

Sea Classics

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ENVOYS IN BATTLE GRAY: THE ERIE-CLASS GUNBOATS

*Designed to expand the traditional role of gunboats, the hybrid
Erie-class ships became the basis of the highly successful
prewar Treasury-class Coast Guard cutters*

BY ROD REDMAN

"They were ships unique unto themselves; too large for the usually defined tasks of a gunboat and too lightly armed to be effective warships. Intended for the tropics, they better resembled a millionaire's yacht; the choicest duty for peacetime black shoe sailors. They were built to display the American flag in Central America; to be naval diplomats," recalls Al Deeming of his time spent aboard the gunboat USS *ERIE* (PG-50) in the warm spring of 1940.

Gunboats indeed held a unique status in the US Navy. By international definition they were small heavily armed ships used for coastal or riverine patrol conducted in the policing of colonial waters. Most were slow, shallow-draft steam-powered vessels rated well under a thousand-ton displacement. A gunboat's primary mission was to keep order in distant domains that were under the protection of a major power; to provide security for nationals ashore; to quell uprisings by insurgents or bandits; and to maintain an obvious high visibility national presence in territorial waters.

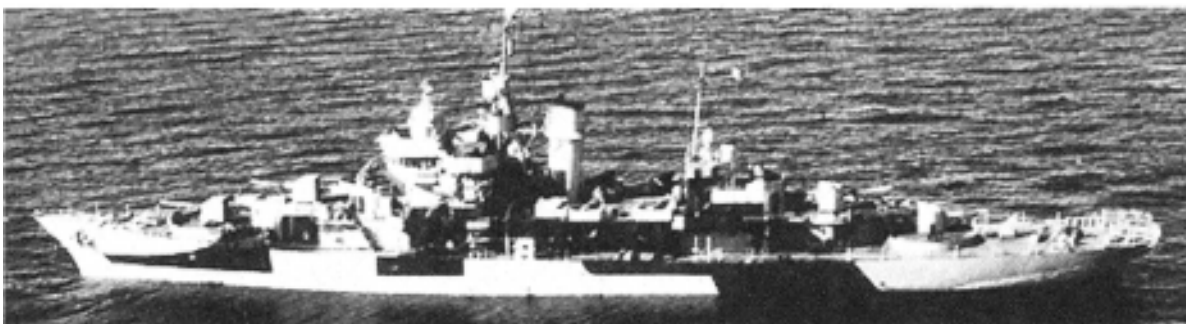
Designed to operate alone and far from the shores of the nation they represented, the traditional gunboat was unsuited for fleet operations. One or two medium caliber rapid-fire deck guns was its principal authority_ These were augmented with a few machine guns and a detachment of armed sailors or marines who could quickly storm ashore to put down any signs of trouble or rebellion within the native populace. Most often they enjoyed the far more pleasant duty of being good will ambassadors; ships ideally suited for ceremonial occasions. As such, the gunboat was a microcosm of the nation it represented; a floating embassy in peace; a mobile arsenal capable of quick response when trouble flared afloat or ashore.

"There was plenty spit and polish on the *ERIE*, what with all of those visiting dignitaries," Deeming, a former Yoeman, remembers.

"The ship always sparkled from stem to stern so you could see your reflection in the bright work. You couldn't have the slightest smudge on your whites, or a speck on your shoes. Discipline was strict, but there were lots of exotic ports of call for young sailors; interesting sights to see and plenty of liberty when we were in port. The tropic heat and bugs sometimes got to us in the Canal region, but all in all those were great days aboard the *ERIE* before the war."

It was only after America was forced to abandon its isolationist policies late in the 1800s that a need for gunboats arose. Though crude versions of a sort were utilized in the latter stages of the Civil War, their type all but disappeared in the miasma that gripped the Navy from 1865 to 1880. From a force of 700 ships that included 65 ironclads in 1865, the US Navy shriveled to a fleet of 48 ships capable of firing a gun in 1880. As a world sea power it ranked twelfth, well behind China and Chile. Luckily, the growth of American industry and commerce in the intervening 15

USS *CHARLESTON* (PG-51) seen in her 1944 Pacific camouflage. Her scout plane has been removed with six 20mm AIA guns installed in its place. An RDF has been fitted at the head of the foremast with extra depth charge racks installed aft.



