



IMAGES
of America

THE NAVY IN SAN DIEGO

Bruce Linder



The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan returns to port via the San Diego channel in 2006 with her crew manning the rail. (U.S. Navy.)

ON THE COVER: A navy recruit stands at the temporary naval training station during the summer of 1918. In the four years of its existence, nearly 4,000 sailors passed through this temporary boot camp housed in the vacant buildings of the Panama-California Exposition in Balboa Park before the opening of the naval training station in Loma Portal in 1923. (Maritime Museum of San Diego.)

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*To Terri and Kelly: May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun
shine warm upon your face, the rains fall soft upon the fields.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to many across the San Diego navy community who have added their own insights, astute perspectives, and discerning reviews to this project. The navy in San Diego is such an immense operation with such a stimulating history that no single historian has a corner on all the potential information available. To get it “right” and to seek the right amount of information and balance, one must travel many paths and seek the clairvoyance of many different experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Today San Diego is synonymous with American naval might: nuclear-powered carriers sit at its piers, jets flash across its skies, SEALs train on its beaches, and warships appear in nearly every picture taken of San Diego Bay. The navy is more alive in San Diego than in any other city in the nation.

Over the years, the navy's impact on San Diego has been immense and, likewise, San Diego's positive impact on the navy has been a thing of legend. The navy's presence and influence on San Diego can be felt everywhere but, importantly, always with a sense of effortless coexistence and mutual gain. The navy serves as a foundation stone for San Diego's economy and also contributes daily to the city's sense of self: its "DNA," its culture, its polish, its sophistication.

Interestingly the navy's original plans for West Coast bases did not include San Diego. In the year before World War I, as the needs for shore support for its newly modernized forces first became apparent, the navy's design for the West Coast favored its longtime presence in San Francisco Bay or a new base in Puget Sound, Washington, with little consideration for the small town of San Diego with its perilously shallow bay. The navy politely listened to San Diego lobbying but focused its attention on other alternatives, such as Honolulu and San Pedro.

Even after World War I, when a wartime glut of ships had to be distributed to a growing U.S. Pacific Fleet, the navy's grand plans for West Coast base building still placed San Diego well down on its preferred list. Only when postwar budget cuts limited new facilities was San Diego mentioned and then only as a "temporary" base for smaller ships that could navigate its shoaling bay.

But the ensuing story of happenstance, cleverness, blind luck, and changing national priorities all played to San Diego's advantage. Inexorably, year by year—through the 1920s, 1930s, World War II, and the cold war—San Diego's stock steadily rose in navy estimation. Once San Diego commanded a critical mass of naval bases, follow-on investment and further growth became preordained in cycles that today have established San Diego as the dominant American naval concentration in all of the Pacific.



Shown is a view from the deck of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Carl Vinson as she maneuvers in the turning basin off North Island in 2005 with downtown San Diego, the USS Midway aircraft carrier museum, and the Navy Broadway Complex in the background. (U.S. Navy.)

