

Featured Felines: Cats in Wartime

At Sea – Ship's Cats (2006+)

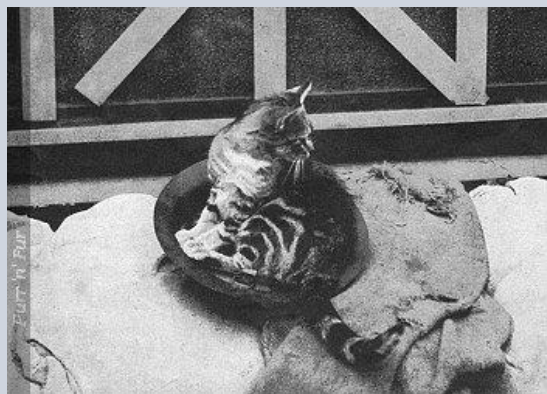
(page checked July 2026)

[For wartime cats on land and in the air, see separate page.]

Cats don't have a natural or important place in mankind's wars in the same way as dogs, horses and some other animals do, since (as cat owners will know!) it is very difficult to get a cat to do what you want. There were stories that the Americans tried to use cats during the Vietnam war, but they were too easily distracted and either started playing or disappeared into the jungle. However, these tales are apocryphal. During the nineteenth century it's said that the Belgians tried using cats to deliver letters, but with a marked lack of success.

There is one function that cats have fulfilled since time immemorial, though, and that is as ship's cats, where they kept the vessel's stores free from rodents and also acted as mascots and companions to the crew. They were especially important in wartime, when supplies could be short, and men were far from home for extended periods and welcomed feline companionship. Sadly, since 1975 the British Royal Navy has banned cats, and indeed all animals, from its ships. It's a far cry from the days of Louis XIV's French Navy in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when it is reported that all French ships were ordered to carry two cats for rodent-control duties.

Many of these wartime tales are short and without photos, as they date from decades ago now; information is sparse and snippets have been gleaned from many sources.



War at Sea

Cats, being attached to a territory as much as to people, are better mascots for a ship's company — or perhaps for an air-force base — than they are for an army regiment which is likely to be on the move for much of the time during war. The story of [Simon of HMS Amethyst](#) is well-known and it seems likely that one reason he didn't survive in quarantine was simply that he pined so much for his ship and his friends on board. Some ships had more than one cat (and many kittens were born at sea); and ships' cats were able to, as it were, 'rise through the ranks' to become the mascot of a particular part of a ship, such as the engine room or one of the mess-decks, before going on to maybe ultimately become the 'official mascot' of the whole vessel.

From the many stories involving cats at sea during wartime, here are ones I've come across. Many are from Britain and World War 2, and are in **alphabetical order of the ships**; however, British Admiralty documents from World War 1 show significant sums paid out during that conflict, too, for the annual maintenance of cats to keep down rats on board ship.

▣ HMS Amethyst

Amethyst became an unwitting victim of the Chinese civil war in 1949 when she was fired upon and stranded for some 100 days on the Yangtze river. Ship's cat **Simon**, although wounded, recovered enough to maintain his battle against the rats that were eating dwindling supplies, and he was also a great morale booster, especially for those crew members who had also been wounded. When the ship finally escaped he was awarded the PDSA's Dickin Medal, the only cat and the only Royal Navy animal to be thus recognised. Sadly he died in quarantine in England before it could be awarded. For his full story see [Simon of HMS Amethyst](#).



▣ HMS Anson

The main claim to fame of **Annie**, wardroom cat of this battleship, was the number of kittens she produced during an especially long voyage! Presumably there was at least one tomcat aboard too — but when the vessel finally returned to port there were found to be more than 50 kittens, mostly looking remarkably like Annie!

▣ HMS Argonaut

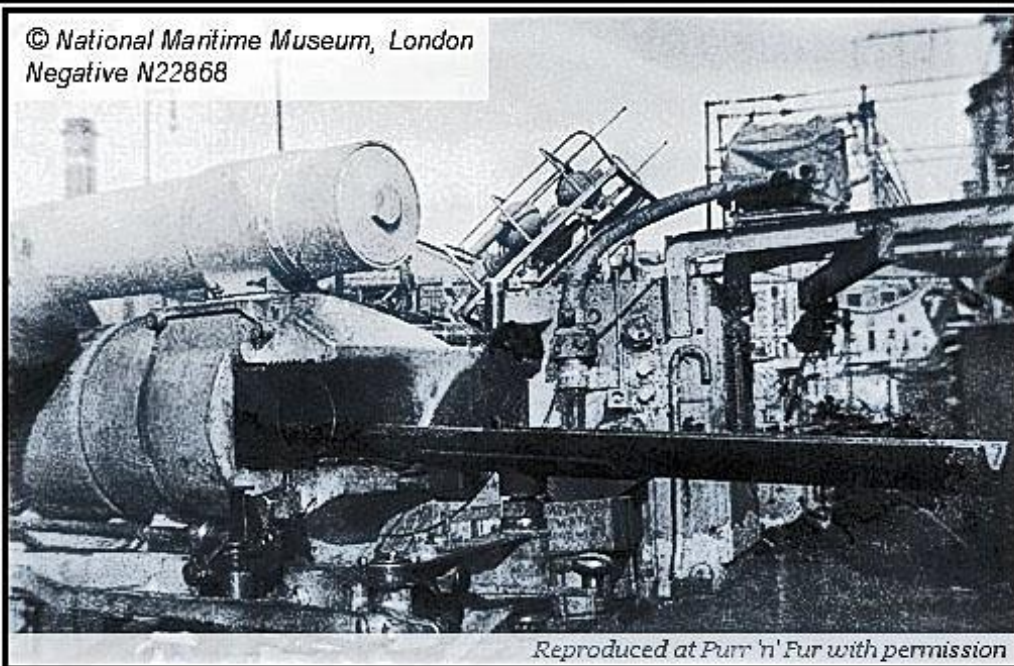
Ship's cat **Minnie** of the cruiser *Argonaut* was one of the most travelled of naval cats. She joined the crew early in 1944 from Tyneside, in north-east England, and among many other pets that came and went she stood out and became indisputably 'the ship's cat'. A bit of a loner, she took no special friends and seemed to regard the whole ship as her domain; she'd sleep on the mess-decks just as happily as in the captain's cabin. Minnie was a tabby, with immaculate white paws and breast. She first saw action at the D-Day invasion of the Normandy beaches, where none of the pandemonium appeared to affect her routine of sleeping, eating and doing her rounds. Subsequently she sailed with *Argonaut* to the French Riviera; to Palermo, in Sicily; Colombo and Trincomalee in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka); the Dutch East Indies; Sydney and Fremantle in Australia; several of the larger Pacific island groups; and when news of the Japanese surrender was received in 1945, her ship was off Tokyo.

Lengthy peacetime voyages then followed; but after 2½ years 'before the mast' Minnie disappeared while the ship was in Singapore. She had previously gone missing in Hong Kong, where she was eventually found aboard another warship in the harbour — so it is thought she may have become fed up with *Argonaut*'s long and monotonous voyages and sought adventure elsewhere. The ship waited until the last minute in Singapore before having to sail without her, and she was sorely missed. A signal was sent to the Commander of the naval base to request her return to the UK if found — but she never was.

▣ HMS Aurora

Aurora carried among her armaments four of the 4-inch 'quickfire' guns shown in the photo, which dates from 1914 while the ship was in dry dock at Devonport during her commissioning period. The kitten, name unknown, is sitting on the gun's loading tray.

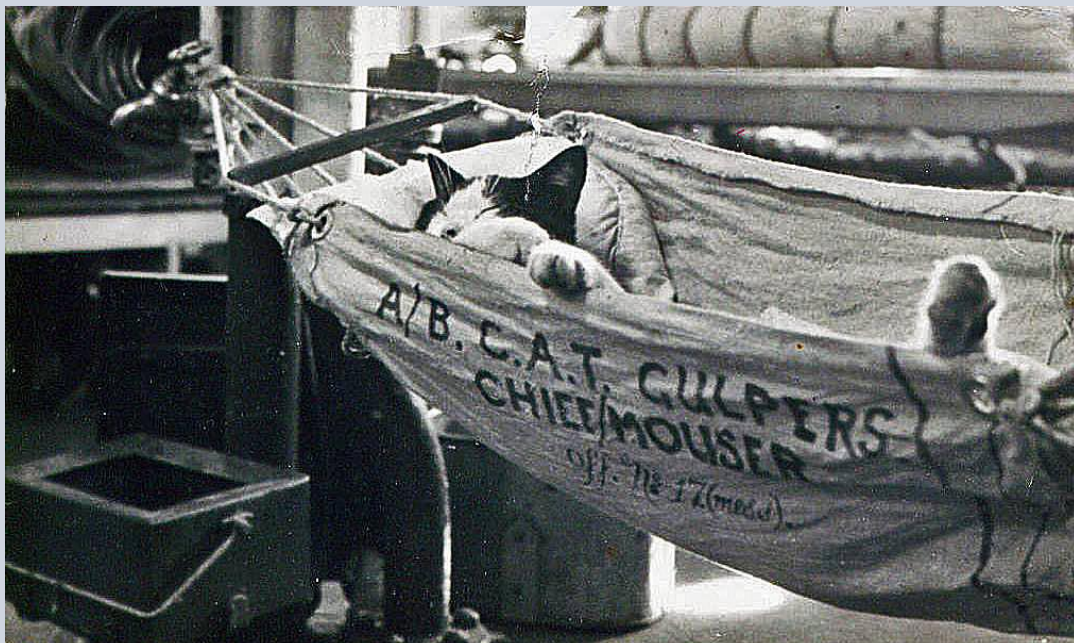
Image: [National Maritime Museum](#), London



Black kitten
aboard HMS Aurora, September 1914

▣ HMS Barfleur

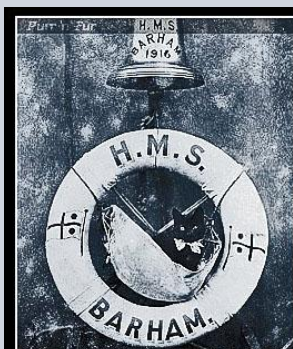
I think this was the British destroyer of that name launched in 1944, the fourth ship to bear the name that commemorates a seventeenth-century victory over the French off Cape Barfleur. The cat, apparently '**AB Gulpers**, Chief Mouser', clearly had his own hammock on board. The ship survived the war and was scrapped in 1966.



▣ HMS Barham

This battleship was launched in 1914 and commissioned the following year. The image of the kitten (*below left*) seen apparently hanging onto the ship's bell for dear life is used by courtesy of the [HMS Barham Association](#). Later, perhaps in 1916, there appear to have been both a ship's dog and a ship's cat (*below right*), who were evidently friendly enough to have their photo taken together. The cat was called **Cochrane**. *Barham* went on to see service in the Second World War but was sunk by a U-boat in 1941.

Cat/dog image © and reproduced by kind permission of the National Maritime Museum, London.



The image on the left is from a Christmas greetings postcard



HMS Barham WW1

Image courtesy of HMS Barham Association



Cat and spaniel mascots

HMS Barham about 1916

© National Maritime Museum, London
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HMS Barham during WW1

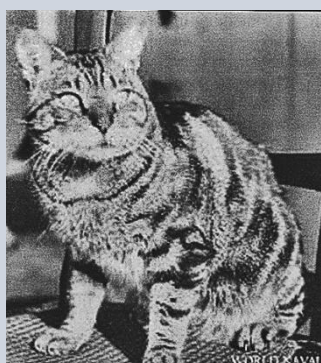
Evidently at least two cats were on board at this point (left)

Below, crew watch the black kitten playing



■ **HMS Belfast**

The light cruiser *Belfast*, launched in 1938, had a cat on board in 1942/3 called **Frankenstein**. The photo (*below left, next page*) shows sailors with a young cat, which may be Frankenstein, on the starboard side of 'A' turret in about 1942. These are also thought to be Frankenstein:



Belfast survived through the war and beyond, being decommissioned in 1963. A campaign to

save her from being scrapped and preserve her for the nation was ultimately successful, and since 1971 she has been moored and is open as a museum on the River Thames, close to the Tower of London. From time to time until the fairly recent past the museum also had ship's cats aboard, although since a [nasty incident](#) in 2008 when ship's cat **Kilo** (*below right*) was thrown overboard (and, in an unrelated development, his companion **Oscar** subsequently went missing) a decision was made not to replace them. Instead a tableau [shows a cat](#) protecting ship's stores by catching a rat (*Flickt – use Edge*).

