

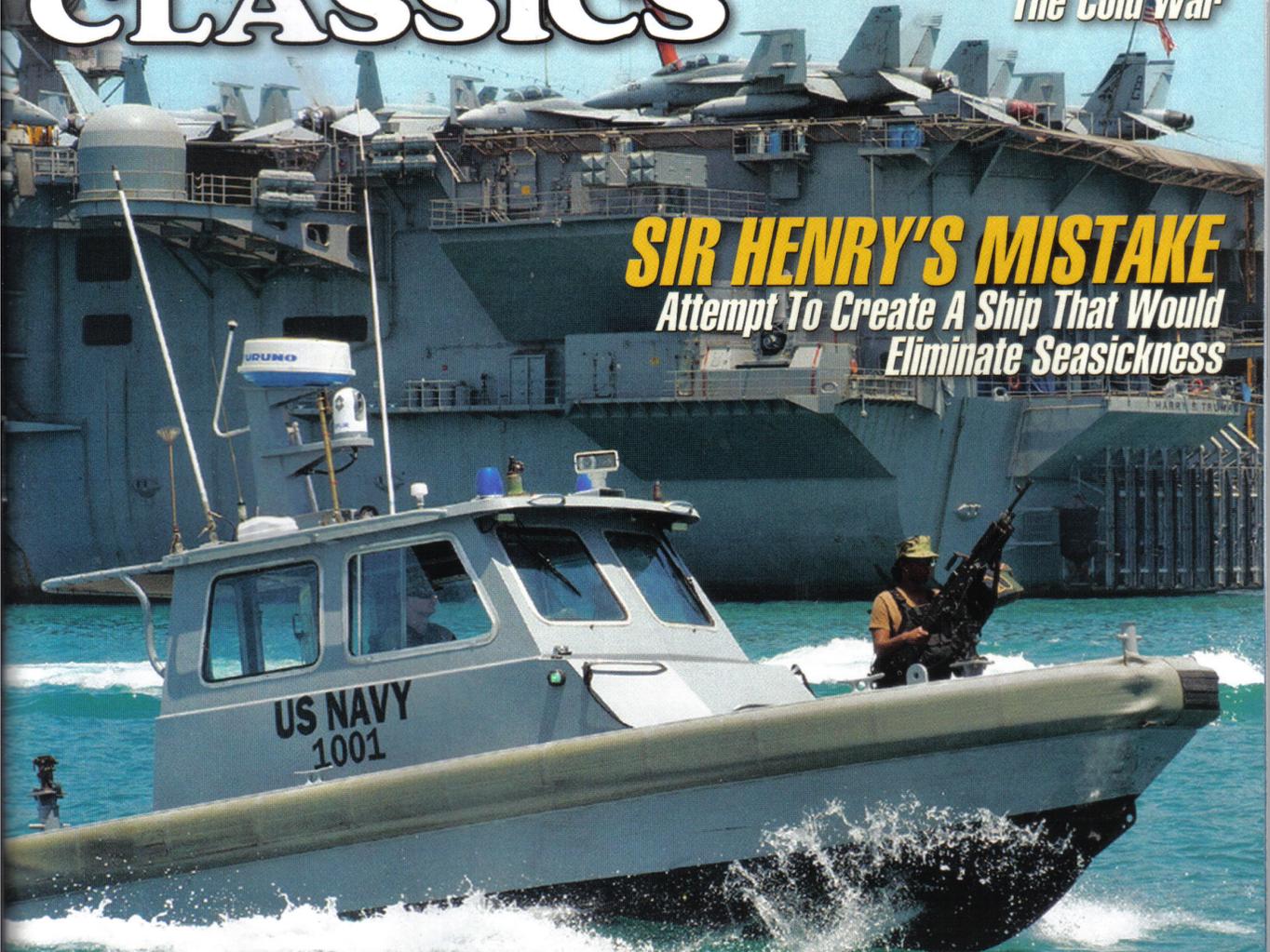
CONESTOGA: NAVY'S LAST MISSING SHIP DISCOVERED

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RETURN OF THE CONESTOGA

The last US Navy ship to disappear without a trace has been discovered

BY SUSAN DUPREY

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE US NAVY AND NOAA



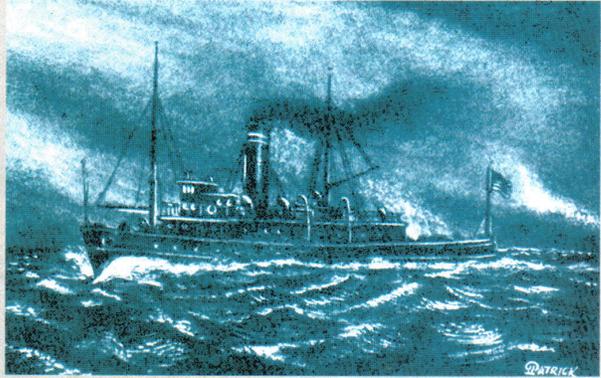
USS *Conestoga* in its last known broadside photograph, likely taken during WWI when the tugboat was equipped with a 3-in gun and two machine guns. The tugboat was equipped with a single 3-in weapon when it disappeared while *en route* from Mare Island to America Samoa by the way of Pearl Harbor.

The US Navy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) made a joint announcement on 23 March regarding the discovery of the World War One-era fleet tugboat USS *Conestoga* (AT-54). The ship had disappeared without a trace some 95-years ago and the announcement was made at the Navy Memorial. Along with the ship, 56 officers and sailors also were lost.

