



USS Wakefield, AP-21

ex-SS Manhattan



The birthplace of George Washington, located in Westmoreland County, Virginia.

Length: 705'

Beam: 86'

Draft: 31'

Displacement: 33,650 (1944)

Commissioned: June, 1941 (originally commissioned as SS Manhattan in 1931)

Decommissioned:

Disposition: Sold for scrap, 1965

Complement: 934

Troop capacity: 6,000

Armament: 4 x 5"; 4 x 3"/50 cal.; 8 x .50-cal. mg

**"EVOLUTION OF LUXURY LINER MANHATTAN TO THE COAST GUARD
MANNED TROOP TRANSPORT WAKEFIELD"**

**Public Relations Division
U.S. Coast Guard (circa 1944)**

Typical of the pre-war American liners that have doffed their luxurious trimmings and pleasurable devices for wartime service is the U.S.S. WAKEFIELD. This Coast Guard-manned troop transport of 24,289 gross tons, painted battleship gray and bordered with a chain of rubber life rafts, is a veteran of many wartime crossings. Her decks and holds crowded with thousands of fighting men and their equipment leaving the United States or with battle casualties and prisoners of war returning, present a sharp contrast to their gay atmosphere of peacetime when they were said to exemplify the finest craftsmanship in beauty and color that this country afforded, and several hundred passengers in festive mood danced, drank, lounged, or played games in luxurious surroundings.

Luxury Liner

Before she joined the service, the WAKEFIELD was the MANHATTAN, queen of the United States Lines, a ship of comfort and luxury, with a shining black hull and gleaming white superstructure, built solely for pleasure, equipped with a swimming pool, beautiful chandeliers, rare hand-carved woods, hand-wrought railings, colorful paintings by Aldo Lazzarini, rugs, draperies, pianos, and an organ. Nothing needful for rest or play was lacking. Among her passengers were many famous people, and her arrivals and departures were festive occasions, with bands, flags, reporters, cameramen, and gay throngs of well-wishers. Her route, which she started to ply in August, 1932, was between New York and Hamburg, Germany, and she was welcomed in the German port as ceremoniously as she had been sent off from New York, with the addition of the Nazi salute.

Rumblings of War

While she was in the German port, the MANHATTAN was subject to German law. She was frequently inspected by German officials, and as she lay in the harbor, she was probably often the object of Nazi speculation. In 1935, a member of her crew was arrested and placed in a German prison on the charge of having a quantity of Red literature in his cabin, in violation of the Nazi law forbidding the possession of any communistic propaganda.

In spite of the rumblings of war, the MANHATTAN continued her New York--Hamburg pleasure trips until September 28, 1938, when Germany suddenly recalled all her ships by wireless, ordering them to return to their home ports immediately, without passengers, if necessary. This act caused the worst disruption of ship schedules since the first World War and gave American luxury liners their first taste of wartime emergency service. Thousands of American citizens were stranded in Europe and emergency evacuation committees were established to arrange for their transportation home. The MANHATTAN was sent to Havre, France, instead of to Hamburg, and she returned crowded to capacity--her grand salon, palm court, auditorium, gymnasium, post office, and corridors filled with Army cots.

Because the four-power "peace or war" conference held in Munich was apparently successful, the MANHATTAN'S weekly sailings to Hamburg were resumed, but there were very few passengers leaving the United States--only newspapermen on assignments or tourists who ignored the threat of war, but she was crowded on her return trips. Finally, the Neutrality Act put an end to the Hamburg stop in December, 1939, and the MANHATTAN and her sister ship, the WASHINGTON, were routed from New York to Naples and Genoa, Italy, where they were greeted by the Fascist salute.

Government Girl

Then, the MANHATTAN started her emergency pace at the request of the Government, which asked the United States Lines to operate its North Atlantic services on the fastest possible schedule in order to bring home the American citizens unable to obtain passage due to the complete disruption of practically all foreign trans-Atlantic ship services. The MANHATTAN and WASHINGTON made eleven round trips from New York to Italy until the summer of 1940, when the President closed the Mediterranean to American Flag ships.

