

9. THREE FLAGS

What became of YMS 339 and her sister YMS's after the war?



Ex-YMS 327, renamed USS Ruff (MSC 54); photo from 1960's; last YMS in the Navy.

Some, typically those built last and which had seen the least action, were kept on active duty in the Navy or in the Naval Reserves. They swept mines in the Korean War. They were slowly replaced by new all-metal minesweepers, built from expensive non-magnetic metals. The last Navy WWII era YMS to see service was number 327, struck from the naval registry in November, 1969.

Most YMS's were either given to the navies of foreign allies, or were stripped of their weapons systems and sold as surplus to the highest bidder, typically for less than \$50,000, which was less than 15% of the cost to build them. \$50,000 is about \$0.5 million in 2005 dollars. The acknowledged public authority on the world's navies, "Jane's Fighting Ships", said of

these sales in their 1946/1947 edition: "Hundreds of the escort vessels and minesweepers which were a material factor in Allied victory at sea have been sold at bargain prices." Of those YMS's that were sold, some were refitted to become yachts—one notably owned by actor John Wayne—that one and a very few others are still in use. Another, that had been one of the YMS's transferred to England, was first sold to a car ferry company then to undersea explorer and movie-maker, Jacques Cousteau. It was renamed to become his famous "Calypso." Cousteau, being a true Frenchman, rarely acknowledged that his beloved vessel was originally an American-built warship, and, even worse, that it came via England. Calypso collided with a barge and sank in Singapore harbor in 1996. It was salvaged, but is in poor condition in La Rochelle, France, the subject of lawsuits by Cousteau's contesting heirs.



John Wayne's "Wild Goose"; ex-YMS 328; still in use as a yacht.

Maurice's first minesweeper, the converted steel fishing trawler USS Hawk (AM 133) was decommissioned on May 1, 1944. It was no longer needed on the east coast, as new more capable sweepers were being constantly added to the fleet. Hawk was sold back into the fishing trade. One of Maurice's Hawk shipmates wrote in a letter in early 1946 that Hawk had been "wrecked completely in a storm off the Maritime Islands" while fishing—and added "what an ignoble end for that noble craft." This shipwreck was not independently confirmed, as other sources list Hawk as "fate unknown" after being sold.

Maurice's second minesweeper, YMS 308, received no battle stars in WWII. It first served, with Maurice onboard, on the east coast and in the Caribbean, searching for German mines that weren't there and escorting convoys, while training new officers and crewmen who would go on to serve on other ships. 308 was later transferred to the Pacific, where in mid-September 1945 it was blown onto a reef by the typhoon that month at Okinawa. It was towed off by a sea-going tug, but was not fully repaired and was decommissioned and struck from the naval registry in January 1946 at Okinawa. It may have been sold, for scavenging or scrapping, but its ultimate fate is listed as "unknown." Strange that vessels that were highly valuable and in great demand a few months before, were now not important enough to even keep track of once they were decommissioned. But such was the rapid demobilization of the American military after WWII, even with the Cold War coming on.



Cousteau's Calypso, an ex-BYMS, in La Rochelle.

However, of YMS 339, more information was found. Maurice was relieved on November 30, 1945 as commanding officer by Lt (jg) R. F. Quinn, who was previously executive officer. He, in turn, was relieved around year end by Lt (jg) B. J. Hook, 339's fifth and last Navy captain. The ship was operating in Philippine waters, doing considerable minesweeping. It last swept for the Navy, in Ragay Gulf, in March 1946. It went to Subic Bay in April. It was last underway on its own power as a United States warship on May 3rd, in Subic Bay. On May 9, 1946, USS YMS 339 was decommissioned. Its last deck log entry says: "colors, commissioning pennant, and jack hauled down." The deck watch

was secured and the ship was turned over to the Captain of the Yard, Naval Operating Base, Subic Bay, for custody and disposition.



Underwater photo of ex-YMS 359; sold & later sunk in a Washington state lake.

