

THE DECKS RAN RED!

The grimmest of all wartime shipboard duty was experienced by the valiant medical corpsmen who manned the PCE (R) rescue ships the Naval equivalent of seagoing ambulances



One of the least-known but most significant warship variants of WWII was the PCE(R) - the Navy's equivalent of a seagoing ambulance. Only 13 were commissioned and these saw extensive duty only in the later campaigns of the Pacific. Though few in number the heroic role of the PCE(R)s in Pacific invasions was truly remarkable for had they not existed thousands of wounded aboard the smaller vessels of the amphibious fleets may have perished before adequate medical aid reached them.

Born to battle, the PCE(R)s proved war at best is a nasty business. Saving as many lives as possible in the bloody arena of battle became an urgent priority in the island-hopping phase of the Pacific War where heavy casualties were frequently taken far at sea thousands of miles from hospital facilities. While large hospital ships assigned to invasion fleets did their best to expedite front-line medical aid they were not always available in adequate enough numbers to be everywhere when needed. This shortcoming became especially critical to those who sustained

serious wounds aboard the smaller ships of the fast moving battle fleets, and with amphibious landing craft which existed in large numbers but whose diminutive size precluded the inclusion of sick bays or emergency facilities for medical personnel.

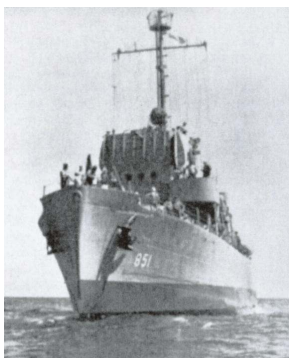
HE WHO RECEIVES PROMPT MEDICAL ATTENTION IS LIKELY TO SURVIVE

America's Civil War, the first conflict to experience the terrible wounds caused by explosive shells and high volume musketry, early proved that recovery of the seriously injured largely depended upon how quickly proper medical aid could be obtained. By the onset of WWII, the US Army had addressed this problem by inserting trained medics in every infantry unit. The medics were in turn supported by mobile front line dressing stations and these in turn were networked with mobile field hospitals which were served by corps of motorized ambulances. In this manner during the European War it was not uncommon for a wounded soldier to often find himself in a full-blown hospital bed withing hours after being injured.

But not so at sea where the vastness of the ocean often spelled the difference between life and death. Sailors and seamen severely injured on merchant ship in convoy, on patrol craft or aboard vessels involved in rear area combats, were forced to depend on whatever limited medical facility was available. Emergency medical aid was frequently nonexistent or, at best, limited to small pharmacist manned dispensaries of destroyers or destroyer-escorts and LSTs. Small escorts such as PCs, AMs and landing craft like LCIs, LCTs, LCMs, and LCVs - backbones of the amphibious fleets - generally carried no medical personnel.

To correct this dilemma in the far-flung Pacific the Navy, late in 1943, decided to create what was tantamount to a special sea-going ambulance staffed with doctors and trained corpsmen who could provide adequate emergency aid to smaller vessels during amphibious operations. The early success of two field modified Army Headquarters ships assigned to Gen. Mac Arthur's command provided the inspiration for the rescue ship/ambulance program. By the time the waterborne ambulance concept took organizational form in the Pentagon the advent of the death-bound Japanese kamikazes - who especially sought out lucrative humanity intense targets like troopships and landing craft - made the need for the emergency medical aid afloat all the more acute.

A VERY SPECIAL VESSEL FOR INTER-ISLAND MERCY MISSIONS



PCE(R)-851 was one of 13 - 185ft steel-hulled convoy escorts modified from AM-type mine-sweepers. Fitted with 80 bed hospitals, they featured surgery bays, a pharmacy, x-ray facilities, trained medical specialists and had CICs for amphibious operations. Unlike hospital ships, the PCE(R)s were armed and carried no distinctive markings.

The vessel chosen for this salubrious task was a specially modified 185-ft long patrol craft based on the well-proven diesel-powered all steel *Admirable*-class mine-sweeper. Capable of making 15 - 16 kts, a number of AM hulls had been converted into ocean-going patrol craft whose 8,000 mile range, sea keeping ability and imposing armament made them well-suited to the Pacific. Based on a design originally ordered by the General Board in 1941 to include British specifications, the 795-ton AM hull proved itself readily adaptable to a multitude of uses within the patrol craft escort (PCE) role. Of the 49 AMs completed as PCEs, ten were converted to amphibious PCE(C) control ships, eleven

were altered in weather ships, two became ACM minelayers, two others morphed into Coast Guard cutters, three became YDG degaussing vessels, and 13 were altered in the rescue ship configuration as PCE(R)s.

