

# THEY ALSO SERVED

*Among the silent heroes of World War II were the seaplane tenders and their seaplane squadrons. While often on the front lines, working in the heat of the action, their tales of heroism are often forgotten*

**BY CHARLES H. BOGART**

**S**tarting in 1939, the US Navy began to rebuild its surface and air components in case the US would become a belligerent in World War II. Among the air units the US Navy began to expand were its sea plane patrol squadrons. As the aircraft would reach the fleet faster than ships could be built to service them, the Navy began to look around for existing ships that would be converted into seaplane tenders. Among the ships investigated for conversion was the SS *Exchequer* of the American Export Line.

The late 1930s had seen not only a surge in naval construction in the US but also a

revitalization of the Merchant Marine as a result of new Maritime Legislation. Fiscal years 1938 and 1939 saw 83 new merchant ships laid down in the US. Among them were four ships ordered from Ingalls Corporation of Pascagoula, Mississippi, for the American Export Line US-Mediterranean Service. This was the first order entered into the Pascagoula shipyard books.

These ships of the C3 type were to be 475-ft long, 66-ft in beam, with a draft of 27-ft and a displacement of 14,450-tons. Power was provided by two boilers operating at 450-lbs per square inch at 750° Fahrenheit.

The steam passed through triple series turbines connected to a single reducing gear providing 8000-shp to drive the one screw at 96-rpm for 16.5-kts. The resulting vessels would have been the fastest cargo ships on the Mediterranean run. They were also the first all-welded merchant ships to be built in the United States.

There is some confusion as to the actual dimensions of the ships as I have found four different dimensions quoted. The above dimensions are those reported at the time of ordering. DANFS however gives the dimensions as 492-ft x 69.5-ft x 21-ft and a displacement of 8950-tons. A press release at the time of launching gives 465-ft x 69.5-ft x 33.5-ft and a gross tonnage of 8950-tons. The Maritime Commission stated in 1939 that they were 492-ft x 69.5-ft x 27.5-ft with a full load displacement of 17,600-tons.

First of the four vessels to be laid down was *Exchequer* on 14 August 1939. She was launched on 8 June 1940 and sailed on only one voyage under her house colors in April 1941 from Pascagoula to

Norfolk, Virginia. Since the original trade route for which she had been built now laid in a war zone that US ships were forbidden to enter, *Exchequer* was offered to the US Navy. This offer the Navy accepted and commenced to convert her into a large seaplane tender.

The *Exchequer* was taken

into the Navy on 28 April 1941 as the USS *Pocomoke* (AV-9). The name honors a small river in the Chesapeake Bay. She entered the Norfolk Naval Yard that day to begin conversion. Among the changes undertaken by the Navy were rebuilding of the cargo holds into work and berthing areas, the addition of a new 01 deck from amidship aft and the construction of a heavy duty crane on the fantail for hoisting seaplanes on board.

*Pocomoke* was formally commissioned on 18 July 1941 and then commenced a shake down training phase in the Chesapeake Bay area until 1 October

1941. That day she joined the Atlantic Fleet and became mother ship to Patrol Wing 7 consisting of Patrol Squadrons 82 (VP-82), 71, 72, and 74 operating single-engine Vought OS2U-2 Kingfishers, and twin-engine PBY Catalinas and PBM Mariners. Standing out to sea that morning she turned her bow north for Argen-

During World War II, the mobility of the Navy's vast fleet of seaplanes was greatly increased by the efficient fleet of seaplane tenders. In this view, USS *Norton Sound*, anchored at Kerama Retto, Ryukyu Islands, May 1945, retrieves a Martin Mariner.