

# A monumental loss

## **Veterans, obelisk honor sailors killed 100 years ago in disaster that forged bond between city and the Navy**

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A century ago, on a slightly overcast Friday morning, San Diego was visited for the first time by catastrophe. A Navy gunboat, the Bennington, blew up in the bay, and 65 sailors were killed.

The city had known death before, of course, but it was a stranger to the kind of disaster that makes national headlines and alters a community's physical and emotional landscapes.

Today, the Bennington is the stranger. Not many people know its story, or how, amid the horror and the suffering, a bond was formed, helping San Diego become a Navy town.

A few years after the explosion, a 60-foot-tall granite obelisk was built on Point Loma to honor the fallen, at what later became Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery. The monument was a city landmark then, discernible for miles and featured on post cards.

But it, too, has been obscured by time and all that has grown up around it. You have to look for it now.

This Thursday marks the 100th anniversary of the Bennington explosion. Some local veterans have organized a ceremony at the monument, where 35 of the dead rest beneath simple white



San Diego Historical Society  
Officers and crew posed on the Bennington in March 1905. Four months later, in one of the Navy's worst peacetime accidents, boilers exploded as the gunship sat anchored in San Diego Bay.

headstones marked with individual names and a shared identifier:  
"U.S. Navy."

At 10:38 a.m., the exact time when the Bennington's boilers exploded, there will be a moment of silence. Then the names will be read, speeches made, and for a while, anyway, people will remember.

"Never let it be said that we failed to do the obvious and recognize the souls lost on the Bennington," said Ed Coffey, who is coordinating the ceremony.

Up the coast, at the private Santa Catalina prep school in Monterey, a historian named Broeck Oder will be looking at his watch for the exact moment, too. He grew up in San Diego hearing tales of the Bennington from his father, a Navy hospital corpsman, and when he went to the University of San Diego, he did his master's thesis on the event and its aftermath.



San Diego Historical Society  
The flag was lowered to honor the dead.

"Proportionally, Bennington is still the worst disaster in San Diego history, because we're talking about 65 deaths in a town with about 20,000 people," he said.

"If a proportionally similar accident struck San Diego today, God forbid, the death toll would be approximately 4,000 people, greater than the number of souls lost in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11."

Oder said when he encounters people who know about the Bennington, they tend to remember certain myths – that the explosion was caused by drunken sailors, for example. He thinks that's unfortunate.

So even though work commitments will keep him from attending Thursday's ceremony, he's glad it's happening.

"For some years, I've thought that just a few of us historians might be the only ones who knew the centennial of the disaster was approaching, so I am happy beyond expression that Bennington's men are now being remembered and honored in the city which so embraced them."

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The Bennington, named after a Vermont town where a key Revolutionary War battle was fought, was a familiar sight to San Diegans by 1905.

Commissioned in 1891, the 230-foot-long steel patrol boat made regular visits here as part of a fledgling courtship between the Navy and San Diego.

The military wanted a stronger presence in the Pacific and saw the city with its protected harbor as an ideal place for support bases and training exercises. City leaders saw commercial possibilities.

For local residents, the visitors were often a source of entertainment. They marched in parades and put on impressive shows with their ships' searchlights. But they weren't really considered San Diegans.



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune

Thirty-five of the Bennington's dead are buried near a large obelisk at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery.

"It is important to remember that in 1905, Navy personnel, unlike today, were not always seen as valuable members of the community, as friends and neighbors," Oder said.

That changed on July 21. The Bennington was anchored about 100 yards off the waterfront near what is now Seaport Village. It had just arrived from Hawaii and was preparing to head up the coast to help another Navy ship that had broken down.

Coal was thrown into the furnaces. The commander was gathering supplies on shore. The decks had been scrubbed.

What happened next was described in the following day's *San Diego Union* as "the most terrible accident that has ever happened in Southern California."

One of the boilers exploded – later investigations blamed poor construction and maintenance – and shot into a second boiler, which also exploded. Scalding steam surged through the ship.

People on shore reported hearing the blasts and seeing men tossed 30 feet into the air. Sailors tore at their uniforms and jumped overboard to escape the heat. Flames spread toward compartments where ammunition was stored. Water poured into a hole blown in the starboard side.

Crew members responded with the kind of heroism that earned 11 of them the Medal of Honor. One, Lynn Gauthier, went down through the steam to cut free the anchor so a tug could push the Bennington onto a mud bank, preventing its sinking. He died the next day from steam inhalation.

