

LST-124 GOES TO WAR

BY BOB BURR

Seaman 2C Martin Pintar served aboard LST-124 for his WWII tour. He kept a periodic diary of each movement of his ship from his joining up in Pearl Harbor on 6 May 1944 until his departure on 24 Dec 1945 at Noumea, New Caledonia. He wrote frequently to his parents during the war and they kept all of the letters plus a few which were never delivered and returned by the FPO service.

A copy of the handwritten diary, a compilation of letters with those hard-to-identify FPO locations and some online research allows us to detail a very busy wartime LST, some formerly classified data, and a seamen's communications to home.

First the details of LST-124:

LST-124 was laid down on 7 June 1943 at Evansville, Ind., by the Missouri Valley Bridge & Iron Co.; launched on 18 August 1943; sponsored by Mrs. Hunt Greathouse; and commissioned on 24 September 1943, Ens. William A. Bartos in command. Unbeknownst to Martin Pintar, a shipmate named Leo Bednarczyk, machinist mate 2nd class was assigned to LST-124 during its built-out and launch. Leo relates later in this saga. During World War II, *LST-124* was assigned to the Asiatic- Pacific Theater and participated in the Marianas operation including the capture and occupation of Tinian in June 1944 and the capture and occupation of Saipan in June and July 1944 and the Okinawa Gunto operation which was the assault and occupation of Okinawa Gunto during May and June 1945. The ship was awarded three battle stars.

Upon her return to the United States, the ship was decommissioned on 26 July 1946 and struck from the Navy list on 28 August 1946. On 13 December 1947, she was sold to the Kaiser Co., Inc., of Seattle, Wash., and subsequently scrapped.

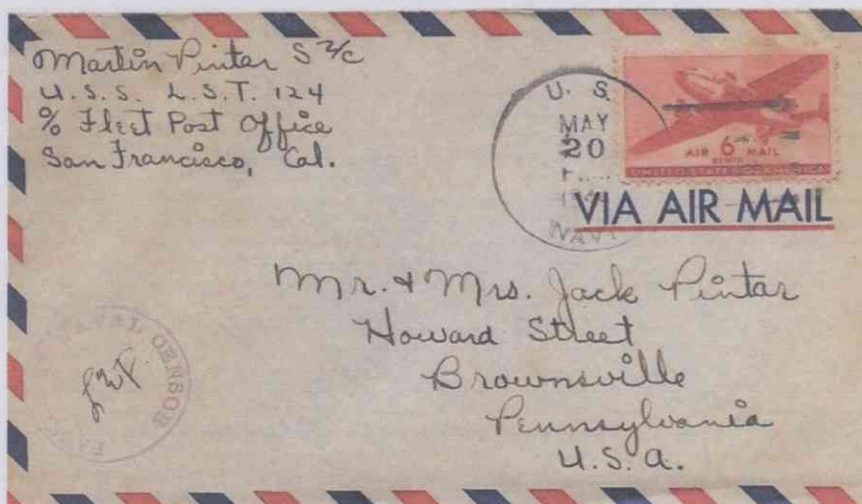
**LST 124, Noumea, New Caledonia, Dec. 15 1945
Half mast flag honors shipmate Williams, buried in National
cemetery, New Caledonia**



Having passed his Physical in January 1944 Pintar started naval basic training "boats" at Great Lakes Naval Training Center on 1 February and was finished by 23 March 1944. After some additional training at O.G.U. at Great Lakes in April he is sent to Camp Shoemaker, CA. He gets letters send home on 12, 14 and 23 April.



By 23 April he is assigned to Treasure Island Naval Base for shipment to Hawaii. Departing on 24 April and arriving at Pearl Harbor on 29 April Seaman 2nd class Martin Pintar is assigned to LST-124 on 6 May 1944. Working for over two weeks he and shipmate Bednarczyk, Seaman 2nd Class Wes Freeman and Pharmacist Mate 3th Class Ernie Andrus and 122 others helped loaded the LST in preparation of the invasion of the Marianas.



First censored cover

In May 1944, the West Loch area of Pearl Harbor was unusually crowded with various vessels as it was being used as a staging area for the upcoming Operation Forager. Twenty-nine

Landing Ships, Tank (LSTs) were tied up, beam to beam, at six Tare piers. Many of the LSTs, in addition to carrying their own complement of munitions and fuel, were also fully loaded with the munitions, fuel, vehicles, equipment, and other general stores required by the 2nd and 4th Marine Divisions for the invasion of the Marianas, that was to begin in mid-June. To aid quick deployment once ashore, high-octane gasoline was stored in barrels on deck.

In the weeks leading up to 21 May, the vessels and crews had all been training for the upcoming invasion. The LSTs were each crewed by around 120 Navy sailors or Coast Guardsmen, and manned by around 200 Marine loaders, drivers and mechanics. The rapid expansion of the fleet meant many of the crews were made up of inexperienced sailors and Marines. On 21 May, many of the LSTs had only half their crew aboard because, after a week of intensive training, most officers and ratings had been given shore leave.

At 15:08, the *LST-353* moored at Tare 8 exploded sending a large fireball into the sky. The noise was heard miles away at Pearl Harbor Headquarters. More explosions of increasing intensity followed, sparking fears of a Japanese attack or even an earthquake. Fire and debris raining down on the fuel and munitions stored on the decks of other LSTs had caused an explosive chain reaction. Within minutes, 200 men had been blown into the water. Eleven wooden buildings on the shore were destroyed and vehicles blown on their side. In all, 20 buildings were damaged.