Here is where old annual editions of “Jane’s Fighting Ships”, found in a New York City research library, pick up the story. 339 was transferred in June 1948 along with three other YMS’s and one British YMS to the National Chinese navy, then fighting in a civil war against the Chinese communists, under Mao Tse-tung. Mao’s forces prevailed, and in 1949, the Nationalists fled to Formosa, now Taiwan, to set up a separate country. The Nationalists took most of the larger vessels, but the communists acquired any left, which included all five ex-YMS’s, and put them in the new Red navy as minesweepers or gunboats. 339 continued in service until 1963 when it became the first of the five to be decommissioned. Perhaps the Chinese needed to use one of the ships as a source of parts for the others, since they couldn’t buy spare parts from the West then. Or perhaps 339 was in the worst condition of the five, with the hard work of the Pacific war showing itself more often, after 20 years of operating. The other Chinese YMS’s were decommissioned by 1977. Whether the ships were used after that for some commercial purpose, or were scrapped for the value of their component material, is not known. The Chinese navy, unlike most of the world’s navies, does not divulge this kind of information. But it is safe to say that 339 is now long gone, given the cost and effort that would have been necessary to keep her viable and afloat.

Maurice was probably unaware of 339’s fate, as he never mentioned that his ship served in China. He probably would not have liked the thought of 339 serving against the US and other countries of the United Nations in the Korean War. But no Chinese naval units were involved in Korea, so 339 did not fire a shot against its builders. Serving in multiple navies, such as 339 did, was more common in the heyday of wooden sailing ships, with many vessels boarded and captured. So perhaps it was an appropriate fate for the wooden 339.



EPILOGUE

1946 was a year of endings and beginnings for Maurice. His mother, Delia, had taken to telling people that she would be fine once her younger son came home from the Pacific war. She held on to see him return, but succumbed to cancer in March. She bequeathed the house on Quinlan Street in equal parts to her two sons. Maurice sold his half to his sister-in-law, Frances, for \$1—typically generous of him, and at a time when he had little money. He did it partly in recognition of her having cared for Delia during her illness.

Rita sued for divorce in that year of many divorces. It was a painful process, with no such thing yet as a “no-fault divorce.” She was given custody of their young daughter and he got visitation rights consisting of three hours every second Sunday afternoon.

He was given a Navy discharge physical exam in Boston on January 10th. He had two months and one day of accrued leave, representing slightly more than two years worth of vacation not taken. This leave time counted as active service, so he was freed from any further duties with his official discharge date set for March 11th.



1946 campaign ad.

Maurice took up private practice of law in Milford, but was, by his own later account, discouraged. All the returning warriors had decisions to make. His friend John Jennings wrote from the Pacific: “Fitz...now I am a bit timorous at the thought of being a civilian and making decisions that will last all my life, and yet out here we’ve been making snap decisions that certainly had a lot to do with our chances for old age.”

Maurice decided to run for political office, state representative from his home district, the 10th (later 9th) Worcester County district. His brother was his campaign manager. He ran as a Democrat in a district that, despite being heavily working class, had traditionally only elected Republicans. It was a hard-fought campaign, with charges and counter-charges carried in the local newspapers. When the votes were counted in November, he was ahead by just 29 of the thousands cast. After the first recount, demanded by his opponent, his lead dropped to only six. In the second and final recount, he led by ten votes. He was sworn into office in Boston. The Massachusetts House of Representatives met only part of the year, so he also continued his small law practice.



Maurice & Ruth in 1950's or early 1960's.

Maurice had met Ruth Hiebert during the war at a dinner given for visiting ships by people of Provincetown. He may have been on either the Hawk or YMS 308 then, and they probably were in company with other ships, stopping in the fine protected harbor for a short visit. A search of the Provincetown Advocate newspaper archives was not successful in finding a date for the ships' visit—perhaps wartime secrecy rules prohibited the printing of that information, since “loose lips sink ships” as the saying then went. Ruth was the only child of Emily and Daniel Hiebert, the town doctor. Now that Maurice was back from the Pacific and getting divorced, he and Ruth became over time, a devoted couple. He would later try to get an annulment of his marriage from the Catholic Church, so that he could remarry within the Church. But that was much harder to get then than now, and although he continued to work towards it, it did not happen in time.

