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Leon (APA-48)

1944-1946

Counties in Florida and Texas.

(APA-48: displacement 8,100; length 492'; beam 69'6"; draft 26'6"; speed 18.4 knots; complement 571, troop capacity 1,562, flag accommodations 151; armament 2 5-inch, 4 40-millimeter, 18 20-millimeter; class *Bayfield*; type C3-S-A2)

Originally projected as *Sea Dolphin*, *Leon* (APA-48) was laid down on 6 February 1943 at Pascagoula, Miss., by Ingalls Shipbuilding Co., under a Maritime Commission contract (M.C. Hull 428); launched on 19 June 1943; sponsored by Mrs. Earl K. Hammett; accepted by the Navy and commissioned on 11 September 1943 for transfer to Bethlehem Steel Shipyard, Brooklyn, N.Y., for conversion; decommissioned on 27 September 1943; and recommissioned in full on 12 February 1944, Capt. Bruce B. Adell in command.

Upon arrival in Norfolk, Va., on 24 February 1944 *Leon* received her allotment of landing craft and underwent shakedown. With 1,345 marines of the 47th Replacement Battalion and 195 Seabees (Navy Construction Battalion) embarked, she departed Norfolk on 18 March for the Pacific, arriving at Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, on 7 April.

By that time a great store of battle experience in operations had been gained since the early landings in the Solomon Islands. With the U.S. controlling many of the Gilbert and Marshall Islands, *Leon* and elements of the 4th Marine Division practiced and rehearsed almost two months for the next operation into the Marianas. As part of Task Group (TG) 52.4, she sortied from Honolulu on 29 May 1944. The invasion fleet rendezvoused at Eniwetok and arrived off Saipan on 15 June. On D-Day, *Leon's* beach party and boats, in the midst of enemy artillery and mortar fire, successfully put ashore their marines although three boats were lost. Nine days later, she departed and arrived at Pearl Harbor on 20 July. Again the cycle of training and invasion repeated itself. This time, *Leon* had embarked troops of the 81st Infantry Division with the Palau Islands as the objective. On 17 September, *Leon* put 1,404 soldiers ashore on Angaur Island. Recalled from the area on 23 September, she proceeded to Manus Island in the Admiralty group.

Preparations now were underway for the invasion of the Philippines. *Leon* transported elements of the 1st Calvary Division to Leyte from 16 to 22 October 1944, and on a repeat voyage debarked troops of the 77th Division there on 23 November. *Leon*, as part of Rear Adm. Richard L. Conolly's Reinforcement Group (TG 77.9), brought troops from both Noemfoor and Leyte to Lingayen Gulf, Luzon, on 11 and 27 January, respectively.

Completing the latter debarkation, *Leon* sailed to Guadalcanal to prepare for the Okinawa campaign. Departing on 15 March 1945 with men of the 11th Special Construction Battalion and 6th Division Marines, including a platoon of war dogs, she arrived off the landing area on Easter Sunday, D-Day, on 1 April. After her troops were ashore, *Leon* remained to unload cargo. The night of 4 April in a high wind she slipped a dragging anchor and worked her way skillfully through the crowded anchorage to sea and the next day departed for Saipan.

After a dry dock period at Pearl Harbor she had the pleasant task on 31 May to 6 June of transporting 299 WAVEs [Women Accepted for Volunteer Service] and a vast quantity of mail from San Francisco to Pearl Harbor.

Leon resumed her task of carrying Army troops on 1 July 1945 when she departed Portland, Oregon, with 1,368 officers and men for Pearl Harbor. *Leon* then proceeded on to Ulithi and Okinawa where she took on board 1,169 men of the Army's 7th Infantry Division destined to accept the surrender of the Japanese in South Korea. After a three-day voyage, landings were effected 8 and 9 September at Jinsen [Inchon]. The vacuum in northern China created by the collapse of the Japanese was partially filled at first by U.S. Marines and later by Chinese Nationalist troops. *Leon* and sister ships of Vice Adm. Daniel E. Barbey's Seventh Amphibious Force were involved in this operation, bringing marines from Okinawa to Tientsin, China, on 30 September and carrying Chinese troops from Hong Kong to Chinwangtao on 30 October and Tsingtao on 14 November.

The attack transport now turned her bow toward home. At Sasebo, Japan, as part of Operation *Magic Carpet*, she embarked 5th Marine Division veterans and sailed on 9 December 1945 for San Diego, Calif., arriving on Christmas Day. *Leon* then departed San Diego, 11 January 1946 for the Gulf Coast, and reached Mobile, Ala., on 1 February. She then proceeded to Chickasaw, Ala., on 1 March; and was decommissioned on 7 March.

Leon entered the Reserve Fleet at Mobile, Ala., at 4:00 p.m. on 2 April 1946, and her name was stricken from the Navy Register on 17 April 1946, but bids for her conversion to a C-3 freighter began on 2 October 1946. A contract for her reconversion went to the Waterman Steamship Corp., of Mobile, and she was removed from

the Reserve Fleet at 2:30 p.m. on 23 October 1946. Sold soon thereafter to the Isthmian Steamship Co., she was renamed *Steel Chemist* on 11 April 1947. She carried that name for the remainder of her mercantile days, ultimately being purchased by *Hierros Ardes S.A.*, a Spanish firm, for scrapping, on 29 July 1971.

Leon received four battle stars for her World War II service, for her participation in the capture and occupation of Saipan (15-24 June 1944); the capture and occupation of the southern Palau Islands (6 September-14 October 1944); the Leyte landings (16-21 October and 19-29 November 1944), and the assault and occupation of Okinawa Gunto (1-5 April 1945).

Updated, Robert J. Cressman

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