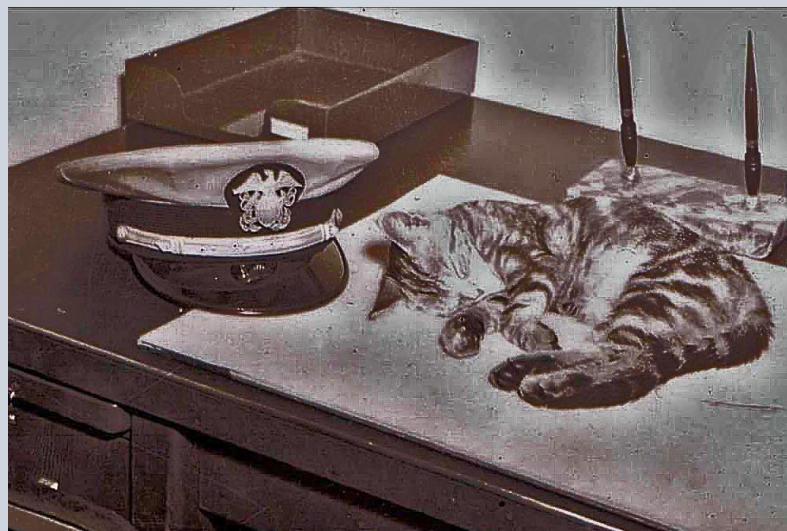
Image © and reproduced by kind permission of the Imperial War Museum, London



▣ **USS Big Horn**

A number of ships have borne this name and it isn't certain to which one the cat belonged. Perhaps most likely was a disguised merchant ship, or 'Q-ship', operated by the US Navy to combat Nazi U-boat attacks on tankers. That *Big Horn* was herself a former tanker, converted from SS *Gulf Dawn* during early 1942.

Unfortunately I don't know the name of the ship's mascot seen in the delightful photo.



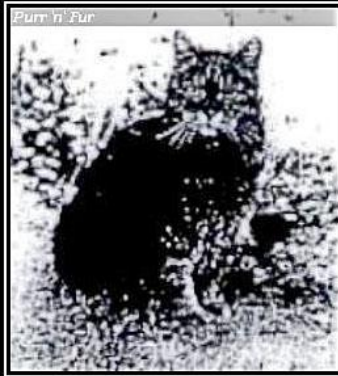
▣ **Bismarck**

The tale goes as follows . . .

The German battleship was sunk on 27 May 1941. Of more than 2200 men on board, only 116 survived, together with **Oscar**, the ship's cat (or **Oskar**, to use the German spelling). He was picked up by the British destroyer HMS *Cossack*, but she too was torpedoed a few months later, on 24 October, with the loss of 159 lives. Attempts to rescue the ship failed, and she was abandoned and sank two days later. Oscar survived again, was taken to Gibraltar, and was then taken on by HMS *Ark Royal*. His stay there was even shorter, as the aircraft carrier was torpedoed by U-81 on 13 November, eventually capsizing and sinking only 30 miles (50 km) from Gibraltar.

Yet again Oscar was lucky — but there were no more ships for him, as it was decided that his presence was certainly not lucky! By now known as **Unsinkable Sam**, this great survivor among cats stayed as mouse-catcher in the Governor General of Gibraltar's office buildings

until he was taken by a brave ship to Belfast, in Northern Ireland (although some reports say Plymouth). There he lived until his death in 1955, at the Home for Sailors. A portrait of him has a place of honour in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, near London.



Oscar/Oskar, aka Unsinkable Sam

Allegedly he was plucked from the sea following the sinking of the *Bismarck* and went on to survive further sinkings of British ships, but there are several reasons to doubt the validity of this widely-circulated tale, as detailed in the accompanying entry.

.. BUT, did Oscar really exist?

Some serious researchers of the matter believe that the tale of Oscar/Sam, as given above, while it makes a marvellous story, is what would probably today be called an 'urban myth', and is highly unlikely to have happened in that way, or most likely at all.

The reasons are several:

- (1) — None of the survivors from *Bismarck* remembers there being such a cat on the ship — not even the Baron, who would have been in its likely home of the wardroom.
- (2) — There is no photographic or documentary evidence of a cat on board (and there are plenty of surviving photos of and from *Bismarck*).
- (3) — A small animal like a cat in the sea could not have reached a rescue ship. Both of the rescue ships present (neither of which was the *Cossack*, incidentally) were high-sided vessels, and *Bismarck*'s survivors, covered in oil, had to climb ropes in heavy seas to reach safety — so how could an extremely wet cat have got on board? A sailor would not have been able to reach down and pick it up, either. And no cat could have survived for long, drenched through and very cold, to be picked up later.
- (4) — Human survival instincts make it extremely unlikely that any sailor, German or British, as much as they liked their mascots, would have rescued an animal under the very poor conditions at the time, when all efforts were being concentrated on saving human lives.
- (5) — The *Ark Royal* part of the tale sounds similarly unlikely. On that occasion the ship sank very slowly; there was time to evacuate all survivors in an orderly way, and no one had to be rescued from wreckage. If there had been a cat alive, unless it hid itself very well, it wouldn't have had to be in the water at all.
- (6) — There seem to be two different versions of Oscar/Sam! The photo above, although copied a number of times, definitely shows a striped tabby. However, there's a painting in the British National Maritime Museum, supposedly of Oscar, that shows a 'tuxedo' (black-and-white) cat. They cannot both be correct — but is either of them? Did Oscar/Sam ever exist, or was he the figment of someone's fertile imagination?
- (7) The German military and naval historian Heinrich Kaufhold-Roll, in his excellent 2017 book *Able Seacats: Ship's Cats on board Warships* (Conta Books, Bonn; ISBN 978-3-9817339-1-4) gives a detailed account of *Bismarck*'s

sinking and the positions of all the ships involved. He says that HMS *Cossack* was not at the immediate scene at the time, did not pick up any survivors, human or animal, and – interestingly – that animals were strictly prohibited on German warships, so the presence of a ship's cat seems most unlikely.

(Many thanks to Frank Allen of the [HMS Hood Association](#) for allowing us to publish his thoughts above, in 2008.)

It was also interesting to read [elsewhere](#) (archived copy – May 2012) that the secretary of the HMS Cossack Association, while having little doubt that a ship's cat named Oscar probably existed somewhere, also debunked the tale.)

There are various cartoon versions of Oscar's tale available on the internet.

▣ HMS Black Prince

Her ship's cat, named **Beauty**, was another feline present at the D-Day landings. While the ship's guns were busy bombarding the Normandy coast, Beauty chose to give birth to three healthy kittens. The captain, impressed, said that she 'carried on with magnificent indifference to her surroundings'.

▣ HMS Bramble

This was a minesweeper in the early years of WW2, with two ship's cats **Ginger** and **Minnie**. The ship was sunk by German action during the Battle of the Barents Sea on 31 December 1942, while she was on convoy-escort duty to Russia. All 121 crew, and surely the cats, were lost, and the wreckage of the ship was never found.



Ginger and Minnie
ship's cats of HMS *Bramble*,
lost with all hands on Arctic convoy duty in the Barents Sea
on 31 December 1942

▣ HMS Bulldog

Smokey was ship's mascot here, and had her moment of fame when the battleship, one of two — the other was HMS *Beagle*— sailed to the Channel Islands in 1945 to accept the surrender of the German occupation forces there. As the ship approached the waterfront, which was lined by wildly cheering islanders, Smokey was sitting at one of her vantage points watching the scene with interest. A BBC radio commentator, reporting the event to the world, noticed her and referred to her presence as 'a symbol of the importance servicemen and -women attached to their animal friends'. Subsequently thousands of eager listeners wrote in to enquire about her.

▣ ORP Burza

[ORP is 'Okret Rzeczypospolitej', or 'ship of the Polish Republic'; *Burza* translates as *Tempest*

or *Storm*.]

Shortly before WW2, after a visit to the Hei naval base in Poland, the Chief Petty Officer of *Burza* reported to the captain that a new crew member, with a nice fur uniform, had joined the ship. The captain said that was a good sign. The ship then sailed for Great Britain, along with two other Polish destroyers, and when war was declared soon afterwards they came under the command of the British Admiralty. The cat, now named **Kicia**, was living in a petty officer's quarters near the bow of the ship — and one day produced six tiny kittens. But then not long afterwards, following a heavy storm, she moved them all one by one, along practically the length of the ship and across wet and slippery decks, to a cabin at the stern belonging to a Georgian officer, Lt Tumaniszwili, where she deposited them in a drawer of clean laundry.

A few days later *Burza* was engaged in action off Calais, during which HMS *Wessex* was sunk. *Burza* shot down two Stuka dive-bombers, but received a hit on her bows. The petty officer's quarters where Kicia had her kittens was completely destroyed. Cat's intuition? The story parallels that of London church cat [Faith](#).

(Many thanks to Bartłomiej Blaszkowski for sending us this account. He was in touch with [Jerzy Tumaniszwili](#), who was living in the US with his cat Roscoe.)



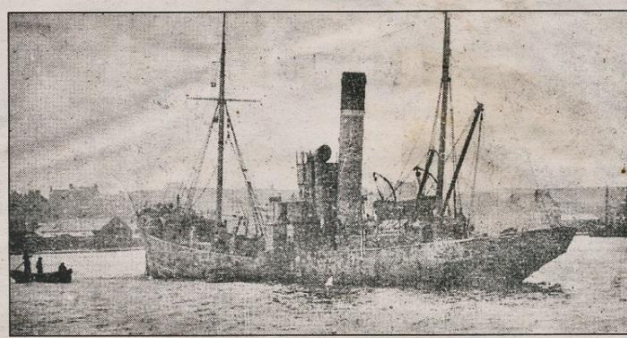
I can't be certain, but this looks as though it may be Kicia and two of her kittens

▣ HM Trawler *Caesar*

A trawler converted to a makeshift minesweeper during WW1, *Caesar* had a very unusual mascot – a Scottish wildcat. How that came to be is unknown, although he must have been taken on board as a young kitten; and he was called **Rehoboam**, after the biblical son of Solomon. One of the crew, William 'Laddie' Page, was tasked with looking after him, and when the crew went on leave Page took the cat home to Much Wenlock, in Shropshire, England with a set of instructions from the ship's captain as to how he was to be looked after. No photo of Rehoboam exists, but Page's daughter still has the set of instructions, complete with the cat's paw-print. The instructions state, for example, that 'For breakfast a little lightly cooked fish, preferably plaice or sole, meets with his approval'; and his milk was not to be watered down, but it should be made up of equal amounts of fresh milk and cream. Clearly Rehoboam was highly thought of! Unfortunately it isn't known what became of him when Page left the navy; maybe the cat still lived with him.



Rehoboam's pawprint



The trawler Caesar

▣ HMS *Centaur*

A light cruiser launched in 1916, she took part in WW1 and in the Russian civil war. I have only this image (*below*) and know nothing about the cat.



▣ HMS Chester

The ship took part in the Battle of Jutland in May 1916. On board were the ship's cat **Hoskyn** and the captain's sheepdog, the latter being wounded during the action. After the battle Surgeon-Lieutenant Brownfield of the ship's medical staff was presented with this cushion cover picturing Hoskyn, embroidered by one of the crew.

Image © and reproduced by kind permission of the National Maritime Museum, London



Cushion cover depicting ship's cat Hoskyn of HMS Chester, embroidered by a member of the crew after the Battle of Jutland in 1916



▣ HMAV Daffodil ('His Majesty's Armoured Vehicle')

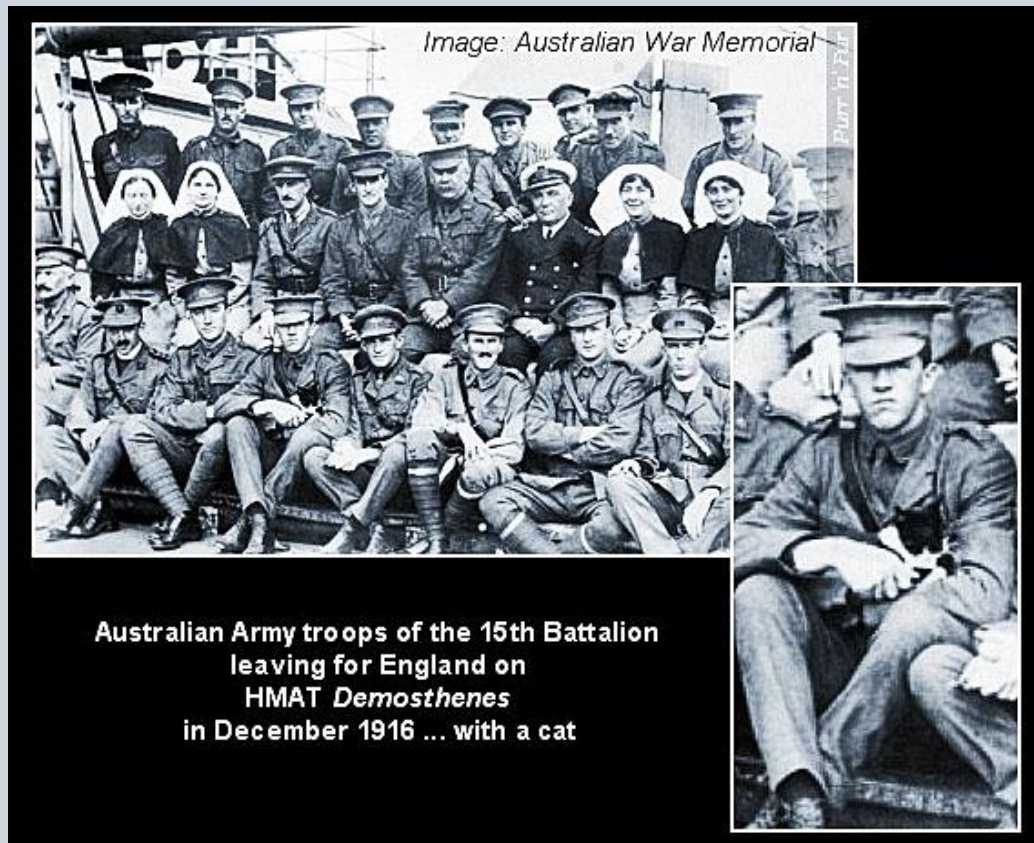
Several ships have borne the name, but this *Daffodil* was probably a converted train ferry, built in 1917 and commissioned in 1941 for the transport of railway material between England and France. She hit a mine off Dieppe and sank early in 1945. I have no information about the ship's cat.