At the request of the State Department and the U.S. Maritime Commission, the MANHATTAN then made a special trip to bring home almost 800 passengers from Lisbon, Portugal, after which she served the United States Lines on intercoastal trips from New York to California. Early in 1941, on her third trip, she went aground on a sand bar off West Palm Beach, Florida. Coast Guard cutters tried in vain to pull the huge liner off the sand bar, for each time, the heavily grounded 24,289-ton ship snapped the hawser as the cutter strained to move it. Finally, Coast Guard surf boats removed the passengers, and a few weeks later,

the liner was freed and sailed back to New York for repairs. Over a million dollars worth of damage was done, and it was not until the summer of 1941 that the repair work was completed. Then, the MANHATTAN was chartered to the Government for two years.

Service Career

Anti-aircraft guns, depth charges, a degaussing system, and a coat of gray paint were the MANHATTAN'S service uniform. And, in accordance with the policy of naming transports for American shrines, she was given a new name, the WAKEFIELD, after the Virginia birthplace of George Washington. Bereft of the ornamentation that made tap the artistry and beauty of the luxury limes, MANHATTAN, a gray troop transport emerged, the U.S.S. WAKEFIELD.

As a troop transport, the WAKEFIELD was to carry the most important of all cargoes--men. And to be prepared for this important task, she took part with other transports in intensive "war games".

War Games

After Captain R.G. Reinicke, U.S.N. (Ret.) had turned the command of the huge transport over to Commander Wilfred N. Derby, United States Coast Guard, on June 15, 1941, and the Coast Guard crew had been assembled, Army troops and equipment were taken on board and the practice began. Troops and equipment, including trucks and Jeeps, were carried ashore and then back to the ship time and again. Loading and unloading the Y-boats and hauling them up the sides of the ship were timed for efficiency. A study of the engines was made to discover the best position of the ship for unloading operations. Anti-aircraft practice was carried on, the degaussing system was tested, and various drills for crew and passengers were held daily. Zig-zag sailing in convoy formation practiced during the day and in blackout conditions at night.

Commander W. K. Scammell, U.S. Coast Guard, succeeded Commander Derby as Commanding Officer of the transport on August 17, 1941, and the training and drilling were climaxed by an overhauling and further conversion of the ship, so that the American declaration of war found the WAKEFIELD and her Coast Guard crew ready for their important assignment.

Attacked at Singapore

The convoy position of the WAKEFIELD was astern her sister ship, the MOUNT VERNON, formerly the luxury liner, WASHINGTON. In this position, she pursued her zig-zag course through the sub-infested waters of the Atlantic and around South Africa to deliver British troops at Singapore.

In spite of constant air raid alarms from shore, the stream of men and supplies kept moving from the huge ship to the beleaguered stronghold.

Two formations of Japanese bombers flew over Singapore's dock area and began dropping bombs the morning of January 30, 1942, while the WAKEFIELD was fueling. One bomb fell about 50 yards off the transport's port quarter and another about 50 feet off her port beam, but did no damage. Then there was a direct hit. The bomb exploded in the ship's hospital section on B deck, killing five men and injuring nine. Several fires started and there was a great deal of damage, but all above the water line. In twenty minutes, the fires were under control and a hospital was set up in another section.

The attacking planes, flying at 20,000 feet, made off, and the war-initiated liner completed fueling. During the afternoon, while air raid warnings continued to sound, evacuees, including women and children, came aboard, as well as British servicemen and merchant seamen. In the darkness of night, the transport got underway, and burial services were held at sea for the five men killed in the morning raid.

While at sea, a baby was born in the WAKEFIELD'S sick bay to one of the evacuees, the wife of a British flyer. As a tribute to the ship, the mother gave her son the middle name, "Wakefield."

Temporary repairs of the bomb damage was made at a port in India, where more evacuees as well as merchant seamen and Allied servicemen came on board for transportation. Following her zig-zag course, the Coast Guard-manned ship arrived back in New York about two months later, having discharged and picked up passengers and mail along the way.

Repairs were completed at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and the WAKEFIELD'S next trip, with Commander Harold G. Bradbury, U.S. Coast Guard in command was through the Pacific. Several thousand officers and men of the Marine Corps boarded the ship in a steady stream, hundreds each hour. And sacks of mail, the morale-building cargo, were stowed away. The Coast Guard-manned transport started her zig-zag course in May, 1942, delivered her passengers and supplies at Wellington, New Zealand, picked up returning passengers and mail, and arrived at New York in July.

Atlantic Fire

Early in August, the WAKEFIELD left port with the largest number of troops ever ferried across the Atlantic in a single operation until that time. There was perfect weather and complete absence of enemy interference all the way over, but on her homeward trip, carrying 850 passengers, mostly American construction workers from a northern base, merchant seamen, and service men, a fire broke out which almost demolished the ship.

