

S.S. JOSHUA TREE

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Joshua Tree National Park
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Little did Jeff know in his periodic searching of eBay, for Joshua Tree National Park memorabilia, that he would run across someone selling cachets depicting victory ships with names of national parks. We became intrigued. Was there one named for Joshua Tree?

A little searching and there she was, the S.S. Joshua Tree.



(photograph courtesy of the private collection of William F. Hultgren)

The S.S. Joshua Tree was (hull) number "114" of a total of 153 T2-SE-A1 Steam Turbine-Electric Drive Tankers. These tankers were built by Kaiser Company during World War II for the U.S. Maritime Commission (USMC) and named after national parks and monuments, American battlefields, historic settlements, forts, trails, etc. of the United States. Built at the Swan Island Yard, in Portland, Oregon between October 28, 1944 and December 3, 1944, she was accepted by the Los Angeles Tanker Operators Inc., an operating agent for the U.S. War Shipping Administration. It was one of 39 T2 tankers built at the shipyard that year.

The Kaiser Swan Island Yard was an emergency yard, built with 8 ways, in the fifth wave of World War II shipbuilding expansion. The yard was funded with \$23 million from

the U.S. Maritime Commission and was one of four specifically designed to build T-2 tankers. It was built on land belonging to the Port of Portland, which bought the yard after the war and operated it as a common-user ship repair facility until 1999, when it sold it to its principal tenant, Cascade General, Inc. Cascade continues to operate it as a ship repair facility today.

The T2-SE-A1 was the workhorse of the tanker fleet. The average production time from laying the keel to completion for sea trials was about 70 days, including 55 in the building ways and another 15 days in the fitting out dock. During World War II, American tankers made 6,500 voyages to carry 65 million tons of oil and gasoline from the U.S. and the Caribbean to the war zones and to our Allies. They supplied 80% of the fuel used by bombers, tanks, jeeps and ships during the War.

The S.S. Joshua Tree cost \$2,961,000 to build and was Number 247055 (USMC Number 2397). When completed, she had one deck and could carry 141,200 barrels or 5,930,000 gallons of oil in ten sets of tanks. Eight of the tanks carried 391,500 gallons and two side tanks (one port, one starboard) carried about 165,000 gallons each.

There was also a small dry cargo space of about 15,200 cubic feet located forward of Tank Number 1 above the deep tank. There were two pump rooms, one forward and one aft. The main pump room was aft, and contained six pumps. There were three large capacity pumps of 2,000 gallons per minute (GPM) which were driven by electric motors located in an adjacent machinery space. There were also two 400 GPM pumps and one 700 GPM pump. In the forward pump room was one 700 GPM pump and 300 GPM pump which were reciprocating pumps used for fuel transfer.

Her cruising range was 12,600 miles at a speed of 14-1/2 to 15-1/2 knots with a crew of forty-six commanded by T.J. Cullum, Ship's Master. Her length was 504 feet (68 foot beam and 30 foot draft) with a gross tonnage of 10,448 tons (21,880 loaded displacement tons). The S.S. Joshua Tree was equipped with an echo sounding device, gyro-compass, radio telephone, and radio directional finder. Her 6,000 shaft horsepower Turbo-Electric propulsion engine, built by General Electric and fueled by oil, powered her single screw solid bronze propeller. She was painted "neutral grey."

She was armed with (1) 5" 38 caliber Double Purpose gun on the aft boat deck, (1) 3" 50 caliber Double Purpose gun on the forward gun platform, and (8) 20 mm Anti-Aircraft Machine Guns (AAMG). These AAMGs were mounted four on aft deck (two port and two starboard) and four on bridge house (two port and two starboard). She had a complement of twenty-eight Navy Armed Guards initially commanded by Lt. (jg) Charles G. Fry, USNR, until April 16, 1945 when Lt. William H. Laird, USNR, took command.

On December 26, 1944, her degaussing (a process to neutralize the magnetic field surrounding the ship as a protection against magnetic mines) installation was completed.

On January 2, 1945, her maiden voyage was from Swan Island to San Pedro, California, then north to Port Angeles, Washington, and finally south to San Francisco, California, arriving January 17, 1945.

On January 22, 1945, she took on 100 octane airplane fuel and cargo and headed to Dutch New Guinea stopping at Manus Island (now Papua New Guinea) and then Hollandia (now Jayapura, Indonesia), arriving on February 11, 1945. From there, she sailed on February 14, 1945 to Tacloban, San Pedro Bay, Leyte, Philippines in a convoy of twenty-seven vessels with four destroyer escorts to drop off her fuel. She was delayed twenty-nine days in Leyte due to "lack of facilities."

On March 20, 1945, she left Leyte in a convoy of five vessels with two destroyer escorts for Manus Island and then San Pedro, California, carrying airplane gasoline arriving on April 13, 1945.

On April 16, 1945, she left San Pedro. She stopped at Kossol Roads (Palau) and Hollandia before arriving at the oil docks of Tanahmerah, Dutch "New Guinea" (now Indonesia), on May 9, 1945. She left there on May 14, 1945 carrying gasoline and sailing solo for Balboa, Canal Zone via Hollandia, Langemak oil jetty (New Guinea), Dreger Harbor, Finschhafen, Dutch New Guinea (now Papua New Guinea), arriving on June 11, 1945.

On June 24, 1945, she left Balboa, Canal Zone carrying "special navy fuel" and sailed solo for Tacloban, Philippines, arriving on July 22, 1945.

Her final war cruise began July 28, 1945 from Tacloban, Philippines sailing empty to Balboa, Canal Zone, arriving August 24, 1945. Daily logs show she received word from Washington of Japan's surrender on August 14th at 1400 hours. Then through the Panama Canal on September 1, 1945 arriving in New Orleans, Louisiana, on September 8, 1945.

Comments from her daily deck logs show during her voyages blackout conditions were checked nightly and the temperature in the magazines checked daily. Daily activities were plentiful from inspections, deck and quarters cleaning, fire and boat drills, painting, to cleaning, testing and drilling of weapons. Church services were held every Sunday. On March 23, 1945, the "signalman dipped Ensign to half mast in respect for the dead, burial at sea on another ship." While at anchor, there was a daily "movie party" on adjoining ships beside "liberty" for the crew.

During her 1945 voyages, she never encountered the enemy. However, General Quarters was sounded almost daily for unidentified aircraft which always turned out to be "friendly". General Quarters were sounded twice for reported submarines (January 28th and March 29th) and unidentified surface craft (April 30th & May 30th). She encountered two floating mines on July 20th and 22nd but was unsuccessful in detonating them with her 20 mm AAMG. While at Tacloban, she reported daily air raid alerts.

The daily logs report two disciplinary incidents. On May 19, 1945, there was a Ship's Mast held for Seaman First Class William Virden. Two of the charges were for bringing whiskey on board and planting empty liquor bottles in gunnery officer's quarters. However, his sentence was for 200 hours extra labor for being present in the engine room and deck cadet's quarters in direct violation of Ships Orders. On July 30, 1945, Seaman First Class Calvin Schoonover was given an additional one hour of watch for one week for reading a magazine while standing General Quarters.

On October 15, 1945, she was "disarmed" (guns and guards removed), in New Orleans, Louisiana.

After the war, her USMC travels took her to North Africa and the Middle East where she picked up cargo and returned to the United States.

In 1947, she was sold commercially to National Bulk Carriers and kept her name when many of her class were renamed. However, they removed her masts. In 1948, she was re-engined with two steam turbines. In 1952, she was sold to American Tankers Corporation of Delaware.

An internet search for S.S. Joshua Tree produced one document, a Decision of the Commandant United States Coast Guard against Seabron H. Wright, Merchant Mariner's Document No. Z-150345-D2, dated October 22, 1962. Apparently, Seaman Wright was found guilty of possessing hashish (in his flashlight) and marijuana while serving as gallery man aboard the S.S. Joshua Tree. This contraband was discovered during a U.S. Customs search when the ship arrived at the Port of Mobile, Alabama, on February 18, 1960. Wright had his seaman documents revoked for this "misconduct."

Finally in July 1963, the S.S. Joshua Tree was declared "unfit for sea duty" and taken to Hirao, Japan where Matsukura & Company of Hong Kong cut her up for scrap.

In this day of environmental awareness and especially after the Exxon Valdez oil spill, it is ironic that an oil tanker would be named after a national park service area.

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