THE SHIPS NAMED SACRAMENTO

The Sloop, The Gunboat and The Fast Combat Supply Vessel

by Jack Halligan

SACRAMENTO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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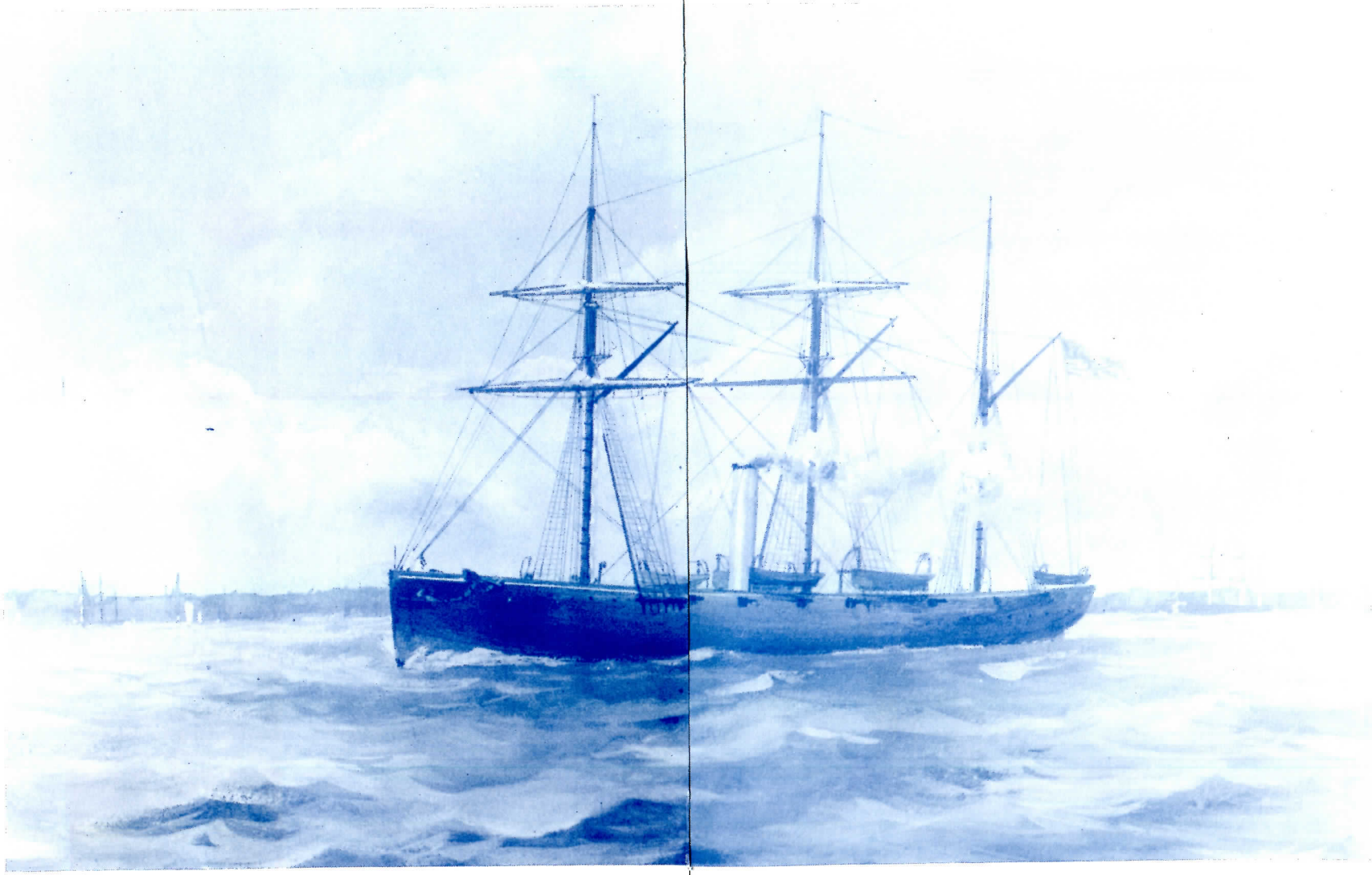
In the long history of the United States Navy the name Sacramento has been given to three ships of the line—the first operated from 1862 to 1867, the second from 1914 to 1946, and the third from 1964 to the present. All three vessels have or had colorful histories, particularly the 1914 to 1946 ship, that are worth recounting in some detail.

