

DE CLASSIFIED

USS STEWART DE-238

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. I'm Liam Mitchell, back now for my fourth episode of DE Classified. Previously, I discussed the histories of USS Mitchell, an Evarts class destroyer escort, and USS Eldridge, a Cannon-class destroyer escort, as well as an in-depth look at the history of the United States Navy. In today's episode, I'll be discussing the history of USS Stewart DE-238, an Edsall class destroyer escort. This episode is an exciting one; other than our beloved Slater, Stewart is the only destroyer escort remaining in the United States. Located in Galveston, Texas, Stewart is now a museum ship open for tours in the summer months. Unfortunately, Stewart has been heavily damaged by hurricanes in the region and is therefore not seaworthy; she has not been returned to her World War 2 configuration like Slater has. Still, Stewart remains open for tours, and is the best chance for Americans on the West Coast to experience life on board destroyer escorts.

As always, let's begin with the story of the ship's namesake. Charles Stewart was born July 28th, 1778 in Philadelphia to Scottish-Irish parents from Belfast, Ireland. His father died two years later, and his mother would later marry a former bodyguard of George Washington. He attended the Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia, and first went to sea at the age of 13 as a cabin boy. He remained at sea for many years, eventually rising to the rank of master of merchantmen.

In 1798, the Quasi-War with France erupted over a growing argument regarding the Jay Treaty of 1794 between the United States and Britain. France viewed the treaty as incompatible with the treaties of Alliance and Commerce between itself and the US, both signed in the 1770's; as a result, the French Navy began seizing American ships that did business with Britain in the Caribbean and Atlantic. At the time, the United States Navy was small and largely ineffective, with few active officers and largely incapable of competing with the powerful French Navy. A plan was quickly drawn up to fortify the United States against the growing threat, and Congress quickly reauthorized the formation of a full Navy. At only 19 years old, Charles Stewart became the one of the first officers of this newly reestablished Navy, and was commissioned as a lieutenant on board the USS United States under the command of the infamous John Barry, considered by many to be the "Father of the US Navy". Together, they would cruise to the French Indies to curtail the threat of French privateers, with Stewart in charge of the ship's outfitting and the recruitment of crew.

On July 16th 1800, Stewart assumed command of a ship for the first time, the schooner USS Experiment, and quickly captured two French vessels and rescued numerous American vessels in the process. He later rescued 70 people from a sinking ship in the Dominican Republic; the Governor of Santo Domingo was so grateful for the rescue that he actually sent a letter of thanks to President Thomas Jefferson.

Over the next 11 years, Stewart held a number of commands and received a number of promotions. First, he commanded USS Chesapeake in 1801, followed by USS Constellation in 1802. Later that year he commanded USS Syren, and made his first trip to the Mediterranean. He was promoted to master-commandant in 1804, and in that capacity maintained the blockade of Tripoli during the First

Barbary War. In 1806 he was promoted to the rank of captain, returned home on leave from the US Navy, joined the merchant fleet, and remained there until 1811.

When the War of 1812 erupted, Stewart quickly resumed his duties with the US Navy. First he commanded USS Argus, then USS Hornet, followed by a second stint as commander of USS Constellation. While commander, Constellation was effectively blockaded at Hampton Roads, Virginia, near Norfolk. Realizing that he would not be able to break the blockade, Stewart ordered the men to drop anchor between the forts and to prepare to defend the ship from boarding parties. The crew placed gun boats around Constellation, pulled up all hanging ropes, and boiled the nettings in pitch until they were hard as wire. On two occasions a force of roughly 2,000 British attempted to take Constellation by surprise, but were discovered and turned back by the crew.

With Constellation still blockaded in Virginia, Stewart traveled north and took command of the infamous USS Constitution, known as “Old Ironsides” in Boston Harbor. He would remain as captain of the Constitution for two years, leading her to numerous victories against the British. Under Stewart’s command, Constitution captured HMS Cyane and HMS Levant on February 20th, 1815. By capturing two ships using only one of his own, Stewart became a national hero and was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in a special ceremony on February 22nd, 1816. In the same year, he was also admitted as an honorary member of the Pennsylvania chapter of the Society of the Cincinnati; this society is a fraternal, hereditary society whose sole goal is to remember the events and the men that achieved American independence. The society still exists today, and uses museum exhibitions and publications to spread its message.

After the War of 1812, Stewart took command of the American Mediterranean Squadron from 1816 to 1820, and then the Pacific Squadron from 1820 to 1824. He then served as Naval Commissioner from 1830 to 1832, and later

saw service in the West Indies, when he captured a Portuguese slaver ship and freed the African children on board. According to some reports, Stewart was so outraged at the horrible conditions and health on the ship that he went out of his way to inform the British Commissioner of Havana of the dire situation.

