

### The Story Behind the Cover...

USS ASTORIA (CA 34) in 1939 –  
 Returning ashes of Hiroshi Saito to Japan  
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Recently I purchased a cover mailed by a sailor on board the cruiser ASTORIA during a 1939 stopover in the Philippines. An unusual and quite interesting cover—mostly because ASTORIA was headed home after returning the ashes of Ambassador Hiroshi Saito back to Japan. It's the story of this special mission, rather than the cover itself, that is most important in this case.

Although I don't have a specialized collection for the cruiser ASTORIA, over time I have accumulated a number of covers. The ship was named in honor of Astoria, Oregon, where both my wife and I were born. Located near the mouth of the Columbia River, the entire area has a rich maritime history that I was keenly aware of while growing up. Shipwrecks from the past were still visible along the shore, and stories were still fresh in the minds of local residents. Astoria is the oldest settlement west of the Rockies (1811) and it also had the first post office (1847). With the city's colorful history, it's not surprising that the name "ASTORIA" was chosen when construction of a new navy cruiser began in 1930. She was commissioned at Bremerton in April 1934. Surprisingly, it does not appear that the cruiser ASTORIA ever visited her namesake city.

For most of her career, ASTORIA was based out of San Pedro, California, part of the Navy Scouting Force. During peacetime years, most naval vessels participated in the annual Fleet Problem training exercise, a huge event where ships and aircraft engaged in mock battles. The location for these maneuvers varied, and in February 1939 *Fleet Problem XX* was held in the Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean, with President Franklin Roosevelt observing. It was this exercise that brought the cruiser ASTORIA to the east coast, and by happenstance marked the beginning of her most significant pre-war assignment.

#### The Death of Hiroshi Saito



Hiroshi Saito (1886-1939), former ambassador to the U.S. After his death, ASTORIA carried his ashes back to Japan on a goodwill mission.

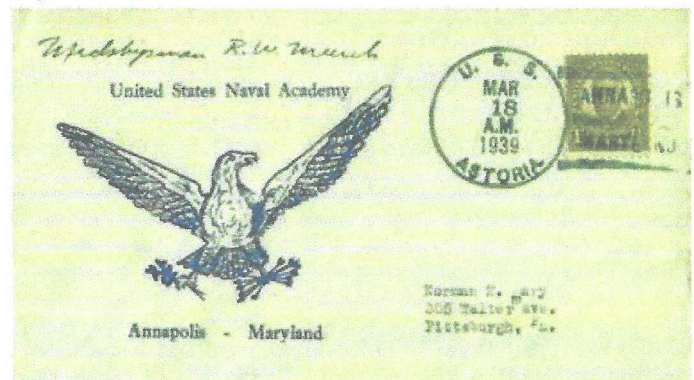
On 26 February 1939, former Japanese ambassador Hiroshi Saito passed away in Washington D.C. He had only recently resigned his post for health reasons; however, his

death was still unexpected. Saito had first come to Washington as ambassador in 1934, and had worked closely with President Roosevelt as relations between the countries deteriorated. Roosevelt considered him a personal friend. Now with Saito's death, he saw an opportunity for a gesture of good will by having the Navy formally return his ashes to Japan. It is said that Roosevelt personally selected the cruiser ASTORIA for the honor.

As the ambassador to the United States, Hiroshi Saito was highly regarded, but had it not been for current political tensions, the mission would probably not have taken place. In Europe, the world was watching the rise of Hitler and Mussolini; and in the Pacific, it was the aggressive Japanese actions, especially in China, that were of concern. In 1937, Japan invaded China in an undeclared war, and relations with the United States were further strained with the sinking of the river gunboat PANAY. Even though reparations were agreed to, relations with Japan remained poor. With this background, the gesture of returning ambassador Saito's ashes was viewed as a signal that, perhaps, relations between the U.S. and Japan were not irreparable.

