

Asterion; USS

AK-100; WAK-123; ex-*Evelyn*



Asterion: a star in the constellation *Canum Ven.*

Builder: Newport News Shipbuilding & Drydock Company, Newport News, Virginia

Length: 382' 2"

Beam: 46' 1"

Draft: 21' 6"

Displacement: 6,610 tons

Cost:

Launched: 1912

Commissioned: 1942 (USN); 12 January 1944 (USCG)

Decommissioned: 20 July 1944

Disposition: Sold, 14 March 1946

Machinery: 1 3-cylinder triple expansion steam engine producing 1,200 SHP; single screw

Performance: 11.0 knots maximum speed

Complement: 141

Armament: 4 x 4-inch guns (concealed); 4 x .50-caliber machine guns; 4 x .30-caliber Lewis machine guns; six depth charge projectors)

History:

SS *Evelyn*--a steel-hulled, single-screw steamer--was laid down on 17 January 1912 by the Newport News (Va.) Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., for the A. H. Bull Steamship Line; launched on 9 May 1912; and delivered on 11 June 1912.

For the next 30 years, *Evelyn* operated between ports on the eastern seaboard of the United States and the West Indies, carrying passengers and freight. During World War 1, she was inspected in the 3d Naval District on 9 January 1918, for possible naval service and was assigned the identification number, Id. No. 2228. However, she was not actually taken over. Remaining a merchantman, she received a Navy armed guard detachment that protected her between 31 January and 11 November 1918.

Acquired by the Navy from the Bull Line early in 1942, *Evelyn* was renamed *Asterion* and classified as a cargo ship, AK-100. That designation, however, was strictly a "cover," for *Asterion*,

like her sister ship *Atik* (AK-101) (the former *Carolyn*) was to pursue the far more dangerous game of a "Q-ship." While this *ruse de guerre* had worked moderately well in World War I, it was at best a stop-gap measure adopted in the hope of ending a rash of sinkings of merchantmen in American coastal waters. Given a main battery, machine guns and depth-charge gear hidden in concealed positions, *Asterion* was placed in commission at the Portsmouth (N.H.) Navy Yard in early March 1942, LCDR Glen W. Legwen, Jr., in command.

After brief sea trials, *Asterion* sailed for her assigned patrol area on 23 March 1942 in company at the outset with her sister ship *Atik*. The mission assigned each ship was to sail under the guise of a "tramp" steamer, proceeding independently, in the hope of luring a U-boat to the surface and destroying the submarine with gunfire before she could realize what was happening. Once out at sea, the two vessels parted company.

One day out, *Asterion* picked up a submarine contact on her underwater detection gear. Two days later, however, her radios picked up ominous traffic. "*Carolyn*" (*Atik*) had been torpedoed. Then, after luring her assailant, *U-123*, to the surface with her "tramp" steamer guise, *Atik* had engaged the U-boat with gunfire, but succeeded only in mortally wounding an officer on the submarine's bridge before the German captain wisely broke off the action and cleared the area to await nightfall and a second crack at the Q-ship. *U-123* delivered the *coup de grace* that evening, and *Atik* exploded and sank. *Asterion* plodded immediately to *Atik's* assistance; but, when she arrived on the scene, found only wreckage. Not a man in *Atik's* crew had survived.

Arriving at Norfolk, Virginia, on 31 March 1942, *Asterion* set out for her second cruise on 4 April, and that afternoon witnessed the torpedoing of the tanker SS *Comol Rio* by *U-154*. A destroyer arrived on the scene shortly thereafter and took up the search after *Asterion* had picked up a sound contact.

Operating off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, 10 days later, *Asterion* rescued the 55 men of the crew of a British merchantman that had been torpedoed earlier--saving even the captain's dog. She entered New York harbor on 18 April and there disembarked the sailors she had rescued, cautioning them not to tell anyone of what they had seen on board the "Q-ship."

Asterion's third cruise commenced on 4 May 1942 from New York, and she sailed between Key West and Norfolk, proceeding as an independently routed merchantman or as a straggler from a convoy. The fourth cruise commenced on 7 June 1942, and, due to increased submarine activity in the Gulf of Mexico, the "Q-ship" set course for those dangerous waters. Clearing New York, she sailed down the eastern seaboard, transited the straits of Florida on 11 June, passed the Dry Tortugas on 14 June; and thence steamed to the Yucatan Channel. Then, after reversing course, she moved to the Mississippi River Delta whence she continued on a westerly course toward Galveston, Tex. She then returned to New York, and arrived there on 6 July.