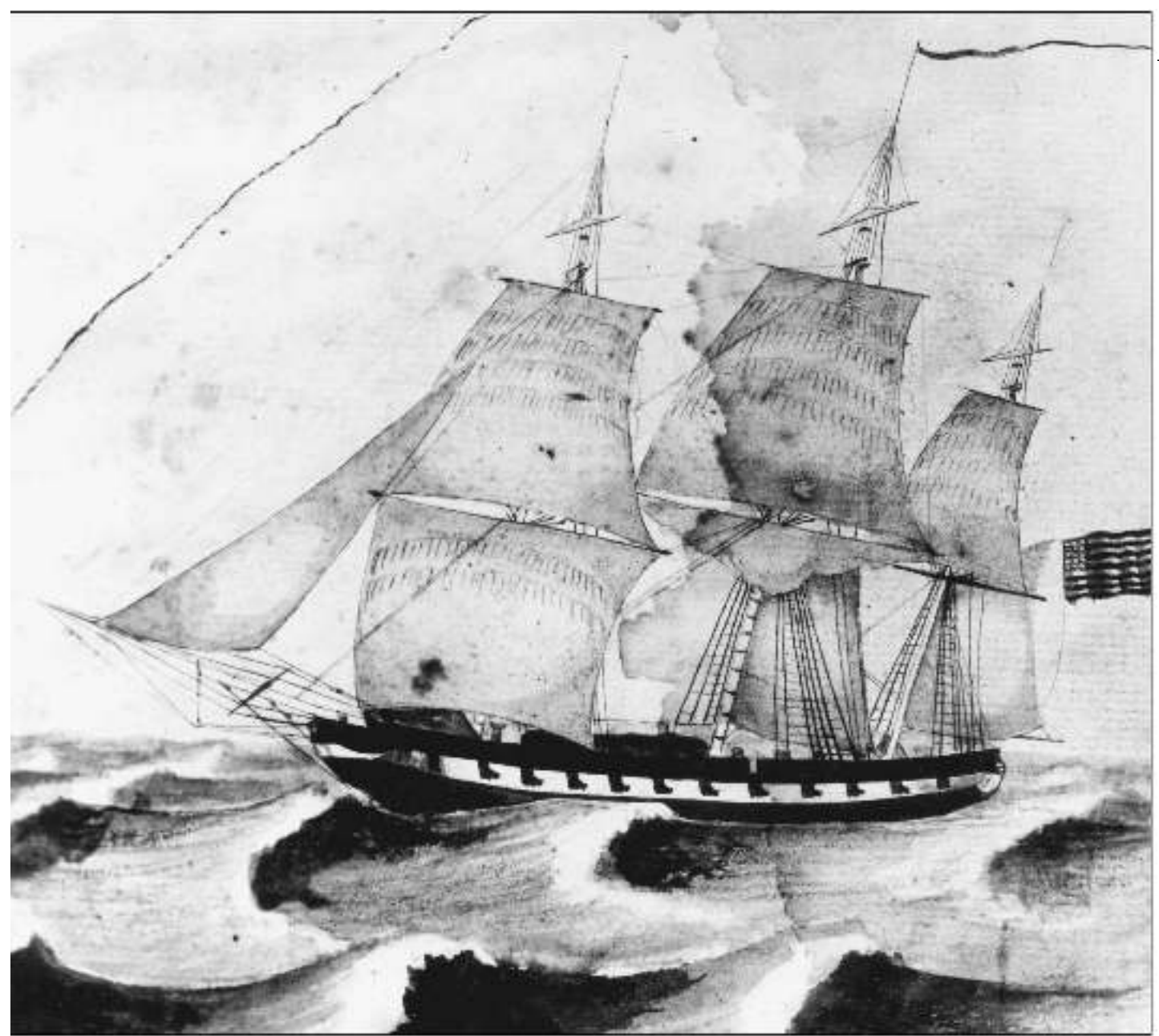
One

THE NAVY FINDS SAN DIEGO

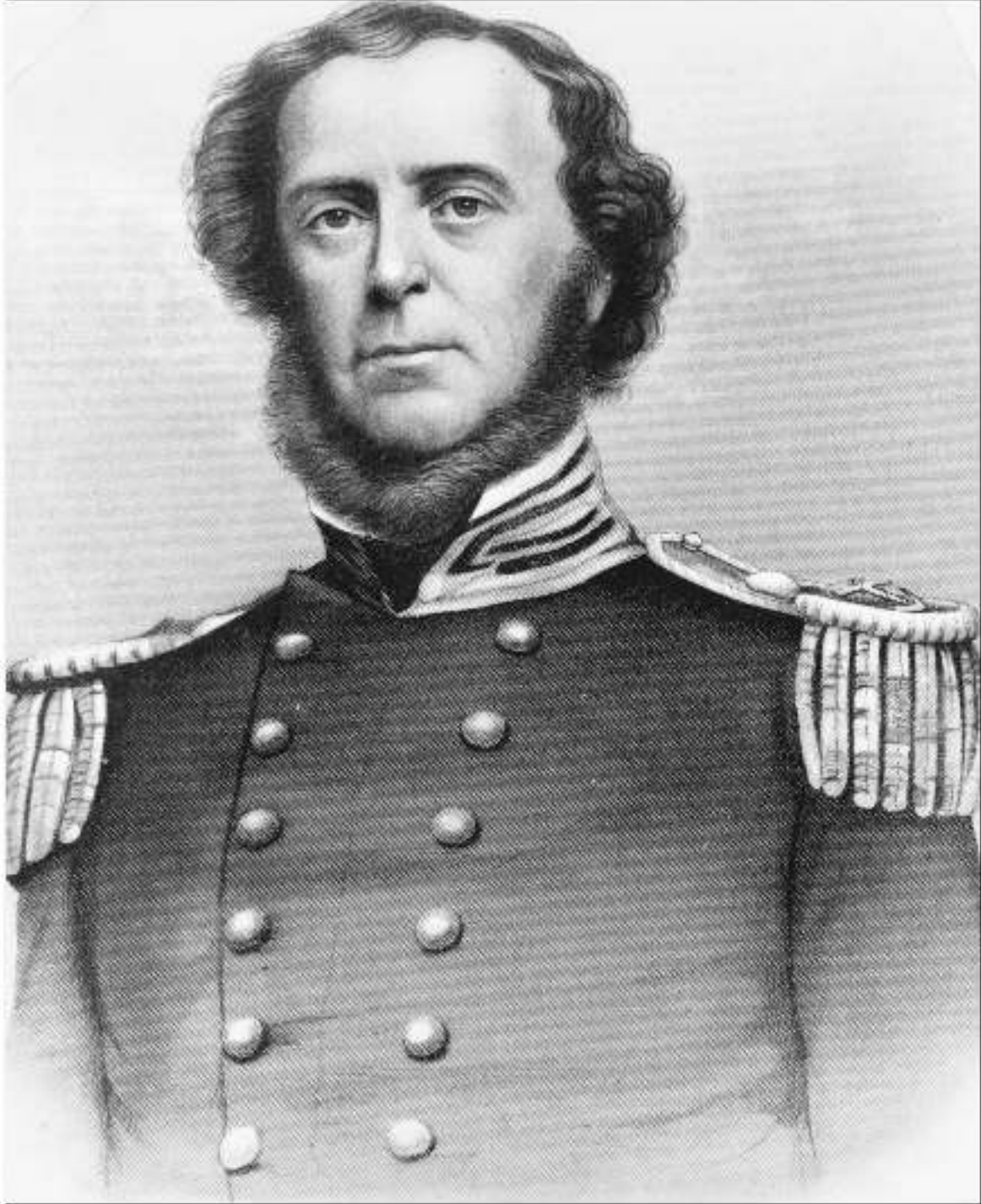
The U.S. Navy first came to San Diego's shore during the opening weeks of the Mexican War. Its mission was strategic—to seize the city and establish American rule. The draw was San Diego's incomparable bay and central location along the lengthy California coast. The aim was to provide a strategic center for supply and logistics that would support naval operations along the entire west coast of Mexico and California.