▣ HMAV Demosthenes

This was a WW1 troopship, perhaps formerly the White Star liner of that name. The

photograph shows members of the Australian Army 15th Battalion leaving Australia for England on the ship on 20 December 1916. A soldier, third from left in the front row, is holding a cat.

Image: [Australian War Memorial](#)



Australian Army troops of the 15th Battalion
leaving for England on
HMAT *Demosthenes*
in December 1916 ... with a cat

▣ **HMS Despatch**

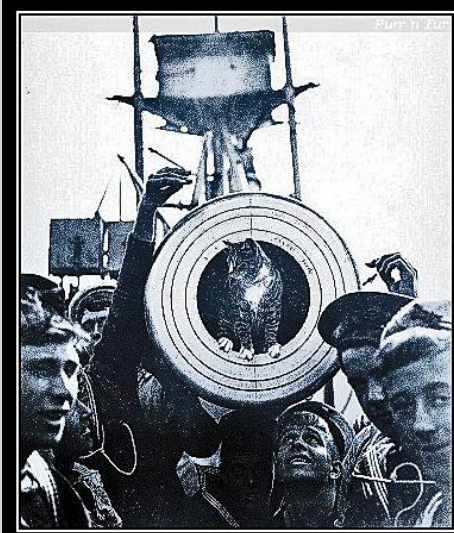
Launched in 1919 just after the end of WW1, *Despatch* was a light cruiser. She served in WW2 and was scrapped in 1948. This is her mascot **Ginger**; no other information.



▣ **HMS Dreadnought**

Entering service in 1906, *Dreadnought* was the first of a new and revolutionary class of battleship in terms of speed and armament. In common with many naval ships of the time she had a ship's cat, called **Scatters**, seen (*below left*) posing in one of the 12-inch guns. Scatters had kittens, one of which remained aboard as **Scatters II** (*below right*)

Left image: National Maritime Museum at Facebook

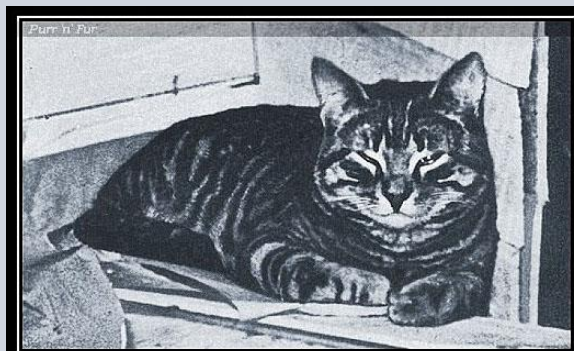


Scatters
of the
battleship
HMS
Dreadnought



▣ HMS Duke of York

The German battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* was sunk on Boxing Day 1943 by HMS *Duke of York* and other Royal Navy ships; out of the German crew of almost 2000 there were but 36 survivors. **Whisky**, the tabby mascot of *Duke of York*, slept through the whole of the action; after all, it was time for her afternoon nap, so that's what she did! She had a reputation as a formidable rat-catcher when she was awake.



Whisky
HMS Duke of York
She's reputed to have slept through the action
against the battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* in late 1943

▣ HMS Eagle

Eagle had this kitten who, like a number of ship's cats, relaxed in his own hammock made by the vessel's sail-maker. The photos (below) date from about 1945.
Image © Imperial War Museum, London



Kitten in hammock
HMS Eagle



▣ *Empire Winnie*

This was a steam rescue tug with two mascots: tomcat **Tommy** and black female **Lucky**. They had no problems with being at sea, and made numerous trips between Normandy and the Channel ports on D-Day and afterwards. By Christmas of 1944, though, the ship was due for a refit and the crew for some shore leave; she returned to her base on Tyneside, north-east England, and a watchman from ashore was engaged to 'keep an eye' and look after the cats. But Lucky seemed to miss her crewmates and, not long before they were due to return, she abandoned ship and disappeared; extensive searches of the dockyard area failed to find her. The men were very upset, as she had been very popular as well as being an excellent rat-catcher. Tom was also highly thought of, but unfortunately they lost him too, as he was not aboard when the tug was called out suddenly on an urgent mission. Later it was discovered that he had joined another tug — or possibly had been 'coaxed' aboard — and he was thought to have continued going to sea.

▣ *HMAS Encounter*

A cruiser built in Britain early in the 20th century and transferred into the Australian Navy in 1912. She took part in WW1, which she survived. Her ship's cat, name unknown, is seen here sitting in the muzzle of one of the ship's 6-inch guns. Image: [Australian War Memorial](#)



▣ *HMS Exeter*

The ship's cat of this heavy cruiser was **Scouse** (see below), a handsome white fellow with ginger and tabby blotches, reported later to have joined the ship in 1939 as a stowaway in Bermuda. There's a fine painting of Scouse in the National Maritime Museum, but it can't be reproduced here owing to copyright difficulties.

Exeter took part in the action that resulted in the scuttling of the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* off South America, in December 1939. Suffering extensive damage and heavy casualties, *Exeter* was nevertheless able to make her return to Plymouth for a refit by February 1940, to a rousing welcome led by Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty. Scouse (one or two references quote his name as 'Pincher') is seen here disembarking on that occasion with Herbert Chalkley, who was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal following the action, for his efforts in saving human lives — and it was he who had rescued the cat too.

Sadly, Scouse's arrival in Britain did not herald a happy new life. He was stolen at Plymouth shortly after *Exeter's* homecoming, but was recovered later from a cellar by a crew member searching for him. Then, in company with the ship's canary, he was taken to stay at the London home of artist Mrs G Shaw Baker, who painted the portrait noted previously. The plan was to produce two paintings of the mascots, one for presentation to *Exeter* and the other to be sold in aid of the fund for dependants of crewmen who had died in the River Plate action.



According to one interview with Mrs Shaw Baker, on arrival at her home Scouse was already showing signs of being unwell, and he continued to deteriorate despite efforts to make him comfortable. A vet was called and treatment given, but he died soon afterwards, in mid-March 1940. A theory put forward was that having come from much warmer climes, he had succumbed to the colder climate of a British winter, having already possibly been weakened by his ordeal when stolen. The painting was nevertheless able to be completed, the artist having done some preliminary work. Press reports seen spelled Scouse's name as 'Skeuse'.

▣ **HMS Gention**

In 1940 this corvette was on duty in the north Atlantic, with the crew on constant alert for submarines. One calm day when no shipping was apparent, a disturbance was seen in the water — and it turned out to be a kitten, swimming for its life. It was scooped out of the water in a net and became the ship's cat. No one knew how a kitten came to be swimming alone in the ocean, but presumably it must have fallen from a ship, or perhaps was a survivor from one that had been sunk. Whatever the case, it certainly used up some of its lives that day!

(Thanks to Amanda Woolley for the story: her father was on board Gention at the time.)

▣ **HMS Hawkins**

We'll squeeze in this delightful pair (*below left, next page*), possibly siblings, who were ship's cats on board the light cruiser, although actually the ship was built in 1917 and didn't see service in WW1. She served on the China Station in 1919–20 as the flagship of the Commander-in-Chief. From a verse in the ship's magazine of the time, one of the cats was called **Tibby**, but I don't know which one or the name of the other.

Image © and reproduced by kind permission of the National Maritime Museum, London

A later ship's cat on *Hawkins* was **Minnie**, pictured here in China in 1930.





Kittens aboard HMS Hawkins, ca 1920



Torps
HMS Haydon
Taranto, Italy
1943

▣ HMS Haydon

This was a Hunt-class escort destroyer of the Royal Navy, launched in 1943 and named after a foxhunt in the northern English county of Northumberland (now Northumbria). That would explain the fox's head trophy, which was presented to the ship by the hunt and was hung in the wardroom. The scene on the image (*above right*) shows Able Seaman Rogers giving the fox its weekly grooming, supervised with great interest by ship's cat **Torps** (short for 'Torpedo') and it was taken in Taranto, Italy while *Haydon* was on duties in the eastern Mediterranean following the surrender of Italy. She survived the war and was scrapped in 1958.

▣ HMS Hermione

This anti-aircraft cruiser was launched in 1939, and went into service a few months later with ship's cat **Convoy**, seen here in his hammock during November 1941 while the ship was docked in Gibraltar. Convoy had full kit and was listed in the ship's logbook. He was so called because of the number of times he had accompanied the ship on convoy patrol. Unfortunately *Hermione* was sunk by U-205 in the eastern Mediterranean in June 1944 and presumably the cat perished.

Images © Imperial War Museum [\(1\)](#) [\(2\)](#), London



Convoy
with crew of HMS Hermione
Gibraltar, November 1941



Hermione was sunk in mid-1944

▣ SS Hjalmar Wessel

This was a Norwegian cargo ship during WW2 and had a ship's cat known simply as **Puss**. She was determined to go ashore at every port where the ship docked but, as with some

other ship's cats, she had an amazing homing instinct and the uncanny ability to arrive back on board shortly before sailing time. In the latter part of 1943 the ship was on convoy duties ferrying war goods between Italy and North Africa; to her disgust Puss was often shut up in a cabin when docked in Italy, because the local population was starving and it was feared she would be abducted and made into a tasty meal for someone.

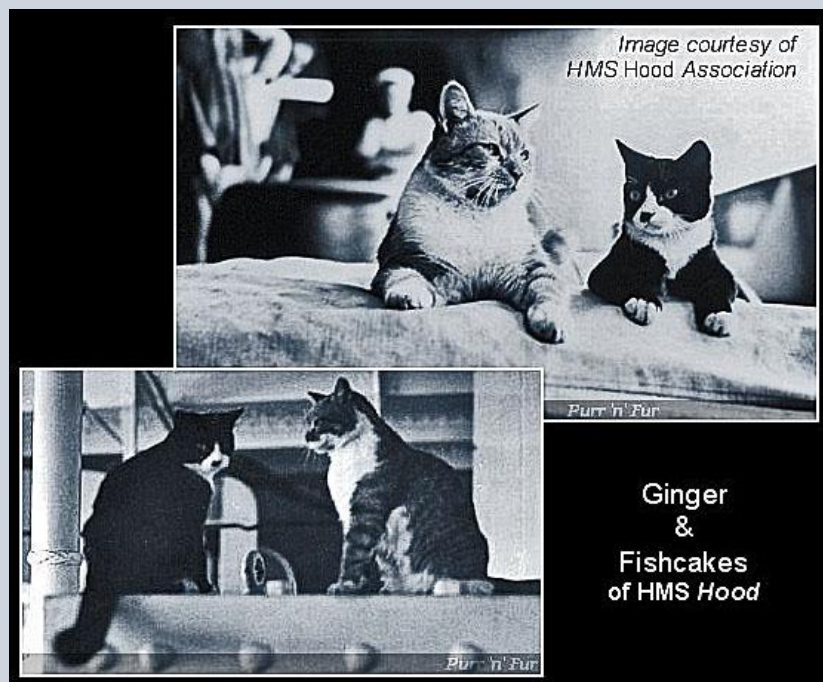
One day when about to leave the port of Algiers the unthinkable happened and Puss had not returned to her ship. They delayed as long as possible, but eventually had to leave without her. Several round trips were made between Algiers and various Italian ports, until one day they were due to dock at Bari — but Bari had been bombed the previous day, many ships sunk and crew and civilians killed. The *Hjalmar Wessel* was diverted instead to Barletta. While it was docked there, sailor George Barrat was leaning over the ship's rail when he was astonished to see the lost cat Puss crawling weakly up the gangway, exhausted and much the worse for wear. She made it up to the deck, and was found to have a nasty wound on her back. They were unable to do much for her; her special friend the chief engineer, whom she used to follow around the ship, took her to his cabin, where she died next day. She was treated as any dead shipmate would have been, and consigned to the sea with a prayer.

