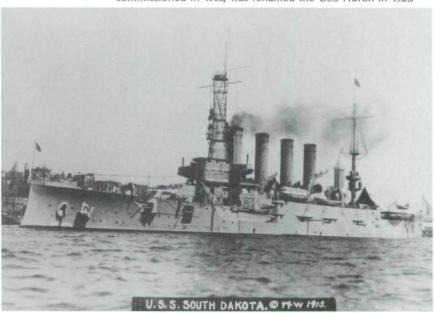
Life Aboard "Battleship X": The USS South Dakota in World War II

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Relics of the Second World War still linger on the South Dakota landscape. A few World War II-era buildings remain at Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City and at Joe Foss Field in Sioux Falls, remnants of the facilities constructed there for the Army Air Force in the massive military buildup following Pearl Harbor. Satellite airfields for those training bases now serve as municipal airports at Mitchell, Pierre, and Watertown. Unexploded ordnance still litters what was once the Badlands Gunnery Range, where B-17 bomber crews from Rapid City Air Force Base, as Ellsworth was then known, practiced before flying off to bomb Germany. The site of the Black Hills Ordnance Depot at Igloo, built in 1942, continues to provide a focus for conflicts over large-scale solid-waste disposal in the state. All of these vestiges of the Big War seem, somehow, part of the landscape on which they rest. What is probably South Dakota's most unusual souvenir of the conflict sits far from its element, however. Visitors to Sherman Park in Sioux Falls can look up the Big Sioux River at most of what remains of one of the most famous battleships of World War II-the USS South Dakota. The story of the battleship and the affection that South Dakotans developed for it is a unique chapter in the heritage of the state.

Officially designated BB 57 (Battleship Number 57) in the ship nomenclature of the United States Navy, the South Dakota was not the first American fighting ship to bear the name. In 1908, the navy had commissioned the armored cruiser South Dakota, a vessel displacing 13,680 tons and carrying a main armament of eight-inch guns. Its twenty-two-year span as an active warship far exceeded the less than five years of its more illustrious successor. Before World War I, the old South Dakota operated in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Its initial wartime station was in the southern Atlantic, off the coast of Brazil. Later in the war, it escorted convoys operating out of Halifax, Nova Scotia. In 1919, the armored cruiser joined the Pacific Fleet, serving for a time as its flagship. Renamed the USS Huron in 1920, the vessel finished its career in the Pacific, performing such services as the good-will visit it made to Japan in 1923 to assist earthquake victims. Decommissioned in 1930, the Huron was sold for scrap later that year. Ironically, parts of the old ship may have aided Japanese efforts to sink the new South Dakota during





World War II, a result of Japanese purchases of scrap metal from the United States in the 1930s.1

During the 1930s, as the growing belligerence of both Germanv and Japan began to threaten world stability, the process of rebuilding the United States Navy slowly began. On 27 March 1934, Congress authorized major new ship construction, including that of a battleship to be designated the South Dakota. At the same time, however, isolationist and pacifist sentiment proved strong enough to block appropriations for most of the authorized ship construction. While Congress continued to debate the need for naval rearmament, navy designers refined plans for the next generation of warships. In 1938, responding to Japan's renunciation of all naval treaty obligations and its invasion of China, Congress agreed to fund major shipbuilding programs.2

The new generation of battleships reflected rapidly developing changes in naval warfare. Two new weapons, the submarine and the airplane, had rendered battleships more vulnerable than in the days when other battleships were their only deadly adversaries. Newgeneration vessels of the South Dakota class, their predecessors of the North Carolina class, and the ultimate heavyweights of the lowa class all shared characteristics intended to make it harder for airplanes and submarines to catch and destroy them. In addition to speed and maneuverability, the modernized battleships had thicker armored decks, sixteen-inch main batteries, and five-inch secondary batteries in twin mounts.3

When Congress funded the South Dakota in 1938, Navy Department shipyards were inundated with new construction projects. Consequently, the South Dakota became the first battleship since

2. Alan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America (New York: Free Press, 1984), pp. 386-87.

^{1.} U. S., Department of the Navy, Naval History Division, Ships' Histories Section, "History of USS South Dakota (BB 57)," n.d., p. 1. The armored cruiser was renamed because construction of a new, state-of-the-art battleship to be called the South Dakota had begun in 1920. The vessel was never built, however. When it was nearly forty percent complete, it became a casualty of the Washington Treaty for Limitation of Naval Armament, which was intended to end a rapidly escalating naval arms race among the United States, Great Britain, and Japan. The Washington Treaty required the scrapping of nearly all capital ships (battle cruisers and battleships like the South Dakota) under construction and the destruction of many older ships as well. Russell F. Weigley, The American Way of War: A History of United States Military and Strategy Policy (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 243-45.

^{3.} Samuel Eliot Morison, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. 1: The Battle of the Atlantic, September 1939-May 1943 (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), p. lviii.

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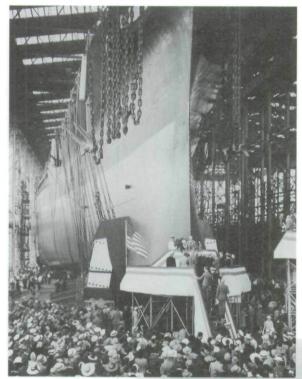
the early 1920s to be built at a private shipyard, the New York Shipbuilding Corporation of Camden, New Jersey. The South Dakota's keel was laid 5 July 1939, and the project ran ahead of schedule from the beginning. Launching ceremonies were held four months ahead of the originally projected date. Displacing 28,000 tons at launching, the South Dakota was the heaviest United States ship constructed up to that time. Its \$52.8 million price tag also made it one of the most expensive ships in the navy's inventory.⁴

