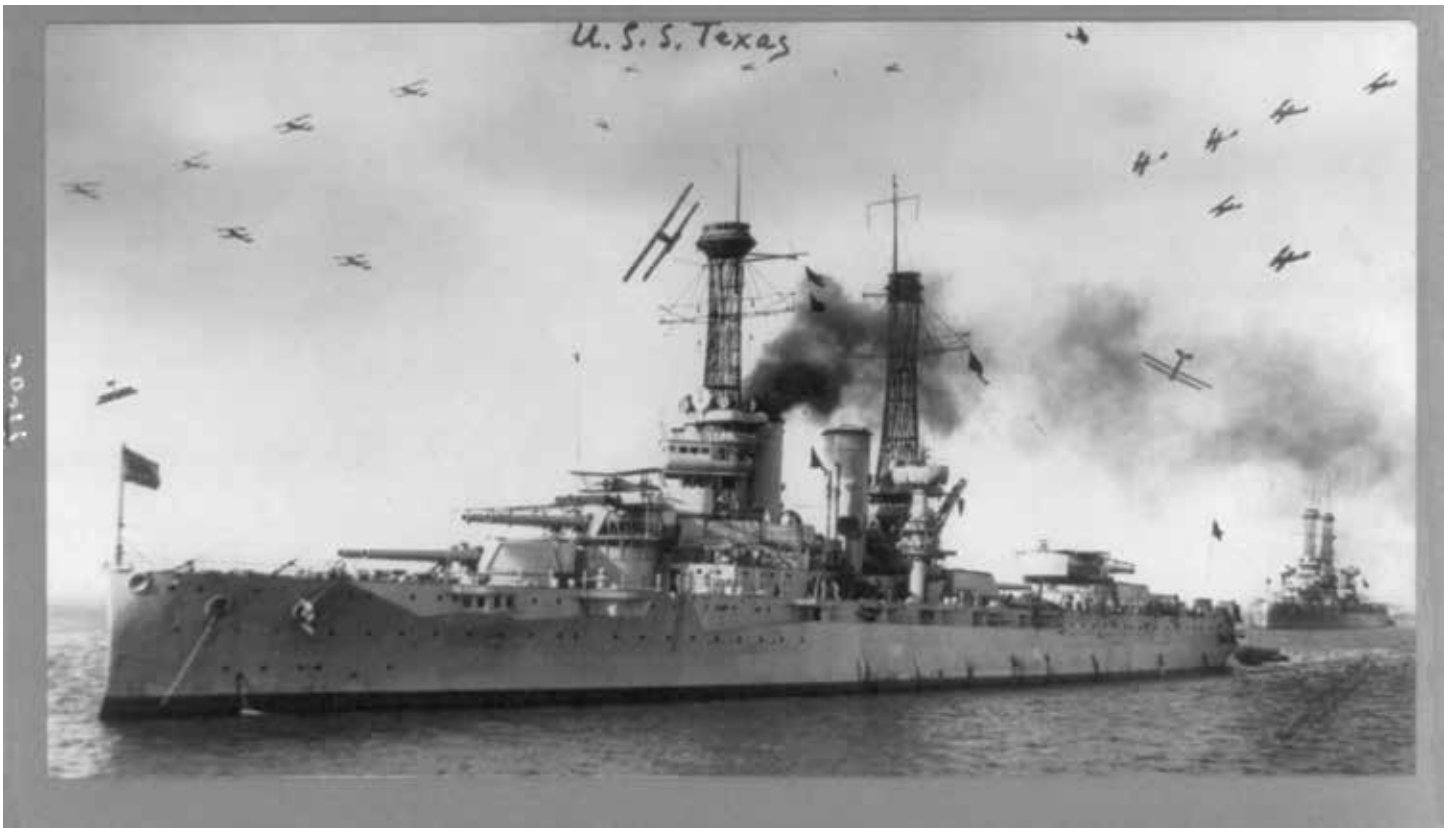
USS *Texas* BB-35, Boasting More "Firsts" than any Ship in the U.S. Navy

By Johnathan Flerchinger



USS Texas *surrounded by bi-planes, circa 1919.* Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