How did she get to Barletta from Algiers? — presumably she had hitched a ride on another ship. How did she find the *Hjalmar Wessel*? It was uncanny. And had the ship arrived at Bari a day earlier, it would have been blown to smithereens.

Information about the *Hjalmar Wessel*'s war service can be seen at WarSailors.com.

HMS Hood

When commissioned in 1920 the battleship *Hood* was the largest warship afloat. Over the years she had a number of mascots of varying species, including a wallaby, a macaw — and these two fine felines, known as **Ginger** and **Fishcakes**. Ginger was a large, ginger-and-white male and Fishcakes a smaller 'tuxedo' cat. Although Ginger, at least, is known to have been aboard throughout the 1930s, not much else is known about them, they seem to have left the ship early on in the war, but no one knows where they went or what became of them. Ginger would have been relatively old by then, so might have died beforehand. The latest-known photo of Fishcakes was taken aboard the ship in late 1940, but no one recalls either of the cats being aboard later than that, so it seems they weren't there when the ship was sunk in May 1941, with huge loss of human life. The larger image of Ginger alone (*below left*) was taken on board while *Hood* was in the Mediterranean Fleet, probably during the late 1930s.



Right and below
courtesy of HMS
Hood Association
(below © Willis
family)



Ginger
HMS Hood

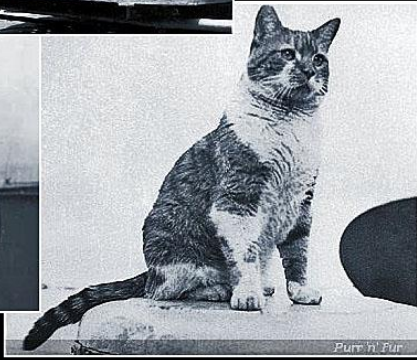


Image courtesy of
HMS Hood Association
© Willis family



Fishcakes of HMS Hood

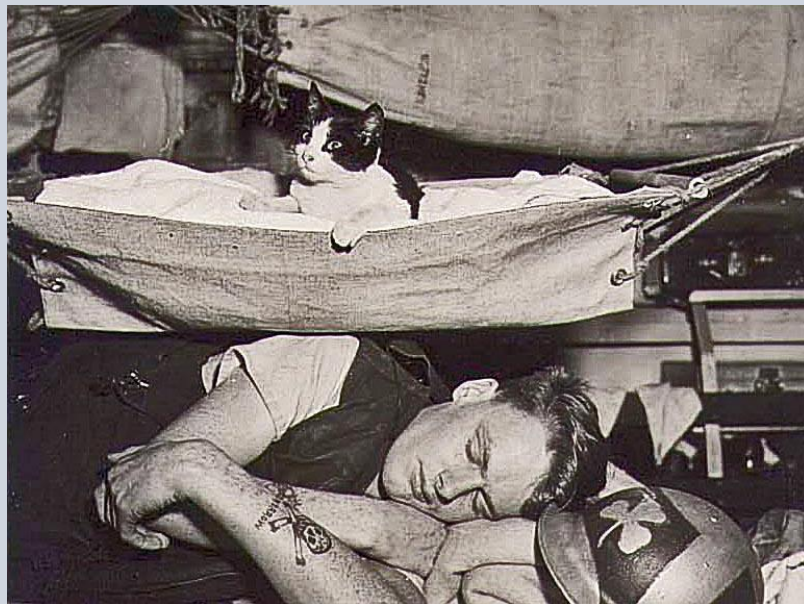
The battlecruiser sank
in only three minutes
with enormous loss of
life: from a complement
of over 1400 men there
were just three
survivors.

There are reports
(unconfirmed) that
Fishcakes, who had
never been known
to miss his ship's
departures previously,
did not return as usual
from 'shore leave', despite
crew members calling and
whistling for him as *Hood*
made ready to leave port
for what was to be her
final action.

Photos of the cats seated on the guns are © and the property of the Willis family, and all photos reproduced with the kind permission of the [HMS Hood Association](#) are as marked.

HMCS *Iroquois*

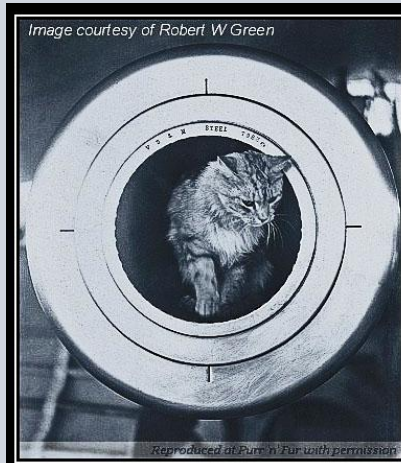
A tribal class destroyer, launched in 1942, that served in WW2 and the Korean war. The ship's mascot, name unknown, looks ready to report for duty! Photo from 1944.



HMS *Irresistible*

This is **Togo** of the battleship *Irresistible*, posing in the muzzle of a 12-inch gun in 1905 (*below left*). The photo and accompanying details were kindly sent in by Robert Green. Mr Green's grandfather, William Thomas Clegg, AB, served on the *Irresistible* from July 1905 to the end of 1906, and apart from his assigned duties as a gun-layer it was his responsibility to look after the ship's mascot, 'Ordinary Sea Cat Togo' (a title written by AB Clegg on the back of the photo). Togo certainly qualifies as a wartime cat, as he stayed with the ship until she was sunk by a mine off the Turkish coast during the 1915 Dardanelles engagement. Leading Stoker William Burrows made a heroic attempt to save the cat, but sadly both he and Togo drowned. The second photo (*below right*), also from Mr Green, shows Togo to better effect, and he was clearly a very handsome cat.

Note: The book *Able Seacats* by Heinrich Kaufhold-Roll has Togo, along with another cat called **Toby**, as belonging to the battleship HMS *Dreadnought*, I'll stick with him belonging to *Irresistible*, as that information came from a first-hand account. See this interesting [Maritime Quest](#) link.



Togo

HMS
Irresistible
1905



Togo
HMS *Irresistible*

▣ SS *Julia*

The *Julia* was one of only two Belgian merchant ships to take part in the 1944 D-Day landings of WW2, when she carried munitions, explosives and a New York infantry division for Omaha beach. Ship's cat **Peggy** was black and white, and had a canine pal in the captain's dog, Mireau. Very shy at first, Peggy felt at home with the crew before long, but her best friend was Mireau. (The dog later went missing when the *Julia* berthed in England, but was found again in Portsmouth.) Both animals were terrified by all the noise and hid during the invasion. The photo (*below left*) shows Peggy in the arms of Robert van Damme, *Julia*'s first officer, before D-Day; we are indebted to his daughter Jeanine Hardcastle, of Brussels, for passing it on together with information about the ship.



Peggy
of the Belgian merchantman SS *Julia*
prior to D-Day, with first officer Robert van Damme



Mouse and Snow
with J. E. Hall aboard the American SS *Jupiter*, WW1

▣ SS *Jupiter*

Later renamed *Democracy*, the SS *Jupiter* was an American cargo ship built in 1917. Later that year she transported World War 1 cargo, and while doing so she carried a Naval Armed Guard unit. The photo (*above right*) shows a J.E. Hall with the ship's cats, **Snow** and **Mouse**.

Source: [US Navy's Naval History and Heritage Command](https://www.history.navy.mil/our-navy/ww1/ww1-naval-armed-guard.html)

▣ HMAS *Kanimbla*

A WW2 Australian landing craft. The cat's name is not recorded, but as with many naval felines a dedicated hammock went with the job (*below*), and the occupant certainly looks relaxed!

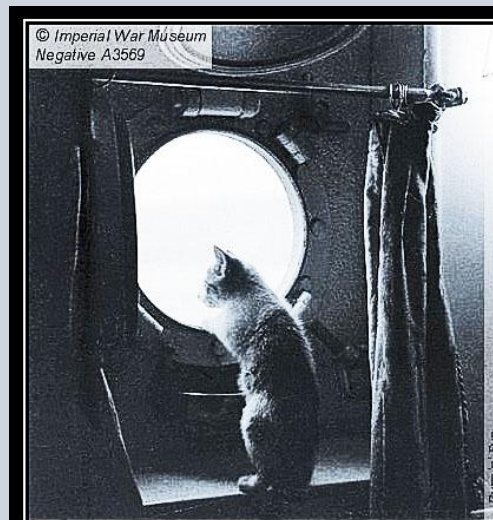
Image: [Australian War Memorial](https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/special/ww2/ww2navy/ww2navy.html)



▣ HMS Kelvin

The kitten, born in the wardrobe of an officer's cabin and pictured in 1941 (*below right*), was the ship's cat of this K-class destroyer launched in January 1939. The left-hand image is captioned as being **Sprinkles**, the mascot of HMS Kelvin, in September 1940, but whether or not it's the same cat I don't know. One short but quite important role the ship fulfilled later on in the war was to carry Winston Churchill and various dignitaries across the Channel to Normandy shortly after Operation Overlord, the 1944 D-Day landings. She was scrapped in 1949.

Right-hand image © [Imperial War Museum](https://www.imperialwarmuseum.org/), London.



HMS Kelvin's
kitten, born
in an
officer's cabin
wardrobe,
looks out
on the world

March 1941

▣ HMS King George V

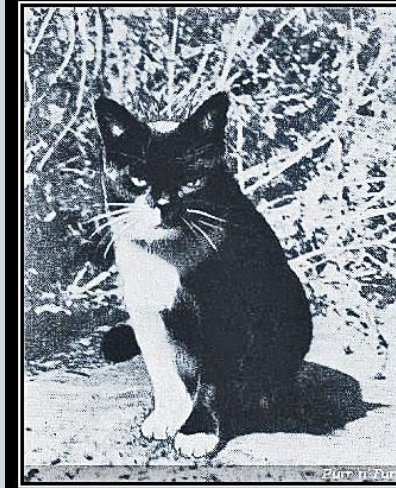
This is the battleship that sailed at the head of Britain's Grand Fleet to the Battle of Jutland in May 1916. On board was ship's cat **Jimmy**, a large, long-haired, tortoiseshell type who had been adopted by one of the ship's cooks when his former owner, an Australian soldier, had been wounded and was no longer able to look after him. Jimmy suffered severe damage to his left ear when a shell exploded near him on deck and he was hit by a piece of shrapnel. Later he was transferred to HMS Renown (*see entry with photo below*).

▣ HMS Ladybird

Ladybird was a river gunboat launched in 1916, but was pressed into service in WW2 in the Mediterranean. Her ship's cat was **Cinders**, who most likely perished when the ship was sunk off Libya in May 1941.

▣ **HM Landing Craft T166**

The unlikely mascot of this vessel was **Susan**, a black-and-white cat; in fact, there were two mascots, as there was also Bosun, a boisterous mongrel dog. Susan was given to a lieutenant on the craft shortly before sailing one day and, being a former street cat, was found to have fleas. Not wishing to transfer these unwelcome guests to the wardroom, and having no flea powder, the officer bathed Susan in warm disinfectant. She appeared to be none the worse and soon became a favourite of the crew along with Bosun, with whom she became friends. The animals saw several engagements in the English Channel and were in on the action on D-Day.



Susan
saw action on
D-Day with
HM Landing Craft T166

Susan (*above*) became such a dyed-in-the-wool sea cat that when the war ended and she was taken ashore, she didn't like dry land at all; grass, in particular, terrified her! Eventually, though, she did settle down to being a 'landlubber' at her home in Ireland, where she loved playing in the garden with her companions of a Yorkshire terrier, two Siamese cats and her own son — named Bosun, after her friend who had died just before the war ended.