Ruth, a 1944 graduate of Tufts University, was nine years younger than Maurice. In the Cape Cod tourist season, she managed a group of efficiency apartments “on the sea”, called Captain Jack's Wharf, that had been acquired by her father, with its net-mending and fish-drying sheds converted to vacation units. Ruth's efforts at working and managing the business would result in some tenants coming back year after year—and later their children and grandchildren. Her consistent success led to her acquiring other nearby rental properties, which she also ran. She would later become a key leader in local business, civic, and charitable affairs; and well-loved by many.



Re-election ad in 1948.

Maurice quickly became an effective legislator. He ran for re-election in 1948 and 1950, and won easily both times. He served on House committees devoted to labor issues, the elderly, and the mentally ill. He became chairman of the committee on pensions and old age assistance. He was one of only a few to call for an independent state-level investigation of organized crime. Governor Paul Dever was quoted as saying: "Fitzgerald is my right arm in the legislature." The Boston Herald, the unabashed voice of the opposition Republicans, said: "Representative Fitzgerald of Milford [is] one of the better members of the Democratic group. He has been looked upon as material for the bench, or for a place on the party escalator towards the governorship."

In 1948, Maurice started a joint law practice in Milford with a friend, Bob Phillips, as junior partner. They did both civil and criminal law, notably defending a double murderer in 1950. In November of that year, with the Korean War started, Maurice was recalled to active duty. This time, the "needs of the service" determined that his best use would be in the Judge Advocate General (JAG) corps, working as a lawyer, not as skipper of a minesweeper. He served first in Newport, then Boston, and lastly in Philadelphia.

His recall by the Navy led the Boston Herald to editorialize on February 22, 1951: "Fitzgerald is one of the ablest Democrats in the House. He is evidently well liked by the voters of his district because they used to have none but Republicans until he broke through. He was easily re-elected last year. However popular and competent he may be, the [state] Constitution indicates that he is ineligible to serve in the Legislature." It turned out that the Constitution barred officers of the Massachusetts Navy, which had existed in colonial times, from serving in the state legislature. This did not apply to officers of the US Navy. Regardless, once Maurice was transferred to Philadelphia, he decided that he could not well serve both the Navy and the people of his district. So he chose not to run for re-election in 1952. His involvement in politics thereafter was limited to helping in the presidential campaigns of Adlai Stevenson and John Kennedy, both of whom he had met. When he decided not to run again, he issued a press statement that said: "I am very sorry that I cannot be a candidate for re-election. You, the people of Milford and this area, are the most wonderful people in the world. When I was rather down after the war due to so many things you restored my confidence by making me your representative. I shall be forever grateful....Recently, it has been a little difficult to serve the US Navy and act as your representative. I can not complain about contributing my little bit to our country's attempt to build itself so strong militarily that it will not be to the communists' advantage to start the terrible all-out war that we all want to avoid."



The Wharf, built by Capt. Jackson Williams in 1897; once the hangout of playwright Tennessee Williams; now condo's.

Governor Dever named Maurice Special Justice for the 2nd District Court of Worcester County on July 30, 1952. He would serve as a part-time Judge thereafter, often sitting on Saturdays in the various district courthouses after he returned from his second Navy tour of duty.



With Governor Dever.

That Navy tour lasted from November 1950 to July 1956. He acted as defense counsel or judge in numerous Navy proceedings. He also supervised thousands of claim investigations for and against the government. He was promoted to Lieutenant Commander while on active duty, and to full Commander, USNR, in February 1957, while staying in Reserve status. He would attend monthly "drills" and a two week active duty training period each year afterwards. While he was in Philadelphia, Ruth worked there in the winters as a fund raising manager for the annual Heart Fund drive. She continued to operate Captain Jack's in the tourist season.