Constructed by the Maryland Steel Company during 1904 at Sparrows Point, Maryland, the tug was built for commercial service. SS *Conestoga* had a displacement of 420-tons, length of 170-ft, beam of 29-ft, draft of 16-ft, and a top speed of 13-kts.

SS *Conestoga* was one of a pair of large sea-going tugs built to the same design and the sistership was SS *Monocacy*. The two tugs were among the largest in the Merchant Marine and were utilized to tow coal barges along the east coast of the USA.

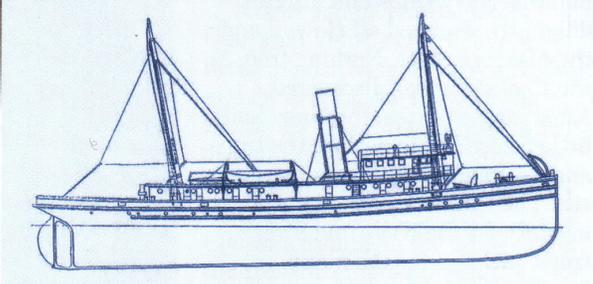
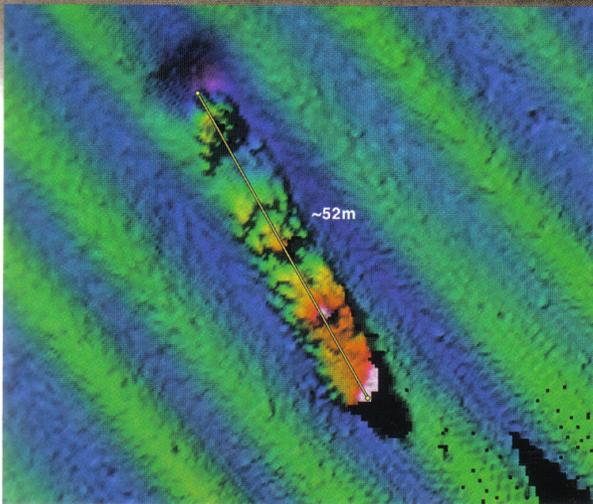
With America's entry into the Great War, the US Navy had a great need for craft such as SS *Conestoga* and the tug was purchased on 14 September 1917 and commissioned USS *Conestoga* (SP-1128, later AT-54) on 10 November of that year with Lt. (jg) Carl Olsen in command. SS *Monocacy* was also acquired by the Navy and commissioned USS *Genesee* (Fleet Tug #55, later AT-55) with Lt. Charles H.T.B. Tissell in command.



