

Niobrara (AO-72)

1942-1959

Named for the river rising in northeastern Wyoming and flowing across Nebraska to its confluence with the Missouri River. The name comes from an Omaha-Ponca phrase, "Ní Ubthátha khe," which translates to "water spread-out horizontal-the."

(AO-72: displacement 5,958; length 502'0"; beam 68'0"; draft 30'8"; speed 15.0 knots; complement 247; armament 1 5-inch, 4 3-inch, 8 40 millimeter, 12 20 millimeter; class *Kennebec*; type T3-S-A1)

Citadel was laid down on 29 June 1942 at Sparrows Point, Md., by Bethlehem Steel Co. under a Maritime Commission contract (M.C. Hull 520); launched on 28 November, sponsored by Mrs. Mark O'Dea; acquired by the Navy and commissioned as *Niobrara* (AO-72) at noon on 13 March 1942, Lt. Cmdr. Theodore G. Haff in command.



Caption: Aerial view of *Niobrara* underway near Hampton Roads, Va., 16 March 1943. (U.S. Navy photo 80-G-63516, National Archives and Records Administration, Still Pictures Branch, College Park, Md.)

After shakedown and at-sea refueling training, *Niobrara* sailed from Norfolk, Va., on 17 April 1943, carrying oil to Argentia, Newfoundland. She then sailed for the Mediterranean with oil from Texas and the Netherlands Antilles to support North Africa and Sicily operations. In March 1944, she was modified at Norfolk for Pacific service and departed for Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, and Kwajalein to fuel ships bound for the June invasion of the Marianas.



Caption: Niobrara in wartime camouflage at Norfolk, 18 April 1944, before departing for the Pacific, showing the 160-ton capacity derrick installed to facilitate the handling of tank landing craft (LCT) to tank landing ships. (U.S. Navy Photograph 19-N-64643, National Archives and Records Administration, Still Pictures Branch, College Park, Md.)

Niobrara served as station tanker at Eniwetok until July 1944, then operated from there to fuel ships at sea. She helped keep carrier task forces operating in the western Pacific and Philippine Sea without returning to base to refuel. On 1 October 1944, she arrived at Kossol Roads, Palau, to serve as a station tanker for smaller combat ships during the assault and occupation of the Palau Islands. On 13 October, she helped refloat the oiler *Mascoma* (AO-83) aground on Ejinkoto Shoal by removing 658 barrels of fuel oil from her.

On 18 October 1944, *Niobrara* sailed to Manus Island in the Admiralties, arriving on the 21st. She returned to Kossol Roads, replenished ships bound for the invasion of the Philippines, and proceeded to Leyte on 8 January 1945, taking station in San Pedro Bay on the 10th. *Niobrara* put to sea on the 14th to refuel Task Force 58 for attacks on the Chinese coast.

On 17 January 1945, *Niobrara* began fueling operations at 1001, shortly after the mid-point in the forenoon watch, and would not secure from those evolutions until a little over eight hours later. She provided fuel to the small aircraft carrier *Langley* (CVL-27), the destroyers *Preston* (DD-795) and *Longshaw* (DD-559), then finally the light cruiser *Vincennes* (CL-64). Replenishment under those stormy conditions, however, proved no easy matter. With the wind blowing at Force 8 from the northeast by east, with the sea condition of 5, with swells from northeast by east, conditions "caused heavy seas to sweep the weather deck."

The surging water knocked men off their feet; Lt. (j.g.) Stanley E. English, D-V(G), USNR, suffered a contusion of his right hip; S1c Ronald K. Snell, multiple contusions and lacerations; S1c George H. McGinnis, a lacerated right ankle; S1c Theodore C. Grunewald, a laceration of his right cheek and his nose; SF3c Sam Xavier, USNR, contusions of his right thigh; S1c Richard M. Stentiford, abrasions to the lower part of his right leg; S1c George C. Holder, USNR, lacerations to his chin; SF2c Weldon W. Pace, USNR, contusions and abrasions to his right hip; S1c Stanley F. Spurgiesz, USNR, contusions and lacerations under his left eye; F2c James M. Smith a laceration to his scalp.

Niobrara was at Ulithi and Saipan in March and April 1945, fueling ships bound for Iwo Jima and Okinawa. On 26 March 1945, *Niobrara* sailed for the latter locale, refueling Fifth Fleet ships at sea. On 5 April, she closed Hagushi Beach, Okinawa, to fuel picket destroyers while under gunfire from shore and amidst air and submarine alerts and attacks. Moving away from the beach, she witnessed several attacking planes being shot down and two U.S. ships on fire from air strikes. Through it all, she continued her refueling duties, serving six ships. On 7 April 1945, she resumed refueling duties at Kerama Retto, Okinawa, and fired on enemy planes during several raids on the fleet. On the 8th, after a morning of air raids and alerts, she departed to rendezvous with Task Group (TG) 50.8, which she joined the next day. The task group reached Ulithi on the 13th, and all the ships in the harbor lowered their flags to half-mast to mark the passing of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had died at Warm Springs, Georgia, on 12 April from a cerebral hemorrhage.

