

**Military Matters – ‘On the Town’ the American Fleet Visits Egypt.**

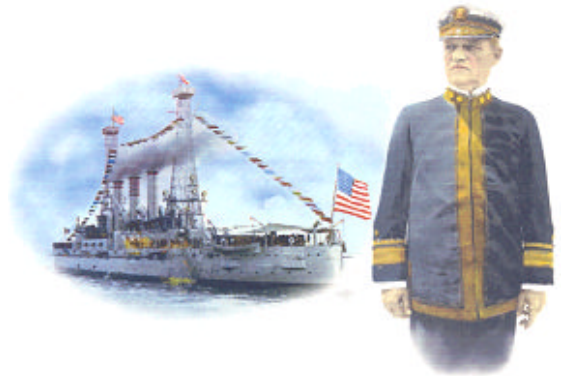
**Edmund Hall (ESC 239)**

I couldn't resist the title, taken of course from that splendid 1949 film in which three sailors – Gabey (Gene Kelly), Chip (Frank Sinatra) and Ozzie (Jules Munshin) – take shore leave in New York. It wasn't until a trip to New York some ten years ago that my wife and I understood the meaning of the song, with the line “the Bronx is up and the Battery down”. Now, far be it for me to make any comment on the propriety of American sailors on shore leave after having been cooped on ship sans female company, but over the years the American fleet has made calls on Egyptian ports.

Linking items philatelically is not very easy but for the fact that American Navel postmarks often include the port of call, and some covers have cachets linking a postal item to Egypt. Such items are not common and some are highly sought after by collectors of Naval mail.

At the turn of the nineteenth century the American President Theodore Roosevelt wanted to showcase America's naval power and to this end he ordered the American Fleet to undertake a lengthy cruise around the world. It was known as the “Great White Fleet” because all the warships' hulls and superstructures were painted white except for the gilded scrollwork with a red, white, and blue banner on their bows. After the Spanish-American war, where Roosevelt had distinguished himself in Cuba, America began to emerge as one of the great military powers.

The Great White Fleet sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia, on December 16, 1907, returning to Hampton Roads on February 22, 1909. It consisted of 16 battleships divided into four squadrons, along with various escorts, under the command of Rear Admiral Charles S. Sperry



*USS Kanas with Rear Admiral Charles Sperry, who was in charge of the fleet*

The fleet reached Suez on January 3, 1909. The transit through the Canal would be the largest in history, started on three successive days in groups of four, five and seven vessels and leaving the Canal closed to other traffic. A select group of sailors were put ashore at Suez, without officers; many of these went to Cairo and rejoined their ships at Port Said, where the fleet departed on January 4-6, 1909.



*Fig.1*

Under US Navy General Order No 74 of June 27, 1908, naval Ship Post Offices were established, with navy mail clerks. The ships of the Great White Fleet were the first to make use of these naval markings, which are eagerly sought after by collectors. The postcard *Fig.1* is dated January 5, 1909.

After defeat by Russia in a campaign in the winter of 1914-15, the Turkish Government made the Armenian community a scapegoat for the military losses that had occurred at the hands of the Russians. By the spring of 1915, leaders of the ruling party, the Committee of Union and Progress, seized the opportunity of a world preoccupied by war to erase the Armenian presence from almost all Ottoman lands.

Henry Morgenthau was the United States Ambassador to Ottoman Turkey from 1913 to 1916 and set out to help the Armenian refugees and alleviate the mass killings. Early in 1915 he was instrumental in alleviating the persecution of Jews in Palestine. He stopped wholesale deportations and negotiated acceptable terms for their stay there.



Morgenthau was also responsible for American naval ships — the *USS Des Moines* and *USS Tennessee* —which were active in the eastern Mediterranean. He used these ships to ferry refugees and supplies as necessary between Beirut, Jaffa, Alexandria and Constantinople, United States diplomats having secured safe passage of Jews and Armenians to Alexandria to save them from Ottoman persecution.

