



CHICAGO DIED HARD

THIS CRUISER COVERED ITSELF IN GLORY DURING THE EARLY DAYS OF WORLD WAR TWO. HOWEVER, HER DESTRUCTION WAS CAUSED BY A SERIES OF INCOMPETENT COMMANDERS

BY JOHN LAUDERMILK

“Coming right at you, they looked monstrous,” recalled Frank Garringer as he remembered the Mitsubishi Betty bombers roaring in at wave top as they rushed in to drop their torpedoes at the USS *Chicago*. His ship possessed a special significance for Garringer: He had requested posting there as she was named for his hometown. “Those bombers had plenty of gunners, too. Lots of strafing going on.”

As gun captain of an open 5-inch mount lacking protective armor, he remembered that vividly. His gunners and the rest of the crew fought off repeated attacks for a night and a day before *Chicago* went down fighting. On 30 January 1943, the battered cruiser finally sank after stopping six Japanese torpedoes during the Battle of Rennell Island.

The heavy cruiser USS *Chicago* (CA-29) was a *Washington*-class cruiser built at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard under the supervision of Naval constructor Charles W. Fisher Jr. An estimated 20,000 spectators cheered as Miss Elizabeth Britten smashed a bottle of champagne across its bow on 10 April 1930, but official representation from the ship’s namesake city was sparse — one alderman and an assistant corporation counsel.

Statewide elections two days earlier had



A 1943 jacket patch for *Chicago*.

apparently pre-empted political interest. Later, however, the city did present the traditional gift of a formal silver service embellished with local scenes. It had originally belonged to the old protected cruiser *Chicago* built in 1885.

Unlike city politicians, the Navy was interested. The 1922 Treaty of Washington had halted battleship construction for a decade and started an arms race in cruisers. At the urging of “Big Navy” advocates such as Chicago Republican Fred A. Britten, Elizabeth’s brother and Chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee, President Calvin Coolidge grudgingly authorized the six-ship *Northampton*-class. (Lead ship of the class was named in honor of Northampton, Massachusetts, which, by some coincidence, was the president’s home town.) Built with extra accommodation to serve as a flagship, *Chicago* was the largest of the six.

She measured 600-ft 3-in long, had an extreme beam of 66-ft 1-in, and a mean draft of 16-ft 8-in. Designed to meet the treaty limitation of 10,000-tons, her displacement of 9300-

USS *Chicago* (CA-29) on 31 May 1934 as the cruiser was underway off New York City for Fleet Review. Commissioned on 9 March 1931, the ship’s main battery consisted of nine eight-inch guns and four five-inch weapons.