

THE NAVY IN RHODE ISLAND

America owes a lot to Narragansett Bay

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

THE PEOPLE in Washington—pols and warriors alike—who are in the process of scuttling the Navy in Rhode Island should be ashamed of themselves. Their activities reveal abysmal ignorance of history, tradition and the essential fact known to every Rhode Islander that Narragansett Bay is the finest place for a naval base in the whole of creation.

The early voyagers knew it. The early Rhode Islanders, although they had little need for a Navy, knew it. And the fact was called to the attention of the Admiralty during the rule of George III by Robert Melville, an officer in the King's Own Scottish Borderers—the Edinburgh Regiment—as early as 1764. Melville had served his king on the Continent and in garrisons in the West Indies. On August 3, 1763, he was appointed captain general and governor of Grenada. On his way to that Caribbean post, he was asked to stop off in Rhode Island and send home a report on the suitability of Narragansett Bay as the American base for His Majesty's Navy.

Melville was two months at sea, getting from Land's End to Rhode Island and he spent two months here studying the bay.

Working in Rhode Island at that time was Charles Blaskowitz, the skilled surveyor and map maker who was later to produce the great Chart of the Bay of Narragansett printed in London in 1777.

A week before Melville sailed from Boston for the Grenadines, he wrote a report, presumably to the Admiralty, and sent it home, accompanied with what must have been an early version of the Blaskowitz chart and many other detail maps showing pro-

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posed locations for docks, shipyards, hospitals and points of defense against attack. The report was written either in January or June, 1764.

"The whole bay is an excellent man-of-war harbour . . . affording good anchorage, sheltered in every direction and capacious enough for the whole of His Majesty's Navy, were it increased four fold." Thus Melville, and he went on to remark the absence of dangerous ledges or shoals near the bay's entrance "which is easy with all winds." From the British standpoint, Narragansett Bay was centrally located in His Majesty's colonies in North America and Melville also noted its proximity to the English colonies in the West Indies.

Rhode Island's climate appealed to Melville as the "most salubrious" of any part of British America, the "garden of America." Newport, he noted, was a town of 9,000-plus population, learned and friendly, blessed with a fine library and freedom of religion. Thirty miles to the north lay Providence, between three and four thou-

His Majesty missed a chance

sand population, which traded to the southern colonies and the West Indies. But its river, being shoal for several miles south of the town, was not suitable for warships of any considerable burthen and thus could never be a place of much navigation or commerce.

Melville's report on the suitability of the lower bay as a naval base was a resounding "Yea" which has been repeated often since his time. But the British at the moment had financial troubles and other fish to fry, notably the increasingly restless colonies. Several writers on the naval history of Narragansett Bay have speculated

that if the Admiralty had moved quickly on the Melville report, if the lower bay had become a bastion of sea power, history might have taken a far different direction when the Americans and the British had their war. Maybe there wouldn't have been a war.

But the British naval presence in the late 1760s and early '70s wasn't much and Rhode Island seamen, schooled in the rough and profitable business of privateering, gave the British a bad time. Notably, they burned the *Gaspee*, an early example of twisting the British lion's tail.

Abraham Whipple of Providence had a large part in that business and this formidable sea fighter was soon to become a captain in the hastily assembled fleet put together by the Continental Congress. A Providence sloop, *Katy*, later *Providence*, in the first naval engagement of the Revolution, took on the sloop *Diana*, a tender of *HMS Rose*, and drove her ashore on the north end of Conanicut Island. That was in June, 1775, only weeks after Lexington and Concord.

The Hopkins brothers, Stephen and Esek, loom large in the boring days of the American Navy. Stephen was a brilliant man for all seasons, a farmer turned politician and patriot. Esek was a seaman who sailed on commercial voyages and as a privateer. When the infant nation under the Continental Congress was putting its Navy together, Stephen had enough political clout to have Esek appointed commander-in-chief, our first admiral if you will, on December 22, 1775.

In January of '76, Esek Hopkins assumed command of the Continental fleet in the ice-choked Delaware at Philadelphia. On duty were three Rhode Island captains—Whipple in the *Columbus*, another Hopkins

(John) in the *Cabot* and "Sailor Tom" Hazard in the *Providence*.

