

# NAVY BIRTHDAY

## Podcast Script

Hello and welcome to DE Classified, a podcast showcasing the history of destroyer escorts in World War 2. My name is Liam Mitchell, and I know what you must be thinking: didn't this guy just do last week's episode? Why is he back again? Well, you are correct: last week I hosted our episode all about USS Eldridge and the mysteries that surrounded it. I also hosted our second episode all about USS Mitchell. Today though, I'd like to take the podcast in a little bit of a different direction with a special episode; instead of discussing another DE, we'll be taking a look at the legendary history of the United States Navy itself. For those that don't know, today, October 13th, marks the 246th birthday of the Navy. In those years, the Navy has gone from a fledgling collection of frigates to the most powerful navy the world has ever seen. We'll discuss how exactly that happened, from the development of ships to the progression of naval technology and the commanders that made it all possible.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary Age, the rebellious colonies did not have one centralized Navy to fortify their ports against British attacks. As I'm sure you know, the legendary British Royal Navy was the most powerful navy in the world at that point, Patriot merchant ships could do little to defend themselves from the constant harassment and aggression. In June 1775, Rhode Island became the first colony to create their own Navy; they soon recognized, however, that the colonies needed one centralized Navy under a unified command and funded by the Continental Congress. On October 13th, 1775, the Second Continental Congress passed a resolution to create what they called the Continental Navy; the resolution read:

“Resolved, That a swift sailing vessel, to carry ten carriage guns, and a proportionable number of swivels, with eighty men, be fitted, with all possible despatch, for a cruise of three months, and that the commander be instructed to cruise eastward, for intercepting such transports

as may be laden with warlike stores and other supplies for our enemies, and for such other purposes as the Congress shall direct.

That a committee of three be appointed to prepare an estimate of the expense, and lay the same before the Congress, and to contract with proper persons to fit out the vessel. Resolved, that another vessel be fitted out for the same purposes, and that the said committee report their opinion of a proper vessel, and also an estimate of the expense.”

With the passage of this resolution for two ships, the United States Navy was born. Later, in December 1775, the Continental Congress approved the construction of an additional thirteen frigates, and in early 1776, General Benedict Arnold ordered the construction of 12 vessels to slow the British fleet invading New York from Canada. Admittedly, the effectiveness of this Continental Navy was severely lacking; while they were able to battle with the Royal Navy on a number of occasions, they were simply no match for the mighty Royal Navy, and desperately needed all the help they could get. By 1781, nearly all American ships had been captured or sunk by the British. Still, American sailors learned much from their time fighting in the Revolution, and gained valuable insight from their French compatriots who fought alongside them. Indeed, the patriot victory at Yorktown was only possible due to the formidable French Navy and their success over the British in the Battle of the Virginia Capes.

Unfortunately, the Navy went into a period of disarmament after victory in the revolution. By 1785, the Continental Navy was disbanded and any surviving ships were sold. This was due to a number of factors; first, the fledgling United States were held together only by a loose Confederation, and each state largely valued their independence from one another. Second, early American leaders favored moving the United States away from a position of war to a position of peace, and so deemed a Navy unnecessary. Perhaps most importantly, though, was a simple lack of money; establishing a new country is expensive work, and Congress simply didn't have the funds necessary to sustain a well-armed navy.

As a result, American merchant ships were left vulnerable to attacks both abroad and off the coast of the United States, culminating in the capture of 11 American ships and more than 100 sailors by the Barbary Pirates in 1793. Finally, in 1794, Congress debated and approved the

Naval Act of 1794, which recreated the American Navy and authorized the construction of six frigates, named United States, President, Constellation, Chesapeake, Congress, and Constitution; after a treaty with the Barbary Pirates, an amendment to the act was passed and three frigates were finally constructed: United States, Constitution, and Constellation. These frigates would form the foundation of the Navy we now know today. Constitution was the first of the frigates to be launched, in 1797; nicknamed “Old Ironsides,” the Constitution survives to this day as an active duty vessel, moored in Boston Harbor and open for tours.