The first ship to be called *Sacramento,* a Union vessel during the Civil War, was named after the river and not the city. A Canandaiga class wooden screw sloop 229 feet long with a displacement of 2100 tons and a top speed of 12 knots, the ship was built at the Navy Yard in Kittery, Maine at a cost of $393,000. It was christened by a Mrs. Tilton of Boston on April 28, 1862. The *Sacramento's* complement of men was 19 officers and 119 enlisted men. Its armament consisted of four rifles: one 150-pounder, one 30-pounder, and two 12-pounders; and four howitzers: two 24-pounders and two 12-pounders; and two 11-inch Dahlgren guns.

After preparing at Hampton Roads, Virginia, the *Sacramento's* first assignment was blockade duty off the North Carolina coast, especially Wilmington, which was the center of blockade running. The threatened Union Army move on Charleston had greatly increased the importance of Wilmington as a point of operations for blockade runners. On May 1, 1863 off Cape Fear, under the command of Capt. Charles S. Boggs, the *Sacramento* captured the British blockade runner, *Wanderer,* a schooner that carried a cargo of salt and herring.

The *Sacramento* was taken off blockade duty in early 1864 and sent to Boston for refitting and assignment to European waters. Leaving Boston, she called at the Azores, Cape Town and the Canary Islands before arriving at Cherbourg, France in July. Her mission was to stop Confederate ships from leaving Atlantic ports and, if possible, to raid and seize them and confiscate their cargo. Among its exploits the *Sacramento* bottled up the Confederate ship *Rappahannock* in Calais, France in early 1865.



A wash drawing of the *USS Sacramento* (1863-1867) by Clary Ray circa 1898. Courtesy of U.S. Navy.

After the war ended the *Sacramento* was decommissioned but re-commissioned in 1866 and assigned to the European Squadron that cruised from the North Sea to the Canary Islands. In October, 1866 the sloop was dispatched to Liberia on the African coast to assist that government in persuading dissident tribesmen to attend a peace conference. After that situation was resolved, the ship visited several ports, including Cape Town and Madras, India. On June 19, 1867, after having departed from Madras, the sloop went aground on a reef at the mouth of Godavery River. Although the *Sacramento* was battered into a total wreck, the entire crew was saved. Forty-seven years would pass before another U.S. Navy ship would be named *Sacramento.*

