

The *USS Elrod* and the Proud Tradition of U.S. Navy Warship Visits to Tallinn



USS Elrod

Following last June's port visit of the destroyer *USS Mahan* (DDG-72), Estonians will get a chance to see the frigate *USS Elrod* (FFG-55) in Tallinn's harbor on August 10, 2008. The *USS Elrod* is one of thirty *Oliver Hazard Perry* class frigates on active duty in the U.S. Navy. Her sister ships can be found serving in the Australian, Spanish, Polish, Taiwanese, Turkish, Bahrainian, and Egyptian navies.

This U.S. Navy frigate specializes in underwater warfare and comes equipped with multiple-launchers for its Mark 45 anti-submarine torpedoes as well as a Vulcan Phalanx anti-missile system and an Italian-built Oto Melara 76 mm gun for self-defense. In order to expand its underwater warfare capabilities, the *USS Elrod* normally deploys with two SH-60B Seahawk helicopters on board.

The *USS Elrod* was commissioned on September 21, 1985 and named in honor of Second World War Medal of Honor winner Henry T. Elrod (1905-1941) – a Marine Corps officer who became the first fighter pilot to ever sink an enemy warship (the Japanese Navy's destroyer *Kisaragi*)

and who died heroically soon afterwards defending Wake Island from attack. When not deployed overseas, the Elrod's crew of 200 men and women call Norfolk, Virginia home. The ship is 138 meters long and can travel at speeds of 30 knots.

November 1919: The Start of a Long Tradition of U.S. Navy War Ship Visits

When the cruiser *USS Chattanooga* (C-16) became the first U.S. Navy warship to visit the Republic of Estonia in November 1919 (see the June 21, 2007 edition of *Eesti Päevaleht* for the full story), it launched what would become a new tradition. Over the next eight years, U.S. Navy warship visits to Tallinn became a regular summer occurrence.

But even before the Soviet occupation of Estonia in June 1940, two other events took place which created a sixty – rather than a fifty – year gap in U.S. Navy warship visits. The first event was the Great Crash of October 1929 which triggered a world-wide economic recession and government cost-cutting measures. The second event was the signing of the London Naval Treaty of April 22, 1930 (also known as the *Treaty for the Reduction and Limitations of Naval Armament*) which required the U.S. Navy to scrap many of its warships. With fewer warships and a smaller budget, this tradition was put on hold in the 1930s until it was restarted again in the 1990s.

Some of the documented U.S. Navy warship visits to Tallinn in the 1920s include:

August 1920: USS Pittsburgh (CA-4)

The armored cruiser *USS Pittsburgh* arrived in Tallinn for her first visit in August 1920 with an unidentified destroyer serving as her escort. On August 28, the newspaper *Kaja* reported that the purpose of the visit was “unknown.” Two days later, *Vaba Maa* wrote that “a source privy to the information has stated that the presence of the Pittsburgh and another destroyer in the Baltic Sea has no political overtones.”

The *USS Pittsburgh* was commissioned on March 9, 1905 and served for a time as the flagship of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Originally known as the *USS Pennsylvania* (ACR-4), the ship was renamed the *USS Pittsburgh* in 1912 when the U.S. Navy launched a new series of battleships named after U.S. states.

While in San Francisco Bay on January 18, 1911, the *USS Pittsburgh* made history when test pilot Eugene Ely landed the first airplane on to a ship-board platform thus opening the age of naval aviation and giving rise to the first aircraft carriers. During World War I, the *USS*

Pittsburgh worked together with British warships to keep the Pacific clear of German raiders. By August 1920, the *USS Pittsburgh* was serving as the flagship for the U.S. Baltic Fleet. Its first visit to Estonia was cut short when U.S. Navy Secretary Daniels ordered the ship to Danzig to protect U.S. citizens there.

Decommissioned on October 15, 1921, the *USS Pittsburgh* was then re-commissioned on October 2, 1922 as the flagship of U.S. Naval forces in Europe before eventually transferring back to Pacific waters in 1926. The *USS Pittsburgh* was decommissioned on July 10, 1931 in keeping with the terms of the London Naval Treaty.

August 1921: USS Childs (DD-241)

When she visited Tallinn under her first captain Commander I.H. Mayfield, the destroyer *USS Childs* was a brand new warship only recently commissioned into the U.S. Navy on October 22, 1920. The *USS Childs* – named after U.S. Navy submariner Earle W.F. Childs who died during World War I – may have been joined the next day by another unnamed Clemson-class destroyer. Estonian newspapers reported that the lights from the ships were a spectacular sight.

On August 26, Kaja also reported that “the American sailors filled the streets of Tallinn in the evening where their peculiar uniforms and high spirits gained much attention.” Two days later, Kaja reported: “On Monday at 5 PM in the rooms of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Executive Officer of the *USS Childs* Lt. Holmes will give a presentation on the topic of 'The American Navy in the Great War.'”

