

CRADLE OF VICTORY

The Battle of Midway, which commenced on 4 June 1942, turned the tide in the Pacific during the early days of World War Two. Central to this American victory were three aircraft carriers; **USS YORKTOWN (CV-5)**, **USS ENTERPRISE (CV-6)** and **USS HORNET (CV-8)**. Historical accounts of that pivotal battle appropriately concentrate on the tactics, the accomplishments – and the sacrifices – of the carriers’ air wings.

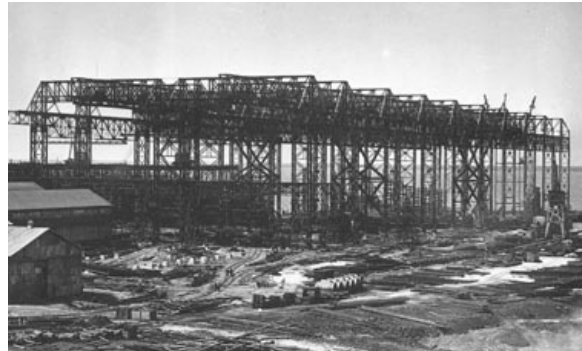


Recorded history seldom notes that the three carriers were essentially sister ships. Historical chronicles almost never mention that they were all designed and built at the same shipyard – the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company. And, apparently, no history has ever recorded the fact that all three carriers were constructed in - and launched from - the same cradle.

This is the story of that cradle; now but a memory, as are the three carriers. A common cradle of creation; what could well be called the United States Navy’s unheralded naval Cradle of Victory for not just the Battle of Midway, but for much of the Pacific war.

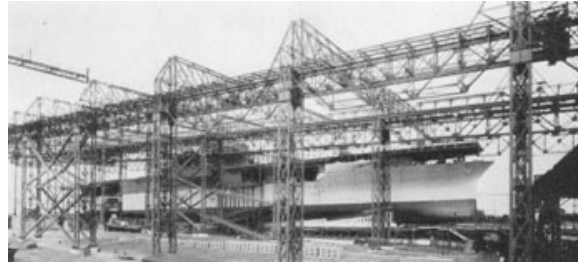
In 1917, as part of the NNS wartime expansion in World War One, construction was begun on a then-massive shipbuilding facility. Initially known as “the new battle cruiser ways”, Shipways 8 and 9 were constructed on fill land in shallow tidal waters just north of the yard’s original plant.

Technically designated “semi-submerged inclined shipways”, the twin shipways’ most noticeable feature was a gigantic steel structure some 1,100 feet long, 305 feet wide and 152 feet above grade. This structure, which weighed over 7,500 tons, supported several gantry cranes that could traverse the entire length of the two shipways, making it possible to install multi-ton equipment and sub-assemblies safely and efficiently.



That was state-of-the-art shipbuilding in 1917, as was the idea of depressing the outboard ends of the inclined shipways some twenty feet below high water to avoid excessive height of the structure. Even so, the forward end of the two 1,000-foot long shipways rose several feet above grade. A paved roadway ran at right angles and just ahead of the shipways (but beneath the gantry cranes’ support structure), permitting bulky pieces of machinery and large structural subassemblies to be trucked within easy reach of the cranes. Two floating caissons, essentially dry dock gates, were fitted at the outboard end of the shipways to keep the 130 foot wide shipways dry except when it was time to launch a ship.

The shipways had a constant slope (called declivity) of 5/16ths of an inch to the foot. This inclined plane enabled the efficient utilization of the forces of gravity, with a generous application of grease, to transfer a ship the size of an aircraft carrier (that weighed millions of pounds) from her building cradle to the waters of the historic James River. But it also complicated seasoned shipbuilders' efforts to build everything plumb and true. Not to mention the tedious and delicate procedure for preparing a ship to slide at just the proper moment.



This major addition to NNS' facilities cost \$4 million – considered an astronomical cost in 1917. The original completion date (1919) proved to be optimistic; the complex was not completed until 1920, too late to support the war effort. And too late to allow the first vessels laid down, the battle cruiser USS CONSTELLATION and the battleship USS IOWA, to be completed. As part of the infamous naval shipbuilding holiday that followed World War One, these two partially constructed warships were scrapped on the ways in 1923 (CONSTELLATION was 22% complete; IOWA 31.8%).

But this inauspicious start was soon eclipsed by the twin shipways' track record over the next half-century. Some 85 vessels – major warships, luxury liners and jumbo tankers - were built and launched there. In addition to YORKTOWN, ENTERPRISE and HORNET, that listing features many world-famous vessels, including several that had significant roles in achieving final victory in 1945:

- HOUSTON (CA-30) – the first warship built at NNS after the naval shipbuilding holiday was launched in 1929.
- RANGER (CV-4) – first ship in our navy that was specifically designed and constructed as an aircraft carrier was launched from Shipway 8 in 1933.
- ESSEX (CV-9) – first aircraft carrier in the largest class of carriers ever built in history. Five more carriers of this class followed her down these ways during World War Two (and three others were built nearby). In August of 1945, LEYTE (CV-32) became the last NNS-built aircraft carrier to be launched from a sliding shipway.
- YORKTOWN II (CV-10) – her keel was laid under another name, but shipyard wartime workers campaigned tirelessly to have her renamed (and contributed to her cost via war bonds' purchases) following the loss of CV-5 at the Battle of Midway.
- HORNET II (CV-12) – another Essex-class carrier whose name was also changed while under construction, following her namesake's loss in October of 1942.
- INDIANA (BB-58) – the last battleship built at NNS, and by far the heaviest vessel to safely slide from the Cradle of Victory.