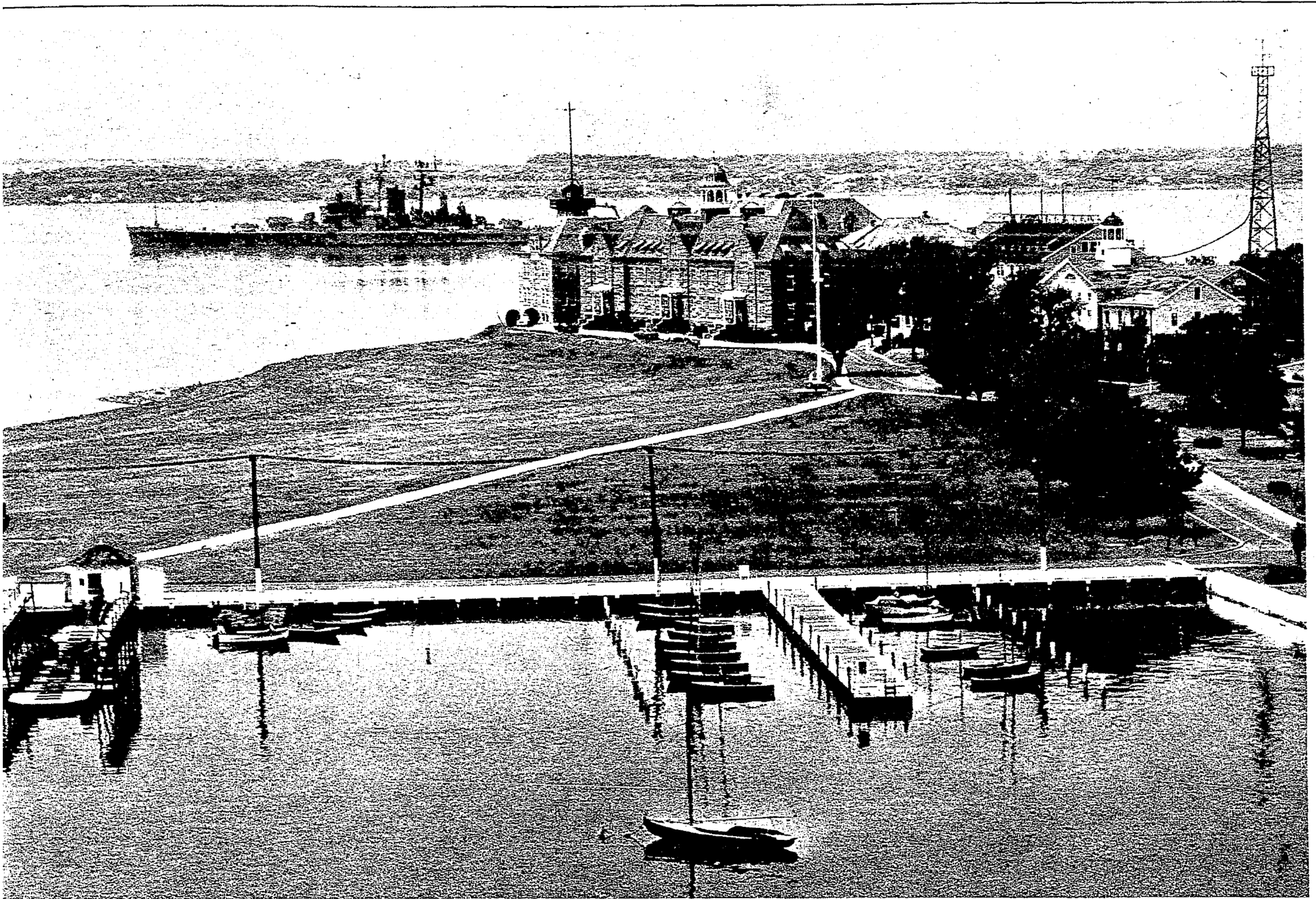
The Congress ordered Esek to get to sea and attack enemy vessels off the Virginia and Carolina coasts, but there was an elastic clause in the orders and Esek Hopkins proceeded to New Providence in the Bahamas and captured the port today's tourists know as Nassau. It was the first amphibious naval operation, the first action for the Marines, the first time a naval force flew our flag over captured enemy territory. Hopkins came away with guns, gunpowder, ammunition and stores sorely needed by Washington's army. On the way home, he took a couple of prizes.

The small fleet, happy with a job well done and some of its men glowing with rum from the prizes, was standing for Newport. But Hopkins heard from the skipper of one of the captured vessels that a British squadron was off the mouth of the bay, so he ordered his ships to change course for New London. Off Block Island, the Americans ran into some English ships of war, there was a sharp fight in which the colonial gunnery suffered from too much rum, and *HMS Glasgow*, a 20-gun corvette, managed to escape.

