

THE PANAMA RAILROAD SHIPS AND THE OTHER SS ANCON

During World War 2, alongside the Canal itself there was a trans-isthmus railway – the Panama Railroad Company - and an associated shipping line, both of which were to play important roles during the war. In this piece I intend to look at the service of the three vessels of the shipping line, along with the role of the ship which had been the first to complete a transit of the Canal in 1914, as well as associated matters.

While all of the shipping line's vessels survived the war, 82 other ships on the Panamanian register were lost to U-boats.

After the US bought the Panama Canal Company in 1902, it had set up the Isthmian Canal Commission to oversee construction of the Canal, and the railway also came under this Commission. Until 1939, when 1936 Treaty amendments were ratified by the US Senate, the Panama Railroad Company had a monopoly on trans-isthmus transportation¹. In 1939, the company also operated, as its largest commercial enterprise, the commissary stores throughout the Canal Zone. This was as well as handling all dock and harbour activities at the terminal cities, and the Hotel Washington and Hotel Tivoli at either end of the Canal.²

The Panama Railroad Company also owned a shipping line, which offered connections to New York and San Francisco, as well as having a Central America network linking Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala to Panama City. One of its own ships, the SS *Ancon*, had been the first-ever ship to transit the completed Canal in August 1914³.

¹ In 1948, the US passed The Panama Railroad Act 1948, amending the Canal Zone Code 1934 with the addition of Article 3 - this Article re-incorporated the Panama Railroad (PRR) making it an official operating arm of the Canal.

² https://aquadocs.org/bitstream/handle/1834/19156/pages39_66.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

³ See below for her World War 2 story.

Formed in 1893 as the Colombian Line, it initially operated between Colón and New York using chartered vessels. It was re-named as the Panama Railroad Steamship Line on 1 January 1896, and in 1904 it passed into the control of the US Government. It was operated by a Board of Directors appointed by the Secretary of War, and the Line played a critical role in the construction of the Canal.⁴

In 1932, the US Congress overruled President Hoover's plan to disband the line, and instead planning for new tonnage began, but this proposal then came under attack from privately-owned companies opposed to a government-owned line being involved in commercial trade⁵.

However, the plans for new ships were revived in 1936, this coinciding with legislation in the US intended to revive and strengthen the US Merchant Marine, as the US sought to recover from the Depression. A new Federal Maritime Commission had been created, and this subsidised the construction and operation of US vessels. However, the Merchant Marine Act 1936 also reaffirmed US Government support for private shipping companies, and this prompted criticism of plans to upgrade the railway's shipping line and what was, in effect, a government-owned shipping line.

The plans were eventually finalised, providing for three new vessels designed by the noted naval architect George G Sharp of New York⁶, with the intention to offer 52 passenger sailings a year compared to the 26 previously offered.

⁴ Journal of The Steamship Historical Society of America (1991)

<https://www.czbrats.com/Builders/liners.htm>

⁵ <https://www.czbrats.com/Builders/liners.htm>

⁶ The company of George G Sharp Inc, founded in 1920, still exists. During World War 2 the company was commissioned by the US Department of Commerce to design "standard types" of merchant ships, including the C4 - the largest cargo ships built by the US Maritime Commission (MARCOM). During the war, as George G Sharp Co., it was heavily involved in the emergency shipbuilding programme.

At the outbreak of World War 2, the Line had its small fleet of new passenger-cargo liners, built in the US by the Bethlehem Steel Company in Massachusetts⁷. These were designed to accommodate passengers or cargo at a speed of around 17 knots. The three ships were named *SS Ancon*, *SS Cristobal* and *SS Panama*. They all were of 10,021 gross tons (9,091 tonnes) and 14,206 tons (12,887 tonnes) displacement; 493 feet 6 inches (150.4 metres) in length, 64 feet (19.5 metres) beam and 26 feet 3 inches (8 metres) draught. They were designed to accommodate 202 passengers (or over 2,000 as a troopship), as well as 292,410 cubic feet (8,280 cubic metres) of general cargo and had 90,460 cubic feet (2,561.5 cubic metres) of refrigerated cargo capacity (chiefly for green bananas).

