

Maurice E. Fitzgerald in the Pacific War



by Edward J. Fitzgerald, April 2006

**Revised May 2009, with excerpts from the wartime diary of
Quartermaster Hartford H. Holden, and recollections of
Electricians Mate Harper L. Gruber, crewmates on USS YMS 339.**

2006 Preface

When Maurice Edward Fitzgerald ran for the Massachusetts House of Representatives in an extremely tight election race in 1946, even a newspaper that supported his opponent referred to him as a “Pacific war hero.” What had happened during his Navy service as captain of a wooden minesweeper to make this an accepted fact? Maurice did not talk about it much. He did tell some wartime anecdotes to a young midshipman attending Brown University on a Navy scholarship in the late 1960’s, but they were mostly self-effacing stories that did not include the combat he saw. I was that midshipman and if I thought about it at all then, I would have thought that there would be plenty of time later to ask my Uncle Maurice what had happened in the Pacific. But, sadly, that was not to be. And so it is now much too late to get his personal account of what it was really like.

Nevertheless, I decided in 2004 that perhaps it would be possible to research and get a skeletal outline of the wartime story of the minesweeper USS YMS 339 and of her captain and crew, starting with such sources as the original deck-logs and once classified after-action reports, both maintained at the National Archives in Maryland. Leads pointed to other sources, including old photos and newspaper articles kept by my mother. My special thanks to her and to her great memory! This history is the end result of my part-time, much enjoyed research. I have included the anecdotes Maurice related to me as I recall them as well as some from family lore, and have given a sketch of his life before and after the Pacific.

My thanks also to my daughter, Laura, and wife, Anne, who provided much-needed editing advice.

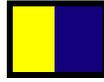
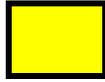
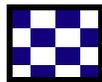
If anyone reading this sees a factual error, please tell me.



With good fortune while writing the narrative, I was able to locate one of Maurice’s Pacific shipmates, Stacey F. Pickup, of Denver Colorado, age 84, and his wife Catherine. Thank you, Stacey, for your service to America and to world freedom and peace more than 60 years ago. [2009 note: Stacey F. Pickup died January 13th, 2008, at age 86.]



Those who knew Maurice recognized him as extraordinary. He was exceptionally smart, energetic, personable, perceptive, and honorable. I hope in telling some of the story of his wartime service, I have been able to illustrate a few of his wonderful traits. This history is dedicated to his memory.



Cover photo: Maurice Fitzgerald on the port-side bridge wing of a minesweeper at sea in World War II; certainly not in formal Navy uniform this day, but typical for a minesweeper underway independently in fine weather.

May 2009 Revision

A rainy day search in October 2008 for more photos of minesweeper USS YMS 339 included returning to "NavSource Online", the site where the only known photo at the time had been found in 2005. NavSource credited the undated photo, which is shown on page 43, to a "John Holden" with no further information. A check of the September 1944 Master Roll of the ship's crew, obtained earlier at the National Archives, showed a Quartermaster Third Class, then nineteen years old, named Hartford Hale Holden, responsible for the ship's charts and navigation. Through his unusual name, it was learned online that unfortunately he had died in 2002. However, I was also able to locate and telephone his son, the photo's source John Holden, in Houston Texas. I had hoped he might have additional photos, and that he might like a copy of this history. John did have more photos, that he graciously shared, but more significantly his father had kept a diary from August 1944 to August 1945 .

