

## USS CONYNGHAM (DD-371)

The second MAHAN class destroyer to be built at the Boston Navy Yard was laid down the same day as her sister, USS CASE, and would be launched on the same day, almost a year later. DD-371 would not be ready for commissioning until November 4, 1936, slightly more than six weeks after CASE.

USS CONYNGHAM bore a name familiar to students of the American Revolution. Gustavus Conyngham was a renowned privateering captain, capturing sixty British merchant ships in less than two years, many literally under the noses of Royal Navy escorts. He later served as a commissioned captain in the Continental Navy and was instrumental in the defense of Philadelphia during the War of 1812. Capt. Conyngham passed away in Philadelphia in 1819. DD-371 would be the second naval vessel to be named for the captain.

USS CONYNGHAM combined a shakedown cruise with visits to Northern European ports in the spring of 1937, only to return to Boston for an overhaul. By October, she had been assigned to the Battle Force, Pacific, and her home port became San Diego. Training cruises, some of them through waters she would later visit under less peaceful circumstances, dominated the remainder of the pre-war years.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, USS CONYNGHAM was undergoing a tender overhaul when the Japanese air attack hit USS WHITNEY (AD-4) and the five tin cans clustered at her side. CONYNGHAM blasted away at the attackers, then, with the superhuman effort of her crew and those aboard the tender, she was able to aid in the abortive search for the attackers before the end of the day. Following the attack and another overhaul, DD-371 was tasked with covering convoys from the West Coast to the New Hebrides on the vital supply line to Australia.

Now a veteran, USS CONYNGHAM was called upon to screen the carriers which were to end the Japanese string of victories with the pivotal battle of Midway. She followed her assignment with activities around the embattled island of Guadalcanal,

providing gunfire support and protection for the transports. The need for a brief overhaul, along with repairs from a collision, brought CONYNGHAM back to Pearl Harbor by the end of 1942. Her crew was unaware of the role that would soon face them.

DD-371 was reassigned to the Seventh Amphibious Force, nicknamed "MacArthur's Navy" in a role seldom performed by a destroyer. Beginning with the Allied landings at Lae in New Guinea and lasting for almost a year, USS CONYNGHAM would be VADM Daniel E. Barbey's flagship for landing operations. Often the largest ship off some of the smaller beachheads in MacArthur's drive to the Philippines, DD-371 hosted a command staff of both Army and Navy planners and expanded communications. It was a role normally reserved for a battlewagon, or a cruiser, or, later in the war, a specially-dedicated command vessel many times the size of a destroyer, but CONYNGHAM filled the role so well that no one, except perhaps her crew, noticed that she was somewhat small for the task.

Often, DD-371 was the focus of attackers intent on destroying the command structure of the amphibious operation. Many times, the valiant destroyer led a motley collection of vessels well beyond the umbrella of protective aircraft, literally into the enemy's back yard. Once attacking aircraft from the Japanese base at Rabaul knifed straight toward a convoy, escorted by CONYNGHAM and composed of slow-moving, poorly armed LSTs (Landing Ship Tanks - nicknamed by their crews, "Large, slow targets"). DD-371 was supported by three destroyers. The raiders broke through and only sharp maneuver by the destroyers and a heavy anti-aircraft fire protected the tin cans. Two LSTs were damaged, but CONYNGHAM could claim two of the aircraft. DD-371 screened the wounded landing ships while cargo and casualties were transferred.

In one of the most remarkable incidents of the war, CONYNGHAM led a convoy of thirty-six ships in a feint toward a preexisting beachhead, then deftly maneuvered toward Arawe. Japanese reconnaissance aircraft overflew the strike force as low as four hundred feet, but the blacked-out destroyer

led the way to the beaches. Without radio or signals, the carefully planned landing went off without enemy reaction until the rubber assault boats were within yards of the beach. The first waves were hit hard by enemy shore batteries, but support fire from CONYNGHAM silenced them. By daybreak, the troops were ashore, the harbor taken, and all of the support and transport craft had left. Only CONYNGHAM and a subchaser, SC-699, remained to search for survivors from landing craft that were wrecked off Blue Beach. A radar picket off shore warned that an enemy attack from Rabaul was inbound; thirty-three dive-bombers and torpedo bombers were headed toward the beachhead. CONYNGHAM was the biggest target in the harbor, and she drew the aircrafts' fire like a magnet. Torpedoes splashed down on both sides of the embattled tin can, but CONYNGHAM succeeded in 'combing the wakes' time and again. Bombs bracketed the destroyer, showering her with water and shrapnel, but no enemy succeeded in hitting the skillfully handled tin can. After several minutes, the attackers flew off toward the north; both the destroyer and the subchaser came through unscathed.

By May, 1944, DD-371 was assigned to screen battleships through the Marianas. Her role as flagship put aside, CONYNGHAM would appear off many a beachhead in the American drive through the Philippines, serving in a more "traditional" destroyer role, that of close support for landing craft and shore bombardment. She would remain actively engaged in the Philippine campaign into 1945. The Japanese surrender found the veteran destroyer undergoing an overhaul at the "new" American naval base at Subic Bay, northwest of Manila.

USS CONYNGHAM was decommissioned on December 20, 1946. She would be employed as a target in the Bikini Atomic Bomb test in 1946 and was finally sunk in 1948. .

USS CONYNGHAM earned fourteen battle stars for her service in World War II.

From The Tin Can Sailor, April 1998

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