

= SS West Cheswald =

SS West Cheswald was a cargo ship for the United States Shipping Board ( USSB ) launched shortly after the end of World War I. The ship was inspected by the United States Navy for possible use as USS West Cheswald ( ID @-@ 4199 ) but was neither taken into the Navy nor ever commissioned under that name . West Cheswald was built in 1919 for the USSB , as a 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 32nd ship built at Northwest Steel in Portland , Oregon .

She operated for several years as a merchant ship , and was involved in a court case that eventually reached the Supreme Court of the United States in 1928 . She was laid up in New Orleans , Louisiana , until late 1940 when she was reactivated and refitted to carry American defense @-@ related cargos to Africa and chromium and manganese ore to the United States .

Continuing in African service after the United States entered World War II , she was diverted in March 1942 for one round trip to the Soviet Union , enduring German attacks that earned her U.S. Navy Armed Guard a battle star . After her return , she sailed mainly between the United States and African and Caribbean ports . In March 1944 , she sailed from the United States for the final time , and was scuttled in June as part of the " gooseberry " breakwater off Utah Beach during the Normandy invasion , earning a second 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 Cheswald , the one of some 40 West ships built by the Northwest Steel of Portland , Oregon . West Cheswald ( Northwest Steel yard number 32 , USSB hull number 1421 ) was completed in September 1919 .

West Cheswald was 6 @,@ 187 gross register tons ( GRT ) , and was 412 feet 1 inch ( 125 @.@ 60 m ) long ( between perpendiculars ) and 54 feet 6 inches ( 16 @.@ 61 m ) abeam . She had a steel hull with a hold that was 29 feet 9 inches ( 9 @.@ 07 m ) deep . She had a displacement of 12 @,@ 200 t with a mean draft of 24 feet 1 inch ( 7 @.@ 34 m ) . The ship had a single steam turbine that drove a single screw propeller , and moved the ship at up to 11 @.@ 5 knots ( 21 @.@ 3 km / h ) .

= = Early career = =

West Cheswald was inspected by the 13th Naval District of the United States Navy after completion for possible use as a service collier and was assigned the identification number of 4199 . Had she been commissioned , she would have been known as USS West Cheswald ( ID @-@ 4199 ) , but the Navy neither took over the ship nor commissioned her .

Information on West Cheswald 's early career is lacking , but records of some of her movements and cargo are available . On 30 September 1920 , West Cheswald took on a load of white sugar at Java and headed for the United States via the Suez Canal . While she was near Bermuda , West Cheswald was diverted from her original destination of New York to Philadelphia , to deliver her cargo in fulfillment of an order . Because the cargo had not been originally headed to Philadelphia , the purchasers refused to pay for it , believing that the voyage took too long . After litigation and various appeals , the case ended up before the Supreme Court of the United States in 1928 as *Lamborn v. National Bank of Commerce* , 276 U.S. 469 ( 1928 ) . The court found that under the contract signed , the purchasers were obligated for the sugar regardless of whether or not the ship had originally been destined for Philadelphia . West Cheswald was also reported in Hawaiian service during 1920 . The report of the Governor of Hawaii in the annual report of the United States Department of the Interior for the 1920 ? 21 fiscal year , listed West Cheswald among the four USSB @-@ owned ships sailed to Hawaii by the Pacific Steamship Company .

From 1922 , West Cheswald operated to South America , often bringing coffee to the United States

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= = World War II = =

In June 1940 , as World War II raged in Europe , the United States Maritime Commission ( USMC ) ( a successor to the USSB ) announced bidding for the reconditioning of West Cheswald and nine other ships that were in the reserve fleet . The low bid for West Cheswald was by the Maryland Drydock Company of Baltimore , which priced the repairs at \$ 169 @, @ 961 . In February 1941 , the USMC announced another round of bidding , this time for the operation of West Cheswald and three other ships on defense routes to southern and eastern Africa . The ships would carry defense cargo to African ports and return loads of chromium and manganese ore ? both needed for the production of steel for armaments ? to the United States . The American South African Line had the low bid for West Cheswald , offering to operate her for \$ 17 @, @ 174 monthly .

With her reconditioning complete , West Cheswald arrived in New York from Baltimore on 23 March . Although she may have been scheduled to begin her African service as early as 29 March , she sailed from New York on 11 April for the Cape Verde Islands , and from there , to Cape Town , where she arrived on 15 May . Beginning the next day , West Cheswald visited Port Elizabeth , East London , Durban , Mombasa , Tanga , and Zanzibar through 11 June . She returned to Tanga , then sailed from Dar es Salaam to Zanzibar and back on 23 and 24 June . She next made her way to Lourenço Marques , where she arrived on 3 July . From Lourenço Marques , she sailed back to Durban and Cape Town , before she began her transatlantic journey to Trinidad on 18 July . After calling at that Caribbean port , she returned to New York to complete her first circuit on 18 August .

