

# FIRST TO DIE

A MONTH BEFORE PEARL HARBOR, THE AGING DESTROYER  
USS REUBEN JAMES WOULD FALL VICTIM TO A MARAUDING U-BOAT

BY WILLIAM B. MUELLER

She was an old 1920s flush deck, four stack destroyer that was named for one of the authentic heroes of the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods. Like her sisters, she was long and narrow, getting up to almost 30 knots when the occasion demanded. She had 16 different captains during her lifetime and as many different crews. When she was laid down in 1919, she was the latest in destroyers; when she was blown out of the water in 1941, she was an antique, yet *Reuben James*, or "The Rube" as she was nicknamed, was still a fighting ship with a fighting crew.

DD-245 was the number assigned to the destroyer that was built at the

New York Shipbuilding Corporation yard in Camden, New Jersey, in just six months in 1919. Commander Gordon W. Haines took command of the vessel on her commissioning on 24 September 1920. With five other officers and 95 sailors she sailed into the Atlantic.

In 18 days she made the trip from Newport, Rhode Island to Zelenika, Yugoslavia, where she spent the next year cruising the Adriatic and Mediterranean Seas. Recently liberated from the yoke of the Imperial German Empire, the Balkan area of the Mediterranean was still crowded with refugees needing assistance which *Reuben James* provided.

One of her next, and most important, assignments came when the body of the Unknown Soldier was departing from LeHavre, France. She participated in the ceremonies there and then departed for Danzig where she remained until February 1922. Again she was called on to provide relief to the victims of the

First World War by assisting the American Relief Administration in distributing food and clothing.

From July 1922 until July 1931, *Reuben James* was stationed at New York. She was on patrol most of this time in Atlantic and Mediterranean waters. In early 1926, she was called on to set up a blockade on the Nicaraguan coast to prevent gun runners from bringing arms to the revolutionaries who were trying to topple the pro-American government. The year 1929 saw her participate in the Spring Fleet Maneuvers where the concept of the aircraft carrier strike force with its attendant screen of destroyers was worked out and made a part of US Naval Strategy.

*Reuben James* was out of commission from 20 January 1931 until 9 March 1932 for a period of well-deserved rest for the twelve-

year-old destroyer.

Back in commission, *Reuben James* patrolled her usual haunts in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. She was called upon once again to provide counterrevolutionary assistance to the Cuban government from September 1933 until January 1934. After this period of excitement she returned to Norfolk to await her next assignment.

"To the Pacific," read ship's orders in October 1934. She made San Diego her home port, cruising the Pacific for the next four-plus years. These blue water cruises gave commanders and crews experience in the screening of aircraft carriers which were to become such a vital part of naval grand strategy during the Second World War.

By early 1939, war clouds were gathering in Europe. Hitler was being appeased. The Germans were on the move. *Reuben James* returned to the Atlantic seaboard since war was threatening both Europe and the security of the Eastern Coast. She went on many training cruises.

When Germany invaded Poland in



An old ship trying to keep up with the times, *Reuben James* mounted a 3-inch gun over the after deckhouses and twin depth charge tracks angled off the fantail. Also note towing booms port and starboard under the ship's name and the maze of rigging on fore and aft masts. The photo was taken on 30 November 1939 after the embarrassing incident when the destroyer ran aground at Lobos Cay, Cuba.

September 1939, *Reuben James* was assigned to the newly created Neutrality Patrol. Her first bad luck occurred during one of these patrols, off the northern coast of Cuba. Her captain, L/Cmdr. E.V. Sherman, a regular Navy officer, somehow was unaware of the treacherous shoals near Lobos Cay. *Reuben James*, at slightly less than standard speed, grounded on the last day of November just before noon. Somewhat embarrassed, Capt. Sherman called for a fleet tug to assist her. She was moved off the shoal before nightfall. She had to return to the New York Navy Yard to be repaired and overhauled since the grounding had torn up the relatively

soft hull and internal bracing under the machinery spaces.

In the summer of 1940, when pacifists were on the move to try to keep President Roosevelt from any actions which would bring the United States into the European war, *Reuben James* was once again ready to take up her station on the Atlantic seaboard.

The destroyer was now commanded by Lt. Heywood L. Edwards, a regular Navy officer. He took command of the ship as she was undergoing repairs on 6 April 1940. When he wasn't overseeing the work on the ship, he was working out in one of the local gyms since



When torpedoed, *Reuben James* had a crew of seven officers, 136 enlisted men, and one enlisted passenger. Only 44 enlisted men survived the sinking.