The fire started the evening of September 3, when the WAKEFIELD was on the port flank of a convoy about 350 miles from Boston. It spread so rapidly that within ten minutes after the first alarm, the flames had reached A and C decks. When it became apparent that the blaze could not be brought under control, the U.S.S. BROOKLYN came alongside and began disembarking passengers and crewmen. The destroyer, MAYO, took off 200 officers and men who had been hemmed forward by the fire amidships, and remaining survivors in the forward part of the vessel were rescued in lifeboats from the U.S.S. MADISON.

When Commander Bradbury, last to leave the transport, was taken off, the blaze was so strong that it blistered the paint of the rescuing ship. As soon as it had abated somewhat, Commander Bradbury and a special fire-fighting party reboarded the ship.

However, the fire continued until additional help reached the scene with special fire-fighting equipment. Towing operations were begun by a Canadian tug, and when the charred hull reached Halifax, the fire was still burning and was approaching the fuel oil tanks, already so hot that the oil in them could be heard boiling. Immediate attention to these flames averted the imminent explosion.

In spite of all efforts, it was nine days after the fire started before it was finally extinguished. Then a new hazard developed. A heavy rain, reaching cloudburst intensity and lasting several days, filled the holds of the WAKEFIELD so full of water that she took on a decided list. Pumps were kept going constantly and blow torches were used to burn holes in the sides through which the water might drain. When the ravaged ship finally reached Boston Navy Yard, there was little but the hull left. The government declared the MANHATTAN a constructive total loss and paid the United States Lines for her.

Rebuilt Transport

Welders, riveters, plumbers, carpenters, electricians swarmed over the crippled giant. A corps of officers and civilian workmen took over, cutting away the mangled superstructure, removing burned out sections with blow torches, and rebuilding the ship from the waterline up. Their engineering and construction skill remade the huge liner into virtually a new ship, with extensive safety features built into it.

The MANHATTAN is no more, for the WAKEFIELD is not a converted ship now, but actually a troop transport--rebuilt for just one purpose, carrying the maximum number of troops. It can no longer be reconverted into a luxury liner. The WAKEFIELD is one of the few fortunate ships where such privileges as making below decks are made possible because of exceptional fire-proofing and ventilating systems.

Everything on the rebuilt Coast Guard-manned transport is non-combustible. And, while most other troop transports have only salt water for washing, the WAKEFIELD can produce ninety gallons of fresh water daily more than enough for every man aboard.

Since her attack at Singapore and her fire in the Atlantic, the WAKEFIELD has experienced many peaceful crossings under the command of Captain Roy L. Raney, U.S. Coast Guard, who has served on her since she first started her Navy service. The WAKEFIELD'S speed and the alertness of her crew are her protection. She had made dozens of crossings, carrying hundreds of thousands of troops over, and returning with the fruits of war--the wounded and prisoners. There are no celebrating crowds at her arrivals and departures, and the end of one trip merely signifies the beginning of another--perpetual service, backing the fighting fronts with a constant supply of men and equipment until the day of victory when the Coast Guard-manned ship will return crowded with victorious men and met by crowds more triumphant than any she has yet seen.

-USCG-

DANFS History:

Manhattan-a passenger liner built for the United States Lines at Camden, N.J., by the New York Shipbuilding Co.-was launched on 5 December 1931; and sponsored by Mrs. Edith Kermit Roosevelt, widow of former President Theodore Roosevelt.

After trials in and off the Delaware River, *Manhattan* departed New York City at midnight on 10 August 1932 for her maiden Atlantic crossing. Arriving at Hamburg 10 days later, she made the return voyage to New York in 5 days, 14 hours, and 28 minutes-a record for passenger liners. Proudly carrying the title of "the fastest cabin ship in the world," the liner continued to ply the North Atlantic from New York to Hamburg, via Cobh, Ireland, Southampton, England; and Le Havre, France, into the late 1930's. When Germany recalled her ships from the high seas during the Munich crisis in September 1938, *Manhattan* was en route to Hamburg but immediately came about and put into British and French ports instead, to bring back anxious American travelers who feared that they would be engulfed in a European war.

After war broke out a year later, she made voyages to Genoa and Naples, Italy. Following the Allied collapse in the lowlands of western Europe in the spring of 1940, she made a transatlantic crossing in July to repatriate American nationals from Portugal. With the European war endangering commercial shipping of neutral nations, *Manhattan* was then withdrawn from the once-lucrative

transatlantic trade and placed in intercoastal service from New York to San Francisco, via the Panama Canal and Los Angeles.

