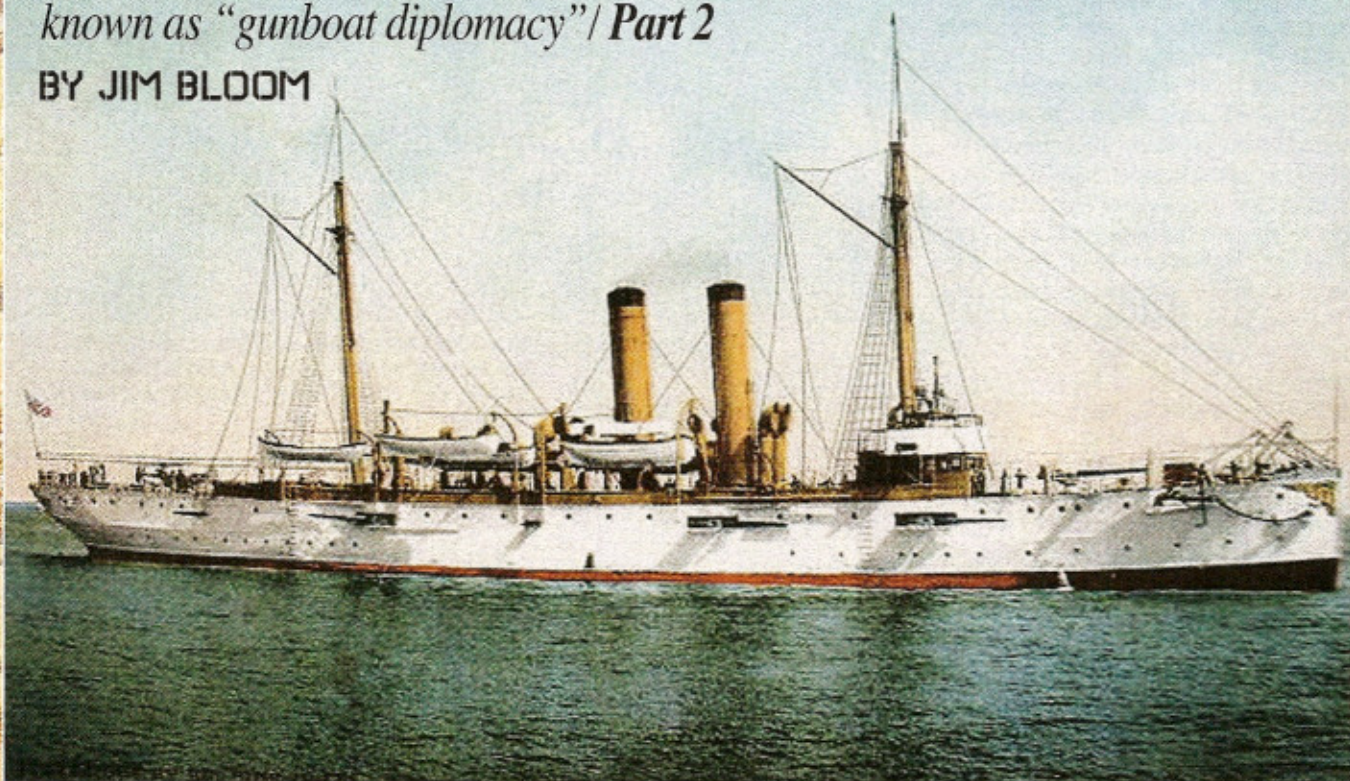


ARMED & ALONE:

America's Century-Long Romance with

Long before powerful nuclear armed fleets controlled the seven seas, it was the forlorn little unarmored warship, often boasting only a single cannon, that kept trouble at bay in what was known as "gunboat diplomacy" / Part 2

BY JIM BLOOM



Armed with ten 5-in/50 guns the 292-ft USS *Tacoma* was built as the protected cruiser C-18 before being redesignated PG-32 and still later CL-20. Commissioned in 1904, she featured a crew of 310 officers and men and had eight six pounders in addition to her powerful main battery. Reclassified CL-20 in August 1921, she ran aground at Vera Cruz in February 1924.

