

NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY ASSESSMENT

VESSEL: SS *Cape Girardeau*, ex-SS *President Adams*, ex-*Alaskan Mail*



SS *Cape Girardeau* underway near San Francisco, California, circa 1990s.

Vessel History

Cape Girardeau is a break-bulk general cargo ship owned by the federal government. Built for subsidized commercial liner service in 1968, the Maritime Administration (MARAD) purchased the ship in 1988 for use in its Ready Reserve Force (RRF), which consists of a group of vessels that can be activated on short notice to assist in the deployment of military equipment and supplies during times of national emergency. RRF ships are maintained under contract for MARAD, and are manned by civilian crews when activated by the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC). *Cape Girardeau* was downgraded from RRF status in October 2008. It is currently moored at MARAD's Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet (SBRF) in Benicia, California, where it was used for logistics support from 2008-2019.

Cape Girardeau was originally built in 1968 as the *Alaskan Mail*, the last ship completed in a flight of five ships, classified as C5-S-75a¹ at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, in Newport News, Virginia for the American Mail Line of Seattle, Washington (AML). The other four ships included, *Indian Mail*², *Korean Mail* (1969, scrapped 1995), *Hong Kong Mail* (1969, scrapped 2008), and *American Mail* (1969, scrapped 2009). Collectively the ships were known as the Mailiners class.

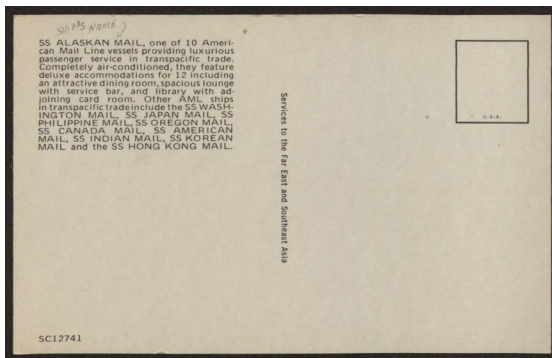
¹ MARAD uses a vessel classification system based on groups of letters and numbers. For example, for the classification C5-S-75a, the C signifies vessel type (cargo, passenger, tanker) and the number 5 signifies its approximate length. Therefore, C5 is a cargo vessel with a length between 550-600 feet. The S indicates the type of propulsion and has a single propeller, in this example the ship is equipped with steam propulsion machinery. The last group indicates the original vessel design and any modifications made to the vessel.

² MARAD acquired *India Mail* in 1988 and renamed it *Cape Gibson*. The ship served in the RRF from 1988-2014. MARAD sold the ship for recycling in 2015.

These ships comprised the final phase of AML's fleet modernization program in the early 1960s. Although larger than the five ships built in the program's first and second phases, *Alaskan Mail* and its sisters were substantially similar to the earlier ships in overall design and equipment, and were basically modifications of the Mariner cargo ship design (C4-S-1a) developed in the early 1950s.³ The C5-S-75a design was characterized in the professional press as, "conservative, with few of the new basic features found on other American vessels," but, "in terms of equipment," the ships were said to have "the best of everything."⁴

Alaskan Mail was designed to carry general bulk, break-bulk, and refrigerated cargos. Its original cargo design also included capacity for 409 containers and 2,377 tons of liquid cargo carried in deep tanks.⁵ It entered AML's subsidized liner service in early 1969 connecting ports in the Pacific Northwest and western Canada with ports in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore. It continued operating on the Pacific, as far as can be determined, until 1988.

At the time of the ship's delivery in 1968, American President Lines (APL)⁶ owned 90 percent of AML. APL later acquired the ship from AML in October 1973, but retained its original name until the two companies completely consolidated and APL changed its name to *President Adams*.⁷ APL sold the ship to MARAD in 1988. MARAD renamed it *Cape Girardeau* and the ship entered MARAD's Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet in a five-day activation status.



Front and back images of a postcard of *Alaskan Mail* underway while serving AML, circa late 1960s early 1970s. Colonel Sigmund Alexander Maritime Collection.