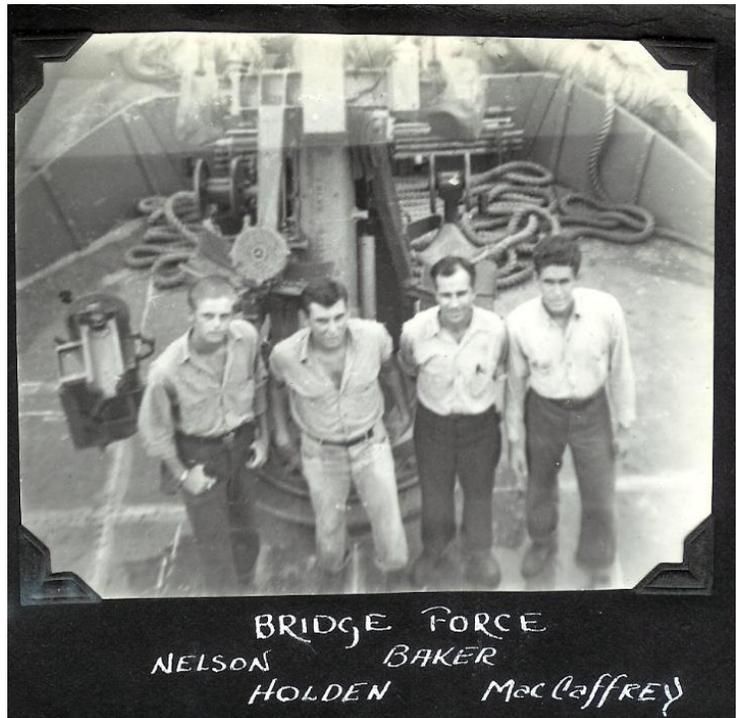
Hartford H. Holden was born and raised in Lowry, Minnesota. He excelled in studies and in athletics, especially his favorite, baseball. He graduated from Glenwood High School in 1942 and enlisted in the Navy starting in December 1942. He attended basic training and quartermaster school before being assigned to YMS 339. He was a "plank-holder", assigned to the ship at her commissioning in September 1943. He stayed in the Navy through war's end and was promoted to Petty Officer First Class.

Hartford's diary was hand-written, but had just recently been transcribed so that his son John could publish it to his family. John and I readily agreed to share what we each had. John subsequently prepared and sent out for Veterans' Day 2008 the "Writings of a Young Man in Harm's Way - the Diary of Hartford Hale Holden". John included the verbatim diary along with annotations including some excerpts from the 2006 edition of this history.

Similarly, this May 2009 Revision includes selected Holden diary excerpts where they fit chronologically. They are in script font style (demonstrated in this paragraph) for easy identification. I am indebted to John for his generous permission to quote from his father's diary. The diary entries, written in the casual vernacular of the time and not intended to be published, are nonetheless rich and insightful and add greatly to the story of what it was like to be on YMS 339 underway in the Pacific, of the places they saw and the combat they endured.

Newly added photos, with black borders like this one, are also courtesy of John Holden, from his father's papers.

Hartford Holden with other members of the enlisted general quarters "bridge force", standing behind 339's main 3" gun.



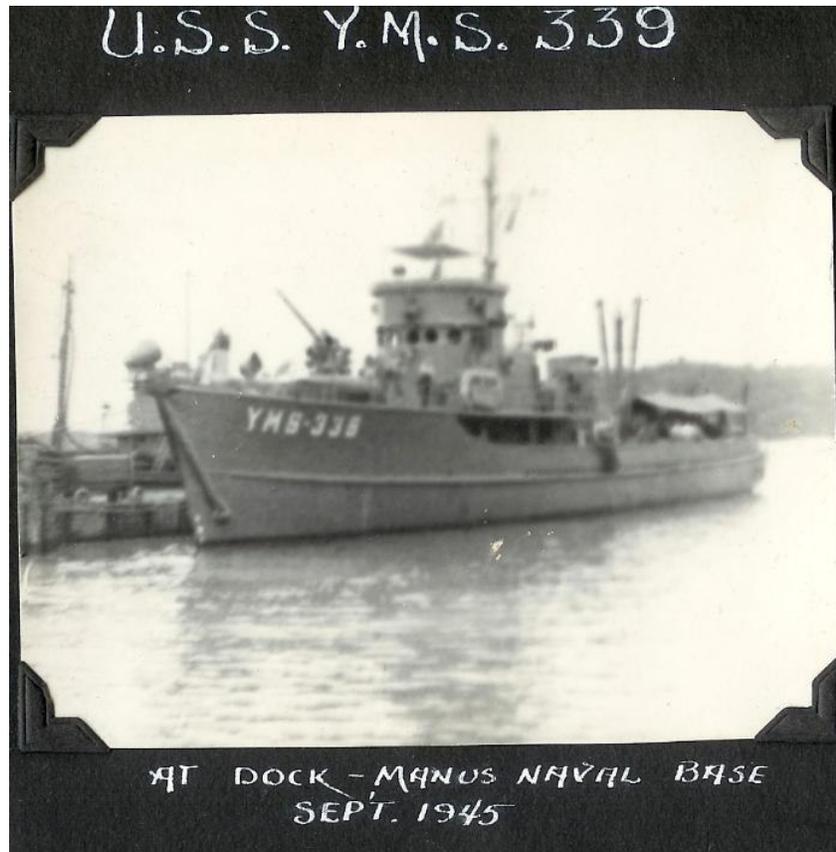
As a result of research John did while transcribing his father's diary, he located another YMS 339 crewmate, Electricians Mate Harper Gruber. John's father had been good friends with Gunners Mate Jerry McCaffrey, during and after the war. McCaffrey, in turn, was good friends and kept in touch with Harper Gruber. Although McCaffrey died in 2001, his daughter had an address for Harper. Consequently, both John and I contacted and have greatly enjoyed long distance conversations with Harper, who has a keen memory of his war days and a willingness to share. He related a number of anecdotes and answered numerous questions - I have included some of what he told us where it fits chronologically in this May 2009 revision.

