

THE CONTE BIANCAMANO – ITALIAN LINER SEIZED IN PANAMA TO BECOME A US TROOP TRANSPORT

The *Conte Biancamano* was a 23,225-ton liner that set out from Italy in 1940 on a Genoa-Naples-Panama-Valparaíso-Panama-Genoa voyage, but ended the trip unexpectedly in the Canal Zone, was detained, then seized, saw its passengers and crew interned, and the ship went the US Navy as a troopship for the rest of the war.



THE SHIP

Built by William Beardmore of Dalmuir, Scotland, she had been laid down in 1924 and launched in Glasgow in 1925. She carried 180 passengers in first class, 220 in second class, 390 in economic class and 2,660 in third class.¹

The new ship followed two earlier liners built for the same shipping line by the same yard, having almost identical external lines, but being somewhat larger.²

She was 653 feet long (198.4 metres, though she would be longer after her postwar refit), 71.1 feet (21.7 metres) in the beam and her geared turbines produced some 24,000 horsepower, with twin screws that gave her a service speed of 20 knots (and a top speed of 21 knots).

Built for the *Lloyd Sabaudo* shipping line of Genoa,³ she made her maiden voyage from Genoa to New York in November 1925, flying the Italian flag. She continued to serve the line on routes to North and South America until 1932.

¹ <https://deeproots.family/up/ConteBiancamanoVessel.htm>

² <https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

³ Founded in 1906 to participate in the lucrative migrant traffic across the Atlantic. The name, translated as “Lloyd of Savoy” suggested connection to the Italian royal family, the House of Savoy. After World War 1 it expanded rapidly, acquiring other lines and even shipyards and an engine-maker. It was one of

In 1932, she became part of the combined fleet of the nationalised *Italia Flotte Riunite*, while continuing her service across the Atlantic, and undertaking her new owner's first cruise the same year.⁴



In 1934, she carried troops for the first time, something that she would do during the war – albeit for the Allies. In 1934, the men and equipment were being transported for the Italian Navy in preparation for the invasion of

Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia).

In 1937, she was transferred to *Lloyd Triestino* as the flagship of its fleet.⁵ Her passenger interior was renovated and improved, and her third-class accommodation deleted. She also received a new and elegant white livery. The new company used her on its “express” service to Shanghai.⁶

Sailing from Genoa on 29 March 1939, she carried climbers led by mountaineer Fritz Wiessener for an ultimately unsuccessful attempt on K2, the Himalayan mountain, the second-highest in the world.⁷

the very few transatlantic lines to maintain a positive balance sheet after the worldwide financial crisis of 1929. However, in 1932, it and a subsidiary line were nationalised as part of the new *Italia Flotte Riunite*: <https://www.italianliners.com/lloyd-sabaudo-en>

⁴ This nationalised line, aka *Società Italia di Navigazione*, or more simply “The Italian Line”, was founded in 1932, absorbing lines such as the owner of the *Conte Biancamano*. At the height of its powers in the 1930s, it had a large fleet of some 680,000 gross tons and ran both passenger and cargo liners in regular services to North and South America, Australia, South Africa and the Italian colonies. It is said that, when Italy declared war in 1940, the government “forgot” to inform Italian merchant ships and as a consequence many of them fell into enemy hands or were sunk: <https://www.italianliners.com/italia-flotte-riunite-en>

⁵ Originally founded in 1836 in Trieste (then in Austria-Hungary), becoming *Lloyd Triestino* in 1919, when Trieste became part of Italy following World War 1. By the end of the 1930s the line had become an important one, with a fleet of 85 vessels. It recovered and continued after World War 2 and, as cargo had displaced passenger services as the main business activity, in 1993 entered into a partnership with Evergreen Marine of Taiwan, being bought outright by the Taiwanese company in 1998. In 2006, it was renamed *Italia Marittima* and continues in existence: <https://www.italianliners.com/lloyd-triestino-en>

⁶ <https://www.italianliners.com/cont-biancamano-en>

⁷ Four members of the 1939 American Karakoram expedition were lost. <https://americanalpineclub.org/news/2018/2/17/k2-1939-the-second-american-karakoram-expedition>
<https://deeproots.family/up/ConteBiancamanoVessel.htm>



Prewar First Class

Finally, in March 1940, she rejoined the national shipping line on charter.⁸ She began her first (and, as it transpired, her last prewar) voyage from Genoa to Valparaiso on 23 April 1940.

