

U.S.S. WILKES-BARRE

Light Cruiser

WHEN?
1943-1972

WHERE? Pacific Ocean



EVENT
Pacific Theater WW II

VOCABULARY
Cruiser, floatplanes
flotilla, task force

The U.S. had been thrust into war since Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, though the formal declaration didn't come until December 8. Since then, production of all war materials ramped up quickly. It didn't take long before the government was producing three ships every two days—nearly 200 per month. By war's end nearly 4,600 ships slipped into the water.

One of those was a Cleveland class light cruiser christened the U.S.S. Wilkes-Barre and nicknamed the Willie Bee (Times Leader). Part of the Navy's flotilla of heavy cruisers, destroyers, and battleships, light cruisers were considered the workhorse of the group. The ship carried twelve 6 inch (diameter) guns and twelve 5 inch (diameter) guns as well as a battery of 40 and 20-mm anti-aircraft guns (WreckWiki). That armament accounts for the heavy amount of firepower they can produce. The *USS Wilkes-Barre* also carried four floatplanes (Kingfishers) launched by catapults for rescue or reconnaissance.



“The new cruiser, named after the Northeastern Pennsylvania city, the heart of the anthracite, was started seaward with the traditional smashing of a bottle of champagne on its bow by Mrs. Charles H. Miner (Grace Shoemaker Miner),” reported the Times Leader on Dec. 24, 1943 (Times Leader).

Launched on December 24, 1943, the ship went through its training looking for any problems until they got underway on October 23, 1944. Eventually the ship's crew loaded the needed ammunition and provisions on at San Diego, CA. Once completed, they started for Hawaii on November 10 (Navy history). Combat came quickly with various bombardments and operations against targets in the South China Sea, the coast of China and French Indochina (now Vietnam) (Navy history). By February 16, the cruiser continued as part of a group of other ships (task force) off the coast of Japan. That group was used as a diversion during the invasion of Iwo Jima (Navy history). On February 21, the cruiser took part in the bombardment of the island. A few days later, one of the ship's floatplanes rescued two fliers from the *Bunker Hill* from the waters off Yaku Shima (Navy history).

During Japanese air attacks the task force including *Wilkes-Barre* used anti-aircraft fire to knock down three fighters, and a dive bomber as well as assisting with two more downed fighters. In yet another firefight, the ship's crew took down a bomber and another fighter plane.

Navy history states that planes from the ship rescued two downed Navy pilots 30 miles off the coast of Okinawa. The island was continually attacked by *Wilkes-Barre* and the sister ships. On May 11, the *Wilkes-Barre* and aircraft carrier *Bunker Hill* met again as two kamikaze planes attacked the carrier and set it ablaze. The *Wilkes-Barre* under the command of Captain Robert L. Porter, Jr., pulled alongside the burning ship and trained water hoses on the fires. Forty men trapped on the *Bunker Hill* were able to get to the *Wilkes-Barre* (Navy history). Wounded sailors were transferred, too. Three other destroyers also trained their firehoses on the burning ship until the fires were out and the battleship saved.

From the Navy history: “

Bunker Hill's captain later praised the ships which had labored bravely and tirelessly to save the carrier.

“The Wilkes-Barre, the Sperry, and Stembel, and English did a magnificent job. They came alongside not knowing whether we were likely to have explosions aboard. The Wilkes-Barre evacuated our seriously wounded, and with their able assistance, we got through.”

After moving through typhoons and other firefights in the ensuing weeks, the *Wilkes-Barre* and crew made its way to Tokyo Bay following the Japanese surrender. This was in order to take part in the great procession of ships to witness the end of the conflict. The *Wilkes-Barre* left the theater of war and finally made it back to San Pedro, California, by the end of January 1946 (Navy history). After a cruise to England operating in the British Isles, the ship returned to the US. She received four battle stars for her service during the war and shot down seven enemy aircraft.

As a way to honor the ship and crew, her anchors and bell are on display at the Luzerne County Courthouse. Other items from the ship such as the telegraph machine, compasses, and rudder control are inside the courthouse (Times Leader). The newspaper also states that four hundred people attended the dedication including Rear Admiral Robert L. Porter, Jr., the first captain and Richard F. Jordan a member of the original crew. In May of 1972, the ship was sunk off the Florida Keys to serve as an artificial reef (Navy history).



ONLINE RESOURCES

[Kingfisher float plane USS Wilkes-Barre](#)

[Navy history USS Wilkes-Barre](#)

[Times Leader USS Wilkes-Barre](#)

[USS Bunker Hill fire](#)

[WreckWiki USS Wilkes-Barre](#)