Initial efforts by the crews to fight the fires were impeded by the heat, although some ships further away managed to muster damage control parties. Many of the LSTs tied together at Tare 8 began to sink. Within the hour, Admiral Richmond K. Turner was directing fire-fighting efforts from a launch.

Various LSTs managed to move to safety under their own power or with assistance by tugboats. However, others were abandoned and allowed to drift, spreading fires, before sinking in the channel. Leaking oil ignited on the water also spread fires to Tares 7 and 9 even though they had been unharmed after the first explosions at Tare 8. Eventually tugboats and foam-carrying salvage ships from Pearl Harbor arrived to fight the spreading fires. One ship managed to turn a drifting LST away from a collision course with an ammunition ship docked across the loch at the ammunition depot.

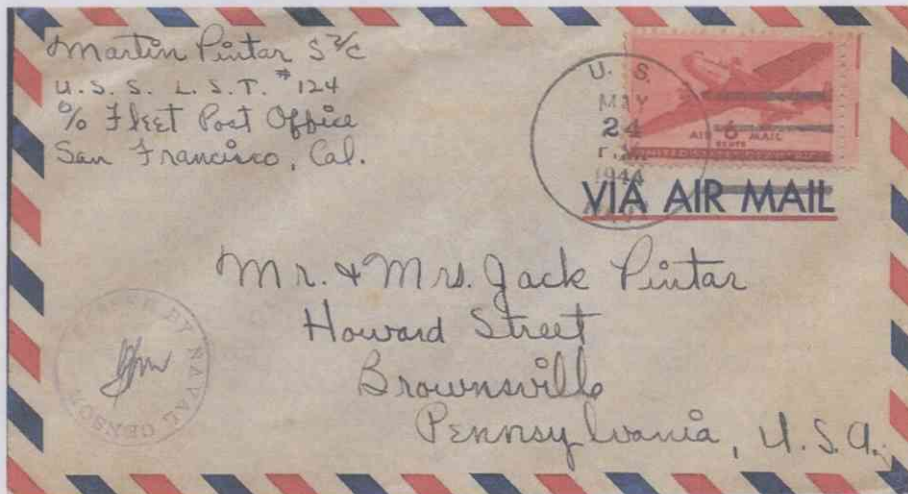
A final explosion occurred at 22:30, while several LSTs continued to burn for 24 hours. In total, the harbor tugs *Osceola*, *Hoga*, and *Geronimo*, the net tender *Tamaha*, the chartered tug *Mikioi*, and smaller tugs *YTL-233*, *YTL-306*, *YTL-307*, *YTL-308*, *YTL-309*, and *YTL-339* were damaged while engaged in fire control efforts.

In Bednarczyk's words in 2002: "another one of the worst experiences that I had, it was a non-combat experience and it happened on May 21, 1944, in a place called Westlock, an annex of Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor has annexes called Southlock, Westlock, Northlock and Eastlock and we happened to be in Westlock and it was an area where ships with a shallow bottom such as an LST was, could go in and get their fuel and ammunition and in this case, there must have been 50 LST's tied up in groups of five or six.

In our case, we were the outboard ship and the inboard ship caught fire. It not only caught fire, it exploded. We had skid loads of armament for fuel artillery aboard ship. The second one caught fire and exploded. The third exploded. The fourth sunk and we were the sixth ship and we were able to survive. Most of the sailors in this crew and most of the cargo were ashore. It was the middle of the afternoon about 3:00 when it happened. Since I was responsible for taking on the fuel, I was aboard ship.

My executive officer at the time could see what was happening and immediately summoned me to start the engines along with another one of our engine men, and we got the crew members to untie the ship and he just took us away. We started the engines and we gradually drifted away from the holocaust that happened there. We were just extremely fortunate. "

The Westlock disaster remained classified until 2000. Pintar forwarded a letter on 24 May, three days later. LST-124 left Pearl Harbor for war on the 25th of May.



Pearl Harbor FPO



Convoy of packed LSTs enroute to Saipan.

On 31 May the convoy crossed the International Dateline and arrived 7 June at Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands. Pintar posted two letters on 7 June at Eniwetok. The LST departed Eniwetok on 9 June as part of "Task Force 58".



Eniwetok FPO

The invasion of Saipan started on 15 June. By 18 June the LST had endured its tenth air raid by Japanese planes. It was the first LST to hit the beach. On the 22nd it was shelled and machine gunned by unknown sources. Pintar went ashore for souvenir hunting.

Shipmate Bednarczyk recalled: "because we had a doctor aboard, our small boats were assigned to go pick up the boys that could be treated aboard our LST. Our cargo hold below decks, when emptied, appeared to be a dancehall perhaps 40 feet wide and 80/90 feet long, became a hospital"

LST-124 left Saipan on 24 June and arrived 30 June at Eniwetok. Pintar mailed three letters from Eniwetok, 3, 7 and 11 July 1944.



Eniwetok FPO

Leaving Eniwetok on the 12th of July and arriving back at Saipan on the 16th, LST-124 prepares for the invasion of Tinian Island in the Marianas. Pinter mails home another letter prior to the invasion.



Saipan FPO