

NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY ASSESSMENT VESSEL: SS *Ambassador*



The SS *Ambassador* at its anchorage at the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet in Benicia, California.

Vessel History

The SS *Ambassador* was launched on April 23, 1960 as the break-bulk cargo ship SS *Export Ambassador*. Bethlehem Steel's Technical Department¹ designed the ship and it was built by the New York Shipbuilding Company in Camden, New Jersey. Its keel was laid on January 22, 1959, and it was delivered to its owners, American Export Lines (AEL), in January 1961.

In 1919 a group of businessmen originally organized AEL as the Export Steamship Corporation. By the mid-1920s, "American" was added to the name. Between 1919 and 1977, AEL was the principal U.S.-flag shipping company that operated between the U.S. East Coast and the Mediterranean. In 1960 the company operated three passenger liners,² two combination cargo and passenger vessels, and 17 C-3 type cargo ships on services between the U.S. Atlantic seaboard, including the Great Lakes, and Spain, Portugal, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and, via the Suez Canal, southern Asia as far east as Rangoon. The combination vessels and cargo ships were built between 1939 and 1946.

¹ For much of the 20th century, Bethlehem Steel was a major domestic shipbuilder, operating as many as eight separate shipyards and ship repair facilities on the U.S. East, West, and Gulf coasts. Bethlehem's marine technical department provided design services, even to shipowners who chose not to construct vessels in a Bethlehem yard.

² Two of the three liners AEL operated included the American-built luxury ocean liners *Independence* and *Constitution*. The liners provided passenger service between the U.S. to Europe via the Mediterranean throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The *Export Ambassador* was the first ship of an ambitious AEL modernization program begun in the late 1950s. Thirty vessels were initially scheduled for construction but the number was later reduced to 12 after AEL merged with the Isbrandtsen Company, creating American Export-Isbrandtsen Lines (AEIL) in 1962. The partnership continued until Isbrandtsen's interests were dissolved in 1973.

The 12 replacement ships were divided into three series of four vessels each, which were called the "A," "B" and "C" series. Ships in the "A" series included the *Export Ambassador* and *Export Adventurer*, built by New York Shipbuilding Corporation of Camden, New Jersey, and the *Export Agent* and *Export Aide*, built by the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company of San Diego, California. The "A" series employed the classic midships machinery arrangement, and was designated C3-S-38a under the Maritime Administration design classification scheme; the "B" and "C" series were machinery-aft versions of the "A" series and were designated C3-S-46a and 46b respectively. The new cargo ships ranged from 10,589 to 11,040 gross tons; much larger than the ships they replaced, which ranged from 6,536 to 7,052 gross tons.

The company placed the "A" series ships on their three trade routes: the Great Lakes to the Mediterranean; the U.S. Atlantic seaboard to the Mediterranean; and the U.S. Atlantic seaboard to the Red Sea, India, Pakistan, and Burma. They operated in these trades with the "B" and "C" series ships, and with the nuclear-powered merchant ship *Savannah*, which was operated by the company for the Maritime Administration in the 1960s under a general agency agreement. The Military Sea Transportation Service³ chartered AEIL vessels during the Vietnam War from 1966-1971. During the early 1970s AEIL (after 1973 going by its original name of American Export Lines), was also operating services to ports on the Atlantic coast of Europe as far north as Scandinavia, and to ports in the Far East.

The replacement ships of the early 1960s were larger and in many ways more modern than the ships they replaced. However, they were designed and built without full appreciation for the coming impact of containerization. As built, their holds were not practical for transporting the 40-foot containers that soon came into universal use. Just two or three containers (stacked) could be stowed on top of the deck's hatches. This area could be extended on ships with centerline hatches by installing pedestals the same height as the hatches placed on both sides of the hatches. By the late 1960s AEIL began contracting for the construction of pure container vessels. In addition to constructing container ships, the company also invested heavily in road transport for containers and built a container handling terminal at Howland Hook, Staten Island, New York. However, Isbrandtsen had over extended itself financially and was forced into receivership. Not long after, AEL also filed for bankruptcy and in 1978 Farrell Lines of New York purchased the company.

³ MSTs was a post-World War II combination of four predecessor government agencies that handled similar sealift functions. These included the Navy's Naval Transportation Service and Fleet Support Service, the Army Transport Service, and the War Shipping Administration of the United States Maritime Commission. In 1970, MSTs was renamed the Military Sealift Command.

