

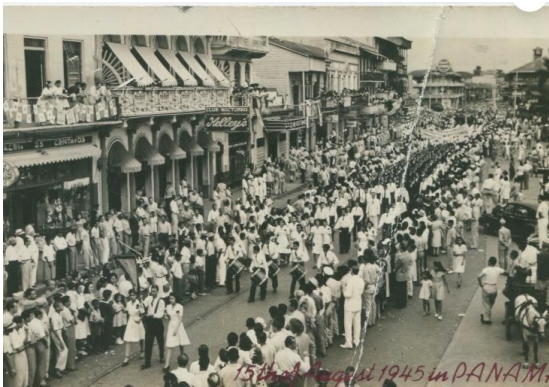
PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2

OPERATION TRANSIT AND THE MAGIC CARPET

The apparent threat to the Canal having receded, with troop levels and defence activities reduced, the Canal Zone would see a further burst of activity as the war in Europe, and then the War against Japan, both ended in 1945.

On 5 July 1945, Operation *Transit* was formally initiated, as troops were moved from the European theatre to the Pacific. Just over a month later the fighting in the Pacific had ended too, with the last vessel in the operation was diverted *en route* to New York on 14 August.

In the Canal Zone, the air raid sirens sounded to announce that the war was over, with VJ Day on 2 September. Four days later another large-scale operation was launched, and for over the next 360 days the largest combined air and sealift ever organised took place. This was known as Operation *Magic Carpet*, and saw 22,222 men transported home to the US each day – many passing through the Canal for the East Coast.

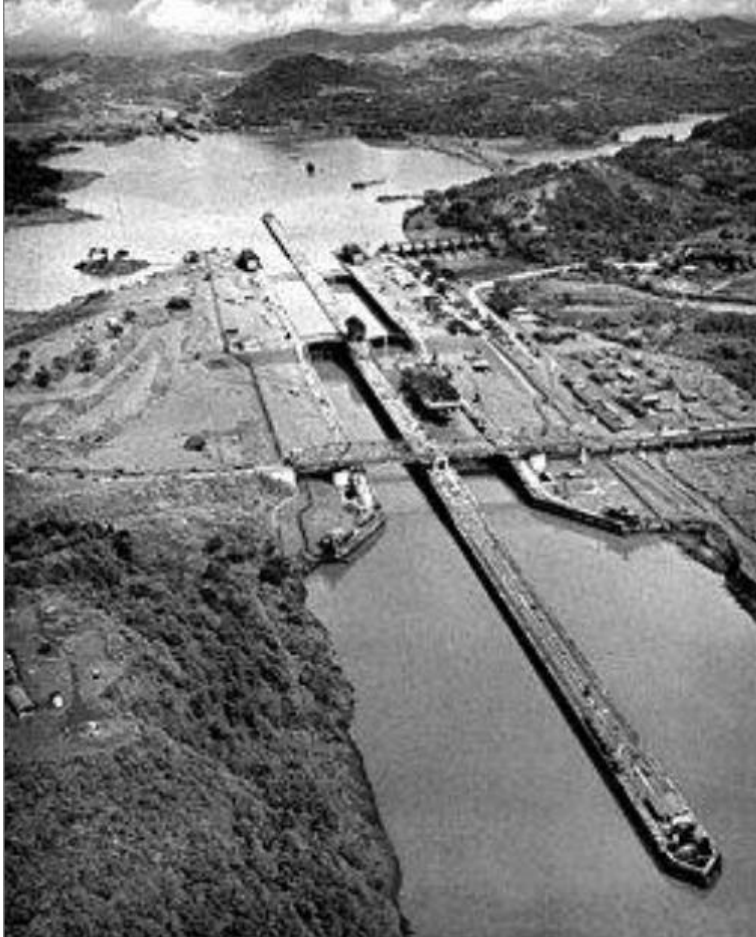


VJ-Day in Panama

By early 1945, the US forces in Canal Zone were already submitting plans for postwar scenarios and, by the end of the year, many defensive emplacements had been abandoned or removed.¹ Meanwhile, plans for demobilising of US forces distributed around the globe had been under development for many months, with some two million soldiers requiring transport home.

