



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

American Seaman, 1939

WIX; ex-Edgemoor

Builder: Skinner & Eddy Corporation, Seattle, WA

Commissioned: May 1919 (Commercial); 6 May 1939 (USCG)

Decommissioned: 1942

Disposition: N/A

Cost: N/A

Tonnage- 5,194 gross (1941); 3,317 net (1941)

Length- 380' 3" bp

Beam- 52' max

Draft- 30' max (1941)

Main Engines- triple-expansion steam

Main Boilers- 3 single-ended boilers

SHP- 2,500

Propellers- Single

Armament- probably none

TRAINING MERCHANT MARINERS FOR WAR: The Role of the United States Coast Guard

Safety at Sea has always been one of the major concerns of the U.S. Coast Guard. When the United States entered World War II, national exigencies created the need for the service to be more closely associated with merchant marine functions. Therefore, during the early months of the war, the Coast Guard was temporarily tasked to assume an even greater role in the safety of mariners at sea. February 1942 saw two important maritime agencies transferred to the Coast Guard by President Roosevelt under Executive Order 9083. The U.S. Maritime Service, a non-military merchant marine reserve, and the marine safety aspects of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation (BuMIN) were transferred to the Coast Guard on 28 February 1942. The Maritime Service was later transferred to another agency, but marine inspection and licensing continued to be Coast Guard missions.

U.S. Maritime Service

The merchant marine in the United States was in a state of decline in the mid-1930s. At that time few ships were being built, existing ships were old and inefficient, maritime unions were at war with one another, ship owners were at odds with the unions, and the crews' efficiency and morale were at an ebb. Congress took action to fix the problems in 1936. The Merchant Marine Act, approved on 29 June 1936, created the U.S. Maritime Commission "to further the development and maintenance of an adequate and well balanced American merchant marine, to promote the commerce of the United States, and to aid in the national defense."

The commission realized that a trained merchant marine work force was vital to the national interest. At the request of Congress, the chairman of the Maritime Commission, VADM Emory S. Land worked with ADM Russell R. Waesche, Commandant of the Coast Guard, to formulate a training program for merchant-marine personnel. Called the U.S. Maritime Service, the new training program was inaugurated in 1938. It used a combination of civilian Maritime Commission and uniformed Coast Guard instructors to advance the professional training of merchant mariners.

As with the other military services, the entry of the United States into the Second World War necessitated the immediate growth of the merchant marine and the Coast Guard. The Maritime Commission spawned the War Shipping Administration in early February 1942. This new agency received a number of functions considered vital to the war effort, including maritime training. Several weeks after the creation of the new agency, however, the Maritime Service was transferred again to the Coast Guard. The transfer allowed the War Shipping Administration to concentrate on organizing American merchant shipping, building new ships, and carrying cargoes where they were needed most.

The need for administering the merchant marine during wartime was demonstrated during the First World War. Commerce warfare, carried on by submarines and merchant raiders, had a disastrous effect on the Allied merchant fleet. With the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, U-boats sank ships faster than replacements could be built. The United States intended to meet this crisis with large numbers of mass-produced freighters and transports. When World War II loomed, the Maritime Commission began a crash shipbuilding program utilizing every available resource. The experienced shipyards built complicated vessels, such as warships. New shipyards, which opened almost overnight around the country, generally built less sophisticated ships such as the emergency construction "Liberty" ships. By 1945 the shipyards had completed more than 2,700 "Liberty" ships and hundreds of "Victory" ships, tankers and transports.

Coast Guard Trains Merchant Mariners

All of these new ships needed trained officers and crews to operate them. The Coast Guard provided much of the advanced training for merchant marine personnel to augment the training of state merchant marine academies. The Maritime Commission requested that the Coast Guard provide training in 1938 when the Maritime Service was created. Merchant sailors from around the country trained at two large training stations. On the East Coast the men trained at Fort Trumbull in New London, Connecticut, and Government Island in Alameda, California served the West Coast. In 1940 Hoffman Island in New York Harbor became the third training station for the service. After the start of the war other training stations were added in Boston, Port Hueneme, California, and St. Petersburg, Florida.

Training ships manned by the Coast Guard included the Maritime Commission American Seaman. The 7,000-gross-ton American Seaman, carried 250 trainees in addition to the regular crew of 18 officers and 100 enlisted men. Four complete machine shops, various lifeboats and up-to-date navigational equipment comprised the special educational equipment. Licensed and unlicensed merchant marine personnel enrolled in the service. The ranks, grades, and ratings for

the Maritime Service were based on those of the Coast Guard. Training for experienced personnel lasted three months; while inexperienced personnel trained for six months. Pay was based on the person's highest certified position in merchant service. New students received cadet wages. American citizens at least 19 years old, with one year of service on American merchant vessels of more than 500 gross tons, were eligible for enrollment. Coast Guard training of merchant mariners was vital to winning the war. Thousands of the sailors who manned the new American merchant fleet trained under the watchful eyes of the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard only continued the administration of the Maritime Service for ten months after the United States entered the war. Merchant marine training and most aspects of merchant marine activity transferred to the newly created War Shipping Administration on September 1, 1942. The transfer allowed the Coast Guard to take a more active role in the war and concentrated government administration of the merchant marine in one agency. However, Just as the transfer removed the merchant marine training role from the Coast Guard, the service assumed the role of licensing seamen and inspecting merchant vessels.

History:

A freighter-type merchantman, she was converted to a school ship at Bethlehem Steel, Baltimore, MD.

1939-1942 used for merchant marine training, stationed at St. Petersburg, FL; December 1939 training cruise to the Caribbean.

Sources:

Cutter History File, Coast Guard Historian's Office.