The 1790’s brought the first test of American naval effectiveness in the Quasi-War with France. When the United States chose to remain neutral in the British-French hostilities of the time, the French government took this as a violation of the Treaty of Alliance of 1778 and began to capture American ships. By 1797, over 300 American merchant vessels had been seized by the French. Newly inaugurated President John Adams worked with Congress to secure funding for the completion of the three frigates, as well as additional funding to begin construction on further ships deemed necessary in a time of war.

The Quasi-War with France was fought almost entirely at sea, and saw many great victories for the infant Navy; on July 7, 1798, USS Delaware achieved the first victory for the United States Navy when she captured French privateer ship *Le Croyable*; on February 9, 1799, USS Constellation achieved the first victory over an enemy warship by capturing French frigate *L’Insurgente*. The turn of the 19th century brought peace with France, and the outgoing Federalist government quickly moved to establish a peacetime Navy. Although not as large as they would’ve liked, the Federalists were able to keep six frigates in active service, and the rest were sold or scrapped.

The following administration saw a massive decrease in the size of the Navy, as President Thomas Jefferson and the Democrat-Republicans favored a small, coastal Navy comprised of gunboats rather than a large force of frigates. This strategy proved disastrous, however, when the Royal Navy began forcing American sailors into service for the Crown; between 1799 and 1812, an estimated 10,000 American sailors were forced into the Royal Navy, resulting in increased tensions with the United Kingdom. HMS *Leopard* demanded that USS *Chesapeake* submit to inspection; when they refused, *Leopard* severely damaged *Chesapeake*. This would be one of

many encounters that would increase tensions between the two countries, finally culminating in the US declaration of war on Britain in June 1812.

The War of 1812 brought numerous victories for the US Navy, albeit against long odds; at the outset of the war, the Royal Navy outnumbered the US Navy 50 ships to 1. Still, American sailors rose to the task and defended our nation's sovereignty valiantly. USS Constitution would defeat HMS Guerriere in September 1812 off Nova Scotia, Canada; in December 1812, Constitution would defeat HMS Java off the coast of Brazil. In October 1812, USS United States captured HMS Macedonian, with Macedonian then being entered into American service. USS Essex captured HMS Alert in 1812, and in 1813 conducted an incredibly successful raiding campaign in the South Pacific against British merchant ships. Over the course of this raiding campaign, Essex would capture 15 British merchantmen; this finally prompted the British to take action, finally capturing Essex with HMS Cherub and HMS Phoebe in the Battle of Valparaiso, Chile.

After the war of 1812 finally came to a close in 1814, the United States was on firm footing and its Navy was now experienced and recognized as necessary to the security of the country. Congress was able to better fund the Navy, resulting in the construction of many frigates and sloops. By the 1840s, the Age of Sail had all but passed, and the Navy began implementing steam powered engines and shell-based ammunition on board its ships - albeit at a slower rate than the British and French navies.

These years also saw victories for the Navy, as well as improvements to how the Navy itself is operated. Victory in the Second Barbary War brought great experience to many sailors, which in turn would aid the Navy in its role during the Mexican-American War, where over 12,000 men were transported by the Navy to Veracruz, Mexico. This invasion force would go on to capture Mexico City and end the war.

By this time, however, there were growing concerns regarding officer training within the Navy. Midshipmen had few opportunities for promotion, and some sailors even mutinied in the ill-fated Somers Affair of 1842. This scandal motivated George Bancroft, Secretary of the Navy, to circumvent Congressional approval and establish a new academy for officers. After creating a council led by Commodore Matthew Perry, they turned what was Fort Severn into what we now

know as the United States Naval Academy, in Annapolis, Maryland. Today, the Naval Academy instructs over 4,500 midshipmen, and many of America's most legendary commanders graduated from the academy.