¹ <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388262.pdf>

Operations *Transit* and *Magic Carpet* would not only see ships carrying servicemen moving one way or the other through the Canal, it would also see wounded men, nurses and other medical staff, and even former prisoners of war in transit. There would also be the need for support services ashore, and all manner of supplies and assistance, from medical treatment to ice cream.



Miraflores Locks in 1945

OPERATION *TRANSIT*

The first troopship dispatched from Europe to the Pacific after the German surrender was the USS *Admiral C F Hughes*.² She departed Marseille on 16 June 1945, passed through the Canal, and arrived at Manila in the Philippines in late July with 4,832 service troops aboard.³

² A brand-new vessel, only commissioned on 31 January 1945. Previously operating in the Pacific, she had only left San Francisco for Europe in late May, for use in the redeployment.

³ *The Transportation Corps: Operations Overseas* by Joseph Bykofsky & Harold Larson (Center of Military History, US Army, 1990): <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/USA-in-WWII/Set-4-of-7/Disk-3/Overseas.pdf>



USS Admiral C F Hughes (AP-124)

However, the first troopship to pass through the Canal loaded with redeployed troops was the USAT *Uruguay*,⁴ which docked at Cristobal at the Caribbean end on 20 June with 4,400 men aboard, having sailed direct from Leghorn, Italy.

Between 4 July and 9 August, 36 troopships passed through the Canal Zone carrying approximately 125,000 troops, all being redeployed from the European and Mediterranean theatres, and mostly destined for a possible invasion of Japan.

However, when Japan surrendered,⁵ 17 ships then underway, including one actually in the Canal, were rerouted to US East Coast ports instead.

The last ship, the one which was in the Canal when rerouted, was the USS *Hawaiian Shipper*, which arrived in the Canal Zone from Naples on 14 August, just in time for its passengers to get news of the Japanese surrender and to find their destination changed to New York.⁶ She departed Balboa (the port on the Pacific end of the Canal)

⁴ The US Army Transport *Uruguay* was originally a 32,000 ton passenger liner built in 1928 as the *California*, and had been being used on the New York – San Francisco route for the Panama Pacific Line. She was sold to the US Maritime Commission in 1938 and renamed (in large part as the Canal tolls had increased and made the route unprofitable). In January 1942, she was acquired by the War Shipping Administration and transferred to the US Army as a transport and became USAT *Uruguay*, with a capacity of over 4,000.

⁵ Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender on 14 August. The formal instrument of surrender was signed on USS *Missouri*, in Tokyo Bay, on 2 September.

⁶ USNS *Hawaiian Shipper* was a Modified Type C3 cargo liner and had been built in 1941 for the War Shipping Administration, being converted to a troopship for the US Navy in 1943

on 16 August, returning through the Canal once more, and arriving in New York on 21 August with 1,819 troops aboard.

The Canal element of the operation was dubbed Operation *Transit* by the Panama Canal Department, the US Army command based in the Canal Zone. It was formally initiated on 5 July, although, as we have seen, redeployments had already begun. It was placed under the direction of the Deputy Commander of the Panama Canal Department, and the Department's chief of transportation was assigned responsibility for the technical phase, which included any servicing and repair required, as well as the transit of the ships.

Operation *Transit* consisted of four different plans, which differed depending on how long the vessel was in the Canal, if would stop during its crossing of the isthmus, and if any of the troops aboard were able or required to disembark.