#### ASTORIA Headed for Japan

It was on March 6<sup>th</sup> that newspapers announced the special mission of ASTORIA. At the time, the ship was at Norfolk, having just completed the fleet exercise. Before her new assignment, ASTORIA was supposed to visit Tampa in early April, but other arrangements had now been made. The ASTORIA crew had much work to do readying the ship for the trip to Japan, including painting and a brief overhaul. She was due to arrive at Annapolis on 16 March, just two days ahead of scheduled ceremonies

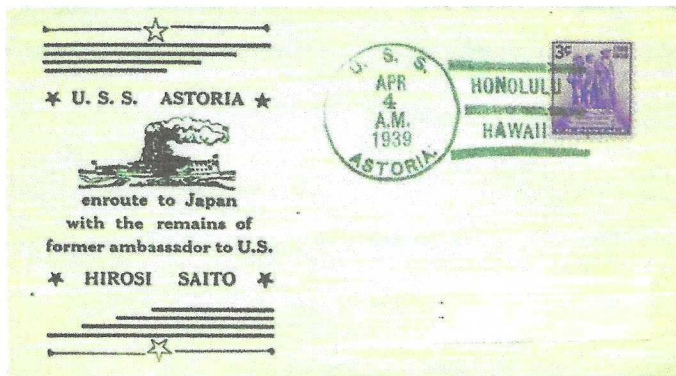


Locy Type 3 (AC-TBB) USS ASTORIA 18 March 1939, at Annapolis, Maryland. The ashes of Hiroshi Saito were carried on board this date, and ASTORIA got underway for Japan. —courtesy Brent Jones

On the day of the event, March 18<sup>th</sup>, a funeral procession brought Saito's remains from Washington D.C. to Annapolis by funeral procession. Midshipmen from the Academy lined the streets to greet the family as they arrived, paying their respects to the former ambassador. Attending the ceremony were more than 100 naval officers, including Rear Admiral Wilson Brown, representatives of the diplomatic corps, several Japanese naval officers, and other dignitaries. A 19-gun salute was given, and the Academy Band played during the ceremony. Following that, the ashes

of ambassador Saito were carried aboard ASTORIA in a pagoda-shaped container, placed in an area ordinarily used as the ship's band room. That afternoon, they departed for Japan.

There were no stops made as ASTORIA headed for the Panama Canal, and after crossing into the Pacific, she headed directly to Honolulu. This was a scheduled stop, and upon her arrival on April 4<sup>th</sup>, she was greeted by a 19-gun salute as she pulled into Honolulu Harbor. She moored at Pier 2, near the entrance, welcomed by a crowd of some 1,500, including Governor Poindexter, and the Japanese Consul. Arriving at almost the same time was the liner TATUTA MARU, docking a Pier 8 with the family of Hiroshi Saito.



USS ASTORIA 4 April 1939, upon arrival at Honolulu after traversing the Panama Canal en route to Yokohama. —courtesy Brent Jones

Captain Turner and the officers of ASTORIA were the focus of much attention during their two-day stop at Honolulu. There were many visitors to the ship, including Saito's widow, and the captain of the Japanese oiler IRO, also in port. Many local organizations sent tributes and paid their respects. When ASTORIA got underway on 6 April, another 19-gun salute was given from Fort Armstrong, and the ship was escorted to sea by two U.S. destroyers and a squadron of navy bombers.

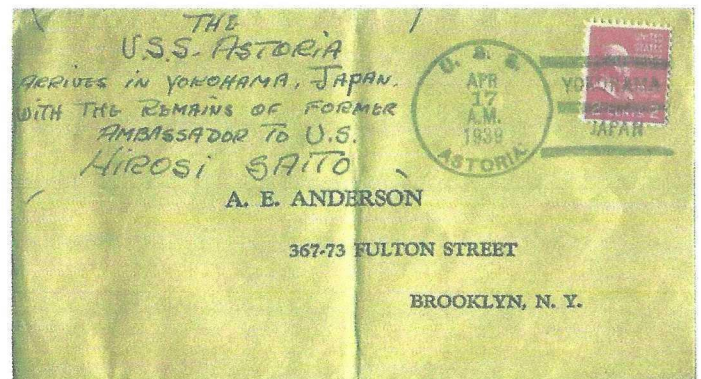
**Arrival at Yokohama**

For days before ASTORIA left Honolulu, newspapers were buzzing with stories about adventurer Richard Halliburton, who was missing. He had been traveling on the 75-foot Chinese junk SEA DRAGON, and was last reported on 24 March near Midway Island. It was feared the boat and her crew may have gone down in a typhoon, but there was no verification. Family members still clung to hope they might be found safe.

