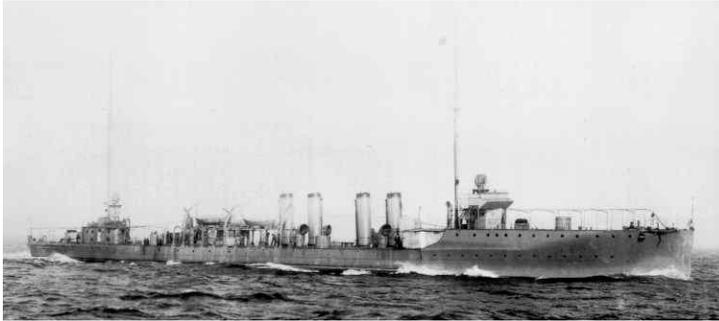




Wilkes

(CG-25)



Charles Wilkes—born on 3 April 1798 in New York City—served in merchant ships between 1815 and 1817 before being appointed a midshipman in the United States Navy on New Year's Day 1818. Following initial training in *Independence*, he transferred to *Guerriere* in July 1818 for a cruise in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas. After a two-month assignment in *Washington* between March and May 1821, Midshipman Wilkes received orders to *Franklin*, in which ship he voyaged to South America. During that cruise, Wilkes briefly commanded *Franklin's* tender *Waterwitch* before being detached from *Franklin* on 3 March 1823 to command the American merchant ship *Ocain* on her way back to Boston, where he arrived on 15 October. From there, he reported to Washington for duty in conjunction with the court-martial of Capt. Stewart, his former commanding officer in *Franklin*. On 28 April 1827, Wilkes was promoted to lieutenant. Apparently at home awaiting orders between 1826 and 1830, Lt. Wilkes requested surveying duty in March of 1827 but withdrew his application in July 1828 in favor of one for duty with a proposed exploring expedition. Late that fall, he received orders to New York where he set about the task of procuring the necessary instruments for that expedition.

In April 1830, Lt. Wilkes resumed sea duty. Assigned to *Boston*, he made a cruise in her to the Mediterranean. On 15 November, he transferred to *Fair-field* in which ship he served until May 1831 at which time he was detached and ordered home to await orders. Late in the spring of 1832, Wilkes returned to active duty as a member of the team which surveyed Narragansett Bay. In February 1833, he received orders to duty in charge of the Depot of Charts and Instruments (forerunner both of the Naval Oceanographic Office and of the Naval Observatory). In August of 1836, Wilkes briefly took leave of that post when he sailed to Europe to acquire additional equipment for the exploring expedition. He returned to the Depot of Charts and Instruments after that trip; and, in March 1837, Secretary of the Navy Mahlon Dickerson requested Wilkes to take a position in the astronomy department of the exploring expedition. That fall, he participated in an oceanographic survey of the Carolina coast.

The following spring, Wilkes learned that he had been chosen to command the South Seas Exploring Expedition. President Van Buren approved his appointment on 20 April, and Wilkes assumed command of *Vincennes* at Norfolk on 7 July. He received his final orders on 11 August and set sail in *Vincennes*—in company with *Peacock*, *Porpoise*, *Sea Gull*, *Flying Fish*, and *Relief*—on the 18th. After stops at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Tierra del Fuego located at the southern tip of South America, Wilkes took his expedition on its first cruise through Antarctic waters in February and March of 1839. He returned to Tierra del Fuego and then later

headed through the south seas to Sydney, Australia, where he arrived on 29 November. On the day after Christmas, he embarked upon his second voyage to the Antarctic. In January 1840, he sighted the actual land mass which constitutes Antarctica, though it took later explorations to vindicate his assertions that the continent existed.

