

# HOPKINS VS. STIER

During 1942, a lone *Liberty* ship faced off against a dreaded German surface raider

BY WILLIAM MUELLER

Although Seaman 2nd Class Wallace E. Breck had never seen a 37mm gun, much less fired one, he was to become killingly proficient in using the weapon. In late May 1942, he was billeted on Treasure Island with other members of the Naval Armed Guard so that he could become familiar with the intricacies of this Army cannon at the Presidio, the picturesque base across from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

Learning how to service and fire the weapon in just a few days, Breck awaiting assignment to a ship. At midnight on the evening she sailed, Breck boarded the SS *Stephen Hopkins*, a new *Liberty* ship fitted with two 37mm weapons. The ship was just off the ways at the Kaiser Yards in Richmond, California, where work was going 24-hours per day, seven days a week.

Named for Rhode Island's representative to the First Continental Congress, *Stephen Hopkins* was one of the first *Liberty* ships. She was begun on 2 January 1942 — not quite a month after Pearl Harbor had been attacked

— and launched on 11 April. She immediately began being fitted out, which was completed on 11 May with the acceptance of her Certificate of Registry by E.D. Mausshardt, agent of the War Shipping Administration, the owner of the new vessel.

Her statistics included a length of 422.6 feet and a beam of 57 feet. Her registered depth was 34.85 feet loaded with 11,000 tons of cargo. She was described as a steam screw vessel with two decks and three masts, a raked stem and elliptical stern. (This was the classic description of all the Emergency Cargo ships of her type.) Her gross tonnage was 7182. Her triple expansion reciprocating engine was built by Joshua Hendy Machine Company of Sunnyvale, California, and yielded 2500 horsepower, indicated. This gave her a cruising speed of 10.5 knots with an all-out speed of 12.5 knots. She had a cruising

radius of 18,000 miles on 34,000 gallons of bunker oil.

Getting her official number of 241648 and call letters KEWH required further details on yet another application. Her forepeak tank was filled with water for ballast and her after-peak tank was used to carry the fresh water needed for the crew. There were no cabins for passengers but there were staterooms for the Naval Armed Guards on the upper deck. Her radio set was a Federal Telegraph with storage batteries for auxiliary power.

Her armament seemed heavy enough for the time. The two 37mm cannons were mounted

in an armored tub over the forepeak. A 4-inch 50 caliber naval rifle sat squarely in a tub over the afterpeak. Two .50-caliber machine guns were mounted on the bridge, two more were on mounts forward and below the 4-inch weapon, while the final two were fitted aft of the deckhouse.

Most of the crew were US citizens although there were two Greeks, a Swede, a Dane, an Irishman, and a Spaniard aboard. The youngest hands on the ship were 18-years-old — one of them, Edwin Joseph O'Hara, a cadet engineer from Lindsay, California, was already a veteran of ocean cruising aboard the *Mariposa*. The oldest man aboard was George Papas, who at age 60 was an able bodied seaman. Many of the others were long-time Merchant Mariners, although a few had signed on for their first voyage.

A detachment of Army personnel and a few civilians, bound for the seasoning station at Bora Bora, had come aboard the day the ship was to sail. These men were crowded into staterooms on the second deck.

On 1 June 1942, *Stephen Hopkins* with a crew of 41 officers and men, an armed guard detachment of 14 enlisted men and

one officer, and the Army personnel and civilians cast off her lines bound for the South Pacific. Her five holds were filled with cargo including vital aircraft, trucks, and other general stores.

With a San Francisco bar pilot aboard, *Stephen Hopkins* made her way out of San Francisco Bay toward the pilot boat standing 20 miles offshore. Dropping the pilot off, Captain Paul Buck took command of his ship again, turning her to port to begin the long and hopefully uneventful journey to Bora Bora, one of the islands of the Tahiti group.

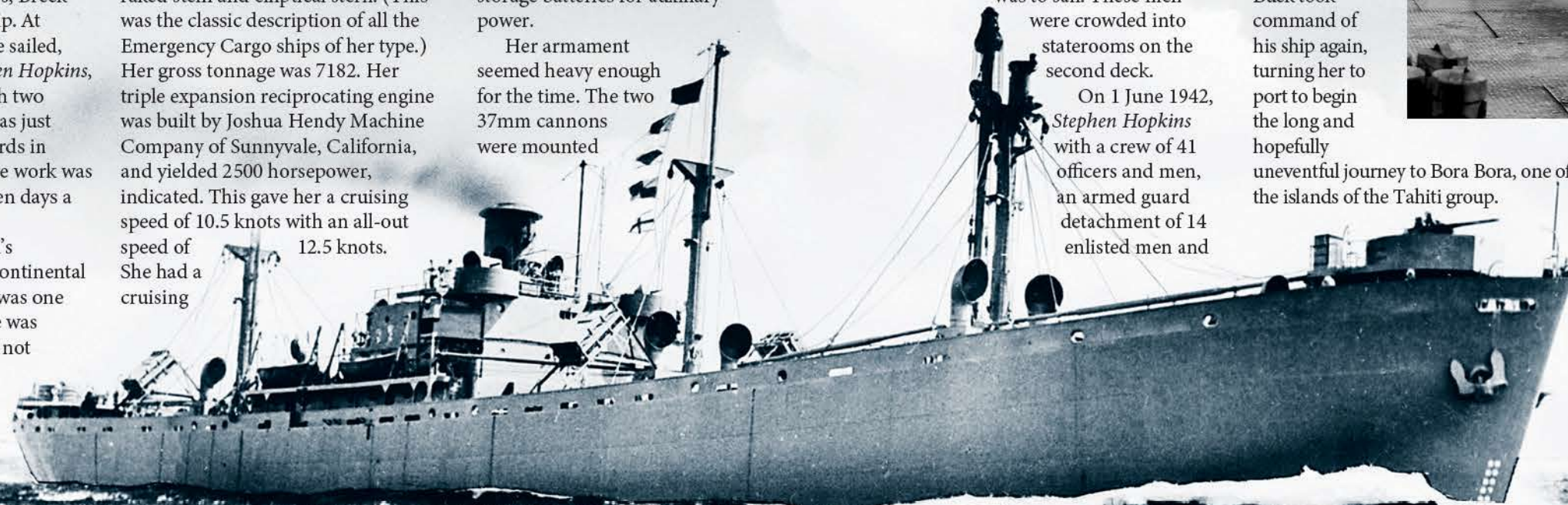
Captain Buck wanted to make good time on this initial voyage so he did not zig-zag and maintained the cruising speed of 10.5 knots. During this outbound leg, no aircraft were spotted although about midway through the journey, there was a bit of excitement when one of the lookouts thought he saw a periscope but after careful evaluation Buck determined it was an optical illusion. She made land on the 20th of June and the Seabees on



*Stephen Hopkins* shortly after launching on 11 April 1942.



Four-inch gun aboard a *Liberty* ship.



Alone and hundreds of miles from any Allied assistance, it seemed the SS *Stephen Hopkins* would be easy pickings for any Germans warships. Yet, that statement would prove to be far from the truth.