Battleship launchings have long been a favorite navy public-relations ploy, and the trip of the South Dakota down the ways at Camden was no exception. Scheduled for 7 June 1941, the launching created considerable excitement in the ship's namesake state. Naval tradition attributed feminine gender to all ships (even those named after men), and women were preferred as sponsors at official launching ceremonies. The honor of christening the South Dakota fell to Vera Bushfield, the wife of South Dakota governor Harlan Bushfield. Her delegation of four hundred South Dakotans, including the Sioux Falls Washington High School Band, would compose almost a third of the fifteen hundred invited guests. Worsening relations between the United States and Japan contributed to a sense of urgency that the South Dakota be readied as soon as possible. The public was barred from the launching ceremony, and there would be no official day off in the shipyard, whose thirteen thousand employees would see the battleship down the ways on their lunch break.5

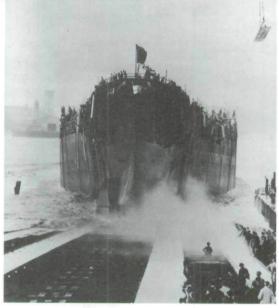
In some respects, the adventures and misadventures surrounding the launching of the USS South Dakota provided a preview of its eventful career. The ceremonies, scheduled for 12:45 in the afternoon, did not begin until 1:20, when the tide in the Delaware River had risen sufficiently to prevent grounding the ship. Some officials welcomed the delay, because they were struggling with a difficult question of protocol. The launching ceremonies were being covered by several major radio networks, which had recently concluded a bitter labor dispute by agreeing to use only union musicians on their broadcasts. By no stretch of the imagination did the Washington High School Band, which was scheduled to play at the ceremony, fit the definition of union labor. James C. Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians, refused to allow the networks to carry the high school band's music. Other officials overruled him at the last minute, however, and the Washington High band re-

^{4.} Paul Stillwell, USS South Dakota: The Story of "Battleship X" ([Sioux Falls, S.Dak.]: Battleship South Dakota Memorial Association, 1972), pp. 1-4.

^{5.} Ibid., pp. 2-3; Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 8 June 1941.



Dwarfed by
the giant
vessel (above),
South Dakota's
first lady Vera
Bushfield prepares
to christen the
USS South Dakota.
Shortly thereafter,
the battleship
slid down the
ways at the
Camden, New Jersey,
shipyard (right).



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sponded with the "Star-Spangled Banner" and "Anchors Aweigh." With the traditional "I christen thee South Dakota," Vera Bushfield pushed the ritual champagne bottle toward the ship's bow, and the navy's newest battleship slid into the water.⁶

Bushfield's bottle was not the only one to hit the *South Dakota* that day. A shipyard official broke another bottle of champagne, one that had begun its long career as a wedding gift from Howard Trask of Pierre to his sweetheart, Genevieve, on Thanksgiving Day in 1912. The champagne survived the marriage ceremony when the couple decided to save it for another special occasion. Their offer to donate it for the dedication of the Missouri River bridge between Pierre and Fort Pierre in 1926 was turned down when officials deemed the alcohol inappropriate for a prohibition-era ceremony. By the time the Trasks offered their bottle for the *South Dakota* christening, it had evaporated to become half a bottle, and there was concern that it might not break properly. It did, however, and the pieces found their way back to South Dakota in an inscribed mahogany souvenir case.⁷

Even though it had been christened and launched, the *South Dakota* was far from complete. Turrets, guns, and most of the ship's superstructure were added at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. By the time this work was finished, the nation was at war. While the ship's official commissioning day was 20 March 1942, construction continued until 4 June, when it sailed for its first brief sea trials in Chesapeake Bay. The crew of 115 officers and 1,678 men, who had begun arriving in early March, then sailed the ship to Casco Bay off the Maine coast, where they test-fired its sixteen-inch main batteries. By mid-August, the *South Dakota* was ready for wartime sea duty.⁸

The completed South Dakota was 680 feet long, 108 feet and two inches at its greatest beam, and displaced 35,000 tons. It drew almost thirty feet of water. Eight Babcock and Wilcox oil-fired boilers, which supplied steam to four General Electric geared turbines, powered

^{6.} Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 8 June 1941.

^{7.} Ibid., 7 Sept. 1969.

^{8.} Stillwell, *USS* South Dakota, p. 4; "History of USS *South Dakota* (BB 57)," p. 14. During World War II, several South Dakotans served aboard the ship named after their home state. Navy Department records compiled shortly after the war's end indicated the following men: Thomas D. Morris of Sioux Falls, Herbert G. Klein of Calriche, Roy Flores of Ortley, G. J. Hirshman of Yankton, David J. Wipf of Ethan, Francis Hojnacke of Butler, and Stanley Holbeck of Colman. Howard Anderson, "Battleship *South Dakota* in World War II," in *South Dakota* in *World War II*, ed. Will G. Robinson ([Pierre, S.Dak.]: World War II History Commission, n.d.), p. 437.

the vessel, whose maximum speed of twenty-seven knots placed it in the navy's "fast battleship" category. Fast battleships were able to steam in task forces with aircraft carriers, a trait that would determine the type of action its men would see during World War II. The nine sixteen-inch guns in the ship's main batteries, which could fire shells weighing over a ton, had a range of almost thirty thousand vards. The superstructure included quarters for an admiral, an arrangement that limited secondary-gun-mount space to eight pairs of five-inch guns. South Dakota-class sister ships, like the Indiana. Massachusetts, and Alabama, each mounted ten five-inch gun turrets. The South Dakota's antiaircraft armament initially consisted of seven 1.1-inch quad mounts (for a total of twenty-eight guns) and thirty-five twenty-millimeter guns, an arrangement that would change drastically as the navy gained knowledge of the damage air attacks could inflict on fighting ships. Two catapults on the ship's stern were used to launch OS2U Kingfisher spotting planes.9

