

The Last Voyage of the PANOCEANIC FAITH

Was this transport fit for sea or did she sink because of the neglect of her owner?

BY MICHAEL D. WHITE

Noted maritime historian and writer James Hornfischer once wrote that after a ship sinks, “there is no place to anchor a memorial flagpole, or a headstone. It is a vanishing graveyard.”

What he penned about the aftermath of the epic naval battle off Samar in October 1944 has proven to hold true in peacetime, as well as war.

Twenty-three-years after that storied combat, another battle was fought in the Pacific; not ship versus ship, but ship versus nature. In peace as in war, some of the ships caught in the conflict won the contest and survived, some others did not.

It was 1967 — a year that did not have a Pacific storm season — it *was* a storm season. A twelve-month-long chain of overlapping typhoons and tropical storms that lashed the ocean into a wind-swept frenzy as 40 tropical storms — one of which generated winds in excess of 157 miles per hour — churned the vast ocean into a giant boiling cauldron.

One of the several ships that paid with their lives in the ironically named Pacific was the freighter *Panoceanic Faith*.

She began her career as the C-2-type freighter *Midnight*, built in 1944 at the North



Calm before the storm — SS *Panoceanic Faith* was typical of the hundreds of hard-working transports that traversed the world’s oceans during the 1960s.

Carolina Shipbuilding Company yard in Wilmington.

With the end of World War II, the 459-foot ship was acquired by the Pacific Far East Line (PFEL) of San Francisco, renamed *Pacific Bear* and operated in the transpacific trades. Later, she sailed for the Coastwise Line, a PFEL subsidiary, which ran her between the US West Coast and the Alaskan ports of Seward, Valdez, and Anchorage.

Purchased in 1956 by the newly formed Hawaiian Steamship Company, the ship was once again renamed, this time to *Lanikai* and put in a

cargo-passenger service between San Francisco and Hawaii with the passenger ship *Leilani*, formerly the liner *LaGuardia*.

The *Lanikai* loaded her first cargo for Hawaiian Steamship, a subsidiary of the Textron Corporation, in February 1957 and sailed for the company until December of the following year when the line’s parent decided to cede its Hawaii cargo and passenger service to its larger rivals — the Matson Navigation Company and American President Lines.

Returned to PFEL and given her old name *Pacific Bear*; she was bought in 1960 by Panoceanic Tankers of New York and, for the next seven years, plod the world’s trade routes as the *Panoceanic Faith*.

After taking on stores and loading bunker fuel, she had sailed from Oakland, California, on 29 September 1967, bound for Bombay, India, via Yokohama, with a charter cargo of 10,200 tons of fertilizer, and a union crew — six of whom had attended the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. Four of the six had graduated from the school just six months earlier.

Encountering heavy weather almost from the start of her northwest swing through the frigid North Pacific, on Monday, 9 October, she was slammed by a terrific gale, 870 miles southwest of Kodiak, Alaska.

The situation began to come apart quickly. Pounded by 20-foot waves driven by 45-knot winds, the ship was taking on water in her forward holds, where the tarpaulin covering a leaking hatch had come undone two days previous and had not been replaced. As the water poured in it created a domino effect, filling the No. 1 hold and then gradually flowing into No. 2 hold through any opening it could find.

To make matters worse, a starboard list was developing and the *Panoceanic Faith* was having engine trouble—from the day of departure to the day she was lost, the ship’s starboard boiler’s tubes had started leaking; both boilers “lost their fires” due to water in a settler

tank; lube oil pressure was lost, temporarily; and a fresh water evaporator was out of commission “for an unexplained reason.”

Her Master, Capt. John F. Ogles, of Alexandria, Virginia, took to the radio and reported to the ship’s owners in New York — “Due to continual gales and mounting seas and swells numerous repairs to boilers and other engine room equipment... fuel and water very critical... doing best.”

His first message to New York was quickly followed by an SOS call at 9:58 am reporting the situation to the US Coast Guard Command Center in New York City, which began the intricate coordination of a response to the distress call that would, eventually, consist of a pair of Coast Guard cutters, two US Navy and a pair of US Air Force aircraft, a trio of Coast Guard planes, and a dozen merchant ships.

Shortly afterward came Ogles’ last communication to the Panoceanic Tankers headquarters: “Speed four knots... boilers, tubes, plates leaking badly... repairs impossible because of weather... advise nearest bunkering station.”

At 2:51 pm, the US Coast Guard Station Adak intercepted a distress signal from the *Panoceanic Faith* stating that the crew was abandoning ship.

Panoceanic Faith was doomed and survival options for her crew were shattered in the wind and waves. The order to abandon ship was

given, but with the ship listing to starboard at more than 30 degrees, the port lifeboat could not be launched. The only means of escape that remained was the starboard boat. The lifeboat’s motor failed to start after repeated attempts, and the boat jammed while being lowered, spilling its 20-plus occupants into the 50-degree sea.

It was later disclosed that, while the crew had been mustered for fire and boat drill a few days previous, neither lifeboat was lowered nor were their engines checked.

The ship’s 25-man inflatable life raft was thrown over the side; it inflated properly with its canopy raised, but, survivors later related, it drifted away, far out of reach of the men struggling in the sea. The only hope left the men were the lifejackets they wore.

Shortly before noon, a US Air Force C-141 StarLifter arrived over the stricken *Panoceanic Faith*, reporting that conditions were worsening and that the ship “couldn’t hold out much longer.” The plane orbited the ship and acted as a radio relay for a US Navy P-2H Neptune patrol plane, which appeared on scene after a six-hour, roller-coaster flight from its base at Adak, Alaska. The Neptune dropped seven life rafts to the men in the water, but only three inflated.

Of the six of the men in the water who were able to pull themselves into one of the rafts, only two survived.

Two hours after the first SOS, another brief

Built as a C-2-type transport during 1944, the vessel originally operated as SS *Midnight*.