- Plans A and B dealt with situations where short stays were involved, and troops did not disembark, except into the immediate dock area for a few hours of recreation, with temporary facilities to provide refreshments, souvenirs etc. Plan A involved ships docked at Pier 18 in Balboa after transit, or Piers 6 or 9 in Cristobal before transit. Magazines and recreational equipment would be put aboard, and films to be viewed later by the troops. If time allowed, a military band would set up on the pier and entertain the troops. Plan B was where troops were allowed ashore for a few hours in the pier area. Mobile PX facilities were parked at the pier,⁷ and soldiers were able to buy candy, soft drinks, ice cream, toiletries, and souvenirs;
- Plan C included arrangements for troops to be shuttled to other areas ashore for more extended rest and recreation away from the ships.⁸ In such cases, soldiers could get in a game of baseball, for example;

⁷ The PX, or Post Exchange, is a retail store on an army installation that sells goods and services to military personnel and their dependents, and to certain authorised civilian personnel.

⁸ Such as at Balboa High School stadium.

- Plan D involved having to temporarily provide accommodation for troops in the Canal Zone.

At the Pacific end, the closest installation to the Balboa pier was Albrook Field air base, to which troops were routinely taken for billeting. An officer from the Panama Canal Department would board the ship while in transit, and provide briefings and make the necessary arrangements.⁹

Similar arrangements were made for ships and servicemen heading in the other direction, returning from the Pacific theatre. In both directions, injured or ill troops would be removed to hospitals in the Canal Zone, with several hundred being removed to the hospitals during Operation *Transit*.

Every possible facility, including religious, USO¹⁰, Red Cross, and PX services, were made available to make the short stay in the Canal Zone pleasant and profitable.

The responsibility for arranging USO shows, orientation courses, and radio programs fell to the Department Special Service Office. This office also coordinated with the Red Cross and other volunteer organisations to organise athletic and recreational activities, and even to provide dance partners for the troops.¹¹

One ship, the USNS *General D E Aultman* (AP-156),¹² returning from the Pacific, and in transit through the Canal, ran aground about a mile south of the Miraflores Locks during August. She had left Marseille on 24 July. Her passengers were disembarked but there was a shortage of suitable accommodation, as others from two other

⁹ *Guarding the Gates: The Story of Fort Clayton - Its Setting, Its Architecture, and Its Role in the History of the Panama Canal* by Susan I Enscoe, Suzanne P Johnson, Julie L Webster, and Gordon L Cohen (ERDC/CERL Monograph 00-01, Construction Engineering Research Laboratory, US Army Engineer Research and Development Center, September 2000): <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA388262.pdf>

¹⁰ The United Services Organization, established in 1941, united a number of voluntary organisations for morale and physical support of servicemen. This included entertainment, as well as religious and physical sustenance.

¹¹ *Guarding the Gates: The Story of Fort Clayton - Its Setting, Its Architecture, and Its Role in the History of the Panama Canal* by Susan I Enscoe, Suzanne P Johnson, Julie L Webster, and Gordon L Cohen (ERDC/CERL Monograph 00-01, Construction Engineering Research Laboratory, US Army Engineer Research and Development Center, September 2000): <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA388262.pdf>

¹² https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ships/AP/AP-156_GeneralDEAultman.html

troopships were already being looked after at Albrook Field and Fort Amador, at the Atlantic end of the Canal. She had been carrying 3,209 men, together with 84 nurses and five other women from the Red Cross.



USS General D E Aultman (AP-156)

These unexpected tourists spent a week in the Canal Zone, enjoying, amongst other things, sightseeing tours by bus to historic sites in the Republic. They finally departed on 13 August.¹³ However, having sailed on from the Canal Zone, and bound for New Guinea, she arrived there on 4 September with the war already over. She would subsequently be employed in Operation *Magic Carpet*.

On 12 September, Lieutenant General George H Brett, the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department, formally ended Operation *Transit*.¹⁴

¹³ At one site at which they were accommodated, Fort Clayton, close to the Miraflores Locks, they had been welcomed with \$7,000 worth of Coca Cola, 180 gallons of ice cream, and 35 kegs of beer – with more to follow.

