As the sun rose over the Pacific Ocean on the morning of 13 October 1966, the residents of Pacifica, California, a suburb of San Francisco, woke to a new feature on the sandy beach. Washing ashore was a haze grey warship, with the numbers 583 painted bright white standing as tall as a building. As the locals arose for the day and started on their morning walks, round of golf, or AM commute, the questions started circling. “What ship was this?” “Where did it come from?” “Why is it washing ashore, and who is in charge of it?” These were all very good questions, so let me start from the beginning.

The ship, USS GEORGE A. JOHNSON (DE-583), was a Rudderow-Class Destroyer Escort. George Alfred Johnson was born in Fleetwood, Pennsylvania, on 26 September 1922, the first of seven children born to Isabella and Alfred Johnson. Alfred was a WWI veteran, fighting on behalf of the United Kingdom. Alfred was wounded at Belleau Wood, in June 1918, was captured by Germans, and remained a prisoner of war until the armistice in November. Throughout his youth, George admired his father, and was especially proud of his service. George worked as a pin-boy and a welder at Lukens Steel, in his hometown. He left school in his senior year to attend boot camp, and to join the Marine Corps on 28 January 1942.

By 3 May, Private Johnson found himself in Tulagi, Solomon Islands, about 15 miles north of Guadalcanal. He participated in the invasion, as a crucial part of “Operation Watchtower.” Two days after the initial invasion, his squad came under enemy sniper fire from a hideout in a nearby cave. Johnson rushed the cave while throwing grenades as he went, allowing his squad to continue moving forward. Johnson continued toward the cave until both he and the sniper fell silent. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star and a Purple Heart for his indomitable spirit and outstanding bravery.

DE-583, named in Johnson’s honor, was laid down at Bethlehem-Hingham Shipyard, in Massachusetts, on 24
November 1943. She was constructed in part by steel plates manufactured at Lukens Steel, where George had worked. By 12 January the ship was launched, with George’s mother, Mrs. Alfred R. Johnson, as the sponsor. Alvin Robinson took command of the ship when she was commissioned on 15 April 1944.

After completing shakedown off Bermuda, GEORGE A. JOHNSON left New York on 24 June, in an escort convoy bound for Tunisia. As the convoy approached the North African coast, the German Luftwaffe initiated an air attack. GEORGE A. JOHNSON opened fire with her two 5 inch/38 guns, four 40mm, and ten 20mm anti-aircraft guns. The crew fired rapidly, and threw everything they could at the attacking planes. The guns successfully repelled the enemy aircraft, and allowed the convoy to arrive safely in Tunisia on 14 July.

In August 1944, she earned her first “dent,” when she was rammed by YO-153, a fuel oil barge, which left a 6-inch hole in her hull, while entering the Brooklyn Navy Yard. After the repairs to her hull, she was ordered to Norfolk to join another convoy bound for the Mediterranean. Upon her return to the States on 17 October, she was refitted for the warmer waters of the Pacific. She left New York, traveled through the Panama Canal, and arrived in Hollandia, New Guinea, in December 1944, where her orders were to carry out escort tasks from New Guinea to Allied bases in the Philippines.

In January 1945, Lieutenant Commander Albert T. Horn relieved skipper Robinson, and GEORGE A. JOHNSON joined Task Force 78. While the task force was heading to Lingayen Gulf, they were attacked by four Japanese Kamikazes on 12 January. USS HODGES DE-231 was hit by one of these planes; it took out her mast, radio antennas, and splashed without inflicting a single casualty. The entire convoy reached their destination the following day. After departing Leyte Gulf, GEORGE A. JOHNSON arrived at New Guinea on 27 April, and remained at Humboldt Bay until August, where she was dry docked for many overdue repairs.

After the repairs, she returned to the Philippines independently, and went on to join Admiral Thomas C. Kincaid’s force in Jinsen, Korea. This force set course to the Yangtze River, where on 19 September 1945, they were
among the first American ships to enter the river since 1941. They also assisted in the reoccupation of Shanghai, and the establishment of a Yangtze Patrol.