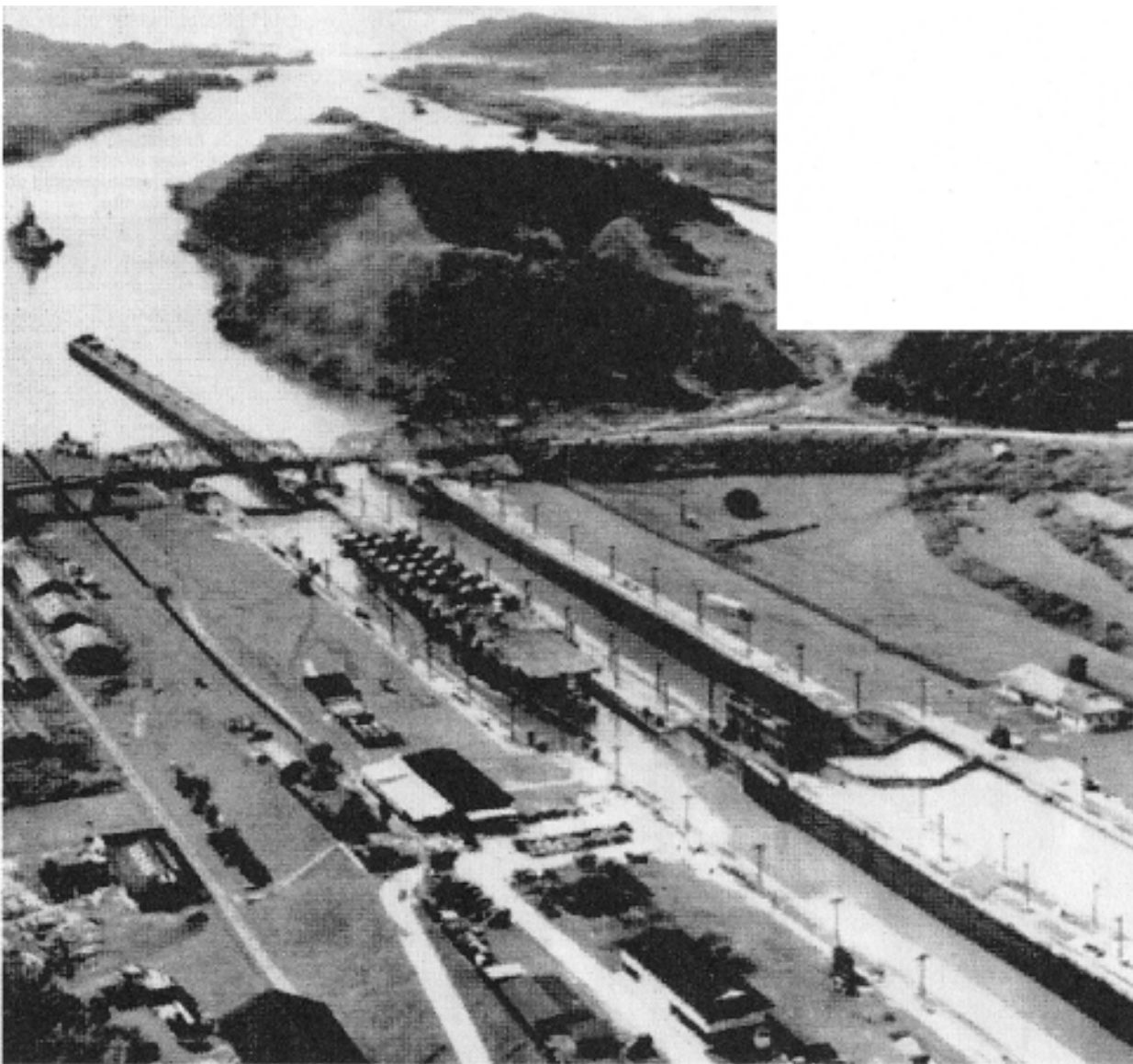
years led to the revitalization of the Navy in the early 1880s. This resurgence came none too soon as nations like Spain with expansionistic ambitions began to test America's resolve as a

world power.

As a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898, gunboats returned to the US Navy. This short-lived conflict saw the United States win possession of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines from Spain. The islands of Hawaii, Samoa and Wake soon were annexed and the American empire was born.