The sloop-of-war *Cyane* with its 18 guns, under the command of Comdr. Samuel Francis Du Pont, first arrived off Point Loma at dawn on July 29, 1846. Although it carried an army detachment of irregulars led by western trailblazer Maj. John C. Frémont and scout Kit Carson, the first ashore that summer day were two boatloads of sailors and marines who proceeded directly to the central plaza of the village (today's Old Town) to raise the American colors. Their welcome was warm, with many of San Diego's leading families in favor of the inevitability of U.S. rule and the attractive promise of economic gain and community stability.

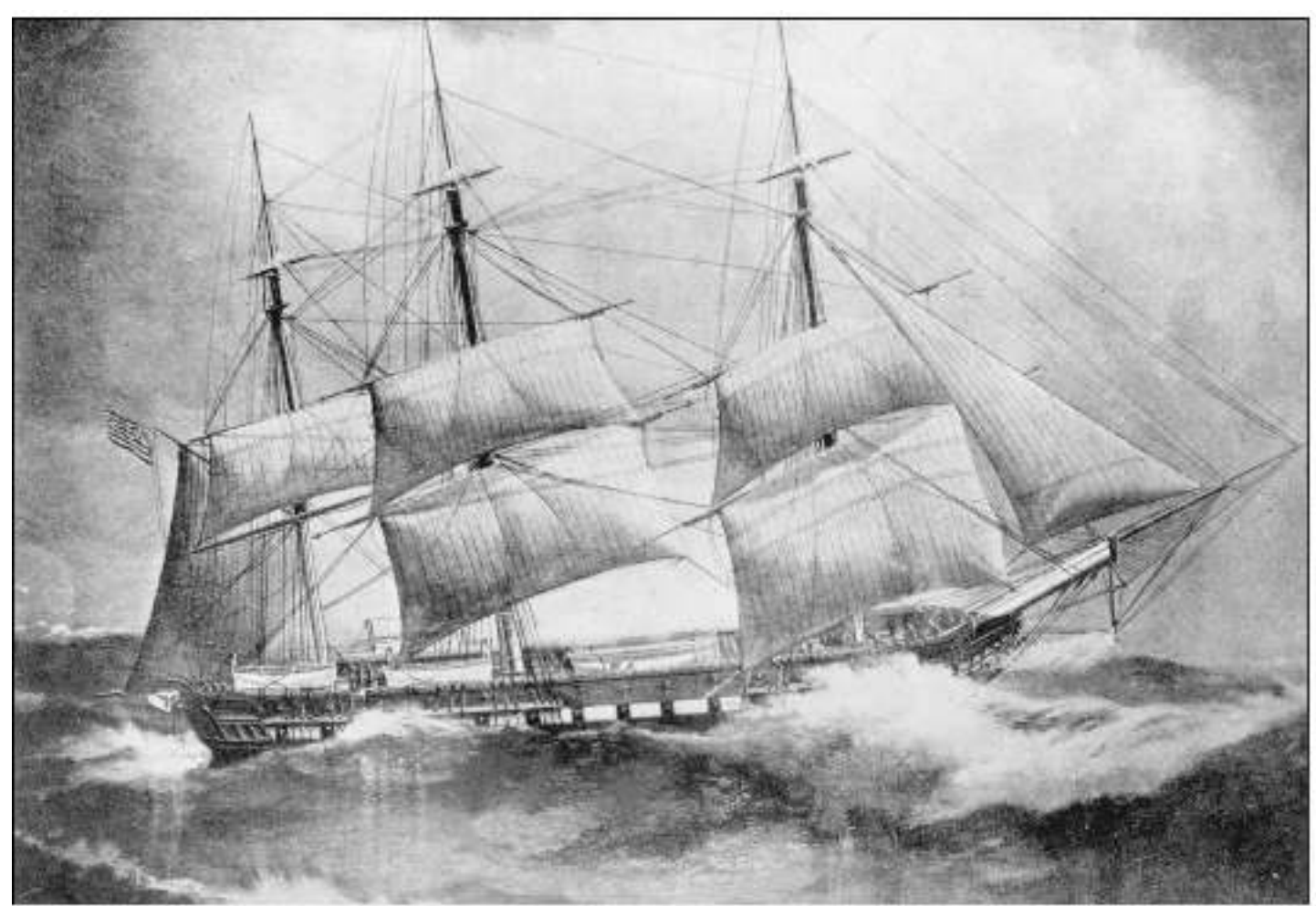
As crucial as the navy was to the first American chapter of San Diego's rich history, it was not until 50 years later, at the beginning of the 20th century, that the navy was to return with any permanence. Again the attraction was both strategic and geographic in nature as the navy built both a coaling station and an experimental wireless facility at the southwestern corner of the country to support extended fleet operations. Again the city's reception was warm, and again, the promise was for economic gain and stable growth. This time, the navy engaged in the acquisition of property and negotiations for support that would set the foundation for everything that was to come.