On 30 September 1945, almost a full month after the formal surrender of Japan, GEORGE A. JOHNSON was moored on the Huangpu River, in Shanghai. The crew had assembled on the fantail to watch a movie when a shot rang out. Radioman 3/c Eugene E. Rahmer was hit. Rahmer was taken down to sick bay, where the Pharmacist Mate found an entrance wound one-eighth of an inch to the right of his spine and an exit wound under his right armpit. When his shirt was removed the .25 caliber bullet rolled out and hit the deck. Rahmer was transferred to USS NASHVILLE CL-43, a Brooklyn-Class Cruiser, for further medical care. The wound was clean and there was no sign of infection or damage to his spine, so Rahmer was transferred back to his ship on 6 October, and was the only person ever injured aboard GEORGE A. JOHNSON, despite numerous encounters with the enemy. It took forty-five years and a run around with the Navy, but Gene Rahmer received his Purple Heart in 1991.

The mysterious shot came from the Pootung side of the Huangpu River, where Japanese Naval Landing Party Marines were evacuated from Shanghai and being held. The bullet was traced back to this camp, and upon investigation a small arsenal was found, even though all rifles and ammunition were ordered to be turned in under the terms of the surrender.

The man in charge of this camp was Japanese Rear Admiral Minoru Katsuno. He was commander of the marines in Shanghai since 1944. Katsuno was held as the responsible party for Rahmer getting shot, as he could not produce the man who pulled the trigger. After the investigation, a trial was held at his former headquarters in Shanghai. He was brought to court before three Chinese Generals on charges of failing to discipline his men, and having guns and ammunition in his possession after the surrender. Five American officers attended the trial, as well as many members of the press, so the trial was conducted in Chinese and English, while an interpreter sat next to Katsuno, who only spoke Japanese.

Two of the American officers were witnesses that testified to Rahmer being shot while aboard GEORGE A. JOHNSON. They also were among the group that discovered 290 .25 caliber rifles and 10,000 rounds of ammunition at the camp. Katsuno’s defense was that he was permitted to keep the weapons to protect his troops. He also suggested that some of the rifles may have been stolen by “bandit” troops who were responsible for the shooting.

A Chinese newspaper written in English stated that Katsuno was the first man charged with violating the Terms of Surrender. The article stated that the Chinese Generals were going to reconvene later in the week to announce a verdict. By November, the Long Island Star-Journal reported that Katsuno was sentenced to solitary confinement for two months.

Days after Rahmer re-joined the crew, excitement poured over the bulkheads when GEORGE A. JOHNSON’s crew received their order to return back to the States. On 9 October, she took on 65,000 gallons of oil to fuel her Foster-Wheeler boilers, and departed for Okinawa. Once in Okinawa, she picked up happy homeward-bound servicemen, and steamed for San Diego via Pearl Harbor.
Larry Rody leaving the ship to retrieve supplies, leaving Paul Farley aboard to keep their claim.

The ship was decommissioned on 31 May 1946, and in August re-commissioned and assigned to the 12th Naval District as a training ship. Reserve Sailors would make training cruises off of the California coast aboard the seasoned vessel. On Memorial Day 1952, she hosted Marines aboard for a gun salute outside the Golden Gate Bridge and she hosted Mexican dignitaries on a visit to Manzanillo, Mexico. In September 1957, GEORGE A. JOHNSON was again decommissioned, and entered the Pacific Reserve Fleet at Mare Island.

On November 1, 1965 GEORGE A. JOHNSON was struck from the Navy List, and sold for scrap to National Metal & Steel Corporation. Almost a year later, when being towed from San Francisco to San Pedro to the scrap yard, the ship broke free of her tow line and ran aground on Mori’s Point Beach in Pacifica, California. The ship just missed an outcropping of jagged rocks that would have been detrimental to scrapping the ship and could have released 88,000 gallons of oil into the shallow waters. Luckily she ran aground on the sandy beaches near a golf course.

