

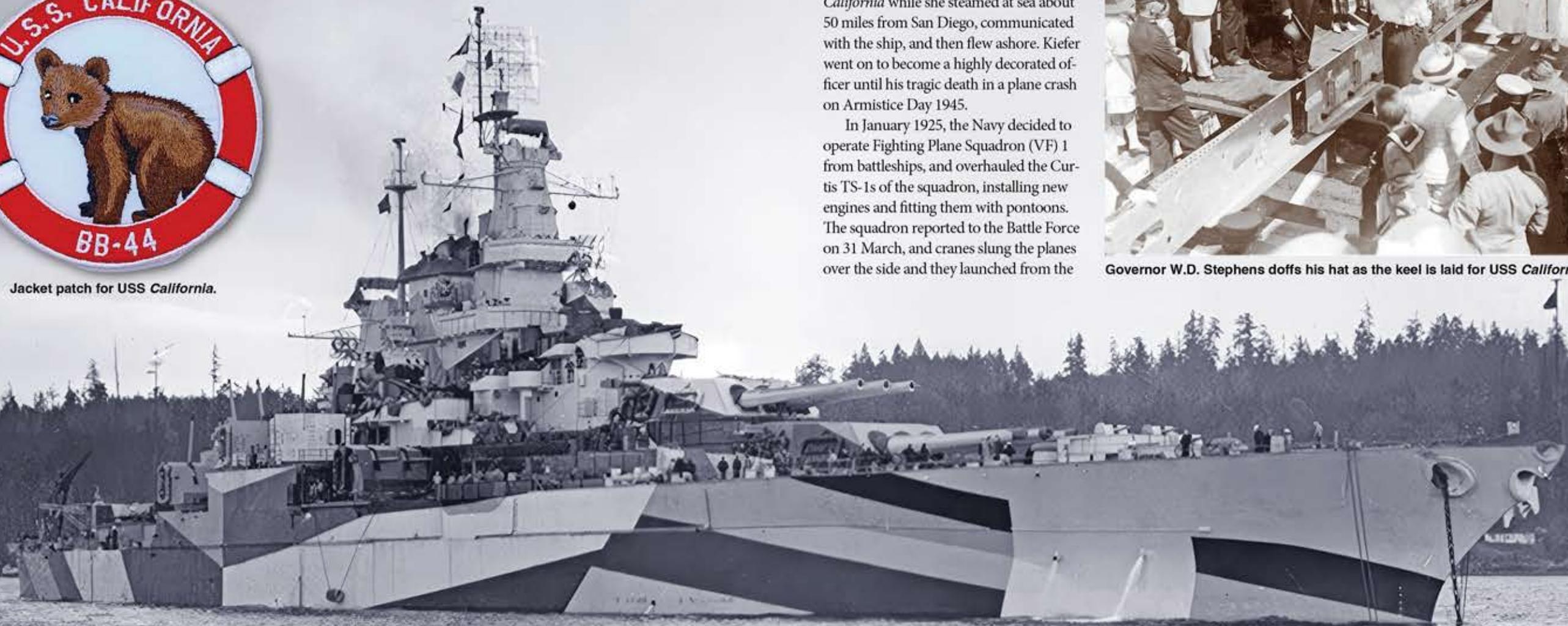
BATTLEWAGON!

THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF USS CALIFORNIA — THE BATTLESHIP THE JAPANESE NEARLY DESTROYED AT PEARL HARBOR BUT WOULD COME BACK TO LIFE AS THE ENEMY'S WORST NIGHTMARE

BY JERRY FIELDS



Jacket patch for USS California.



The fifth *California* (Battleship No. 44) was launched on 20 November 1919 at Vallejo, California, by Mare Island Navy Yard; sponsored by Mrs. Barbara S. Zane, daughter of Governor William D. Stephens of California; redesignated as BB-44 on 17 July 1920; and commissioned on 10 August 1921, Capt. Henry J. Ziegemeier in command. For 20 years, from 1921 to 1941, *California* served first as flagship of the Pacific Fleet, then as flagship of the Battle Fleet Battle Force, US Fleet. Her annual activities included joint Army-Navy exer-

cises, tactical and organizational development problems, and fleet concentrations for various purposes.

Lieutenant Dixie Kiefer made the first night takeoff in an airplane from a ship when he launched from *California* in San Diego Harbor on 11 November 1924. Kiefer was born in Blackfoot, Idaho, on 4 April 1896, and graduated from the Naval Academy in 1918. "Good-natured, impulsive, generous," the academy's annual, *The Lucky Bag* described the young man, "he makes friends everywhere, and when he gets the ordeal of reporting aboard

ship over with, he will make a good officer and, in an emergency, mighty fine ballast." Kiefer became a naval aviator and served with Observation Squadron (VO) 2 during the event. A full moon lighted the night, and officers in dress blue uniforms swarmed around the catapult and Kiefer's plane, a Vought UO-1 (BuNo A-6494). The ship trained her searchlights on a dredge about 1000 yards away to illuminate the area of the launch, and at 2146 the plane hurtled into the night. The pilot relied on the moon light when he "landed" in the water.

Ready for vengeance, USS California (BB-44) emerges from Puget Sound during January 1944.

Bureau of Aeronautics Weekly News Letter No. 76 of 24 November 1924 observed that "the shot was a success in every respect and illustrates the degree of expertness in handling catapults on shipboard which has been obtained since this development was incorporated in battleship installations during the last two years." He repeated the operation at 2300 on 13 November, and the following day launched from *California* while she steamed at sea about 50 miles from San Diego, communicated with the ship, and then flew ashore. Kiefer went on to become a highly decorated officer until his tragic death in a plane crash on Armistice Day 1945.

In January 1925, the Navy decided to operate Fighting Plane Squadron (VF) 1 from battleships, and overhauled the Curtis TS-1s of the squadron, installing new engines and fitting them with pontoons. The squadron reported to the Battle Force on 31 March, and cranes slung the planes over the side and they launched from the



Governor W.D. Stephens doffs his hat as the keel is laid for USS California.



The keel laying of USS California attracted many spectators from the area.