The *Glasgow* affair was the beginning of the end for Esek Hopkins in the young Navy. His ships were in bad shape, his sailors found it more profitable to go privateering, and among the pols in Philadelphia his only stout defender was John Adams of Massachusetts. In March, 1777, he was suspended from command and formal dismissal from the service came on January 2, 1778.

Abraham Whipple, captain of the 20-gun *Columbus* in the fight off Block Island when *Glasgow* got away, also came under the guns of the marine committee of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. But he was ordered back to his ship and later

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THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE on Coasters Harbor Island. Below, apprentice seamen pass in review.





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NAVY

continued

took the frigate *Providence* to France to get munitions.

Later, he sailed as commodore of a small fleet with his flag in *Providence* and took several East Indiamen, among the richest prizes of the war.

In their turn, the British fleet and the French fleet found lower Narragansett Bay all that the Melville report said it was.

The young nation allowed its Navy to go to pot until, in the late 1790s, there was trouble with Algiers and Tunis in the Mediterranean and with our former French allies. The frigates *United States*, *Constitution* (Old Ironsides) and *Constellation* were built.

The desirability of a dockyard in southern New England was mentioned and Newporters quickly called attention to the advantages of their harbor and bay. Nothing came of it.

Two men, the Perry brothers, added much luster to the Rhode Island naval tradition during that half century when things around here were pretty much in the doldrums. Oliver Hazard Perry, born in South Kingstown in 1785, an able and aggressive line officer, came into his own during the first three hours of the afternoon of September 10, 1813, when his hastily built fleet of small ships met and mastered an English fleet on Lake Erie, an engagement all of us remember for the signal, "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

Oliver's younger brother, Matthew Calbraith, born in Newport in 1794, first served in *Revenge*, a ship commanded by Oliver. He had a hand in the establishment of Liberia, a colony of American Negroes in Africa, urged the creation of a training system for apprentice seamen and the conversion of the Navy to steam. His greatest achievement was the opening of Japan under a treaty of amity and commerce on March 31, 1854. The Perry brothers are buried in Newport.

Soon after Fort Sumter, the situation of the Naval Academy at Annapolis seemed insecure and the midshipmen, professors, books, instruments and other gear were ordered to Newport in the frigate *Constitution* and the steamer *Baltic*.

Newport, for the first time in a long while, was indeed a Navy town during the four years the midshipmen

were there, variously on training ships in the harbor, at Fort Adams—the quarters there proved too cold and damp—and finally at the Atlantic House, a large summer hotel at the corner of the Avenue and Pelham Street, across from Touro Park. The academy in 1863 got high marks from a captain in the Royal Navy who was in America studying the entire American naval establishment: Captain James G. Goodenough reported to London that the instruction was excellent, that the weeding out process was so rigorous that only 60 per cent of the students appointed to the academy stayed on to finish and become ensigns, and the only fault he could find was that the midshipmen had no play hour for sports and games.

The gradual accumulation of the Narragansett Bay naval establishment which today, exclusive of ships, is valued in excess of 400 million dollars, began four years after Appomattox when the Secretary of War began to think about Goat Island as a site for an experimental torpedo station.

The island, along with Coasters Harbor and Dyer Islands, was bought from the Indians in May, 1658, by Governor Benedict Arnold and John Greene for six pounds, 10 shillings. On May 1, 1676, Arnold and Greene sold Goat and Coasters Harbor Islands to the Town of Newport for six pounds, 10 shillings.

Goat Island had a succession of

Tallapoosa had a strange crew

forts under English, colonial and federal auspices as the names suggest—Anne, George, Liberty, Washington and Wolcott. The Town of Newport sold Goat Island to the United States for \$1,500 in April, 1799.

The *Newport Mercury* on August 28, 1869, reported the recent arrival of the steam frigate *Tallapoosa* at Newport. The vessel was one of 27 double-enders, 1,175 tons, laid down in 1862; in the rapid dispersal of the powerful Civil War Navy, all but two of this class were sold before 1870, but *Tallapoosa* was retained until 1892.

When she arrived in Newport in 1869, she had aboard a remarkable group of people—General William Tecumseh Sherman and daughter, Admiral Porter with wife and four children, the two Misses Lyon of Boston, Secretary of the Navy Robeson, ex-Secretary Bowie and his brother, and a Chancellor Zabriskie of Penn-

sylvania. The *Mercury* said the party was inspecting fortifications and Navy yards along the coast and they looked at Fort Wolcott whose "advantages may before long be put to practical use."