▣ **HMS London**

The ship had two cats, both pictured here. The spotted tabby with the 'prize' of a fish was **Minnie the Marines' Cat**, while the handsome tabby-and-white was the **Chief Baker's Cat** (*below*). HMS London was involved in the 1949 Yangtze Incident, along with *Amethyst*, *Consort* and *Black Swan*. All images courtesy of Mike Overton, HMS London 1947–49 Association:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20150629015314/http://www.hmslondon.org.uk/>



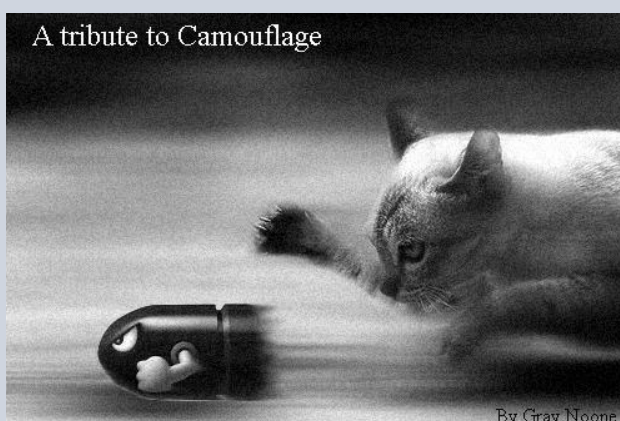
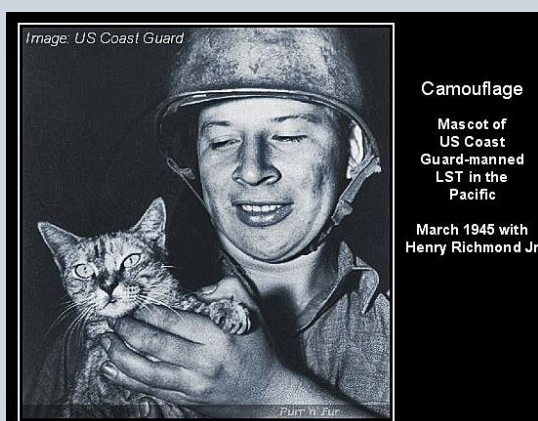


HMS Lord Nelson

A crew member recalled that this 'pre-Dreadnought' battleship — launched in 1906 and flagship of the Channel Fleet when war broke out in 1914 — had two cats on board, a black one and a tabby (names unknown). The strange thing about the black cat was that gunfire never seemed to worry him at all. He'd walk about on the top of a 12-inch turret when that gun was firing; his fur would stand right up on end, but he'd just look around to see what was happening, and never move. The tabby cat, on the other hand, was terror-stricken by gunfire, and it was a long time before the crew found where he used to hide.

LSTs (Landing Ships, Tank)

Camouflage, pictured on 30 March 1945 (*below left*), was the mascot of a US Coast Guard-manned LST operating in the Pacific. His shipmates swore that when the craft was being strafed by Japanese planes with tracer bullets, Camouflage's idea of fun was to chase the bullets from one ship's rail to the other as they pinged across the deck. He never caught one, which is probably just as well as it sounds a highly risky occupation; but his antics kept the crew amused and helped to relieve their tension in difficult times. He is pictured with Coast Guardsman Henry Richmond Jr (*below left*).



On another LST, **Tarawa** (*below*) was named after the atoll in the central Pacific Ocean, previously part of the former British colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, where she was rescued as a frightened and half-starved kitten from a smashed pillbox during the WW2 battle there. She was taken aboard and installed in the officers' quarters, where she looks fairly relaxed about the whole thing. Kodiak, the ship's canine mascot, however, didn't think much of this intruder in his domain, and the two didn't get along, so he stuck with the enlisted men and Tarawa decided she preferred her privileges with the officers. When the vessel returned home for a spell she jumped ship, so Kodiak had his 'empire' to himself again.

Camouflage and Tarawa images: [United States Coast Guard](#). (*archived copy*)



▣ **HMS Manxman**

This was a WW2 minelaying light cruiser commissioned in 1941, reported once to be the Royal Navy's fastest vessel. Naturally the ship had a Manx cat as mascot, but the holders of the post don't seem to have been very lucky. The first, taken on when the ship was commissioned, was lost at sea during the war. A replacement was taken on when the ship visited the Isle of Man on an official visit, but it too was lost at sea. Further peacetime mascots seem to have fared little better, and the next two did not live out their natural lifespan either.

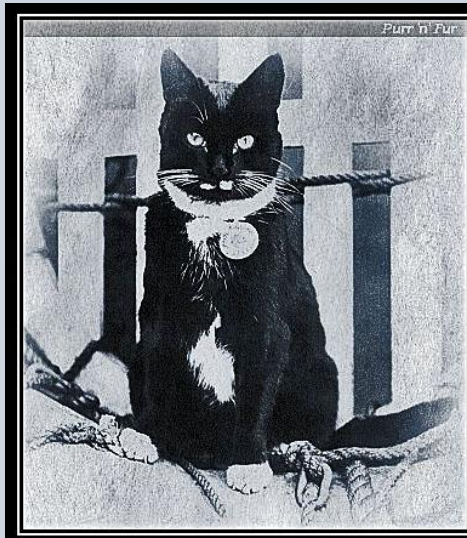
▣ **USS Merrimack**

The third ship to bear the name, the *Merrimack* was a fleet oiler acquired by the United States Navy at the end of 1941. Commissioned in 1942, she served in both the Atlantic and Pacific during World War II and gained [eight battle stars](#) for war service. She had two ship's cats, appropriately named **Mary** and **Mack** (below). Images: [NavSource Naval History](#). (archived)

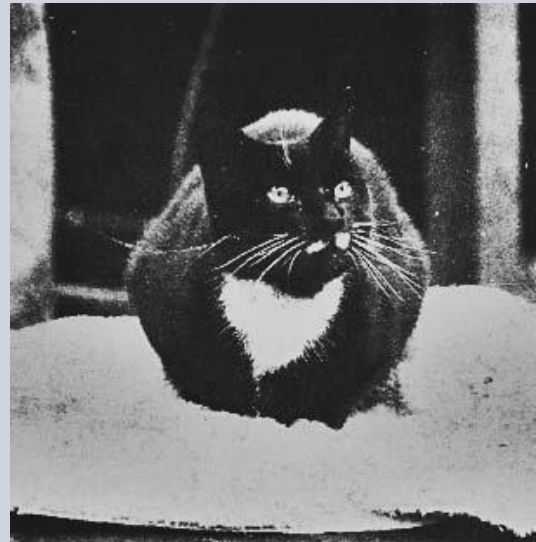


▣ HMS Neptune

A World War 1 battleship of 20,000 tons, *Neptune* had a handsome black mascot called **Side Boy**. He featured on one of the 'lucky black cat' postcards (*below left*), popular at the time, which crew members could send home to their loved ones. Maybe he did bring luck: the ship survived the war.



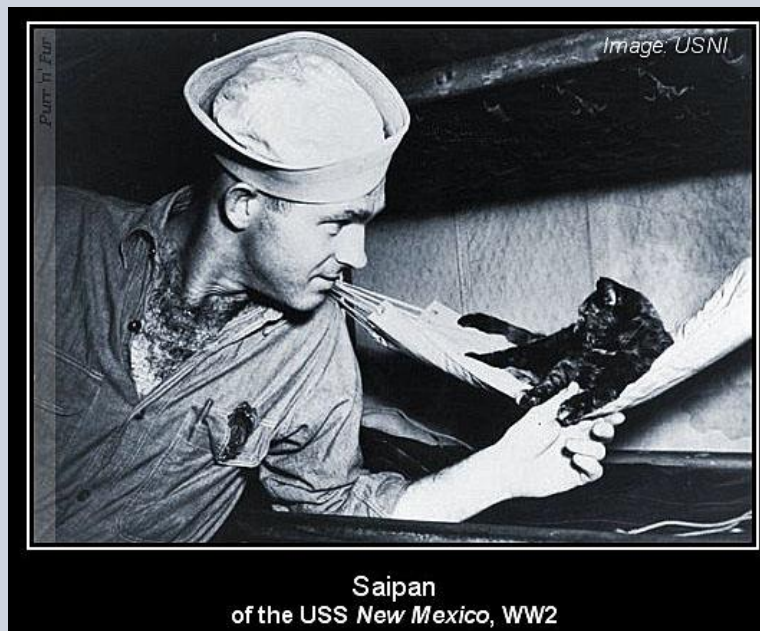
Side-Boy
of the
British battleship
HMS *Neptune*
during
World War One
The ship survived
the war
and went on to
serve in
World War Two,
but was
sunk in 1941



▣ USS New Mexico

The ship was one of three similar battleships and was launched in May 1918. Extensively modernised in the early 1930s, she served in WW2 in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. Although I don't know its story, **Saipan** the cat (*below*) was no doubt named after the Pacific island, one of the places where *New Mexico* saw action in 1944.

Image: [USNI: Cats in the Sea Services](#). (*archived copy*)



▣ HMAS Nizam

Launched in 1940, the destroyer *Nizam* had two cats (*below*), names unknown, in June 1941 when the photo was taken. Named after the Nizam of Hyderabad, who helped to pay for her, the ship was owned by Britain's Royal Navy but sailed under the Australian flag during WW2. After hostilities ceased she was returned to Britain but didn't see active service again, and was broken up in 1956.

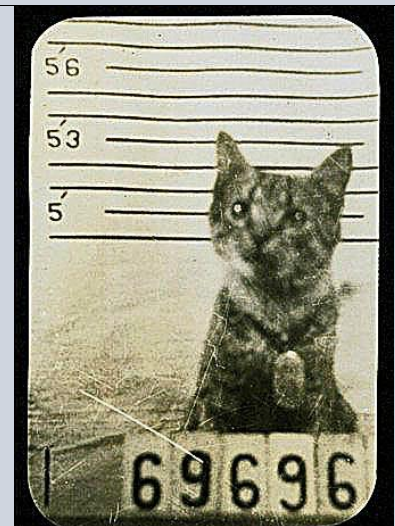
Image: [Australian War Memorial](#)



▣ **USS North Carolina**

This was an American fast battleship launched in 1940 and entering service not long before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the US into WW2. She saw varied service during the war, was mothballed in 1947 until 1960; not long afterwards she was towed to Wilmington in Delaware to become a permanent memorial, a National Historical Landmark, where she remains.

The ship's feline mascot was tabby **George**, pictured here in 1944 after he'd been rescued from the water off New Caledonia by a crew member. His full service number was 696969; he was a full member of the ship's complement with his own health record and so on and proved to be a great morale booster. See [this link](#) and also [Instagram](#).



▣ **HMS Orion**

On board here was intrepid ship's cat **Nigger**, who insisted on staying on the bridge to keep an eye on things while the ship was involved in the shelling of Salerno, in Italy, in September 1943. But the following month, a letter written by *Orion*'s commander said, 'Unfortunately Nigger is not with us at present. He wished to remain on active service in the Mediterranean, so he was temporarily allowed to transfer to one of His Majesty's battleships in the sphere of operations. We hope, however, to have him back before long.' But the cat did not return, or appear on any other of HM's ships, so maybe he just preferred a Mediterranean lifestyle on land.

▣ **HMAS Perth**

The light cruiser *Perth* served in the Mediterranean during the early years of WW2 and then returned to Australia. Before long she was needed in the Pacific to help combat the Japanese advance across south-east Asia. She left Sydney in January 1942, stopping en route at Fremantle in Western Australia. It seems likely that's where a small kitten joined the crew as mascot, and she may have been given to one of the crew, AB Bob Collins, by the daughter of a shipmate. She was named **Red Lead** (some accounts give that as one word: Redlead), because soon after arriving on board she knocked over a tin of red-lead paint and needed a serious clean-up afterwards – but not before she'd left some pawprints on the deck! There aren't any existing photos of Red Lead, so her colour is uncertain; some reports have her as tabby and white, others as black.

She quickly became a favourite and, as cats do, found the most comfortable spot to sleep, in Captain Waller's cabin. At the end of February battle was joined with a Japanese convoy

attempting to make a landing on the island of Java; Allied ships were seriously outnumbered and in the fierce fighting that followed many were badly damaged, and some were sunk. The noise and chaos of battle, which included aircraft flying close overhead, frightened Red Lead and she spent the entire time in 'her' cabin, until *Perth* finally withdrew and returned to harbour. At that point the kitten seems to have decided she'd had enough of battle and that it would be prudent to seek a quieter and safer home. She crept quietly down the gangplank, but unfortunately for her a sailor saw her and brought her back on deck, ignoring her loud protests. She tried again, and again — three times she tried unsuccessfully to leave. It was a bad omen, and the sailors knew it.

Perth sailed into battle again the following day, 1st March 1942, and met a large fleet of Japanese warships. This time she was not so lucky; she was sunk, with the loss of Captain Waller and 352 other crewmen — and the little kitten called Red Lead.

