

American Steam Yachts at War: Yachtsmen and Their Boats Commissioned for Wartime Service

by Steve R. Dunn

This is the story of how rich men's playthings became weapons of war. Steam yachts were the peacock-tail-feathered, must-have luxury item of the late 19th and early 20th century. When wars came, first in 1898 and again in 1914–1918, they suddenly transformed into warships and often their crews became warriors, not servants.

Steam yachts became possible because of a concatenation of three factors: the development of a relatively small, reliable, and powerful marine propulsion plant as a result of the invention of the compound steam engine and the Scotch (multi-tube) boiler; the emergence of yachting and of the yacht club as a place of status and display, much favored and patronized by British and European royalty and American millionaires; and finally the very consider-

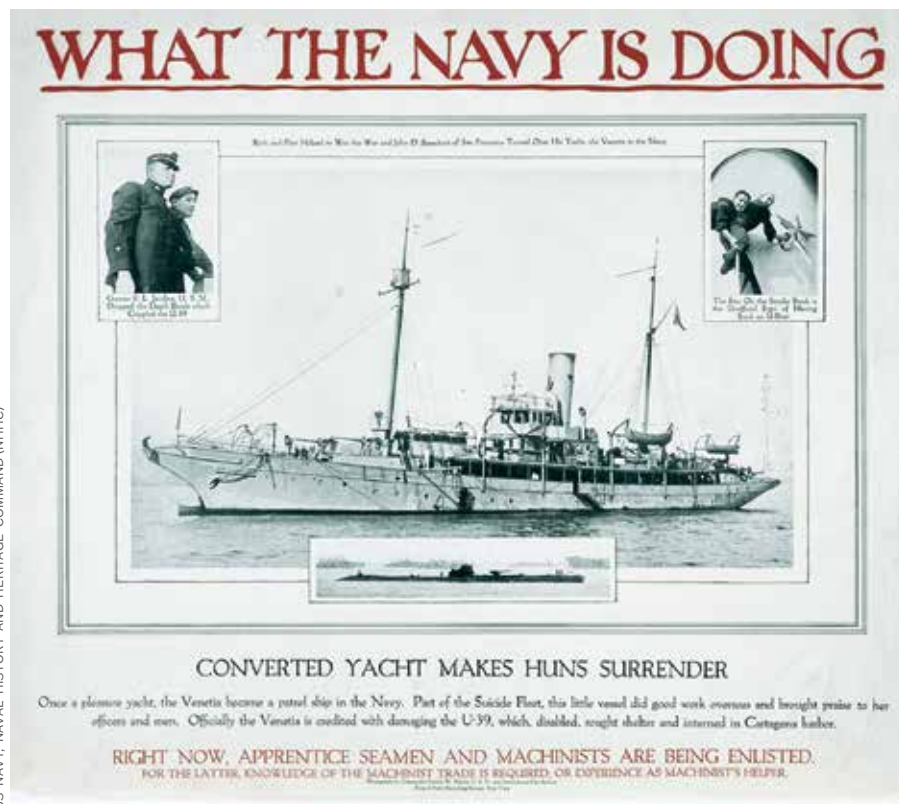
able wealth of a small number of *nouveau riche* businessmen, especially in the United States of America, and of the British landed gentry. In the second half of the 19th century, this extreme concentration of wealth among a relatively small group of people facilitated steam yachts becoming the most striking personal possession ever produced by man to that date. They were a visible sign of affluence, and there was scarcely an ugly ship amongst them.

The first American steam yacht was probably the 270-foot *North Star*, constructed for Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1853 and used by him to sail to Europe and back. It was 1864 before the first steam-powered yachts, *Clarita* and *Bijou*, were admitted to the New York Yacht Club (NYYC). In the country that invented “conspicuous consumption,” the steam yacht began

to replace the private rail carriage as the must-have, show-off item of choice. In 1870, the NYYC had four steam yachts on its membership list; twenty years later, there were seventy-one. Hugely expensive to build and run and fitted out like waterborne palaces, they gave their owners privacy, the ability to travel wherever they pleased without let or hindrance, and membership in an exclusive stratum of society.

