

The Blue-Collar American Tug Fleet of WWII

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Abstract

The World War II American Tug Fleet (ATF) performed important, but little publicized, operations. As time went on, these large ocean-going tugboats became legendary for aiding ships on the high seas during combat or in post-combat areas. They were the first responders to provide tows to damaged or disabled US Navy ships at sea. In addition, they did other special duties like pulling landing craft off beaches, providing floating fuel service stations and tugging vital supply barges, including ammunition for the fleet. This article examines a sample of six vessels, three deployed in the Atlantic and three seeing combat in the Pacific as a profile of their activities and subsequent post-war use.

The World War II American Tug Fleet (ATF) performed important, but little-publicized operations. As time went on, these large ocean-going tugboats became legendary for aiding ships on the high seas during combat or in post-combat areas.¹ They were the first responders providing tows to damaged or disabled US Navy ships at sea and giving firefighting assistance. In addition, they performed other special duties such as pulling landing craft off beaches, providing floating fuel service stations and tugging vital supply barges including ammunition for the fleet.

Two hundred and five feet long, thirty-eight feet at their beam and eighteen feet of draft, each was given an official “AT” navy hull designation, but had “TF” plus its numeral painted on their bows. There were twenty-nine of these vessels called *Cherokee* class after the prototype tug. Each ship was given a native or indigenous American identity. They were the only navy unit that totally used tribal names.

These tugs were powered by four General Motors diesel engines totaling 3,800 horsepower, capable of handling heavy ships in harbor maneuvers or at sea. They also had a 600-kilowatt General Electric generator directly connected to each of the four 12-cylinder two-cycle diesels with powerful diesel electric tug engines.² In addition, they had three General Motors auxiliary engines. The shaft’s single screw (propeller) could produce 16.5 knots.³

The vessels had a crew of eighty-five officers and men were armed with one 3inch /50-caliber gun, four 40mm AA guns (2x2) and two 20 mm AA guns (2x1) for self-defense plus a depth charge launcher.

ATF veterans of this unit formed The National Association of Fleet Tug Sailors. This was a tightly knit group of the former sailors and their families allied by military service in the tugs and salvage ships of the United States Navy, Coast Guard and Army. This special association emphasizes the significant contribution these small ships made a in both war and peace. The

group perpetuates and memorializes the tugs and those who served onboard them in the naval and military services of the United States of America and seek out those who served on these ships. They also serve as an informational repository concerning tugs, publicize the contribution of tug type ships to the naval and military services of the United States, have a website with facts and histories about select vessels, and publish the *Towline*, a magazine largely containing updated particulars.

Accounts of the ship's histories found in the vessel's logs are in the World War II Diaries, part of the Operational Archives Branch of the Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC. The following are brief excerpts and descriptions of the service and daring exploits of six tugboats during WWII and beyond largely extracted from these narratives. For quasi-narrative symmetry, three of the ships were assigned to the Atlantic and three to the Pacific theaters of operation. Obviously, some vessels saw more action than others, but these synopses represent the exceptionally varied activities in which the American Tug Fleet engaged during and after that conflict.⁴ Two small addendum anecdotes are added because a tugboat fleet captain's diary account is so vivid and later when this same vessel was given a unique assignment.

Atlantic Deployment

Cherokee (AT-66) was launched 10 November 1939 at Staten Island, N.Y. and commissioned 26 April 1940.⁵

Before WWII *Cherokee* was assigned towing duties along the east coast of the United States and in the Caribbean. As American naval ships took up escort duties for Atlantic convoys to support besieged Britain, *Cherokee's* operating area was expanded to the old and storm-tossed reaches of Newfoundland and Iceland. The vessel's operations continued in the North Atlantic until 23 October 1942, when *Cherokee* was ordered to participate in the invasion of North Africa, the only tug that accompanied the substantial invasion fleet across the Atlantic to French Morocco. *Cherokee* saw service well off the beaches during the shore bombardments and landing assaults of 8 through 12 November. She came to the aid of two disabled destroyers that were torpedoed by enemy aircraft.

