

US Cruisers in the South Pacific during World War II

By Glen "G" Martin

WWII Pacific naval lore...as you read and do your research on history, pay particular attention to the performances of the US heavy and light cruiser forces and the record of those ships. It is worthy to note how glaring the US cruiser designs were at the time, much like the inept layout of the USS *Wasp* aircraft carrier; a ship class that was fatally flawed from its inception. As I often do every night, I read about US naval operations in WWII. It is a passion of mine that goes back to being a kid in the 1970s. Just the other night, I was reading about the Battle of Tassafaronga that took place during the Guadalcanal Campaign in the Solomon Island chain. In particular, I enjoyed reading about the non-aircraft carrier battles. I love to read about the cruiser/destroyer actions. The Battle of Tassafaronga took place Nov 30, 1942. In that battle, the US cruiser/destroyer force hit the Japanese cruiser/destroyer forces with accurate naval gunfire and yet they get off their long lance torpedoes and proceeded to sink the US Heavy Cruiser *Northampton*, while blowing off the bows off the USS *New Orleans*, USS *Minneapolis*, and USS *Pensacola*. The *Minneapolis* and *Pensacola* had to have false bows made from coconut logs while in the harbor at Tulagi before they could leave for the United States mainland to use a drydock to rebuild the front parts of those cruisers. The *New Orleans* lost over 170 feet of her forward length, all the way back to Second Turret, and was down by the head and would come close to sinking. I read about eyewitness accounts of the forward part of the ship breaking off, slowly drifting down by the side of the ship as it was trying to maneuver, the forward part of the ship with the first turret gradually sinking with trapped men in the turret. Amazing account of a ship breaking in two pieces and not going down. *Pensacola's* bow folded down at a sharp angle when the long lance torpedo folded that up on detonation. Just like in the Battle of Savo Island during the evening of August 8th, American cruisers present were torn asunder by the Type 93 Japanese Long Lance torpedo, in this case, let loose in the dozens. Sad to note however that the *Northampton* would be lost weeks later after pulling a tow line that was connected to the aircraft carrier USS *Hornet* that was incapacitated during the battle of Santa Cruz. The *Northampton* was a strong and sturdy 8-inch gun heavy cruiser.

As a result, the United States was dangerously close to not having enough heavy cruisers to cover the six-month operations in the Solomon campaign until declared over in early-1943. By the time Tassafaronga took place on November 30, the US lost the heavy cruisers ...USS *Vincennes*, USS *Astoria*, USS *Quincy*, USS *Chicago*, USS *Northampton* along with the light cruisers USS *Atlanta* and USS *Juneau*. Pair those losses with the heavy cruiser USS *Houston* lost at Java in Feb 1942 and the light Cruiser USS *Helena* at Kula Gulf, July 1943, and the US cruiser contingent had a lousy showing in the first 16 months of WWII. That would be six heavy cruisers and three light cruisers lost. Most of the US cruiser designs were plagued with non-alternating firerooms and engineering propulsion rooms in their designs, with thin hulls below the water line in those areas that the Japanese Long Lance torpedoes exploited. The problem was that a hit often took out both firerooms in these cruisers and once that happened, steam was lost, propulsion and power bled off, and the ship would come to a halt with no way to pump out from serious flooding that would take place.

Out of necessity, most of the lost cruisers were pressed into action without operating as a screen for an aircraft carrier battle group and were pressed into blockade duty, often against battlecruisers and battleships that Japan threw at them. Once Admirals Halsey, Spruance, Kinkade and Ainsworth realized that sending cruisers to battle the Japanese head-on was a very bad idea, they quit doing it. After that, amazingly, the US would not lose another cruiser until the loss of the USS *Indianapolis* in July 1945 and only then due to sailing with no escort through the area east of the Philippines in some of the worst Japanese submarine infested waters in WWII.

