

Marine Repair Ships

Army Operation of Repair Ships in World War II

As with several other special-function ship types, the need for repair and spare parts ships became evident only after the war had been under way for some time and the experience of early operations was available. By that time there was no time to design new ships for these specific purposes, so conversion of existing vessels became the means whereby the Army achieved ship specialization.

As requests for repair and spare parts ships began to accumulate, the Army found itself without a suitable class of ships to use for this purpose. Through allocation from the War Shipping Administration it finally assembled a motley collection of six repair ships. Five were similar in size, 350 to 390 feet in overall length and had been built on the Great Lakes from 1901 to 1913, each at a different yard. The sixth was a 202-foot ship that the Army owned, the *James B. Houston*, built on the West Coast in 1900. She was available in 1943 only because she had been rescued earlier from a watery grave. As the USAT *Kvichak* she had grounded in British Columbia in 1941, subsequently slipping off the rocks into 80 feet of water. Later that year she had been salvaged and beached at Prince Rupert. Because of the wartime shortage of ships she was pressed back into service, even though she was then well over forty years old.

Assembling these six ships had been difficult enough. Now the Transportation Corps was spared the further challenge of operating them by turning them over to the U. S. Coast Guard crews while retaining administrative control. These ships all served in the Southwest Pacific Area, operating in New Guinea and the Philippines. Previous to their arrival in that theater in the latter part of 1944, marine repairs had been effected by two small Australian vessels, the *Bell Bird* and *Sea Rover*, along with several large barges outfitted for this purpose. With the arrival of large concrete barges from the United States beginning in 1944, it was possible to develop repair facilities with adequate storage for parts, and the repair ships added a new dimension of mobility when they arrived.

The repair ships began the war as tired old vessels, and at the end of the war had relatively few years of service left. The *J. M. Davis* sailed for a few years under that name as an American-flag ship before becoming the Argentine *Canopus* in 1951 and a Great Lakes auto carrier in 1958, eventually dropping off the lists in 1965. The *J. E. Gorman* became the Panamanian *Adelaide* and no longer appeared in directories after 1958. The *W. J. Conners*, as the Icelandic *Haeringur*, followed the same timetable. The *Duluth* returned to the Great Lakes, became a cannery ship in 1951, also dropping from sight in 1958, as did the *James B. Houston*, which had become the Philippine vessel *Bisayas* in 1951. The *William F. Fitch* was returned to MARAD after the war, and dropped off the lists in 1951.

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