

# OFFICIAL HISTORY, BATTLE SHIP WEST VIRGINIA

*From the Office of Naval Records and History, Navy Department*

Having read in the newspapers brief accounts of the achievements of the USS West Virginia, inquiry was made of the Navy for additional data, and the following complete history was supplied. Proud of the magnificent record made by the state's namesake, and believing other West Virginians would enjoy reading it, we decided to publish it and pass it along to anyone who may desire it. A charge of 10c per copy (12c if mailed alone) is made to partly cover the cost.

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Like a vengeful ghost reappearing from the dead, the USS WEST VIRGINIA (BB 48) rose from the murky bottom of Pearl Harbor to unleash retaliatory fury on the enemy for a full year preceding the Japanese surrender.

The 22-year-old battleship returned to combat duty at Leyte in the Philippines, in October 1944, where she bombarded enemy shore installations, and from that time until V-J day, she cut a well-marked swath with her 16-inch artillery to the gates of the Japanese homeland.

When she finished this series of bombardments, the old "WEEVEE" found herself sitting in Tokyo Bay, witnessing the signing of the Japanese surrender. It was an old score repaid.

Two officers and 103 enlisted men lost their lives when the Japs struck the "old" battleship at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. The WEST VIRGINIA seemed to bear the brunt of the attack; two bombs and six aerial torpedoes left her a flaming wreck and she settled on the bottom, her portside main deck awash.

Battered and torn the ship was raised on May 30, 1942, and the once majestic vessel limped into the West Coast under her own power a year later. The grotesque hull, patched with temporary plates, appeared to be fitted only for the nearest scrap pile.

But, the magic of our civilian-manned shipyards, equipped her with modern weapons of sea warfare and she became, in many respects, a new vessel. The WEST VIRGINIA left the ways at Puget Sound Navy Yard, Bremerton, Washington, on July 4, 1944. Two months later she set her course westward.

## BATTLE FOR LEYTE GULF

Number 1 stop on the WEST VIRGINIA'S "hit parade" was Leyte Gulf, Philippines, late in October, 1944. Flying the same colors she had flown at Pearl Harbor, the veteran battleship poured tons of explosives on Japanese shore installations to help pave the way for American landings on the island.

It was here that the "WEEVEE" drew first blood. A Japanese "Kamikaze" plane attempted to pierce the WEST VIRGINIA'S anti-aircraft defenses, but the ship's gunner sent the onrushing Nip to visit his ancestors. During operations in and around Leyte, the

Waiting at the northern entrance to the Strait was the bombardment and support force of the SEVENTH Fleet, and proudly leading a battleline of six "old" battleships was the WEST VIRGINIA. As the enemy approached within range the "open fire" order was received, and the WEST VIRGINIA poured 93 one-ton armor-piercing projectiles into the enemy formation. She was the first of the battleships to open fire.

When the battle was over the Japanese task force had been crushed and the WEST VIRGINIA had sunk an enemy battleship.

## MINDORO

In December, after a brief respite in the New Hebrides, the WEST VIRGINIA was chosen flagship for the carrier task force covering the Mindoro operation.

With two other battleships, a division of cruisers, six escort carriers and a dozen destroyers, the WEST VIRGINIA entered the Sulu Sea in the Central Philippines to protect the beachhead of General MacArthur's forces at the southern end of Mindoro.

During the operation the ship weathered scores of air attacks, shooting down a Japanese bomber and fighter attempting to reach the carriers.

## LUZON

The WEST VIRGINIA spent Christmas at one of the Navy's advance bases below the Equator. The day after Christmas she departed for a rendezvous at sea with the task force scheduled to take part in the invasion on Luzon, at Lingayen Gulf.

For nearly a week the Japanese air force pressed home attacks on the force as it approached the main Philippine Island. And for three days preceding the invasion

battleship assisted in the destruction of five more suicide planes.

## SURIGAO STRAIT

Only a few days after the U. S. landings on Leyte, on October 20, the task force of which the WEST VIRGINIA was part, received word of the approach of powerful elements of the enemy fleet through the Mindano Sea. To reach the newly-won beachhead and its hundreds of landing craft, transports, supply ships and tankers, the enemy force had to penetrate narrow Surigao Strait. The Japanese flotilla steamed up the passage on a moonless, starless night, planning to reach the congested transport area by dawn.

The WEST VIRGINIA pounded shore installations in preparation for landings by the U. S. Sixth Army. On "L" day the Army went ashore, meeting negligible resistance in the bombarded area.

Again enemy air attacks were warded off, and the WEST VIRGINIA and other warships remained in the area over a month to forestall any Japanese attempt to send the remainder of their fleet against the vital Gulf area.

In February the WEST VIRGINIA departed for a rest and recreation period in the rear area, only to find new orders and another assignment awaiting her.