All three vessels were taken over for war use, with *USS Ancon*, in particular, having an active and distinguished wartime record.

SS ANCON

SS Ancon was launched in 1938 and only delivered in June 1939⁸. She had been laid down at Bethlehem Steel Company of Quincy, Massachusetts, launched on 24 September 1938, and delivered on 16 June 1939 at a cost \$5 million.

Her interior featured mirrored lounges, cocktail bars and a dinning salon, as found on many liners of the period. Until the Pearl Harbor attack on 7 December 1941, she continued to undertake her peacetime civilian service, between New York and Cristobal.

⁷ Which had won the contract with a tender of \$4.04 million per ship:

<https://www.czbrats.com/Builders/liners.htm>

⁸ The original *SS Ancon*, which had made the first-ever transit of the Canal, was sold in 1941 and her wartime story is related below.

On 11 January 1942, she was taken over by the Army Transportation Service whilst still at Balboa. After modification in San Francisco⁹ she was used for four months ferrying US troops to reinforce Australia, being renamed as the attack transport USAT *Ancon*¹⁰.

She was then acquired by the US Navy on 7 August 1942, underwent further modification, and was commissioned as USS *Ancon* (AP-66) on 12 August 1942, for use as a troopship.

However, during 1943-45, she became an Auxiliary Amphibious Force Flagship (AGC-4) with upgraded communications equipment¹¹, and was reclassified as such on 26 February 1943 – this was following modifications undertaken between 16 February and 21 April 1943 at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, Portsmouth, Virginia. The changes made included gun mounts added fore and aft. More cargo hoisting booms were also added. The swimming pool was drained and became a washroom and shower facility for troops. The cargo holds became the crew quarters, dinning salons became crew mess decks, the lounge and bar became the officer wardroom, the passenger staterooms became cabins for the officers (with their pink-tiled bathtubs and showers from the ship's peacetime role).¹²

In this new form the USS *Ancon* was a first, the first US communication ship, having been converted by the Navy for Army use, and equipped solely to transmit and receive vital information and intelligence, reports and combat commands. She would operate as a headquarters ship, playing a vital role at several landings.¹³ She was first assigned to the

⁹ Including over 1,500 metal standee type bunks: *Troopships of World War II* by Roland W Charles (Army Transportation Society), 1947. https://history.army.mil/documents/WWII/wwii_Troopships.pdf

¹⁰ "USAT" denoted that she was a US Army Transport, not a Navy ship at this time.

¹¹ https://history.army.mil/documents/WWII/wwii_Troopships.pdf

Amphibious command ships were fitted as flagships for the Chiefs of Combined Forces with accommodations for Marines or Army units. The *Ancon* was also fitted with elaborate radio and radar equipment.

¹² <https://www.pancanalsociety.org/articles/SSAnconGoesToWar.html>

¹³ *The Signal Corps: The Test (December 1941 to July 1943)* By George Raynor Thompson, Dixie R Harris, Pauline M Oates & Dulany Terrett (Center of Military History, US Army, Washington DC), 2003.

Europe-Africa-Middle East Theatre and then reassigned to the Asiatic-Pacific Theatre and participated in the landings at –

- Algeria-Morocco (November 1942);
- Sicily (July 1943);
- Salerno, Italy (September 1943);
- Normandy, as part of Task Force 122, Assault Force Q (June 1944); and
- Okinawa Gunto (April-June 1945).

She won her first Battle Star at Operation *Torch*, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942. This was at Fedala in French Morocco, 15 miles from Casablanca. She was then the flagship of Transport Division 9, Amphibious Force, US Atlantic Fleet. When USS *Joseph Hewes*, another transport which was alongside, was torpedoed and sunk USS *Ancon* rescued survivors. The following night five large transports (by now empty of troops) were also torpedoed and sunk, as bombs fell and torpedoes ran around the USS *Ancon*, but she remained untouched. At one point the captain gave the order to cut the anchor chain and depart, with USS *Ancon* and the other ships retreated further out to sea and safety.