There was now little commercial demand for break-bulk cargo ships. However the vessel type remained in demand for the transportation of military cargo, especially palletized ammunition. Consequently, the four *Export* "A"-series vessels, along with all of the "B" and "C" series, were acquired by the Maritime Administration for its National Defense Reserve Fleet (NDRF). The vessels were renamed by dropping the "*Export*" prefix; the *Export Ambassador* became simply the *Ambassador*.

Maritime Administration

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. A Ready Reserve Fleet (RRF) component was established in 1976. RRF vessels can be activated on short notice to provide rapid deployment of military equipment during an emergency. When activated, operational control of the ships is transferred from the Maritime Administration to the Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC).

On December 15, 1980, *Ambassador* was assigned to the RRF,⁴ and was placed on a five-day activation status and moved to the James River Reserve Fleet off Fort Eustis, Virginia. On July 24, 1981 the ship was moved and outported at Cheatham Annex in Williamsburg, Virginia.⁵

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 U.S. 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. The *Ambassador* arrived in the RRF too late to operate in those crises, but performed valuable service in Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM, which stemmed Iraqi military expansion in the Persian Gulf area and subsequently liberated occupied Kuwait in 1991.

RRF Modifications

The "A" class ships were among a large population of RRF break-bulk cargo ships modified during the mid-to-late 1980s under the Navy's "Sealift Enhancement Features" program (SEF). The modifications were generally intended to allow these commercial vessels to better support military operations, particularly underway replenishment of stores and ammunition to naval auxiliary vessels such as fleet oilers, ammunition ships, and stores ships. The "A" class ships were fitted with dunnage systems in cargo holds to permit secure handling of palletized

⁴The Ready Reserve Fleet later became known as the Ready Reserve Force.

⁵Cheatham Annex is part of the U.S. Navy's Naval Weapons Station Complex in that state.

ammunition; heat isolation bulkheads in the cargo holds bordering on the ship's engine room; two (2) receive-only underway replenishment rigs – one each forward and aft; and main deck modifications to allow for passage of electric forklifts. All modified vessels had their personnel complements increased to support specialized Navy cargo handling battalions. Modifications made under the SEF program did not significantly alter the ships, but instead were incremental improvements. The change to the ships' exterior appearance was imperceptible; the two underway replenishment rigs were installed against the vertical sides of two kingposts on one side of the ship only.

Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM

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 established. The vessels involved were roll-on/roll-off (Ro-Ro) vessels (which described how cargo is handled), break-bulk cargo ships, tankers, and barge carriers.

Three of the former American Export Lines vessels, the *Ambassador*, *Agent*, and *Aide*, were activated in 1990 and 1991 to provide logistical support for Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM. The Navy's Military Sealift Command activated the *Ambassador* on January 16, 1991. The ship left Cheatham Annex for the Norfolk Shipbuilding and Drydock Corporation (NORSHIPCO), in Norfolk, Virginia where it was made fully operational. On January 26, the *Ambassador* proceeded to the Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point in Southport, North Carolina to load its cargo. During its voyage to the Middle East, *Ambassador* experienced mechanical problems, which forced the vessel to return to the U.S. in March where it was towed to Mayport, Florida for repairs. After the repairs were completed, *Ambassador* sailed to the Military Ocean Terminal in Bayonne, New Jersey for sheathing of the cargo holds in order to carry ammunition. *Ambassador* delivered its cargo to the port of Ad Dammam, Saudi Arabia in the spring. Following Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM the *Ambassador* was returned to the Maritime Administration. It was placed in the RRF at Suisun Bay, California on December 7, 1993, and downgraded to non-retention in 2001.

More than seventy-five percent of the RRF provided sealift to support the U.S. effort's 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. The Ro-Ros proved to be the most effective vessels and they delivered nearly twenty percent of Central Command's material and other support during the first phase of the operations. Unfortunately, there is very little published on the role of the Maritime Administration's RRF during the Gulf War. Locating information that details individual ship operations has proved difficult. One of the better books published on the subject is, *Shield and Sword: The United States Navy and the Persian Gulf War*, by Edward J. Marolda and Robert J. Schneller. While this book does not discuss details of a specific ship's operations, it does provide an excellent overview of the logistical build-up to the war and the RRF's role. Several of the topics that the book discusses

include the difficulties encountered during the vessels' activation into the Navy's Military Sealift Command, their successes, and the amount and kind of material they carried.