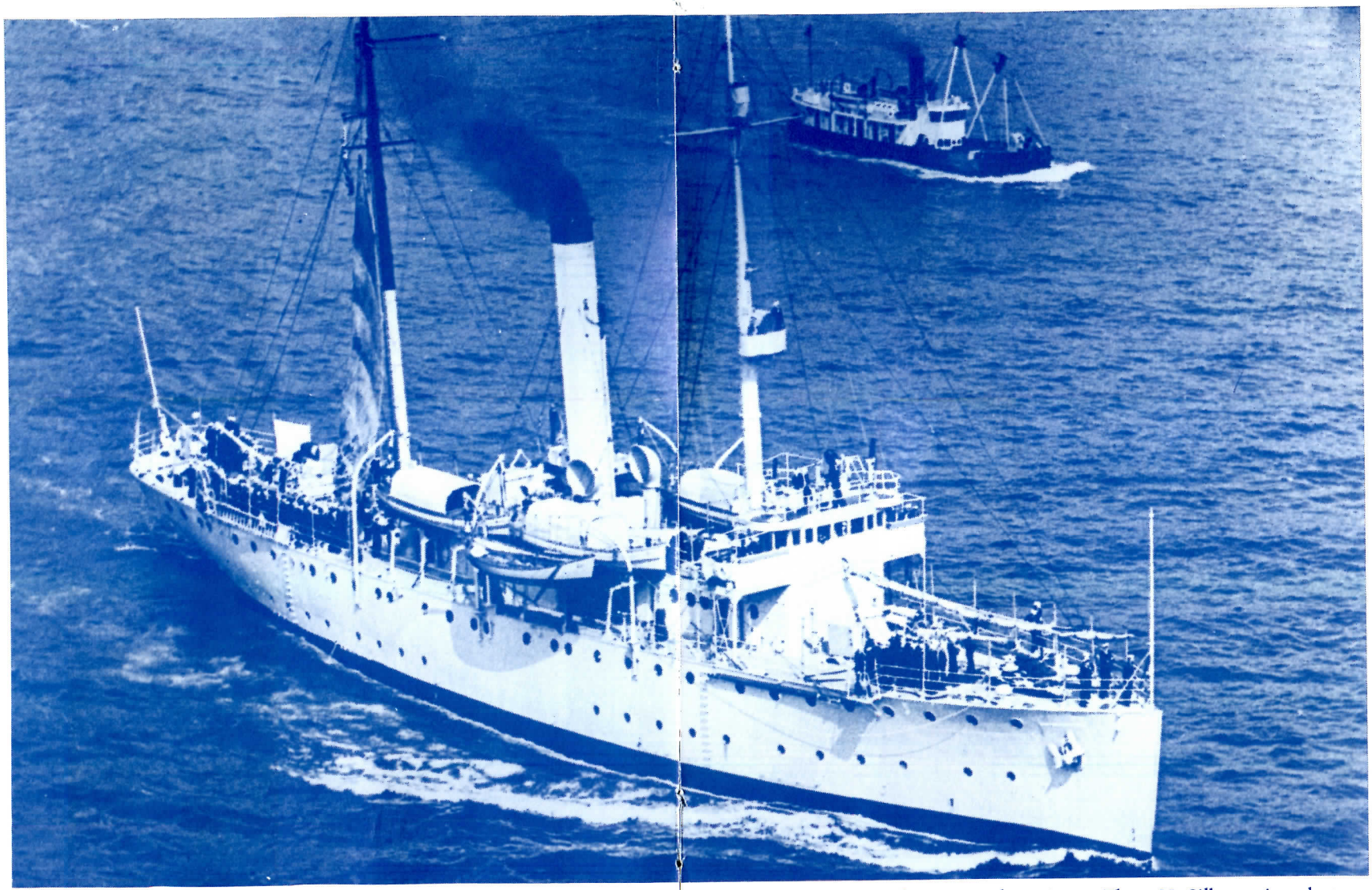
The second ship to bear the name *Sacramento,* and the first to be named after the capital city, sailed in most of the world's oceans and saw considerable action during her 32 years of service that began in 1914 and ended in 1946. A steam gunboat, she was built by the Cramp Shipbuilding Company of Philadelphia and launched on February 21, 1914. The ship was christened with a bottle of Sacramento Valley champagne by Miss Phebe Briggs, the daughter of Dr. Ellery Briggs of Sacramento. Miss Briggs later became the wife of Carlos K. McClatchy, publisher of the *Fresno Bee.* Carlos, who died in 1933, was the brother of Charles K. McClatchy, editor and publisher of the *Sacramento Bee* from 1883 to 1936. The Sacramento City Council's gift to the gunboat was a silver service valued at $2000.

The *Sacramento,* designated PG-19, was 226 feet long with a 40-foot beam and a displacement of 1400 tons. She had one tall smokestack, a coal-carrying capacity of 428 tons and two Babcock boilers. Her armament consisted of three 4-inch guns, two 3-pounders and two 1-pounders. The ship carried a crew of 160 officers and men and had a top speed of nearly 13 knots. The gunboat's first assignment was with a special service squadron labelled the "Banana Fleet" in Mexican and Caribbean waters, and she arrived off Vera Cruz on May 14, 1914 with the primary purpose of protecting American lives and property and aiding U.S. troops. President Woodrow Wilson had sent in the troops and captured the city after an incident in which U.S. sailors had been arrested by Mexican police. The sailors were released but Admiral Mayo, the American fleet commander, demanded Victoriano Huerta, the Mexican president, apologize and salute our flag. Huerta apologized but his refusal to salute the flag created a situation that nearly resulted in war.