The tug remained in North African waters to service the many warships that were concentrated there doing salvage work, towing and shuttling vital supplies to the troops ashore through March 1943. The vessel was briefly fitted with tanks so that she could serve as yard-oiler at Casablanca. On 3 May 1943 she departed for Norfolk for an overhaul and on 20 June the tug sailed to Bermuda to provide towing and salvage services and to escort surface vessels and submarines that were conducting training there. *Cherokee* twice crossed the submarine infested waters of the Atlantic to Casablanca in 1944 to take damaged destroyers in tow for the United States. These were dangerous and difficult assignments requiring excellent seamanship. Upon her stateside return in July, *Cherokee* towed targets for ships in training in Casco Bay, Maine,

not far from Portland. Roughly a year later she was assigned to warmer water duty at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba from May through July 1945.

After the war *Cherokee* continued Caribbean-based towing operations along the east coast and southward to Brazilian ports. The seagoing tug was decommissioned 29 June 1946 and transferred to the United States Coast Guard the same day. *Cherokee* (AT-66) was awarded one battle star for her World War II service.

Hopi (AT-71) was launched 7 September 1942 at Charleston, S.C. and commissioned 31 March 1943.⁶

USS *Hopi* sailed with a convoy for North Africa on 10 June 1943. Arriving at Oran on 21 June, she performed local towing service and then was ordered to Bizerte, Tunisia to join the Western Naval Task Force to service the Allied assault on Sicily (10 July-17 August 1943). She departed Bizerte 8 July with pontoons in tow, landed them 2 days later in time to help for the initial assault.⁷ Shortly thereafter she helped clear the beaches of damaged landing craft, fought fires on vessels in the transport areas, and performed many arduous tasks that were vital to the success of all amphibious operations.

Hopi returned to Bizerte 10 August to prepare for anticipated salvage work, an inevitable outcome of the planned Salerno operation. On 11 September, while delivering invasion support gunfire, cruiser *Savannah* received a direct hit on her No. 3 turret that left the vessel dead in the water. *Hopi* and the salvage tug *Moreno* came alongside and the two tugs enabled *Savannah* to withdraw to the safety of Malta that evening. On 16 September, HMS *Warspite* was put out of action when she suffered direct hits by two German guided bombs. The British warship was taken in tow by *Hopi* and *Moreno* and also delivered to Malta without further incident.

Hopi next sailed to assist in the assault on Anzio in late January 1944 remaining on station through February. On 15 February the liberty ship *Elihu Yale* was severely damaged by a bomb strike that started a fierce fire onboard. The ship had to be abandoned, but many of her crewmen were able to cling to life lines. *Hopi* picked up survivors in the water, then she maneuvered alongside, and transferred fire-fighting equipment to the stricken vessel. After 2 harrowing days, the fire was extinguished and the liberty ship was saved. Part of *Hopi*'s crew handled the harrowing rescue-firefighting operation while other sailors remained on their gunnery stations during repeated air raids and fire from shore, an example of the courage, devotion and spirit of those who served in the ATF in the face of danger.

On 15 May 1944, *Hopi* was once again assigned towing duty to various craft about the Mediterranean. In August she rejoined the Western Naval Task Force "Operation Dragoon," the invasion of southern France. Designated as flagship of the "Salvage and Fire-fighting Group," *Hopi* once again provided invaluable service with her towing duties and once again shuttling pontoons from Bizerte to Oran.

After the war in Europe ended, *Hopi* was ordered to Antwerp, Belgium, to tow the massive Army Power Plant *Seapower*. to Bermuda. On 25 August 1945, she sailed for the United

States for peacetime duty such as assisting of the coastal collier *Tristan* that had lost her rudder in a storm. *Hopi* towed her to Boston 3 December 1945.

For the next 3 years *Hopi* operated along America's East Coast with several foreign towing duties in Oran, Algiers, Newfoundland, and the Caribbean. During the 1948-1949 Berlin Airlift, Navy tankers and other ships brought 12 million gallons of aviation gasoline, goods, and supplies into Bremerhaven with navy tug assistance. *Hopi*, assigned to the 2nd Task Fleet, participated in North Atlantic maneuvers to demonstrate American power at sea—visible evidence of United States strength if needed.

In the 1950's *Hopi* resumed her operations along the East Coast to perform towing and salvage services contributing to the operating efficiency of America's naval fleet in peace. *Hopi* was decommissioned at New London, CT 9 December 1955 and became a member of the Atlantic Reserve Fleet. She was finally turned over to the Maritime Administration 27 March 1962 and moved to the Maritime Administration's National Defense Reserve Fleet, James River, VA. *Hopi* received four battle stars for her World War II service.