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry undertook what is perhaps one of the most infamous voyages in American history. Now known as the Perry Expedition, the Commodore sailed his squadron of four ships directly into Tokyo Bay, a direct violation of Japan's isolationist policies. His ships were highly advanced for the time, being steam-powered; this display of force plus his calm diplomacy caused Japan to finally end its 300 year isolation from the rest of the world. The treaty they signed, known as the Treaty of Kanagawa, established friendly relations between Japan and the US for the very first time.

Now imagine this: the year is 1861, and South Carolina suddenly secedes from the Union after attacking Fort Sumter. Soon, almost every southern state joins them. If you're an American sailor from the South, what do you do? Do you remain loyal to the country and Navy that has always existed, or do you commit treason against the United States and join the Confederate Navy?

At the beginning of the war, 373 officers, warrant officers and midshipmen chose the latter option. They either resigned or were dismissed, and soon joined the fledgling Confederate Navy. The US Navy quickly burned all ships located at Norfolk Navy Yard, in order to stop the Confederates from capturing and enlisting the new, powerful ships moored there. While most of the ships were destroyed, USS Merrimack, a screw frigate, was scuttled too quickly and therefore left largely intact. The Confederates seized this opportunity; they raised her from the bay, armoring her hull with iron plates, and renamed her CSS Virginia. Around the same time, Swedish-American inventor John Stockton received funding for and designed the first ironclad warship with a rotating gun turret for the US Navy. Named the USS Monitor, it would serve as the basis and prototype for what is known as the monitor warship, which would be used heavily during the Civil War to enforce the Union blockade of the South.

The first naval battle between ironclad ships occurred on March 8th, 1862, when CSS Virginia attacked the Union blockade. USS Monitor would attack back, and the ensuing battle would last over two days and ultimately end in a draw. This event marked the official beginning

of the age of ironclad warships, specifically the beginning of the transition from wooden hulled ships to the impressive steel ships we know today.

Interestingly, many naval technologies used today have their modern origins in the Civil War. Introduced by the Confederacy in 1862, the naval mine was used by the Confederacy to protect their ports from the Union blockage. Known to them as spar torpedoes, the mines were attached to a long pole and would be rammed into an enemy ship, detonating upon impact. The first ship sunk by a mine was USS Cairo, sinking in 1862 in the Yazoo River, Louisiana. Around the same time, precursors to the modern submarine were first deployed in combat roles. Although not capable of diving deep beneath the waves like our modern subs, these “torpedo boats”, as they were known, would take water into ballast tanks to force the boat just beneath the waves, with only the conning tower and boiler stack visible above the water. The first such boat was CSS David, and the Confederacy would build over 20 of these submersible vessels over the course of the Civil War.

Unfortunately, the Navy then went into another period of steep decline following the Civil War. In 1864, the Navy had over 51,000 men, over 700 ships and 60 monitor-class ironclads. By 1880, only 6,000 men remained, with only 40 ships in commission and all ironclads were laid up for repairs. Even the shore facilities and naval bases were becoming decrepit, with Congress deciding that it was not worth the expenditure to repair them.

When tensions began rising with Spain, Secretary of the Navy William H. Hunt finally requested additional funding from Congress to construct new warships. The first ships of the New Navy were collectively known as the ABCD ships; they were USS Atlanta, USS Boston, USS Chicago, and USS Dolphin — all protected cruisers. In 1885, the Congress also ordered the construction of the first battleships for the US Navy; known as USS Texas and USS Maine, this type of ship would become the driving power behind the US Navy around the world for the next 60 years. [[[Five years later, Congress would authorize three more battleships: USS Indiana, USS Massachusetts, and USS Oregon, followed the next year by USS Iowa.

In 1898, rising tensions with Spain led to open war following the explosion of USS Maine while in Havana, Cuba. This war marked a major turning point for the US Navy; they faced one of history’s most formidable navies, and would ultimately emerge triumphant. Led by

the legendary Admiral George Dewey, the Asiatic Squadron sailed from Hong Kong to the Philippines and decisively defeated the Spanish fleet there in the Battle of Manila Bay. George Dewey would attain the rank of Admiral of the Navy, and remains the only man in American history to achieve this rank.