## IWO JIMA

The "WEEVEE" reached her operating base in the morning, and less than 24 hours later, after loading provisions and supplies all night long and filling tanks with fuel, she departed for Iwo Jima at top speed with two escorts, missing the initial Marine landings on the island by only an hour. She remained on the scene giving vitally needed fire support until the ammunition supply was exhausted.

For her quick "turn around" for combat service and for being the only heavy ship from the Lingayen Gulf operation ready for the mission, the WEST VIRGINIA received a "well done" from Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz.

## OKINAWA

The most modern of the old battleship "ghosts" did not escape unscratched in her rampage against the Japs. Off Okinawa in April, a hotly-contested stepping stone to Japan, she received her only damage as a result of enemy action.

A Japanese suicide plane penetrated the screen of anti-aircraft fire the night of the invasion and crashed into her port side, killing

four men and wounding 23 others. The commanding officer reported her fully operating less than an hour after the plane had crashed.

Repair parties began clearing away the wreckage immediately after the hit. In less than three days all work was completed. The only permanent loss to the ship was one 20 MM machine gun mount.

Evading the rain of tracer fire, the suicide plane dove steeply into the superstructure on the port side. Its bomb plunged through a deck but failed to explode, later being rendered harmless by the ship's bomb disposal officer.

The plane battered the splinter shield, a fire room intake, and parts of the signal bridge, broke through one deck and wound up in the galley. Its engine, thrown clear of the plane, bounded into the ship's laundry. Fortunately there was no explosion.

Fires which broke out in the galley, tailor shop, laundry and crew's spaces, were quickly extinguished by the repair parties. The damage was superficial, affecting only parts of the superstructure which were hit and lines and cables in the interior of the ship.

The WEST VIRGINIA brought guns to bear on Shuri Castle, a strongly fortified ridge position. One hundred 16-inch shells were poured into Shuri town, eliminating one on the "thorns in the side" of the U. S. Tenth Army. At Ie Shima, west of Okinawa, the WEST VIRGINIA delivered fire support for the invading troops.

During the Okinawa conquest and at Ie Shima, where Ernie Pyle met his death, the "WEEVEE" fired nearly 1,300 rounds of 16-inch ammunition against enemy defenses on the islands.

#### SURRENDER OF JAPAN

The proudest moment in the history of the WEST VIRGINIA came on August 31, 1945, when she steamed through narrow Uraga Channel into Tokyo Bay, the first of the "old" battleships to anchor off the Japanese capital.

She was a few miles from the USS MISSOURI (BB 63) when, two days later, the Japanese completed the formality of surrendering aboard that battleship. On the day of the signing of the surrender documents, the sturdy old battleship was the only ship present which bore the scars of December 7, 1941 raid on Pearl Harbor.

At the time negotiations were first being made for surrender, the WEST VIRGINIA was laying at anchor in Okinawa's Buckner Bay, preparing to depart on a raiding mission that would have taken her to the China coast. Instead of proceeding west into battle, she headed northward to

join Admiral William F. Halsey's THIRD Fleet as part of the advance occupation force.

#### "MAGIC CARPET"

The end of the war did not mean termination of duty for the veteran battlewagon. She was assigned "magic carpet" duty . . . a pleasant detail in which she brought home many of the men that just a few months ago were hitting the Pacific beachheads under the protection of her fire. By mid-December she had brought back 7,500 veterans.

Shortly after the Japanese capitulation, the WEST VIRGINIA began her long return trek to the continental United States. She halted at Okinawa only long enough to take aboard several hundred Pacific war veterans going home for discharge.

From the Ryukyus, the veteran battlewagon journeyed to Pearl Harbor and thence to San Diego where an enthusiastic crowd greeted her at Navy Day ceremonies.

On December 30, 1945, the weary but proud warrior was detached from her transport duty and she steamed a few days later into Puget Sound Navy Yard, Berton, Washington, to be preserved in inactive status.

\* \* \*

The WEST VIRGINIA spent 223 days in battle actions, shooting down eight planes and assisting with twelve others. She was hit by a Kamikaze on April 1, 1945, with four killed and 23 wounded.

She had many close calls, the most dramatic coming on May 23, 1945, while at anchor in Buckner Bay, Okinawa. An enemy fighter slipped into the anchorage low on the water during a heavy air attack and streaked at great speed toward the battleship.

Anti-aircraft guns opened fire as the plane raced toward the ship's starboard side. When the aircraft was about 100 yards from the vessel, the stream of projectiles tore off one wing and the attacking plane plunged into the sea 30 feet from its target. The severed wing sailed clear across the ship and fell into the water on the far side. Parts of the plane bounced off the water and landed on the quarterdeck.