***Kiowa* (ATF-72)** was launched 5 November 1942 at Charleston, S.C. and commissioned 7 June 1943.⁸

After shakedown cruise, *Kiowa* reported to her primary duty station at Norfolk, then sailed for its first operations off Newfoundland. In the summer of 1943 the ocean-going tug performed a variety of services, including towing targets for new battleship USS *Iowa* (BB-61), enabling these vessels to fulfill their vital roles. For 6 months *Kiowa* towed ships and floating equipment before sailing south to New York 2 March 1944. She was then ordered to cross the Atlantic and arrived at Falmouth, England, 19 April. The Allies were in the final planning stages for the Normandy invasion. Loaded with firefighting and salvage equipment, *Kiowa* joined a convoy of LST's to participate in the largest amphibious operation of the war. The tug was employed in repairing landing craft, assisting disabled ships, and performing general salvage duty. She remained off Normandy until 25 July, briefly returned to British waters and to Norfolk on 30 September.

For the rest of the war *Kiowa* operated along America's Atlantic coast, towing and assisting disabled ships, escorting Allied merchant ships as they sailed to and from convoy lanes and as a fuel-barge-tanker for the vital role of re-fueling ships at sea. Following the war, *Kiowa* arrived at Argentia, Newfoundland for North Atlantic duty. From 1946 to 1959 the ocean-going tug continued operations along the extended east coast from the Canal Zone to Newfoundland, doing salvage work, towing ships and gunnery targets. These were unheralded but important assignments that contributed to the naval power for peace.

Arriving Guantanamo Bay 9 April, 1959 *Kiowa* was assigned to Antigua in the Caribbean as recovery ship for the beginning America's space flight program. On 28 May, the tug recovered the nose cone of a Jupiter missile that contained primates "Able" and



Figure 1 Tug KIOWA towing target in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, 1963. U.S. Navy Official Photo. Wikimedia Commons.

"Baker," the first space riders launched by the United States.

From 1959 into early 1965 *Kiowa* continued towing operations out of Norfolk and also implemented extensive services at Guantanamo Bay during the early years of the Castro regime. *Kiowa* operated as a unit of a task force patrolling the West Indies during the second Dominican Republic Crisis, sent to maintain the off-shore pump for petroleum products to blockaded Santo Domingo. On 7

September *Kiowa* joined the 6th Fleet. Arriving off Rota, Spain, the 20th, she

engaged in target-towing, diving, and salvaging duties into 1966. From 26 January to 26 February 1966 the ship participated in the storied search for an H-bomb that fell into the Mediterranean off Palomares, Spain, following an Air Force bomber's collision with an air-tanker. *Kiowa* then returned home, arriving at Little Creek, VA, on 16 April. *Kiowa* spent the next 5 months towing targets off the Virginia Capes followed by a much needed drydock overhaul at Norfolk 27 September. In late January 1967, *Kiowa* returned to operations off the East Coast, cruising from Bermuda to Canada and back into late 1967. *Kiowa* received one battle star for her World War II service.

Pacific Deployment

Abnaki (ATF-96) was laid down on 28 November 1942 at Charleston, S.C., launched on 22 April 1943 and commissioned at the Charleston Navy Yard on 25 November 1943.⁹



Figure 2 Tug ABNAKI towing captured German U-505, June 1944. U.S. Navy Official Photo. Wikimedia Commons.

This fleet tug initially began operating with the Atlantic Fleet conducting American eastern seaboard towing operations until the spring of 1944. On 28 May 1944, she sailed to Great Britain to tow barges and tank landing ships (LSTs) as preparation for the planned Normandy invasion. During the winter of 1945, she returned to Norfolk for repairs so that she could support the Pacific Fleet that was heavily engaged in battle.

On 24 April 1945, *Abnaki* passed Capes Henry and Charles to ultimately arrive at Pearl Harbor where she was ordered to

tow a barge laden with vital supplies to the lagoon at Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. On 25 July *Abnaki* discharged her tow and the next day, she proceeded to Eniwetok Atoll which was her primary base through the end of WWII.

Early in October 1945, she sailed north to join the forces that were to occupy Japan. That mission lasted through the first six months of 1946. On 6 July, the fleet tug departed Japanese waters and was involved in a series of towing operations in China, the Mariana Islands, Guam and the Admiralties. After February 1947, her mission sphere was enlarged to include ports in Japan and in China.