The Navy and Coast Guard conducted radio searches for the missing boat, and asked any ships in the vicinity to be watchful. Influential friends and some politicians urged the Navy to order a search for Halliburton, even suggesting that ASTORIA be diverted while en route to Japan. That did not happen, however, and ASTORIA continued on to Yokohama as planned.

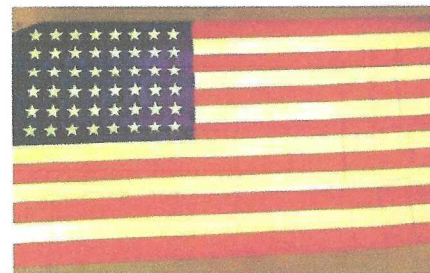
On April 17<sup>th</sup>, as ASTORIA approached Yokohama, three Japanese destroyers, HIBIKI, SAGIRI, and AKATSUKI came out to escort her into port. A 21-gun

salute was fired as they entered the harbor, and that afternoon, Navy sailors carried the urn with the ambassador's ashes off the ship. Newspapers reported that hundreds of mourners were present, lining the streets as the funeral procession went to the train station. A special train was there to take members of Saito's family, the U.S. Ambassador, and other officials, to Tokyo. The actual ceremony was the next day with services held by Buddhist priests at the Honganji Temple.



Canceled 17 April 1939, the day ASTORIA arrived at Yokohama, delivering the ashes of ambassador Saito to his homeland. — courtesy Brent Jones

During the ten days ASTORIA was at Yokohama, the officers and crew were able to go ashore. Even before her arrival, the ship's newspaper provided information about the Japanese culture, including how to pronounce certain words and phrases. It also had a tentative listing of planned events, which included sightseeing around Tokyo, a garden party at Yokohama, and a reception for guests on board the ship. For most of the crew, this was the first time they'd been to Japan.



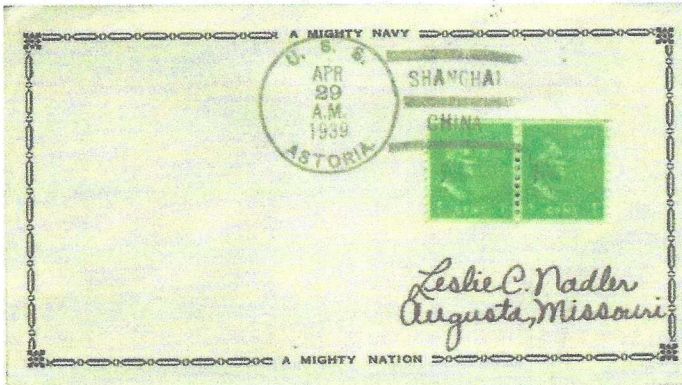
ASTORIA crewmember Carl "Sam" Sickman was presented this 4' x 26" flag while in Japan playing in a baseball game. —courtesy Steve Sickman



Photo of ASTORIA sailors at an event in Yokohama, Japan. In front row, 2nd from left (looking toward camera), appears to be Carl Sickman. The insert shows Carl about mid-1930's, probably while in China —courtesy Brent Jones and Steve Sickman