S.S. Conte Biancamano at Balboa, Canal Zone, in June 1940



HER TIME IN THE CANAL ZONE

The ship had departed Valparaiso on 26 May 1940, for the planned return leg to Genoa, but whilst at sea she received orders to proceed to Balboa in the Canal Zone.

She was docked at Cristobal at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, having arrived in Balboa, the port at the Pacific end of the Canal Zone in June 1940, carrying 400 crew, 50 passengers (other sources say just 10 passengers), and 2,000 tons of copper.

⁸ As a replacement for the *Orazio*, which had been lost in the Bay of Marseilles in January 1940, in an incident in which the *Conte Biancamano* had rescued the survivors - 423 passengers and 210 crew.



Conte Biancamano seen transiting the Canal Zone in early June 1940, just a couple of days before Italy joined the war; several days later on her way back from Valparaíso, Chile, she would be interned at Cristóbal, Panama.⁹

As mentioned above, at the time of her arrival in the Canal Zone, she was on charter to the Italian national shipping line.¹⁰

It is said that she had being held in the custody of a US Marshal of the Federal District Court in the Canal

Zone, pending the outcome of judicial proceedings which had been instituted by British fuel suppliers, the East Asiatic Petroleum Company over fuel supplied at Suez (to it and other ships).¹¹

However, on 7 June 1940, the Italian Government had ordered vessels to neutral ports, as it prepared to enter the war on 10 June, invading southern France. After a transit of the Canal on 25 June, with an armed guard aboard,¹² it anchored in Limón Bay off Colón. The US Neutrality Patrol had impounded the ship and confined its crew on board for the next 18 months before finally transferring the crew¹³ to Ellis Island in New York on 4 April 1941.



In Cristobal on 5 April 1941¹⁴

⁹ https://www.instagram.com/p/CnA_5wzsduq/

¹⁰ <https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

¹¹ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

¹² Armed guards were placed on ships in transit from 1939, the rules being tightened and, from January 1941, they required all non-US ships to carry an armed guard.

¹³ Some sources say that there were 500 crew, others 400, the discrepancy perhaps being the “entertainers” mentioned below when interned in the US.

¹⁴ <http://www.navsource.org/archives/09/22/22054.htm>

BALBOA, C. Z., June 25—*The Conte Biancamano, 25,000-ton Italian liner, today passed through to the Atlantic terminal of the Panama Canal at Cristobal, C. Z., where she is expected to tie up indefinitely. She had been anchored off Fort Amador for two weeks. Only thirty-five passengers remain aboard. The ship received the usual inspection before entering the canal and carried the military and naval guards placed on all ships. The reason for the transfer to the Atlantic was not revealed, but on Thursday the French motorship Oregon, which is armed for protection against submarines, arrived from Chile and anchored near the Italian liner. The crews were not friendly. The Conte Biancamano is still under libel by the United States marshal, who has a representative aboard.*

New York Times

BALBOA, C. Z., Aug. 30—*Three Panama Canal tugs completed the tow of the 23,000-ton Italian liner Conte Biancamano from Cristobal to Balboa today. This largest of the Axis ships in American waters is expected to be the last put into service, as extensive repairs are needed following sabotage by the crews.*

The captain and three engineer officers are in jail at Cristobal awaiting trial. Other members of the crew are in a detention camp in Montana.

The United States Marshal here has a custodian aboard because libel suits involving a million dollars are pending in the local courts. Since the suits were brought by British interests it is believed to be unlikely that they will interfere with the use of the ship once it is ready for service.

It is understood that repairs, including the installation of new turbines, will be made by the mechanical division of the Panama Canal because yards in the United States are already overcrowded.

New York Times

On 7 March 1941, it was moved into dock – to avoid it leaving without clearance, or causing some sabotage or other damage.¹⁵ Later that month the US moved to seize the ship, but it is reported that the crew cause serious damage to the engines before

¹⁵ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

handing her over. In April, while the crew are transported to the Continental US, her captain and seven officers are arrested on charge relating to the sabotage.¹⁶

On 30 March 1941, President Roosevelt ordered federal authorities to take possession of foreign vessels lying idle in US waters, to prevent damage to the ships or their machinery.

