

The Cruisers Des Moines

Iowans are justly proud of their capital city. Tracing its beginnings back to 1843, when Captain James Allen established Fort Des Moines at the Raccoon Fork of the Des Moines River, the city has grown from 502 to 177,965 in the century ending with 1950. A great insurance, publishing, and manufacturing center, Des Moines is also recognized as an outstanding cultural center, with great political influence both at home and in Washington. Little wonder that the Navy should have named two powerful cruisers in honor of the capital and metropolis of the Hawkeye State.

Perhaps the first inkling that the Navy might name a cruiser for the capital of Iowa appeared in the *Des Moines Weekly Leader* of March 31, 1898. In an interview with newspaper correspondents, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long declared that he was still trying to purchase cruisers from foreign countries to be used in the event of war with Spain, then impending. It appears that the name Des Moines had already been proposed, despite the fact that Iowa already had a battleship named for it. According to Phocion Howard in the *Leader*:

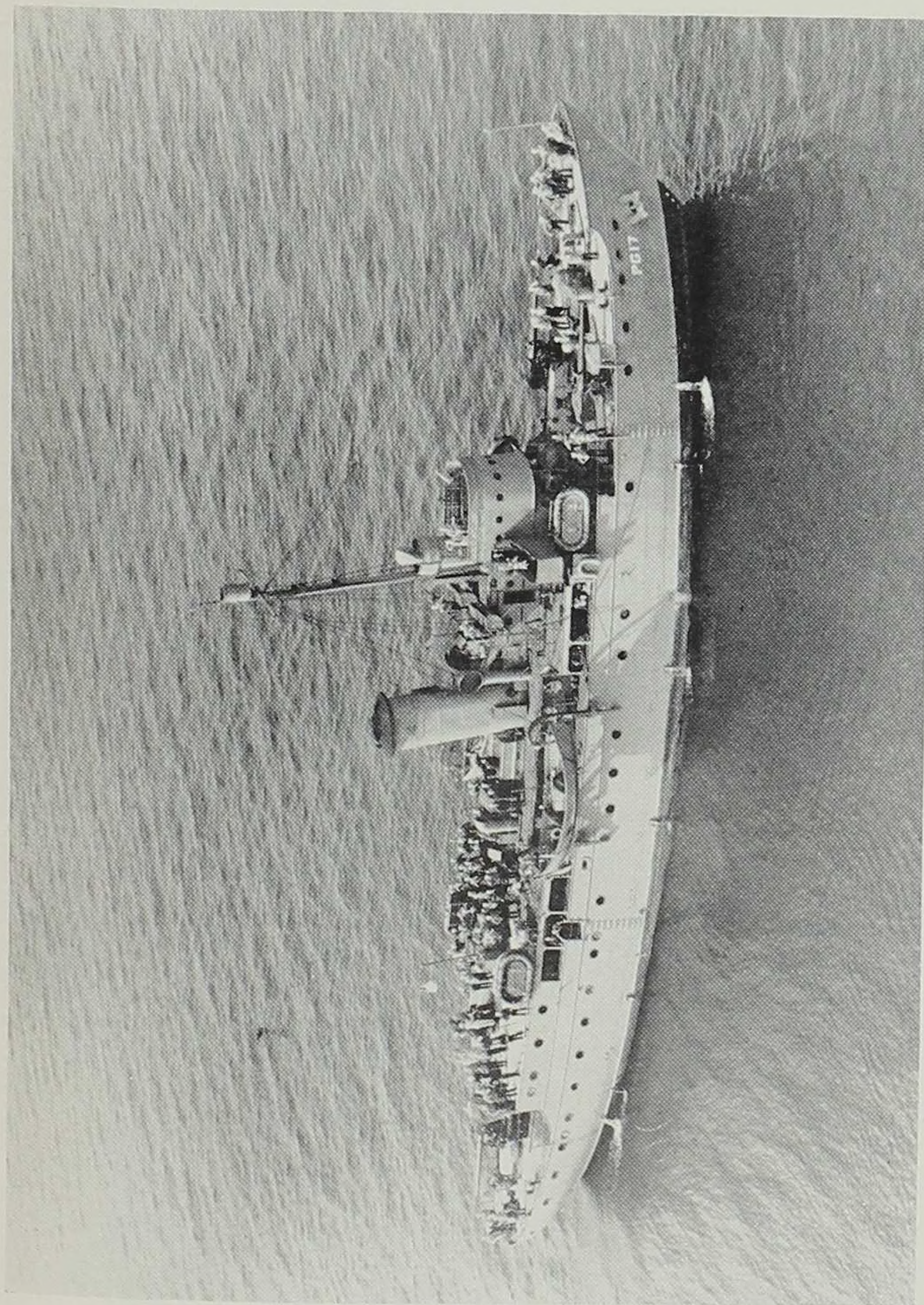
The Iowa delegation in congress may be relied on to

