

= SS El Occidente =

SS El Occidente was a cargo ship for the Morgan Line , a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Company . During World War I , she was known as USAT El Occidente in service with the United States Army and as USS El Occidente (ID @-@ 3307) in service with the United States Navy . At the end of war , she reverted to her original name of SS El Occidente .

Built in 1910 , SS El Occidente was one of four sister ships that carried cargo and a limited number of passengers for the Morgan Line . She was acquired by the U.S. Army after the United States entered World War I in April 1917 , and converted to carry horses and mules to France . In February 1918 , she fought a 20 @-@ minute gun battle with two German submarines , destroying the periscope of one . In August 1918 , the ship was transferred to the U.S. Navy and continued transporting animals through the end of the war .

El Occidente returned to the Morgan Line in 1919 and sailed with them until June 1941 , when the entire Morgan Line fleet was purchased by the United States Maritime Commission . While serving as a civilian @-@ crewed cargo ship during World War II , El Occidente was torpedoed and sunk by German submarine U @-@ 435 on 13 April 1942 .

= = Early career = =

SS El Occidente was a cargo and passenger steamship launched on 24 September 1910 by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co. of Newport News , Virginia (yard no . 133) , and delivered to the Atlantic division of the Morgan Line on 2 December 1910 . She was the newest of four sister ships ; the older three being El Sol , El Mundo , and El Oriente . El Occidente was 6 @,@ 008 gross register tons (GRT) , was 430 feet 2 inches (131 @.@ 11 m) long by 53 feet 1 inch (16 @.@ 18 m) abeam , and made 15 @.@ 5 knots (28 @.@ 7 km / h) . The vessel sailed for the Morgan Line , the brand name of the Southern Pacific Steamship Company (a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad) , which employed her to carry cargo and a limited number of passengers between New York and New Orleans , the eastern terminus of the Southern Pacific line .

In April 1913 , The New York Times reported that El Occidente , loaded only with cargo , had rammed a schooner in fog off the New Jersey coast . Responding to a wireless message , the Savannah steamer City of Montgomery came alongside El Occidente to offer assistance , but was refused . The name and fate of the schooner were not reported .

= = World War I = =

After the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917 , the United States Army , needing transports to get its men and materiel to France , had a select committee of shipping executives pore over registries of American shipping . The committee selected El Occidente and thirteen other American @-@ flagged ships that were sufficiently fast , could carry enough fuel in their bunkers for transatlantic crossings , and , most importantly , were in port or not far at sea . After El Occidente discharged her last load of passengers and cargo , she was officially handed over to the Army on 30 May .

Before any troop transportation could be undertaken , all of the ships had to be hastily refitted . Of the fourteen ships , four , including El Occidente , were designated to carry animals and cargo ; the other ten were designated to carry human passengers . The four ships designated to carry animals had to have ramps and stalls built . All the ships had to have gun platforms installed , before each ship docked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard to have the guns themselves installed . All the ships were manned by merchant officers and crews but carried two U.S. Navy officers , Navy gun crews , quartermasters , signalmen , and wireless operators . The senior Navy officer on board would take control if a ship came under attack .

The American convoy carrying the first units of the American Expeditionary Force was broken into four groups ; El Occidente was in the fourth group with Montanan , Dakotan , and Edward Luckenbach , and escorts consisting of cruiser St. Louis , U.S. Navy transport Hancock , and

destroyers Shaw , Ammen , and Flusser . El Occidente departed with her group on the morning of 17 June for Brest , France , steaming at an 11 @-@ knot (20 km / h) pace . A thwarted submarine attack on the first convoy group , and reports of heavy submarine activity off of Brest resulted in a change in the convoy 's destination to Saint @-@ Nazaire .

El Occidente departed Saint @-@ Nazaire on 14 July in the company of her convoy mates Dakotan , Montanan , and Edward Luckenbach . Joining the return trip were Army transport Momus , Navy armed collier Cyclops , Navy oiler Kanawha , and cruiser Seattle , the flagship of Rear Admiral Albert Gleaves , the head of the Navy 's Cruiser and Transport Force .

Sources do not reveal El Occidente 's movements over the next eight months . But in April 1918 , the Chicago Daily Tribune reported on an encounter El Occidente had with two German submarines that had occurred on 2 February . In a 20 @-@ minute running gun battle , Naval Armed Guardsmen aboard El Occidente exchanged fire with two U @-@ boats , one on the port and one on the starboard . The news item reported that El Occidente 's gunners had demolished the periscope of one of her attackers .

El Occidente 's next recorded convoy trip took place on 23 March , when she sailed with Navy transports Martha Washington and Powhatan , Army transport ship Finland , and cruiser Pueblo , arriving in France on 4 April . El Occidente next sailed on 18 May with President Grant , Calamares , stores ship Bridge , and Italian steamer Duca degli Abruzzi . Rendezvousing with a contingent of transports from Newport News ? Madawaska , Pocahontas , Zeelandia , and Italian steamer Re d 'Italia ? the convoy was escorted by American cruiser Huntington , and destroyers Little and Kimberly . The convoy arrived in France on 30 May . On 10 July , El Occidente departed Newport News with Navy transports Aeolus , Powhatan , Martha Washington , Matsonia , but had to return to port with a leaky gas injector .