By extending the long forecastle almost to the stern, the planners at Pullman-Standard Car Co. - designers and builders of the 185-footers - were able to create a large hospital bay able to accommodate beds for 80 patients. A complete surgery, X-ray and pharmacy were provided along with quarters for a medical officer, and a staff of 15 pharmacist mates, including lab technicians. Quarters were also made available for additional doctors who augmented the staff as the need arose. The rescue PEECEE's complement numbered 120 men and eight officers, generally all reservists or inductees.

Unlike hospital ships, which by international law carried no armament, the PCE(R) retained its full gunboat-type weaponry of a single 3-in/50 DP gun on the foredeck, two single 40mm, and six 20mm. As the kamikaze became more of a threat it was not uncommon for PCE(R)s to add a variety of single and dual-mount .50-cal machine guns readily made available from the Army by unrecorded trades of "medicinal" brandy for Brownings.



Although the Brits refused to accept the AM versions built for them under Lend-Lease because they did not include diesel-electric power, the PCE design retained the raised open bridge wherein an enclosed wheel-house was provided in the deck below. Late model sonar and a variety of VHF/HF communications, plus a modified Combat Information Center (CIC) gave these hybrid vessels the ability to provide escort duty en route to an invasion and upon arrival at an enemy beach quickly transformed into the rescue role.

To better appreciate the type of war these unique vessels fought, let's trace the exploits of the PCE(R)-851, one of a trio of newly commissioned rescue ships which arrived in the Pacific shortly before the 1944 invasion of Leyte after many dull months of patrol duty out of Bermuda.

PCE(R)s -851, -852 and -853 arrived at Manus in time to report to DesRon54 just before the destroyer's departure for Leyte. Having traveled as a team en route from Hawaii, the trio of young captains had evolved a number of plans for various types of rescue work which they felt would prove the life-saving potential of their vessels. Among these specially developed procedures was the ability to transfer wounded quickly via Stokes litters, methods of identifying and classifying required medical attention and, above all, procedures to assure maximum survivability of those in their care. Although extremely pleased with their innovative accomplishments, the officers and their medical staffs were due for an unfortunate rude awakening. It seems no one deigned to inform them that the Navy had failed to advise the 7th Fleet of the new ships' purpose, existence, or presence.

Acting as spokesman for the trio, Cmdr. F.S. Bayley, USNR, a Harvard educated attorney from Seattle who commanded -851, did his best to explain to the destroyermen the variety of rescue services his vessels were capable of performing. However, the officer Bayley addressed lacked an y comprehension of what the weird new ships were able to do. Worse yet, he confused the stubby-looking gunboats with high speed Air-Sea Rescue boats, advised them not to race about the harbor at 35-kts, that there was little flying activity and ordered all three to tie-up to

harbor buoys and await further orders.

PROVING THEIR VALUE AS THE WOUNDED LAY DYING

After days of inactivity as the invasion of Leyte progressed as planned, Bayley and his fellow PCE(R) skippers took matters into their own hands. Going ashore, they consulted with the very harried beachmaster and convinced him they could expedite the transfer of seriously wounded GIs. In a matter of hours several boat loads of Army wounded were transferred from the exposed well decks of sun-baked landing craft to the well-ordered facilities of the PCE(R)s. For their efforts the Army gave the trio a well done. With that, the PCE(R)s were in business.

The next day, Bayley's -851 received a signal from a nearby Liberty ship asking for medical assistance to aid a number of Army Air Force personnel, including four P-38 fighter pilots wounded by friendly fire in an early morning air raid. Going directly alongside the Liberty's warlike hull the highly maneuverable rescue ship proved - thanks to its high freeboard and multiple deck levels - that it was easier to transfer the wounded from deck to deck rather than by sling or via boats, a procedure they would follow from then on whenever sea conditions allowed..

Responding to the sinking of the escort carrier *Gambier Bay* the rescue PCE(R)s finally came to the attention of their own Navy, whose Fleet Medical Department up until then was not-aware of the rescue ships' existence. Notified that three new seagoing ambulances were nearby, the 7th Fleet Surgeon dispatched them post haste to aid the hundreds of injured and badly burned *Gambier Bay* survivors. With this mammoth effort soon accomplished the three rescue ships now found their services in high and continual demand as the dread kamikazes began to take their toll.

