

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION (OP-09B9)
SHIPS' HISTORIES SECTION

HISTORY OF USS PINKNEY (APH 2)

The keel of USS PINKNEY was laid down as the SS ALCOA CORSAIR at the Moore Drydock and Shipbuilding Company, Oakland, California, on 3 June 1941. The ship was launched on 4 December 1941, three days before the Pearl Harbor disaster, for the Alcoa Steamship Company. The ship was designed to accommodate one hundred passengers in the West Indies and north coast of South America cruise trade, and to carry 8,000 tons of cargo in the bauxite trade between the British and Dutch Guianas and the United States.

Immediately after the war started, the Navy began to convert fast merchant ships to naval auxiliaries. SS ALCOA CORSAIR was among the first to be taken over for the Naval Service. In February 1942, the ship was converted to an attack and hospital evacuation transport. Her passenger spaces became hospital wards and officer accommodations and her cargo compartments were altered to berth combat troops and equipment. Her swimming pool, passenger public rooms and promenade decks disappeared or were changed beyond recognition. Dual-purpose and anti-aircraft guns were installed. Her open decks were fitted with landing boat chocks and davits. The ship was girded for war and was named USS PINKNEY (APH 2).

Commissioned on 27 November 1942, USS PINKNEY was placed under the command of Commander A.L. Hutson, USN. The ship was named in honor of Ninian Pinkney, the Force Surgeon who commanded the first hospital ship in the United States Navy. His ship was the RED ROVER, a converted prize of war captured from the Confederacy during the Civil War.

In January 1943, PINKNEY departed from the United States and headed across the Pacific. She was manned by young Americans from all over the U.S.A., 85% of whom were commencing their first sea voyage. The ship crossed the International Date Line in late January and, for twenty-nine months, she never steamed east of the 180th meridian. From January 1943, until April 1945, when her cruise was suddenly interrupted by a Japanese suicide plane, PINKNEY amassed quite a record. She steamed about 150,000 nautical miles, equal to six times around the world; crossed the equator twelve times; made 180 ports of call; transported over 35,000 patients and more than 65,000 troops.

PINKNEY arrived in the New Hebrides in February 1943 when the base at Espiritu Santo was still suffering from growing pains. In her first battle assignment the ship carried troops to the Florida Islands, where U.S. Marines were recovering from the bloody battles of Tulagi and Gavutu. Here PINKNEY's boats landed her troops and their equipment between calls to battle stations during enemy air attacks.

The conquests of Munda, Vella Lavella, the Shortlands and Bougainville were next on the calendar. PINKNEY was assigned to service evacuating casualties from the field hospitals of the Solomons and the New Hebrides to hospitals in the cooler climates of New Caledonia and New Zealand. The ship became well known among battle-worn patients for good American food supplemented by New Zealand and New Caledonia vegetable and dairy products. In addition, her crew members on many occasions presented needy patients with cigarettes, candy, ice cream and even clothing from their own seabags.

PINKNEY saw the Fiji Islands when their usefulness was ending because the battle line was moving up. Naval installations in New Zealand and other large bases in the tropics "down under" shrank from mammoth proportions to mere storage spaces with well graded though empty roads and airfields.

During nineteen months of service between New Zealand, Guadalcanal and the Florida Islands, PINKNEY was assigned to many and variable missions. She unloaded torpedoes in Tulagi at night while under enemy attack. During the historic naval engagements of the Solomons "Slot," she carried ammunition which was unloaded directly into cruisers and destroyers in Purvis Bay. She embarked and transported U.S. Army and Navy nurses between and for various southwest Pacific hospitals. She also carried New Zealand Waacs and nurses from Auckland to New Caledonia.

The first leave granted to the ship's company was at Auckland in November 1943. All hands were allowed to bring friends on board for the Thanksgiving Day dinner.

At Auckland, Commander A.L. Hutson, USN, was relieved as commanding officer of USS PINKNEY by Commander A.A. Downing, USN.

In one of her many cruises from New Zealand to New Caledonia, PINKNEY carried French war brides and babies. The pharmacist's mates on board and the cooks and bakers prepared special baby foods and formulas for the infants. It was not exactly a routine operation since neither the children nor the mothers could speak English. On this voyage, a man was lost overboard at night. The ship was stopped, a boat lowered and the man was safely back on board in thirty minutes.

In September 1944, PINKNEY laid off Peleliu while her boats landed combat loaded troops and equipment of the FIRST Marine Division on the beaches. Then, for five days, she stood off to reload many of these same fighting men, some wounded, some dying. The island which was to be conquered in 48 hours was taking days, and finally the fighting ran into weeks. In intense tropical heat, all hands worked for days without sleep as the ship maneuvered to hole the ship out of range of enemy mortar fire and yet close enough to allow a short, quick run for the boats returning with the wounded.