From 1838 to 1841, and again from 1853 to 1861, Stewart commanded the Philadelphia Navy Yard. During this time, Captain James Barron died and Stewart became the most senior ranking officer in the Navy. By a joint resolution passed on March 2nd, 1859, Congress made Stewart “senior flag officer,” a rank created specially for him in recognition of his distinguished service.

Charles Stewart finally retired from the Navy on December 21st, 1861, after serving 63 years in the Navy. He age at the time of retirement was 83 years old, making him the second oldest officer on active duty in the history of the US Navy, after William D. Leahy. While retired, he was promoted to the rank of rear admiral; this rank is one of the highest in the Navy, placed just below the rank of Vice Admiral and equivalent to a Major General in the Army. He still holds the all time record for longest active duty career, and as well as the record for the longest time holding a single rank on active duty.

Soon after retirement, Stewart was elected a companion of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, a military society of officers who had served the Union during the Civil War, despite being retired for the duration of the war. On November 6th, 1869, Rear Admiral Charles Stewart died at the age of 91. He was buried at Woodlands Cemetery in Philadelphia.

His legacy is one of massive importance to the 19th century Navy, and is remembered today as one of the most effective commanders of the early 1800’s. his estate would later become a preparatory high school, and many of his descendants would follow his footsteps into the US Navy. Two destroyers, DD-12

and DD-224 where named in his honor, as well as our focus today, destroyer escort number 238.

Laid down on July 15th, 1942, USS Stewart was the third and, to date, final ship named in honor of Rear Admiral Charles Stewart. Constructed by Brown Shipbuilding in Houston, Texas, she was commissioned on May 31st, 1943 with Lieutenant Commander B. C. Turner in command.

Brown Shipbuilding is a fascinating company with an important role in the backdrop of American history. Founded by two brothers who had no prior shipbuilding experience, they quickly began producing quality vessels for the Navy, which led to them winning a contract for the construction of destroyer escorts, valued at \$3.3 million per ship. By the end of World War 2, they ranked 68th in the United States in terms of value of contracts, with a final total value of over \$500 million. Most notable of ships built here was the USS Samuel B. Roberts, the infamous “destroyer escort that fought like a battleship” during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. In 1961, they would win the contract to build the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, Texas; this is now the world-famous Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, the location of flight control for all NASA missions.

After commissioning, USS Stewart briefly transferred down the Gulf of Mexico to Galveston, where she entered dry dock. On June 17th, 1943, Stewart finally got underway to New Orleans, Louisiana, where she reported for duty to the commandant of the 8th Naval District. She departed New Orleans for her shakedown cruise on June 22nd, and headed towards Bermuda; shakedown was completed a month later, and Stewart sailed towards Philadelphia. After a week there, Stewart was sent to Miami, Florida, where she conducted patrols of the area and ran practice exercises, until sailing north for Norfolk, Virginia, arriving August 31st, 1943.

Stewart remained in the Virginia area for the next four months; she cruised up the Potomac River and visited Quantico and the Washington Navy Yard, and even escorted President Roosevelt to the USS Missouri for his mission to Casablanca and Tehran. She then began a tour of duty as a school ship training prospective destroyer escort sailors out of Norfolk. In March 1944, Stewart departed Virginia for Tompkinsville, New York on Staten Island. Finally, she received her first assignment as a convoy escort. On March 19th, 1944, Stewart joined and escorted a convoy on its way to Reykjavik, Iceland via Naval Station Argentia, in Canada. The mission was completed in under a month, and Stewart was back in Norfolk by April 12th.

A week later, Stewart joined a convoy with Task Unit 29.6.1 to Cristobal in the Panama Canal Zone, via Aruba in the Dutch West Indies. They continued on to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where Stewart detached from the Task Unit and steamed independently for Bermuda, arriving there on May 10th, 1944. Over the next week, Stewart participated in experimental training exercises with the captured Italian submarine Rea. On May 18th, an unidentified contact was picked up on sonar, and Stewart went out to investigate. It remained searching for the contact off Bermuda for 4 days, and launched depth charges once, to inconclusive results. Returning to Port Royal, Bermuda for four days, Stewart was reassigned to a Hunter Killer group composed of USS Rhind and USS Wainwright; these three ships rendezvoused with convoy UC 25, sailing north. Stewart was detached from the group on June 8th, and arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, where she remained for the rest of the month.