The first commanding officer of the USS South Dakota was Capt. Thomas L. Gatch, whose eccentricities made him something of a navy legend. A 1912 Annapolis graduate, Gatch had no prior combat experience and had, in fact, spent much of his career ashore in the office of the navy's judge advocate. He was a great admirer of Shakespeare and an avid student of the American Civil War. A deeply religious man, he revived the old navy custom of the ship's captain reading the lesson at religious services on board. Gatch also adopted a simple philosophy concerning the mission of the South Dakota, which, he believed, existed solely to destroy enemy fighting ships and planes. Because the vessel's guns were the only means to accomplish this mission, its sailors should know how to shoot. As a result, Gatch emphasized gunnery at the expense of almost every other task on shipboard. Historians and those who knew him personally agree that the captain's men adored him and that the South Dakota earned a reputation unique among the navy's battleships. Spit-and-polish ritual was noticeably absent. Gatch allowed his men to wear anything or nothing. The sailors have been described as looking like a lot of wild men, and the ship was said to have been dirty-except for its guns. 10 However, according to naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison, "No ship more eager to fight ever entered the Pacific, for Captain Gatch, by . . . exercising a natural

^{9. &}quot;History of USS South Dakota (BB 57)," p. 14; Stillwell, USS South Dakota, p. 16. 10. An interesting and readable profile of Captain Gatch by Capt. J. V. Claypool, chaplin of the South Dakota, appears in the 13 May 1944 issue of the Chicago Tribune.



The USS South Dakota had a single funnel, or smokestack, and four five-inch gun turrets on both sides, giving it a slightly different appearance from other battleships in the navy's fleet.

gift for leadership, had welded the green crew into a splendid fighting team."

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On 16 August 1942, three years to the day before Japan's surrender, the *South Dakota* began a long voyage to the South Pacific and to war. By the beginning of September, it was headed for the Solomon Islands as the flagship of Battleship Division Six, commanded by Vice-Admiral Willis A. Lee, Jr. At Tongatabu, in the Tonga Islands, the ship struck a reef, severely damaging its hull and necessitating a return to Pearl Harbor for repairs. In the long run, the accident may have been fortunate, for workers also replaced the ship's 1.1-inch

11. Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 5: *The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942-February 1943* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1975), p. 200.

antiaircraft guns with forty-millimeter guns in quad mounts. These weapons were highly effective against aircraft, and the vessel would eventually have seventeen of the quad mounts. Early in October, the *South Dakota*, the carrier *Enterprise* (affectionately known as the "Big-E"), and their escorting destroyers headed back to the South Pacific to join the desperate battle for Guadalcanal.¹²

In the fall of 1942, Guadalcanal Island in the Solomons was the focus of a vast campaign to control the South Pacific. A United States Marine landing force had established an airfield on the island in August. Japanese troops fought desperately to drive the Americans into the sea, where Japanese naval units also sought to win control. By the time the *South Dakota* and the *Enterprise* arrived, several bloody naval battles had already been fought. When a large Japanese fleet, including three carriers, moved in to sweep the American navy from the area, the result was the 26 October Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands.

The Santa Cruz engagement was a long-range battle, with distant United States and Japanese carrier forces exchanging air strikes. Playing a major role in the battle was Task Force 16, commanded by Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid and made up of the South Dakota, the Enterprise, two cruisers, and eight destroyers. At the time, the navy was still perfecting its tactics for defending against air attacks. Enemy planes that slipped past a ship's first line of defense, its combat air patrol, were to be engaged by the ships' antiaircraft guns. Carriers were prime targets for the Japanese, who quickly broke through the Enterprise's combat air patrol, which had been placed too close to the ships. Maneuvering to within one thousand yards of the Big-E, the South Dakota put out a withering volume of antiaircraft fire. Crew members claimed thirty-two enemy aircraft destroyed, and the battleship was officially credited with twenty-six. Three bombs hit the Enterprise, but it was able to continue operations. Bombs and torpedoes repeatedly hit and eventually sank the carrier Hornet, operating in a separate supporting task force whose escorting cruisers and destroyers had much less firepower. The protection of the Enterprise by the South Dakota indicated the value of fast battleships in the support of carriers.

The South Dakota itself did not escape the Santa Cruz engagement unscathed. A five-hundred-pound bomb hit the main gun turret, but the massive sixteen-inch gun mount was so heavily protected that most of the gun crew did not realize they had been hit. A number of crew members standing on the bridge were less fortunate.

^{12.} Ibid.; "History of USS South Dakota (BB 57)," p. 1.

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Bomb fragments hit the group, which included Captain Gatch, and a number of men were injured. Quick action by two quartermasters saved the life of the skipper, whose jugular vein had been severed. Of the fifty crew members wounded, one died. The confusion on the bridge nearly caused an even greater disaster. Running out of control, the South Dakota headed directly toward the Enterprise, which beat a hasty retreat. When control was transferred aft to the executive officer, the battleship steadied and moved back to protect the carrier. Caught up in the intensity of the battle, the South Dakota crew continued to fire at anything in the air, including, unfortunately, six SBD dive bombers returning to the Enterprise. Their planes running low on fuel, the pilots begged the carrier's air controller to call off its battleship.13 This incident may have sparked the South Dakota's reputation for shooting first and asking questions later. Navy veteran Donald E. Young of Spearfish recalls that navy fliers had a simple rule regarding the ship named after his home state: "Don't fly anywhere near that big so-and-so; she'll shoot you down."14

Although the United States Navy suffered heavier losses, the engagement at Santa Cruz forced Japanese carrier forces to retire northward. Attempts to reinforce Japanese troops on Guadalcanal continued, however. During the night of 26-27 October, the South Dakota collided with the destroyer Mahan while attempting to avoid a Japanese submarine. Officials decided to repair the battleship temporarily, for the likelihood of new attacks made it essential to keep every ship in operation. On the morning of 14 November, a large lapanese naval force shelled Henderson Field on Guadalcanal Island. Task Force 64, including the Enterprise, the Washington, and the South Dakota (whose command Captain Gatch had resumed after recovering from his injuries), steamed up from the south to engage the attackers. By that evening, Japanese naval units were known to be moving toward Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal. The Enterprise could not conduct nighttime air operations, so Task Force 64 commander Admiral Lee took the South Dakota, the Washington, and four destroyers on a search for the enemy. Near Savo Island shortly before midnight, the destroyers encountered Japanese destroyers and cruisers, which quickly sunk or heavily damaged all four American ships. Two Japanese heavy cruisers and the battleship

^{13.} Ibid., pp. 2-3; Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, pp. 210, 214-15, 218; Stillwell, USS South Dakota, p. 8; John Costello, The Pacific War (New York: Rawson, Wade, 1981), pp. 361-64.