The USS *Ancon* later served as flagship of Commander Amphibious Force US Atlantic Fleet in support of Operation *Husky*, the invasion of Sicily in 1943. The task was to land the 45th Infantry Division at Scoglitti on 10 July 1943. General Omar Bradley was the commanding general and was aboard USS *Ancon* during the operation. Once again, the *Ancon* came under heavy fire during the 10 days of the Sicily operation.

She then participated in the amphibious assault at Salerno in Italy from 9 to 19 September 1943 and had on board Lieutenant General Mark Clark, Commander of the 5th Army. Four days after the invasion of Salerno had started an Italian submarine surfaced alongside the USS *Ancon*, indicating a desire to surrender¹⁴.

¹⁴ Ibid.

On D-Day in June 1944, USS *Ancon* was the flagship of the Commander of the Amphibious Assault Force for Omaha Beach.

USS *Ancon* then spent New Year's Eve in Panama, and its were able to have liberty in Colón. The following day she passed through the Canal on the way to Pearl Harbor with an intermediate stopover in San Diego. After three weeks at Pearl Harbor, as the flagship of the Commander of the 5th Amphibious Group and having on board the Commander of the 2nd Marine Division, she sailed for Okinawa as part of the Ancon Amphibious Battle Group, and faced *kamikaze* attacks. These included a near miss astern of the ship which caused a fire to break out on the ship's fantail, as it fought off no less than 19 air attacks during its time on station.

She was the first Amphibious Force Flagship (ACG) to enter into Tokyo Bay in 1945, where she was present for the Japanese surrender on 2 September.¹⁵

Following the end of the war, she was assigned to Occupation service in the Far East between September and November 1945. She was decommissioned on 25 February 1946 at the New York Naval Shipyard, and was struck from the Naval Register on 17 April 1946. She returned to the Panama Railroad Company under her original name¹⁶, and continued in use for resumed commercial service until 20 April 1961.

On 29 June 1961, she was loaned to the Maine Maritime Academy, for use as the school's training ship and was renamed TS *State of Maine* on 14 July 1962. Title for the ship was then returned to the United States Maritime Administration (MARAD) by the Panama Railroad Company on 29 June 1962. She was sold to the North American Smelting

¹⁵ <https://www.pancanalsociety.org/articles/SSAnconGoesToWar.html>

¹⁶ The original plan had been for the ship to be delivered back to the Army, but was instead delivered directly to the Panama Railroad Company on 25 February 1946.

Company for scrapping on 9 May 1973, and delivered on 25 May, with her scrapping completed by 22 August 1975.

SS CRISTABOL

This ship was launched on 4 March 1939, and made her maiden voyage from New York on 17 August.

After being requisitioned by the US Army on 11 January 1942¹⁷, becoming the USAT *Cristobal*¹⁸, she underwent minor modifications at the Atlantic Basin Iron Works and Bethlehem Steel Company in New York, and then sailed from New York with troops and supplies bound for New Caledonia in the Pacific. However, political relations between the Free French, the Vichy French and the US were uncertain and the convoy was initially diverted to Australia. There the ship reloaded, picked up field artillery guns and proceeded to New Caledonia.

She arrived at Noumea, New Caledonia, in March, 1942, the troops being disembarked by using the ship's lifeboats. For days, these troops then performed the unfamiliar and back-breaking job of unloading the cargo by hand, as there were no cargo handling facilities ashore at New Caledonia.

She was next ordered back to New York, where she was further converted at the Atlantic Basin Iron Works so as to be able to carry 2,300 troops. She then sailed for Belfast, and thence to Scotland to collect British troops, and to join a convoy of British and US ships, departing for Suez via Freetown, Cape Town, Durban and Aden, arriving in Suez on 23 July

¹⁷ Just after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, the Secretary of War had directed the company to turn the ship over to the Quartermaster General "for use in the national emergency because of its suitability for Army service": *Troopships of World War II* by Roland W Charles (Army Transportation Society), 1947.

