

# On for the Long Haul

By Liesl Bradner



Arriving late to the big fight helped the SS Lane Victory survive a startling seven decades.

IF DURING SOME Southern California summer you notice warplanes with wartime German markings flying toward the Port of Los Angeles, you have not entered a wormhole—it's merely showtime. The pilots, aboard disguised AT-6 Texan trainers from the Condor Squadron of Van Nuys, are pretending to swarm the SS Lane Victory, a World War II cargo ship turned museum that offers a glimpse into the Allied supply line. Staged by the museum three times a year during day-long summer sea cruises, the spectacular mock aerial assault and a swing-dancing session follow a service memorializing one of the 1,500-plus merchant ships that were lost during the war.

One of three Victory ships still functioning, the Lane Victory is the only one



In 1944 Victory ships under construction filled Los Angeles's Terminal Island yard.

certified seaworthy. The ship, a National Historic Landmark, began its museum career in 1992—restored and ready for passengers to tour. But a 70-year-old vessel is a fragile thing, and in 2014 management suspended the summer ocean cruises because many of the ship's steam-generating tubes had failed. The U.S. Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II, the non-profit that maintains the ship, is hoping to raise \$2 million for the repairs through grants and donations—such as a “Buy-a-Boiler Tube” campaign—and hopes to have the transport ready for summer 2015 cruises.

Constructed by the California Shipbuilding Corporation at nearby Terminal Island, the Lane Victory was one of 534 Victory ships meant to outperform the

earlier Liberty ship, courtesy of their modern steam plants, electric winches, and stronger hulls. Like many of its ilk, the Lane Victory was named after an educational institution: Lane College, in Tennessee. (Victory ships were also named for towns, cities, and United Nations member states.) And like most Victory ships, it was launched late in the war, on May 31, 1945. Within a month, the crew was carrying munitions and supplies across the Pacific. On a run to Guam, the ship spent 14 days in a typhoon.

After the war, the Lane Victory carried Marshall Plan supplies to Europe. The 10,750-ton ship's most dangerous mission came during the Korean War. In December 1950 the crew took on more than 7,000 refugees at Wonsan and transported them to Pusan, a voyage of more than 300 miles. In 1966, the Lane Victory transported supplies to South Vietnam. Decommissioned in 1970 and mothballed in Northern California, the aging vessel became a pet cause of Merchant Marine veterans petitioning to designate a World War II cargo vessel as a memorial museum—as occurred in 1988, leading to a three-year restoration effort.

With the exception of three days reserved for cruises and special events, the Lane Victory is open daily 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Painted wartime gray, the stately ship docks at Berth 49 in Los Angeles's San Pedro neighborhood at the Port of Los Angeles. One of the nation's busiest container ports, it is home to several maritime museums and historic vessels, including the battleship USS Iowa.

It was a perfect morning when I visited the Lane Victory with my kids, ages 12 and 10. I'd learned from the museum brochure not to wear open-toed shoes, which would keep me from visiting the engine room. Crossing the gangplank toward the 455-foot ship, my son pointed out a sea lion frisking in the water below. A crewmember greeted us with a smile, a self-guided tour map—visitors can roam at will or join groups led by a guide—and a briefing on the layout. For the moment, we had the vessel to ourselves.



From top: Steam turbines dominate the engine room; U.S. Naval Armed Guards slept very tight; underage anti-aircraft gunners stretch their legs to reach the pedals of twin 40mm Oerlikons.



With three forward holds and two aft, the *Lane Victory* could accommodate five tons of freight; today two holds are exhibit spaces. The Hold #4 Museum displays World War II artifacts, such as chronometers, uniforms, and weapons. In a letter home on display in Hold #4, a seaman writing from a different Victory ship describes how, in 1946, he and his shipmates were transporting GIs home from Antwerp, Belgium. “We may purchase 24 candy bars at prices from 2 – 4 cents” and, “twice a day, gobs of ice cream,” he writes, boyishly boasting that he snagged a top bunk. He writes of previous trips on which the ship hauled German POWs from Le Havre and reports his gross income for 1945: \$1,680.31.

My son steered us topside to climb ladders and navigate narrow passageways to the cozy crew cabin, the starker Naval Armed Guard sleeping quarters and its triple-decker hammocks, and the galley. Passing the main mast, cargo booms, and winches, we arrived at the forecabin deck. At the bow we found the hulking anchor windlass and chains, a three-inch gun, and 20mm antiaircraft guns.