Harper Gruber grew up in South Carolina where he still resides. He enlisted in the navy in June 1943, also at age 19. He attended boot camp and electrical school at Bainbridge, Maryland. Upon graduation, he was sent to Panama, where he spent about a year maintaining onshore electrical equipment. On August 18, 1944, Harper was assigned to replace YMS 339's Electricians Mate, who had developed a back problem. (This was two days after Maurice reported to the ship.) Harper was promoted from Electricians Mate 3rd Class to 2nd Class in October 1945, and to 1st Class before being discharged from the service in April 1946. He is 85 in 2009, and has three daughters.

As best we can determine, Harper Gruber is the last surviving member of USS YMS 339's wartime crew. My deepest appreciation go to him for the time he took to read the original version of this history and discuss his recollections. And thank you, Harper, for your faithful service under fire on that wooden warship.



Finally, formally incorporated in this May 2009 revision, in the Epilogue, is the "2008 Addendum" that I earlier sent out separately to some holders of the original history. It summarizes the 2008 fortuitous rediscovery of Maurice's daughter and her family, including his three grandsons, who now have had the opportunity to learn more about their grandfather; and we about them. Maurice always looked to the future, and perhaps it is fitting that his story now ends with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



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1. A NEW WARSHIP

United States Ship (USS) Yard Motor Minesweeper (YMS) number 339 was built in a wartime rush by the Seattle Shipbuilding and Drydock Company. The ship was normally known more simply as Motor Minesweeper 339, YMS 339, or just 339 to the minesweeper men themselves. To others in the fleet, it was also a “yard bird” a term used both in derision and in admiration. The YMS’s were relatively small, slow wooden warships. But they always ventured first into enemy coastal waters to clear the way—before the marines to the beaches in their landing craft, before the amphibious ships with their valuable loads, and before the big carriers and battleships into a captured gulf or harbor. “Where the fleet goes, we’ve been” was the sweepers’ motto.