She had caused the Japs so much distress that Radio Tokyo once made a special broadcast addressed to her, saying that numbers of Japan's best pilots were attending their own funeral services in a mass ceremony before taking off to destroy the USS WEST VIRGINIA. Many a Jap has qualified for a funeral since then as the "old" battleship took on all comers right down to the finish.

\* \* \*

Captain H. V. (High Velocity)

Wiley, USN, of Chillicothe, Montana, was in command of the WEST VIRGINIA from January 1944 when the battered ship was still in process of being rebuilt at a West Coast yard, until May of 1945 when he was relieved by Captain R. W. Helsinger, USN, Arlington, Virginia.

From January to October of 1945 the WEST VIRGINIA was flagship of Rear Admiral Ingram C. Sowell of Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, then commander of Battleship Division Four.

#### PRE PEARL HARBOR

The USS WEST VIRGINIA was commissioned on December 1, 1923, at the Norfolk Navy Yard. She was built at the plant of Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company where she was launched in November, 1921. Her first commanding officer was Captain Thomas Jones Senn, USN.

The ship was the latest of the super-dreadnaughts. She was the last of the fleet of similar vessels, eleven of which, in process of building, were surrendered to destruction at the Conference for the Limitation of Armament. "That was the priceless sacrifice our country made in the hope of international peace and in the interest of domestic economy," wrote Edwin Denby, then Secretary of the Navy.

The WEST VIRGINIA and her sister ships, the Colorado and Maryland, were authorized in the Act of 29 August 1916. Hence they were designed and built after the Battle of Jutland. They embodied all the latest knowledge of Naval Architecture and the watertight compartmentation of their hulls and their armor protection marked a step in advance over the battleships built or designed before that historic naval engagement.

The new battleship had a displacement of 32,600 tons, was 624 feet long, and breadth at water line of 97 feet. Full lead draft was 31 1-2 feet. These measurements are much the same today, except the beam was increased to 114 feet, for after Pearl Harbor, the ship was fitted with antitorpedo blisters.

The "WEEVEE" carried an imposing arsenal of heavy and light artillery. The main battery consists of four 16 inch, .45 twin-gun turrets, and the secondary battery is made up of eight 5 inch by 38 twin-mounts. The anti-aircraft batteries include ten 40mm quad-mounts, 58 20mm single mounts, 1 20mm quad-mount, and 1 20mm twin-mount.

Two directors control fire from the WEST VIRGINIA'S main battery. Four directors guide the secondary battery. In addition there are ten gun directors, two stable

vertical directors, and thirteen installations of various types of radar fire control gear.

### TROUBLED START

The new battleship experienced a minor disaster in its first year of service. While underway in Thimble Shoal Channel, off Hampton Roads, Virginia, on June 16, 1924, the WEST VIRGINIA ran aground.

A Court of Inquiry investigated the grounding and decided that "No blame was held to have been incurred by any officers or men on board the WEST VIRGINIA; the navigational data furnished the ship from official sources was found to have been inaccurate and misleading, the legends on the charts indicating uniformly greater width than actually existed at the time of grounding."

In 1925, the USS WEST VIRGINIA stood first in short range target competitive practice. Commanded by Captain A. J. Hepburn, USN, the comparative newcomer in battleship ranks was awarded two trophies given annually to the battleship making the highest merit in short range target practice.

She was given the American Defense Cup, presented by the American Defense Society to the battleship obtaining the highest merit with all guns at short range, and the Spokane Cup, presented by the Chamber of Commerce of the city of Spokane, Washington, to the battleship obtaining the highest merit with all guns at short range practice.

The WEST VIRGINIA continued to gather laurels. On August 17, 1933, Secretary of the Navy Swanson announced that the battleship had been awarded the Battle Efficiency Pennant for the Battleship Class.

This was the fourth time that the WEST Virginia won the "meatball" and she was then in possession of the pennant, having won it in the 1931-32 competitions. Second to the "WEEVEE" in competition that year was the USS Oklahoma; USS California was third.

She won her first battle efficiency prize in 1925, again in 1927, and once more in 1932.

The WEST VIRGINIA swept the battle efficiency laurels for the fifth time in 1934 while under the command of Captain Walter S. Anderson, USN, and Captain Harold R. Stark, USN. The award was made by acting Secretary of Navy H. L. Roosevelt.

\* \* \*

The modern WEST VIRGINIA is as tall as an eight story building and is furnished with many shops and conveniences for use of the ship's personnel. Among these are

the printer, cobbler, barber, butcher, tailor, photographer, carpenter, plumber, optical and machine shops. There is a hospital and fully equipped operating room, dentist's office, news stand, library, bank and reception and reading room. There is a ship's store where articles for the comfort and convenience of the crew may be purchased.