Faced now with the political mandate of keeping order and guiding the destiny of its new protectorates, the Navy acquired or built a number of gunboats for specialized duty in distant territorial waters. The first of these were several small warships captured from the Spanish. These would quickly be put to good use as America developed its new found international responsibilities not only in the Caribbean and Pacific, but also in China after the Boxer Rebellion.

Built for tropical service the Erie-class gunboats were prewar guardships for the vital Panama Canal area. The coming of war mandated heavily increased protection for this critical transoceanic shortcut. A CVL carrier is seen transiting the Miraflores Locks in 1943.



By 1904 the Navy decided to build two new 990-ton gunboats the *DUBUQUE* (PG-17) and *PADUCAH* (PG-18) - to replace its aging force of Spanish prizes. The 1000-ton *SACRAMENTO* (PG-19) followed in 1914 with the 1200-ton displacement *ASHEVILLE* (PG-21) and *TULSA* (PG-22) in 1918 and 1922 respectively. America's naval buildup of World War I provided many additional vessels suitable for the gunboat role. The result was that no further ships of this type other than flat-bottomed vessels required for Asian riverine duty were considered until late in 1931. It was then that the General Board began to entertain the idea of new gunboat construction that would rigidly conform to the provisions of the recently enacted 1930 London Naval Treaty.

Outlining the concept for the envisioned vessel proved to be no simple chore. Times had changed. America had established a worldwide network of embassies and consular offices. Diplomatic matters of every nature needed to be attended to with respect to the provisions of countless treaties and the rights of American citizens living abroad. Technology, too, had advanced considerably. The scout airplane, having proven its value as a keen naval asset, would be included in the envisioned new vessel. Conceptually, the gunboats under consideration would become more versatile than ever before - ideally able to double as formidable warships in times of national emergency.



USS ERIE (PG-50) seen as commissioned in 1936. Though retaining the designation of gunboats, ERIE and CHARLESTON should have been rated as sloops because of their size. [Note: This photo was taken in April 1938 --- she was commissioned on July 1, 1936.]

While gunboats were formerly regarded as primary peacekeepers, there was considerable expression that overall usefulness could be expanded into a wider multipurpose role on the world's oceans. Paramount among these requirements was the idea to build a ship suitable for long-range ocean escort duty. This concern was brought about, in part, by the advent of armed merchant cruisers in World War I. Easily converted from cargo liners, these innocent appearing

makeshift vessels could wreak havoc on an up-suspecting merchantman. Merchant cruisers were tough adversaries, but they could be readily knocked out of action by a bantam-sized warship fitted with a light cruiser's firepower. It was prudently argued that a lone gunboat operating far from the protection of a major fleet should be powerful enough to counter any type of surface or submarine threat. To a naval community striving to conform to treaty restrictions and the constraints of a budget-minded Congress the idea made sense. Finalizing specifications that would create a new form of hybrid warship, the General Board handed the project to the naval architects.

A myriad of other factors confronted the ship planners; each element having to be carefully weighed and considered. Up-to-date long- range communications capability was now a key element in diplomatic as well as naval affairs. Provision had to be made for a large flag suite; suitable space for the entertainment and reception of foreign dignitaries; an enlarged sick bay for emergencies; ample berthing for an enlarged crew of administrative personnel. To achieve suitable comfort during operations in equatorial waters, the latest in high-capacity cooling equipment was included in the design parameters. As the requirement grew, so did the size of the proposed new gunboat. Whereas, earlier ships of this type managed to perform their assigned chores within a hull of 1000 tons displacement and 12 knots maximum speed, the new vessel would require considerably more horsepower and the latest powerplant to achieve the desired 20 knots mandated by the General Board's specifications.

Then there were the imposing matters of range, weaponry and armor. Gunboats of old boasted virtually no armor protection other than light shields intended to deflect rifle bullets or spears. If the new design were to be capable of going gun to gun against a heavily armed sea raider, warship or submarine, then it, too, had to have sufficient armor to assure its chances of survival. As effective firepower the 4- and 5-inch guns of the past were hardly suitable against the big-bore rapid-fire guns that future merchant-cruisers would ship. Last and by no means least, the matter of range and seaworthiness became imperative to a ship intended for a wide range of ocean escort duties. It mattered little that the old coal-fired gunboats were notoriously short-legged because they seldom ventured far to sea without benefit of an accompanying collier. The new concept required a ship capable of independently steaming 8000 miles at 12 knots or 4000 miles at 20 knots.

