

The US Army Small Ships 1942 – 1945

In 1942 Rabaul and Singapore had fallen, Darwin had been bombed, the Japanese had landed in New Guinea, General Douglas MacArthur had arrived in Australia to become Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in the South West Pacific. In order to halt the Japanese, General MacArthur needed a way to move men and materials along the uncharted reef strewn coastline of New Guinea.

Into this breach came two brothers, Sheridan and Bruce Fahnstock. They had arrived in Australia with the mission to assist those still fighting in the Philippines. As that assistance was no longer needed they turned their task to raise what became known as the US Army Small Ships Section. They were told not to expect any assistance from the United States; that they would need to find the ships and crews to man them in Australia.

The ships were commandeered, leased or purchased from ports along the east coast of Australia, from Tasmania and from New Zealand. They were schooners, ketches, trawlers, tugs, ferries, barges, fishing boats and even a paddle wheel steamer, in fact any vessel that had a shallow draft suitable to navigate the uncharted reef strewn coast line of New Guinea.

The Australian Government allowed the US Army to hire boys as young as 15 years of age, men who were medically unfit or too old for the Australian Military Forces. These men and boys were hired one day and sailed the next as crew on these ships.

Until November 1943 these various ships became the landing craft for MacArthur. The small ships took Australian and American soldiers to the beach head, returning with the wounded and the dead. They took arms and ammunition to the front in addition to food, medical supplies. They even took field gun artillery shells and Matilda tanks to Finschaffien. They were bombed and strafed by day and by night.

The unit served along the New Guinea coast, Cape Gloucester, Morotai, Biak, The Philippines, Okinawa, the liberation of Korea and the occupation of Japan. The unit disbanded in January 1947.

On 9 November 2009 The Australian Government granted the US Army Small Ships the entitlement to the Imperial and Australian Campaign medals for service in WWII. On 9 July 2010 the US Army Corps of Transportation inducted the US Army Small Ships into the Hall of Fame for demonstrating exceptionally distinctive service to the Corps in WWII.

Information provided by Captain E. A. Flint, MBE, ED (Retd)

Ernest Flint was a seaman boy in the Small Ships in WWII.