

Contributions of USS West Virginia remembered on Memorial Day



USS West Virginia

By MetroNews Staff | May 24, 2020

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — The USS West Virginia was a Colorado Class battleship that was commissioned in 1923. Through the 1930s, the battleship participated in routine training missions called Fleet Problems.

The warship was 624-feet long, had eight 16-inch naval guns, torpedo tubes, anti-aircraft guns, 16 5-inch guns and was built by the Newport News Shipbuilding Company.

On December 4, 1941, the ship was moored alongside the USS Tennessee on battleship row in Pearl Harbor. At Pearl Harbor the “Wee-Vee” was being retrofitted for action in the South Pacific Theater.

During the Japanese attack the Wee-Vee was hit by seven torpedoes and two aerial bombs. A total of 106 members of the 1,400 crew were killed during the attack.

Captain Mervyn S. Bennion commanded the ship and was struck and killed by shrapnel while directing anti-aircraft fire during the attack.

“Shrapnel from the bomb strike that killed him did not hit the West Virginia, it hit the Tennessee,” U.S. Naval Historian Rick Stone said. “But, the shrapnel flew across the bridge of the West Virginia and killed Cpt Bennion, who later received the Medal of Honor.”

The first African-American to earn the Navy Cross was Doris Miller, a mess attendant on the USS West Virginia earned the honor for his efforts to continue anti-aircraft fire.

“The United States Navy has decided to the next aircraft carrier after him,” Stone said. “So, a nuclear aircraft carrier named the USS Doris Miller is underway.”

Following the attack, sailors began to rescue and recover shipmates who were trapped in lower compartments.

Three sailors trapped in a dry compartment tapped distress signals on the hull of the ship during the rescue. Stone says Marine guards heard the tapping nightly, but they were never able to rescue them.

“When she was finally raised and salvaged they found their bodies and there was a calendar on the wall where they had marked off the days until December 23,” according to Stone. “So, they had lived from December 7 to December 23 and marked off the days on the calendar and probably succumbed to a lack of oxygen”

By September of 1944 the Wee-Vee was back in the Philippines with two other battleships damaged at Pearl Harbor, the USS California and the USS Tennessee.

When the fight resumed the Wee-Vee continued to make history supporting invasion at Okinawa, Iwo Jima and participated in a historic battle according to Stone.

“The last known battleship-to-battleship engagement ever was by the Wee-Vee,” Stone said. “She took under fire at night, about three o’clock in the morning two Japanese battleships and a cruiser at a range of over 44,000 yards and scored a hit with her very first salvo.”

Stone says the Wee-Vee had a very distinguished record during World War II.

“The Wee-Vee was there at the beginning of the war on December 7 at Pearl Harbor, and she was there at the end of the war in Tokyo Bay when the Japanese surrendered,” Stone said. “They did the surrender ceremony on a newer battleship, the USS Missouri.

After the war, the ship was used to bring Americans home from the Pacific Theater.

In January of 1947 the Wee-Vee was decommissioned and in 1959 the U.S. Navy sold it for scrap and by 1961 she was being broken up at the Todd-Pacific Ship Yard in Seattle.



This is a circa 1960 photo of the mast of the USS West Virginia on WVU's downtown campus.