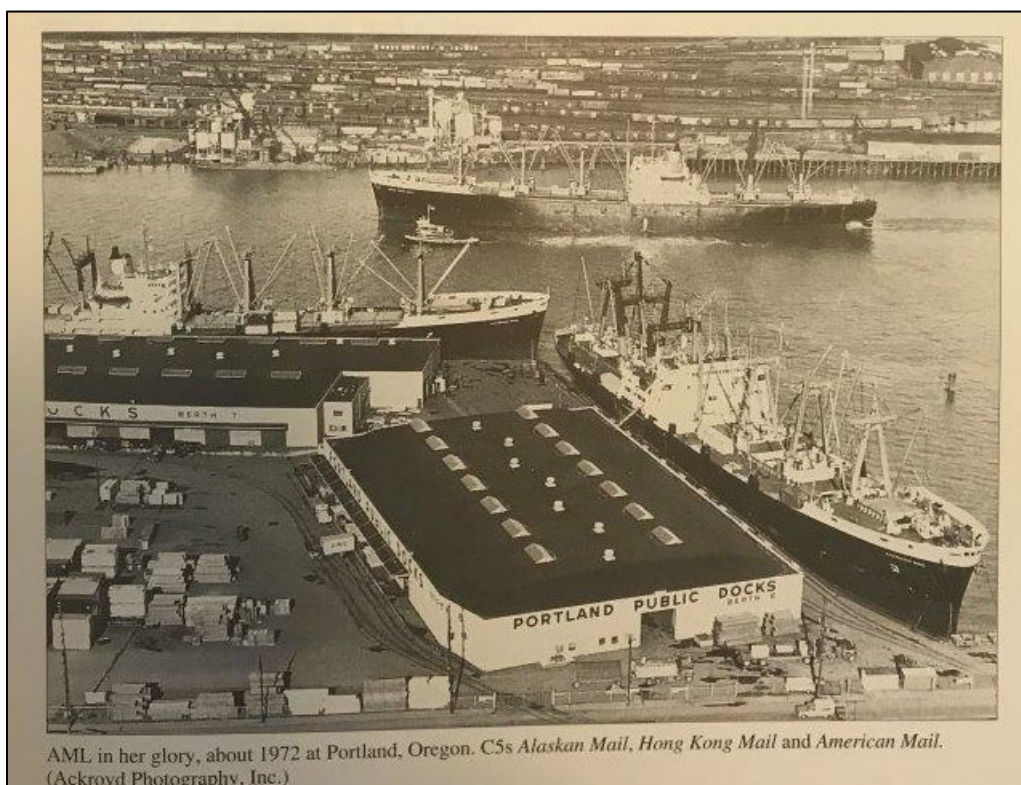
³ The ships in the first phase of American Mail Line's fleet modernization were the *Washington Mail*, *Japan Mail*, and *Philippine Mail*, delivered in 1962; the second phase comprised *Oregon Mail* and *Canada Mail*, delivered in 1964 and 1965. "Line alters plans for 4 freighters," *New York Times*, June 21, 1965, 57.

⁴ "SS 'Alaskan Mail,' A Ship that has Everything," *Marine Engineering/Log* (November 1968), 61.

⁵ "'68 Good Year for U.S. Yards," *Marine Engineering / Log* (February 1969), 64.

⁶ House Committee on the Judiciary, *The Ocean Freight Industry*, H. Rpt. 1419, 87th Cong., 2d sess., March 12, 1962, 47.

⁷ Vessel status cards for *Cape Girardeau* ex-*Alaskan Mail*, MARAD Vessel History Database, <http://www.marad.dot.gov/sh/ShipHistory/Detail/741>.



SS Alaskan Mail and its two sister ships in Portland, Oregon in 1972. “American Mail Line, Limited, 1926-1974, A Historical Reference,” page 9.

