

## *U.S. Coast Guard History Program*

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### Owasco, 1945



WPG / WHEC-39  
Call Sign: NRUA

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Owasco was named for Owasco Lake, New York.

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Builder: Western Pipe & Steel Co., San Pedro, CA

Commissioned: 18 May 1945

Decommissioned: 27 June 1973

Disposition: Sold for scrap on 7 October 1974

Length: 254' oa; 245' bp

Navigation Draft: 17'3" max (1966)

Beam: 43'1" max

Displacement: 1,978 fl (1966); 1,342 light (1966)

Main Engines: 1 Westinghouse electric motor driven by a turbine.

SHP: 4,000 total (1945)

Performance, Maximum Sustained: 17.0 knots, 6,157-mi radius (!966)

Performance, Economic: 10.0 knots, 10,376-mi radius (1966)

Fuel Capacity: 141,755 gal (Oil, 95%)

Complement: 10 officers, 3 warrants, 130 men (1966)

Electronics:

Detection Radar: SR, SU (1945); SPS-23; SPS-29-B; SPA-52 (1965)

Sonar: QJA (1945); SQS-1, SQA-2, 55134-B; UQC-1C (1965)

Fire Control Radar: Mk 26

Armament: 4 x 5"/38 (twin mounts); 8 x 40mm/60 (2 quad mounts); 2 depth charge tracks; 6 "K" gun depth charge projectors

1 hedgehog A/S projector (1945)

1 x 5"/38; 1 x Mk 10 MOD D depth charge projector; 1 x .50 caliber MG (1965)

1 x 5"/38; 2 x 81mm mortars; 6 x .50 caliber MGs (1973)

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**Class History**—"The bow and the stern for each other yearn, and the lack of interval shows..." Myths have long shadowed the design history of the 255-foot class. These cutters were to have been much larger ships, and two theories persist as to why they were shortened. The first is that these cutters were built to replace the ships given to Great Britain under lend lease, and Congress stipulated that the Coast Guard had to build these replacement cutters to the same size and character as those provided to the British. The second is that their length was determined by the maximum length that could pass through the locks of the Welland Canal from the Great Lakes to the St. Lawrence River. The Great Lakes shipbuilding industry brought pressure on Congress to ensure that it had the potential to bid on the contract. The first theory seems to be correct, but the second cannot be ruled out.

The Coast Guard had prepared a design for a 316-foot cutter that was to have been an austere 327. This design was cut down into the 255-foot ship. To accomplish this, everything was squeezed down and automated to a degree not before achieved in a turbo-electric-driven ship.

The machinery design of the 255s was compact and innovative, but overly complex. It had pilothouse control, variable-rate (10 to 1) burners, and automatic synchronizing between the turbogenerator and the motor. Westinghouse engineers developed a system of synchronization and a variable-frequency drive for main-propulsion auxiliary equipment, which kept the pumps and other items at about two-thirds the power required for constant-frequency operation. The combined boiler room/engine room was a break with tradition.

The turbo-alternators for ship-service power exhausted at 20 psi gauge pressure instead of into a condenser. This steam was used all over the ship before finally going to a condenser. Space,

heating, galley, cooking, laundry, freshwater evaporation, fuel, and feed-water heating were all taken from the 20 psi backpressure line.

The 255-foot class was an ice-going design. Ice operations had been assigned to the Coast Guard early in the war, and almost all new construction was either ice-going or ice-breaking.

The hull was designed with constant flare at the waterline for ice-going. The structure was longitudinally framed with heavy web frames and an ice belt of heavy plating, and it had extra transverse framing above and below the design waterline. Enormous amounts of weight were removed through the use of electric welding. The 250-foot cutters' weights were used for estimating purposes. Tapered bulkhead stiffeners cut from 12" I-beams went from the main deck (4' depth of web) to the bottom (8" depth of web). As weight was cut out of the hull structure, electronics and ordnance were increased, but at much greater heights. This top weight required ballasting the fuel tanks with seawater to maintain stability both for wind and damaged conditions.

The superstructure of the 255s was originally divided into two islands in order to accommodate an aircraft amidships, but this requirement was dropped before any of the units became operational. Construction of this class received a low priority, and none of the cutters served in the war. Following completion of the preliminary design by the Coast Guard, the work was assigned to George G. Sharp of New York to prepare the contract design.