All the steam yachts of this era were luxurious in the extreme, with carved wooden paneling, ornate decoration, music rooms, dining rooms, and libraries; they were “a regular home away from home.” The level of interior finish and indulgence in many was scarcely credible. The *Dreamer* was constructed for Boston’s “Copper King,” Thomas W. Lawson. She was designed by the firm of Tams, Lemoine, and Crane of New York and built at the yard of Lewis Nixon of Elizabethport, New Jersey. According to the 28 April 1900 *New York Times*, “very few private yachts afloat or building will equal in convenience and luxury of appointment the steam yacht *Dreamer*.” The *San Francisco Call* detailed her beauties, describing her as “the most luxurious yacht in the world.... The deck boudoir is finished in white, with old rose-colored upholstery, while green is the prevailing color in the oak rooms, the frieze panels, and the sofa.... Mrs. Lawson’s room is finished in ivory white, the panels and bed hangings being of pink

US Navy propaganda poster boasting the efforts of the steam yacht *Venetia* during WWI. “Rich and Poor Helped to Win the War and John D. Spreckels of San Francisco Turned Over His Yacht, the *Venetia*, to the Navy.”



US NAVY, NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND (NHHC)

silk with linen-lace applique. The furniture in Mr. Lawton's room is old mahogany, with delft blue and ecru furnishings on ecru ground."

Not all steam yachts were of such size and build, however. Those whose wealth did not permit a 1,000-ton vessel made do with smaller craft. In 1913, 236 out of 272 US-registered steam yachts were less than 500 tons (Thames Measurement).

Spanish American War

When war broke out between the United States and Spain over Spanish-held Cuba, the lack of investment in smaller craft for the US Navy meant

that there were not enough patrol warships to effect a blockade of Cuba and provide coastal patrols. So, the Navy turned to privately owned steam yachts. Commencing in March 1898, the US Navy bought (or received as donations) twenty-eight steam yachts. The purchase price was fixed by the Navy Board. The Navy armed the yachts, painted them battleship gray, and put them under naval command. Some were given protective plating over the engines and boilers. Six of the yachts were larger vessels, over 400 gross register tons (GT), the remainder a mixture of smaller sizes. By far the largest (and the first to be acquired) was the G. L. Wat-

son-designed *Mayflower* (1896) of 1,800 GT. She had been built by J. and G. Thompson, of Clydebank, Scotland, as a luxurious steam yacht for millionaire Ogden Goelet, property developer and yachtsman, who died onboard her in August 1897. The US Navy acquired her from Goelet's estate on 19 March the following year. J. P. Morgan's (second) *Corsair* of 1891 became USS *Gloucester* on 23 April for a consideration of \$225,000. Morgan publicly opposed the war against Spain—and he loved his yacht, which was furnished to the highest standards. He vigorously protested its forced sale when the Navy appropriated her.

USS *Mayflower* (PY-1) in dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1904. The yacht was decommissioned on 1 November 1904 in New York and subsequently converted for use as the presidential yacht. She was recommissioned during World War II as USCGC *Mayflower* (WPG-183)



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The Great White Fleet being reviewed by President Theodore Roosevelt aboard the presidential yacht *Mayflower*, after her service in the Spanish American War. The fleet then departed Hampton Roads, Virginia, on 16 December 1907, bound for the Pacific by way of the Strait of Magellan.



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022398. U.S. BATTLESHIPS SALUTING THE "MAYFLOWER" HAMPTON ROADS, VA.



William Randolph Hearst handed over his ten-year-old yacht, *Buccaneer*, gratis in 1898; it was returned to him that September, after the war's end. He had attempted to get a commission in the Navy in return but was told that he would have to apply through the normal channels; by the time he was made an ensign, the war was over.

