

Brownsville's Forgotten Namesake

Norman Rozeff, Revised May 2008

With more than a half-century since its end, World War II is quickly becoming a distant memory. Most surviving WWII veterans are now in their 80s. It should not be surprising then that Valleyites have forgotten about one particular Brownsville-WWII connection. It is the *USS Brownsville* (PF-10). PF stands for patrol frigate, a class of ship originally designated as PG or patrol gunship. The *Brownsville* was one of 96 Tacoma Class frigates constructed. Seventy-four of these served in the US Navy while 21 were loaned to the Royal Navy. All the American ships were named after middle-size cities. In addition to Brownsville other Texas cities honored were Abilene, Corpus Christi, El Paso, and Orange. The design for these vessels was based on that for the British River class frigate, but the US ships had a pole foremast rather than a tripod design and smaller guns than their British counterparts. Furthermore they were built to mercantile standards resulting in a weaker vessel but which enabled them to be assembled quickly by Maritime Commission shipyards rather than Navy shipyards.



The *Brownsville* had its keel laid on September 14, 1943 at Richmond, CA by the contractor Kaiser Cargo, Inc. This was but one of the firms ruled at the time by Henry Kaiser, the forceful, successful, and ambitious industrialist. The hull was launched on November 14, 1943 under the sponsorship of 29-year old Lillian Runyon Gurney. She was the oldest child of Robert and Amelia Medrano Runyon. Her father was the famed photographer, botanist, and at the time completing his second term as Mayor of Brownsville.

After additional outfitting the ship was commissioned on May 6, 1944 with Commander Hollis M. Warner, USCG, in command. Additional work at Richmond, CA lasted until June 19 after which the ship and crew headed south to San Diego for a month's shakedown cruise. This is when the ship is put through its paces to see if it has any problems and is up to its specifications. It also serves as a training period for its new crew. After returning to Alameda and Oakland for repairs and modifications the *Brownsville* then reported for duty at San Diego on 28 September. At right are shipmates of James E. White aboard the *USS Brownsville*. (Picture is thumbnail, Click on it to enlarge.)



The ship had a displacement of 1,430 tons when light and 2,415 when full. It was 303' 11" in length, had a beam of 37' 6", and a draft of 13' 8". Three oil-fired boilers provided power for the two 5,500 shaft horse power turbines driving the twin propellers. This generated a top speed of 20 knots. The ships complement was 190 Coast Guardsmen. While a frigate was fast and maneuverable, its narrow beam meant it rolled unpleasantly in rough seas.

For armament the ship was outfitted with three 3 in/50mm anti-aircraft guns, four 40mm Bofors guns, nine 20mm guns, one hedgehog projector (this fired stubby anti-submarine missiles from the bow), eight Y-gun depth charge projectors, and two depth charge racks. Having served as Gunnery Officer on a Coast Guard cutter having a 3in/50 and hedgehogs, I can attest that neither one was very quick, reliable, or accurate.

Assigned to the Commander Western Sea Frontier, the *Brownsville* served in the Southern California Sector from September 1944 to April 1945. It conducted barrier patrols and escorted coastal shipping. It also participated in amphibious landing training and anti-submarine warfare exercises.

After April 1945 the ship was assigned to the Northern California Sector. It briefly patrolled the entrance to San Francisco Bay then began weather patrols and plane guard duties until April 15, 1946. This latter is when a ship is assigned to accompany an aircraft carrier to pick up any air crewmen who may have crashed or ditched during operations.

In April 1946 the *Brownsville* was decommissioned and turned over to the Coast Guard on loan. She then became the *USCGC Brownsville*. On August 2, 1946 she was decommissioned again and returned to the Navy. Then declared surplus to Navy needs she was berthed in Seattle for more than a year. Her name was struck from the Navy list on September 25, 1946. She was sold to the Franklin Shipwrecking Company on September 30, 1947 for scrapping. So ended her short history.

One officer who served aboard the *Brownsville* was Alabama native Helmer Sheppard Pearson. He was a 1941 graduate of the US Coast Guard Academy. Rising to the rank of rear admiral he served for over 30 years, retiring in 1974.

Of the 563 destroyer escorts that served during WWII there is only one that has been restored to its working status. It took 10 years to bring the *USS Slater* back into shipshape. This vessel is now moored on the Hudson River at Albany, NY.

