

## **Burial at Sea<sup>1</sup>**

By Lawrence Markworth

An old warrior, relegated to obscurity in the backwaters of San Diego Bay with the rest of the Navy's unwanted fleet, waited. A destroyer, unable to serve her country after a crippling collision that amputated most of her bow, the USS Tingey was disabled, decommissioned, and cast aside. Guns removed from her decks, stripped of every piece of machinery of value, no longer able to fight, she lay naked, aging, and lonely, secretly wishing for rehabilitation or death. From her remaining superstructure, she could occasionally see the proud fleet leaving the bay for the real action in the South China Sea. She longed to be with them, cutting the waves at 30-plus knots, protecting aircraft carriers, looking for Russian submarines, or shelling the enemy in some far-away jungle. Instead, rust ran rampant through her decks, passageways, bulkheads and bilges, eating away at her insides like an inoperable cancer. But the worst was the neglect. No one worked on her, no one visited, no one cared. Nothing but silence, except for the occasional wave lapping at her rust-oozing sides, as a tugboat brought in another old hulk. How long could this idleness and humiliation last?

As her aging compatriots were towed from their berths, she could not believe the way they looked. It was a shame and a disgrace for warships to be in this condition. As they slowly flowed past, the painful reality would sink home: this is what she must look like. Each time that happened, deep in her heart she knew there would be no rehabilitation. She now faced the disgraceful end she had seen too many times before in this God-forsaken hellhole. She tried to turn her mind from it, but the images kept coming back. The victim would be towed into the dry-dock moored just across the way. It would rise until the ugly aging hulk completely lifted out of the water. Before the hull even had a chance to dry, the death crew would swarm the victim like ants and begin to cut it apart. The screams of skin and guts ripped from it in small chunks were too much to bear. The desecration continued day and night until the only sound left was the dull thud of steel flung into awaiting trucks and barges. The remains of once proud warriors, fodder for foreign steel mills. The dry-dock stood empty, the victim a non-entity. An honorable death? Far from it. A disappearing act, a life sliced into oblivion

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<sup>1</sup> Based on an actual training exercise during my tour of duty aboard the ocean going tug USS Tawasa, off the coast of California in early 1966.

with no grave or memorial to commemorate its existence. No, the only honorable death for an old warship was burial at sea. Anything less was a disgrace – a blasphemy.

Tingey often wondered what happened to her fellow internees who were towed out of this purgatory and never seen again. She doubted very much that they were rehabbed, for she had never seen them steam past in the outer harbor as revitalized warships. Then one day she began to see activity on her pier. At first, a horrible panic gripped her, as she feared she was headed to the dry-dock herself. But small signs allayed her trepidation. A crew boarded, and made one last sweep of decks and compartments as they searched for any remaining equipment of value. She knew they could have just as easily done that in the dry-dock. Next, they installed portable running lights port and starboard, and attached a stern light on her bow and a bow light on her stern. How strange. It could only mean one thing; she was going to sea, but how and why?

The next morning a large ocean-going Navy tug pulled up to her stern and the tug's crew attached a stout towing cable. Slowly she eased out of her berth as the tug guided her toward open water. As she left her solitary home – held captive there for so many years she had lost count – there was no regret or hard feelings, only hope for whatever lay ahead. A nearly forgotten surge of excitement flowed through her. Long ago her powerful engines had been surgically removed. She could now recall the beautiful song of those steam turbines winding up and applying the massive force of torque to her screws.

They steamed all day and into the night with the blowing wind creating a turbulent sea. Lacking her normal ballast, she bounced around like a cork. Not designed to move stern first in a heavy sea, she continually swung port to starboard, starboard to port on the tug's tow cable. Although still chained to her liberator, she felt free for the first time in years. The salt spray on her decks and superstructure felt like a magic potion injecting new life into her tired and rusty bulwarks. The years of wear and neglect seemed to fade with every nautical mile.

In addition to not running under her own power, the other strange sensation of finally being at sea again was the lack of a crew. A ship at sea without a crew was like an army without a general, Napoleon without Josephine, a war without a victory. She continued to wonder where she was going and what was going to happen. But her newfound freedom overcame her concerns of the fate that lay ahead.

Sunrise brought a stop to their progress. The crew from the tug launched an inflatable and they headed toward the old destroyer. Soon she heard footfalls on her

decks and it was like old times again, miles at sea with an active crew aboard. She continued to bob around in the choppy waters, some of her hatches clanging open and shut with the action of the waves. The crew moved quickly, for being on the abandoned, gutted ship so far at sea proved quite unnerving. Almost as soon as they boarded her, the crew was gone, breaking loose the towing cable and removing the portable running lights. They steamed away leaving her to drift alone.

Puzzled by this action, but at the same time she enjoyed the solitude of floating on an open ocean. Her peace was soon broken by the sound of aircraft carrier fighter jets swooping low across her bridge. Real action, like the old days, when it was her duty to protect the giant carriers. Then something went terribly wrong, for on their next pass the jets began to rain bombs down upon her. Her first thought was to run. She instinctively waited for the general quarters alarm to sound. Of course, nothing happened. She had no crew, no engines, no guns, no alarms, and no defenses. Helpless, she began to yell, "You idiots, I'm not the enemy, I'm on your side!" Her calls of outrage went unheeded as the planes made pass after pass, the bombs making direct hits on her decks and structures, smoke and searing heat engulfing her. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the bombing runs briefly stopped, and the smoke cleared. Still afloat, she reflexively surveyed her decks. There were holes everywhere, huge gaps ripped from her skin, and agonizing pain from her deep wounds. She could see several ships on the horizon: two or three destroyers, the aircraft carrier, the tug, and the admiral's flagship, a cruiser. Enough fire power to sink a battle ship and more. Then she understood. "Oh my God, they are trying to kill me." She was *the* target in target practice. Hallelujah! They were going to give her her wish, death with honor, burial at sea. She would show them how old warriors die: with tenacity, with courage and with dignity. Years of neglect had not taken the fight out of her. "Alright, give me everything you got, I'm ready." And they did. Run after run of the bombers. The destroyers fired round after round into her, the sound deafening. The sight of warships doing what they were designed to do was awesomely frightening. The onslaught continued late into the day. After some time, numbness replaced the pain and euphoria entered her. She knew the end was near.

Time after time they would stop the attack, wait for the smoke to clear, expecting her to be gone. However, she held on, still floating proud. Late in the afternoon, she was listing at forty-five degrees and taking on water. She spotted the cruiser maneuvering into position to take some shots with its eight-inch guns. She knew one of those large rounds could easily blow her in half, and she welcomed it. Then, as quickly as the cruiser got into position, it came about and headed out of range. From the west, she

observed the tugboat heading into a tactical position. What is this? That little peashooter gun on the tug couldn't sink a life raft, let alone a destroyer. She was tired of holding on, ready for the end. This bad joke was just going to prolong her agony. Then she saw a small flash from the tug's only gun, and felt a dull thud as the round entered the side of her listing hull. She let out a small sigh as her remaining air escaped. Down went her stern, straight up went her bow, as if in a salute to the tug, then she quickly sank. Tingey's years as a warrior, years of serving her country, and years of waiting – finally rewarded with an honorable burial at sea.