The larger yachts were equipped with two or more 6-pounder guns. The smaller vessels were given only 3 pounders. The latter served as dispatch vessels and patrolled close to the coast, whilst the larger ones joined the blockade, a thin gray line of warships stretching along the northern coast of Cuba from Bahia Honda to Cardenas, and another off the port of Cienfuegos on the southern coast.

The yachts acquitted themselves as well as anyone could expect and took part in several actions, too many to detail here, but they included cutting communication cables, raiding the Cuban coast, attacking land defenses, and firing on the Spanish naval squadron based there when it put to sea (and was destroyed), later rescuing some of the survivors.

The short war ended on 13 August. All twenty-eight converted steam yachts survived the conflict. Four were handed over to the Army, and eleven were returned to their owners or sold. *Mayflower* became the presidential yacht. The remaining 12 stayed in the possession of the Navy or were scrapped.

The First World War

The United States did not join the World War until April 1917, but before then some American politicians were taking steps to prepare, including Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt, who had held the post in the Wilson Administration since 1913. Unlike his boss, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, Roosevelt was a strong supporter of the Prepared-

ness Movement and helped establish the United States Navy Reserve Force (USNRF) before America joined the fighting.

Roosevelt and others recognized that U-boats presented a clear and present danger to the United States and that the means to defend against them was lacking. He tried to bring a degree of pre-planning to bear. When the American Motor Boat Club assembled at New York for a cruise in 1916, Roosevelt sent a team of naval officers to inspect and register craft for potential military service. Boat owners with suitable watercraft took their vessels to the Brooklyn Navy Yard or to Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston for registration; by June 1917, there were 799 vessels listed.

When the United States joined the war in April 1917, the government promulgated an order allowing for the acquisition of private yachts:

The Secretary of the Navy may permit the enrollment of owners and operators of yachts and motor power boats suitable for naval purposes in the naval defense of the coast; and is hereby authorized to enter into a contract with the owners of such power boats and other craft suitable for war purposes to take over the same in time of war or national emergency upon payment of a reasonable indemnity.

Many yacht owners were willing to sell their vessels on the basis that they would have the option to repurchase their yacht at the end of hostilities. Other vessels were leased to the US Navy for free or on a "peppercorn" (for a token amount) basis. By a combination of such methods, the Navy boasted a total of 132 armed steam yachts by November 1918.

Much work was necessary to make the yachts fit for naval service. Their lavish furnishings and decorations were removed and stored in Brooklyn warehouses. Gray paint was slathered over white topsides and glittering brightwork. Guns were mounted fore and aft, while machine guns were installed on the upper decks. Below deck, cutlasses and rifles lined bulkheads of paneled oak or mahogany.

Not everyone in the Navy was delighted by the deployment of the yachts in war. In both quality and usefulness, the boats were a mixed bag. Secretary of the Navy Daniels wrote that he had accepted the yachts under protest, knowing "that they had not been constructed for the purpose for which we needed them." The commander of US naval forces in France, Rear Admiral Henry Braid Wilson, was distressed at the lack of homogeneity of the ships he was sent; some could make only nine knots and would not endure heavy seas; some were designed as ocean-going watercraft and could attain speeds of eighteen knots when pushed. This meant that squadron patrolling was compromised from the start.

Indeed, it was not intended that Wilson would have yachts under his control. The original plan had them being used to patrol the Eastern Seaboard; but the acute need to protect American troopships arriving in France from U-boat attack saw some of them dispatched to French waters.

Yachtsmen and yacht clubs provided the more experienced sailors for operating these new auxiliary warships. Ninety-three New York Yacht Club members were commissioned into the US Naval Reserve in early 1917, and 300 volunteered for military service. Ninety club members donated or leased their vessels.