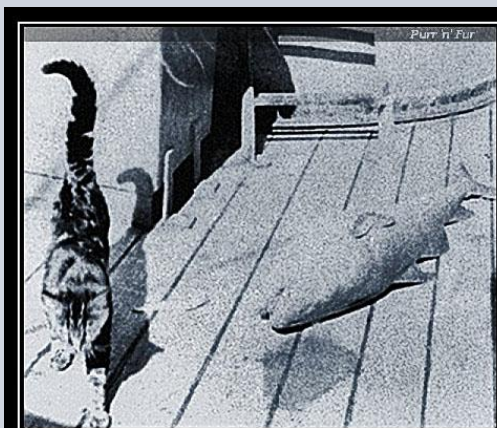
Note: In 2021, almost 80 years after the above events, a book was published purporting to tell the story — as a 'dramatic narrative' — of the cat's survival of the sinking, her adventures with Australian PoW survivors of the sinking in various prison camps and on the notorious Thai–Burma railway. and her final years at home in Thailand after the war. It may make a good story, but it's very hard to believe and reliable sources suggest that, as related above, Red Lead did not survive *Perth's* sinking. There's a scathing review of the book [here](#), which relates that AB Collins — who himself survived the sinking — did see the kitten in the water after he had abandoned ship, but she was swept away by the fast-flowing currents.

There's a postscript to Red Lead's story; the third ship to bear the name *Perth* carries on its bridge a silhouette of a cat — with red paws! — as a tribute to the little wartime kitten; and there are paw-prints painted on the companionway leading to the bridge and outside the wardroom. As mentioned above the cat was quite possibly not black, but a black silhouette would be easier to paint and would stand out better)

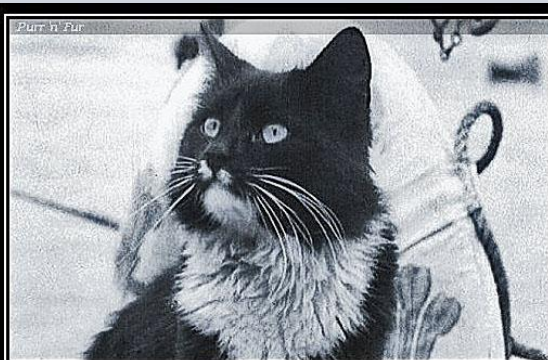


HMS Poppy

A Flower-class corvette on Atlantic, Mediterranean and Arctic-convoy duties — her ship's cat was **Monty**. He's shown here in 1944 (*below left*) when the ship was in the Hebrides, in Scotland, with a large fish that had been killed by a depth charge.



Monty - HMS Poppy, 1944



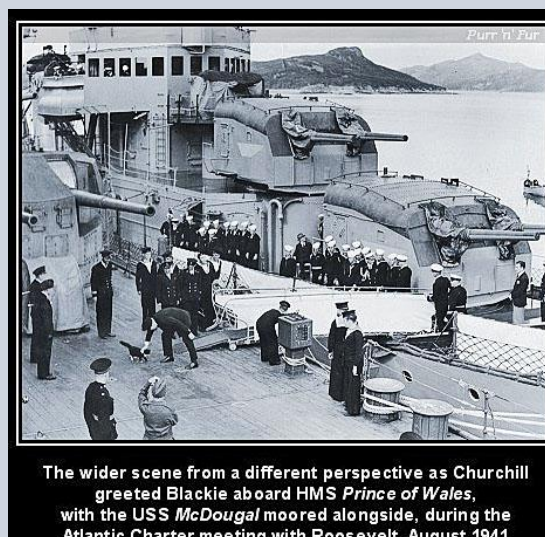
Blackie, later renamed Churchill, mascot of HMS *Prince of Wales*. He was rescued when the ship was sunk later in 1941, and remained ashore with shipmates until the urgent evacuation of Singapore, when he could not be found in time to be taken with them.

■ HMS *Prince of Wales*

In August of 1941 Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister, was meeting President Roosevelt of the USA on board this battleship off the coast of Newfoundland in Placentia Bay; they were discussing the Atlantic Charter. The story goes that Churchill noticed the ship's large, black cat **Blackie** (above right) apparently about to cross the gangway to the American destroyer USS *McDougal*, moored alongside, whereupon he bent down to stroke the cat, the distraction successfully averting a possible desertion! The wider scene can be seen in the right-hand image below — the *McDougal* ferried the president from his flagship, the USS *Augusta*.

Churchill was very fond of cats and at the time had his own 'Nelson' at home. Blackie was, of course, renamed **Churchill** and was a much loved mascot. When *Prince of Wales* was sunk later that year off Malaya by the Japanese, with great loss of life, Churchill the cat managed to make it ashore with some of the crew to Sime Road Royal Air Force Station in Singapore. He settled in with them, shared their rations and moved camp with them, but in February 1942 orders came to evacuate Singapore within hours in view of the Japanese advance, and Blackie/Churchill, off on one of his hunting trips, could not be found in time. Despite extensive searches, he finally had to be left to his fate.

Blackie image © Imperial War Museum, London.



The wider scene from a different perspective as Churchill greeted Blackie aboard HMS *Prince of Wales*, with the USS *McDougal* moored alongside, during the Atlantic Charter meeting with Roosevelt, August 1941

■ ORP *Piorun*

A Polish WW2 destroyer based in Great Britain, *Piorun* ('Thunderbolt' in English) was involved in the action against the *Bismarck* in 1941. Here in this earlier photo, probably from 1940, ship's cats **Zaba** ('Frog') and **Tygrys** ('Tiger') are being encouraged to make friends with a stowaway thought to have escaped from an oiler. The name of the third cat is not recorded. Polish sailors make a big fuss of their pets, as it's considered an ill omen if cats voluntarily leave a ship before it sails.

Image © Imperial War Museum, London



▣ HMS *Queen Elizabeth*

A 'dreadnought' battleship launched in 1913 and named after Elizabeth I of England, she saw service in both world wars, but was scrapped in 1948. Here she is off the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915 during the Dardanelles campaign, and the ship's cat, name unknown, is seen 'exercising' on one of the 15-inch guns that formed the ship's main armament.



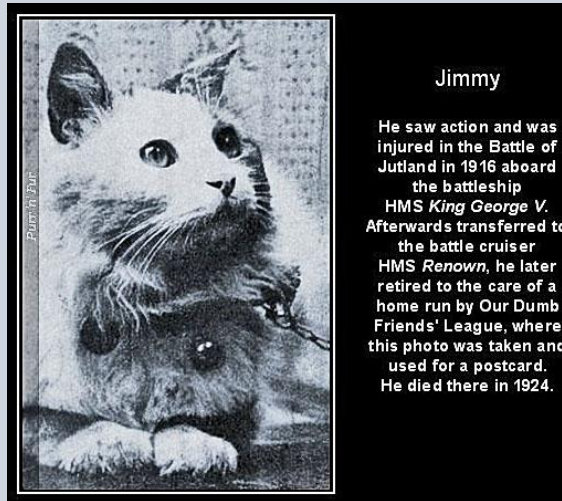
▣ USS *Ranger*

Launched in 1933 and commissioned the following year, *Ranger* was the first American ship to be purpose-built as an aircraft carrier, and she survived WW2. The photo (left) from July 1944 shows two pilots awaiting instructions in the briefing room while playing with the ship's mascot (name unknown). At the time the *Ranger* was on training duties in the United States, including Hawaii.

Image: [USNI: Cats in the Sea Services](#). (archived copy)

▣ HMS *Renown*

Formerly ship's cat of HMS *King George V* (see entry above), **Jimmy** (below) was transferred in September 1916 to the newly commissioned battle cruiser *Renown*, where he became ship's mascot and was reportedly usually to be found in the galley (well, he had been a cook's cat!). He probably had a rather quieter time than with his previous ship, as *Renown* saw no combat action during the rest of WW1. Jimmy was later 'decommissioned', and he died in 1924 in a Chelsea cats' home in London.



▣ SS *Rinda*

This was a Norwegian cargo ship that was torpedoed and sunk during World War II off the coast of Sierra Leone. The ship's cat was rescued, along with the surviving crew, by the naval trawler HMT *Pict* and remained on board as its cat. He was given the name **Rinda**, after his previous ship.

A page on *Rinda* at the [WarSailors](#) site includes a description of the sinking and its aftermath, based on a Norwegian published account. The ship capsized very quickly, taking all but one lifeboat with it, and survivors who had managed to reach it were still looking for anyone left in the water: 'Suddenly, they realized everyone's beloved cat was not among them in the boat, so they proceeded to row around into the night until, to their great joy, they heard a pitiful "miauw" in the distance. "We rowed as hard as we could, and laughed and cried when we lifted the sopping wet furball aboard".'

▣ HMS *Scorpion*

The tomcat mascot of one of the messes on the destroyer *Scorpion* was called **Thomas Oscar** and was spoiled rotten. As with many ship's cats, he had his own hammock complete with mattress, blanket and pillow — but he also had a kitbag, an 'HMS' cap ribbon that he wore round his neck on Sundays, and a rabbit-tail toy that he loved to play with. In October 1944 the crew of No. 3 Mess applied for Thomas Oscar to be enrolled in the Allied Forces Mascot Club, with his own pawmark at the foot of the application. This Able-Bodied Cat participated in several Russian convoys, a raid in Norway, and he was at a beachhead offensive on D-Day. He was never seasick, always cheerful and a great companion and source of comfort to the men.

▣ HM *SGB-7*

This was a steam gunboat, launched on the river Clyde in Scotland in 1941. One winter's night, when it was snowing and bitterly cold, crew members were unloading boxes of ammunition from railway wagons and carrying them to the boat. Someone heard a strange noise, and called on his mates to stop cursing and grumbling for a moment; there was a faint mewling, and by using a torch the men located a small, cold and pathetic kitten hiding under one of the wagons. 'Poor little b----!' someone said, picking it up and putting it under his jersey. Back on board on the mess-deck, the freezing cat was gently warmed up by putting it in one of the galley's warm ovens with the door open, and then on top of a bulkhead heater. A bowl of evaporated milk with a dash of rum in it was quickly lapped up, and the little soul became a mess-deck resident and a crew member, although he never had a proper name other than **That Bloody Cat**, or **TBC**. In his own way he showed quite warlike behaviour: whenever the Action Stations alarm sounded, he would rush towards the bridge,

spitting and snarling all the way! And he would always be around when the time came for the rum ration to be issued!

TBC liked to be 'first ashore and last aboard' in port, and used the forward torpedo tubes as his launch pad for disembarking and returning; he would often come flying down the jetty at the last minute, to leap aboard as the vessel started to move off. Unfortunately, after some months on board, he misjudged his departure one day when coming into port, slipped on the rounded surface of the torpedo tube and fell into the sea. Despite prompt action by a sailor (who had been described as 'the worst, dyed-in-the-wool villain') who immediately jumped in after him, TBC could not be found and must have drowned. Unfortunately the ship herself was also lost during an attack on a German convoy in the English Channel in June 1942.

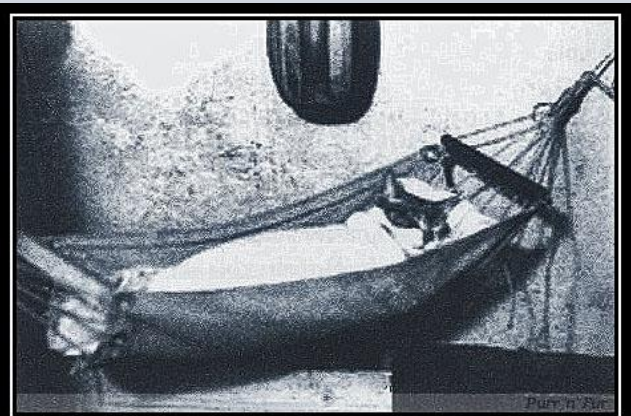
▣ **HMS Shark**

This undated picture (*below left*) shows **Lyddite**, the feline mascot of HMS *Shark*. Presumably it refers to the World War I destroyer of that name, which was torpedoed and lost at the battle of Jutland on 31 May 1916. If so, Lyddite surely perished along with most of the ship's crew.



Lyddite

Mascot of the
British destroyer
HMS *Shark*, which
was sunk at the
Battle of Jutland
in 1916



Sarah
of HMS *Shropshire*

▣ **HMS Shropshire**

A London-class cruiser launched in 1928, she gained a number of battle honours in WW2, later being involved in prisoner-of-war repatriation. Her cat **Sarah** was another feline with her own hammock (*above right*), including her own personal mattress, blanket and pillow. She is said to have been 'spoiled rotten' by the crew. {Note: One source gives the cat's name as **Thomas**.}

▣ **HMS Sleuth (formerly Vigilant)**

This was an Australian WW2 auxiliary patrol vessel; she had a ship's cat called **Minnie**, but I have no other details.

▣ **HMS Snowflake**

She was a Flower-class corvette on Atlantic convoy duties, and one of the crew later recalled some memories of ship's cat **U-Boat**. He didn't know how the cat came on board, but said he was an 'incredible little animal' who taught himself things. Like many other Royal Navy cats, U-Boat had his own little hammock and lifejacket, and he was listed on the ship's complement. When 'action stations' was called, the cat would make a beeline for the flour bin in the galley and would stay up on top of it until the action was over.

