

NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY ASSESSMENT

VESSEL: SS *Cape Nome*, ex-SS *Rapid*, ex-SS *American Rapid*, ex-SS *Red Jacket*, ex-SS *Mormacstar*



SS *Cape Nome* during sea trial 1997. Maritime Administration photo.

Vessel History

Cape Nome is a combination container ship, breakbulk cargo and roll on/roll (Ro/Ro) off ship owned by the federal government. Ships designed for Ro/Ro capabilities have a below-deck storage area for wheeled vehicles that drive on and off the vessel via a ramp. With this sort of combination cargo vessel however, in addition, breakbulk cargo can be stowed in holds and containerized freight can be secured on the top decks of this ship.¹ Built under a Maritime Administration (MARAD) subsidized contract in 1969 for Moore McCormack lines, MARAD later purchased the ship in 1988 for its Ready Reserve Force (RRF).² The RRF is 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).³ MARAD downgraded the vessel to the non-retention status July 2021. *Cape Nome* is currently non-

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roll-on/roll-off>. Accessed 6-24-22.

² Vessel Status Card, Vessel History Database, *Cape Nome*.

³ MARAD Annual Reports 1968-2014.

retention status and moored at MARAD's James River Reserve Fleet (JRRF) at Ft. Eustis, VA.

Commercial Shipping Lines

Ingalls Shipbuilding Division, in Pascagoula, MS delivered *Cape Nome* in 1969 as *Mormacstar*, to Moore McCormack lines under MARAD subsidized contract. MARAD classified the ship type as a C5-S-78a.⁴ Ingalls Shipbuilding Division built a total of four C5-S-78a ships. These four vessels were delivered in 1969 and 1970.⁵ Andrew F. Gibson, MARAD administrator who spoke at the *Mormacstar*'s launching said *Mormacstar* and its three sister Sea-Bridge Class containerships were the first to be designed and built to handle roll on, roll off cargoes simultaneously with lift on lift off cargoes.⁶ Each ship could transport 1.3 million cubic feet of cargo.⁷

In 1969 the decline in active American merchant vessels had reached a point of concern for the United States Government. The U.S.-owned commercial fleet had declined from 2,201 after WWII to 1,050 the end of fiscal year 1969. All ships of the fleet were over 20 years old, and it was projected that by the end of 1971 there would only be 145 dry cargo ships available for emergency use. Shipbuilding reached a desperate state as early as 1954 when no new ships had been ordered for over a year. As a result, a plan to start replacing aging vessels was begun in 1955. The C5-S-78a class of four ships not only helped fill this need, it also was evidence of the advent of containership and intermodal transportation systems since the ships could not only take wheeled cargo, but also containers and break-bulk cargo.⁸

Initially Moore McCormack operated all four vessels but sold them to American (AEIL) in 1970. At the time, Moore McCormack had service to South America, Europe and South and East Africa.⁹ AEIL used the vessels in their North Atlantic-Mediterranean freight service.¹⁰ AEIL renamed the ship *Red Jacket*.¹¹

⁴ MARAD uses a vessel classification system based on groups of letters and numbers. For example, for the classification C8-S-81b, the C signifies vessel type (cargo, passenger, tanker) and the number 8 signifies its approximate length. Therefore, C8 is a cargo vessel with a length ~800 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.

⁵ Vessel Status Card, Vessel History Database, *Cape Nome*.

⁶ The four ships were *Curtiss* (ex- *Mormacsky*, ex- *Great Republic*, Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet, Emergency Fleet status), *Rover* (*Mormacsea*, ex- *Defiance*, ex- *American Rover*, scrapped in 1993), *Wright* (ex- *Mormacsun* ex- *Young America*, James River Reserve Fleet, Emergency Sealift status) and *Cape Nome*, ex- *Mormacstar*, ex- *Red Jacket*, ex- *American Rapid*, James River Reserve Fleet in non-retention status).

⁷ "Launching Friday at Pascagoula." *Daily Herald*, Biloxi, MS, 10 Apr 1969, "Any Vessel, Anywhere." *Herald-News*, Passaic, NJ, 11 Jul 1969.

⁸ MARAD Annual Report 1969.

⁹ MARAD Annual Report 1970.

¹⁰ MARAD Annual Report 1971.

¹¹ Vessel Status Card, Vessel History Database, *Cape Nome*.