As an exemplar of the volunteering yachtsman, consider Robert Elliot Tod, who made his fortune in railroads and

banking. He served as president of the Atlantic Yacht Club, as well as the Indian Harbor Yacht Club and the New York Yacht Club, owned a succession of yachts, and participated in the successful defense of the America's Cup. In 1911 he launched the *Karina*, reportedly the largest private yacht afloat at the time. When war came, fifty-year-old Tod joined the US Naval Reserve Force (USNRF), serving as third in command and navigating officer of J. P. Morgan's yacht *Corsair III*, redesignated during the war as USS *Corsair*, SP-159. This was not an uncommon situation; often the Navy got a yacht along with its owner.

In April 1917, James W. Aker of New York City was commissioned into the USNRF and brought with him on a free lease his 124-foot yacht *Quickstep*, (renamed USS *Florence* SP-173 during her wartime service). The 104 GT vessel was built in 1903 by yacht designer and builder Nathanael G. Herreshoff of Rhode Island. During the war, she served as a patrol boat in the 3rd Naval District. USS *Florence* navigated the waters of Long Island Sound on patrol service, guard duties, and target-range support, and as an escort for US Navy submarines.

Industrialist Maxwell Wyeth lent his 140-foot yacht, *Emerald*, to the Navy in July 1917; he and his boat were assigned to the 4th Naval District. She performed as a mine sweeper, convoy escort, and patrol vessel. Wyeth was awarded the Navy Cross for his service. William Kissam Vanderbilt II's beloved *Tarantula II* went with him in April 1917 to the 3rd Naval District for patrol duty, again on a free lease.

In French Waters

On 4 June 1917, a collection of six rich men's toys left the New York Navy Yard for France and steamed slowly down the stream. Collectively, they bore the official appellation of "1st US Patrol

