

= SS Montanan =

SS Montanan was a cargo ship built in 1912 for the American @-@ Hawaiian Steamship Company . During World War I service for the United States Army Transport Service , she was known as USAT Montanan . Montanan was built by the Maryland Steel Company as one of eight sister ships for the American @-@ Hawaiian Steamship Company , and was employed in inter @-@ coastal service via the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Panama Canal after it opened .

In World War I , USAT Montanan carried cargo and animals to France , and was in the first American convoy to sail to France after the United States entered the war in April 1917 . While in another eastbound convoy in August 1918 , USAT Montanan was torpedoed and sunk by U @-@ 90 some 500 nmi (900 km) west of Le Verdon @-@ sur @-@ Mer , France . Of the 86 men aboard the ship , 81 were rescued by a convoy escort ; five men died in the attack .

= = Design and construction = =

In September 1911 , the American @-@ Hawaiian Steamship Company placed an order with the Maryland Steel Company of Sparrows Point , Maryland , for four new cargo ships ? Minnesotan , Dakotan , Montanan , and Pennsylvanian . The contract cost of the ships was set at the construction cost plus an 8 % profit for Maryland Steel , but with a maximum cost of \$ 640 @,@ 000 per ship . The construction was financed by Maryland Steel with a credit plan that called for a 5 % down payment in cash , with nine monthly installments for the balance . The deal had provisions that allowed some of the nine installments to be converted into longer @-@ term notes or mortgages . The final cost of Montanan , including financing costs , was \$ 73 @.@ 62 per deadweight ton , which came out to just over \$ 692 @,@ 000 .

Montanan (Maryland Steel yard no . 126) was the second ship built under the original contract . She was launched on 25 January 1913 , and delivered to American @-@ Hawaiian in April . Montanan was 6 @,@ 649 gross register tons (GRT) , and was 428 ft 9 in (130 @.@ 68 m) in length and 53 ft 7 in (16 @.@ 33 m) abeam . She had a deadweight tonnage of 9 @,@ 406 LT DWT , and her cargo holds , which had a storage capacity of 438 @,@ 154 cu ft (12 @,@ 407 @.@ 1 m3) , were outfitted with a complete refrigeration plant so that she could carry perishable products from the West Coast ? such as fresh produce from Southern California farms ? to the East Coast . Montanan had a single steam engine powered by oil @-@ fired boilers which drove a single screw propeller at a speed of 15 kn (17 mph ; 28 km / h) .

= = Early career = =

When Montanan began sailing for American @-@ Hawaiian , the company shipped cargo from East Coast ports via the Tehuantepec Route to West Coast ports and Hawaii , and vice versa . Shipments on the Tehuantepec Route arrived at Mexican ports ? Salina Cruz , Oaxaca , for eastbound cargo , and Coatzacoalcas , Veracruz , for westbound cargo ? and traversed the Isthmus of Tehuantepec on the Tehuantepec National Railway . Eastbound shipments were primarily sugar and pineapple from Hawaii , while westbound cargoes were more general in nature . Montanan sailed in this service on the east side of North America .

While headed from New York to Coatzacoalcas in October 1913 , Montanan ran aground on Mantanilla Reef , north of The Bahamas . Answering Montanan 's distress calls , the Standard Oil Company tanker Rayo assisted in freeing Montanan from the reef . Although she was leaking slightly , Montanan continued on to her destination , and put in for repairs after a return trip to New York .

Following the United States occupation of Veracruz on 21 April 1914 (which took place while six American @-@ Hawaiian ships were being held in various Mexican ports) , the Huerta @-@ led Mexican government closed the Tehuantepec National Railway to American shipping . This loss of access , coupled with the fact that the Panama Canal was not yet open , caused American @-@ Hawaii to return to its historic route of sailing around South America via the Straits of Magellan in

late April . With the opening of the Panama Canal on 15 August , American @-@ Hawaiian ships switched to the canal route .

On 2 December , The Washington Post reported an incident involving Montanan . While headed down the Pacific coast of Mexico with a cargo of dried fruits and canned goods , Montanan was approached by a Japanese warship , which fired a warning shot for Montanan to stop . After doing so , a boarding party with Japanese officers in a launch headed to Montanan . When the American identity of Montanan was established to the satisfaction of the Japanese , they returned to their ship without boarding Montanan . The news report did not identify the type or the name of the Japanese warship , which had been searching for a German vessel thought to be operating in the area .

