

GOOD-BYE TO THE BATTLESHIPS

IN JANUARY 2006, CONGRESS OKAYED STRIKING USS IOWA (BB 61) AND USS WISCONSIN (BB 64) FROM THE NAVAL REGISTER AND AUTHORIZED THEIR USE AS MUSEUMS. BUT WAS IT PREMATURE TO WRITE-OFF THE LAST OF THE BIG-GUN SHIPS AS MUSEUM-PIECES?

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Once again, the United States Navy is without a battleship. On 6 January 2006, President George W. Bush signed the Fiscal Year 2006 Defense Appropriations Bill making it Public Law 109-163. Included in this law is a provision directing the Secretary of the Navy to strike USS IOWA (BB 61) and USS WISCONSIN (BB 64) from the Naval Vessel Register. In addition, the Secretary was directed to donate the two ships for use as museums. As a condition for the donations, the party receiving IOWA must agree to locate the ship in the State of California and the party receiving WISCONSIN must agree to locate that ship in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Practically speaking, this means that WISCONSIN will stay where she is at the Nauticus Museum in Norfolk, Virginia and IOWA, which has been in San Francisco Bay for the last few years, will find a home either in Stockton or San Francisco.

To many people, it may come as a surprise that the Navy had any

battleships to strike from the Naval Register. In early 1995, all four of the Iowa-class battleships, including IOWA and WISCONSIN, were stricken from the Naval Register - - marking the first time since 1895 that there were no battleships in the United States Navy. However, this state of affairs did not last long. Congress was persuaded, largely by Marine Corps supporters, that the Navy lacked adequate naval gunfire to support ground forces and, in the National Defense Appropriation Act for Fiscal Year 1996, directed that the Navy retain at least two of the battleships in the reserve fleet until such time as the Secretary of the Navy could certify that the Navy had within the fleet operational "fire support capacity that equals or exceeds the fire support capability that the Iowa class battleships . . . would, if in active service, be able to provide for the Marine Corps amphibious assaults and operations ashore."

The Iowa-class was the last class of fast battleships constructed by the United States. Concern that Japan would not abide by the limitations on battleship size mandated by the 1936 London Naval Treaty led the Navy to contemplate building a class of 45,000 ton battleships. Eventually, a design was

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selected for a ship 887 feet in length, with a beam of 108 feet, a speed of 33 knots and with a 57,000 ton full load displacement. The ship's main battery would consist of nine 16 inch/50 caliber guns. According to Captain Edward Snyder, commanding officer of USS NEW JERSEY (BB 62) in 1969, the armor-piercing shell from these guns is capable of penetrating 32 feet of reinforced concrete. As originally built, the ships had 20 five inch guns in their secondary batteries.



USS IOWA returns to the city of her birth for the Statue of Liberty celebrations July 4th Weekend 1986. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).

Six ships were authorized but only four were completed. USS ILLINOIS (BB 65) was cancelled when 22 percent complete and USS KENTUCKY (BB 66) was cancelled when 70 percent complete. All four of the completed ships were built in the 1940s with the last to be completed, USS MISSOURI (BB 63), commissioned in June 1944. William H. Garzke, Jr. and Robert O. Dublin, Jr., in their book *Battleships, United States Battleships, 1935-1992* wrote: "Without question the Iowa-class battleships were the best ever built. They possessed an unmatched combination of great offensive power, good protection, and high speed. Ships

of other nations occasionally equaled or surpassed them in specific categories, but no other capital ships ever built had such an impressively balanced combination of military characteristics."

During World War II, the traditional role of the battleship as part of a battle line that would engage the enemy's battle line evaporated. In its place, however, the battleship was found to be ideally suited for another role - - providing artillery support for ground forces assaulting enemy held beaches or carrying on operations in the littorals. Their main batteries of 16 inch guns could provide massive force, day or night, in any type of weather, regardless of defenses, against targets nearly 30 miles inland. In addition, their secondary batteries provided the fire power of five Fletcher-class destroyers. They demonstrated their value throughout the Pacific, in North Africa, Sicily, Anzio, and Normandy.

