

History of the USS New Mexico (BB-40) "The Queen"

by John J. Wickland
Former Crew Member of Battleship NEW MEXICO

Up for sale to the highest bidder, the Navy had announced, is "The Queen", then berthed in exile at East Boston's Commonwealth Pier One. A 33,400-ton monarch, the battleship NEW MEXICO held sway with other U.S. dreadnoughts over the world's sea routes during the 23-year bridge between two wars. When Pearl Harbor broke, USS NEW MEXICO went into the Pacific, and old as she was, took the Japs severely to task all the way from the Aleutians to Okinawa. Though originally slated for the Atlantic Reserve Fleet, deep budget gouges, plus her steady decline in power, saw the venerable ship ear-marked for the scrappers under the Navy's Postwar Plan Number Two. "The Queen" at 29 lay in regal state.

Authorized by an Act of Congress dated June 30, 1914, construction of Battleship 40 was allocated to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and begun in October 1915. At first scheduled to bear the name CALIFORNIA, the huge finished product was officially labeled USS NEW MEXICO as she plunged down greased ways on April 23, 1917. Sponsor at the elegant launching ceremonies was Miss Margaret C de Baca, daughter of New Mexico's Governor Ezequiel Cabeza de Baca. For Miss C de Baca and for the state of New Mexico (the first time a U.S. Navy ship had been named NEW MEXICO), it was a red letter day.

War-built battleship NEW MEXICO constituted at that time the prime example of engineering prowess, of U.S. naval architectural know-how. Rising ominously from the NEW MEXICO's deck in a 2-A-2 gun arrangement were four massive steel turrets, each built up entirely of flat armor plates and housing a trio of 14-inch rifles. Most of the 5-inch guns in her secondary battery were spotted strategically in drier positions at upper deck level. Submerged below the waterline were two 21-inch torpedo tubes. Two popular-like cage masts adorned the 624-foot hull (16 feet longer than any previous BB class). Improved compartmentation and the substitution of a graceful clipper bow with bulbous forefoot for the ram bow of earlier capital ships were outstanding features.

However, top innovation of all came when the NEW MEXICO was singled out to be the first turboelectric-driven battleship. Prompted by the successful record of the fleet collier JUPITER, pioneer in electric propulsion, Secretary of the Navy

Josephus Daniels put his official O.K. on an order to outfit the NEW MEXICO with four mammoth General Electric motors. They would operate the NEW MEXICO's four propellers and enable her to make her accredited 21 knots.

Old time sailors and engineers were quick to voice strong opposition in letters, telegrams and interviews, and soon had the controversy before the House Naval Committee. "It is bound to prove an expensive failure," argued the protesting experts, "so let some other nation try it first." The decision of the Committee put the decision squarely up to Secretary Daniels.

Daniels later happily reported to the House Naval Committee on USS NEW MEXICO's performance: "The machinery was designed to develop 26,500 horsepower at full speed, which it was expected would give the ship a speed of 21 knots. She actually developed more than 31,000 horsepower and maintained for four hours a speed of 21.25 knots - and this when running at a displacement of 1,000 tons greater than her design called for. If she had been tried at her designated displacement as is customary with all new ships, she would have made 21.5 knots without any trouble whatsoever; and what is still better, she could have kept up this speed as long as her fuel lasted, for like all our later dreadnoughts, she is an oil-burner and there would be no reduction in speed due to the necessity of cleaning fires, which must be done in coal-burning ships after a run of four hours at top speed.

"On the whole, I think the country has cause to be proud of this achievement in engineering, not alone because of the pronounced success in this particular instance but because of the assurance it gives us of the superiority of our capital ships to those of foreign nations."

On May 20, 1918, a U.S. Navy at war placed in commission this powerful 21-million dollar weapon with Captain Ashley H. Robertson in command. Trial runs completed, USS NEW MEXICO joined the Atlantic Fleet at Yorktown, Virginia, rushed through a necessarily brief shakedown stint and cruised up-coast to Boston in September 1918. Barely had she assumed active wartime duties when Germany fell. With the Fleet at New York on December 26, 1918, the NEW MEXICO was full-dressed for review.

January 1919 saw her moving out of New York Harbor as an escort to the Brest-bound USS GEORGE WASHINGTON. Aboard the transport was President Wilson armed with Fourteen Points and confident of his plan for communion of nations. Later the battleship was on hand for his return trip from the ill-fated Paris peace parley.

On the morning of February 22nd, 1919, the NEW MEXICO found a live target for her guns when she came across the 3-masted derelict schooner CHARLOTTE J. SIBLEY, in a sinking condition at 33-51N, 41-47W. Rescuing master and all crew members, the warship promptly polished off the wreck with shellfire.