¹⁴ Despite it only having lasted a matter of weeks, during the operation ships had taken on 410,000 barrels of fuel oil (with 124,725 complimentary pints of ice cream also being provided).
<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388262.pdf>

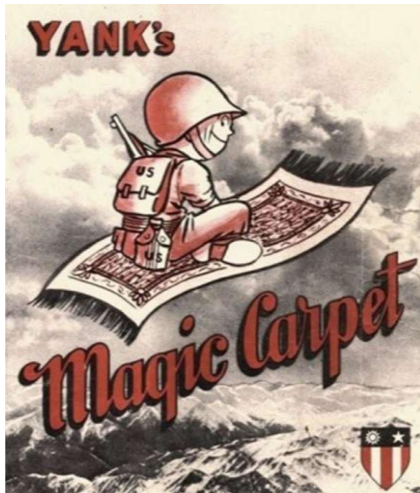


OPERATION MAGIC CARPET

Even before Operation *Transit* formally ended on 12 September, a new and even larger operation had been begun, again affecting the Canal. The Pacific element of Operation *Magic Carpet* officially began on 6 September, four days after VJ-Day.¹⁵

With the war now officially over, US Navy warships were able to take part in this new operation (they having been excluded from a role in the original repatriations from Europe, as the war in the Pacific was still ongoing).

¹⁵ Already by then, over 1.4 million US servicemen had been repatriated from Europe since VE Day on 8 May.



Organised by the War Shipping Administration (WSA), the operation saw an average of 22,222 servicemen returning home to the US every day, in an operation that was to run for 360 days. The original War Department plans had visualised the demobilising of some two million men, with 50% of these in Europe and 33% in the Pacific.



An aircraft carrier hangar in use as a servicemen's centre for those in transit¹⁶

¹⁶ <https://aafcollection.com/items/documents/view.php?file=000134-01-00.pdf>

The War Shipping Administration (WSA) was established during World War 2 to acquire and manage civilian shipping that the US required for the war effort. It allocated vessels to the Army, Navy or to civilian use. Concerns about the availability of shipping during wartime had led to the formation of the Strategic Shipping Board on the entry of the US into the war in December 1941, this being superseded (though not entirely replaced) by the WSA in February 1942.

It was separate from the US Maritime Commission, established in 1936, which oversaw design and construction of merchant type vessels, including the famous Liberty and Victory mass-produced merchant ships – though cooperation was assisted by having the same Admiral in charge of both organisations.¹⁷

The WSA took control of all offshore merchant vessels under various charters and coordinated use. It also instituted a new ship-building program to replace the Liberty ships with more agile Victory ships.¹⁸

While working closely with the British Ministry of War Transport to make the most efficient use of available tonnage, by the end of the war, the US merchant fleet had grown to comprise some 3,500 dry cargo vessels and over 1,500 high-speed tankers.

Crew for the ships was provided by the Recruitment and Manning Organization (RMO) of the WSA, the work of which greatly reduced delays caused by crew shortage. In 1948, WSA functions were returned to the Maritime Commission.

The US Army had begun planning for the return of its troops from as early as 1943 and, by 1944, with the end of the war seemingly in sight, began implementing procedures for an orderly demobilisation of overseas forces.¹⁹ Pressure from the home front to

¹⁷ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-9054-establishing-the-war-shipping-administration>

¹⁸ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/merchant-marine-world-war-ii>

¹⁹ The initial scheme involved points being awarded to qualify for repatriation, with points awarded for such things as time in the theatre to awards, and even that they were parents to young children.

speed up the return of those in Europe intensified after Germany surrendered and, by June 1945, the European element of Operation *Magic Carpet* was underway.²⁰



Homeward-bound men aboard USS Enterprise

By October 1945, there were over 700 ships of all shapes, sizes, and even nationalities involved, ranging from pre-war tankers, ore carriers, and cargo ships to battleships and aircraft carriers. Both US Navy ships and Army transports were involved, and the WSA ordered the conversion of 300 Liberty and Victory ships into transports for the purpose.