By late spring 1840, the expedition moved north again and began the exploration of the islands of the South Pacific. After surveying the Fiji Islands between May and August, the expedition departed those islands, bound for Hawaii on 11 August. The Hawaiian survey, conducted between 24 September 1840 and 5 April 1841, centered upon a study of the volcanoes, Mauna Loa and Kilauea. Wilkes completed his work in Hawaii in April 1841 and set sail on the 5th for the west coast. After surveys of parts of the coast of the Pacific Northwest during the summer of 1841, he brought his expedition into San Francisco on 14 August. Its arrival back in the United States, however, signaled no end to the work of the expedition. On 1 November, it put to sea once again, this time for a voyage to the western Pacific. During that cruise, Wilkes visited Manila in the Philippines, the British colony at Singapore, and Cape Town on the southern tip of Africa. Wilkes and his command concluded the expedition upon arrival at New York on 10 June 1842.

For almost 19 years, Wilkes worked with the data gathered by his expedition. During that period, he supervised the publication of the results of that exploration in a series of *Narratives* under the auspices of the Navy. He also received two promotions during that time—to commander in 1843 and to captain in 1855. The only break in this duty came in the second half of 1858 when the Secretary of the Navy sent Wilkes on a special mission to evaluate the potential for naval use of the natural resources—primarily iron, coal, and timber—of North Carolina's Deep River region.

The outbreak of the Civil War, however, brought an interruption to his scientific work. On 19 April, he was detached from his duty with the expedition publication program in order to help destroy the Norfolk Navy Yard before Union forces abandoned it to the Confederacy. In May, Capt. Wilkes received orders to take command of the steam-powered frigate *San Jacinto*. He arrived on board his new command on 27 August, at Monrovia, Liberia, just before she set sail to return to the United States. During the voyage home, he took her to the West Indies in search of the Southern commerce raider, CSS *Sumter*, under the command of Capt. Raphael Semmes—later commanding officer of the famous Confederate cruiser CSS *Alabama*. During that mission, his ship stopped at Cienfuegos, Cuba, for coal, and Wilkes learned that the South's commissioners to England and France, James Mason and John Slidell, had escaped from Charleston on board the fast coastal packet *Theodora* and were then in Havana awaiting transportation to Europe. *San Jacinto* quickly headed for Havana, hoping to catch *Theodora* when she embarked upon her return trip but arrived a day late. He learned, however, that Mason and Slidell were still in Cuba and planned to board the British mail packet *Trent* at St. Thomas for the voyage to Europe.

Thereupon, he concocted a plan to intercept *Trent* in Old Bahama Channel, some 230 miles east of Havana, and capture the two Confederate diplomats. On 8 November, the British ship steamed into sight, and Wilkes coerced her into stopping with two shots across her bow. A boarding party seized Mason and Slidell and their secretaries and then allowed the neutral ship to continue her voyage. *San Jacinto* then headed home with her prisoners. Upon his arrival in Boston, Wilkes was loudly acclaimed for his action, but soon the clouds of war with Great Britain over the incident began to darken the horizon. Ultimately, the dubious legality of Wilkes' action and the threat of war with Britain and France brought a complete disavowal of Wilkes' act by the Federal Government and the release of the prisoners.

On 30 November, Capt. Wilkes was detached from *San Jacinto* and ordered to duty with the Board of Naval Examiners. That assignment lasted until the following summer. He commanded the James River Flotilla briefly in July and August of 1862 and received his promotion to commodore at that time. On 29 August, Wilkes left that post and took over the

Potomac River Flotilla. That assignment proved to be of short duration. On 8 September, he received orders to command the West India Squadron. Promoted to acting rear admiral, Wilkes directed the West India Squadron— primarily concerned with hunting down Southern commerce raiders and blockade runners—until the summer of 1863. On 1 June, he was detached from the squadron and, on the 30th, set sail from Havana for the United States in *Roanoke*.

Conflicts with the Navy Department, probably stemming from his treatment during the *Trent* affair negotiations, culminated in Wilkes' court-martial early in 1864 over the publication of a letter he wrote to Gideon Welles castigating the Secretary for statements made against Wilkes in his annual report. On 26 April 1864, Acting Rear Admiral Wilkes was found guilty by court-martial of disobedience of orders, insubordination, and other specifications and was sentenced to receive a public reprimand and suspension from the service for three years. President Lincoln reduced the term of suspension to one year, at the conclusion of which Wilkes retired from the Navy. On 6 August 1866, he was promoted to rear admiral on the retired list and, for the remainder of his life, worked for the completion of publication of the results of the Wilkes Exploring Expedition. He also took time out to do some writing, including an autobiography. On 8 February 1877, Rear Admiral Wilkes died at Washington, D.C. Initially interred at Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington, his body was moved to Arlington National Cemetery in August 1909.

