

LIFE ABOARD A TROOP TRANSPORT

Today, cruise ship companies vie with each other to build ever bigger and more luxurious liners, many of which can comfortably accommodate 3,000 tourists and vacationers. In 1944, the US Army employed a ship which shuttled between the States and Europe with up to 7,000 aboard, albeit not quite in the luxury modern passengers take for granted. My personal experience with the US Army Transport (USAT) George Washington began on the night of 5 October 1944 at the Port of New York.

My buddies and I from the 100th Infantry Division had traveled from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey by train to the ferry that took us to the New York Port of Embarkation. We were herded like cattle, struggling under the weight of 100 pound duffel bags, packs with bed rolls, rifles and steel helmets into a gaping hole in the side of the towering ship. In the dark of night required for operational security, we never did get a look at her before boarding.

Once we had climbed the gangway and gotten aboard, each of us simply followed the man in front of us through a maze of hatches and companionways until we reached our assigned area. This consisted of a forest of steel pipes supporting canvas strips stretched tightly with ropes. Each "hammock" was approximately two feet wide by six feet long, and was strung about two feet from the "hammock" above. These hammocks were tiered three high and the man on the uppermost one stared into a tangle of pipes immediately above his face. The men below had to contend with the indentation made by the bodies of the men above them, and each had to adjust his position to provide adequate clearance.

Aisles between the hammocks were extremely narrow and packed with duffel bags and gear, so we were constantly climbing over something. Our deck was just below the waterline, so we had no portholes and the ventilation was far less than adequate for the number of men in that confined space.

We weighed anchor on 6 October and sailed for an unknown port: security requirements prevented us from being apprised of our destination before we set sail. Many of us would never return.

The almost 7,000 souls aboard the George Washington joined a convoy of ten other troopships.

Our convoy, designated UFG-15B, carried the over 13,000 men of the 100th Infantry Division and a similar number from the 103d Infantry Division from the New York Port of Embarkation to Marseilles in eight transports, escorted by five combatant vessels.

TROOP CARRIERS

You may *CLICK* on the pictures to see an enlarged view.



US Army Transport (USAT) George Washington.

Specifications:

721 feet long; 23,788 tons displacement.

6,341 troops embarked.

Built in Germany in 1908.

Operated by a Merchant Marine crew.



United States Ship (USS) Monticello. (AP-61)

Specifications:

652 feet long; 23,000 tons displacement.

6,890 troops embarked.

Built in Italy in 1928.

Operated by a US Coast Guard crew.



USS General Gordon. (AP-117)

Specifications:

622 feet long; 17,833 tons displacement.

5,196 troops embarked.

Built in New Jersey in 1944.

Operated by a US Coast Guard crew.



USS General J. R. Brooke (AP-132)

Specifications:

522 feet long; 13,000 tons displacement.

3,456 troops embarked.

Built in California in 1943.

Operated by a US Navy crew.

USAT Henry Gibbins.

Specifications:

489 feet long; 12,097 tons displacement.

1,948 troops embarked.

Built in Mississippi in 1943.

Operated by a Merchant Marine crew.

USAT J. W. McAndrew

Specifications:

491 feet long; 7,997 tons displacement.

1,891 troops embarked.

Built in Maryland in 1940.

Operated by a Merchant Marine crew.

Steam Ship (SS) Mooremac Moon.

Specifications:

492 feet long; 7,939 tons displacement.

549 troops embarked.

Built in Mississippi in 1940.

Operated by a civilian crew.

SS Santa Maria

Specifications:

459 feet long; 6,505 tons displacement.

1,791 troops embarked.

Built in United States in 1942.

Operated by a civilian crew.



USS Merak

A US Navy refrigeration vessel carrying food to the European Theater.

His Majesty's Ship (HMS) Engadine

A British vessel; cargo and passengers unknown.

COMBATANT VESSELS



USS Solomons (CVE-67)

An escort carrier, or "baby flattop" of the *Casablanca* class.

Displacement: 7,800 tons

Length: 512' 3"

Beam: 108'

Draft: 22' 4"

Speed: 19 knots

Armament: 1 x 5" gun (Caliber length 38), 28 airplanes

Complement: 860

Propulsion: Reciprocating engines.