The tug continued to operate in Far Eastern waters while the communist tide swept over the Asian mainland engulfing China, Manchuria and the northern half of Korea. After the invasion of South Korea by communist forces from the north late in June 1950, *Abnaki* was not assigned to the combat zone of operations for over a year. However, in July 1951 she joined Service Division (ServDiv) 31 to provide mobile logistical support for the United Nations naval task forces engaged in the conflict. *Abnaki's* support role for United Nations forces in Korea ended in February 1952. She resumed service in Western and Central Pacific waters, but was once again removed from the combat zone.

After an overhaul at the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard, her Far East service continued. On 15 July 1955, she left Sasebo, Japan bound for Hawaii when the fleet tug encountered an Army ship, FS-179 in distress. She towed the disabled vessel all the way to Pearl Harbor arriving 1 August. *Abnaki* operated for the next 17 months from that base in the mid-Pacific as far as such outlying islands as Midway and Johnston.

Her itinerary changed late in February 1957 when she steamed to San Francisco, CA in order to tow *Springfield* (CL-66) for her conversion to a guided missile cruiser. She then headed back for operations in Hawaiian waters through the summer. On 17 September, the tug sailed to provide support services for units of the 7th Fleet in the western Pacific.

Upon her return to Hawaii midway through 1959, *Abnaki* took up the mundane chore of towing various types of vessels between locations in the islands and to more distant destinations. On 6 February 1960, she left Pearl Harbor and sailed a few degrees west of north to arrive at Adak, Alaska. Shortly after her arrival she assisted in the salvage of *Kodiak* (LSM-161). This was followed by four months of towing duties between such ports as Sasebo and Yokosuka in Japan, Ream in Cambodia, Naha and Buckner Bay at Okinawa, and Subic Bay located on the west coast of the island of Luzon in the Philippines. *Abnaki* finally returned to Pearl Harbor in August.

Following an upkeep and repair period, in 1963 she returned to her previous Pacific duties including deployment to the Aleutians and the western Pacific. During the latter part of 1964, American involvement in the civil war in Vietnam escalated as a result of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. What became known as the Vietnam War heralded a change in the nature of *Abnaki's* western Pacific deployments for the next few years. She operated out of Subic Bay in the Philippines until 5 March when she sailed for Vietnam. The ocean-going tug served in Vietnamese waters as tender for a squadron of mine-craft and conducted some patrols.

Following a three-month overhaul stateside, *Abnaki* departed Pearl Harbor on 29 March 1966 for the western Pacific to be used for a variety of towing assignments throughout the far east. Picking up a tow, she steamed on toward Vietnam, finally to anchor off Vung Tau on Navy Day 1966, to transfer her charge.

Beginning in 1967 *Abnaki* conducted less challenging local operations between Hawaii and the outlying islands. On 18 August, she exited Pearl Harbor on her way back to Vietnam arriving at Danang on 15 September. There the tugboat took up duty on surveillance patrol at an area of ocean known as "Yankee Station," shadowing the Soviet trawler *Ampermetr*. Relieved from this tedious duty on 15 October, *Abnaki* proceeded to Taiwan, but on the way, she encountered Typhoon "Carla." In the storm's aftermath she came to the assistance of an Army tug towing an ungainly floating crane to safety.

Abnaki departed Subic Bay on 25 November for Vietnam where upon arrival she joined the fleet tug *Bolster* (ARS-38) and *Ute* (ATF-76) near Due Pho, South Vietnam, to assist in salvaging *Clarke County* (LST-601). After the three vessels toiled with some difficulty, they refloated the tank landing ship in a week. She was then once again assigned to a trawler surveillance unit.

Before long *Abnaki* was bound for the Far East to Subic Bay again to deliver the floating crane *YD-127* before reentering the combat zone off Vietnam. The tug arrived at Danang on the last day of 1968. On New Year's Day 1969, she departed Vietnam with orders to Naha, Okinawa, to assist in the salvage of a grounded tank landing ship. She completed that mission on 19 January.

On 1 February, she put to sea for a 21-day tour of duty on her familiar "Yankee Station." Late in the month, she towed *Asheville* (PG-84) from Camranh Bay to Yokosuka, then commenced operations mostly out of Subic Bay, Sasebo and Hong Kong. *Abnaki* had another voyage into the Vietnam combat zone to visit Danang late in May and later back at Vung Tau.

While there she did towing, standby salvage ship and training missions until she put to sea on 21 August 1972 to rejoin the 7th Fleet in the western Pacific. While visiting Danang she was ordered to work in the harbor only during the day to provide salvage services and put to sea each night because of the threat posed by Viet Cong sapper-swimmers. She concluded that assignment on 20 October.