At the start of the next great war, the *USS Childs* managed to survive the Japanese bombing of the Philippines on December 10, 1941. For the remainder of the war, the *USS Childs* served as a tender and mine layer while also performing various air-sea rescue missions throughout the South Pacific. She was decommissioned on December 10, 1945, having been superseded by the many newer destroyers built during the Second World War.

August 1923: USS Pittsburgh (CA-4)

While serving as the new flagship of U.S. Naval forces in Europe, the *USS Pittsburgh* paid a second visit to Tallinn in August 1923. On August 19, *Vaba Maa* reported that “Vice Admiral Andrews, Commander of the U.S. Fleet currently in European waters, was also on board.” While Estonian newspapers were not quite sure why the *USS Pittsburgh* visited Tallinn back in August 1920, this time the ship was welcomed with open arms. As she entered the harbor, the *USS*

Pittsburgh fired a salute in honor of the Estonian flag while the Estonian Navy's *Lembit* responded with a salute of fifteen shots. Later in the day, various high-ranking officials from the Estonian government toured the ship including Mr. Martus from the Estonian Foreign Ministry. The Foreign Ministry also hosted a formal dinner in the honor of the visiting U.S. Navy officers.

The crew of the *USS Pittsburgh* even got a chance to play a game of baseball against a local Estonian team, defeating them by a score of 6 to 1. U.S. Army Lt. John Thors first introduced baseball to Estonia back in 1919. In his memoirs *An American Epic* (1961), former U.S. President Herbert Hoover writes: "The only bit of humor from the Baltic was provided by Lieutenant John Thors who had charge of child relief in Estonia. He reported that upon the arrival of our ship the *Lake Dancey*, the captain asked for a field for his crew to determine whether the sailors or the fire-men had a better baseball team. Thors had a field marked out and decided that he would charge the Estonians admission to this strange performance. He borrowed a band from the town and saw to it that full publicity appeared in the press. The sailors and firemen donated cigarettes to be sold for 1.50 marks a pack – say 25 cents – a reduction of about 80 per cent of the current price. The band, cigarettes, and baseball game proved a huge success. Lieutenant Thors counted up 3,200 marks for the Children's Relief." While Estonia's YMCA did its best to encourage the spread of baseball in the 1920s, the organization was much more successful at introducing basketball and volleyball to Estonia – both sports originally developed by the American YMCA.

July 1924: USS Flusser (DD-289)

Another Clemson-class destroyer named the *USS Flusser* (commissioned February 25, 1920) visited Tallinn in July 1924. The U.S. built a total of 156 Clemson-class destroyers from 1919 to 1922. As a result, they became common sights in ports around the world whenever the U.S. decided to "show the flag." As with the *USS Childs* before her, the *USS Flusser* was greeted with full military honors and her officers visited the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of War. The Foreign Ministry hosted a dinner in the U.S. Navy warship's honor. *Vaba Maa* covered the visit in its July 24 edition.

This particular destroyer was named after Charles W. Flusser – a U.S. Navy hero from the U.S. Civil War who died while in command of the gunboat *USS Miami* during its engagement with the Confederate ironclad *CSS Albemarle* on April 19, 1864. The *USS Flusser* served with both the U.S. Naval forces in Europe and in the Caribbean before she was decommissioned on October 22, 1930 in accordance with the terms of the London Naval Treaty.

June 1925: USS Pittsburgh (CA-4)

On its third and final visit to Tallinn, the flagship *USS Pittsburgh* arrived the same summer along with various Latvian, Dutch, Danish, and English warships as reported in a June 5 article in *Vaba Maa*. Although she was already twenty years old at the time, the 154 m long *USS Pittsburgh* would have still made a good impression among all this foreign naval competition. The *USS Pittsburgh* carried a crew of 829 and plenty of firepower including: four 200 mm guns, fourteen 150 mm guns, eighteen 76 mm guns, as well as two torpedo tubes and various other weapons. Heavily armored with a 150 mm thick hull and 100 mm of steel on deck, the *USS Pittsburgh* could still manage to cruise at a respectable 22 knots.

August 1926: USS Sharkey (DD-281) and USS Lardner (DD-286)

With the arrival of the sister ships *USS Sharkey* (commissioned November 28, 1919) and *USS Lardner* (commissioned December 10, 1919), Clemson-class destroyers were definitely a regular feature in Tallinn's harbor. The *USS Lardner* was named in honor of James L. Lardner – a senior U.S. Navy officer in the U.S. Civil War cited for gallantry while serving as the captain of the frigate *Susquehanna* and who was later put in command East Gulf Blockading Squadron and then the West India Squadron. The *USS Sharkey* was named after Lieutenant (Junior Grade) William J. Sharkey who died on board the submarine *O-5* while trying to prevent an onboard explosion on October 5, 1918.

With two U.S. destroyers in the harbor, the Estonian Navy's *Lembit* fired salutes in their honor while both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and U.S. Consul Harry Carlson organized dinners for all the officers on board. Instead of baseball, the U.S. sailors were supposed to play football with their Estonian hosts. The U.S. Navy officers were treated to a formal ball on August 7 while their sailors enjoyed shore leave. *Esmaspäev*, a weekly supplement to *Vaba Maa*, wrote on August 9: “a sight already familiar from recent years could be seen: cheerful young men with their little white hats and white socks. They'll gladly visit the taverns – they've got plenty of dollars.”