After the war, planners foresaw that there would be little need for naval gunfire support. The next war would be against the Soviets on the plains of Europe. They were wrong. In Korea, Viet Nam, and in the Middle East, naval gunfire was needed and the Navy had to scramble to reactivate one or more of the Iowas on each occasion. With a singular reliance on hope over experience, the ships were always returned to the mothball fleet. As a result, the four ships spent more time in the reserve fleet than on active service.

Seemingly, the battleships' capacity to provide gunfire support fits hand in glove with the Navy's post- Cold War strategy of transforming itself to fight in the littorals. Some 86 percent of the roads and railroads in the Third

World are within the range of the Iowas' main batteries. Moreover, one does not have to go back to World War II, Korea, or Viet Nam for evidence that the Iowa-class battleships have the ability to engage effectively in such combat. On 3 February 1991, USS MISSOURI (BB 63) entered the waters off Iraq destroying Iraqi command and control bunkers near the Saudi border. During the next two days she destroyed Iraqi artillery emplacements in support of Marines, a command and control bunker, and a radar installation. WISCONSIN arrived in the area and in one day destroyed a dozen artillery emplacements, 50 boats that had been used in raids, and fired at missile and artillery sites. During the course of 20 days, the two battleships responded to numerous fire support requests from Coalition forces, damaging or destroying bunkers, artillery, missiles, command and control facilities, and other targets as much as 20 miles inland. Gunfire support from MISSOURI and WISCONSIN has been credited as allowing Coalition forces to enter Kuwait City essentially unopposed.

All this was done by the two battleships' main and secondary batteries. However, in addition to these missions, the battleships were able to strike targets 700 to 800 miles inland with Tomahawk missiles that had been installed on these ships during the 1980s. MISSOURI fired some 28 missiles and WISCONSIN 24 during the first two days of the campaign. In fact, WISCONSIN served as the Tomahawk strike-warfare center during the initial phase. Thus, not only did the battleships prove themselves effective in littoral combat but they showed that they

were capable of projecting power inland like aircraft carriers but without the risk to pilots.

Still, the Navy leadership never whole-heartedly embraced the Congressional directive to re-instate the battleships. In 1999, the General Accounting Office reported that the Navy was in compliance with the statute's requirement that it maintain the ships in good condition. However, the Navy never behaved as if it seriously foresaw using these ships in action again. To begin, the Navy did not return any of the battleships to the Naval Register until 1998 - - two years after the requirement was enacted and then only after additional political pressure. Since MISSOURI and WISCONSIN were the ships in the best condition, one would have thought that they would have been the ones that would have been relisted if the Navy had desired to comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the relisting requirement. But since MISSOURI was already in the process of being donated as a museum, the Navy listed WISCONSIN and NEW JERSEY, the next best in condition. When interest arose in New Jersey in obtaining the ship that bore the state's name as a museum, the Navy quickly complied with a new Congressional mandate to substitute IOWA for NEW JERSEY even though the former was in much worse condition than her sister and even though the Navy was storing much of the repair parts for all the remaining Iowas in the NEW JERSEY. In 2000, WISCONSIN was moved from her berth among the aircraft carriers at the Norfolk navy base to the Nauticus Museum and large portions of the ship were opened to the public - - again not something that one would do if

one envisioned ever using that asset. Similarly, when Congress began to smile on the idea of creating a battleship museum in California, IOWA was towed from Newport, Rhode Island to San Francisco Bay in 2001. Unable to meet the criteria for striking them and unwilling to activate them, the Navy left the two ships hanging suspended. IOWA was tied up with other mothballed ships, making a pathetic appearance in a recent History Channel documentary on "Boneyards," while WISCONSIN became a tourist attraction with sensitive sections that were off limits to tourists.