use their influence in behalf of Des Moines, regardless of the fact that Burlington and several other aspiring towns are anxious for recognition. As chairman of the appropriations committee of the senate, Mr. Allison [Senator William Boyd Allison] wields considerable influence, and if his services can be enlisted, and I believe they can be from what he has told me, Des Moines will be recognized.

Chairman [John A. T.] Hull of the house military affairs committee tells me that he will do what he can for Des Moines and several of the other Iowa representatives are favorably inclined toward the Capitol City.

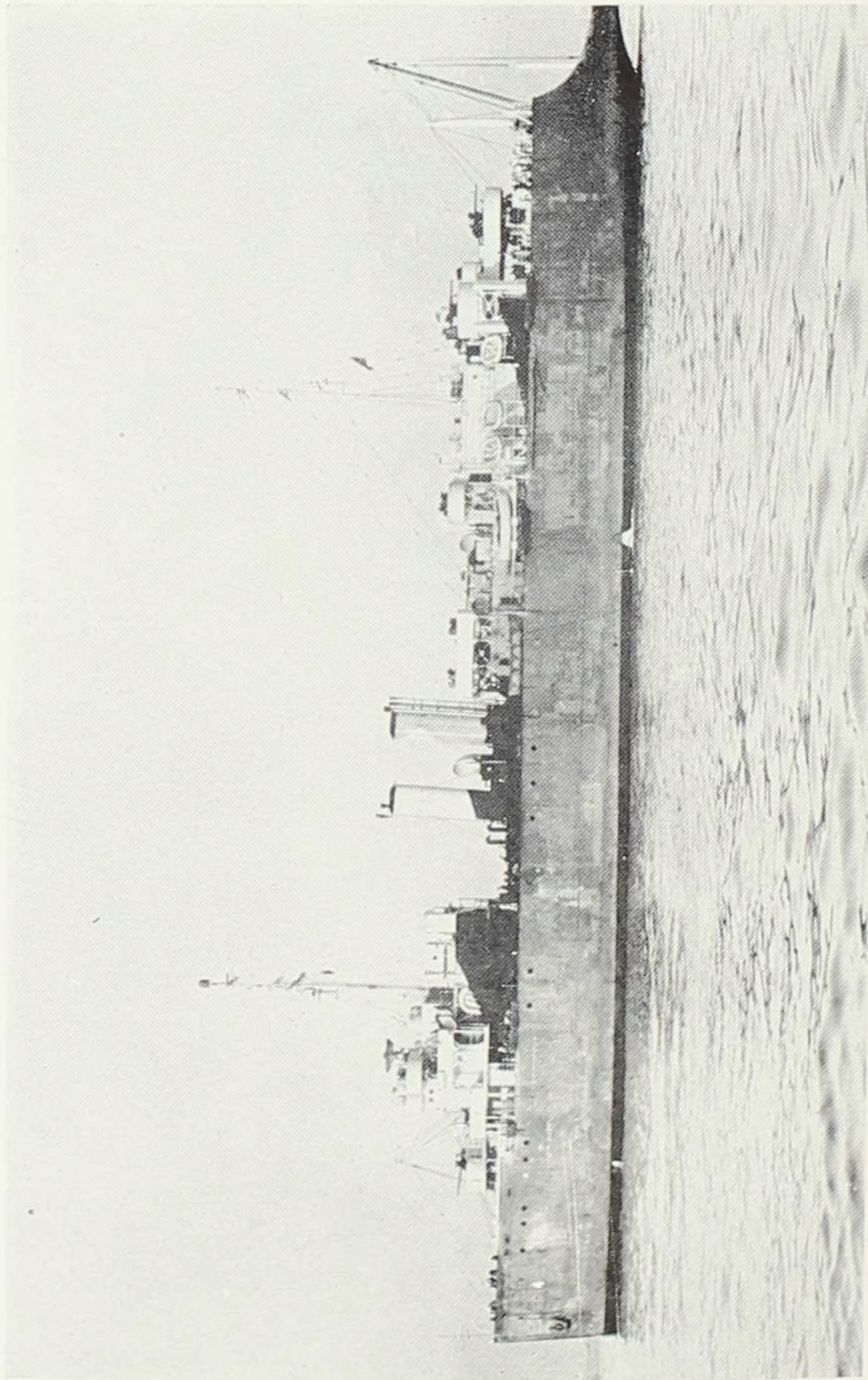
Several years slipped by with no results. It took wholehearted cooperation on the part of many people to get the Navy to designate one of its top fighting ships for a city. This is readily demonstrated in the case of the first cruiser named for Des Moines, the idea originating with Captain Frank E. Lyman, managing editor of the Des Moines *Daily News*, who used his paper to push the matter. According to the *Daily News* of August 8, 1904:

Leslie M. Shaw was then governor and he backed the scheme with a letter. John MacVicar, just reelected mayor, approved the plan as did many prominent citizens, including the commercial exchange and city council, not to forget the board of supervisors. Then a joint resolution was introduced in the legislature asking Hon. John D. Long, Secretary of the Navy, to name the next ship purchased "Des Moines" and the Iowa delegation in congress was instructed to see that he did it. This resolution went through one house easily enough but an envious evening paper made fun of it and got it tabled in the other house.



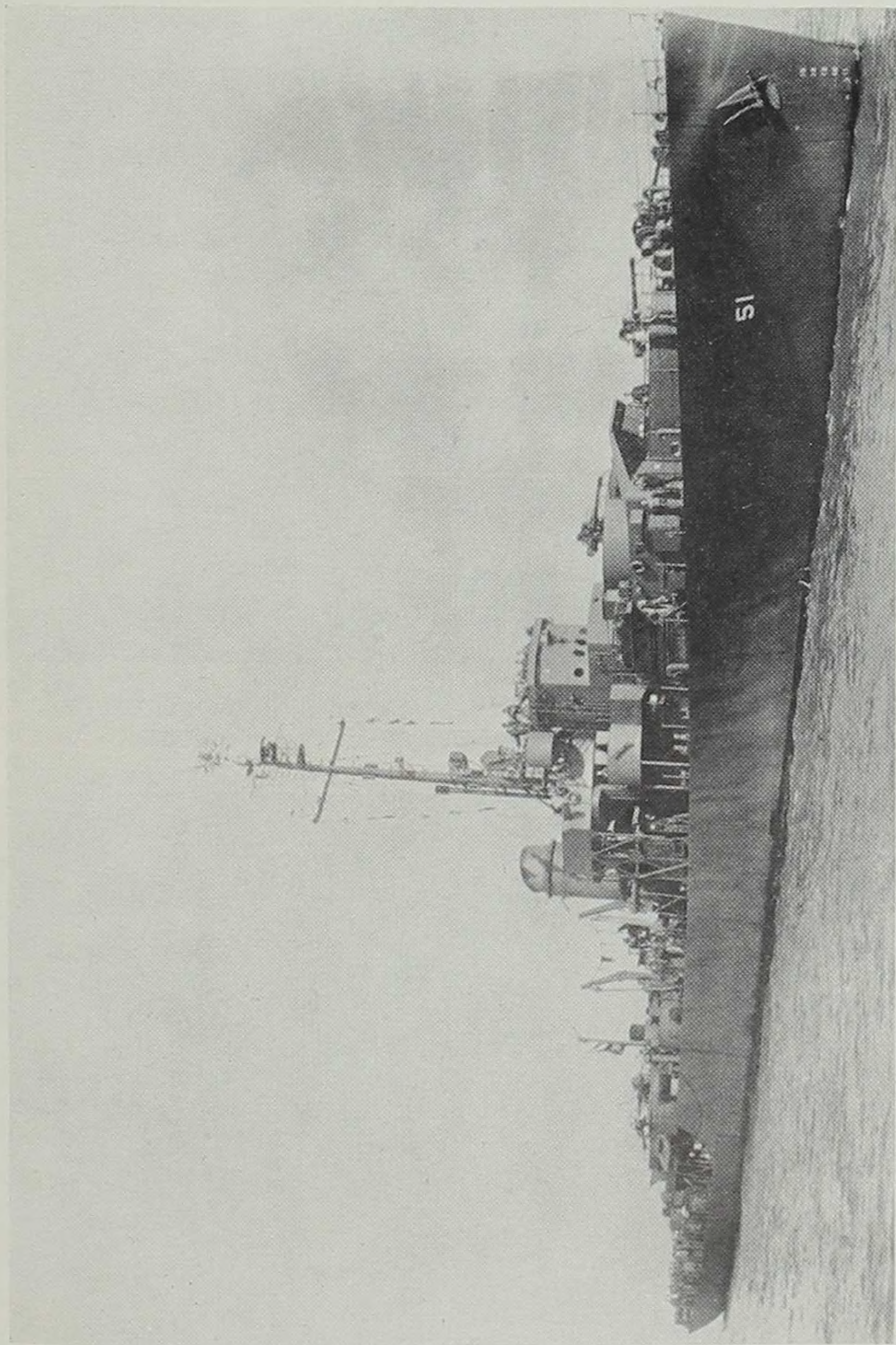
Official U. S. Navy Photograph

U.S.S. Dubuque (PG17)



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

U.S.S. Keokuk (AKN-4)



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

U.S.S. Burlington (PF-51)



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

Dr. William J. Petersen presents Captain Charles K. Bergin with his
Iowa: The Rivers of Her Valleys for the ship's library.



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

Navy Guests Learn How the *Des Moines* Operates

Then this dis-spirited paper crowed of its prowess and printed a cartoon of a flatboat with mule power as the "cruiser Des Moines," secured for the News.

About this time Senator John Henry Gear took a hand in the business. He remembered that the News had supported him in his hard fight for congress, against Cummins. The News was backing the scheme and he backed the News. Gear was a power in Washington, far more so than the people of Iowa generally imagined. He took his cane one morning and marched into Secretary Long's office. He explained the situation to the secretary and the secretary who knew that Gear had to have everything he went after or there was long drawn out trouble said all right.

Then the legislature took interest again and Miss Jessie Lee Wilcox, the senate reporter for the News, got the resolution taken from the table and passed. Engrossed copies were sent to Secretary Long and he saw that Iowa was behind Gear and Des Moines was slated for a ship. But no more were purchased at that time principally because no more could be secured.