Departing New York a fortnight later, *Asterion* went directly to Key West and then sailed north of the Bahamas to the Windward Passage. Returning to New York on 18 August, *Asterion* sailed at the end of the month for her sixth cruise, which took her through the waters that she had traversed on the fifth patrol. On 25 September 1942, she was redesignated AK-63. Commencing her seventh cruise on 18 November, the ship proceeded to Key West and, while there, carried out training exercises on 30 November with a friendly submarine.

On 2 December 1942, *Asterion* got underway for the British West Indies and, going via the Old Bahama Channel, followed the convoy route to Trinidad, patrolling to the westward of Aruba, in the Dutch West Indies. Departing Trinidad on the day after Christmas the ship headed home and arrived at New York on 10 January 1943.

Over the next few months, *Asterion* underwent an extensive overhaul, involving the strengthening of her whole structure and modification of her armament. Steaming to New London, Connecticut,

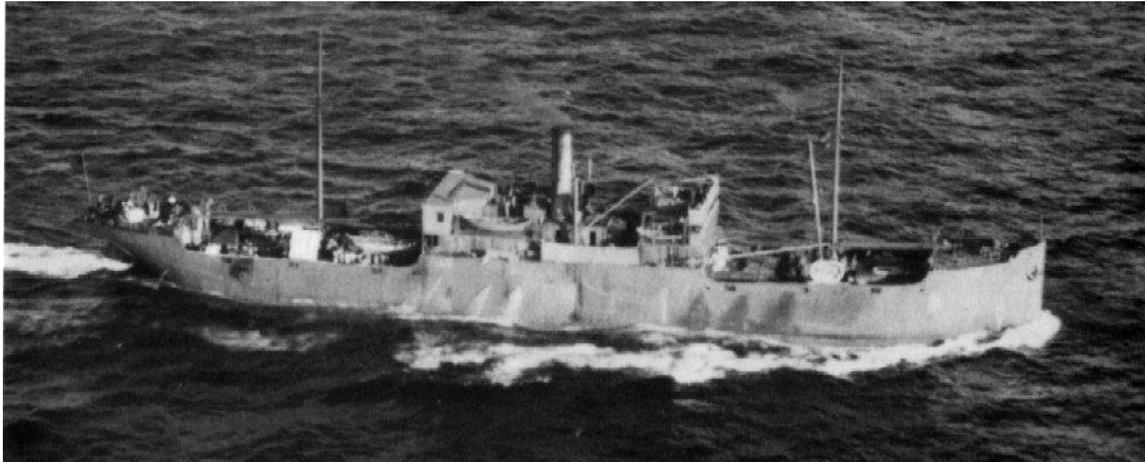
on 4 September, *Asterion* operated with American submarines, in training. After returning briefly to New York, from 18 to 20 September, she resumed her training at New London before proceeding back to New York for post-shakedown availability. During the ensuing weeks, on 14 October 1943, Admiral King decided that--since the "Q-ship" effort had achieved nothing--*Asterion* should be assigned to other duties. On 16 December 1943, the venerable auxiliary and erstwhile "tramp" was ordered to proceed to Boston, Massachusetts, where she reported to the Commandant, 1st Naval District, for transfer to the Coast Guard.

Turned over to that service and commissioned by it at Boston on 12 January 1944, *Asterion* (given the designation WAK-123) was converted for service as a weather ship. Ten days later, on 22 January 1944, her name was struck from the Naval Vessel Register.

Based at Boston, *Asterion* performed duty as a weather patrol ship on Atlantic stations 3 and 4 until decommissioned on 20 July 1944 because of "age, condition of hull and machinery, and lack of speed." Turned over to the War Shipping Administration for disposal in April 1946, *Asterion* was sold to the Boston Metals Co. on 10 September 1946 and was subsequently scrapped.

Asterion (AK-63) earned one battle star for her World War II service.

Images:



Asterion as the Q-Ship *Evelyn*, 10 May 1942. She was transferred to the Coast Guard for service as a weather ship in 1944. Taken from Robert Scheina's *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft of World War II*, p. 64.

Sources:

Cutter History File. USCG Historian's Office, USCG HQ, Washington, D.C.

Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships. Washington, DC: USGPO.

Robert Scheina. *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft of World War II*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982.