Proceeding to Hampton Roads, Virginia in July 1919, the NEW MEXICO figured prominently in a significant change in the strategic disposition of American naval might. With the realization that U.S. foreign policy would henceforth face its chief problems in the West came the decision to create two main fleets, one in the Atlantic and one in the Pacific, concentrating the newer ships on the west coast. Admiral Hugh Rodman, newly-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the newly-organized naval force, chose to break his flag in USS NEW MEXICO. Thus, as the first flagship of the United States Pacific Fleet, the NEW MEXICO accompanied other units through the Panama Canal and established her base at San Pedro, California.

(pic of BB-40 in locks at Panama Canal in 1919)

Two decades of fatal apathy followed, for the only positive result derived from the Great War was the comforting thought that it could never happen again. Dreadnought NEW MEXICO busied herself with matters of protocol, e.g. receiving ambassadors, participating in centennials and, in general, extending goodwill to a world that was soon to forget what it meant.

Once in a while her activities made news. Flashed to the Navy Department in Washington on September 8, 1919 was the following dispatch: "At 1630 September 7, NEW MEXICO had a fire in after searchlight rheostat room. Three casualties and thirty-one overcome by smoke and gasses. Cause and origin of fire not yet determined, being investigated. Rheostat room had been used for photographic purposes." It was signed simply "Rodman".

In 1920 the NEW MEXICO made a cruise to Hawaii, and early in 1921 led the Fleet on the 6,000-mile jaunt to Panama and Valparaiso, Chile. In 1924 she went with the Fleet on a cruise to Panama, the Caribbean and New York. About this time U.S. naval forces were again revamped and the Pacific Fleet became known as the United States Battle Fleet. USS NEW MEXICO was made flagship of the Commander, Battleship Division Four.

To join the Fleet in sham battle at Hawaii, the NEW MEXICO left Bremerton, Washington on April 25, 1925. Then came a voyage to Australia and New Zealand, with pauses enroute at Samoa and New South Wales. Returning to San Pedro, the NEW MEXICO carried out routine maneuvers from that base during the following

years, took time out in 1928 for a cruise to Hawaii and again in 1930 for a brief visit to Hampton Roads.

Fleet blue-jackets came to nickname her "The Queen" in tribute to honors won in competition with other first liners. In 1920-21, 1927-28 and 1929-30 the ship copped the coveted "meat ball" (red pennant with a black circle in its center) for the best in gunnery, engineering and battle efficiency.

Mindful that age was catching up with its NEW MEXICO and that newer developments rendered her somewhat outmoded, the U.S. Navy on March 5, 1931 ordered her to check in at the Philadelphia Navy Yard for modernization. Complete re-engining, re-boiling and reworking on internal protection was affected, while a tower bridge was installed and cage masting reduced to a minimum. Additional defenses against submarine and air attack, warranted by the rapid rise of both these threats to surface craft, were incorporated in the NEW MEXICO, e.g. "blisters" and additional armored deck protection. During the early '30s the two other battleships of the NEW MEXICO Class (MISSISSIPPI - BB41; IDAHO - BB42) were brought up to date in the same manner, making the trio the Navy's most effective units until the 1941 commissioning of the NORTH CAROLINA Class.

Released from Philadelphia on January 22, 1933, the modernized "Queen" was tried and tested in Cuban and Haitian waters while under the command of Captain David A. Weaver. After a Presidential review off New York in May 1934, the NEW MEXICO remained on the east coast until September 15, 1934, when she again returned to San Pedro and the Pacific. Cruises were made in 1936 and 1937 to Hawaii.

Blitzkreig made its bow along with 1940 and world events were fast coming to an explosive head. Completing gunnery training and tactical exercises in the Hawaiian area, the NEW MEXICO left Pearl Harbor May 20, 1941, transited the "Big Ditch" June 6 and 7 to reach the Naval Base at Cuba's sunlit Guantanamo Bay June 9. North to Norfolk the battleship steamed on the 11th, making port five days later. Ready to commence a series of neutrality patrols in the storm-torn North Atlantic under Presidential "shoot on sight" orders, "The Queen" stood out of Hampton Roads June 20, 1941 and made her way up the east coast to Newport, Rhode Island.

On July 20 the NEW MEXICO put to sea for a lengthy reconnaissance of shipping lanes choked with material being hauled to the harassed Britons. Stopping at Iceland where the rapidly-expanding U.S. military forces had thrown up an outer bulwark, the old warship spent nine days at anchor within the picturesque harbor capital of Reykjavik, got underway September 25. Her operation with Task Force 15 over on October 3, 1941, the NEW MEXICO, conned by Captain Walter E. Brown,

departed Argentia, Newfoundland bound for isle-dotted Casco Bay in southwestern Maine.

