

Office of Naval Records and History
Ships' Histories Section
Navy Department

HISTORY OF USS MAJOR (DE 796)

On 23 October 1943, at the Consolidated Steel Company's Orange, Texas shipyards, two ensigns of the United States Navy were honored. One was Ensign Charles Nance Major, USNR, who had been killed in the Atlantic action earlier in the war, and the other was his widow, Ensign Margaret Roper Major of the WAVES. They were honored in the naming of a pugnacious little destroyer escort after Charles Major and the sponsoring of it by his widow. And so -- another of this nation's fighting ships perpetuated the honor of one of its fighting men.

The MAJOR was commissioned on 12 February 1944 at Orange, Texas. After a ten-day filling out period at Galveston, Texas, she proceeded to Bermuda for a month's shakedown cruise with other destroyer escorts. After ten days' availability in Charleston Navy Yard, Boston, the ship reported to Commander, Caribbean Sea Frontier in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for a warm-up period. Here, in company with PC's, the MAJOR escorted convoys from Guantanamo to Trinidad.

Arriving back in the States on 11 June, the ship had availability and a short training period at Casco Bay, Maine. Her first big assignment was with Task Force 61. The flagship was the USCGC CAMPBELL, and Escort Division Five and Fifty-Six were included in the force. The first trip was from Norfolk, Virginia, to Bizerte, Tunisia.

Bound for the States again, an eastbound convoy 20 miles away was attacked by German aircraft from southern France. No ships were lost in the engagement, and the planes stayed clear of the task force's westbound group. The next trip was to Plymouth, England, to escort a group of LST's and LCI's back to the states. A storm north of the Azores gave the smaller landing craft a bad few hours, but none were lost. One more trip to Oran, Algeria, from which the MAJOR returned to Boston on 29 December, wound up the year's Atlantic Duty.

A month's duty in New London, Acting as "target" for school submarines, preceded the ship's departure to the Pacific on 21 February 1945.

The MAJOR arrived in Manus, in the Admiralties, on Easter Sunday. She escorted a convoy from Hollandia to Leyte and reported to Commander, Philippine Sea Frontier for duty. Then followed a period of patrol duty around Leyte, another convoy to Hollandia and back, and a mail run to the southern islands of the Philippine Group.

Returning from the mail run along the northern coast of Mindanao, the MAJOR picked up four Filipino guerrillas and three native women found drifting in an overturned canoe. Among the guerrillas was Lieutenant Hermongildo Acosta of the U. S. Army, leader of a guerrilla band in the recapture of Mindanao. The party had started out for Leyte at the close of the Mindanao campaign and their canoe had overturned four days previously in a storm. The band owed its rescue to the resourcefulness of the lieutenant's wife, who had removed her print dress to wave at the ship in the hope of attracting attention. She did. The rail was lined with sympathetic rescuers as the MAJOR pulled alongside the overturned canoe. That same night the seven were turned over to Army authorities in Leyte, all of them out of physical danger after their experience.

In July the MAJOR, the KNOX (DE 580) and the JOHNSON (DE 702) left Leyte as escort for an Okinawa-bound convoy. After two days at sea, word was received of the sinking of one of the division ships, the UNDERHILL, in the waters northeast of Luzon. All evidence pointed to human torpedo attack. The ship had broken in half, and gone down with the loss of over half her crew. This resumption of enemy sub activity called for vigilance, and the watches were alerted on the three escorts as they headed northward. No attacks took place, however, and the convoy arrived safely in Buckner Bay. Three nights of air raids followed while the returning convoy was held up because of an approaching typhoon. Six ships, including the destroyer CALLAGHAN, were hit by Kamikaze planes on the first night there. None of the DE's were damaged. Finally, on the first of August, all large ships in Buckner Bay were forced to get underway and steam southward as the typhoon struck in full force.

Three days of battling the storm found the convoy, on the early morning of the fourth, to the east of the convoy lane. It was then that the JOHNSON, dropping back to investigate a sonar contact, saw three enemy torpedoes streak past her, one passing directly beneath the ship. A subsequent depth charge attack brought an underwater explosion and a column of white smoke, but no debris. Leaving the PCE-849 to continue the search until a killer group should arrive, the JOHNSON rejoined the convoy, which immediately commenced frequent course changes to discourage further attacks. None were forthcoming.

Two days later, a Navy Mariner, sent to provide air cover for the convoy, was forced down nearby in a choppy sea. Visibility was poor, and the only contact with the drifting plane was by voice radio. Employing a high frequency radio direction finder, a device which had proved valuable against German wolf pack tactics in the Atlantic war, the MAJOR was enabled to guide the KNOX through the mist to the plane by taking comparative radio bearings on the two. "Gee, thanks a lot!" were the Mariner pilot's heartfelt words as the KNOX finally reported the plane in sight. Thus ended for the "Mighty Major", as the ship was termed by her crew, the last big job of the war.

On 10 August, in San Pedro Bay, word came of the Jap offer of surrender. Whistles blew, sirens screamed, rockets and flares filled the sky as hundreds of ships gave vent to the emotion that months of Pacific isolation intensified. Late in August the MAJOR went to Tokyo, arriving with two LSTs on the third day of the American occupation. The LSTs, carrying General Mac Arthur's automobile and other of his personal and staff equipment, landed in Yokohama. The MAJOR anchored near the MISSOURI.

The following morning, September second, 1945, the surrender of the Japanese Empire was accepted by Allied leaders aboard the giant battleship. Army B-29's and Navy carrier planes by the hundred thundered overhead in a salute to victory. As the defeated Japanese left the MISSOURI, the MAJOR weighed anchor and began the return trip to the Philippines. The war trail, one hundred thousand miles of it, was at an end.

MAJOR spent a few months in the Philippine area before returning to San Diego late in 1945 where she underwent an overhaul.

By Directive dated November 1947, USS MAJOR (DE 796) was placed out of commission, in reserve, attached to the U. S. Pacific Reserve Fleet.

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USS MAJOR earned the Navy Occupation Service Medal, Pacific, for the period of 2 to 6 September 1945.

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STATISTICS

DISPLACEMENT	1,275 tons
LENGTH OVERALL	306 feet
BEAM	36 feet
COMPLEMENT	220 men

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Stencilled April 1947
Restencilled July 1951

MAJOR was stricken from the Naval Vessel Register on 1 December 1972, sold to Levin Metals Corporation, San Jose, California, on 27 November 1973 for \$40,666.00 and scrapped.