

U.S. Navy ships honor an Abbot

Career exploits from War of 1812 to Commodore Perry's expedition

By Gordon B. Seavey
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Over the centuries, Westford men and women unhesitatingly served their country when called upon. Greatest sacrifice was probably when 250 men and boys participated in the War of Rebellion.

Then came the War of 1812 followed by the Civil War. The latter conflict found 200 men fighting for the North.

Greatest land hero of all, many historians believe, was Col John Robinson whose exploits at Concord Bridge, Bunker Hill and several other conflicts are well known.

But there was another Westford man to come along soon after who took to the sea in the Spanish-American War. He was Joel Abbot, a member of the distinguished Abbot family, which already had contributed much to the town's protection and growth from early times.

Joel was a freshman at Westford Academy when he was appointed a midshipman in the U.S. Navy. He was first assigned to the U.S.S. President, and shortly thereafter, to the Lake Champlain squadron. Here his ship penetrated the British lines and destroyed a large quantity of the enemy's masts, spars and stores. This was the day of sail.

For this, he was promoted to lieutenant and voted a sword by Congress.

In 1818, Abbot was placed in command of a vessel seized by the Navy, a Portuguese privateer named Marianna Flora and was ordered to take her into port. En route, the pirates who formed the Flora's crew instigated a mutiny which was promptly suppressed. This enabled Abbot and his men to sail the ship into port without further delay.

For three years, Abbot saw duty as executive officer in the Boston Navy Yard and afterwards duty in the Mexican Conflict.

Oriental duty

His big break came in 1852 when he was given command of a frigate which accompanied Perry on his famous expedition to open Japan to world commerce. When Perry returned home, Abbot became commander of the squadron.

Navy records officially recorded that during this critical period of our relations with China, he was often called upon to perform delicate diplomatic duties and discharged them to the complete satisfaction of the government.

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It was under Abbot's direction that the Yangtze River in China was made safe for navigation. He personally supervised the placement of buoys and a lightship in the river, which for the first time had its channels and sailing courses properly defined in the Yangtze Kiang River.

This arduous work brought on an illness which resulted in the death of the Westford man in 1855. He was 62. It was malaria.

In his name

When a destroyer 314 feet long was launched in Newport News, Va., on July 4, 1918, it carried the name of Abbot (DD-184) in commemoration of the Westford native. She carried a crew of eight officers and 124 men. The sponsor was Miss Louise Abbot Cooke, great-granddaughter of Commodore Abbot.

The Abbot became involved with the destroyer-land bases deal with Britain in 1940 and was turned over to the Royal Navy. Renamed HMS Charlestown, she took part in minelaying operations off Scotland.

While on convoy escort duty, she collided with a cargo ship in 1944 and subsequently was scrapped on Jan. 15 the following year. This information was furnished this spring by Stanley Kalkus, director of the U.S. Navy Department in Washington.

Apparently the memory of Abbot's earlier accomplishments remained in the U.S. Navy files, for when it came time to select a suitable name for Destroyer (DD-629) being built at Bath Iron Works, in February 1943 it became the second Abbot. His mother's grand-daughter, Mrs. Grace Abbot Fletcher, was its sponsor.

This new destroyer was larger than the original Abbot and cruised at 35 knots in Atlantic and Caribbean waters as escort for large combatant vessels. She then departed for the Pacific, and participated in practically all the landings in the Pacific with 3rd Fleet operations against the Japanese.

She received eight battle stars for her Pacific service during World War II.

As far as can be determined, this ship is still in service.

Gordon Seavey is a Westford native. For many years he remembers Joel Abbot's ceremonial sword hanging over a fireplace in the Abbot mansion on upper Main Street.

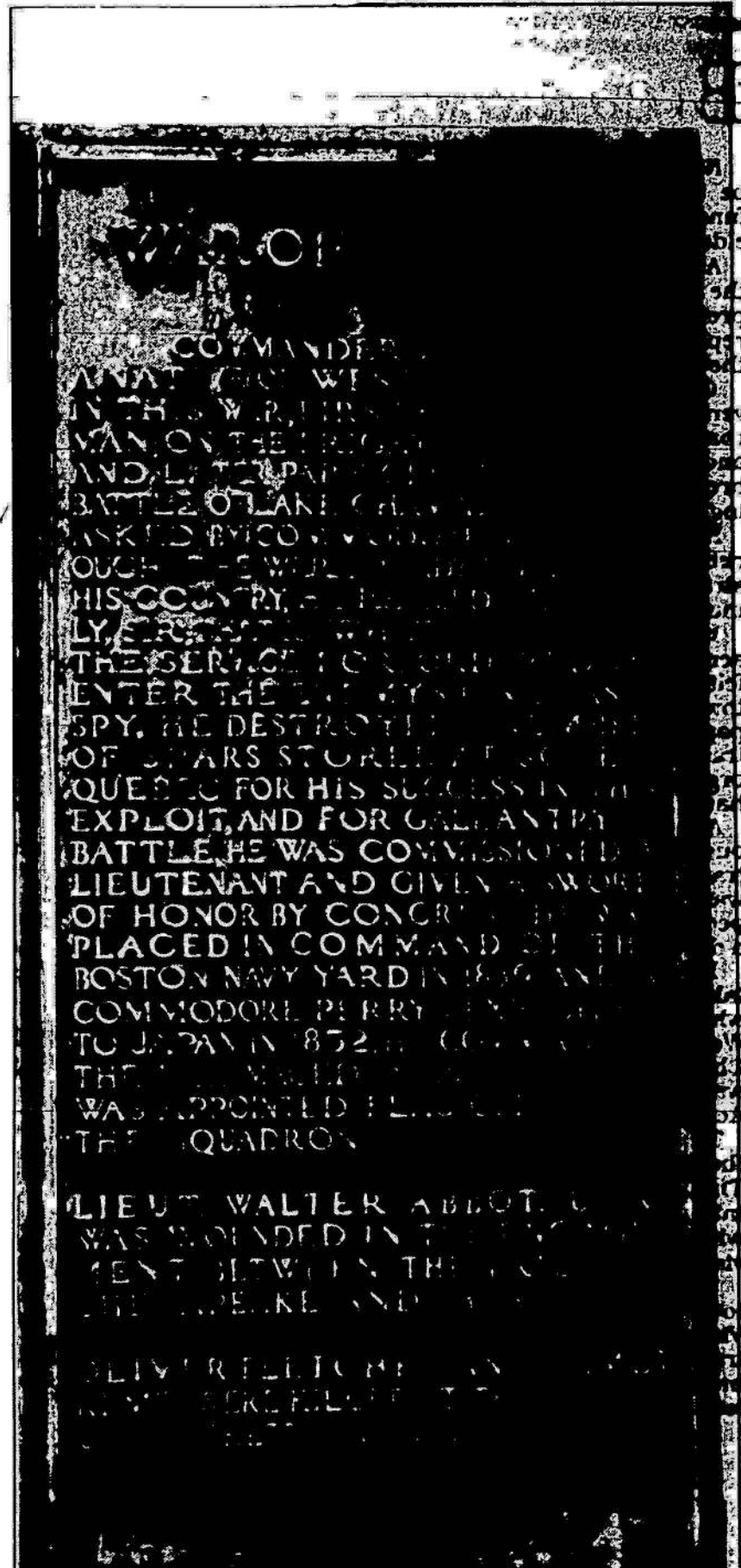


Photo courtesy Gordon Seavey

A bronze plaque on the hexagonal Veterans' Memorial on Town Common details the service of Commander Joel Abbot during the War of 1812, as well as his later accomplishments as a career Navy man.