Later, when Congress passed a big appropriation bill for more cruisers of the second class, including the Topeka and Denver, Des Moines was at the top of the list and got the honor along with the other cities. That is the way the cruiser Des Moines was named.

The First Des Moines

The first *Des Moines* was built by the Fore River Engine Company of Quincy, Massachusetts. Her keel was laid on August 28, 1900, and the ship was launched on September 20, 1902. The *Des Moines* was commissioned as Cruiser Number 15 on March 4, 1904. She was sponsored

by Miss Elsie L. Macomber, daughter of a prominent Des Moines lawyer — J. K. Macomber. Commander Alexander McCrackin served as her first captain.

After commissioning, and during the year 1905, the first *Des Moines* served in the Caribbean, protecting American interests, and in Europe and the North Atlantic. From 1906 to 1908 she conducted survey work in the West Indies and Central America. The *Des Moines* was ordered to Liberia during 1910 and 1911 to investigate conditions there. The following three years were spent in Mexican and West Indies waters. Between 1915 and 1917 she was stationed in Syria; then she was recalled to the United States and assigned to duty protecting convoys across the Atlantic during World War I. In 1919 she served as flagship of Admiral McCully, then Commander of Naval Forces, Russia, at Archangel, returning to the United States later that year via France and England. In 1920 the *Des Moines* was back patrolling Mexican waters. Later that year she was ordered to Valparaiso, Chile, to participate in the Magellan Celebration. The following year she returned to New York, where she was decommissioned on April 21, 1921. Her commanding officer at the time was Captain A. St. Clair, United States Navy.

During her years of colorful service in the Navy the *Des Moines's* classification was changed from

the original Cruiser Number 15 to Gunboat Number 29 and then to Light Cruiser Number 17. The *Des Moines* was stricken from the Navy List on December 13, 1929, after a long and useful career. She was sold during March, 1930.