A month later, the *Mercury*, recalling the *Tallapoosa* visit, reported that Commander O. E. Matthews had been ordered to Newport to superintend construction of a laboratory, magazine and other buildings for a torpedo station. The records fail to show what influence, if any, the two Misses Lyon of Boston had on the decision to establish what was to be a large and vital part of the Navy in Rhode Island for 80 years.

The torpedo station with its resident scientists—notably chemists, metallurgists and electrical engineers—began its experiments with what today would be called mines. But by 1871, they had an air-driven tin fish with a range of 200 yards, a speed of six to eight knots, and a warhead loaded with 100 pounds of dynamite, an explosive Nobel had invented five years earlier. In the early '70s, Lieutenant George Dewey—later to be heard from in Manila Bay—was assigned to the torpedo station and may have been a temporary commanding officer.

There were experiments with gun cotton and smokeless powder. A system for the electric lighting of warships was worked out on Goat Island. In October, 1883, the War Department took over Rose Island for the storage of explosive materials, anticipating the large scale production of gun cotton which began at the torpedo station in February, 1884. In 1887, the Navy bought from the Herreshoffs of Bristol the swift steam yacht *Stiletto* and she was assigned to the torpedo station, the first vessel in our Navy to fire an "automobile" torpedo.

Interrupted by occasional explosions, the work at Goat Island, largely experimental, hummed along. The island had the Navy's main radio station in Narragansett Bay for many years and the signals received by it gave precision to the time ball dropped each day at noon so Newporters could set their watches. The Navy's first submarine, *Holland*, arrived at Goat Island in 1900 for experiments and trials.

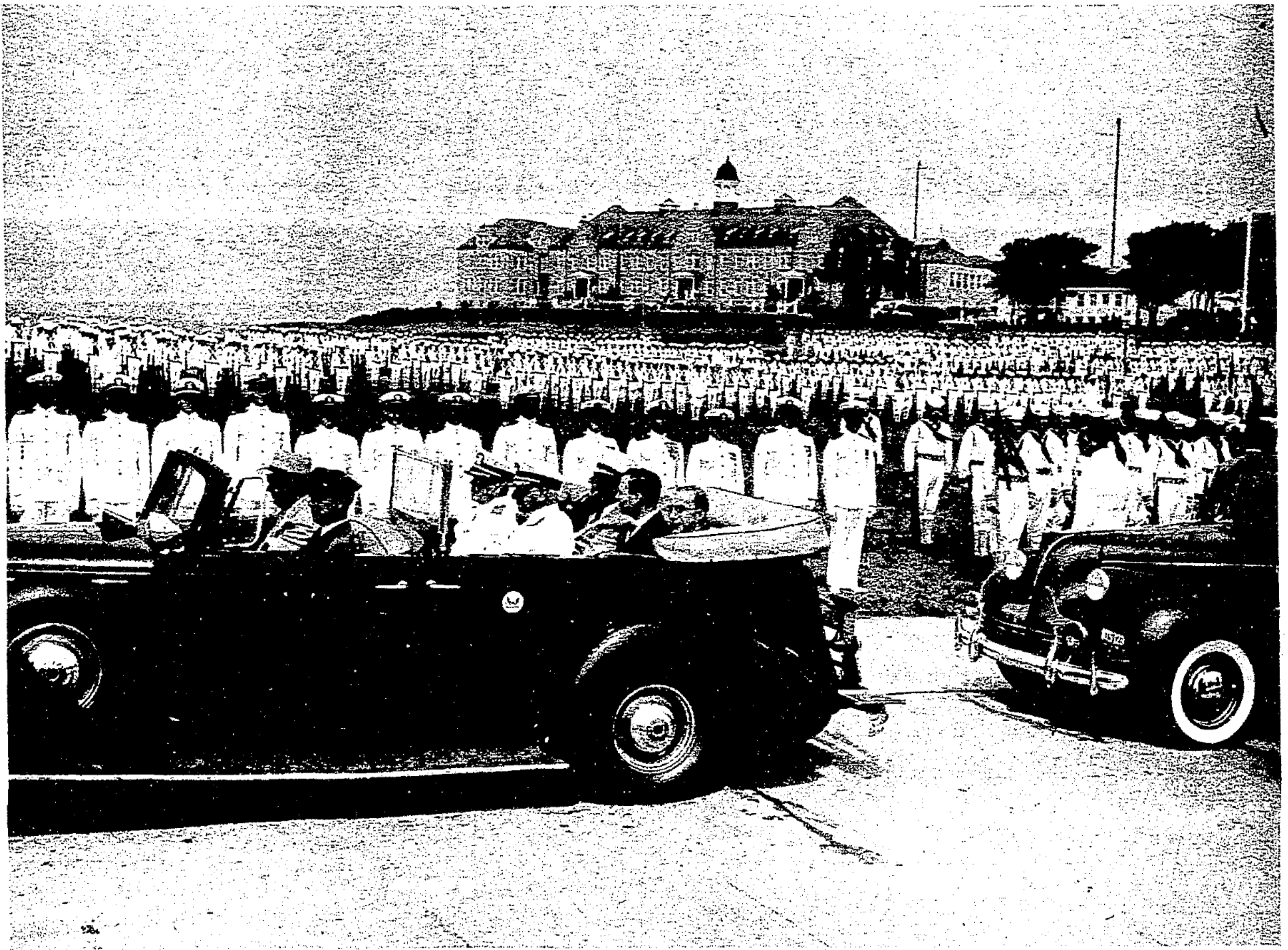
The station worked on the development of primers, warheads, practice torpedoes and, on July 1, 1907, the government's first torpedo factory was established for a mere \$150,000.