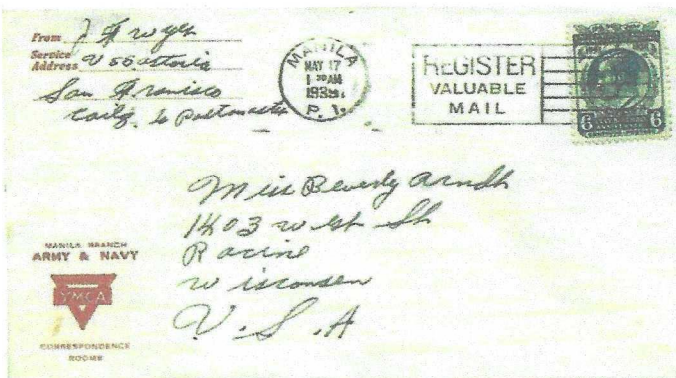
### The Return Trip

On 26 April ASTORIA left Yokohama, but instead of returning directly to Hawaii and the west coast, she headed for Shanghai, China. A delayed return had been part of the plan all along, allowing ASTORIA to operate briefly with the Asiatic Fleet. Speculatively, this may have been intended as a sign of continued U.S. interests in China. She arrived at Shanghai on 29 April, and a few days later made a courtesy visit to Hong Kong before continuing on to Manila.

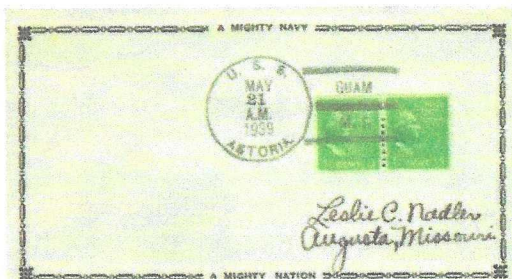


After departing Japan, ASTORIA went to Shanghai, arriving on 29 April 1939, the date of this cancellation. —courtesy John Young

So far, ASTORIA was on schedule for planned stops, but that was about to change. She departed Manila on 17 May, but at Guam was called upon to assist with efforts to refloat the Army transport GRANT. Within a day or two, ASTORIA departed for Pearl Harbor.

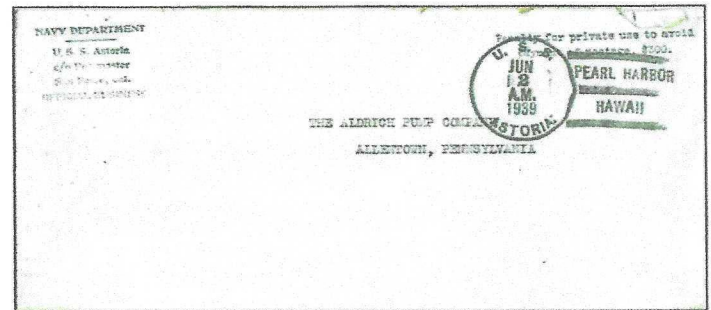


Sailor mail from ASTORIA dated 17 May 1939, during a stopover in the Philippines. Sent by Joseph F. Wyer Jr. (1918-1997) to his fiancé in Wisconsin. He joined the navy in 1938, and transferred to NORTH CAROLINA in 1941. —personal collection



Postmarked 21 May 1939, the day ASTORIA arrived at Guam. Here she assisted refloat the transport GRANT before continuing to Pearl Harbor. —courtesy John Young

In the meantime, orders had been received for ASTORIA to conduct a search for Richard Halliburton, now missing for nearly two months. After leaving Guam, she spent six days looking for any sign of Halliburton and his vessel, scouring 162,000 square miles of ocean by sea and air. The search was discontinued on 29 May, and ASTORIA set a course for Hawaii, arriving at Pearl Harbor on 2 June. She remained here only briefly, and then continued on to San Pedro where she arrived a week later. Her mission now completed, ASTORIA was back home.



Locy Type 3 (AC-TBB) Official mail from ASTORIA dated 2 June 1939, upon arrival at Pearl Harbor this date. —personal collection

### Aftermath

The improvement in relations between the U.S. and Japan generated by ASTORIA's mission was short-lived. The world situation changed in September 1939 when Germany, an ally of Japan, invaded Poland, igniting the Second World War. Just over two years later, on 7 December 1941, Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor. In August 1942, the cruiser ASTORIA, once part of a goodwill mission to Japan, was sunk during the Battle of Savo Island.

