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THE BATTLE FLAG OF THE U.S.S. NEW MEXICO

By REAR ADMIRAL GEORGE LESTER WEYLER

Mr. Chairman, The Honorable Governor of New Mexico, Honorable Postmaster General of the United States, distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I find it a great honor and a pleasure to represent the Navy at this celebration of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of a new province, by that great pioneer and soldier, General Stephen Watts Kearny. With their unyielding spirit, and unmatched courage, this man and his followers conquered the wilds of our western territory. On half rations, insufficient shelter, inferior equipment and poor horses, many of which were abandoned and others used for food, these men inched along, establishing bases, taming the inhabitants, and fighting the elements until their goal was reached.

Comment on these exploits will be left to others—as my mission is one relating to recent achievements in which the very flag that Kearny carried across this continent in the name of freedom was, a century later, carried on across the vast reaches of the great Pacific, to crush an enemy seeking to destroy the peace of the world.

There is, however, great similarity in General Kearny's accomplishments and those who fought our ships in the recent war, capturing from a determined and strongly entrenched enemy every island essential to further operations, and planting thereon this symbol of freedom. As with Kearny, our movement was slow at the beginning as

little was known of practical amphibious warfare. However, lessons were learned *well*, and no obstruction of nature, or counteraction of man, could deter either from their missions.

It is deemed appropriate to relate in some detail the war service of the United States Battleship New Mexico, named after your great state, whose *battle* flag is to be presented here tonight. May I also say that Vice Admiral J. B. Oldendorf, Commandant of the Eleventh Naval District, of which New Mexico is a part, regrets that he was unable to make this presentation personally, and that it is his wish to visit your city in the near future.

The battleship New Mexico well earned her part in the triumphant final operation of World War II, when, with other powerful units of the Third Fleet, she steamed past Fujiyama, to drop anchor in Tokyo's outer harbor at 3 p. m. on August 27, 1945.

Active in the Pacific since January, 1942, she steamed 183,000 nautical miles in war operations, in the course of which she participated in nearly every *major* campaign from Guadalcanal to Okinawa. Of the 1,365 days between the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the enemy's surrender, the New Mexico spent 544 in combat areas. She was three times damaged in battle, suffering a total of 307 casualties including 86 dead and five missing. Her batteries fired more than 69,000 rounds of ammunition on enemy held bases and in enemy actions. The weight of the ammunition expended was approximately 13 million pounds—a weight greater than was fired by any ship in any previous war in history.

Though the New Mexico is no youngster, with her 27 years of service, she packs a punch that belies her age. These old battleships, some of which saw action in two world wars, were rarely in the headlines. Many times they moved in ahead of invasion armadas to soften enemy strongholds for landings. They stayed on to cover the assault forces until beachheads were secure, sticking by the troops ashore despite bombs, torpedoes, short battery fire, suicide planes and suicide boat attacks.

Twice in the closing months of the war the New Mexico suffered serious battle damage. First, during pre-invasion bombardment off Luzon. On January 6, 1945, she was fiercely attacked by Japanese suicide planes. One of the planes carrying a 500 pound bomb crashed on her navigation bridge, killing her commanding officer, 29 others, and wounding 87. At the time, the New Mexico served as my flagship, and we were honored with the presence of Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, Royal Navy, Commander British Eastern Fleet, and Lieut. General Herbert Lumsden, Royal Marines. The latter lost his life in the attack. Numerous Army officers and observers were also aboard, including William Chickering of *Time Magazine*, who gave his life in the performance of *his* duties.

Again on 12 May while supporting landings on Okinawa, a bomb laden plane crashed on the gundeck. Fifty-eight men lost their lives and 121 others were wounded.

The New Mexico, attached to Battleship Squadron One, under the command of Vice Admiral J. B. Oldendorf, also operated with the First, Third, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Fleets, serving under Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Admiral William F. Halsey, Admiral Raymond A. Spruance and Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid.

The New Mexico was operating with the North Atlantic neutrality Patrol when the enemy struck at Pearl Harbor, and was immediately transferred to the Pacific Fleet transiting the Panama Canal on January 11, 1942.

Her early war service in the Pacific found her operating from bases in the Fiji and New Hebrides Islands, harassing the Japanese withdrawal from the Solomons, and covering the final consolidation of Guadalcanal. She then aided in the reconquest of Attu in the Aleutians, and covered the landing of assault forces on the island of Kiska. Next she appeared astride the equator, pounding the shores of Butaritari Island and supporting the landings on Makin Island. Then came Kwajalein in the Marshalls where the New Mexico again supported landings, after which she turned her guns on Taroa and Wotje in the same island group. It was in this campaign that she suffered her first personnel

casualty of the war when her target spotting plane was shot down in Kwajalein Lagoon.

After a brief rest for her crew in Sydney and change of commands, the New Mexico was again ready for action and with others steamed toward the Marianas Islands, taking Tinian under fire and covering landings on Saipan. After these islands were secured, she conducted 19 consecutive days of firing against Guam and nearby Rota Island. After the initial landing on Guam, she provided illuminating fire to prevent Japanese surprise counterattacks against our forces under cover of darkness. So efficiently was this service performed that at dawn the Marine Commanding General radioed his personal congratulations to the ship. The Marianas campaign completed a year of heavy bombardment for the New Mexico, and she was returned to Puget Sound Navy Yard for new guns and overhaul.

