

# INTRODUCTION - THE MAN - PhM3 Henry Warren Tucker 1919 – 1942



**USS Henry W. Tucker (DD/DDR 875)** was named in honor of Pharmacist's mate third class Henry Warren Tucker, United States Naval Reserve. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama on 5 October 1919. He enlisted in the USNR on 24 June 1941. Tucker was called to active duty in July 1941, and was assigned to the US Naval Hospital in Pensacola Florida. On 15 January 1942, he was transferred aboard the tanker, **USS Neosho (AO 23)** for sea duty. The **NEOSHO** had just survived the Pearl Harbor attack despite being berthed on "Battleship Row".

For next five months **NEOSHO** fueled fighting ships all over the Pacific.

On 7 May 1942, five months to the day after the crushing attack at Pearl Harbor, in the company of the Destroyer

**USS Sims (DD 409)**, she was to meet the carriers of her task force a few hundred miles off the Australian coast. Captain Phillips had received a coded message that the Japanese were near at hand in heavy force. What the Captain could not know for radio silence was that the battle of the Coral Sea was here and now, and his ship was between the opposing fleets.



The Imperial Japanese Navy was at the peak of its success. The United States was striving desperately to regroup and regain the advantage. The **USS Neosho (AO 23)** steamed restlessly, her men alert for the sudden deadly appearance of the flashing wing displaying the fire-like sun symbol. And it came...

During the opening phase of the battle of the Coral Sea, Japanese naval forces launched an aerial attack on what they believed was the main U.S. battle force. What the Japanese found instead was the **NEOSHO** and the destroyer **USS Sims (DD 409)** waiting for a fueling rendezvous.

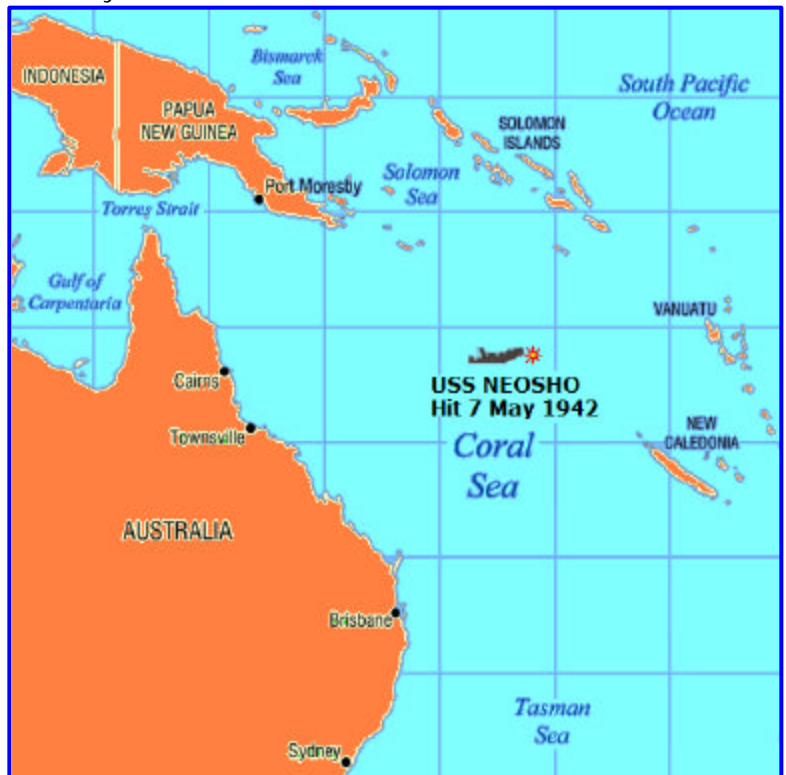
Facing a 60-plane attack, the fate of the two American ships was never in doubt. **SIMS** exploded and sank immediately with a loss of 237 men, almost the entire crew. Despite its cargo of burning aviation gas and fuel oil, the **NEOSHO** managed to remain afloat for a while because some of the fuel tanks were empty and their buoyancy kept the oiler afloat.