The casualties were brought from the beaches, hoisted aboard and carried to the hospital spaces where doctors, assisted by hospital corpsmen, performed operations, dressed wounds and cared for the patients. Casualties came from the beaches at Peleliu until PINKNEY could take no more. She got underway for an emergency full speed run to the Admiralties and returned back to Peleliu for more wounded.

In November 1944, PINKNEY was assigned to the Philippines where she remained in San Pedro Bay, between Leyte and Samar to receive the wounded from the Battle for Leyte Gulf. The Japanese were employing their suicide tactics and the ships fought off air attacks day and night. Here PINKNEY loaded her survivors and wounded from ships hit by Kamikaze planes. In the daytime natives came out to the ships in outrigger canoes begging for food. The crew on board PINKNEY responded with whatever they had or could get until the ship's Supply Officer had to lock up everything and post a guard over the spud locker.

Later in November, PINKNEY left San Pedro Bay with a full load of patients in a convoy which included Liberty ships, LST's and many other types, escorted by a damaged destroyer. The ship landed her wounded at Hollandia where she embarked other patients for care and transportation to the Admiralty Islands. From the Admiralties she carried more wounded to New Caledonia.

By December 1944, PINKNEY was working her way north for another campaign proceeding from Tulagi through the Coral Sea to Bougainville. She let go her anchor in Empress Augusta Bay, where a large number of ships was assembling for the coming landings at Lingayen Gulf. As the ships lay at anchor assembling men and supplies for a strike three thousand miles away, Australian soldiers were arriving to replace American troops in battle against thousands of Japanese still on Bougainville. The island's active volcano puffed white smoke into the air and white plumes of steam trailed downward from the crater's brim.

The lull in activities didn't last long. From Bougainville the transports proceeded to New Guinea along the shores of Lae and Salamaua for amphibious exercises. Christmas Day found PINKNEY in the Admiralty Islands with over a thousand troops on board and no mail.

The ships left Manus just before New Year's Day and steamed at night through the Straits of Surabaya, whose bordering islands were all Japanese-held. Steaming on through the Sulu Sea and the Mindoro Sea, the ship continued into the South China Sea. The cruisers and destroyers gave all hands a feeling of security and the voyage was very much uneventful. However, on "D-Day" minus one, all hands were called to their Battle Stations. Four enemy planes could be seen bearing down on the next transport division to starboard. Suddenly, two carrier-based Corsairs appeared and, in what seemed like a matter of seconds, the enemy planes plummeted into the sea in flames.

Before the cheers died down, antiaircraft fire from the ships opened up on an enemy plane coming in fast from ahead. In spite of the hail of shells, the plane came in fast and dived into an escort carrier. There was a rush of flames and then dense clouds of black smoke obscured the carrier from view. The ships then turned their guns on a plane diving on the formation from above. Apparently unharmed, the plane continued his dive through the heavy antiaircraft barrage. Orders to "take cover" and "hit the deck" came over PINKNEY's public address system. Suddenly, the enemy plane burst into flame and dove unguided into the sea half-between PINKNEY and the next column of transports.

The stricken carrier dropped farther back with black clouds of smoke still billowing from her. Two destroyers and several other rescue vessels were standing by to render aid. All the other ships steamed on to the objective area.

On "D-Day" in Lingayen Gulf, the radar scope showed many unidentified planes in the immediate area but the carrier planes knocked them all down or drove them away from the transports. Some of PINKNEY's boats as well as those of other ships broached in the heavy surf running on the beaches. Dawn and dusk bombing attacks at high altitude became routine but only one large ship was hit. Enemy suicide swimmers appeared, carrying small bombs lashed to their bodies which they would endeavor to detonate near or against the sides of the transports. Japanese suicide boats also appeared loaded with explosives for the purpose of running head on into our ships; a few succeeded.

The transports that came with PINKNEY had unloaded and departed the target area, but PINKNEY stayed at Lingayen Gulf for 23 days, embarking and treating casualties from the beaches and from the ships which were hit by bombs and suicide tactics. On one occasion an emergency call for aid was sent out by an LST that had been hit by a "Kamikaze" plane. PINKNEY's fire and rescue boats were alongside the stricken ship within fifteen minutes to fight the fire and return the injured personnel. Later a crew of PINKNEY shipfitters and carpenter's mates went aboard the LST to make emergency repairs. During the long stay at Lingayen Gulf, PINKNEY gave water and food to many amphibious vessels who were running low in supplies. Consequently, before PINKNEY arrived at the next supply base, her crew was eating dehydrated potatoes, hardtack and "C" rations. On 2 February 1945, the ship proceeded to Leyte where all patients were transferred to a hospital ship.

