

History of the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps

Until 1874, young Americans who wanted careers at sea as officers had to work their way "up the hawsepope," learning practical seamanship and navigation as best they could. That year, Congress authorized the Navy to lend ships to leading U.S. ports "for the instruction of youths in navigation, seamanship." **New York Nautical School** was the first to take advantage of the Act, and the only school which survived, eventually becoming State University of New York (SUNY).

In 1891 the **Pennsylvania Nautical School** started operation, followed two years later by the **Massachusetts Nautical School**, but both limited enrollment to state residents. Other state-funded Maritime schools for the training of officers, were established in California (1929), Maine (1941), and Texas.

In response to a need for officers to man the **Emergency Fleet** during WW I, the **United States Shipping Board** set up a crash training program in 1917. The 6 week long program, limited to men who had at least 2 years sea time, was called **Free Training Schools for Merchant Marine Officers**. There were 6,300 graduates as WW I ended, and 11,000 by the end of the program in 1921.



Another training program was based on the 1891 **Postal Aid Law** and 1928 **Jones-White Act** which mandated that ships accepting U.S. Government mail subsidies should take cadets for training --"one American-born boy under 21" for each 1,000 tons gross weight -- to be "educated in the duties of seamanship."

Unfortunately, the selection and training of "**Mail Cadets**" was haphazard at best: some cadets only wanted a free trip to Europe and had no intentions of a sea career; others complained of being given only the most menial chores and no training. Of 1,987 cadets placed with 13 shipping companies between 1932 and 1937, only 100 received licenses. [Two "Mail Cadets" were killed on the **Morro Castle** in 1934.]



Merchant Marine Act of 1936

The Merchant Marine Act of 1936, provided for establishment of **Federal** training for merchant marine officers. **The U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps** was officially founded March 15, 1938 under the auspices of the **U.S. Maritime Commission**, chaired by **Joseph P. Kennedy** (father of President John F. Kennedy), a position taken over by **Admiral Emory Scott Land**.

Initially, training of cadets was given aboard government-subsidized ships under the direction of shore-based **Port Inspector-Instructors**. In February 1942, administration of the training program was turned over to the **Coast Guard**, but in July 1942 it was given to the **War Shipping Administration**.

In 1941, the requirements for appointment as cadet were:

- American citizen between 18 and 25
- Good moral character, unmarried
- Between 5'4" and 6'4," in height
- Meet Navy physical requirements
- Meet requirements for sight, color perception, speech and hearing
- At least 15 high school credits
- Good teeth, good feet, good posture

[Note: Today entrance to the Academy is by Congressional Appointment and is open to men and women.]



After **8 weeks** of "preliminary shore training" cadets went to sea by arrangement between a shipping company and the **U.S. Maritime Service**. Cadets were paid \$50 per month, but had to pay for textbooks and uniforms. For the **third year of training**, cadets returned to shore to a Maritime Service Station or Training Ship, and worked at shipyards, stevedoring companies, etc. The **fourth year**, the cadet returned to sea at \$70 per month.

The **U.S. Maritime Service** told the graduates "Graduation is as honorable and significant an achievement as graduation from West Point or Annapolis or the Coast Guard Academy." The young graduate sat for licensing examinations, and became an Ensign in the **Naval Reserve**, "subject to call by the Navy during emergencies or times of war."

The need for a permanent shore facility became obvious quickly. After several years of temporary facilities, Congress appropriated funds in 1942 for the purchase of the former **Chrysler** estate for an **Academy at Kings Point, Long Island, New York**. At the same time the **Merchant Marine Cadet Schools** were established at **Pass Christian, Mississippi**, and **San Mateo, California**.

The Merchant Marine Academy's campus was dedicated on September 30, 1943. A message from President Franklin D. Roosevelt read "the Academy serves the Merchant Marine as West Point serves the Army and Annapolis serves the Navy."

The Academy planned to offer a full 4 year undergraduate program which included sea training, but during wartime the course was condensed to **8 weeks of basic training**, at least **6 months sea duty** on a merchant ship, and **9 months of advanced training** at the **United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, NY**.

In 1945, competitive examinations for appointment as Cadet-Midshipmen were held four times. Admission was based on scores on the examinations and State quotas based on population. Physical requirements were the same as for the Navy, and age requirement was 16 years 6 months to less than 23 years old.

The cadets at **San Mateo** were transferred to **Kings Point** in September 1947, and the school closed, becoming a junior college, and later, a nature preserve. **Pass Christian Cadet School**, already suffering severe financial problems, was devastated by a hurricane in September 1947. The School closed in 1950, the facilities turned into a religious college, then a resort.

Enrollment in the Cadet Corps

The first graduating class from the United States Merchant Marine Cadet Corps was in 1942.

Year	Cadet Enrollment	Cadets at Sea	Cadets Graduated
1938	99		
1939	187		
1940	282		
1941	425		
1942	461		90
1943	4,658	2,885	
1944	7,148	3,350	
1945	4,912	1,615	
1946	3,746		
1947			
1948			
1949			

Year	Cadet Enrollment	Cadets Graduated
1950	1,272	220
1951	1,193	330
1952	1,026	140
1953	889	353
1954	826	242
1955	883	127
1956	882	154
1962	917	209
1963	925	191

Year	Cadet Enrollment	Deck Cadets Graduated	Engine Cadets Graduated	Dual Cadets Graduated	Total Cadets Graduated
1964	927	90	101		191
1965	950	90	101		191
1966	899	85	111		196
1967	829	77	125		202
1968	915	73	109		182
1969	918	85	109	19	213
1970	945	81	86	16	183
1971	950	83	109	15	207
1972	911	105	91	10	206

U.S. Merchant Marine Cadets in War Zones

Mariners, including Cadets, were on the front lines the moment their ships left U.S. ports, subject to attack by submarines, surface raiders, mines, bombers, kamikaze, and land-based artillery. At least 8,651 mariners were killed at sea, and an estimated 11,000 wounded. Among them were 142 Cadets. The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, by virtue of its war dead, is the only Federal Academy authorized to carry a Battle Standard.

Cadets went to sea with their books and were required to write reports upon return, describing enemy craft seen, damage, lifeboat voyages, acts of heroism, etc. In 450 reports filed, cadets described attacks on 250 different ships, of which 220 were sunk.

Isadore E. Kimmelman, Class of 1940, was aboard the SS City of Flint when she rescued 200 survivors of the torpedoed British passenger liner SS Athenia in early September 1939. He was still aboard on October 9, 1939, when the unarmed SS City of Flint, clearly marked as neutral and carrying general cargo from New York to Great Britain was stopped in mid-Atlantic by the German pocket battleship Deutschland. The Nazis decided lubricating oil in her holds was "contraband," and put on a "prize crew" which took the ship month-long journey to Norway via Murmansk. Norwegian commandos eventually freed the ship and crew.

Raymond Holubowicz was torpedoed on SS Syros which sailed to Murmansk in Convoy PQ-16 in May 1942. On the return voyage in July (QP-13), Holubowicz was on the SS Hybert, which sank when the convoy was led into a minefield. Immediately upon his return to New York, Holubowicz was assigned to the Liberty ship J. L. M. Curry, and sailed to Murmansk again. On her return voyage in March 1943 the ship, weakened by many bomb "near-misses" and a winter in the Arctic, broke in half, and sank with no casualties.

Carl Anderson and Calvin Foote were on the tanker SS Pan Atlantic, in convoy PQ-17. Foote was one of 25 killed when the ship was sunk by German dive bombers; Anderson spent 4 days in an open lifeboat in the Arctic, then was torpedoed during the return voyage on the SS Bellingham in QP-14.

Michael Carbotti and Nathan Kaplan were torpedoed on the SS Potlatch in June 1942. The men spent 32 days in a lifeboat along with 47 other crew members, running out of provisions by the 18th day. They reached one uninhabited Caribbean island, then another, before finally landing in the Bahamas.

William E. Sigman, assisted at the 3 inch gun as second loader when the SS Nathaniel Currier was attacked by Aichi 99 dive bombers "off a Southwest Pacific island" on June 16, 1943. The crew shot down two planes and badly damaged two others.

Joseph Banks Williams, the first African-American to enroll at and graduate from the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps, was a native of Annapolis who was refused admission into the Naval Academy. Williams was assigned deck cadet on the SS Booker T. Washington, which carried war cargo to Europe and North Africa during his 10 months aboard. After graduation he went on active duty with the Navy -- which was finally accepting African-Americans as officers -- becoming the second African-American to be made an officer in the Naval Civil Engineer Corps.

Photo: Joseph B. Williams, shown at right



Robert J. Rhein rendered "meritorious service" on the 23 year-old Esso tanker John Worthington, when she was torpedoed off Brazil while in convoy. Three main tanks were flooded and the engine room slightly damaged, forcing the ship to leave the convoy and making a 4,600 mile dash for Galveston, Texas for permanent repairs.

Maurice W. Price was aboard the SS Henry Knox when she was torpedoed by Japanese submarines in the Persian Gulf. Price was badly injured, but took command of a lifeboat and rescued other survivors from the water. The Japanese stopped one of the lifeboats, and broke the oars and took the sails, mast, charts, rations, and flashlight. The men in Price's lifeboat hid under blankets and went undetected. They were in a lifeboat for 11 days before reaching land.

The tanker SS Yamhill, with Cadets William Jopes, Doug Dekeyser, Virgil Mace, and Robert J. Henderson aboard, engaged in a 12 hour-long battle with a Japanese submarine in the Indian Ocean. The sub fired 5 torpedoes and about 60 shells, while the Yamhill answered with about 30 shells. [William Jopes wrote a book about his experiences on the SS Yamhill, *A Voyage to Abadan*, available at <http://www.Xlibris.com/avoyagetoabadan.html>; Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Borders Books.]

William Thomas Mitchell was aboard the SS Capillo when it was sunk in Manila. Mitchell and his shipmates managed to reach Corregidor, were taken prisoner, and were interned by the Japanese. For three years at Santo Tomas and Los Banos he subsisted on rice, potatoes and occasional water buffalo, his weight dropping from 162 to 120 pounds. Finally, with the aid of American paratroopers and Filipino guerrillas who came over the walls, the prisoners killed their Japanese captors and averted their planned massacre. Mitchell re-enrolled at San Mateo, California Cadet Corps Basic School upon repatriation.

P. B. Moran and **W. J. Kutney** displayed heroism while serving aboard the Liberty ship Francis Scott Key. While in Murmansk, Moran escaped from a hotel which was severely damaged and on fire from German bombs, but returned to save a Russian Army officer who was unconscious inside. Kutney was wounded while manning an anti-aircraft gun, but remained at his station until enemy aircraft were driven off. On another occasion, Kutney took over when the ship's master was seriously wounded, and yet again, led efforts to extinguish a large number of incendiary bombs which had fallen on deck, saving the vessel.

Rafael R. Rivera, Class of 1942, was one of 7 Cadets or graduates whose names were used for Liberty ships to commemorate their bravery. Rivera was third mate on the Liberty ship William C. Gorgas in Convoy HX-228, torpedoed in mid-Atlantic, killing the engine room crew. The survivors were picked up by a British destroyer, which herself was torpedoed the following day, leaving only 12 survivors among the 67 merchant mariners and Armed Guard.

U.S. Merchant Marine Cadets Awarded Distinguished Service Medal

Eight cadets were awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, the Merchant Marine's highest award for "heroism beyond the call of duty."

- **Francis A. Dales, Deck Cadet-Midshipman on SS Santa Elisa/SS Ohio**
- **Elmer C. Donnelly, Deck Cadet-Midshipman on SS Daniel Huger**
- **Edwin Joseph O'Hara, Engine Cadet-Midshipman on SS Stephen Hopkins**
- **Walter G. Sittmann, Engine Cadet-Midshipman on SS William T. Coleman**
- **William M. Thomas, Jr., Engine Cadet-Midshipman on SS Edgar Allen Poe**
- **Phil Cox Vannais, Engine Cadet-Midshipman on SS Daniel Huger**
- **Frederick R. Zito, Engine Cadet-Midshipman on SS Fitz John Porter**
- **Carl M. Medved, Engine Cadet-Midshipman on SS Daniel Huger**

U.S. Merchant Marine Cadets Killed During World War II



[Painting by W.M. Wilson, reproduced by permission of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy]

142 Deck or Engine Cadets were killed in action when their ships were torpedoed, bombed, or from other war-related causes. In addition, 68 men were killed soon after their speeded-up graduation.

Among them was Midshipman Edwin J. O'Hara, shown in the painting above, loading the last shell into the stern gun of the SS Stephen Hopkins on 9/27/42 while battling German raiders Stier and Tannenfels. The Stier was sunk and the Tannenfels was damaged. O'Hara, who was enrolled at San Mateo, California, was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal posthumously.



Howard Payne Conway, first Cadet killed in WWII

[photo: We'll Deliver: Early History of the United States Merchant Marine Academy, 1938-1956]

Engine Cadet Howard Payne Conway was the first cadet lost in enemy action. He was one of five men killed when a torpedo struck the engine room of SS Liberator, in March 1942, off North Carolina. The Liberator, armed with one 4 inch gun, was carrying 11,000 tons sulfur.

It is to these men who died and the men who graduated and served we dedicate this memorial.

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