In February 1941, during her third voyage to California, *Manhattan* ran aground off West Palm Beach, Fla., but was pulled free by tugs after the ship was lightened. After the ship was repaired at New York, the Government chartered her on 6 June 1941 for a two-year period and renamed her *Wakefield*. Converted to a troop transport at Brooklyn, N.Y., by the Robins Drydock Co., her costly furnishings and trappings of a luxury cruise liner were carefully removed and stored for future use. All of the ship's external surfaces were painted in Navy camouflage colors. On 15 June 1941, *Wakefield* was commissioned, with Comdr. W. N. Derby, USCG in command.

On 13 July, *Wakefield* departed New York to participate in joint Navy-Marine-Army-Coast Guard amphibious training exercises at New River Inlet, N.C., in late July and early August. In early November, the troopship proceeded to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to take on board British troops. *Wakefield*, with 6,000 men embarked, and five other transports got underway on 10 November for Capetown, South Africa. Escorted by a strong screen-which, as far as Trinidad, included *Ranger* (CV-4)-the convoy arrived at Capetown on 8 December, the day after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. This drastic change in the strategic situation prompted the convoy to be rerouted to the Far East. On 29 January, *Wakefield* and *West Point* arrived at Singapore to disembark troops doomed later to capture by the Japanese upon the fall of the city in the following month.

On 30 January, *Wakefield* commenced fueling at Keppel Harbor for the return voyage and awaited the arrival of some 400 British women and children who were being evacuated to Ceylon. At 1100, lookouts spotted two formations of Japanese bombers-27 planes in each-approaching the dock area at Keppel Harbor. Unhampered by anti-aircraft fire or British fighter planes, the enemy bombers droned overhead and released a brief rain of bombs on the waterfront. One bomb hit 50 yards off *Wakefield's* port quarter, and another blew up in the dock area 40 feet from the transport's bow before a third struck the ship's "B" deck and penetrated through to "C" deck where it exploded in the sick bay spaces. A fire broke out, but it was extinguished in less than one-half hour. Using oxygen masks, fire-fighting and damage control crews extricated five dead and nine wounded. Medical assistance soon came from *West Point*.

Completing her fueling, *Wakefield* embarked her passengers and got underway soon thereafter, burying her dead at sea at 2200 and pushing on for Ceylon. After disembarking her passengers at Colombo, the ship found that port authorities would not cooperate in arranging for repair of her damage. *Wakefield*, therefore, promptly sailed for Bombay, India, where she was able to effect temporary repairs and embark 336 American evacuees. Steaming home via Capetown, the transport reached New York on 23 March and then proceeded to Philadelphia for permanent repairs.

Underway on 11 May for Hampton Roads, *Wakefield* arrived at Norfolk two days later to load cargo in preparation for Naval Transportation Service Operating Plan "Lone Wolf." This provided for *Wakefield* to travel, for the most part, unescorted-relying on her superior speed to outrun or outmaneuver enemy submarines. On the 19th, she embarked 4,725 marines and 309 Navy and Army passengers for transportation to the South Pacific and moved to Hampton Roads to form up with a convoy bound for the Canal Zone. Arriving at Cristobal on the 25th, *Wakefield* was released from the convoy to proceed west. After *Borie* (DD-215) escorted her out of the Canal Zone, *Wakefield* proceeded independently to New Zealand and arrived at Wellington on 14 June. Departing one week later, the transport steamed via the Panama Canal and reached New York on 11 July.

On 6 August 1942, *Wakefield* departed New York with Convoy AT-18-the largest troop convoy yet assembled. A dozen troop transports made up the bulk of the convoy, escorted by 12 warships-cruisers and destroyers. After proceeding via Halifax to Great Britain, *Wakefield* received orders routing her and three other transports to the River Clyde, where they arrived without incident. On 27 August, *Wakefield* departed the Clyde estuary as part of Convoy TA-18, bound for New York.

While the transport was en route to her destination, on the evening of 3 September, fire broke out deep within the bowels of the ship and spread rapidly. In the port column of the formation, *Wakefield* swung to port to run before the wind while fire-fighting began immediately. Ready-use ammunition was thrown overboard to prevent detonation, code room publications were secured, and sick bay and brig inmates were released. *Mayo* (DD-422) and *Brooklyn* (CL-40) closed to windward to take off passengers, a badly-burned officer, and members of the crew not needed to man pumps and hoses. Other survivors were disembarked by boat and raft, to be picked up forthwith by the screening ships.

