

= MS West Grama =

MS West Grama , sometimes spelled as West Gramma , was a diesel @-@ powered cargo ship of the United States Maritime Commission ( USMC ) that was sunk as part of the " gooseberry " breakwater off Utah Beach during the Normandy invasion . Prior to her diesel conversion , she was known as SS West Grama . In 1919 , she was briefly taken up by the United States Navy under the name USS West Grama ( ID @-@ 3794 ) .

SS West Grama was built as a steam @-@ powered cargo ship in 1918 for the United States Shipping Board ( USSB ) , a predecessor of the USMC . She was part of the West boats , a series of steel @-@ hulled cargo ships built on the West Coast of the United States for the World War I war effort , and was the 9th ship built at Los Angeles Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company in San Pedro , California . She was commissioned into the Naval Overseas Transportation Service ( NOTS ) of the United States Navy as USS West Grama ( ID @-@ 3794 ) in January 1919 . She became the first American @-@ flagged vessel to enter Bulgarian waters when she delivered a load of wheat flour to Varna in early 1919 . After her one overseas trip for the Navy , she was decommissioned in June 1919 and returned to the USSB .

SS West Grama sailed between Genoa and New York early in her civilian career . In 1927 , West Grama was outfitted with a diesel engine that replaced her original steam engine as part of a pilot program by the USSB . After her conversion , she sailed primarily between East Coast ports and South America . By the late 1930s , she had been laid up , but was reactivated for merchant service during World War II . She sailed primarily in the Caribbean until March 1944 when she sailed from the United States for the final time . She was scuttled in June as part of the " gooseberry " breakwater off Omaha Beach during the Normandy invasion , earning a battle star in the process .

= = Design and construction = =

The West ships were cargo ships of similar size and design built by several shipyards on the west coast of the United States for the United States Shipping Board ( USSB ) for emergency use during World War I. All were given names that began with the word West , like West Grama , the ninth of some 40 West ships built by the Los Angeles Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company of Los Angeles . West Grama ( Los Angeles Shipbuilding yard number 9 ) was one of three Los Angeles Shipbuilding ships launched on 4 July 1918 , and was completed in December .

West Grama was 5 @,@ 445 gross register tons ( GRT ) , and was 410 feet 1 inch ( 124 @.@ 99 m ) long ( between perpendiculars ) and 54 feet 6 inches ( 16 @.@ 61 m ) abeam . She had a steel hull that displaced 12 @,@ 225 t with a mean draft of 24 feet 2 inches ( 7 @.@ 37 m ) . Her hold was 29 feet 9 inches ( 9 @.@ 07 m ) deep and she had a deadweight tonnage of 8 @,@ 028 DWT . West Grama 's power plant , as built , consisted of a single triple @-@ expansion steam engine driving a single screw propeller , which moved the ship at up to 10 @.@ 5 knots ( 19 @.@ 4 km / h ) .

= = Military career = =

West Grama was taken over by the U.S. Navy on 9 January 1919 at San Pedro , California , and was commissioned into the Naval Overseas Transportation Service ( NOTS ) the same day with Lieutenant Commander Eugene McCarthy , USNRF , in command . West Grama headed north to San Francisco to take on a load of wheat flour for delivery to Europe . After undergoing boiler repairs at Union Iron Works , she departed San Francisco for Norfolk , Virginia , on 28 January . West Grama transited the Panama Canal on 14 February and got underway again on 19 February , after a four @-@ day layover in the Canal Zone .

On 25 February , a half @-@ submerged ship was spotted some 200 nautical miles ( 370 km ) east @-@ northeast of Nassau , Bahamas . Upon investigation , it was determined to be the wreck of the American schooner Nettie Shipman , but , with no signs of life aboard the hulk , West Grama continued on to Virginia , where she arrived three days later .

After general repairs and fuel replenishment , West Grama got underway for the Mediterranean on 13 March . Touching at Gibraltar , she next headed to Constantinople , Turkey , to unload part of her cargo , and then proceeded into the Black Sea . She arrived at Varna , Bulgaria , to unload the remainder of the flour , and , in the process , became the first American @-@ flagged vessel to enter Bulgarian waters . After departure from Varna , West Grama returned to the United States via Gibraltar . She carried a mixed load of 13 depth charges and 218 long tons ( 221 t ) of general cargo . In early June , during her return voyage , West Grama was disabled by some unspecified problem while west of Bermuda . The U.S. Navy cargo ship Eastport , en route from New Orleans to Cardiff , assisted West Grama , and the Navy dispatched the icebreaker Rogday from Boston to aid West Grama . It 's not known what assistance was provided or if West Grama was even able to proceed on her own , but she arrived at Norfolk on 11 June . Five days later , West Grama was decommissioned and returned to the USSB for civilian service .