On 6 June 1941, there were 84 voluntarily inactive large ships of foreign registry in US ports. The Ship Requisition Act¹⁷ signed on that day allowed the US Coast Guard to seize these vessels for the war effort.¹⁸ In addition, the British Ministry of War Transport transferred some vessels to the jurisdiction of the War Shipping Administration. Brazil transferred several vessels which it seized in its own ports. Representatives of the friendly governments under which some these vessels were previously registered such as the Dutch Ministry of Shipping cooperated with the War Department. Additional ships were seized at other times and others turned over to the Allies after the signing of the Armistice with Italy in 1943.¹⁹

In 2020, Gerald Hamilton Halsall, who was a boy in the Canal Zone during the war, was interviewed, and the transcript published by Florida University -

“Another historical event was the capture while in port of Italian ocean liner Conte Biancamano at Cristobal. This famous liner was captured by Canal authorities and was docked at Cristobal when Italy entered the war on 7 December 1941 [in fact, this happened on 11 December].²⁰ The captain ordered the destruction of certain engine parts before capture. The captain and officers were then sent to the Gatún Police Station for temporary internment. Soon my father [a police sergeant with the Canal Zone Police]

¹⁶ <https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

¹⁷ <http://usmm.org/requisition.html>

¹⁸ In April 1941, President Roosevelt had sent a message to Congress calling for statutory authority to take over and use such vessels. On 6 June, the President signed the Act passed following the request authorising the Maritime Commission to requisition or otherwise acquire idle ships in US waters; and virtually all of the foreign vessels requisitioned by the US were taken over prior to the entry of the US into the war; a few were taken over in the early months after Pearl Harbor.:

<http://usmm.org/fdr/foreignfdr.html>

¹⁹ <http://usmm.org/foreign.html>

²⁰ Italy declared war on the US on 11 December, the same day as Germany.

drove me to the police station to meet them. The officers looked nervous and sad, but were very nice to me tried to make the most of their situation. They did speak some English.

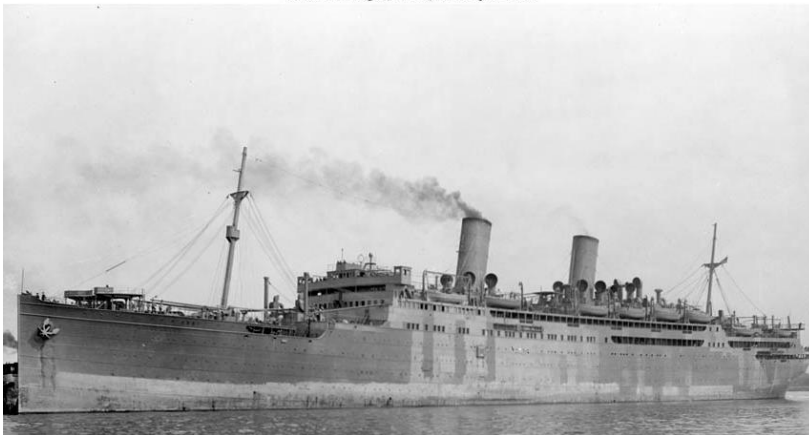
I remember the Gatun police having a Christmas party for them even though we were at war with Italy. My father told me later, that the Chief of Police was very upset because the Gatun police did not ask permission to have the Christmas party for the prisoners".²¹

On 30 June 1941, the US Coast Guard towed the ship back to Balboa, where she stayed until 11 December, when she was declared a "prize of war" by the US Government and formally seized.²²

The ship's turbines were sent to the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company in the US, where they were reconditioned between October 1941 and January 1942.²³

On 21 March 1942, she was assigned to the US Navy.²⁴ Finally, she was towed from the Canal Zone to Philadelphia for repairs and modification for use as a troop transport, arriving on 31 March.²⁵ During the voyage to Philadelphia she carried a temporary defensive armament of four 4-inch (100 mm) guns.²⁶

USS Hermitage (AP-54) on 3 April 1942



²¹<https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/AA/00/08/13/46/00001/Jerry%20Halsall%20Biographical%20Sketch.pdf>

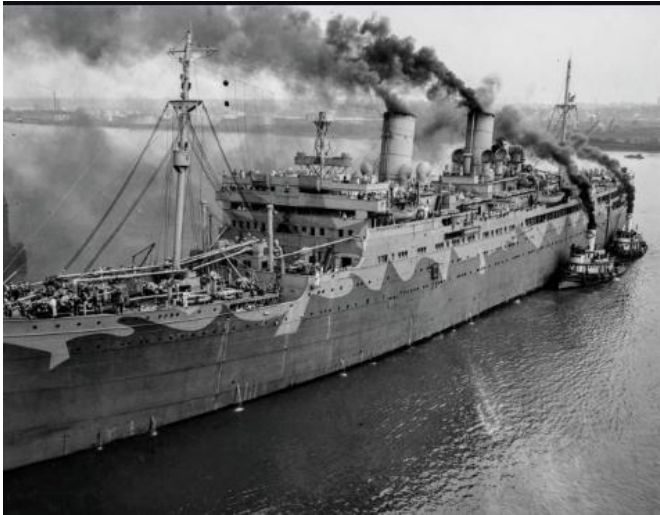
²² <https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

²³ <https://www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/AP/AP54.html>

²⁴ In December 1941, the Auxiliary Vessels Board recommended that, upon her arrival in the US, she be acquired by the Navy and converted to a transport. The Bureau of Ships assigned her the identification number AP-54 in early February 1942, and the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) assigned the name *Hermitage* on 11 February.: <https://www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/AP/AP54.html>

²⁵ <https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

²⁶ <https://www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/AP/AP54.html>



USS Hermitage

After September 1939, 28 Italian ships sat idle in US ports,²⁷ and in March 1941 the Department of Justice maintained that an Espionage Act 1917 provision made it a crime to damage a ship in US waters. This, it was argued, could be used as authority to act, it being alleged that crews were sabotaging their ships. On 1 April 1941, warrants were issued, alleging either sabotage or crewmen overstaying the 60-day time limit allowed to alien seamen in the US. By 12 April, there were 1,300 Italian nationals interned on Ellis Island. To this number was added 483 men from the *Conte Bianamano*. The need for extra space led to the detained Italian seamen being moved to Fort Missoula in Montana.²⁸

INTERMENT OF HER CREW AND PASSENGERS

The Italians crew sent from the Canal Zone in April 1941 joined a large group of German seamen, as well as a group of Italian Pavilion employees from the 1939 New York World's Fair. In all, nearly 1,700 Axis non-combatants were detained on Ellis Island in a country not yet at war.²⁹ In due course, the Italians were transferred to new location in Montana.

²⁷ Italy remained neutral until June 1940, but being an ally of Germany, this did not prevent the US authorities from acting against Italian ships as well as German (there being just two German ships similarly idle in US ports).

²⁸ *Axis Nation 'Detainees' and in the West during Japanese Enemy Aliens World War II* by Carol Van Valkenburg (Montana: The Magazine of Western History, 2011).

²⁹ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/spring/mail-censorship-in-world-war-two-1.html>

Fort Missoula Internment Camp was in Missoula, Montana and was to contain about 100 men from the ship and who it is said put on shows such as operas and comedies about once a week.³⁰ The Fort, originally established as a military post in 1877 (to protect from attacks by native Americans), had been turned over to the Department of Justice in 1941 and would hold nearly 1,100 Italians, more than 1,000 Japanese, and 23 German resident aliens – the Germans were later transferred elsewhere. The Italian inmates referred to Fort Missoula as Camp *Bella Vista*, and undertook work on farms, the railroad, and local businesses,³¹ and also fought forest fires.³²

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) first flew some officers from the ship to Missoula, to have them view the facility and consult on how it would operate. The first 134 inmates arrived on 9 May 1941.³³ Those that met them included the Italian consul from Seattle, who urged good behaviour by the internees, and that they remain in the facility. 483 more men arrived later in the month. This latter group included a band and orchestra from the *Conte Biancamano*.³⁴



A large group of internment prisoners arrive at Fort Missoula.

The internees undertook chores and repairs and tasks around the camp, being paid for their work. There was also entertainment and sports to pass the time. There were guards, chiefly Border patrol officers – although the guards were not allowed to shoot to prevent escape.

³⁰ <https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1207&context=pilr>

³¹ By the end of July 1943, 800 out of 1,300 men held in the camp had found work outside the camp.

³² In 1943, the US Forestry Service recruited 360 internees to fight fires in Montana and Idaho.

