



AWAITING THEIR FATE

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As we drove north and over the hill from the quiet and quaint town of Benicia, I could see the clusters of ships riding at anchor out in the middle of Suisun Bay. There was a long narrow road leading down to an already packed parking lot of cars. Groups of people were hoofing it to the shore boat terminal, which consisted of nearly a half mile of floats over mud flats that led out into the bay. The weather that morning wasn't cooperating, as a stiff chilling breeze was coming up the bay from San Francisco driving a mist that penetrated our clothing and dripped down our necks from the rims of our hard hats. The long walk from the parking lot was almost unbearable in our light Southern California clothing as we had no protection from the wind.

"Hurry up and wait" seemed to be the order of the day. The first crew boat left at 0800, but it was loaded with Global Marine employees heading down-stream. So, we had to wait our turn, and that appeared to be after a load of young Marines were to be deposited to the string of ships just abreast of our present location.

I struck up a conversation with one of the young Marines. He couldn't have been older than 17, but he talked as if he had been in the Corps for a couple of years or more. They were on a training exercise to take over a belligerent ship and were armed with shotguns and pistols. It reminded me of the Malagasy incident in Thailand near the end of the Viet-Nam war when well-trained U.S. military personnel boarded a ship which was being held hostage along with its civilian merchant crew.

Out on deck as you glance from one ship to the other you can see that the rust is taking over most of their topsides. The booms are stored below decks along with the rigging, winches, and life boats. The hatches are all sealed with tarpaper and then coated with tar.

The next row of ships resembled C-3's. "American Racer" was one of about nine ships. The row behind us was all Navy Fleet Oilers; a big "145" was painted on the bow of one, and something that looked like "Missipillion" was painted on the stern of another. While we were there two more ships were brought in. One looked like a giant catamaran, the scuttlebutt being that she was a submarine retrieval vessel.

Twenty volunteers of the SS LANE VICTORY, many of us in our sixties and seventies who had sailed in the Merchant Marine during World

War II, had come up from San Pedro the night before to help cannibalize a sister ship for hard to get or non-existent replacement parts.

MARAD, a government organization overseeing the operation of the ready-reserve mothballed fleet, permitted us from time to time to board ships that were destined for the breakers and remove much-needed parts so we could continue to rebuild what will soon become "THE LAST VICTORY" of over four hundred Victory class ships that were built for World War II.

Maybe I'm too close to the subject or I'm just a sentimental old fool, but to see these once proud ships deteriorate into their present condition is heartbreaking to say the least. I notice their dwindling numbers each trip I make. Where there were 40 a year ago, only 20 or so now remain. The Reserve Fleet crews no longer try to maintain them. They know the end is near for these vessels.

My particular responsibility on this trip was to locate 1,000 Coast Guard-approved life jackets aboard the two P-2's, Generals "Patrick" and "Pope" (their sisterships were once the pride of the post war passenger fleet). I was to take the life jackets off the ships, load them into a truck and drive them post haste to San Pedro, 500 miles south. Awaiting delivery aboard the ship was a crew ready to attach lights, whistles and reflective patches, then stencil "SS LANE VICTORY" on every one. We had several hundred new jackets on our ship, but at the last moment we were informed they didn't have the "Coast Guard Approved" stamp,

which was mandatory. With our inaugural cruise nearly a week away we became desperate; no jackets, no cruise.

Our secondary objective was to remove a large air compressor and DC motor, IMO lube-oil pump and motor, main steam stop-valves, and several large electrical controllers. Our list had other items, but if we could get those few main parts we would have some back-up machinery to replace the parts being serviced by our all-volunteer work crew.

On other trips we took only those parts needed to get the "LANE" up and running. We found out that replacing armatures, pumps, regulators, and the many other parts was next to impossible, as many of the original manufacturers are no longer around or discontinued the products after World War II. A case in point: a DC armature shaft grounded out, we asked for estimates to rewind the shaft, and the lowest figure was \$18,000...and that was just for repairing. It didn't cost that much new.

The differences between the 8,500 and the 6,000 HP VICTORY's are many but what we didn't realize was that so many different manufacturers were involved and that such subtle differences existed in the same machinery designs...where a throttle on one wouldn't work on an identical twin from another manufacturer...or that the flanges of an auxiliary steam stop valve on one 6,000 HP ship is too wide or too narrow for a sistership. Also, some equipment was modified as the original parts wore out. The Lane, now a National Historical Monument and Museum we are obligated to keep our ship as it was originally built, a hard thing to

do when a present day hand-held transistorized communicating device can replace the entire original radio shack.

Most of these VICTORIES were laid up in the 1960's. All steam and water piping were opened and vented, and the thru-hull or skin-valve outlets were plated over and welded. A de-humidifier was installed along with a hull electrolysis control system, so sitting in a fresh-water bay as they were, they should have lasted forever.

Of the three major W.W. II cargo ship restoration projects in the U.S., the S.S. LANE VICTORY exists only with the funds and hard work from it's all volunteer members and friends. Many of the local maritime industries have also made gracious donations, but unlike the other projects, we receive no local or State tax monies. Our recent shipyard haul-out bill came to more than \$250,000, and was paid entirely from membership, private donations and movie location contracts.