*USS Des Moines* (C-15/PG-29/CL-17) was one of six Denver-class protected cruisers. She was launched on September 20, 1902, and commissioned on March 5, 1904. On April 24, 1915, sailed from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for Alexandria, Egypt. She was finally decommissioned on April 9, 1921. *Fig.2*



*Fig.2*

*USS Houston* (CL-81) was a 10,000-ton Cleveland-class light cruiser and was the third ship to bear that name. *Houston* was built by the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company at Newport News, Virginia, and was commissioned on December 20, 1943.

After action in the Second World War she had a complete overhaul in New York harbour. She steamed on April 16, 1946, for an extended goodwill tour of European and African ports, visiting cities in Scandinavia, Portugal, Italy, and Egypt as part of the 12th Fleet.

Returning to Philadelphia on August 16, 1947, the *Houston* was decommissioned on December 15, 1947, placed in reserve for over a decade, and then finally stricken from the Naval Vessel Register on March 1, 1959, and scrapped. *Fig.3*

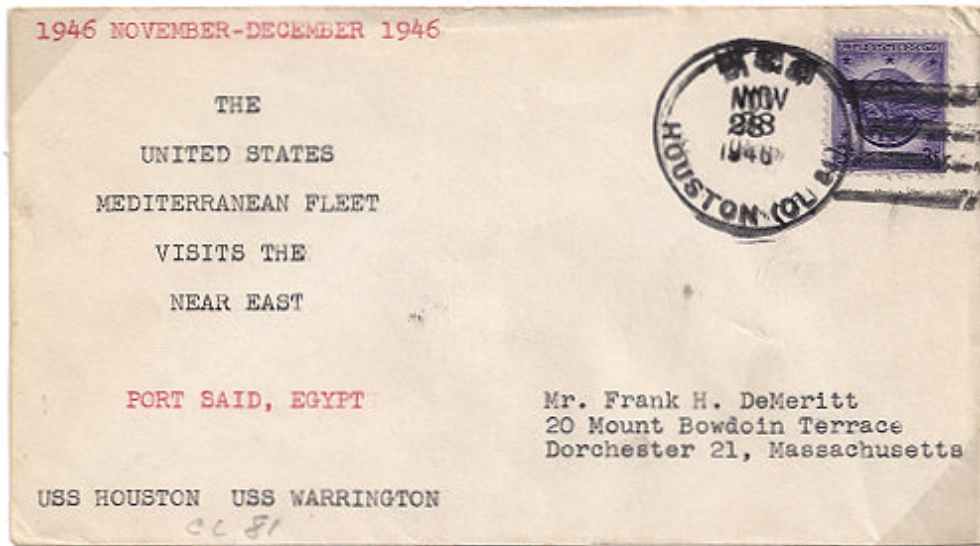


Fig.3



USS Samuel B. Roberts (DD-823), a Gearing-class destroyer, was the second ship of the United States Navy to be named for Samuel B. Roberts, a Navy coxswain who was killed evacuating Marines during the battle of Guadalcanal in 1942. She was commissioned on 22 December 1946.

In August 1954 the ship headed for the western Pacific, via the Panama Canal, to begin an around-the-world cruise. The destroyer spent five months in the waters around Japan and the Philippines, then sailed across the Indian Ocean and through the Suez Canal, arriving home on 14 March 1955. Fig.4.

