

NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY ASSESSMENT

VESSEL: USNS *Harkness*



The USNS *Harkness* underway. Location and date unknown.
<http://www.navsourc.org/archives/09/10/1032.htm>. Bill Valashinas.

Vessel History

The USNS *Harkness* is a former research ship built to operate for the Oceanographer of the Navy. Its keel was laid in June of 1967 and the vessel was launched June 12, 1968. *Harkness* was delivered to the Navy's Military Sealift Command on January 29, 1971. *Harkness* was one of two sisterships; the second ship, USNS *Chauvenet*, was authorized in fiscal year 1965 and delivered in November 1970. The *Harkness*, designated T-AGS 32, and *Chauvenet*, designated T-AGS 29, were built to replace the USS *Tanner* (AGS-15) and the USS *Maury* (AGS-16), which were survey ships converted from World War II attack transports.

Harkness was named for astronomer William Harkness, who was associated with the United States Naval Observatory from 1862 until his retirement in 1899. *Harkness* and *Chauvenet* were built at the Fairfield Govan Yard No. 836 of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilding Corporation in Scotland.¹ Ordering the ships from a shipyard outside the U.S. was a departure for the Navy. It was standard policy to build ships in U.S. naval shipyards or commercial yards, so that those facilities and their skilled shipwrights were available in time of war. This would continue to be the policy for combat vessels, but the ordering of the two survey ships coincided with a major round of base closings that eliminated naval shipyards such as the shipyard in New York. Scotland's Clyde River had once been the world center for shipbuilding, but by the 1960s activity in the region was declining in the face of competition from builders in Scandinavia and the Far East.

The Upper Clyde Shipbuilding Corp. was created around the time the *Harkness* was ordered through the merger of several yards, including the former Fairfield

¹ Anecdotal reports suggest that the *Chauvenet* and *Harkness* were constructed in Scotland as a gesture in response to the renewal of the lease of the U.S. ballistic missile submarine support base in Holy Loch.

Shipyard in Govan. Shortly after the *Harkness* was delivered the Upper Clyde Shipbuilding Corporation went into receivership.

The *Harkness* was turned over to the Military Sealift Command (MSC), formerly the Military Sea Transportation Service, in a ceremony at the Boston Navy Yard on April 30, 1971. Now the USNS *Harkness*, the vessel was assigned to MSC Atlantic. USNS *Chauvenet* was assigned to MSC Pacific. Each was powered by twin 1,800 horsepower diesel engines geared to a single shaft with a cruising speed of 15 knots. A civilian merchant marine crew of 13 officers and 56 non-licensed personnel operated the vessel. Additionally, *Harkness* carried accommodations for eight scientists and 104 sailors and/or Marines.

The ships gathered data necessary to create detailed navigational charts of coastal waters, or maps of land areas. To fulfill this mission, the vessels were fitted with helicopter pads and hangers, and survey launches. Navy helicopters and helicopter pilots were assigned to the ships. Kaman "Seasprite" helicopter No. 149031, which operated from the *Harkness* during surveys in Indonesia in the late 1980s, is now preserved in the American Helicopter Museum in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Between 1972 and 1976 the *Harkness* conducted survey work in the eastern Atlantic, the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey, and the Mona Passage between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. In November 1973, while working in Turkish waters, the ship made a courtesy visit to the Russian Black Seaport of Novorossisk. During the bicentennial celebrations in July 1976, the *Harkness* was opened to the public at Port Canaveral, Florida. In 1977 the ship conducted further surveys in the waters surrounding Haiti and the Dominican Republic, before crossing the Atlantic to do similar work off of Morocco.

The *Harkness* spent much of the 1980s performing survey work in the Indian Ocean. It operated in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the waters off Somalia. Land and sea surveys were performed at Diego Garcia, a small island located in the western Indian Ocean. Between August and October 1984 the *Harkness* participated in "Operation Intense Look," an airborne search for mines in the Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea in support of the governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The ship received a Navy Humanitarian Service award for this work. Circa 1989, the *Harkness* spent 16 months performing land and sea surveys in the Indonesian archipelago. In 1990 and 1991 the *Harkness* and *Chauvenet* both operated in the Persian Gulf in support of Desert Shield/Desert Storm.

The U.S. Navy and U.S. State Department intended to offer *Harkness* and *Chauvenet* for foreign military sale in the early 1990s. At the same time, however, the Maritime Administration was actively seeking suitable vessels to replace the aging merchant marine training ships at the Maine Maritime Academy and Texas Maritime Academy. An agreement between the Navy and the Maritime Administration stipulated that if the foreign sale was not completed, the

vessels would be transferred to the Maritime Administration. Eventually the sales did fail, and the two vessels were transferred; with *Chauvenet* intended for Texas, and *Harkness* for Maine.