I don't know how MARAD establishes a formula to offer what vessels to auction...if it's by age, lot or by deterioration. Getting to this specific ship required that we carry all our gear up a steep ladder from the shore boat, then cross over seven VICTORY class ships that were rusting hulks anchored and tied with heavy wire, bow to stern. It seems odd that the ships we are allowed to board are always the ones furthest from the boarding ladder, necessitating lugging our chain-falls, tools, generators, and ice chests. Many of us were huffing and puffing before we even started working. The men knew exactly where to go and what to do, as they were

assigned specific duties to expedite the removal of equipment in a very short allotted time frame.

Our escort unlocked a hatch leading into the mid-ship house of the "General Patrick" first. As we entered we could smell the stuffy odor. The passageway decks were blistering up in two-inch bubbles in spots, and as we stepped on the blisters they would poof, then crumble from the rust building underneath. Most of the cabins looked as if they were in use only yesterday, volumes of books and official documents were everywhere. He then allowed us to canvas the troop berthing compartments, only to reveal that someone had beat us to the cache. At this point we became desperate and began searching in every compartment. Oh, there were many life jackets...but only a few hundred with the mandatory "US Coast Guard Approved" stamp.

Taking our one last chance, we crossed our fingers and boarded the "General Pope". Our escort unlocked an after-companion hatch to allow most of our crew to search the after berthing areas. He then offered to escort a couple of us to the forward troop compartments, making sure we entered the dark interior with two flashlights apiece, and cautioned that we remain in pairs.

My partner and I made our way through the inky blackness down several decks and forward to the troop berthing areas, the small beacons from our flashlights our only light as we made our way through the lonely passageways and down the crisscrossed stair wells. My partner went into

a starboard compartment and I went into the opposite one, searching for the "approved" jackets. I started pulling the jackets off the bunks and stacking them in the passage way as fast as I could, and presumed my partner was doing the same. The troop bunks were stacked six high, and as I reached under them I noticed writing on the under-side of the laced canvas pipe berths. Being curious by nature, I started reading the messages. Most were just names, outfits, and dates. Some had home towns, girl's names and even vivid sketches of women that left very little to the imagination. Several had poems. I visualized those young troops from long ago with little else to do but lay in their sacks. I wondered and hoped they got home safely.

I must have spent more time reading the inscriptions than I thought, because when I called for my partner for help to carry out the life jackets...I got no answer. I checked the starboard compartment and found it empty. Puzzled at his disappearance, I decided to go topside for help to carry out the jackets. I started up the ladder carrying as many jackets as I could handle all the while calling for my "Buddy", when something hooked my arm causing me to drop my flashlight. I watched helplessly as the beam of light flashed crazily at the bulkheads, stairs, and decks as it tumbled down the stairway. Then the light went out. Total darkness. For a split second I could feel a jolt of panic streaking through me. I dropped the life jackets and fumbled for my other flashlight 'Bless that Reserve Fleet escort that insisted I bring two!' I switched on the

other light and it was as weak as a match-light...a faint feeble beam that flickered as I moved. I made my way back down the stairs trying to locate the other light. I found some of the parts, but not enough to use...not even a battery to back up the ever-weakening ones in my spare.

I climbed up about three decks, still calling out for my "buddy". Meantime my light was getting weaker. It was about then that I realized I was completely lost. Again, the sick jolt of panic in the pit of my stomach. I turned off my light to see if I could spot any other light at all... just a faint glimmer from a porthole was all I wanted. Nothing. Just that soft velvet blackness that seemed to be brushing my face as I twisted my head back and forth searching. I switched my light back on and started running down the black passage ways, through one hatch after another...I had to find a way out of this damned ship before my flashlight went out completely! Please remember these were large passenger ships, sealed tightly so weather, humidity or intruders couldn't get in, but that was also keeping me from getting out. I think it was at this point I started bargaining...with myself...with God...or with the Devil...I'm not sure which. "Let me get out of here and I'll be good...I swear! No more high cholesterol foods, no more fussing with Mary, no more drinking, no more ANYTHING BAD!! JUST LET ME GET OUTTA HERE!!!"

I don't know if it was instinct or pure unadulterated luck, but I finally made it to the lounge deck and light. But, ol' Lady Luck wasn't through playing tricks on me...all the doors and hatches were sealed. I

thought it best to reverse my course and try again to find the opened hatch where we all had entered so many hours...weeks...months(!) ago. I went all the way forward again, up some stairs, and found the hatch where I had entered in the first place, only to find it locked. I broke out in a cold sweat and started yelling. My mind was racing a mile a minute trying to decide what to do. I raced off towards the lounge deck area planning to break out a glass portlight. Then I heard it...the sweetest sound my old ears had heard in a long, long time! Shouts coming from behind me, and the beautiful gleam of flashlights in the passage way.

Once on deck I found out that my "buddy" had heard my shouts and "assumed" I was leaving. He informed the escort I was out and that he could lock the hatch. Lucky for me they were holding a head-count prior to leaving the ship, and I was reported missing.

We were successful in retrieving the 1000 life jackets needed to satisfy the Coast Guard requirements. The inaugural cruise of the SS LANE VICTORY came off without a hitch a week later.

The MARAD people were very accomodating, as if they understood our needs, but they had their orders to see that we left only with the items on our need list. It was a shame to leave behind steel boxes filled with spare parts that could only be used on the machinery installed on the Victory class vessels and specifically by our ship. Hopefully we'll get another chance to go to Suisun. And hopefully also, I'll have enough

**foresight to check the batteries in both flashlights that I carry....and
maybe even tie a third light to my belt!**