It is not without irony that Port Brownsville would become the graveyard for numerous other Navy ships both famous and not. Here shipwrecking became a major enterprise. Some of the firms operating at the port over the years have included All Star Metals, Inc ; International Shipbreakers Ltd.; Marine Metals; ESCO Marine Salvage; and Andy International. Some of the US Navy ships to see their last days at the port were: the USS Des Moines—the last heavy cruiser afloat; Cabot (CVL28)—an historic light aircraft carrier; Preble, Cochrane, Gridley, Tattnell, Sterett (DDGs, guided missile armed destroyers); Leahy, Farragut, England (all DLGs, Leahy-class destroyers); Roark (DE1053) and Francis Hammond (DE 1067), destroyer escorts; Fulton (AS11, troopship); Spiegel Grove (LSD32, Thomaston-class dock landing ship); Hewitt, Moosebrugger (DDs, Spruance-class destroyers); Santa Barbara (AE28, ammunition ship); Puget Sound (AD38, destroyer tender); Yukon, Aldebaran (AFs, store ships); Neosho, Marias, Caloosahatchee (AOs, oilers); Admiral Hugh Rodman (AP126, troop transport); Protector (AGR11, liberty ship); York County (LST1175, De Soto County-class tank landing ship); Jason (AR8, repair ship); Iwo Jima (LPH2, landing assault craft); Neptune (ARC2, cable ship); Albemarle (AV5, seaplane tender); Northampton CC1, heavy cruiser); Donner (LSD20, dock landing ship famed for picking up astronaut Chimp, Ham); San Diego (ASF6, combat support supply ship); USS Pvt. Jose F. Valdez (TAG169), a cargo transport and later a technical research ship launched as the Joe P. Martinez then renamed the Round Splice, and many others from the Ghost Fleet. Martinez was the first Hispanic awarded the Medal of Honor in WWII. From New Mexico, he died in the Aleutian Island chain. Valdez was also a Medal of Honor recipient from New Mexico. He was killed in France.

One special ship that saw its last days in Brownsville after being returned to the Navy in Delaware was the 802-bed hospital ship USS Consolation (AH15). Launched in 1945 this hospital ship was to see much of her duty in the Far East. After her military service she was re-christened the SS Hope and, from 1960 to 1974 manned by civilians, she participated in 11 cruises to all parts of the world and provided humanitarian medical aid wherever she docked or anchored.

There were 2710 Liberty cargo ships built at US shipyards in the years 1941-45, easily the largest number of ships with a single design. It is natural then that the Brownsville yards would demolish more of these types of vessels than any other. Most were reclaimed for scrap in the years 1970-73. The names of them honored many famous Americans including poets, statesman, inventors, and more. The list of those seeing their last days in Port Brownsville include:

Abigail Adams
Adoniram Judson
Alexander H. Stephens
Alfred J. Evans
Aram J. Pothier

Art Young
Carlos Findlay
Charles W. Wooster
David Gaillard
Edward E. Spofford

Edward R. Squibb
Edward Richardson
Eli Whitney
Frank Flowers
George McMillan

Hannibal Hamlin
Hannis Taylor
Harry L. Glucksman
Henry D. Thoreau
Henry J. Raymond

Henry T. Rainey
Henry W. Grady
Isaac Mayer Wise
Jacques Laramie
James B. Duke

James Bowie
Jerry S. Foley
Louis Sloss

Lucy Stone
Matthew Thornton

Nathaniel Silsbee
Oliver Hazard Perry
Pierre S. Dupont
Ransome A. Moore
Rudolph Kauffman

Russell A. Alger
Thomas Sim Lee
Vachel Lindsay
Walt Whitman
Warren P. Marks

William Blout
William Crane Gray
William Floyd
William H. Aspinwall
William Wheelwright

While the *Brownsville* met a sad ending, history was kinder to other frigates in her class. Late in the war 28 were loaned to Russia in preparation for the invasion of Japan. These were returned in 1949 with the exception of one that was shipwrecked in Siberia. With the end of the war, others were sold to friendly nations such as Mexico, Peru, South Korea, France, Greece, Taiwan, and at the time Cuba. The last one was sold in 1953. Some of the dependable frigates, with a remarkable cruising range of 9,800 miles, were re-commissioned during the Korean conflict and saw service there protecting coastlines. Now they, the *Brownsville*, and the many crewmen who served on them are to be remembered.

Addendum

The growing world economy, and especially that of China, has put pressure on natural resources. In the Spring of 2008, steel costs around \$300 a ton. As a result the price paid for scrap metals has sharply escalated in recent years. This has allowed the federal Government under its US Maritime Administration to rid itself of some surplus ships now in the "Ghost Fleets" anchored in the James River, Newport News, VA, Beaumont, TX, and Suisun Bay, Benica, CA. Certain obsolete ships will actually be purchased by commercial firms for dismantling in an environmentally manner.

International Shipbreaking, Ltd. recently purchased the 42-year old Beaumont-stored USS Adonis (ARL-4, a liquid bulk tanker) for \$1,151,727 and paid \$173,297 for Virginia-stored Cape Catawba and Cape Canaveral, both breakbulk freighters built in the 1960s, and the USNS Buyer, a breakbulk vessel. These ships will be towed to Port Brownsville for their final disposal. International Shipbreaking which currently has a workforce of 140 at the Port will likely hire an additional 100 to handle the increased tasks.

While the U.S. Maritime Administration accepts bids for its old ships the U.S. Navy cannot. In 2008 it turned over the USS Puget Sound to Esco Marine, Inc. for a token one cent. In April 2008 scrap metal prices escalated to the record level of \$502.50 per gross ton for "No. 1 heavy melt." Just last year the average price for this category was \$254 and in 2001 when the Maritime Commission was struggling to reduce its inventory the price was \$75. In 1997 the Navy had about 200 ships to dispose of and now 15 are designated for scrapping. In April 2008 six ships—two Navy and four Maritime Commission were in various stages of dismantling at Esco at Port Brownsville. In their final stage winches pull the stripped hulls into earthen slips within the reach of cutters' torches. Monstrous shredders cut steel pieces into manageable size. Most of the ferrous scrap is then loaded into barges and transported to domestic steel mills in Beaumont, New Orleans, and Mobile.