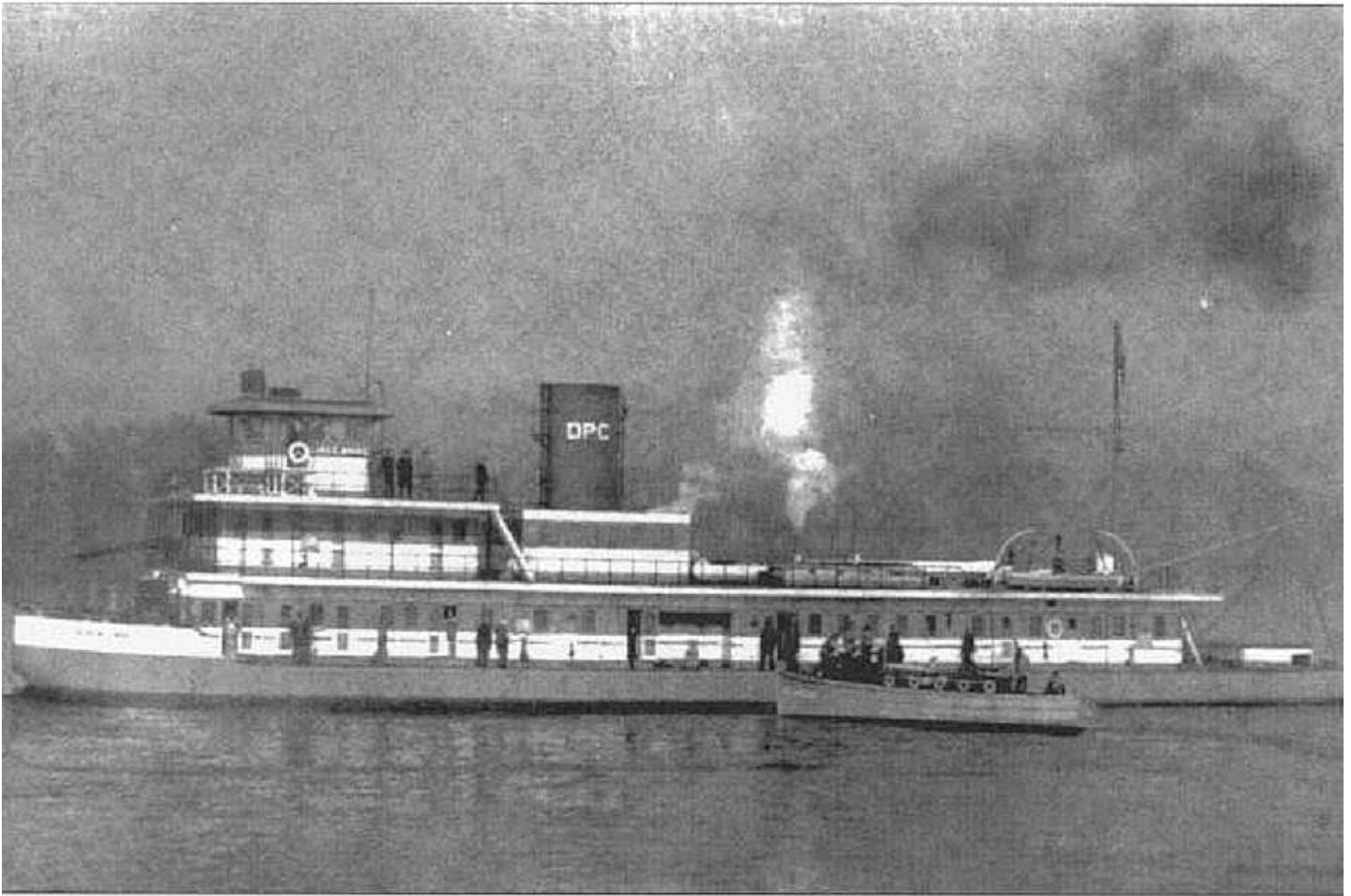


# Defense Plant Corporation



This is the Guadalcanal, brand new, built by Jeffboat. It was operated by the Mississippi Valley Barge Line from 1941 until 1947, then sold to American Barge Line, which ran it until 1960. It was then sold to American Marine Corporation, which retired it. Notice that high head and the plainness of detail. That awning over the foredeck was for the deck crew, but not for the pilot, who could not see what was going on down there. The awning had the boat's name painted on it in huge letters, easily identifiable from a couple of miles.

## BY ALAN L. BATES

Technological history has a way of repeating itself. The clipper ship was evolved when the days of the sailing merchantman were numbered. The best packets were built to meet the unbeatable competition of the railroads. The air conditioned, streamlined train was the dying gasp of railway passenger service. On the rivers, the finest steam towboats were built after Rudolf Diesel's engine had proved its mastery of the rivers.

World War II made immense demands for river freight movement immediately after the Great Depression had practically stopped new steam towboat construction. The few modern towboats built during that period of distress took advantage of the diesel engine's economy of fuel and

labor; the Jason, the last of the steam sternwheelers, came out in 1941. Capital for new construction of all kinds was hard to find. In order to meet those demands for factories and transportation, the Defense Plant Corporation (DPC) was formed.

They commissioned George G. Sharp, a New Orleans naval architect, to design a fleet of powerful diesel towboats, but diesels were desperately needed for combat vessels, which took priority over towboats in a time of war. Sharp designed the last steam towboats built for the Western Rivers. It was an austere design: no fancy trim, no elegant paneling—indeed, nothing beyond plain, comfortable quarters for the crew, a stout hull and a rugged, dependable power plant. This extreme simplicity of design was

essential, for there were few experienced shipyard workers, so the work was done by a small army of farmers, house carpenters and housewives doing their bit to win the war.

The boats were built to last, and it is safe bet that had steam been more economical to use, they would have lasted 50 years. Crews were large and the minimum required to operate one was 20 people. Accommodations were provided for 30—practically an army. They were very nearly silent in operation and crewmen said they "lived real good." The DPC boats handled the largest and heaviest tows of their era, day after day, with no fanfare "for there was a war on, you know," and everything in the land was top secret.

They were big, with a hull size of 18

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## DPC

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feet long, 52 feet wide and 11 feet deep. Power was supplied to two four-cylinder triple expansion engines that delivered 1,000 hp. at 185 rpm., to the two four-bladed propellers nine feet in diameter. They had an impressive safety record. In a total of 373 years of operation, none were sunk, none burned and none exploded.

This is not to say they never had moments of utter terror. The worst power problem was that the water tube boilers had great evaporative capacity with very low water capacity. When a float valve in the hot well stuck, a pilot had about two minutes to do something, while the engineers fought to restore the water in the boilers.

The foredeck was built very high, about the deck level of an empty barge. This obviated the need for towknees, but facing up to loads was difficult at best, for the pilots could not see the barge headlogs. Something in the hull shape made the boats difficult to handle when running tight, and engineers tended to run dead low when "stop" was ordered. This was done to avoid shutting down all of the auxiliaries that depended on the main engine exhaust for power, and led to some bickering between engineroom and pilothouse.

All 21 of the boats were identical until they were sold to private ownership, when new names, different paint schemes and other changes were made. In all, they ran under 34 names. The Lunga Point was fit-

ted with two boilers and two stacks, but only one to get that radical change. None were ever converted to diesel. The last to be retired was the Mateur, decommissioned by the U.S. Engineers in 1979. The last we heard of it, it was converted to a restaurant at Peoria, Ill., and it is the last of them to survive.

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