This meant more workers at the station. To get them out to the island a ferry slip was built in 1904 and Government Landing on the Newport waterfront, hard by the Jamestown ferry slip, came along in 1905.

World War I brought about an expansion with 3,200 civilian workers, 300 of them women, and Navy personnel jumped to 1,300, including 20 yeowomen. Two companies of Marines did guard duty and the station made depth bombs, aerial bombs and mines as well as torpedoes. There was experimentation with net cutters and Gould Island was purchased for the storage of warheads, torpedoes and other explosive devices.

From the factory on Goat Island during World War II came 80 per cent of all the torpedoes used by our forces and it took about 13,000 people to make them. In 1951, Washington closed the torpedo station and Goat Island is now devoted to lodging, fun and games. But in a sense, the Torpedo Station's primary concern with submarine weapons is continued by the Naval Underwater Systems Center which last year had 1,788 personnel (civilian and military)

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FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT in August, 1940, reviewed the regiment of 2,100 boots at the Naval Training Station.

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18 Providence Sunday Journal

NAVY

continued

working on highly sophisticated sub-
sea war problems.

Down the years, Narragansett Bay
has seen scores of brilliant Navy men
come and go. The list is too long to be
put down here. But among them was
Stephen Bleecker Luce, a trade
school boy who left an enduring
mark on the Navy because he was an
apostle of training and, against heavy
odds, he prevailed.

Before turning to Admiral Luce, we
must go back and recall that the
Town of Newport early in colonial
days got title to Coasters Harbor Is-
land. There seems to have been a pest
house there in the 18th century, and
about 1815 Newport built an asylum,
a common harbor for the poor, the
crazy and the criminal.

Luce headed the department of sea-
manship when the Naval Academy
was in Newport and his book
Seamanship (1863) became the bible
on that subject. When the post-Civil
War Navy was down to its scuppers,
Luce began urging better training for
apprentice seamen for the Navy and
merchant marine on the lower rat-
lines, and advanced training for of-
ficers well up the ladder of command.

Against odds, Luce prevailed and
then there was an argument about
where the Naval Training Station
would be located.

The Navy settled for Coasters Har-
bor Island, but the nasty subject of
money got mixed up in the affair.
Newport owned the land and was
willing to cede it to the state, which
would cede to the United States.
Newport wanted \$20,000 for the is-
land. In a series of General Assembly
acts and resolves, 1881 through 1891,
the island went to Uncle Sam and
Newport got its \$20,000, with the
stipulation that if title ever reverts to
Newport, Newport shall pay the state
\$20,000.

The Naval Training Station was es-
tablished in 1883, the boots living
aboard and going on cruises in such
Civil War leftovers as *Monongahela*,
New Hampshire, *Jamestown* and
Richmond. The training station, the
nation's first for naval recruits,
swelled to mighty size during World
Wars I and II, and then got the
Washington ax in 1952 when boot
training moved to Bainbridge, Mary-
land.

Luce's other dream, the training of

senior officers in the arts of war, in-
ternational law and diplomacy and
the skills of command, came into
being when a General Order on
October 6, 1884, established the
Naval War College. Luce, promoted
to commodore on November 25,
1881, became the first president of
the college. The new school was
quartered in the old asylum and
Luce, with characteristic quiet
humor, in his opening address noted
that the college was getting under
way in a poor house.

