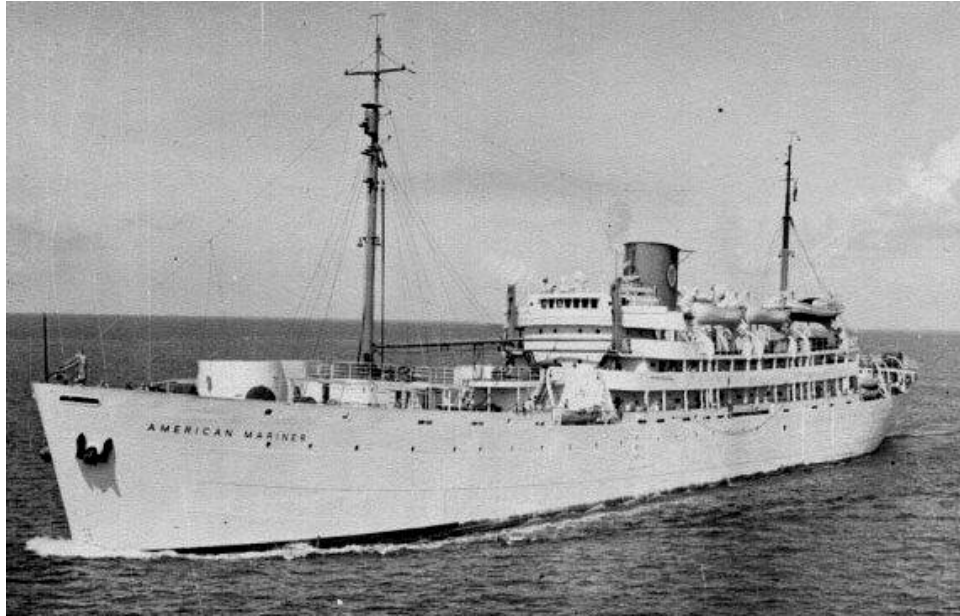


AMERICAN MARINER



Sturdy Ship of Several Services Still Survives

SYNOPSIS: A vessel built in haste in 1941 has had an amazing journey over the past three-quarters of a century. Along the way, she became what is believed to be the only ship ever to have served in the US Coast Guard, Army, Air Force and Navy...and the American Merchant Marine.

The end of her multi-service, active duty odyssey came in 1966, when she became a fixed target for naval aviator trainees. Grounded in the Chesapeake Bay, not far from her birthplace, this sturdy ship still remains largely intact.

Abandoned and badly battered, she continues to defy the elements. There's an old shipbuilder saying about such vessels...they were 'built hell for stout'.



LIBERTY SHIP ORIGIN: The SS AMERICAN MARINER began life as one of the first of over 2,500 Liberty-class cargo vessels built to counter the submarine menace to Allied shipping in World War II. Her original name was SS GEORGE CALVERT, named in honor of a man who helped found the state of Maryland and who was called the Baron of Baltimore.



Identified by the US Maritime Commission as MC Hull #20, she was just the seventh Liberty constructed at Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard in Baltimore, Maryland. Her keel was laid August 15, 1941. She was launched a little over three weeks following the Japanese sneak attack at Pearl Harbor.

After becoming waterborne and at 65.4% complete, she was towed the short distance to Bethlehem's Key Highway Shipyard and modified to become a training vessel for the US Coast Guard. Her conversion work included extending her superstructure to accommodate additional crew and trainees.

One of three cargo vessel conversions that took place there in early 1942, she was renamed SS AMERICAN MARINER and commissioned on February 12, 1942. The other two training vessel conversions utilized World War I freighters of a similar size and were named AMERICAN SEAMAN and AMERICAN SAILOR.

A SECOND LIBERTY NAMED GEORGE CALVERT: Before these conversions were completed, the Maritime Commission named another Liberty in honor of George Calvert; thereby ensuring confusion for maritime scholars forever. The keel for MC Hull #29 was laid in November of 1941 at the same shipyard where the hull of the first Liberty named for the Baron of Baltimore was built.

