

All But Forgotten The USS Huntington

By James E. Casto . Photographs courtesy of James E. Casto



Few are likely aware that two U.S. Navy warships have been named for Huntington, West Virginia. The first served with distinction in World War I. Construction of the second began at the height of World War II but wasn't completed until the war's end. Both ships have long since gone to the scrap yard.

This is the all-but-forgotten story of the first *USS Huntington*. It was actually named the *West Virginia* when first launched at the Newport News Shipbuilding Co. on April 18, 1902. Katherine White, daughter of West Virginia Gov. Albert White, broke the traditional bottle of champagne against the bow.

Completed and commissioned in 1905, the armored cruiser *West Virginia* was one of the largest warships of the day. Costing more than \$6.8 million, it was 500 feet long, with a beam (width) of 69 feet and a displacement of 13,400 tons. The ship bristled with guns and boasted nine inches of armor plate. At top speed, it could make an impressive 22 knots.

Petty Officer H. C. Winn kept a journal of his time aboard the ship and, in 1919, published it under the title *Fighting the Hun on the USS Huntington*. Winn had a good eye for detail and his journal does much to supplement the dry-as-dust prose of the official Navy record. For example, President Theodore Roosevelt traveled aboard the ship from New Orleans to Hampton Roads, Virginia, in October 1905. In his journal, Winn recorded that Roosevelt visited the

On November 11, 1916, the *West Virginia* was renamed *Huntington* to permit the assignment of its old name to a newly authorized battleship.

“The explosion was tremendous as a direct hit was scored, and the submarine disintegrated. The crew celebrated the victory with a rousing cheer.”

~From the journal of *USS Huntington*
Petty Officer H. C. Winn



Some of the *Huntington's* crew members clown it up for the photographer's camera.

ship's engine room, where he tried his hand at shoveling coal. The shovel he used was later hung in the engine room as a souvenir of the occasion.

A New Name and New Equipment

In 1916, the Mexican rebel Pancho Villa crossed the U.S. border and raided the sleepy little town of Columbus, New Mexico, killing more than a dozen Americans. In response, President Woodrow Wilson sent Gen. John J. Pershing and 6,000 troops into Mexico and ordered a naval show of strength along Mexico's western coastline. The fleet that steamed into Mexican waters included the *West Virginia* and it was there the ship was renamed the *Huntington*.

The official Navy history indicates a decision had been

made to build a new class of battleships with state names, so the original *West Virginia* had to be renamed. But the history is frustratingly silent on how *Huntington* was chosen as the ship's new name. Launched in 1920, the new *West Virginia* was badly damaged in the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, but was rebuilt and fought on until the end of the war. But that's getting a bit ahead of our story.

In February 1917, the *Huntington* was anchored at Mare Island Navy Yard in California, where an aircraft-launching catapult was mounted on the quarterdeck. It was also fitted to accommodate four seaplanes, which would be launched down tracks by the catapult. On their return, they would land in the water and be hoisted back aboard by crane. The *Huntington* was one of the Navy's first ships to be so equipped.



The seaplanes aboard the *Huntington* were plagued with problems and ultimately removed.

About 350 men comprised the ship's peacetime crew. In April 1917, when word came that war had been declared with Germany, the Navy ordered all ship commanders to immediately increase their manpower to a wartime total. For the *Huntington*, that meant the recruitment of an additional 300 sailors. Civilians were enlisted directly on the ship and received all their training shipboard.

Sailing from the Pacific to the Atlantic via the Panama Canal, the *Huntington* spent two months at Pensacola, Florida, testing its new catapult launching system. Then it was assigned to convoy duty, escorting troopships carrying doughboys to France.

In addition to its seaplanes, the *Huntington* was one of the first ships in the U.S. fleet to be equipped for launching observation balloons. On September 17, 1917, one of those missions nearly ended in tragedy. When a sudden squall forced a manned balloon into the water, its basket capsized and rolled over several times. Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Henry W. Hoyt was trapped underwater in the balloon's rigging. Ship's Fitter First Class Patrick McGunigal quickly leaped from the cruiser's deck into the raging water, rescuing the balloonist. In recognition of his heroic action, McGunigal was awarded the Medal of Honor, the first awarded during World War I.

On the *Huntington's* return home from its first convoy mission, a decision was made to remove the catapult and the four aircraft, which had been plagued with problems since

being put aboard. Shortly thereafter, the *Huntington* carried a high-level American delegation across the Atlantic to confer with the Allies on the conduct of the war. The 15-member delegation was headed by Col. Edward M. House, a close advisor to Woodrow Wilson. House had such a close relationship with the president that he had his own living quarters at the White House. In his journal, Winn noted that House brought along his wife and her maid.

In all, the *Huntington* made nine eastbound trips across the Atlantic, conveying 62 troopships carrying an estimated total of more than 175,000 troops. During those crossings, the ship frequently sighted and opened fire on surfaced German submarines. Official reports credit the gun crews of the *Huntington* with sinking four German subs.

Winn describes one submarine encounter: "About noon, a lookout, in the maintop, spotted a U-boat on the surface. Our port aft six-inch gun, and all three-inch guns that could bear, opened fire on the enemy, but were unable to hit the target. Suddenly the aft eight-inch turret cut loose. The explosion was tremendous as a direct hit was scored, and the submarine disintegrated. The crew celebrated the victory with a rousing cheer."

Returning Soldiers Home

At the war's end, the American public demanded that family members in uniform be returned home as quickly as possible. So the *Huntington* was pressed into service as an improvised

troopship. The Navy stripped it of everything that could be removed, so that returning soldiers could be tucked into every conceivable nook and cranny.

On its first trip in this new role, the *Huntington* carried 1,700 returning servicemen from France to New York City, landing on January 14, 1919. Nearly two dozen other warships were pressed into service as makeshift transports, but the *Huntington* boarded 200 more troops than any of the other vessels. The ship made five more voyages from France, bringing home a total of nearly 12,000 troops.

The *Huntington* was decommissioned in a ceremony at Portsmouth Navy Yard at Kittery, Maine, on September 1, 1920. Ten years later, in accordance with the London Treaty that limited naval armaments, it was stricken from the Navy's official roster of ships and sold for scrap. After most of a century, the ship has largely been forgotten. Yet its record of service remains admirable and noteworthy.

As for the second Navy

cruiser named *Huntington*, it was launched in 1946, months after World War II ended. It did two tours of duty with the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean and followed that with a goodwill tour of various African and South American ports. The ship was decommissioned in 1949 and placed in mothballs in the Navy's reserve fleet. Like the first *Huntington*, it was sold for scrap in 1962. ✦

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► **Doughboys crowd the rail** of the *Huntington*.



► **A dockside crowd prepares** to welcome the *Huntington* home.