During the early twentieth century, Newport News Shipbuilding Company constructed the USS *Texas* (BB-35), which was commissioned on March 12, 1914.[1] After surviving two world wars, this magnificent vessel became the last surviving dreadnaught battleship, representing an important piece of local and national history. *Texas* measures 573 feet long with a 95-foot beam.[2] Known for having some of the largest engines constructed for American battleships, she used steam turbines and triple expansion engines, which made the ship very fuel-efficient. This battleship, now a tourist attraction, can be found at the Battleship Texas State Historic Site near the south Houston Ship Channel and the San Jacinto Battleground State Park.

The state of Texas adamantly insisted on bringing this incredible ship to Houston to preserve and protect her from government or scientific experiments, such as turning her into an artificial reef that would have ultimately destroyed her. Despite being the only remaining battleship of its kind, sadly with time, *Texas* has begun to wear out. Repairs have become more expensive as Houston's salty water corrodes the ship at an alarming rate, making it difficult to maintain her. As *Texas* celebrates the centennial of her commissioning, this article looks back on some of the major battles she survived and the notable number of firsts she accomplished for the U.S. Navy.

The Major Wars of the *Texas* BB-35

Early in World War I, *Texas* was assigned to train gun crews for merchant ships before she ran aground on hidden underwater blocks, forcing her to undergo major repairs that limited her participation. Her duty shifted to escort missions as part of the 6th Battle Squadron of the British Grand Fleet, reinforcing the British army whenever the German military posed a threat. *Texas* was part of the fleet that met the surrendering Germans in November 1918. Later, she assisted in escorting President Woodrow Wilson to France for the Paris Peace Conference. She resumed her military duties in 1919 alongside the Atlantic fleet. Her postwar service consisted mostly of escort duties, which took her to places such as Casablanca, Gibraltar, and ports in the British Isles.

During the Second World War, *Texas* steamed toward Scotland where she remained for a seven-week training

exercise in preparation for her upcoming role in the U.S.-led D-Day invasion of Normandy, which unfolded on June 6, 1944.[3] During the early hours of this invasion, *Texas* was tasked with anchoring 12,000 yards off Pointe du Hoc, using her 14-inch salvoes to attack the coastal landscapes, while the secondary battery focused on Omaha Beach. By the end of her constant bombardment, *Texas* had strategically destroyed most of the enemy's feared anti-aircraft battery. Afterwards, *Texas* was assigned to support the Army's advance inland. *Texas* soon closed in on the highly important port of Cherbourg where at 13:36 the enemy scored a direct hit on the battleship, killing one helmsman and injuring almost everyone on the navigation bridge. *Texas*, although limping, continued delivering her 14-inch shells despite the damage and casualties she had sustained. *Texas* received her final blow in the form of an unexploded 240-millimeter armor-piercing shell that entered her port bow and came to rest in a compartment near the ward-

Texas's *massive salvoes ultimately helped clear the way for American troops during many large scale battles.*
Photo courtesy of Johnathan Flerchinger.

room. This critical hit forced *Texas* to retreat and head to Plymouth, England, for much needed repairs.

Upon completion of her initial repairs in England, *Texas* returned to New York, where she underwent another thirty-six-day repair to replace the damaged barrels of the main battery.[4] On February 16, 1945, *Texas* was sent to the Pacific to join the attack on the enemy's army in Iwo Jima in preparation of a U.S. landing. The battleship spent days providing lifesaving support to these troops with repeated heavy fire into the highly fortified Mount Suribachi, which proved paramount in clearing the Japanese garrison. On March 7, 1945, *Texas* returned to Ulithi to become equipped with a gunfire support unit to prepare for the next operation on the island of Okinawa. On March 26, *Texas* began her attack on the enemy, ruthlessly using her 14-inch salvoes in the six-day-long attack to open the way for the U.S. Army and Marines to invade the island.

During her time in Okinawa, *Texas* retreated from her position every evening, only to return the next day to

This anti-aircraft gun and many others were added to the USS Texas *during her upgrades.* Photo courtesy of Johnathan Flerchinger.