Not surprisingly, word spread quickly around town that a warship had washed ashore and people stormed the beach to see for themselves. Two “enterprising San Franciscans” took it upon themselves to board the ship and claimed possession of the unmanned vessel. A claim that National Metal & Steel Corporation politely ignored. Naturally, the
media picked up this story, and thousands of people flocked to the beach to watch the ownership dispute. According to an unnamed admiralty lawyer, the two men legally had ownership of the vessel as long as one of them remained on board.

The two men, an “adventure-minded airline pilot” named Paul Farley and his brother-in-law, Larry Rody, a classical composer, climbed aboard the empty ship and claimed marine admiralty laws gave them the right to scrap the ship and keep the profits for themselves. Rody at one point left the ship to gather supplies and medical equipment, as Farley had diabetes. One of them had to stay on the ship to keep their claim. Upon his return, Rody found the beach crowded with thousands of on-lookers and police bellowing at them to give up the ship. The police would not allow Rody to re-board the ship.

The pair held onto their claim for 27 and one-half hours, until finally forced to abandon ship. Paul Farley was unable to obtain the insulin he needed, as he left the ship he said “I am leaving this vessel under protest.”

At this point, the ship was back in the ownership of National Metal & Steel, but this story isn’t over yet. The ship was on the beach but not getting out to sea under her own power. There were many discussions on what the best course of action moving forward was. With the shallow beach stretching 3,000 feet seaward, it was not possible to refloat GEORGE A. JOHNSON, take her out to sea, or reattach the towline. She washed ashore during extreme high tide, and was pushed along by sixteen-foot rolling waves. Someone threw out the idea of preserving her as a memorial museum or recreation center, but the idea was dismissed quickly because of the regular maintenance costs.

Three weeks after her stranding, it was decided to remove the Navy-owned equipment aboard the ship, and scrap GEORGE A. JOHNSON on the beach. It took several more weeks to get permission from the city to continue with the beach-side scrapping. The winter season was approaching, and seasonal storms and high tides had moved GEORGE A. JOHNSON’s stern 12 feet seaward. Fearing that the waves would grow worse and GEORGE A. JOHNSON would be tossed uncontrollably, crews pumped water into the after section of the ship to settle her more into the beach. After information was made public that the vast amount of oil could pollute beaches from San...
Francisco to Northern Oregon, permissions were granted and the scrapping quickly moved forward.

Crews started by pumping out the water ballast and oil, which lightened the weight of the vessel. Next, the hull was moved further onto the beach and out of the surf, to assist in the safety of the cutting work. Soon the hissing of cutting torches filled the small beach; a 110-ton Bucyrus-Erie Transit Crane moved into position. This was the first time a modern truck crane would salvage a vessel of 1,450 tons from the open sea. At the end of the first week, all the anti-aircraft gun mounts were removed, as well as the aft 5-inch gun weighing in at 25 tons. All of the gun mounts were returned to the Navy.

Workmen cut off the superstructure, except a small section protecting the workers from the incoming winter waves. Sections of the stern were removed and the bow began to disappear as the men worked their way amidships from both ends with cutting torches. These sections weighed 50 tons each, and were lifted by the massive crane with a 100-foot boom. The cable line took most of the weight horizontally, and the rolling waves helped spasmodically. Eventually, the crane was able to lift the sections of hull up vertically and swing them ashore. The crane then loaded the sections onto flatbed trailers, and they were driven the 400 miles to San Pedro.

As the hull got smaller, it rocked more and more violently in the waves, making the dismantling even more difficult and dangerous. Throughout the dismantling, this small town beach was littered with an assortment of machinery, pipes of different lengths, and sections of hull deck, and bulkheads.

Six months after the ship washed ashore, on 26 April 1967 National Metal & Steel finished their “practically impossible” salvage of USS GEORGE A. JOHNSON. All traces had been cleared from the beach. This mighty warship was removed from the beach one truckload at a time never to be seen again. Today, as people walk along the beach or enjoy the ocean vista from a green of the golf course, few will remember the proud WWII warship that made her last stand on that beach over 50 years ago.