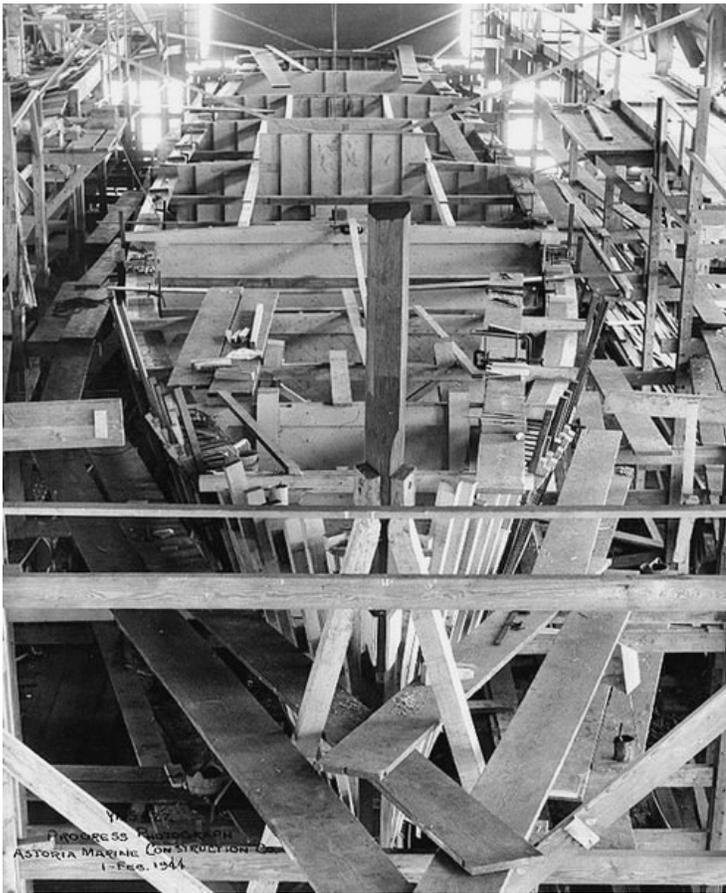
YMS 339 was commissioned into active naval service on Saturday, September 25, 1943. Commissioning is a formal ceremony in which the crew takes control of the ship from its builders and “sets the watch” not to be relinquished at sea or in port as long as the ship is in active service. This is not to be confused with the launching, when a ship’s hull first floats and it is given its name. Construction started when the keel was laid down on March 8th. Launching was May 8th. So, from start to September commissioning was a fast six and a half months. At the commissioning, Lieutenant (LT) E.A. Simpson became 339’s first captain, in command with 3 other officers and 27 enlisted men on-board, 2 shy of a full normal wartime complement.

The United States was in the middle of the greatest program of warship construction by any nation ever. Built and put into service during the war were thousands of warships and transports including these notable examples: 30 fleet aircraft carriers (designated CV), 10 battleships (BB), 75 cruisers, 240 submarines, and 436 destroyers (DD). Also built were 561 YMS’s and 231 of their larger sisters, the auxiliary ocean minesweepers (AM). Of the new YMS’s, 411 went to the Navy, 128 were transferred immediately after construction to Great Britain and 22 to Russia. With the war progressing well in Europe in 1944, an additional 30 YMS’s were transferred from Navy duty to the Free French.

All the warships mentioned above were given names, as well as designation numbers, except for the YMS’s. Due to the rush of the war and their quantity and size, the YMS’s had to make do with numbers only; like the patrol torpedo boats made famous by John Kennedy’s sunk PT 109. The YMS’s that survived the war and that were kept on active duty beyond 1947 were named, after-the-fact, for sea birds such as the albatross—as if to confirm officially their “yard bird” nickname.

All the YMS’s were essentially built to the same plan, with displacement of 320 tons; length 136 feet; beam, or width at widest point, 24.5 feet; draft, or depth below the waterline, 6 feet 1 inch. Top speed was 13 knots, about 15 miles per hour. Propulsion came through twin screws, each powered by 500 horsepower diesel engines which, in the case of 339, were manufactured by General Motors.

In addition to the new YMS’s and AM’s, the Navy bought 20 large fishing trawlers and converted them to AM’s. These were needed while shipyards built the new minesweepers. Also, 42 old destroyers, many from World War I, were converted into high speed ocean minesweepers (DMS). Finally, 70 small coastal minesweepers (AMc) were built, 87 feet long. Almost all of the AMc’s stayed in US coastal waters during the war.



YMS 422 under construction—keel, frames, bulkheads, and outer hull, all of wood.

The YMS's were built to clear underwater mines as their primary job. But they had to conduct other missions, including defending themselves, and so were armed with these weapons: one 3 inch 50 caliber naval gun mounted near the bow with a range of over seven miles (3 inch refers to the diameter of the shell fired); two 20mm cannons; several 50 caliber machine guns; two depth charge racks and projectors on the stern quarters; and a number of 30 caliber rifles. They also had surface search radar to track ships, sonar to find submarines, and multiple radios.



