

“A Second USS *SAN DIEGO*”

The city San Diego has been the namesake for two U.S. Navy ships with distinguished careers in the two world wars. The armored cruiser USS *San Diego* served in World War I before its sinking by a German mine off the New York coast in 1918. Another USS *San Diego* would fight in World War II, remembered by San Diego author Fred Whitmore as “the unbeatable ship that nobody ever heard of.”

The warship was awarded 18 battle stars for its actions in the Pacific during World War II, and was the first major Navy ship to enter Tokyo Bay, only days before the formal Japanese surrender. Forgotten by many in the decades that followed, the ship is commemorated today by the U.S.S. San Diego (CL-53) Memorial on N. Harbor Drive.

After the loss of the first *San Diego* in World War I there were repeated efforts to revive the name for a new warship. In the late 1930s, the San Diego Chamber of Commerce urged the Navy to name one of its newly authorized aircraft carriers in honor of the city as recognition for the part San Diego had played in aviation development. Secretary of the Navy Claude A. Swanson responded that their naming policy meant carriers would only bear the names of historic fighting ships or important battles. But the Secretary promised that the city would be considered when funds were authorized for new cruisers.

In August 1938, President Roosevelt approved a list of names for four new battleships and four cruisers. Included was the name *San Diego* for an antiaircraft light cruiser. *Union* newsman Jerry MacMullen hopefully noted that the selection of a light cruiser rather than a heavy one, “no doubt will mean that San Diego will become the homeport of its namesake.”

Construction of the ship began in March 1940 in Quincy, Massachusetts by the Bethlehem Steel Company. A San Diego delegation took the train across the country to be there for the official launch on July 26, 1941. Grace Benbough, wife of San Diego mayor Percy J. Benbough was named the ship’s sponsor. She broke a bottle of champagne on the prow of the new ship, which then slid down the ways and, as Mrs. Benbough recalled, “settled into the water like a swan with scarcely a flying drop of water.”

Six months ahead of schedule, and only one month after Pearl Harbor, the USS *San Diego* was commissioned on January 10, 1942, in Boston. Taking command was Captain Benjamin Franklin Perry who chose to speak only briefly at the commissioning ceremony: “Action speaks louder than words—there’s a war to be won—let’s get going.”

Built like a large destroyer, Perry’s ship boasted a top speed of nearly 35 knots—“perhaps the fastest light cruiser ever built in the United States,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. The cruiser was 542 feet long and 53 feet in the beam, and powered by two steam turbines, of 75,000 horsepower. The ship carried 756 officers and men, and was armed with sixteen, five-inch guns; sixteen heavy machine guns; and eight torpedo tubes.

After an abbreviated shakedown cruise in Chesapeake Bay the USS *San Diego* steamed south. The ship passed through the Panama Canal and headed for San Diego.

On May 17, the *San Diego* slipped unnoticed into port for training exercises. Wartime secrecy kept the news from most of the city. Fred Whitmore recounts the experience of one sailor on liberty who found himself arrested for public drunkenness. “As the hour was late the policeman asked, ‘Where are you from, sailor?’ The sailor: ‘San Diego.’ Policeman: ‘What part of San Diego?’ Sailor: ‘The forward boiler room.’ The policeman led the sailor off to the drying-out tank, having never heard of a ship with that name.”

After two weeks the secret exercises ended when the Navy got word of an impending Japanese attack at Midway. The *San Diego* hurriedly headed out to sea, escorting the carrier *Saratoga*. But by the time the two ships reached Pearl Harbor the great battle had ended.

In August, the *San Diego* took part in the first big U.S. offensive in the Pacific: the assault of the Solomon Islands. The ship would earn its first battle star at Guadalcanal. Major combat followed in October with the Battle of Santa Cruz, where the ship’s five-inch guns brought down three Japanese planes. But the carrier *Hornet*—remembered for its launch of the Doolittle Raiders in April 1942--was sunk. The *San Diego* rescued 200 of the *Hornet*’s sailors.

Protecting the Navy’s big aircraft carriers would be the major role of the *San Diego* for the next two years. The cruiser’s anti-aircraft guns provided a bristling defense against enemy fighters and torpedo planes. One officer marveled, “When seven turrets with fourteen five-inch guns were all firing at the enemy, it looked like the ship itself was on fire.”

The *San Diego*’s endurance was extraordinary. In the course of the war, the cruiser would steam over 300,000 nautical miles throughout the Pacific as it took part in one successful campaign after another: Tarawa, Saipan, the Battle of the Philippine Sea, Guam, Tinian, and Okinawa—all without sustaining any major damage itself. Remarkably, not a single sailor was killed serving aboard the *San Diego*.

In the last months of the war the cruiser served with carriers off the coast of Japan as the Navy prepared to invade the enemy homeland. But after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Imperial Japan sued for peace.

Days after the atomic blasts, Admiral William “Bull” Halsey selected the *San Diego* as the flagship of Task Force 31, designated as the fleet that would soon enter Tokyo Bay. On August 27, the *San Diego* led the U. S. warships into the bay, followed two days later by the USS *Missouri*, where the formal Japanese surrender was signed on September 2, 1945.