San Diegans rushed to the ship's aid. Some in row boats pulled sailors from the sea. Others helped ferry the injured to hospitals. "Strong men wept when they heard the pitiful cries of the wounded or saw their terrible plight," the *Union* reported.

Residents donated blankets, cots, books, fruit, ice cream. Others volunteered as nurses or entertained the injured by reading stories and playing music. Oder said the town essentially shut down for a week. Events were canceled or postponed, flags flew at half-staff, and clergymen talked about the Bennington during their Sunday sermons.

"We did not know any of these men," W.B. Henson, a Baptist minister, said at one of the services, according to the *Union*. "We are all one, down beneath the surface."

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Although the death toll would eventually reach 65, on the day of the public funeral, two days after the explosion, there were 47 coffins. Officials didn't have enough flags to drape the black-stained boxes, so the call went out for people to donate theirs.

The caskets were loaded onto horse-drawn, flower-filled wagons. It took four hours to make the trek from downtown, around the bay and up Point Loma to the Army's burial ground at Fort Rosecrans. The papers called it a "desolate cemetery surrounded by a rude picket fence."

Hundreds of people joined the procession; the line stretched for more than a mile by the time the wagons reached the cemetery. A large crowd was waiting. They had taken boats five miles across the bay, then hiked some 500 feet up the cliff.

"San Diego was in mourning yesterday," the *Union's* account said.

The burial trench was 60 feet long and 14 feet wide. Surviving sailors from the *Bennington*, working in crews of six, unloaded the coffins and put them in the trench. It took them more than an hour.

Commander Lucien Young stepped forward and raised a hand to get the crowd's attention. He turned to the Army officers who were present.

"I want to commit to your tender care the bodies of our unfortunate shipmates and patriotic dead," he said. "May their graves never be forgotten by the hand of affection, and may marble slabs rise on this, their last earthly resting place, and may the morning and evening sun playing upon the grassy mounds be symbolical of their shipmates' affection."

Three volleys of rifle shots were fired. Taps was played. As the crowd walked away, cemetery workers began filling in the trench. Wooden markers, numbered 1 through 47, were stuck in the ground, awaiting more permanent headstones.

San Diegans started talking almost immediately about a monument. Early plans called for something in a city park. A *Union* editorial said,

"San Diego has borne a most creditable part throughout this sad affair. It should not refuse this final tribute of patriotism."

The tribute was more than two years in the making.

Navy servicemen in the Pacific Squadron, determined to honor their own, donated the money to erect an obelisk at Fort Rosecrans. It was built out of 74 granite blocks, carved locally, and topped by a pyramid-shaped stone.

On the dedication day, Jan. 7, 1908, schools closed at noon so children could attend. Several thousand people ("of low and high degree," according to one newspaper account) made their way to the cemetery.

Rear Admiral C.F. Goodrich gave the main talk. He said the obelisk "makes no pretense to elaboration of design or of ornamentation, for it merely commemorates the heroism of simple men whose sole guiding motive was devotion to duty."

He applauded the city for its "prompt and practical expression of a sympathy without limit and without qualification," and said, "So long as there is a navy of the United States, the memory of these ministrations will be fresh and green in the hearts of all who go down to the sea in its ships."

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A century later, there's still a Navy, of course, and it's made a home – a very large home – in San Diego.

Oder, the historian, said ties were forged when the city "clearly saw the Bennington's misfortune as something that had happened to all San Diegans, and acted accordingly." That bond played a major role in paving the way for the decades of military growth that followed: fleet visits, sea bases, training centers, air stations.

Mention the Bennington now, though, and people are more likely to think of the World War II-vintage aircraft carrier of the same name.

The original Bennington never saw service again, not as a warship. It was repaired and turned into a barge, carrying loads of molasses in Hawaii before it was retired in the late 1920s and sunk at sea.

The obelisk is still at Fort Rosecrans, which became a national cemetery in 1934. It once soared above the landscape, easily seen by ships in the bay, but now there are trees nearby that are taller.

(Although 47 coffins went into the ground at the funeral two days after the explosion, there are 35 markers at the monument now. Some of the bodies were disinterred and sent to the sailors' hometowns for burial.)

Oder believes the Bennington's legacy for the city is in the way it responded to disaster. "It should, without question, still be a proud hallmark in the collective memory of all San Diegans," he said.

For the Navy, the explosion highlighted the need for better equipment maintenance and specialized training, Oder said. "While the loss of the Bennington remains one of the worst peacetime disasters in the Navy's history, we can appreciate the fact that those men did not die needlessly in the long run."