The number of units – 13 of them – had an interesting origin. Three were to have been replacements for over-aged cutters, the *Ossipee*, *Tallapoosa*, and *Unalaga*; ten units were to be replacements for the 250-foot class transferred to Great Britain under lend-lease. For economy, all 13 units were built to the same design.

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### **Cutter History:**

*Owasco* was built for the Coast Guard by the Western Pipe and Steel Company in San Pedro, California. She was launched on 18 June 1944 and was commissioned on 18 May 1945. She was the first of the 255-foot cutters to enter service. After undergoing trials and shakedown she was initially homeported at Galveston, Texas as of 1 October 1945. On 29 January 1946 she was assigned to duty as a radar research vessel on the International Ice Patrol and was ordered to Boston, Massachusetts, on that date. Initially fitted out as a gunboat, in 1946 she was converted to peace-time status, including the removal of much of her armament and the installation of weather observation facilities and various aerological equipment, at the Coast Guard Yard at Curtis Bay, Maryland. The work was completed in May, 1946. By this time, on 1 April 1946, her homeport was officially designated as Boston.

After her initial assignment she returned to her regular duties, including law enforcement, ocean station, and search and rescue operations. A public affairs release noted that she was: "Equipped with electronic aids to enable her to make special weather observations and to render navigational aid to trans-oceanic aircraft." The cutter was decommissioned and laid up in the Coast Guard Yard, Curtis Bay, Maryland, from 1951 through 1955. She was placed back in commission on 15 August 1955. From that date until 27 June 1973 the *Owasco* was homeported at New London, Connecticut.

A 1973 unit history described a typical ocean station patrol: "When the OWASCO leaves New London for ocean station she is heading for a 210 mile square, and once there remains for 28 days obtaining meteorological and oceanographic data and information. A characteristic signal from her radiobeacon serves as an aid to navigation. She also furnished all passing aircraft within radar range accurate information as to their position, course, speed, and up to date

weather forecasts. While performing her duties as an Ocean Station Vessel, she carries a crew of 13 officers and 121 men."

She was damaged while on an ocean station patrol in January 1962, including having one lifeboat crushed by a wave and her SPS-29 radar antenna shear off, during a series of severe storms. The crew also fought an almost continuous battle to keep the cutter free from ice. A photo caption noted: "Using muscle power and a baseball bat, a crewman attacks ice formed of spray on the superstructure of the Coast Guard's 255-foot cutter OWASCO during her recent weather patrol and plane guard duty on Ocean Station "Bravo" situated in the passage between Labrador and Greenland. A northeaster picked up spume from high waves and deposited it as ice over the vessel. Crewmen fought this ice battle for ten hours to preserve the ship's stability. They use bats, pick handles, meat cleavers, fire axes, shovels and other objects to crack away the dangerous tons of white weight." Some of the wind gusts reached 80 miles per hour. During a cruise for dependents, she grounded on Little Goshen Reef, New London, on 24 August 1965, sustaining minor damage to her hull and sonar dome.

While at sea on Ocean Station Charlie, on Friday, 13 October 1967, *Owasco* was notified of her assignment to Coast Guard Squadron Three in Vietnam. From 10 August 1968 to 6 March 1969, *Owasco* served with the Squadron. Her commanding officer was CDR William R. Fearn and her crew numbered 160 men. While in Vietnam she participated in Operation Market Time, the attempt to interdict communist supply lines by sea. She departed New London on 20 May 1968, and arrived in theatre on 23 July of that same year, after undergoing refresher training at Guantanamo Bay, steaming through the Panama Canal and making port stops in Hawaii, Guam and Subic Bay.