October 12-25 the battleship's gunnery and navigation departments were put through their paces in Casco Bay, and again November 9-11. USS NEW MEXICO left Halifax, Nova Scotia November 14 for more patrolling, put in at Boston on the 25th and loaded with ammunition. By December 1 she was back in Casco Bay. Meanwhile the Nazi divisions rode roughshod and the idea of salvaging world peace from the ruins of the Low Countries grew less and less feasible. On December 7, 1941, it was cast out altogether.

Flying the flag of Battleship Division Three's Rear Admiral W.R. Munroe, NEW MEXICO sailed out of the Casco Bay anchorage December 9 and made the 2-day trip to Norfolk. With "The Queen" brought to her peak of fighting trim, Skipper Brown took her out of Hampton Roads on January 6, 1942 and inched his bulky command through the Panama Canal locks on the night of the 11th.

Temporarily or otherwise, one-third of the Navy had been blasted out of action in the Pearl Harbor thrust. Quick marshalling of all available sea power in the Pacific was the only way to block the rampaging Jap amphibious legions. Swelling the ranks of mustered surface units, the NEW MEXICO plowed into San Francisco Bay on January 22, 1942.

In and around San Francisco the old battleship conditioned for war while the carrier battles in the Coral Sea and at Midway decisively blunted enemy spearheads. Twice she went to nearby San Pedro Naval Base (May 10-13; June 19-22). Long awaited routing orders sent the NEW MEXICO steaming out of San Francisco Bay and away from home waters on August 1, 1942. Meeting Task Force 17 south of the Hawaiians August 8, she participated in joint exercises before putting in at sprawling Pearl Harbor on the 14th.

Rear Admiral Theodore S. Wilkinson, Commander of Battleship Division Two, had his flag in USS NEW MEXICO through August and September 1942. No sooner had he shifted than the boss of all Pacific Fleet battleships, Vice Admiral Herbert F. Leary began setting up shop aboard "The Queen".

In September the warship had a new Commanding Officer as well. Captain Brown relinquished the helm to Captain Oliver Lee Downes. On the first anniversary of the Jap attack at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1942, USS NEW MEXICO proceeded out past Diamond Head and got underway for the forward area.

On December 18, NEW MEXICO arrived in the Fiji Islands and anchored at Nandi, ready to lend her weight to the final consolidation of the embattled Solomans. On January 9, 1943 she left neighboring Suva to screen the slow, thin-skinned escort carriers whose planes were acting on Bull Halsey's exhortation to "hit hard, hit fast, hit often" at Guadalcanal. Fueling from advance bases in the Fiji-New Hebrides area, the NEW MEXICO continued in that capacity until February 11, 1943 when she returned to Nandi. By that time the capture of Guadalcanal was two days old.

Enroute to Pearl Harbor the ship stopped on March 8 at Efate in the New Hebrides, and at Samoa March 11-15, reaching her destination on the 22nd. For the rest of March and all of April NEW MEXICO remained based at the Oahu bastion. Vice Admiral Leary left the battleship in April; Rear Admiral Robert M. Griffin, Commander Battleship Division Three, embarked with his staff in May, precipitating much "scuttlebutt" among the crew to "The Queen's" next assignment and where it would take her.

Ever since the Japanese snatched Attu, Kiska and Aggatu, craggy studs in the fog-swept Aleutian chain, U.S. Pacific plotters stood ready to erase this alarming threat to the northwestern United States whenever sufficient forces became available. Spring of 1943 saw the enemy relaxing his grip on the New Guinea-New Britain-Solomon Islands arc, warranting the allocation of enough ships, planes and troops for an all-out effort in the North Pacific. Designated to assist in ousting the Japanese from the Aleutians, battleship NEW MEXICO set sail for desolate Adak Island on May 10, 1943.

With its blasts that sometimes reach velocities well above 100 knots and which roll up unbelievably gigantic seas of 50 to 70 feet from trough to crest, the Northern Pacific was the war's most rugged theater from the climactic standpoint, a "proving ground" for both ships and man. Into Adak's Kuluk Bay sailed the NEW MEXICO on May 17, her log about to record three months of campaigning.

Since being put ashore on snowy Attu Island May 11, U.S. 7th and 4th Infantry Divisions had butted and bayoneted their way through molasses-like mud and bitter cold to cut off Chichagof Harbor. On the 21st of May the NEW MEXICO rendezvoused with other units to cover Attu from seaward, preventing possible reinforcement of Colonel Yamazaki's exhausted garrison. Shortly after midnight on May 29, 1943, what remained of the Japs on Attu came howling up the valley from Chichagof toward the American artillery positions beyond Clevesy Pass. Those few who were not killed by the Americans chose suicide rather than surrender. Chichagof Harbor was occupied without opposition May 30.