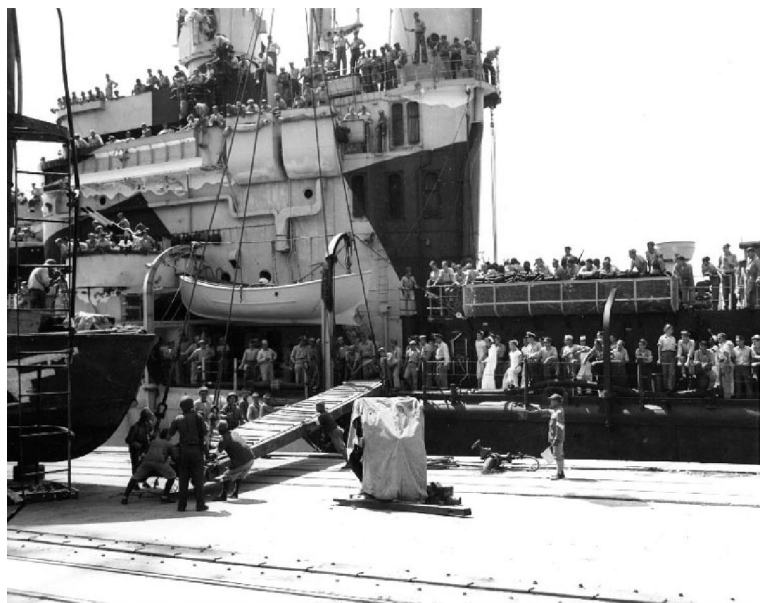
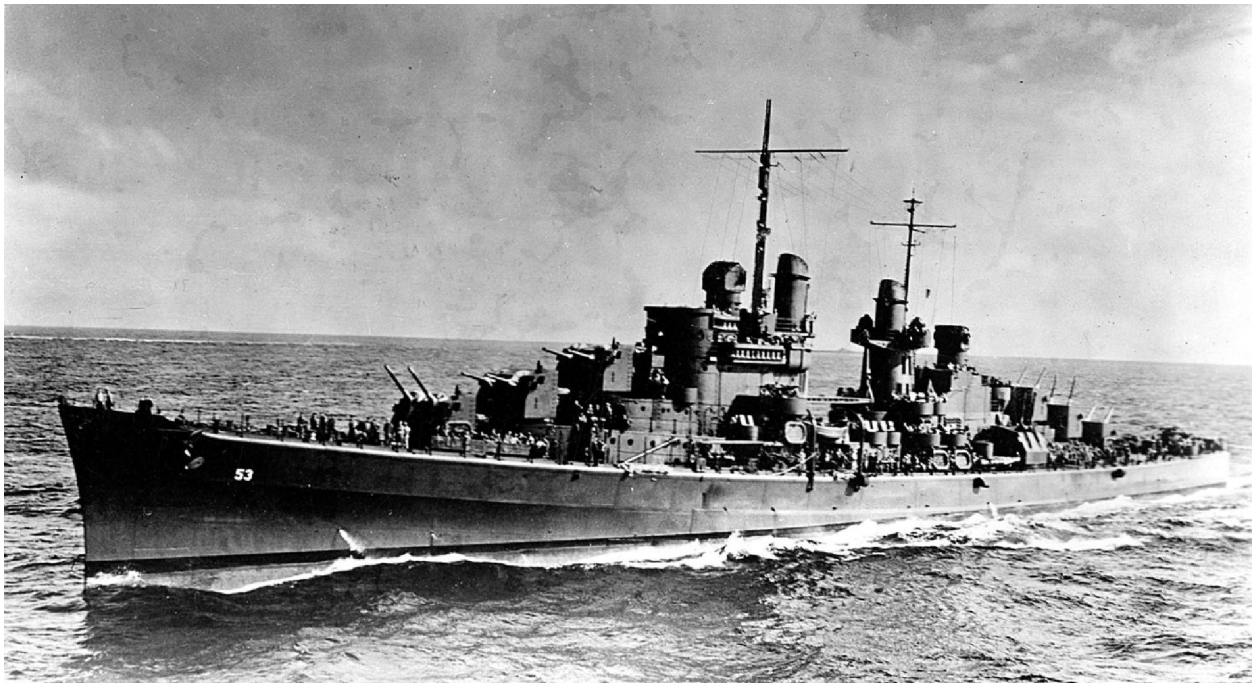


Photo # 80-G-338387 USS San Diego docks at Yokosuka, 30 Aug. 1945

A return to San Diego on October 27 was greeted by “the noisiest welcome ever given a warship by the city.” The next morning—“Navy Day”—brought an open house aboard the ship and a mile and half long celebratory parade from the harbor to Balboa Stadium.

It would be the last opportunity for San Diegans to see their warship. The second most decorated ship in the U.S. Navy was decommissioned the next year. The cruiser was mothballed in Bremerton, Washington and sold for scrap in March 1959.



U.S. Navy photo.

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