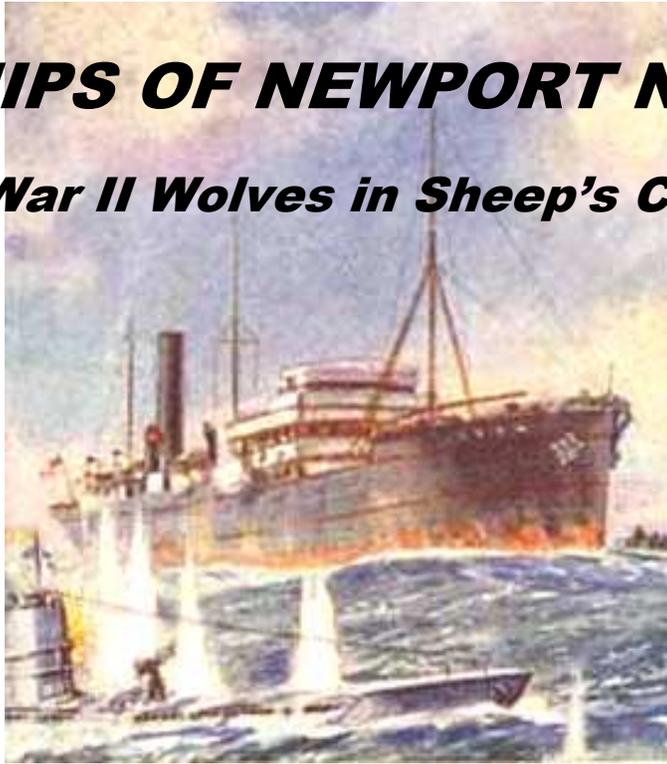


# ***Q SHIPS OF NEWPORT NEWS***

## ***World War II Wolves in Sheep's Clothing***



### ***~ Synopsis ~***

When America was forced to enter World War II, her merchant fleet became easy prey for German U-boats, roaming unmolested up and down the Atlantic seaboard. Borrowing a brain child of Winston Churchill that dated back to World War I when he was First Lord of the Admiralty, several American-flagged civilian vessels were commandeered by the US Navy in 1942 and reconfigured as decoys.

Their outward appearance largely remained that of innocent merchant ships. But, they were fitted with a number of cleverly concealed weapons that provided their US Navy crews the capability to become hunters...instead of being the hunted.

The appellation 'Q-ship' derives from the fact that the first such vessels converted by the British were home ported in Queenstown, Ireland during World War I. They were also called Mystery Ships or Decoy Vessels. Regardless of what they were called, their mission was to entice German U-boats to surface and use their deck guns to sink what appeared to be unarmed vessels too small to be worthy of being torpedoed.

Two such vessels, the modest-sized freighters EVELYN and CAROLYN, were originally delivered to their civilian owners in 1912 by Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS). One of them survived the war, thanks to being assigned less dangerous duty after six fruitless missions. The other suffered a horrific end just four days into her first and only mission.

*~ Sister Ships and their Namesake Sponsors ~*

In late October, 1911, the steamship firm of A.H. Bull & Co. contracted with NNS for the construction of a coastal freighter. Three months later, they doubled that order. NNS Hull Numbers 156 and 158 were assigned to the work, which progressed rapidly:

NAME	KEEL	LAUNCH	DELIVERY
EVELYN	January 17, 1912	May 9, 1912	June 11, 1912
CAROLYN	March 15, 1912	July 3, 1912	July 20, 1912

Both of these vessels were named after granddaughters of the steamship company's owner and president, Archibald H. Bull. The SS EVELYN was christened on a Thursday afternoon in early May by Miss Evelyn Kiggins. Less than two months later, her cousin, Miss Carolyn Bull, did likewise; christening the SS CAROLYN at 11 AM, the day before the Fourth of July.

The sister ships were virtually twins. All of their principal dimensions and data were identical. Each measured 328.17 feet in length, with beams of 46 feet. Single screw vessels, they both displaced 6,610 tons. Propulsion power for each was provided by two coal-fired boilers and a 1,200 horsepower, triple expansion engine; giving them a top speed of 10 knots.

When launched, both of these coastal steamers were in an advanced stage of construction. The SS EVELYN was delivered just over a month following launch. Only 17 days elapsed between CAROLYN's slide to the sea and her delivery.



They looked very much like dozens of other ships of that era. About the only thing that distinguished these sister ships from others likewise engaged in coastal commerce were their prominent funnel markings.



After leaving Newport News in mid-1912, their careers were remarkably uneventful. For the next thirty years, they operated between ports on the eastern seaboard and the West Indies. Both were briefly considered for possible naval service during the First World War, but remained in private hands. In early 1918, they were fitted with some antisubmarine weapons which were manned by Navy armed guard detachments until the war's end. For the next two-plus decades, they quietly served their owners well.

~ *Sister Sheep Given Wolves' Teeth* ~

Both EVELYN and CAROLYN were pursuing their prosaic calling under the house flag of the Bull Line when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. By mid-January, 1942, after a state of war between the United States and Germany had been declared the previous month, U-boats arrived off the east coast of America.