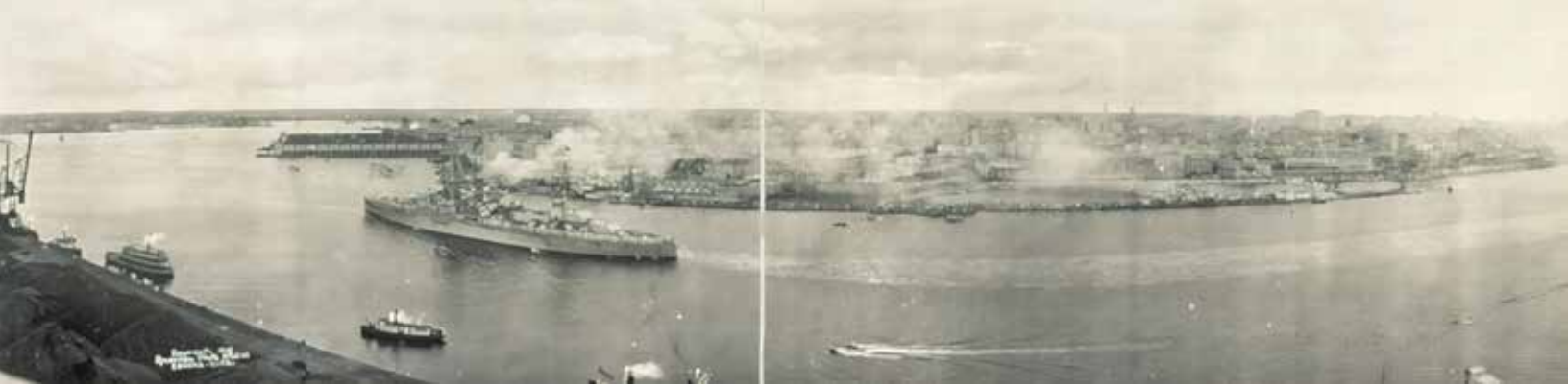
resume the enemy bombardment. The Japanese had no response to this continued shelling except for multiple air units of kamikazes sent with orders to either destroy or slow down *Texas* and other U.S. ships' powerful salvoes by any means possible. These kamikaze raids failed miserably and caused very little damage to this juggernaut's capability.[5] The enemy's true response came April 1, when the U.S. ground troops landed. *Texas* supplied a steady stream of gunfire to protect the charging troops from the enemy's relentless ground and aerial attacks. She claimed one kamikaze kill single handedly, while assisting with three others.

Weakened by the battle, *Texas* left on May 14, bound for Leyte in the Philippines, where she stayed until August 15, after the Japanese capitulation. She then returned to the waters off Okinawa arriving toward the end of August.[6] On September 23, she finally received orders to embark our tired troops and carry them back to the United States.

By February 13, 1946, *Texas* was steaming toward Norfolk, Virginia, to prepare for the ship's decommissioning. The U.S. Army then moved her to Baltimore, Maryland, until she sailed to her permanent home in La Porte, Texas, outside Houston. This giant steel war hero ultimately earned five battle stars for her service during the two world wars and had many crowning achievements, which made her unlike any other ship to serve the U.S. Navy before or since with a long list of notable firsts.

The First U.S. Navy Vessel to House a Permanently Assigned Contingent of U.S. Marines

The warship's design easily accommodated twenty-one 5-inch guns, which protected the 1,072 officers and enlisted men who proudly served upon this vessel, including members of the Navy and the first permanently assigned contingent of Marines to serve on a U.S. Naval vessel. *Texas* was newly equipped with all-electric galleys and a state-of-the-art laundry installation, which helped keep the morale high. The Navy and Marine personnel who drew orders to this ship could easily travel for months on end inside the skin of the ship and still have a surplus of food, clothing, and ammunition. One of the main jobs assigned to *Texas* during World War II was to supply the troops and ammunition to



USS Texas *entering Havana harbor from Cabanas, 1928.* Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

the battle zones. Because she had carried the contingent of U.S. Marines, she usually arrived at the red zones prior to other troops and cleared the shore of enemy combatants. *Texas* saved countless lives by diverting the enemy's attention from the attacking U.S. troops and clearing the path for them with armor-piercing rounds intended to kill everything in its path.