The crew consumed each day about 2100 pounds of meat, 4500 pounds of vegetables, 1050 pounds of bread, 375 pounds of coffee, 675 pounds of sugar, and 150 gallons of milk.

The payroll has been approximately \$225,000 per month. On Pearl Harbor Day, 1944, the officers and men of the WEST VIRGINIA bought \$51,450 worth of War Bonds.

By Directive dated January 1947 the USS WEST VIRGINIA was placed out of commission, in reserve, attached to the U. S. Pacific Reserve Fleet.

\* \* \*

One ship before her carried the name WEST VIRGINIA. This vessel was an armored cruiser, length 502 feet, beam 69 feet, draft 24 feet, displacement 13,600 tons, carrying 40 guns. Built at the plant of Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., Newport News, Virginia, she was launched on April 18, 1903. On November 9, 1916, her name was changed from the WEST VIRGINIA to HUNTINGTON for a city in that state. The ship was attached to the Navy cruiser and transport force during World War I and was later placed out of commission.

### STATISTICAL WAR SUMMARY

#### ... USS WEST VIRGINIA

**A. Operations Against the Enemy: Invasion of Leyte, Battle of Surigao Straits, Invasion of Mindoro, Invasion of Luzon, Invasion of Iwo Jima, Invasion of Okinawa, Occupation of Japan.**

**B. Days in Combat Area: (21 Sept. 1944 to 6 Sept. 1945)**

Leyte .....	34
Mindoro (Sulu Sea) .....	9
Lingayen Gulf .....	44
Iwo Jima .....	15
Okinawa .....	109
Japan .....	12
Total .....	223

**C. Days in Rear Areas:**

Pearl Harbor to Manus .....	14
Manus .....	14
Espiritu Santo .....	7
Ulithi .....	40
Kossol Passage .....	12
Leyte .....	30

**D. Number of Planes Shot Down, Enemy Ships Destroyed:**

8-Enemy Planes Shot Down.  
12-Sure Assists in Destruction of Enemy Planes.

1-Enemy Battleship Sunk, Battle of Surigao Straits.

**E. Ammunition Fired Against**

### The Enemy:

16-Inch .....	2,865 Rounds
5-Inch .....	23,880 Rounds
40-MM .....	11,041 Rounds
20-MM .....	21,759 Rounds

### F. Damage by Enemy Aircraft or Enemy Gunfire:

Ship was Hit by Suicide Plane On 1 April 1945 at Okinawa.

Ship was Sunk in Pearl Harbor Attack December 7, 1941.

### G. Number of Miles Steamed:

1943 .....	5,000
(Pearl Harbor to Bermerton)	
1944 .....	36,615
1945 .....	30,000
Total Miles .....	71,615

### H. Personnel Combat Casualties:

Mindoro Operation .....	1 Wounded
Iwo Jima .....	1 Wounded
Okinawa .....	4 Killed, 29 Wounded, 2 Missing in Action

Total 4 Killed, 31 Wounded, 2 Missing in Action.

### I. Miscellaneous Data:

Two men killed in accidental crash of observation plane in November, 1944.

Observation plane shot down over Okinawa 16 June 1945, with crew of two men missing in action.

Ship was strafed by Japanese plane in the Mindoro operation, suffering one personnel casualty.

Ship was struck by small caliber projectile at Iwo Jima suffering one personnel casualty.

Ship was struck by suicide plane on 1 April 1945 at Okinawa suffering 4 men killed, 23 wounded.

Ship was swept by shrapnel from near miss of bombs on 16 June and 17 June 1945 at Okinawa suffering 6 casualties.

### Awards to Ships' Personnel:

3-Distinguished Flying Crosses
3-Air Medals
1-Silver Star Medal
21-Bronze Star Medals
10-Letters of Commendation

The USS WEST VIRGINIA (BB 48) earned five (5) battle stars on the Asiatic-Pacific Area Service Ribbon for participating in the following operations:

One Star—Pearl Harbor—Midway—7 December 1941.

One Star—Leyte Operation—Leyte Landings—10 October—29 November 1944.

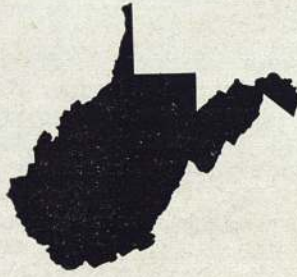
One Star—Luzon Operation—Lingayen Gulf Landing—4-18 January 1945.

One Star—Iwo Jima Operation—Assault and Occupation of Iwo Jima—15 February—16 March 1945.

One Star—Okinawa Gunto Operation—Assault and Occupation of Okinawa Gunto.—24 March—30 June 1945.

\* \* \*

The WEST VIRGINIA also earned the Navy Occupation Service Medal for her activities in the Pacific Area through the dates of 2 to 24 September 1945.



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