USS *Gloucester* (ex-*Corsair II*), 1918

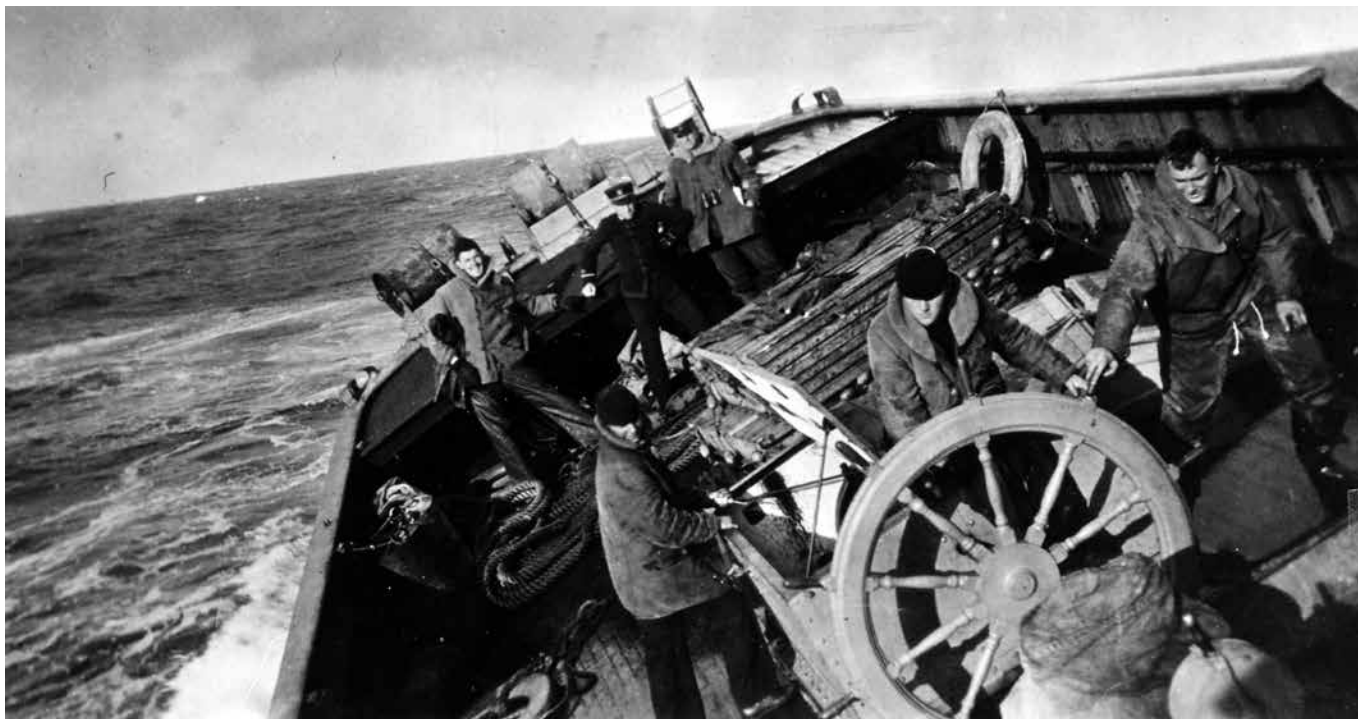


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Robert Elliot Tod



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USS *Noma* rolling heavily during WWI patrol duty, circa 1917–18. In view are depth charges mounted on the taffrail.

Squadron in European Waters.” USS *Noma* (1902), *Harvard* (1894), *Kanawha II* (1899), *Vedette* (1900), *Christabel* (1893), and *Sultana* (1889) made up the formation; they were to sail to Bermuda first, and then continue east to the Azores, as it was not considered that they could withstand the rigors of a non-stop Atlantic crossing. Two other members of the squadron, *Corsair* and *Aphrodite*, took the direct route, as part of the escort for the first major troop convoy dispatched from the US to France.

En route, *Sultana* got her introduction to war on the high seas when she and her crew rescued 37 survivors from SS *Orleans* on 3 July, inbound for Bordeaux from New York with general cargo, which had been sunk by *UC-71*. The merchant crew had taken to their lifeboat and asked the Germans to rescue those who were still in the water around their sinking ship. “Can’t help you. This is war. They’ve no business to be over here,” said the U-boat commander and sailed away.

The six yachts arrived at Brest around 4 July, where they met up with *Corsair* and *Aphrodite*. On 14 July, they began operations under squadron commander Captain W. B. Fletcher, USN. The 2nd Squadron arrived between 29 and 30 August, having met dreadful storms on the passage across. It comprised *Guinevere* (1908); *Carola IV* (1885), originally Scottish-built for the Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery; *Alcedo* (1895); *Wanderer* (1897); *Remlik* (1903), constructed in Hull and owned by patent medicine manufacturer, newspaperman, horse breeder and entrepreneur Willis Sharpe Kilmer; *Corona* (1905); and *Emeline* (1898). Some vessels arrived with badly leaking decks, damaged as they fought through the weather.

This latter grouping was known as the “Easter Egg Fleet,” owing to the riotous patterns of color used in creating a dazzle-type camouflage pattern on their sides and upperworks. Known as the Mackay Low Visibility system, it was developed in 1917 by American

artist William Andrew Mackay, intended to reduce ship visibility at a distance and in varying light conditions.

The yachts were charged with protecting convoys and hunting submarines, but only one was able to claim a sinking. By mid-1918, the Navy had seventeen converted yachts operating off the French coast. By far the smallest and oldest of these was the schooner-rigged steam yacht, *Christabel* (1893). The 164-foot yacht had been built for wealthy Scottish ironmaster Arthur C. Kennard, by D. and W. Henderson to the designs of G. L. Watson. *Christabel* was sold to New Yorker Walton Ferguson in 1910, and she eventually came into the ownership of Irving Ter Bush, son of Rufus T. Bush, who had made a fortune in oil and industry. The US Navy purchased her for \$55,000 in April 1917 and armed her with two 3-inch guns and two machine guns.