¹⁸ "USAT" denoted that she was a US Army Transport, not a Navy ship.

1942. In Suez she faced nightly to air raids, but survived to make the long voyage back again, carrying Italian prisoners of war from North Africa and bound for Durban.

After this she sailed back to New York and, at the end of October 1942, saw further modification by Bethlehem Steel¹⁹, and then the 20th Engineer Regiment embarked and the vessel left New York, with the ship being directed to transport the troops to French Morocco for the invasion of Casablanca as part of Operation *Torch*. After discharging the Regiment, she took on 1,300 wounded servicemen and took them back to New York.

After D-Day, she landed elements of the 104th Infantry Division on 7 September 1944 at Utah Beach. She also made sailings to Le Havre, Marseilles, and to Port Said at the Mediterranean entrance of the Suez Canal.

On 30 March 1945, she collided with an Allied tanker ship, the *Crow Wing*, in the North Atlantic, but both ships, though damaged, were able to continue with their missions.

When the European conflict ended, the *Cristobal* brought US troops back from Italy, France and England; and she carried a great many sick and wounded, being used as a hospital ship²⁰. In January 1946, she was modified at Newport News and used to transport 119 war brides and 101 dependent children from the UK to the US, carrying on in this role until returned to her owners in New York on 14 June 1946²¹.

Postwar, she resumed her position as fleet flagship²² and continued a passenger/cargo service between New York and Panama until 1961, after which she operated a New

¹⁹ This included installing a larger evaporator and additional ventilation.

²⁰ <https://www.20thengineers.com/ww2-cristobal.html>

²¹ https://history.army.mil/documents/WWII/wwii_Troopships.pdf

²² She was flagship for a total of 42 years.

Orleans-Panama route until her final voyage in September 1981²³. She was scrapped in Texas the same year²⁴.

SS PANAMA

Laid down on 25 October 1937 and launched on 24 September 1938, the SS *Panama* was completed and delivered on 22 April 1939. Unlike her sisters, her wartime service was not to be under her own name.

Although the third of the 1939 constructions by Bethlehem Steel, she was actually the first to enter service with the shipping line, in May 1939, when she made a transit of the Canal, and saw a gala reception held aboard at Balboa²⁵.

She was taken over by the US Army Transport Service earlier than the others, in June 1941, while in New York, and initially without any modification, becoming the USAT *Panama* (AP-46)²⁶. After trips to Bermuda and the Canal Zone, she underwent conversion to a troopship at the Atlantic Basin Iron Works in New York and was renamed the USS *James Parker*²⁷ as a US Navy vessel.

She made several voyages between New Orleans and Cristóbal before returning to New York and, in March 1942, sailed from there, via the Canal, to Bora Bora, Australia and New Zealand. She then returned to Charleston in the US, which became something of a home port for a time, but she travelled more widely than her sisters, venturing as far as Ascension Island and French Equatorial Africa, as well as to Cape Town. From December 1942 until 1945, she began making frequent journeys between the US and the UK and

²³ <https://www.czbrats.com/CuPA/Everson/sscris.htm>

²⁴ Ships Monthly (October 2013)

²⁵ *The Panama Canal Review*, 4 March 1955.

²⁶ "USAT" denoted that she was a US Army Transport, not a Navy ship at this time.

²⁷ In honour of Brigadier General James Parker, of the Class of 1876, US Military Academy. He had won the Medal of Honor in the Philippines in 1899, and had been a divisional commander during World War 1.

North Africa, supplying the European and North African theatres, operating out of New York.

