

The U.S.S. Cacapon

Rivers are ecosystems, ecological units that support a rich array of plants and animals. But rivers also occupy a special place in human society. They are woven deep into our symbols, history, art, literature, and culture. And even, as the article below reminds us, into our military and maritime traditions.

By David Malakoff

"Find them, fuel them, forget them..." that was the feisty motto of the U.S.S. *Cacapon*, a Navy Fleet Oiler that carried the name of one of our favorite rivers across the world's high seas for 30 years.

The *Cacapon* was born of war, her keel laid at the Bethlehem-Sparrows Point Shipyard near Baltimore on November 16, 1942, less than a year after the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Part of the nation's crash wartime ship-building program, she was constructed in six months and, after a few months of outfitting, entered service on September 21, 1943.

Following the Navy's practice for all Fleet Oilers — floating gas stations that provide oil and gasoline to other vessels — the *Cacapon* was christened after a U.S. river with a Native American name. (Who suggested *Cacapon*? The historical records are silent on this question.)

In late 1943, the *Cacapon* journeyed through the Panama Canal, entered the Pacific Ocean — and promptly sailed into some of the fiercest battles of the war against Japan. From the Philippines to the Solomons, from Iwo Jima to Okinawa, the *Cacapon* was engaged in many of the Pacific War's legendary struggles, shuttling vital fuel to troop transports, aircraft carriers, and other vessels of the Seventh Fleet.

Terse entries in the *Cacapon's* World War II diary — which I recently reviewed at a U.S. Navy historical library in Washington, D.C. — seemed to confirm that old cliché about war: days of total boredom broken by moments of sheer terror. Most of the entries found below the diary's inch-high CONFIDENTIAL warnings are full of numbing prose about sailing orders, course adjustments, and weather conditions.

But you can still feel the tension rise when the diary dryly notes an "emergency turn to avoid torpedo." Indeed, the fear of torpedoes and mines must have been immense for the ship's 300 crew members, who spent their days at sea living atop giant tanks that held up to 6.3 mil-

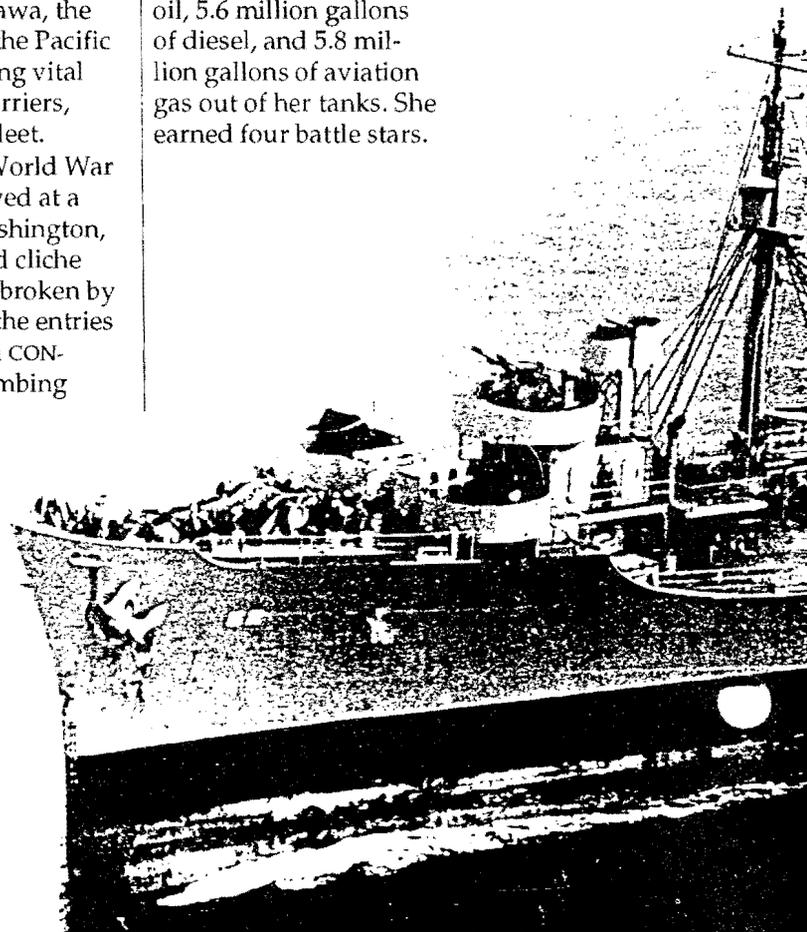
lion gallons of explosive fuel. Time and time again, the diary records enemy submarine, torpedo, and mine sightings and the ship's corkscrew maneuvers to avoid them.

