

A TALE OF TWO COLLIERS

WHEN A LOSS AT SEA RESULTED IN AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SHIPBUILDER INGENUITY

In the lean shipbuilding years following the end of World War II, Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) sought other sources of revenue in order to stay in business and maintain a skilled workforce. In addition to performing ship repair and conversion work, and manufacturing a wide variety of industrial products, NNS ingenuity created an opportunity in the wake of a valuable customer's maritime misfortune.

The Pocahontas Steamship Company of Wilmington, Delaware owned and operated a small fleet of coastal coal colliers during the 20th century. These vessels routinely carried bituminous coal from Hampton Roads to port cities in New England. When repair work was required, Newport News Shipbuilding was often chosen to do that work, and as a result, steamship and shipyard officials were well acquainted with one another.

On March 3, 1947, Pocahontas' thirty-two year-old flagship, the SS OAKLEY L. ALEXANDER was caught in a severe storm off the coast of Maine. Fully loaded, 130 feet of her bow broke off. But her captain, Raymond W. Lewis, skillfully maneuvered the sinking ship close to shore, enabling a dramatic rescue to save the entire crew. The collier's total loss was particularly depressing for the firm's president, since the stricken ship had been named in his honor.



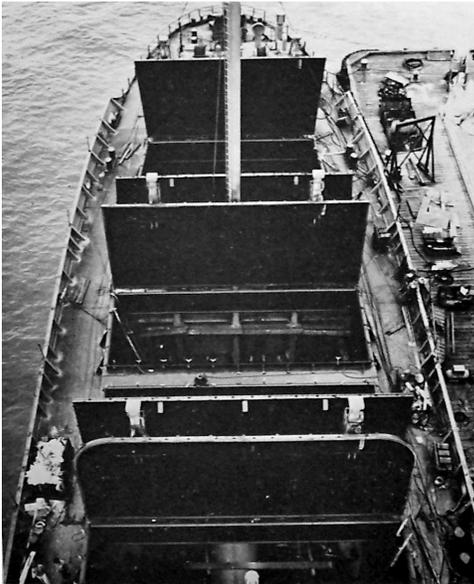
Soon thereafter, NNS officials hatched a plan to help their good customer...and themselves. Replacing the firm's flagship quickly and relatively cheaply was a desire that Mr. Alexander stated publicly. Seizing on that thought, innovative shipbuilders soon hatched a plan to help their good customer...and themselves.

Just days after the loss, NNS determined that it would be economically feasible to convert a Victory-class vessel languishing in the James River Idle Fleet to become a replacement collier.

With Mr. Alexander's support, detail plans and specs for such a conversion were rapidly developed by the shipyard. Within weeks, the SS LACONIA VICTORY was acquired by the steamship company from the Maritime Commission.

That particular vessel had been completed in April of 1945 as a troop transport for the US Army Transportation Service. Sparse accommodations for over 1,500 troops had been fitted in the vessel's cargo holds. She made a few trips to Europe that same year to bring American soldiers home before suffering extensive boiler damage. With far more ships on their hands than missions for them, the Maritime Commission had the LACONIA VICTORY laid up along with dozens more essentially surplus ships.

The vessel's seemingly unfavorable boiler situation actually fit right into the new owner's plans. Mr. Alexander insisted that all of his ships burn coal, not oil. The LACONIA VICTORY was towed down the James River to the shipyard in early March, 1948. Although not given a hull number, the conversion effort that followed was extensive.



Seven months later, she had been rebuilt as a coal collier, and renamed OAKEY L. ALEXANDER. All of the vessel's wartime features were removed. Her cargo holds and hatches were modified to carry coal. The view on the left shows the ship's aft cargo hatches in their fully opened positions. There were thirteen such hatches in all.

Her break-bulk cargo handling gear was removed, and two new coal-burning boilers were substituted for the vessel's original, but inoperable oil-fired boilers. Mechanical and electrical systems throughout the vessel were modified to suit her new role. The ship's superstructure generally retained the look of a Victory ship externally. Internally it was modified extensively.

One unique feature was the provision for garaging several small bulldozers onboard the collier. When lowered into nearly empty cargo holds, they were utilized to scoop up coal from areas inaccessible to dockside unloading cranes and place it in the center of each hold's hatch opening. This eliminated the need for manual labor to do that dirty job.

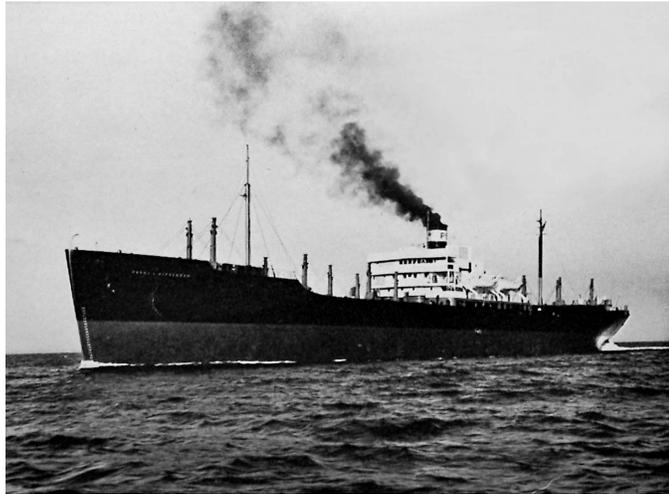
In addition to larger and better quarters for a peacetime crew of 37, accommodations were added for eight passengers, which included this austere owner's stateroom that was fitted with twin beds. Mr. Alexander, often accompanied by his wife, was fond of riding his ships and entertaining clients and personal guests on coastal runs.



When her conversion was complete, the revitalized vessel measured 453 feet long, with a beam of 62 feet and a displacement of 15,690 tons. From a distance she could be easily mistaken for a Victory-class cargo vessel.

On October 26, 1948, at the unusual time of 7:40 AM for such ceremonies, Mrs. Alexander christened the converted vessel SS OAKLEY L. ALEXANDER in honor of her husband and the prior ship that had borne that same name. Immediately afterwards, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander and forty-three guests went aboard to experience the vessel's brief trial trip. Also onboard was the ship's designated captain; the same fearless fellow who had saved all of his crew when the first collier named for Mr. Alexander was lost.

Operated by shipyard personnel, the new collier made a clean sweep of her trials requirements, and attained a maximum speed of 15 knots. The traditional broom was hoisted at her masthead to signal those accomplishments to shipbuilders awaiting her return to NNS. Prior to disembarking, Mrs. Alexander requested...and was given...the large broom. She later displayed it above a mantle in her home until her death in 1974.



Unfortunately, Mr. Alexander had far fewer years to enjoy further excursions onboard his namesake. He passed away in 1950, less than two years after the converted coal collier went into service. She was quietly and efficiently operated by the Pocahontas Steamship Company until 1965, when she was sold to the Marine Navigation Company.

Renamed MARINE COLLIER, the vessel remained in coastal service for just four additional years. In 1969, she was sold and subsequently scrapped in Santander, Spain.

History has almost forgotten the unique circumstances that led to this damaged and laid-up Victory ship being modified for beneficial service through the ingenuity of the management of Newport News Shipbuilding. But in this case, perhaps the shipyard's time-honored motto might best be footnoted thusly:

*Always Good Ships**

*...even when necessity becomes the mother of invention

Bill Lee

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