The next gunboats, *Wilmington* (Gunboat No. 8, designated PG-8) and *Helena* (Gunboat No. 9, designated PG-9, 7 July 1920), 1390-ton displacement, with a top speed of 15.5-kts, were designed for service on the Chinese rivers with an intended draft of only 9-ft, and so ostensibly not of interest here. However, they proved to be capable of offshore patrols and had large berthing capacity due to fitting of a superstructure extending aft three-quarters towards the poop.

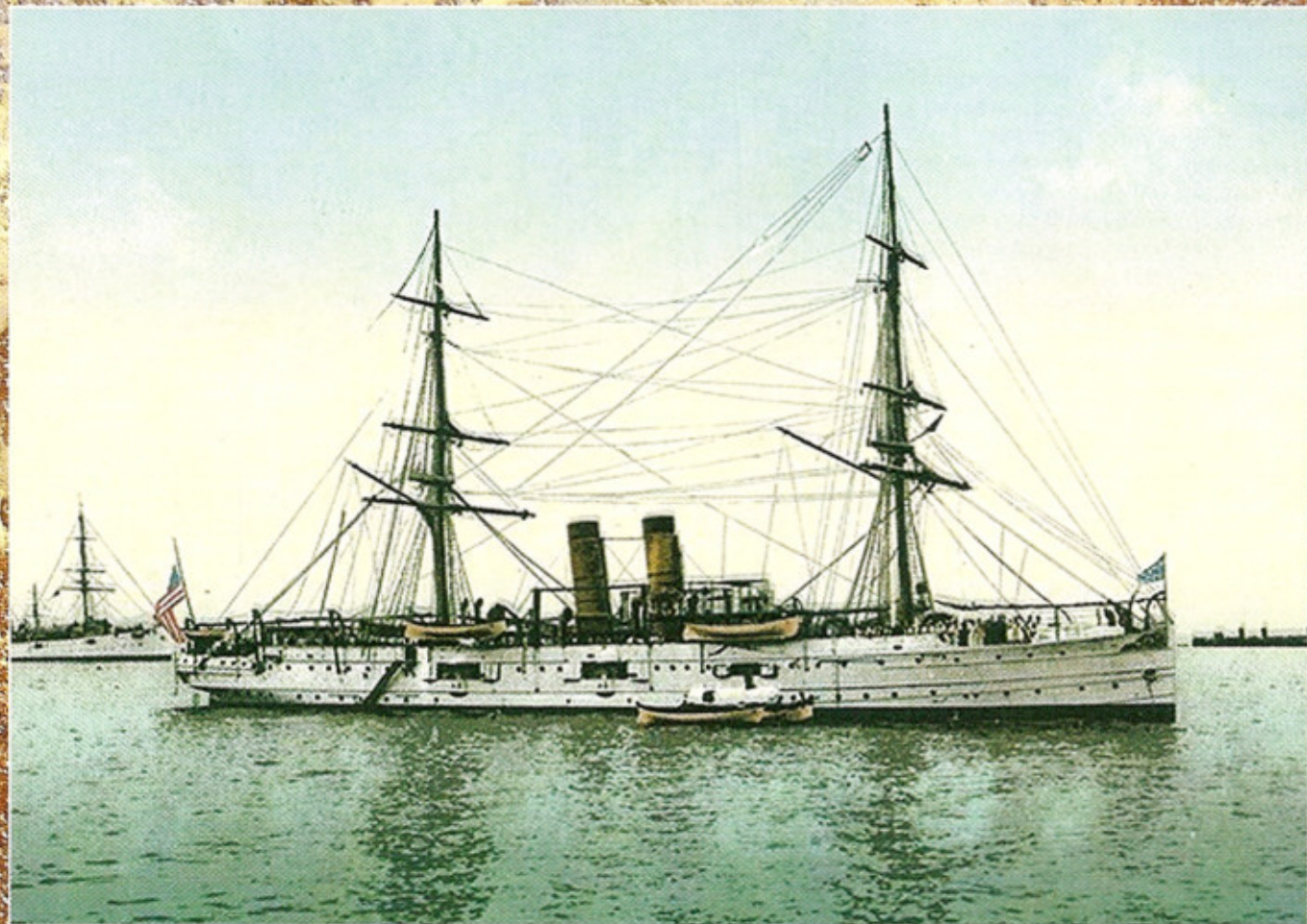
The resulting high freeboard gave good reserve buoyancy. Although the boats were seaworthy enough to traverse open waters en route to their China stations, with their shallow draft, they would roll up to 60-degrees, making them very uncomfortable at sea. Their length was 250-ft 9-in, beam 40-ft 11-in. At an economical cruising speed of 10-kts, their endurance was 2200-nautical miles. The complement of the *Wilmington*-class was 75 and they were armed with four

4-in gun mounts, four 11-pounders, and one 3-in rifle. *Helena's* service record illustrates how this nominal river gunboat was able to handle a wide variety of tasks.