AEIL transferred the ship to Mediterranean Marine Line (MML), (a subsidiary of AEIL¹²) and the ship operated between North America and Mediterranean ports. In 1972, AEIL became American Export Lines, Inc. (AEL). In 1977 MML transferred the ship back to AEL who sold the ship to Farrell Lines, at sea, on March 28, 1978. In 1982, Farrell lines sold the ship to United States Lines, Inc. (USL) and renamed the ship *American Rapid*.¹³ In April 1982, *American Rapid* was chartered Military Sealift Command (MSC). In January 1984 USL sold the ship to Central Gulf Lines, Inc. (CGL) who renamed the ship *Rapid*. While with CGL, *Rapid* continued under charter service to MSC. Finally in December 1987, the Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC) purchased the ship for MARAD's Ready Reserve Fleet, and the ship became *Cape Nome*.¹⁴

Maritime Administration



SS *Cape Nome* and *Cape Lambert* at the James River Reserve Fleet in 2000

MSC purchased *Rapid* in May 1985 from CGL and renamed the ship *Cape Nome* in 1993. CGL delivered the vessel to MARAD's JRRF after out porting for maintenance and

¹² Ad, "For the Fastest Containership Service to and from the Mediterranean." *Charlotte Observer*, Charlotte, NC, 7 Dec 1970.

¹³ Vessel Status Card, Vessel History Database, *Cape Nome*.

¹⁴ Vessel Status Card, Vessel History Database, *Cape Nome*.

repairs at Avondale Shipyards in New Orleans. The ship was placed on 5-day notice activation status.¹⁵

There is no record of *Cape Nome* activity after RRF purchase until MSC activated the ship for Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm between September 1990 and February 1992.¹⁶ During this time MSC activated *Cape Nome* in thirty-seven days and the vessel made three trips to the middle east carrying supplies and equipment for the U.S. Army and U.S. Airforce.¹⁷

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).¹⁸ 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 Nome* performed valuable service during Desert Shield/Storm to stop Iraqi military expansion in the Persian Gulf area and subsequently to liberate occupied Kuwait.

In the years after its participation in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, *Cape Nome* was put through various turbo activations and sea trials meant to keep the ship in a readiness status should it ever been needed again for a national emergency. *Cape Nome* underwent a no notice activation in September 1997, November 1999, and a turbo activation and sea trial in September 2002.¹⁹ MARAD downgraded the vessel to non-retention status July 2021.

¹⁵ *Cape Nome* Ship File, MARAD 05.05 NDRF Ship Files, HQ office.

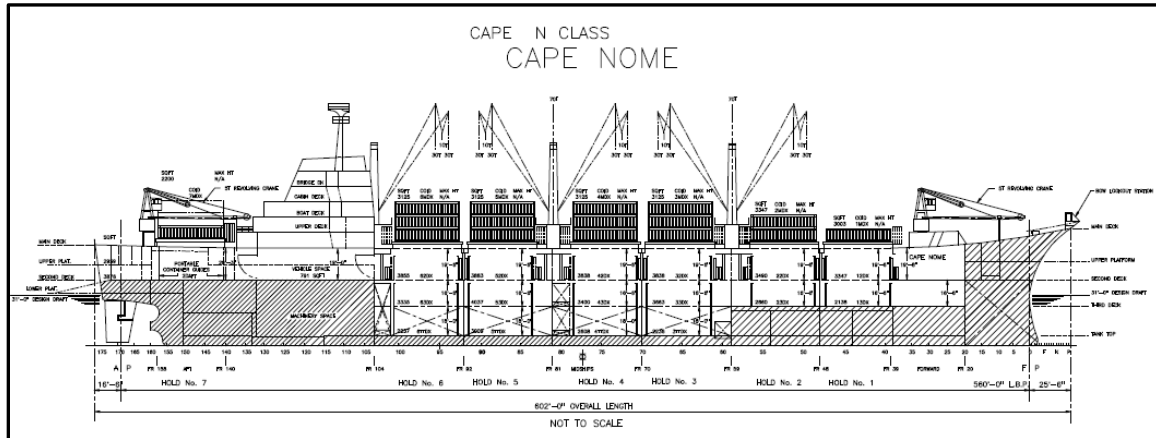
¹⁶ Vessel Characteristics Card, Vessel History Database, *Cape Nome*.
<https://vesselhistory.marad.dot.gov/ShipHistory/Detail/734>, accessed 4-1-22.

¹⁷ Rost, Ronald F., John F. Addams, and John J. Nelson. Sealift in Operation Desert Shield / Desert Storm: 7 August 1990 to 17 February 1991, Report CRM 91-109. Alexandria, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, May 1991., B-9.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ *Cape Nome* Ship File, MARAD 05.05 NDRF Ship Files, HQ office.

Description/Characteristics of Vessel Type



SS Cape Nome profile and deck plan.