San Diego naval history began when two boatloads of sailors and marines from sloop-of-war Cyane captured San Diego and raised the American flag over the town square (today's Old Town) on July 2, 1846. They were followed later in the day by irregular troops of the California Battalion led by the noted frontier explorer Maj. John C. Frémont. Warmly welcomed by most San Diegans, American forces quickly built Fort Stockton on the heights above Old Town and garrisoned the village. Cyane sailors would later participate in land battles near Los Angeles that secured Alta California for the United States, and the sloop helped capture and blockade ports in Baja California and along the Mexican coast. (Naval Historical Center, from watercolor by Cyane gunner William Myers.)



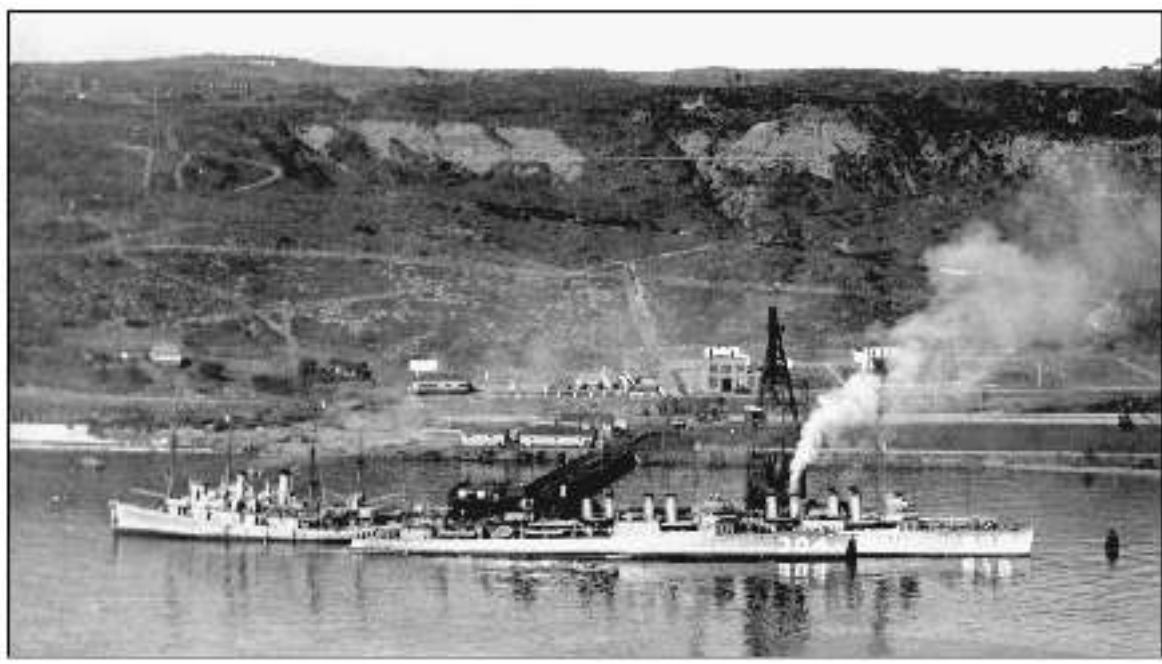
Comdr. Samuel Francis Du Pont, of the celebrated Du Pont family of American industrialists, commanded Cyane and ordered the first American flag to be raised over San Diego. By the time he arrived in San Diego, Du Pont had already served in the navy for 31 years and had commanded schooner Grampus, sloop-of-war Warren, and frigate Congress. Well-thought-of in the navy, Du Pont would later help establish the U.S. Naval Academy and would rise to the rank of rear admiral while commanding Union fleet actions against Port Royal and Charleston, South Carolina, during the Civil War. This lithograph was printed c. 1848 with Du Pont in the uniform of a navy commander. (Naval Historical Center.)



