This Destroyer Did the US Proud Through Three Wars

By Kris Osborn
 President & Founder, Center for Military Modernization

Navy Destroyer USS Radford

From supporting amphibious attacks against the Viet Cong to fighting off Japanese warships, the USS Radford has seen it all -- and the Fletcher-class destroyer is credited with one of the most daring rescues of World War II.

The Radford, which was commissioned in 1942, saw action in World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam. It became famous in 1943 for sinking a Japanese submarine while carrying out a perilous rescue operation, Naval History and Heritage Command historian Guy Nasuti told Military.com in an interview.

The Radford's rescue of the cruiser USS Helena came after the U.S. Navy had captured the small island of Munda, a Japanese outpost in the Pacific. After the U.S. invasion of the island, the USS Radford and other U.S. ships engaged in open-water warfare with the Japanese.

"A Japanese torpedo tore off Helena's bow and two more hit the main hull, sending it to the bottom. That battle became a contest between Japanese torpedoes and American gunfire," states the history journal "World War II." The article, titled "Heroic Rescue of Helena's Survivors," catalogs the deadly battle between a U.S. Navy cruiser division and a 12-warship strong Japanese naval force.

The ocean battle presented unique challenges for the Radford and other U.S. Navy forces, because the Japanese attacked with a powerful Akizuki-class destroyer equipped with a newer type 22 radar detector and Long Lance torpedoes.

As open-water warfare progressed, the USS Radford pulled wounded "oil-soaked" sailors from the Helena out of the sea with cargo nets -- all the while under enemy fire.

Despite the perils of ongoing Japanese attacks, the Radford repeatedly returned to rescue more sailors.

"The ships were like sitting ducks, stopped dead in the water to allow the men in the sea to swim over to them. Their rescue operations continue to be interrupted by enemy attacks," writes Thomas McLoughlin.

USS Radford Home to Enduring Friendships

During the Vietnam War, the Radford provided naval gunfire support and escorted aircraft carriers during the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. The destroyer became an instrumental part of a broad amphibious attack strategy during the ensuing Vietnam War.

Not all the occurrences aboard the Radford during the war were happy ones. A particularly memorable and poignant moment occurred when Lt. Doug Vaughan was laid to rest at sea -- after being hit by a Viet Cong ambush during treacherous land warfare operations.

Vaughan had been an officer on the Radford and volunteered for ground duty during the height of combat in the war. According to Nasuti, in an unexpected coincidence, Vaughan's close high school friend (and fellow sailor) had been assigned to replace Vaughan on shore duty. Tragically, Vaughan's friend was injured while at a special military survival school and did not get a chance to see Vaughan before his death.

Vaughan's sense of duty and dedication to the mission have inspired a lasting memory among his fellow service members. "I feel privileged and honored to be able to tell these stories, to keep the memories of these veterans and people that served alive," Nasuti said.

The Radford was finally decommissioned in 1969 and sold for scrap a year later, but not without one final feisty moment. She broke away from the tug that was towing her from California to Portland, Oregon, resulting in a 34-mile chase along the Oregon coast to retrieve her. In all, the Radford received 12 battle stars and two Presidential Unit Citations for World War II service, five battle stars for the Korean War, four for the Vietnam War and the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal.

Currently, memorabilia from the Radford, including photos, uniforms and displays about the ship and her service, can be found at the USS Orleck Naval Museum in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Editor's note: The USS Orleck was relocated to Jacksonville, FL in 2022