

At War

Notes From the Front Lines



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A World War II Destroyer's Demise in Mexico

By [WALT BARANGER](#)



Jennifer Szymaszek for The New York Times
The Navy destroyer John Rodgers in 2008, docked in Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico.

A 69-year-old retired American warship from World War II has met its end in a Mexican port where it had languished for nearly a decade amid international legal wrangling and mounting bills.

The former Navy destroyer John Rodgers, its sagging hull a faded gray generously streaked with rust stains and pocked with dents, finally fell victim to the ravages of seawater and good intentions gone awry. It was one of the last American fighting warships from World War II that had not been scrapped or sunk or converted into a museum. Despite an international struggle for preservation that lasted more than five years, neither the Mexican government nor a parade of would-be warship owners from the United States could find a permanent home for the ship.

When [The New York Times wrote in 2008](#) about the travails of the John Rodgers, it was already facing a bleak future. Built in Texas in 1942 and commissioned in early 1943, the John Rodgers was one of 175 Fletcher-class destroyers that served mostly in the Pacific during World War II. In just a few years the John Rodgers amassed quite a combat résumé, participating in a dozen major battles in the western Pacific, including Guam, Leyte Gulf, Okinawa and Iwo Jima.

After more than two decades of retirement, the ship was given to Mexico in 1968 and rechristened Cuitláhuac. The ship served an additional 33 years interdicting drug traffickers and enforcing Mexico's maritime borders, and eventually became the last Fletcher-class destroyer still on active duty.

The Mexican Navy decommissioned Cuitláhuac in 2001, and that is when the problems began. The

ship was well known to American veterans because of its extraordinary longevity and its prolific role in the Pacific war, so there was much discussion on veterans' Web sites that a preservation group would step forward to repatriate the ship as a museum. The Mexican Navy harbored hopes that such a floating museum would also honor its own veterans — after all, the ship served the United States for only four years and was one of hundreds of destroyers prowling the Pacific, but it served for 33 years in the Mexican Navy, where destroyers are normally the largest vessels in the fleet. Mexico, always sensitive about its military relations with the United States, could have seen it as a happy way to honor veterans of both countries.

However, any group trying to save an old warship faces daunting obstacles, and the John Rodgers was no exception: it was laced with asbestos, toxic lubricants, solvents, fuels and lead-based paint, all of which must be removed before preservationists can work. Dangerous equipment was wedged into small dark spaces, serious rust damage weakened the hull, small leaks and other structural problems abounded. The required permits and licenses alone would discourage even the saltiest potential ship owners.

Then there was its erstwhile savior, an American nonprofit company with virtually no assets or maritime expertise but a persuasive patriotism-laced Web site. The company, the Beauchamp Tower Corporation of Milton, Fla., persuaded the Mexican government in 2006 to issue a presidential proclamation declaring it the owner, with the nebulous goal of restoring the ship as both a museum and as a working emergency communications facility — and with heavy hints that the Mexican Navy would also have a place in the museum. After much fanfare and a brief surge of interest (and at least one lawsuit), Beauchamp Tower abandoned the ship to sit at a granary pier in the Pacific port of Lázaro Cárdenas, where it was burgled and stripped of its valuable brass fittings and almost anything else that could be carted away.

Fees, penalties and liens began to pile up, and eventually anyone contemplating saving the ship would have needed more than \$2 million and a lot of legal work just to get a clear title. Towing the ship to the United States would be another dangerous and expensive challenge — in the 1960s and '70s, several retired Fletchers grounded or sank while being towed.

Meanwhile, Beauchamp Tower promised to deliver the ship to Mobile, Ala., during a reunion of John Rodgers veterans. When the much-anticipated arrival fizzled and the ship remained firmly moored in Mexico, the aging veterans were deeply disappointed and began to suspect that it would never return.

“We were all excited about it. We were going to have our reunion there in Alabama,” said Chuck Stansbery, a former radio operator and anti-aircraft gun crewman who at age 17 sailed with the John Rodgers through a dozen battles. Now living in Leslie, Ark., he has tried to stay in contact with the 60 or so remaining John Rodgers crewmen, and he remembers the John Rodgers in its prime. “We all loved that old ship. We were a close-knit group. I can to this day remember the smell of the hot bulkhead, the ink from the typewriter ribbon, I even miss the smell of the smoke from our big guns. The sound of the screws on the fantail as the ship would lift her stern.”

With the youngest John Rodgers veterans now in their mid-80s, the happier wartime memories seem to be the ones recalled most vividly. “Probably the most vivid memory other than kamikaze attacks was going across the equator,” Mr. Stansbery said, recalling an age-old maritime rite of passage. “As a pollywog you went through pure hell during initiation. This included crawling on your hands and knees from the bow to the fantail, on a hot metal deck, periodic stripes across your back with whips made from mooring lines, being cleansed inside and out by King Neptune's physician and then dunked into a huge vat for final purification.”

Several veterans' groups and even a Mexican university pondered saving the ship, but the expense and logistics proved impossible to overcome, and in the end the old ship simply rusted away. Alarmed that the 2,100-ton destroyer could break loose and run amok in the harbor during a hurricane or maybe just sink at its commercial wharf and block vital shipping channels for months, officials condemned the ship in 2010 as a derelict and a hazard to navigation.

This week the captain of the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, Miguel Ángel Martínez Hernández, revealed that the ship was dismantled in 2010 and 2011, and that its scrap steel was sent to a smelter in the northern city of Monterrey. Despite a public proclamation in 2010 authorizing demolition, news of the dismantling was kept muted, no doubt in part because of international sensitivities. Even as late as last week, long after the John Rodgers's steel became part of a gleaming Mexico City skyscraper or perhaps a Puebla-built Volkswagen, yet another Florida-based group was mounting an attempt to save the ship; it had no idea that the John Rodgers had been gone for more than a year.

To Mexican officials, the preservation efforts were understandable, even if they went nowhere. They, too, wanted the ship saved.

"I have served over 18 years as a mariner, but on the civil side with the merchant navy and not the armed," Mr. Martínez said. "From the romanticism side it hurts a lot, but from the other side — the administrative side — the ship was an old vessel."

Now only four Fletcher-class destroyers — which were 376 feet long and carried a crew of about 310 — remain: three are floating museums in Boston, Buffalo and Baton Rouge, La., and one is a museum in Athens honoring the Greek Navy.

Though disappointed, Mr. Stansbery said he understood why Mexico's patience finally ran out. "To think that she is gone forever and we will never see her again is almost like losing a loved one," he said, but then he thought about the potential for harbor damage and added, "That's a reasonable reason to scrap it."

Yadira Solano contributed reporting from Mexico City.

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