The First U.S. Ship to Control Gunfire with Directors and Range-keepers

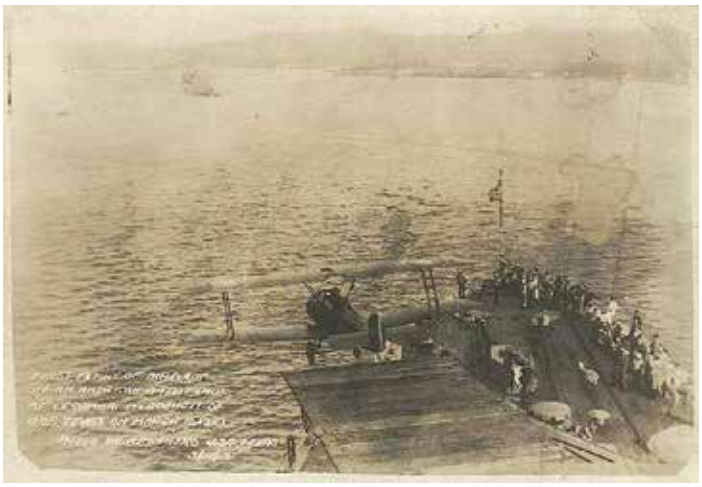
Although technology was nowhere near today's levels, *Texas* was the first U.S. ship with a gunfire control system that used directors and range-keepers. Directors were the forerunner of analog computer technology in contrast to the digital versions in use today. A fire-control system consists of a number of components working together, usually a gun data computer, a director, and radar, which is designed to assist a weapon system in hitting its target. It performs the same task as a human gunner firing a weapon, but attempts to do so faster and more accurately.[7]

Texas's deadly main battery that contained 14-inch salvos provided her most notable defense. The battleship's crew used the fire control system to key in the location, direction, and speed of a given target in order to engage. It enhanced the accuracy of the *Texas* but was not foolproof because the lack of precise calculations could cause the gunners to miss the target. This fire control system did, however, make it much easier for the crew because once they entered correct data, the system's accuracy made it deadly to anyone or anything in this juggernaut's path.

The First U.S. Battleship to Mount Anti-aircraft Guns and the First to Launch an Aircraft from it's Deck

On March 10, 1919, while she lay anchored off Cuba near Guantanamo Bay, *Texas* made history when she became the first American battleship to launch an airplane from her turret. Considered an advantage to the fleet as a result, *Texas* was assigned to the Pacific Fleet where she served until 1924.[8] At that time, USS *Texas* left the Pacific and headed for her new assignment with the Naval Academy to conduct training, and the Navy soon decided to use the ship in a training cruise for the European waters.

On July 31, 1925, *Texas* went to the Norfolk Navy Yard for a modernization overhaul, which brought her back from near death. The modernization included replacement of the cage masts with the single tripod foremast and the installation of the latest and greatest fire control equipment. The Navy also installed one of the first anti-aircraft weapons ever housed on an American battleship. The modernization



