

HASSAYAMPA, KAWISHIWI And PONCHATOULA, On The Way To Breakers

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HASSAYAMPA, KAWISHIWI And PONCHATOULA Historic Naval Ships To Be Scrapped

By

Shawn J. Dake

They may not have been the most glamorous ships afloat but without them, the U.S. Navy would have been out of gas; or more correctly oil for fuel. Now three more units have left the dwindling Maritime Administration Reserve Fleet at Suisun Bay. The U.S. Navy Fleet Oilers HASSAYAMPA, KAWISHIWI and PONCHATOULA were moved to Mare Island for cleaning, in preparation for the long tow to the scrap yards at Brownsville, Texas. The three ships were all built in the mid-1950's, as the third, fourth and sixth members respectively of the "Neosho Class" of fast, 655 foot long fleet oilers. Each had a beam of 86 feet, draft of 35 feet and measured approximately 38,500 long tons displacement fully loaded and 11,700 long tons light. Each vessel had a capacity of 180,000 barrels of fuel. When designated as USS ships they carried a complement of 323 Navy officers and sailors. As U.S. Naval Ships, they normally carried 106 civilian crew and 21 Navy personnel. Propulsion was by two geared steam turbines with two boilers, and twin screws producing 28,000 shp, for a cruising speed of 20 knots.



USS HASSAYAMPA refueling USS PREBLE at sea 1979, US Navy Photo



USNS KAWISHIWI (T AO-146) entering Pearl Harbor

Photo # NH 99060 USS Ponchatoula underway in the Philippine Sea, December 1991



USS PONCHATOULA underway in the Philippine Sea, December 1991. US Navy photo

Ships like these three of the “Neosho Class” were the first oilers built for the U.S. Navy after World War II. They were the first to be built specifically as naval oilers rather than being converted from civilian tanker designs and they were notably larger. Among other firsts, they were engineered with the ability to provide underway replenishment and also the first designed

from the outset to support jet operations. Fuel for aircraft was carried in addition to fuel for other ships. The six vessels of this class were ordered in 1952 and completed during 1954 and 1955. The other three were named NEOSHO (AO-143), MISSISSINEWA (AO-144), and TRUCKEE (AO-147). The nomenclature for all six ships derives from the American Indian names of various rivers.



HASSAYAMPA at Mare Island 2014. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr.

Terry Tilton, a retired Captain of the U.S. Navy had personal experience with several vessels of this type including briefly sailing with the HASSAYAMPA. He kindly recounted some of his recollections of these valuable vessels and the role they played:

“The 1954/55 NEOSHO types were needed to carry the replenishment fuel for the big carriers (and escorts) which were coming into the Navy at the same time: USS FORRESTAL, SARATOGA & RANGER were really thirsty; both ship oil and plane, JP5 fuel. Sure, these oilers could carry a lot more fuel, but the biggest advantage was speed. These were our first 20 knot oilers, twin screw reliability. It was becoming a determination that a fleet speed of 18/20 knots was necessary. There was a big time effort in the 1960s to get the Navy into the 20 knot category. That’s why the Mariner and other C4 size ships were being sought after. Even the amphibious ships. My LST was radically larger and different from earlier LST types with an over the bow ramp, so the ship could make 20 knots easily. I have been alongside taking fuel from all three [vessels], especially PONCHATOULA. I was underway on HASSAYAMPA for a couple of days. When loaded, they rode better than almost anything we had. Nice ships, now 60 years old and they have those great tanker lines.”



HASSAYAMPA at Mare Island. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr. June 2014

HASSAYAMPA was launched on September 12, 1954 from the New York Shipbuilding Corporation yards at Camden, New Jersey. It was formally commissioned on April 19, 1955 as the USS HASSAYAMPA (AO-145). It is named for a river in the state of Arizona. The maiden voyage departed from Philadelphia and proceeded through the Panama Canal. While in Panama, revised orders instructed the ship's captain to proceed directly to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii instead of sailing to Southern California as had originally been planned. En route it hit a terrific storm which required an extended stay to complete repairs. From that July, forward until 1963, the HASSAYAMPA was deployed in support of the United States Pacific fleet. Along with the KAWISHIWI and PONCHATOUOLA among others, it took part in the atmospheric nuclear testing program off Johnston Island and Christmas Island in the Pacific from April 25th until December 31, 1962, in which over 100 test explosions were detonated before Operation Dominic ended. Future deployments kept the ship in the Western Pacific and Far Eastern waters. Among the more memorable footnotes in the career of this vessel were aiding in some of the early NASA manned spaceflight missions. On December 16, 1965, HASSAYAMPA served as a recovery logistic ship for Gemini 8. It would continue this role in 1969 when it refueled the USS HORNET (CVS-12) just prior to that ship's recovery of the crew and capsule of Apollo 11, freshly back from their journey to the moon. Four months later these same ships would repeat the procedure for the return of Apollo 12. The ship played a role in naval operations during the conflict in Vietnam and continued to assist in peacetime refueling operations in the 1970's. On November 17, 1978 a new phase of its career began when the ship was transferred to the Military Sealift Command (MSC) and designated as the USNS HASSAYAMPA (T-AO-145). As political problems and strife shifted to the Middle East, the ship served as support in the Persian Gulf and North Arabian Sea in several operations including Desert Shield and Desert Storm. It has been said that this ship is "The most decorated and memorable fleet oiler the U.S. Navy and Military Sealift Command has ever had. The nickname of the "Humpin' Hass" stuck with the ship and was in semi-official use within the Navy. Like all old ships, the time finally came to decommission the old veteran. On May 1, 1999, the Navy transferred the title to the Maritime Administration (MARAD). The HASSAYAMPA remained laid up in the Suisun Bay, National

Defense Reserve Fleet alongside its sisterships in Row G until May 29, 2014 when it was moved to the dry dock facilities at Mare Island for hazardous material cleaning. It departed on June 13th from San Francisco Bay under tow by the tug SIMONE and five days later, as this is being written, it was anchored off Point Loma in San Diego. It had been expected to arrive in Brownsville, Texas on July 23, 2014 but that date may be delayed due to the unscheduled stop in California. When it does arrive, it will fall to the breaker's torch, or be recycled in government parlance.



HASSAYAMPA at Mare Island with PONCHATOULA in background. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr. June 2014



KAWISHIWI at Mare Island. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr. June 2014

KAWISHIWI was launched on December 11, 1954, christened by Mrs. Edmund T. Wooldridge. She followed her sister from the same shipyard, entering service on July 6, 1955 as USS KAWISHIWI (AO-146). The vessel is named for a river in Minnesota. After positioning to the Pacific, the ship divided her time between homeports at the Long Beach Naval Base in California and Pearl Harbor. As early as 1961, the ship was involved in the various conflicts developing in Southeast Asia. From 1965 through 1972, much of her career was spent in waters off the coast of Vietnam. During that time KAWISHIWI delivered millions of gallons of fuel oil, jet fuel, aviation gasoline and even occasionally mail and passengers to 271 ships operating in the area. Like her slightly older sister, the ship was decommissioned by the Navy on October 10, 1979 and transferred to the Military Sealift Command as the USNS KAWISHIWI (T-AO-146). The crew was reduced from 324 Navy personnel to 106 civilian mariners and a naval detachment of 21. The armament of eight guns was removed. On November 7, 1994, she was struck from the Naval Register and on May 1, 1999, title was transferred to MARAD with the ship going into extended lay up in the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet. For awhile, it looked like the fate of the KAWISHIWI would be preservation on the bottom of the sea off Dana Point, California as an artificial reef. Those plans were scuttled by MARAD in May 2012, even if the ship wasn't. They simply changed their minds in favor of "recycling" and the ship remained anchored at Suisun. Ultimately, on June 12, 2014 it became the last of the three sisters to be towed away when it was moved the short distance to Mare Island for cleaning. Notably, it will be the sixth to last vessel removed, of the hundreds of old Navy and MSTs ships that have formed the "Ghost Fleet" of Suisun Bay through all the years since World War II ended. Over the last five years, most of those ships have disappeared. The KAWISHIWI soon will too. It is scheduled to depart for a final voyage at the end of a tow line on July 1st with an estimated arrival at Brownsville by August 9, 2014.



KAWISHIWI at Mare Island. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr. June 2014



KAWISHIWI at Mare Island. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr. June 2014



HASSAYAMPA at Mare Island with PONCHATOULA in background. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr.
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HASSAYAMPA at Mare Island with PONCHATOULA in background. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr.
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PONCHATOULA was launched on July 9, 1955, the christening being performed by Mrs. I. N. Kiland at the New York Shipbuilding, Camden yard. The ship entered service on January 12, 1956 as the USS PONCHATOULA (AO-148). The name means “falling hair” in the native American language, describing the “Spanish Moss” that hangs from the trees along the Louisiana river of that name. After final fitting out at Philadelphia, the ship made her way to Long Beach,

where she arrived for the first time on March 10th. It spent that summer on shakedown cruises and training exercises off the California coast before deploying on her first tour to the Far East. At the beginning of 1958 her homeport shifted to Pearl Harbor where she continued to refuel vessels of the Western Pacific fleet. In many instances, this ship was selected to participate in experimental operations such as support services for the previously mentioned Christmas Island nuclear tests, and the first Pacific splashdown of a Mercury space capsule when Sigma 7 piloted by Wally Schirra returned to earth on October 3, 1962. The operation was repeated May 16, 1963 for the reentry of Faith 7 with Gordon Cooper at the controls. The PONCHATOULA continued to assist with NASA space flights as a secondary recovery support ship for Gemini 4, 6, and 7 in case those flights splashed down in the Pacific instead of their intended targets in the Atlantic. It also continued to play a supporting role in the recovery operations for Apollo 8, the first manned flight around the moon in 1968. This interesting phase was soon replaced by the much more serious role in the Vietnam War. From 1964 and again beginning in 1966 through 1972 the ship would periodically be involved in major campaigns of that war, earning 12 battle stars. The Navy decommissioned the ship in September, 1980, turning it over to the Military Sealift Command as the USNS PONCHATOULA (T-AO-148). The ship was struck from the Naval Register on August 31, 1992 and like her sisters, was transferred to the Maritime Administration on May 1, 1999 with the ship being laid up with all the other unwanted ships in the Suisun Bay National Defense Reserve Fleet, within view of Benecia, California. For over 15 years she rested beside two of her sisterships; the other three, having remained on the East Coast, were scrapped between 2005 and 2007. The last of the "Neosho Class" was the first of the three ships left at Suisun to depart, being pulled away from the raft on May 15, 2014. It remained at Mare Island until June 5th when it departed the Bay area at the end of a tow line attached to the tug ELIZABETH III. The tow continued to progress well with three to seven foot swells encountered along the way off the coast of Baja California, Mexico. By July 6th the PONCHATOULA will be at the entrance to the Panama Canal and is expected to arrive at Brownsville on July 19, 2014. There she will be dismantled, 60 years after her keel was first laid down.



PONCHATOULA at Mare Island with HASSAYAMPA on the left. Photo Frank Cleope, Jr. June 2014

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