Artist conception shows how USS *Conestoga* might have appeared before she disappeared in 1921. From *All Hands* magazine, March 1958.

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SS *Conestoga* was one of a pair of large seagoing tugs built to the same design by the Maryland Steel Co. for the Philadelphia and Reading Transportation Line of Philadelphia during 1904/05, the other being SS *Monocacy* (later USS *Genesee* [AT-55]). Designed to tow coal barges along the US East Coast, they were among the largest tugs in the US Merchant Marine.

Scan that revealed the wreck of the USS *Conestoga*.

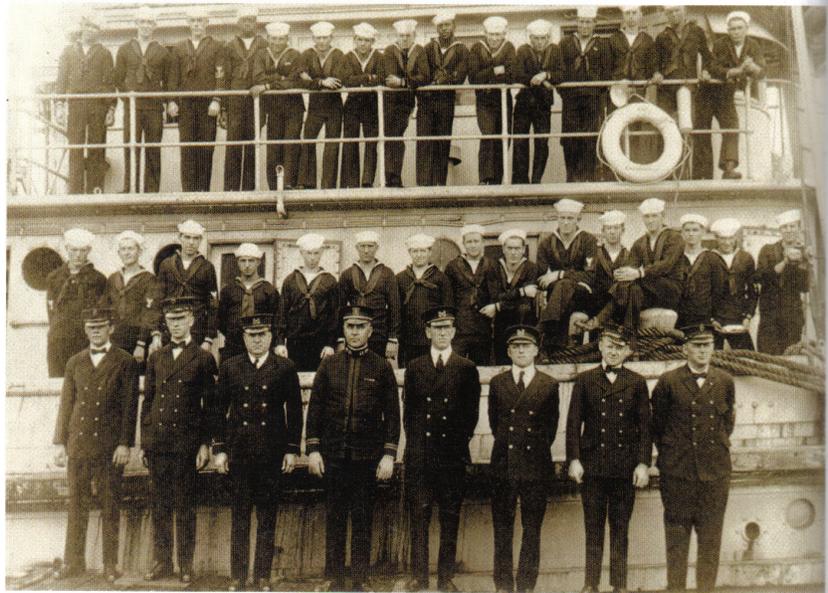
The USS *Genesee* would have a much longer life and after lengthy between-the-wars service, the ship was scuttled at Corregidor on 5 May 1942 to avoid capture by advancing Japanese forces. However, the enemy also had a need for rugged ships such as the *Genesee* and the tug was raised, repaired, and put into Imperial Japanese Navy service as *Patrol Vessel 107* on 20 April 1944. The ship did not survive long in enemy service as USN aircraft sank her on 5 November 1944 while off Corregidor.

USS *Conestoga* was ordered to Tutuila, American Samoa, and the tug steamed from Mare Island Navy Yard, California, on 25 March 1921.

The first stop was Pearl Harbor, but *Conestoga* never arrived — it was supposed to steam into Pearl on 5 April. The Navy high command was initially puzzled. Was the ship simply overdue by a storm or mechanical failure? However, since nothing had been heard from the tug a massive aerial and sea search was put together and initiated.

