

From Island Ferry to Hospital Ship

A brief account of the World War II service of the steamships Naushon and New Bedford.

by E. Graham Ward

1929 was a dark year for the economy but there was at least one bright spot for the New Bedford, Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Co. That year *Naushon*, perhaps the most elegant Cape and Islands ferry ever built, the queen of the line, was launched from Bethlehem Steel's nearby Fore River Quincy yard. The previous year the same yard had launched *New Bedford* and now the so-called "White Fleet," composed of four similar ferries, was complete.

Although outwardly similar to the others of the fleet, *Naushon* was designed with a level of elegance previously unimagined and never attempted again by the line. She featured 32 staterooms, a glass-enclosed observation deck, writing desks with specially monogrammed stationery, and at one time her own daily newspaper. She served the Steamship line for 13 years and then suddenly, at the height of the summer of 1942, she was gone, together with her sister ship, *New Bedford*. *The Falmouth Enterprise* editorialized that, "to see the *Naushon* steaming away from our docks on less than 24-hour notice and in the midst of the summer season is to

realize how completely the nation's resources are going to war."

Because both ships had shallow drafts, originally designed to navigate Cape waters, they were taken over by the United States War Shipping Administration and then transferred to the British Ministry of War Transport which found their shallow drafts useful in navigating the English channel and, ultimately, the shoreline of Normandy. Thanks to the research of Theodore C. Wyman, who had worked on both *Naushon* and *New Bedford* at the Fore River yard, and who served as an officer on LST 197 (Landing Ship, Tank) during the Normandy campaign, we know some of the details of the fate of these ships.

In September the ships joined Convoy RB-1, a convoy of eight vessels. On September 21, the convoy left St. John's, Newfoundland, bound for Londonder-



SS *Naushon* in her glory days in the 1930s. Postcard courtesy E. Graham Ward.

ry, Ireland. On September 25, one of the group, the former ferry *Boston*, was struck by two torpedoes and sank rapidly. Probably due to its shallow draft *New Bedford* avoided the torpedoes and, with the help of two destroyer escorts, was able to rescue survivors. The next day the ferry *New York* was hit and *New Bedford* again rescued survivors transferring them to a British destroyer which in turn was torpedoed that night and sank. The convoy lost one more vessel before it finally made it to Londonderry.

In November both *Naushon* and *New Bedford* were converted to hospital ships. The *Armed Forces* newspaper,

Stars and Stripes, described the conversion of *Naushon* into *Hospital Ship 49*: "The outer staterooms...have been converted into nurses quarters. Part of the promenade deck has been closed in and is used as the officers' wardroom. The car deck contains bunks for the wounded men and has been sectioned off into wards.... [She was] painted white with a green stripe running fore and aft and large red crosses on her sides and stack."

On June 6, 1944, *New Bedford* was part of the initial assault on Omaha Beach (American troops) and sailed to Gold Beach on June 10 to evacuate British wounded. *Naushon* was not part of these initial assaults but evacuated American wounded from the beaches in June and July. During this difficult time period for American forces there was at

least one happy coincidence. On June 9, *Naushon* received a severely wounded soldier, Sgt. Ralph F. "Jerry" Robbins who, despite his condition, was alert enough to recognize his surroundings, the former ferry *Naushon*.

Remembering that time, Sgt. Robbins later said, "I sort of felt at home as soon as I got there. I was pretty full of morphine but I sat right up and yelled, 'Never mind going to the hospital; tell the captain just to sail for home!'"

Sgt. Robbins recognized *Naushon* because he had lived most of his life in Falmouth and had graduated from Lawrence High School. An alert

military reporter saw the news potential in Robbins' situation and sent the information along to the War Department. The War Department sent the news to *The Falmouth Enterprise*.

At that time the *Enterprise* was a weekly paper published around noon on Friday. The story arrived at noon. In true celluloid newspaper tradition, a cliché come true, the presses were stopped. Sgt. Robbins' wife was telephoned with the news. The front page was remade to include the Robbins-*Naushon* story.

In May, 1945, both ships, at the request of the U.S. Forces, were loaned to "Operation Overlord," the U.S. name for the Normandy campaign. They spent most of their time transporting Americans from



SS Naushon seen in her conversion to Hospital Ship 49 during World War II. Courtesy E. Graham Ward.

Southampton, England, to Le Havre, France, carrying over 40,000 troops across the channel.

But both ships were war weary and late in 1945 they were laid up at Le Havre. There was some question about whether they would ever get back to American shores but eventually they did only to have the Massachusetts Steamship Lines deem them not worth re-fitting. Sound Steamship Lines bought *New Bedford* and used her to run a service between Providence and Block Island. In 1967 she was sold to a Staten Island junkyard for scrap. *Naushon* was sold to the Meseck Steamboat Company where, for ten years, she was used for excursions in the New York area. In 1969 she found herself in a maritime junkyard in Delaware and in 1974 she was scrapped.

But before that ultimate act *Naushon's* voice was to be heard once more. The general manager of the now Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Authority acquired *Naushon's*

whistle and arranged for it to be mounted on the *SS Nantucket*. As the Associated Press reported in December 1967:

WOODS HOLE, Mass.(AP) – Tones of summers past will echo across the waves of Nantucket and Vineyard Sounds next summer when the whistle of the old steamer *Naushon* belts forth its throaty F-major chord once more.

Sources:

Offshore magazine, December, 1996.

Steamboat Bill, a publication of the Steamboat Historical Society of America.

The Falmouth Enterprise, particularly the May 23, 1997, issue.

E. Graham Ward, together with his wife Maria, has been a member of the *Spritsail* editorial board since 2005. He remembers seeing the convoys make up in Buzzards Bay in the early 1940s. In 1964 he and his wife sailed to Nantucket for their honeymoon aboard *Nobska*, which, when she was part of the White Fleet, was briefly named *Nantucket*.



SS New Bedford from postcard. Courtesy E. Graham Ward.