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Captain held command of USS Missouri twice

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USS MISSOURI MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

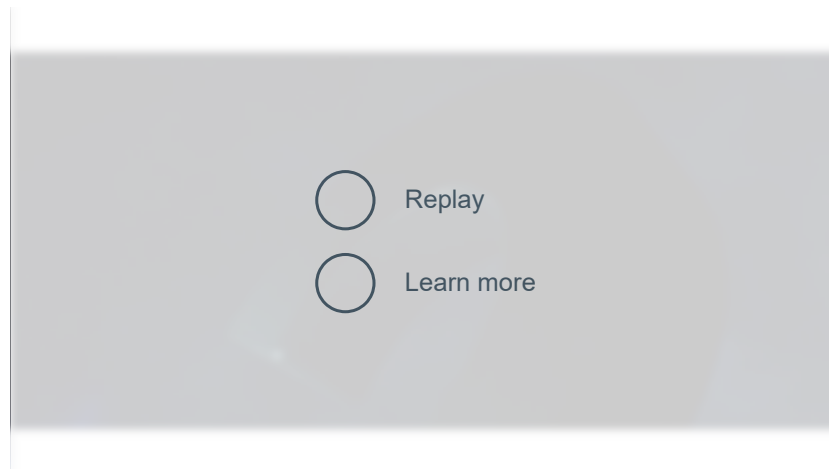
A. Lee Kaiss became the Navy's last battleship commander at the USS Missouri's decommissioning ceremony in 1992.

Navy Capt. A. Lee Kaiss twice held command of the USS Missouri — the second time as the last battleship captain in the U.S. Navy.

The 887-foot warship had a storied career, serving as the site of Japan's formal surrender on Sept. 2, 1945, fighting in the Korean War, and firing 305 16-inch shells in the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Its last mission was an appearance at Pearl Harbor for the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Dec. 7, 1941, attack.

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Kaiss, 78, died July 25 in his hometown of Hagerstown, Md.

"Lee was the last (commanding officer) of the ship and when he was the last to walk off the ship at her second decommissioning in 1992, that made him the last battleship sailor in the world — a title he wore proudly," said Michael Carr, president and CEO of the USS Missouri Memorial Association. "He was a great resource for our curatorial staff and loved to come and visit and share his stories with the staff."

The "Mighty Mo" opened as a museum and memorial on Jan. 29, 1999, opposite the sunken USS Arizona.

Decommissioned in 1955, Missouri was reactivated in 1986 to support President Ronald Reagan's plans for a 600-ship Navy — with Kaiss at the helm of the battlewagon.

But Kaiss suffered a heart attack. Following his recovery, he was in the right place at the right time to resume command of the Missouri in 1990.

At the time, two of the remaining four battleships, the New Jersey and Iowa, were being decommissioned. The Defense Department had said all four would be retired, but that plan changed and Missouri and Wisconsin were sent out on Gulf War duty.

Wisconsin was decommissioned in September 1991, leaving just the Missouri as an active battleship.

President George H.W. Bush “gave the Mighty Mo one last reprieve, wanting Missouri to be part of the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor,” according to the curatorial staff of the Battleship Missouri Memorial.

At the final decommissioning on March 31, 1992, in Long Beach, Calif., Kaiss watched the crew depart and was the last person on board.

“When he reached the bottom of the gangway and stepped onto the pier, he became the last active duty battleship sailor,” the memorial said. “At that moment, 11:32, 31 March, 1992, the era of the battleship ended.”

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