

PANAMA LINE'S TRIO

Revolutionary small ships with distinguished careers



Stylised 1930s painting by artist Frederick J. Hoertz shows Panama with a little extra streamlining.

Panama Line's trio were not particularly large and were not built for one of the high-profile glamorous shipping routes, but were nonetheless innovative ships, as Allan E. Jordan explains.



▲ Panama Line began offering commercial cruises aboard the trio, promoting the trips with brochures such as this 1940 piece.

At 10,000gt and measuring 493ft in length, Panama Line's *Panama*, *Ancon* and *Cristobal* were not particularly large, but they were innovative. Promoted as the 'safest ships in the world' when they entered service in 1939, they went on to have long and interesting careers.

During the early 1930s the Panama Railroad Steamship

Line proposed building new ships to maintain its service between New York and Cristobal, in the Canal Zone, only to be stymied by the commercial shipping industry's opposition. The shipping division of the Panama Railroad, its heritage stretched back to 1849 and the construction of the railroad across the Isthmus of Panama.

They began shipping in 1855 and later became part of the

French effort to build a canal. In 1904 the company passed to the US Government and began transporting machinery, supplies and Canal employees. In time, they also developed a small cargo business.

INNOVATIVE DESIGNS

Maintaining its operations with four antiquated passenger and cargo ships, the Panama Railroad commissioned noted naval architect George G.



▲ The first of the trio, Panama, heads to sea for a trial, spring 1939, while Ancon is behind her fitting out and Cristobal is on the ways nearing her launch.



▲ All three sisterships served in World War II as troop transports, and Ancon also became a command ship participating in major amphibious landings during World War II.

► Cristobal made an unusual transit of the Panama Canal to visit Balboa to mark the election of the Panama Republic's new president in 1968.

PANAMA CANAL GRAPHICS BRANCH

◀ Cristobal, the third sistership, was launched on 4 March 1939.

▼ Ancon shows off her style and the mix of passenger accommodation and heavy cargo equipment.

It was a highly efficient plant, and Panama Line boasted of nearly soot-free operations.

Among the key features of Sharp's design was the absence of sheer or camber. The ships were also the first built using the new fire standards (later known as SOLAS Method I), with steel decks, houses and interior bulkheads.

The ships were divided into 12 watertight compartments and three fire zones, each with wide and straight corridors, enclosed stairways with a fire station, fire detection and suppression systems, and a central fire control room next to the bridge. Reflecting his proclivity for modern design, glass, mirrors and aluminium replaced wood for the furnishings and décor. As a result, they boasted that the only combustible material carried on board the ships was the fuel oil.

Sharp to design new vessels. Sharp, known as an advocate of modern design, had led the United States' efforts to develop new fire standards after the 1936 *Morro Castle* disaster. He produced designs for three modern ships able to carry 202 passengers, as well as nearly 400,000ft³ of general and refrigerated cargo in seven holds.

Sharp faced a number of unique challenges with the design. The ships would sail a 4,300-nautical-mile round-trip between New York and the Panama Canal Zone, with stops at Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Three ships, with a 16.5-knot speed, would reduce the turnaround time, making weekly sailings possible. Outbound, the ships would carry a heavy cargo of machinery, cement, steel and vehicles, but northbound would return light, creating

wide variances in stability which would only be partially resolved by loading fuel for the round trip in Panama.

The ships were given a larger steaming radius than other vessels their size, and were fitted with cargo machinery able to handle heavy loads, as well as sideports for fast and efficient handling of refrigerated perishables, including coffee beans and up to 25,000 bunches of bananas.

Propulsion came from twin screws driven by two cross-compounded double reduction Bethlehem geared turbines, each rated at 4,500shp when operating at 90rpm. Steam at 450lbs pressure would be produced by two Bethlehem watertube boilers, each fitted with seven newly designed Todd variable capacity atomising oil burners.



The ships were ordered in May 1937, with Bethlehem Steel's shipyard in Quincy, Massachusetts bid of \$12 million being accepted to build the three ships in just 18, 20 and 22 months. The first two keels were laid simultaneously on 25 October 1937, followed by the third on 15 November. The first ship, aptly named *Panama*, was launched on 24 September 1938, followed by *Ancon* on 10 December and *Cristobal* on 4 March 1939. After trials, on which *Panama* produced an average top speed of 18¾ knots, she entered service on 27 April 1939.

Externally, the ships featured a blue-grey hull with green boot topping, white superstructure and a Panama Line emblem on the bow. A traditional funnel, buff-coloured with three modern-looking aluminium bands, also housed the radio room at its base. The decks were uncluttered, with a large sports area and an outdoor pool. The passenger areas, designed by famed industrial designer Raymond Loewy, included a two-storey main hall with a balcony, a lounge, club room, deck café, wide promenades and a dining room made more spacious by lowering the centre section.

