



## *Unalga*, 1912

WPG-53

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An island off Alaska.

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Builder: Newport News Shipbuilding Company, Newport News, Virginia

Length: 190'

Beam: 32' 6"

Draft: 14' 1"

Displacement: 1,180 tons

Cost: \$250,000

Commissioned: 23 May 1912

Decommissioned: 10 October 1945

Disposition: Sold

Machinery: 1 triple-expansion steam engine; originally fitted with a coal-fired boiler; 1,300 IHP; single propeller

Performance & Endurance:

Max: 12.5 knots

Cruising: 7.9 knots; 4,200 mile range

Complement: 73 (1930)

Armament: 2 x 6-pounder rapid-fire guns (1912); 2 x 3"/50s; 2 x 20mm/80s; 2 depth charge tracks (1943)

Electronics: SF-1, SA-2 detection radars; QCL-5 sonar (1945)

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## History:

The *Unalga*, one of two *Miami*-Class cutters (the other being the *Miami*), was built by the Newport News Shipbuilding Company of Newport News, Virginia. She was launched and christened by Miss Elizabeth Hills, sponsor, on 10 February 1912. After successfully undergoing trials in the Hampton Roads area, she was accepted by the Government on 20 April of that same year. She then steamed in convoy with the Revenue cutter *Apache* to Baltimore. She was commissioned at Arundel Cove on 23 May 1912.

*Unalga* spent the summer of 1912 fitting out. In June, she received her guns at Washington, D.C., and completed installing them at Baltimore in July and August. On 6 September, she received orders to report to the Commander, Northern Division, Pacific Coast, RCS, at Port Townsend, Wash.

She departed Baltimore that day and, after stops at Newport News and Norfolk, she headed out into the Atlantic. She reached the Straits of Gibraltar on 11 October and, three days later, continued on toward Naples, Italy, where she arrived on the 19th. She got underway again on the 25th ; stopped at Malta from 26 to 29 October ; and arrived at Port Said, Egypt, the northern terminus of the Suez Canal, on 1 November.

While *Unalga* made her way from port to port eastward across the Mediterranean, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro took advantage of the Italo-Turkish War in Libya to form the Balkan League and descend upon the

embattled Ottoman Empire. Greek and Serbian armies invaded European Turkey in an effort to liberate Ottoman possessions populated by their kinspeople. While the Greeks and Serbs moved into Macedonia, three Bulgarian armies drove headlong into Thrace, invested Adrianople, and defeated Turkish armies at the battles of Kirk Kilissa and Lule Burgas. The success of that drive alarmed the foreign community in Constantinople lest the capital fall to the invader with all the murder and mayhem attendant upon a Balkan war.

To protect Americans and other foreigners in Turkey in the event that Constantinople should fall, the United States Ambassador, Mr. Rockhill, asked that warships be sent to the Levant. In response to this request, the Navy Department dispatched *Brutus* and planned to send two other warships. The Treasury Department ordered *Unalga* to remain at Port Said and place herself under the orders of Ambassador Rockhill should need for her services arise. During the six weeks she stayed at Port Said, the tempo of hostilities decreased in Thrace because the Bulgars failed to breach the Chataija Line held by the Turks athwart the road to Constantinople. On 3 December, the Turks and Bulgars concluded a preliminary armistice preparatory to the peace conference which began in London in late December. On 17 December, the same day the conference began, *Unalga* departed Port Said to transit the Suez Canal and continue her interrupted voyage to the west coast of North America.

After stops at Aden, Ceylon, Singapore, Manila, Yokohama, Japan, and Honolulu, the cutter arrived at Port Townsend on 22 March 1913. Five days after reporting to the Commander, Northern Division, she was reassigned to the Bering Sea Fleet. On 3 May, she departed Port Townsend for her first cruise to Alaskan waters. During that assignment, she visited Kodiak and Unalaska before returning to Port Townsend on 11 August. On 3 October, *Unalga* was reassigned to the Southern Division and, on the 21st, got underway for San Francisco, where she arrived four days later. The cutter served with the Southern Division until detached on 25 March 1914. After spending the first 20 days of April at Oakland, Calif., undergoing repairs, she headed back to Alaska and duty in the Bering Sea.

For the next three years, the cutter alternated between assignments with the Northern Division and the Bering Sea Fleet. After World War I broke out in Europe on 1 August 1914, she took on the added responsibility of enforcing America's neutrality laws. In February 1915, she also started patrols to enforce the provisions of the 1911 convention between the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and Russia for the protection of fur seals. Those two responsibilities, as well as her normal duties, took her to a number of Alaskan ports such as Seward, Juneau, and Skagway in addition to Unalaska and to such places as Cook's Inlet, Slime Banks, the Pribilofs and St. Matthew's Island.

When the United States entered World War I on 6 April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson issued an Executive Order which placed the Coast Guard

under the jurisdiction of the Navy Department for the duration of hostilities ; and *Unalga* joined the Navy. Though assigned to the seagoing fighting service, she continued to discharge her former duties. She made a cruise a year to the Alaska-Bering Sea area during the summer months of 1917, 1918, and 1919. On each cruise, she transported mail and supplies to fishermen and natives in inaccessible areas, provided medical assistance where needed, and aided vessels in distress. During the 1918 cruise, she also participated in the settlement of a labor dispute that arose in several canneries. In addition to the routine described above, she continued patrols in support of the fur seal protection convention. Since the nation was at war, *Unalga* also kept a vigilant watch for enemy ships, but the slight probability of the appearance of a German, Austro-Hungarian, or Turkish ship in the northern Pacific allowed her to concentrate on her peacetime mission. In all probability, *Unalga* never fired her guns in anger during her first hitch with the Navy.

