

By LEONARD SMITH

The Navy is permitting to be told the story of the fabulous U. S. S. West Point, the nation's largest transport, which carried more than 350,000 persons to and from all war zones without coming closer to being sunk than false announcements on the Axis radio.

With speed enough to outrun anything the enemy sent against her; with guns enough to fight off the most desperate suicide aerial attacks, the West Point—the one-time luxury liner America—traveled alone through enemy waters, maintaining almost peacetime schedules across the Atlantic without the loss of a passenger.

A Fast Traveler.

As a soldier I made two trips in the giant ship—in May, 1943, when she made a five-day dash from New York to Casablanca with approximately 8,000 men crowded aboard, and in January, 1945, with 8,000 returnees, in an eight-day trip from Naples, Italy, to Boston.

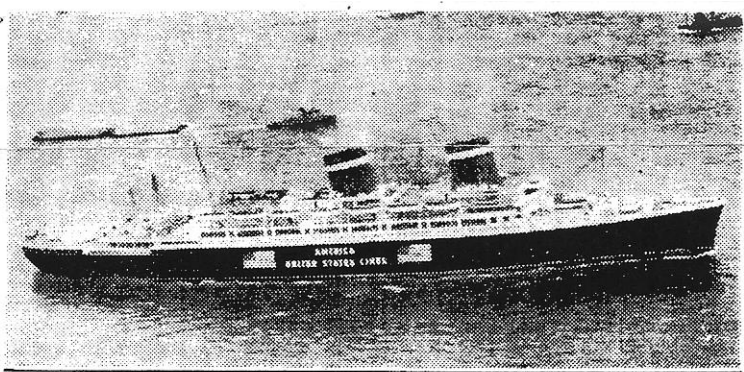
The West Point was a far cry from the luxury liner built to carry 1,218 passengers, that was caught in Singapore while on a round-the-world cruise when the war started—an event which turned her from white to gray overnight.

Guns bristled on what had been spacious recreation decks. Stiff, uncomfortable iron bunks, tiered three and four high, were hung in spaces allotted originally to a single bed. Spacious dining salons became jammed, slippery and smelly mess halls, inviting seasickness with each of the two meals that were fed daily to the troops aboard.

Deck Space at Premium.

Deck space even though troop and ship officers tried valiantly to ration it to all aboard, was always at a premium, and some men never got there except for the daily "abandon ship" drills. Others, the smarter of the goldbricks monopolized the decks by the simple process of obtaining little round disks which proclaimed their wearers as Sanitary Detail members. I had one both ways, and during my total of 14 days aboard the West Point held a broom twice and a mop once to pay for my deck chair.

By any standard of measure-



The America as she sailed under colors of the U. S. Line.

ment, however, crossing aboard the West Point was a pleasure compared to other transports. From the moment you stepped aboard, and were given your ticket listing berthing space, chow line and meal times, you had an overwhelming sense of security. You felt certain that this ship would take you to your destination, come hell or high water.

Loading With Dispatch.

Loading, and unloading, was done with the dispatch of movie house ushering. Guides along the course steered the heavily-laden, griping soldiers to their assigned space; making themselves heard and understood over the constantly blaring loudspeakers warning against smoking below decks; ordering all troops off the weather decks.

You learned the ways of the ship, but fast! You learned that to get a taste of the endless supply of cokes from the ship's soda fountain you had to lay out a buck for a gallon jug which you guarded with your life. To share in the ice cream, sold only to compartment commanders for rationing to his men, you had to get into line early. You learned that very, very few sailors could be bribed into buying anything for a soldier from the ship's ample post exchange.

Three Cartons for Trip.

The sailors had knives and cigarette lighters and cigarettes, but not for soldiers—the punishment was far greater than the risk of getting caught was worth. Soldiers could buy two cartons of cigarettes—at 50 cents a carton—but no more. In

addition, on the way over, the Red Cross handed a carton to every man, enough even for chain smokers.

Eliminating the manner in which it was dished out, the food was good, but the necessity of feeding so many people taxed even tremendous galleys capable of dishing out 20 tons of food daily. Filet mignon and delicacies were out of the question: The steak was there, cut up in stew.

Sunk 7 Times by Radio.

Both trips I made in the West Point were as drab as the endless craps games, blackjack and poker the men played constantly. However, the day before we landed in Casablanca, the Rome radio announced the West Point had been sunk off South America. On at least six other occasions similar announcements came from Axis commentators.

Yesterday the Navy admitted the West Point had been in some danger. At Singapore, with Jap guns barking around her, she escaped with only a shrapnel-scratched deck.

Off Rio de Janeiro, a Nazi torpedo streaked across her bow. In Milne Bay, her crew stood battle station for hours fighting off Jap air raiders. In the Red Sea and at Suez she was alerted and barrage balloons were lifted against Nazi torpedo plane attack. Submarines were sunk near the West Point, but she's still afloat today, rushing the same men home from Europe that she rushed over on their eastward crossing. Some are coming back casualties, but they're getting back.