Ordered back to Guadalcanal, PINKNEY received orders while enroute to proceed to Babelthaupt and then to Guam via Ulithi. Upon arrival at Guam, it was learned that a squadron of transports had recently departed with assault troops to land on Iwo Jima. The news of this invasion received at Guam was not encouraging, and PINKNEY was dispatched to Iwo Jima to evacuate casualties. She arrived there on the day that the Stars and Stripes were raised on Mount Suribachi.

PINKNEY embarked casualties close inshore where enemy mortar fire fell just short of her. Marine tanks could be seen plainly, advancing on the enemy pill boxes and gun emplacements. The wreckage of many enemy planes was visible on the air strip and on the cliffs of Suribachi, dynamite was exploding where the Marines were sealing the mouths of enemy caves and asphyxiating the occupants. High up on the slopes and inland, shells pouring from the broadside of our surface ships were exploding. Planes from carriers could be seen dive bombing, rocketing and strafing the enemy positions. All hands on board PINKNEY worked feverishly to get the wounded on board from the beaches, treat them and berth them. In forty-eight hours the ship had a capacity load of casualties and was ordered to proceed to Guam at full speed.

From Guam, PINKNEY proceeded to Saipan, where preparations were underway for the invasion of Okinawa. Assault troops and equipment were embarked and the transport squadron got underway for another amphibious landing on enemy beaches. Heretofore, PINKNEY had known nothing worse than near misses. She had watched other ships get hit and helped them to recuperate and mend battle damage. In this invasion she was slated to take the punishment herself.

The transports were four uneventful days enroute to the target area. On "D" Day, the transport squadron to which PINKNEY was assigned disembarked its troops in landing boats at the southernmost tip of Okinawa a few miles from Naha. The boats circled in the rendezvous area, formed in waves and maneuvered toward the beach. Before reaching the beach, they turned back and reloaded the troops on the transports. On the following morning, the same feint landing was repeated. While these tactics in the south kept the enemy defending forces divided, the main landings, comprised of two full Marine divisions and four Army divisions, were progressing ahead of schedule in the central portion of the island.

PINKNEY's transport squadron remained at sea awaiting orders to land their embarked troops when and where they were needed. On "D" Day plus ten, PINKNEY and other ship were ordered detached from the squadron to report to the main unloading area. That night, as preparations were made to disembark troops at dawn, PINKNEY zigzagged through enemy torpedo wakes. She came through unscathed and unloaded troops and equipment successfully.

PINKNEY loaded casualties from a damaged battleship that day and from a destroyer that had been hit on the following day. The ship's repair force went to the destroyer to help make emergency repairs. At night, during high-altitude bombing attacks, the ships threw up antiaircraft fire that looked like sparks flying from an enemy wheel. The Japs were fighting desperately to make the allied advance cost dearly as the fighting drew nearer to Tokyo.

PINKNEY was ordered northward to land the personnel and equipment of a Marine evacuation hospital at Nago Wan. Nago Bay was surrounded by terraced hills with pine trees jutting into the sky. Artillery fire could be heard and dust clouds were visible where shells detonated. Intermittent fire from shore batteries splashed in the sea just short of the anchored ships. Whenever these coast defense guns opened up, destroyers would level their guns on them until the enemy shore batteries were silenced.

In the evening of the second day at Nago Wan, PINKNEY weighed anchor to get underway. Shell splashes from a coast defense gun started walking out towards the ships. The shells could be heard whining closer and as PINKNEY swung inshore to make the turn to get out, four shells bracketed her. A ragged piece of shrapnel, large enough to decapitate a man, landed on the number four hatch. The ship pulled away from the shore without further trouble and early the next morning she arrived back in the area of the main landings and transferred the patients on board to the hospital ship SAMARITAN.

PINKNEY then proceeded to Kerama Retto to serve as a floating hospital for damaged ships that put in there. From one to four ships were hit daily by Kamikaze planes. As they limped into Kerama Retto, PINKNEY received their casualties. Floating drydocks mended jagged holes in the ships to prepare them for returning to battle or to return to a rear area for more complete repairs. Battleships, cruisers, carriers and destroyers entered this harbor to replenish their ammunition from ammunition supply ships. Working parties from PINKNEY were sent aboard the ammunition ships to help load shells and bombs into the fighting ships. The ship's crew also helped bury the dead men from ships on a small island, where the white crosses multiplied daily to represent over nine hundred naval officers and men. From about 15 miles away, the big guns on battleships and cruisers could be heard plainly and at night the reflections of glaring light from shell bursts were visible against the black northern sky.