July 1944 saw Stewart operating out of Casco Bay, Maine, conducting training exercises on the captured Italian submarine Vortice. On the 27th of June, Stewart returned to Norfolk, Virginia and was attached to convoy UGF 12 headed for Naples, Italy. She arrived July 15th, and departed with the convoy on July 21st,

screening the return journey home. She repeated the process once more; back to Naples on August 24th, and returned to American waters on 26th of September, where she resumed training with the captured Vortice submarine in Casco Bay, Maine.

Late October 1944 brought Stewart back to Boston, where she was attached to convoy CU 44. On October 20th, 1944, Stewart picked up a contact on sonar and proceeded to drop depth charges; after no results were observed, she returned to the convoy and proceeded uninhibited to Scotland. Stewart remained there for a week, returning to New York on November 22nd.

This was the beginning of a number of voyages for Stewart to the United Kingdom; first, she escorted a convoy to Plymouth in December 1944, followed by a trip to Falmouth and two trips to Liverpool. On each return home, Stewart participated in anti-submarine training exercises off the New England coast. During one convoy in April 1945, Stewart rescued the surviving sailors of SS Saint Mihiel and SS Nashbulk after the vessels collided; the crew assisted in stopping fires and salvaging the ships. By the time these three convoys to the United Kingdom were safely escorted, victory was declared in Europe, and Stewart found herself steaming towards Guantanamo Bay for two weeks of training.

On July 12th, 1945, Stewart was reassigned to the Pacific theater. Sailing with USS Edsall and USS Moore, they crossed the Panama Canal on the 16th and arrived in San Diego on the 24th. Stewart spent four days at the Naval Repair Base; once all outstanding issues were fixed, the three destroyer escorts began the trip across the Pacific to Pearl Harbor, now joined by USS Wilhoite. Reaching Pearl on August 4th, Stewart remained there to conduct training exercises with USS Spearfish and USS Baltimore. By this time, victory was declared in the Pacific, and the war was over. Stewart departed for the west coast on September

5th, 1945, and reached San Diego a week later. There she stayed for two days, and then continued on back through the Panama Canal.

From there, Stewart continued up the east coast and reached Philadelphia on September 27th. There, Stewart was formally decommissioned and placed in the reserve fleet, to serve out the remainder of her life.

While in the reserve fleet, Stewart had a fairly interesting life; while most ships are quickly stricken from the Navy list and sold for scrap, Stewart was repeatedly moved from one berthing to the next, first to Green Cove Springs, Florida, then to Charleston, South Carolina, followed by Norfolk, Virginia, and finally to Orange, Texas. While there, she underwent inspection and was declared unfit for further Naval service. Consequently, her name was finally struck from the list on October 1st, 1972.

It was at this time that Stewart received a second chance at life. On June 25th, 1974, Stewart was donated by the Navy to the city of Galveston, Texas, along with the Gato class submarine Cavalla. There, they would become the centerpieces of the new American Undersea Warfare Center at Seawolf Park, where it would operate as a museum ship. Both vessels were placed fully on land; Stewart still sits in that same spot today.

Unfortunately, was soon Stewart neglected, due to lack of funds for maintenance and restoration. The ship was repeatedly vandalized, with many pieces of equipment fully missing. In 1996, the US Navy considered reclaiming Stewart and donating her to the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on the condition that a metallurgical analysis would be performed on the ship's hull. In 1998, however, the Galveston Parks Board announced that Stewart would be scrapped, along with the Cavalla submarine. Seawolf Park, they added, would be turned into an RV park. This was met by large public outcry, and motivated the

people of Galveston into action to save Stewart; after a lengthy legal battle, the city allowed the historical foundation to raise funds for restoration.

After this, Stewart returned to great condition, and tours soon began on board. On November 11th, 2007, Stewart was formally inducted into National Register of Historic Places in a ceremony overseen by Captain “Swede” Anderson, then-president of the Texas Navy Association.

In 2008, much of Stewart was damaged during Hurricane Ike. Despite only being a Category 2 hurricane, the storm surge that struck Stewart had the force of a category 5. This force of nature resulted in Stewart listing to her starboard side. After years of restoration, Stewart is now upright and back to proper touring condition.

I greatly encourage you to take a tour of the Stewart if you ever find yourself in the Galveston area. Although not fully restored to her World War 2 configuration like Slater is, Stewart still provides valuable insight and fascinating details about life on board a destroyer escort. She is a vital part to the story of history’s greatest war, and the actions of both the ship and the crew are worthy of our honor and respect.

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 USSSLATER.ORG/DE-CLASSIFIED. I am Liam Mitchell, and I hope you join us next month to DE classify USS [____].