

# “THEATER OF HORRORS”

The tragic wreck of the SS *Valencia* has spawned a legend of nautical ghost stories but it is just one of hundreds of shipwrecks that line the “Graveyard of the Pacific”

BY MARSHALL WAINWRIGHT

The very early morning hours of 21 January 1906 dawned reasonably well off Cape Mendocino with a heavy mist and low sunlight. However, as the SS *Valencia* steamed its way through the coastal waters off the Strait of Juan de Fuca later in the day, the weather began to deteriorate. To the captain and the eight officers and 56 crew aboard *Valencia*, this was just part of what could be expected in an area that often saw uneasy seas and poor visibility. At least 108 passengers (as we shall see, the exact number varied) were aboard the coastal passenger steamer and, shortly before midnight on 22 January, most had retired to their cabins while a few stayed awake to sample whiskey from the ship’s well-stocked bar as they smoked cigars and enjoyed a final game of poker.

As the minute hand ticked towards midnight, a horrible grinding noise went through the *Valencia* from bow to stern and the entire vessel shook as if it was in the hands of an enraged demon. Passengers were thrown to the deck or tossed out of bunks, their sleep rudely

awakened by the unknown terrors presented by a dark and unsettled night. From that moment, the *Valencia* was doomed.

The simply named Red D Line had been operating a well-regarded shipping service to Venezuela from American East Coast ports since 1839. Red D’s attractive sailing vessels continued on uninterrupted service for nearly four decades. However, by 1879, Red D officials decided that, in order to stay competitive, they needed to modernize with steamships. Accordingly, the company leased three German-built steam vessels but concluded that to keep profitable it would be better to own their ships rather than lease them.

Red D Line entered into negotiations with the

well-known shipbuilders William Cramp & Sons in Philadelphia and a contract was issued for the construction of two steamships. Both would carry a combination of mail, cargo, and passengers and would sail under American registration with American crews. By July 1881, the first of the duo, SS *Caracas*, was completed and went into service on the New York City to Caracas route with stops at Laguayra and Puerto Cabello. By May 1882, sistership SS *Valencia* (yard number 228) was ready to begin earning money. Some five-feet shorter than *Caracas*, the new iron-hulled steamer set out on the same route. As a point of interest, the smaller wooden-hulled SS *Maracaibo* was utilized as an extension of the basic route with service to the port that was the vessel’s namesake. This ship sailed under the British flag since it did not operate from the USA.

As built, *Valencia* was a 1200-ton (expanded to 1598-tons) ocean/coastal passenger liner that had a length of 252 feet and a beam of 34 feet. She carried six lifeboats, one workboat, four life rafts and one dual-

purpose workboat. She was also fitted with a Lyle gun — a short-barreled cannon line thrower invented by Capt. David Lyle. A 100-foot long bow gave the *Valencia* the appearance of a fast vessel but the long bow reduced visibility, especially during fog.

The two new steamers had voyages set at twice a month, with each voyage lasting about 26 days. For now-unknown reasons, *Caracas* was sold in 1888 to Thomas Egerton Hogg of the Oregon Pacific Railroad Company. Under this new owner, the ship was renamed *Yaquina Bay* but was lost on its delivery voyage. On 9 December 1888, soon after arriving on the West Coast, it broke free from its tugboat and ran aground at the bay of its namesake and was declared a total loss. Red D Line would continue utilizing *Valencia* on its now familiar route but, in later years, *Valencia* began sailing from New York City to Languayra via Puerto Cabello and the island of Curacao.

The Ward Line (the shorter and more popular name for the New York and Cuba Mail Steamship Company) was operating SS *Niagara* but in 1897 the ship had to be laid up for repairs. Rather than lose revenue from the popular run, the Ward Line negotiated with the Red D Line to charter *Valencia* to temporarily take the place of *Niagara*. This was done, and *Valencia* went to work for its new master but all the crew were Red D employees.

## ATTACKED BY THE SPANIARDS

Soon after Ward Line operations began, on 29 May 1897 the *Valencia* found herself under attack off Guantanamo Bay by the Spanish cruiser *Reina Mercedes*. The warship fired two shots, one hitting the water just 240 feet off *Valencia*’s stern. The captain ordered the American flag immediately raised, thus stopping the attack even though the captain of *Reina Mercedes* was well-aware of the steamship’s identity.

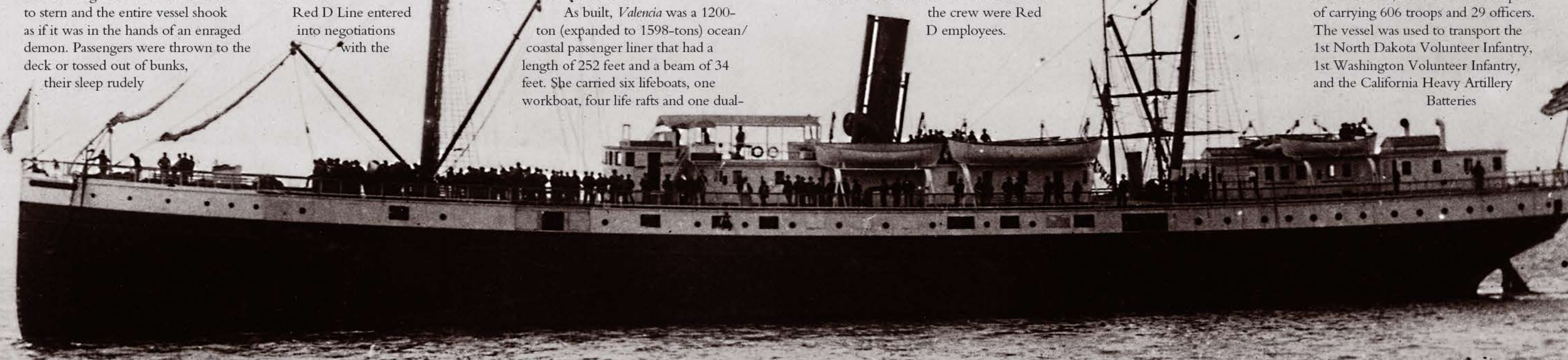
Just a couple days earlier, both ships had been together in Santiago de Cuba so *Valencia*’s captain was able to identify the Spanish warship with certainty, even though he could not see the ship’s flag. A Spanish government official stated



House flag of the Red D Line.

the cruiser had every right to fire on the liner since it was not displaying the American flag, which violated maritime courtesy. However, American officials said the cruiser did not display her colors during the firing, thus making the attack unjustified. This would be just another incident in the building tensions that would lead to the Spanish-American War, which broke out in April 1898.

In early 1898, *Valencia* was sold to the Pacific Steam Whaling Company and the vessel was sailed around Cape Horn to the West Coast of the USA where it began operating from San Francisco to the Territory of Alaska. However, on 19 June of that year *Valencia* was chartered (at a cost of \$650 per day, \$21,400 in 2021 dollars) to the US Army for use as a troopship in the Spanish-American War. With quick modifications, the *Valencia* was capable of carrying 606 troops and 29 officers. The vessel was used to transport the 1st North Dakota Volunteer Infantry, 1st Washington Volunteer Infantry, and the California Heavy Artillery Batteries



Profile view of SS *Valencia* displaying much of her original Red D Line profile.