

AMERICA'S FORGOTTEN FRIGATES

Seemingly falling through the cracks in the pages of history, the 77 Patrol Frigates of the Asheville/Tacoma-class receive scant mention in any account of the naval war, and few other than those who served on them recall that they ever existed

BY ROD REDMAN

“Gads, they were beastly hot below decks and wet as hell above,” said ex-Coast Guardsman Bill Yoder, recalling his wartime experiences aboard the frigate USS *Muskogee* (PF-49).

“The bulkheads constantly sweat a putrid green slime and tack-welded seams were forever popping open under the slightest stress. They creaked and groaned and were so noisy, stiff, and uncomfortable in a seaway that we often wondered if they’d been designed by the Jerries rather than our boys. You didn’t dare fire more than one of the 3-inch guns at a time for fear its recoil would tear the mount from the paper-thin deck!

“No wonder the Navy wouldn’t put their own crews aboard them — they’d have had mass mutiny on their hands! So, they manned them with young Coast Guard crews and let us do the suffering...” Yoder added derisively.

Not everyone who served aboard the Asheville/Tacoma-class frigates are as negative as this salty veteran, but the fact remains that this unique class of World War Two escort vessel — America’s only war built vessels

classified as frigates — received little publicity during the war and even less mention in the many histories that followed.

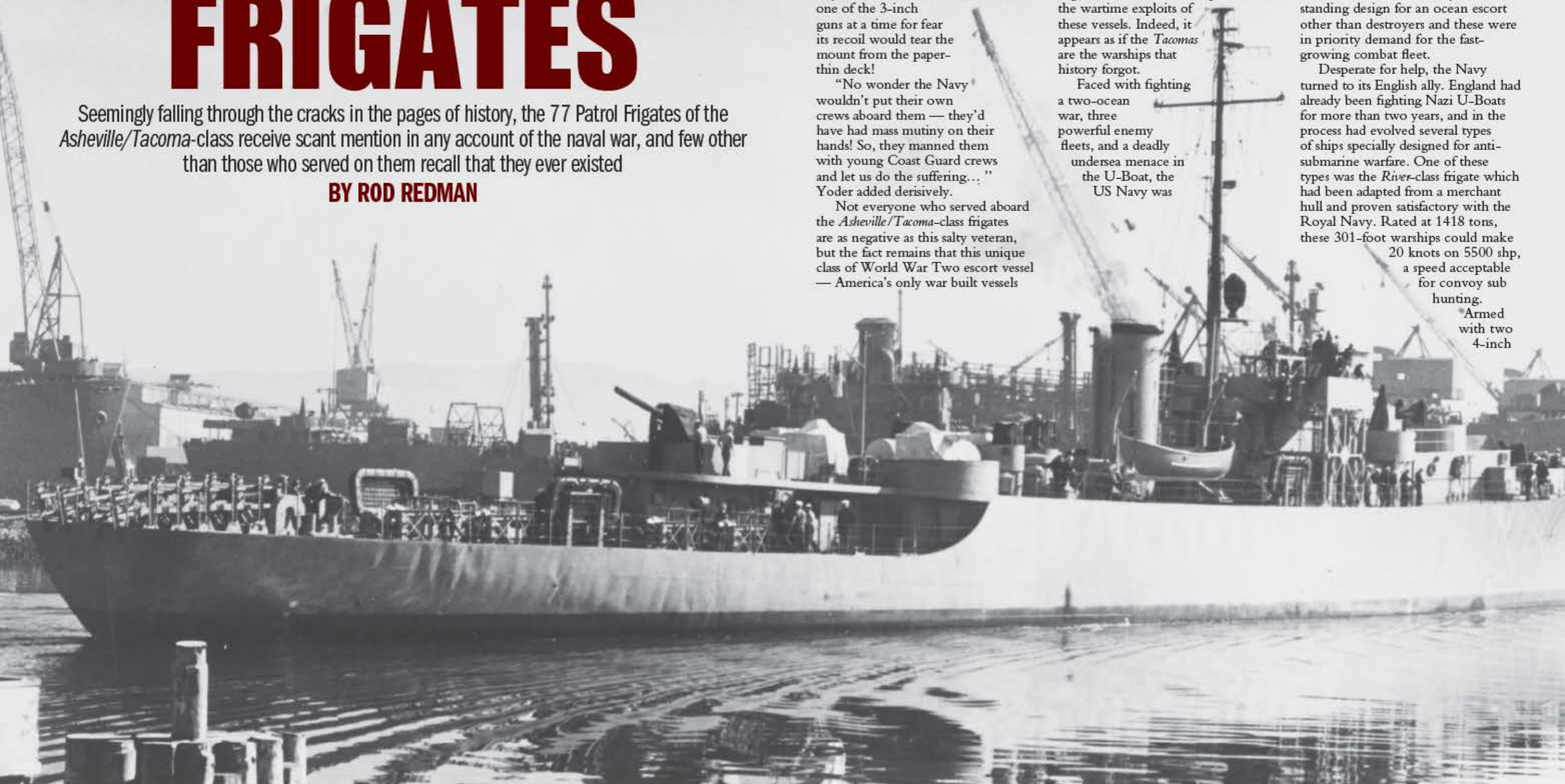
Samuel Elliott Morrison noted the class’ existence with one brief sentence in his massive twelve-volume *History of US Naval Operations in World War II*, and Malcolm F. Willoughby offers little more than that in his much-honored study, *The US Coast Guard in WWII*. Other highly regarded texts on the warships of World War Two make little mention of the Tacoma-class frigates and even less is in print about the wartime exploits of these vessels. Indeed, it appears as if the Tacomas are the warships that history forgot.

Faced with fighting a two-ocean war, three powerful enemy fleets, and a deadly undersea menace in the U-Boat, the US Navy was

desperate for warships of every type in the early stages of WWII. Key to logistics survival of America’s Allies were the supply lifelines flowing from every coastal port in a steady stream of cargo-laden merchant ships. These slow-moving merchantmen were massed into convoys and these convoys needed naval escorts to help stem the rising toll of excessive losses from U-Boat torpedoes. But there weren’t enough suitable ocean-going escorts available to meet the need, nor men to man them in early 1942. Even worse, the US Navy had no standing design for an ocean escort other than destroyers and these were in priority demand for the fast-growing combat fleet.

Desperate for help, the Navy turned to its English ally. England had already been fighting Nazi U-Boats for more than two years, and in the process had evolved several types of ships specially designed for anti-submarine warfare. One of these types was the *River*-class frigate which had been adapted from a merchant hull and proven satisfactory with the Royal Navy. Rated at 1418 tons, these 301-foot warships could make 20 knots on 5500 shp, a speed acceptable for convoy sub hunting.

Armed with two 4-inch



USS *Tacoma* (PF-3) being fitted out at Richmond, California, during November 1943.