After initially serving in the North Atlantic, the approach of the Spanish-American War found *Helena* in Lisbon, Portugal. She was ordered to Key West, and then to Cuba to take part in the Naval blockade. The gunboat escorted the Army's Fifth Corps transports from Florida to Cuba, and bombarded Siboney (Ensenada de los Altares) as a feint while troops were being landed at Daiquiri. *Helena* also took part in the shelling of Spanish blockhouses and fortifications near Tunas on 2 and 3 July 1898.

After the armistice was agreed to between the US and Spain, the need for vessels at Cuba lessened, however, there was a concern about the situation in the Philippines. *Helena* was transferred to the Pacific, where she would serve the remainder of her career. She departed from Boston, Massachusetts, on 3 November

GUNBOATS



USS *Topeka* (PG-35) seen off Long Island, New York, became IX-35. Built in Kiel, Germany, as the *Diogenes* for Peru, she was resold and commissioned in the US Navy in April 1898. Decommissioned and recommissioned a number of times, *Topeka* was finally scrapped in 1930. Like all gunboats, she carried a full fit of sails to extend her range. The 220-ton 259-ft *Topeka* boasted six 4-in/50 guns and six three pounders, plus one Colt machine gun.

1898 and proceeded to Manila via the Suez Canal.

She arrived on 10 February 1899, six days after the Philippine American War began. She took an active part in the conflict, being present at the evacuation of Jolo and the landing of American forces, taking part in actions in Cavite Province, and in the bombardment of San Fabian in Lingayen Gulf. Her landing parties also aided in the capturing of Filipino defensive lines along the Zapote River.

Beginning in October 1900, *Helena* served variously between China and the Philippines. Her service in China encompassed both the Yangtze River Patrol, and on the South China patrol, the latter requiring considerable offshore patrols as well as river work. She continued in this role right up to her final decommissioning on 27 May 1932.

During 1896-1897, there were launched six gunboats of circa 1000-tons displacement, built essentially for police service and other peacetime duties in waters

where deep-draft cruisers could not go. They were of composite construction, with steel plating above and wood planking below the waterline. Two of these vessels, the *Marietta* and *Wheeling* had twin screws and a schooner rig, while four of them, the *Annapolis*, *Newport*, *Princeton*, and *Vicksburg*, had a single screw and barkentine rig. The armament consisted of six 4-in guns and speeds were 12- to 13-kts.

During the Spanish-American War, the US Navy actively employed 17 gunboats and ten torpedo boats.

Seven of the Navy's gunboats were of larger types, displacing over 1300-tons. They represented five different basic designs: *Dolphin*, built in the mid-1880s as a dispatch vessel; *Concord* (Gunboat No. 3) and *Bennington* (Gunboat No. 4), sea-going ships with relatively heavy gun batteries; *Nashville* (Gunboat No. 7), a seagoing gunboat of relatively shallow draft; *Wilmington* (Gunboat No. 8) and *Helena* (Gunboat No. 9), lightly armored and intended for service in rivers; and

Topeka, an older ship purchased in England just before the war started.

With two exceptions, these ships performed their war service in the Caribbean. *Concord* was in the Asiatic Squadron and took part in the Battle of Manila Bay. Her sister ship, *Bennington*, spent the war in the eastern Pacific and Hawaii. The latter ship was lost to a boiler explosion in 1905. *Concord* left active service before WWI, but the others lasted at least up to the 1920s. Remarkably, *Wilmington*, then nearly 50-years old, remained on duty throughout the Second World War.

The 1898 Navy also had ten gunboats of relatively modest size, displacing between 800- and 1200-tons. *Bancroft*, smallest of the group, had been built as a Naval Academy training ship.