When the Vera Cruz situation eased, the *Sacramento* plied Central American waters and dropped anchor at ports in Nicaragua, Mexico, Honduras, Haiti and the Dominican Republic until the beginning of World War in April, 1917. Then she was called back to the United States, where she was ordered to assist customs authorities in New Orleans in the seizure of two German merchant ships, the *Breslau* and the *Andromeda.* The *Sacramento's* next actions, both which occurred off the coast near Newport, Rhode Island, involved the rescue of the 36-man crew of the *Sebastain,* a British ship that was being destroyed by fire, and assisting in the refloating of the *USS Olympia,* a cruiser that had run aground on a shoal.

By then the war was in full swing and the *Sacramento* was fitted out for foreign service and assigned to convoy duty in European waters. On August 6, 1917, when the gunboat steamed into Gibraltar escorting a convoy of 18 British merchant ships, she became the first U.S. ship to sail into that port since the days of the Barbary pirates. Based at Gibraltar, the *Sacramento* performed continuous escort duty between there and Plymouth, England with additional service along the North African and Italian coasts. During World War I the gunboat convoyed 483 ships, spending 343 days at sea and cruising 63,640 miles. She participated in a number of rescues in submarine-infested waters, including saving the crew of the *Swan River,* a British freighter that had been torpedoed by a German submarine. The *Sacramento* sighted and fired on the sub, and succeeded in chasing it away.

After the Armistice ended the war on November 11, 1918, the *Sacramento* visited ports in Italy, Portugal and Tunisia before returning to the U.S. for repairs. Her next assignment was to Murmansk at the northern tip of Russia in 1919 as a dispatch ship. There she distributed food and clothing, dispensed medical aid to refugees of the Russian civil war, and gave support to the other ships of the Atlantic fleet in the area. The gunboat also assisted in the withdrawal of American forces from areas bordering the White Sea and those men guarding the Siberian and Russian railroads. The *Sacramento* was in and out of European waters until the middle of 1920 when she was again assigned to the "Banana Fleet" in Central America. Two years later the ship was sent to the Pacific to be part of the Asiatic Squadron, also known as the "China Fleet." Except for short stints in other parts of the world, the *Sacramento* spent most of her time until World War II in the Orient.



USS Sacramento (1914-1946) steaming up the East River to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, with homeward bound pennant and junk sail flying upon her return from Asiatic waters in January, 1940.

Courtesy of U.S. Naval Institute; Theo N. Silberstein, photographer.