At the end of a voyage, U-Boat went ashore as soon as the ship had tied up in harbour, but somehow he knew when it was due to sail again and reappeared shortly beforehand. On one memorable occasion he hadn't returned by sailing time, and half the crew were talking of jumping ship, as it was considered extremely unlucky to sail without the mascot; but then, just as *Snowflake* was casting off, a little grey shape came hurtling down the jetty, made a flying leap across the widening gap of several feet between ship and shore, just made it onto the deck and then calmly sat down to wash himself.

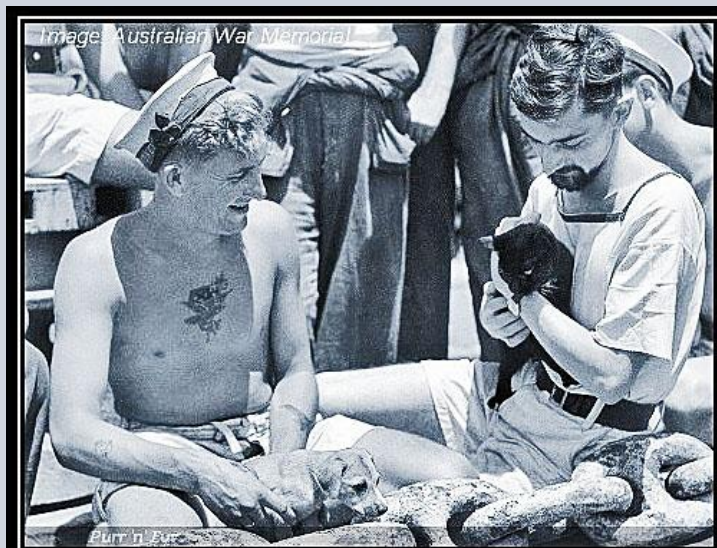
On another occasion, after U-Boat had been on board about a year, someone decided he should have a birthday, and on such an occasion it was customary to provide some rum. The cat was given some, mixed with evaporated milk, in a saucer and lapped it all up. It made him quite

drunk, and he ended up with a terrible hangover! He eventually slept it off, and would never touch rum again.

U-Boat left the ship in rather strange circumstances. Normally a very clean cat, he always 'did his business' on the upper deck, where it would be cleaned up by the crew, but one day, for some unknown reason, he made a mess on the captain's wardroom chair. The captain put him on report and, to cut the tale short, the upshot was that the captain decided U-Boat was to be put ashore when the ship reached Newfoundland and was not to be allowed back on board.

The crew felt this judgement was 'over the top' and were not at all happy about it. But the extraordinary thing was that the cat seemed to make his own decision. When *Snowflake* tied up at St John's he went ashore, as was his custom — and didn't return. The crew never saw him again.

HMAS Sydney



HMAS Sydney, July 1940
Able Seaman Gamble with Salvo the cat,
and Able Seaman J. T. Walker with puppy Shrapnel



HMAS Sydney was a light cruiser and at the time of this photo (*above left*) was serving in the Mediterranean, where she gained an impressive record. Here, AB J.T. Walker of the Royal Australian Navy is pictured with his puppy 'Shrapnel' in July 1940, while AB Gamble holds his kitten **Salvo**.

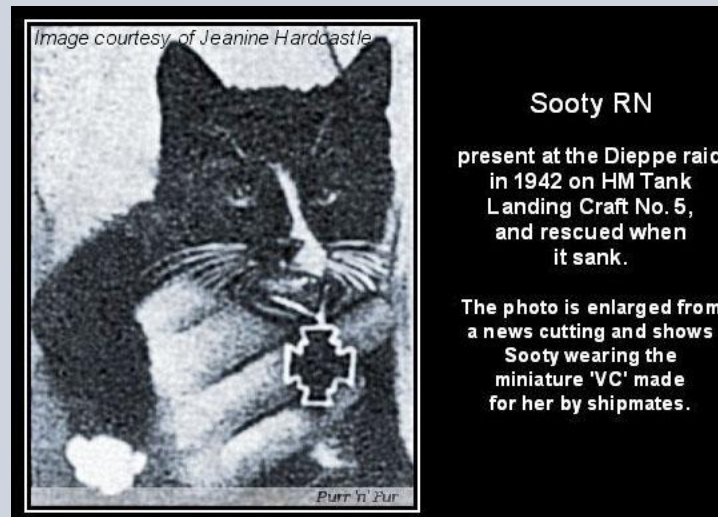
According to another source (*Able Seacats* book) the puppy is 'Whiskey' and the cat is **Cordite**, both joining the ship in 1940 – so I don't know which is correct. Cordite, jet-black with yellow eyes, is said to have strolled on board one day from another vessel and proceeded to make himself at home. Shy at first, he was welcomed by the crew and was soon relaxing in his favourite spots. After a couple of months aboard, during which there were a few raids on the ship, he developed an uncannily accurate ability to predict when the ship was about to be bombed. From where he was curled up asleep he would suddenly wake, walk around nervously for a few moments, and then dash off down the ladder to the half-deck below, where he'd take refuge under a wooden stool that was kept there. Sure enough, within a few minutes the 'take cover' alarm would be sounded and action would begin. Nothing would induce the cat to leave his little shelter until the action was well over.

After a few months on board Sydney, Cordite decided to depart, and with a flick of his tail was gone down the gang-plank as suddenly as he'd arrived. He apparently joined an oiler and Sydney's crew didn't see him again. When they were back in Australia a new ship's cat was taken on (*photo above right*), but no details of it are known because soon after, in November 1941, in a mutually destructive engagement with a German raider off the western coast of Australia, the ship was lost with all hands.

Right-hand image: [Australian War Memorial](#)

HM Tank Landing Craft No. 5

This vessel was involved in the abortive British raid on Dieppe, France, in 1942. **Sooty RN**, Ship's Cat First Class, was a small black-and-white female attached as mascot to the vessel and was just ten weeks old at the time. The craft was hit by enemy fire while retreating, caught fire and was sinking when Sooty managed to swim clear. She clung on to a surviving crewman's steel helmet until both were rescued by a flak-ship. She was the only animal to accompany the force involved in that ill-fated operation, and was said to have behaved throughout in 'a seacat-like manner', taking little notice of all the noise and confusion. The photo below was sent by Mrs Jeanine Hardcastle, to whom thanks; the quality isn't great as it's from an old newspaper cutting, but it shows Sooty wearing a 'miniature VC' fashioned for her by her shipmates.



USS Texas

Mr Riley was the mascot of the ship, an early battleship launched in 1892. The cat was born on board, and was there throughout the Battle of Santiago de Cuba of July 1898 during the Spanish-American war. The young man assisting with the portrait was the son of the ship's Captain Phillips.



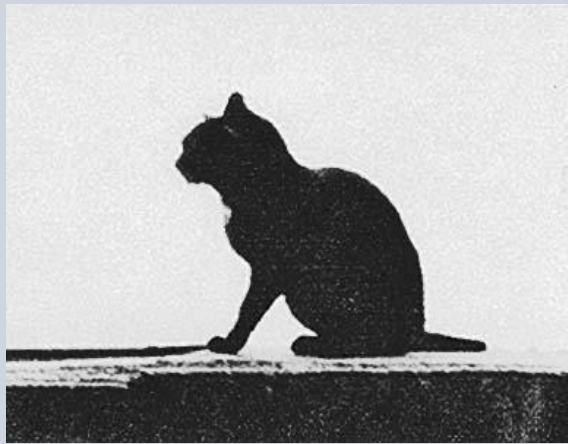
U-boat cats

Although animals were forbidden on board German naval vessels during WW2, it seems the ban wasn't always observed! Two cats that were U-boat mascots are mentioned in the book *Able Seacats*; for **Peter** of U-933 there are only two rather indistinct photos (*below*), while for the mascot of U-1192 there are details but no surviving photos.

In late October 1944 U-1192 entered the Baltic port of Memel, which was overrun with refugees and wounded soldiers. They were unable to take any of them on board, but a crew member spotted a small black-and-white kitten sitting by an abandoned pile of clothes and mewing pitifully. Her they felt they could help, and she was smuggled aboard into the sub's crew quarters hidden under someone's leather jacket. They named her **Minka**. When the captain saw her a couple of days later there was some awkward explaining to do, but the crew told the truth about finding her abandoned – whereupon Minka meowed, the ice was broken, and she was

accepted as a full crew member. She made herself at home in the crew quarters, but explored all the cramped confines of the ship. She was spoiled and offered whatever delicacies could be found, and the crew felt that as long as she was on board, they would be safe.

In early 1945 the U-boat was in dock in the massive submarine pen at Hamburg, being fitted out for a new mission. The work was never completed, as in early April an Allied bomb penetrated the pen and badly damaged the sub. Fortunately for Minka she was on shore leave with some of the crew at the time. It was impossible to repair the ship, so it was due to be taken to Kiel to be scrapped; but what would happen to the cat? To save her from an uncertain fate, they took her to a fisherman's hut nearby and, explaining their problem, asked him and his family if they would look after the little feline. They agreed, and as a reward were gifted an expensive pair of Zeiss binoculars. All the photos and undeveloped film with photos of Minke were destroyed in the air raid – but U-1192's little *Glückskatze* was fondly remembered by the crew members who survived the war.



▣ HMS Vanity

She was a V-class destroyer launched during WW1 and saw service during then closing months of that war, Placed in reserve during the 1930s, she was recommissioned for WW2 and served throughout. Placed in reserve again after the war, she was finally scrapped in 1947.

The photo shows Leading Seaman L.S. Lawrence with the ship's feline mascot, name unknown, in October 1940.



▣ HMS Vernon and cats' collars

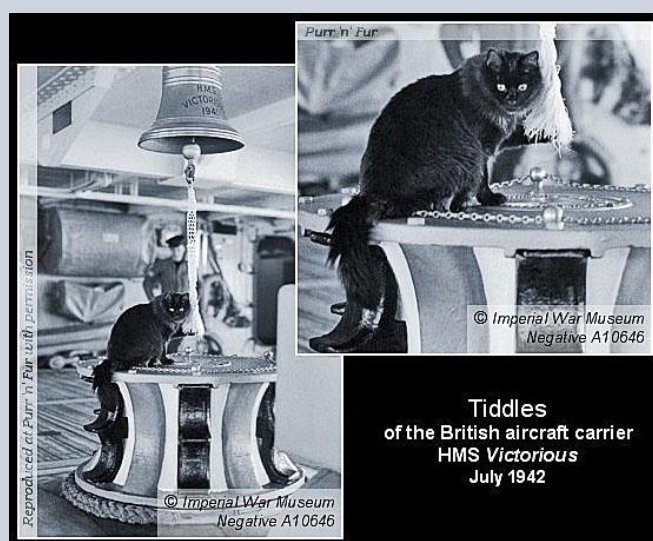
Ship's cats were actively encouraged during WW2 by the Royal Navy, although not usually officially listed as part of the crew. However, cats being cats, of course they tended to change ships quite often, so to try to bring some order into the chaos it had some time earlier been decreed by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that 'All cats in naval establishments must wear collars at all times.' The collars were to have the ship's name embroidered on them, so it would be known where a cat belonged. Ominously, it was also stated that cats wearing no collar were to be 'summarily dealt with'. The cat at the shore base, HMS Vernon, was duly supplied with his smart collar, as pictured (*below left*). However, no one seems to have considered who was going to pay for the thousands of collars that would be needed! As neither the Treasury nor the Admiralty was willing to find the funds, the order was quietly forgotten.



HMS Victorious

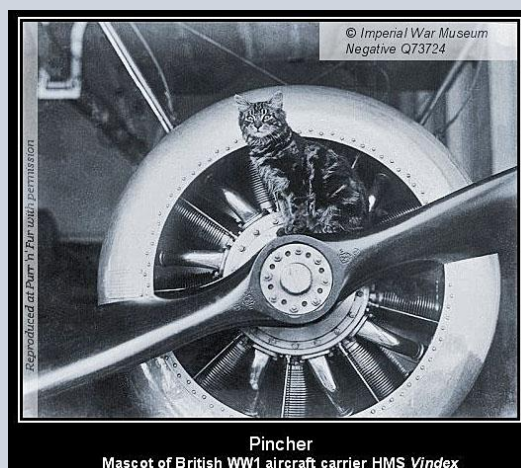
This WW2 aircraft carrier had **Tiddles**, who had spent his whole life on aircraft carriers, having been born at sea on another one, HMS Argus. Tiddles is seen at his favourite station on the aft capstan, where he enjoyed playing with the bell rope. At the time of this photo, dating from July 1942 he was serving as the captain's cat, and it was estimated that he had travelled about 30,000 miles on the high seas.

