

SHIPS VS. BOATS



A whimsical look at when and why any waterborne vessel should properly be called 'A Ship' vs. 'A Boat'...or both!

To all landlubbers and most novice mariners, many maritime terms seem to be illogical, ambiguous, confusing, erratic or just plain weird. At or near the top of anyone's list of confusing maritime terms has to be the multiple and sometimes downright conflicting definitions of when a vessel should be termed a ship vis-vis calling it a boat.

This review isn't going to resolve that issue, but hopefully may clarify it a wee bit...although what follows contains enough exceptions to the general rules (yes, plural!) to render said 'general rules' virtually useless. But the reader will be provided with some seemingly knowledgeable information with which to impress young ladies (unlikely), or at least be beneficial to any listener that has insomnia.

To be quite clear about the subject of this essay: There is no precise distinction between a ship and a boat. It's more a matter of custom and usage...or plain common sense. After all, like a lot of things in life, size matters, but in the case of ships vs. boats, size alone can be confusing. Consider:

Submarines of all sizes are traditionally referred to as 'boats' (never mind that an integral part of their official names is always 'USS' - denoting United States Ship). Present-day ballistic missile-firing, nuclear-powered submarines that are almost 600 feet long, displace approximately 19,000 tons and can dive more than 800 feet deep are hardly 'boats'. But US Navy submariners proudly refer to their underwater homes as such; and any other reference would likely incur the considerable wrath of the senior enlisted man (i.e., the Chief of the Boat...or the COB).



Here's another oft-quoted rule of thumb: ships have to be big enough to carry boats, and boats have to be small enough to be carried by ships. Ah...but there are many exceptions. Any or all of the following could just as easily be called ships. For example: PT Boats, Ferry Boats, Ocean-going and Harbor Tugboats, Tow Boats, River Boats, Fire Boats, Fishing Boats...and on and on. In addition, being capable of being carried by a ship...a boat does not necessarily make. Consider the case of the USS COLE, which was transported home following her near sinking in the Middle East in 2000. The only thing in this photo of that accomplishment that classifies as a boat is in the foreground.



Perhaps we should seek an authoritative answer - and who else but the United States Navy would know best? Or perhaps not; here's what a navy manual has to say on this subject:

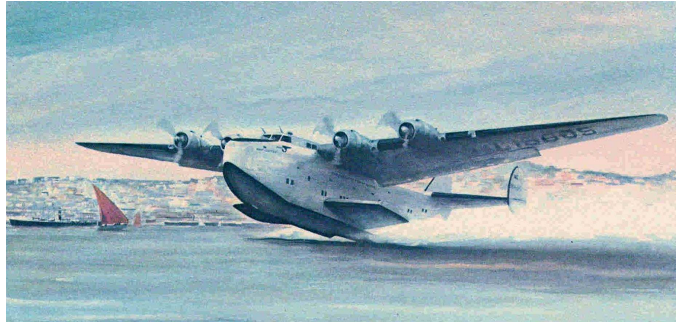
According to NAVEDTRA 14325, page AI-2, a boat is "A small craft capable of being carried aboard a ship." But hold on, in true navy fashion the same manual gives a different definition on page 7-5, where it says, "The term boat refers to a non-commissioned waterborne vessel that is not designated as a service craft." And then on page AI-11: A ship is "Any large vessel capable of extended independent operation."

Not much help...especially when considering the case of one of the largest amphibious design creations of World War II; the LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry). LCI's measured 158 feet in length and displaced about 400 tons. A USN web site refers to them as "sea-going amphibious assault ships capable of landing 200 or more soldiers directly onto beaches."



Does that mean that these versatile craft were ships? Well, maybe...and maybe not. After all, they were also capable of being lifted on the decks of cargo ships and reportedly even onto the decks of much larger landing craft that were dubbed Landing Ships, Tank). This might cause some to think of LCI's as boats. At best, it appears they were neither fish (ships) nor fowl (boats).

Then, there are the Flying Boats of the 20th century to consider. These beautiful aircraft spent as much or more time on the water as they did in the air. People often referred to them as 'ships of the air' and their crews, operational nomenclatures and structural features were distinctly maritime-influenced.



A few of them, disabled and forced down on the water, sailed hundreds of miles and navigated just like ships (until they could reach port and be safely docked). Hardly reflecting the capabilities of a mere 'boat'!

Perhaps it's best to revert to using common sense (i.e., if a vessel looks like a ship and acts like a ship then that's probably what it should be called). Same holds true for boats...unless tradition dictates otherwise. Obviously, an aircraft carrier or an ocean liner is a ship. As is anything of that size...supposedly.

However, consider the Great Lakes, where numerous large vessels are in service. At least a dozen are currently in service, which are over 1,000 feet long. For all appearances they are ships, but in fact such vessels are commonly called ore boats.



These huge exceptions mar the classic purity of the common sense approach, so its best to pay them (and other exceptions, like in the case of submarines) no mind...except to take care and follow custom when in the company of those who deeply care about such things. Rowboats, canoes, kayaks, skiffs or sailboats (up to some ill-defined size) are all boats. But barges are neither ships nor boats...they are just barges.



