

Golden Bear II had a full and varied career

By Jerry Bowen

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A few months ago as I was driving along the Vallejo waterfront I noticed a rusting ship tied up along the Mare Island waterfront. I pondered what ship it was; what I discovered has led to this article.

A ship named Golden Bear is familiar to many of Solano County's residents. There have been three TS Golden Bears attached to the Vallejo Maritime Academy, appropriately named TS (Training Ship) Golden Bear I, II, and III. But what most don't know is that there are other names associated with the TS Golden Bears.

For the purpose of this article we will concentrate mainly on the TS Golden Bear II.

The TS Golden Bear II began life as a cargo/passenger ship, the SS Del Orleans, built at Bethlehem-Sparrows Point Shipyard Inc. in Sparrows Point, Md. She was designed for Delta Line's New Orleans-to-Argentina service and had a passenger capacity of 67 when she was launched, Feb. 17, 1940.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the planned operations for the Del Orleans were to change drastically. Nine months after her launch, she was commandeered by the U.S. Navy in June 1941, sent to Mobile, Ala., refitted as the troop transport USS Crescent City, and placed in commission in the following October.

She was sent to the Pacific in December 1941 to carry men and equipment between the West Coast and Hawaii. After dropping passengers off in the Canal Zone, she sailed to San Diego to load Navy and Marine passengers for Pearl Harbor. She carried civilian evacuees back to San Diego, returning immediately with workers and equipment to rush repairs at the damaged naval base at Pearl Harbor. AP-40 was then assigned to transport men and equipment to set up the advanced base at Efate, New Hebrides. When the base was completed she returned to San Diego, arriving April 22, 1942, for a brief overhaul.

On July 1, 1942, Crescent City sailed from San Diego bound for the initial assault landings on Guadalcanal. Landing her troops Aug. 7 under heavy air attack, she shot down at least four of the enemy planes. For two days she remained at anchor unloading the necessary supplies to hold the beachhead, then returned to Espiritu Santo to unload material to set up a new forward base to supply the Guadalcanal operations.

Through the rest of the year, and into 1943 she helped achieve ultimate Allied success in the prolonged campaign to defend Guadalcanal against strong Japanese efforts to retake it.

In February 1943 she was reclassified as an attack transport, with a new hull number APA-21. The USS Crescent City performed logistics functions during most of the drive up the Solomon Islands chain and into the Bismarcks, but also participated in amphibious landings at Cape Torokina, Bougainville, at the beginning of November 1943, and at Emirau in March 1944. In July she landed troops on Guam, then repeated the same efforts at Peleliu during September and at Leyte in October. During the rest of the year the transport brought reinforcements from New Guinea to Leyte and then steamed back to the United States to begin a much-needed overhaul.

After overhaul, the USS Crescent City departed from San Francisco on Feb. 25, 1945, and arrived at Pearl Harbor March 4. Here she was converted to a temporary hospital evacuation ship, and two weeks later was under way for Kerama Retto, arriving on April 6. Receiving casualties from the beaches of Okinawa and from other ships, she transferred them to the USS Hope (AH-7) for evacuation. The Crescent City remained at Okinawa receiving casualties and transients until the end of the war.

Aiding in the redeployment of troops for the occupation of China, Crescent City carried the 1st Marines to Taku between Sept. 30 and Oct. 6, 1945, and transported Chinese troops from Hong Kong to Chinwangtao and Tsingtao in November. Returning to Okinawa on Dec. 1, she embarked men eligible for discharge and sailed for Seattle, arriving Dec. 20.

The Crescent City was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation for her outstanding performance throughout World War II, and received 10 battle stars.

Departing from Seattle Jan. 23, 1946, Crescent City arrived at Norfolk, Va., on Feb. 14. She operated from New York and Norfolk on training duty in the Caribbean until Oct. 10, 1947, when she sailed for the West Coast.

She sailed back to the Pacific coast on Oct. 10, 1947, and was decommissioned there in April 1948. Transferred to the Maritime Commission in September 1948, the ship had no further Navy service and was laid up at Suisun Bay in 1948.

But she was not yet done serving! In May 1971 she was loaned to the state of California Maritime Academy at Vallejo and renamed the TS Golden Bear II.

The renamed Golden Bear II operated as a maritime school ship until July 1995, when she was again put in the reserve fleet. The ship sat between other old cargo vessels

until August of 1999, when the Artship Foundation obtained the ship to serve as a floating university of peace/cultural center. She was renamed Artship and berthed at the Port of Oakland's Ninth Avenue terminal near Jack London Square while efforts to raise \$5 million for her conversion were made.

Apparently they failed to raise the required funds. In 2003 the Port of Oakland evicted the Artship and required it to be moved within a year. After the foundation failed to find a place to move it to, the Port of Oakland took possession of the vessel and sold it to a Sanship, Inc., a Texas ship dismantler.

Sanship, Inc., moved the ship to the former Mare Island Naval shipyard, and scheduled it to be sent later to China for recycling.

Then, in 2004, the bovine bum booty hit the fan in the form of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Acting on a tip from the Basel Action Network (BAN), a global green organization dedicated to halting exports of toxic waste from rich to poor countries, the EPA moved to halt the export of the vessel to China. Samples from the ship had PCB concentrations greater than 125,000 parts per million. The EPA regulations prohibit the export of materials that contain more than 50 parts per million. The EPA required the ship's owners, Sanship, Inc., to remove and dispose of the toxic materials before the ship could be sent overseas.

Then, to add to the troubles of this old World War II fighting ship still owned by Sanship, Inc., a barge that had been acting as a fender between the ship and the pier sank into the murky Mare Island waters. The ship had to be moved to another pier so they could refloat the barge that had also started to leak a small amount of diesel fuel. All this was adding up to a large expense to the company because they are responsible for all damages incurred by the ownership of the vessel.

The last I can find out is that Sanship, Inc., had a couple of different prospective buyers who wanted to restore the ship as a museum. But that takes money and so far neither have been able to raise the required ransom.

It would be nice if the interested parties could raise the funds and prepare the ship for exhibit. I only touched lightly on its very impressive war record and its time with the Vallejo Maritime Academy. With so many veterans of the war dying off today, it would make a nice tribute to their valiant efforts on this nation's behalf.

In the meantime, there it sits alongside historic Mare Island's now closed shipyard, deteriorating and rusting away, hoping for the kind caring hand of someone or some organization with lots of money and who appreciates its glorious past.

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