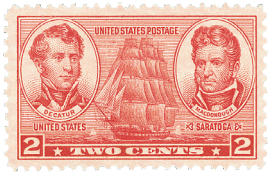
This Day in History… October 31, 1941

Sinking of the USS *Reuben James*

On October 31, 1941, the Atlantic became a battlefield for the United States even before the country had formally entered World War II. The German submarine attack on the USS *Reuben James* marked the first time an American Navy ship was destroyed during the conflict, foreshadowing the coming fight across the globe.

From the 1941: World at War Sheet

The USS *Reuben James* was named in honor of *Reuben James*, a naval hero born around 1776. James served in the US Navy during a time when America was still proving itself on the world stage. During the Barbary Wars, he served aboard the USS *Enterprise* under Lieutenant Stephen Decatur. In 1804, when Decatur led a daring mission to burn the captured American frigate *Philadelphia* in the harbor at Tripoli, James showed extraordinary courage. Stepping between a pirate's sword and Decatur during the boarding, James was wounded but survived to continue serving with distinction through the War of 1812 and subsequent naval engagements. He passed away in 1838 at a Naval Hospital, leaving behind a legacy of bravery that inspired the naming of the ship decades later.



The ship's namesake served aboard the USS Enterprise *under Stephen Decatur (pictured at left on this stamp).*

The USS *Reuben James* (DD-245) was commissioned in September 1920. In its early years, the destroyer patrolled the Adriatic and Mediterranean Seas, providing humanitarian aid to refugees fleeing the unrest in Yugoslavia. In October 1921, the ship participated in ceremonies honoring the return of the Unknown Soldier to the United States. Later, the *Reuben James* patrolled the coast of Nicaragua, helping prevent weapons from reaching revolutionaries. After more than a decade of service, the destroyer was briefly decommissioned in 1931, only to return to duty the following year amid growing global tensions.

When World War II erupted in Europe in September 1939, the *Reuben James* joined the Neutrality Patrol, protecting the Atlantic and Caribbean shipping lanes and helping ensure that vital supplies reached allied nations. By March 1941, the ship was escorting convoys carrying war materials to Britain, part of a strategy to aid the Allies without direct involvement in combat.

Woody Guthrie wrote a song about the event, titled "The Sinking of the Reuben James*."*

On October 23, 1941, the *Reuben James* departed Newfoundland with four other destroyers, escorting a convoy of merchant ships across the Atlantic. Eight days later, in the early hours of October 31, the convoy encountered a German "wolfpack", a coordinated group of submarines lying in wait. Acting heroically, the *Reuben James* positioned itself between a merchant vessel and a torpedo fired by a German U-boat. The torpedo struck the destroyer, detonating a magazine and blowing off the ship's entire bow. The forward section sank instantly, and the remainder of the ship floated for only about five minutes before succumbing to the sea.

The Reuben James *was sunk while escorting a convoy carrying Lend-Lease supplies to the United Kingdom.*

The *Reuben James* had seven officers, 136 enlisted men, and one passenger on board. Tragically, 100 crew members were killed, and only 44 enlisted men survived the attack. This marked the first time a US Navy ship had been sunk in World War II, serving as a stark reminder that the Atlantic war had already reached American sailors.

The loss of the *Reuben James* had immediate strategic consequences. Following the attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the US Navy to engage German and Italian warships in the Atlantic whenever necessary. Just over a month later, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, would propel the United States into full-scale global war.

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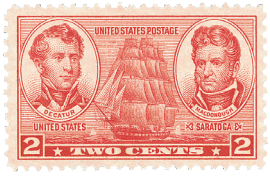

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