

USS Atherton Script - DE Classified

Hello and welcome to DE Classified, a podcast showcasing the history of destroyer escorts. Each month, a member of the USS Slater's education crew will highlight a specific destroyer escort and share the stories of the sailors who served aboard these Trim but Deadly ships. My name is Liam Mitchell, back now for my 5th episode, where I'll be talking all about the exciting history of USS Atherton DE-169. Previously, I hosted episodes on USS Mitchell, USS Eldridge, USS Stewart, and the history of the Navy's birthday. If you missed those or any of our other previous episodes, you can find the full library of DE Classified on our website, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

Now as I said, I'll be discussing the history of USS Atherton, a destroyer escort who played a pivotal role in the very last battle in the Atlantic during World War 2. But, as always, let's begin by discussing the history of the ship's namesake.

Lieutenant Junior Grade John McDougall Atherton was born in 1918 to Peter Lee Atherton, a Kentucky businessman, and Cornelia Atherton. Little is known about his personal life prior to his enlistment in the Navy; he was, however, named for his grandfather who served as a Democrat in the Kentucky State House of Representatives from 1869 to 1871. His grandfather founded Atherton Whiskey in 1867, which was once the largest whiskey making operation in Kentucky by volume. The Atherton family can trace their lineage back to the founding of the United States; Lieutenant Atherton's twice great grandfather, Aaron Atherton, was part of a group of settlers who first travelled through the Cumberland Gap in the Appalachian Mountains and was later awarded a land grant by Virginia in modern-day Kentucky of 1000 acres; his home in Hodgenville,

Kentucky was later admitted to the National Register of Historic Places. Furthermore, another of Lieutenant Atherton's ancestors was Alexander McDougall, a New York City merchant, who became a leader of the Sons of Liberty in New York during the Revolution and would eventually join the Continental Army as a colonel. Rising to the rank of Major General, Alexander McDougall would later assume command of West Point following Benedict Arnold's treason. After the war, Alexander McDougall would be elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress, then served as the Secretary of the Marine, then elected to the New York State Senate as well as the first president of the Bank of New York and as the New York Society of the Cincinnati. It is therefore clear to see that Lieutenant Atherton had deep roots in the most pivotal chapters of American histories, and when his time to serve his country came, he did so with courage just as his ancestors did.

John was the youngest of four children and the only boy; he had three older sisters, Valerie, Sarah, and Cornelia, as well as an older half-sister from a previous marriage of his father's. At 23 years old John joined the Navy, and after training was stationed on board USS Meredith, a Gleaves Class Destroyer as a signal officer.

On October 12th, 1942, Meredith departed the island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu as part of a convoy of cargo ships bringing aviation fuel to Allied forces on Guadalcanal. Although the convoy knew that a Japanese carrier task force was in the area, Commander Harry E. Hubbard decided to continue on to Guadalcanal, even after most of the rest of the convoy turned back, believing that the Allied forces needs for aviation fuel outweighed any potential risk of attack.

On the morning of October 15th, Meredith was sighted by a Japanese patrol plane. By early afternoon, the Japanese had launched a full assault on Meredith, consisting of 38

bombers, torpedo planes, and escort fighters launched from their aircraft carrier Zuikaku. Over the next 10 minutes, a bomb destroyed her bridge, communications, and gun direction; a second bomb destroyed much of the forward port side, and a torpedo exploded below the ready ammunition locker, igniting the fuel oil leaking from within. She rolled over and sank, and of the crew of 273 men on board, only 8 officers and 73 enlisted men survived. The survivors were then forced to endure three days of exposure on the open sea, until finally they were rescued by destroyers Grayson and Gwin and fleet tug Seminole.

Meredith had fought bravely, bringing down 3 of her attackers before she sunk, and was awarded one battle star for her heroic stand; it is estimated that Meredith was struck by 14 bombs and 7 torpedoes. It is unknown where Lieutenant Atherton was when the ship was sunk, but ultimately his fate was sealed with that of his ship. His body was never recovered, and he was buried at sea in the Pacific.

USS Atherton was laid down on January 14th, 1943, by the Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company in Newark, New Jersey. She was launched on May 14th, and formally commissioned on August 29th, sponsored by Lieutenant Atherton's mother, Cornelia. Atherton is a Cannon-class destroyer escort, sitting at 306 feet long with a beam of 36 feet 10 inches and a draft of 11 feet 8 inches. She weighs in at 1,620 long tons when full and is capable of making 21 knots or 24 miles per hour when her diesel-electric propulsion system is at flank speed.

She's equipped with 3 3-inch 50 caliber guns, one quad 1.1-inch gun, 8 20mm guns, 3 21-inch torpedo tubes, 1 hedgehog anti-submarine mortar, 8 depth charge projectors, and 2 depth charge tracks.

Atherton began its shakedown in September, conducting exercises in the Chesapeake Bay and making two trips to Bermuda. Her first assignment was in the Caribbean, where she assumed anti-submarine warfare patrol duties between St. Croix, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. On November 24th Atherton attacked a submarine contact, but observed no damage and continued on in her duties. She was relieved of her duties on November 30th and returned to Norfolk, Virginia. There she assisted in the training of future destroyer escort sailors throughout the Chesapeake Bay; on December 11th Atherton was assigned to protect a convoy bound for the Panama Canal. She turned back at the Canal, returning to Virginia on December 27th.

