

Feeling the Roll

Memories of RMS *Queen Mary* Powering Through an Atlantic Storm

by Suzanne Pool-Camp

Mariners justifiably fear a storm in which waves tower over their ship, tossing it about like a cork bobbing in the ocean.

Even modern cruise ships have met their demise—or at least been grievously damaged—by oceanic storms over the annals of history. One of these historic tempests brought the 1,019-foot RMS *Queen Mary* within a few degrees of capsizing during her wartime service in 1942. If she had been lost on this passage in the Atlantic, more than 10,000 troops would have died before they reached Europe. The story of this

“perfect storm” was recorded by only a few of the passengers, perhaps because many of the others had been so seasick and traumatized that they preferred to forget the experience altogether.

For the men and women who boarded the ocean liner *Queen Mary* at Pier 90 in New York Harbor that cold day on 8 December 1942, it was the beginning of their adventure into the jaws of war, from which many would never return. Most of them, arriving by bus or train from military camps across the eastern seaboard, knew little about the ship in which they would be traveling.

From her maiden voyage in May 1936 from Southampton to New York City until her last trip as a luxury liner before World War II, she served as a floating resort for the wealthy and famous. Passengers dined in elegance, listened to celebrity entertainers, and exercised on the tennis courts and in sparkling swimming pools. On 1 September 1939, *Queen Mary* departed Southampton, England, with 2,332 passengers, including Bob Hope and his wife, Dolores. By the time they made their arrival in New York just four days later, World War II had been declared.

After an extensive conversion to serve in her new role, including the removal of fine carpets, china, crystal, and other luxury features, the ship received a coat of dull gray paint to camouflage her from German vessels and U-boats. The liner’s best defense against enemy torpedoes was her speed—about 25 to 30 knots—and steering a zigzag course across the Atlantic. Soon known as the “Gray Ghost,” she proved her value as one of the few large Allied troop carriers. The British Admiralty ordered additional anti-aircraft guns for her defense and enough canvas racks to accommodate the thousands of troops she would transport over the next five years.

Her first wartime voyage in May 1940 was a 6,000-mile passage from Australia to South Africa, and another 6,000 miles to Scotland. For the early years of the war, *Queen Mary* and her sister ship *Queen Elizabeth* shuttled more than 80,000 troops from Down



