

Adm. Cameron Briggs, 96; Former Skipper of the USS Boxer CV21 July 1950--August 1951

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Retired Rear Adm. Cameron Briggs showed early in life that he was destined for high places. The son of a well-traveled Army officer, Adm. Briggs spent part of his youth in Japan, where he received an engraved silver sake cup from the emperor in 1913 for climbing the country's tallest mountain: Mount Fuji. One of the first American youths to scale the 12,388-foot peak, Adm. Briggs would go on to reach higher elevations as a Navy aviator and serve on the Navy's first aircraft carrier, the Langley. The decorated veteran of World War II and the Korean War died of natural causes Jan. 23 at his home in Point Loma. He was 96.

A 1925 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Adm. Briggs earned his wings as an aviator at Pensacola, Fla., in 1928. He helped perfect aircraft landings aboard the Langley and later served as executive officer of the carrier Yorktown during World War II. During the Korean War, he commanded the carrier Boxer, which received eight battle stars during the conflict. Assigned to carry military planes into combat, the Boxer set a record for a U.S. aircraft carrier by crossing the Pacific in 8 1/2 days in July 1950.

Its load included 150 Air Force and Navy planes, along with 1,000 troops. The return trip eclipsed the freshly set record, taking 7 days, 10 hours and 36 minutes for the Boxer to reach home port on Aug. 4.

When Adm. Briggs retired from active duty in 1955, his awards included a Legion of Merit with a combat V, a Bronze Star with a combat V, an Air Medal and a Presidential Unit Citation. Early in his 30-year naval career, he flew exhibitions with a group of aviators known as the Navy High Hats in the 1929 National Air Races in Cleveland. The High Hats, a formation team considered the Blue Angels of its day, dazzled onlookers by flying with their biplanes tied together with rope.

Assigned in the early 1930s to the carrier Saratoga, Adm. Briggs served with Fighter Squadron 1. As a pioneering fighter pilot, he was depicted in "Tailspin Tommy," a cartoon book illustrated by Hal Forrest. Along with "Betty Boop" and "Smilin' Jack," "Tailspin Tommy" was among the most popular so-called big little books of the 1930s. "In one of the episodes, he saved the lost hero in a storm at sea by leading the hero's plane to his carrier," said his son, Raymond.

Adm. Briggs was born in San Francisco, where he survived the 1906 earthquake as a young boy. His father, Raymond W. Briggs, an Army lieutenant at the time, was involved in dynamiting operations to demolish buildings on the edge of the Barbary Coast. The demolition was an attempt to keep fire from spreading into the financial district. Adm. Briggs later moved with his family to the Philippines and Japan before attending college preparatory school in Pennsylvania. He was 20 when he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy. For the next three decades, he would serve on destroyers, cruisers, battleships and seven aircraft carriers.

In retirement, Adm. Briggs was president of the Yorktown Association for veterans who had served aboard the vessel. In 1970, he helped coordinate census research in San Diego as district manager of the nationwide project. In 1996, he was among a group of carrier veterans honored at the dedication of the Aircraft Carrier Memorial on Harbor Drive. Adm. Briggs' wife, Doris, past president of the Star of India Auxiliary and an auxiliary to the Military Order of World Wars, died in August 1987. Adm. Briggs is survived by daughters Bette Briggs Humphrey of San Diego and Joan McLaughlin of Lacey, Wash.; a son, Raymond of Escondido; 14 grandchildren; 17 great-grandchildren; and four great-great grandchildren.