Builder: William Cramp & Sons, Philadelphia, PA

Commissioned (USN): 10 Nov 1916

Acquired (CG): 25 Mar 1926

Commissioned (CG): 23 Aug 1926

Decommissioned: 27 Apr 1934

Displacement (tons) 1,110

Dimensions 315' 3" x 29'11" x 10' 8 1/4"

Machinery 2 direct-drive main turbines, 1 or 2 triple-expansion or turbine-cruising engines

16,000-17,500 shp, 29.5 knots.

Complement 6 officers, 82 men (CG, 1930)

Armament 3 x 4"/50, 1 x 1-pdr

History:

The second *Wilkes* (Destroyer No. 67) was laid down on 11 March 1915 at Philadelphia by the William Cramp & Sons Ship & Engine Building Co.; launched on 18 May 1916; sponsored by Miss Carrie McIver Wilkes; and commissioned on 10 November 1916, Lt. Comdr. Julius F. Hellweg in command.

Wilkes spent the winter preceding America's entry into World War I outfitting—first in the Philadelphia Navy Yard and later in the Torpedo Station located at Newport, R.I.—and conducting fleet maneuvers in Cuban waters. She returned from those operations at the height of the crisis over the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, arriving in Norfolk on 7 March 1917. Just one month later, on 6 April, the United States joined the war against the Central Powers. At the end of April, the destroyer escorted the French cruiser *Amiral Aube* from Norfolk to New York. On 15 June, she departed New York in the screen of the first American troop convoy to voyage to Europe. She escorted her charges into Saint Nazaire on 26 June then headed for Portsmouth, England, where she celebrated Independence Day. From there, she continued on to her permanent European base, Queenstown, Ireland, where she arrived on the 6th.

Wilkes operated from the Queenstown base for the duration of World War I. For the most part, she conducted antisubmarine patrols and escorted convoys bound for England on the last leg of their voyage. Occasionally, however, she was called upon to shepherd convoys into port at Brest and Saint Nazaire, France. Although her duties appeared routine, they were strenuous. She spent many arduous days at sea in the stormy Atlantic with only hours or, at most, a day or two in port to provision. Though it appears that she never saw combat with German U-boats, she did witness the results of their depredations once when she rescued 23 survivors of the torpedoed British merchantman SS *Purley* on 25 July 1917. She continued her patrol and escort duties until after Christmas 1918, over a month after the cessation of hostilities. On 26 December, she departed Queenstown and headed for home. On 7 January 1919, she arrived in New York.

Immediately upon her return, *Wilkes* began overhaul at New York. That occupied her time until 1 May when the destroyer embarked upon her most noteworthy postwar mission—duty as a picket ship for the first transatlantic flight. Only one of the four Navy-Curtiss (NC) flying boats slated for the mission actually completed the flight. NC-4 reached the Azores at Horta on 17 May, made the hop to Ponta Delgada on the 20th, and departed the Azores for Lisbon, Portugal, on the 27th. *Wilkes* served as a picket on that second leg of the flight as the fourth ship in a line of 14 destroyers between the Azores and the European continent. The NC-4 reached her destination that same day, and *Wilkes'* part in the event was completed. While NC-4 finished the third and last leg of its flight—from Lisbon to Plymouth, England—on 30 and 31 May, *Wilkes* pointed her bow homeward. The destroyer reentered New York harbor on 4 June and resumed peacetime operations along the Atlantic coast. For the next 34 months, she plied the waters off the eastern seaboard in the spring, summer, and fall. Late each fall, she headed south to participate in fleet maneuvers in Cuban waters, the Caribbean, and the Gulf of Mexico. During that time, she was based at three different ports—Newport, R.I.; New York, N.Y.; and Charleston, S.C. On 12 April 1922, *Wilkes* entered the Philadelphia Navy Yard where she was placed out of commission on 5 June 1922.