Bypassed Kiska then became Captain Downes' immediate concern. In perfect concert with Eleventh Air Force bombers, USS NEW MEXICO's battleship-cruiser bombardment force opened up against Kiska on July 22, 1943. Return fire was meager and inaccurate, and Rear Admiral Griffin's BBs left twisted, smoldering shore batteries plus a shattered submarine base as an example of their handiwork. Before retiring from the operating area, battleship NEW MEXICO roamed Kiska's southern and southwestern approaches in anticipation of meeting an enemy cruiser-destroyer group reported approaching the Aleutians. This force failed to put in an appearance.

American reoccupation of Kiska, 175 miles east of captured Attu, was about to be realized, as the strongest force ever mounted in the North Pacific readied for the onset. In a support group, the NEW MEXICO stood offshore August 15 as U.S. troops broke into Quisling Cove on the northwest coast and began probing camouflaged enemy positions. But Kiska was as void of Japs as Times Square after Pearl Harbor. (Two light cruisers and ten destroyers had sneaked off in zero visibility with Kiska's 5,100 defenders on July 29). With the abandonment of their largest Aleutian base, the Japanese were through in the Northern Pacific.

Battleship NEW MEXICO jubilantly cleared Kuluk Bay August 29, thawed as she sailed southeast to arrive in the Puget Sound Navy Yard on the 4th of September 1943. There an army of steel-helmeted workers, armed with everything from acetylene torches and riveters to paint brushes, spent a month grooming the battle-wise "Queen" for future fighting. Assigned to direct the NEW MEXICO in future fighting was Captain Ellis Mark Zacharias, who relieved Captain Downes during the September upkeep. Escorted out of the yard October 9 by the auxiliary FOX, the NEW MEXICO reached familiar San Pedro on the 12th. By October 26 she was back in Pearl Harbor.

Astride the Equator some hundred miles north of Tarawa and 2,500 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor lay the enemy seaplane base of Makin. Tarawa and Makin Atolls had been picked as the twin striking points for "Operation Galvanic", the U.S. push into the Gilbert Islands. In the pre-dawn darkness of D-Day at Makin, November 20, 1943, Rear Admiral Griffin's Battleship Division Three unleashed a full-scale bombardment.

Captain Zacharias' guns hammered shore installations on tiny Butaritari, important link in the Makin ring, while Major General Ralph C. Smith's 27th Infantry Division landed and overran stout Nip defenses. NEW MEXICO's mission was "accomplished precisely according to plan", explosions and smoke emanating from her target area attesting the effectiveness of the ship's cannonading. No enemy opposition was directed against her; no casualties were incurred as a result of enemy action. Out

of the Gilberts the NEW MEXICO sailed November 29. On December 8, 1943 she stood into Pearl Harbor.

Along with the new year came a new job in the Central Pacific. This time it was the Marshall Islands, which extend over six hundred miles of water and screen the island of Truk, then the key Japanese naval fortress in the Carolines. Battleship NEW MEXICO left Pearl Harbor in her wake on January 22, 1944, arriving off Kwajalein Atoll for the pre-invasion battering on the 31st. Into Ebeye and Kwajalein Islands the NEW MEXICO pumped high explosives by the ton, cutting them up into a maze of craters before she retired late in the afternoon of February 1. Here she suffered her first casualty of the war.

(BB-40 color postcard)

Two Kingfisher scouting planes were sent buzzing over embattled Kwajalein from the NEW MEXICO, their skilled pilots relaying vital topographical information and target locations to the battleship's gunners. One of them, piloted by Lieutenant Forney O. Fuqua, USNR, with Radioman Second Class Harrison D. Miller as passenger, was struck by enemy shellfire over Kwajalein's eighty-mile long lagoon. Fuqua radioed his ship: "Cockpit full of gasoline fumes . . . hit very badly . . . am making emergency landing . . ." Taking over the controls Miller brought the damaged plane down to the surface, but it overturned before landing. An alert U.S. minesweeper operating inside the lagoon rescued Radioman Miller, but the NEW MEXICO's Kingfisher sank before Lieutenant Fuqua's body could be recovered.

Turning her attention to Taroa Island in the Maloelap Atoll February 20, and Wotje Island in the Wotje Atoll on the 21st, both in the Marshalls, the New Mexico bombarded those pinpoints to such an extent that not a worthwhile target remained on either of them. By the end of the Marshall strikes, Captain Zacharias' main and secondary batteries had donated 2,400 rounds to the destruction of enemy defenses.

(Marshall Islands' BB-40 stamp)

Into Majuro Lagoon, some 270 miles southeast of Kwajalein, churned the NEW MEXICO on February 23. Later she continued southward to Havannah Harbor, Efate for re-arming. On March 20 she joined units in the diversionary 1-day bombardment of Kavieng on New Ireland, in coordination with a U.S. Marine invasion of Emirau Island 75 miles to the northwest. This sudden blow brought accurate, rapid counter-battery fire, but again the NEW MEXICO went away undamaged.

From Efate April 23 the battleships IDAHO, PENNSYLVANIA and NEW MEXICO headed southwest with a band of destroyers. Recreation awaited their crews upon arrival in Sydney, Australia April 29. On the 5th of May the Navy pulled out of Sydney's harbor. USS NEW MEXICO came up from down under to reach Efate May 10, 1944.

By this time the projected seizure of Marianas Island strongholds had long since outgrown the map consultation stage. America had the forces plus the initiative to pierce Japan's inner defense perimeter; in the Hawaiian and Solomon Islands the salient sword was being sharpened. Rear Admiral George L. Wayler replaced Rear Admiral Griffin as Commander Battleship Division Three in May, and "The Queen" went into her next action without a flag officer.

Stationed off Tinian June 14-15, the NEW MEXICO cut loose with a murderous artillery assault. On the small island tranquility rapidly evolved into pandemonium. Sand, concrete and palm trees were gouged out and sent climbing into the sky. Lt. General Holland M. "Howlin Mad" Smith's 2nd Division Marines lanced into the southwest quadrant of Saipan (separated from Tinian by a channel three miles wide) on the morning of the 15th. Battleship NEW MEXICO focused her fire on Guam June 16, ham-stringing Jap airfields. In addition to her rigorous shooting schedule, the big warship provided protection for the soft transports and supply ships huddled around Saipan until June 25, when she steamed away from the Marianas.

Phase 2 of the Marianas occupation (Phase 1, the storming of Saipan, had taken a little longer than estimated) was the reconquest of Guam Island. Undisputed control of Marianas approaches had been gained by thoroughly whipping the Japs in the Battle of the Philippine Sea (June 19-20). "The Queen" dropped anchor within Eniwetok Atoll June 27 and spent over two weeks of inactivity. On July 15 she bobbed up off the coast of subdued Saipan.

A naval assault team was formed at Saipan on the 15th, consisting of battleships PENNSYLVANIA and NEW MEXICO, destroyers HAILEY and HAGGARD and the auxiliary HAMILTON. These ships arrived off Guam Island June 17 to hit shore defenses. NEW MEXICO guns chimed in with others to cut a fiery swath across Guam, kept at it until shortly after the sun had risen on July 21. That morning, taut-faced Marines in mottled garb scrambled onto the shell-pocked beaches. From then on, the NEW MEXICO's job was that of rendering close fire support.

(pic of BB-40 gun crews preparing for 1944 invasion of Guam)

After the initial landings had been made, Captain Zacharias got an urgent request for illumination fire to prevent Japanese counter-attacks under cover of darkness.

In reply the NEW MEXICO's rifles sent showers of star shells arching out over the hidden enemy positions, lighting up the sky over Guam with all the brilliance of a motion picture premiere and thus obviating full-scale forays against the struggling U.S. beachheads. At dawn Major General Roy S. Geiger contacted the NEW MEXICO. "Thanks", he messaged, "you saved the day."

At one point in the operation the NEW MEXICO chalked up an extraordinary gunnery feat. One of the ship's target-spotting planes detected a shore battery and requested some salvos for it. Although the objective was completely obscured from view, the navigator hurriedly obtained range and bearing. Electric motors buzzed as they swung the big pieces into position. An orange tongue of flame licked at the muzzle of a leveled gun and a 14-inch projectile drilled through a small, swirling cloud with a deep-throated haroop.

"Salvo!" reported the shipboard radio talker to the pilot. "Splash!" he added a moment later as the shell burst on the island. To report on the shot, the pilot soared over the battery. It was gone. "I'm speechless," he radioed back. "You got a direct hit. Scratch this target off your list."

For cool and courageous conduct while serving as the target-spotting "eyes" of the battleship during these operations, two pilots, Lieutenant (jg) Thomas Moore, USNR and Lieutenant (jg) Harold K. Anderson, Jr., USNR (missing in action) were awarded Air Medals by Vice Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner. At the same time Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz cited the rear-seat radiomen-gunners for efficiently carrying out "numerous naval gunfire spotting missions" during the Marianas campaign. One of the planes was riddled by fragments of a Japanese shell while over Guam, while both planes encountered heavy caliber and automatic anti-aircraft fire during their hazardous missions.