The *Harkness* was deactivated on February 15, 1993. On February 16, 1994 it was transferred to the Maritime Administration, and placed in its National Defense Reserve Fleet (NDRF) in the James River off Fort Eustis, Virginia. A contract to reactivate and convert *Harkness* was awarded in early 1994 to Eastern Technical Enterprises (ETE), of Brooklyn, New York. The *Harkness* was delivered to ETE's facilities in the former Brooklyn Navy Yard later in 1994. The conversion envisioned major changes to the ship, including removal of most of the research and survey features. Progress on the contract was unsatisfactory, resulting in its termination in 1995. The conversion was subsequently abandoned when a more suitable vessel, the ex-USNS *Tanner*, became available later that year.

The *Chauvenet* conversion was successfully completed in 1996 and the vessel entered service for the Texas Maritime Academy under the name *Texas Clipper II*. *Harkness* later returned to the James River Reserve Fleet (JRRF), where it was used as a cannibalization asset to support the *Texas Clipper II*. In 2001 *Harkness* moved to the State University of New York Maritime College campus at Fort Schuyler in the Bronx for temporary use as a stationary training facility while that school's training ship, *Empire State*, was on loan to the Massachusetts Maritime Academy². On February 28, 2001 *Harkness* departed Fort Schuyler for the Massachusetts Maritime Academy in Buzzards Bay, to serve as a stationary facility while the *Cape Bon* was prepared to serve as a seagoing training vessel for the school. Following this service, *Harkness* returned to the JRRF where it has remained; it continues to be used as a cannibalization and spare parts source to support the former *Chauvenet*, which is presently operated by the Maritime Administration in service for the U.S. Missile Defense Agency as the *Pacific Collector*.

Description / Characteristics of Vessel Type

Type: Research Vessel

Hull Number: T-AGS-32

Official Number: 7100473

Sister ships: *Chauvenet*

Builder: Fairfield Govan Yard No. 836 of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilding Corporation, Scotland.

Year: 1968

Length: 394'

Beam: 54'

Draft: 31'

Depth: 17.4'

Displacement: 5,360

² In 1998 the Massachusetts Maritime Academy's training ship *Patriot State* was retired, and a general cargo ship, the *Cape Bon*, was selected to replace it. During the period between 1999 and 2003 the school was furnished with the *Empire State* for seagoing training in January and February. The temporary assignment of *Harkness* was intended to fill the gaps at both schools due to the absence of the "permanently-assigned" training ship; however, the experiment was not successful, and consequently not repeated after 2001.

Statement of Significance

The USNS *Harkness* is associated with Desert Shield/Desert Storm; however, it does not appear to have played a prominent role in that conflict. From a design and construction standpoint, the vessel is not significant. It was built to commercial classification rules for hull and machinery; U.S. Navy General Specifications were employed for accommodations and military features. It was a fairly conventional research vessel at the time; neither the largest nor the smallest such vessel in service, and it did not employ or introduce any special equipment or features.

Historical Integrity

The aborted training ship conversion resulted in the loss of nearly all of the ship's distinctive features as an oceanographic survey vessel. In particular, the helicopter hangar was removed; all survey boats and davits were removed; and the laboratories were stripped and modified for use as classrooms and merchant mariner training facilities. The ship's original Panxman diesel generators were replaced with equivalent Caterpillar models by MSC in the mid-1980s. During the 1994-1995 training ship conversion, many of the remaining auxiliary equipment and systems were replaced. The ship's complement was projected to increase from about 200 persons to 350 persons; this necessitated major topside changes, including fitting of a new accommodations superstructure in place of the helicopter hangar and installation of new covered lifeboats and davits. The entire navigation and communications equipment suite was replaced, as was the engine room control system. Consequently, nearly all historical integrity relating to the ship's years of service as a research vessel was lost.



USNS *Harkness* at the James River Reserve Fleet. Maritime Administration photos.

Subsequent to the conversion project, the new equipment and machinery fitted to the ship was removed for re-use; principally on the *Tanner*. Over its years as a cannibalization asset for the *Chauvenet*, many of the remaining original equipment was also removed. Today, the *Harkness* is essentially a slowly-deteriorating shell.

National Register Eligibility Statement

The USNS *Harkness* is not yet 50-years-old and does not possess the extraordinary historical significance in any category necessary to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria G. While it did participate in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, its role there was not significant enough to qualify under Criteria A, particularly considering the recent nature of those operations. The vessel does not possess the significant historical or technological characteristics, or integrity of design and materials necessary for listing under Criteria C, nor is the vessel associated with the lives of persons significant in our past as required under Criteria B, other than being named for the acclaimed nineteenth-century Scottish-born astronomer William Harkness, known for his construction of telescopes and work with other astronomical instruments.

Date: 18 June 2009

Determination: Not eligible

Sources

Brouwer, Norman. *Harkness Ship History*. 2007.

Internet Site

Maritime Administration's Property Management and Archive Record System Website:
<http://www.pmars.imgs.com/detail.asp?Ship=2088>