The -51 and -52 soon evolved a teamwork method of supplementing each other with personnel and supplies, loaning doctors and medicines as needed. They anchored at short stay, with steaming watch set at all times, and as raids approached, the main engines were lit off and kept warm. They were able to get underway within three minutes, and frequently did so. In a short time the -51 had gone alongside *Montpelier*, *New Orleans*, *Lamson*, and numerous merchant ships and other Naval vessels, while the -52 was similarly engaged. No sooner were wounded treated and transferred to hospital ships than a new load would come aboard. In the surgery, operations of every kind were constantly performed, frequently while under fire.

Shortly before the Ormoc landing in December of 1944, the -852 and -853 were returned



to Manus for overhaul and repairs, and the -51 stayed as the only rescue ship in the Philippines. She was damaged finally, in a minor way, at Mindoro, while going alongside the burning LST-472, and also was flooded forward by a friendly shell hit. As a result, the -51 was allowed to proceed to Hollandia at the end of December for repairs. She had been under way or anchored at war cruising condition on five minute ready duty since leaving Pearl Harbor in September. The crew had not during

this time been ashore, and after five months together in a small ship tempers were growing short. Much strain arose from the fact that the ship had no air search radar, and visual sighting of planes had to be relied on. In addition, lacking a TBS, the ship was unable to tune in on many of the warning from nearby vessels, which caused a feeling of being alone in the ocean.



PCE(R)-851 snubs her bow against the side of an LST struck by a kamikaze. Whenever possible they came directly alongside stricken vessels to remove the wounded with their specially trained teams of Naval corpsmen. This tactic speeded up the first-aid process and also minimized the amount of handling the wounded were forced to endure.

The grim nature of the duty gave rise to humor or an equally grim

sort. Returning at dusk from a Liberty ship that had been hit at sea, and anchored at the northern end of Surigao strait, the -851 had 60 burned and wounded men below and 15 dead stacked on the boat deck. Out of the shadows of the straits, without warning, came a string of Japanese Bettys, flying low on the water. They passed close aboard to starboard, while the ship's gunners blasted without success at them. In the course of some violent (and probably un-needed) evasive action, the corpses rolled wildly about the boat deck. For the balance of the night the crew located bodies, and parts of bodies, by stumbling over them in the dark. The engine rooms complained when the bodies were stacked too close to the ventilator intakes, and as they were moved from place to place, different parts of the ship called the bridge to grouse.

In the morning the ship went alongside a hospital LST to unload. Seamen on that ship were busily painting out its numbers, because Tokyo Rose had identified them by number as a target for the Kamikaze. She was also generally understood to have the -851 in mind when she accused our Navy of employing armed hospital ships to shoot down the "indomitable" Nipponese flyers.

ON TO THE OKINAWAN BLOOD BATH

After repairs at Hollandia - 851 found itself reassigned to the 5th Fleet's DesRon 60 at Saipan for the upcoming invasion of Okinawa. At this point the ship fortuitously came under the command of Capt. C.B. Buchanan, USN, an officer who became enthralled with the vessel's unique life-saving mission. Taking voluminous notes on rescue techniques for future reference, Buchanan's interest would soon pay handsome dividends to those whose lives the ship saved.

The screening position of the -851, while steaming to Okinawa, was directly ahead of Adm. Turner's big AGC. As the force steamed at 14 to 15 kts, and the -51 had a maximum speed at that time of 15-kts, screening became of secondary importance. Captain Buchanan was aware of the predicament the ship was in and authorized a more or less straight course while the

formation followed a zig-zag plan. This kept the ship out of harm's way until at last, on the night before D-day, the Engineer gave the bridge a solemn warning on stack temperatures, pressures, and Diesel engines in general. At the same time, an LSD was falling astern, so Capt. Buchanan assigned the -851 as escort for the cripple, and as dawn came the two ships chugged alone toward Okinawa.

Approaching Hagushi Beach, with the island about ten miles distant, the ships were relieved to hear over Local Air Warning that the condition was Flash White - with no enemy planes in the area. As the -51's gunners climbed out of their straps and seats, and a cloud of cigarette smoke rose over the ship, an airplane engine was heard in the clouds overhead. The gunnery officer, a tall and slow-spoken Texan, drawled, "Hell, Cap'n that ain't no F6F - I bet it's a JBJ." (This latter was -851 talk meaning "Jap By Jeezus," as opposed to FTG, meaning "Friendly Thank God.") No sooner had he spoken than through a rift in the clouds came a Zeke, diving almost vertically, with its propeller spinner centered directly on the bridge of the ship. Being unfamiliar with the laws of relative motion, the pilot passed behind the funnel, a few inches above the starboard motor whaleboat, and splashed ten feet from the ship.

Not a shot was fired.

