

Wichita

(revised Memorial Day essay – c. 2000 AD)

Many years ago, passing through St. Leo's parking lot, I saw a bumper sticker that said "I served on the *Wichita*." Immediately my mind went back to a November day in 1937 when at age nine I stood beside my father at the Philadelphia Navy Yard and beheld something wonderful: the launching of the heavy cruiser, the *USS Wichita*. Philadelphia had always been a Navy town. The Navy began there and sailors were often seen striding up Broad Street. It was Navy we boys rooted for during the annual Army-Navy game played at Municipal Stadium.

So you can imagine the thrill I felt as I stood there along the port side of the *Wichita* - its sleek hull rising above me upon greased ways; signal flags dancing in the breeze. And then slowly the great ship began to slide, the timbers fell away; it picked up momentum and gracefully settled into the Delaware River as into its proper element - and I went home feeling: "The *Wichita* will always be my special ship!" It was only much later that I finally traced the owner of the bumper sticker to Bill Barber at a Men's Club dinner. He had served on the *Wichita* as a Marine and was able to lend me its full photographic history. And what a history it was. The *Wichita* served in nearly every theatre of the 2nd World War - Atlantic and Pacific! But after so remarkable a career, the official history says of her: "In 1959 she was sold for scrap to the Union Minerals and Alloys Corporation."

And I began to realize: "The *Wichita* was obsolete the very day it was launched." Already naval technology was changing. The aircraft carrier would soon become queen of the fleet (Pearl Harbor proved that). And then there would be rockets and nuclear this and nuclear that to make even battleships relics to be tied up beside *Old Ironsides*.

Nor was it just naval technology that was changing; it was our whole age of innocence. I mean, back then we were not possessed of a highly critical mind. We lived by dogma. We were patriotic, trusted our institutions, had no doubts about the justice of our causes or the structures of our Church. Our horizon stopped at the boundary of our hometown whose axis was called Main Street. Our historical horizons went back to Valley Forge, the Pilgrims, maybe Hiawatha – to penny candy and two way football. But it was a time about to change under the influence of so many things like mobility and electronics which would reconfigure not only our politico-economic world but our Church as well. And so it's no wonder that on days like Memorial Day some of us aging folk, weary of modern change, meditate not only about past wars but the end of an era – like listening to (not watching) Jack Benny on Sunday nights.

And yet isn't it about time we widened the scope of Memorial Day? I mean, isn't it time for us to remember not only those simpler days of our youth and distant wars but the whole of our lives since then – the expansion of our horizons, the questioning of prejudices once taken for granted, a wisdom derived from tragic experiences I never anticipated as I stood a nine year old beneath the prow of the now scrapped *Wichita* – a "never again" wisdom we owe to new generations lest they pay an even higher price in a nuclear age for racial, ethnic, class, political, and inter-religious animosities which we should know by now, thanks to our ancient Gospel, have always been absurd?

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