Thirteen days and 6,500 shells after she had begun her job on Guam and nearby Rota, on July 30, 1944 USS NEW MEXICO left the Marianas. With a stop at Eniwetok August 2, the battleship wended her way across the Pacific to Pearl Harbor. Oahu disappeared over her stern August 11 and the NEW MEXICO drew into Puget Sound on August 18, 1944 for availability at the Navy Yard. Behind her was a solid year of heavy bombardment.

Puget Sound brought new guns for "The Queen", leave for her sailors. During September 1944 Captain Zacharias was detached. Succeeding him as Commanding Officer was Captain Robert W. Fleming, USN. Fresh from an overhaul herself, the destroyer BANCROFT escorted the battleship out of Seattle October 26, and the two units arrived in Pearl Harbor November 1, 1944.

To sea again on November 10, the NEW MEXICO sailed to Ulithi in the Western Carolines, spent November 21-23 there before heading into battle with the light cruiser MONTPELIER and four destroyers. All up and down the Philippine Archipelago war had already been raging for a month. NEW MEXICO and Company moved into Leyte Gulf on November 25 to cover the battling on Leyte and Samar.

A week later, on December 2, the force of battleships, cruisers and destroyers to which the NEW MEXICO belonged swarmed out of Leyte Gulf for logistic replenishment. Augmented by several escort carriers, the group returned a few days later and entered Surigao Strait, then passed through the Mindanao Sea into the Sulu Sea to screen and support the December 15 landings on Mindoro. With Mindoro wrested from the enemy against light opposition, the covering force withdrew westward.

Final operation of consequence in the Southwest Pacific was the Lingayen Gulf invasion of Luzon, biggest and most-prized of the Philippine Islands. Gun snouts poking starkly out of her cluttered mountain of superstructure, the NEW MEXICO rode out in early January 1945 to meet the Japanese at Lingayen Gulf.

(BB-40 painting)

Quartered aboard her was a host of notables. Rear Admiral George L. Weyler had embarked making "The Queen" Flagship of BatDivThree once again. Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, Commander-in-Chief of the British Pacific Fleet and young Lt. General Herbert Lumsden, leader of the armored herd which trampled Rommel in North Africa, were on hand to observe U.S. amphibious tactics. Lanky, 28-year old William Henry Chickering, veteran Time Magazine correspondent, who had covered the range of Pacific battle history with General MacArthur since 1942's dark days in New Guinea, filed his last dispatch from the NEW MEXICO on January 2: "It is my hunch that the Japs at Lingayen won't react very favorably, may even retreat to the hills and make our initial success easy . . ."

General MacArthur gave an ironical twist to the invasion by employing the same route which the Japanese had used in 1941-42. Battleship NEW MEXICO arrived in the Gulf on the morning of January 6 and commenced her systematic bombardment of Luzon. At 1000 the Japs began retaliating with fierce and repeated air attacks on the formation.

Less a handful of planes reserved for the evacuation of staff officers, the enemy had commandeered everything flyable for suicide missions. Macabre, effective, practical under the desperate circumstances, the newly-formed Special Attack

Corps of the Imperial Air Force was making its debut in force against the U.S. invasion fleet at Luzon.

While fighting off suiciders overhead, the NEW MEXICO continued uprooting installations in her assigned areas. Suddenly, just at noon, a kamikaze plane with its 500-lb bomb swooped down, slashed into her port navigation bridge and blew up. Damage repair parties were galvanized into action putting out fires and tending to the 30 dead and 87 wounded. Among the dead: Commanding Officer Fleming, Bill Chickering, Lt. General Lumsden.

Standing only the width of the ship's bridge away from Lumsden, with whom he had been discussing the action, Admiral Fraser suffered nothing worse than "a bit of a bang in the ears." Commander John T. Warren, USN, Executive Officer of the NEW MEXICO, assumed command upon the tragic death of his skipper. Anti-aircraft fire continued to stream skyward from the battleship's guns, though two of her weapons had been knocked out in the explosion. But 14-inch fire from the NEW MEXICO continued to flail Luzon, paving the way for MacArthur's men.

Despite personnel losses the NEW MEXICO lost little in battle efficiency. Among the targets assigned to her were two bridges, each 16 feet wide and roughly 7-1/2 miles inland. Though they were considered almost impossible to hit, the NEW MEXICO's gunnery damaged one beyond repair and made the other useless to the Japanese. Unopposed on the beaches, U.S. troops went ashore January 9 to fight a campaign against an enemy disorganized and demoralized, badly equipped and badly supplied, isolated beyond hope of remedy.