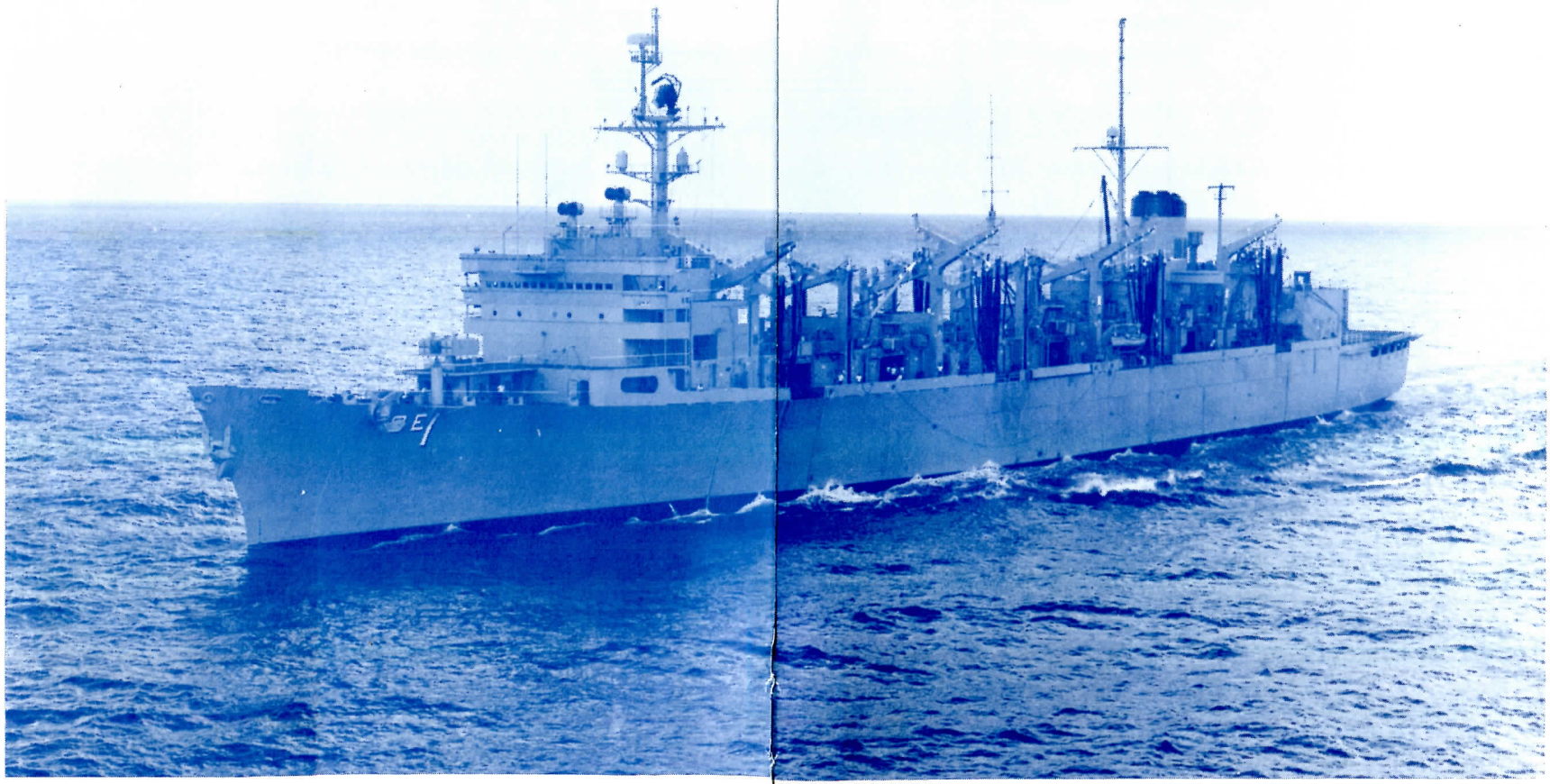
One of her interesting Pacific assignments occurred in 1922 when she was sent to Vladivostok, Russia for three months to relieve the *USS Helena* as station ship. Along with France, Italy, England and Japan, the United States became a part of the joint expeditionary force to Siberia during the Russian Revolution. The occupation was ended in late 1922. After leaving Russia, the *Sacramento* aided in quelling a native uprising of the Colorums on the island of Surigao in the Philippines, an action for which each crewman received a campaign medal. A year later the gunboat aided victims from the earthquake in Yokohama, Japan that virtually destroyed the entire city. In 1930 the *Sacramento* was on the scene assisting at a major earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua. And in 1931 the *Sacramento* assisted victims of a severe earthquake that rocked Honduras and the nearby Cocas Islands.

Until Pearl Harbor, the ship's greatest days of glory came during her years as part of the "China Fleet." Called the "Galloping Ghost of the China Coast" and, at other times, "Sacramento Maru," the ship performed yeoman duty for several years. The *Sacramento* was impressive to many Chinese because of its high smokestack, which the Chinese felt signified power. From the first Chinese revolution in the 1920's to the Japanese invasion in the 1930's, the gunboat was often on or close to the scene of battle. Particularly in the 1930's, when war or revolution often threatened, the *Sacramento* proved a presence that eased the fears of Americans and other foreigners in China. The gunboat's main purpose was to provide radio communications between the U.S. consuls on shore and the fleet commander-in-chief, and to be available in case American lives or property were in danger.

