

HELL SHIPS

From the River Thames to the California Gold Rush days, floating hulks were pressed into duty as prison ships and, more often than not, earned the reputation and title of "Hell Ships"

BY LEO ROSENHOUSE

Blocked by vigilant and brave American colonials, the British, whose custom had been to send various law offenders to distant colonies for servitude, could no longer chance such long voyages to outposts of the Empire and thereby risk loss of its merchant fleet in the process. The American Revolutionary War blockade was very effective and from the late 1700s to beyond the War of 1812, Britain found herself troubled by a population of prisoners for whom there were no longer available cells at Dartmouth and other prison fortresses. What to do?

Law violators usually served terms of from seven to twenty-one years overseas. The British

Transport Office, in charge of carrying and settling felons overseas, first proposed that overseers be appointed to make use of battered and useless war hulks lined up along the River Thames and that such vessels be used as gaols (jails) until it was expedient to again transport the felons to distant colony prisons.

The British Admiralty began the process by selling a frigate named *Censor* to a prison overseer, or contractor, who also provided a vessel of his own named *Justitia*, weighing 260 tons. These two ships were dismantled and the decks cleaned. Spaces were built on a two level basis, and prisoners were brought aboard chained in pairs and told that their period of servitude would involve cleansing the shoreline of the Thames, which had become unsightly and badly polluted.

Carpenters hired to rebuild the hulks, also then being called prison brigs, and "hell ships" by the prisoners, built decks so low that it was difficult for a tall man to stand upright. Officers and crew usually were assigned small cabins at the stern. A vessel meant to contain 200 prisoners had to maintain a crew or law enforcement group of 40 men because desperate escapes were so frequent. Prisoners were assigned tiers of hammocks, and later platforms as the prison hulks became overcrowded and room had to be made for the growing list of criminals. The platforms were planks of 20-inch width, and a man was allowed a six-foot length of resting space. By day, these planks were folded up against the walls to provide moving space and at mealtimes they were dropped to serve as mess tables.

Many vessels in the fleet of prison hulks were three deckers and all were so well-moored in the mudbanks of the river to be considered immovable. The forecabin and the space between it and the quarter deck were the only parts where prisoners were allowed air and exercise. On some ships of size, such space measured 44 feet long by 38 feet wide, but many vessels had no exercise accommodations at all.

As one prisoner aboard the *Proteus* later related: "The part of the ship allotted to prisoners was strongly boarded over and the planks thickly studded with broad-headed nails, making them almost impenetrable as a wall of iron. At intervals were loopholes which in case of an outbreak, would allow the garrison to fire on us without exposing themselves.

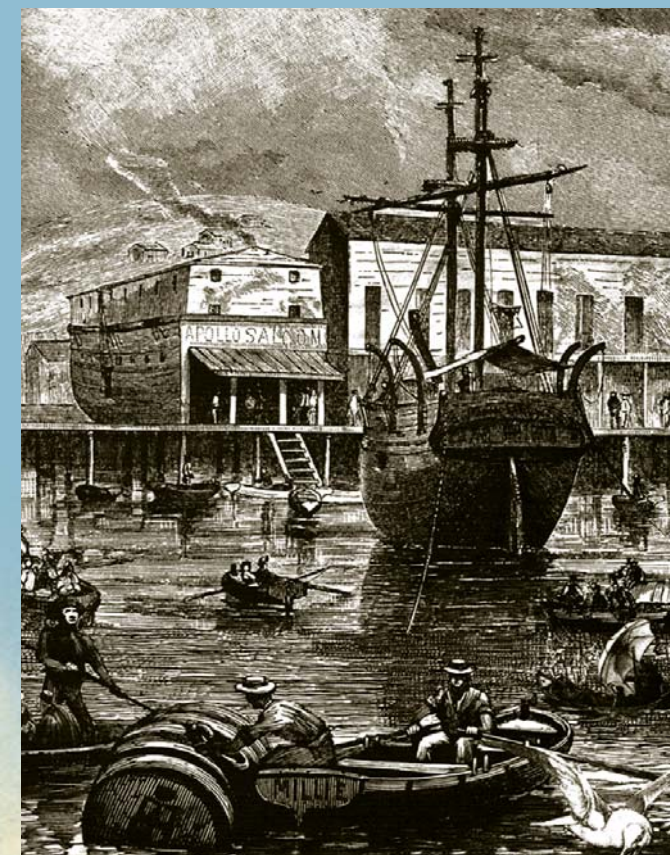
"Prisoners' berths were on the lower gun deck of the *Proteus*, and also on the orlop-deck, each of which measured about 130-feet long by 40-feet wide. In this space were lodged nearly 700 men. The little light which could have reached us through the portholes was obscured by gratings two-inches thick, inspected daily by our jailers.

"All around the vessel ran a gallery with open floor so that anyone attempting to hide underneath would have been immediately seen by the sentinels always on duty."

As the fleet of prison hulks grew, such ships were added with at least two being former line battleships. They were the *La Brave* and the *Hector*. These vessels, like their counterparts, were held by chain moorings about two miles from Plymouth.



Beached convict ship HMS *Discovery* at Deptford was originally launched in 1789 as a ten-gun sloop. It was scrapped in February 1834.



The prison ship *Euphemia* beached near the Apollo Saloon in San Francisco.

The first prisoners in the hulks were a bit more fortunate than latecomers in that they received a straw mat upon which to sleep, providing some protection against the rough, sliver-ridden planks. Each vessel has its own overseer or Captain, and the man in authority was likely a profiteer who had never actually gone to sea, yet he took the title of the ship's top officer and was often inclined to dress as a sea captain when, in reality, he was nothing more than a hired contractor.

Such officials knew little about the maintenance of a vessel and cared less. The Captain of the *Justitia* refused to allow the decks of his hulk to be washed to rid it of



Prison hulks in Portsmouth Harbor are portrayed in this oil painting by Ambrose Louis Garneray.