Only slightly bigger, *Petrel* was the oldest, having been commissioned in 1889. The other eight, of three different designs, were somewhat larger. They included the aforementioned *Machias* and *Castine* (Gunboat Nos. 5 and 6); *Annapolis*, *Vicksburg*, *Newport* and *Princeton* (Gunboat No.s 10 through 13); and *Wheeling* and *Marietta* (Gunboat Nos. 14 and 15)

Petrel served with Dewey at the Battle of Manila Bay. *Wheeling* spent the war on patrol in the Northern Pacific. The others were all active off Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean, with *Marietta* reaching that area by voyaging around South America with the battleship *Oregon*. Nine of these ships remained in Navy service through WWI and, in some cases, even longer. *Bancroft* became a Revenue Service cutter in 1906.

The "between wars" (Spanish-American War and WWI) record of USS *Wheeling* (displacement 990-tons; overall length 1897-ft; beam 34-ft; draft 12-ft 10-in; (aft) speed 12.88-kts; complement 140; armament six 4-in, four 6-pounder rapid-fire, two 1-pounder rapid-fire, one Colt 30-cal. machine gun) illustrates typical gunboat functions.

In 1913, the gunboat anchored in the vicinity of Vera Cruz and Tampico, Mexico, to investigate reports of violence against Americans living there and remained to protect American property. In early 1914, she plied waters off the Republic of Haiti to protect American citizens against guerrilla terrorists fighting the government, and from 7 to 13 March she was at Puerto Plata, Santo Domingo, with the President of Santo Domingo on board. When the threat of violence against Americans loomed at Vera Cruz once again in mid-1914, *Wheeling* sailed to that port and landed a force to protect Americans during the period 25 April to 30 June. Upon being detached from duty in Mexico, *Wheeling* proceeded to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for repairs.

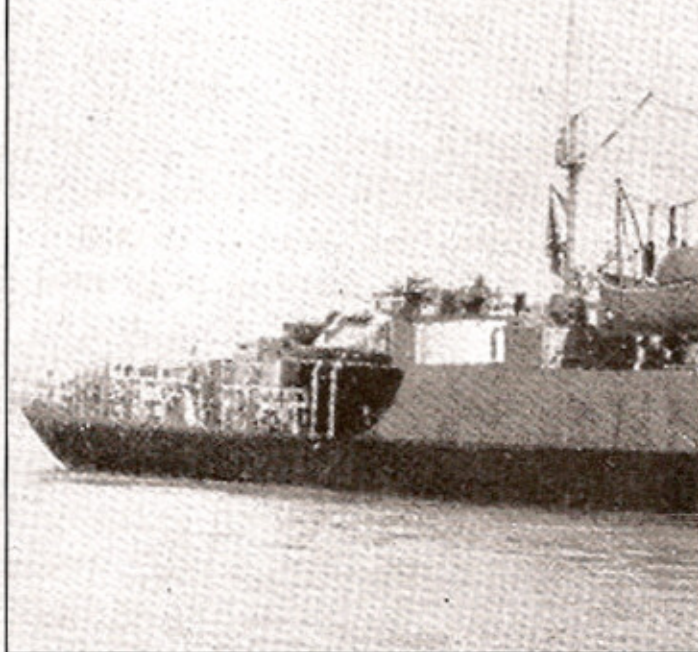
She returned to the West Indies in mid-October 1914 and took station off the Republic of Haiti.

During the year 1915, *Wheeling* cruised between Haiti, Cuba, and Mexico showing the American flag for the benefit of various political groups in each country which were attempting to terrorize resident Americans.



Aft view of the large gunboat USS *Charleston* (PG-51) which was built on a *Treasury*-class USCG hull. Commissioned in 1936, *Charleston* survived the war and became a training ship for the Massachusetts Maritime academy in 1948.

Another class of rapidly built WWII warships were the 1430-ton *Tacoma*-class patrol frigates based on the Brit's *River*-class convoy escorts. Many were given gunboat designations like American-built USS *Huron* (PF-19) which briefly served as gunboat PG-127 before being retired to become the merchant *Jose Marcelino* in 1948.



She patrolled the Mexican coast near Vera Cruz from 23 March to 16 June 1916 to aid Americans in case of any disturbances, and put in at Puerto Mexico, Mexico, on 17 June to embark American refugees driven from their homes by bandits. *Wheeling* remained in port six days and then sailed to Carmen, Mexico, where she anchored from 25 to 29 June and took on board more displaced Americans. The gunboat joined United States Army transport *Sumer* at Vera Cruz on 29 June 1916 and transferred her passengers to that ship.