The Second Des Moines

The second cruiser named for Des Moines was built at the same shipyard as her predecessor, a yard owned by the Bethlehem Steel Company. The new *Des Moines* was authorized on July 9, 1942, and launched on September 26, 1946, with Mrs. Edwin T. Meredith, Jr., of Des Moines, daughter-in-law of former Secretary of Agriculture E. T. Meredith, serving as her sponsor. The ship was originally approved as CA (Heavy Cruiser) 75, but was commissioned in November, 1948, as CA134, with Captain A. D. Chandler, United States Navy, as her first commanding officer.

It was while making the shakedown cruise aboard the battleship *Iowa* in 1951 that the writer first heard of this fast, hard-hitting cruiser from Captain William R. Smedberg III. Some time later I learned more about her from an Iowa medical officer serving aboard her sister ship — the *U.S.S. Newport News*. Since many of the latest installations had been incorporated in the three ships of this class — *Des Moines* (CA134), *Salem* (CA139), and the air-conditioned *Newport*

News (CA148) — their fighting potential greatly intrigued me. It was with no small pleasure, therefore, that I received a letter from Admiral Francis T. Old of the Ninth Naval District at Great Lakes, Illinois, forwarding an invitation from the Secretary of the Navy to make a four-day gunnery practice cruise on the heavy cruiser *Des Moines* from Norfolk to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

It was with keen anticipation that I boarded the *U.S.S. Des Moines* early Sunday afternoon, February 1, 1953. For days I had wondered how she would compare with the battleship *Iowa*, on which fourteen Iowans had made the shakedown cruise to Pearl Harbor in November, 1951. During the next four days I was destined to learn this powerful cruiser possessed experienced and well-trained officers and crew, extraordinary defensive weapons, and a devastating lethal punch.

I was greeted by Commander C. McKellar, Jr., and promptly introduced to Captain Charles K. Bergin, the commanding officer of the *Des Moines*. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Captain Bergin had graduated from Annapolis in 1927. Thereafter he had attended the United States Naval Post-Graduate School, Johns Hopkins, Harvard Graduate School, and the National War College. Prior to World War II, Captain Bergin was assigned tours of duty aboard such ships as the *Maryland*, *Detroit*, *Dobbin*, *Blakely*, *Gilmer*, and *Ralph Talbot*. During World War II he served in the Pa-

cific as destroyer commanding officer, Destroyer Division, and squadron commander in the 7th, 3rd, and 5th fleets. During the closing days of the war he was assistant chief of staff for plans and operations to Vice Admiral Harry W. Hill of the 5th Amphibious Force, Pacific Fleet. Captain Bergin's rich experience was typical of many Navy officers aboard the *Des Moines* and *Iowa*.

After an illuminating tour of the Norfolk Naval Base with Commander Taylor W. Gray, operations officer of the *Des Moines*, I returned to the ship and met the other guests who had been invited to make the cruise from Norfolk to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Prominent among these was Lieutenant General Andrew D. Bruce, who headed the Armed Forces Staff College at Norfolk. Philius H. Girouard, Chief Engineer of the Bureau of Ordnance, and Albert Wertheimer, Director of Bomb-Projectile and Armor Research for the Bureau of Ordnance, were civilians employed by the Navy who made the trip. In addition to these highly-trained men in naval ordnance, the Secretary of the Navy had invited such men as Ashley Halsey, Jr., associate editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*; Oliver J. R. Troup, owner of the Atlas Metal Stamping Company of Philadelphia; John Norman, a Roanoke, Virginia, businessman; and the superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa, to record his opinions of this mighty namesake of the capital of Iowa.

Our group spent Sunday evening together getting acquainted. Our dinner consisted of steak, French fries, lima beans, hot rolls, jelly, ice cream and cake, with plenty of coffee. We saw a good movie on the ship's fantail — Cary Grant and Betsy Drake in *Room For One More*. Then most of us retired early in order to be ready to watch the bustle that always attends a ship's departure.

I was up before seven on Monday morning, February 2, and after a typical breakfast of tomato juice, eggs, toast, and coffee, went to the ship's bridge. Below me I saw the crew of the *Des Moines* already hard at work readying the ship in anticipation of "letting go" the anchor. A spirit of eager expectancy filled the air.

Moored all around us were such vessels as the giant aircraft carrier *Coral Sea* and the escort carrier *Siboney*, the heavy cruiser *Albany*, and numerous smaller craft. Out in the James River a flotilla of naval vessels, large and small, were putting out to sea on various assignments. Finally all was in readiness and the *Des Moines* backed slowly from her slip with the aid of tugs and joined the caravan of ships steaming out of the James River into historic Hampton Roads, scene of the clash between the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*. I could not help but muse what Lincoln would have said had it been possible for him to return and see these mighty battlewagons, the smallest of which could have annihilated any Civil War vessel.

Once we had rounded Cape Henry we proceeded in a southeasterly direction around Cape Hatteras. The changes in temperature were recorded at regular intervals:

<i>Day</i>	<i>Hour</i>	<i>Air Temp.</i>	<i>Water Temp.</i>	<i>Location</i>
Feb. 2	10 a.m.	39°	46°	Norfolk
Feb. 2	6 p.m.	51°	51°	Cape Hatteras
Feb. 2	8 p.m.	64°	74°	In Gulf Stream
Feb. 5	12 noon	88°	79°	Guantanamo

Once at sea Captain Bergin had a heavy program prepared for his guests. Several hours each morning and afternoon were set aside for studying the *Des Moines*, and since the departments (or Divisions) in such a ship would be as complicated as any large factory or university, we soon were receiving instructions from experts in gunnery, navigation, operations, damage control, and fleet logistics. Each lecturer, beginning with Lieutenant D. A. Webster of the Gunnery Department, impressed us with the importance of his department's work, and thus all Divisions seemed to carry on at a highly competitive level.

This competitive spirit appears in the *Des Moines*'s annual cruise book as well as in officers' lectures. In the ship's cruise book I read the *Des Moines* has three turrets, each containing three 8-inch rapid fire rifles, the first ship to be so equipped. Instead of cumbersome powder sacks, the crew simply inserted giant cartridges in the

rifle, allowing them to be fired several times more rapidly per minute than before. The First Division on the *Des Moines* which was responsible for the first of the three 8-inch gun turrets, pointed out that the primary purpose of this 17,000-ton heavy cruiser was "to provide a ship that can shoot." They proved to us they were highly skilled in handling their complex rapid-firing guns. The Second Division, equally as skilled as the First, was responsible for the three 8-inch rifles which were housed in Turret II, directly behind and above Turret I. The Third Division, which had the responsibility for Turret III and its magazines in the after part of the ship, had won the gunnery "E" for "local control competition" on the *Des Moines's* previous August cruise. The fighting spirit of these men was revealed to us by the Sixth Division, which mans the 3-inch guns in the fore part of the ship. According to their spokesman:

For the Sixth Division the Mediterranean cruise has meant many hours spent manning the port three-inch battery whether it was for drone or sleeve firing or for target acquisition. This time spent has purchased for the deck force, as well as the Gunner's Mates, proficiency in the cooperative endeavor of getting the guns on target and rounds fired at it. If an enemy plane ever becomes the target of our battery, we will be ready to give its pilot the choice of keeping his distance or of being brought down in short order.

A similar esprit de corps prevails in all depart-

ments. Commander L. G. Seebach's Medical Department and Lieutenant Commander J. F. Pennington's Dental Division were doing particularly fine work. There were sixteen hospitalmen and two doctors in the medical division. Many of the hospitalmen were specialists in their fields — pharmacists, laboratory workers, X-ray technicians, operating room technicians, and medical technicians. The operating room was equipped to handle any and all kinds of surgery. Thirty-two beds in sick bay provided adequate space for the sick and injured. I counted only three beds occupied when I visited sick bay, graphic testimony of the health of the crew, particularly in a period of colds.

The Dental Department consisted of two dental officers aided by well-trained assistants working in quarters which made it possible to execute their primary function, that of maintaining the oral hygiene and dental health of personnel assigned duty aboard the ship. Additional dental duties were coordinated with the Medical Department, and of course both were assigned regular battle dressing stations for drills or combat.

I found the spiritual and moral side of the crew's life ministered over by Chaplain Thomas J. Mullins, a Catholic priest whose duties were many and complex. The ship's library, movies, aboard-ship entertainment, and arrangements for touring parties ashore — these were but a few of the many

assignments that befell the chaplain. In addition to providing services for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (both on ship and on shore), the chaplain had to serve as a psychological advisor for all family and personal problems befalling 1,700 men.