The MARAD ship type C5-S-78a has a length of 601.5 feet, a beam of 90 feet and a maximum draft of 34.08 feet. It has a gross tonnage of 11,670 and a net of 6,850. The design can carry 334 Twenty Foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) containers above deck, 490 TEU below deck and 40 TEU powered (usually refrigerated) units. It can support 25,000 square feet of Ro/Ro cargo. At its top speed of 24.75 knots, it has a range of 15,500 nautical miles with an endurance of 27 days. It can accommodate 39 crew and 12 passengers.²⁰

The vessel's design might be considered a transition between the full break bulk cargo ship, or breakbulk-roll on/roll off ship with some container capacity rather than a fully-fledged Container/Roll on-Roll off (ConRo). Although classified as a ConRo in some sources, it is not like the container and roll on/roll off ships which came after and became the standard configuration. *Cape Nome* had a full suite of cargo booms and winches that do not grace a true ConRo ship, for instance. The ship had both limited container and Ro/Ro capabilities, with break bulk cargo capacities as its mainstay. Although there was a ramp on the aft end of the ship for driving wheeled vehicles into the cargo area, there were no interior ramps connecting the decks. Rolled cargo could only be accommodated on the ship's second deck. The second deck is only 25,000 sf; quite small for a ship of that size.

Containers were stowed on top of the cargo hatches, as seen in the profile and deck plan above. Some sources state up to 824 TEU containers could be stowed elsewhere but there is no dedicated cellular container hold, one feature that would justify the designation of ConRo, and such small container accommodation is also light for a ship this size.

²⁰ *Characteristics and Index of Maritime Administration Ship Designs January 1991*. U.S. Department of Transportation Maritime Administration. p. 99.

Although somewhat unique in its arrangement and capabilities, there are other Ready Reserve Fleet ships of the combination Breakbulk/Ro-Ro variety such as *Comet* and *Meteor* that are smaller than *Cape Nome*, but each have four times the Ro/Ro space and are equipped with internal ramps and bulkhead watertight doors so that Ro/Ro cargo can be carried on multiple decks fore & aft. Those same holds can carry general cargo, and both ships have full suites of cargo gear (booms, hatches) to load "lift on / lift off" cargo.

The concept of rolling wheeled cargo onto water borne transport was not new, as many smaller ferries operating across rivers and other short distances had been used for many years, but ocean-going transport of wheeled vehicles usually meant they were treated like all other cargo, where the fuel had to be removed and batteries disconnected. The process was tedious and difficult, and the vehicles had to be lifted onto the vessel rather than rolled up a ramp. Chocked vehicles were also subject to damage. Indeed, the military used landing tank ships during World War II where tanks rolled on and off the landing ships. The advent of Ro/Ros brought the capacity and capabilities for large merchant vessels to take on wheeled vehicles which could be securely tied down to the deck, in addition to using the ship's on-board cranes to lift containers onto the deck of the ship. Today Ro-Ro and ConRo vessels are the backbone of the breakbulk fleet.²¹

Alterations to the Ship

Two of the four C5-S-78a class vessels (*Curtiss, Wright*) were altered to T-AVB-3 configurations for Aviation Logistics Support, to include a helipad near the bow.²² *Cape Nome* was not altered.

Statement of Significance

Military Sealift Command's activation of *Cape Nome* during Desert Shield/Desert Storm was the RRF's first large-scale activation since its creation in 1976. *Cape Nome* transported 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

Cape Nome is in good condition; it has experienced only normal wear and aging for a vessel of its age, and routine upgrades to navigation and communications systems. The hull, machinery, passenger, and crew accommodations are largely intact. The vessel was never altered from its original design and configuration. The ship retains integrity

²¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roll-on/roll-off>. Accessed 6-24-22.

²² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Wright_\(T-AVB-3\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Wright_(T-AVB-3)). Accessed 6-29-22.

precisely because it is now obsolete and is unlikely to meet any further national or economic need.

National Register Eligibility Statement

Cape Nome is the last remaining unaltered C5-S-78a ConRo ship. It was one of the first four American RoRo and container capable ships.²³ This design was not revolutionary but more reflective of a time when containerships and intermodal transportation were rising in importance. This need has remained a MARAD focus for effective and efficient cargo transport. *Cape Nome* had no unique features nor association with significant historical figures.

While the vessel 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: April 1, 2023

Determination: NOT ELIGIBLE

²³ "Any Vessel, Anywhere." *Herald-News*, Passaic, NJ, 11 Jul 1969, "Launching Friday at Pascagoula." *Daily Herald*, Biloxi, MS, 10 Apr 1969.

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