Image © [Imperial War Museum](https://www.imperialwarmuseum.org/), London.



HMS Vindex

Pincher was the WW1 mascot of HMS Vindex, one of Britain's first aircraft carriers. He's seen here sitting on the propeller of one of the seaplanes the ship carried, so his entry is duplicated in the Air section of the Cats in Wartime – Land & Air page.



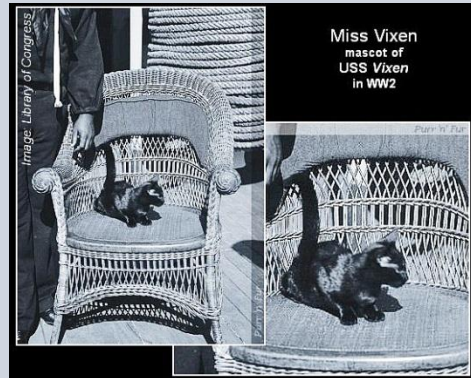


▣ HMS Vindictive

There have been several Royal Navy ships with that name and I'm not certain to which this photo belongs, but as it was dated 1918 I think it was the light cruiser that took part in WW1. Eventually she was refitted as an assault ship to attack Zeebrugge, in Belgium; during that action she suffered heavy damage and was scuttled outside the harbour, although later recovered. Nothing is known of the handsome black kitten mascots.

▣ USS Vixen

Miss Vixen was mascot aboard the USS *Vixen*, a former pleasure yacht bought by the US Navy in 1940 and converted to a gunboat. It was commissioned in 1941 and served in the Caribbean, keeping an eye on German U-boat activity. It was decommissioned in 1946. Thanks to Michael W Pocock of *Maritime Quest* for sending the photo, originally from the [Library of Congress](#)



Whitey
of HMT Vizalma
from an album belonging to
Lt Peter Taylor

Left - with Cox Astles
and ship's dog Whisky
with J Butcher



▣ HMT Vizalma

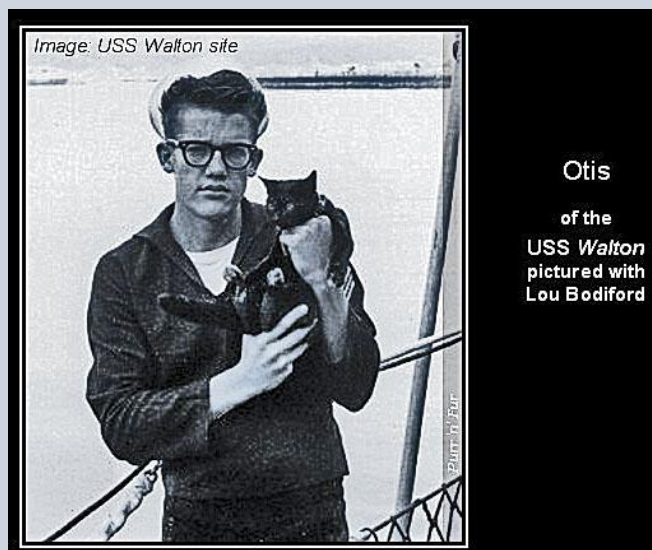
This was a Royal Navy antisubmarine trawler, built in 1940 and commissioned in 1941. She apparently had two mascots on board: **Whitey** the cat and Whisky the dog. In the photo (left) Whitey is held by Cox Astles and Whisky is with sailor J. Butcher. The photos came from an album that belonged originally to a Lt Peter Taylor, from Australia, and were kindly sent in by Kathryn Shapland of Western Australia..

▣ USS Walton

This was a destroyer escort ship that saw service in the latter stages of WW2, but later served in the Korean War in the early 1950s, and it's thought this sad story dates from then. Apparently at some point the captain decided to bring aboard a ship's cat, although the crew didn't particularly want one; it was named **Otis** (below). The radio operators — a group of sailors the captain had for some reason taken a dislike to — were tasked with attending to

Otis's litter box, a job they didn't welcome. At one time someone covered the poor cat in diesel oil; it was suspected that it was one of the radio men 'getting back' at the captain. One day while the ship was in the South China Sea Otis disappeared; again it was suspected the radio operators had a hand in his vanishing. However, much later on one of the men reported that he had seen the captain himself throwing the unfortunate animal overboard.

Image: USS *Walton* site, no longer online — the Internet Archive has a copy of the [page](#) minus the image.



▣ HMS *Warspite*

Around 1939, **Stripey**, tabby and white, was born on board the battleship, which had already seen service in World War One. Over an eventful 30-year period of service, *Warspite* had the distinction of earning the most battle honours ever awarded to an individual ship in the Royal Navy, and the most for actions during the Second World War. At 05:00 on D-Day at the start of the Normandy offensive in June 1944, she was the first ship to open fire in the naval bombardment of German defensive positions, in support of Allied landings.

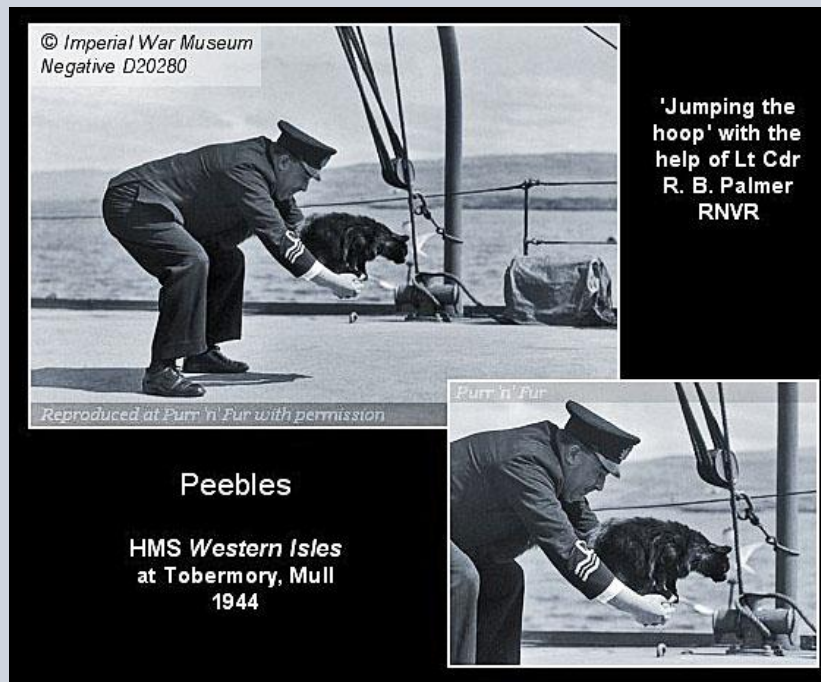
Stripey remained with *Warspite* beyond her decommissioning in early 1945, until 1947 when the ship was due to be broken up, but for the last year or so she was alone on board with George Watson, the watchman. They became very attached to each other, and George was determined the cat would not be abandoned. When their watch duties ended, he was transferred to HMS *Malaya*, and the pair continued to sail together.



HMS Western Isles

Western Isles was an old Scottish inter-island ship that was based at Tobermory on the island of Mull. During WW2 Vice-Admiral Sir Gilbert Stephenson, KBE, CB, CMG (known as 'the Terror of Tobermory' because of his ruthless efficiency) used it as his headquarters when he was running a Royal Navy battle school for U-boat hunters. Ship's cat **Peebles** was said to be very clever, and would 'shake hands' with strangers when they entered the wardroom. Here he is 'jumping through the hoop' formed by the arms of Lt Cdr R.B. Palmer, OBE, in 1944.

Image © [Imperial War Museum](https://www.imperialwarmuseum.org/), London



HMS Weston

A sloop launched in the early 1930s, *Weston* was used as a convoy-escort ship in British waters and in the north Atlantic during World War 2.

The photo shows the ship's first lieutenant in 1940 with **Blitz**, **Winston** and **Smutz**, all born on board.



USS Wyoming

USS *Wyoming* was a WW1 battleship launched in 1911, serving as a training ship during the 1930s and a gunnery ship during WW2. Below is a charming photo of the ship's kitten mascot; 'Six bells' no doubt refers to the system of bells sounded every half hour to mark the time during watches on board ship; six bells would be three-quarters of the way through a four-hour watch.



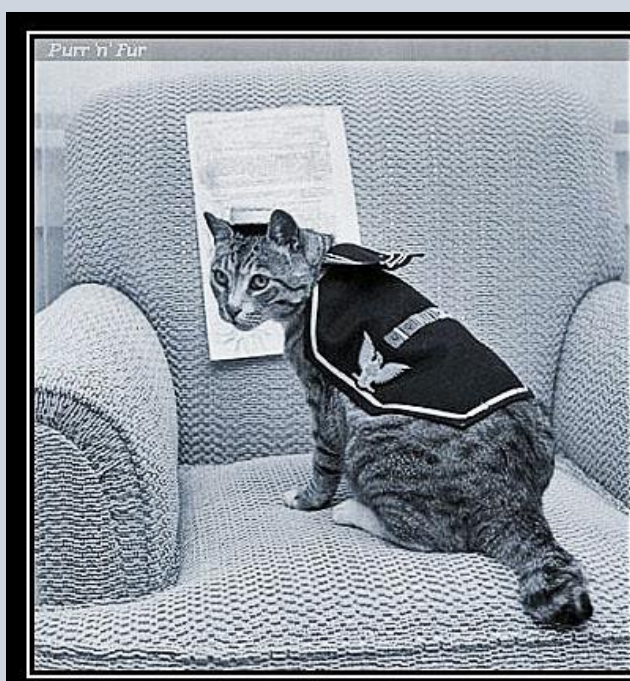
Unknown Ships

After their merchant ship was sunk in the North Atlantic in March 1943, ship's cat **Maizie** and six crew members spent 56 hours on a life raft before they were rescued. Crewman Eugene Clancy of New York said, 'If Maizie hadn't been with us, we might have gone nuts. We completely forgot our personal discomfort and almost fought for the privilege of petting her.' Maizie took her turn at eating malted milk tablets and condensed food with the men, and even comforted those suffering from exposure or seasickness by going from one to another 'almost like a mother'. It was reported that the cat had spent only about ten days on shore since America entered the war in December 1941.

Pooli, born in July 1944 at a navy yard in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, served as a youngster aboard the United States attack transport ship USS *Fremont* during the latter part of World War II. When the battle alarms rang, Pooli made for the mail room and would curl up in a mail sack! This picture was taken on Independence Day in 1959, her fifteenth birthday, when Pooli, a veteran who rated three service ribbons and four battle stars, showed she could still get into her old uniform. Her name was short for 'Princess Papule'.

Image:

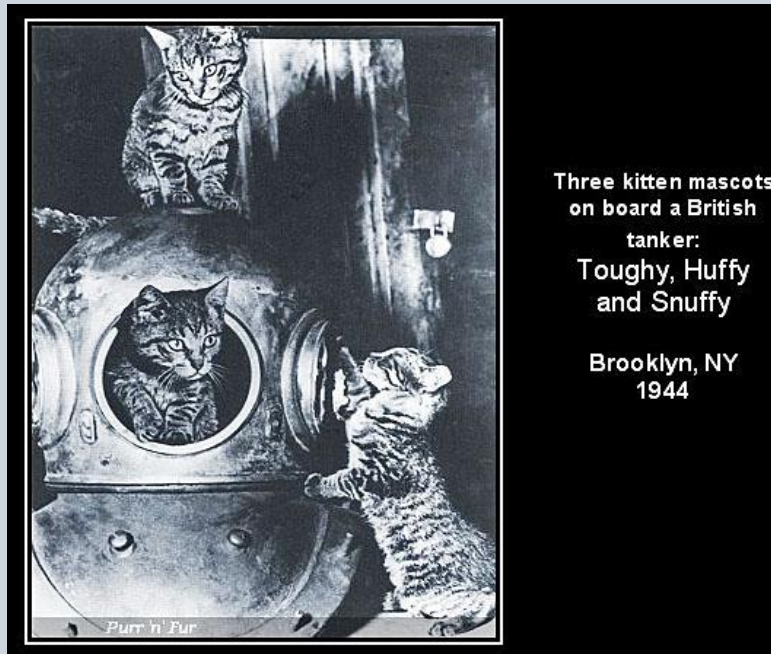
[Wikimedia Commons](#)



Pooli

US Navy veteran of WW2 when she was a youngster, pictured in 1959 on her 15th birthday

▣ **Toughy, Huffy and Snuffy** (*below*) were mascots on board a British tanker vessel, and this delightful photo was taken when it was berthed at a shipyard in Brooklyn, New York, in 1944. They are investigating an old-fashioned diver's helmet.



[Guardian article](#) (c. 2015) about Royal Naval pets

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