Her next mission was in the securing of Leyte and Samar, and later covering landings on Mindoro, all in the Philippines. Early in January, 1945, this proud battleship named after your great state was the flagship of the bombardment group in Lingayan Gulf, in strategic Luzon Island, and commenced her systematic bombardment on San Fernando, and the northern landing beaches in that gulf. The Japanese retaliated with fierce and repeated air attacks on the formation, and it was here that the ship received her first serious battle damage. Although badly injured, and her captain, Robert W. Fleming lost, the good ship stayed in action and continued her bombardment schedule. During this operation, strategically located enemy shore batteries were destroyed, and two railway bridges were rendered useless, thus preventing reinforcements of enemy troops from the North.

After battle repairs were completed, the New Mexico was again at sea, this time to play a major role in the greatest amphibious operations yet undertaken in the Pacific, the assault on the Japanese Island of Okinawa.

For six days the New Mexico supported underwater demolition teams and mine sweeping operations, blasted away at pill boxes, airplane revetments. She cleared her

assigned sector of coastal guns and camouflaged positions. After the assault waves landed on the beaches, the New Mexico with other units gave gunfire support to our troops ashore. Narrowly did she escape being struck by torpedoes fired from an enemy submarine, but prompt maneuvering avoided them.

For 64 days the New Mexico remained at Okinawa and was subjected to repeated suicide air attacks. The ship was credited with 21 enemy planes shot down. At Okinawa 8 planes were accounted for, and four within 16 minutes during a heavy air attack on April 12. She also *assisted* in the destruction of seven planes during this operation.

Etched deep in the memory of the crew is an air attack which occurred at dusk on May 12. A group of enemy planes approached from astern and closed to dive. The first kamikaze was destroyed by a 5" shell passing under it, flaming it, and lifting it clear of the mastheads. Meanwhile, another plane had begun its final dive, and though hit several times, could not be stopped. It crashed on the gun deck and tore into the stack leaving a jagged 30 foot hole. Flames from the exploding bomb and the plane's ruptured gasoline tanks shot 200 feet skyward, like a gigantic blow torch.

While doctors, hospital corpsmen, and stretcher bearers went to the aid of the wounded, damage control parties fought the fires, and in the amazingly brief period of 15 minutes reported all fires under control, and in 21 minutes all were extinguished. The ship had taken a *hard* blow. Casualties totalled 177 men, 55 dead and 3 missing. Weary, grimy men worked throughout the night appraising damage, clearing debris and readying the ship's guns for new attacks. During the next few days miracles of gunnery and hull repairs were accomplished, permitting her to remain on station. Later after permanent repairs were affected, she accompanied the Third Fleet to Tokyo, and took part in the initial occupation of the enemy's home island.

The New Mexico has one of the longest histories of any ship in our Navy. Authorized by Congress in 1914 and commissioned in 1918, her history bridges two world wars. Like most things war built she incorporated many advances

in naval construction, being 16 feet longer than previous ships of her class with a main battery larger than any ship before her. After World War I she became the flag ship of the newly created Pacific Fleet.

Long before World War II men of the fleet nicknamed the New Mexico "The Queen of the Fleet" in tribute to honors she won in Fleet competitions, in gunnery, engineering, and battle efficiency.

You can well be proud of this gallant ship which, with other old battleships, helped to deliver the hard punches that knocked out the enemy from island to island. These ships have forged a magnificent fighting record, firing a greater weight of shells effectively against the enemy than any squadron of ships in naval history. Although now "in commission in reserve" the New Mexico is still "The Queen."

During these operations the New Mexico flew this flag which is to repose tranquilly in the museum here in your capital city. Be it known that no other flag ever flies above the Stars and Stripes, except the church pennant when religious services are in progress on our ships and stations. This custom is in accord with our belief that the church is above the state, but both marching forward together seeking world peace.

When thus displayed we see the church flag flying majestically above the Stars and Stripes, yet so close together they seem to merge into one banner dedicated to the brotherhood of man, and freedom for all mankind. That freedom seems obscured today, necessitating full faith in our statesmen to bring about unity among nations, otherwise our civilization cannot survive.

While we call this a battle flag in war, in peace it represents the symbol of individual liberty, under which your state and cities grew and prospered, as did the nation to which it belongs. A young nation founded on principles of equality and freedom was to become the greatest of all lands, towards which the world looks for aid in peace and in war. America has never failed to render such aid, nor has it ever offered or accepted war, except in the defense of the precepts of freedom of democracy.



U. S. S. New Mexico



Palace of the Governors

Mr. Paul A. E. Walter, President
 Historical Society of New Mexico
 Santa Fe, N.M.

1846
 Santa Fe New Mexico
 GENERAL KEARNY 1946
 FIRST DAY COVER
 October 16, 1946

Kearny Centennial Stamp 1946

Governor, in the name of the Navy Department, I present the Battle Flag of the Battleship New Mexico to your state, with the knowledge that we will all *ever stand close* to it, and *defend* it whenever or wherever needed.