

US Navy “Bird Boats” – Four Generations of Mine Warfare Ships
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First Generation

The Navy’s very first minesweeper was a “bird boat,” launching a 90-year series of sweepers or their equivalents named for birds worldwide. Its production stimulated by the “Great War,” LAPWING (AM 1) was laid down by Todd Shipyards of New York on 25 October 1917, launched 14 March 1918, and commissioned 12 June 1918. She was followed in close order by forty-nine others, AM 2-54 (five of the contracts were cancelled). The last of the group, WILLET (AM 54), joined the Navy 29 January 1920.

Photo # NH 44903 USS Lapwing anchored in the Hudson River, November 1919

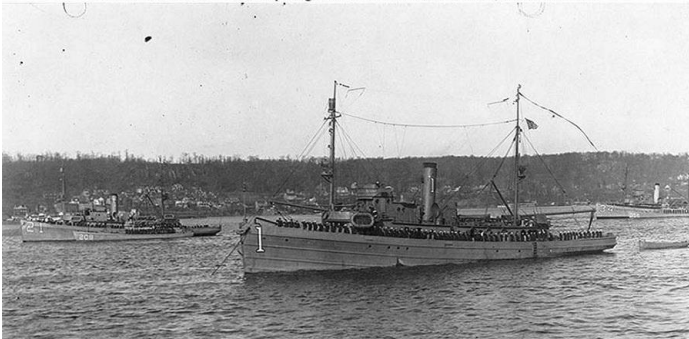


Figure 1: USS LAPWING (AM 1) the first of the “bird boats”

Many of these minesweepers engaged in the dangerous task of removing the massive North Sea mine barrage after World War I. Most survived that experience and the tests of time to aid their nation in World War II. Those that did, however, were considered antiquated and by the end of 1947 had been relegated to the scrapyards.

The majority of this first generation of sweepers sported post offices. They were very popular with cachet makers, especially in the 1930s, and some truly gorgeous cachets exist on covers from many of them. They remain an exceptionally popular collecting field to this day.



Figure 2: USS LAPWING (AM 1)/(AVP 1) Memorial Day 1937 with William F. Schlechter Bird cachet—COCO SOLO/CANAL ZONE in killer bars. At this date LAPWING had been reclassified as AVP 1.

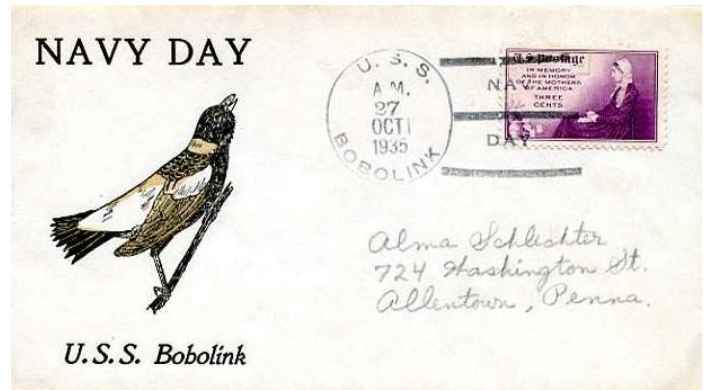


Figure 3: USS BOBOLINK (AM 20) with William F. Schlechter Bird cachet for 1935 Navy Day. Locy Type 3 cancel with NAVY/DAY in killer bars.

Second Generation

World War II witnessed the last contributions of AM 1/AM 54. Yet, like the preceding world conflict, it also gave birth to a fleet of new, modernized minesweepers. RAVEN (AM 55) began to take shape at the Norfolk Navy Yard 28 June 1939. She rolled off the assembly line 24 August 1940, and entered service 11 November 1940. The last of this breed, SWALLOW (AM 65), was commissioned 14 January 1943.



Figure 4: RAVEN-Class minesweeper USS OSPREY (AM 56) off the Norfolk Navy Yard, Portsmouth, Virginia, 19 April 1941 National Archives photo.

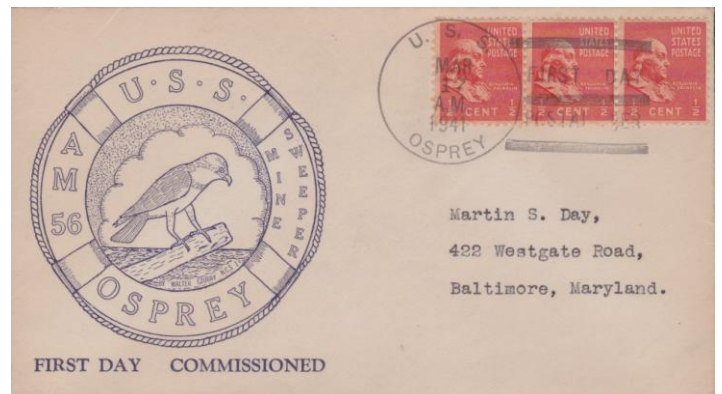


Figure 5: Walter Czubay cachet for commissioning of USS OSPREY (AM 56)—Locy Type (FDPS) 3 with FIRST DAY/POSTAL SERV IN KB

Trying to keep up with the tremendous demands of the war, the Navy also turned to the conversion of fishing trawlers, beginning with BULLFINCH (AM 66), and even a yacht [GOLDCREST (AM 78)]. USS MERGANSER (AM 135) represented the last of the trawlers.

Minesweepers AM-55 to AM-65 served in both the European and Pacific theaters of the war, several succumbing to enemy action. On the other hand, those that had been fishing boats operated along the North and South American coasts. Two of those that had been built as minesweepers recommissioned in the 1950s - BROADBILL (AM 58) for training purposes and SHELDRAKE (AM 62) as a survey ship. The Navy quickly dispensed with the others, and all of the trawlers, after the war. Some of these sweepers had post offices, but their almost exclusively war-time tenure provided little opportunity for much in the way of philatelic activities.

Then in 1945, alone, the Navy requisitioned no fewer than sixty-nine new sweepers, with hull numbers ranging from AM 352 to AM 420. Forty of these were eventually cancelled, and one [DRAKE (AM 359)] never sailed under her bird name. The commissioning dates for the twenty-eight new additions ranged widely over the year; for example, the first new sweeper on the list, CREDDOCK (AM 356), did not commission until December, the third [DUNLIN (AM 361)] set sail in June, and the last of the hull numbers completed [WHEATEAR (AM 390)] began service in October. Eight of these ships saw service in the Korean War. Many, and even some of the earlier AMs for that matter, lasted long enough to be reclassified as Minesweepers, Steel-Hulled (MSF) in 1955. Most but not all were granted post offices.



Figure 6: USS RUDDY (AM 380) was built by the Gulf Shipbuilding Corp., Chickasaw, AL. RUDDY earned one battle star for post-World War II minesweeping operations and two for her service during the Korean War.

The World War II era also spawned a large family of avian cousins in the forms of coastal minesweepers. The AMc classification was new to the navy, but before their construction came to an end no fewer than 204 of them had done service. Some were contracted as such, but the majority was converted from former fishing vessels

(trawlers, purse seiners, draggers, etc.). There were previous submarine chasers or yachts in the mix as well. Some of this rather motley group were commissioned, but some were simply placed in service. AMc 1 to AMc 60, AMc 149, and AMc 203-204 (the last of the breed) sported names of birds. PIPIT led the parade; MINAH ended it. All but the final three coastal minesweepers actually began duty before U.S. entry into the war, but only MINAH survived the post war onslaught of decommissionings. As their classification suggests, these small ships performed strictly coastal operations – sweeps, patrols, and training exercises along the Atlantic, Pacific, Hawaiian, Panamanian, Alaskan, and Gulf Coast shores. As their size suggests, they had no postal clerks.



Figure 7: USS QUAIL (AM 377) cover dated 6 MAY 1946 with 1L corner card and Locy Type 2z (used after POD). Post office closed 1945-09-01



Figure 8: The first ship to be named PARRAKEET by the Navy, AMc-34 was built in 1934 by Al Larson, Terminal Island, California, as the Jackie Sue; acquired by the Navy 14 November 1940; and placed in service 29 April 1941



Figure 9: Censored airmail cover sent by BM 2nd H.C. Hurley aboard USS PARRAKEET (AMc 34) 15 May 1944.