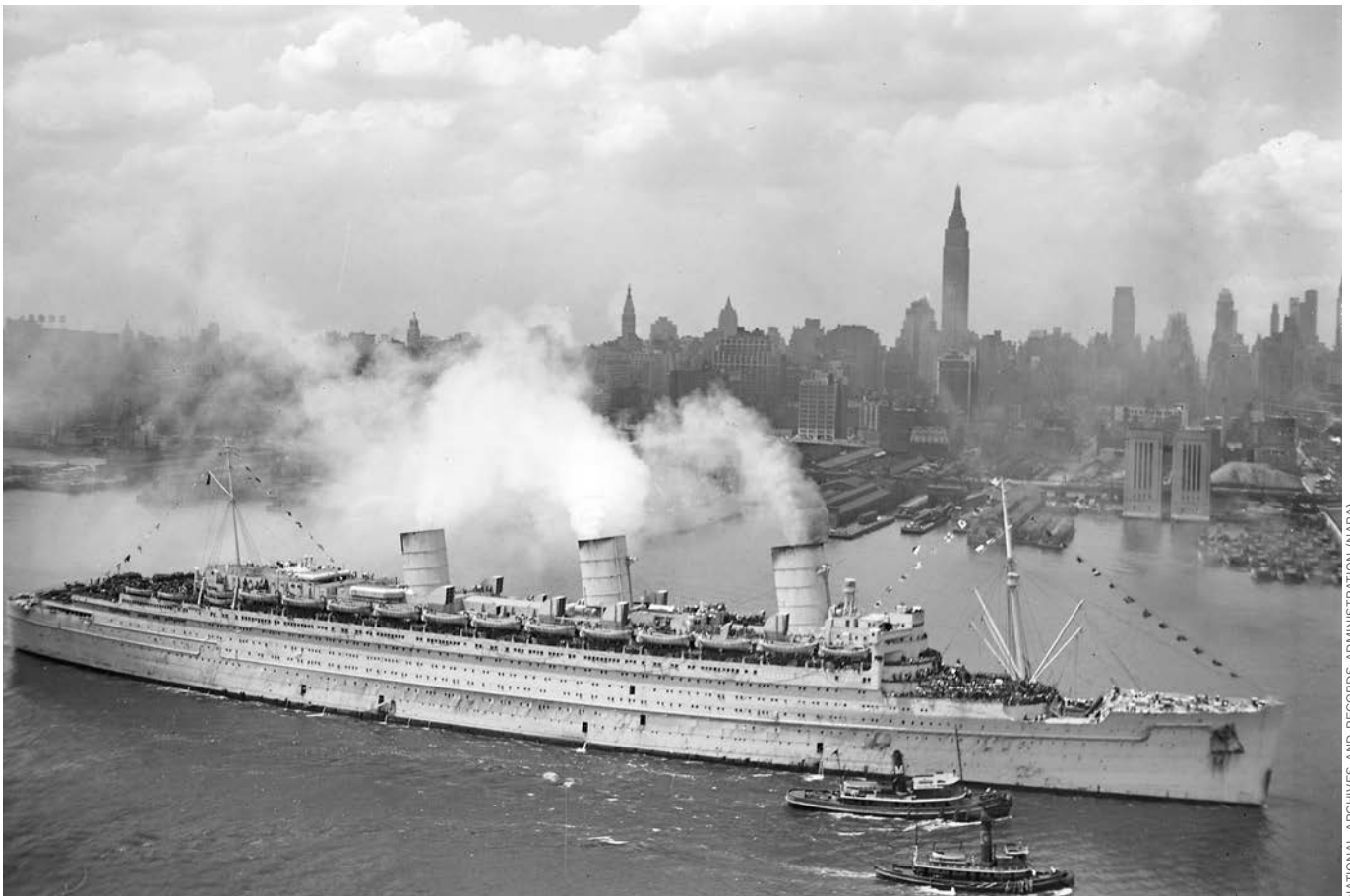
PHOTO BY ANGELO RIZZUTO (1906-1967)

Crowds gather at the pier to bid adieu to family and friends aboard RMS *Queen Mary*, August 1949.

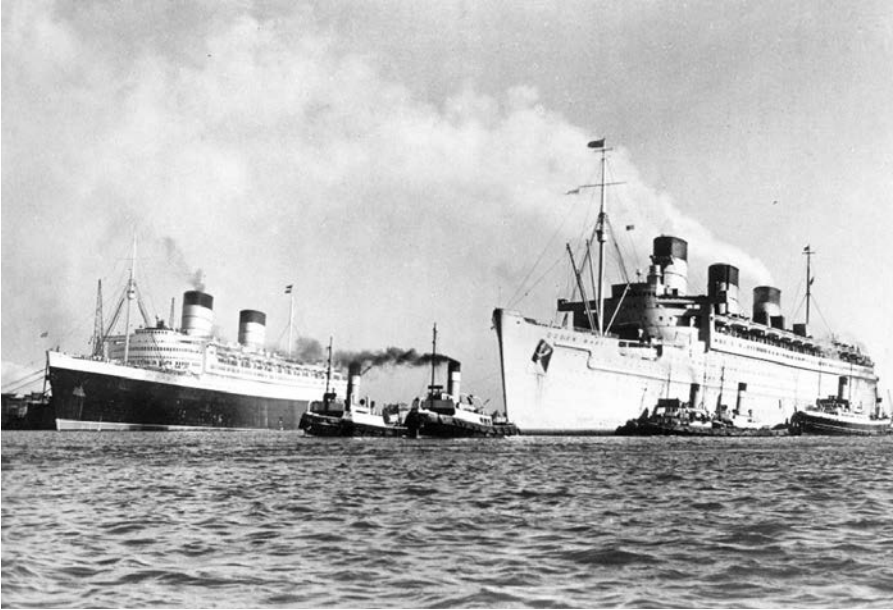


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RMS *Queen Mary* in her two paint schemes: (above) Steaming into New York Harbor in 1936, her first year of operations. (below) Camouflaged in gray paint to reduce her silhouette on the open sea. In World War II, *Queen Mary* carried thousands of troops to war zones and home again after the war was over.