Having expended ammunition amounting to 1,391,975 pounds at Luzon (25,795 rounds), the NEW MEXICO moved out of Lingayen Gulf January 22, and dropped anchor in San Pedro Bay off Leyte on the 24th. On the long transpacific haul to Pearl Harbor, where needed repairs were to be effected, the battleship stopped at Ulithi January 28, finally sighting Oahu February 6, 1945.

At Pearl Harbor the NEW MEXICO's first battle damage in her long career of U.S. Naval Service was patched up. Metal plating was welded into place, and bomb-riddled machinery replaced with new. On March 1, 1945, Commander Warren was relieved, and control of "The Queen" given to Captain John Meade Haines, USN. On the 9th of March the man-o-war headed for Ulithi.

In the offing was the capture of Okinawa, most difficult operation undertaken by U.S. forces in the Pacific, also the most ambitious amphibious push of the Pacific war (1,213 ships, 564 carrier-based support aircraft and Army-Marine ground forces numbering 451,866). While her sailors swarmed over the tiny island of Mog-

Mog in the Ulithi Atoll, NEW MEXICO re-armed, provisioned and took on fuel. On the 20th of March Captain Haines conned his battleship northwest toward the Ryukyus.

For six days prior to the landings on Okinawa Jima, the mighty dreadnought NEW MEXICO supported underwater demolition teams and minesweeping operations in the area. Baleful orange flashes and whine of shells accompanied her bombardment of Okinawa's broken ugly terrain as she plastered pillboxes, airplane revetments, camouflaged positions and fortified caves. So thorough was her job that, before the first wave of assault forces rolled in to hit the beaches at 0830 on April 1, every known coastal gun in her assigned sector had been silenced.

And the suicide attacks began! Low over the water they came, dozens of them, with the anti-aircraft fire like a storm in the sky. In seconds a small dot on the horizon would loom as a suicider loaded with bombs on a one-way trip. On April 5 USS NEW MEXICO became the flagship of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, Commander United States Fifth Fleet. On April 6 the Japanese "Divine Wind" started blasting the Navy at Okinawa with a fury never before encountered.

During the 64 days spent at Okinawa, the Fifth Fleet's Flagship went to General Quarters 82 times and to Air Defense 86 times. NEW MEXICO sailors brought her score of planes downed to 21 by accounting for eight Japanese aircraft. Four of them were dropped within 16 minutes during a heavy air attack on April 12. On one occasion there was a dubious diversion when the NEW MEXICO out-maneuvered torpedoes loosed at her by an enemy pig-boat. Harmlessly the "tin fish" passed down her port and starboard sides.

(underway vertical bow shot of BB-40)

Dusk on May 12 brought the Imperial Air Force thundering forth in droves. Shortly after 1700 a formation closed the NEW MEXICO from astern. Captain Haines' gunners nestled in anti-aircraft tubs frantically banged away at one of them, which peeled off and dove down on "The Queen". One 5-inch shell burst directly under the kamikaze, lifting it clear of the mastheads as it zoomed overhead. Close aboard it smacked into the sea. "It came so close," exclaimed one observer, "that I could have hit it with a spud!"

NEW MEXICO shells ripped a second diving suicider from cowling to tail-tip. But he whipped in through the blizzard of gunfire, crashed on the gun deck and tore into the funnel, leaving a jagged 30-foot hole in the side.

With a tremendous roar the plane's bombs exploded upon impact. Steel plates were peeled back like waste paper; white hot shrapnel sprayed the deck from foremast to mainmast. Aviation gasoline in the ruptured gas tanks sent flames swooshing skyward 200 feet, and "the top of the stack looked like a gigantic blow torch."

Then 20 mm and 40 mm ammunition from the ship's anti-aircraft guns, plus the plane's 50-caliber shells tumbled down the stack through battle bars. Fireboxes among the boiler tubes below immediately broke out in a series of rat-tat-tats. Meanwhile doctors, corpsmen and emergency stretcher-bearers went to the aid of the wounded.

Others sprang into action in the ammunition clipping room, first removing the injured, then passing up shells to hard-pressed gunners still fighting off enemy planes. Damage control parties, aided by volunteers from gun crews, broke out firehouses and doused the flames. In an amazing 15 minutes all fires were reported under control. In 21 minutes they were extinguished.

Weary sailors worked amid grime and twisted steel throughout the night, clearing debris, appraising damage and readying the ship's guns for new attacks. Casualties incurred amounted to 177 men, including 55 dead and three missing. Damage was so extensive as to be believed irreparable outside a Navy yard.

Before dawn on May 13, the NEW MEXICO's anti-aircraft batteries, excluding those smashed in the attack, were primed for action again. During the days that followed, the deck and engineering departments performed miracles of gunnery and hull repair, aided by technicians from the chunky repair ship OCEANUS which hove to alongside. So much was accomplished in so little time that the NEW MEXICO was able to continue as Admiral Spruance's Flagship until May 27, when she was ordered to Guam.