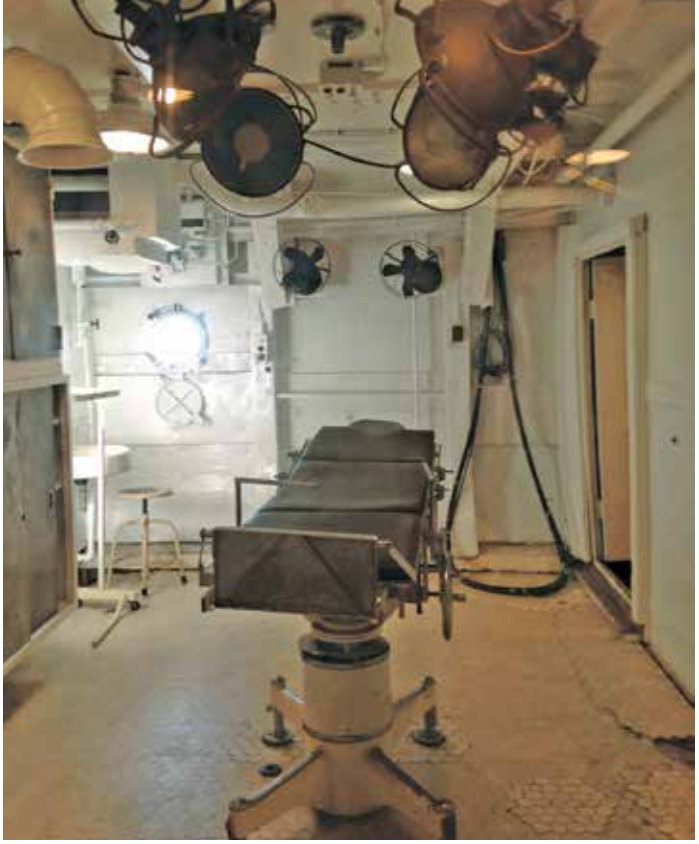
Medal of Honor winner, Lt. Cmdr. E. O. McDonnell became the first man to successfully launch a plane from a U.S. battleship. The Sopwith Camel took off from Texas's No. 2 Turrett on March 10, 1919, at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

of *Texas* extended to the torpedo tubes and her casemated secondary armament. However, one of the most important additions to the ship's arsenal was an aircraft catapult on the Number 3 main gun turret, which was virtually unheard of at the time and made her unique to the fleet.

One of the First in the U.S. Navy to Receive the CXAM-1 Production Radar

After the much needed overhaul, *Texas* began operating between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In 1931, she shifted duty stations to California where she served as a hand chosen flagship and took part in many national celebrations. In 1939, with World War II already underway in Europe, she successfully carried out many patrol missions and received her first radar that made her a main contender on the sea. This new radar, known as the CXAM, was developed from merging the XAF and CXZ technologies into one super-radar.[9] Demand for such high-tech systems ran high for deployments that required detection of approaching airplanes and ships. In October 1941, *Texas* had the CXAM-1 modifications to the CXAM installed, which greatly enhanced the battleship's safety, security, and morale.

In comparison to the CXAM, the CXAM-1 system increased the detection range from sixty-eight to one hundred miles, and these radar modifications ultimately led to a change of duty for *Texas*. Once the nation joined World War II, the Navy shifted her halfway across the Atlantic to support the needs of the country and its allies. These



The operating room served as the ship's surgical theater. Large ships like Texas *offered medical support to smaller ships. The wardroom and crew berthing space on the third deck could also be used as makeshift operating rooms.* Photo courtesy of Debbie Z. Harwell.

state-of-the-art radars also proved extremely helpful when she moved to the Pacific by detecting nearby enemy ships to clear the path during the Iwo Jima invasion. In 1945, when kamikaze raids were at their height, these new radar systems helped *Texas* escape certain disaster, which could have ended her service to the nation.

The First U.S. Battleship to Become a Permanent Museum Ship

When World War II ended in August 1945, the battleship became a transport vessel to help bring our returning war veterans stateside, transitioning them from the fierce battlefield they had survived. In February 1946, she returned to New York where the Naval Commission decided to keep her in service until April 1948. At that time, she moved to her final dock at the Battleship Texas State Historic Site near the San Jacinto Battleground State Park in La Porte, Texas, where she soon became the first U.S. battleship named a floating museum.[10] The Texas State Legislature assigned the ship to the Battleship Commission for maintenance.

During her first years in Houston, battleship-loving volunteers, who felt a personal need to maintain the beautiful ship, manned and cleaned it. Most of these volunteers had either served as crewmembers onboard this vessel or served in the Navy and felt an unspoken duty to continue serving *Texas* even after her decommissioning. However, with time, the severe lack of funds for the proper maintenance of the iconic ship took a huge toll.[11] By 1968, *Texas* had significantly deteriorated. Rainwater rampantly leaked into the different compartments and the wood all around the vessel had rotted. With what little funds the battleship commission had, they fought to preserve as many

During World War II, Texas *had approximately 1,700 crew members, who had no privacy in their berths, restrooms, or bathing facilities. Making use of every available space, berths lined hallways. Most of the enlisted crew washed their own uniforms, which were stored in their nearby lockers.* Photo courtesy of Debbie Z. Harwell.

areas of the ship as possible. Some of the most interesting historic areas preserved included the vintage engine room, which dates back to the battleship's birth; along with other compartments, such as the dining room, which still houses the old silver cutlery the Navy used in her galleys.