Their skippers found peacetime conditions prevailing all along the coast. Cities and towns were not blacked out, and navigational buoys remained lighted. Ships sailing solo were hugging the shoreline, following their normal routes, but also remained lit. The glow of lights from ashore silhouetted the American vessels, making them easy targets for the U-boats.

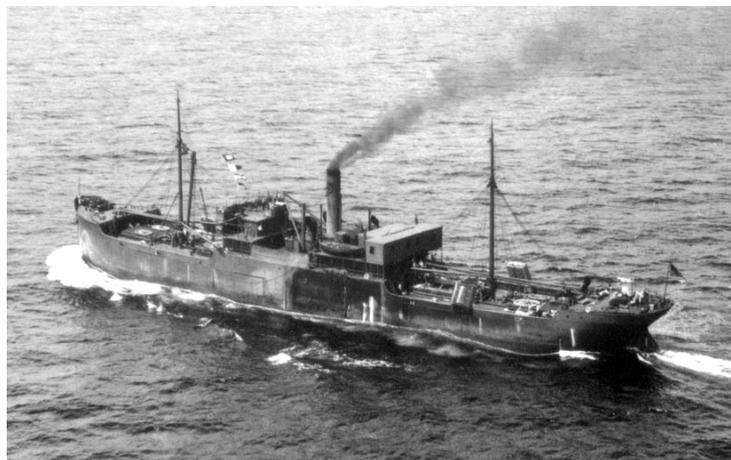
Losses mounted rapidly. In late January, Admiral King, Commander-in-Chief of the US Fleet, ordered the conversion and manning of several of what were called 'Queen' ships, to be utilized as an antisubmarine measure until enough armed escorts could be built to initiate a convoy protection system. The program was code-named Project LQ.

Five merchant vessels were rapidly acquired and secretly converted at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine. They were an eclectic collection of ships; two freighters, a tanker, a trawler and even a sailing schooner. Obviously, those desperate times required desperate measures.

The two Bull Steamship Lines' vessels were converted into clandestine men-of-war. Both vessels were each armed with four 4-inch-fifty caliber guns, four .50 caliber and four .30 caliber machine guns, six single depth charge projectors devices and underwater sound gear. Their civilian crews were replaced by a naval complement of 141 men. Their holds were packed with pulpwood in hopes of keeping them afloat in the event of a torpedo hit.

Outwardly, they still looked like un-armed merchant vessels. The larger caliber guns they received were hidden in dummy deckhouses.

The photo on the right depicts an abnormally large and boxy deck house affixed high on the aft part of the original superstructure of one of these ships. Most likely, it was a fake deckhouse with hinged bulkheads that could be quickly folded down to reveal the ship's biggest guns and their crews, when attacked by a U-boat on the surface.



This unusual design was copied from one developed by the British for use in the Q-ships they created during World War I. The following photos depict a similar 'deckhouse' on one of those British ships in 'closed' and 'open' positions, respectively.



Hiding guns from view was predicated on the relatively humane practice employed by U-boat commanders at the onset of the First World War. They would surface, determine the nationality of an intercepted ship, and if it was British, allow the crew to take to lifeboats before attacking with deck guns. This approach also allowed the U-boats to conserve their limited supply of torpedoes for use against larger and more dangerous vessels; especially warships.

This ruse back-fired, after a few Q-ship successes, when U-boat skippers began what was called 'unrestricted submarine warfare' and began to attack vessels indiscriminately and without warning during World War I. Ignoring this lesson of history because of reports of surface attacks against small vessels by U-boats prowling the American coast, US Navy officials were willing to give the Q-ship concept a try.

The cargo vessels EVELYN and CAROLYN became commissioned ships in the US Navy on March 5, 1942. Although they purposefully retained their unarmed, coastal steamer looks, they were assigned new names and naval designations.

EVELYN was renamed USS ASTERION (AK-100); CAROLYN became the USS ATIK (AK-101). These unusual names were derived from celestial bodies. Why is not known...

The ships' commanding officers were instructed to use their former civilian names and radio call signs when communicating with friendly vessels or Allied shore installations. But, for reasons somewhat unfathomable today, they were instructed to use specific foreign ship names and call signs, if challenged by the enemy.

After brief sea trials, ASTERION and ATIK quietly left the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard on March 23, 1942 and sailed to separate assigned areas of operation. Each ship had orders to proceed independently under the guise of being innocent tramp steamers, in hopes of luring U-boats to the surface and destroying them with gunfire before the Germans could react to exposure and use of the Q-ship's guns.

~ *Separate Sagas for Sister Q-Ships* ~

One day out, ASTERION (ex-EVELYN) picked up a submarine contact using her underwater sound detection gear, but no action resulted. Her first patrol ended when she arrived at the Norfolk Naval Base in Virginia at the end of the month.