When the incident was reported later to Capt. Buchanan, his remark was only: "if you think you scared him to death, claim him!"

At Okinawa the -855 arrived, fresh from the States, and joined with the -51 and -52 in performing most of the rescue work during that operation. The Okinawa days were without a doubt the fastest moving and busiest days for these ships. Almost without cease, except during stormy days, the continuous raids called for the services of the PCE(R)s. To be readily available at all times to the picket ships, they were stationed well out at sea, separately, where they steamed alone until directed to a damaged picket. The duties of the ships were well expressed by Commodore Moosebrugger:

"The services of these ships were urgently and almost continuously required. Whenever a vessel was damaged in action, one of these PCE(R)s would be directed immediately to render aid. Many heroic rescues of wounded personnel from alongside bumming and sinking vessels were carried out, frequently in addition to saving survivors from water. The frequent and unpredictable enemy attacks required that the ship stand by on instant notice, 24 hours a day, day after day. Her station while awaiting call was an isolated and remote one from which she could proceed with the least delay to the distant Radar Picket Stations. Frequent under attack herself, she had to fight off enemy planes with her own gunfire and by maneuvers.

Although on occasion the dead were taken aboard with the wounded, as when the -851 went alongside *Maryland*, it was necessary finally to refuse to do this at Okinawa. This was partly because of space limitations and the difficulty of getting the Graves Registration people on the beach to take the bodies away - but principally because of the adverse effect upon the morale of the ship's own personnel. The continual grimness of the duty was by this time making its mark upon all hands. In the case of other ships, unless they were hit, they rarely came in direct and immediate contact with the savage results of a kamikaze hit. But the PCE(R)s saw little else for months, and the crews became disheartened and morbid as a result. The feeling that "They won't get us" was slowly lost, and it became a certainty in the minds of the officers and men that the ship would be hit. The question with all hands was not "when," but "where." Such a conclusion was inevitable, because the ships traveled alone, without air cover, and could only rely on visual sighting of bogeys. And then when they were sighted, there was little or nothing to

throw at them.

During night attacks the -51 did not man battle stations. The large number of ships hit at night, when the kamikaze flew down the tracer path, forced the conclusion that no guns should



be fired after evening twilight. Consequently, only the damage control stations were fully manned, and the crew was ordered to disperse, with all hands except watchstanders in the engine rooms above the water line and with no more than ten men in any compartment. When a bogey closed the ship, word was passed to hit the deck. In this manner, the ship had many low-flying planes pass close aboard, but none ever hit it. On one moonlight night, while returning from Radar Picket Station #2, and still well north of the island, the -851 had four low-level passes made at it by one plane. The last three passes missed the bridge by over 30-ft, and the plane then flew off, leaving the ship with a badly overheated steering engine and a watery-kneed bridge gang. In the distance the tracers of another ship were seen steaming across the water, followed by a flash of flame as the plane dove in alongside it.

Some of the gun crews were vexed at this passive procedure until the ship took casualties from the *Maryland*, where a night kamikaze had struck directly in the midst of a group of 20mm on the top of Number Three turret. This and other similar sights soon took the itch from their fingers.

TOO MANY, TOO CLOSE, TOO OFTEN

Though thousands of sailors were forced to endure unspeakable horrors seeing their shipmates immolated aboard ships struck by kamikazes most would only be forced to face this ordeal once, or twice at best before being pulled out of combat. But the men of the rescue ships faced these gruesome sights every day with every ship they were called upon to assist. Working ankle deep in blood and mangled body parts became de rigeur as the Stokes litter bearers and attendants sought to find those amidst the debris of battle who could be saved. This constant exposure to grim death and dismemberment eventually took its toll on the young impressionable sailors who, unlike ambulance drivers facing similar horrors in big city hospital emergency rooms, found no respite from death and bloodshed for week at a time.

Particularly demoralizing was the fact that the rescue ships were not fitted with refrigerated morgues to store the dead. In the tropic heat stacked bodies decomposed quickly and the attendant smells of decaying flesh sent many of the younger sailors repeatedly to the rails to retch. In this grim atmosphere of sudden and violent death by fire, explosions or drowning it was inevitable that some crewmen would snap mentally and become victims along with those they attempted to save. This was part of the price paid to try to save precious lives in a conflict that killed more than 30,000,000.

SHIPS BECAME SCARRED AND BEATEN

During these days a jocular sort of camaraderie existed between the -851 and -852. If

they joined up during a moonlight night there was quiet discussion over the SC 510 voice radio as to who would stay up the path of the moon or who would take station astern, where most of the fire power lay. At other times the signals usually involved such priorities as who was entitled to ask first for permission to go in for supplies, or water, or repairs. Since ships were a fairly independent unit, such matters usually were agreed upon first, and permission requested in accordance with that agreement.