### Main Sources:

Various resources at [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com), [Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com), and [Fold3.com](http://Fold3.com); DANFS; Wikipedia; [ussastoria.org](http://ussastoria.org)  
 The Astorian (ship's newspaper), 15 April 1939 (courtesy Brent Jones)  
 Photos and info from Steve Sickman, Bridgeport, West Virginia  
 Photos and info from Brent Jones of [ussastoria.org](http://ussastoria.org)  
 Newspapers (Main ones):  
 "Ex-Ambassador from Japan Dies Suddenly in Washington" (AP), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 27 Feb 1939, p.2; "U.S. Ship to Sail with Saito's Body March 18" (UP), *St. Louis Star and Times*, 6 March 1939, p.4; "Cruiser Changed," *The Tampa Times*, 6 March 1939, p.2; "U.S. Cruiser Sails with Saito's Ashes" (AP), *The Evening Sun* (Baltimore), 18 March 1939, p.16  
 Norwood, William, "Honors Paid as Astoria Brings Ashes of Saito," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 4 April 1939, p.1; "Saito's Family Sees Cruiser Dock with Ashes of Late Envoy," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 4 April 1939, p.1; Coll, Ray Jr., "Shoreside Shorts," *Honolulu Advertiser*, 5 April 1939, p.15; "Astoria Sails for Japan with Saito Ashes," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 7 April 1939, p.5; "Saito's Ashes to Reach Japan Next Monday," *Baltimore Sun*, 11 April 1939, p.2; "Cruiser Arrives at Yokohama With Ashes of Envoy" (UPI), *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, 17 April 1939, p.7; "U.S. Captain Turns over Ashes of Saito to Japan" (AP), *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 17 April 1939, p. 14; "Saito Funeral Held in Buddhist Temple" (AP), *The Evening Sun*, 18 April 1939, p.2; "Halliburton Lost; Navy Search Vain" (UP), *Daily News* (New York), 1 June 1939, p.22; "No Trace of Halliburton Lost at Sea" (INS), *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, 10 June 1939, p.2

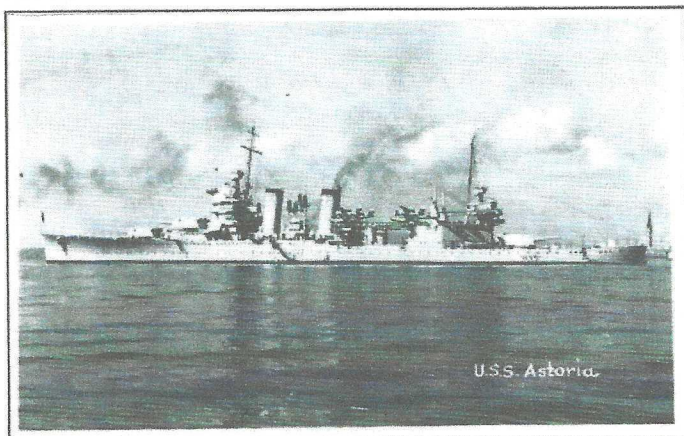
My thanks to John Young and Brent Jones for sharing scans of their covers.

**USS ASTORIAS Chapter Two**

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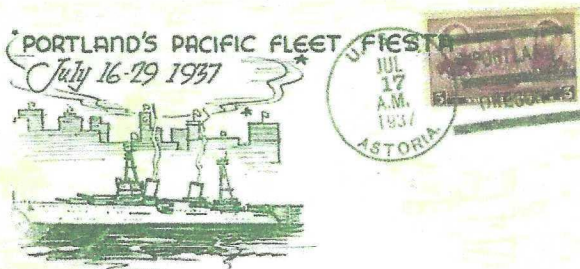
I read with great interest the story about USS ASTORIA (CA 34) written by Lloyd Ferrell in the January 2019 issue. His story focused on this ship making her transit from Annapolis, MD., to Yokohama, Japan, carrying the ashed remains of Japanese Ambassador Hiroshi Saito to his homeland. The high regard of him by President Franklin D. Roosevelt resulted in the memorial transport of the Ambassador. Secondly, it was thought the cordial and respectful task may improve US and Japanese political relations.



U.S.S. Astoria.