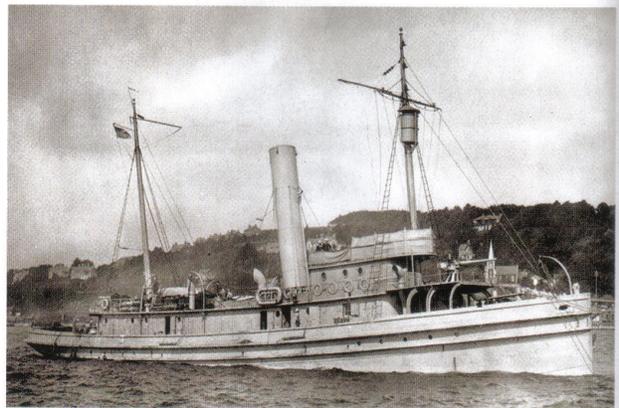
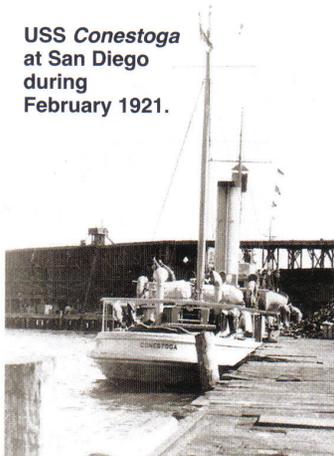
The main problem was that the Navy did not know at what point the *Conestoga* disappeared and this caused the search to spread over a vast area. For three-months, Navy ships and aircraft diligently searched off Hawaii and the Mexican coast. Nothing from the *Conestoga* was discovered. After three-months, the Navy had little choice but to declare the tug and its crew of 56 as missing at sea. The loss was a complete mystery for the Navy and a very tragic incident for the many families involved.

NOAA located *Conestoga*, the last US Navy ship to be lost without a trace, in the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary off the coast of San Francisco — an area that had been completely ignored by searchers.



Crew of the US Navy tugboat USS *Conestoga* (AT-54) photographed at San Diego in early 1921.

USS *Conestoga* at San Diego during February 1921.



Sistership USS *Genesee* underway at Queenstown, Ireland, during 1918.



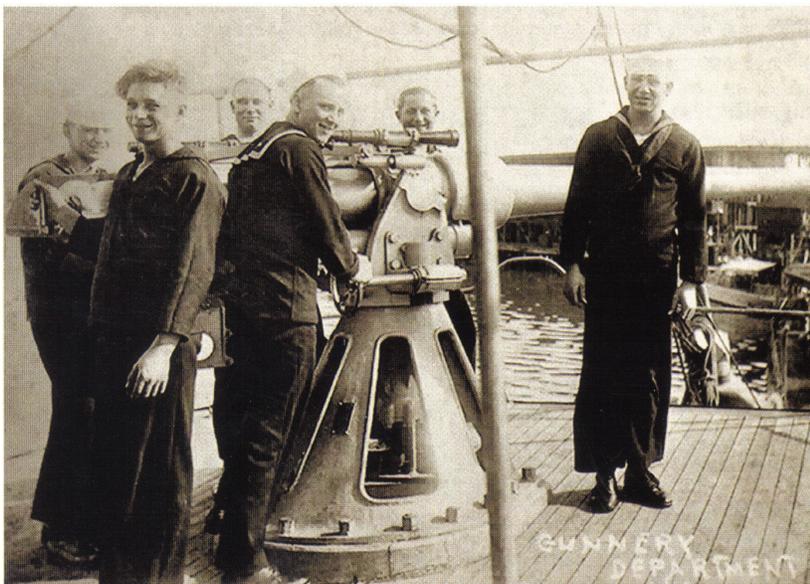
Lieutenant Ernest L. Jones was the commanding officer of the *Conestoga* when the tug disappeared.

As a point of interest, the exact location has not been revealed by the USN/NOAA to prevent unauthorized diving or looting.

Robert Schwemmer, West Coast Regional Maritime Heritage Coordinator, stated that the ship had actually been found during September 2014 but no reason was given for the time lag in announcing the discovery. "Today [23 March] was the first time we could reach out to the families in person, put faces to the long list of 56 sailors lost 95-years ago," stated Schwemmer. "It's been amazing to honor these sailors and to... meet their families, bring them closure, and let them know that the *Conestoga* lies in the National Marine Sanctuary and that is



The 1000-hp triple-expansion steam engine inside the hulk of the *Conestoga* in the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary.



