

CHICAGO'S FINAL FIGHT

The heroic crew of USS Chicago fought everything the enemy threw at them. However, they also had to fight a treacherous captain

BY JOHN LAUDERMILK

Dramatic view of USS Chicago at full steam while taking part in Fleet exercises during the early 1930s. Note the four Vought observation biplanes on their mounts. The cruiser was powered by eight White-Forster boilers with four Parsons reduction steam turbines, capable of 107,000 shaft horsepower that could drive her at a top speed of 32.7 knots. At 15 knots, she had a range of 10,000 miles.

“Coming right at you, they looked monstrous,” Frank Garringer remembered the twin-engine Mitsubishi Betty bombers nearly skimming the wave tops as they rushed in to drop their torpedoes at the Chicago. The ship possessed a special significance for Garringer: He had requested posting aboard her since she was named for his hometown. “Those Betty bombers also had plenty of gunners. Lots of strafing was going on.”

As gun captain of an open five-inch mount lacking protective armor, he recalled that fact vividly. His gunner and the rest of the crew fought off repeated attacks for a night and day some 77 years ago 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 launched on 10 April 1930 at Mare Island Navy Yard near San Francisco. An estimated 20,000 spectators cheered as Miss Elizabeth Britten smashed a bottle of champagne across its bow, but official representation from the ship’s namesake city was sparse — one alderman and an assistant corporation counsel. Statewide elections two days earlier had apparently pre-

empted political interest. Later, however, the city did present the traditional gift of a formal silver service embellished with local scenes. The service had originally belonged to the old protected cruiser Chicago that was completed 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 accommodations to serve as a flagship, Chicago was the largest of the six.

She measured 600 feet three inches overall length, had an extreme beam of some 66 feet one inch and a mean draft of 16 feet eight inches. Designed to meet the treaty limitation of 10,000 tons, her displacement of 9300 tons was achieved by using some welding in the place of rivets, making Chicago the first American warship to employ this technique. This also initially classified her as a light cruiser (CL-29) because of the thin armor utilized to meet the requirements. However, on 1 July 1931 Chicago was redesignated as a heavy cruiser (CA-29), because of her eight-inch guns and this was in accordance with the London Treaty of 1930.

Her top speed was 32.5 knots. A complement of 45 officers and 576 enlisted men

manned nine eight-inch weapons in three turrets, four five-inch guns in single, open mounts and a pair of triple 21-inch torpedo tubes. Light anti-aircraft guns would replace torpedoes six years later. Four catapult-launched float planes were stored amidship. For protection, the cruiser’s decks were covered with up to two inches of armor. Three inches fortified her sides and half that width plated the turrets. Commissioned the following year, she became flagship of Commander-Cruisers, Scouting Force, and of Cruiser Division 5, with San Pedro, California, her normal home port throughout the 1930s.

In 1934, the annual Fleet exercises were held in the Caribbean, followed in May 1934 by the Presidential Fleet Review in New York Harbor. The Scouting Force operated along the east coast and in the Caribbean until October of that year and then returned to San Pedro. Chicago was one of six ships to receive the new RCA CXAM radar in 1940 and this would soon prove to be a very important feature. Chicago continued to operate out of San Pedro until 29 September 1940, when she sailed to Pearl Harbor.

For the next 14 months, the cruiser operated out of Pearl, exercising with various task forces to develop tactics and cruising formations, and cruising to Australia and the West Coast.

By decade’s end, the world was marching toward war. Frank Garringer, not quite 20, enlisted in the Navy shortly after Hitler’s invasion of Poland and he did this for personal reasons. Working for an appliance distributor in Chicago’s downtown Loop district, he enjoyed a window facing Lake Michigan. “One day I saw the old Wilmette [formerly the ill-fated cruise ship Eastland] dock at Navy Pier with all the guys decked out in dress uniforms.

That looked pretty neat. Besides, I wanted to travel.”

Another Chicago area man, 18-year-old Donald “Gabby” Ryan, signed up for \$21 a month in September 1940 at the suggestion of his father, a Navy veteran of the Spanish-American War. Ryan, too, went to the cruiser Chicago but, unlike Garringer, his assignment fell to chance.