To relieve the tension, movies were shown for small groups of men in one of the cargo holds on board PINKNEY. Sometimes, on a cloudy night, a complete movie could be seen without interruption of "man Battle Stations"

Saturday, the 28th of April 1945, was a warm day with only a few wisps of cloud in the sky to curtain the sun periodically. Chaplain V.A. Nels was ashore with a burial party to inter the dead from the previous day near a small village called Simami. The cemetery was neat with rows of white crosses and the surrounding hills were green with vegetation on patterns of terraced farms. Down in the Bay out, ships were dispersed at about one-half mile intervals. The sound of the ships' General Alarm gongs could be heard faintly, calling their crews to Battle Stations. Probably a report of "unidentified planes approaching" had been received again. These alarms were received several times daily but the enemy planes did not often get in as far as Kerama Retto by day.

Just before sundown on this day, a call to Battle Stations indicated that enemy planes were in the area again but the alert lasted for less than an hour. Life on board PINKNEY settled down for the night. A small group of men were allowed to attend a movie in #5 hold . . . "The Northwest Rangers". Doctors and corpsmen were operating on a casualty in #1 Operating Room. Captain Downing was working on some ship's papers in his cabin.

At 1730 the deck security patrolman on the forecastle saw a low-flying plane coming in and fired his carbine at it. Suddenly the roar of plane motors could be heard throughout the ship. As all hands scrambled to their feet a terrific explosion rocked the PINKNEY. A boat handling crew, lowering a boat from #3 davit set, never knew what hit them. The men at the movies knew that the ship was badly hit but quitted the hold in good order and without panic. In #1 Operating Room the operation was interrupted momentarily and was then resumed by flashlight.

On deck, the after end of the superstructure was enveloped in a solid sheet of flames reaching high into the sky. Ammunition in the ready boxes at #23 and #24 guns began exploding. Behind and beyond the crackling of flames and barking of exploding 20 millimeter ammunition the General Alarms and bugles of other ships could be heard calling their men to General Quarters.

The fire hoses were out but there was no water in the main. Water lines, electrical conduits and steam pipes had been ruptured by the explosion or were cracking wide open from the intense heat of the fire. A distant hiss and roar of steam could be heard from the engine room, where officers and men were fighting in the dark to close the valves and secure the boilers and machinery. Two men died here, but the plant was secured in time to prevent the boilers from exploding.

Bulkheads clocks throughout the ship that were not completely destroyed stopped at 1931. Everywhere below decks was fire or darkness. More enemy planes had now approached and tracer fire from other ships streaked through the smoke from PINKNEY. Fog generators on ships and small boats were laying down a smoke screen to obscure the ships from above but there was no means of hiding the yellow flames that leaped into the sky from PINKNEY.

Outside aid would be required to extinguish the fire but in the meantime there was work to be accomplished toward rescuing personnel, both well and wounded, from below deck compartments on fire or endangered. Captain Downing, badly burned and dazed from a severe brain concussion, managed to wriggle through a porthole and take charge on the bridge. Lieutenant Duggan, the executive officer, directed the work abated the flaming superstructure. Live ammunition was thrown overboard from ready boxes, in the immediate proximity of the fire.

All but sixteen patients, who died in the explosion, were evacuated in landing boats to other ships. Eighteen ship's officers and men lost their lives in the explosion and fire or in fighting the fire and rescuing trapped personnel below decks.

Rescue tugs, LSTs and LSMs had moved in close now and were playing water on the fire. Hoses were led from these ships to the decks of PINKNEY to get water on the fires in below deck spaces. About three hours after the hit, the fire was brought under control. After another hour of probing and investigating to kill the last surviving remnants of fire and smouldering the men had time to survey what the Japanese "divine Wind" had brought them.

PINKNEY lay dreadfully silent, with a heavy list to port. From the bridge deck, a jagged hole, thirty feet in diameter and surrounded by twisted steel, extended down through three decks to the bulkhead deck. All but four of the officers' staterooms were totally destroyed or gutted. Bulkheads and decks throughout the midship section were bellied in or out, up or down, by the force of the explosion or the heat of the fire. All wards in the amidships hospital area were blasted and burned out or gutted.