**Neosho's position when she was attacked was determined later as Longitude 158°03E, Latitude 16°09S**

**NEOSHO** attempted numerous maneuvers but could not avoid what was inevitable. She was hit, and hit again. Fires blazed uncontrolled. Burning and immobilized, the *Neosho* began listing sharply in the choppy seas. She heeled slowly. Her life was ebbing as the Pacific waters invaded her.

Afraid that **NEOSHO** would capsize, Captain John Phillips ordered the crew to prepare to abandon ship. **NEOSHO's** decks were canting perilously, and men scrambled in desperation to free the life rafts.

Dozens of men immediately jumped into the water. Many of those drowned while others piled into the three motorized whaleboats that slowly circled the ailing ship. Dozens more clambered onto life rafts that slowly began drifting away from **NEOSHO**. Most of those men were never seen again.



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More men jumped. Still others fell. The surrounding waters were turmoil of burning oil, debris, and shouting, struggling humanity. Many men were afflicted with searing burns received on board or in the water, suffering unbearably.

With complete disregard for his own life, Henry Tucker swam between the various life rafts, carrying tannic acid in his hands to treat the burns of the injured men. He braved the dangers of exposure and exhaustion to continue his task, helping the injured to boats, but refusing a place for himself.

**The Japanese imperial forces took this photo of NEOSHO during their attack. It has since been released and is now posted on Wikipedia.**

The next morning, the men on the motor whaleboats went back aboard the immobilized **NEOSHO**, now listing at 30 degrees with the starboard rail underwater, and Captain John Phillips did a head count. Of the 293 men onboard the ship before the attack, 20 men were confirmed dead and 158 men were missing, many of whom were on the rafts that had drifted away from the ship.

Despite the battering it had suffered, **NEOSHO** refused to sink, buoyed by her partly emptied tanks. The deck of the listing ship, however, was a mess. Half of the men were burned or wounded and almost everyone was covered with black oil. The men patiently waited in the hot sun for three days without knowing what had happened in the battle. They had almost decided to abandon **NEOSHO** when an Australian aircraft participating in the search flew overhead, signaling: "Do you need help?" Captain Phillips signaled his response: "What do you think?"



**NEOSHO**'s location was transmitted and the next day, on 11 May, the 123 men remaining on the badly listing but still afloat **NEOSHO** were rescued by the destroyer, **USS Henley (DD 391)**. After the surviving 123 men were safely aboard the *Henley*, the destroyer tried to sink **NEOSHO** so that the Japanese wouldn't find her. The ailing tanker was stubborn, though, and it took two torpedoes followed by 146 shells to put her under. Finally she began to sink, stern first, and many of **NEOSHO**'s crewmen wept from the deck of **HENLEY** as they watched their beloved tanker sink beneath the waves.

Five days later, another destroyer, **USS Helm (DD 388)**, picked up four more survivors of the attack several miles away. These were the only survivors of those 68 *Neosho* crewmen who had jumped into rafts and lashed them together shortly after the attack. Two of those rescued died shortly after.

Henry Tucker was one of many subsequently reported as missing in action and it is believed he lost his life in his loyal and courageous devotion to duty. Those who survived and were rescued shared their stories of the brave efforts by Henry Tucker to treat the suffering of as many men as he possibly could. His valorous actions enhance and sustain the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

For his actions during this attack and the subsequent sinking of **NEOSHO**, Henry Warren Tucker was posthumously awarded the **Purple Heart** and the **Navy Cross**, one of the highest tributes that can be paid by his country.

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The Navy Cross



Henry Warren Tucker



The Purple Heart

### The Navy Cross citation reads as follows:

*"For extraordinary heroism and distinguished service in the line of his professionalism following the attack on USS Neosho by enemy Japanese aerial forces on 7 May 1942.*

*With complete disregard for his own life, Tucker swam between the various life rafts carrying tannic acid in his hands to treat the burns of the injured men. He hazarded the dangers of exposure and exhaustion to continue his task, helping the injured to boats but refusing a place for himself. Tucker was subsequently reported missing in action and it is believed he lost his life in his loyal and courageous devotion to duty. His valorous actions enhance and sustain the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service."*

*For the President*

*Frank Knox  
Secretary of the Navy*