That employment continued into the New Year 1974. On 19 February, the ship entered the Fellows & Stuart Shipyard for a seven-month overhaul after which she resumed west coast operations out of San Diego. On 11 January 1975, she left for the Far East for an unusual naval salvage operation to retrieve the cargo door of a C-5A cargo plane. That was followed by participation in "Operation Frequent Wind," the evacuation of Saigon. *Abnaki* transported supplies for the Marshall Islands natives and then continued east on via Pearl Harbor to San Diego.

Operations along the California coast kept the tug busy shuttling tows between various California ports for the first seven months of 1976. *Abnaki* assisted a civilian auxiliary sailboat grounded on a reef at Palmyra Island and towed it to Christmas Island. She resumed towing and other operations along the California coast including surveillance operations and fleet training services. At the beginning of 1978, *Abnaki* towed a cable-laying ship to Panama, but normal operations along the west coast occupied her time until she retired.

On 15 August 1978, *Abnaki* began preparations for her decommissioning on 30 September 1978 and then a transfer to the Mexican Navy. Her name was stricken from the Naval Vessel Register and commissioned in the Mexican Navy as *Yaqui* (A-18). *Abnaki* earned three battle stars for service during the Korean conflict and 10 battle stars during the Vietnam War.

Seminole (AT-65) was laid down on 16 December 1938 at Staten Island, N.Y., launched on 15 September 1939 and commissioned on 8 March 1940.¹⁰

Following a shakedown cruise along the east coast, *Seminole* headed west to its base at San Diego for Pacific towing operations. These would include around Hawaii, Wake Island, and the western Panama Canal area. On 7 December 1941 *Seminole* had just left Pearl Harbor for San Diego when the wailing signal for general quarters was sounded. She reversed her course and dropped anchored once again at Pearl Harbor on the 12th.

She and her sister ship, *Navajo* (ATF-64) operated in Pearl Harbor during the frenzied rescue and retrieval following the Japanese attack. On 15 February 1942 *Seminole* was assigned as part of a salvage team to go to Canton Island where she took part in reclaiming the grounded Army transport, *President Taylor*. On the 24th, she re-embarked and took *Sonoma* in tow, and steamed for Pearl Harbor. Arriving on 31 March, she remained in the busy harbor doing channel escort duty, but was called to salvage patrol craft, *YP-108* aground off nearby Wahie Point, Lanai, Hawaii.

On 4 June, the ocean-going tug left for Midway. Arriving on 10 June, she took *Vireo* in tow and delivered her to Pearl Harbor on the 17th. While there she was assigned further channel

escort. Her next journey took her south and west to the Fiji Islands, then the Tonga Islands where she commenced channel escort duty in Nukualofa anchorage, Tongatabu.

Seminole arrived off Tulagi on 18 October, where she ferried troops, ammunition, and gasoline ashore. On the morning of 25 October, *Seminole* and *YP-284* were unloading marines, howitzers and aviation fuel east of Lunga Point when three Japanese destroyers appeared on the northwest horizon. The two smaller vessels got underway, heading eastward hoping to avoid enemy fire. The enemy first engaged two nearby American destroyers, then broke contact, changed course and pursued the slower *Seminole* and *YP-284*. An early shell hit *Seminole* followed by strikes from two more salvos that did a great deal of damage. The order to abandon the burning sinking tug was given at 1120. *Seminole* sank about 1,000 yards off-shore between Lengo and the point to the east. Fortunately, the majority of the enemy projectiles passed through her thin-skinned sides without exploding, thus *Seminole* lost only one crew member because of the action. *Seminole* was struck from the Navy list on 2 December 1942, but the ocean-going tug received one battle star for her World War II service.

Ute (AT-76) was laid down on 27 February 1942 at Alameda, CA, launched on 24 June 1942, and commissioned on 13 December 1942.¹¹

Ute (AT-76) embarked on its first mission to the rough Aleutian waters on 10 February 1943 to salvage the attack transport *Arthur Middleton* (APA-25) that had run aground. *Ute*, assisted by a smaller tug, struggled in extremely foul weather to successfully haul the stranded vessel off the beach. The tug towed *Arthur Middleton* to Dutch Harbor, Alaska for repairs.