Other visitors arrived, ending our reign as masters of the ship. My son briskly led us to the bridge and beyond. We descended the stairs to the Hold #2 Museum, aka “The Jeep and Torpedo Room,” a miscellany of military and maritime gear. Torpedoes and mines illustrate the danger Allied merchant ships faced; U-boats sank nearly six million tons of shipping in the first six months of 1942. Naturally for a vintage vessel harbored so near Tinseltown, the *Lane Victory* makes its share of film and TV appearances; the ship features props from *The Thin Red Line*, *Flags of Our Fathers*, and was drafted to make special effects test shots for *The Life of Pi*, among other cinematic cameos.

Hold #2 Museum’s centerpiece display is a 20-ton, 1,000-horsepower triple expansion steam engine. Considered the state-of-the-shipbuilding-art in 1920, the engine originally powered a trawler repurposed as a wartime convoy escort.

The engine was restored for the Academy Award-winning 1966 film, *The Sand Pebbles*, with Steve McQueen as the engineer who keeps the temperamental machine running. When the *Lane Victory* is under way the engine’s piston rods and crankshaft move in harmonious but only decorative action, driven by electricity.

We saw the ship’s own power plant in the engine room as part of a tour group that first went to the bridge. Pausing at the radio room to see the original RCA 4U communications unit, we filed past a mess hall and the captain’s quarters to steep steps leading to the bridge. Our guide, merchant mariner and able-bodied seaman Wendy Joseph, explained the gyroscopic compass, binnacle, and radar system, and decoded signal flags stashed along the wheelhouse ceiling.

Amidships, Wendy stopped the group and opened a hatch, revealing the engine room—hands down the tour’s highlight. Two forced-draft oil-fired boilers gener-

ate the power to run the steam turbines that could push a Victory ship to 16.3 knots. We got to study the main control panel and the generator that provides the ship’s electricity. During a cruise, we’re told, it roars. The engine room holds only eight people—and inside the tight quarters I understood why sandals aren’t allowed. Continuing our descent, we edged single file through the not-for-the-claustrophobic propeller shaft alley. At the stern, Wendy let us glance up the 50-foot ladder leading to an escape hatch allowing in a tiny circle of sunlight.

After the tour, we strolled the stern. Above the armed guard quarters was a gun tub that had held a five-inch piece. The navy removed it after the war but left the tub, used as a swimming pool and stowage. Hanging onto their journey into the past, the kids mounted gunner’s seats and pretended to man twin 40mm anti-aircraft guns. Then we stepped down the gangplank and out of history. ★

WHEN YOU GO



For a schedule of *Lane Victory* cruises and other events, visit [lanevictory.org](http://lanevictory.org). The ship is located 20 miles south of Los Angeles International Airport, in San Pedro—a lively neighborhood with plenty of activities for everyone. The town’s most prominent landmark, visible for miles, is the 1,500-foot Vincent Thomas Suspension Bridge, immortalized in films like *Gone in 60 Seconds* and the 1960s TV series *Mission: Impossible*.

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT



The Double Tree Hotel is steps from the Cabrillo Marina, a yacht marina near the *Lane Victory*’s dock. Nearby is the 15-acre Ports

O’Call Village, filled with waterfront shops and dining establishments, including the popular seafood restaurant of the same name. Away from the crowds there’s Think Café, Grinder Restaurant, Green Onion Mexican Restaurant, and Neil’s Pasta & Seafood Grill in San Pedro.

Looking to spend the night on a luxury liner? The *Queen Mary*, docked nine miles east at Long Beach, offers original first class staterooms and hosts a permanent exhibit, “Her Finest Hour: A WWII Tour.”

For more of a Hollywood-style retreat, the Mediterranean style Terranea Resort, with stunning oceanfront views, is 10 miles northwest in Rancho Palos Verdes.

WHAT ELSE TO SEE



At Angel’s Gate Park, overlooking the Pacific, the recently restored 17-ton Korean Bell of Friendship honors the sacrifice of Americans who fought in Korea. The vintage red trolley is a convenient way to take in the sights such as the free Frank Gehry-designed Cabrillo Marine Aquarium, the Bellagio-inspired Fanfare Fountains at Gateway Plaza, Fort MacArthur Museum, Los Angeles Maritime Museum, and the art deco Warner Grand Theater, opened in 1931. Last year San Pedro completed a \$32 million promenade and harbor revitalization project intended to make the waterfront more family friendly.