

TOUGH TUG MOVES ON TO SERVE TAIWAN

After 3 Wars, Even Navy Can't Sink the Grapple

Pearl Harbor (UPI) – The USS Grapple Lives Again

Survivor of three wars, shelled by both enemies and friends, retrieved once from mothballs and holder of just about every Navy efficiency award, the Grapple was headed for the mudflats again. But Dec 1 she starts a new career in the Taiwan navy.

Not bad for a plain old tugboat

The 213 – foot salvage and towboat fell victim to the Navy's economy drive and will be mustered out after 34 years of valiant service. But within minutes after the stars and stripes are lowered at the Pearl Harbor decommissioning ceremonies, the red, white and blue flag of Nationalist China will be raised and a crew of Chinese sailors will ready the tug for the trip to Taiwan.

Along with a new flag, Grapple will get a new name – 5- and a new commander, Han Ping of Taipei. The vessel is being sold to the Chinese at its scrap value, about \$250,000.

In its fighting days, armed with two .50 caliber machine guns and a couple of 20 mms, the little Grapple and her crew of 120 went everywhere the heavies went. Certainly it didn't poke its stubby bow out front with the carriers, the cruisers and the battlewagons, but Grapple was in Guam for that in invasion, at Peleliu and in the thick of the Philippine campaign, first at Leyte Gulf and then on to Lingayen.

The Japanese tried to sink the tug at Guam, The North Koreans tried to kill it at Wonsan, and so did a sister ship, the USS Chief. The Chief crew mistook the Grapple for a North Korean patrol boat.

Grapple proved so useful after the Korean War that the Navy decided against mothballing it again. Thus Grapple became one of the first Navy ships sent to Vietnam 11 years ago. The little tug survived that war, a bit slower in movement and prop weary, but intact.

Despite 34 years as an "active combat ship," Grapple boasts only one kill, a Japanese bomber that attacked off Guam, and that scalp was disputed by other ships in the area.

Although listed as a combat ship, Grapple earned its keep as ship's medic. It was Grapple's job to get the flooded-hulled and battle-torn ships out of the line and safely back to rear areas where they could be rebuild to fight another day.

When the North Koreans put a shell into the tug's hull at Wonson, it was fortunately a dud. Grapple's crew applied their own Band-Aid. They extracted the shell, plated the hole and carried on.

They even patched themselves up after being severely wounded by the gunfire of their sister ship which killed two of Grapple's crew and wounded 11 others. Grapple made it back to Japan under its own power, and was back in Korea three weeks later salvaging the USS Sarsi again under enemy fire.

Grapple's logbook reads like Sinbad's diary. It helped clean up Hilo harbor after the 1960 Hawaii tidal wave. It dodged ice floes in Arctic assignments and salvaged the USS Frank Knox off Pratas Reef. They converted the Grapple fantail into a medical clinic at Ulung Do Korea, to fight a typhoid epidemic.

The little ship delivered schoolbooks and generator fuel in the West Caroline Islands and food, medical supplies and a baby in the East Carolines. Grapple divers located and salvaged wrecked planes in the Yellow Sea, carried out underwater surveys in the Marshalls and pulled a tanker to safety in Kaneohe Bay.

Grapple's crew have done liberty in every Asian port from Hong Kong to China.