³³ Legally these men were not “prisoners”, nor prisoners of war, but were classified as “detainees”, being detained by the INS for overstaying permitted time in the US.

³⁴ There were also 62 Italians in the US to work at the World’s Fair in New York in 1939.

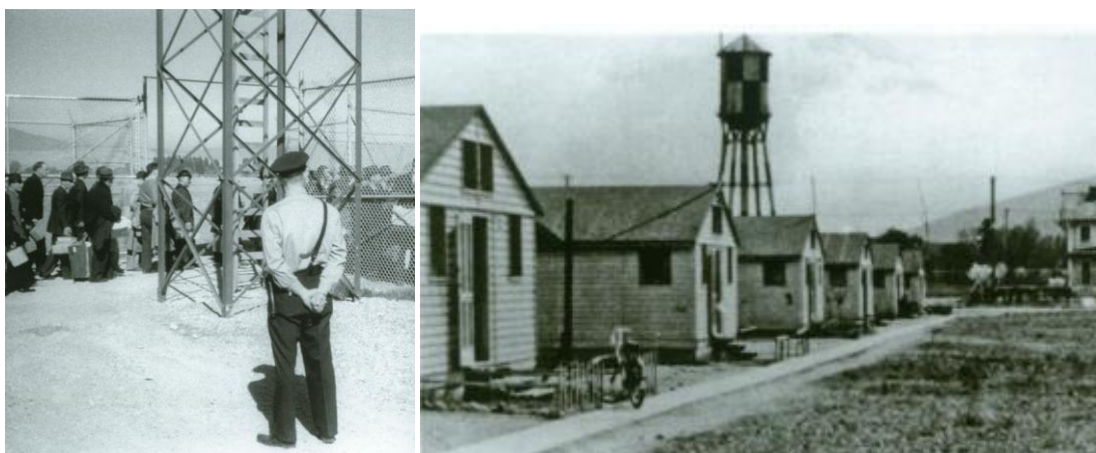
There was little real trouble at the camp, but there was one incident apparently triggered by the camp's doctor, said to be a troublemaker. The situation seems to have developed into something of a farce – one guard dropped a tear gas canister in a car, setting it on fire, and another managed to accidentally shoot himself in the foot. Nevertheless, the unrest left 13 men injured – and the doctor was to end his duties in the camp.³⁵

Following the Pearl Harbor attack, Japanese internees began arriving at the camp from 18 December 1941, and (with a small number of additional Italians), the camp reached its capacity by early 1942. The atmosphere in the camp was affected by the influx of Japanese, and the general feeling of the country after Pearl Harbor.³⁶

After Italy surrendered on 8 September 1943, the Italians were allowed even greater freedom, and allowed to mingle with local residents. By the end of 1943, many Italians had been paroled to take up work outside the camp, but 442 remained, and even some of these also worked in Missoula. Another two dozen had volunteered for the US military, in the hope of eventually receiving US citizenship.

On 14 May 1944, the Justice Department announced that the camp was to close, and it was closed down by June.

When it closed most of the internees having already been relocated. However, the relocations and closure of the camp saw tears, apparently those of local women who had formed relationships with some of the internees (fights between seeming rival women were also reported).