Because Canal company employees often travelled with their families, the ships included a large children's room. In another revolutionary design, the 80 staterooms all included private bathrooms, and 32 were grouped around eight verandas, with couches and large windows, a design patented by Sharp and a forerunner of the court cabins made famous more than 20 years later on *Canberra*. Sharp even included four of the veranda groupings for crew cabins. The passenger dining room and crew mess were air-conditioned, and mechanical ventilation was evident throughout the ships.

DISTINGUISHED CAREERS
Panama arrived at Cristobal in May 1939, and more than

8,000 people turned out to see her; she made a special transit of the Canal for a welcoming ceremony at Balboa. *Ancon's* maiden voyage departed on 22 June, with *Cristobal* following on 17 August. In their first year, each of the sisterships completed 17 round-trips, sailing approximately 73,000 nautical miles. The Panama Line also began marketing commercial cruises to Haiti and Panama, offering paying passengers four days in the Canal Zone, in addition to transporting Canal employees.

Like all American-built ships, the trio was designed to support the military. The two-year-old *Panama* joined the US Army on 13 June 1941 to help with the war effort. Later renamed *James Parker*, she spent the next five years transporting troops, and in 1943 hosted the famed aviation pioneer Igor Sikorsky for shipboard helicopter tests. *Cristobal* was assigned to the US Army on 11 January 1942. Outfitted to carry 2,300 troops, she spent most of World War II shuttling back and forth across the Atlantic.

Ancon, however, had the most distinguished war career. Handed over to the US Army on 11 January 1942, she trooped to Australia before being transferred to the US Navy, which outfitted her as a command and communications ship. Nicknamed the 'Mighty A', she became a platform for famed commanders, including General Omar Bradley and Lieutenant General Mark Clark, being present at five of the War's critical invasions.

She participated in the landings at North Africa, Sicily and Normandy before going to Saipan, Okinawa and the Philippines, where she was readied for the planned invasion of Japan. At War's end, she joined the American Third Fleet carrying war correspondents into Tokyo Bay and anchoring next to *Missouri* for the surrender ceremonies.

In 1946 *Cristobal* and the former *Panama* began repatriating troops and

PANAMA TRIO IN SUMMARY

	PANAMA	ANCON	CRISTOBAL
NAMES/OWNERS (OPERATORS)	1939-41: Panama (Panama Railroad Steamship Line) 1941-46: James Parker (US Army) 1946-56: Panama (Panama Line) 1957-64: President Hoover (American President Lines) 1964-71: Regina (Chandris Cruises) 1972-85: Regina Prima (Chandris Cruises)	1939-41: Ancon (Panama Railroad Steamship Line) 1942-46: Ancon (US Army/US Navy) 1946-62: Ancon (Panama Line) 1962-73: State of Maine (US Maritime Administration/ Maine Maritime Academy)	1939-41: Cristobal (Panama Railroad Steamship Line) 1942-46: Cristobal (US Army) 1946-81: Cristobal (Panama Line)
TONNAGE	10,021gt / 14,206 displacement; 10,153gt (Regina)	10,021gt / 14,206 displacement	10,021gt / 14,206 displacement
CAPACITY	202 passengers (650 as Regina) 292,410ft³ of general cargo 90,460ft³ refrigerated cargo	202 passengers 292,410ft³ of general cargo 90,460ft³ refrigerated cargo	202 passengers (12 from 1970s) 292,410ft³ of general cargo 90,460ft³ refrigerated cargo
DISPOSAL	Scrapped Turkey (1985)	Scrapped Maryland (1973)	Scrapped Texas (1981)

transporting war brides and dependants to America. *Ancon* was the first to be returned to Panama Line in February 1946, followed by *Panama* on 15 May 1946. *Cristobal* completed her last war brides trip on 5 June 1946. The Panama Line had a year-long backlog of Canal employees anxious for leave in the United States, so *Panama* was rushed into dry dock for a partial overhaul.

She resumed service in September 1946, followed by *Cristobal* in February 1947. *Ancon*, however, received a total refit at Bethlehem's shipyard in Quincy before resuming service in June 1947. Completing the restoration, *Cristobal* went to the Bethlehem yard in November 1947 for a 130-day refit, and *Panama* was drydocked for 55 days in the spring of 1948.

In June 1948 the trio were fully restored and resumed offering cruises and carrying commercial cargo, in addition to transporting the Canal's employees and supplies. Stops

in Haiti, however, were not resumed until 1953.

POST-WAR DECLINE

The post-war years proved difficult ones. In 1949 the trio carried 13,268 passengers and 12,966 in 1950, but Canal employees all travelled at discounted fares. Cruise passengers, known on board as 'round trippers', and commercial cargo helped revenues, but could not offset changes in the Panama Canal's operations.