Frigate Congress, commissioned May 1842, was the last fully sail-powered frigate built by the U.S. Navy. As the Pacific Squadron flagship, she carried the flag of Commodore Robert Stockton during the Mexican War and frequently visited San Diego while the village served as the logistics base for American naval operations along the Mexican west coast. Her deep draught was ill-suited for San Diego Bay, where twice she ran aground. The first navyman to die and be buried in San Diego was Ordinary Seaman John Simpson, who fell from the fore royal yardarm of Congress while at anchor in the bay and was later buried at Fort Rosecrans Cemetery. Congress met her demise famously in 1862 in Hampton Roads, Virginia, in battle with Confederate ironclad Virginia the day before the remarkable engagement between Virginia and Monitor. (Naval Historical Center.)



Following the Mexican War, the navy rarely visited San Diego until ships such as the steam sloop Hartford, Adm. David Glasgow Farragut's famous Civil War flagship, began to visit in the years before the beginning of the 20th century. Hartford served as an apprentice sea-training ship along the West Coast from 1884 to 1899 and, during one visit, assigned her cutter permanently to the San Diego Naval Militia. Tradition says the Hartford cutter never lost a pulling-boat race (a favorite form of sport where boats from different ships would engage in spirited rowing competitions for fleet bragging rights). (Naval Historical Center.)



The army transferred land at LaPlaya to the navy in 1901 for a coaling station that the navy began constructing in 1904. This site at the mouth of the bay became the navy's first permanent base in San Diego. Due to the shallowness of the bay, only small vessels (like destroyers Henshaw and Farquhar seen above in 1925) could pull up to the pier. Others had to be replenished from coal barges while at anchor off Coronado. No sooner had Lt. Comdr. J. H. L. Holcombe assumed duties as the navy's first officer-in-charge in San Diego than the chamber of commerce began to lobby the navy to expand the base with a dry dock and repair yard. Coal can clearly be seen below in this c. 1930 photograph, laid out in long piles just east of Rosecrans Street. (Naval Historical Center.)





On May 12, 1906, San Diego's first wireless radio station, dubbed NPL for its three-letter call sign (Navy-Point Loma), rose on the crest of Point Loma, the site selected to provide maximum radio range over the ocean to the south and west of the United States. During its early years, NPL set several records for long-distance ship-to-shore radio transmission. Immediately following the San Francisco earthquake, the commander of the Pacific Squadron used NPL to relay orders to several ships to urgently proceed northward to provide aid, the first-ever use of wireless to direct fleet operations at sea. NPL would serve for over 40 years at its site on Catalina Boulevard, and in this 1924 photograph the nearby naval coaling station can also be seen. (National Archives.)



The Chollas Heights radio transmitter site, east of downtown San Diego, was the navy's first land purchase in San Diego, bought in July 1914 for \$15,000 in a land deal brokered by a helpful San Diego Chamber of Commerce. Upon its commission in 1917, the site was described as the most powerful radio station in the world and was the station that first relayed word of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to Washington. The navy integrated the site (shown here in June 1958) into its worldwide radio network but demolished the towers in the mid-1990s to make room for family housing (U.S. Navy/Naval Facilities Engineering Command.)