On 6 September , West Cheswald began another , similar voyage to Africa . In addition to calling at many of the same ports she visited on her first trip , she visited the port of Beira , Mozambique for the first time in early November . The ship was in transit from Cape Town to Trinidad on 7 December during the Attack on Pearl Harbor , and by the time she arrived at Boston on 27 December , the United States had joined the Allies of World War II in declaring war against the Axis powers .

= = Arctic convoy = =

West Cheswald sailed from Boston for New York on 30 December , and spent nearly eight weeks at New York . Outfitted with armament and a Naval Armed Guard detachment , she sailed from Boston for Halifax with a load of tanks on 23 February 1942 . After spending five days at Halifax , she sailed as part of Convoy SC 72 to Clyde on 28 February . After arriving at Clyde on 17 March , West Cheswald made her way to Oban on 22 March and sailed four days later for Murmansk as part of Convoy PQ 14 . The convoy consisted of approximately 25 merchant ships , ten of which were American , and of the American ships , only two ? West Cheswald and Yaka ? possessed defensive weaponry manned by Naval Armed Guardsmen . Many ships turned back because of heavy fog and snow ; West Cheswald , Yaka and several other ships from the convoy remained at Reykjavík from 31 March to 8 April . On 15 April , the convoy was tracked by a German aircraft , and convoy escort ships made contact with three German destroyers . The following day , the convoy commodore 's ship was sunk by a submarine ; at least two other torpedoes traveled through the convoy without hitting any ships . The convoy came under air attack on 17 April , but suffered no losses . As the convoy neared Murmansk , two Soviet destroyers with air cover joined the escort , and the convoy arrived without further incident on 19 April .

Though the convoy had arrived at its destination , the danger of attack was still present . The nearest German airfield was 35 miles ( 56 km ) away ? about 7 to 10 minutes flying time ? which gave almost no advance warning of air raids . German dive bombers would silently glide in below Soviet anti @-@ aircraft fire , drop their bombs , and fly away . West Cheswald was luckier than

some . Her closest call occurred when a bomb fell 50 feet ( 15 m ) away from the ship during an air raid on 23 April , destroying a 50 @-@ ton crane that had earlier finished unloading the ship ; West Cheswald suffered no major damage in any of the attacks . Despite the fact that Murmansk had limited port facilities and typically slow unloading of cargo , West Cheswald was ready to sail in the next departing convoy , Convoy QP 11 , on 28 April . West Cheswald 's armed guardsmen received a battle star for their participation in Convoy PQ 14 .

= = Later voyages = =

After returning to New York on 31 May by way of Reykjavík and Halifax , West Cheswald made a brief trip to Philadelphia and back before she worked her way down the East Coast to Norfolk , Virginia , where she arrived on 17 June . Sailing the next day , the cargo ship began the first of two African trips , during which she made many of the same ports as in her two 1941 voyages . On the homeward leg of her second voyage , she called at Takoradi and Freetown on the western coast of Africa in March 1943 . After returning to the Americas , West Cheswald visited Saint Thomas , San Juan , and Mayagüez in the Caribbean before returning to Philadelphia on 28 April .

West Cheswald 's next sailing began on 6 June , when she left Boston for Halifax , sailing from the latter port on 16 June in Convoy SC @-@ 134 bound for Liverpool . Breaking off from the convoy for Loch Ewe , West Cheswald also visited Methil , Southend , and Oban , before returning to New York on 11 August . Sailing from there on 6 September , she began her final trip to Africa , in which she visited the West African ports of Bathurst , Freetown , Monrovia , and Takoradi before returning to Philadelphia via Trinidad on 27 January 1944 . She sailed from Philadelphia ten days later , ending up in Boston .

= = Final voyage = =

West Cheswald 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 Cheswald 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 Cheswald , 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 transverse bulkheads aboard that ship were cut open to facilitate sinking .

West Cheswald departed Boston on 10 March and arrived at Halifax two days later . Departing from that port on 29 March , she sailed in Convoy SC @-@ 156 and arrived at Swansea on 14 April . She departed there on 30 April for Oban , where she joined the assembling " Corncob Fleet . " The Corncob Fleet was the group of ships 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 . After five weeks of isolation at anchor , West Cheswald headed south for Poole , to join the first corncob convoy .

West Cheswald sailed from Poole on 7 June in a convoy , consisting of what one author called the " dregs of the North Atlantic shipping pool " , and reached the Normandy beachhead the next day , two days 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 ; West Cheswald 's gunners were credited with downing one plane on 10 June . All the while , harbor pilots ? about half of the New York Bar Pilots Association , according to one source ? carefully positioned the ships . West Cheswald and West Nohno were the last two ships sunk off Utah Beach when they went down on 11 June . Even though she had been sunk , West

Cheswald continued to serve as an antiaircraft platform manned by Navy gun crews until 19 June , and by Army crews after that date . West Cheswald 's naval gunners were awarded a second battle star for participation in the Normandy Landings .