^{14.} Interview with Donald E. Young, Spearfish, S.Dak., 17 Jan. 1993.

Kirishima then moved in for the kill, while the South Dakota and the Washington also closed in on the action. As the South Dakota moved toward its radar contacts, it lost all electrical power. Even though power was restored three minutes later, most of the ship's radar continued to malfunction. Losing contact with the Washington, it steamed through the darkness directly toward the Japanese vessels, which fired thirty-four torpedoes. By some miracle, the American battleship managed to dodge them all. When the South Dakota had approached within five thousand yards of the enemy, the Japanese ships shined searchlights on it and opened fire.¹⁵

During the next few minutes, a rare event in World War II naval history occurred—a direct surface action between battleships. Focusing their entire attention on the South Dakota, the Japanese repeatedly lobbed five- to fourteen-inch shells, scoring forty-two hits in all and producing casualties of thirty-eight men killed and sixty wounded. The firing allowed the Washington crew to get a clear view of the positions of both the South Dakota and the enemy. Absolutely unhampered, the Washington concentrated on destroying the Kirishima. Within seven minutes, the Japanese battleship took nine sixteen-inch and forty five-inch shells. Reduced to a flaming wreck. it sank a few hours later. The South Dakota, which had one inoperable main turret, major radar damage, and a number of superstructure fires, left the battle at full speed. Most of the surviving Japanese ships also retired. The rapid disappearance of the South Dakota after what became known as the Second Battle of Savo Island caused the Japanese to believe that the ship had been sunk. Because aviators had mistakenly reported it lost in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, this "sinking" was the ship's second. Naval intelligence chose to encourage the belief, and, for a time, the South Dakota was identified only as "Battleship X" in dispatches. The press later referred to it as "Old Nameless." To the sailors aboard, the South Dakota was always simply the "Sodak." Whatever the ship's name, the survival instincts of its men were excellent. The crew of the unscathed Washington was relieved to find the South Dakota waiting at a prearranged meeting point at 0900 the next morning.16

Damage to the South Dakota was serious enough to force it to return to the United States for repairs. While the ship refitted at

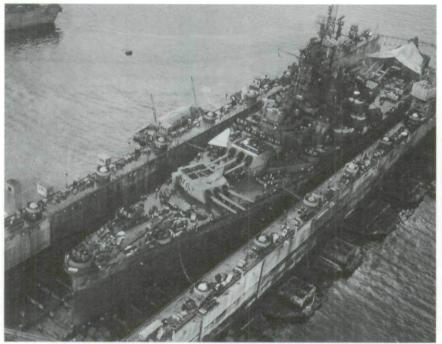
^{15.} Costello, *Pacific War*, pp. 369-71; Morison, *Struggle for Guadalcanal*, pp. 223, 277-79; "History of USS *South Dakota* (BB 57)," pp. 3-5. At the beginning of the war, the ability of the Japanese navy to fight night actions had clearly been superior. American use of radar, at which Admiral Lee was expert, largely negated this advantage.

^{16.} Morison, Struggle for Guadalcanal, p. 279; "History of USS South Dakota (BB 57)," p. 4; Stillwell, USS South Dakota, p. 1.

the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Captain Gatch and the crew got plenty of attention from an American public and media eager to find war heroes. Here, direct from the South Pacific, was a real American fighting ship and crew. Ironically, the *Washington*, still on duty in the South Pacific, received little attention for its exploits at the Second Battle of Savo Island. Following sixty-two days of repairs, the *South Dakota* was again ready for sea duty. Capt. Lynde D. McCormick took the place of Captain Gatch, who had been reassigned elsewhere.¹⁷

Upon leaving the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the *South Dakota* began a unique chapter in its wartime career. Unlike many other American battleships, which served in only one theater of operations, the *South Dakota* would claim both Pacific and Atlantic service. In June 1943, it joined an Anglo-American effort to bag the German navy's most elusive battleship, the *Tirpitz*. Sent north from German home waters to Trondheim, Norway, in January 1942, the presence of the *Tirpitz* posed a substantial danger to Allied convoys headed for North Russia on the Murmansk run. Convoy escorts were generally made up of cruisers and destroyers, whose thin hulls and lighter guns made them no match for the big German battleship. Air attacks launched from carriers might have neutralized the *Tirpitz*, but in 1942 and 1943, Allied carriers were precious resources that rarely saw duty as convoy escorts.

British attempts to destroy the Tirpitz had been repeatedly frustrated. In mid-March 1943, the British admiralty decided to suspend the North Russian convoys, and the search for a means to dispose of the Tirpitz intensified. Anglo-American naval planners finally decided to position British and American warships provocatively close to the Tirpitz's anchorage. Allied ships cruising along the Norwegian coast might lure the big German ship into a battle, where surface and air units held in reserve could destroy it. Aside from the Tirpitz itself, the primary danger to the ships acting as bait would be German planes based in Norway. Because the fast American battleships had demonstrated excellent ability to defend themselves from air attacks in the South Pacific, the South Dakota and her sister ship, the Alabama, were chosen as primary lures. In July and early August 1943, the two ships cruised the Norwegian coast, daring the Tirpitz to come out and fight. Direct orders from Hitler kept the ship in port, however, foiling the decoy-and-ambush plan. In August 1943, the South Dakota gave up and, with its destroyer screen, steamed westward toward the Pacific. In the unsuccessful effort to bag the



Aside from the ships hit at Pearl Harbor, the South Dakota was among the most heavily damaged battleships of World War II. It went into dry dock several times for repairs during its active five-year career.