Between 9 October and 16 December 1916, *Wheeling* returned to the waters off Vera Cruz to provide Naval gunfire support to Army units operating ashore against Mexican bandits.

With the two-ship *Asheville*-class, both designed during the First World War and commissioned in 1920-1923 (*Asheville*, Gunboat No. 21, later PG-21, and *Tulsa*, Gunboat No. 22, later PG-22) we have the zenith of the pre-WWI archetypal gunboats. They displaced 1207-tons (light), and 1760-tons (full load) with an overall length of 241-ft 2-in; beam 41-ft 3-in; draft 12-ft 9-in; speed 12-kts; complement 159; armament five 4-in/50 gun mounts and two 3-pounders.

Both *Asheville* and *Tulsa* had distinguished careers in the early days of WWII, employed as convoy escorts and coastal patrol pickets in various islands which fell one by one in the face of the determined and methodical Japanese offensive.

We will pass over the six ships designed as Yangtze River patrol craft during the 1920s (initially PGs but changed to PRs) as they are first and foremost riverine vessels, and, in addition, have been adequately described elsewhere.

Almost certainly the pinnacle of the PG, and its ultimate manifestation until the appearance of the *Asheville*-class PGs of the 1960s, was the two-vessel *Erie*-class, consisting of the USS *Erie* (PG-50) and the USS *Charleston* (PG-51). These ships were, in effect, the Patrol Gunboat's last hurrah. The design history, beginning in 1931, is indicative of how the gunboat was perceived when the epoch of the Yangtze River gunboats (PRs) was coming to a close. The London Naval Treaty of 1930, established a maximum of 6-in guns for any new cruiser, while ships of 2000-tons and below were excluded from the limitations. The cruisers built to the 1930 treaty restrictions became known as Light Cruisers (with a hull



WWII saw a number of warships given gunboat classifications like this 1118-ton *Flower*-class Canadian corvette HMS *Mandrake* (K-207) renamed USS *Haste* (PG-92) when loaned to the US Navy in May 1943. Decommissioned in 1947, she became the Italian ferry *Porto Azzuro*.

designation of CL) to differentiate them from the prior Heavy Cruisers (with a hull designation of CA).

In order to conform to these limitations, and build a patrol vessel class capable of showing the flag, and policing our Central/South American backyard and our trans-Pacific domains, the parameters of a 2000-ton Patrol Gunboat were projected with the main battery of 6-in guns and secondary armament of four quad 1.1-in anti-aircraft emplacements, six 20mm mounts and two depth charge tracks anticipated that they'd be capable of holding off any of the destroyer types then being built. Their top speed of 20-kts was generally sufficient to overtake any merchant vessels trying to circumvent a blockade but certainly marginal with respect to enemy warships.

At 328.5-ft overall length and 41.5-ft beam, they were in effect, mini-cruisers, though tasked for classic Patrol Gunboat assignments. Cruising at 12-kts, their endurance of 8000-mi was more than adequate to monitor US interests both in the Canal Zone and across the Pacific Ocean. They were equipped with a float plane, but this was stored partially disassembled under the boat deck behind the bridge and was to be dispatched by lowering it to the water with a crane rather than by punctual catapult launch. The plane was thus intended for diplomatic liaison duties as well as observation of a mutinous coastal area or one infiltrated by enemy operatives. While nominally displacing 2000-tons per the treaty limitation, this was soon exceeded by