The reluctance to embrace the battleships appears to have been two-fold. First, critics contended that the battleships are 1940s technology and thus have no place in the 21st century. While the ships were built in the 1940s, they were upgraded at various times, most extensively in the 1980s when the Navy spent \$1.7 billion on their reactivation. They could have been upgraded further. Moreover, 1940s technology is not all bad. The quality of the steel used in those ships is much superior to the steel being used today. Furthermore, their thick armor allows them to absorb punishment that no class of ship in the active fleet could tolerate. Whereas an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer has Kevlar protecting some sensitive areas, an Iowa-class battleship has as much as 16 inches of steel protecting its sensitive areas. This added protection would allow the battleships to get much closer to the enemy than more modern ships. Finally, the contention that the battleship's technology is obsolete was demonstrated to be false by

their outstanding performance during the First Gulf War.

Second, critics argue that the battleships require a large crew and are costly to operate. To a large extent, the size of the crew is a function of the technology employed. When the Iowas went to sea in the 1980s, they did so with crews that were about half the size of the crews that operated the same ships in World War II. It is reasonable to expect that similar crew reductions and other savings could be achieved if there were a further investment in upgrading the technology. Furthermore, it is inconsistent to complain about costs when the Navy is seeking billions of dollars to build something new that will be able to perform the mission that the battleships can already perform.

Of course, what some people mean when they say that battleships are too expensive is that battleships are a big ticket item and that if money were spent on them, there would be less money available for his or her pet project. Because of such thinking, the battleships have suffered over the years because they have no powerful constituency within the Navy. Such thinking is built upon the premise that there is a cross-elasticity between battleships and other assets, and, to give it its due, one of the reasons the battleships were reactivated in the 1980s was to act as the foundation for building battle groups - - a role usually performed by aircraft carriers. However, while there may be some cross-elasticity of function between carriers and battleships, there is nothing to indicate that more money would be available from Congress for aircraft carriers if no money were spent on battleships. Experience has shown that

savings in one area do not produce a credit that can be used on other projects. Rather, the Congressional reaction is usually that savings are an indication that it was unnecessary to allocate the money that was saved in the first place.

The new law is not a recognition that the Navy now has comparable fire support capacity in the active fleet. Indeed, it is admitted that there will not be comparable capacity until 2014 when DDX is scheduled to join the fleet but it is argued that until then 5-inch gunfire from Arleigh Burke-class destroyers and Ticonderoga-class cruisers will do. However, DDX is still only a concept and thus it is little more than a hope that those ships will have comparable firepower. Furthermore, weapons systems often do not come about in the time that the planners allot. Indeed, in the 1990s it was argued that there would be comparable gunfire support by now. Moreover, given recent Congressional reluctance to invest in new shipbuilding, it is reasonable to expect that DDX may not join the fleet until well after 2014. Indeed, the DDX program barely survived in this year's budget. Finally, as for the contention that the guns on the current ships will do until DDX emerges, the General Accounting Office pointed out in 1999 that the guns on cruisers and destroyers "lack the range, accuracy, and lethality the Marine Corps says it needs for naval fire support." The knowledge that adequate fire support may be coming in eight years will be of little comfort to the Marines who are making amphibious landings and carrying on littoral operations in the interim.

Did Congress do the wrong thing? Probably not.

Having two battleships in the reserve fleet did little to remedy the lack of adequate fire support in the active fleet. In order to bring the two battleships back to life, each ship would have to first spend several months in a shipyard being refitted. IOWA, in particular, would need repair as her number two turret was not repaired after the notorious explosion in 1989. Following the refits, crews would have to be selected and trained. It has been estimated that it would take some 18 months to bring one of the ships back to active status. Thus, if naval gunfire were needed to support a landing, the battleships could not have provided it unless the amphibious assault could have been postponed for a couple of years.

The battleships could only provide gunfire support on a whenever needed basis if they were in the active fleet. While keeping them in the reserve fleet did make it possible to reactivate them at some point in the future, during the last decade the Pentagon has made it abundantly clear that, despite their proven abilities, it has no interest in having battleships in the active fleet. As a result, the two ships would have remained suspended in limbo indefinitely if they had been left in the reserve fleet. Sadly, it is better that they join their sisters as museums where they will be appreciated.

But, full retirement comes at a big cost, even leaving aside their loss as military assets. While they were part of the reserve fleet, it was still possible to imagine that these magnificent ships would someday once again put to sea, projecting American power to both friends and foes. As museums, they will just become remnants of history.