

MYSTERY OF THE CONESTOGA

THE LAST US NAVY SHIP TO DISAPPEAR IN PEACETIME WITHOUT A TRACE
BY DANIEL WESTERLY



She certainly wasn't the most glamorous ship in the US Navy fleet, but she was one of the most useful. She never gained battle honors but she would become one of the greatest mysteries in the Navy's history. The vessel is the USS *Conestoga* (SP-1128/AT-54) and she was an ocean-going tug that was commissioned on 10 November 1917. By the very nature of their assignment, an ocean-going tug is a tough and powerful vessel and her crew tends to be the same way.

Conestoga was built in 1904 by the Maryland Steel Company located at Sparrows Point, Maryland, and she was contracted for by the Philadelphia and Reading Railway Company. This was a Philadelphia-headquartered company that provided passenger and freight transport in eastern Pennsylvania and neighboring states beginning in 1833 until its acquisition by Conrail in 1976. Many railroad concerns wanted to get into other forms of business to increase profitability and Philadelphia and Reading was no different. As one of the first railroads in the USA, the company was extremely profitable but it got into a number of other businesses including shipping — hence the building of the *Conestoga* to tow coal barges. Philadelphia and Reading had invested heavily in coal (also essential for the locomotives) for coal was driving America and the earth of Pennsylvania was rich with the substance.

The powerful tug went to work hauling the coal-laden barges until the Great War interrupted operations. On 14 September 1917, the US Navy took over the vessel to be operated as a fleet tender and minesweeper. She was given the identification number of SP-1128. After overhaul and being fitted with armament, she was commissioned on 10 November 1917 with Lt. (jg) Carl Olsen in command.

She was assigned to the Submarine Force and at the Philadelphia Navy Yard she was fitted out for long-distance service. Olsen and his ship began towing barges laden with supplies, guns, ammunition, and other weapons of war along the Atlantic Coast and also to Bermuda and the Azores. Basing at the Azores, she was

This painting was done to illustrate the *Conestoga* battling toward the protection of a cove some three miles away. However, it was also an act of desperation since several ships had been wrecked over the years while also trying to find protection in the cove. (Danijel Frka)