

# ASIATIC MINE FORCE: UNSUNG WARRIORS

While the cruisers, destroyers, battleships, and aircraft carriers received most of the accolades and are most often the subjects of the most exciting stories to come out of WWII, the minesweepers conducted a war of their own and, in respect to their size, were in some of the most intriguing actions of the Western Pacific **BY CHARLES H. BOGART**

With the deterioration of American relations with Japan during the late 1930s, the USA in 1940 began to rebuild its Asiatic Fleet. Among the Fleet's deficiencies was a lack of minesweepers to keep open a mine-free channel leading into Manila Bay and/or Subic Bay. The Asiatic Fleet in 1940 consisted of two *Bird*-class minesweepers — the *Finch* (AM-9) and *Bittern* (AM-36) — forming Mine Division 3 (MinDiv3). These two ships had been in the Far East since 1921. To reinforce these ships the Navy in May 1941 ordered MinDiv2, consisting of *Lark* (AM-21), *Quail* (AM-15), *Tanager* (AM-5), and *Whippoorwill* (AM-35) to sail from Pearl Harbor to Manila.

These minesweepers upon arrival settled down to a period of intensive training, which included patrol duty along the Philippine coast. All were aware that it was but a matter of time until war broke out. Along with Gen. MacArthur, though, they thought that war would not break out until spring 1942.

With the expansion of the US Navy during 1941, MinDiv 2 and 3 were renumbered 9 and 8 respectively. Commanding Officer for MinDiv 8 was Lt. T.W. Davison, Captain of the *Finch*. *Finch* served as flagship for MinDiv 8 as *Quail* did for MinDiv 9.

Lieutenant Commander J.H. Morrill, the *Quail's*

Captain, commanded MinDiv 8. The *Bird*-class minesweepers, forming MinDiv 8 and 9, had all been built during World War I. As displaced 850-tons but modernized, they increased this to 1250-tons. Dimensions were 187-ft x 35.5-ft x 12-ft. Engines of 1400-hp drove a single screw propeller to a speed of 14-kts. Armament consisted of two 3-inch forward and one aft, plus eight .50-cal machine guns, the number of machine guns being in direct proportion to the crew's midnight requisition ability. 78 officers and men manned the ships.

Also present at Manila was another *Bird*-class ship, the *Pigeon*, which had been converted to a submarine rescue ship. The workshops and artificers on board the *Pigeon* were to prove to be

a great boon to days ahead.

Expecting war to Adm. Hart, Fleet, ordered the repairs to their Thus, when the Harbor on 8 much of the Asia-repairs in the Among the ships and *Bittern*. The without their without by her-moored

the minesweepers in the

break out in the spring, Commander of the Asiatic Fleet to have all necessary ships performed that winter. Japanese attacked Pearl December 1941 (local time) tic Fleet was undergoing Cavite Naval Yard at Manila. in the yard were *Quail*, *Finch*, *Quail* and *Bittern* were engines while *Finch* was her rudder. *Bittern* was tied up self but *Quail* and *Finch* were together.

The commanding officers of the *Quail* and *Finch* therefore decided that, if attacked, *Finch* would cast off from the pier but they

would remain tied to each other. *Finch* would supply the propulsion while *Quail* provided the steering. Once out into the bay, the two ships planned to drift as they assumed the Japanese would concentrate on the shipyard.

It was not until 10 December that *Quail* and *Finch* had to execute their plan. This two-day period of grace was put to good use in that both ships had retrieved all of their engine and rudder parts from the yard. Neither, however, had completely reassembled their machinery. The powder magazines, which had been emptied in compliance with naval regulations governing ships undergoing overhaul, were once again full with ammunition, thanks to *Pigeon*.

When, on the afternoon of the 10th, Japanese planes were reported making for Cavite, *Finch* cast off her lines from the docks and *Finch* and *Quail*, acting as one ship, backed out into the bay.

Both ships were spitting fire from their guns but most of it was wasted. The majority of the Japanese planes flew out of range of both the 3-in guns and the .50-cal machine guns. As L/Comdr. Morrill had guessed, the Japanese concentrated on the shipyard leaving the ships in the bay alone.

Less lucky than *Finch* and *Quail* was *Bittern* tied up at the pier astern of *Seadragon* (SS-194) and *Sealion* (SS-195). The *Bittern* still had her engine in the shops at Cavite while alongside her was a gasoline barge. Unable to get underway she found herself at the receiving end of a pattern of bombs, which sank *Sealion*, damaged *Seadragon*, and set the gasoline barge afire.

USS *Tanager* in port during a scientific expedition from Honolulu to Wake Island in 1923.



Letter of USS *Tanager* Naval Cover 1938 Wentz Cachet Easter Pearl Harbor.