

MYSTERY OF

MARINE SULPHUR QUEEN

SAILORS KNEW THAT THE T2 TANKER FLEET SUFFERED FROM NUMEROUS DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING DEFECTS. HOWEVER, THE USEFULNESS OF THESE VESSELS WAS SUCH THAT T2 TANKERS OFTEN SAILED INTO HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS. WE EXAMINE THE T2 FLEET ALONG WITH ONE SPECIFIC DISASTER THAT PROBABLY COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED

BY C.E. COLBY

If America was going to win the war against the Axis powers, massive amounts of fuel would be needed — especially in the vast area comprising the Pacific Ocean. Fuel was one thing, transporting it was an entirely different matter.

To move these quantities of fuel, the T2 tanker series was created. Construction speed was of the essence so the United States Maritime Commission (US MarCom) came up with what was called the “National Defense Tanker” — a medium-size merchant ship that could be militarized as a fleet auxiliary in the time

of war. The basic T2 design was based on two vessels from 1938/1939 — the SS *Mobilfuel* and SS *Mobilube*. The pair had been built for the Socony-Vacuum Oil Company by Bethlehem Steel for the efficient transportation of large quantities of the company’s products. All across the globe, nations were beginning to gird for war while some nations, such as Japan, were notoriously short on petroleum products. Hence, militarists in that nation were eyeing oil-rich countries that could be easily taken over.

More power for higher speeds was required and the standard T2s were

fitted with steam turbines driving a single propeller to produce up to 12,000 horsepower and this transferred to a respectable top speed of up to 17.5 knots. Six of the standard T2s were constructed by Bethlehem Steel at the company’s Sparrows Point Shipyard in Maryland but these were quickly taken over by the US Navy following the Pearl Harbor attack. The following list describes the T2 variants.

T2-A DESIGN

This kicked off the numerous variations of the basic T2 design and the



The tanker originally went into service as the SS *Esso New Haven*.

T2-A was longer with increased capacity. Keystone Tankerships contracted with Sun Shipbuilding & Drydock Company of Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1940 for five T2-As that were 526-feet in length and displaced approximately 22,425 tons while being rated at 10,600 tons gross with 16,300 DWT. Even with this heavier weight, they were capable of a top speed of 16.5 knots. However, all were requisitioned after Pearl Harbor and converted to fleet oilers of the *Mattapoin*-class.

were constructed in an extremely short period of time. Manufacturing was undertaken by the Alabama Drydock and Shipbuilding Company in Mobile; the Kaiser Company at Swan Island Yard, Portland, Oregon; Marinship Corporation at Sausalito, California; and Sun Shipbuilding and Drydock Company of Chester, Pennsylvania. Highly-motivated workforces were capable of setting an



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T2-SE-A1 CLASS

Under construction immediately prior to America’s entry into the Second World War, the T2-SE-A1 is classified as the “most common” variant of the basic T2 design. Sun Shipbuilding was constructing the type for Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and they started life at 523-feet in length with a 68-foot beam, 10,448 GRT, and 16,613 DWT. The steam/turbo-electric transmission system could pump out 6000-hp (with a maximum thrust of 7240-hp) and this resulted in a top speed of about 15-knots while the cruise range could go to 12,600 miles.

With America’s entry into WWII, MarCom placed huge orders for the class and gave production of the ships a high priority so that the flow of fuel to Europe and the Pacific could dramatically increase. Also, the increased orders meant that overall tanker tonnage could be maintained despite the heavy losses to the U-Boats.

In a display of American production capabilities, some 481 T2-SE-A1 tankers



Esso New Haven shortly after its completion.



Esso New Haven in dock.

Despite an intensive investigation, no solid reason for the loss of SS *Marine Sulphur Queen* could be determined. The loss probably came about because of a combination of factors including the extensive modifications undertaken to the ship combined with the hazardous cargo that it carried on its final voyage.