⁵ Others wrote seeking information on their father’s experience, thirsting for understanding of their family’s connection to the war. One child wrote, “I am the daughter of a veteran that served aboard the USS Cape Esperanza. I am totally unfamiliar with Escort Carriers until doing some research and finding this site. Thanks for making this history available.”⁷³⁶ Virtually, these children were given a platform for expressing their family’s connection to the CVEs, whether a simple statement about their father’s service or their life after the war.

⁷³³ Amato, *Jacob’s Well*, 241.

⁷³⁴ “Escort Carriers: Non-Profit Organization,” Facebook, accessed on January 31, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Escort-Carriers/144430398902720>.

⁷³⁵ Ibid.

⁷³⁶ Ibid.

This Facebook group includes the participation of CVE veterans themselves. Raymond Thornburg wrote, “I was on the USS Copahee (CVE-12) during WWII.”⁷³⁷ Group members witnessing veterans themselves partaking in this dialog about CVEs has led to inquiries by family members. One son wrote on the blog page, “My father was Navy crewman on the USS Long Island in the Pacific during WWII around 1942. Anyone know of anyone on the same ship?”⁷³⁸ This exemplifies the transforming notions of remembering the escort carriers. Starting with small gatherings of crewmembers with specific ties to an individual CVE, spanning into the 1990s with the development of individual websites, to today’s children seeking information on their loved one’s experience using social media that connects over one billion people, remembering CVEs has been transformed by the communication networks that connect the world.

CONCLUSION

The experience of serving on a U.S. Navy vessel during World War II has produced veteran’s groups based on collective memory, which is seen in all classifications of vessels. These groups function in commemorating their collective experience and preserving the history of their vessel. However, for groups formed around the collective experience of CVEs these hold an additional motive. These groups bestirred as a result of the national narrative of carriers

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

ignoring the contributions of their classification of carrier have developed ways of challenging the dominance surrounding the role of the fast fleet CVs.

These efforts achieved the commemorative space these escort carrier veterans fought for in a number of ways. They carved out multi-form methods of recalling and preserving their vessels individually and collectively. Evolving tactics was central to their strategy of self-commemoration. First they promoted the greater role of CVEs in stressing their individual ship. Later, with the development of the ECSAA, collectively they confronted the narrative of CVs representing all carriers in World War II and sought the inclusion of escort carriers. With no floating examples to serve as a memorial, they sought out CV based museums that were willing to expand their institution's interpretation to include all classes of carriers. In this vein, they also looked to other institutions, including those outside the U.S., that were willing to include the role of CVEs in their presentation of the history of the war. Beyond museums, these CVE veterans constructed connections to the larger heritage of the U.S. Navy and their modern day carrier force. Lastly, these veterans and their children embraced the commemorative medium of websites and social media. Those connected to the collective story of the escort carriers fought and won the commemorative space that the original CVE veterans thought their ships deserved.

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Object Number 06.10.2007, USS Block Island Collection, Block Island Historical Society, Block Island, Rhode Island.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

“Approaching Recreation Island” and “Landing on the Beach”. Photographs. Roy Swift Collection. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

“Arming Aircraft Off to Okinawa”. Photograph. Roy Swift Collection. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

“CVE 21 Radio Gang (1943/1944)”. Photograph. USS Block Island Collection. San Diego, CA.

“Drawings of Damage to CVE-21”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

“Entering Belfast Harbor”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

“FBI Avenger on Formosa”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

“Marines Celebrating in the Ready Room.” Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

“POW Enlisted Officers from U-66 aboard CVE-21”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

“POWs Awaiting Transport to CVEs.” Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.

- “POWS in the Hangar Deck”. and “POWS Boarding the 106”. Photographs. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.
- “Resupply at Kerama Retto”. Photograph. Roy Swift Collection. USS Block Island Collection. San Diego, CA.
- “The 106 in the Korean Era,” Photograph, USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.
- “The Block Island Mortally Wounded”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.
- “USS Block Island, CVE-21 on Cruise”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.
- “USS Block Island, CVE-21 under Construction”. Photograph. USS Block Island Association Collection, San Diego CA.
- “USS Block Island, CVE-106”. Photograph. USS Block Island Collection. San Diego, CA.

APPENDIX A

LISTING OF U.S. AIRCRAFT CARRIERS SUNK DURING WORLD WAR II

USS Langley, AV-3, sunk in the Pacific February 27, 1942.
Lost off the island of Java. Severely damaged by Japanese aircraft and later
shuttled. While termed a seaplane tender at the time of sinking, she was the first
U.S. Navy aircraft carrier and held the designation of CV-1.