Two

THE GREAT WHITE FLEET

No single event had greater impact on solidifying San Diego's destiny with the U.S. Navy than the visit of the Great White Fleet in April 1908. This single three-day event captured the attention and imagination of the city's populace like nothing before or since, and galvanized the disorganized efforts of city leaders around a single objective: attracting the navy.

Interestingly the navy never intended to include San Diego on its world-girdling agenda. Envisioned by Pres. Theodore Roosevelt as a dramatic expression of America's global maritime power, the fleet had sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia, in late 1907, rounded the tip of South America, and planned fleet visits only to San Pedro and San Francisco, California, and Seattle, Washington, before heading to the Orient. When it became evident that the navy's greatest battle fleet might pass within sight of Point Loma without stopping, a delegation from San Diego intercepted the fleet while it exercised in Baja California and convinced them of the value of a brief stopover.

Thousands turned out for an extravaganza of parties, receptions, speeches, parades, and banquets, and to view the imposing battleships while in port in San Diego. Ten thousand oranges were hastily arranged for immediate delivery to the ships, and city florists were put to work on the presentation of centerpiece flowers. The city's effervescent reception, gracious hospitality, and wonderful spring weather left an indelible mark on the memories of the thousands of the navy's officers and men who would rise to leadership positions in the decades to come.



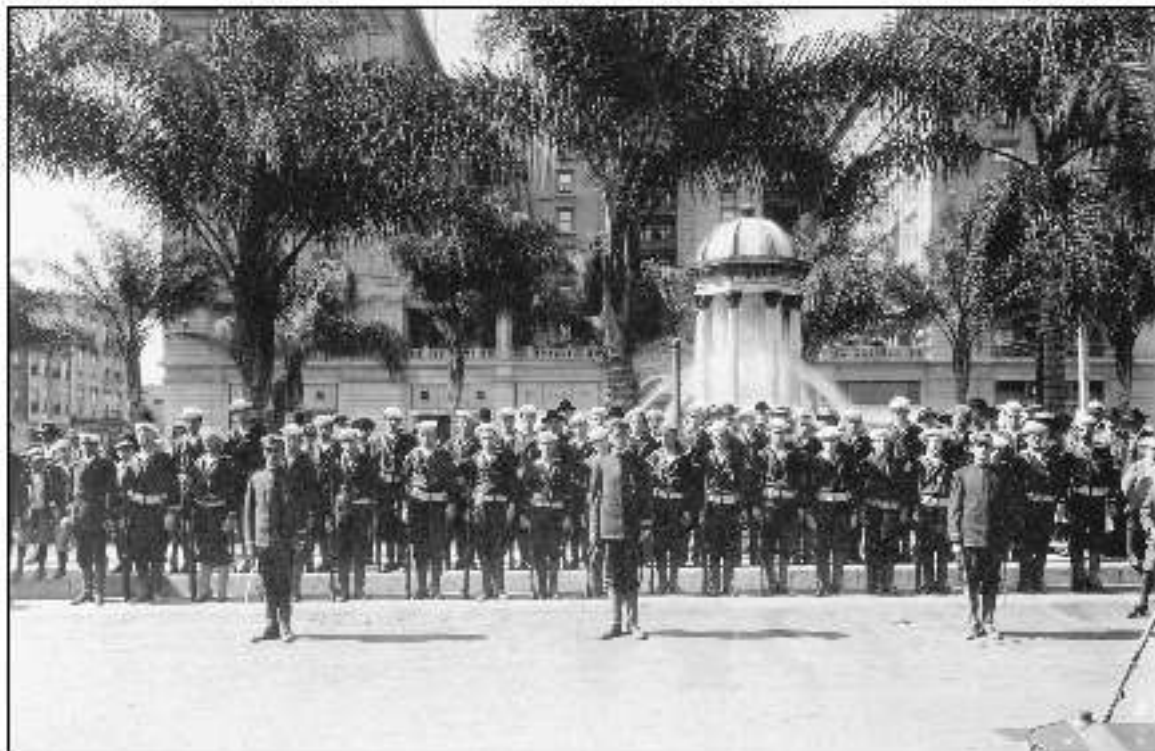
Before the arrival of the Great White Fleet, the most dramatic moment in San Diego's naval history was the explosion and sinking of the gunboat Bennington in San Diego Bay on July 21, 1905. Officers and men of the Bennington gather for this photograph (above), taken in San Diego just four months prior to her sinking. Many of those pictured would be later counted among the dead and injured. Comdr. (later Rear Admiral) Lucien Young, Bennington's captain, is seated at far left. Shortly after the explosion, further loss of life was averted when she was pushed from deeper water onto the city shore by tug Santa Fe (left). Sixty-four enlisted men and one officer perished in the explosion, and only 25 of the 200-man crew escaped unharmed. (U.S. Navy.)