When he left the Navy the second time, Maurice got a legal position with American Universal Insurance Company in Providence. He was promoted in 1959 to claims department counsel; later to Secretary-Counsel of the corporation; and finally to Vice President—Secretary in March 1968. So, he worked one full time executive position, and two part-time ones, as

Judge and his small law practice in Milford—this does not count his Naval Reserve time. All this was in character, as he had written in a mid-1950's resume that he had been "employed continuously from 7th grade." He had an apartment near Wayland Square on the east side of Providence, and Ruth had one nearby that she used in the winters, working again for the Heart Fund there.



During the Cape tourist season, with Ruth full-time in Provincetown, Maurice would drive to Milford after work on the weekday evenings. He would arrive after the family had eaten, but my mother would have a full meal ready for him. He would sit at a small table in the kitchen and he and I would talk while he ate. Afterwards, he would listen to the Red Sox on the radio with my father and talk, or we would do something in the area. They were good times. He slept in one of the maple beds that his brother had paid for with his "339" winnings, in a bedroom with my younger brother, Richard, and me.

On weekends he would drive his convertible—he always had one—to the Cape to help Ruth on the Wharf. There would be tenant parties with interesting people, and swimming in the sea. Their plan was to work and save, so that when they retired they would live on the Cape in the summers and travel in the winters. The two of them would shop extensively before each Christmas, and their generous gifts became a legend in the family.



Marianne.

This section was edited for the internet to remove comments here about some of Maurice's living descendants, in the interests of their privacy. Only family and close friends have the full, unedited text.



In the spring of 1968, a friend wrote to Maurice to congratulate him on his promotion to Vice President. In his reply, Maurice made a joke and then was serious: "I have finally grown up and have not yet volunteered for Vietnam. My life is complicated in that there is my limited [law] practice, sitting [judge], and the insurance company. But strange as it seems, I am happier than I have ever been."

He expressed that same last sentiment in a letter to me that summer. I was on a refurbished WWII-era destroyer, USS Lowry (DD 770), as a midshipman the summer before graduating from Brown. My tour on Lowry included a stop in Sasebo, Japan. Guiding the ship into the harbor, passed tall green hills on both sides of the winding entrance, was an old Japanese pilot. In conversation on the bridge wing, it came out that he had been captain of an Imperial Japanese cruiser in WWII. He reluctantly related that it had been sunk by Americans with high loss of life. He added that his country was better off now and that he was glad the Japanese were friends with the Americans. In Maurice's letter, he said he was pleased that I was able to visit a peaceful Japan and he hoped that I would have a good time there.

While sitting on the bench in court in early fall of that year, Maurice was stricken suddenly and passed out. It was eventually diagnosed as brain cancer. His condition deteriorated slowly but inexorably. Ruth took care of him in her Providence apartment, with frequent visits from his brother and sister-in-law. He died May 30, 1969, at age 55.

The night we learned that his condition was inoperable and fatal, it was cold and windy, sleet falling. In the parking lot outside Rhode Island Hospital, his brother Bill said with unmistakable conviction and sadness: "If I had the power, I would change places with him. And I wish I had the power."

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Maurice was asked by Milford town officials to be the main speaker at Memorial Day ceremonies in 1957. The Milford Daily News for May 31, 1957 reported on page one: "Special Justice Maurice E. Fitzgerald, the principal speaker at exercises in General Draper Park, said Memorial Day was an event devoted to the dead, but he urged the gathering to honor the living. "Do not wait until your parents and loved ones are dead...be kind and helpful to them," he said."

His speech was perfectly in character.

Small ship and a Provincetown sunset in 2005.



Epilogue: 2008 Addendum

This section was deleted from the internet version to remove comments about Maurice's living descendants, in the interests of their privacy. Only family and close friends have the full, unedited text.

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