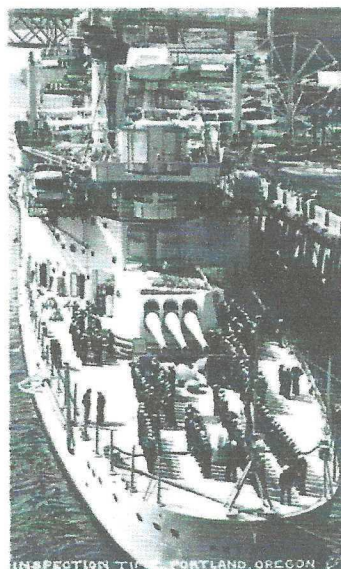
Portside view of USS ASTORIA (CA 34)

USS ASTORIA was built, launched and commissioned at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, Bremerton, WA, on 28 April 1934. As Mr. Ferrell's story stated, the ship known in the fleet as "Nasty Asty" never visited her namesake of Astoria, OR. The closest she got to the city was traveling by at 0600 on 15 July 1937. She was behind the flagship USS INDIANAPOLIS (CA 35) en route to Portland, OR, for Fleet Week at the Portland Rose Festival. Historically, these 15 cruisers, 11 heavy and 4 light, are the largest group of this type of vessel ever sent by the US Navy to the Rose Festival. These vessels of Cruiser Division Seven, Scouting Force, were under the command of Rear Admiral W.H. Tarrant.



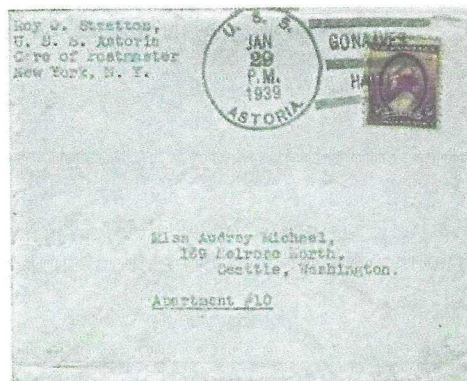
U.S.C. CHAPTER 22 WELCOMES THE NAVY

USS ASTORIA (CA 34) at Portland's 1937 Fiesta



USS ASTORIA (CA 34) in Portland, Oregon July 1937. Crew Inspection

During the late 1930's, the US Navy engaged in promoting its image to attract recruitment of new naval personnel into the service. The Navy sent vessels to many public expositions to communicate the glamour of the naval service and a need to increase the size of the Navy. The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 led the Navy to suspect Japan might carry out aggressive acts against the United States; the annual Navy war games (Fleet Problems) were based on this.



Sailor mail USS ASTORIA anchored in Gonaives, Haiti during Fleet Problem XX. Lucy Type 3 (AC-TBB)

Richard Jones collection

American involvement in World War II commenced on 7 December 1941 by the attack of Japanese naval forces on Pearl Harbor, HI. The United States armed forces initiated an aggressive campaign against the Japanese starting in the southern Pacific Ocean with the invasion of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. On 9 August 1942 at Savo Island, off Guadalcanal, a battle that lasted exactly 33 minutes, Japanese naval forces enacted the worst defeat of US Naval Forces in history.

The Japanese task force slipped past two light cruisers USS SAN JUAN (CL 54) and HMAS HOBART (D63) and their two picket destroyers, to enter Savo Sound. The Japanese ships ran head-on into destroyer USS PATTERSON (DD 392) of the Allied southern task group of heavy cruisers HMAS CANBERRA and USS CHICAGO (CA 29) with the destroyer BAGLEY (DD 386).

At 0143, 9 August, PATTERSON radioed the alarm: "Warning! Warning! Strange ships entering the harbor!" But Japanese cruisers had already launched torpedoes and opened gunfire, disabling HMAS CANBERRA (D33) with shells striking two of PATTERSON's turrets.

The northern group of three US heavy cruisers ASTORIA, VINCENNES (CA 44) and QUINCY (CA 39) were lost with 911 lives and the southern group's Australian cruiser HMAS CANBERRA were sunk in an area later called "Ironbottom Sound". USS CHICAGO was badly damaged and it should be noted all four of these heavy cruisers had attended the 1937 Portland Rose Festival. The battle at Savo Island was the first of five major naval engagements off Guadalcanal, the last at the end of January 1943.