The First Battleship Declared a U.S. National Historic Landmark

The U.S. *Texas* BB-35 has another notable first, which is actually the main reason this battleship survives today. Her legacy lives on as the first battleship that the United States government named as a National Historic Landmark. In 1983, the Texas State Legislature handed over full control of this battleship and responsibility for its existence to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). Taking this task very seriously, TPWD quickly hired skilled architects whose expertise included the proper preservation of this aging battleship.[12] During one of their many inspections, they highly recommended that the ship be dry-docked to enable the crew to complete some major repairs as part of the preservation. After collecting $15 million from a fund-

If Texas *is permanently dry-docked as she was in 1988-1990 for repairs, the ship would be protected from wide-spread decay and visitors could see her entire hull, keel, and superstructure.* Photo courtesy of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

raising campaign, architects and crew pulled the battleship to the Galveston shipyard, where the process of repairing the highly corroded ship began. This process took fourteen months, bringing *Texas* back to life and restoring her to her 1945 condition.

Deterioration continues to haunt this aging ship. In June 2012 *Texas* "began taking on water at rates as high as 2,000 gallons per minute" from leaks in the hull. TPWD, the Naval Sea Systems Command, the Texas Historical Commission, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the other parties involved in a project to dry-berth the ship, "determined the most critical repairs necessary for the ship and conducted those repairs." They used funds originally allocated for the Battleship Texas Dry Berth Project to finance this endeavor. By November 2013, approximately a third of the overall work was completed, including almost two thirds of the required work to repair the keel, which represents the ship's backbone. The longer term goal, however, remains creation of a permanent dry dock once adequate funds can be raised.[13]

Although many areas of the ship still need some tender loving care, one thing is certain—this world war warrior continues to serve the people of the great state for which she was named as she continues to fight for her own survival.