Ute pulled the stranded Russian merchantman *Krasnyl Oktyabr* off another shoal the next day. That mission completed, the tug took two LCT's (landing craft tank) in tow and proceeded to Sweeper's Cove. While there, *Ute* assisted other vessels in laying antisubmarine nets in the cove. She then steamed to support the invasion of Japanese held Aleutian Island as a salvage unit. The merchantman *SS Perida*, transporting an Army combat team, struck a rock and started to founder. The *Ute* shot a line to the stricken vessel, pulled the ship out of danger, pumped water from her breached hull and then pushed the transport to a position where she could unload her troops and essential cargo. *Ute* continued with her salvage operations where needed, but remained near the stranded *Perida*. In time they got a towline to the transport and took her to the safety of Adak, Alaska.

Ute next assisted the subchaser/patrol craft, *PC-487* that had recently rammed and sunk a Japanese submarine. Taking the submarine chaser's crew and its vital equipment on board, the tug stood by the stricken vessel until she was relieved by another ship. Ordered to blast uncharted Aleutian shoals with depth charges, *Ute* left that task to assist merchantman *SS MacVeigh* that had become stranded on a reef. *Ute* easily pulled the vessel free and, assisted by another tug, towed her to Massacre Bay.

Ute helped repair a small Army tug and, two days later, returned to Attu to assist the grounded *Hulbert* (AVD-6), a vessel that provided fuel and communications services for

seaplanes and patrol boats. She was interrupted in that effort to assist the foundered merchantman *SS Delwood*. *Ute* got the ship off the rocks, but the damage was so great that the vessel listed heavily and began to go down stern-first. *Ute* cut herself free of *Delwood* and all men were saved in the operation. The tug then went on to tow several damaged LCT's to Constantine Harbor, in Amchitka. The Japanese finally evacuated the island of Attu, but weather and mines still endangered the ships in the area. The *Abner Read* (DD-526) struck one of these mines and *Ute* towed the crippled destroyer to Adak.

Ute attempted to return to Kiska harbor with a barge in tow, but was forced to abandon the ungainly flat-bottomed vessel because of extreme weather. Two days later, *Ute* took disabled *LST-461*¹² in tow and delivered her to safety.

For the next month *Ute* cleared fouled anchors, recovered tackle from sunken Japanese vessels, retrieved a capsized Navy plane in the harbor, salvaged sunken and damaged ships in Kiska harbor, and searched for Army barges reported adrift at sea. Later, she salvaged a PT-boat towing it to the safety of a mooring. Because of the foul Alaskan weather, *Ute* engaged in pulling several other ships free of beaches including destroyer *King* (DD-242).

Ute next came to aid the Russian merchantman *Valery Chkalov*. The ship had split in half in the heavy seas and saved many Soviet seaman that had jumped overboard into the freezing waters. *Ute* got a grapnel on the wreck and commenced towing, but the line broke the following day. The tug's sailors welded a 400-pound anchor to a depth charge projector and fired it off in the direction of the wreck. One of the anchor's flukes caught on a heavy structure on the Russian ship's deck. After taking up the slack wire, the hulk was under tow once again. Two hours later the towing line parted. The derelict now drifted aimlessly in the extremely turbulent seas. Finally, five previously rescued Russian crewmen clambered onboard the bow section, took a fresh line from *Ute*, then secured a stout anchor chain to the wreck and saved the ship. Soon after returning to Adak, the *Ute's* base, Rear Admiral Francis E. M. Whiting presented the tug's captain Lieutenant William F. Lewis with the Legion of Merit for his outstanding leadership in commanding AT -76.

For another six months, *Ute* continued hauling stranded ships off shoals and carrying out diving and salvage operations in frigid Aleutian waters. The ship then sailed for Oakland, California to be refurbished. *Ute* left San Francisco Bay on 16 December 1944 in a convoy bound for the warmer waters off Pearl Harbor and a week later sailed for the Marshall Islands. Her first south Pacific assignment was to provide logistic support to the 5th Naval Fleet at Eniwetok in support of the Iwo Jima campaign.

On 9 February, *Ute* patrolled east of Iwo Jima for the rest of the month, then on the 21st, was ordered to assist carrier *Bismarck Sea* (CVE-95), damaged by a Japanese kamikaze, but before she arrived, *Bismarck Sea* sank. AT-76 picked up what survivors she could then returned to her station in the task group to complete other salvage missions and search for mines.