= = Civilian career = =

After her return to the United States Shipping Board ( USSB ) , West Grama sailed on a Genoa ? Gibraltar ? New York route through 1920 . In April 1920 , West Grama carried some 52 passengers from Genoa and Gibraltar to New York . There is no mention in sources of the ship 's activities over the next seven years , but in June 1927 , the Los Angeles Times reported that West Grama had been selected for a \$ 400 @, @ 000 conversion from steam @-@ power to diesel @-@ power . By late November , the conversion , undergoing at the Fore River Shipyard near Boston , was nearly complete . The new engine was a McIntosh & Seymour double @-@ acting diesel , the first of its type built in America . On 8 December , during successful sea trials of West Grama 's new diesel power plant , a malfunction in a steam boiler used to heat the crew quarters caused minor damage to the ship .

Allocated to the American Republics Line for service to the east coast of South America , West Grama sailed for Buenos Aires , Argentina , where she had arrived by late January 1928 , and back to New York by late March . In October 1929 , West Grama was reportedly assigned to the new Pacific ? South Africa Line by the USSB , an around @-@ the @-@ world venture under the management of J. J. Moore & Company . The Pacific ? South Africa Line ? the world 's only all @-@ diesel around @-@ the @-@ world service , as described by the Los Angeles Times ? sailed from Los Angeles to South Africa via the Straits of Magellan , across the Indian Ocean to Japan and China , across the Pacific to San Francisco , and back to Los Angeles . It 's not clear how long , if at all , West Grama sailed for this line . In July 1929 , a report in The New York Times shows that West Grama was still in South American service , sailing to Santos , Brazil .

Sources are not clear as to all of West Grama 's movements over the next years . Hints can be gleaned from contemporary news accounts . In March 1930 , the Los Angeles Times reported that West Grama was en route from Balboa to San Francisco . The New York Times reported West Grama 's arrival from Portland , Oregon in September , her departure for Fremantle , Western Australia in October 1933 , and her arrival from Baltimore in March the following year . After these mentions , West Grama disappears from contemporary news accounts , and by 1939 , West Grama had been laid up in a reserve fleet .

= = World War II = =

In December 1940 , the United States Maritime Commission ( USMC ) , a successor to the USSB , announced that it was seeking bids for the sale of 24 ships from its reserve fleet , including West Grama . In January 1941 , the USMC announced that a consortium of Commonwealth shipping lines had been the high bidders for 19 of the 20 ships still offered . The highest bid for West Grama was \$ 80 @, @ 000 , but it is not clear if the bid was , in fact , accepted ; by November , West Grama was sailing between Antofagasta , Chile , and New York , but remained under the American flag . From July 1942 through February 1944 , West Grama sailed between the United States and Caribbean ports , frequently traveling in convoys . The ship 's recorded movements show her calling at

Cristóbal , Guantánamo Bay , Trinidad , Key West , and Pilottown , Louisiana . In mid @-@ February 1944 , West Grama sailed from Key West to New York , and from there , on to Boston .

= = Final voyage = =

West Grama had been selected to become one of the blockships for the Allied invasion of France , then in the planning stages . Though the specific modifications performed on West Grama are not revealed in sources , modifications for other ships do appear . In November 1944 , The Christian Science Monitor reported that blockships dispatched from Boston , like West Grama , had been loaded with " tons of sand and cement " and had been rigged with explosive charges before departing the port . Further , existing antiaircraft weapons had been moved higher up on the ship and supplemented by additional guns . An account by Cesar Poropat , chief engineer aboard West Honaker , another blockship dispatched from Boston , mentions that shipyard workers proceeded to cut holes in " strategic places " .

West Grama departed Boston on 25 March and arrived at Halifax two days later . Departing from that port on 29 March , she sailed in Convoy SC @-@ 156 and arrived at Barry Roads on 13 April , and by 7 May , she had arrived at Methil . West Grama 's whereabouts and movements through early June are not recorded . Other ships that had been selected as blockships assembled in a " corncob " fleet at Oban , though it 's not clear if West Grama did or not . The " corncob " fleet was the group of ships intended to be sunk to form the " gooseberries " , shallow @-@ water artificial harbors for landing craft . Poropat reports that once the ship crews were told of their mission while anchored at Oban , they were not permitted to leave the ships .

Three " corncob " convoys , consisting of what one author called the " dregs of the North Atlantic shipping pool " , departed from Poole and reached the Normandy beachhead the next day , shortly after the D @-@ Day landings . Poropat reports that the corncob ships traveled under cover of darkness and , stripped of all unnecessary equipment , carried no radios , having only a signal lamp ( with a spare bulb ) for communication . Once at the designated location , the ships were put into position and scuttled over the next days , under heavy German artillery fire . Naval Armed Guardsmen manned the guns on all the gooseberry ships to protect against frequent German air attacks . All the while , harbor pilots ? about half of the New York Bar Pilots Association , according to one source ? carefully positioned the ships . West Grama was sunk off Omaha Beach on 8 June , though she continued to serve as an antiaircraft platform manned by Navy gun crews . On 9 June , West Grama 's gunners fired 19 times and were credited with assisting in the downing one German airplane ; only one of West Grama 's Navy gunners was wounded during the attack . On 14 June , West Grama escaped serious damage when a bomb landed near the ship . By the time her Naval Armed Guardsmen were replaced by Army crews on 18 June , they had received credit for a second assist , and had been awarded a battle star for their participation in the Normandy Landings .