

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 39  
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 34

---

1986

# Ships of the Panama Canal

Thomas Hone

James Shaw

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hone, Thomas and Shaw, James (1986) "Ships of the Panama Canal," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 39 : No. 4 , Article 34.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss4/34>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

Shaw, James. *Ships of the Panama Canal*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985. 269pp. \$29.95

In 1906, a professional photographer by the name of Ernest Hallen was hired to document on film the construction of the Panama Canal. Hallen did that and more: from the opening of the Canal in 1914 until his retirement in 1937, he also recorded the passage of several hundred ships through the waterways and locks of the Canal. In 1964, another Canal employee, Adrien Bouche, Jr., began a volunteer effort to catalogue and restore Hallen's glass plate negatives. Now, James Shaw, a journalist familiar with the Canal's operation and history, has prepared a book with approximately 100 of Hallen's ship photographs accompanied by captions naming the ships illustrated and giving details of each ship's history.

The ship photographs are grouped into three categories of approximately equal size: (1) warships and military transports, (2) passenger ships and yachts, and (3) cargo ships and various "work craft." Opposite each photograph is Shaw's capsule statement about each ship. There is great variation within each category. Warships range from the British battle cruiser *Hood* to the Japanese armored cruiser *Izumo*, a veteran of the battle of Tsushima in the Russo-Japanese War. There is even a picture of the frigate *Constitution* in the Pedro Miguel lock in December 1932. Passenger ships run from the 3,400-ton *City of Para*, built in 1878, to the North German Lloyd flagship *Bremen*, launched 50 years later and displacing

nearly 52,000 tons. In between, there are a number of examples of ships which plied the routes to Australia, from east and Gulf ports to the Pacific, and from Europe and North America to the west coast of South America. There is even a 1934 photograph of J.P. Morgan's 2,650-ton, \$2.5 million yacht *Corsair*. The third group of ships is perhaps the most interesting, if only because so little is usually written about them. The "work craft" include Canal dredges and tugs. The cargo ships are mostly motor ships in the 5 to 10 thousand-ton range—the workhorses of merchant shipping between World Wars I and II. However, Shaw also describes the last of the commercial sailing ships, stumpy tankers, and passenger-cargo liners owned by firms such as the Dollar Line.

Perhaps surprisingly, the cargo carriers have the most exotic histories. Most carried several names and flew the colors of more than one owner. Many were pressed into war service during the Second World War and a large number were sunk by submarines. To read their stories is to review the history of the world's merchant fleets for the first half of the 20th century. *Ships of the Panama Canal* is definitely good reading for those who understand that the seas are a vast commercial highway, and that many types of ships once numerous on that highway are no more to be seen. Shaw clearly has a love for and appreciation of both the Panama Canal and of ships, especially the "ordinary" merchant ships which usually receive very little attention

## 150 Naval War College Review

from students of naval warfare and naval affairs.

*Ships of the Panama Canal* contains more than photographs and interesting captions. There is an illustrated introduction which reviews the construction of the Panama Canal and even describes how ships' toll charges were computed. The bibliography at the end of the book, though short, is good, and there are also several appendixes, including one which lists the volume of Canal traffic for the years 1915-1939 and another which gives some all-time Canal records through 1985 (did you know that the highest toll ever paid was \$99,065.22 by *Queen Elizabeth II* on 20 January 1985?). The book is more than a collection of fascinating trivia, however. It is also a striking and valuable record of the tools of seapower three and four generations past.

THOMAS HONE  
Washington, D.C.

---

McFarland, Philip. *Sea Dangers: the Affair of the Somers*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985. 308pp. \$19.95

On 1 December 1842, three hooded men with nooses about their necks stood beneath the main yardarm of the U.S. Navy brig *Somers*. The ship was homeward bound to New York from a training cruise to the West Coast of Africa and the executions took place about 525 miles from the West Indian island of St. Thomas. At Captain Mackenzie's command, a cannon fired, and the three men were

hauled skyward. As their bodies rotated aloft, the commanding officer delivered an edifying address to the crew assembled before him.

The dead men were executed on charges of planning a shipboard mutiny. The *Somers'* officers and many of the crew were to be killed, control of the ship passing to the mutineers who would then turn pirate and prey on West Indian shipping.

Planner and leader of the proposed action was 18-year-old Midshipman Philip Spencer, son of Secretary of War John Canfield Spencer. Elisha Small, seaman, confessed his guilt, as did young Spencer. Boatswain's Mate Samuel Cromwell, died protesting his innocence.

Spencer had a bad reputation, a "young punk" as Samuel Eliot Morison judged him in his 1967 biography of Matthew C. Perry, *Old Bruin*. At the time of the incident, Perry was commandant of the Naval Shipyard, Brooklyn, home port of the *Somers*. Brother of Oliver Hazard Perry, the hero of Lake Erie, Matthew Perry would later command the "black ships" that opened Japan to the West. "Old Bruin" also happened to be brother-in-law to Commander Mackenzie, skipper of the *Somers*.

At sea aboard the brig-of-war, Spencer had approached Purser's Steward Wales and disclosed his plan. Wales told his superior who reported the plot to the second in command, Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort who in turn informed the captain. Alarmed at the prospect of mutiny aboard his