

Nine Sisters
World War II Light Carrier
Documentary Prospectus

October 2003
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What Were The “Nine Sisters”?

“Nine Sisters” is a nickname for the nine Independence-class light aircraft carriers that furnished strong naval support for the United States in World War II. The idea to convert cruisers into fast, light aircraft carriers was initiated by Admiral John S. McCain, the grandfather of Arizona Senator John McCain. Two Presidents, Gerald Ford and George Bush Sr., served as officers on these vessels. Three of the top ten ace pilots from World War II flew off Independence-class carriers. A stopgap measure designed and built in record time to fill a critical need when many United States Navy flattops were sunk, the Nine Sisters were the USS Independence, USS Princeton, USS Belleau Wood, USS Cowpens, USS Monterey, USS Langley, USS Cabot, USS Bataan, and USS San Jacinto. The Nine Sisters project is planned as part of a triad of multimedia - book, video and website - to bring the light carrier story back into focus for the American public.

Need For The “Nine Sisters” Project

Time in which to accurately document the story of the “Nine Sisters” is running out. The best way to approach this is by documenting the men who served on these ships. Most of these veterans are now in their late seventies or eighties. If they don’t tell their stories soon, they will be lost forever. Incredibly, few books and no documentaries currently exist that focus on the saga of the light carriers, yet it is a major part of American military history. The Navy designation “CVL” stands for “Carrier Vessel, Light.” Over 15,000 United States Navy personnel, and thousands of sailors of the French and Spanish Navies, served on light carriers. Recent efforts were made to save the last light carrier, the USS Cabot, as a museum before it was scrapped. Those efforts failed. With the existing World War II veterans aging, and the scrapping of the light carriers complete, the urgency in documenting this history intensifies.

Production Information

The World War II Light Carrier Historical Project has completed over thirty-five hours of interviews with veterans from five of the nine ships of the Independence class. This leg of the production began in October 2002. Interviews with crewmembers from the four remaining ships need to be completed as soon as possible. Plans are being made to attend the USS Cabot Association Reunion in New Jersey in October 2003. A shoot has also been scheduled for the annual “Mighty Moo” Festival in Cowpens, South Carolina. This festival honors the veterans of the USS Cowpens. The producers have been invited to videotape the proceedings in June 2003.

Interested Participants

Arizona Senator John McCain has expressed interest in participating and the producers hope he will serve as narrator. A 1998 interview with former President Gerald Ford, who is too ill to participate, may be made available for inclusion in the documentary. Veterans of USS San Jacinto believe former President George Bush Sr. will be very interested in participating, and the producers plan to ask him for an interview.

Distribution and Exhibition

The project is scheduled for rough cut completion by October 23, 2004, sixty years to the day after the USS Princeton, the only CVL lost in World War II, was hit by a kamikaze. The USS Hornet Museum has expressed an interest in hosting the premiere of the Nine Sisters documentary. The audience is historians, veterans, students and others with an interest in World War II. Venues such as PBS and the History Channel would be an ideal place for the *Nine Sisters* documentary. In addition, teacher study guides will be created after broadcast for use in schools. Clips will be available on our website, www.ninesisters.com.

The real story of the light carriers is the tales of the men who sailed them. Pilots like Irving Mayer, who in our documentary recalls the terror of waiting in the dark for his fellow pilots to land after a long mission, hearing their splashes as they miss the carrier and land in the dark ocean. Or Howard Skidmore, who sat strapped into his torpedo bomber waiting for takeoff as a kamikaze hit the back of the plane. Medic Bill Terheun tells of cleaning the body of a combat casualty, suddenly realizing that he was burying his best friend. Gene Massuci recounts his experience of surviving a double kamikaze hit, only to see the bodies of dozens of men killed on the hangar deck. Dominick DeMasi, Emilio Faiella, and Dominic J. Bianco grew up on the same street in the Bronx and served together on the USS Monterey. Their struggle to save each other during the 1944 typhoon is one of the many stories worthy of medals that were an everyday occurrence on these ships.