The hostilities ended with the armistice of 11 November 1918, but the Coast Guard continued under Navy jurisdiction for another nine months. On 28 August 1919, the Treasury Department resumed control. On that day, the names of all Coast Guard ships which had served the Navy were struck from the Navy list. *Unalga* hardly noticed the change, however, because she continued her Bering Sea cruises and Northern Division assignments just as before. The cutter cruised the Alaskan and northern Pacific coasts, making calls at familiar ports through the 1920's. At the conclusion of her summer cruise to the Bering Sea in 1930, she departed Port Townsend to return to the east coast for the first time in 18 years. On 5 September, she arrived at an unspecified depot (probably the one at Arundel Cove, Md.). In any case, she was placed out of commission there on 16 February 1931 and, two days later, moved to Philadelphia for extensive repairs. She departed the navy yard on 27 June 1931 to return to the depot, probably for additional work since she was not placed back in commission until 23 April 1932.

On 14 May, she headed south for duty at Port Everglades, Fla., where she arrived on the 24th. She served at that port and at Fort Lauderdale until sometime in 1934. In September of 1933, the cutter served briefly with the Navy again when she was called upon to patrol the waters of the Florida Strait during the series of revolts in Cuba which finally resulted in the beginning of Fulgencio Batista's 25-year dictatorship. On 1 November, she was released from that duty and, the next day, was ordered to report to the Commander, Southern Area (USCG) for further orders. She resumed normal operations from the Coast Guard station at Port Everglades until sometime in 1935 when she was transferred to San Juan, Puerto Rico.

On 1 November 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt transferred the Coast Guard to the jurisdiction of the Navy Department; and *Unalga* rejoined the Navy. Classified as WPG-53 sometime in early 1942, she spent the early part of the war operating out of San Juan, conducting antisubmarine patrols under the auspices of the Commandant, 10th Naval District. [See the letter below for

details on her World War II service as provided to the USCG Historian's Office by a former crewman.]

Sometime around September, 1943, she transferred to the Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron Training Center in Melville, Rhode Island after undergoing a refit. While at the MTBSTC she served as a target ship for PT boats and then recovered the test torpedoes.\* She was reassigned to the 5th Naval District on 7 June 1945, operating in and around Norfolk.

She was decommissioned and turned over to the War Shipping Administration on 10 October 1945 and was sold on 19 July 1946. She was renamed *Ulua* and then participated in the immigration of Jewish refugees to Palestine. Renamed *Chaim Arlosoroff* (Ship Number 123) by Haganah, she embarked 1,378 refugees in Sweden and Italy and departed Italy on 24 January 1947 for Palestine. She was intercepted by HMS *Chieftain* and ran aground at Bat Galim on 27 February 1947, injuring 30 of the refugees. Her crew and the refugees were interred in Cyprus.\* \*\*

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Former crewman Merle L. Harbourt, in a 15 May 1992 letter to the USCG Historian's Office, wrote about *Unalga* during the war:

"She never sank a submarine nor shot down a plane but there is one old ship that I served in that should get some mention simply because she survived. The former Revenue Cutter UNALGA, or 'Mighty U' as she was not too affectionately referred to by her crew, is a case study in unpreparedness.

As memory serves, the *Unalga* was commissioned in 1912 as a vessel of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. I joined her in June of 1941 when she was home ported in San Juan, P.R. She was powered by a four cylinder triple expansion reciprocating steam engine, which Lt. L. M. Thayer (later to be RADM Thayer) our engineering officer was intent upon her maintenance since she was forever snapping piston rings.

Shortly before the outbreak of WWII we painted her gray and limbered up our armament, one three-inch twenty three caliber mount on the fore deck. We were tied up in San Juan, at the still existing buoy depot, when December 7th became a day of infamy.

We served as Harbor Entrance Control Vessel for San Juan for a period and then were pressed into service to haul aviation gasoline from Puerto Rico (Ponce) to Charlotte Amalie, Virgin Islands, in 55 gallon drums stacked all over the main deck, to provide fuel for the Marine air station. The small tanker that had formerly provided that service was shelled and sunk by a sub earlier. Later, without benefit of radar or sonar, we assisted in the escort of ships between

Trinidad and Cuba, convoys that sometimes got away from us during darkness or heavy rains.

My humorous tales of life on that old ship are endless. Like the time when we thought we might be facing a German Q boat, or raider, and .30 caliber rifles were issued to a few crewmembers. And us with one snub-nose three-inch cannon! Or the time when, after sonar installation, we thought we had a sub contact, dropped a pattern of depth charges and the main engine stopped. Vacuum had been lost. If we were in the vicinity of a sub he probably thought we wouldn't make it back to port anyway and didn't waste a fish."

Merle L. Harbourt  
Pensacola, Florida

15 May 1992

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**Sources:**

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

*Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships.*

\*Email from Charlie Jones.

\*\*[www.paulsilverstone.com/immigration/Primary/Aliyah/ShowShip2.php?shipno=123&pic=ShipPix/Ulua4.jpg&shipname=Chaim%20Arlosoroff](http://www.paulsilverstone.com/immigration/Primary/Aliyah/ShowShip2.php?shipno=123&pic=ShipPix/Ulua4.jpg&shipname=Chaim%20Arlosoroff)

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

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