USS Mississippi passing through the Canal, 12 October 1945²¹

In fact, the suddenness of the ending of the war with Japan (following the use of the two A-bombs and without the planned invasion of the home islands) caught the US armed services off guard,

and hence a sudden need for extra capacity above what had been planned for. This led

²⁰ A Century of Misunderstanding: the history of the development of post-traumatic stress disorder understanding in the United States Military by Major CS Lawrence (US Army. 2015).

²¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/WarshipPorn/comments/12lhmg/uss_mississippi_bb41_making_passage_through/

the Chief of Naval Operations, the overall commander of the US Navy, to order combat vessels to be modified to serve as temporary troop transports.²²

Some Navy vessels, made just a single, one-way trip during the operation, as they were being returned home to be laid up or even scrapped.²³

Hasty conversions undertaken by the Navy included installing three- or five-tiered bunks in the hangars of aircraft carriers, providing a degree of comfort for up to several thousand men at a time. In the end, the Navy would be employing six battleships, 18 cruisers, 57 aircraft carriers (chiefly the smaller escort and light carriers) and 12 hospital ships, along with no less than 222 attack transports formerly used for the island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific.²⁴



USS Saratoga being used as a troop transport – she brought home a total of 29,204 men, more than any other ship

There was a large air element as well, with the US Army Air Force Air Transport Command (ATC) and the Navy's Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) involved – including to airlift prisoners of war (POW) who were injured or otherwise unable to travel by sea. However, the overall numbers moved by air were tiny in comparison to the numbers carried in the massive sealift operation.

²² The Navy's efforts were handicapped by the fact that many sailors had the acquired the necessary points required for repatriation themselves and could not be forced to stay in the service to provide the crews for the operation. Another problem was delays caused by ships having to be modified in yards in the US to take part.

<https://uscs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DS31-Operation-Magic-Carpet.pdf>

²³ <https://uscs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DS31-Operation-Magic-Carpet.pdf>

²⁴ *Operation Magic Carpet* by Owen Gault (Sea Classics, Challenge Publications, 2005).

<https://historycollection.com/20-events-of-operation-magic-carpet-at-the-end-of-world-war-ii/>

There was a degree of two-way traffic involved, with over 500,000 German and Italian POW were returned to Europe by way of the ships involved in the operation. Later, Japanese POW would be removed to prison camps in Japan pending release.²⁵

There were also the “GI brides”, with over half a million women war brides being carried on 29 troop ships to their new homes in North America.

Obviously, the bulk of the movements from Europe to the US did not travel via the Canal, while in the Pacific theatre, personnel bound for the US East Coast were separated from those headed for the West Coast, with the former travelling through the Canal.



*USS Enterprise entering the Canal
c.1945, battleship USS Washington in the
other lock*

The European phase of the operation was essentially complete by February 1946,²⁶ whilst the Pacific element continued for another seven months to September. However, the highest monthly number of troops returning from the Pacific, at nearly 700,000, was in December 1945.

²⁵ <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nmusn/explore/photography/wwii/wwii-pacific/japanese-surrender/operation-magic-carpet.html>

²⁶ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/operation-magic-carpet-1945>



The hangar deck of USS Enterprise

In April 1946, 29 transports brought back to the US over 200,000 soldiers, sailors and Marines from the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre.

Particularly for those returning from the Pacific or the CBI theatres, the voyage home was not an easy one. The ships would be crowded, and there would be limited recreational facilities (and alcohol and gambling were both forbidden on Navy ships, although it is said that officers tended to turn a blind eye), and the voyage across the Pacific was a long, and often tedious, one. It was not improved on Navy ships by a shortage of cooks, bakers and stewards to service the passengers, with less experienced personnel pressed into service.²⁷

²⁷ Again, this was largely due to the more experienced crew having accrued sufficient points for their own repatriation.

<https://uscs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DS31-Operation-Magic-Carpet.pdf>



*USS Enterprise and USS
Washington returning to the US
East Coast in October 1945*

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

26 September 2025