On 21 May, *Christabel* was on escort duty, standing by SS *Danae*, a laggard about eight miles adrift of her coastal convoy out of La Pallice to

Quiberon Bay. Two miles outside the Île d'Yeu, a lookout spotted an oil slick to port. The yacht investigated it and saw nothing; but then at 1720, her lookout sighted the wake of a periscope 600 yards off her port quarter. *Christabel* altered course and headed towards its location at her top speed of 10.5 knots, whereupon the wake disappeared amidst a number of oil slicks.

Commanding Officer Lieutenant Millington B. McComb climbed aloft to con his vessel from the foretop. Believing he had arrived over the U-boat's position, he dropped a depth charge. At 2052, still lagging behind the convoy, *Christabel* again sighted a periscope about 200 yards off her starboard beam. Maneuvering to where it had been spotted, at 2055 she dropped another depth charge and then a second one moments later. Nothing followed the explosion of the first charge, but the second occasioned a third and violent explosion, which shot skyward between *Christabel's* stern and the water column raised by the second bomb. The detonation was such that "the officers thought at first that the ship had been seriously damaged, and a couple of men were knocked sprawling on the deck." *Christabel* turned, cruised in the vicinity and observed a quantity of heavy black oil and splintered pieces of wood, with very large oil bubbles rising to the surface. In a few minutes, the sea, for a space many hundred yards in diameter, was covered with dead fish, about ten times as many, the officers reported, as could have been killed by a typical depth charge.

While this was taking place, some of the yacht's depth charges had come loose and began to roll around the deck. Ensign Daniel Sullivan, USNRF, flung himself on them and secured the bombs, for which he later received the Medal of Honor.

Christabel could claim a U-boat sunk. On 12 September 1918, Admiral

Henry Wilson, Commander, US Naval Forces in France, wrote to McComb that "you are authorized to paint a white star on the smokestack of the vessel under your command as a mark to denote the fact that the USS *Christabel* has successfully engaged and put out of action an enemy submarine."

The U-boat she had attacked, however, the minelayer *UC-56*, although badly damaged, escaped and made a difficult three-day voyage to Santander in neutral Spain where she was interned, as were her crew. Not sunk, but still put out of the war by a rich man's toy.

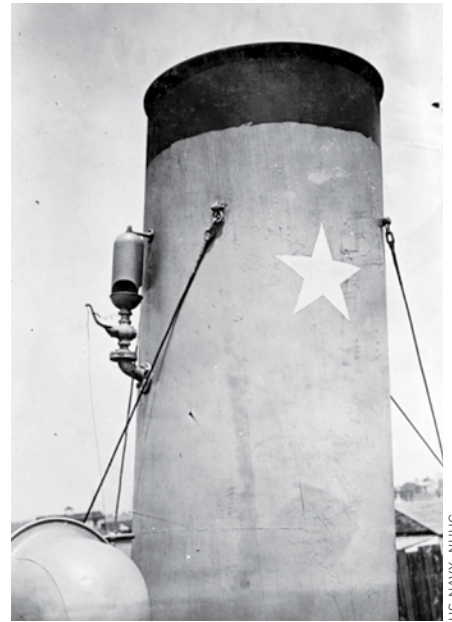
The yachts were far from perfect as warships but filled a gap and bought time for better escort vessels to be built.

(right) USS *Christabel*, circa 1919. The star was painted on the smokestack after she was credited with sinking a U-boat off the coast of France.

(below) *Corsair III's* crew spelling out the yacht's name in semaphore code. In view amidships are two 3-inch/50-caliber guns.

They had many other actions and adventures than those narrated here. To discover them, read *Steam Yachts at War!* ⚓

Steve R. Dunn is the author of thirteen books on naval history. This article is based on research from his latest book, Steam Yachts at War: The Naval Deployment of British and American Armed Yachts 1914–1918 (Seaforth Publishing, 2024).



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