

NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION

Captain Abernethy, born June 14, 1899, at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, was graduated from the Oklahoma City High School before entering the U. S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, from his native state, in June, 1917. He had World War I service during the summer of 1918 as a Midshipman aboard the USS MISSOURI. Graduated from the Naval Academy and commissioned Ensign in June, 1921, he subsequently advanced through the grades to that of Captain, to rank from June 21, 1942.

Following graduation in June, 1921, Captain Abernethy was ordered to duty aboard the battleship NEW YORK, then serving in the Pacific. Thereafter he made a cruise in the destroyer PARROT, on duty with the Eastern Mediterranean Squadron, cruising to Southern Russian ports, and was present at the burning of Smyrna in September 1922. He returned to the United States aboard the USS GOFF, and proceeded to Newport, Rhode Island, where he had instruction at the Torpedo School. Sea duty prior to World War II included service aboard the destroyers REUBEN JAMES and GREER, the battleship NEW YORK and the cruiser SALT LAKE CITY. For two years he was flag lieutenant on the staff of Commander, Cruiser Division 4, USS NORTHAMPTON, Flagship, and from May 1937 to May 1938 he served as communications officer of the USS MARYLAND.

His tours of shore duty prior to World War II were as aide to the Commandant of the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Naval Districts; at the Naval Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island; and as inspector of guns at the Naval Gun Factory, Washington, D. C.

In July, 1940 he was ordered to the Orient, where he assumed command of the USS PECOS, Asiatic Fleet tanker. His ship was in Manila on December 7, 1941, but left the night of December 8 for Darwin, Australia. After missing the entry of the Japanese at Keopang, Dutch East Indies, by five hours, the PECOS went to Soerabaja and was near by when the USS HOUSTON and the USS MARBLEHEAD were hit by Japanese bombs. After the battle, the PECOS proceeded to Tjilatjap, where she remained to fuel warships of the United States, the Netherlands, and Great Britain.

On the afternoon of February 27, 1942, the USS LANGLEY was sunk off the southern coast of Java and the PECOS was ordered to take aboard the survivors who had been picked up by two destroyers. The PECOS and the two destroyers made a rendezvous at Christmas Island the next morning to make the exchange but arrived just in time for a Japanese bombing attack. Survivors of the LANGLEY were transferred to the PECOS the following morning at sea. About noon the same day, aircraft from a Japanese aircraft carrier started attacking the PECOS

and later in the afternoon sank her. Captain Abernethy was injured during the Japanese attack and was later awarded the Purple Heart. For extraordinary heroism as Commanding Officer of the PECOS, he was awarded the Navy Cross. The citation follows:

NAVY CROSS

"For extraordinary heroism as Commanding Officer of the USS PECOS during the bombardment and sinking of that vessel by enemy Japanese air forces off Christmas Island on March 1, 1942. Putting up a desperate fight against successive waves of hostile dive bombers which swept down out of the sun, Commander Abernethy, although his ship was mercilessly overwhelmed by exploding bombs and strafing machine guns, kept her engines operating and her guns blazing away until accumulated damage eventually opened her to the sea. Thereafter, calmly remaining aboard as the vessel settled forward, he directed abandon ship operations under a blistering hail of fire from ruthless enemy flyers who kept circling back to shell the helpless survivors huddled on life rafts and floating debris. His courageous and inspiring devotion to duty, maintained with utter disregard of personal safety, was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

After the sinking of the PECOS, Captain Abernethy became executive officer of the USS PRESIDENT JACKSON. The PRESIDENT JACKSON was the first ship to land troops at Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942. During the following several months that troop ship was engaged in reinforcing Guadalcanal and participated in several of the battles in that area. For services during that early period of the war, Captain Abernethy was awarded the Legion of Merit, with citation as follows:

LEGION OF MERIT

"For exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the Government of the United States as Executive Officer of the USS PRESIDENT JACKSON operating against enemy Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands Area from August 7, 1942, to June 30, 1943. After participating in the initial occupation of Guadalcanal-Tulagi on August 7, Captain Abernethy subsequently made many trips into the forward area to deliver reinforcements to the American Garrison on Guadalcanal. On June 30, his ship carried troops and supplies for our assault on Rendova Island and, while retiring from this mission helped to repulse fiercely attacking Japanese aircraft. Despite frequent engagements with

LEGION OF MERIT: (Cont'd)

hostile planes and submarines during this period, Captain Abernethy skillfully aided his commanding officer in bringing the PRESIDENT JACKSON through without damage. By his gallant leadership, aggressiveness and unswerving devotion to duty under extremely hazardous conditions, he contributed in large measure to the success of these vital missions."

In June 1943 Captain Abernethy assumed command of Boat Pool Number 8 which carried 20,000 troops to various beaches in the Rendova-Munda area, resulting in the capture of the Munda airport. Although under frequent enemy attack during that period, not one soldier was lost while being transported by the landing craft under his command. After the capture of Munda, Captain Abernethy assumed command of the PRESIDENT JACKSON and later participated in the landings at Bougainville and Emirau. He was awarded a Letter of Commendation, with authorization to wear the Commendation Ribbon, by Fleet Admiral Nimitz, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas with the following citation:

LETTER OF COMMENDATION:

"For meritorious and efficient performance of duty as Commanding Officer of an attack transport vessel carrying reinforcements to the American-held positions in the Empress Augusta Bay area, Bougainville Island on November 8, 1943. When the force of which his ship was a part was subjected to a coordinated attack by approximately one hundred Japanese torpedo and fighter planes, Captain Abernethy, by skillfully maneuvering his ship under extremely difficult navigational conditions, assisted in repelling the attack and in destroying several enemy aircraft. His skill and able leadership contributed materially to the successful completion of this vital mission and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the naval service."

Captain Abernethy was ordered in March 1944 to San Pedro, California, for the purpose of organizing the San Pedro Shakedown Group, and as prospective Commanding Officer. While under his command, 216 large auxiliary ships built on the West Coast were "shaken down" and for that service Captain Abernethy received a second Letter of Commendation from Fleet Admiral Nimitz with the following citation:


LETTER OF COMMENDATION:

"For distinguishing himself by meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service as Commander, San Pedro Shakedown Group of the Fleet Opera-

LETTER OF COMMENDATION: (Cont'd)
tional Training Command, Pacific. As a result of his initiative, energy, and administrative ability, over 215 ships, manned by thousands of officers and men, received the shakedown training essential to their successful operation. His conduct throughout was an inspiration to his officers and men and in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

From May 1945 until November 1946 Captain Abernethy was Port Director and Operations Officer of the Thirteenth Naval District, Seattle, Washington. In November 1946 he assumed command of the USS TUCSON, and relieved of that command in July 1947, was ordered to duty as Commanding Officer of the Naval Ordnance Plant at South Charleston, West Virginia. On August 11, 1947, he received further orders to duty as Public Information Officer on the staff of Commander, Marianas. He served in the above assignment until May 7, 1948, when he was ordered to duty with the San Diego Group, Pacific Reserve Fleet, San Diego, California.

In addition to the Navy Cross, the Legion of Merit, the Commendation Ribbon with bronze star, and the Purple Heart Medal, Captain Abernethy has the Victory Medal (USS MISSOURI); the Second Nicaraguan Campaign Medal; and is entitled to the American Defense Service Medal, Fleet Clasp; the Asiatic-Pacific Area Campaign Medal; the American Area Campaign Medal; the Philippine Defense Ribbon; and the World War II Victory Medal.



4 June 1948.