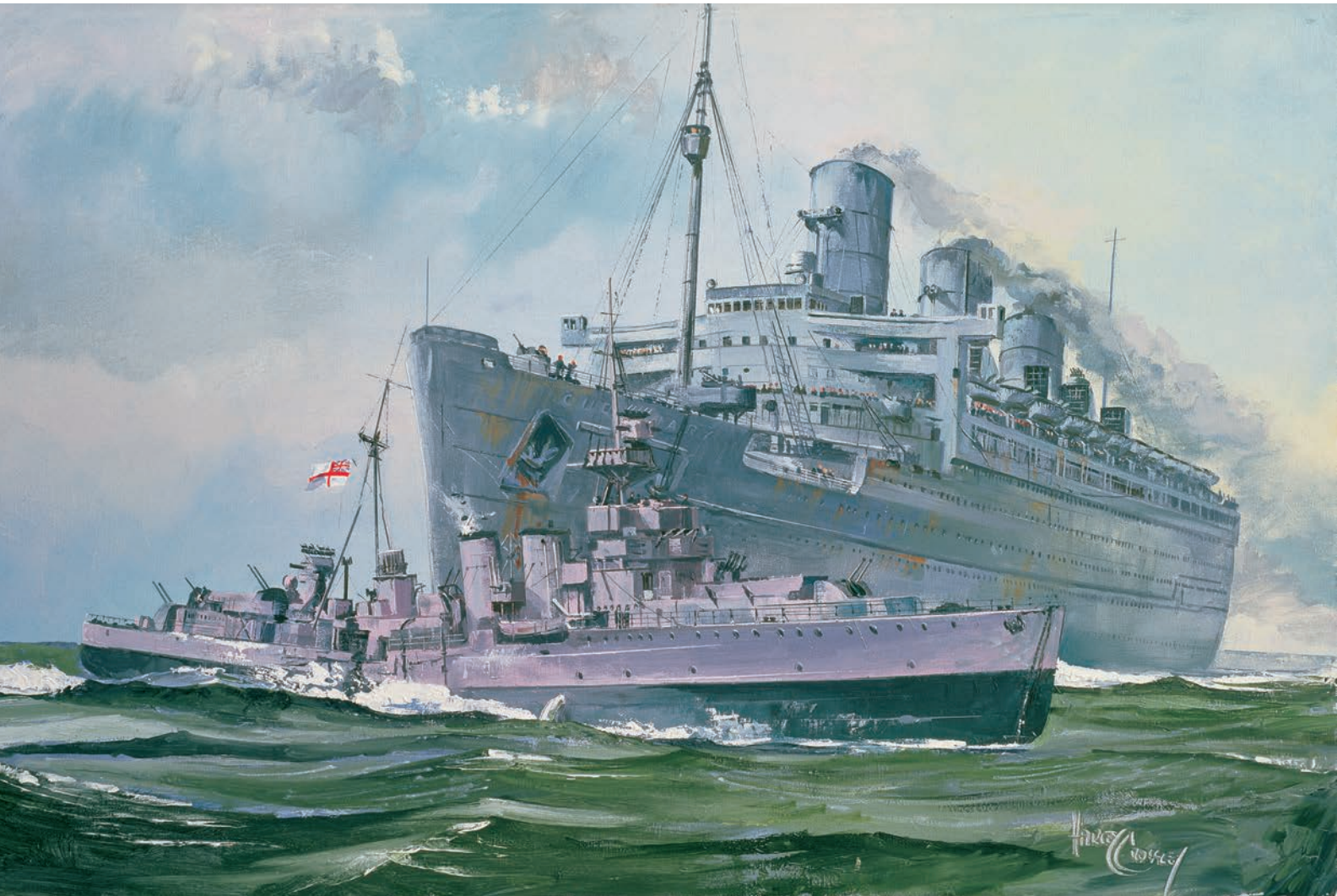


NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION (NARA)



Queen Elizabeth (left) and Queen Mary (right) in Southampton, England, on 27 September 1946. This was taken just before Queen Elizabeth's sea trials, having been repainted in Cunard livery. Queen Mary was just concluding her war duties and had yet to be repainted.