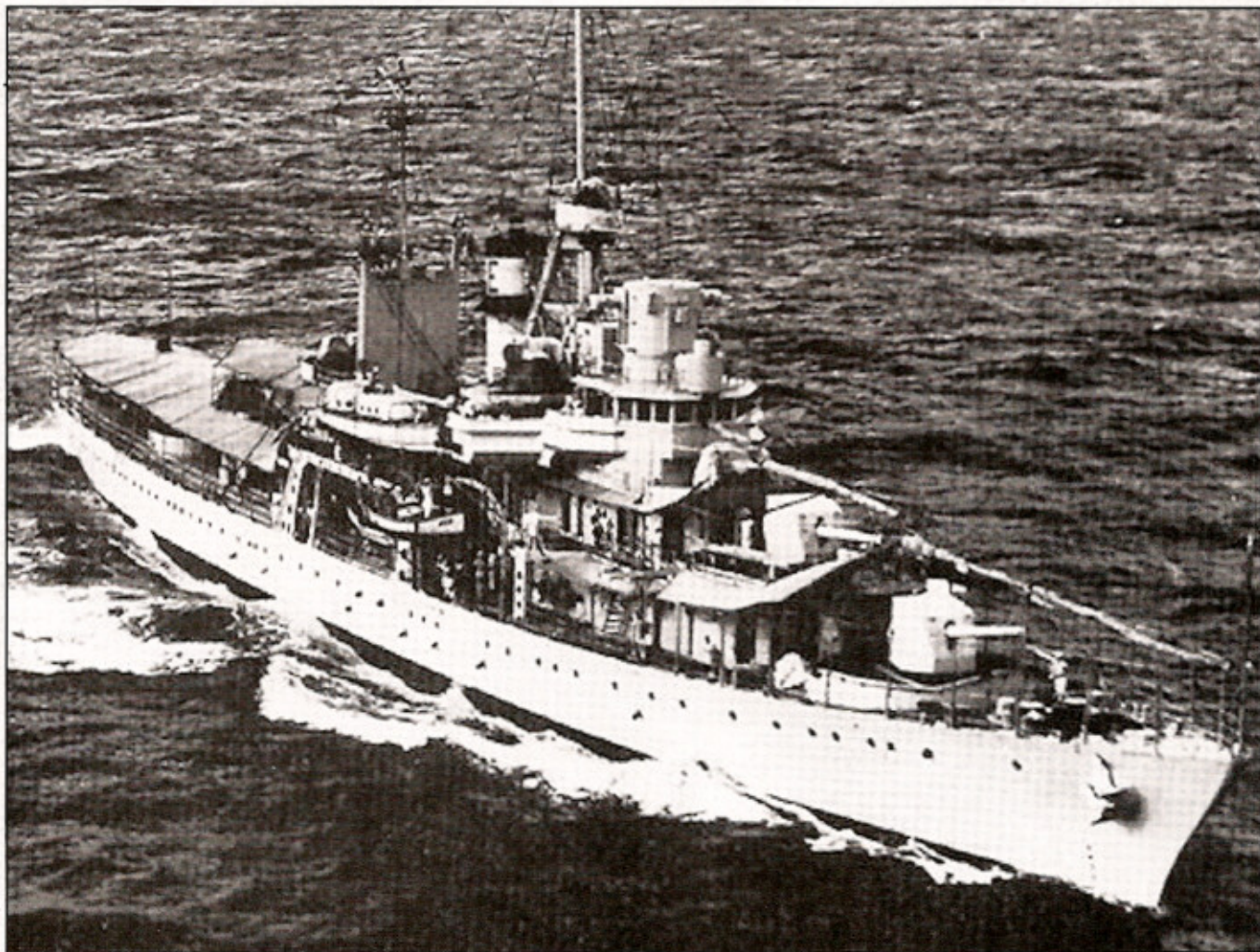
the addition of the depth charge apparatus, so that the full load displacement approached 2500-tons.

The ships had a rather large superstructure above the main deck. This was because these housings accommodated a captain's suite and an admiral's suite, in addition to a two-stateroom guest quarters. This arrangement emphasizes the ships' diplomatic function as did the broad expanses of uncluttered deck space covered over with framed awnings. It had to have the capacity for meetings and conferences with allied leaders, both diplomatic and military, often holding formal dinners on the awning-covered stem deck. Further, the ships were designed to impress, being singularly handsome vessels, reverting to the old clipper bow and cruiser stem for the sake of beauty.

In wartime, the vessels were to undertake convoy escort and with this in mind, the after deck was sufficiently broad to accommodate depth charge tracks. However, as noted above, the armament and speed were not really satisfactory for convoy duty.

Right after their shakedown cruises in 1936, *Erie* proceeded with sister ship *Charleston* to join Squadron 40T, the special force in the Mediterranean created during the Spanish Civil War to patrol and guard American interests. Both PGs cruised the entire length of the Mediterranean, safeguarding American lives and property during that tense period as well as showing the flag.

Erie arrived at Balboa, Canal Zone, in February 1938



The 2000-ton 328-ft USS *Erie* (PG-50) sistership of the *Charleston* was armed with four 6-in/47 guns and two 1.1-in.

to serve as flagship of the Special Service Squadron operating along the coasts of Central and South America, training with submarines, conducting exercises, and later on neutrality patrol and serving as guard ship for the Panama Canal.

Through the first half-year of WWII, *Erie* was based at Balboa, on the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone, patrolling regularly along the Central American coast and to the Galapagos Islands. In June 1942, while patrolling out of Cristobal, she rescued 46 survivors of torpedoed SS *Fort Good Hope*, and six days later, took 25 survivors of SS *Lebore* from a lifeboat, and 28 more

from *St. Andrews Island*. She escorted convoys to Yucatan Channel and Guantanamo Bay, and on 28 September cleared Coco Solo to guard the passage of a convoy to Trinidad.

Erie got underway from Port-of-Spain 10 November for Guantanamo Bay, and when two days out of Curacao, was torpedoed. Raging fires, worsened by the rupture of tanks of oil and gasoline, exploded the charges for her 6-in guns; abandon ship was ordered after the fires got out of control. Seven men were killed, and eleven wounded. Survivors were taken from the water by a Netherlands ship, HNS *Van Kinebergen*.

Four days later, firefighters with advanced equipment boarded *Erie*,



The gunboat USS *Erie* (PG-50) seen grounded and burned out at Curacao, NEI, in December 1942.

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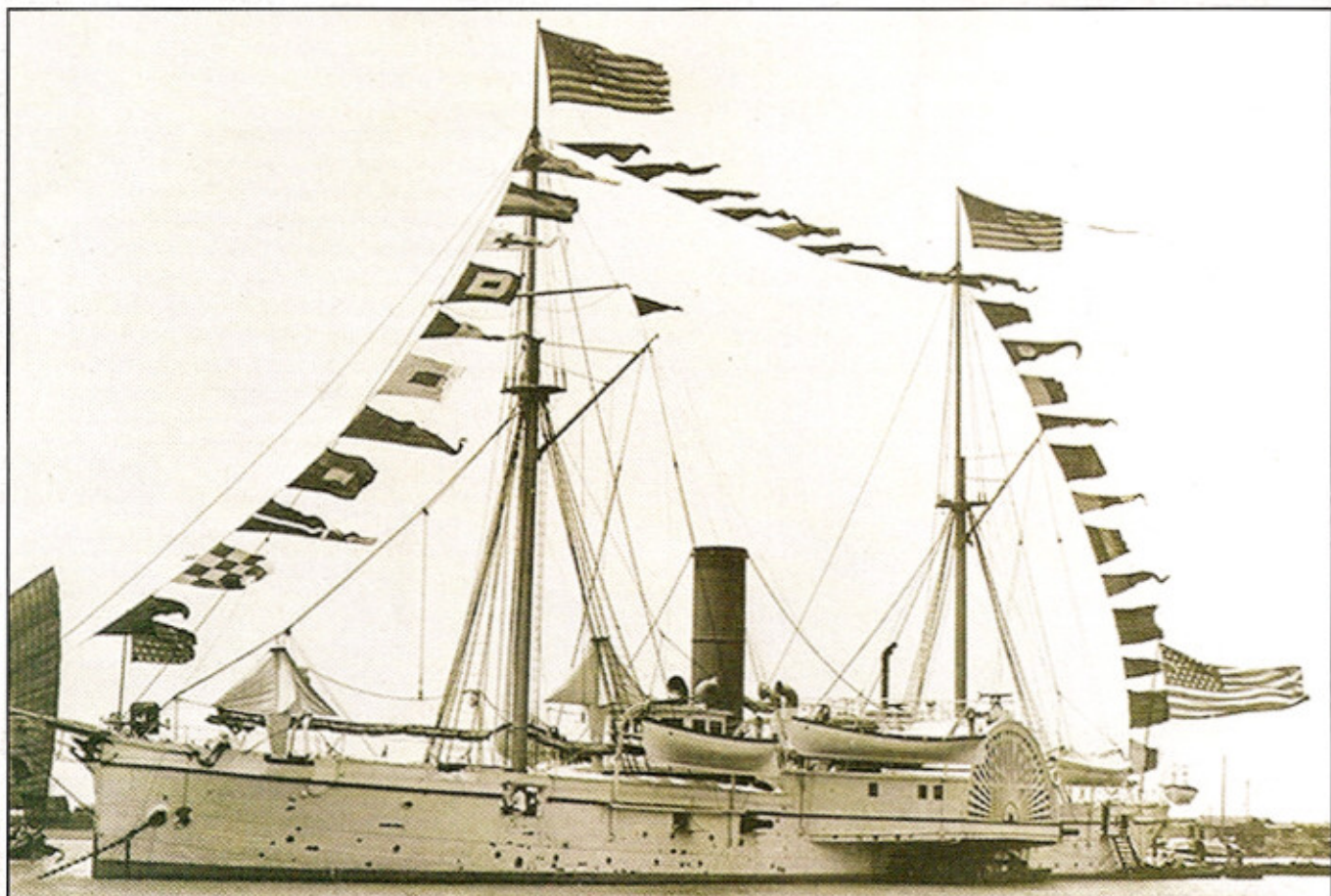
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Flying her full regalia, the sidewheel gunboat USS *Monocacy*, built in 1866, shows her stuff in Tienstin, China. Boasting six 4-in guns, she was sold in at Nagasaki, Japan, in 1903.