The Estonian media of the day was very impressed with the armaments and power of these two destroyers and described them in great detail – perhaps after having had a chance to come on board for an early version of a media tour. A typical Clemson-class destroyer usually carried four 102 mm guns, four 76 mm guns, and 12 torpedo tubes. These 95 m ships boasted crews of 122 and were capable of cruising at an impressive 35 knots thanks to their four boilers and two Westinghouse turbines. Both the *Sharkey* and the *Lardner* were decommissioned on the same day – May 1, 1930 – in keeping with the London Naval Treaty signed by the U.S. Government

the week before.

August 1927: USS Barker (DD-213) and USS Whipple (DD-217)

Another pair of Clemson-class destroyers – the *USS Barker* (commissioned on December 27, 1919 and named after Rear Admiral Albert S. Barker who fought in both the U.S Civil War and the Spanish-American War) and the *USS Whipple* (commissioned on April 23, 1920) visited Tallinn the following year. The *USS Whipple* was named in honor of American Revolutionary War naval commander Abraham Whipple. Captain Whipple is credited with sinking the first British ship during America's War of Independence. And while in command of the frigate *Columbus*, Captain Whipple commanded the first ever U.S. Navy-Marine Corps joint amphibious assault against the British garrison in Nassau, Bahamas in 1776.

Although these two destroyers were named in honor of exceptional American naval commanders, Estonian journalists were impressed by their crews because they seemed just like normal people. The crew wore their regular work clothes as they cleaned the ship in advance of their arrival in port, making no effort to hide their day-to-day lives and avoiding any special displays as if they truly “felt at home.” In their August 20 coverage, *Vaba Maa* once again paid particular attention to their headgear: “The sailors' hats look peculiar – small and white, almost making it seem like the crew is any army of cooks.”

Vaba Maa's reporter was also impressed with the multi-ethnic composition of the ships' crews which included Asian sailors described as “Japanese and Chinese” but who were most likely Filipino. After the Philippine Islands became a territory of the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898, the U.S. Navy regularly took on Filipino crew members.

During the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the *USS Barker* happened to be in Borneo where she was quickly assigned to perform convoy duty in the South Pacific. After being overhauled in 1942, the *USS Barker* served on anti-submarine in the Atlantic Ocean, escorting the aircraft carrier *USS Core* (CVE-13) which sank several German submarines. After completing multiple runs as a convoy escort in the Atlantic, the *USS Barker* was decommissioned on July 18, 1945.

Like her sister ship the *USS Barker*, the *USS Whipple* also avoided the scrap yards in the aftermath of the London Naval Treaty of 1930 to see duty in World War II. But even before then, the *USS Whipple* led a very interesting life. In June 1920, she visited White Russian forces in Sevastopol. On July 7, 1920, she was in Batumi when the British turned over control of the city to the new Republic of Georgia. On November 14, 1920, the *USS Whipple* was the last Allied

ship out of Sevastopol as she helped evacuate defeated White Russian forces under General Baron Pjotr Wrangel's command.

In 1928, the *USS Whipple* joined the U.S. Navy's Asian Fleet where she would have another set of adventures. On April 14, she collided with her sister ship the *USS Smith Thompson* (DD-212) while taking part in training exercises in Subic Bay in the Philippines. The *Smith Thompson* was so badly damaged that she had to be scrapped – but not before donating her bow to the *Whipple*. After her nose job, the *USS Whipple* became the first U.S. Navy ship to call on a Soviet port when she arrived in Vladivostok on July 28, 1937 along with the heavy cruiser *USS Augusta* (CA-31) and her sister Clemson-class destroyers the *USS Barker*, *USS Alden* (DD-211), and *USS Paul Jones* (DD-230). The five warships remained in port until August 1, 1937.

In Manila Bay on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the *USS Whipple* was assigned to various escort and patrol duties in the South Pacific. She was escorting the U.S. Navy's first aircraft carrier – the *USS Langley* (AV-3) – when Japanese bombers sunk her off the coast of Java. The *USS Whipple* went to the rescue, saving 308 crew members from the carrier.

After serving together with ships from Australia and New Zealand's navies, the *Whipple* was upgraded for convoy duty, performing multiple runs between Hawaii and the West Coast until spring 1943. In May 1943, the *Whipple* crossed through the Panama Canal into the Atlantic where she served as a convoy escort and German U-boat hunter. After a stint as a target vessel for U.S. submarines, the *Whipple* was decommissioned on November 5, 1945.

August 2008: USS Elrod (FFG-55)

The *USS Elrod* is proud to continue the tradition of U.S. Navy warship visit to Tallinn which re-started in the early 1990s and continue to this day. During her years of service, the *USS Elrod* has earned multiple awards and has deployed five times to the Persian Gulf, including in the wake of Operation Desert Storm.