A tragedy of Bennington's magnitude was unheard of in a San Diego that numbered only 25,000 residents, but it helped bond San Diego to the navy in a powerful way. The dead were buried on July 23, 1905, in Fort Rosecrans Cemetery in a ceremony attended by thousands of San Diegans. Many more attended the formal dedication ceremonies on January 7, 1908, of a granite obelisk to memorialize the dead. (Naval Historical Center.)



Members of the San Diego Naval Militia are shown here c. 1910 in a picture taken by a local photographer. (Maritime Museum of San Diego.)



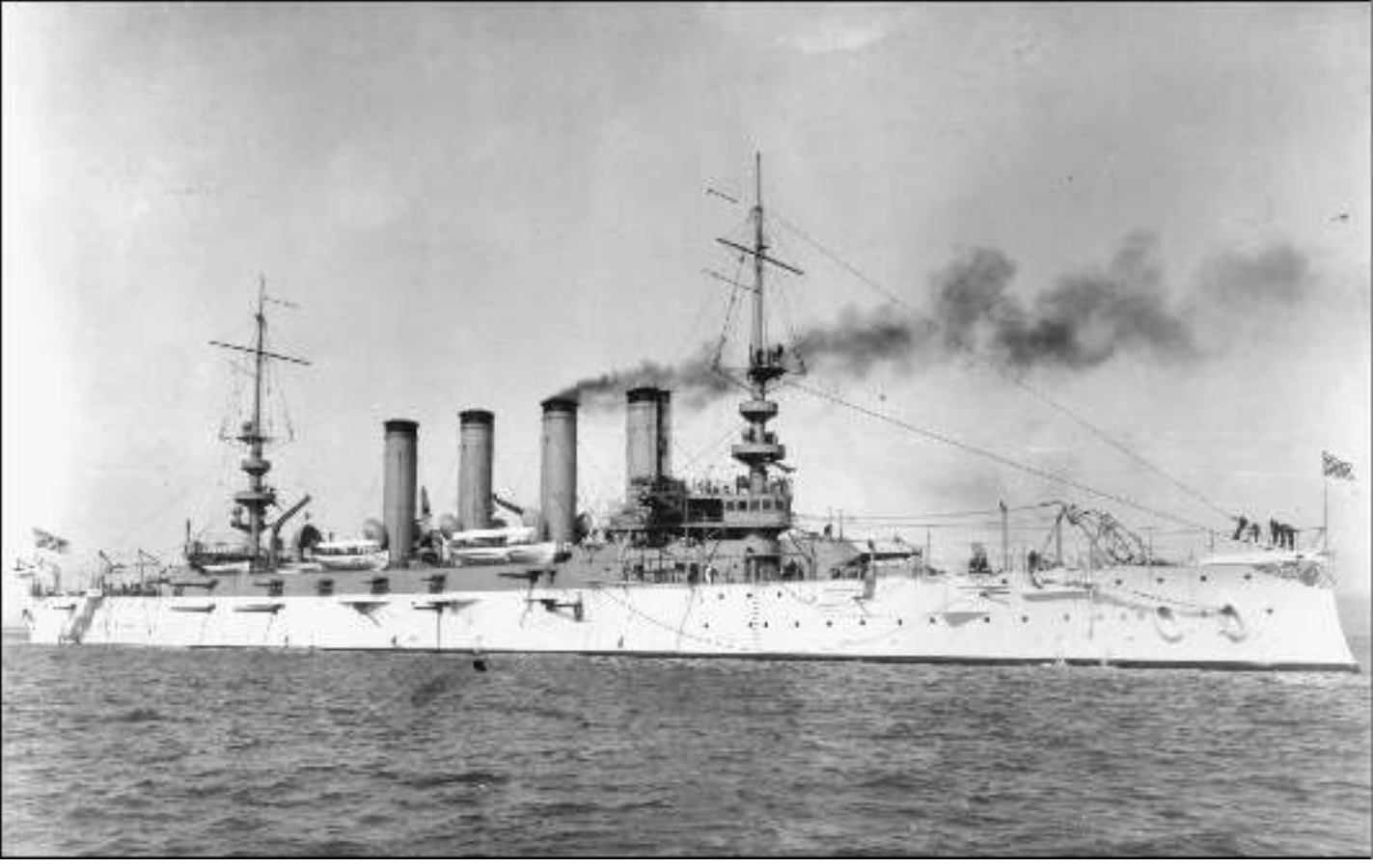
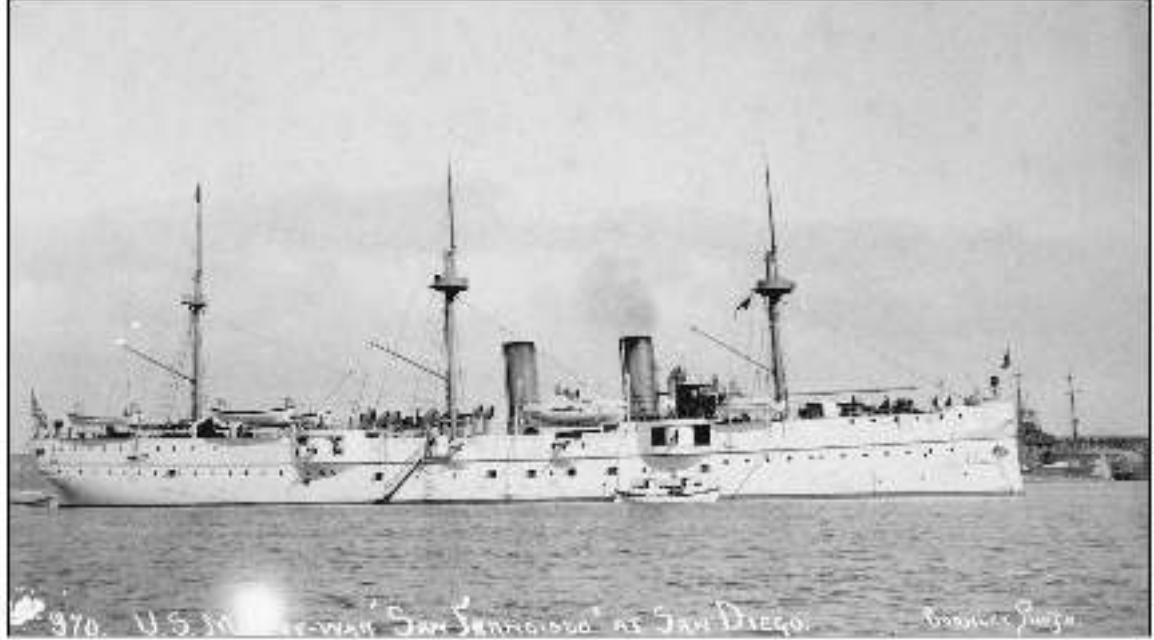
Lt. Comdr. Don Stewart leads a formation of the San Diego Naval Militia c. 1915 (above), and the militia was sent north to help keep the peace in San Francisco after the earthquake in 1906 (below)