THIRD GENERATION

Technological developments brought about by WW II led to the end of minesweepers. Instead of sweeping mines, by definition a rather dangerous task, the objectives became first to locate them and then to destroy them. This new approach actually began to appear during the war; in March 1945 tank landing craft (LCT) and large infantry landing craft (LCI(L)) vessels completed conversion to AMCU's, i.e. Coastal Minesweepers (Underwater Locator). All told, forty-eight AMCU's were built (AMCU 1-44, 46-50). The first ten were not given names. In 1951, two coastal survey ships underwent the same conversion. But it was in March 1952 that the next generation of "bird boats" came into being, including the aforementioned coastal minesweeper, MINAH. Twenty-nine AMCU's appeared in that year. Six more "birds" came along in 1955 - the belatedly named BLACKBIRD (AMCU 11), which took ten years to receive a name, and five others. The only AMCU of the BITTERN-class, and the last of the AMCU's, appeared in 1957. These ships largely performed tests and training operations. Most were quickly reclassified as coastal minehunters (MHC), the mine warfare ship to which the Navy had turned to by 1955.

as motor minesweepers. In 1954, the Navy turned to a new improved FALCON-class motor minesweeper which had a non-magnetic hull (a nice thought when dealing with mines). All of these later ships (AMS 190-209) were almost immediately redesignated, some even before commissioning, as Non-Magnetic Coastal Minesweepers (MSC). In 1961, the Navy commissioned the last two MSC birds, ALBATROSS and GANNET (MSC 289-290); by the end of 1970 all had been retired from service.



Figure 12: USS FRIGATE BIRD (MSC 191) was built by the Quincy Adams Yacht Yard, Inc., Quincy, MA

Figure 10: USS GOLDCREST (AMCU 24) originally served in WW II as LCI(L)-869. The landing craft was renamed USS GOLDCREST and redesignated (AMCU 24) on 7 March 1952. USS GOLDCREST was converted to a minehunter at the Charleston Navy Yard, assigned to 6th Naval District, and operated out of Key West, FL.

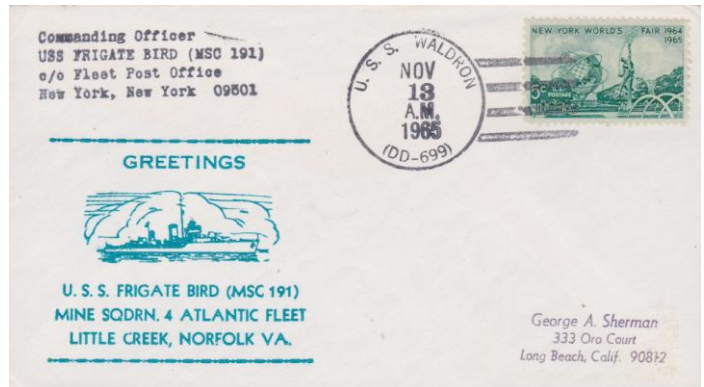


Figure 13: Taze Nicholson cachet and corner card from USS FRIGATE BIRD (MSC 191) cancelled on USS WALDRON (DD 699) at Norfolk VA.

FOURTH GENERATION

The next vessel of choice in mine warfare was the Coastal Minehunter (MHC). AMCU's redesignated in 1955 dominate the list. The pioneer ships built with the MHC classification from the keel up were BOBOLINK and BUNTING (MHC 44-45), both constructed in 1955, during the AMCU era. However, in the 1990s the navy introduced a brand new "OSPREY-Class" of coastal minehunters, complete with fiberglass hulls, sonar detection, and a remote control neutralization system. The new class comprised twelve ships (MHC 51-62). They didn't last long; all were gone by 2008.



Figure 11: Cover with USS GOLDCREST's corner card dated 1 April 1955 at Charleston SC.

The Cold War era also produced a host of motor minesweepers (AMS), 1947-1956. These were small ships as well. In fact, all of the earliest AMS (#1-58) were converted auxiliary motor minesweepers (YMS) originally built for yard or harbor service. In 1953, two were actually laid down



Figure 14: USS PELICAN (MHC 53) passes MV CAPE KNOX (T-AKR 5082) as she departs from Naval Support Activity, New Orleans. U.S. Navy photo 061023-N-6857S-008 by Sam Shore



Figure 15: Commissioning cover for USS PELICAN (MHC 53) with Decatur Chapter No. 4 cachet and pictorial commissioning cancel.

SUMMARY

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, hundreds of mine sweeper/mine destroyer ships have been named for birds. To be expected, we have had ships honoring the robin, the mockingbird, and the cardinal. We have even recognized the turkey, the parakeet, and the grackle. But over the course of time, the Navy sometimes became desperate and honored birds which could send ornithologists to their reference books. The tapacola, the medrick, and the roselle are hardly recognizable as birds to most of us. The complexity of the list is enhanced by the fact that quite a few names were used multiple times. Plus, multiple reclassifications by the Navy can make them hard to follow. WAXBILL, for example, evolved from PCS 1456 to YMS 479 to AMS 39 to AMCU 50 to MHC 50. The Navy, of course, continues to rely on minehunting vessels. Today’s Mine Countermeasure Ships (MCMs), for example, continue the tradition begun by LAPWING, at home and abroad. But after ninety years of continuous service, there are no longer any “bird boats” in the US Navy. The MCMs have names like AVENGER and CHIEF – nice names for warships, for sure, but missing something.