But not all cruisers were prone to destruction and loss. One such cruiser that was almost lost was put in a perilous situation on a mercy mission in a bit of irony. That was the USS *Birmingham*. The *Birmingham* was trying to help save the light aircraft carrier USS *Princeton* during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in Oct 1944. The *Princeton* was severely on fire and the *Birmingham* was alongside training water on the fire from her firefighting equipment to help bring the *Princeton's* fires under control. The *Princeton* blew up while men were transferring to the *Birmingham* as the ships were in very close contact with one another. When the *Princeton* blew apart, men on the forward part of the *Birmingham* paid a terrible price in being hit by flying shrapnel from the explosion, killing over 230 and wounding over 400 men if my memory serves me right. Out of 1,250-plus officers and men, that is a casualty rate of about half the crew being killed or wounded in trying to save the *Princeton*. Tough ship and a bit ironic when you think about the permanent loss of only two battleships in Pearl Harbor after salvage operations and the total loss of heavy cruisers standing at (7) heavy cruisers and (3) light cruisers for the Pacific war. You could say that the heavy cruiser was by far the heaviest type of combat vessel that went down in terms of size, more so than the US aircraft carriers (4) and battleships (2). Destroyers would be the most numerous vessels sunk in the Pacific bar none. The *Birmingham* defied those odds successfully and, you could say, lived a charmed life. Not many cruisers would go that close to the edge and come out floating.

Another such charmed Cruiser was the heavy cruiser USS *Salt Lake*. That ship would come close in a gunnery dual with a Japanese cruiser/destroyer force at the Battle of the Komandorski Islands in 1943. The *Salt Lake* would be saved by the *Omaha*-class light cruiser USS *Richmond* in a bit of heroics. The *Richmond* would help protect the *Salt Lake City* after charging in and laying down a smoke screen until the cruiser could recover from a propulsion casualty during a gunnery duel with a pair of Japanese heavy cruisers. The *Richmond* was a tough ship. Out of 10 ships in the *Omaha* class, and showing how tough those Cruisers were, the USS *Raleigh* took a torpedo at Pearl Harbor on December 7th and came very close to capsizing. But it didn't. The USS *Marblehead*, stationed in Java, became part of the bastardized ABDA joint force that was tasked with defending the Indonesia/Java/Sumatra region. That ship took 2 bomb hits and a close 3rd that severely damaged the hull at the Battle of Makassar Straights and came close to going down. Since the Japanese had overrun so much of the region, the ship being severely damaged when on one of the longest recorded trips in maritime history in search of a shipyard that could repair her damage, sailing for India, then South Africa before sailing on to the shipyards in New York, something like over 20,000 miles in search of much needed repairs. The *Marblehead* was down by the bow, close to ten feet lower than the stern, yet made the trip successfully. In all, ten ships of the *Omaha* class would enter the war and yet survive service being one of the most successful classes of cruisers that America would press to service during WWII. A pre-WWII design that owes its lineage back to WWI, the *Omaha's* were armed with two twin 6 inch/35 cal turrets and six single 6 inch/3 cal guns and torpedoes. You could say being the class with the least modern capable design was the most reliable. The *Omaha's* lived a charmed life that most cruisers did not have.

From pre-WWII cruiser designs to the anti-aircraft designed *Atlanta* class, to the rapid firing 6-inch *Cleveland* class, to the short lived 12-inch cruiser killer *Alaska* class, to the USS *Salem* towards the end of the war, cruisers were some of the most fascinating ships. Some ended up being sold, like the USS *Phoenix* being sold to Argentina to be renamed the *General Belgrano*, only to be sunk by a British submarine during the Falklands War in the early 1980s. (Ironically, the bow of that ship was blown off, too, by torpedo!!)

I still think the USS *Norfolk* was one of the sexiest US cruisers ever built!!! I give you the *Norfolk*.... post-WWII design:



And the USS *Richmond*... sexy ship... designed after WWI... gorgeous:

