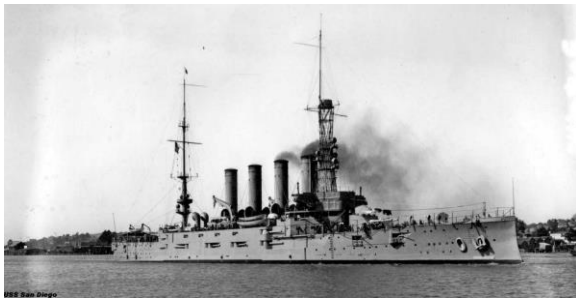


USS *San Diego*

On Wednesday morning the United State cruiser San Diego will be formally rechristened in San Diego's harbor . . . No city on the California coast has been so signally honored by the government, and the fact that a modern war vessel with its hundreds of men will carry the name of San Diego to all parts of the United States and the world is worthy of a celebration.

--San Diego Union, September 14, 1914.

With a gala ceremony in San Diego harbor, the flagship cruiser of the Pacific fleet was christened with style. Thousands watched as the daughter of the mayor, six-year-old Miss Annie May O'Neill, undraped a canvas over the stern, revealing the name "SAN DIEGO." Mayor Charles O'Neill proudly declared the day a city holiday. A barbecue honoring the ship's sailors was held in Balboa Park and the officers and their ladies were treated to a grand ball at the U.S. Grant Hotel.



The USS *San Diego* was the new name for a heavy armored cruiser that had been launched ten years earlier as the *California*. Built in San Francisco by the famed Union Iron Works, the ship was 505 feet in length, 70 feet in width, and displaced 13,600 tons. Coal-fired steam engines turned two eighteen-foot diameter propellers and powered the ship to a top speed of 22 knots.

The cruiser was a *Pennsylvania*-class ship, one of the most potent warships in the world. Its armament included four eight-inch guns, 14 six-inch guns, and an assortment of rapid fire weapons and torpedo tubes. Nearly 900 men and officers served aboard ship. The gun crew was the proud holder of the Spokane Trophy, an annual award given the ship with the best marksmanship in the Navy.

The ship's name change came as the Navy began building a new series of super-dreadnoughts that would all be named after states. San Diego Congressman William Kettner alertly contacted friends in the Navy Department and pushed for the "San Diego" name on the *California*, which would soon lose its name to a new battleship. The Secretary of the Navy approved the request and San Diego had its first namesake warship.

Serving in the eastern Pacific, often as the fleet's flagship, the *San Diego* would anchor frequently in the city. The ship was a popular attraction in 1915-16 as the city held its world's fair, the Panama-California Exposition.

On January 21, 1915, the ship suffered near disaster while cruising in the Gulf of California near La Paz, Mexico. Ensign Robert Cary was taking readings of the steam and air pressure in the boilers. He had just finished inspection of fire room no. 2 when the boilers exploded. Cary quickly returned to the room and grabbed the watertight doors, which were being closed electronically from the bridge. With scalding steam erupting around him, he held the doors open long enough for the men inside the room to escape.

One of the men escaping from the burning room was a young Filipino seaman, Telesforo Trinidad. When Trinidad realized one seaman had been left behind in the room, he returned and picked up the injured seaman. As boilers in another fire room exploded, Trinidad handed off the injured man and assisted in the rescue of more men from the fire room.

For their extraordinary heroism, Ensign Cary and Fireman Trinidad were awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest decoration for valor. Trinidad was the first sailor of Asian descent to win the award. Cary continued as an officer in the Navy and retired in 1945 as a Rear Admiral.



Telesforo Trinidad



Robert Cary

Nine seamen were reported killed in the accident. The wounded ship steamed to Guaymas for temporary repairs, and then proceeded to San Francisco to spend several weeks at the Mare Island Navy Yard. The *San Diego* returned to active duty in the fall and on November 6, 1915, the crew rescued forty-eight passengers from the schooner *Fort Bragg*, wrecked on reef 20 miles northeast of Cape San Lucas.

After the entry of the United States in World War I, the *San Diego* was ordered in July 1917 to join the Atlantic Fleet. After passing through the Panama Canal, the ship joined the fleet at Hampton Roads. For the next year, the cruiser escorted convoys across the submarine-infested North Atlantic—never losing a ship under her watch.

On the morning of July 19, 1918, the *San Diego* was headed for New York from the Portsmouth Navy Yard in New Hampshire. Zigzagging south in calm seas, the cruiser was a few miles off Long Island when a crewman spotted a periscope above the waves. Minutes later, the crew felt a dull thud on the port side. Two explosions followed and with the port side ripped open, the ship began to list.

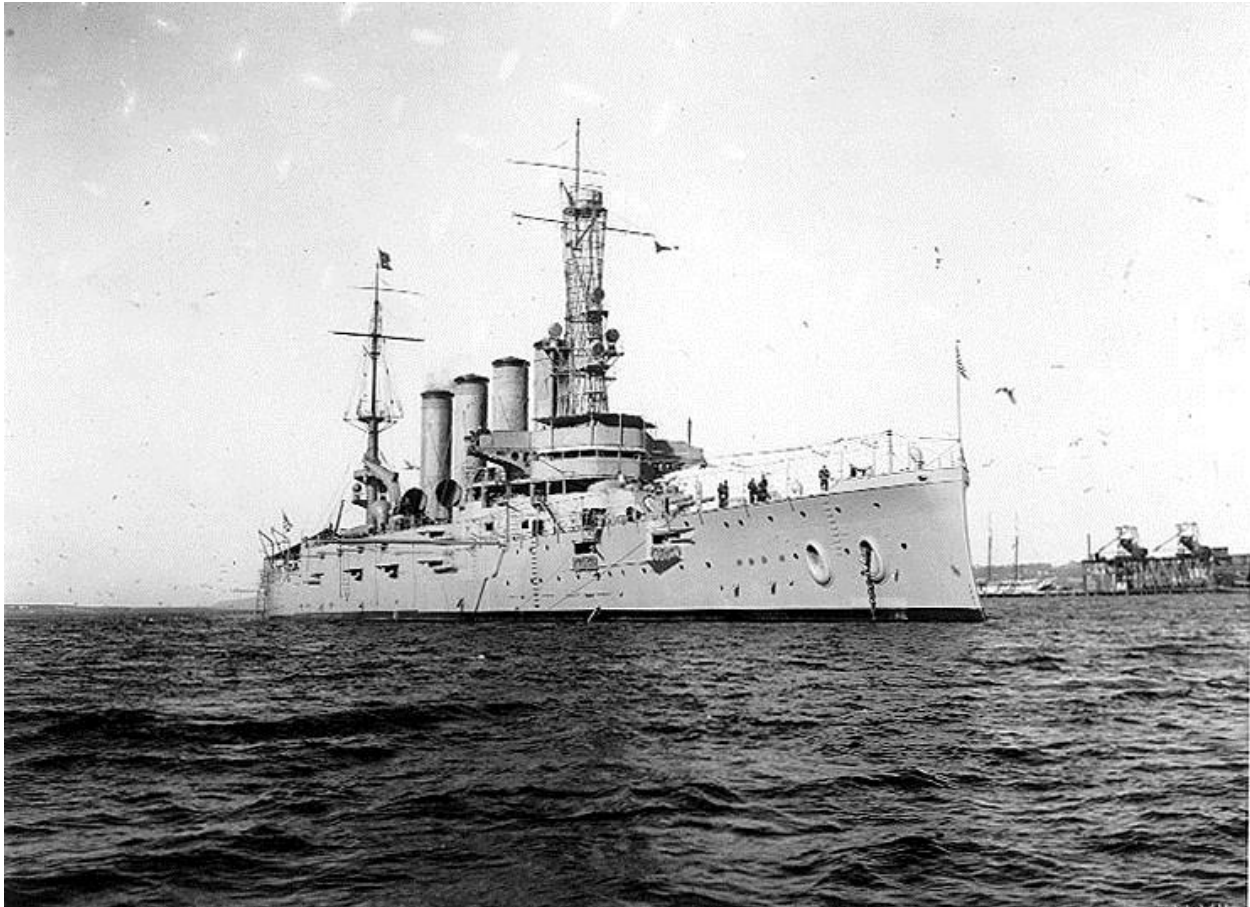
Captain Harley Christy pointed the *San Diego* toward shore and tried to beach the ship on Fire Island. It never made it. With the cruiser sinking fast, Captain Christy gave the order to abandon ship. Most of the nearly 1200 men and officers got off in lifeboats; others dived off the hull with only their life-jackets. Twenty-eight minutes after the initial blast, the ship rolled over and sank.

News of the sinking reached San Diego quickly. The *Union* announced the next day: Destruction of the armored cruiser San Diego by a Hun submarine created universal sorrow throughout the city . . . According to the best information available last night there were 25 San Diego boys serving on the cruiser when she was torpedoed.”

Despite the newspaper's assumption, the cause of the sinking was a mystery, at first. The sailors were convinced a torpedo had hit them. In fact, German U-boats had recently been in the area planting surface mines. U-156, it was ultimately decided, had laid a floating mine, which was struck by the *San Diego*. The secondary explosions were boilers bursting. Three men were killed on the ship; three more died in the water.

A local drive to get the name San Diego attached to a new cruiser began, and then foundered. In 1942, longtime efforts finally succeeded with the commissioning of the anti-aircraft light cruiser *San Diego*. The new ship earned fifteen battle stars in World War II, fighting in major battles such as Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. She was removed from the Navy list in 1959 and scrapped.

The first USS *San Diego* lies today in 110 feet of water, 13.5 miles south of Fire Island Inlet. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it is one of the best known shipwrecks on the East Coast and attracts hundreds of SCUBA divers each year.



USS *San Diego* on January 28, 1915 while serving as flagship of the Pacific Fleet.

From Richard W. Crawford, *San Diego Yesterday* (Charleston, NC: The History Press, 2013).