While most yachts are called boats, there are exceptions. Yachts, like this one - 531 feet in length, with accommodations for up to 115 pampered passengers - which carries a ten-ton helicopter and is capable of independent ocean travel is undoubtedly a ship.

Historically, for sailing vessels, the distinction between ships and boats rigged for sail was stated as follows: A ship is a square-rigged craft with at least three masts, and a boat isn't. Pretty simple...

"Tall ships", like the US Coast Guard's beautiful training vessel, the EAGLE, are quite properly referred to as ships. But some so-called tall ships are just sailboats with tall masts. That moniker probably makes their owners feel important, but their boats are still just boats. Or, as one wit puts it: "Tall ships are simply large sail boats, except when they are not larger."



But on the subject of ships vs. boats, we really can't trust the Coast Guard, either!

Their guidelines specify that barges, boats, ships and other navigable floating things are considered to be vessels. The official USCG listing still includes seaplanes. That, alone, justifies the inclusion of Flying Boats on the previous page; regardless of what any reader may have thought to the contrary. But here's the rub: all Coast Guard vessels, from ocean-going cutters down to the smallest craft employed in protected waters are considered by the USCG to be "assets"!

Watercraft that are usually considered ships, if for no more reason than their size, include cruise ships. Cruise ships are often mistakenly called 'liners'...or 'ocean liners'...or even 'steamships'. Wrong! WRONG!! **WRONG!!!**



Ocean liners of the 20th century were true steamships. Powered by oil-fired boilers and steam turbines, they sailed fixed schedules regardless of bad weather in order to provide their pampered passengers with reliable, yet comfortable transport between such places as Europe and America.

Liners were big. They were sturdy. They were beautiful.

Cruise 'ships' of the 21st century are little more than tenements on a raft. They mostly utilize diesels for propulsion, are therefore classified as motor vessels (MV) and are not entitled to have their names prefixed by the more prestigious abbreviation: SS. Their voyages are typically week-long round trips to 'nowhere', albeit with expensive stops along the way. They dare not confront Mother Nature head-on and must disrupt their schedules and run from storms that true ships can easily shrug off.

These vessels are increasingly too big and too crowded. They are also woefully top heavy, with so many decks that their height exceeds their beam; surely contributing to instability. They are ugly.



Ocean liners met their doom when transoceanic airplane travel became practical and economical. Cruise ships tempt fate, and someday one of them may capsize in a severe storm they cannot outrun, or simply fall victim to a rouge wave. If hundreds...or even thousands...die as a result, that may very well prove to be the doom of the cruise industry.

But I editorially digress... Back to ships vs. boats.

Just when most people thought they had a workable, if imperfect way of distinguishing between ships and boats, last year along came some marketing whiz that introduced yet another confusing term: *PowerShip*. The definition he proffered to go with that non-word is: "Any vessel that moves under power". The creator of this intended all-encompassing misnomer even went so far as to claim that "My sailboat is a PowerShip because it has a diesel engine".

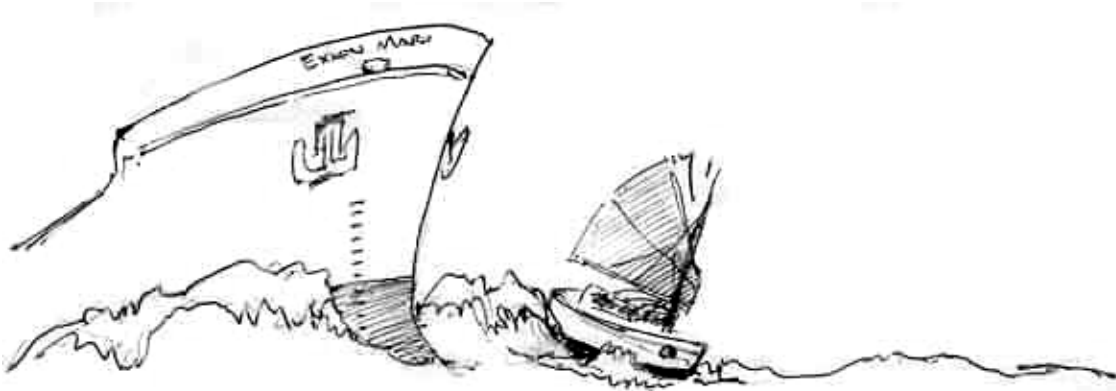
Following that line of what I consider to be non-linear thinking, then this watercraft powered by a risk-taker with a set of over-sized oars might 'logically' be classified as a PowerShip. I think not...



But I do think what a popular TV comedian often says applies to the notion, definition and example of "PowerShips" cited on the previous page:

"You can't fix stupid."

As far as I'm concerned, ships are ships, and boats are boats, and never the twain shall meet. Just don't ask me to define the exact demarcation point...



Bill Lee

March 2010