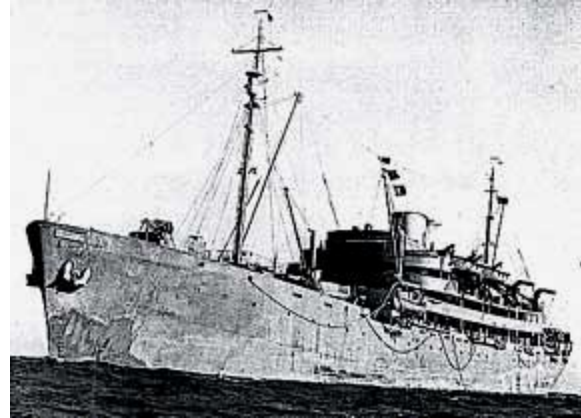
The 'second' SS GEORGE CALVERT was completed in late April, 1942. Less than a month later, she was torpedoed and sunk on her maiden voyage, carrying a military cargo from Baltimore to Iran.

COAST GUARD & US MARITIME SERVICE: The US Maritime Service (USMS) had been set up in 1938 to train officers and men for the merchant marine. Shortly after the SS AMERICAN MARINER was commissioned, the US Coast Guard was designated to administer all training for the merchant marine.



This arrangement only lasted four and a half months. In mid-July, 1942, American's merchant marine training was assigned to the War Shipping Administration, which created a division of training. The prefix for the AMERICAN MARINER and other training ships was changed from SS to USMSTS, which stood for United States Maritime Service Training Ship. This unwieldy abbreviation soon was shortened to just TS.

The TS AMERICAN MARINER was particularly well suited for her assignment as a merchant marine training vessel. Her standard Liberty ship hull, machinery and armament were exactly the same as her trainees would experience later on, when they shipped out in one of the many Liberty ships built during the war. Her complement was much greater than that of a conventional Liberty ship.



She routinely carried an operating crew of 158 and over 400 trainees. When not at sea, she was stationed at one of the several USMS shore bases scattered around the United States that were devoted to merchant marine training.

On at least one occasion, she was also utilized to help sell war bonds; see the undated poster reproduction on the left [the fourth war bond loan campaign took place in January/February of 1944]. The promotional verbiage about her being a Liberty ship was a bit a misnomer. But the use of that technically inaccurate title was no doubt contrived to hopefully attract a patriotic public more so than her prosaic classification of 'training ship'.

IMMEDIATE POST-WAR USAGES: When World War II ended, the AMERICAN MARINER was laid up in one of the nation's ready reserve fleets. There is some indication, albeit undocumented, that she briefly served as a training ship at the Maine Maritime Academy in the late 1940s.

In 1950, she became the training ship for the US Merchant Marine Academy at King's Point, NY. In 1953, she was replaced by a more modern vessel, and reverted to reserve fleet status. For the next four years she lay idle at the National Defense Reserve Fleet anchorage in the Hudson River; nested together with a large number of her near-sister Liberty ships.



MISSILE TRACKING SHIP: On June 18, 1958, she was transferred to the US Army, dry docked for hull cleaning and painting, and outfitted with state-of-the-art radar tracking equipment. Commissioned as the US ARMY SHIP AMERICAN MARINER, she was then placed in service to support the Army's advanced research guided missiles agency.

In this new role, her crew consisted of 67 civilian mariners, supplied by the Mathiesen Tanker Company. Her embarked scientists and engineers were employees of Radio Corporation of America (RCA), who operated the radar gear supplied by RCA and shown on the right.



A third firm supplied equipment and personnel to deal with the ship's optical needs in tracking missiles. The total number of scientific and engineering personnel assigned to the ship in the early 1960s was around one hundred.

Their work was known to few and usually just referred to by the acronym DAMP [Downrange Anti-Missile Measurement Program]. This effort entailed obtaining data associated with the re-entry into the earth's atmosphere of intercontinental ballistic missiles. This work secretly took place between 1959 and 1963. Ultimately, the data acquired by the personnel onboard this ship became an important part of America's anti-ballistic missile defense system.