On 27 August 1918 , El Occidente was transferred to the Navy and commissioned the same day with Lt. Commander E. S. Campbell , USNRF . El Occidente loaded cargo and 585 horses and mules , and sailed for France on 17 September . Five animals died or were destroyed during the voyage . Offloading her cargo at Saint @-@ Nazaire and Verdun , El Occidente returned to the U.S. on 1 November .

In port when the Armistice with Germany was signed on 11 November , El Occidente loaded 1 @,@ 467 short tons (1 @,@ 331 t) of cargo and 800 animals for a second Navy voyage . Departing on 17 November for Verdun , the ship arrived there on 19 December . Returning to Baltimore for repairs and alterations which included the removal of her armament and the stalls for animal cargo , El Occidente sailed again on 15 January 1919 for Bordeaux where she unloaded cargo for the Army of Occupation and embarked 90 passengers for return to the United States . She was decommissioned at New York on 18 March 1919 , and delivered to the United States Shipping Board the same day .

= = Interwar civilian service = =

Returned by the USSB in March 1919 , El Occidente resumed cargo service with the Morgan Line , where she had almost 15 years of routine operation . However , in the 1930s , sailing on a New York ? Galveston route , El Occidente was involved in several notable events .

In July 1933 , El Occidente had a fire in her No. 1 cargo hold while she was southbound 15 nautical miles (28 km) out from Norfolk , Virginia . El Occidente 's initial radio message reported that her crew had the blaze under control , but when that proved not to be the case , she headed in , docked at the Norfolk grain elevator , and requested assistance from local firefighters .

In September 1935 , El Occidente came to the aid of Morgan passenger liner Dixie , which had been driven onto French Reef by the Labor Day Hurricane . Dixie had been headed from New Orleans to New York when she grounded on the reef , located about 60 nautical miles (110 km) south of Miami , Florida and 4 @. @ 5 nautical miles (8 @. @ 3 km) off shore . El Occidente , one of 15 ships that responded to Dixie 's distress calls , carried two loads of passengers and baggage from Dixie to Miami . There was no loss of life during the grounding or the rescue of Dixie 's passengers .

In January 1937 , El Occidente issued a distress call while she was in the Gulf of Mexico . After she reported a fire while some 200 nautical miles (370 @,@ 000 m) south of the mouth of the Mississippi River , U.S. Coast Guard cutters Kimball and Triton and German freighter Leubeck all responded to the call . Before any reached the burning vessel , El Occidente reported that she had gotten the fire under control and needed no further assistance . El Occidente headed to Galveston . The following month , El Occidente issued another distress call , this time for a broken rudder while 80 nautical miles (150 km) off the Virginia Capes . Coast Guard cutter Sebago responded and towed El Occidente to Norfolk , delivering her there on 7 February .

= = World War II = =

In June 1941 , the United States Maritime Commission (USMC) announced that it had requisitioned the entire Morgan Line fleet of ten ships , including El Occidente and her remaining sister ships , El Oriente and El Mundo . The ships were to finish previously scheduled cargo runs and be handed over to the USMC over the following six weeks . The USMC had been charged with assembling a 2 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 GRT U.S. fleet to " aid the democracies " fighting Germany in World War II , and paid \$ 4 @.@ 7 million for all ten ships and a further \$ 2 @.@ 6 million for repairs and refits .

El Occidente was handed over to the War Shipping Administration at Galveston on 7 July and assigned to United States Lines , Inc . , for operation . The cargo ship was placed under Panamanian registry by U.S. Lines . Little is known of El Occidente 's movements over the six months , but on 30 January 1942 , she left Boston for Halifax loaded with a general cargo . Arriving at Halifax on 1 February , she joined Convoy HX 174 and headed for Liverpool on 7 February , arriving at her destination on 21 February .

Two days later , El Occidente sailed for Reykjavík , where she arrived on 1 March , just in time to depart with Convoy PQ 12 for Murmansk . After the convoy arrived at Murmansk on 12 March , El Occidente unloaded her cargo and took on a partial ballast load of chromium ore . She departed in Convoy QP 10 on 10 April . At 01 : 29 on 13 April , while at position 73 ° 28 ' N 28 ° 30 ' E , German submarine U @-@ 435 under the command of Siegfried Strelow fired one or two torpedoes which struck El Occidente in the engine room , nearly breaking the vessel in half . El Occidente went down stern first within two minutes , with no time to launch lifeboats . Within 30 minutes of her sinking , HMS Speedwell , one of the convoy 's escorts , rescued 21 of the ship 's 41 @-@ man crew ; the remaining 20 crewmen died .