

DE CLASSIFIED

USS Mitchell DE-43

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; I am a tour guide and duty officer with the education crew here at USS Slater, currently serving in my third season. I am a local history student with a family background in Naval service and a deep admiration for American military history.

Today we are going to DE classify USS Mitchell DE-43, an Evarts class destroyer escort. The ship was named in honor of Ensign Albert E. Mitchell, a young sailor from Seattle who was killed in action in June 1942. Prior to the war, Alfred attended and graduated from the University of Washington, but then enlisted the Navy on December 20, 1940. After attending flight training at Seattle and Corpus Christi, he was designated a Naval Aviator and assigned to Patrol Squadron 42. On June 4, 1942, Alfred Mitchell was killed in action somewhere over the Unimak Pass, located between Unimak and Akun islands in the Aleutian Archipelago of Alaska. On this day, a small Japanese strike group invaded the Aleutian islands in an attempt to draw American forces away from the larger invasion of Midway near Hawaii. Although the American forces were not fooled by this, the American troops stationed on the Aleutian islands were still tasked with their defense. This battle would go on to be known as the Battle of Dutch Harbor; it marked the first aerial attack on the continental United States and the second

time that the continental United States was bombed by someone working for a foreign power. After his death, Albert Mitchell was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, for “extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight.” His commendation would go on to say that “although he himself was killed when his plane crashed, he had made possible the capture of a Mitsubishi fighter which provided new and invaluable information on this type of enemy aircraft.”

Now as I mentioned earlier, USS Mitchell is an Evarts class destroyer escort. You may remember from last month’s episode that this class was the first type of destroyer escort to enter service, early in 1943. Named for the lead ship in the class, USS Evarts DE-5, Evarts class destroyer escorts were the shortest of all destroyer escort classes and the only class that did not carry torpedo tubes as built. Later classes of destroyer escort would be vast improvements on both the design and the effectiveness of the ships.

USS Mitchell DE-43 was laid down on January 12th, 1943 at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard at Bremerton, Washington. This shipyard was originally constructed during World War One and greatly expanded during World War Two, and was instrumental in the construction and repairing of ships facing battle in the Pacific. The shipyard is still active today; it provides the Navy with maintenance, modernization, and technical and logistics support, and employs about 14,000 people.

Let’s take a look at the specifications of the ship. As an Evarts class destroyer escort, Mitchell was a diesel electric ship capable of producing upwards of 6000 horsepower, with a maximum speed of 21 knots (or about 24 miles per hour). At 289’5” long, a beam of 35’1” and a draft of 11’10”, it had a displacement of only 1436 long tons. This, of course, seems like a large number; however by comparison, USS Missouri, the flagship of the 3rd fleet that Mitchell would later be assigned to, was a battleship with a displacement of 57,540 long tons. This

demonstrates the extremely small size of destroyer escorts, especially among ocean-going warships of World War 2.

On deck, USS Mitchell was equipped with three 3"/50 caliber dual purpose guns capable of firing on both aircraft and land targets, as well as one quad 1.1"/75 caliber AA gun and nine 20mm AA guns for addition anti-aircraft defense. To combat enemy submarines, USS Mitchell came equipped with one forward firing hedgehog projector capable of firing 24 hedgehog rounds at once. It also had 8 depth charge projectors and 2 depth charge tracks located on the fantail of the ship. This set of weaponry made the Mitchell and other destroyer escort ships of World War Two fierce fighters against enemy aircraft and submarines.

On November 17th, 1943, USS Mitchell was commissioned and assigned to Operational Training Command, Pacific Fleet with Lieutenant Commander M.S. Erdahl in command. While leaving the Seattle Bay area, USS Mitchell passed through the Strait of Juan de Fuca, commonly known as the "Graveyard of the Pacific". Unpredictable weather patterns, heavy fog, shifting sandbars, tidal rips, and rocky shorelines have resulted in the sinking of more than 2000 ships since the 18th century, with over 700 recorded lives lost. Many of these wrecks are still visible in the bay; J.K. Carpenter, executive officer of the USS Mitchell after commissioning and future skipper, would later describe the "horrors" of the strait, remarking that "only few of the then neophyte sailors could lay claim to not being sick".