Maritime Administration

In August 1990, the RRF consisted of 96 ships, 78 of which were activated to support Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm. This was the first large-scale activation and employment of the RRF since it was separated from MARAD’s National Defense Reserve Fleet (NDRF).⁸ Prior to RRF operations, NDRF vessels supported emergency shipping requirements in seven wars and crises. During the Korean War, 540 vessels were activated to support military forces. A worldwide tonnage shortfall from 1951 to 1953 required over 600 ship activations to lift coal to Northern Europe and grain to India. Another tonnage shortfall following the Suez Canal closing in 1956 activated 223 cargo ships and 29 tankers from the NDRF. From 1955 through 1964, another 698 ships stored grain for the Department of Agriculture. During the Berlin crisis of 1961, 18 vessels were activated and remained in service until 1970. During the Vietnam War, 172 vessels were activated.

Cape Girardeau arrived in the RRF too late to operate in those crises, but performed valuable service during the Desert Shield/Desert Storm international military operations to stop Iraqi military expansion in the Persian Gulf area and subsequently to liberate occupied Kuwait.

⁸ The NDRF was established under Section XI of the Merchant Ship Sales Act of 1946 to serve as a reserve of ships for national defense and national emergencies. The RRF component was established in 1976.

Modifications

In 1989, *Cape Girardeau* was modified to carry the Modular Cargo Delivery System (MCDS). Two special cargo lifting and transfer platforms were installed over cargo hatches on deck, one forward of the deck house and one aft, to allow the ship to conduct underway replenishment (UNREP) of another vessel while underway via tensioned highlines. The goal of an UNREP operation is the safe delivery of ordnance, provisions, or fuel to a vessel at sea so the ship can continue its mission uninterrupted, which permits vessels to stay on station and avoid transit times to and from port.⁹ A raised deck was added to the stern for the staging of cargo for vertical replenishment (VERTREP), which allows supplies to be airlifted by helicopter from a cargo ship to nearby navy vessels.¹⁰

On September 21, 1990, the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC) activated *Cape Girardeau*. The ship transported the U.S. Marine Corps 5th Marine Expeditionary Battalion and sustainment supplies to ports in the United Arab Emirates and Ad Damman, Saudi Arabia, among other ports in the Persian Gulf. MSC deactivated the ship on November 19, 1991.

More than seventy-five percent of the RRF provided sealift to support the U.S. effort in the Persian Gulf between August 1990 and April 1991. The ships transported 750,000 short tons of dry cargo, which was one-fifth of the total dry cargo sealifted during the conflict.

In the years following Operations Desert Shield/Storm, *Cape Girardeau* participated in numerous at-sea exercises and no-notice activations. The ship participated in UNREP operations from January 18-February 9, 2001, supporting the USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN-72) Battle Group near the Hawaiian Islands. It also participated in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), a multinational warfare exercise, in 2004, among other exercises.

Description/Characteristics of Vessel Type

Cape Girardeau exhibits the typical characteristics of a 1960's-vintage traditional breakbulk cargo vessel. It has a welded steel hull with riveting in way of the gunwale connections and certain deck and bottom shell seams.¹¹ It is longitudinally framed along the bottom and transverse framed at the deck and sides. It is subdivided by nine transverse watertight bulkheads into seven holds, fore and after peaks, and the

⁹ "The Ready Reserve Force: A History upon its Twenty-Fifth Anniversary," November 2001, MARAD Office of Ship Operations, 18-22.

¹⁰ MARAD Division of Ship Maintenance and Repair, Office of Ship Operations, *Readiness Assessment of the RRF*, August 28, 1992, Maritime Administration files.

¹¹ Partial riveting was not uncommon as late as 1968, and was typically employed to prevent or arrest cracking in high-stress areas of the hull.

machinery compartment. There are two decks in the hull plus a third deck in Holds 1 through 4. Corrosion control measures incorporated in the original construction allowed the ship to be built with reduced scantlings.¹²

A single deck house is positioned just aft of amidships. As originally configured, it contained accommodations for 63 officers, crew, cadets, and passengers. The various passenger spaces are now devoted to crew use. The Navigating Bridge Deck holds the wheelhouse, radio room, and sea cabin. The Bridge Deck, next below, contains senior officers' quarters. The Boat Deck contains the original staterooms for 12 passengers plus the passenger lounge, passenger library (all now repurposed) and the emergency generator room. The Upper Deck holds officers' staterooms, officers' lounge, and the officers' and (former) passengers' dining room. Crew quarters are on the Main Deck, as are the crew lounge and hospital. Crew's mess, galley, and food stores are on the Second Deck below the deck house. All accommodation spaces are air conditioned and have been since the ship's construction.