ASTERION commenced a second patrol on April 4, 1942. Later that same day her crew witnessed the torpedoing of a tanker of the Virginia Capes. Ten days later, operating off Cape Hatteras, she rescued the 55-man crew...and the captain's dog...of a British merchantman that had been sunk within sight of the North Carolina coast. When put ashore, the sunken ship's survivors were instructed not to reveal that they had been rescued by a Q-ship.

In the second half of 1942, ASTERION made several patrols along the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coastlines. Her navy crew only appeared on deck in clothing intended to indicate that she was nothing more than a commercial vessel. The lack of enemy contact soon made her patrols seem more like pleasurable cruises.



During this same time period, her designation was changed from AK-100 to AK-63. In November of 1942, she carried out training exercises near Key West with an American submarine. After cruising uneventfully throughout the West Indies, she then returned to New York, arriving there in mid-January 1943.

During the next few months, ASTERION, by then over thirty years old, underwent an extensive overhaul at the New York Navy Shipyard. Inspections had raised doubts about her ability to remain afloat if hit by even a single torpedo. The Navy decided to subdivide her cargo holds by adding five transverse bulkheads and filling her cargo spaces with 16,772 empty steel drums. These additions were considered necessary to give her a better chance of surviving a German U-boat torpedo attack.

This work was not completed until September of 1943. Then, in October, as she was making short training voyages out of New London, Admiral King decided that the Q-ship program had been unproductive. Two months later, ASTERION was turned over to the Coast Guard, given yet another number (WAK-123) and pressed into service as a weather patrol ship; operating out of Boston.

Her Coast Guard service was brief. On July 20, 1944, she was decommissioned and removed from service because of 'age, condition of hull and machinery, and lack of speed'. ASTERION (ex-EVELYN) remained idle at a Boston pier until September of 1946, when she was sold to the Boston Metals Company and subsequently scrapped.

Tragically, ATIK, masquerading as the CAROLYN was sunk due to enemy action just a few days after going to sea as a Q-ship. Not a single soul in her crew of 141 survived.



On the night of March 26-27, 1942, ATIK was cruising alone several hundred miles southeast of the Virginia Capes. An undetected U-boat, operating in darkness on the surface, fired a single torpedo at ATIK around 1945 hours, which struck the cargo vessel's port side just below the bridge. The resultant explosion caused an immediate fire, and the ship quickly began to list to port, as sea water poured into a huge hole in her hull.

Shortly before 2300 hours that same evening, radio monitoring stations in New Jersey and New York received the following distress message:

***SOS Lat. 36-00 N, Long. 70-00 W, CAROLYN burning forward, not bad.***

Two minutes later a second message was received:

***Torpedo attack, burning forward; require assistance.***

Then, nothing...

At the scene of the attack, after closing in to observe the results of his attack, the U-boat's captain noted that his victim was dead in the water. In classic Q-ship fashion, the crew of the ATIK lowered a lifeboat and pretended to abandon ship. As the U-boat turned, ATIK suddenly resumed speed, paralleling her attacker's course.

Her guns were unmasked and ATIK's navy crew commenced firing. Shells from the Q-ship's 4-inch guns hit wide of their mark, but .50-caliber machine gun fire ricocheted around the U-boat's conning tower. One German on the U-boat's bridge was mortally wounded. Pulling out of range, her captain later wrote: "We had been incredibly lucky".

The U-boat submerged, re-approached her target and at 2129 hours a second torpedo plunged into ATIK's machinery spaces. The U-boat surfaced shortly thereafter and her crew watched the plucky cargo vessel sinking bow first; her single screw high out of the water. Some of the ATIK's crew was seen embarking in lifeboats; this time for real.

At 2250 hours, an enormous explosion tore the ship to pieces; killing most if not all of her crew. Any survivors of that blast were apparently lost during a severe gale that hit the scene shortly after the Q-ship went down. The cause of that explosion remains unknown.

At dawn the next day, aircraft were dispatched to search the area from which the distress signal had emanated, but found nothing. A destroyer and a tug were later sent out to investigate, but had to turn back, due to gale conditions.

ASTERION (ex-EVELYN), on patrol miles away, intercepted the ATIK's distress messages. Without hesitation, she steamed towards the scene of the attack to hopefully render assistance to her sister. When she eventually got there, days later, her crew found no signs of wreckage, lifeboats or survivors...just trackless ocean.



The loss of the ATIK (ex-CAROLYN) with all hands essentially ended America's experiment with Q-ships. By the end of 1943, a system for protecting convoys of merchant ships using warships and aircraft had been instituted, and her sister ship and the several other converted Q-ships had all been assigned to other duties.

*~ Postscript ~*

Although the Q-ships, created in times of need during both world wars were largely unsuccessful, the concept has seen some renewed interest in recent years. The repeated attacks on merchant ships off the east coast of Africa by modern-day pirates have fostered several ideas for combating this 21<sup>st</sup> century hazard to shipping.

Currently, several nations have naval vessels patrolling those waters. The use of convoys has also been proposed. Little has been said publicly about sending well-armed, seemingly innocent merchant vessels out to entice over-confident pirates to attack. But don't be surprised if someday in the near future it happens...

*Bill Lee*  
February 2013