

THE MIGHTY

The USS Vigilance (AM-324)
in action during World War Two

BY ROBERT J. CRESSMAN

If a former World War II fleet minesweeper sailor had been in the Philippine Islands during 2016 and had seen a suspiciously familiar looking ship wearing the flag of the Philippine Navy, he was not hallucinating.

Classified as “patrol craft,” two former *Auk*-class minesweepers still existed at that time. One was *Rizal* (PS-69), ex-USS *Murrelet* (AM-372); and the other was *Quezon* (PS-70), ex-USS *Vigilance* (AM-324). Amazingly, *Quezon* would still be in service after seven-decades!

The latter proved herself a valuable little ship off Okinawa in the spring of 1945. Interestingly enough, she was originally earmarked for the Royal Navy; contracted for under Lend-Lease as HMS *Exploit* (BAM-24), the ship was laid down at Seattle, Washington, by the Associated Shipbuilding Corporation, on 28 November 1942. When operational requirements dictated that the US Navy keep the ships instead of providing them to our Allies, that service assigned her the name *Vigilance* (AM-324) on 23 January 1943.

Launched on 5 April 1943, *Vigilance* was commissioned at her builder’s yard on 28 February 1944. Her first commanding officer was a Reservist, but a veteran of the Mediterranean campaign, L/Commander William C. Hayes, USNR. Before the war, he had been curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Egyptology exhibit in New York City.

Commander Hayes apparently did his job well, for his crew performed magnificently in their new ship during her shakedown — that “honeymoon” period in the life

USS *Vigilance* (AM-324)
in WWII 32/1M dazzle
camouflage.

of every man-of-war. *Vigilance* came away with what her historian recorded was the highest rating of any fleet minesweeper put through her paces at the Small Craft Training Center at San Pedro, California. *Vigilance* then trained in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) tactics at the West Coast Sound School, San Pedro, before undergoing some post-shakedown repairs at the US Naval Repair Base, San Diego, through the end of April 1944.

Ready to join the fleet, *Vigilance* departed the west coast on 4 May 1944, bound for the Hawaiian Islands. Escorting two patrol craft, *PCS-1396* and *PCS-1404*, the new minesweeper subsequently arrived at Pearl Harbor on 11 May, delivering a precious cargo carried out from the mainland — hundreds of bags of mail for the Fleet Post Office, Pearl.

Three-days later, *Vigilance* cleared Pearl Harbor, steaming down the channel to the open sea; in company with sistership USS *Triumph* (AM-323), *Vigilance* convoyed the venerable transport *William Ward Burrows* (AP-6), the former merchantman *Fortune* (IX-146), and the refrigerator ship *Boreas* (AF-8) to Majuro, reaching their destination on the 25th.

Vigilance then made three roundtrip escort voyages to the Marshall Islands and routine cruises in company with miscellaneous auxiliaries, merchantmen, and Army transports. Twice she managed to get in some realistic practice with her Hedge Hogs on suspected submarine contacts; and in between the convoy missions she exercised in the Hawaiian Islands, her crew training in the duty for which the ship had been designed — minesweeping.

After the last of those voyages in mid-November 1944, *Vigilance* received orders to conduct local patrol duty off the entrance to Mugai Channel, at Ulithi, in the Western Carolines. Southbound on that patrol station a few minutes before sunrise on 20 November 1944, the minesweeper had swung wide to avoid fouling the screening ships of an outward-bound task

group (that included three destroyers and a cruiser) when Lt. Jackson L. Morton, USNR the executive officer, observantly sighted a small wake 700-yds broad on the starboard quarter with a prominent “bone in teeth.” He sounded the general alarm.

Thus alerted, *Vigilance* heeled over with right full rudder and went to full speed as her crew manned their battle stations. With her depth charges set at



shallow, the minesweeper charged in for the attack, only to find that the contact had disappeared. In the midst of all the wakes and turbulence created by the Saipan-bound group, *Vigilance’s* sound gear was unable to pick up a clear echo.

Curtailing her run to avoid fouling the cruiser in the group, *Vigilance* signaled the position of the suspected submarine to the destroyer *Cummings* (DD-365). Moments later, that cruiser sighted a periscope on her starboard beam. *Vigilance* responded quickly, and headed for the spot indicated, but *Caye* (DD-370) beat her to the proverbial punch. The destroyer rammed the submersible, and, to add the *coup de grace*, dropped depth charges to finish off the midget sub.

After that incident, *Vigilance* remained on patrol off the channel entrance, aided by a pair of USMC Grumman TBF-1 Avengers from VMTB-232. At 0031 on 21 November, one Avenger bore in low from astern, as if to challenge the ship. The *Vigilance* crew thought that the plane might have been a new arrival, unfamiliar with their ship. The plane suddenly banked sharply, however, and a wing-tip caught in the water. The aircraft plunged into the sea about a half-mile from *Vigilance*, and immediately blew up in a burst of flame. Shortly thereafter, the Avenger’s depth charges exploded.

To compound the confusion, a second Avenger roared in and, thinking that the wreckage on the water was a surfaced submarine, fired into it. *Vigilance* launched her motor whaleboat at 0051 and picked up a survivor — Cpl. Robert M. DeHart, USMC. A remarkable occurrence in view of the fact that the plane had crashed, exploded, and had been strafed! *Vigilance* continued the search in hope of picking up other survivors from the crashed TBF, but found none. At 0524, the mincraft was ordered to transfer the injured man to hospital facilities ashore.

USS VIGILANCE (AM-324) STATISTICS

Class: *Auk* **Displacement:** 890-tons
Length: 221-ft 2-in **Beam:** 32-ft 2-in **Draft (Max):** 10-ft 9-in
Speed: 18-kts
Complement: 105 officers and men
Armament: One 3-in/50-cal DP, Two 40mm Bofors,
Six 20mm Oerlikon, Two depth charge tracks, One depth
charge projector (Hedge Hog)
Commendations: Three WWII Battle Stars

Vigilance remained on patrol duties off Mugai Channel for the rest of 1944. She subsequently performed escort duties for individual ships or convoys moving between the Western Carolines and the Palaus into January and February 1945, intervening those escort runs with channel entrance patrols back at Ulithi.

From 6 to 8 March, *Vigilance* lay alongside the minelayer *Terror* (CM-5), receiving an availability in preparation for the upcoming operation against Okinawa. After exercises, logistics, and tests of her sweep gear, *Vigilance* got underway for Nansei Shoto on 19 March, and was soon steaming in cruising formation with Mine Division 11, on *Terror’s* starboard quarter.

Arriving in area V-1, located about 35-mi southwest of Okinawa proper, on 24 March, *Vigilance* and her sisterships formed up in echelon and swept for moored mines until nightfall. She cut loose one moored mine on the 26th, three on the 27th, and one on the 28th. While performing those sweep operations, she also served as MineRon 4 “destruction vessel” drawing the duty of destroying loose, swept mines once they bobbed to the surface. *Vigilance* sank several drifting floats and one moored mine with her guns.

On the morning of the 28th, *Vigilance* encountered her first Japanese plane off Okinawa. Her lookouts spotted a Kate and two Val dive-bombers, and with other ships nearby, commenced fire when the attackers came within range. *Vigilance’s* Bofors battery laid down an 18-sec barrage; enough to help send the Kate spinning into the sea. The minesweeper chalked up her first “sure assist.” It was not to be her last!

Vigilance and the other minesweepers did their duty, clearing the way for the invasion fleet and the assault on Okinawa proper commenced on Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945. *Vigilance* screened transports, over the ensuing days and nights, as they