When you travel aboard a heavy cruiser you are constantly aware of the many services that are available to crew members. The S-1 Division (Supply Department) is concerned mainly with the procuring, storing, custody, issuing, and accounting for materials and monies aboard ship. The Supply Department must take frequent inventories, secure stock for sea, guard against deterioration or rust, and make issues from storerooms which are widely separated throughout the ship. The Financial Department of the Supply Department is probably the most popular. As one sailor put it: "No matter whether the man is single or has family ties, one item which constantly concerns him each day, especially on pay days and the days he may be ashore, is that dollar."

The S-2 Division comprises the larger part of the Supply Department, and is composed of four groups: Commissary, Ship's Service, Stewards, and Mess Deck Master-at-Arms. It has over 120 men, making S-2 the largest division in the ship. According to one sailor:

In the Ship's Service group we have sub groups composed of the laundry, barber shop, tailor shop, cobbler shop, ship's store, and soda fountain, better known as

"Pat's Sweete Shoppe." The gedunk stand is by far the most popular of the group, with the ship's store and its wide assortment of tobacco, watches, sweets, etc., running a close second. You can get your pressing and repairs done in the tailor shop and a genuine "regulation" haircut in the barbershop. The ship's store is forever busy keeping its shelves stocked with razor blades, tooth paste and the like. The line to the store never seems to diminish. When your clothes get soiled, just send them to the laundry, free gratis, and they come back all starched and pressed. The laundrymen have no easy job turning out clean clothes for over 1,500 men, but they do a good job.

Everywhere we went we encountered this same spirit. My sleeping room was the Flag Admiral's quarters just off the CS Division. I could step out of the rear, or outside door, of my cabin and watch the men engaged in flag hoist. Frequently, I joined them in a cup of coffee. The flag bridge could be a cool, windy spot, so the men always had steaming hot coffee close at hand, under a special burner they had rigged up.

These signalmen, consisting of petty officers and seamen, are formed into watch-standing sections and placed, for administrative purposes, in the "CS" Division. The CS Division, headed by the signal officer (in this case Lieutenant JG Robert Brennan of Chicago), is a vital element of the Operations Department. The signal officer is responsible to the communications officer, who in turn is responsible to the operations officer. During my four days aboard the *Des Moines* I had

frequent opportunities to witness all forms of visual communication, including flag hoists, flashing light, semaphore, panels, and pyrotechnics.

Let us turn now to the story of the ship itself. Unlike the battleship *Iowa*, which performed heroically in the Pacific, the *U.S.S. Des Moines* has seen comparatively routine operations. From the start, however, the *Des Moines* has played a strategic role as flagship of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. She has made four cruises in the Mediterranean as flagship: first for the late Admiral Forrest P. Sherman in 1949; next for Vice Admiral John J. Ballantine in 1950; then for Vice Admiral Matthias B. Gardner in 1951; and finally for Vice Admiral John H. Cassady, the commander of the Sixth Fleet in 1952-1953. The confidence of the Navy in this sleek fighting vessel was further attested when the *Des Moines* served for Commander, Battleship-Cruiser Force, United States Atlantic Fleet, Rear Admiral James L. Holloway, Jr., now Chief of Naval Personnel.

Iowans may wonder why the *Des Moines* should be based in the Mediterranean. Actually the ships of the United States Navy have been cruising that historic sea since 1802, and almost continuously since 1886. Even when our fleet was greatly reduced in strength at the close of World War II the Navy continued to maintain ships in the Mediterranean. The reasons were explained by the late Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal:

Today, the United States Navy is continuing to maintain in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea forces for the following purposes: First, to support Allied occupation forces and the Allied Military Government in the discharge of their responsibilities in the occupied area of Europe. Second, to protect U. S. interests and to support U. S. policies in the area.

There are many benefits to be attained by maintaining ships of the United States in these waters. First: It offers a splendid opportunity to train the officers and men of our ships in independent operations and to familiarize them not only with the waters in which they cruise but also with the customs and traditions of the people of the countries which they visit. Second: It is a builder of morale for the many officers and bluejackets who still have the traditional urge to "join the Navy and see the world." Third: It affords an opportunity for American Naval personnel to create good will and better understanding with the people with whom they come in contact.