Few denied that it was well near impossible to design a vessel that could meet so many expectations without making it considerably larger than any of its predecessors. Such a ship came closer to becoming a mini-cruiser and there was no treaty tonnage allowance left for that classification. Clearly, the designers had their work cut out for them. It was no surprise to everyone involved in the gunboat program that London Treaty provisions would be pushed to the limit.

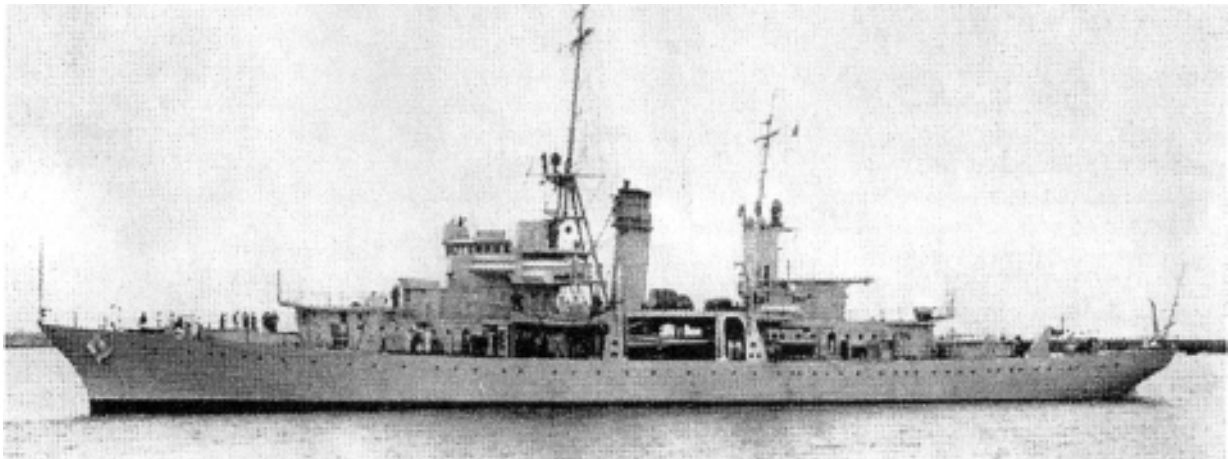
USS ERIE underway off the Panama Canal in 1939. Though fitted with a seaplane, its operation was limited due to the complications of launching and recovering the fragile aircraft via derricks. Note the large awning covering the rear main deck. Sweltering tropic heat made such rigs mandatory in peacetime but were impossible to utilize under war conditions.



The ship that gradually took form in the design lofts -- USS *ERIE* (PG-50) -- would be almost twice the size of its ancestral *PEDUCAH* of 1904; be rated at 2000 as opposed to 1000-ton displacement. It would feature two Babcock and Wilcox boilers feeding newly designed Parsons single reduction-gear turbines delivering 6000 *SHP* to twin shafts. To contain all this machinery, bunker fuel, stores, ammunition and crew space required a hull 328 feet long with a beam of 41 feet and a draft of 11 feet. Armament would be four of the new 6-inch/47-caliber guns fitted behind 1-inch armored shields, plus four quad 1.1-inch (16) A-heavy machine guns. Midships one-inch belt armor would sheath the hull and main deck and three-inch armor would crown the magazines and control tower. No torpedo tubes would be fitted, but she would ship the suggested seaplane. Derricks but no catapult were fitted to launch and recover a folding-wing Curtiss SOC-3 biplane stored on a platform abaft the funnel. Newly developed boat davits would be able to handle a large 50-foot Captain's gig as well as smaller whaleboats. Within all this, ample accommodation was provided for a crew of 236, including medical personnel, musicians and admiral staffs.

Oddly, the designers of the flush-decked hull adopted the sharply raked clipper bow and counter stern which, while pleasing to the eye, was already outmoded in 1935. With the design work completed and approved, construction contracts were awarded to the New York and Charleston Navy Yards. USS *ERIE* would be built in New York and its soon to follow sister *CHARLESTON* (PG-51) constructed in its namesake city. Each would become the most powerful of their day rivaling the best of their type produced for foreign navies. In truth, the new gunboats should have been designated sloops since they would have been so rated by size and armament alone in any other navy. For obvious reasons of its own, the United States Navy retained the term gunboat for a vessel that now far exceeded this humble classification in every way.

A portside view of the *ERIE* as launched, before her four 6-inch guns and other armament had been fitted. Her tall aft tower was often mistaken as a second stack. Note the graceful sheer of her yacht-like hull.

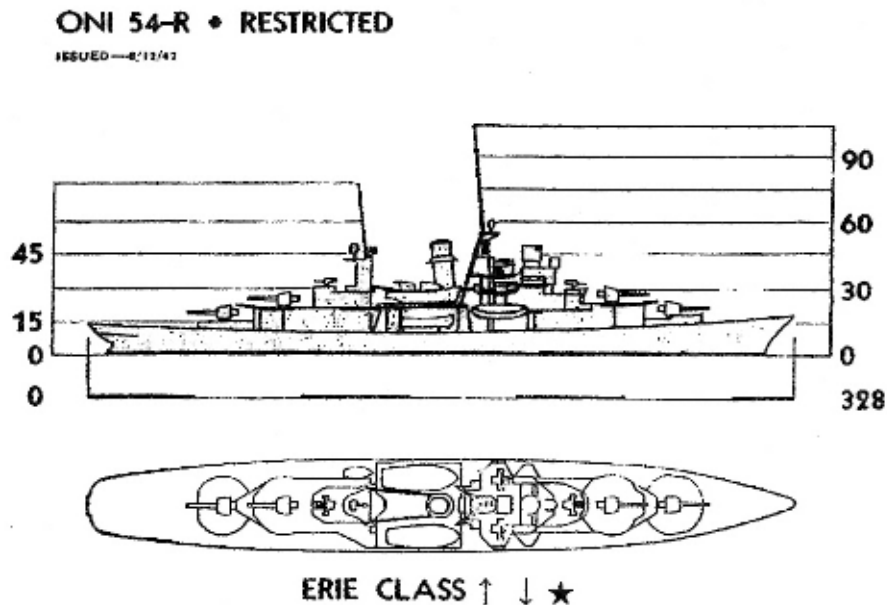


Designations aside, the two ships that slid down the ways early in 1936 were oddly handsome ships with classic yacht-like lines well befitting their diplomatic showboat function. With a sweeping deck sheer, tall tripod mast and a multi-decked superstructure, they bore the look of imposing warships matchlessly imbued with the grace and style of a far more genteel era. True hybrids, the *ERIE* and *CHARLESTON* would not win any beauty pageants but they were compact, well laid out and seaworthy. Together, they would show the American flag with pride.

Commissioning at New York 1 July 1936, USS *ERIE* conducted her shakedown cruise carrying out exactly the type of the mission for which she had been built. Late in October she hurriedly steamed from New York to Spain. There she would be temporarily assigned to Squadron 40-T, a naval group organized to protect Americans and their interests during the bloody Spanish Civil War. This crucial first cruise revealed remarkably few problems with her systems or powerplant. She had been built well by the navy yard workers who happily rejoiced when they learned that *ERIE* was quick to evacuate a large number of refugees from Spain's war ravaged northern coast. After visiting several European ports *ERIE* stopped at the Azores and then returned to New York City in time for New Year's Eve. To everyone's delight her skipper, Cmdr. (later Rear Admiral) Edward W. Hanson, and his crew proclaimed the first cruise an outstanding success.

Having conducted orientation cruises for Annapolis midshipmen from May to October 1937, *ERIE* underwent her first overhaul in New York that winter and then steamed south for tropical duty with the Special Service Squadron operating off the coasts of Central and South America. Arriving at Balboa, Canal Zone, early in February 1938, she was quickly appointed squadron flagship and soon began intensive training exercises with submarines and other naval vessels. As war clouds gathered in far distant Europe, *ERIE* began a number of neutrality patrols while serving as the guard ship for the Panama Canal. After America entered the war on 8 December 1941 she began alternating patrols out of both the Atlantic and Pacific sides of the Canal Zone.