Description/Principal Characteristics of Vessel

Type: C3-S-38a

Official Number: 283150

Builder: New York Shipbuilding Corporation of Camden, New Jersey

Year: 1960

Sister Ships: *Aide; Agent; Adventurer*

Location: Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet

Length (overall): 492.6'

Length (between perpendiculars): 470'

Beam: 73'

Draft (maximum loaded): 27'

Depth to (molded to main deck): 42.2'

Deadweight: 10,986 tons

Gross Tonnage (GRT): 7,848

Net Tonnage (NRT): 4, 274

Speed: 18.5 knots

The 12 replacement ships built by AEL all shared common hull form and propulsion machinery. The first class of the four "A" ship series were constructed along conventional lines with the propulsion machinery and superstructure located amidships. Cargo holds fore and aft of the machinery space were served by conventional cargo handling gear. Although this arrangement had survived for many years, it had several inherent disadvantages; most notably that it effectively wasted the fullest portion of the hull by occupying it with machinery, not cargo. Among the evolutions in ship design that was taking place in the 1960s was a widespread effort to move machinery further aft. Ships derived from the classic Mariner hull form were being built with machinery moved to the 2/3 or 3/4 aft position. AEIL exploited this trend during the design of the "B" and "C" classes by moving the machinery as far aft as possible.⁶

The four Bethlehem-designed ships of the "A" series had a modernized version of the traditional cargo ship profile. There was a unified superstructure amidships containing the navigating bridge, crew quarters and upper machinery spaces. There were six hatches on the centerline serving six cargo holds, three forward of the superstructure and three aft of it. A raised forecastle deck extending aft of the No. 1 hatch provided additional cargo space in the No. 1 hold. Cargo gear was provided on four sets of linked king posts located between the hatches, and two sets of free standing samson posts; one set on the fore side of the superstructure and one on the aft side. The No. 1 and No. 6 hatches were each served by two 7-ton capacity booms. Each of the other four hatches was served by four booms. The No. 3 hatch was also served by a 50-ton heavy lift boom. The cargo winches were operated by electricity and mounted on the king posts to create more deck space. There were hydraulic folding hatch covers at every deck level.

⁶ Refer to the Maritime Administration's March 18, 2009 National Register Eligibility Assessment for the vessel *Bay*, formerly *Export Bay*, for a more detailed discussion of the differences between the "A" and "B/C" classes.

The *Export Ambassador* was powered by steam turbines built by the General Electric Company rated at 12,500 shaft horsepower. Steam was provided by two Babcock & Wilcox boilers. It had a cruising speed of 18 ½ knots. There were living quarters for a crew of 55, staterooms for 12 passengers on the Boat Deck, and a passengers' lounge on the deck above.

Statement of Significance

At the time that the "A" class vessels were designed, they were considered state-of-the-art; however, the class did not influence the design of future comparable cargo ships. The *Ambassador* is representative of the general trends in break-bulk shipping over its final decades of significance. The vessel's history demonstrates the rapid obsolescence of the type, which was of little utility in shipping markets within a decade of its construction. It is not of exceptional significance, either in design, or service history.

The activation of *Ambassador* during the build-up for Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM was the RRF's first large-scale activation since its creation in 1976. The *Ambassador* delivered cargoes of military supplies and ammunition without incident and provided desperately needed services in a time of national need. Subsequent crises involving the Maritime Administration's role of assisting the military during national emergencies have generally utilized more efficient ship types more in keeping with modern logistics operations.

Integrity of Characteristics/Features

The vessel was originally constructed in 1960 and did not undergo any substantial modifications during its service life. The vessel retains its historical integrity, being substantially unchanged from original construction. All (or most) salient design features of structure, machinery, and equipment are substantially intact. The *Ambassador* has been in a non-retention status for more than nine years. Its physical integrity is degraded, and the ship's overall condition is poor.

National Register Eligibility Statement

The vessel is not quite 50-years-old and does not possess the exceptional importance necessary for such properties to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The vessel does not possess the significant historical or technological characteristics, or integrity of design and materials necessary for listing. While it did participate in Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM, it was one of 78 RRF vessels activated by the 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: FEBRUARY 18, 2010

Determination: NOT ELIGIBLE

Sources

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Maritime Administration's Property Management and Archive Record System Website:
<https://pmars.marad.dot.gov/detail.asp?Ship=181>