And you can sense the somber mood as the diary summarizes a day of watching companion vessels pounded by Japanese dive bombers and suicide "kamikaze" attacks. Or, on another day, of having to stand by helplessly as an American aircrew circled and then ditched their damaged aircraft in the sea only a few hundred yards away: "no survivors."

Finally, you can sense the relief when, on August 15, 1945, a single sentence reports that "all hands were jubilant and thankful beyond description upon relay of President Truman's announcement of the Japanese Government's acceptance of the Potsdam surrender terms." After the surrender, she joined General Douglas MacArthur's occupation forces, steaming into Tokyo Bay on September 20, 1945.

By war's end, the *Cacapon* had fueled almost 600 ships, pumping more than 88.2 million gallons of fuel oil, 5.6 million gallons of diesel, and 5.8 million gallons of aviation gas out of her tanks. She earned four battle stars.

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In the late 1940s, the *Cacapon* would set out from her moorings in California for cruises to the Far East and, on one occasion, to Antarctica.

In 1950, she began the first of four lengthy Korean War tours, supporting, among other actions, the amphibious landing at Inchon. She was honored with a Navy Unit Commendation and nine battle stars for her service off Korea.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, her cruises included support of U.S. atom bomb tests in the Pacific and engagement in early phases of the Vietnam War.

By the early 1970s, however, the *Cacapon* was showing the wear and tear of almost three decades of service. On December 10, 1973, she was sold to Zidell's Exploration Company for "non-commercial" use. An archive photo shows her sitting forlornly at anchor in a Seattle harbor, wedged among a flotilla of other surplus vessels. The records do not indicate if she was broken up for scrap or lived on — perhaps to this day — as a workhorse on some unknown shipping route.

Below: The U.S.S. Cacapon (AO-52) somewhere in the Pacific in the late 1940s. U.S. Navy photo.

**"Feeling our way through a heavy rain and fog."
Excerpts from the *Cacapon's* World War II diary**

C-O-N-F-I-D-E-N-T-I-A-L

expeditiously destroyed by the escort vessels.

26 MAY 1945 - As the formation passed around the southern sector of OKINAWA ISLAND, during the early hours of the morning we could hear the naval bombardment... feeling our way through a heavy rain and fog... fueled numerous U.S. Navy vessels the balance of the day, hampered by intermittent squalls and occasional enemy air raids... two to four escorts (destroyers) were rushed to our support...

9 - 11 JULY 1945 - ...an occasional mine was sighted to harass the formation somewhat, which hazards were immediately obviated in each instance...

12 JULY 1945 - the formation consistently encountered floating mines, the escort vessels detonating same with their customary alacrity...

13-15 JULY 1945 - ...The usual "mine" threat together with intermittent sound contacts (submarines - Ed.) necessitated a constant alert...

27 MAY 1945 - Commenced fueling exercises at 0500... Substantial damage and casualties reported inflicted on smaller craft as a result of enemy suicidal antics...

14-17 AUGUST 1945 - ...no tactical or meteorological subject matter worthy of mention. However, early in morning of the 15th, all hands were jubilant and thankful beyond description upon relay of President Truman's announcement of the Japanese Government's acceptance of the Potsdam surrender terms. However... adhered to strict defensive and evasive tactics...

28 MAY 1945 - Enemy air raids in OKINAWA Area continued on a momentous scale during the night... Commenced fueling exercises at 0530...

8 JULY 1945 - Throughout the day mines were sighted along our track, which mines were