Minesweepers (AM)

- USS LAPWING (AM-1)
- USS OWL (AM-2)
- USS ROBIN (AM-3)
- USS SWALLOW (AM-4)
- USS TANAGER (AM-5)
- USS CARDINAL (AM-6)
- USS ORIOLE (AM-7)
- USS CURLEW (AM-8)
- USS FINCH (AM-9)
- USS HERON (AM-10)
- USS CONDOR (AM-11) - Cancelled 4 December 1918
- USS PLOVER (AM-12) - Cancelled 4 December 1918
- USS TURKEY (AM-13)
- USS WOODCOCK (AM-14)
- USS QUAIL (AM-15)
- USS PARTRIDGE (AM-16)
- USS EIDER (AM-17)
- USS THRUSH (AM-18)
- USS AVOCET (AM-19)
- USS BOBOLINK (AM-20)
- USS LARK (AM-21)
- USS WIDGEON (AM-22)
- USS TEAL (AM-23)
- USS BRANT (AM-24)
- USS KINGFISHER (AM-25)
- USS RAIL (AM-26)

- USS PELICAN (AM-27)
- USS FALCON (AM-28)
- USS OSPREY (AM-29)
- USS SEAGULL (AM-30)
- USS TERN (AM-31)
- USS FLAMINGO (AM-32)
- USS PENGUIN (AM-33)
- USS SWAN (AM-34)
- USS WHIPPOORWILL (AM-35)
- USS BITTERN (AM-36)
- USS SANDERLING (AM-37)
- USS AUK (AM-38)
- USS CHEWINK (AM-39)
- USS CORMORANT (AM-40)
- USS GANNET (AM-41)
- USS GOSHAWK (AM-42) - Cancelled 4 December 1918
- USS GREBE (AM-43)
- USS MALLARD (AM-44)
- USS ORTOLAN (AM-45)
- USS PEACOCK (AM-46)
- USS PIGEON (AM-47)
- USS REDWING (AM-48)
- USS RAVEN (AM-49) - Cancelled 4 December 1918
- USS SHRIKE (AM-50) - Cancelled 4 December 1918
- USS SANDPIPER (AM-51)
- USS VIREO (AM-52)
- USS WARBLER (AM-53)
- USS WILLET (AM-54)
- USS RAVEN (AM-55)
- USS OSPREY (AM-56)
- USS AUK (AM-57)
- USS BROADBILL (AM-58)
- USS CHICKADEE (AM-59)
- USS NUTHATCH (AM-60)
- USS PHEASANT (AM-61)
- USS SHELDRAKE (AM-62)
- USS SKYLARK (AM-63)
- USS STARLING (AM-64)
- USS SWALLOW (AM-65)
- USS BULLFINCH (AM-66)
- USS CARDINAL (AM-67)
- USS CATBIRD (AM-68)
- USS CURLEW (AM-69)
- USS FLICKER (AM-70)
- USS ALBATROSS (AM-71)
- USS BLUEBIRD (AM-72)
- USS GRACKLE (AM-73)
- USS GULL (AM-74)
- USS KITE (AM-75)
- USS LINNET (AM-76)
- USS GOLDFINCH (AM-77)
- USS GOLDCREST (AM-78)
- USS GOSHAWK (AM-79)
- USS GOLDCREST (AM-80)
- USS CHAFFINCH (AM-81)
- USS EAGLE (AM-132)
- USS HAWK (AM-133)
- USS IBIS (AM-134)
- USS MERGANSER (AM-135)
- USS BITTERN (AM-352) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS BREAKHORN (AM-353) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS CARIAMA (AM-354) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS CHUKOR (AM-355) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS CREDDOCK (AM-356)
- USS DIPPER (AM-357)
- USS DOTTEREL (AM-358) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS DRAKE (AM-359) – Name Cancelled Before Commissioning (Became YDG-11)
- USS DRIVER (AM-360) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS DUNLIN (AM-361)
- USS GADWALL (AM-362)
- USS GAVIA (AM-363)
- USS GRAYLAG (AM-364)
- USS HARLEQUIN (AM-365)
- USS HARRIER (AM-366)