The Americans were in for desperate times in early 1942. They were losing everywhere. Four carriers were sunk within a year. President Roosevelt and Navy Chief of Staff Ernest King had to get more carriers into combat, but how? Before the war, Admiral John S. McCain, the grandfather of Arizona Senator John McCain, had advocated that the navy take existing ships and convert



USS Cabot Quartermaster Gene Massuci discusses the loss of a man in his division during a kamikaze attack on November 25, 1944 that killed thirty-five men.

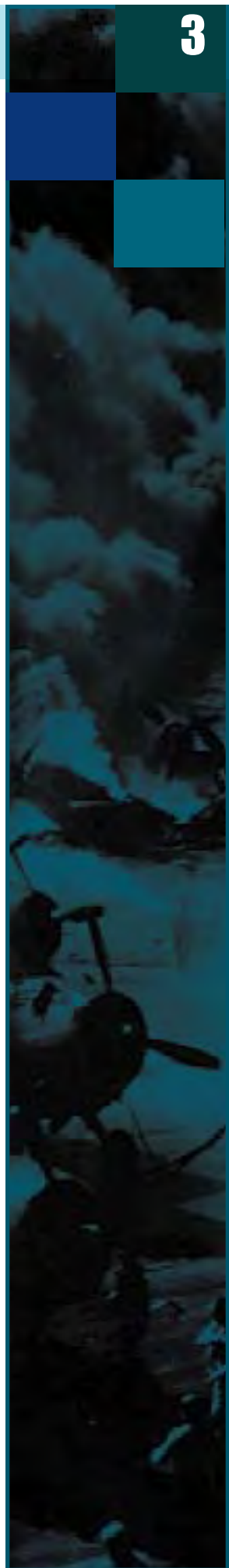
them into small, fast light carriers, but his proposal was ignored. Now, just five years later, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz, was asking Roosevelt for just that very thing. The decision was made to convert nine cruisers, already building at New York Shipbuilding, into light carriers. Some of the veterans who would serve aboard them met the ships as civilian yard workers, turning them into aircraft carriers. Nickolas Verlinich, who later served aboard a light carrier as an enlisted man, helped build them.

The ships were commissioned by "Plank Owners" - sailors who served the ship from the time of her joining the fleet. Meanwhile, pilots trained at bases inland and on the Great Lakes for carrier combat duty. Irving Mayer, a pilot with VF-24 attached to the Belleau Wood, remembers his training vividly. He survived an accident that killed his best friend and wrecked both their aircraft. Many crewmembers were veterans of the

carriers sunk in 1942 - the USS Wasp and USS Hornet. Some veterans would see their ship sunk from under them a second time.

After training, the light carriers went into combat in the Pacific. The harrowing actions left the survivors shocked at the wanton destruction, a memory not blunted by sixty years. Tears still spring to the eyes of Yeoman Frank Cena, the Cowpens's personnel clerk, as he remembers all the men who died. He had to fill out the death certificates for all of them. Between general quarters' alarms, life aboard ship could be monotony punctuated with terror. One of the first casualties was privacy, as 1,300 men grew used to living together with no space to call their own. Now a humorous memory, the sailors ate coffee and bread filled with maggots.

The prospect of combat loomed over everything - sometimes at general quarters for hours, the men ate cold sandwiches at their stations. Any attempt to bring levity into their lives was embraced. The first time each ship crossed the equator, "shellbacks," who had already crossed it once, would torment those who hadn't, "polliwogs," on their first voyage. But soon the crossings became so numerous, no one cared to hold the ceremony.





"Plank Owners" - the first crew of the USS Bataan - place the new light carrier in commission in May 1943. Bataan was named for the Filipinos and Americans who died on the death march across that Philippine island in 1942. All nine Independence class carriers were built between January 1942 and December 1943, an engineering feat considering the problems in converting cruiser hulls into aircraft carriers.

He survived, landing in the water, and was saved by a United States Navy submarine.