Wilkes remained inactive at Philadelphia for over four years. In the summer of 1926, she was turned over to the Coast Guard, desperately in need of additional ships to suppress the illegal, but lucrative, traffic in alcoholic beverages spawned by Prohibition. She was commissioned a Coast Guard destroyer at New London, Conn., on 23 August 1926, Lt. Comdr. M. J. Ryan, USCG, in command. For the next eight years, she patrolled the east coast from New England to Florida. In 1934, the repeal of Prohibition brought an end to the illicit alcohol trade and the "Rum Patrol" as well. *Wilkes* completed her last Coast Guard patrol at Philadelphia on 15 March 1934. There, she was placed out of commission on 29 March and returned to the Navy. On 5 July, her name was struck from the Navy list. She was sold on 22 August 1934 for scrapping under the terms of the London Treaty for the limitation of naval armaments.

Coast Guard Operational Highlights

25 Mar 1926 Transferred from US Navy at Philadelphia Navy Yard.

22 May 1926 Ordered to Boston.

5 Jun 1926 Orders amended, assigned to Division Four, Destroyer Force at New London.

23 Aug 1926 Commissioned at New London.

24 Oct 1927 Authorized to transfer to Division One, Destroyer Force.

31 Mar 1928 Ordered to return to New London.

17 Apr 1931 Arrived at new duty station at Boston.

22 May 1933 Headquarters authorized permanent change of station to New York.

6 Jun 1933 Arrived in New York and reported for duty at new station.

Cuban Expedition

7 Sep 1933 Discontinued target practice at Hampton Roads and left for Key West.

9 Sep 1933 Arrived at Key West for duty with US Navy.

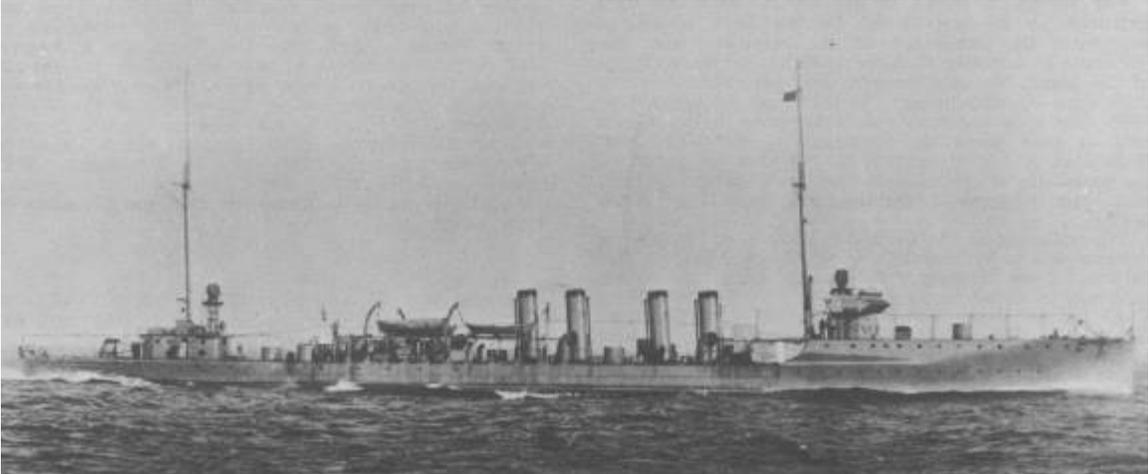
25 Sep 1933 Arrived at Matanzas, Cuba

18 Oct 1933 Left Havana, Cuba for Key West and arrived the same date.

6 Nov 1933 Released from duty with US Navy. Headquarters directed *Wilkes* to return to duty in Eastern Area.

27 Apr 1934 Decommissioned and returned to US Navy at Philadelphia Navy Yard.

Winner of the USCG Gunnery Trophy for Destroyers in 1928-1929 and 1930-1931.



Wilkes (Destroyer No. 67) on trials, 28 September 1916. She has not yet been armed; weights have been installed in the positions of guns and torpedo tubes. (NR&L(M) 3832.

Sources:

Cutter History Files, CG Historian's Office

Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships