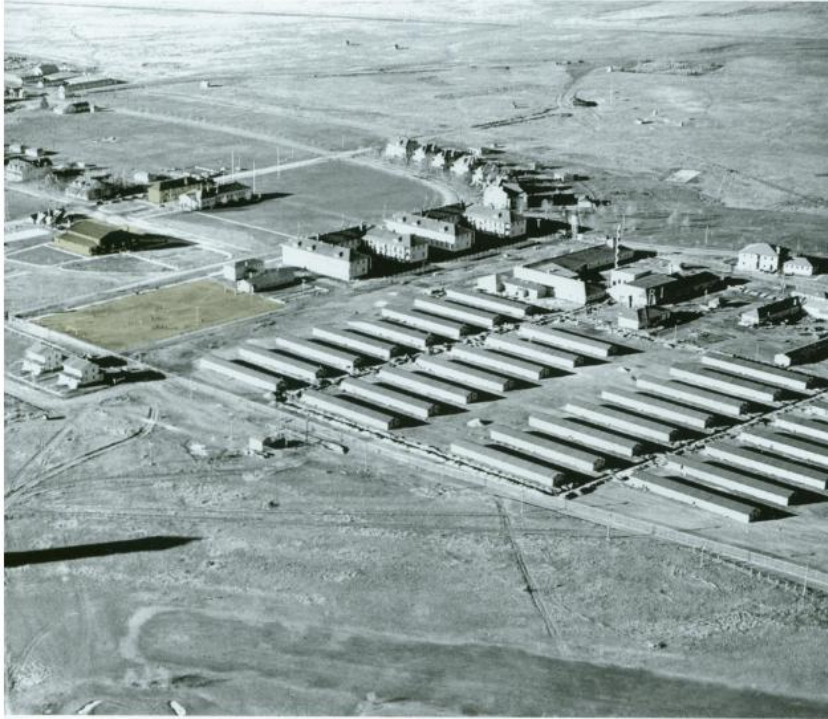


³⁵ *Axis Nation 'Detainees' and in the West during Japanese Enemy Aliens World War II* by Carol Van Valkenburg (Montana: The Magazine of Western History, 2011).

³⁶ The Japanese were treated differently from the Italians, and allowed less opportunity to have contact with those outside the camp.

Nearly all the Italians who had not already been repatriated were rounded up in May 1945 and sent to New York, to eventually sail for home.

It is not known how many of the Italians from Missoula remained in the US after the war, but some former internees have estimated numbers ranging from two dozen to 50.³⁷



You can now visit Fort Missoula as an historical museum.³⁸

USE BY THE US NAVY

After being seized by the US, she was towed to Philadelphia, repaired and subsequently converted there by Cramp Shipbuilding³⁹ into a troop transport, accommodating up to 7,000 men, and earmarked for the US Navy in March 1942. On 14 August 1942, she was commissioned as USS *Hermitage* (AP-54).⁴⁰ She was given an armament of a single 5-inch (127 mm) gun, and six 3-inch (76 mm) anti-aircraft guns.

³⁷ *Axis Nation 'Detainees' and in the West during Japanese Enemy Aliens World War II* by Carol Van Valkenburg (Montana: The Magazine of Western History, 2011).

³⁸ <https://fortmissoulamuseum.org/> There is a PBS documentary about the camp on You Tube: <https://www.montanapbs.org/programs/AnAlienPlace/>

³⁹ A famous shipyard, it had been forced to close through lack of orders in 1927, but the US Navy paid to have it reopened in 1940.

⁴⁰ *Hermitage* is the name of the former estate of the seventh US President, Andrew Jackson, just outside of Nashville, a national shrine maintained exactly as it was when Jackson lived there.

The conversion was completed by 15 September and, on 2 November 1942, she undertook her first mission in her new guise, carrying 5,600 men from New York to take part in the landings in North Africa as part of Operation *Torch*. The passengers disembarked at Casablanca.⁴¹

In December 1942, she returned to the US to collect 6,000 men and transport them, via the Panama Canal, to Australia, South Pacific and Hawaii, before returning to San Francisco in March 1943.

Later in March, she left San Francisco for Australia and New Zealand. She then collected over 700 Jewish refugees in Bombay and took them to San Francisco. Three more similar missions followed, taking troops out and returning with civilian refugees.

From June 1944, she began a series of 11 return voyages to and from Europe, ferrying soldiers to take part in the invasion and battles in France, initially to Britain and later mostly using Le Havre, and returning with wounded men, prisoners of war, and refugees. She was in Le Havre on 8 May 1945, where she was able to take part in the VE Day celebrations.⁴²

Further repatriation voyages to the US followed before, in December 1945, sailing for Nagoya in Japan to take home 6,000 US troops, arriving in Seattle in February 1946.

In August 1946, she recommissioned in San Francisco to undertake three voyages to the Pacific as part of Operation *Magic Carpet*, which ran to September of that year and involved the repatriation of millions of US military and naval personnel.⁴³

She eventually decommissioned in San Francisco on 20 August 1946,⁴⁴ being simultaneously transferred back to the US Maritime Commission. She was transferred to the Commission's reserve fleet at Suisun Bay, California, on 8 November.

During her time with the US Navy she had travelled some 230,000 miles and transported 129,685 passengers of all types and nationalities – soldiers, sailors, refugees and other civilians, and prisoners of war.⁴⁵

⁴¹ <https://www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/AP/AP54.html>

⁴² <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ships/danfs/AP/ap54.html>

⁴³ It is said that eight million personnel were involved, and the Operation saw 22,222 brought home every day for nearly a year: <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/operation-magic-carpet-1945>

⁴⁴ <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ships/danfs/AP/ap54.html>

⁴⁵ Ibid.



USS Hermitage in Yokohama, probably in January 1946

RETURN TO ITALY

On 9 June 1947, the ship was returned to Italy – seven years after setting out on her final prewar voyage, carrying repatriated Italian prisoners of war and civilian internees.⁴⁶

In May 1947, an agreement between President Truman and Alcide de Gasperi, the new prime minister of Italy,⁴⁷ saw the ship formally returned to Italy under a charter for a nominal charge of \$1 per annum. She then underwent machinery trials before departing San Francisco on 1 August 1947. Having been returned to the Italian flag on 18 August, she arrived in Genoa on 25 August, and on 30 August was laid up in Messina, awaiting a refit and modifications.⁴⁸

The refit and modernisation took until March 1948,⁴⁹ but then moved to the Monfalcone shipyard in Trieste, which had been rebuilt after being destroyed during the war. Here she underwent a complete reconstruction, to make her fit for continued civilian use. The work included not just internal reconfiguration – she had lost all of its

⁴⁶ <https://www.shipscribe.com/usnaux/AP/AP54.html>

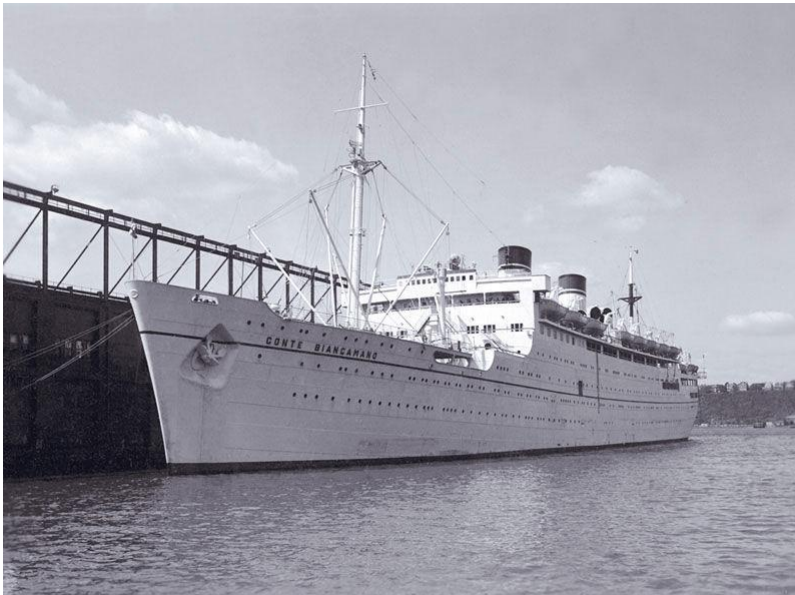
⁴⁷ AP-54 was on a list of 14 former Italian ships that President Truman in an Executive Order of 16 March 1948 had directed be returned to the Government of Italy.

⁴⁸ <https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

⁴⁹ <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ships/danfs/AP/ap54.html>
<https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

prewar luxury fittings, but included structural changes – an entirely new bow design,⁵⁰ reshaped funnels, and an increase in overall length, from 198.4 metres to 202.7 metres.⁵¹ There was also a new enclosed bridge, and new cranes for lowering the lifeboats.

Following the extensive work, and once more named *Conte Biancamano*, after trials from 9 September, she finally left for Genoa on 26 October 1948, resplendent in a fine white livery.



Although returned to her prewar owners, *Lloyd Triestino*, she was eventually transferred to the Italian Line to reopen their “express” service to South America once more (she would also see service to New York and Boston).⁵² Her first postwar trip was from Genoa to Buenos Aires in November 1948.

She was used initially on the Genoa-Buenos Aires route until 1950, when she moved to the Genoa-Naples-Cannes-New York run, returning to the Buenos Aires route in 1957. In May 1957, she carried the body of Eva Peron from Argentina to Italy (although she was given a false name for the trip).⁵³

⁵⁰ Amazingly, this was apparently done with the ship in the water, and with heavy ballast in her stern, raising the bow to allow the work to be carried out.

