

# ***HMS MENESTHEUS***

## ***A 'SECRET WEAPON' BREWED UP BY THE BRITISH... ...BUT TOO LATE TO HELP WIN WORLD WAR II***

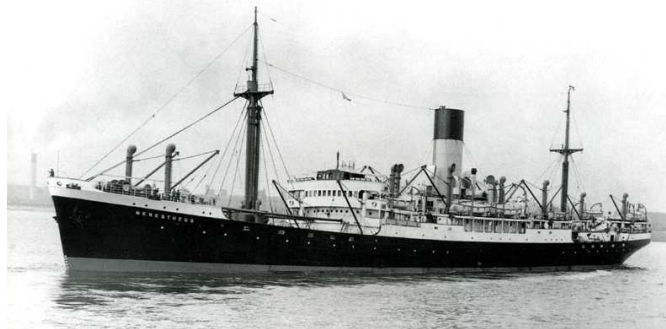
**BACKGROUND:** Never let it be said that the British ever ignored the niceties of civilized life...even in the midst of war. After Germany was defeated, a number of British warships...including several badly needed aircraft carriers...were sent to the Pacific in the summer of 1945 to help America defeat the Japanese.



The British Pacific Fleet also included a number of fleet auxiliaries. They included vessels such as tankers, repair ships, hospital ships, tugs and even a couple of floating dry docks. Expecting a lengthy stay for their forces afloat in the Pacific, the British Admiralty ordered the conversion of two former merchant vessels to become 'amenity ships'. One of these was HMS MENESTHEUS, which ultimately became a one-of-a-kind, sea-going brewery...albeit a short-lived one!

**PRE-WAR SERVICE:** The merchant ship MENESTHEUS was built in Dundee, Scotland in 1929 for a subsidiary of the Blue Funnel Line. Ships in that merchant fleet were traditionally given names derived from classical Greek mythology. Menestheus was King of Athens during the Trojan War.

The MENESTHEUS was a modest-sized cargo vessel. She was 460 feet long, had a gross tonnage of 7,715 and her twin-shaft propulsion plant provided a top speed of 14 knots.



***MINESWEEPER DUTY:*** In 1939, the MENESTHEUS was requisitioned by the British Admiralty and converted into a mine-laying vessel. The photo on the right illustrates the major modifications made to her stern for this purpose. She retained her original name, but with the prefix HMS added. In this configuration, she was able to carry and lay 410 mines



In 1942, she was damaged by German bombers while laying mines off Iceland and had to be towed into a Scottish port for repairs. In 1943, the mine laying squadron, of which she was one of several units, was disbanded. For over a year, she lay idle.

By the summer of 1945, British supply lines to the Far East were stretched thin. For the men in the British Pacific Fleet, beer was a rare luxury. Purportedly, Prime Minister Winston Churchill decided that the morale of British sailors in the Far East should be boosted by having a means of brewing beer in the fleet.

In 1944, MENESTHEUS and a sister ship [HMS AGAMEMNON] were selected for conversion to become what the British referred to as amenity ships.

These vessels were sent to Vancouver, Canada in early 1945, where considerable conversion work was scheduled to take place. They made that long voyage...via the Panama Canal...under their own power.

***AMENITY SHIP CREATION:*** In addition to the installation of a sea-going brewery, the initial plan was for both vessels to each be fitted with a 350-seat cinema, other recreational facilities and expanded berthing spaces for 'R&R' usage. But the unexpected early end to World War II resulted in the termination of the modifications to the AGAMEMNON.

She was then pressed into duty as a transport for taking home British POWs from the Far East. In 1947, she was returned to her civilian owners.

However, the conversion of the MENESTHEUS to become an amenity ship was completed. Her wartime grey paint was covered over with white. Placed back in commission as a unit of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service, she was operated by a mercantile crew.

Her beer-making plant was a one-of-a-kind installation. Distilled sea water was used for brewing purposes. A 55-barrel capacity copper brewing kettle was installed in her forward hold. Heat was provided by steam coils fed directly from the ship's boilers. Storage spaces for malt extract and hop concentrate were a vital part of the overall installation.



Six glass-lined fermenting vessels were also installed. The MENESTHEUS' brewery had a capacity of 250 barrels of beer a week. Only one beverage was produced; a chilled and carbonated mild ale. Besides being dispensed at the ship's bars, this concoction was also made available for disbursement to other ships in five gallon stainless steel kegs.

**DEPLOYMENT:** The first test batch of beer was made onboard the amenity ship MENESTHEUS on the last day of 1945. Although the war was over, British troops and ships remained in the Far East for several months.

The MENESTHEUS sailed in early 1946 from Canada to Yokohama, then Kure, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Brewing took place at sea between visits to these ports of call.

Brewing was managed by a Lt. Commander, who in peacetime had been a professional brew master in England. During the amenity ship's brief tour of the Far East, over half a million pints of ale were dispensed to Royal Navy sailors.

In late 1946, the MENESTHEUS was decommissioned. She was returned to her civilian owners in 1948. Presumably, they placed her back in cargo-carrying service. No mention of what happened to the brewing equipment is recorded.

**DESTRUCTION:** On April 16, 1953, while underway off the coast of Bahia California, Mexico, an explosion in her engine room, followed by a major fire, forced her crew to abandon the vessel. Fortunately, there were no casualties. Ablaze from fore to aft, she was left to drift until the fire burned itself out.

Towed into protected waters, an inspection revealed that everything flammable had been destroyed. The MENESTHEUS was then towed to Long Beach, California where the cause and effect of the disaster were studied by the US Coast Guard, resulting in recommendations for improving precautions to prevent such shipboard accidents from reoccurring.

In mid-summer, 1953, the burned out hulk was towed to Baltimore, Maryland, where she was broken up and sold for scrap. The British shipping company that owned her ordered, over time, two more cargo ships which carried the name MENSTHEUS. In addition, no less than five vessels in the Royal Navy have been adorned with that name, making it decidedly difficult for maritime historians to keep them all straight!

***POSTSCRIPT:*** For several years, German cruise ships operated by Aida Cruises mostly in European waters have had the capability to brew beer while underway. The current 'brewpub' craze that has been sweeping America in recent years has also gone to sea.

One of Carnival Cruise Lines' mega-vessels, which was commissioned in mid-2016, was outfitted with a working brewery. Capable of producing three different types of beer, her brewing equipment is located behind a wall of glass so that passengers sitting in an adjacent pub can watch their beverages being manufactured [see artist's perspective, below].



Carnival's sea-going brewpub is a far cry from what likely was a relatively drab ship's canteen onboard HMS MENSTHEUS. But I suspect the appreciation level in 1945, far from home, exceeded anything that might possibly be experienced by over-indulged passengers on a glitzy cruise ship.

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