In October 1944, the CVLs played a big part in the battles around the Philippines, as the last major Japanese forces attempted to stop the American landings there. Roman Kiefer, serving on the USS Princeton, watched in horror as a Japanese plane came in and bombed the flight deck. Despite hard firefighting by her crew and the cruiser USS Birmingham, the fire reached the ammunition stores. The resulting explosion raked the Birmingham, killing many of her crew. Princeton sank, completely wrecked by the huge explosion. Kiefer spent hours in the water watching his home for over a year exploding nearby until he was picked up by a destroyer. Planes from other CVLs sank the giant Japanese battleship Musashi and many other ships.

The most terrifying night for many CVL veterans was the typhoon of December 1944. More damage was done to the light carriers by the typhoon than by the Japanese. Officers and men were washed overboard, never to be seen again. Giant waves picked up planes and jeeps on the flight and hangar decks and threw them around like toys. One brave black mess attendant (African-Americans were never allowed to serve on Navy ships as anything other than mess attendants) climbed up to the ceiling and cut down overhanging planes before they could smash into gasoline fires below. Every man aboard thought he should have gotten a medal, but it was just another example of bravery. The fleet lost dozens of planes and hundreds of men overboard. Three destroyers sank in the heavy sea. Later on, while

The light carriers were well traveled, going wherever the fleet carriers went. From 1944 onwards, the forward base of the Pacific Fleet was wherever the fleet happened to be, and the light carriers were in the middle of it. Many carriers fought in the Battle of the Philippine Sea, called the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" because over 400 Japanese aircraft were destroyed for the loss of 29 American planes. That night, despite warnings of Japanese submarines, Bill Ross watched as all the lights on his ship, the Cowpens, and on all the other ships, were turned on to guide planes home.

Besides three aces, two men would achieve fame for their postwar careers. Gunnery Officer on the Monterey, Gerald R. Ford would guide the country through the Watergate scandal. Ens. George H.W. Bush would become President of the United States in 1988. In a famous story, Bush was shot down over Japanese Territory. He



USS Cowpens crewmen who handle aircraft - "airedales" in the Navy lingo - wait for orders during strikes on Tarawa and Makin Atolls. Makin was taken after brief but heavy fighting, Tarawa would go into the history books as one of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific. Marines on Tarawa counted on Cowpens and other carriers to provide close air support during the landings.



Aerographer's Mates prepare to launch a weather balloon from USS Independence in 1943. Each CVL was a self-contained city, with their own medical facilities, barber shop, bakery, law office, and weather facility. The men interviewed so far for Nine Sisters include firemen, engineers, plane handlers, pilots and officers. They came from forty-eight states and many territories. Most had little to no experience as sailors.

participating in the Okinawa invasion, Musashi's sister ship, the Yamato, was surprised and sunk by carrier planes, including those from the light carriers. The war was coming to an end. Soon the carriers attacked Japan itself. When the Japanese Emperor Hirohito sued for peace, the Americans initially expected a trap and kept the carriers outside Tokyo Bay in case the Japanese attacked. USS Cowpens stood by for the surrender ceremonies aboard the USS Missouri, the only carrier present in Tokyo Bay.

The war was over. After the war, the carriers were laid up in reserve. The USS Independence helped usher in a new atomic age, destroyed by the Able and Baker tests on Bikini. On the USS Monterey, a new generation of CVL sailors took over. John Palone, Larry Mosnick and Jim Pallace served aboard the USS Monterey in 1955, which was still a dangerous ship in peacetime. Novice pilots frequently crashed, and many died. All this was

unseen by a public tired of war. Due to the success of the Independence class, two more light carriers were completed after the war.

By the 1960's, most of the carriers were decommissioned in reserve. They were too small and too expensive to operate. The new jets were unable to operate safely. Only the USS Cabot, now the Spanish Navy's Dedalo, was still in operation by 1970. After a tortuous process lasting over ten years, and many hands trying to save her, she was scrapped in Brownsville, Texas, in 2001. The last of her kind, she represented a desperate measure to bring air power to the Pacific.

Succeeding beyond their designers' dreams, yet only useful in the short term, the light carriers were powerful and underrepresented contributors to America's victory in the Pacific. The deeds of the light carriers live on in new Navy ships that carry the proud names of the CVLs. Also, each year, the town of Cowpens, South Carolina, adopts the veterans of the USS Cowpens, in a week-long celebration called the "Mighty Moo Festival." Even current Cowpens (CG-63) sailors are invited, coming all the way from Japan.