During this war, there was one man that was the ultimate driving force behind the increase in naval power: Assistant Navy Secretary Theodore Roosevelt. When Roosevelt became President only 3 years later in 1901, he oversaw a massive industrialization and build up of the Navy. For the first time, the US Navy was the second largest Navy in the world, behind only the Royal Navy. Over the course of Roosevelt's presidency, the Navy would be used often to further his ambitions in the Caribbean and Central America. One infamous example is the construction of the Panama Canal; after Columbia failed to ratify the sale of the Isthmus of Panama to the United States, Roosevelt urged the Panamanians to revolt against Columbia. When they did, the US Navy blocked any interference by Columbia, ensuring independence for Panama. The US then gained control of the Panama Canal Zone; the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba was built the following year to protect American interests in the canal.

At the same time, the modern submarine finally began to evolve from the Civil War-era prototypes into the modern boats of the 20th century. Developed by John Philip Holland, the USS Holland became the first commissioned submarine in US Naval service in the fall of 1900. American continued the construction of the dreadnought battleships, with 16 battleships ready for war by 1907. This fleet, known as the "Great White Fleet", was a signal to the rest of the world that the United States was finally a formidable naval power; the fleet took a cruise around the world to showcase the technological advancements of the Navy, and many nations finally began taking American military might more seriously.

Despite this newfound size and power, the US Navy was relegated to a mostly supportive role during World War One. As the main focus of the war was in the trenches of the Western Front, the Navy was tasked with transporting millions of American soldiers and tons of supplies to France. Warships of the fleet saw little action; destroyers and other small escort ships were tasked with sinking German u-boats around the British Isles, and battleships aided the British Royal Navy in the largely uneventful blockade of German shipping lines in the North Sea.

One notable event occurred on November 17, 1917, when USS Fanning and USS Nicholson became the first US destroyers to sink an enemy submarine. While escorting merchant convoy OQ-20 across the Atlantic, a lookout spotted the periscope of U-58. The destroyers gave chase and dropped depth charges, damaging the sub and forcing them to surface. After a brief surface battle, the crew of the sub surrendered rather than face the reality of their sinking boat. 39 German sailors were captured and taken prisoner; Lieutenants Frank Berrien and Arthur Carpenter, commanders of the destroyers, each received the Navy Cross for their actions.

Over the course of the Great War, four US Navy ships were lost, only two of which were lost to enemy action. The first combat loss was USS Jacob Jones, a destroyer, sunk by U-53 while sailing to Ireland from France; the second combat loss was USS San Diego, an armored cruiser, sunk by an explosion on her port side below the water line while off the coast of Long Island, New York. To this day, it is unknown what exactly sank San Diego; Captain Harley H. Christy contended a torpedo must've been the cause, however no u-boats were spotted in the area. The best theory is that San Diego was sunk by a sea mine placed by U-156 a few weeks earlier. Regardless, six sailors were lost, and San Diego remained the only capital ship lost by the Navy during World War One.

The interwar period of the 1920's and 30's was a relatively quiet time for the Navy; no battles were fought and no ships were sunk. That does not mean that the Navy sat idle, though. During this time, the Navy rapidly built massive new battleships and updated older ones; this era also saw the introduction of the ship type most dominant in the world today: the aircraft carrier. By 1936, the United States operated 5 aircraft carriers, more than any other country in the world: these carriers were Saratoga, Lexington, Yorktown, Enterprise, and Wasp. Each one of these carriers would see action in the forthcoming Second World War, and play vital roles in some of history's greatest naval engagements.