In January 1946, she was converted (by the Bethlehem Steel Company) like the *Cristobal* to carry US dependents from the UK, operating between New York, Belfast and Southampton. Her last use before being returned to Panama was to transport \$80 million worth of famous paintings which had been looted from various European capitals during the war.²⁸

After a hasty refit, she made her return to Panama and her owners in September 1946, and for several months was the only one of the fleet available for service with the line.²⁹

From 31 March 1955, she operated as a freight-only vessel, this being said to be due to a reduction in the number of employees in the Canal Zone using the passenger service following a change to the home leave legislation. The last passenger service was a northbound voyage on 19 March 1955.³⁰

Unlike the *Cristobal*, which continued in service with the Shipping Line to 1981, *Panama* was disposed of in 1957, and she then operated with different cruise lines³¹ before being laid up in 1979, and scrapped in Turkey in 1985, the last of the sisters to go.

THE PANAMA SHIP REGISTER

While latterly well-known as an international or open register or, less kindly, as a “flag of convenience”, the use of such a flag is said to have been “of little practical significance

²⁸ *The Panama Canal Review*, 4 March 1955.

²⁹ https://history.army.mil/documents/WWII/wwii_Troopships.pdf

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ As the SS *President Hoover* with American President Lines, from January 1957; and then as the SS *Regina* for International Cruises SA, a Greek company and part of the Chandris Group, from February 1964. Under the latter ownership she was reflagged back to Panama in November 1964 and renamed SS *Regina Prima*, in 1973, before ending her days laid up at Piraeus in Greece in 1979.

until after the Second World War” and, for the ships that were flying foreign flags in the interwar period, the original main motivating factors for re-flagging were for avoidance of the US alcohol prohibition laws and attempts to keep wage levels low. In any case, the extent of their use was very limited, and this situation – where flags of convenience were of minor importance – continued in the first years after World War 2, before gradually becoming more significant.³²

In 1925, Panama had been the first open registry to be given full international legal recognition. This was largely supported by the US Government, with the incentive being the ability for US shipowners to use the mechanism to be able to employ cheap labour³³.

Even earlier, an amendment to Panamanian law in 1916 had allowed shipowners to register under the Panamanian flag using the services of a Panamanian consul in a foreign port. Over the coming decades the flag became one used by those owners seeking to escape costs or other problems. In 1921, an officer of one shipowner company admitted that –

“The chief advantage of Panamanian registry is that the owner is relieved of the continual but irregular boiler and hull inspections and the regulations as to crew’s quarters and subsistence. We are under absolutely no restrictions. So long as we pay the \$1 a net ton registry fee and 10 cents yearly a net ton tax”.³⁴

The Register was boosted in 1939, when the US Government exempted from tax the profits made in Panama from shipping, which made it attractive to US shipowners to take

³² Ships under “Greek, US and Italian ownership accounted for at least 70% of all tonnage under flags of convenience” by the end of the 1960s, followed by owners from Hong Kong (around 5%) and Formosa (i.e. Taiwan) <https://openaccess.nhh.no/nhh-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2393499/DP12.pdf?sequence=1> The Liberian registry was launched in 1948. In the early postwar period, the Panama flag became less popular due to criticism from US labour organisations and political unrest that affected the country into the 1950s.

³³ It is said that Panamanian-flagged ships in this early period paid crew on the lower Japanese wage scale, rather than the US one.

³⁴ *Rough Waters: Sovereignty and the American Merchant Flag* by Rodney Carisle (Naval Institute Press, 2017).

advantage of both the tax benefits and use of cheaper labour. In addition, Panama's neutrality at the start of World War 2 was an encouragement for shipowners from the US and elsewhere to use the Panamanian flag. Indeed, 100 US-controlled ships traded under the Panamanian and Honduran flags during the war.³⁵

Panama's neutrality was also useful to the US Government in the months before the Pearl Harbor attack, as US-owned ships under the Panama flag could be used to supply Britain without involving US-flag merchant ships^{36, 37}. The legendary tanker owner, Aristotle Onassis, already involved in shipping, operating his business out of New York in 1942, was another who took advantage. He managed his fleet of tankers and tramp steamers sailing under the neutral flag of Panama (and of Sweden), and exploiting the high freight rates that were available in the free market.³⁸