Tirpitz, the South Dakota had twice crossed the Arctic Circle, operating to almost seventy degrees north latitude, perhaps as far north as any American battleship in the war.¹⁸

Upon returning to the Pacific, the South Dakota found itself engaged in a naval war in which the United States was rapidly gaining the upper hand. Between mid-November 1943 and June 1944, the ship participated in actions in the Caroline Islands, against the big Japanese base at Truk, and in support of Marine landings on the

18. The South Dakota crew was not alone in its failure to bag the Tirpitz. The German battleship survived damage inflicted during a British midget submarine attack in the fall of 1943 and an attack by British carrier aircraft in April 1944. British Lancaster bombers carrying twelve-thousand-pound bombs finally sunk it on 12 November 1944. Samuel Eliot Morison, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. 10: The Atlantic Battle Won, May 1943-May 1945 (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1975), pp. 231, 310.

Marianas Islands. Most of the ship's activities involved providing antiaircraft protection for carriers and the bombardment of landing beaches prior to invasions. When hundreds of Japanese planes attacked fleet operations near Guam on 19 June 1944, the *South Dakota* had the unpleasant distinction of being the only major ship damaged. A five-hundred-pound bomb hit the superstructure, destroying the captain's quarters and killing or wounding sixty-five men. By the end of the day, fleet surface and air units, including the *South Dakota*, had accounted for 402 enemy planes in an engagement that would be remembered as the "Marianas Turkey Shoot." At the end of the Marianas operation, the *South Dakota* again returned to the United States for repairs and overhaul lasting through July and August 1944.

When the battleship returned to the war, it carried some new crew members, including a journalist-turned-sailor from Metropolis, Illinois. His writings and copies of ship's crew letters that he sent home to southern Illinois provide some valuable glimpses of life aboard the USS South Dakota during the last year of the war. Little is known about Seaman Allan Vernon Robinson. He worked for the Metropolis Republican-Herald, a small weekly newspaper, for several years before and after serving in the navy. Sometime in 1948, he left his spouse, Mayme Teuton Robinson, moved on to find other work, and disappeared. Mayme Robinson spent the rest of her life in Metropolis, and the wartime writings of her husband eventually found their way into the estate of her friend, Mildred Parr of Metropolis. Following Parr's death in 1992, her son, Ron Parr, gave the materials to the author, a childhood friend. They are now part of the collections of the South Dakota State Historical Society.

Most of Seaman Robinson's writings reflect on the uncertainties of life aboard the *South Dakota*. One brief essay, written at the end of the war and entitled "Some Anxious Moments," explains that soldiers and sailors often experienced little fear in pitched battles, which had usually been expected and prepared for. "It was the sometimes small, sometimes large, spontaneous, unannounced actions that threw more fear into one," he wrote. "You did not always know what the enemy had in mind and what might start as small and insignificant may [sic] turn out into something you were most totally unprepared for. Added to these uncertainties was the peculiar psychology of the lap: He fought to die; we fought to live."

Robinson continued his chronicle of "anxious moments" with memories of the role the South Dakota crew played in the Caroline

^{19. &}quot;History of USS South Dakota (BB 57)," pp. 5-8.

Islands landings of late September 1944. Ulithi Island, the easternmost atoll in the Caroline chain, had a deepwater harbor that could shelter a large fleet. As American naval forces approached the island, Japanese units evacuated, and it was captured without opposition on 22 September 1944. Upon receiving this word, Robinson recalled:

the South Dakota with an escort of two destroyers headed north to be the first heavy ship into Ulithi lagoon. The Japs had heavily mined the entrance and a few mine sweepers were hastily sweeping the channel. A few mines were certain to be missed the first time, and one of these blew to match sticks a sweeper just ahead of us. It was a frightening sight to see an entire ship lift up and disintegrate before your eyes. There were Americans on that sweeper; men just like me, who hoped to go home some day; just as I did.

Death came to many other Americans in the struggle for nearby Peleliu Island, which was heavily defended and required over two months of bloody fighting to capture. During this time, fleet units, including the USS South Dakota, stood by to protect the island assault forces. Robinson wrote of two of the unexpected but inevitable attacks that terrorized the men on the battleship:

Ulithi was an advance anchorage and was supposed to be a haven for rest and recreation, among other things, but the Japs would not leave us alone. They were based yet on Yap and a few isolated islands in the rest of the Carolines. They never came in force, but just enough to heckle and would sometimes get in a good blow. While anchored here at one time, another and I were sleeping topside on the first superdeck forward, star-board. About 6 a.m. I heard a dull thud but just rolled over paying no at-tention. My buddy then gave me a punch and told me something was happening up forward. I jumped up and dead ahead a tanker was just beginning to burn. As we watched Captain (now Admiral) [R. A.] Riggs came out to view the situation. The tanker was beginning to blow up and burn furiously. We immediately went to general quarters and the destroyers and destroyer escorts began dropping their depth charges. One or two midget subs had gotten in and torpedoed the tanker. A torpedo is a fierce weapon and the nasty holes it can tear in a ship can soon send it to the bottom. We could hear and feel the depth charges exploding against our bottom and sides. The Dds and Des [destroyers and destroyer escorts] were laying a pattern of charges. We were in the suspense of never knowing when we might take a torpedo and we had hundreds of men below decks. Fortunately the tanker was the only ship hit. Two midget subs were brought to the surface and a large sub was struck dead in the water just outside the entrance nets and towed into captivity. Breakfast was late that morning, but we had lived through another scrape.