The log of the *Des Moines's* visits to colorful Mediterranean ports reads like a veritable *Bae-decker* to that historic inland sea. The ports of call on her itinerary, some of which have been frequented four or five times, include: Athens, Greece; Beirut, Lebanon; Istanbul, Turkey; Messina and Augusta, Sicily; Naples and Taranto, Italy; Cannes and Villefranche on the French Riviera; Barcelona, Spain; Bizerte, North Africa; Tunis, Tunisia; Oran and Tangier, French Morocco; Lisbon, Portugal; Gibraltar, Malta, Sardinia, Crete, and the Isle of Rhodes. In December, 1951, the *Des Moines* was the first United States

warship to visit Yugoslavia since World War II when she steamed up the Adriatic Sea to visit the port of Rijeka. While in port Vice Admiral Matthias Gardner had lunch with Marshal Tito at Belgrade.

For many years the writer has been intrigued by the slogan — "Join the Navy and See the World." No doubt his own wistful feelings for far places can be traced in part to the fact that his own father went to sea in 1862 at the age of fourteen, sailed around the world three times, was at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and ended his career with 38 years of service for the Diamond Jo Line Steamers on the Upper Mississippi.

This wonderful opportunity for world travel afforded by the Navy was driven home forcibly by Chaplain Mullins of the *Des Moines*. Working with the American Express, the Navy has arranged for inexpensive tours "selected for their wide range of interest" and designed to fit into the shore liberty of the men. For example, from Leghorn a full day tour to Pisa and Florence by bus with two meals costs \$8.00. A three-day tour to Rome by train with meals costs Navy men \$32.00. A half day of sight-seeing in Venice by gondola costs a mere \$1.75. From the French Riviera ports Iowa boys aboard the *Des Moines* could make a five-day tour to Paris by train with meals and four nights in Paris at a cost of only \$65.00.

As I thumbed through the Cruise Book of the

Des Moines, comparable to a college annual, I saw pictures showing the crew viewing the Acropolis in Athens, a mosque in Istanbul, the Coliseum in Rome, the casino at Monte Carlo, and numerous other historic points. Equally interesting were the mimeographed pamphlets issued from time to time for *Des Moines* crew members telling the history and customs of the ports they visited, how and what to shop for, and the best places to eat. The introduction in the booklet issued on Villefranche, Naples, and Augusta concludes:

In World War II, as in all past wars, the Mediterranean played its part, our first victories being achieved in this area. The North African campaigns paved the way for our re-entry of Europe through Sicily and Italy.

Now in these post-war days it again is of vital interest to us. While we are here let us learn much from their culture and traditions and in return demonstrate to these peoples a proper way of action — the real American way. We are ambassadors — let us act the part.

Some of the distinguished visitors who have been received aboard the *Des Moines* during her Mediterranean tours of duty have been Princess Elizabeth (now Queen of England) and her husband; the Governor of Malta; and many of the ambassadors of the countries the ship has visited. During her 1950 Mediterranean cruise General Dwight D. Eisenhower, then the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in Europe, boarded the *Des Moines* for a three-day inspection cruise.

Visiting strange historic ports is by no means the only work of the *Des Moines*. There is work aplenty in the Navy. While en route to the Mediterranean in 1952 the *Des Moines* participated in the large scale NATO Operation MAINBRACE, which took place in the North Atlantic Ocean, and which greatly displeased Joseph Stalin. During this exercise the *Des Moines* made her first trip across the Arctic Circle. That same year, while in the Mediterranean, the *Des Moines* took part in another NATO exercise, Operation LONGSTEP, with Turkish, French, British, and Italian ships.

Since her commissioning, the *Des Moines* has operated in the Caribbean on three previous occasions. She has undergone two training periods with the Fleet Training Command at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; conducted extensive shore bombardment exercises with the United States Marines at Culebra, Puerto Rico; and participated in the Second Fleet Maneuvers in the Caribbean in 1950. While in the Caribbean, the *Des Moines* visited Port-au-Prince, Haiti; St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands; and Ponce, Puerto Rico.

We left the *Des Moines* anchored at Guantanamo Bay and returned to the United States. She had demonstrated to us her superior fire power and proved herself one of the most powerful warships afloat — a worthy namesake of Iowa's capital.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN