

Bay Area Landmarks: The Sunken Ship (seventh in a series) ***by Robert French, CFI***

Anyone who has flown to Oakland, or from Coyote Hills to San Carlos, has encountered the "sunken ship". It's a convenient reporting point for all neighboring airports that is outside of everyone's airspace (assuming you don't go too high). Today, the old ship in the middle of the Bay is hardly visible, but this was not always the case.

The USS Thompson (DD-305) was one of 156 Clemson-class destroyers created after World War I. The destroyers had a speed of 36 knots, a complement of 122 sailors, and five large guns with 12 torpedo tubes. They were 314 feet long and displaced 1,308 tons. The Thompson was named for Richard W. Thompson. Thompson, who was born on June 8, 1809 in Virginia, was a member of the Indiana legislature and eventually the U.S. House of Representatives. He then became a Circuit Court judge in Indiana, and was appointed by President Rutherford B. Hayes as Secretary of the Navy in 1877. He died in 1900.

The keel of the Thompson was laid down on September 25, 1918 in San Francisco by the Bethlehem Steel Corporation. She was launched on January 15, 1919, and commissioned at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo on August 16, 1920. The Thompson participated in many naval exercises, traveling off the coasts of Washington, California, San Diego, Mexico, Panama, Chile, and El Salvador through 1926.

On September 8, 1923, the Thompson was part of the worst navigational disaster in U.S. Navy history. Seven almost brand new Navy destroyers ran aground on Honda Point, a few miles north of the northern entrance to the Santa Barbara Channel. It was a dark and foggy night, and the navigators were relying on dead reckoning for navigation. Radio Direction Finding told the navigators that they were in a different location than they were expecting, but the technology was new and untrusted. Twenty-three lives were lost. However, the Thompson, along with six other destroyers, managed to turn away in time.

Continuing its tour of duty, the Thompson left San Francisco for Pearl Harbor on April 15, 1926 and continued onward for a good will tour to Australia and New Zealand, returning to San Diego on September 26. After a brief trip to the east coast, the Thompson was decommissioned on April 4, 1930 as part of the arms limitations of the 1930 London Naval Treaty. She was sold for scrap on June 10.

During the depression of the 1930s, the Thompson was used as a floating restaurant in the lower San Francisco Bay. She was repurchased by the Navy in February, 1944 and sunk in the mud flats south of the San Mateo bridge to be used as target practice for Army and Navy bombing runs.

The USS Thompson is still in the same location today, although the actual ship is hardly visible. The square box visible from the air is a sunken barge attached to the ship that was used to access the hull for work parties. Throughout the past few decades, there have been many accounts of recreational boaters investigating the ship or using it as a base for duck hunting. A few years ago, I was a passenger in a small helicopter when the pilot decided to explore the sunken ship a little more thoroughly. We actually touched a skid to the barge (without putting any weight on it) to get a good up-close view. There wasn't much of the ship left visible above the water at that point, and it has sunk even further down in the mud since then. It wouldn't surprise me if the ship disappears entirely from view within a few years, thus ending the nearly 90-year career of a distinguished Navel vessel.