

USS Henry B. Wilson

Published 19 November 2015 by [Matt Rudy](#)



USS HENRY B.WILSON DDG7

The USS Henry B. Wilson has made it around the world leaving its mark along her journey; starting right here in the Great lakes region. The USS Henry B. Wilson was built by Defoe Shipbuilding Company located in Bay City, MI in February 28, 1958. The USS Henry B. Wilson was a guided missile destroyer and was easily identified as the ship with the big 7 found on the bow. The destroyer was launched on April 22, 1959 and by August 11, 1960; the destroyer was commissioned. (6) During this period of time, she was the largest vessel to be side-launched and built on the great lakes. (7)

Planning to Build

In the early 1950s, the Navy announced that they were going to request bids for guided missile destroyers. Shortly after hearing this news along with hearing that the St. Lawrence Seaway was being improved to be larger, the CEO of Defoe Shipbuilding Company, Harry J. Defoe, decided to go after a couple of the contracts. With the St. Lawrence improvements, this would allow Defoe Shipbuilding Company to build and deliver larger ships the size of the destroyers.

In 1957, the Defoe shipbuilding company was awarded a contract to build 2 guided-missile destroyers. Less than a year later, the Navy extended the contact to 4 guided-missile destroyers. The contracts for the four missile launching destroyers were awarded in competitive bidding and are being built at a fixed price, Defoe pointed out. (A) The destroyers' contracts are worth an estimated \$68 million and will provide steady employment for 1,450 workers for more than 3 years according to the Bay City Times.

Among the 4 ships that were contracted to be built at Defoe, the USS Henry B. Wilson was the first to be built. The first destroyer will be named the Henry B. Wilson, after a late World War I hero and onetime U.S. Naval Academy superintendent, Admiral Henry Braid Wilson. (B) The destroyer had a final destination set before it was built and that was at the Boston Navy yard.

Along with the planning for the destroyers, a key to the success is having enough power on the boat. The USS Henry B. Wilson was planned to be equipped two turbines that will are each rated 500 kilowatts, 60 cycle, three phase, 450 volts. And there will be two gear sets. (D) Of the power generated from USS Henry B. Wilson is enough power to easily provide power to roughly 3,000 people.

Building the Destroyer

After receiving the contract to build four navy guided missile destroyers, the Defoe Shipbuilding Company didn't waste any time getting started. The construction of the USS Henry B. Wilson started in late February and by

late April; the destroyer was ready to be launched. The USS Henry B. Wilson is expected to weigh approximately 1,300 tons as she slides into the water and will displace 4,500 tons by the time she is ready for her first trial run on Lake Huron. (B) Once in the water, Defoe Shipbuilding Company equipped her with the aluminum superstructure, steam turbines and her weapon mounts.

Among the many excited Naval Officers, Admiral C. W. Nimitz was one that said:

“Of all the tools the Navy will employ to control the seas in any future war, the most useful of the small types of combatant ships -the destroyer- will be sure to be there.” (C)

April 22, 1959 was a mark in history not only for the Defoe Shipbuilding Company but for the city of Bay City and the rest of the United States. This day was when the USS Henry B. Wilson was launched, becoming the first guided missile destroyer to be launched at Defoe and in the entire United States. (A) As imagined, this was going to be a popular event in Bay City, and would only become even more popular as the event got closer and closer.

At 12:00 o'clock, there was a ceremony set in place that was at this time the largest launching ceremony ever staged in the Defoe Shipbuilding Companies history. (B) The crowd was expected to be over 5,000 people. Among those in attendance for the big day would be many Navy officers, a 40 person Naval Band from the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Chicago and the Naval ROTC from the University of Michigan will provide the color guard. (B) In addition, there were National Press, radio, and television representatives at the event to report the history breaking event. And to capture this historic event, the navy used a special twin-rotor Navy Helicopter that whirled at some 50 feet over the vessel to obtain the official Navy aerial photographs of the trip that lasted about eight seconds.(C)

Along with the building of the four Destroyers in Bay City at the Defoe Shipbuilding Company, there was another project that had to be done to make this all possible. The Navy had to make it possible for the ships to travel out to the Atlantic Ocean. Before the St. Lawrence Seaway underwent improvements, it was too shallow for a ship the size of a destroyer to go through the locks. The improvements were to deepen the canals for larger ships to fit through. The great lakes highly benefited from these improvements because it brought even more jobs to the area.

Destroyers Sea Trial

After a ship is built, it is protocol that the ship is taken out to be tested on all of the equipment on the ship. The testing for the USS Henry B. Wilson took place here in the Great Lakes Region on Lake Huron which was performed by members of the Defoe Shipbuilding Company.