Armed crewmen from the *Sacramento* were sent ashore several times during this period. One occasion took place during a Communist uprising in December, 1928. Then on August 20, 1937, a 230-man landing force composed of men from the *Sacramento* and the *USS Augusta,* the flagship of the Asiatic Fleet, was sent ashore in a show of arms. Earlier in January, 1932 the *Sacramento* evacuated refugees from the first Japanese bombing of Shanghai to Hong Kong and Manila, and aided crew members of the *USS Panay,* which was sunk by Japanese planes on the Yangtze River near Nanking on December 12, 1937. The *Sacramento's* closest call came on August 15, 1937 when a Japanese pilot dropped a bomb twenty yards from the ship, but no damage was done.

The gunboat was ordered to the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1939 for conversion from coal to oil. Her last journey as a steam ship was unusual because she used sails, a tradition that originated on the China coast. Along with tradition, a practical reason existed for the use of sails. The gunboat was quite round-bottomed and utilizing sails on the open sea steadied the ship considerably. For her last trip, the sails were made from an awning from the *Augusta* and a portion of a sail from a Chinese junk. As a matter of fact, the gunboat often ran faster under sail than under steam. By the time she dropped anchor in Brooklyn, the *Sacramento* had steamed and sailed nearly a half-million miles. In Brooklyn the ship received a 950-horsepower oil engine, which increased its speed considerably. Her smokestack was shortened and she was given new weaponry. Also, the gunboat added two 50 caliber guns and one 3-inch anti-aircraft gun. With the modern engine, the ship began a new period of usefulness. In her next assignment, the *Sacramento* provided quarters for rescue and salvage workers at the scene of the *Squalus* disaster. The *Squalus,* a submarine, went to the bottom off Hampton Beach, New Hampshire on May 23, 1939 with the loss of 26 out of a crew of 59. The duty off the east coast ended in November, 1939 and until the middle of 1941, the gunboat served as a reserve training ship on the Great Lakes.

When it became evident there might be a war in the Pacific, the *Sacramento,* along with a number of other ships, was dispatched to Pearl Harbor. Most of her crew came from a naval reserve unit in Indianapolis, Indiana. The gunboat arrived on August 15, 1941, less than four months before the Japanese attack. On the morning of December 7, 1941, a total of 101 ships were in the harbor. The ship, the only gunboat there, and one of the few in the Navy at the time, had come out of drydock only a few days earlier and was anchored next to the *USS Argonne,* an auxiliary ship. One standing order for all ships at Hawaii was that 25% of all anti-aircraft batteries be in ready status. Even though the *Sacramento's* ammunition lockers were far from full, she was ready to swing into action. The alarm was sounded by Seaman Charles Bohnstadt and the lines were cut by the ship's cook using a butcher knife. Less than five minutes after the initial attack, gun crews from the gunboat opened fire on Japanese aircraft attacking ships on "Battleship Row" off Ford Island. The *Sacramento's* guns destroyed one enemy plane that crossed 200 yards in front of her bow and downed another that was



A port quarter bow view of the fast, combat support ship, *USS Sacramento,* underway on the Pacific Ocean. Courtesy of U.S. Navy; Arthur E. Legare, photographer.

attacking the battleship *Nevada.* The gunboat fired 18,000 rounds and rescued 27 crew members from the battleship *Oklahoma.* The vessel was awarded one battle star for its actions at Pearl Harbor.

After the attack the *Sacramento* was ordered to Palmyra Island, south of Hawaii, to serve as tender for a torpedo boat unit and as an air-sea rescue ship. Late in 1942, the gunboat was sent to San Diego, where she spent the remainder of the war as a training ship for gun crews; more than 1800 gunners were trained aboard the ship. In 1945 the *Sacramento* was assigned to Treasure Island, San Francisco and served as a weather ship before decommissioning on February 6, 1946.