It is important to note that during my research for this podcast, I came across the complete Mitchell War history transcript, written by J.K. Carpenter in 1945 after the ship's return to the United States; if you wish to view this document for yourself, it is linked on our website at [USS SLATER dot org](http://USSSLATER.org). As I mentioned earlier, Carpenter was assigned to USS Mitchell as executive officer upon the ship's commissioning in 1943. Before Mitchell left for shakedown training,

Lieutenant Commander M.S. Erdahl fell ill and was transferred to a US Naval Hospital. Carpenter took temporary command, before relinquishing duty on December 28th. He would later assume temporary command again in April 1944, until being promoted and told to assume full command of USS Mitchell in May 1944. Carpenter's War History of the USS Mitchell is the most complete documentation of the ship and crew's exploits in the Pacific, and is the main source of information for this episode of DE Classified.

While underway for shakedown training to San Diego, J.K. Carpenter remarked that they faced a "three week nightmare of intensive training". Shakedown is considered the trial run of the ship, where the crew finally learns their individual roles on the ship and gets hands on experience in every aspect of Naval life. Training includes anti-submarine warfare, CIC work, formation steaming, emergency drills, battle stations, changing and revising the watch, and much more. A shakedown cruise is essential to the effective operation of a ship post-commissioning, and provides insight into the compatibility of the crew and their knowledge of their impressive naval vessel.

After completion of shakedown, Mitchell arrived in San Diego harbor and the crew received a very quick liberty. USS Mitchell was quickly assigned to what is known as the "Battle of San Clemente", a training exercise in the Channel Islands off the coast of Los Angeles. This mock battle served as a sort of dress rehearsal for the Allied invasion of the Marshall Islands. Beginning in January 1944, Mitchell was assigned to the transport screen of the mock invasion fleet of San Clemente, and trained with the destroyers, battleships, cruisers and carriers that would later go on to make history in the Pacific. Acquired by the Navy in 1934, San Clemente island served vital functions for the Navy in wartime, and continues to do so today; it is the only remaining "ship to shore" live firing range, and serves as the center of the San Clemente Island Range Complex, which covers

an area of 2,620 square nautical miles. It is an active sonar base, with a simulated city for elite commando training, as well as a rocket-test facility and an auxiliary air base that serves the US Navy, US Air Force and Coast Guard. Additionally, it is one of several locations throughout the country where Navy SEALs are trained.

On February 8, 1944, USS Mitchell departed for Pearl Harbor with 8 liberty ships; this would be the official beginning of Mitchell's war service. In the Mitchell War History, JK Carpenter remarks that "We were on our way for good, though we didn't realize it then." Mitchell remained in Pearl Harbor for 2 months, gaining practical experience with Allied submarine squadrons, learning the intricacies of anti-submarine warfare. During this time, the commanding officer of the Mitchell, Lieutenant Commander Erdahl, fell ill again, and command of the ship was once again temporarily transferred to Lieutenant Commander JK Carpenter. On May 13, 1944, Lieutenant Commander Carpenter was ordered to assume full command of Mitchell; he would remain in this capacity until the end of the war.

On June 3rd, 1944, Mitchell was assigned to the Fifth Fleet off Guam under Admiral Raymond Spruance; you may recognize that name from the annals of the Battle of Midway. On that fateful day, Admiral Spruance commanded Task Force 16, which was comprised of carriers Enterprise and Hornet, as well as the cruisers Salt Lake City and Northampton and over half a dozen destroyers. Spruance led the American victory over the invading Japanese forces at Midway, and Spruance and his Task Force would go on to be one of the most storied forces of World War 2. Later, as commander of the Fifth Fleet, Admiral Spruance led the Marianas campaign, the Iwo Jima campaign, and the Okinawa Campaign. This fleet would also be responsible for the sinking of the massive Japanese battleship Yamato in April 1945. As part of the Fifth Fleet, USS Mitchell was in charge of escorting fleet tankers across the operating area and performing screening duty for the fleet.

During this time, Mitchell and the other destroyer escort of the fleet were the subjects of an infamous radio call, originating from one of the Essex class carriers; an officer questioned, “What the hell are those two very small boys doing out here?” At that time, Mitchell was far out beyond the normal range of destroyer escorts, in deep waters west of Guam, just after the Battle of the Philippine Sea. During these operations, Mitchell could see the battle raging far in the distance; for its support role in the invasion of Saipan, Mitchell earned its first battle star.

On June 28th, 1944, Mitchell escorted an oiler to Agat Bay, Guam; this was the closest that Mitchell would get to physical combat. The crew looked on as cruisers and destroyers shelled the beach and ridge above, with dive bombers making runs over the Orote Peninsula. Known as the Second Battle of Guam, it resulted in the recapture of the island from Japanese forces. Guam had been a United States territory since 1898, when it was ceded to the US from Spain as a result of the Spanish-American War. Japan previously captured the island in December 8, 1941, just one day after the attacks on Pearl Harbor. As a result of its escort duties during the Second Battle of Guam, Mitchell received its second battle star.