Still later and again at Ulithi, movies were being shown on the main deck aft. The lagoon was filled with supply ships and war ships of all kinds. The Wrangell, an ammunition ship, loaded to the gunwales with bombs, powder and ammunition was tied sharply alongside the South Dakota. We were always uneasy when a powder ship was at our side. I was sitting at a corner of No. 3 turret watching the show; a good thousand others were there too. The carrier Randolph was anchored just off our starboard quarter. Suddenly a huge flame rose from the stern of the Randolph. It was so sudden no one realized what was happening. We didn't even rise. A second later a great ball of orange shot up from the carrier—magazines were exploding. We knew it then—it was an air attack; sirens started screaming and the

stampede began. I drew my chair in front of me to get a little protection from the mob. I thought I had plenty of time and would let the stampede pass before I joined in the rush to battle stations. The ammunition ship was tied to our port beam and I was on the port side. Before the mob cleared another great explosion went up to port and forward, and its center again was a ball of orange fire. Lines to the ammunition ship were cut with an axe and it was shoved off. If that ship had blown up there would not be a man alive in the harbor. The two hits were suiciders. The Randolph was not seriously hurt and the other hit was on Asor Island. You can say for me that I was scared.

Another rendezvous with the *Wrangell* in May 1945 nearly proved deadly as the *South Dakota* took on supplies and ammunition at the end of a bombardment campaign against Okinawa. Robinson recalled that the ammunition ship was positioned

80 feet to the starboard and steaming at 10 knots. Lines were over and powder was coming aboard the *South Dakota*. The great tanks of high capacity powder were being lowered below decks to the fourth level and from there into the magazines. Tanks were standing in the trunk, or passageway, and the magazine doors were open. Suddenly a tank blew up. We heard a muffled explosion throughout the ship; then another and still a third in quick succession. A fourth tank exploded while the sirens and alarms sounded. Each one of these tanks contained 300 pounds of powder and each explosion spread burning powder through the decks around the trunk. The ship billowed smoke. The decks around the trunk were solid masses of flame. All personnel not connected with fire-fighting assembled on the main deck to abandon ship if necessary. When it was all over 11 men were dead and 32 injured. That experience caps them all for fright.

Even when the men had prepared themselves for the worst, the unexpected often intervened to create a situation that was suspenseful, to say the least. Robinson recalled that the ship's duty in the South China Sea from 12 to 21 January 1945 had been "introduced with as terrific a typhoon as we had ever experienced" and "was no sideshow" when compared with his other wartime experiences. The ship continued to encounter the unexpected, Robinson wrote:

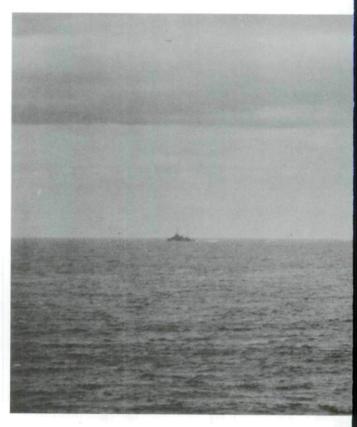
Returning from Hong Kong, Swatow and Amoy on the China Coast brought us a bad hour. We emerged from the South China Sea at the northern tip of Luzon and began the 100-mile passage through the Luzon straits. The straits were narrow and the Japs were still strong, and were waiting for us. The midnight attack was expected and we were prepared for it. But at daybreak after a sleepless night, as we neared the eastern end of the straits with the open sea in sight, the *South Dakota* fouled a screw and had to come dead in the water. As destroyers screened us, and divers went over the side, we stood by for a torpedo, but Lady Luck was still with us.²⁰

Luck stayed with Robinson throughout his tenure on the South Dakota. From late 1944 until the Japanese surrendered in August

20. Allan Vernon Robinson, "Some Anxious Moments," 10 Aug. 1945, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, S.Dak. (this repository is hereafter cited as SDSHS).

1945, the battleship served mainly in carrier escort and shore bombardment, supporting operations against the enemy on Okinawa and in the Philippines. Most memorable of all the bombardments were the ship's actions against the Japanese home islands, which took place near the end of the war. On 14 July 1945, the *South Dakota* became the first enemy warship in almost a century to fire directly on Japanese shores. Robinson left no record of this first attack on the Japanese Imperial Iron Works at Kamaishi, 275 miles north of Tokyo, but he vividly described the bombardment of the same target on 9 August 1945:

Shortly before noon we opened fire with our 16 inch guns and kept at it until about 3 p.m. That is hard work, and it grew harder as the powder charges were gradually increased to get more range and to drive larger projectiles through the air. Kamaishi was burning smartly. The bombard-



Crewman Allan Robinson recalled that the concussion from the broadsides firing of the South Dakota's sixteen-inch guns "stood your hair on end."

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ment charges were running low so larger high capacity charges were substituted. The flashes burned your eyes, the concussion jarred you off your feet, the blast blew off you[r] hat, tore at your clothes and stood your hair on end in wild disorder; to keep your phones on you had to hold them with your hands. All the while Kamaishi was being systematically and methodically erased.

As the rapídity of fire increased, targets decreased. When the 5 inch guns quit there were not enough targets fit for a .22 rifle. It had been a good day's shooting. As it might take a half-dozen 16 inch shots to sink any possible Jap ship that might dispute our retirement, we saved seven rounds against that possibility. We had exhausted ou[r] heavy shells. Other ships laying off that did not participate in the bombardment stood by to give us protection if needed.

Tired and hungry, we retired in the middle afternoon. Kamaishi was gutted.