- USS HUMMER (AM-367) – Cancelled 6 June 1944
- USS JACKDAW (AM-368) - Cancelled 6 June 1944
- USS MERDICK (AM-369) - Cancelled 6 June 1944
- USS MINAH (AM-370) - C Cancelled 6 June 1944
- USS MINIVET (AM-371)
- USS MURRELET (AM-372)
- USS PEREGRINE (AM-373)
- USS PIGEON (AM-374)
- USS POCHARD (AM-375)
- USS PTARMIGAN (AM-376)
- USS QUAIL (AM-377)
- USS REDSTART (AM-378)
- USS ROSELLE (AM-379)
- USS RUDDY (AM-380)
- USS SCOTER (AM-381)
- USS SHOVELER (AM-382)
- USS SURFBIRD (AM-383)
- USS SPRIG (AM-384)
- USS TANAGER (AM-385)
- USS TERCEL (AM-386)
- USS TOUCAN (AM-387)
- USS TOWHEE (AM-388)
- USS WAXWING (AM-389)
- USS WHEATEAR (AM-390)
- USS ALBATROSS (AM-391) – Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS BULLFINCH (AM-392) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS CARDINAL (AM-393) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS FIRECREST (AM-394) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS GOLDFINCH (AM-395) - Cancelled 1 November 1945
- USS GRACKLE (AM-396) – Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS GROSBEAK (AM-397) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS GROUSE (AM-398) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS GULL (AM-399) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS HAWK (AM-400) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS HUMMER (AM-401) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS JACKDAW (AM-402) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS KITE (AM-403) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS LONGSPUR (AM-404) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS MERGANSER (AM-405) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS OSPREY (AM-406) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS PARTRIDGE (AM-407) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS PLOVER (AM-408) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS REDHEAD (AM-409) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS SANDERLING (AM-410) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS SCAUP (AM-411) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS SENTINEL (AM-412) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS SHEARWATER (AM-413) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS WAXBILL (AM-414) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS BLUEBIRD (AM-415) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS FLICKER (AM-416) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS LINNET (AM-417) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS MAGPIE (AM-418) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS PARRAKEET (AM-419) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS PIPIT (AM-420) - Cancelled 11 August 1945
- USS GOLDCREST (MHC-24)
- USS KESTREL (MHC-26)
- USS LONGSPUR (MHC-28)
- USS MAGPIE (MHC-29)
- USS MALLARD (MHC-30)
- USS MINIVET (MHC-32)
- USS ORIOLE (MHC-33)
- USS ORTOLAN (MHC-34)
- USS OWL (MHC-35)
- USS PARTRIDGE (MHC-36)
- USS RAIL (MHC-37)
- USS SANDPIPER (MHC-38)
- USS SENTINEL (MHC-39)
- USS SKIMMER (MHC-41)
- USS SPARROW (MHC-42)
- USS BITTERN (MHC-43)
- USS BOBOLINK (MHC-44)
- USS BUNTING (MHC-45)
- USS GULL (MHC-46)
- USS MERGANSER (MHC-47)
- USS REDHEAD (MHC-48)
- USS SANDERLING (MHC-49)
- USS WAXBILL (MHC-50)
- USS OSPREY (MHC-51)
- USS HERON (MHC-52)
- USS PELICAN (MHC-53)
- USS ROBIN (MHC-54)
- USS ORIOLE (MHC-55)
- USS KINGFISHER (MHC-56)
- USS CORMORANT (MHC-57)
- USS BLACK HAWK (MHC-58)
- USS FALCON (MHC-59)
- USS CARDINAL (MHC-60)
- USS RAVEN (MHC-61)
- USS SHRIKE (MHC-62)

NOTE: For a complete list of “bird boat” and all mine warfare ships, with both hull numbers and names, see:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mine_warfare_vessels_of_the_United_States_Navy

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- USS PIPIT (AMC-1) / USS MINAH (AMC-240)

COASTAL MINESWEEPERS (UNDERWATER LOCATOR) (AMCU)

- USS BLACKBIRD (AMCU-11) / USS WAXBILL (AMCU-50)

MOTOR MINESWEEPERS (AMS)

- USS ALBATROSS (AMS-1) / USS GANNET (AMS-290)

MINESWEEPERS, COASTAL (MSC)

- USS BITTERN (MSC-70) / USS GANNET (MSC-290)

COASTAL MINEHUNTERS (MHC)

- USS BLACKBIRD (MHC-11)
- USS MINAH (MHC-14)
- USS AVOCET (MHC-16)