1941 brought the date most well known to all military historians and naval history enthusiast: December 7th, 1941, the Japanese launched a surprise attack on the fleet stationed in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Some say that Japan was foolish in their decision-making, but the move was quite calculated: the American entrance into the war was all but certain, and the fledgling Japanese Empire would face an indestructible foe in the United States Navy. They calculated that



a preemptive strike on America's naval forces would temper America's growing power in the Pacific, leaving the Empire of Japan plenty of time to secure its footing across the region. Although the attack did not complete 100% of its objectives, it was extremely effective in meeting its goals and slowed the American response in the Pacific considerably. It would take almost a year for the Navy to recover its full strength and begin the push back against the Empire.

World War Two brings us our most heroic tales of American naval excellence, like the legendary Battle of Leyte Gulf in October of 1944. Considered by many historians to be the largest naval battle in human history, the American sailors spent 3 days repelling attacks from the combined Second, Third, and Fifth fleets of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Approximately 300 American ships took part in the assault, including 34 aircraft carriers of varying sizes, 12 battleships, 24 battleships, and 166 destroyers and destroyer escorts. By the end of the battle, approximately approximately 3,000 Americas sailors had been killed or gone missing, compared to 12,500 Japanese casualties. It was a massive victory for the US Navy, and would provide the staging ground for America's final push towards Japan and ultimate victory in World War Two.

This era also brings us some of our country's greatest naval commanders, names that many people will recognize from the countless films, books, and television shows made about the war. These commanders include Fleet Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, commander of the 3rd Fleet, victor of Guadalcanal and one of only 4 Americans to ever achieve the rank of Fleet Admiral; he would be joined in this distinction by Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet. In 1975, the lead ship in a new class of super carriers would be named in his honor; USS Nimitz remains in active service today.

Other notable commanders of World War 2 include Admiral Thomas Kincaid, commander of the 7th fleet, and victor of Leyte Gulf; Admiral Raymond Spruance, commander of Task Force 16 and victor of the Battle of Midway; in truth, there are hundreds of commanders and thousands of sailors who served with courage and distinction in history's greatest war, and naming them all would take far too long. Still, the United States owes an enormous debt to these heroic sailors who defended our freedom; it is a debt that cannot be repaid save for our immense gratitude.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not give a special shoutout to our beloved destroyer escorts of World War Two, whose legacy we carry with us here at the Destroyer Escort Historical Museum. Though small, lightly armed and a little too slow, DEs stepped up and performed exceptionally well, and ultimately played a pivotal role in many of the war's legendary engagements.

With the Allied victory in World War Two, the United States was now recognized as the world's foremost military power, and this fact is all thanks to the might of the US Navy. On V-J day in 1945, the Navy's size was larger than all other world navies combined; 70% of warships in the world were American, and at its peak the US Navy operated 6,768 ships simultaneously.

The rest of the 20th century brought more innovation, advancement, and testing for the Navy. The discovery of nuclear power radically changed naval propulsion systems, so much so that all aircraft carriers of the modern navy are nuclear powered. Due to this, the navy changed its tactical strategy in favor of forward deployment in support of US allies, with emphasis on carrier groups. The Navy would play an important role throughout the Cold War with the Soviet Union, with the blockade of Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis, involvement in the Vietnam War, and numerous operations throughout the 1980's and 90's in the Persian Gulf in support of land operations in the Middle East.

The United States Navy continues to impress its power upon the world in the 21st century, with allies around the world playing host to our ships and sailors. We remain larger, more advanced, and more powerful than any other nation on Earth, and our sailors continue in their courageous defense of American freedom. We owe our thanks and our respect to these men and women, without whom we would face a much weaker country. The strength of the United States and the strength of the navy are synonymous; we cannot have one without the other. As we push forward into the unknown future, let us honor the heroic sailors of our past, so as to better respect and admire the heroic sailors of the present.

Thank you for listening to DE Classified. This podcast is brought to you by the Destroyer Escort Historical Museum aboard USS Slater. You can find a transcript of this episode, accompanying photos and a bibliography at [usslater.org/de-classified](http://usslater.org/de-classified). Once again I'm Liam

Mitchell, and I hope you join us in two week's time for another special episode for Oxi Day, a celebration of Greek resistance in World War Two.