*Owasco* began her first Market Time patrol on 10 August 1968 just south of the Demilitarized Zone in the South China Sea. A Coast Guard press release noted: "Although her patrol areas may change from time to time during the next several months, her duties will not. Market Time units are assigned primarily to keep the Communists from sneaking men, arms and other supplies into the Republic of Vietnam. They include U.S. Navy aircraft, destroyer escort radar picket ships, ocean minesweepers and swift boats and Vietnamese Navy Junk Force craft, as well as 82 foot and high endurance Coast Guard cutters. *Owasco* is one of five of the latter group, which makes up Coast Guard Squadron Three on duty with the Seventh Fleet's Cruiser-Destroyer Group in Southeast Asia. In addition to keeping track of shipping in their patrol areas and inspecting and searching suspicious water craft and their occupants, Market Time units are often called upon to lend gunfire support to friendly forces ashore. *Owasco's* 5 inch, .38 caliber main battery is well suited to shore bombardment and she also carries 81 mm mortars and .50 caliber machine guns for close range engagements with the enemy." From 13 September to 3 October 1968 she served as the SOPA Administrator for all U.S. Naval vessels in Hong Kong, maintaining the shore patrol for the fleet and handling all mail, communications, and all matters concerning U.S. naval personnel there. She got underway for Subic Bay for a regular upkeep period on 1 October 1968. The following month, *Owasco* crewmen went to the aid of a Navy Swift boat in an incident that was described in the official cutter scrapbook of her deployment to Vietnam, entitled: *USCGC Owasco (WHEC-39): A Pictorial History of Its Deployment to Southeast Asia--Viet Nam During 1968-1969*:

SIX OWASCO CREWMEN WERE CITED FOR MERITORIOUS SERVICE AS A RESULT OF DIRECT ACTION WITH THE ENEMY, WHILE THE SHIP WAS PATROLLING MARKET TIME AREA TWO ON WEDNESDAY 6 NOVEMBER 1968. THE SIX MEN HAD JUST COMPLETED A MEDCAP MISSION ASHORE IN PHOUCTHAN. . . EMBARKED IN NAVY SWIFT BOAT PCF-75 FOR RENDEZVOUS WITH THE OWASCO, THE BOAT, IN COMPANY WITH THE ILL-FATED PCF-70, RECEIVED HOSTILE GUNFIRE DURING WHICH PCF-70 PERSONNEL WERE HIT FROM A SURPRISE RECOILLESS RIFLE AMBUSH ON THE BEACH. TWO MEN WERE KILLED AND FOUR OTHERS WOUNDED.

LCDR SPOTT USPHS (MEDICAL OFFICER) AND SN MAISON (CORPSMAN ASSISTANT) RENDERED MEDICAL AID IN THE MIDST OF THE ENEMY ATTACK. FOUR OTHER OWASCO MEN, LTJG MACK, BM2 SCHEYER, DC3 BANE, EM3 SWITLIK ALL ASSISTED IN RESCUE AND SALVAGE OPERATIONS TO THE BATTLE DAMAGED NAVY CRAFT. FOR THEIR ACHIEVEMENT UNDER FIRE, DOCTOR SPOTT AND SEAMAN MAISON RECEIVED NAVY COMMENDATION MEDALS, WHILE THE OTHER FOUR WERE CITED IN LETTERS OF COMMENDATION BY COMMANDER, SEVENTH FLEET. ON 19 JUNE 1969, LTJG WARREN HUDSON USN, THE PCF-70 SKIPPER WHO WAS WOUNDED IN THE ACTION, VISITED THE OWASCO IN NEW LONDON TO EXPRESS HIS THANKS TO THE COMMANDING OFFICER."

She was again in Subic Bay from 15 January to 25 January 1969 for emergency dry dock repairs. She was at sea from 26 January to 11 March 1969 on Market Time Station One. From 12 March to 13 March 1969 she was at Subic Bay "For Turnover Relief to CGC SEBAGO." She departed Subic for home on 14 March 1969, arriving at New London at 1000 hours on Wednesday, 23 April 1969 after conducting a "MEDICO Case" on 21 April.

By the end of her tour overseas, she had supplied logistical support to 86 Navy Swift boats and 47 Coast Guard 82-foot patrol boats. She had detected 2,596 junks and conducted 178 "actual boardings and 2,341 inspections," exceeding the "results of any Squadron Three cutter thus far." She conducted 17 Naval Gunfire Support Missions, firing 1,330 rounds of 5-inch ammunition." She was officially credited with killing four enemy soldiers, destroying 18 bunkers and damaging 10, destroying 11 "military structures" and damaging 17, destroying 550 meters of "Enemy Supply Trails," destroying 1 sampan, 1 loading pier, and interdicting 3 "Enemy Troop Movements." She carried out 49 underway replenishments while in theatre and her medical personnel carried out 7 medical and civil action programs (MEDCAP), treating 432 Vietnamese civilians.