The Queen Mary, HMS Curacoa Incident by Harley Crossley (1936–2013), oil on canvas



Under to South Africa and the Middle East. After the United States entered the war in December 1941 and the Allies began to focus on preparing for an invasion of Europe, the two *Queens* began transporting American troops to theaters of war across the Pacific and in the Atlantic to Great Britain. On 11 May 1942, *Queen Mary* sailed from New York to Scotland and set a record as the first ship to carry more than 10,000 people. Another record-breaking crossing for the Gray Ghost came in August 1942, when she carried the US First Armored Division of 15,125 men from New York to Ireland and then on to England.

In early October 1942, *Queen Mary* had a disastrous accident with one of her escort vessels forty miles off the coast of Northern Ireland. As was standard procedure, small destroyers and larger escort Royal Navy vessels met the liner as she entered the dangerous North Atlantic waters, which were haunted by German U-boats and Luftwaffe planes, to protect her for the final 160 miles to Scotland. During this passage, her escort, the 450-foot light cruiser HMS *Curacoa*, appeared to be on a parallel zigzagging course with the huge ocean liner, but when the *Queen Mary* turned to starboard to initiate the next zag, the escort vessel did not answer the change in course. *Queen Mary* slammed into her escort amidships, slicing its armored hull in half. To avoid being targeted by U-boats, it was policy for the liner not to stop, so the *Queen Mary* pressed on. Her captain radioed the other smaller vessels in the vicinity to rescue the sailors in the water, but 338 would perish in the icy waters.

After a temporary patch job on *Queen Mary's* bow, she sailed for Boston for extensive repairs in dry dock, which took several weeks. She then headed to Manhattan and returned to her berth along the south side of Cunard's Pier

90 on the Hudson River. RMS *Queen Elizabeth* was docked on the north side of the pier. *Queen Mary's* scheduled voyage to Scotland on 8 December 1942 would be her first trip since the *Curacoa* accident.

All through the evening of 7 December, thousands of passengers gathered at the pier before boarding. Army nurse Lt. Mildred A. Radawiec, Third Auxiliary Surgical Group, arrived about 10 PM, having traveled from Camp Kilmer in nearby New Jersey and then across the Hudson by ferry from Weehawken. After struggling up the gangplank with her suitcase, gas mask, purse, and canteen, she followed directions to her cabin. Out of the seven decks on the ship, nurses were assigned to the main deck. Her cabin had twelve narrow bunks in tiers of four, the top one nearly touching the ceiling. After stowing her baggage, she climbed into the top bunk and tried to sleep, despite the sounds of pounding boots and clanking gear of troops making their way to lower decks.

Early the next morning after a breakfast of eggs and bacon, Radawiec and other nurses went topside to watch the surrounding vessels guide the massive liner past the Statue of Liberty out to sea. She noticed the smaller ships changing positions according to semaphore signals, as well as planes flying over the convoy to watch for enemy U-boats patrolling the waters around New York Harbor. Along the entire Eastern Seaboard in early 1942, German U-boats had sunk more than a hundred merchant ships and oil tankers. Once *Queen Mary* sailed beyond coastal waters, she was on her own until she reached the Irish coast, where British escort vessels would meet her.

As the liner was a prize target of the Nazis, the British crewmen conducted emergency drills at random and warned passengers about not smoking or using flashlights on deck to maintain

the ship's blackout. They also pointed out that the ship's 24 lifeboats would not be enough for all of the passengers, so everyone must carry their life preservers, and they added: "Should any of you fall overboard, this ship will not turn back for any reason." The visibility of numerous 40mm and 20mm anti-aircraft guns stationed at several places along the ship's deck were a constant reminder of the threat of enemy attack.

Racing through the waves at 32 knots, the Gray Ghost continued on a zigzag course, creaking as she lurched from the shifting action. On the fourth day at sea, a squall and accompanying rough seas developed. Soon the ship pitched even more. Radawiec recalled how huge waves crested and then the *Queen* would drop into a trough, "where she trembled in every joint as the waves receded." The roaring wind drove waves crashing into each other until the lone vessel was surrounded by a violent storm.