During the war, a number of ships belonging to Axis countries were interned in the US and were subsequently taken over by the US Government under an Executive Order, Public Law 101, and this took place from the outbreak of hostilities in Europe and up to entry of the US into the war. Dozens of foreign-flagged ships taken over by the US were reflagged out to Panama (by my count, 78).³⁹ In a similar move, in March/April 1941, the US seized 600,000 tons of Axis-owned and Danish-owned shipping then lying idle in American ports

³⁵ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/10874137.pdf>

³⁶ *The Outlaw Sea – a World of Freedom, Chaos, and Crime* by William Langewiesche (North Point Press, New York, 2004). *From Flags of Convenience to Captive Ship Registries* by Le T Thuong (Penn State university Press: *Transportation Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2. 1987).

³⁷ In 1939, the Declaration of Panama, signed by the US and all the republics of the Americas, included a resolution permitting ships to change their registry, allowing US ships to deliver war material to the Allies under the flag of Panama, thus avoiding any potential violation of the Neutrality Acts. There were allegations that tankers transferred to the Panamanian flag supplied not only the Allies, but also, by means of shipments to the Canary Islands, shipments that US intelligence suspected made their way to the Axis.

³⁸ He also became of interest to the FBI, which suspected him (until it dropped its investigation in 1944) of anti-war and anti-American sentiments (and perhaps illegal activities): <https://www.cairn.info/revue-entreprises-et-histoire-2011-2-page-80.htm>

³⁹ <http://www.usmm.org/foreign.html>

and turned these ships over to the British, and succeeded in persuading the other republics in the Americas to follow suit⁴⁰.

The Axis ships retained by the US were eventually allocated to the US Maritime Commission, who in turn handed them on to the War Shipping Administration⁴¹ for operation, then being assigned to various US steamship companies (under what was called a General Agency Agreement) and registered under the flag of Panama⁴².

There were also ships that had been already on bareboat or time charter with US shipping companies and flying the flag of Panama. The crews for both these and the seized of ships came from a variety of countries and many ships carried a US Naval Armed Guard⁴³.

Inevitably, a number of Panama-flag vessels became U-boat victims during the war – six in 1940 (while Panama was still a neutral⁴⁴); eight in 1941 (again, before Panama had actually entered the war⁴⁵); 53 in 1942 (11 while in convoys); 11 in 1943 (all but two while in convoys); just three ships in 1944 (and only one while in a convoy); and one more ship in 1945 (in a convoy).⁴⁶

⁴⁰ <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch05.htm>

⁴¹ This was an emergency war agency of the US Government used to operate civil tonnage. It was established on 7 February 1942 and was separate from the Marine Commission (which oversaw design and construction of merchant vessels). It was empowered to control the operation, purchase, charter, requisition and use of ocean-going vessels under the flag or control of the US (except for those of the armed services).

By the end of the war, its fleet had expanded to some 3,500 cargo vessels and 900 tankers, including the wartime designs, *Liberty* ships and *Victory* ships (about 75% of the WSA fleet would be made up by *Liberty* ships): *The United States Merchant Marine At War: Report of the War Shipping Administrator to the President* (Washington, 15 January 1946). One of the *Victory* ships was the *Panama Victory*.

⁴² <http://www.armed-guard.com/panama.html>

⁴³ The US Navy Armed Guard was a service branch responsible for defending US and Allied merchant vessels from enemy air, submarine or surface vessel attack during the war, serving mainly as gunners, signallers and radio operators. The service was disbanded soon after the end of the war: <http://www.armed-guard.com/>

⁴⁴ Although two sinkings involved ships in British convoys.

⁴⁵ But with four sinkings whilst in convoys.

⁴⁶ <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants>

One example of an interned vessel that flew the Panama flag during the war was the SS *Africander*. This was an Italian ship of 5,441 tons that had been built in 1921. It had been interned under the Executive Order in New York in September 1941, and was allocated to the Waterman Steamship Company of Mobile, Alabama. It had a Norwegian master and a crew of 35. In September 1942, it was attacked by German aircraft while on passage from Scotland to Archangel in the Soviet Union, when part of the British convoy PQ18⁴⁷, carrying machinery, six tanks and five aircraft as deck cargo. It was torpedoed and sunk, but all the crew and the 11-man contingent of US Navy Armed Guard manning its guns survived.