Both in weight and the number of rounds expended, the amount which the NEW MEXICO fired at Okinawa was the largest of any of her previous engagements. She had used up 21,876 rounds for a total of 4,708,517 pounds, with 2,778 projectiles for her main battery alone. Reaching Guam May 31, "The Queen" reluctantly transferred her Fifth Fleet Flag, then set out June 4 for Leyte with the destroyer PATTERSON.

Permanent repairs were made at Leyte from June 7 through August 8, 1945. On August 6 the atomic bomb revolutionized modern warfare and finished off an already-tottering Japan. Via Ulithi the NEW MEXICO arrived at Saipan on August 15 when the Japanese voiced their willingness to accept the Potsdam Ultimatum. On the following day, August 15, "The Queen" rode at anchor. An enemy no longer

waited for her out on the high seas. Leaving Saipan August 16 she arrived at Okinawa on the 19th.

Sailing August 23 to make the most important rendezvous in her history, the NEW MEXICO three days later joined Admiral Halsey's myriad Third Fleet units which were massing off Sagami Wan at the entrance to Tokyo Bay. A fleet minesweeper aptly named USS REVENGE on August 30 led 189 combatant U.S. Navy ships, their auxiliary supporting force and 17 British seafighters past shattered Yokosuka Naval Base into the "mouth of the dragon".

Sunday, September 2, 1945 dawned with a gray overcast through which the endless field of Navy ships surrounding the battleship MISSOURI loomed darkly. Promptly at 0855, eleven gnomic figures in black morning coats, or the Japanese army's shoddy drab, mounted the MISSOURI's accommodation ladder and formed a little knot before a galaxy of top-ranking Allied leaders on the slate-gray weather deck. When the last signature had been affixed to the instrument of Japan's unconditional surrender, the sun pried through the clouds in fiery brilliance. Like a footnote to history, echelon after echelon of U.S. Navy planes roared overhead in perfect counterpoint to Pearl Harbor.

(pic of BB-40 with Mt. Fuji in background)

Battleship NEW MEXICO steamed out from under the shadow of snow-capped Fujiyama on September 6, 1945 and made the 3-day cruise back to Buckner Bay. Hundreds of high-point Pacific veterans eagerly padded up her gangway at Okinawa and were soon firmly ensconced in makeshift quarters. Casting off her lines on September 10, "The Queen" began the long voyage home.

Five days at Pearl Harbor (September 20-25) and the NEW MEXICO continued to the Panama Canal Zone. Leaving the locks behind her for the last time October 12, she arrived in Boston on the 18th. Navy Day, 1945 (October 27) at Boston was highlighted by the presence of "The Queen".

Commander Arnold H. Newcomb, who had served as Gunnery Officer during the Philippine and Okinawa campaigns, took over command from Captain Haines November 15, 1945. In the subsequent months while the NEW MEXICO was laid up at Boston, Newcomb supervised preparations for her decommissioning. On July 19, 1946, USS NEW MEXICO was placed out of commission. On February 25, 1947, she was stricken from U.S. Naval registry and allocated to the auction block. She was sold for scrapping October 13, 1947 to Lipsett, Inc., New York City.

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USS NEW MEXICO received six battle stars for World War II services.



Epilogue

by Dick Brown

New Mexico Council, Navy League of the United States

The Navy League's New Mexico Council petitioned the Navy for five years to name the next Virginia-class submarine USS NEW MEXICO. Indeed, on December 6, 2004, Secretary of the Navy Gordon England came to Albuquerque and officially announced his selection of SSN-779 as USS NEW MEXICO.

(Pic of two New Mexico's)

The naming of submarine NEW MEXICO perpetuates the memory of all who served aboard battleship NEW MEXICO, especially the 86 BB-40 sailors who gave their lives for our country.

*A ghost ship now sails on the Ocean somewhere,
Shrouded in clouds but you know she is there.
Moon lights the blue water a weird sinister glow,
Reveals the image, of the New Mexico!*

The second naming of a warship after the State of New Mexico is a great honor and a salute to "The Queen" and her remarkable legacy in U.S. Naval history. Other than memories of this great battlewagon, only a few treasures remain. The wardroom's 56-piece Tiffany silver set resides in the Museum of New Mexico, the ship's bell is on display at the University of New Mexico main campus, and the ship's wheel survives at the UNM Naval Reserve Officer Training Center.

Submarine NEW MEXICO will soon be carrying our name while carrying out her missions. She will be a living tribute to all New Mexicans who gave their lives in defense of this great nation and to all New Mexicans who have served, or are serving, in our Armed Forces.