The harsh reality of tense war patrols soon broke the torrid tranquility of steaming under tropical skies. On the night of 10 June some 40 miles off Cristobal, *ERIE* pulled 46 survivors from the sea after the SS *FORT GOOD HOPE* was torpedoed. Six days later she would rescue 25 survivors from the lifeboat of torpedoed SS *LEBORE* and another 28 marooned seamen who found refuge on St. Andrews Island. The sight of these weary merchant seamen crowding her sickbay and wardroom left little doubt that the gunboat was in a deadly shooting war.

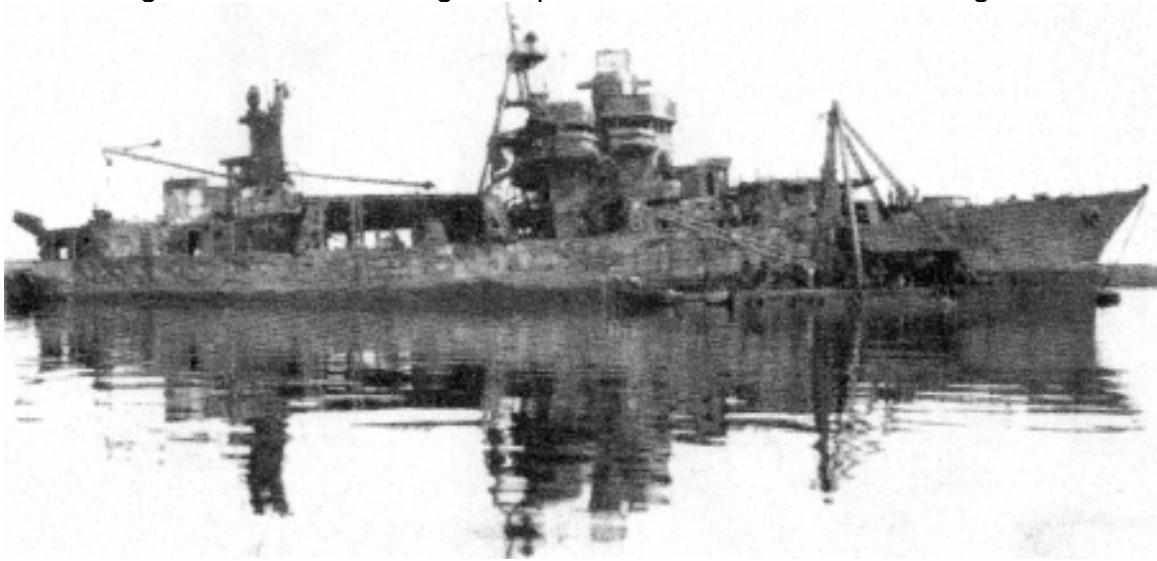


As the U-boat menace intensified so did the rigors of *ERIE*'s patrols. She began escorting convoys to the Yucatan Channel and Guantanamo Bay and late in September *ERIE* cleared Coco Solo to guard the passage of a convoy bound for Trinidad. For a time it seemed the busy gunboat was expected to be everywhere at once, but these were hectic

days in the greatly expanded Atlantic War. Merchant ships were being sunk with frightful rapidity as German U-boats freely roamed the serene Caribbean stalking hapless prey with near impunity. With all too few Allied naval escorts or aircraft available for convoy protection, U-boat attacks would continue to destroy Allied shipping at an alarming rate throughout 1942.

Constant tension and endless months of patrolling soon took its inevitable toll on *ERIE's* crew. Tempers flared in the sweltering heat as dreary routine was broken only by the nagging stress of impending enemy attack. Denied normal maintenance because of the need to remain at sea, equipment breakdowns became inevitable and led to all manner of make-do repairs. Officers and crew alike were at near exhaustion when *ERIE* was ordered to get underway from Port-of-Spain on 10 November to join Convoy TAG-20 for yet another perilous voyage to Guantanamo Bay. Anticipating a well-deserved liberty at this popular Cuban port, her crew could little predict that this would be the *ERIE's* last voyage.

From the outset the mission was rife with problems. Escorting ships flying the flags of a dozen Allied nations, *ERIE's* signalmen had difficulty trying to keep the poorly disciplined merchantmen in their assigned positions. Stragglers had to be constantly rounded up and coaxed back into place for convoying was still a new routine disdained by many merchant skippers in the early stages of the war. Also, of no little concern to *ERIE* and the other escorts was the dubious presence of the ex-tanker Q-ship USS *BIG HORN*. Filled with empty oil drums making her virtually unsinkable, *BIG HORN* hoped to lure a U-boat into range of her hidden guns. Innocent-looking Q-ships like the *BIG HORN* were designed to look vul-



The fire-gutted wreck of the *ERIE* seen at Willemstad, Curacao, on 2 December 1942. After the war the hulk was raised and taken to deep water where it was sunk to become an artificial reef.

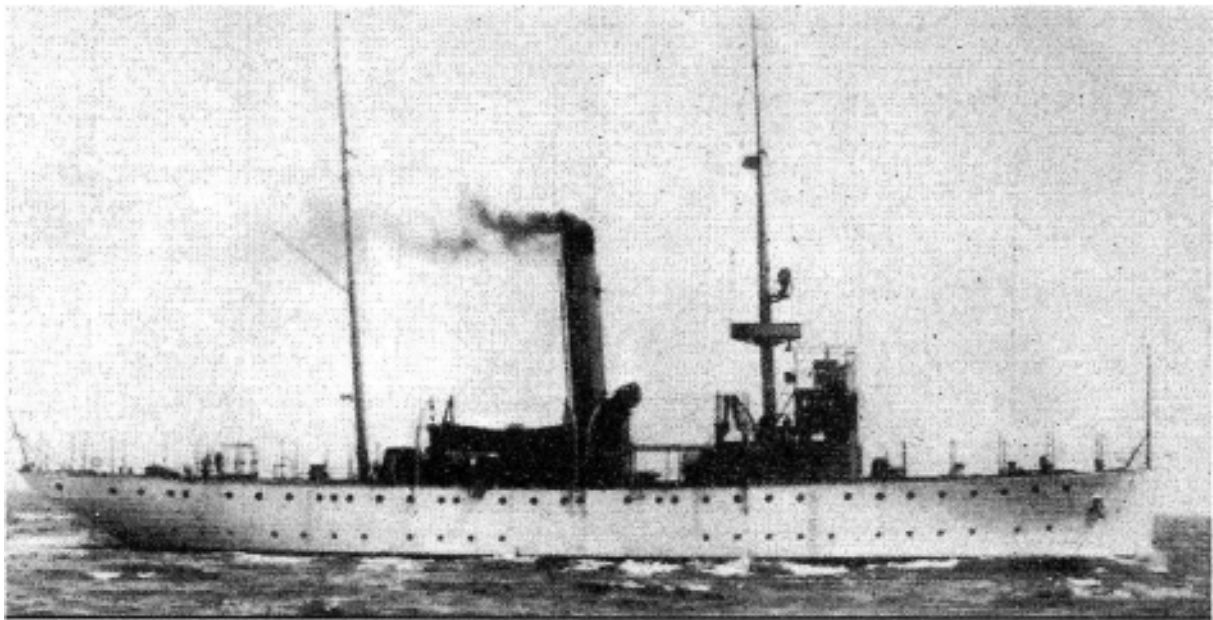
nerable to attract submarine attack. The ruse worked well in World War I, but the crafty skippers of Hitler's new U-boats failed to take the bait. To the wary crew of the *ERIE* the presence of the Q-ship was like waving a red flag at U-boats needing no additional invitation to attack.

Two days out of Curacao with the lumbering *BIG HORN* well in the rear of the van, USS *ERIE* was torpedoed by *U-163*. The hunter became the hunted; the shepherd slain guarding his flock. The sudden blast killed seven men instantly and badly injured 11 others. Hit amidships, the torpedo ruptured *ERIE's* bunkers and aviation gas tanks igniting a raging inferno that soon reached her 6-inch ready magazines. Exploding ammunition erupted in the faces of the firefighters and damage control parties curtailing all efforts to stem the blaze. Seeing the futility of trying to save his sinking ship, the captain ordered the flaming *ERIE* grounded on a nearby shoal. Once her keel wedged firmly on the sand the

captain feared the out-of control fires would ignite her main magazines. Not a moment too soon he ordered *ERIE* abandoned before a disastrous situation became catastrophic. Luckily, another naval escort - the Netherlands *HMNS VAN KINGSBERGEN* - was nearby. Observing the firestorm enveloping the *ERIE*, she sped to the scene, arriving in time to pull the mortally damaged ship's crew from the water.