Another view  
USS ASTORIA  
(CA 34)  
In Portland Harbor  
1937



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On 9 June 1946, the light cruiser USS ASTORIA visited Astoria, OR, to stay two days. The commanding officer Capt. Frank R. Walker had taken command on 14 March of that year. Capt. Walker had a notable war record before assuming command of USS ASTORIA.

Capt. Walker (at that time LCDR) was the commanding officer of USS PATTERSON, a destroyer moored in Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. His vessel's anti-aircraft fire on the striking Japanese aircraft was credited with one of their losses. The ship was able get underway during the attack and assisted in anti-submarine operations outside Pearl Harbor.

After the Pearl Harbor attack Capt. Walker, still aboard PATTERSON, was promoted to Commander and ordered to take command of Destroyer Division 8, he commanded these destroyers during the 1942 Battle of Savo Island. As noted above his destroyer had met the oncoming Japanese warships, radioed a warning to others in the southern group and immediately underwent an enemy attack.

During 1943 the Navy wanted to perpetuate the names of the lost vessels by renaming ships currently under construction: USS ASTORIA (CL 90), USS VINCENNES (CL 64), USS QUINCY (CA 71), USS CHICAGO (CA 136), and to honor the Australian cruiser, USS CANBERRA (CA 70). The naming of the USS CANBERRA after the sunken Australian cruiser, was made at the personal direction of President Roosevelt, all five of the newly built cruisers participated in World War II.

The visiting USS ASTORIA (CL 90) was launched on 6 March 1943, sponsored by Mrs. Robert Lucas (wife of the editor of the Astorian-Budget newspaper), and was

commissioned at the Philadelphia Navy Yard on 17 May 1944. Known as the "Mighty Ninety" this CLEVELAND-class light cruiser was based out of San Pedro, CA. Capt. Walker donated the ship's battle flag to the City of Astoria.

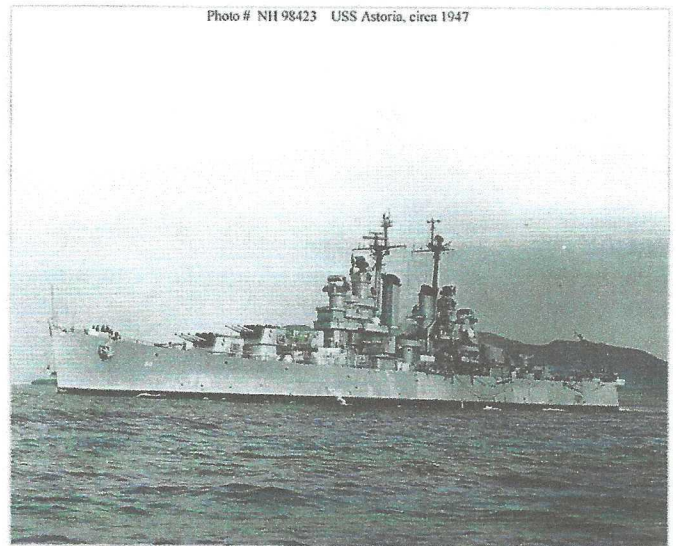
The City of Astoria has proclaimed 9 August to be USS ASTORIA Day as an honor to the memory of those lost on the original heavy cruiser.

The light cruiser ASTORIA departed Monday, 11 June traveling to Bremerton Naval Shipyard. Thereafter she was sent to visit many ports on duty assignments in the Pacific for the next three years. She was ordered to return to San Francisco and decommissioning 1 July 1949 being placed in the Pacific Reserve Fleet. She was sold for scrap 12 January 1971.



USS ASTORIA (CL 90) at Portland for 1946 Rose Festival.  
Locy Type 2(n)

Photo # NH 98423 USS Astoria, circa 1947



USS ASTORIA (CL 90) circa 1947

**Resources**

Astorian-Budget newspaper, Clatsop County Library, Astoria, OR

	Location:	Tukwila Community Center 12424 42nd Avenue South Tukwila, WA
	Sponsor:	Seattle Philatelic Exhibitions, Inc.
	Next Show:	September 13-15, 2019 Fri. & Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun. 10 a.m.-4 p.m.