When the Sacramento was decommissioned, the Navy removed its 390-pound bell and stored it in a government warehouse in Williamsburg, Virginia. It was located there in 1983 by Jack Halligan, who had the idea that having the bell displayed in Sacramento would be very appropriate and a contribution to local history. He interested Terry Kastanis, District 7 Councilman, in the project. Kastanis assembled a committee that included Capt. William Gengler, U.S.N. (Ret.), Robert Thomas, City Parks and Community Services Director, and Halligan. While Kastanis' committee was developing ideas for the display of the bell, Capt. Gengler was making efforts to have the bell transported from Washington, D.C. to Sacramento.

The bell arrived in the late summer of 1984 and was temporarily stored in the city. It was mounted on a plaque that shows a line drawing of the ship with a synopsis of the ship's history. The bell and plaque are permanently mounted on a stand on the docking barge in Old Sacramento. A ceremony dedicating the bell was held on October 16, 1984. It was presided over by Kastanis and featured Capt. Gengler, Councilman David Shore, Navy League President Roderick Ward and Halligan as speakers. An added feature was the attendance of four men of the ship's crew who were on the gunboat at the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. One of the crewmen, Paul Kennedy, who is a Sacramento resident, spoke at the ceremony. Kennedy presented to the Sacramento History Center artifacts and memorabilia pertaining to the gunboat. The pieces included radio messages, copies from the log book, bits of Japanese aircraft, and signal flags.

After being sold in August, 1947, the *Sacramento* became a merchant ship with Italian registry under the name *Fermina.* In 1948 she was sold again and put into passenger service between Hong Kong and Manila.

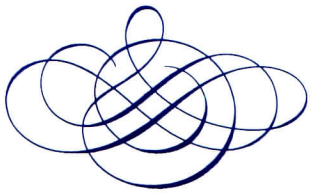
But persistent engine trouble forced the new owners to abandon the venture. The ship's last role was as a floating office and warehouse at Hainan Island, off the coast of China.

The third ship to be named after the capital city is the first of a new class of fast combat supply and support ships, and was built at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, Washington. Sponsored by Mrs. Edmund G. Brown, wife of the governor of California, the ship, designated AEO-1, was launched on September 14, 1963. On behalf of the city, Mayor James B. McKinney presented a sterling silver punch bowl to Capt. Mark M. Gantor, the commanding officer, whose first Navy assignment in 1940 was on the gunboat *Sacramento.*

The biggest auxiliary ship in the Navy at the time, the *Sacramento* cost $66 million. The ship, which is 115 feet longer than the battleships *Alabama* and *Indiana,* is 793 feet long. She has a displacement of 53,600 tons and a top speed of 25 knots with a crew of 33 officers and 567 men. The armament consists of a Sea Sparrow missile, two Sea Knight Helicopters, eight 76-millimeter guns and four 50 caliber guns. Other ships in the same class—*Camden, Seattle* and *Detroit*—were built before the program was cancelled in 1970.

The *Sacramento,* which allows combat ships to remain in forward areas for longer periods, is truly a floating supermarket. Her capacities are awesome: eight million gallons of fuel, 1600 tons of ammunition ranging from small arms to missiles, 250 tons of refrigerated products, 250 tons of staple foods and stores, a sizable load of mail and miscellaneous freight, and parts for repairs. For refueling the *Sacramento* utilizes a probe similar to that used for in-flight refueling of aircraft. The probe is sent to other ships by a "high line" shot. For the transfer of other supplies the AEO-1 employs transfer-at-sea tackles and the two helicopters.

During the Vietnam War the *Sacramento* made seven deployments to the Pacific as part of the Seventh Fleet's replenishment and mobile logistics support force. In one nine-month stint, the ship set a record by supplying 812 ships with 74 million gallons of fuel, 3,000 tons of provisions, 14,000 tons of ammunition and 1,000 tons of other materials. Some 5,000 tons were delivered by helicopter. The *Sacramento* was awarded 15 battle stars during the conflict. Should another war erupt, the ship is ready to assume support of U.S. combat ships anywhere in the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Halligan, a member of the Sacramento County Historical Society, has been a librarian at Sacramento City College since 1968. A past president of the Sacramento Book Collectors' Club, he is a book reviewer for the Sacramento Bee and wrote the "Background Books" column from 1980 to 1982.