He quickly got Alfred Thayer
Mahan, the great student of the influ-
ence of sea power on history, ap-
pointed to the college staff and
Mahan succeeded him as president.

The college got out of the poor
house and into its own building in
1892; this structure was wood, paint-
ed white, but it later was sheathed in
Fall River granite, 18 inches thick.

A flag officer in the Navy, more
likely than not, will be a graduate of
the college. The concepts established
by Admirals Luce and Mahan paid
off. The wars of tomorrow are fought
today on the game boards—now elec-
tronic—of the college, and it's worth
noting that the island hopping strategy
in the Pacific in World War II was
worked out as the "Orange Plan" in
war games in 1936.

The college community last year—
civilian, military and students—to-
taled 1,464 people operating on a
budget of just over 14 million dollars.

The torpedo station, the training
station and the war college formed a
Navy nucleus in the lower bay which
seemed to attract more Navy.

The first naval hospital opened in
1897 and the coaling station in Mel-
ville came along in 1901.

Things looked much brighter for
the Navy in Rhode Island during the
administration of William Howard
Taft. His SecNav, George von L.
Meyer, a Massachusetts man, came
out in 1911 with the suggestion that
Narragansett Bay was the ideal place
on the Atlantic coast to consolidate
naval might, and the *Providence Sun-
day Journal* followed up with a fea-
ture which suggested that the Boston
and Brooklyn navy yards were all
right but without room for expansion
and that anything else between Kit-
tery and New Orleans just didn't
have the room, the deep water, the
easy access to the sea and the defensi-
ble harbor, all attributes making the
bay the logical location for the
Navy's main base. It was the Melville
argument all over again, but no one
seemed to hear.

World War I resulted in greater naval activity in the bay, followed by the inevitable post-war slump.

Harding's Secretary of the Navy, Edwin Denby, in September, 1922, set up a board of four rear admirals and three captains, headed by Rear Admiral Hugh Rodman, to study and make recommendations concerning the Navy's shore establishments. The board recommended expansion of fleet use of Narragansett Bay, consolidation of all boot training at Newport and continuation there of the torpedo station and the war college. Other potent naval voices — Admirals Sims, Bristol, Knight and Ralph Earle Sr. — favored Narragansett Bay as a base.

Yet strangely enough, almost every year during the '20s, it was touch and go whether the Atlantic Fleet or, later, the Scouting Fleet would anchor in the bay during the summer. It became almost routine for the state's men in Congress to pressure the Navy Department to make sure the ships would come.

The ships came more often than not, and the lower bay was an exciting place with the battleships and cruisers in deep water over toward Jamestown and the destroyers—four-pipers from World War I—nesting in twos and threes closer to Newport. Liberty boats and officers' gigs shuttled between the ships and Government Landing. The Navy's fliers put their float planes down in Potter Cove on the Jamestown shore.

Early in the Franklin Roosevelt administration, expansion of the naval base at Norfolk, Virginia, began, and as Norfolk grew the chances of a major base in Narragansett Bay diminished.

Things began to hum in the bay, however, as the United States started

to get ready for World War II. Where the Rhode Island Militia had trained for so many years, where Lindbergh had landed *The Spirit of St. Louis* when he visited Rhode Island, where summer residents had listened nights to the heavy engines and occasional gunfire of rum runners and hijackers, the Navy in 1938 decided to put an air station. Quonset was placed in commission in July, 1941.

Simultaneously, the Naval Construction Battalion Center mushroomed at Davisville and started sending out those metal huts which made Quonset a familiar name the world over.

While Quonset was sending out its patrol planes and training fliers and air intelligence officers, while Davisville was training SeaBees, the Navy at Newport mushroomed northward along the Aquidneck shore. Crews of PT boats trained at Melville and in the farmland on the hill above, big underground fuel tanks were installed.

Naval growth since the war has continued, perhaps at a slower pace, but continued nonetheless with the cruiser-destroyer piers in Coddington Cove, the fleet supply center, and numerous schools.

The conviction of Melville and Meyer, of the Radford board and many others that Narragansett Bay is the logical location for the major naval base on the Atlantic never quite came true.

Right now, the Navy in Rhode Island is something of a colossus involving (as of 1972) 76,484 persons, military and civilian, and a payroll of \$344,000,000.

When the wizards of the Department of Defense get through with it, there will be damn little of it left.

Except the bay. □



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