Again, the unexpected intervened in "a fight that was as fierce as it was freakish." Following the bombardment, Robinson remem-



bered, "we. . . served ourselves hot soup and coffee, and sprawled anywhere that there was room for a little rest. But there was no rest yet. Three Jap planes roared into the formation." He described the subsequent raid:

A three-plane raid is a puny one, a penny-ante raid, but they might get a ship if they chose to suicide it. The picket destroyers opened up and missed. Then the cruisers and carriers opened up, and missed. Attracted by gunfire many on the South Dakota went on deck to see the show. When our own guns opened up, there was no question as to what to do. We tore through the ship to battle stations like greased lightning, tired as we were. In a way it was a show. Three stinking planes that couldn't be hit. They dived and recovered; they ducked and dodged; squirmed in and out of anti-aircraft fire like snakes, but they couldn't get a target. At length every ship in the formation was pumping anti-aircraft with the fury that marked the first days in the Philippines, when 100-200 plane raids were common affairs. No one can say who got these three bogies but they hit the drink in quick succession when the hail really got thick. And that was the end of the day.²¹

Some of those sailors scrambling to battle stations on the *South Dakota* during the second bombardment of Kamaishi were wearing unconventional garb. With the exception of a brief pause for repairs at Guam in June 1945, the *South Dakota* had been operating at sea almost continuously for nearly a year. Aside from ammunition, fuel, and provisions, opportunities to resupply had been limited. Robinson recalled that the sailors had been especially glad to receive one new issue—trousers—but that some of them had seemed a bit odd. After conducting some detective work, Robinson wrote a brief essay, dated 10 August 1945 and entitled "Milady's Pants." It offers some insight into the origin of the strange garments and displays attitudes typical of the time before the American armed forces had seriously begun to confront such issues as women serving in combat:

At first they seemed alright, but this feeling soon gave way to an uncomfortableness. I promptly took them off and gave them away without having satisfactorily explained to myself the reason why the discomfiture. But that feeling of having invaded something inviolate persisted for some days afterward and mysteriously disturbed my peace of mind. Others who had done the same thing expressed a like feeling but offered no acceptable explanation. All who tried them felt as if they were where they ought not to be. These pants were definitely not suitable for males; perhaps to play in, but not to work in.

After being in this situation for months the navy comes up with a public announcement which clears up the mystery and permits a discussion of the subject. It seems an enormous excess of dungarees, tailored and styled for Waves and Spars, were sent to ships at sea for use by that unimportant part of the Navy that is manned by men. That announcement explains a

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lot of things and removes all trepidation on our part. We didn't know the pants were for the women.

... The women, God bless 'em! Who can deny their influence is allencompassing. But if you want to know what is wrong with the Navy—it's gone panty-waist.

Please send us some rouge and nail polish.22

More glimpses of American society in the 1940s and of life aboard the battleship are scattered throughout the mimeographed "crew letters" that Robinson also sent home. These items were produced so that the ship's crew could send information on their activities back to the home front without violating wartime censorship rules. The crew letters were not written according to any schedule but seem to have appeared whenever circumstances allowed. The mailing of a Mother's Day letter was delayed "because of a lamentable shortage of air mail stamps." The writer concluded, "We were thinking of you, however, and as this letter tells you the ship and its complement are still in one piece." Although there is no direct evidence that Robinson wrote these letters, he may have been the author. The writing style resembles that of his essays, and handwritten comments at the bottom of several of them—"I hope you enjoy this"—raise the possibility of Robinson's authorship.²³

While the American armed forces were segregated according to gender during World War II, the crew letters from the *South Dakota* indicate that, while prejudice continued to operate, some racial integration existed aboard the ship:

In one of our actions some time ago the colored boys on the machine guns saw something dropping from the Jap bombing plane—and it wasn't grapes, grandma! They kept firing on the Nip despite their imminent danger from the bomb. A marine near by who also saw what was coming and knowing that the plane had no more bombs but had very accurate machine guns shouted to them, "Drop down, drop down on the deck!" They stood erect and continued to fire. Suddenly all was silence as the plane, a flaming comet, trailed off into the sea. The machine gun had only crumbled figures around it. Some of the boys were taken to sick bay. One of them, heavily bandaged and sorely wounded, was asked: "Did you hear the marine call to you to lay on the deck?" "Yes, we heard," came the answer, "but that ain't no way for a fighting man to die—laying on the deck."

Stories of such wartime heroism, patriotism, and the need for everyone to sacrifice and do his or her part found their way into each crew letter:

We are sorry to be away at Christmas time. Perhaps in another year we can all be at home. At the present time it is difficult for everyone, but when

^{22.} Robinson, "Milady's Pants," 10 Aug. 1945, SDSHS.

^{23.} USS South Dakota, "Crew Letter Number Eight," 20 Mar. 1945, and "Crew Letter No. 9," 19 May 1945, SDSHS.

we look back in the years to come, our reaction to the whole episode will be like that of the boy dying in our sick bay. He had been shot up, was gravely wounded and life was fast fleeting. One of the Chaplains knelt beside him to listen as he whispered with a last heroic effort, "I am happy to have done my part." We all feel that way, no matter how small the part.²⁴

Thoughts of the world back home and the comforts and pleasures it might offer again someday often crept into the letters. Describing the transfer of several wounded men to a hospital ship, the author of the crew letter for 19 May 1945 wrote:

We had dropped back a little from the front line during the night and there, in the early morning light at the rendezvous was the hospital ship. What was so special about it? One of the boys told us he counted "Thirteen white women." That is something special. He had thought the breed extinct. ²⁵

When he could, the author of the crew letters also tried to leave the impression that the men did have an occasional laugh to relieve the monotony, loneliness, and danger that filled their lives aboard ship:

During the last few operations things have quieted down and most of the "glamour" comes from fueling destroyers as they come alongside. We have done this so much that now the boys break out a big canvas sign with "Welcome to AO-BB57. Oil and Gas, Hot Dogs and Ice Cream." An "AO" is a tanker. On the canvas, beside the gas pump, is pictured a beautiful (?) girl attired in "brevities." The visiting destroyer personnel have quite a laugh on us. Recently we had some fun at the expense of a "pore little" destroyer pup. As the "can" came along side the dog walked the deck in solitary grandeur—the canine king of the Pacific Ocean Areas. One of our carpenters had an idea and a little spare time. He constructed a wooden dog on wheels; the next time we fueled this destroyer the pup discovered that his regency was apparently being challenged! He spent most of the operation barking insulting remarks at the wooden dog pulled around by one of the sailors. Some of the men laughed so heartily at the pup's antics and anger that we could not tell whether they were laughing or crying. With laughs few and far apart this one made up for many.²⁶

By 10 August 1945, when the second bombardment of Kamaishi had been completed and the crew of the *South Dakota* had survived the Japanese suicide attack, the men had time to relax and to begin considering the possibility of peace. Not far away, B-29 bombers had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima on 6 August and on Nagasaki on 9 August. None of the men realized how close at hand peace was, however. In an essay written a few weeks later and entitled "The War's End," Robinson recalled:

We expected the war to end suddenly, untrumpeted and without ceremony. For us it did that [but] we did not expect it to end when it did.

^{24.} USS South Dakota, "Crew Letter Number 7," n. d.

^{25. &}quot;Crew Letter No. 9."

^{26. &}quot;Crew Letter Number Eight."

It was 8:55 p.m. on the night of August 10, 1945, that this bad dream came to an end for us. At that moment word was received and relayed throughout the fleet that the Japs were feverishly radioing that: "We have accepted your terms." It came through the air repeatedly and repetitive. It was unofficial as far as the statesmen were concerned, but the sources from which it came left no doubt in our minds that the Japs meant it. Shouts, screams and impromptu celebrations reverberated throughout the ship. It was too good to be true, but it was.

In the days that followed the surrender of Japan, there was more time to reflect on the significance of the war's end. Having seen



Heavy seas made vivid memories for the South Dakota crewmen who sailed on the battleship through typhoons.

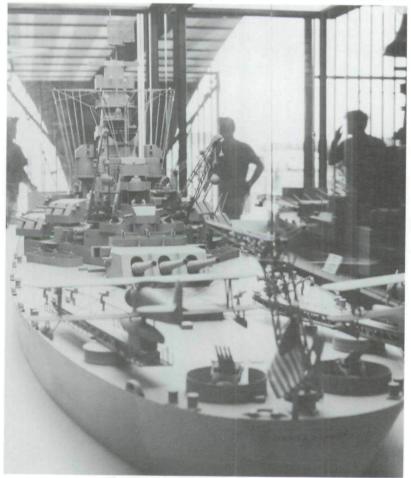
the destructive force of the *South Dakota* in action, Robinson was guardedly optimistic about the future:

Like the bride, it happened so suddenly, we have yet hardly had time to soberly review and reflect the implications of the war's end. It has many and a lot of them are unpleasant. Trained to destroy or be destroyed many may find the transition to peaceful pursuits difficult. Not the least disturbing factor is the first hand knowledge of what desolation and death . . . can be wreaked on civilians, and that the next war, if any, will see still more civilians involved. Maybe us; atomic energy is free.

In a sense it may be a blessing that so many millions of men have been veterans of this war, the world over. For it will be from among these veterans that will come the politicians and statesmen for generations to come. Having lived through this hellish nightmare he [sic] will think long and hard before releasing another and more terrible one loose upon the world. 27

27. Robinson, "War's End."

Along with a number of artifacts salvaged from "Battleship X," the USS South Dakota Battleship Memorial museum in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, houses this scale model of the vessel.



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After the hectic pace of the previous three years, the sudden end of the war was anticlimactic for the crew of the South Dakota. The vessel was one of the first large American ships to enter Tokyo Bay. There, as the flagship of Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, it awaited the official surrender ceremonies that took place aboard the USS Missouri on 2 September 1945. Ceremonies ended, the South Dakota began the long voyage home on 20 September 1945. By the time it left Tokyo Bay, it had traveled 246,970 miles—roughly the distance from the earth to the moon. It had crossed the equator and the international dateline thirty times each and the Arctic Circle twice. Its guns had claimed three ships and sixty-four airplanes. The navy awarded the South Dakota thirteen battle stars.28

The South Dakota returned to the United States via Okinawa. where it stopped to pick up as many homeward-bound veterans as it could carry. After Navy Day ceremonies in San Francisco Bay, the ship was based at San Pedro from 29 October 1945 to 3 January 1946. Its voyage from there to the Philadelphia Navy Yard via the Panama Canal marked, for all practical purposes, the end of the ship's operating life. On 31 January 1947, the South Dakota was decommissioned and added to the reserve, or "mothball," fleet. It remained there until a 1962 decision to scrap all battleships of its class.29

Desiring to preserve at least part of the ship named for their state, a group of South Dakotans worked with the Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce and the Navy League to form a nonprofit foundation to raise funds for a memorial. By 1964, the group had obtained a number of artifacts from the ship, including its mast and anchor, which were placed at a site in northwest Sioux Falls. The completed USS South Dakota Battleship Memorial, whose museum houses smaller items from shipboard, was dedicated on 7 September 1969.30 These relics of South Dakota's namesake battleship still rest near the banks of the Big Sioux River—a stream where its mammoth steel hull could never have found room to float.

^{28. &}quot;History of USS South Dakota (BB 57)," pp. 12-13; Anderson, "Battleship South Dakota," pp. 424-36.

^{29. &}quot;History of USS South Dakota (BB 57)," pp. 12-13; Stillwell, USS South Dakota, p. 1; Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 8 Sept. 1969.

^{30.} Stillwell, USS South Dakota, p. 31.

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