

U.S. Merchant Marine The Forgotten Service



The time was 1942. World War II was underway along the Atlantic seaboard. The Roosevelt administration refused to turn off the bright lights of the coastal cities in fear of panicking the nation. The unarmed and defenseless merchant ships were sitting ducks silhouetted by the coastal lights. Seventy nine allied ships were sunk along the Atlantic Seaboard due to German U-boat actions during 1942. It wasn't until 1943 that merchant ships were armed. During 1942 alone a total of 507 ships were sunk or damaged throughout the war zone.

The U.S. Merchant Mariners who manned these vessels suffered the highest rate of casualties of any service in World War II with 9,521 mariners killed and 12,000 wounded. Officially, a total of 1,554 ships were sunk due to war actions.

The Merchant fleet carried 95% of the personnel, supplies, and equipment needed by the combined Allies to defeat the Axis powers and without their support the war would have been in all likelihood prolonged, if not lost.

History can sometimes be very cruel. During World War II shipping casualties were kept secret to keep the information about enemy successes from the public and to continue to attract and keep mariners at sea. As a result the general public then and now knows very little about the sacrifice these men made to the war effort.

One of those merchant mariners was Issie Dietsch. At the age of 15, Issie joined the U.S. Navy in 1942, but his neighbor found out he had joined and told his mother. She contacted the Navy and they all discovered he had lied on his application, said he was 18. Issie was immediately "un-joined" from the Navy. Pressed by his buddy, he submitted the same incorrect information to the U.S. Merchant Marine, was accepted, and was at sea before his mother found out and could react in a similar manner. Too late Issie was a 15-year-old Ordinary Seaman (OS) in the U.S. Merchant Marine. Issie soon found out it probably wasn't that good an idea. In the North Atlantic, his first ship, the SS Weatherspoon was torpedoed and sunk. The crew was picked by a British Corvette or Destroyer which took them to Great Britain. Then it was back to the United States and a short leave, in his home town of Albany, New York, before shipping out in the SS Tivites. He was torpedoed again, this time in the Mediterranean Sea. Rescued once more he went back to the United States for a short leave and then he was off again in another merchant ship. Issie served in the Merchant Marine as an Ordinary Seaman, a deckhand, on several more ships, from 1942 until 1947. Now at the age of 86 Issie, for the last 20 years, is once again serving on a Merchant Ship, the S.S. *Lane Victory*, volunteering in the galley.





Bob Figueroa came to the merchant fleet as a signalman in the U.S. Navy Armed Guard. Born in East Los Angeles, Bob attended Garfield High School and joined the U.S. Navy at age 17 in 1943. Bob trained as a U.S. Navy Armed Guard for service on a merchant ship and was assigned to the SS Fort Moultrie, a T-2 Tanker (T2-SE-A1) headed to the Solomon Islands with a load of fuel and Navy fighter aircraft and torpedo bombers. After the Solomon Islands, it was through the Panama Canal to duty in the South Atlantic. Bob was then transferred to the SS John P. Altgeld, headed to the Aleutian Islands, near Alaska, refueling a squadron of Destroyers en-route. Bob served on several other ships until he was discharged in 1947. Bob joined the Navy Armed Guard on the S.S. *Lane Victory* in 2004. At 87 years old you can now find Bob on the signal bridge as head signalman hoisting signal flags as necessary.

These are typical of the crew of the S.S. *Lane Victory*. Moored in the backwaters of Los Angeles Harbor in the shadow of the battleship Iowa, sits the S.S. *Lane Victory*, a relic of World War II, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Acquired in 1988 by the U.S. Merchant Marine Veterans of WWII, the ship was fully restored and was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1990. Today the S.S. *Lane Victory* has become more than a Historical Monument; it is symbolic of our nation's humanity and compassion for our people and the world. Even the ship's name, LANE', is a symbol of compassion, as it is named after Bishop Isaac Lane and the first black college he founded in 1883.



The story of the S.S. *Lane Victory* does not stop with a name. In December of 1950 at the height of the Korean War, the S.S. *Lane Victory* successfully evacuated 7,000 Korean civilians, in one trip, from Hungnam to Pusan and is considered by the Korean community here and in Korea as the most humanitarian operation in all of the war's history.

The S.S. *Lane Victory* has been part of the Los Angeles harbor's history and culture since it was built in 1945 by California Shipbuilding Company on Terminal Island. But what is more important is that the S.S. *Lane Victory* is one of only two surviving, fully operational Victory ships from WWII of the 534 that were built.

Each year when the ship holds its public World War II reenactment cruises to Catalina and back, a dedication memorial service is held for one or more of the merchant ships and crews lost during World War II. As you walk her passageways in the cabin areas, mounted on her bulkheads are past cruise memorial plaques listing the ships and crews lost at sea.

The S.S. *Lane Victory* is not only a memorial to the past but a part of the present. The ship is used as a platform for security training of law enforcement personnel from the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors as well as other security agencies. Organizations that participate in the training include the U.S. Coast Guard, Los Angeles Fire and Police Departments, Long Beach Police Department, ICE and the Port of Los Angeles Harbor Police.

The ship also hosts various public school students and Boy and Girl Scout groups throughout the year and is host to the U.S. Sea Cadet program.



Since 1999 when the S.S. *Lane Victory* was fully restored, the Sea Cadets have been serving and training on weekends at dockside and on the S.S. *Lane Victory's* three summer cruises. This is a unique experience for many of these young men and women coming from low socioeconomic families in the San Pedro and Wilmington areas. The program provides the cadets the opportunity to develop their leadership skills, build their character, and become productive citizens.

Today the S.S. *Lane Victory* is facing a critical milestone. Every five years the ship must be dry docked and the hull and vital machinery inspected. That inspection is set for June of 2014. Last year the U.S. Coast Guard, for inspection purposes, changed the designation of the ship from a passenger ferry to a passenger ship. This means that the *Lane Victory* must now meet the more stringent standards of the modern cruise ship. With the weak economy, the recent rise in fuel costs and a more costly requirement for the fuel used by the ship only \$500,000 of the estimated \$945,000 of dry dock cost has been raised.

For this reason, the U.S. Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II are asking for the public's support and the awareness of the need to preserve the S.S. *Lane Victory* for generations to come and to help raise the remaining \$495,000 needed.

For those wishing to contribute to the dry dock fund please send your tax deductible donation to the *Lane Victory* at P.O. Box 629 San Pedro California 90733-0629.

For those interested in obtaining more information about the S.S. *Lane Victory* or the summer cruises please call 310-519-9545 or visit our web page at www.lanevictory.org.

The *Lane Victory* is open to the public at Berth 49 in San Pedro, Friday through Wednesday 11:00 AM through 4:00 PM.