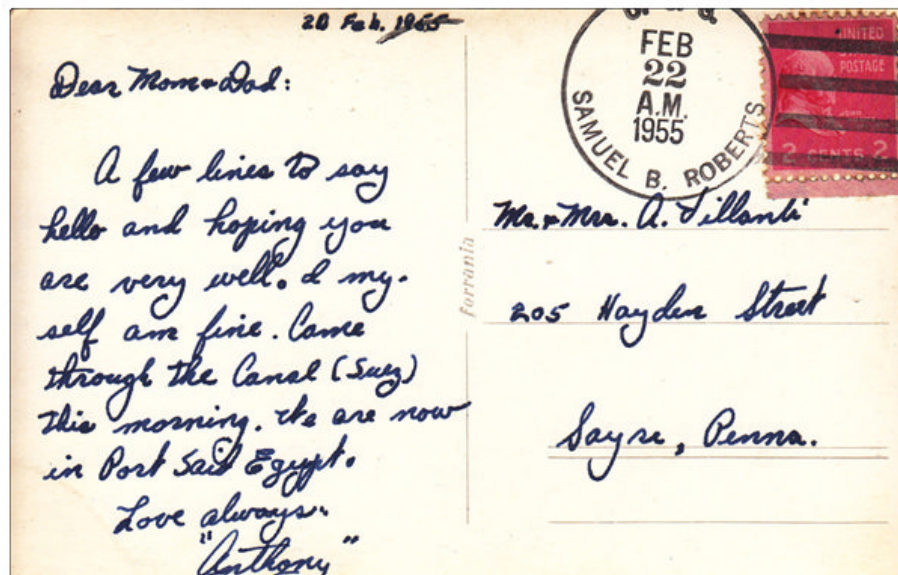


Fig.4

She joined the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean on 27 September and transited the Suez Canal on the night of 27/28 October, the last warship to transit the canal southbound before it was closed during the invasion of Egypt.

She was struck from the Navy List on 2 November 1970 and was sunk as a target 195 nautical miles off Puerto Rico on 14 November 1971.



USS Saratoga (CV-60) a Forrestal-class aircraft carrier and the sixth ship to use the name, was built at the New York Naval Shipyard and commissioned on April 14, 1956. The ship's name comes from the Revolutionary battle of Saratoga. She visited the Mediterranean annually from 1959 through 1967. In 1967, she was in the area at the start of the Six Day War. After action in the Vietnam War she joined the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.

Saratoga was one of two aircraft carriers to challenge Libya in 1986. In the early 1990s the ship was actively engaged in Operation Desert Storm, with over 10,000 active missions. For the war she passed through the Suez Canal although I doubt there was time for shore leave. She was decommissioned in August 1994. Fig.5

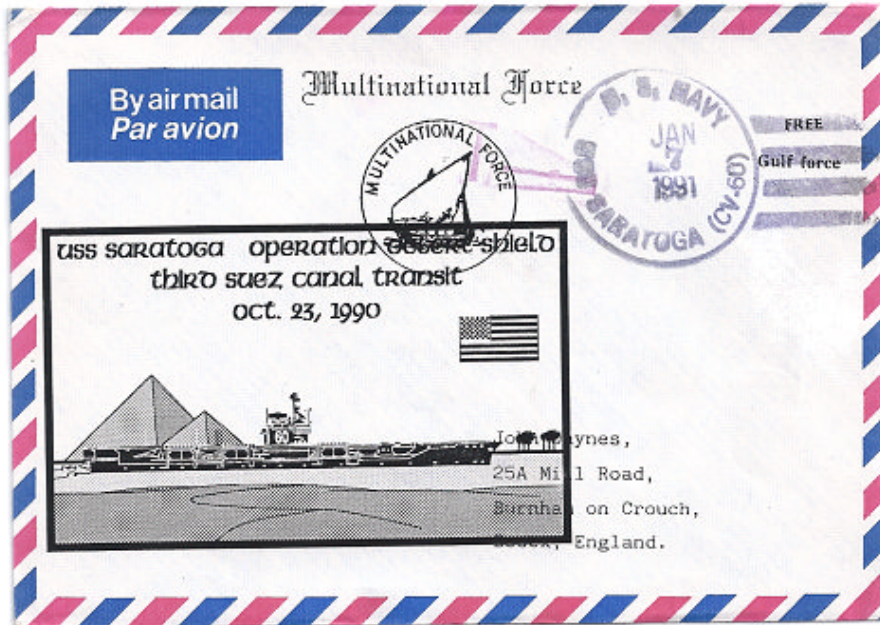


Fig.5