On 19 April 1945, *Niobrara* departed Ulithi as part of Task Unit (TU) 50.8.9 to rendezvous with TG 52.1 for underway refuelings, which began on the 26th and continued until she arrived back at Ulithi on 7 May. She sailed for San Pedro Bay on the 25th, carrying her usual fuel loads and 27 Grumman F6F-3 *Hellcat* belly fuel tanks. *Niobrara* arrived on the 28th.

Niobrara continued to fuel ships during the occupations of the Philippines and Okinawa, even as the Japanese fought back. On 2 July 1945, she was anchored off Hagushi Beach when a Japanese plane got close enough to drop a torpedo that threaded through the anchored ships. It missed, and the aircraft was shot down. A second raid occurred that evening before *Niobrara* steamed for Kerama Retto. After refuelings amid repeated air raid warnings, she sailed on the 3rd for a refueling rendezvous on the 4th.

She returned to Ulithi on 8 July 1945, where she loaded supplies of fuel oil and ammunition, including depth charges. *Niobrara* departed for Okinawa on the 10th and arrived at Buckner Bay on the 14th. She departed the same day to refuel Carrier Division 22 on the 15th and returned to Buckner Bay on the 16th. *Niobrara* conducted stationary and at-sea refuelings around Okinawa for the next six days. On 18 July, seven air raids were launched at the island, with several enemy planes knocked down. A typhoon also threatened the island, and *Niobrara* took evasive action with the fleet on 19 August. She returned to Okinawa on the 21st to refill her fuel tanks and steamed to rendezvous with Destroyer Squadron on 55 for 11 at-sea refuelings, during which she suffered a minor collision with the escort vessel *George E. Davis* (DE-357).

She returned to Hagushi on the 21st and fired on a raiding Japanese plane the following day. *Niobrara* refueled ships in the anchorage until she steamed for Ulithi on 23 July 1945 and arrived on the 27th. She loaded fuel oil, aviation gasoline, and diesel oil and steamed for Okinawa on the 30th. She arrived at Buckner Bay on 5 August and refueled three destroyers that afternoon. An early morning air raid opened 6 August 1945, the first of three that day. *Niobrara* was unaware the United States had dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Her routine duties continued amid frequent air raid warnings, unaffected by the bombing of Nagasaki on the 9th.

On 10 August 1945, at 2115, while at anchor in Buckner Bay, *Niobrara* was informed that the Japanese would surrender. A wild celebration broke out from shore installations and the ships in the harbor as sirens and whistles sounded, antiaircraft guns fired star shells and flares, and tracers and pyrotechnics filled the sky. The celebration was stopped, but the joy was unstoppable.

The next day, *Niobrara* steamed for Ulithi. Wartime procedures continued as treachery and trickery from the enemy were still expected. She arrived on the 15th for fuel transfers and replenishments. On 24 August, she sortied with TU 30.8.9 for Tokyo Bay, where she arrived on 30 August, enabling her to be present for the Japanese surrender on 2 September 1945. After three months of occupation duty, she sailed for Guam, where her large crane could aid in salvage work. On 10 December, she sailed for the Panama Canal and the East Coast, where she operated until decommissioned on 24 September 1946.

Niobrara was in reserve at Philadelphia until recommissioned on 5 February 1951. She spent three years with the Atlantic Fleet along the East Coast, the Caribbean, and the Mediterranean. On 13 June 1954, she arrived in San Diego, Calif., to join Pacific Fleet operations until she was decommissioned again on 13 November 1954.

Recommissioned at San Francisco, Calif., on 14 December 1956 and assigned to the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS), she departed for Balboa, the Canal Zone, on 28 December en route to Aruba in the Netherlands West Indies. *Niobrara* passed through the Panama Canal on 9 January 1957 and arrived on the 12th. She loaded a cargo of Navy fuel oil and departed for Argentia, Newfoundland, Canada, on 13 January.

Niobrara reached the U.S. Naval Station at Argentia on 20 January 1957. She discharged her cargo and sailed on the 22nd to return to Aruba. Arriving on the 29th, she loaded fuel and sailed for Norfolk on 31 January. She discharged her cargo at Naval Operating Base, Norfolk, on 5 February before entering the Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock yard at Newport News, Va., on the 7th.

On 15 February 1957, she steamed for Durban, South Africa. She paused on the 24th to transfer an ill crew member to a hospital in Georgetown, British Guiana, and reached Durban on 14 March. *Niobrara* loaded 67,000

gallons of fuel oil on the 15th and steamed for Bahrain in the Persian Gulf the next day.

On 30 March 1957 she moored at the Bahrain Petroleum Company pier in Awali and loaded 9,260 barrels of bunker fuel. The next day, *Niobrara* loaded 89,500 barrels of oil into her cargo holds and departed for Colombo, Ceylon [Sri Lanka], en route to Sasebo, Japan.

She anchored at Colombo on 7 April 1957 to take on fresh water and departed on the 8th. On 12 April, her destination was changed to Yokohama, Japan. She anchored in quarantine at Yokosuka on the 22nd and proceeded to Yokohama the next day. She moored at the Caltex pier and discharged 64,300 barrels of oil. She steamed to Yokosuka on the 24th to finish unloading her cargo oil and to fill her own fuel bunkers.

Niobrara entered the U.S. Naval Repair Facility at Yokosuka on 25 April 1957 for a brief stay and sailed back to Bahrain for another cargo of oil. She loaded 97,000 barrels on 17 May and returned to Yokohama. She moored at the Yokose Terminal, U.S. Army Fuel Pier, at Sasebo, on 5 June and unloaded 95,000 barrels of cargo oil. On the 7th, she proceeded to Yokosuka and moored at the Naval Repair Facility on 8 June.

After a week at the repair facility, she sailed on 16 June 1957 on a second round trip to Bahrain. She returned to Yokosuka on 31 July and unloaded 95,300 barrels of oil at U.S.A. Petroleum's North Dock at the Hakozaki Fuel Pier on Azumi Island on 1 and 2 August 1957. She then steamed to the Naval Repair Facility.

On 5 August 1957 she departed for Trincomalee, Ceylon (Sri Lanka). She arrived on the 18th and loaded bunker and 91,000 barrels of cargo fuel oil. The next day, she sailed for Gibraltar via the Suez Canal. Except for striking the banks of the Canal while in passage, the voyage proved uneventful, and she reached Gibraltar on 8 September.

Niobrara departed on the 16th to resupply oilers that had participated in Operation *Strikeback*, a seven-nation North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) fleet exercise in the North Atlantic. She crossed the Arctic Circle on the 23rd and joined the fleet that night. She transferred 47,700 barrels of fuel to *Alagash* (AO-97) on the 24th and the balance of her cargo to *Elokomin* (AO-55) and *Nantahala* (AO-60) the next day.

Niobrara was detached and steamed to Invergordon, Scotland, to reload fuel oil that evening. She arrived on 28 September, was resupplied, and then anchored in Cromarty Firth on the 30th to replenish *Allagash* with 83,000 barrels of oil. On 1 October 1957, she steamed for Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and anchored at Ijmuiden on the 3rd. The following day, while hoisting anchors to proceed to Amsterdam, the starboard anchor shank broke, and the crown sank in ten fathoms of water. After notifying Dutch naval authorities, *Niobrara* proceeded to Amsterdam.

On 9 September 1957, *Niobrara* began her last Atlantic crossing, bound for New York. On 20 October, she dropped her port anchor in the Upper Bay of New York Harbor. She moved to Bayonne, N.J., the next day. She returned to the Upper Bay on 25 October and moved to the New York Naval Shipyard, Brooklyn, N.Y., on the 28th.

On 4 November 1957, *Niobrara* departed for Galveston, Texas. She diverted to Sabine Pass, Texas, to unload her fuel and discharged 86,850 gallons on 9 November. She moored at the Todd Shipyard Corp. in Galveston on the 10th.

At 0930, 12 November 1957, *Niobrara* was placed out of commission, in reserve. Her ensign was hauled down, and her commissioning pennant struck. She was transferred to the Maritime Administration (MarAd) at 1330 on 5 December 1957 and entered the Beaumont, Texas, Reserve Fleet. Her title was transferred to MarAd at 0001 on 10 December 1958. Stricken from the Naval Vessel Register on 1 February 1959, she was withdrawn and exchanged to Ferrell Line, Inc. of Sterling, Va., at 0925 on 22 March 1982, which sold her at 2300 that day to Eckhart & Co. for scrapping. *Niobrara* was reported as scrapped in Brownsville, Texas, on 30 May 1982.

Niobrara received four Battle Stars for her World War II service: Marianas operation (Capture and Occupation of Saipan, 11 June–10 August 1944); Western Caroline Islands operation (Capture and Occupation of Southern

Palau Islands, 1–14 October 1944); Luzon operation (Formosa Attacks, 21 January 1945, and Nansei Shoto Attack, 22 January 1945); Okinawa Gunto operation (Assault and Occupation of Okinawa Gunto, 24 March–30 June 1945, and Fifth and Third Fleet Raids in Support of Okinawa Gunto, 27 March–4 May 1945).

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