YMS 312 on launching day. Note celebration flags, and yard workers onboard.

Seattle Shipbuilding and Drydock Company was among 35 yards that built the YMS's. These yards typically specialized in making wooden fishing trawlers, yachts, and other types of wooden craft, and were loosely called "yacht yards". This may account for the "Y" or "yard" in YMS. Seattle Shipbuilding, now long since out-of-business, built 12 YMS's, including 4 for the British. One YMS, not counting engines and weapon systems purchased directly from their manufacturers, typically cost \$325 thousand which would be \$3.6 million in 2005 dollars.

Here is a comparison of YMS's to some other American warship types of the day:

Ship type	Displacement (tons)	Length (feet)	Manning	Main weapons	Size of largest warheads
Fleet carrier (CV)	33,000 Essex class	888	3,500	80-100 airplanes	1,000 lb bombs; torpedoes
Battleship (BB)	52,000 Iowa class	880	2,700	Nine 16 inch guns	2,400 lb shells
Destroyer (DD)	2,500 Fletcher class	376	300	Six 5 inch guns; depth charges	64 lb shells; torpedoes
Submarine (SS)	1,500 Gato class	307	70	10 reloading torpedo tubes	600 lb warheads
Minesweeper (YMS)	320	136	33	One 3 inch gun; depth charges	13 lb. shells; 200 lb Torpex charges
Patrol torpedo boat (PT)	45	81	14	4 torpedoes	600 lb. warheads

After the commissioning ceremony that Saturday in late September 1943, the crew not on duty was given the rest of the weekend off, as most food supplies were not yet onboard. It would prove to be a rare free weekend. On Monday, 339 sailed to Bremerton for final fitting out, while various crew members went off to training schools. On October 8th, the ship took on its first ammunition and depth charges at Indian Island, and on the 10th, a Sunday, they

practiced mine sweeping for the first time in Puget Sound. On the 12th, a Navy "Trial Board" for minesweeping came onboard and 339's crew passed the test.

The ship spent October 14th at the degaussing range. YMS's were made of wood, but their engines, shafts, pumps, pipes, fittings, wiring, and weapons were all metal. To present the smallest possible magnetic signal to magnetically-activated mines, 339 had a wire degaussing coil inside the hull to offset the magnetic field of its metal parts. The coil needed to be calibrated. All warships have similar coils, and although they don't work perfectly, they reduce the danger from mines. Sweeper crews were often told that the use of wood in the YMS's, instead of steel, was a deliberate design element to lower the magnetic signature. The serious tradeoff of lower hull strength against shells, bombs, and mines was usually not mentioned. But, in fact, degaussing coils could do a fair job in small ships even with a steel hull. The Navy was trying to make virtue out of necessity: steel was needed more for larger ships and army tanks, and there were 35 yacht yards experienced in making wooden vessels that could produce minesweepers quickly. Plus, wood was plentiful. So the YMS's were wood—much of it oak and Oregon pine with keels of Douglas fir for those built on the west coast—while the new AM's were made of steel.

YMS 339 left her home waters of Puget Sound, never to return, on Monday November 29, 1943. The captain had orders to proceed to Panama, via a liberty stop in San Diego. Assigned to Naval Station Coco Solo on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal Zone, near the city of Colon, the crew conducted sweeping drills with other minesweepers, and anti-submarine and mine patrols of the shipping lanes. The ship took on the usual provisions, which one day included eggs, cheese, pineapple, corn, pork, bread, potatoes, a case of pickled pig's feet, 50 pints of ice cream and over 4,000 gallons of diesel fuel. LT J. C. Sharp, who had reported in November, 1943, before the ship left Seattle, was promoted to become 339's second commanding officer in April 1944.

Sailors being sailors in a rear area with good shore liberty, there were examples of "Captain's Mast", the Navy's way of dealing with violations to regulations, such as drunkenness and fighting. On May 9th, a 2nd class electricians mate was restricted to the ship for 7 days, and another crew member was confined to "the brig" for 5 days. Their specific offenses would have been listed in their service records, and are not in the ship's deck log. There were

YMS 322 in dry-dock