Sailors assigned to the gunnery department of the USS *Conestoga* (top) pose with the tugboat's main 3-in weapon in San Diego. The lower photograph shows the current position of the gun inside the shipwreck near the forecabin after the gun's support platform had fallen from its original position in front of the pilot house through the main deck. The gun was a key diagnostic artifact that served to identify the wreck as *Conestoga*.



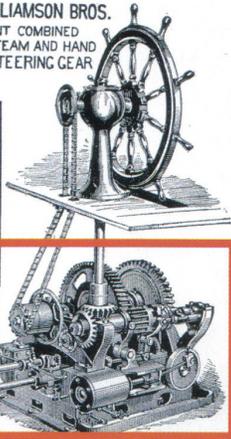
protected... as a military gravesite." However, it is obvious that, given the length of time, no direct family members remain.

NOAA conducted Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) survey dives to positively identify the ship and determine the cause of the wreck. Based on the location and orientation of the wreck, 3-mi of Southeast Farallon Island, NOAA and its consultants believe *Conestoga* sank as the officers and the crew attempted to reach a protected cove on the island.

Videos from ROV cameras show the wreck lying on the seabed and largely intact. Extensive marine growth, primarily white plum anemones, drapes the hull's exterior while various species of marine life inhabit the site. NOAA

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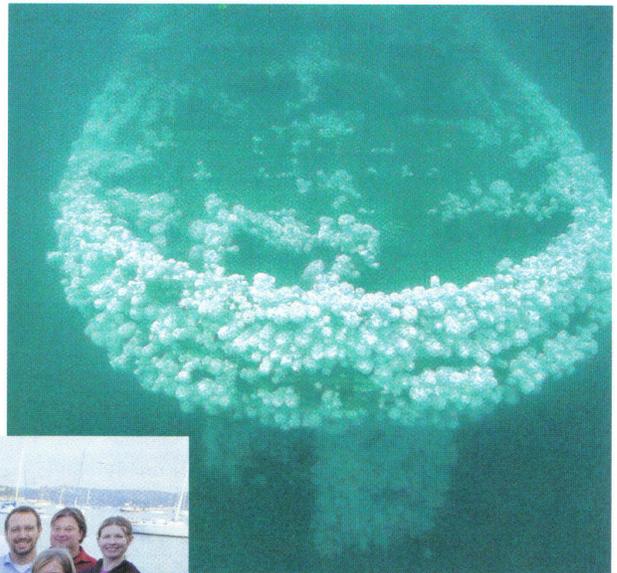
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Steam steering gear of the *Conestoga* inside the shipwreck after falling through the main deck from its original position located below the pilot house. The steering gear served as “power steering” to assist the rotation of the large steering quadrant and rudder in the stern of the tug.

confirmed a number of features consistent with the description of the *Conestoga* published in 1904 including: Size of wreck; four-blade 12-ft 3-in diameter propeller; steam engine and boilers; number and location of portholes, mooring bitts, and ventilator locations; large steam towing winch with twisted wire on the drum; two porcelain marine heads; and a single 3-in gun that was mounted on the main deck in front of the pilot house.

James Delgado, director of Maritime Heritage for NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuary, stated, “This coming season we will be looking at the area of the Farallones Sanctuary that has been recently



Stern view of the *Conestoga*, colonized with white plum rose sea anemones.



Vice Admiral Nora Tyson (left), commander of the US 3rd Fleet, and R/Adm. Markham Rich, commander of the US Navy Southwest Region, aboard the NOAA research vessel *Fulmar* with members of the expedition team that conducted an underwater archeological survey of the wreck of the *Conestoga*.

expanded to the north. We will not only be looking at the shipwrecks but we will be working with California State Parks and other partners to see how the sanctuary connects to the shore.”

A plaque commemorating the memory of those lost at sea aboard USS *Conestoga* has been installed in the lobby of the Navy Memorial Museum.

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