The following months proved quieter for Mitchell and her crew; she performed refueling duty for hunter-killer groups off Eniwetak Atoll, located in the Marshall islands. While in Eniwetak, the crew had their first chance at liberty since arriving in the Pacific theater. They received their pay, enjoyed the experiences of the island, and according to some sources, ate enough ice cream to last the remainder of the war. Finally departing mid August 1944, Mitchell was reassigned to the Third Fleet Logistics Support Group, as part of a screen for oilers and escort carriers. On August 30th, 1944, Mitchell achieved an infamous feat that all sailors look forward to while on its way to the Admiralty islands; crossing the Equator into the Southern Hemisphere. When this happens, a ceremony is held on deck to

honor both the crew and Neptunus Rex, also known as King Neptune, ancient Roman god of the sea. Prior to crossing the Equator, a sailor is colloquially referred to as a “pollywog”; during this ceremony, all polliwogs are quote-unquote promoted into shellbacks, and formally welcomed into Neptune’s realm. Mitchell would cross the Equator numerous times over the next year, making frequent trips to and from Manus, and island in the Admiralty islands.

In September 1944, Mitchell operated with the Third Fleet off Palau in the Mariana Islands; during this time, numerous enemy aircraft appeared on radar, and battle stations was called every time, although no aircraft ever attacked. Similarly, sonar picked up many contacts and numerous objects resembling periscopes were seen, but no enemy submarines attempted an attack. This pattern would repeat itself over the coming months; sightings, contacts and possible fights were an almost every day occurrence at the height of operations in the Pacific theater, with Japanese forces ever present and never far away. In spite of these contacts, Mitchell proceeded in its refueling duties with Task Group 38, now located northeast of the island of Luzon, in the Philippines.

In November 1944, Mitchell made berth at Ulithi Atoll, one of the numerous atolls that makes up the Caroline Islands. At this time, Ulithi Atoll was the largest naval base in the Pacific. Reclaimed by the Americans in September 1944, they soon determined that around 700 ships could fit inside the central harbor; this number far surpasses the capacity of even Pearl Harbor. After relocating the local islanders to a safer, out of the way island, construction began on a series of piers all along the atoll, built from gravel and sand with metal rods driven into the coral and massive ropes attached to the ends. Over the next few months, hundreds of ships began docking; USS Ajax, repair ship, was relocated to inside the harbor, to be utilized by anyone on or visiting the base who needed special parts made in the special metal fabrication shop. If your ship needed repairs beyond the scope of a

repair ship, you should pull into one of the numerous floating dry docks, which were capable of lifting whole ships out of the water and fixed them quickly. USS Abatan, a distilling ship, was assigned the vital job of cooking baked beans, pies, and other meals for the men on the island. Soon, a barge with a very special purpose was moored in the bay; it was an ice cream barge, capable of producing up to 500 gallons of ice cream per shift. For recreation, baseball fields, outdoor theaters, and other activities were built on the island of Mog Mog, on the North side of Ulithi atoll. It was here that the crew of the Mitchell found themselves that November, taking full advantage of everything the island had to offer.

Bases like Ulithi provided a much needed respite for the men fighting this brutal war. Life at sea was harsh, extremely difficult and dangerous even in peacetime. With the added threat of surprise attack by Japanese submarines and kamikazes, stress levels were constantly raised and some men would inevitably break. It was here, on Ulithi Atoll, that the men could unwind, relax, and have some fun, before heading back out to sea to face the trials of war once again.

Mitchell finished out 1944 by screening ships northeast of the island of Luzon and sinking mines. On December 3rd, 1944, Mitchell struck a whale while underway; the whale seriously damaged her underwater sound equipment, and Mitchell was forced to return to Ulithi for repairs in dry dock. Mitchell briefly had towing test duty with USS Wilkes-Barre, followed by escort duty for USS Kwajalein, an escort carrier. Mitchell and Kwajalein spent Christmas singing carols together over the the voice radio, and sent gifts of ice cream and cookies to each other. This, in the words of Lieutenant Commander JK Carpenter, quote “began a fine friendship between the two ships.”