Dr. Norval Carter of the 110th Station Hospital unit was also aboard. A graduate of the Medical College of Virginia, he had volunteered to serve, leaving behind his wife and two young sons. He offered to assist the doctors in the ship's small hospital, but was ordered instead to assist the British crew with an anti-aircraft battery on one of the upper decks. During the storm he anchored himself behind the gun-shield to keep from being swept overboard. He later wrote of his amazement to see the massive ship tossed around like a toy: "One moment the top deck was at its usual height and then swoon, down, over, and forward she would pitch. It was magnificent! I thought for sure I'd get seasick, but didn't." Dr. Carter was one of the few who found it so "magnificent"!

Most of the troops below decks suffered from continuous seasickness during the three-day storm. Some were

so ill they became dehydrated and had to receive medical treatment. Nurse Radawiec saw how “time dragged endlessly for those lying on their bunks retching each time” the ship peaked and plunged. They had to wait for attention from the medical officers and nurses because many others were injured by the violent pitching of the ship. Some fell out of their bunks or got slammed against bulkheads or metal railings. Radawiec recalled the transport commander sitting down to enjoy breakfast only to be thrown from his chair and rolled across the room, “followed by his two poached eggs.”

Several portlights were smashed by the impact of the water, flooding some cabin floors. The ankle-high water frightened one officer into believing that the hull had been torpedoed and that his men should prepare to abandon ship. Meanwhile in the hospital area, Captain Ralph Coffey faced the challenge of doing an emergency appendectomy. He made a swift incision with his scalpel while the floor rocked under his feet and the instruments on the tray rolled back and forth. Fortunately, the patient survived the surgery.

According to Radawiec, the storm lasted for three days: “At times the ship lifted so high on a wave her huge propeller blades were exposed. Several British seamen manning the crow’s nest high over the deck were swept away.” The few passengers who were still unaffected by the tumbling motion went topside to avoid the bad smells in the bowels of the ship. On the third day of the storm, even Radawiec began to feel nauseated and was unable to sleep due to the “ship’s creaking and rolling.” The next morning, she splashed water on her face and ran up the flights of stairs to the upper deck to get some fresh air and feel the ocean spray against her skin. She joined the saltiest sailors—or at least those with experienced sea-legs and iron stomachs.

(below) Army nurse Lt. Mildred A. Radawiec.

(opposite) *Queen Mary*’s Captain James G. P. Bisset was commodore of the Cunard Line from 1944 until his retirement in 1947, having previously served as captain of both *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*. Bisset got his start in the merchant marine as an apprentice seaman aboard the three-masted barque *County of Pembroke*. He was on watch as second officer aboard RMS *Carpathia* when the distress calls about the *Titanic* came in over the wireless, and he assisted in the rescue of the survivors.



PHOTO FROM THE COVER OF WORLD WAR II FRONT LINE NURSE BY MILDRED A. MACGREGOR, COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS



One of these was Chief Warrant Officer James A. Pool, 29th Naval Construction Battalion. He braced himself against gale force winds and near 100-foot waves washing over the deck. As a former merchant mariner and experienced seaman, he preferred facing the storm on deck as opposed to staying below with the unfortunates who were “feeling the roll.” Wearing his long wool naval coat with the collar raised around his face, he tied himself to a sturdy post so he wouldn’t slide across the deck.

On the bridge was Captain James G. P. Bisset. He had been the master of the ship during most of 1942, except for the passages between August and November when the ship was commanded by Captain Cyril G. Illingworth. Bisset had faced many Atlantic storms during the 35 years he had been with the Cunard Line, but this, he confessed, was the worst. In his memoirs he recorded: “This was a passage in severe winter weather with north-westerly gales which made the ship roll heavily for four days.” During this time, he recalled that he had “no rest.”

According to some witnesses, at one point *Queen Mary* rolled on her side 43 degrees and would have capsized if she had continued much further. Major Clifford Graves reported that “the captain’s log noted that the *Queen* had heeled to 30 degrees.” His description of the storm was very similar to that of Lt. Radawiec’s, but he doesn’t mention any loss of life, nor did Captain Bisset.