According to the Bay City Times, the sponsor and daughter of Admiral Wilson, Mrs. Hurley christened the destroyer before the sea trial with water from the Saginaw River, the St. Lawrence Seaway, and the Atlantic Ocean. (D) This symbolizes the route the Wilson will take when she is delivered to the Boston Naval Shipyard after the sea trial. Christening the destroyer also was to emphasize the role that the seaway played in the construction of the USS Henry B. Wilson. Due to the unique circumstances of being the first ship of her size to be side launched and the largest warship to be constructed on the Great Lakes, it is unique that the ship was not christened with the traditional champagne but with water from which the destroyer would be traveling.(8)

The Defoe Shipbuilding Company completed the destroyer by late October and the trial was a two-day trial that started on Oct. 25-27. (Bay City Times) The two-day trial carried the destroyer almost 650 miles which started in Bay City, MI and complete her journey in Boston at the naval shipyard. Along the journey, the destroyer was churning up a wake that stretched from Bay City almost to the Canadian shore near the Saugeen peninsula of Ontario, and set an historic first for the Great Lakes. (Bay City Times)

During the two day trial, the Navy flew a couple planes over the destroyer to see if destroyer could use the weapons with blanks to take down the planes. According to Bay City Times, there were Navy Planes based out of Chicago that flew overhead shortly after noon. According to the Bay City Times reports, those planes would have been “dead ducks” even if they had penetrated the friendly interceptor screen the destroyer would have during normal wartime operations. During the trial, the crews also tested the Tartar missile launching system and its potent antisubmarine rockets were also described as a success.

A photo of the USS Henry B. Wilson as she heads proudly home to Boston. This is dramatic photo of the destroyers stern, at this time was the largest warship to be built in the Great Lakes.

Destroyers Journey after Deployment

This 437 foot destroyer is capable of carrying a crew of around 350 members. The destroyer served on many operations for the navy. The destroyer could travel at speeds of 31+ knots which is equivalent to approximately 36 mph.(8) The destroyer was built to be equipped with the latest in the Navy’s arsenal of submarine killing weapons according to the Bay City Times. There was an operation with the code name “Eagle Pull”. (3) This operation was in plan to pull Americans out of Cambodian capital. The USS Henry B. Wilson was among a few other destroyers to protect the helicopters that were flying into the Cambodian city to retrieve the US soldiers. Within 2 hours, nearly 300 persons were evacuated. (3)

The guided missile destroyer was used during the Vietnam War and sailed on duty in the western pacific. This was the first ship in the region to be armed with Tatar Missiles. (7) The guided missile destroyer made many stops throughout the pacific including: Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, Yokosuka, Japan, San Diego in California, and many different cities in Asia.

There were a couple accidents that occurred on the destroyer while she was in service. On January 5, 1973, there was an accident that happened right off Saigon, South Vietnam.(8) There was an explosion in mount 51 and the explosion destroyed a foot of the barrel and injured two crew members. Another accident that happened on the USS Henry B. Wilson was on February 24, 1975. The destroyer was in Subic Bay, Philippines and the USS Kansas City is struck by the USS Henry B. Wilson while moored at Subic Bay, Philippines.(8) It is fortunate that both ships suffered only minor damage and that no one was injured in the accident.

The USS Henry B. Wilson was a part of the Mayaguez rescue operation. When two days of diplomatic efforts failed to release the ship and crew, President Ford ordered a land-sea-air assault by combined U.S. forces.(1) On May 16, 1975, the destroyer Henry B. Wilson sank an incoming Cambodian patrol boat with 20 rounds from its forward 5”/54 gun. (4) The destroyer was armed with two five-inch rapid fire guns, a surface-to-air missile system, an anti-submarine rocket launcher, and six 12.75-inch anti-submarine torpedo tubes. (5) The crew aboard the destroyer had an objective to rescue the men that were on the ships that were pirated. Those men were picked up by the USS Henry B. Wilson.

“On the USS Wilson, I talked with a Marine Corps major who had a quarter of his back blown off by shrapnel,” recalled the captain of the Mayaguez, Capt Charles T. Miller. “I cried. People were killed trying to save me.” (1)

Throughout the several years of service for the destroyer, she entered many ports along the west coast from San Diego, California to Vancouver, British Columbia. Many of her operations took place on the Pacific Ocean after she made her way from the Caribbean where the ship training took place. (8) And by October 1989, the destroyer had seen her days of combat. The USS Henry B. Wilson was decommissioned and then struck from the Navy list in 1990, and sunk off the California coast in 2003 in an naval exercise. (7)

In January of 2004, the USS Henry B. Wilson Association was formed. The Association had plans to make a place where people can communicate about the history of the Henry B. Wilson. They also started yearly reunions. Every year since 2004, crew members of the USS Henry B. Wilson have been reuniting to share stories of their experiences while serving on the destroyer. There is also a webpage that the Henry B. Wilson

Committee has put together to upload pictures from previous reunions. The website also has a list of crew members that served on the ship along with some contact information.

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