

Theodore Navy Magazine - Tales from the Early Era of Munition Disposal

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The following is the first in a series of articles by Guest Author [Robert "Dale" Woosley](#) who will share his experiences while stationed at the Theodore Navy Magazine, Alabama in the early years following the end of WWII.

I was stationed at the Theodore Navy Magazine from about January, 1946 through May, 1946, having been dismissed from radio and radar school as the ending of WWII reduced the need for virtually all Navy operators. The Magazine consisted of a base facility and a munitions storage area located about two miles from the base, surrounded by dense woods and swampy areas and was located about six miles from Mobile, on an asphalt farm-to-market road. The munitions storage area consisted of a large number of metal igloos on concrete slab floors, sunk about half way under ground level (for temperature stability) and joined by a network of rails for conventional boxcars. Most of the igloos could not be reached except by rail. They were almost of constant temperature year round.

At the time I was there, the base cadre consisted of seven officers and about 35 enlisted men. Some of the officers lived in Mobile and were picked up each morning by our school bus, but there was always the Officer-of-the-Day (OOD) on post. The mission of Theodore was to serve as a staging point for ammunition to be destroyed or sent to another facility. During WWII, merchant ships had Armed Guard Crews aboard to man 3 or 5 inch guns against enemy attack. With the war ending, these crews and armament were taken off merchant ships and the guns shipped to a Navy Arsenal somewhere and the ammunition was shipped to a magazine; Theodore was such a magazine. Most shells up to 5 inches were filled with smokeless powder and had an expiration date; Theodore processed those.

The base consisted of a barracks which had the eating area and a small office manned 24/7 by an enlisted man to take incoming telephone calls and teletype messages. The office was equipped with a radio system which I never saw being used while I was there. The BOQ was directly opposite the enlisted men's barracks with a small parade area separating the two. There was an atmosphere of informality due to the smallness of the base, but colors were raised every morning with full complement of personnel, and the OOD brought us up to date on Navy matters, including what we were scheduled to do that day. Usually, enlisted men worked on the same assignment, but there were exceptions, as will be explained later.

Ammunition arrived at Theodore by two ways: a small percentage came by rail, from places unknown; almost all came from ships docked at our pier on the west side of Mobile Bay, a few miles from our base. In most cases, ammunition from ships was securely placed on wooden pallets which were transferred to rail cars and taken to the igloo area.

Once at an igloo, the ammunition was stacked on U-shaped metal racks and notes were made as to its placement. At some later date, it would be taken out and usually loaded into an LSM of the

model which had a 9-foot deep well running down the middle of the ship for most of its length, with narrow decks along each side at the top edge of the well, and bow doors which normally opened for vehicles. It was customary that we loaded the LSM until the ammunition was even from side to side of the ship; in other words, 9 feet deep.

After we went out into the Gulf of Mexico into 1,000 fathom water, we headed into the wind, held constant position, and opened the bow doors. Two men, stripped to the waist and secured with a rope, stood on the front of the bow doors and threw ammunition overboard. As they made more working room, roller-conveyors were set up and additional men joined the work of moving ammunition to the bow doors. An attempt was made to get rid of stuff from the top down, instead of front to back which would make it necessary to roll boxes uphill and raise the bow doors too high. It took about 9 hours to unload the ship. As the ship pitched, the guys on the bow doors sometime got dunked; we rotated that duty. One bow man had an axe with which he punched a hole in the metal boxes which contained small caliber ammunition to make it sink.

The largest items we had to throw overboard were the high-explosive 9-inch projectiles; the smallest were .22 caliber. Including in the obsolete disposals were .22 caliber; 30 and 50 caliber; 12 and 20 gauge shotgun shells; 20 and 40 mm anti-aircraft shells; 3, 5, 7 and 9 inch projectiles, some of which were non-explosive while most were. We did not handle bags of gunpowder for larger caliber guns.

Many years after my time at Theodore, I had occasion to tour a cruise ship in New Orleans. In the rotunda of the ship was a huge map of the Gulf of Mexico, with an area south of Mobile circled and marked "Ammunition Dump." I supposed then, as I do now, that some of those shells could still explode.