Built at Kaiser S.B. Co., Vancouver and commissioned 21 Nov 1943



USS Dewey (DD-349)

Farragut class Destroyer

Displacement: 1,375 tons

Length: 341' 3"

Beam: 34' 2"

Draft: 8' 10"

Speed: 36.5 knots

Armament: 5 x 5" inch guns (Caliber length 38); 4 x 1.1" Automatic Antiaircraft Guns; 8 21" torpedos fired from quadruple tubes

Complement: 251

Propulsion: Geared turbines with twin screws, 42,800 h.p.

Built at Bath Iron Works and commissioned 4 October 1934

Destroyer Escorts

All three destroyer escorts on this convoy were members of the *John C. Butler* class. As such, their characteristics follow:

Displacement: 1,430 tons (1,811 tons with full load)

Length: 306 feet Beam: 37 feet

Draft: 11' 2"

Speed: 23 knots

Armament: 2 x 5" guns (caliber length 38); 4 x twin 40mm AA guns; 10 x single 20mm AA guns; one triple 21" torpedo mount; two stern-mounted depth charge racks.

Propulsion: 2 x Combustion Engineering or Babcock & Wilcox boilers driving 2-shaft Westinghouse turbines with electric drive

Complement: 156



USS Naifeh (DE-352)

Destroyer Escort

USS Gentry (DE-349)

Destroyer Escort



USS Maurice J. Manuel (DE-351)

Destroyer Escort

After clearing the port of New York, we were allowed on deck to explore the ship. Lifejackets were mandatory and deck space was at a premium. Bodies sprawled everywhere and card games of all types quickly sprang up. We soon settled into the ship's routine, and the first five days were monotonous, but not unpleasant; there was sunshine and sea air, the occasional training class, and two meals per day. The situation changed drastically on the sixth day, when we were forced below decks by the approach of a major storm, bordering on a hurricane. The convoy fought the storm for 24 hours before being forced to change course and run with it.

The 8,000 ton McAndrew came within five degrees of capsizing and almost collided with the 26,000 ton George Washington. Needless to say, the men below were mostly seasick and the conditions were rapidly becoming unbearable. Three days later, the storm moderated and the fresh air on deck was most welcome.

Dining on a troopship was an unforgettable experience. We were only allowed two meals a day and it meant lining up for hours to get to the mess hall. Food was dumped onto the mess tray and you proceeded to a chest high table running the width of the ship. Once there, you moved along the table, eating as you went, and at the end of the table you washed your tray and looked for a place on deck until lining up for the next meal.

Personal hygiene was difficult and a salt water shower was an unsatisfactory experience. The soap(?) was a rock hard bar that produced no lather. When the salt dried on your skin, you felt dirtier than before.

The monotony of days and nights was broken by Special Services shows, but they were difficult to watch because of the extremely crowded conditions; however, the entertainment was appreciated. A mimeographed newsletter called the "Hatchet" was published daily with news of the world, garnered by the crew by radio. Daily inspections made us feel that we were back in a garrison.

Twelve days after leaving New York, a shout went up: "Land!" Rising out of the sea were the cliffs of the coast of Africa, and soon after we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and entered the Mediterranean Sea, with a course set for Marseilles.

We arrived in the harbor on 20 October. Many ships littered the area since the invasion of Southern France had occurred only a short time before. We dropped anchor and waited for landing craft to transport us to shore. Afternoon turned into night as delays developed because of an air raid alarm.

We now faced the prospect of leaving the ship, bobbing at anchor, and clambering down rope cargo nets hung over the side into the tiny landing craft, which were pitching on the waves. Field packs, rifles and steel helmets banged against the massive hull as we worked our way down in the dark. As in New York, we still did not see the ship that had been our home for 15 days. After reaching shore, we had the unpleasant news that we would march twelve miles to the Staging Area at Septemes, France.

Thus ended our lives aboard a troop transport, and a new and even less pleasant chapter in our lives began as we moved to do battle with German troops dug into the Vosges Mountains in Lorraine and Alsace.

Story submitted by Staff Sergeant Robert Tessmer

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Photos and information courtesy of Arthur Cott, 925th Field Artillery and Mr. Chuck Ulrich of the AP Transport Reunion Group. Photo of the USS Manuel and specifications for the destroyer escorts from Destroyers Online (<http://www.plateau.net/usn/dd/index.html>) Specifications for the USS Solomons and the USS Dewey from HyperWar: US Navy in World War II (<http://metalab.unc.edu/hyperwar/USN/USN-ships.html>)