*First authorized in 1891, the San Diego Naval Militia was a spirited addition to the community, participating in frequent local ceremonies, parades, and civic functions. The militia operated its own training ship, the fourth-rate steamer *Pinta*, as well as several training barges, and received training*

from warships stopping in San Diego. Stewart led the company in patrol duty along the border in 1911 to help protect the city's water supply, and the militia was mobilized into active service during World War I before ultimately being disbanded. (Maritime Museum of San Diego.)



Protected cruiser *Boston*, shown above c. 1903 at anchor off Grape Street near the current location of the San Diego County Administration Building, and protected cruiser *San Francisco*, anchored in San Diego Bay in 1891 (below), are two examples of navy ships that were assigned to the Pacific Squadron. Such ships infrequently visited San Diego before the establishment of the San Diego coal station in 1905. Each had participated in the campaigns of the Spanish-American War but, by the beginning of the 20th century, were rapidly falling behind other more powerful warship designs. (U.S. Navy, Maritime Museum of San Diego.)



The armored cruiser San Diego was originally commissioned as California in 1907. This cruiser displaced 13,680 tons and was armed with four 8-inch and fourteen 6-inch guns, making her one of the most powerful ships of her kind in the pre-dreadnought era. California was renamed San Diego on September 1, 1914, so that the name California could be used for a new battleship. The San Diego frequently served as flagship for the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet. While on duty with the Atlantic Fleet escorting convoys during World War I, San Diego struck a mine laid by the German submarine U-156 off Fire Island, New York. San Diego sank in 28 minutes, but with the deaths of only six men, she was the only major warship lost by the United States during the war. An impressive Bureau of Ships model of San Diego and artifacts collected from the wreck can be viewed today at the



This photograph shows members of the San Diego Naval Militia in 1903 or 1904, probably aboard their training ship, Alert. (Maritime Museum of San Diego.)



The sleek destroyer Perry, seen here leaving San Diego harbor c. 1915, is a good example of the first generation of destroyers built by the navy to combat the fast light-torpedo boat. Her open bridge, low freeboard, cramped quarters, and decks that were almost always wet all contributed to the rugged life of a crewman. (Naval Historical Center.)

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