

Smooth Sailing for an Old Warship

Story and photos by Guy Aceto

Looking around at many of my seven hundred fellow passengers making their way up the gang-plank, I realize they faced decidedly different circumstances the first time they made this walk, some sixty-five years ago. The serene sky and calm Chesapeake Bay on this autumn day are a far cry from what these veterans routinely confronted on storm-tossed Atlantic crossings or resupply missions in the Mediterranean, where their eyes had to constantly dart skyward, wary that even the smallest

speck could turn into an enemy bomber. At its berth in Baltimore, the hulking gray SS *John W. Brown* looks out of place alongside the more brightly colored civilian container ships docked around us. One of only two Liberty ships still operational out of the original fleet of 2,710 that the United States produced for the war effort, the *John W. Brown* has been fully restored and is now operated by an all-volunteer nonprofit organization. Project Liberty Ship keeps the vessel shipshape, offers cruises out of Baltimore several times a



year, and occasionally sails the ship to other ports on the east coast, all in the aim of keeping alive the memory of the men and women who built these emergency cargo ships and the merchant seamen and Naval Armed Guard who manned and defended them—often at extraordinary cost; the merchant marine had the highest casualty rate of any military service in World War II.

The ship seems almost frozen in time—and the staff of Project Liberty Ship does its best to keep that illusion alive. Volunteers dressed as period navy guards pace the parking lot, M1 rifles slung over their shoulders. They direct visitors to parking spots at the dock. Other volunteers dressed as crew check our tickets.

And isn't that Gen. Douglas MacArthur, being piped aboard in proper style? Down below us, it appears that President and Mrs. Roosevelt have just arrived in a limousine. With the use of the ship's deck crane, a lift is arranged to get the "president" aboard, and a spokesman cautions the press not to photograph him in his wheelchair. Naturally there are speeches, and I notice that not only does our Franklin D. Roosevelt have the accent down pat, but he also wears the same sort of leg braces the actual FDR wore after contracting polio. I can't help but marvel at how uncomfortable they must be—and how

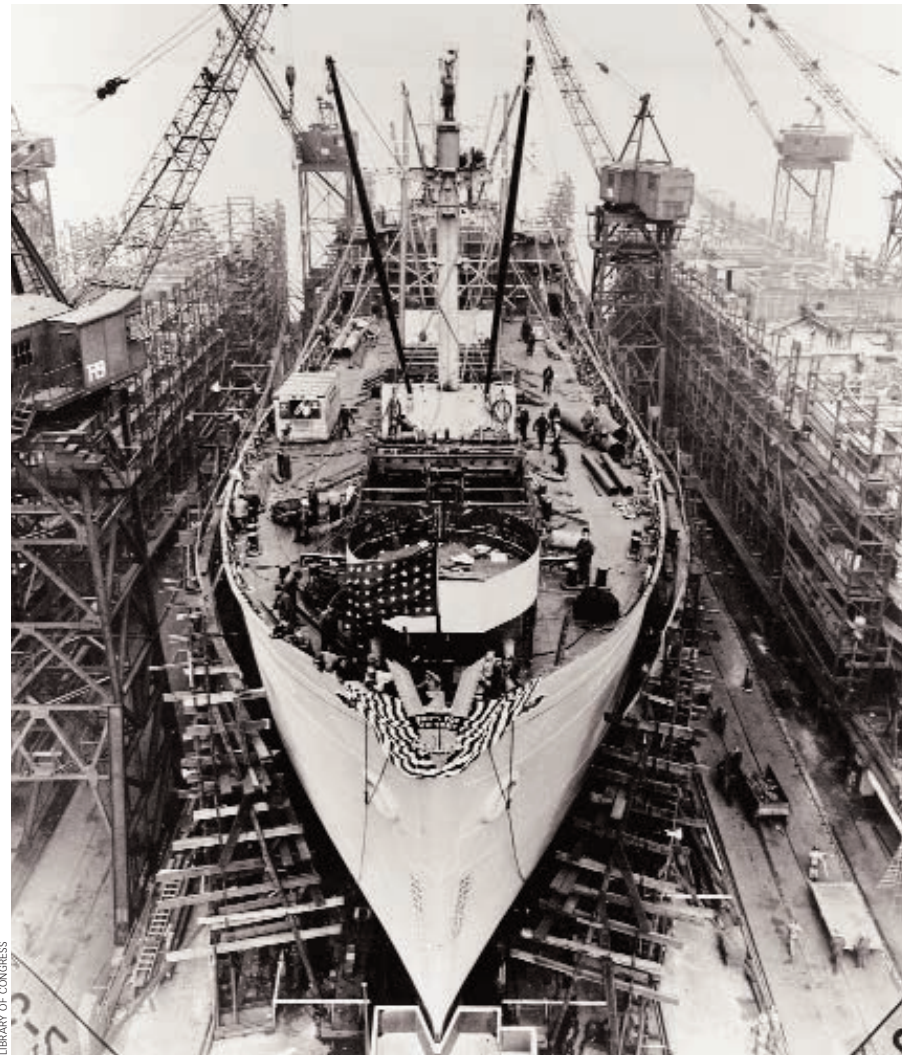


Opposite and below: Passengers can hobnob with 1940s celebrities (or close facsimiles thereof) including the Roosevelts and General MacArthur.



Left: Even the flag flying above the *John W. Brown*—with its forty-eight stars—recalls the era that gave birth to the Liberty ship.

Above: Outfitted to carry troops, the *Brown* had more weapons than a pure cargo ship, including this five-inch gun mounted on the stern.



A Liberty ship nears completion at the Bethlehem-Fairfield shipyard in Baltimore.

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dedicated these volunteers are to bringing history alive for the passengers.

Tugboats gently nudge the *John W. Brown* out into the channel and then we're on our way, gliding out into the Chesapeake Bay at a little under our normal cruising speed of eleven knots. As we set out, a fireboat from the Baltimore Fire Department gives the *Brown* a traditional sendoff, shooting geysers of water skyward. We cruise past Fort McHenry and out under the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

This is familiar territory for the old ship, which hails from Baltimore originally. It was the sixty-second Liberty ship built—in fifty-four days—at the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard, and was launched on September 7, 1942. The *John W. Brown* made thirteen voyages until

version into a museum. They had it towed to Baltimore in 1988, and restored it to operating condition within three years. Today's cruise is the seventy-fifth Living History Cruise the ship has made.

It's wonderfully calm and quiet aboard, but there is plenty to see and do if you'd like. The sound of 1940s music keeps the feel of the era alive, and "General MacArthur," escorted by his aide and a security policeman, roams the ship shaking hands and discussing details of the war. I hear someone ask him when he's going back to the Philippines and he is quite mum about revealing the date. Elsewhere, a pair of gentlemen seems to have truly become Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. They'll later perform their standup show on a stage in the hold, but on deck, they're continually in character and help complete the illusion. On this ship it's always late summer 1944.

The six-hour voyage is not entirely without incident. Just after lunch, the ship's gun crew seems to be expecting something, and eyes are searching the skies. Suddenly a Japanese "Val" dive-bomber roars into view. Fortunately, we seem to be in good hands. The gun crew is on the mark and a vintage navy Corsair fighter roars by in support, followed by a TBM Avenger torpedo bomber. The Japanese bomber (actually one of the reproductions built for the 1970 movie

Tora! Tora! Tora!) never has a chance.

The ship has a small museum in the hold to benefit those less familiar with the history of Liberty ships. But as I spend the day in the company of people sporting nearly identical baseball caps that read "Merchant Marine—Combat Veteran," I realize that the most meaningful exhibits are all around me, in the stories and memories of the many veterans on board. I find myself standing along the rail next to one of these veterans, and mention how I thought the ship seemed pretty stable. He laughs and says, "The Chesapeake is a pond; you get her out in blue water and she'll roll a bit." I can tell by the way he

When You Go

Project Liberty Ship has scheduled four cruises for the 2008 season aboard the *SS John W. Brown*, all of which depart out of Baltimore at 10:00 a.m.: May 3, June 14, September 6, and October 4. All dates are Saturdays; the cruise lasts six hours and costs \$125 per person. To make reservations, call 410-558-0164. For more information, including a map to the pier, visit Project Liberty Ship's website at liberty-ship.com.

If you would like to tour the *John W. Brown* when it is in port, you may do so on Wednesdays and Saturdays, from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., while volunteer crew members are on board. Call Project Liberty Ship's office at 410-558-0646 to confirm that the ship is in port. The mailing address is Project Liberty Ship, PO Box 25846, Highlandtown Station, Baltimore, MD 21224-0546.

On the West Coast

Those who live nearer the west coast and are interested in sailing aboard a Liberty ship are in luck: the only other operational Liberty ship, the *SS Jeremiah O'Brien*, is located at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco and offers cruises from that location. One is scheduled so far this year, for May 17, at a cost of \$150 per person. Four or five other cruise dates for 2008 are soon to be confirmed. The ship is also available for self-guided dockside tours daily, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Cost: \$8 adults; \$5 seniors; \$4 children ages six to fourteen; active military and children under six, free. Visit ssjeremiahobrien.org for more information, or call 415-544-0100.



Even at rest following the six-hour trip, a volunteer crewman looks the part.

November 1946—spending much of its time in the Mediterranean, between ports in Italy, North Africa, and Southern France—emerging from wartime service largely unscathed. In 1946 it was loaned to the Board of Education of the City of New York as a floating high school, where it trained students for careers at sea until the school closed in 1982. The constant care it received during those years helped preserve the ship, making it an attractive candidate to the group of people who went on to form Project Liberty Ship for con-

looks at me he means more than just "a bit."

Beneath another of these caps, a man sits on a folding chair near the railing with his family, looking out to sea. I notice the ship's faux MacArthur step up, shake the veteran's hand, and sit down beside him. The image of these two men engrossed in conversation about the war stops me in my tracks, and I lean in as unobtrusively as I can to take their photo. What grabs me then is a simple truth and it's what makes the voyage today so memorable: while one of this pair is a complete fake, the moment is completely genuine. ★