After returning to New London, she resumed her peace-time operations. On 21 April 1969, she medevaced crew members from the Norwegian M/V *Norefjell* 300 miles southeast of Cape Hatteras. In December 1972 she returned to New London from refresher training at the Naval Fleet Training Center at Guantanamo Bay, having earned her second consecutive "E" for excellence in operational readiness. She was decommissioned on 27 June 1973 and sold for scrap on 7 October 1974.

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### **Commanding Officers:**

CDR D. T. Adams, 1945  
LCDR J. McIntosh, 1945  
LCDR S. R. Sands, 1946  
LCDR J. McIntosh, 1946  
CDR E. G. Brooks, 1946-1947  
LT Richard H. Welton, 1947-1948  
CDR George N. Bernier, 1948  
CDR William B. Chiswell, 1948-1951  
CDR Charles E. Masters, 1955-1957  
CDR James L. Lathrop, 1957-1958  
CDR John W. Hume, 1958-1959  
CDR Gerhard K. Kelz, 1959-1961  
CDR D. L. Davies, 1961-1963  
CDR R. A. Schulz, 1963-1965  
CDR Jason S. Kobler, 1965-1967

CDR William R. Fearn, 1967-  
CDR Charles F. Juechter, -1971  
CDR Robert G. Moore, 1971-1973

**Cutter Awards:**

World War II Victory Medal  
American Area Campaign Medal  
National Defense Service Medal  
Vietnam Service Medal  
Vietnam Campaign

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**Photographs:**



"USCGC Owasco, 18 July 1945 off San Pedro," CA; Photo No. SP-9944; US Navy photo.

Unlike the majority of previous cutters built before World War II, the 255-foot cutters, launched and commissioned between 1944 and 1946, were constructed as heavily armed warships. The Owasco carried two twin 5"/38 dual purpose guns as her main battery and a heavy anti-aircraft armament consisting of two quad 40mm/60 cannons and four 20mm/80 cannons. Her anti-

submarine armament consisted of 2 depth charge tracks, six "Y" guns and a hedgehog. Their displacement was similar to a Fletcher Class destroyer but were 122 feet shorter and three feet wider.



Owasco, 14 April 1945. Caption states: "CR105 Owasco, 3/4 bow view, San Pedro Harbor, Western Pipe & Steel Co. Shipyard, April 14, 1945, No. 63." Photo taken by "Dick" Whittington.



Owasco, 5 May 1946, off of Hawkins Point. Photo No. 930-1. Photo taken by A. Jewell.



Owasco undergoing an underway replenishment in Vietnamese waters; no caption/date; taken from her scrapbook entitled *USCGC Owasco (WHEC-39): A Pictorial History of Its Deployment to Southeast Asia--Viet Nam During 1968-1969*, p. 2.



Owasco's main battery firing on the Vietnamese coast. Caption: ". . . COMMAND, FIRE . . . (if you

look close in upper left, you can see the projectile)."; From *USCGC Owasco (WHEC-39): A Pictorial History of Its Deployment to Southeast Asia--Viet Nam During 1968-1969*, p. 55.



Owasco and the battleship U.S.S. *New Jersey*. Official caption reads: "USS NEW JERSEY. . .SHE SOMETIMES NEEDED OUR HELP: The Battleship *New Jersey* and Coast Guard Cutter *Owasco* shown operating together off the coast of Vietnam." From: *USCGC Owasco (WHEC-39): A Pictorial History of Its Deployment to Southeast Asia--Viet Nam During 1968-1969*, p. 63.



Owasco at Subic Bay; Official Caption reads: "U.S. NAVAL BASE, SUBIC BAY, PHILIPPINES: 'Whiter than white' BM2 Ward, SN Poole, SN Rooney." From: *USCGC Owasco (WHEC-39): A Pictorial History of Its Deployment to Southeast Asia--Viet Nam During 1968-1969*, p. 26.



Owasco, 23 May 1970, no official caption. Photo No. 3CGD 05237002-1.

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**Sources:**

Robert L. Scheina, *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft of World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1981), pp. 1-3.

Robert L. Scheina, *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft, 1946-1990* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1990), pp. 18-26.

255' Cutter Sailors' Page, hosted by 255' cutter historian Doak Walker, RMC, USCG (Ret.):  
[255wpg.11.net.com/](http://255wpg.11.net.com/)

Cutter File, Coast Guard Historian's Office.

Ship's Characteristics Card.