A scandal erupted in the US media when it disclosed that politicians were also sailing at greatly reduced rates, or free, on purported inspection trips to the Canal. The media helped to reignite the complaints of unnecessary government competition. As the controversy simmered, decline in the cargo business prompted Panama Line to offer *Panama* for charter or sale at the end of 1956. American President Line (APL) bid US\$5.7 million, while Grace Line offered US\$4.3 million.



▲ President Hoover (ex-Panama) operated a transpacific service for American President Lines from 1957 to 1964. COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF WILLIAM H. LINDSAY



▲ Above the Great Hall, the lounge, with large windows, shows off the trio's modern interior styles.



▲ The trio had large sports areas and an outdoor pool which was filled with fresh seawater.



▲ The 80 passenger cabins were large and all had private bathrooms.



▲ The broad promenades had low bulwarks and glass windows.

Panama arrived in New York for the last time on 11 January 1957, departing two days later to join APL.

Panama Line continued operating, but by 1960 more than 50 per cent of the passengers and 70 per cent of the cargo was commercial traffic. Finally, President

Dwight Eisenhower ordered the Panama Line to end commercial operations, and the new American President, John Kennedy, supported the decision. On 20 April 1961 Panama Line ceased accepting commercial passengers and cargo. In May operations were shifted to New Orleans, and a



▲ Cristobal in a floating dry dock for maintenance. BILL MCLAUGHLIN

month later *Ancon* was retired, leaving only *Cristobal* to maintain the Panama sailings.

UNIQUE PATHS

The three ships went on to have very different careers. APL acquired *Panama* as an interim ship to increase its passenger and cargo capacity while pursuing construction of its proposed superliner. Departing on 11 February 1957 as *President Hoover*, she sailed between San Francisco, Yokohama, Manila, Hong Kong and Kobe, later adding Honolulu, and operating until her government subsidy expired in April 1964.

APL at first agreed to sell her to a new firm called Hawaiian Monarch Line. Ahead of its time, the plan was to refit her as a luxury inter-island cruise ship named *Queen Liliuokalani* after Hawaii's last monarch. However, the company was unable to complete financing and, facing ownership issues under American rules, the deal collapsed. *President Hoover* was instead sold to Chandris Cruises in October 1964.

Dimitri Chandris was pioneering Greek Island cruises. Rebuilt into a 650-passenger cruise ship and renamed *Regina*, she began cruising from Venice in April 1966 and in the winters sailing from Curaçao. Through an agreement with KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, she offered some of the earliest Caribbean fly/cruises. Renamed *Regina Prima* in 1972, she sailed in Europe and on charter, including pioneering Antarctic cruises in 1974-75 and 1975-76. She was laid up in 1979 and sold for scrap in 1985.

At first *Ancon* was used by the Army Transport Corps as a training ship for cargo operations in Louisiana before being handed over to the Maine Maritime Academy in 1962. On 14 July 1962 she was renamed *State of Maine*, becoming a training ship in Castine, Maine. Once or twice a year she would sail on training voyages with



▲ Operating as a training ship, *State of Maine* (ex-*Ancon*) passing Hoek van Holland 4 June 1970. She was largely unchanged from her days as *Ancon*, except for new davits and lifeboats. MALCOLM CRANFIELD

the merchant marine cadets. After 14 training voyages, the former *Ancon* was sold for scrap on 9 May 1973.

Cristobal continued to operate from New Orleans. Finally, in 1971 passenger operations were limited to 12 passengers per trip. In time, the Veranda Café was dismantled so she could carry more cars on her promenade deck, the swimming pool was drained, and she even began loading containers on deck. The crew, which had been reduced from 129 to 54, moved into the larger former passenger cabins while many of the passenger spaces sat empty.

In September 1980 she completed her 500th trip from New Orleans, but the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty had included provisions for the phase-out of *Cristobal*. She departed New Orleans on 4 September 1981 on her final Canal run. Arriving for the last time in her namesake port, the 42-year-old ship, then the oldest ocean-going American ship, received a grand farewell before returning to New Orleans to be sold for scrap.

The three little ships had long and diverse careers. Built as the first fireproof ships, they demonstrated the virtues of modern design, had been

TECHNICAL DETAILS

BUILT Bethlehem Steel Company, Quincy, Massachusetts

DIMENSIONS 150m x 19.5m x 8m

SPEED 16.5 knots; 18.75 knots maximum

MACHINERY Two Bethlehem watertube boilers; two double-reduction geared turbines; twin propellers

OFFICERS AND CREW 129

popular as early cruise ships, and served with distinction during the war. They went on to become some of the longest-serving ships of the American merchant marine. **SM**

Rebuilt as a cruise ship by Chandris, *Regina* (ex-*Panama*) is seen sailing from Stazione Marittima in Venice. TREVOR JONES COLLECTION