On 16 April *Ute* was ordered to assist another kamikaze-damaged fleet carrier, the *Franklin* (CV-13). On the night of 24 May, *Ute* fired her anti-aircraft guns at a Japanese plane that came within close quarters, but without scoring a success. The next morning, her

gunners vindicated themselves by shooting down a Japanese “Val” bomber that had attacked the helpless merchantman SS *William B. Allison*. Later, *Ute* churned to the assistance of the high-speed minesweeper *Butler* (DMS-29), that had been damaged by kamikazes while the vessel was at anchor. Next *Ute* proceeded to extinguish a fire on *PC-160S* that had been hit by two kamikazes and later took the craft in tow. *Ute* received new orders to assist another kamikaze victim, the destroyer *Braine* (DD-630) about 40 miles east of Okinawa. While steaming toward the *Braine*, a Val pursued by three American Corsair fighters (Vought F4U's), attacked *Ute*. The bomber made a suicide dive toward the fleet tug. Fortunately, the fighter planes and ocean-tug’s gunners mortally wounded the Val and the Japanese plane splashed into the sea some 50 yards on *Ute*'s port quarter. *Ute* got a towline on the damaged kamikaze victim destroyer *Braine* and delivered her to Kerama Retto. She next returned to the crippled leaking *William B. Allison* that threatened to sink, but was once again interrupted in its work to salvage *LST-844*.

The tug towed several of the great many landing crafts off the beaches and one night the fleet tug once again fired on a Japanese plane which attacked ships in a nearby anchorage. The suicide aircraft this time crashed a few hundred yards to the port side of the ship. The next day, *Ute* brought destroyer *Haggard* (DD-555), damaged by a kamikaze, to Kerama Retto¹³ before being sent to Buckner Bay for other duty. After arriving the tug salvaged an LCI (landing craft infantry) that had hit a reef and later relieved another tug that was towing an ammunition barge.

After pulling another LST off a reef on 2 June, *Ute* returned to *William B. Allison* and commenced pumping operations keeping her afloat so that she could be salvaged. Three days later, the tug assisted the minelayer *J. William Ditter* (DM-31) after that vessel had successfully fought off several Japanese suicide attacks and towed the damaged ship to Kerama Retto, an island harbor that had become the refuge for battered and sinking ships.

Ute was involved in one more antiaircraft action, this time on her own. On 11 June her gunners shot down a Japanese plane that passed over her during a suicide run. As a result of its many arduous missions, one of *Ute*'s engines failed. The big tug sailed for Saipan for repairs and alterations when Japan capitulated in mid-August 1945. During her time in the South Pacific, the AT-76's crew was at general quarters between 20 and 30 percent of the time, saw antiaircraft fire nearly every night and was believed targeted by Japanese aircraft numerous times.

The *Ute* saw many years of naval service thereafter, later assigned to the Military Sealift Command, but remained on the Navy list through October 1979. In the end she was sunk as a naval target on 4 August 1991. The *Ute* received three battle stars for her World War II service, two for her Korean War service and nine for her service in Vietnam.

An ATF vignette

USS *Pawnee* (AT-74) was laid down on 23 October 1941 at Alameda, CA launched on 31 March 1942, and commissioned on 7 November 1942.



Figure 3 Tug PAWNEE towing light cruiser HOUSTON after torpedo damage near Okinawa. October, 1944. MUNSEE towing CANBERRA in foreground. U.S. Navy Official Photo. Wikimedia Commons.

Pawnee (AT-74) had a similar history in the Pacific Theater as her ATF peers performing unglamorous but vital duties and taking part in many battles. She operated in the Solomon Islands from June through August 1943, providing towing services until October. She later was assigned to the Western Carolines and saw action off Okinawa, Leyte, and Luzon. Finally, the fleet tug served with the Naval Occupation Forces in the Philippines from 28

September 1945 until 24 February 1946. However, there are a few events relating to the *Pawnee* that bear mentioning. Her skipper Lieutenant (jg) Flavius J. George left two diary descriptions that graphically depict air and sea assaults during the Battle of Guadalcanal. “One plane, then another and another exploded in a burst of flame or nosed over into the sea with a tremendous splash. In a matter of seconds only four were left and these launched their torpedoes wildly, and frantically banked away from the deadly fire.”¹⁴ Later he described what he witnessed of the mortally wounded *USS Atlanta*. “Her entire superstructure has been shot away and her three forward turrets were like shattered crates out of which stuck distorted and twisted guns. Her main deck was almost awash and on it huddled the grimy and dazed remnants of her crew.”¹⁵