THE ORIGINAL SS ANCON IN WORLD WAR 2

The first SS *Ancon* has a permanent place in maritime (and Panamanian) history as the first ship to complete a transit of the Panama Canal in 1914⁴⁸. She had been built by the Maryland Steel Company and launched in 1901. She was of 9,330 tons (8,464 tonnes) and was 489 feet (149 metres) long. The ship had been built as the SS *Shawmut* for the Boston Steamship Company, operating out of Puget Sound for service to Japan, as one of the largest US commercial ships in operation at the time.

She and her sister ship, the SS *Tremont*, were acquired by the US Government for use by the Panama Railroad Company, for use between New York and Colón during the construction of the Canal, and she was renamed as SS *Ancon* in 1909.

For a brief period in March to July 1919, like her namesake of World War 2, she served with the US Navy as USS *Ancon*, being used to bring US troops home from France to New

⁴⁷ This was the one following the infamous PQ17 of July 1942, where a scare over the believed presence of the German battleship *Tirpitz* (sister of the more famous *Bismarck*) had caused the convoy to scatter, leaving the undefended merchant ships to face relentless air attacks in the endless daylight of the Arctic in Summer. Of the 33 ships in the convoy, only 11 made it to Murmansk.

⁴⁸ In fact, the French floating crane vessel *Alexandre La Valley* had completed the first trip in stages during construction prior to the official opening.

York. She was then returned to service with the Panama Railroad Company, and served until 1938. With the new SS *Ancon* entering service in 1939, the old ship was surplus to requirements⁴⁹.

In October 1940, the US company Kaiser & Co purchased the aging freighter for the Permanente Steamship Company and renamed her the SS *Permanente*. The new owners were based in Oakland, California and converted the vessel to a bulk cement carrier. The ship went into service in March 1941 under contract with the US Navy. Henry Kaiser's Permanente Cement works had just begun operations in 1939 when he had learned that the US Navy wanted to improve the delivery of cement to Hawaii, where (as in Panama) it was needed in connection with the improvement of defences and naval installations. He claimed he could cut loading and unloading times by as much as 80% by pumping bulk, dry cement from the holds of ships into storage silos in Honolulu.

She was actually moored at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed by the Japanese on 7 December 1941, but the ship was not damaged and had already offloaded its cargo⁵⁰.

She survived World War 2 but, by 1945, newer and faster surplus ships were available and she was sold in 1946 to the Tidewater Commercial Company of Panama and renamed SS *Tidewater*. In 1948, she was again renamed, this time becoming the SS *Continental*. In 1950, the Bernstein Line of Panama bought her and renamed her SS *Ancon* once more, before sending her to shipbreakers in Italy, where she arrived for breaking up in October 1950.

SS PANAMA VICTORY

⁴⁹ A video exists of her last transit of the Canal on 15 August 1939, marking the 25th anniversary of the Canal opening, and the first transit by the ship:

<https://twitter.com/canaldepanama/status/1496581232523726860>

⁵⁰ <https://about.kaiserpermanente.org/our-story/our-history/photo-of-the-week-ss-permanente-silverbow>

During the war, US shipyards turned out huge numbers of merchant ships, more than compensating for losses to the U-boats. The bulk were of two general designs, the more famous *Liberty* ships, and the less well-known *Victory* ships. One of the latter was the SS *Panama Victory*.

The *Victory* ship was a cargo vessel, with 534 of a planned 615 being built 1944-46. Of the total, 131 were built by California Shipbuilding (aka Calship) alone, and it was that shipyard that built the *Panama Victory*. It was of a more modern design than the *Liberty* ships, slightly larger and with more powerful steam turbine engines for a higher speed, which allowed them to form part of fast convoys and to better evade U-boats. It was also intended that the design would be capable of having a longer a service life, and continue to serve the US Navy after the war.