The year 1945 began and Mitchell resumed her duties in the Philippine Sea, performing screening duty with the fueling groups. Mitchell was reassigned back to the Fifth Fleet Logistics Group in February, where it joined Task Force 58 and

performed numerous jobs of passing mail and personnel at sea. Mitchell performed these duties quite close to the invasion of Iwo Jima; Lieutenant Commander Carpenter stated that they quote “enjoyed watching the flights of B-29’s pass overhead on their way to Japan.” The general alarm sounded a few times during this period, however no contacts closed. Mitchell made several more trips to Ulithi, and there they caught their first glimpse of the British Royal Navy, which seemed to both excite and inspire the men on board.

In March, 1945, Mitchell headed North to rendezvous with the rest of the task group and begin operations off the coast of Okinawa, in support of the American invasion. Mitchell continued to screen ships and sink mines — a job it was all too familiar with by this point in the war. April 1945 brought the somber news of the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt; the flag aboard Mitchell was lowered to half mast and stayed there for 30 days, to honor the deceased President and his legacy.

May 1945, however, brought news of great joy to the men; Nazi Germany had finally surrendered in Europe. Although this surrender was a world away and in no real way affected them, the crew was bolstered by this news and reinvigorated in their quest to finally end the war in the Pacific. It continued to sink mines and screen ships, and make frequent trips between the Okinawa fueling zone and Ulithi Atoll.

In June, 1945, Mitchell embarked on a new, more exciting adventure than the ones of months passed. Reassigned to the Seventh Fleet in Leyte Gulf, she sailed across the Philippines and engaged in the invasion of Borneo along with the rest of the Allied fleet, which included British and Australian forces as well. The largest island of Indonesia, Borneo is filled with thick jungle and exotic wildlife, which makes penetrating the interior difficult. Although conquered by the Japanese in March 1942, the Allied forces were able to quickly and decisively recapture the

island by August 1945. Mitchell was instrumental in assisting in operations in the Makassar Strait, a stretch of water that separates the island of Borneo from the island of Sulawesi in the East. Lieutenant Commander JK Carpenter noted that the crew noticed many native canoes filled with local families, all fleeing the bombings for the safety of the Celebes islands to the North.

July 1945 brought more excitement to the crew; reassigned to Leyte Gulf and the 3rd fleet, Mitchell assisted in the bombing of mainland Japan. Although it never fired any weapons, Mitchell operated with Task Force 38 and engaged in refueling runs, transferring pilots, and screening duty. JK Carpenter wrote that the crew quote “watched the B-29’s and the 3rd fleet planes continue their deadly work.”

On August 6 and August 9, the crew listening to the radio in stunned amazement at the news of the atomic bombings of Japan. Finally, on August 15, 1945, the crew heard the news they’ve been waiting for for so long; orders were received to cease all offensive operations against Japanese forces. The crew cheered and celebrated, and it was said that there was never a happier moment than that night.

Mitchell was transferred to the operating area off Japan and on September 2nd was quote “lucky enough to be sent to Tokyo bay right after the final surrender ceremony”, in the words of JK Carpenter. On September 13th, Mitchell received orders to return to the West Coast for decommissioning via Pearl Harbor, which brought more happiness to the crew. Along the way, Mitchell picked up more US bound passengers and provisions for the last time at Ulithi.

Lieutenant Commander JK Carpenter ends his war history with a poignant and moving paragraph: quote “its been over 15 months since we’ve seen Pearl and nearly 20 out of the States. The officers and the men are proud of her, proud of the

job she's done. She sank no submarines and shot down no planes, but she stayed out there and did the job. She's a good ship, the Mitchell."

The emotion behind JK Carpenter's words are apparent, and highlight the massive significance these ships had to the sailors. Although small and always in a support role, the men were proud of their little tin can ship, and proud of each other for the hard work they've done. Every sailor earned their trip home a hundred times over, and finally the reward was being paid.

USS Mitchell earned an impressive nine battle stars for her support roles in some of the most important battles of the Pacific theater. This number is unheard of for destroyer escorts, and highlights the extreme effort that the crew of the Mitchell put into each and every engagement. She was instrumental in keeping the bigger warships going, and her efforts saved the lives of countless sailors in the Pacific.

Although decommissioned and sold for scrap on December 29th, 1945, the history of USS Mitchell is one that must be remembered for her crucial role in the Pacific theater. Like all destroyer escorts, Mitchell was a very small cog in the massive war machine of the US Military in World War 2. It is, admittedly, very easy to overlook; for most people, it is much more exciting to study the war histories of large, infamous ships like the Missouri or the Enterprise. But here at the destroyer escort historical museum, we believe strongly in preserving the history of destroyer escorts, and educating all who will listen about their fantastic histories.

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. I am Liam Mitchell, and I hope you join us next month to DE Classify USS Leopold.

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