

Port Repair Ships

The Corps of Engineers operated ten port repair ships during World War II, largely in the European Theater. These vessels were specifically designed to clear harbors of debris and sunken vessels by means of diving and salvage operations, demolition, and by lifting and refloating sunken vessels. They were similar in appearance to, and slightly larger in size than, the heavy-lift salvage ships of the ARSD class of the Navy. The creation of the port repair ships reflected the massive damage that had been inflicted on port facilities in Europe and North Africa, and the inability of local authorities or the military to restore them without special equipment.

Pre-1941 Antecedents

Port repair ships had not been used by either the Army or Navy prior to World War II. Salvage vessels, oriented toward raising sunken vessels with air and refloating stranded vessels with beach gear, had become a part of the Navy, although that service was still highly dependent upon the private salvor, Merritt, Chapman, and Scott. The Army Engineers, both through the civil works dredging program and through combat engineering, were familiar with removing underwater obstructions with explosives, but no vessel had ever been adapted specifically for this purpose. The ports of the world were left largely intact after World War I, and for this reason port repair ships – like dredges – had not been used between the wars to train the services for port rehabilitation work.

Army Operation of Port Repair Ships in World War II

The story of the acquisition and operation of the port repair ships is a classic tale of both interservice rivalry and wartime red tape. In the fall of 1942 General Eisenhower, as Supreme Commander in Europe, and the Corps of Engineers each requested that a small group of port repair ships about 275 feet long be made available in Europe and North Africa. The Transportation Corps was assigned the task of procuring the vessels and training the crews.

Competition for vessels was extremely intense at this time, but the Transportation Corps finally found several likely candidates for conversion in the form of a class of coasters being built for lend-lease as well as Navy use. These were the “N3” ships, standard but little-known Maritime Commission hull types that were being built both as diesel motorships and as slightly smaller steamships. The army wanted the diesel version, but the Navy and the British objected to giving up the diesel ships assigned to them, which were being built in the Penn Jersey yard at Camden.

One older vessel, the steamship *Josephine Lawrence*, was made available to the Army by the War Shipping Administration in mid-1943, but the battle over the N3s continued, with the contending parties present their views to the Munitions Assignment Board and the combined chiefs of staff. Finally, in the fall of 1943, a year after the original request for ships had been made, the Navy made four of the ships available to the Army. It is interesting to note that by now the Navy had

commissioned one of these ships and operated it for two months before surrendering it to the Army. Perhaps this brief experience convinced the Navy that it did not want these ships. In any event, in 1944 the Navy freed up the rest of its N3s, three in May and two in October, eventually providing the Army with more of the ships than it had originally requested. At this point the Navy seemed quite willing to eliminate completely this particular class from its wartime fleet.

Conversion to port repair ships was also a time-consuming process for the Army, taking place in a competitive environment in which all kinds of conversion work was going on. Installation of diving support and salvage equipment, including bow horns with their 40-ton lift capability, took many more months. It was clear that the port repair ships had very low priority. Consequently, the first five ships – the *Van Noy* (ex-*Lawrence*), *Manchester*, *Farrell*, *Griswold*, and *Emery* – did not sail for Europe until July and August of 1944. These ships did the bulk of the clean-up of European ports, inasmuch as the other five ships were not ready until 1945.

The port repair ships were manned with military crews. Although considerable time was available for training these crews because of the delays in procuring and converting the ships, the Corps of Engineers was unhappy with the results because no time had been made available to train crews and ships *together* before going into actual port rehabilitation work.

The greatest contribution of the port repair ships may well have been in centralizing the repair functions of the Army Engineers in an accessible location and in servicing and reconditioning equipment. Inasmuch as Navy salvage vessels were at work at an earlier date, the heavy lift capability of the Army port repair ships was not extensively utilized.

Postwar Disposition of Port Repair Ships

As noted earlier, the N3s, even the diesel versions, were not popular ships, and thus there was no clamor for them when the war was over. Even the Navy, which had the original claim on N3s, did not show much interest in them, although two of the ships eventually did see naval service. These two, the *Thomas* and the *Specker*, were among the last of this group of ships to be completed, and saw no real service as port repair ships.

The *Marvin Lyle Thomas* was operated by the Army until 1952 when she went to the Navy as the *Sagitta*, AK-87. She was used by the Military Sealift Command in summers for DEW-line resupply and in winters in the Caribbean. She was transferred to the Maritime Administration (MARAD) in 1960, spent six years in the reserve fleet, and then transferred back to the Army for use as a training vessel.

The *Joe C. Specker* had a similar career. After spending seven postwar years in Army service, she was transferred to the Navy for duty with the Military Sealift Command (MSC) in 1952 as the *Vela*, AK-89, serving in Canadian and Caribbean waters until 1958. After twelve years in the reserve fleet, she was sold to a Spanish firm for scrapping.

One other ship in this group of N3s had already served in the Navy, the *Hydra*, AK-82, was actually completed as a naval vessel late in 1943 and saw two months of commissioned service before

being transferred to the Army for conversion to a port repair ship. As the *Madison Jordan Manchester* this ship then saw Army service in Europe, followed by many years in the reserve fleet before finally dropping off that list in 1984.

Three other N3s had been completed early enough to see service in Europe in port repair work. After the war the *Thomas J. Farrell, Jr.*, and the *Glen G. Griswold* went into the reserve fleet but dropped off that list in 1968. The *Robert M. Emery* served both in Europe and in the Pacific, spent some time in the reserve fleet, and was sold to a shipbreaker in Oregon in the late 1960s.

The three remaining diesel N3s without significant wartime service spent considerable time in the reserve fleet. The *Henry W. Harley* and the *Arthur C. Ely* were eventually sold to the same Oregon shipbreaker at about the time the *Emery* was sold. The *Richard R. Arnold* was sold in the late 1960s to an American firm, Kelbar, Inc., which operated her as a repair ship before she disappeared from the lists in 1984.

The first ship to be acquired in the port repair ship program, the *Junior Van Noy*, survived a few years in reserve, but about 1958 was cut down to a barge, the *Kathleen Sheridan*.

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