- AMERICA – the largest and most luxurious passenger liner built in this country when completed in 1940. Throughout World War Two, she served as the troop transport WEST POINT (AP-23), carrying almost one-half million members of the armed forces to and from the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific without the loss of a single military passenger to enemy action.
- ARKANSAS (CGN-42) – last of five nuclear powered, guided missile cruisers built on Shipways 8 & 9 (and the last vessel of any type to become waterborne from the Cradle of Victory, when she was launched in 1978).

Also in 1978, the twin shipways were declared obsolete; already replaced by larger and more modern ship construction facilities, serviced by cranes of much greater capacity and maneuverability. In 1982, dramatic demolition took place to make way for an even more modern shipbuilding facility – a land-level, enclosed ‘factory’ where today’s nuclear powered submarines are constructed by NNS. Thus, the legacy of the Cradle of Victory continues.



And so do the memories. Newport News shipbuilders from that era, albeit mostly retired now, (but still shipbuilders at heart) fondly recall the bygone pageantry, suspense and triumph of a sliding launching.

At times, these were nationally celebrated events, like the hot summer day of August 31, 1939, when AMERICA was christened by Eleanor Roosevelt. That ship’s slide to the sea was cheered by VIP’s, guests and thousands of proud shipbuilders and their families as the shipyard’s Apprentice School band played *The Star Spangled Banner*.



Mrs. Roosevelt also had previously christened YORKTOWN I in 1936, and these dual experiences gave her the needed understanding in 1943 to quickly react when YORKTOWN II unexpectedly began her slide to the sea several minutes early. Interrupting a speaker, the First Lady grabbed the champagne bottle, loudly pronounced “*I christen thee United States Ship YORKTOWN*” and smartly smashed the bottle against the ship’s rapidly receding bow.

Newspaper articles duly reported that the newest YORKTOWN was obviously anxious to get to sea and avenge her namesake’s loss. Not only did YORKTOWN II have an outstanding naval career in both war and peacetime, even today she serves as inspiration for future generations in her current role as a museum ship in Charleston, SC.

In similar fashion, the second HORNET to be built in the NNS Cradle of Victory had an equally outstanding career, and also survives to this day as a museum ship in the San Francisco Bay area. Only the first ENTERPRISE, of the three carriers that turned the tide at the Battle of Midway, survived the rigors of World War Two.

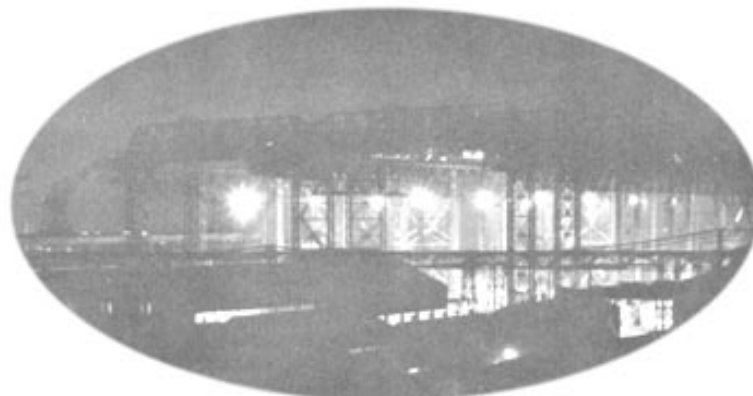
However, in spite of a concerted effort in 1958 by former crewmembers to preserve her as a museum ship/war memorial, they were unable to keep “The Big E” from scrappers’ clutches. But her name survives, gracing the world’s first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, CVN-65, which continues her rich heritage of naval service. Also designed and built at Newport News, within site of her namesake’s Cradle of Victory, the current ENTERPRISE remains in service over four decades after her 1961 commissioning.

Although CV-6 is largely but a memory, a multi-ton section of her stern survived, thanks to the history-minded man in charge of her demolition. This unusual memorial sits behind the centerfield fence at a New Jersey Little League ballpark; the largest tangible part remaining of the only Battle of Midway participant to come home.



The aircraft carrier USS MIDWAY (CV-41), completed in 1945 and named to commemorate that pivotal 1942 battle, was designed and built – where else? – at NNS, and within sight of her predecessors’ common birthplace. After nine years’ of effort by the patriotic citizens of San Diego, she was towed to that city in January of 2004, where she will soon become a museum ship. When MIDWAY was decommissioned in 1992, she held the title as the longest-serving carrier in naval history. In a few years that title will pass, appropriately enough, to CVN-65.

On the evening of June 4th this year, as remaining Battle of Midway participants and their admirers once again gather to remember and commemorate this signal event in our nation’s history, this author will be quietly reflecting on where it all really began...and the stoic shipbuilders who once tirelessly toiled there.



Bill Lee
June, 2004