One unusual incident involved the ocean-going tug used as part of a ruse. A Japanese aerial torpedo attack on the *USS Houston* damaged the cruiser that was part of Admiral William Halsey’s Pacific fleet. The *Pawnee* was ordered to tow the disabled vessel to Ulithi Atoll so that she could be repaired. These two slow moving ships joined by a stout hawser were also used as a tempting lure. It was hoped they might attract Japanese war planes to finish off the vulnerable duo, but this was a naval mouse-trap as Admiral William Halsey’s American carrier-based aircraft laid in wait nearby. Unfortunately, the Japanese high command refused to take the seemingly exposed cruiser and tug bait. Both vessels made it to the safety of Ulithi unscathed.¹⁶

A Retrospective ATF Crow’s-nest Overview

During WWII three ATFs were sunk by the enemy. AT-64 *Navajo* was torpedoed in the Pacific on 12 September 1943. Her sister ship AT-65 *Seminole* 25 October 1942 was abandoned after receiving extensive damage from Japanese destroyer gunfire. The AT-89 *Nauset*, ablaze from German aerial attack in the Gulf of Salerno was abandoned and later sunk on 9 September 1943.¹⁷ The most decorated members of the American Tug Fleet were *Abnaki* (ATF-69) with three battle stars for service during the Korean conflict and 10 battle stars during the Vietnam

war with *Sioux* (ATF-75) a close second having earned 4 WWII battle stars and 8 for her Vietnam service. The *Cherokee* (AT-66), *Seneca* (AT-91) and the *Chilula* (AT-153) became Coast Guard tugs after the war and were later sunk as naval targets. Others were acquired by other nations, sold as scrap or sunk to form artificial reefs. The longest serving ocean-going tug of this class was *Chilula* (AT-153). Commissioned on 5 April 1945, she was decommissioned on 19 June 1991 and subsequently sunk as a gunnery target in 1997.

This summary of the activities and actions of American Tug Fleet vessels illustrates their diversity and the vital services provided primarily to the navy, but also to the marines, army, merchant marine and allies during the war. Today there are very few surviving ATF veterans, but their family members show their pride in their navy unit's service. They hold reunions and some personalized their automobile license tag with ATF, followed by their boat's numeral thereby giving honor to this band of first responders.

Endnotes:

¹ ATF is not to be confused with federal Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms agency.

² Polmar, Norman. (2005) *The Naval Institute Guide To The Ships And Aircraft Of The U.S. Fleet, 18th edition*. (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute. 2005)282.

³ Popular Mechanics magazine, December 1940, 865.

⁴ United States Navy Heritage and History Command archives.

⁵ Cherokee (AT-66) was named for the Indian tribe found today chiefly in Oklahoma and North Carolina.

⁶ *Hopi* (AT-71) was named for the Shoshonean tribe of the Pueblo Indians.

⁷ pontoons were used to construct floating piers, bridges and platforms for marine salvage operations.

⁸ The Kiowa tribe at one time resided in Missouri. Today, members of the tribe largely reside on a reservation in Oklahoma.

⁹ The Abnaki was one of a confederation of tribes of Algonquin Indian stock. They inhabited the region now part of the state of Maine and the nearby Canadian maritime provinces.

¹⁰ The Seminoles are an Indian tribe largely based in the state of Florida. Two other branches of the Seminole Nation are in Oklahoma and together with the Miccosukee Tribe. They form three federally recognized Seminole entities.

¹¹ This vessel was for the Ute tribe of Shoshonean Indians, these American citizens now live largely in Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico.

¹² LCTs were 152 feet long with a 29-foot beam while LSTs were much larger at 382 feet in length with a 64-foot beam.

¹³ The largest member of a tiny group of islands called Kerama Retto about 15 miles west of Okinawa, near the northern end of the island of Tokashiki.

¹⁴ War Diary 1942-44, entry 18 November 1942, Papers of Captain Flavius J. George, USNR.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ian W. Toll. Twilight of the Gods: War in the Western Pacific, 1944-1945. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020) pp. 173-174 and Third Fleet Diary, 17 October 1944, in World

War II diaries, Operational Archives Branch, Naval History and Heritage Command, Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁷ The *Navajo* (AT-64) received the American Defense Service medal, the American Campaign Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Medal with two battle stars and the World War II Victory medal for its actions. The *Seminole* (AT-65) was awarded a battle star for World War II service.