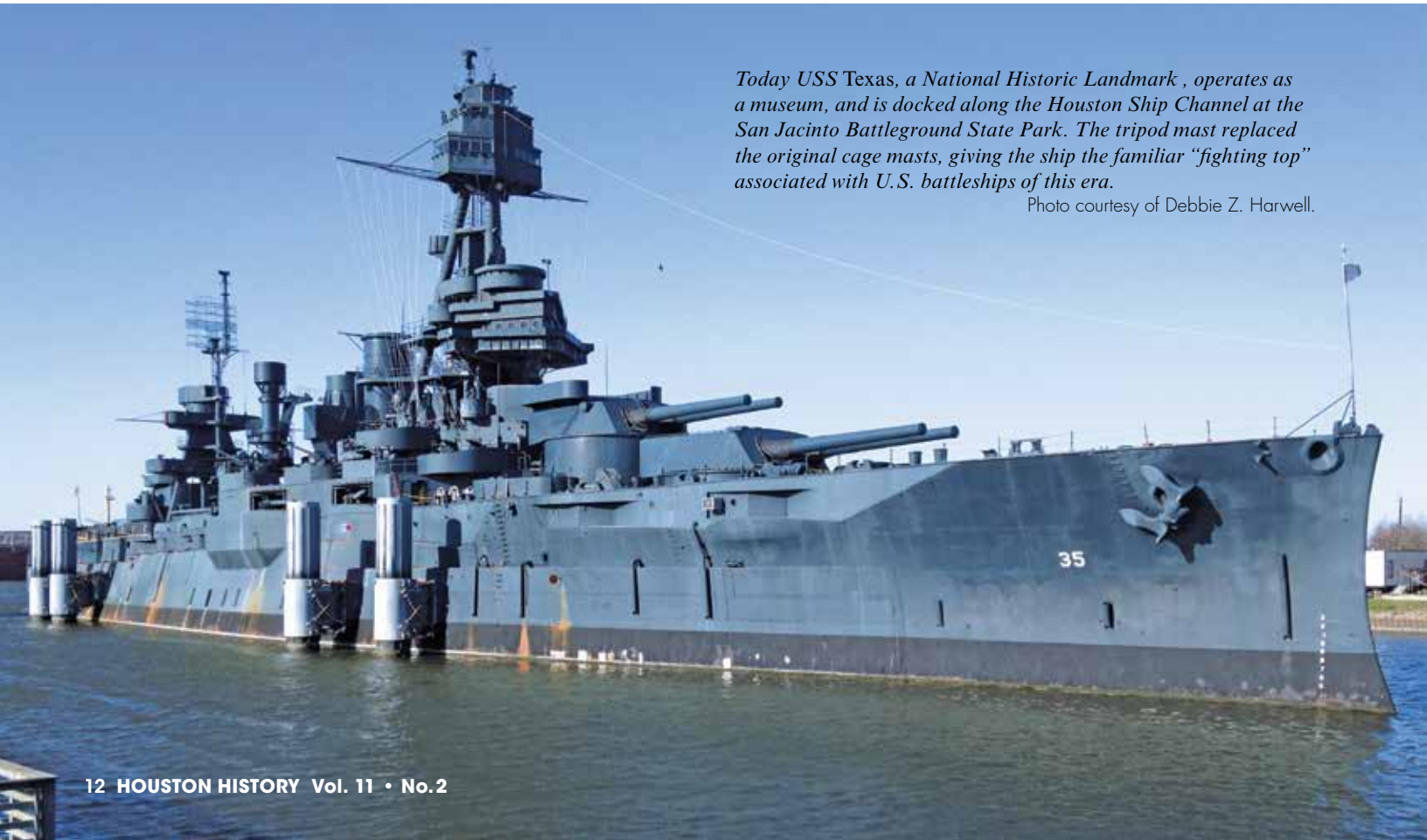
The USS *Texas* is located at 3523 Independence Parkway South, La Porte, Texas. Hours of operation are 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. year round. Admission is $12 for adults, and children under twelve are free. For group rates or additional information, call 281-479-2431 or visit www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/battleship-texas.

Johnathan Flerchinger with his service dog, Walter, who was provided through the Department of Veterans Affairs in conjunction with the Wounded Warriors Project.

Johnathan Flerchinger is a small town boy who was born and raised in the great state of Idaho. After graduating from Lewiston High School in the year 2000, he quickly enlisted in the U.S. Navy as an interior communications electrician. He served in areas of operation such as Japan, Korea, Iwo Jima, Lebanon, and the Middle East, to name a few. After injuries ended his military service, he returned to Houston, Texas, with the mindset of pursuing higher education.

Johnathan is a family man who prefers to spend every possible moment with his wife Michelle and his two sons Dominik (12) and Clayton (born in February 2014). Johnathan will finish his B.A. in both history and political science at the University of Houston in 2014, at which time he will continue working in the field of politics.

Johnathan's family has a long history of serving in the United States military, including his brother Christopher Flerchinger who served four years with the Marine Air Wing located in Miramar, California; his father-in-law Robert Montalvo who served two combat tours with the Marine Corps, one in Quang Tri Province and the other in Ga Dang during the heat of the Vietnam War; and his grandfather, John Flerchinger, who served in the U.S. Navy with Helicopter Squadron 2 based out of San Diego, California, in 1951. Last but certainly not least, his wife's grandfather, Jorge Bravo, served alongside the brave men of the 101st Airborne (The Screaming Eagles) earning both the Purple Heart and Bronze Star for his service and injuries received during the invasion of Normandy in 1944.



Today USS Texas*, a National Historic Landmark , operates as a museum, and is docked along the Houston Ship Channel at the San Jacinto Battleground State Park. The tripod mast replaced the original cage masts, giving the ship the familiar "fighting top" associated with U.S. battleships of this era.*

Photo courtesy of Debbie Z. Harwell.