

THE PALIMPSEST

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Navy Ship Nomenclature

Iowans unacquainted with Navy ways may wonder how ships flying the American flag are named. The Navy does not follow a haphazard but rather a definite pattern in ship nomenclature. For example, battleships are named after states; heavy and light cruisers after large cities; and destroyers after officers and enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps, Secretaries of the Navy, members of Congress, and inventors.

With the expansion of our Navy, in both type and numbers, during the twentieth century, ship nomenclature has become more complex. Thus, submarines are named after fish and marine creatures; aircraft carriers mostly after historical naval vessels or battles; mine sweepers and submarine rescue vessels after birds; gunboats and escort vessels after small cities; repair ships after mythological characters; submarine tenders after pioneers in submarine development and mythological characters; oilers after rivers; store and cargo ships after stars; destroyer tenders after natural areas of

the United States, i. e., mountain ranges and valleys; large seaplane tenders and escort carriers after sounds and bays; small seaplane tenders after bays, straits, and inlets; ammunition ships after volcanoes and ingredients of explosives; transports after flag officers, general officers, and officers of the Marine Corps; attack transports and attack cargo ships after counties; coastal mine sweepers after abstract qualities; ocean-going tugs after Indian chiefs and words of the Indian dialect. Although "occasional exceptions" will be found to this system, according to *Jane's Fighting Ships*, the exceptions are surprisingly few.

The United States Navy was a force to conjure with when Japan surrendered aboard the battleship *Missouri* on August 14, 1945. Speaking at a dinner in his honor after VJ-Day in New York City, Admiral William F. Halsey declared:

As a combat commander, at the other end of an 8000-mile fighting line, I saw the Pacific war in all its fighting phases, both from command and from operations. America had more than 90,000 vessels of all types riding the high seas or waiting cargoes in the world's ports. The United States Navy was the most powerful in the history of the world. Twenty-three modern battleships, twenty-eight large, fast carriers, more than seventy escort carriers, hundreds of heavy and light cruisers and swift destroyers — the strongest and best balanced fleet that ever sailed the seas.

In contrast Halsey observed that Japan could muster only one battleship, damaged; four aircraft

carriers, damaged; two heavy cruisers, damaged; and less than two dozen usable destroyers.

These were the remnants of her once-powerful navy, a fleet at one time composed of 451 warships, a fleet that had to be driven from the seas before we could get at the heart of her empire. Of the 332 enemy warships destroyed by Allied attack and by accident, 257 — almost four out of five of those "kills" — were accomplished by submarines, carrier planes or surface units of the United States Navy that extinguished the naval power of Japan.

Cooperating with the Navy in providing suitable names for the hundreds of vessels under construction in American shipyards were highly trained historical agencies throughout the nation. Early in World War II, for example, the State Historical Society of Iowa was called upon to furnish the Navy and War Shipping Administration with names of Iowa cities, towns, counties, streams, historical personalities, Indian names, etc., for the steady stream of ships that were sliding down marine ways on the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Gulf, the Great Lakes, the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Ohio, and their tributaries. Before the war ended, ships bearing Iowa names were sailing the seven seas performing heroically to bring about ultimate victory. The story of ships named for Iowa cities since Spanish-American War days forms a dramatic chapter in the contributions of Iowa to United States naval history.

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