On Montanan 's next trip , the ship collided with a wharf in Los Angeles Harbor . Montanan had arrived in Los Angeles from Puget Sound on 22 January 1915 to complete her load before sailing for New York and Boston . The almost fully loaded ship was slow to respond to the helm and ended up " ploughing through " 50 ft (15 m) of Municipal Pier A on Mormon Island channel before coming to a stop at a stone bulkhead . One hull plate on Montanan was dented , but the ship was otherwise undamaged . Montanan 's captain , who had a local license , did not take on a harbor pilot and American @-@ Hawaiian was liable for the damage , estimated by the harbor engineer to be \$ 2 @, @ 500 .

Contemporary news reports offer hints at cargoes that Montanan carried during this period . In April 1915 , the Los Angeles Times reported on the sailing of Montanan with a full cargo . The majority of the cargo was rice ? from Japan , China , and California ? which was destined for the United Kingdom to feed Indian troops fighting in Europe . In June , The Wall Street Journal reported that Montanan and Santa Clara (of the Grace Line) had sailed from Tacoma , Washington , with 2 @, @ 500 tons of copper between them .

In October 1915 , landslides closed the Panama Canal and all American @-@ Hawaiian ships , including Montanan , returned to the Straits of Magellan route again . Montanan 's exact movements from this time through early 1917 are unclear . She may have been in the half of the American @-@ Hawaiian fleet that was chartered for transatlantic service , or she may have been in the group of American @-@ Hawaiian ships chartered for service to South America , delivering coal , gasoline , and steel in exchange for coffee , nitrates , cocoa , rubber , and manganese ore .

= = U.S. Army service = =

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 Montanan , her sister ship Dakotan , and 12 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 Montanan discharged her last load of cargo , she was officially handed over to the Army on 29 May .

Before troop transportation began , all of the ships were hastily refitted . Of the fourteen ships , four , including Montanan and Dakotan , were designated to carry animals and cargo ; the other ten were designated to carry human passengers . Ramps and stalls were built on the four ships chosen to carry animals . Gun platforms were installed on each ship before docking at the Brooklyn Navy Yard , where the guns were put in place . 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 separated into four groups ; Montanan was in the fourth group with her sister ship Dakotan , Army transports El Occidente and Edward Luckenbach , and escorts consisting of cruiser St. Louis , U.S. Navy transport Hancock , and destroyers Shaw , Ammen , and Flusser . Montanan departed with her group on the morning of 17 June for Brest , France , steaming at an 11 kn (13 mph ; 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 where

the convoy arrived 2 July .

Montanan departed Saint Nazaire on 14 July in the company of her convoy mates El Occidente , Dakotan , 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 Montanan 's movements over the next months , but on 1 August 1918 , Montanan sailed in Convoy HB 8 with U.S. Navy cargo ships West Alsek , West Bridge , and 13 others for France . Escorted by armed yacht Noma , destroyers Burrows and Smith , and French cruiser Marseillaise , the convoy was 500 nmi (600 mi ; 900 km) west of its destination of Le Verdon sur Mer by the end of the day on 15 August . At sundown , shortly before 18 : 00 , German submarine U 90 launched three torpedoes at Montanan . The first two , spotted by lookouts aboard Montanan , missed , but a third , unseen torpedo struck Montanan amidships on her port side , opening a large hole . Montanan began to settle and was abandoned quickly . Two of Montanan 's Naval Armed Guardsmen drowned when their lifeboat capsized in the heavy seas ; three of her civilian crewmen also died in the attack . Montanan 's 81 survivors were rescued by convoy escort Noma .

Shortly after Montanan was attacked , West Bridge , which had previously developed engine trouble and was drifting , was torpedoed by U 107 and abandoned . By the morning of 16 August both Montanan and West Bridge , with decks awash , were still afloat some 4 nmi (4 @ 6 mi ; 7 @ 4 km) apart . Montanan 's captain and several officers reboarded the ship the next morning for an attempt to get her under tow , but despite their efforts , the ship sank later that morning .