The beached gunboat was still smoldering and nearly gutted when firefighters with advanced equipment managed to board her four days later. Salvage experts were soon flown from Norfolk to inspect the blackened hulk. With the last of the fires quickly extinguished and her condition deemed salvageable, *ERIE* was taken under tow to Willemstad Harbor for repairs. As salvagers examined the extent of the damage *ERIE* took on a considerable starboard list. Hastily applied counterflooding efforts over corrected the list and the hapless hulk capsized to port, sinking on 5 December 1942. *ERIE* would remain a forlorn wreck in Willemstad Harbor until 1952 when she was again salvaged and later scuttled in deep water off Curacao. There she lies to this day.

Destiny would treat *ERIE*'s sister-ship *CHARLESTON* far more kindly. Commissioned at her namesake port early in July 1936, *CHARLESTON*, too, would first venture to Spain on her maiden cruise to join Squadron 40T in guarding American interests. On this uneventful first cruise she showed the flag at Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia; Trieste; and Naples, Italy; then on to Algiers before returning to *Charleston*, South Carolina, for a brief overhaul in April 1937. Soon ordered to South America she became the flagship of the Special Service Squadron based at Balboa, Canal Zone. For the next three years she would alternate flagship honors with sister *ERIE*; paying several good will visits to Mexican and Central American ports while she joined in annual army-navy maneuvers in and around the Canal Zone.



A side view of the gunboat USS SACRAMENTO (PG-19) built in 1914. Rated at only 14 knots, she carried three 4-inch guns. SACRAMENTO was typical of the classic gunboats conceived to protect national interests in protectorate territories.

Early in September 1940 *CHARLESTON* shed her tropical gear to take on new duties in the frigid Arctic. Clearing Norfolk Virginia, she had one last fond taste of equatorial waters as she transited the Panama Canal. Reaching the Pacific, she swung northward headed for the chilly assignment as flagship for the commander of the Alaskan Sector, 13th Naval District. Few

aboard could foretell that it would be five long years and another world war later before she returned to a sunny clime.

Operating out of Seattle, Washington, *CHARLESTON* made five long patrols to Alaska and the Aleutians before the attack on Pearl Harbor. After the Japanese raid she intensified her patrols and frequently escorted convoys bound for Kodiak or Dutch Harbor where she would operate for the rest of the war years. Returning to West Coast ports only for necessary repairs, she had her plane handling gear removed in 1943, replaced by six 20mm A/A guns. At that time new radars, sonar and stern depth charge racks were added to increase her anti- submarine capability.

CHARLESTON participated in many hazardous adventures during her wartime career. Landing recon parties on enemy-held islands, rescuing downed airmen and aiding stricken ships all became part of her normal routine. In May 1943 she joined in the invasion of Attu providing gunfire support during the landings at Chichagof Harbor. A week later she skillfully avoided being hit by aerial torpedoes during an air raid, managing to down a Japanese plane in the process.

While screening the transports she assisted army troops ashore with her 6-inch guns, blasting enemy positions on call. With the island secured she returned to patrol and escort duties between Adak and Attu.

When the Pacific War ended in 1945 *CHARLESTON's* crew was surprised when they were ordered to Far Eastern duty at Hong Kong rather than being sent home. Arriving there late in November *CHARLESTON* would spend the next five months in the Far East before finally turning her stem eastward for the long voyage home. On 4 March 1946 she happily reached San Francisco, California where she would be decommissioned two months later. A long serving ship returned from the wars worn and weary but proud of the service rendered to her country. In March 1948 *CHARLESTON* transferred to the Massachusetts Maritime Academy to begin her second career as a school ship. She was awarded one battle star for her wartime service.

So ends the tale of America's last large gunboats. Although the result of a misconception in naval doctrine they nevertheless distinguished themselves in carrying out their essential purpose as diplomats in peace and escorts in war. That they were well engineered was proven when their basic design and advanced machinery was soon adapted, sans armor and with redesigned superstructures, to become the US Coast Guard's successful and much respected prewar *Treasury (Hamilton)*-class high-endurance cutters. Largely forgotten today, their exploits barely recorded as footnotes in dusty history books, the USS *ERIE* and *CHARLESTON* should be remembered as the last of their kind, an era when a lone gunboat was the stout symbol of a nation's rule. **SC**