1944 was a busy yet quiet year for Atherton; she was assigned to her first transatlantic convoy in January 1944, operating as part of Task Force 62. Over the year she would become a regular at both Norfolk and New York, as well as numerous visits to Casablanca, Morocco; Bizerte, Tunisia; and Oran, Algeria. Occasionally throughout the year Atherton also sailed to the Boston Navy Yard for overhaul.

On May 5th, 1945, just three days before victory in Europe, Nazi U-boat U-853 torpedoed a collier ship Black Point en route to Boston around 5:40 pm, despite President of the German Reich Karl Donitz issuing orders for all U-boats to cease attacks the day before. A distress call was picked up by the Eastern Sea Frontier Command in New York and by the 1st Naval District in Boston; in response, the three nearest warships, destroyer escorts Amick and Atherton and frigate Moberly, were diverted to the area to search for the U-boat. They arrived at the scene around 7:45 pm on May 5th and began sweeping the area; U-853 was discovered sitting on the seabed just after midnight, in just over 100 feet of water. The ensuing battle, known as the Battle of Point Judith, continued for half a day; oil

was first sighted after the first attack in the early hours of the night, yet the attacks continued as each ship continued to pick up contacts. A fourth ship, USS Ericsson, arrived soon after and took command of the scene. Amick departed for a pre-arranged rendezvous with the arrival of reinforcements, consisting of the destroyers Barney, Breckinridge and Blakely, the frigate Newport, the corvettes Action and Restless, and the auxiliary destroyer Semmes. The reinforcements established a perimeter around the area to make sure the U-boat didn't slip away, leaving Atherton and Moberly to continue the attack. By 5:30 in the morning, debris was observed in the water consisting of oil, planking, life rafts, a chart tabletop, clothing, and an officer's cap. This was reported to the 1st Naval District in Boston, however the command did not accept the sinking and the attacks continued. A few hours later, K class blimps K-16 and K-58 joined the attack, locating oil slicks and marking suspected locations with smoke and dye markers. Finally, just after noon, Eastern Sea Frontier in New York accepted the destruction of the U-boat, and the battle came to a close. Divers from the submarine rescue ship USS Penguin were sent down later that day, and the sinking of U-853 was confirmed with no survivors.

Over the course of the battle, Atherton launched her depth charges and hedgehogs four times; the entire American naval force dropped a collective 264 hedgehogs and 95 depth charges. Due to the massive amount of ordinance dropped and the long period of battle, it is unknown when exactly the U-boat was officially sunk. Despite this, Atherton was formally co-credited with sinking U-853 with Moberly, and both ships received a battle star for their actions.

The Battle of Point Judith was notable for a few reasons; one, the collier Black Point was the last US merchant ship sank by a U-boat in World War 2. Second, U-853 was the last

Nazi U-boat sunk in the war; as I mentioned earlier, victory in Europe would come only days later. Finally, this battle took place just 8 miles off the coast of Block Point, Rhode Island, making it one of the closest battles to American shores during the entirety of the war.

After returning to port, Atherton sailed for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, arriving on June 1st, 1945. She remained for a week, conducting exercises with Escort Division 13, before sailing for the Pacific on June 6th. She transited the Panama Canal and stopped in San Diego, then continued on to Pearl Harbor on June 29th. She spent the remainder of her life with the US Navy performing a variety of assignments around the Pacific; she did exercise in Pearl then sailed for Saipan, conducting antisubmarine patrols there throughout July. In August she sailed to Ulithi and operated on picket station, then made two round trip voyages between Ulithi and Okinawa escorting convoys. She then returned to Saipan, where she spent the remainder of the war assigned to rescue station duties.

After victory in the Pacific, Atherton headed back for the east coast of the United States, stopping at Pearl and San Diego, before transiting the Panama Canal and reaching Jacksonville, Florida in early December. On December 10th, 1945, Atherton was decommissioned from US service and placed in reserve at Green Cove Springs, Florida, where she remained for the next 10 years.

Rather than being sold for scrap like most of her sister ships, Atherton found new life in 1955 when she was transferred to Japan. She was commissioned into the Japan Maritime Self-Defense force and renamed Hatsuhi DE-263. She remained in Japan for 20 years, before decommissioning in 1975 and returning to the Navy.

But yet again, Atherton's life was not yet finished. After 3 years in the reserve fleet, Atherton was transferred to the Philippines in 1978. She was commissioned in 1980 as BRP Rajah Humabon PS-78; then reclassified as a patrol frigate and her hull number was changed to PS-6. She was decommissioned in 1993, then later recommissioned in 1995 as PF-11. As Rajah Humabon PF-11, she became the flagship of the Philippine Navy, and still used her World War 2 armament despite the drastic improvements in naval warfare technology over the previous 50 years. She continued in the Philippine Navy performing ceremonial functions, including welcoming foreign warships arriving for joint training exercises.

On March 15th, 2018, Rajah Humabon, formerly USS Atherton, was finally decommissioned for the final time. At the time of her decommissioning, she was one of the oldest active naval ships in the world, one of only a handful left over from World War 2. She was transferred to Naval Station Sangley Point on Manila Bay, and there she remains today. It is anticipated that she will become a museum ship herself and is currently undergoing preparations for the next chapter in her long and storied life.

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. Once again, my name is Liam Mitchell, and I hope you'll join us next month when we DE Classify USS ENGLAND.