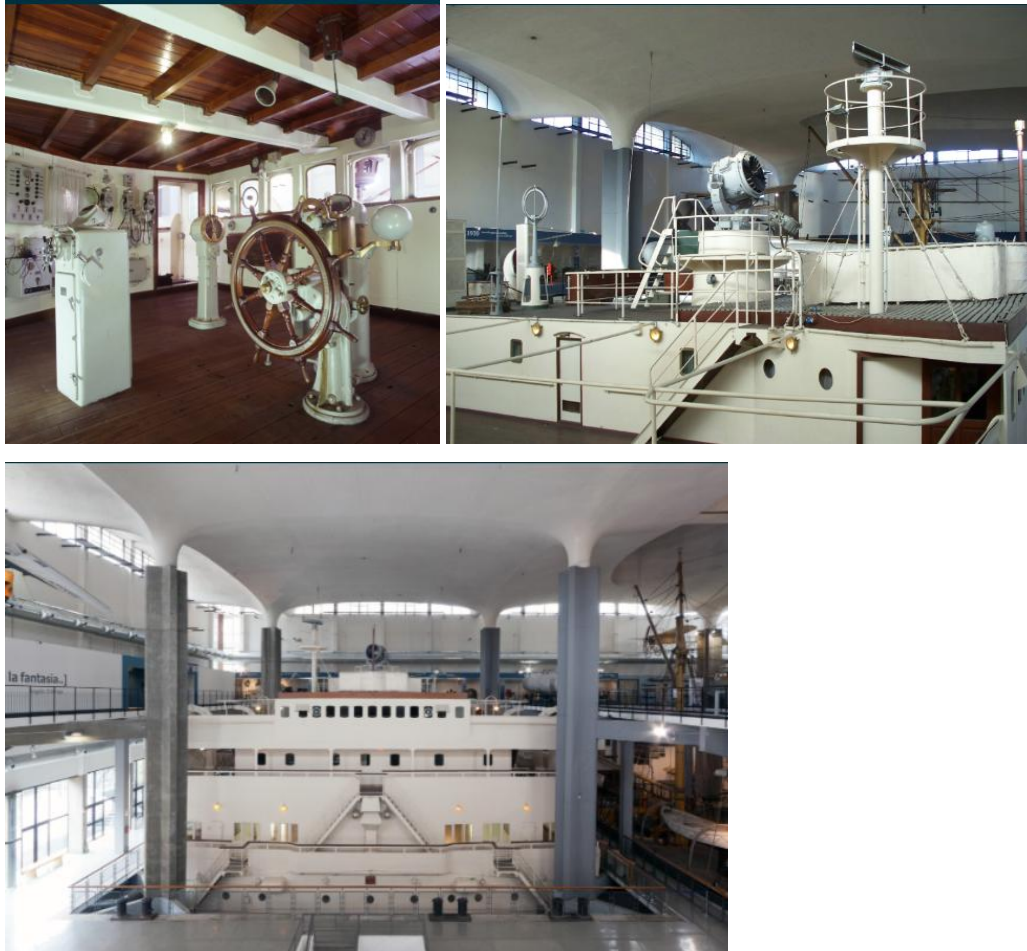
⁵¹ <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/cruising-journal/20260109/282986816352980>

⁵² <https://www.italianliners.com/conte-biancamano-en>

⁵³ She had died in July 1952, but plans for her body to be preserved in a monument fell through when her husband was deposed in a military coup in 1955, following which he had left the country. This led to the body being smuggled out of Argentina to be buried in a crypt in Milan under a false name.

In 1960, she arrived in Naples at the end of her last voyage,⁵⁴ having returned from Boston and New York. She would be broken up in August 1960 by Terrestre Marittima at La Spezia in Italy.

However, part of her superstructure was saved during the scrapping process in 1964, her bridge, ballroom and forward superstructure with some first -class cabins were saved⁵⁵ - and re-assembled at the Leonardo da Vinci Museum of Science and Technology in Milan.⁵⁶



Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

9 February 2026

⁵⁴ Genoa-Naples-Barcelona-Lisbon-Halifax-New York.

⁵⁵ <https://www.igadv.be/post/conte-biancamano-in-milan>

⁵⁶ <https://www.museoscienza.org/en/collection/objects/conte-biancamano-ocean-liner>