The *Panama Victory* was built by the California Shipbuilding Company, and was launched on 3 April 1944 and completed on 30 May. She formed a part of the US Emergency Shipbuilding programme, and was the ninth *Victory* ship to be completed. At her launch, she was christened by the wife of Panamanian Ambassador Enrique A Jimenez⁵¹. Like other *Victory* Ships, she displaced 15,200 tons and was 455 feet (139 metres) long, with a complement of 62.

She was operated by the Marine Transport Line⁵², a shipping line based in New York and established to support commercial shipping services for the war effort, and mostly operated *Victory* ships under charter to the US War Shipping Administration and the Maritime Commission.

The *Panama Victory* was involved as a cargo transport ship in the capture of Guadalcanal and the Ulithi Atoll in the Carolinas, and survived an air attack off the Philippines. She

⁵¹ The Ambassador became President in 1945.

⁵² The company continued postwar, involved mainly in tankers.

carried a US Navy Naval Armed Guard of 28 men, who manned the defensive guns. This Guard was awarded “Battle Stars” for taking part in the invasion at Lingayen Gulf in the Philippines in January 1945,

In 1946, she was sold to the Holland America Line and renamed SS *Amsteldijk* (being renamed SS *Amsteldyk* in 1954). Eventually, in 1968, she was sold to a Panamanian company, Progressive Mariner SA, and renamed SS *Helena*, before being sold on to the Sincere Navigation Corporation of Taiwan. She was scrapped in Taiwan in 1973.

THE CONCRETE-CARRYING LIBERTY SHIPS

The plans for expansion of the capacity of the Canal, by means of the Third Locks Project, were approved in 1939. The work begun in 1940 would have seen new locks large enough to accommodate the planned 58,000-ton *Montana*-class battleships which had been placed on order in 1940, with construction of these locks scheduled to be completed by 1946⁵³. The new locks were to be 200-feet (61 metres) longer and 30-feet (9.1 metres) wider than the existing ones.⁵⁴

The US Army had also expressed concerns that a ship transiting the Canal could be blown up to destroy one or more of the existing locks, and it had agreed with the Navy that a solution was a third set of locks some distance from the others⁵⁵.

One of the preparations involved in planning the new locks involved modification of the *Liberty* ship design to take cement to Panama. The *Liberty* ship construction programme in the US was to produce hundreds of vessels to both replace war losses and provide the

⁵³ Concern of the threat of Japanese bombing also influenced the plans. Whilst the new locks were never completed, the work undertaken would later assist in the Canal expansion project of the 21st Century.

⁵⁴ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/panama-canal-third-locks.htm>

⁵⁵ While the project was cancelled after the Navy changed its mind and cancelled the planned super battleships, the Army had also become worried that the new locks would be a further target in an attempt to drain the Gatun Lake, and so cripple the Canal.

necessary transportation needed to sustain the war effort and, as well as the standard cargo ship layout, there were a number of conversions or modifications. One such conversion was to be as a cement carrier for the Third Locks Project, although no such conversion was ever carried out.

The US naval designers Gibbs & Cox⁵⁶ were directed to develop plans for the modified *Liberty* vessels, which would be capable of carrying about 10,000 tons (9,072 tonnes) of cement from Houston, Texas to Cristobal. In order to accommodate the cargo, the ship had to be limited to a fuel capacity sufficient for a one-way trip at an average speed of 10 knots. Four hulls were designated for such conversion but before work began, the plans for the new locks were dropped, removing the need for such bulk cement carriers.⁵⁷

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

1 September 2022

⁵⁶ A leading ship designer company, still in existence today, and founded in 1922. It is claimed that 70% of US tonnage launched during the war was of its design. It designed the standardised *Liberty* ship.

⁵⁷ *Workhorse of the Fleet A History of the Liberty Ships* by Gus Bourneuf Jr (American Bureau of Shipping) 1990 & 2008: <https://ww2.eagle.org/content/dam/eagle/publications/company-information/workhorse-of-the-fleet-2019.pdf>