In the beginning of her service as a missile tracking ship, the US ARMY SHIP AMERICAN MARINER's profile included a modest array of antennae, as shown on the previous page. But later in the 1960's, her basic missile tracking equipment was augmented by a large antennae [right].



In September of 1964, the DAMP mission ended, and the AMERICAN MARINER changed governmental agency hands once again.

USAF & PAN AM INVOLVEMENT: On January 1, 1964, the ship became a part of the US Air Force (USAF), but was operated by civilians supplied by Pan American Airways (Pan Am). Curiously, she retained the name US ARMY SHIP AMERICAN MARINER during this part of her service career.

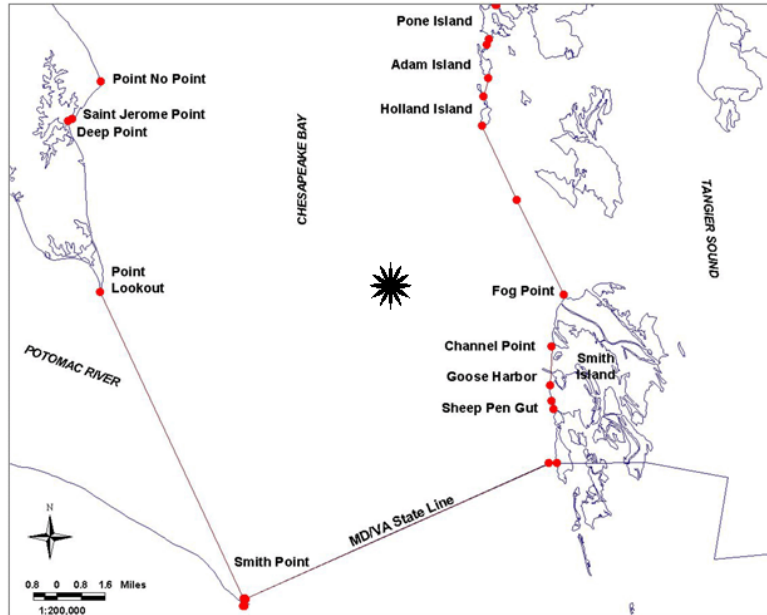
Initially she supported USAF operations in the Atlantic Ocean. In 1962 she was relocated to the Pacific, where she participated in atmospheric nuclear testing near Johnston Island. During one test, a nuclear device was exploded high...and directly above...the AMERICAN MARINER to determine if her radars could track and identify missiles in the resultant nuclear cloud. Afterwards, a wash down system that had been installed was used to rid her of airborne contamination.

While in the Pacific, the ship provided tracking services to NASA for one of its Project Mercury missions. Before returning to the Atlantic in early 1963, the slow-steaming AMERICAN MARINER was caught in a typhoon. Top heavy, due to all the additions made to her Liberty ship hull since 1941, the vessel rolled heavily, and incurred some damage and flooding.

Shortly after resuming operations in the Atlantic for the USAF, the AMERICAN MARINER, which her crew had begun to call 'the ancient mariner', was taken out of service. Two newer and more capable vessels took her place.

LAST TRANSFER: In early 1965 she was transferred to the US Navy Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) and placed in service as the USNS AMERICAN MARINER (T-AGM-12). The Navy replaced the word 'Army' with 'Navy' on both sides of her bow and stern. Unable to find a good operational use for her, the Navy placed the vessel out of service sometime in 1966.

But the Navy soon came up with a suitable way for the venerable AMERICAN MARINER to provide one last service to her nation. After her numerous radar antennae and other sensitive equipment had been removed, she was towed into the upper Chesapeake Bay to a position near the Maryland-Virginia line [marked by the starburst on the map to the right].



In October of 1966, the AMERICAN MARINER was scuttled in shallow water near Smith Island. She settled on an even keel in twenty feet of water; appearing from a distance as if merely anchored there. For the next several years, she was used by naval aviators for target practice.

Those maneuvers ceased in 1971. Located well to the east of the main Chesapeake Bay shipping channel, her battered hulk remains largely intact after being abandoned so long ago.

Surely this well-built vessel with such a unique service record deserves better.



Bill Lee

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