Feverish activity ensued, on board PINKNEY for the next eight days. All hands turned to clearing away the debris. The dead who could be found were buried as soon as their bodies could be extricated from the wreckage. Shipfitters cut and burned away twisted and torn steel while engine room ratings began patching electrical leads. Cooks and bakers went on board other ships to prepare food and brought it to the PINKNEY in containers. Electrical power for lights was supplied by a tug boat alongside so that repair work could continue day and night. Shipboard routine was re-established with messengers serving where telephones and public address systems had served before. Two empty oxygen tanks were suspended by wires, one forward and one aft, with men standing by with hammers to call the crew to Battle Stations during air attacks. On the second night following the hit, a ship two thousand yards astern of PINKNEY was the victim of another "divine wind". PINKNEY doctors and corpsmen left for twelve hours to lend aid to the newly stricken ship.

The repair work progressed at gratifying speed. A temporary deck was laid over the engine room to protect it from the weather. Jury leads for electrical power and "Rube Goldberg" rigs for air ducts and pipe lines were installed. The bare necessities for life on board were provided; cots were distributed, stores brought on board, galleys put back in operation and temporary mess halls set up. Tanks were cleaned and flushed and fresh water pumped on board.

On the eighth day the PINKNEY hove up anchor and moved through the water under her own power. Engine orders were given over a temporary telephone rig. Steering was accomplished from the emergency steering station on the fantail. The engines were operating under power, but it was sufficient to get PINKNEY away from Kerama Retto and started on the long passage home.

Kerama Retto will stir enough memories in the minds of the men who served on PINKNEY to last a lifetime, most of them vivid and awe-inspiring. The Kamikaze plane that Fate labelled "PINKNEY" served to weld these men into a solid group, with confidence in each other and confidence in their individual abilities, in an emergency. Many men received citations from the Secretary of the Navy and the President of the United States for bravery and performance above and beyond the call of duty.

PINKNEY made her way back to the United States via Saipan, Eniwetok and Pearl Harbor. Between ports the weatherman was kind, giving her gentle breezes and smooth seas. Further repairs were accomplished and more jury rigs installed enroute. By the time she reached Pearl Harbor, the engines could propel her at fourteen knots and steering was possible from the navigating bridge. At ports enroute, crowds gathered to look and marvel at the dented and blistered freak that was PINKNEY.

On 8 June 1945, three tug boats shunted PINKNEY alongside Pier #1 at the General Engineering and Drydock Company Yard, Alameda, in the port of San Francisco . . . twenty-nine months to the day since she had steamed out of that port into the Pacific. On this arrival day in San Francisco many officials and representatives of newspapers and magazines came on board the PINKNEY to view the suicide plane damage. Pictures of the ship were taken which were later published in newspapers all over the United States and in a July issue of LIFE magazine.

EPILOGUE

The group of men who had worked together so well as was the crew of USS PINKNEY began to break up. Injured and sick were transferred to hospitals or sent home on rehabilitation leave. Captain Downing was hospitalized and was relieved as commanding officer by Commander J.W. LaBelle, of Avon, Massachusetts. Many new officers and men reported on board and were sent to gunnery, radar, amphibious training and many other schools established and organized by the Navy Department to prepare men for battle.

The ship repair work got off to a good start and continued on a twenty-four hour a day schedule until "V-J" Day. The work was then cut back to eight hours a day, five days a week. On 12 October 1945, the PINKNEY was ready for trial runs. By 18 October all trials and tests had been completed satisfactorily and she resumed service. She sailed from San Francisco on 21 October 1945 bound for Pearl Harbor, Yonabaru, Tokyo and Sasebo with replacements and occupation troops.

PINKNEY's primary mission in the postwar period was the transportation of thousands of Americans on the many islands of the Pacific back to the continental United States for demobilization.

The ship ended her naval service when she was bought for commercial use in September 1946.

USS PINKNEY (APH 2) earned four Battle Stars on the Asiatic-Pacific Area Service Medal for participating in the following operations:

- 1 Star/Western Caroline Islands Operation
Capture and Occupation of southern Palau Islands -- 6 September to 14 October 1944
- 1 Star/Luzon Operation
Lingayen Gulf Landing -- 4 - 8 January 1945
- 1 Star/Iwo Jima Operation
Assault and Occupation of Iwo Jima -- 15 February to 16 March 1945
- 1 Star/Okinawa Gunto Operation
Assault and Occupation of Okinawa Gunto -- 24 March to 30 June 1945

In addition, USS PINKNEY (APH 2) earned the Navy Occupation Service Medal, Pacific, for duty in occupied Japanese waters during the periods of 9 November to 1 December 1945 and 5-17 January 1946,

STATISTICS

Overall Length	450 feet
Beam	62 feet
Speed	18 knots
Displacement	7,791 tons

Stencilled 4/19/63
ISK