USS Lexington, CV-2, sunk in the Pacific May 8, 1942.
Lost in the Battle of Coral Sea from Japanese carrier-based aircraft bombs and
torpedoes.

USS Yorktown, CV-5, sunk in the Pacific June 7, 1942.
Lost in the Battle of Midway. First damaged by Japanese carrier-based aircraft
bombs and torpedoes and later torpedoed by the Japanese submarine, I-168.

USS Wasp, CV-7, sunk in the Pacific September 15, 1942.
Torpedoed by the Japanese submarine, I-19.

USS Hornet, CV-8, sunk in the Pacific October 26, 1942.
Lost in the Battle of Santa Cruz Islands from Japanese carrier-based aircraft
bombs and torpedoes.

USS Liscome Bay, CVE-56, sunk in the Pacific November 23, 1943.
Lost by Japanese torpedo launched from I-175.

USS Block Island, CVE-21, sunk in the Atlantic May 29, 1944.
Lost by German torpedoes launched from U-549.

USS Princeton, CVL-23, sunk in the Pacific October 24, 1944.
Lost in the Battle of Leyte Gulf by land-based aircraft bomb.

USS Gambier Bay, CVE-73, sunk in the Pacific October 25, 1944.
Lost as the result of Japanese naval gunfire.

USS St. Lo, CVE-63, sunk in the Pacific October 25, 1944.
Lost by a Japanese kamikaze hit.

USS Ommaney Bay, CVE-79, sunk in the Pacific January 4, 1945.
Lost by a Japanese kamikaze hit.

USS Bismarck Sea, CVE-95, sunk in the Pacific February 21, 1945.
Lost by a Japanese kamikaze hit.

APPENDIX B

EXPLAINING SAMPLE OF INTERVIEWS WITH VETERANS WHO
ATTENDED REUNIONS AND WERE ACTIVE MEMBERS IN THE 1980s
AND 1990s

In 2005, the author attended his first USSBIA reunion in Branson, Missouri. Interviews with members of the group, which includes veterans, spouses, children, and other relations, have included their recollections of past reunions. Questions focused on personal reflections of these previous meetings as well as the recollection of events, which deceased members had shared with those in attendance. Bill MacInnes, a Vietnam veteran whose uncle served onboard both CVE-21 and CVE-106 as a naval Chaplain, provided invaluable details on areas deceased veterans felt comfortable discussing in previous interviews. Details such as these allowed for this study to more fully investigate the commemorative activities that transpired at the reunions' activities from the 1980s-2000s when the author became an active member in 2005.

APPENDIX C

COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS FROM THE BLOCK ISLAND HISTOICAL
SOCIETY

March 5, 2012
Block Island, RI

To Whom It May Concern:

On behalf of the Block Island Historical Society, I grant permission to Benjamin Hruska to use of the USS Block Island Collection for his dissertation written at Arizona State University. This collection rests in our historic house museum located on Block Island, RI. This permission granted to Hruska includes the objects in the collection, such as uniforms and other pieces of military equipment, and the documents, which include works of art and images.

Signed, Pam Littlefield Gasner

Director
Block Island Historical Society
Block Island, Rhode Island

APPENDIX D

COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS FROM THE USS BLOCK ISLAND
ASSOCIATION

March 5, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

On the behalf of the Board of Directors of the *USS Block Island* Association, I grant permission to Benjamin Hruska the use of the *USS Block Island* Collection for his dissertation written at Arizona State University. This collection is composed of images, memoirs, and primary documents related to the wartime experiences of CVE-21 and CVE-106. Our Association, which started in 1961, has collected these pieces of the past, and for the last thirty years been sharing these with our membership with the publication of our newsletter, *CHIPS*.

Signed, Bill MacInnes

Editor of *Chips* and Board Member
USS Block Island Association
San Diego, CA

APPENDIX E

DOCUMENTATION OF INSTITUTION REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

This project received IRB approval on October 19, 2009. The study title is “USS Block Island Oral History Project.” The IRB protocol number assigned was 0910004436. Interviews conducted occurred at two of the annual meetings of the USS Block Island Association in Davenport, Iowa (May 2010) and New Orleans (May 2011). In addition, interviews also took place with veterans in Arizona in their homes. Interviews before this date were conducted. However, these took place while I was in the employment of the Block Island Historical Society on Block Island, Rhode Island. Thus, these interviews are in the domain of this institution and are cited as such in this study.