As the days and nights were on, the three rescue ships became more scarred and beaten. They were not properly designed to go along side vessels in a seaway, being high-sided with gun tubs flush to the sides. The -851 lost half of its portside stanchions and gun tub supports while backing away from *Laffey* on Radar Picket Station #1, and ran for three weeks with the gun platforms supported by 4 x 4 shoring before availability was granted alongside a repair ship.

The technique of going alongside was developed to the point that the Special Sea Detail was done away with, and the -851 used what was commonly known as the "Special Special Sea Detail," which consisted of a small number of highly proficient line-handlers and the ship's best helmsman. This left more men free for the casualty party. The Casualty Party was a carefully chosen group of men, who were trained in emergency aid techniques by the medical officer, and whose duty it was to scramble aboard the stricken ship with Stokes litters and bring back the wounded. Pharmacist mates led this party, checking on who should be moved first, and the medical officer either went aboard or stayed close by the rail to supervise and direct the seamen on where the injured were to be taken.

The bravery of most of the wounded was characteristic of the Navy. One burly sailor, clothed only in shorts with the rest of his body a blackened and charred mass of flesh, walked to the rail of his ship and across the brow to the -851. As he approached the step down from the brow he stopped, held out his arms, and indicating his wrists said, "Grab 'em there, boys." Other story book examples of heroism were too frequent to mention. A fairly common remark heard from wounded men was something like "Poor Mike fired at the b----- until he smacked into his gun," or a bewildered, "The last 30 rounds went right into the SOB's nose and he didn't even waver," or "I saw him coming in on the port side - and the next thing I knew I was up to my knees in water on the conn."

One of the angriest men to come aboard the -851 was a Marine pilot fished out of the water, who kept saying, with a shocked expression: "They teach these carrier guys recognition for six months, and then they shoot down an F4U." He had been picked off by a Navy pilot. His wrath was equaled only by the TBM pilot who came aboard off Iwo Jima after being shot down by a battleship, in broad daylight.

The general conclusion reached by personnel serving on the PCE(R)s was that they were a most valuable addition to the fleet; but that they should be ten knots faster, carry more guns, and should be specially constructed for close-in work with loading posts in the ships' sides. In addition, all ship's officers should be instructed in the task of the rescue vessel, in what its capabilities are and when it should be called upon. Many lives were saved by the , PCE(R)s, but the number could have been increased had their qualities been more fully recognized and proper advantage taken of them.

POSTWAR CAREERS OF THE PCE(R)S

Although Japan's surrender brought peace to the Pacific battleground it was the advent of helicopter that instantly obsoleted the Navy's PeeCee seagoing ambulances. Already in use even

as Japanese emissaries signed the surrender documents, helicopters quickly established themselves as the revolutionary high-speed link between land and sea. Their ability to hover motionless in the air itself made them the perfect rescue vehicle for any kind of emergency in war or peace.

Happily, the PCE(R)'s inherent seaworthiness, economy and utility saw them sail on in a number of other capacities in the postwar Navy, namely as totally disarmed experimental sonar and weather ships. In February 1956, the eight surviving PCE(R)s on the Naval register were given names; the veteran -851 becoming *USS Rockville*, -852 *USS Brattleboro* and -853 *USS Amherst*. While their original hull numbers were retained the brackets were dropped from their designators thus making PCE(R)-851 simply PCER-851. At that time several were fitted with large aft cargo booms and configured for special use, i.e. *USS Rexburg* (EPCER-855) becoming an oceanographic research vessel. Sold in 1970, *Rexburg* next became the *SS Excalibur* of L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology.

All PCEs including the PCERs were retired, scrapped or transferred to foreign Navies by 1970. *USS Amherst* (PCER-853) and *Brattleboro* (PCER-852) deserve special mention because, after being transferred to the Vietnamese Navy in the late 1960's, both managed to escape capture by the Communists. With skeleton crews they eluded Viet Cong gunboats as South Vietnam collapsed and successfully made their way to the Philippines where in 1975 *Brattleboro* became the Philippine Navy's *Miguel Malvar* and *Amherst* the *Datu Marikuda*. Highlighted in this tribute, *USS Rockville* (PCER-851) became the Columbia Navy's *San Anderes* in 1969. With their decommissioning one of the Navy's most unusual warships of WWII passed into history where little if any mention is ever made of the uniquely humane role they played in some of the grimmest Naval warfare and sailor ever faced.