The light carriers formed an important part of our national defense in the Pacific in World War II. Hopefully more people will realize their contributions after seeing this video. Please consider supporting this very important effort to preserve a little known part of a defining event of the twentieth century.



During the typhoon of December 15, 1944, USS Langley rolls in heavy seas. The shipbuilder's manual said if the light carrier rolled more than 28 degrees to either side, it wouldn't come back. Many CVLs rolled to more than 30 degrees during the storm, but none of them sank. Some men were more scared of this typhoon than they were of combat with the Japanese.



Production Phases

There are three phases to producing the complete Nine Sisters story.

First, the creation of www.ninesisters.com will be completed in early 2003. Ninesisters.com will provide the project with a place where interested members of the online community can get information about the Nine Sisters of the Independence class. Each carrier's web page, in addition to technical information and combat chronology, will have links to veterans' stories and video clips of interviews. Throughout the project's development, and after broadcast, ninesisters.com will link all of the phases of Nine Sisters together.

Second, the video interviews of the Nine Sisters' veterans will be edited into a 120-minute documentary for broadcast on PBS or the History Channel or another cable venue. Using the extensive resources of the Naval Historical Center and the National Archives, the Nine Sisters documentary will present the living history of the actual veterans who crewed the light carriers to victory.

Thirdly, the Nine Sisters will culminate in a book, available at the same time as the documentary, which will cover the veterans' stories in greater detail, with maps and photos not available in the documentary. Also, more veterans will be covered, with excerpts from the transcripts of their interviews available for research. The book will be written by co-producer Peter Stoudt.

All of these materials will eventually be combined into a teacher's guide for use in classroom instruction in history and American experience.

Videography In Progress

In October and November 2002, the Nine Sisters video crew completed 37 hours of interviews with 35 veterans from five light carriers. In October and November 2003, another 35 hours of interviews were completed, including interviews aboard USS Bataan (LHD-5) a currently serving amphibious assault ship deployed in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The next step in the production of the documentary involves a trip to the west coast to interview more CVL veterans. A preview will be shown aboard the USS Hornet in October 2004.

Request

By affiliation with a non-profit, MFA Productions hopes to secure funding from a combination of governmental and private foundations that are dedicated to preserving history through the medium of television. Possible sources include the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Consolidated Edison, Mobil Oil, the Oshei Foundation, and others.

Today's youth don't really understand the service that our troops and the crews of these ships provided. Perhaps the best deterrent to preventing future wars is to understand the sacrifices made to win the past wars. If we don't document their stories, the job they did in protecting our way of life will be lost to future generations.

Nine Sisters Documentary Crew

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Jason McDonald

Co-Producer

Mr. McDonald is the author of the World War II Multimedia Database, www.worldwar2database.com, which has been adopted for use in public and private schools around the world. This resource provides history students with primary and secondary sources on the entire war, including a collection of over 130 essays and over 1,850 annotated photos. His production company, MFA Productions, is currently in post-production on its first video, *Day of the Kamikaze*, about the first large-scale kamikaze attack on the US Third Fleet. The video will be shown on Austrian State Television on November 25, 2004. It is under consideration for video distribution and for airing on PBS. He is the Media Specialist at the United Nations International School, where he has won 21 international awards as a producer for youth-created video. He is a multimedia consultant for political campaigns, designing websites, communications materials and video presentations. His work has appeared on local television and in the Village Voice. Mr. McDonald graduated Summa Cum Laude from Fordham University with a B.A. in History.

Tansal Arnas

Director of Photography

Mr. Arnas is a filmmaker in a broad sense. He has made several short narrative films in which he has served as director, producer, cinematographer, editor, writer and actor, winning festival awards in some of those areas. He is currently in post-production on his first feature-length film. Mr. Arnas was born in Istanbul, Turkey, and resides in New York City. He received a B.A. in Philosophy from New York University. Mr. Arnas is President of Sanra Productions LLC.