The ship's machinery space is subdivided into two levels. The upper level contains the boilers, turbines, reduction gearing, turbogenerators, a centralized control board, the combustion controls, and the electrical switchboard. The lower level contains the condensers, pumps, air-conditioning and reefer compressors, and the evaporator.

The ship is propelled by steam turbines. The steam is supplied by two Babcock & Wilcox boilers that generate 137,000 pounds of steam per hour in normal operation. The main engine is of cross-compound double-reduction type with high- and low-pressure turbines developing 21,600 shp at 102 rpm and 24,000 shp at 105 rpm. The astern element is fitted into the low-pressure turbine. The turbines and gears are by General Electric. They drive a single four-bladed screw of 22' diameter. Electrical service is provided by two General Electric turbogenerators supplying 1,250 kW each. A 150-kW emergency generator is installed on the Boat Deck. An 800-hp, electrically driven Bird-Johnson Model 80 thruster is fitted in the bow to aid maneuvering. The thruster was included in the ship's original construction. The steering gear is a single-ram, electro-hydraulic type manufactured by Western Gear Corporation.

The ship was designed to carry general break-bulk cargo, bulk cargo, refrigerated cargo, liquid cargo, and containers. It has seven cargo holds—four forward of the deck house and three aft—plus numerous deep tanks. Four self-supporting bipod cargo masts equipped with 15- and 20-ton booms, as well as three pairs of kingposts with 20-ton booms, serve the cargo holds. A 70-ton heavy-lift boom serves hatches 5 and 6. The cargo lift and transfer units of the MCDS (see modifications above) are installed on the Main Deck atop Holds no. 3 and 5. Folding hatch covers on the Main Deck and 'tween decks are hydraulically operated. All cargo booms and hatches were designed and

¹² Details of the ship's construction and equipment are drawn from *American Bureau of Shipping Record*, 1969: 1014; "SS 'Alaskan Mail,' A Ship that has Everything," *Marine Engineering / Log* (November 1968), 61–65; and Dillon, "Forty Years of Ship Designs," 207.

supplied by MacGregor-Comarain, Inc., except the heavy lift boom, which is by Newport News Shipbuilding. Selected 'tween deck hatches can be rigged to form grain feeder trunks. An "Air-Glide" system, where compressed air was used with special pallets to assist stowage of containers in the 'tween and orlop decks, was originally fitted on the ship. The ship carries two lifeboats.

Statement of Significance

The activation of *Cape Girardeau* during the build-up for Operation Desert Shield and later Desert Storm was the RRF's first large-scale activation since its creation in 1976. *Cape Girardeau* transported U.S. Marines and supplies without incident and provided desperately needed services in a time of national need. Subsequent crises involving MARAD's role of assisting the military during national emergencies have generally utilized different ship types more in keeping with modern logistics operations.

Historical Integrity

The overall condition of *Cape Girardeau* is good; it has experienced only normal wear and aging for a vessel of its age. The hull, machinery, and crew accommodations are largely intact. The ship was modified in 1989 from its original 1968 configuration to carry the Modular Cargo Delivery System (MCDS). Additionally, a raised deck was added to the stern for the staging of cargo for vertical replenishment (VERTREP).

National Register Eligibility Statement

Cape Girardeau does not possess historical significance in any category necessary to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. While it did participate in Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm, it was one of 78 RRF vessels activated by the U.S. Navy to support those operations and its role was not significant enough to qualify under Criteria A, particularly considering the recent nature of those operations.

Date: 1 September 2020

Determination: NOT ELIGIBLE

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Website

Global Security: Cape G Class Breakbulk

<https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/cape-g.htm>