and next day they were augmented by specialists brought down from Norfolk. The fires were extinguished and *Erie* was brought in to Willemstadt Harbor for repairs. Before they could be completed, she began to take on a starboard list and, when counterflooded, capsized to port sinking on 5 December 1942.

Meanwhile, *Charleston* enjoyed a more auspicious career. After her stint with Squadron 40T, from January 1939-June 1940, *Charleston* joined in Army-Navy maneuvers, conducted off-shore patrols, and created good will by visits to Central American and Mexican ports. During the second of these cruises, she again served as flagship. In September 1940, *Charleston* sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, to Seattle, Washington, and duty as flagship for Commander, Alaskan Sector, 13th Naval District. From 6 November 1940 to 27 November 1941, she made five cruises from Seattle north to Aleutian and Alaskan waters, to guard this long section of American coastline. Upon the entry of the United States into WWII, *Charleston* intensified the schedule of patrol and convoy escort duties necessary to protect this far-northern region operating from Dutch Harbor or Kodiak throughout the war.

Along with her escort and patrol duties, she carried out such missions as landing reconnaissance parties, aiding stricken ships, and taking part in the operations at Attu, which was assaulted 11 May 1943. Two days later, *Charleston* arrived to bring her fire power to support Army troops ashore, bombarding Chichago Harbor, and screening the transports lying off the island. During the attack of Japanese bombers on 22 May, she evaded aerial torpedoes by radical maneuvering, while

splashing one enemy plane and helping to drive off the others. She provided call fire until the island was secured, and supported its occupation through convoy escort runs between Attu and Adak.

At the close of the war, *Charleston* prepared for Far Eastern duty, and on 25 November 1945, arrived at Hong Kong. She also visited Shanghai before returning to San Francisco 4 March 1946. Here she was decommissioned 10 May 1946 and transferred to the Massachusetts Maritime Academy 25 March 1948.

The *Erie* sisters represented the last PGs to actually correspond to the conventional gunboat type. During the war, the Canadian *Flower*-class corvettes provided to the USN under reverse lend-lease were assigned PG hull numbers. This nomenclature was misleading because the corvettes were anti-submarine vessels. The inapt PG designator was most likely assigned because other anti-sub combatants in the Navy's inventory already were classified as SC (subchaser), PC (coastal anti-sub convoy protection), PE (patrol escort) and PF (patrol frigate). The next time the PG label was applied to a bona-fide gunboat, was with the aforementioned *Asheville*-class coming into service during the Vietnam War. These vessels were provided with Combined Diesel and Turbine (CODAG) power plants, the latter providing burst speeds of around 37-kts. In the coastal interdiction gunboat role, this high speed was really not needed — it was a holdover from the design phase when the *Ashevilles* were likely to combat Soviet missile boats. As such, they owed their origin to the WWII-era PT boats. Thus the demise of the *Erie* sisters in fact brought the "gunboat era" to a close.

SC