“On the 14th, the storm began to subside. Seagulls circled the ship, indicating we were nearing land,” Radawiec later recalled. The convoy of destroyers and escort vessels finally found *Queen Mary* at sea, despite her arriving two days late. They guided her through the submarine net into the Firth of Clyde, the deepwater harbor in northern Scotland. She was greeted by a cacophony of horns and cheering crowds waving small Union Jacks. To nurse Radawiec

and those on deck, Scotland was “a beautiful sight.” Major Graves remembered the colorful villages nestled along the shore: “How soothing to the eye that has beheld nothing but angry waters.” Due to the approaching early evening darkness, everyone was ordered to stay on board until the next day, when they were taken to the dock in Gourock, where they were transported to their various stations.

By the end of the war, *Queen Mary* had carried more than 800,000 troops and served a vital role in the Allied victory. Chief Warrant Officer James Pool and Captain Norval Carter both participated in the D-Day invasion. Pool returned home in October 1945, but Carter was killed by a sniper in the fields of Normandy in 1944. Major Clifford Graves wrote about Carter’s service in *Frontline Surgeons: A History of the Third Auxiliary Surgical Group*. Lt. Radawiec returned home in October 1945, married her long-time fiancé, Dr. Robert MacGregor, and in 2006 wrote a book titled *World War II Frontline Nurse*. Captain James Bisset retired as master of *Queen Mary* in January 1947 and wrote his memoir, *Commodore: War, Peace and Big Ships*, published in 1961.

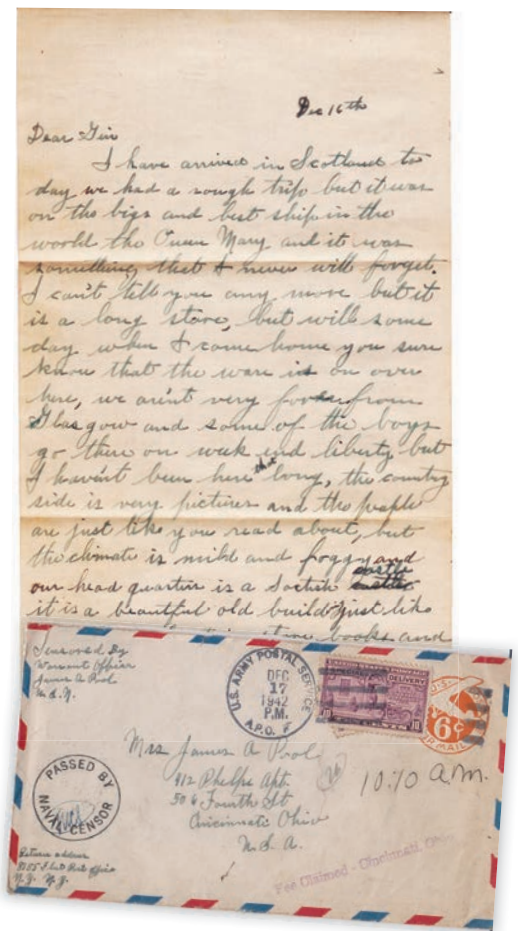
After the war’s end, *Queen Mary* resumed civilian transAtlantic service, sailing until Cunard retired her in 1967. She is permanently berthed in Long Beach, California, where she has served as a tourist attraction and hospitality venue. †

Suzanne Pool-Camp is a freelance author and military historian in Fredericksburg, Virginia. She holds a juris doctor degree from Salmon P. Chase College of Law and has co-authored several books with her husband, Col. Richard Camp, US Marine Corps (Ret.). She is the daughter of James and Geneva “Ginny” Pool.



JAMES A. POOL PHOTO AND LETTER, AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

Chief warrant officer James A. Pool wrote home to his wife after the ship’s safe arrival in Scotland, telling her that they’d had a “rough trip,” but that they were aboard the “best ship in the world.”





DAVID LOFINIK FROM ANAHEIM CC BY 2.0 VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

RMS *Queen Mary* retired from sea service in 1967 and was purchased by the city of Long Beach, California for \$3.45 million and converted to a tourist attraction, museum, hotel, and entertainment venue.



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