At 2100, *Brooklyn* again came alongside to remove the remainder of the crew, while a special salvage detail boarded the ship. On 5 September, towing operations commenced, and the big transport nosed aground at McNab's Cove, near Halifax, at 1740 on the 8th. When fire-fighting details arrived alongside to board and commence the mammoth operation, fires still burned in three holds and in the crew's quarters on two deck levels. Four days later, the last flames had been extinguished, and the ship was re-floated on the 14th.

While *Wakefield* was undergoing partial repairs in Halifax harbor, a torrential rainstorm threatened to fill the damaged ship with water and capsize her at her berth. Torrents of rain, at times in cloud-burst proportions, poured into the ship and caused her to list heavily. Salvage crews, meanwhile, cut holes in the ship's sides above the waterline, draining away the water to permit the ship to regain an even keel. For the next 10 days, the salvagers engaged in extensive initial repair work-cleaning up the ship, pumping out debris, patching up holes, and preparing the vessel for her voyage to the Boston Navy Yard for complete rebuilding.

Temporarily decommissioned, the charred liner proceeded for Boston with a four-tug tow, and was declared a "constructive total loss." The Government purchased the hulk from the United States Lines and stripped the vessel to the waterline. Construction began and a virtually new *Wakefield* arose, Phoenix-like, from her ashes.

The repairs and alterations began in the fall of 1942, and lasted through 1943. On 10 February 1944, *Wakefield* was recommissioned at Boston, with Capt. R. L. Raney, USCG, in command. She departed Boston on 13 April, beginning the first of 23 round-trips in the Atlantic theater, and three in the Pacific. Between 13 April 1944 and 1 February 1946, *Wakefield* transported 110,563 troops to Europe and brought some 106,674 men back to America—a total of 217,237 passengers.

In many cases, *Wakefield* operated as a "lone wolf," except for air coverage a few miles out of a port. Her primary port of call in the European theater was Liverpool—visited so often in fact that the transport's crew nicknamed her "The Boston and Liverpool Ferry." The average round-trip voyage took 18 days.

After D day, 6 June 1944, *Wakefield* began the first of her trips as a casualty-evacuation ship, bringing home wounded GI's. On occasion, she also brought back German prisoners of war for internment in the United States. Sometimes she even carried both evacuees and prisoners on the same voyage. After 13 trips to Liverpool, *Wakefield* was sent to the Mediterranean theater to carry men and equipment to Italy. She made three visits to Naples and a run each to Marseilles, Oran, Taranto, Le Havre, and Cherbourg. Returning from her 22d voyage to Europe, the transport departed Boston on 4 December 1945 for Taku, China, and a "Magic Carpet" mission—returning to San Diego, Calif., on 1 February 1946. Two round trips to Guam, in February through April 1946, rounded out the ship's active service as a Navy transport.

Mooring at New York on 27 May 1946, *Wakefield* was decommissioned on 16 June—five years to the day since she first entered service. There she was laid up in reserve, out of commission, with the Maritime Administration's Hudson River Reserve Fleet at Jones Point, New York. She was struck from the Navy Register in 1959. She was sold for scrap to Union Minerals & Alloys Corporation for \$263,000 in 1965.



"COAST GUARD TRANSPORT HEADS INTO BOSTON. . . . The Coast Guard-manned troop transport, USS WAKEFIELD, arrived in Boston this morning loaded down with more than 8,100 fighting Yanks, from Naples, Italy. Also aboard the transport were Brig. Gen. Raymond E. S. Williamson, of Falmouth, Mass., of the 91st Infantry Division, seven American Red Cross; and six UNRRA members, one of whom was Miss Barbara Johnston of Morson, Mass. The passenger list also included seven members of OWI, one of the OSS, and under heavy guard, six Japanese Diplomats whose status as former representatives to the European Axis was not revealed."; 22 August 1945.



USS *Wakefield* arriving at Boston, 22 August 1945.

Sources:

Roosevelt, Julian K. "Saga of the 'Wakefield.'" *Coast Guard Magazine* (Jun 1957), pp. 12-15, 33-34.

U.S. Navy. *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*. Volume VIII. Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1981, pp. 46-48.

Wakefield Ship's File, USCG Historian's Office.

