

SLATER SIGNALS

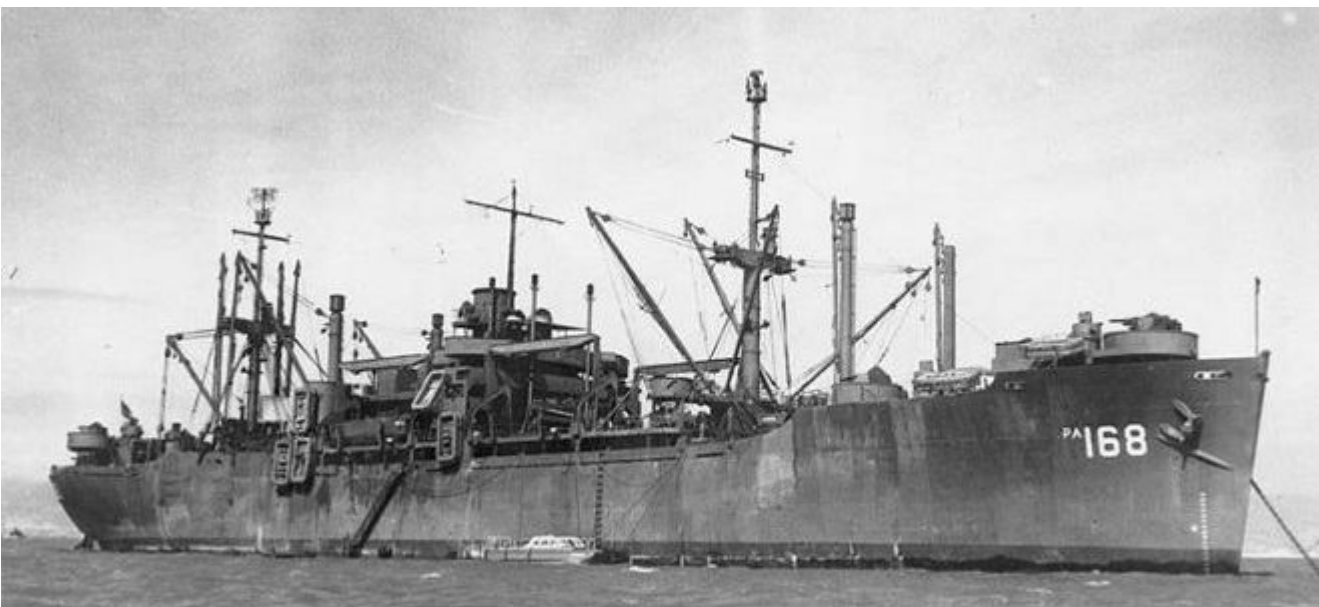
The Newsletter of the USS SLATER's Volunteers
By Timothy C. Rizzuto, Executive Director

Destroyer Escort Historical Museum
USS Slater DE-766
PO Box 1926
Albany, NY 12201-1926

Phone (518) 431-1943, Fax 432-1123
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I'm going to digress this month, because over the past few days several people have sent me news articles regarding the end of ex-USS GAGE APA168.

"NEWPORT NEWS, Va. - The USS Gage departed the James River Reserve Fleet Thursday, headed to Esco Marine, Inc., in Brownsville, Texas, for recycling. According to the Department of the Navy's Naval Historical Center, the attack transport USS Gage was commissioned in November, 1944. During World War II, the Gage participated in the initial assault on Okinawa in April, 1945, landing men and supplies for five days despite nearly continuous alerts of Japanese suicide attacks. She was decommissioned in Norfolk in February, 1947, and transferred to the Maritime Administration Reserve Fleet in September, 1958. Esco Marine, Inc. was awarded a contract to recycle the Gage on July 3rd. The Gage is the 81st ship to leave the James River Reserve Fleet since January 1, 2001. "



The USS GAGE APA168 in 1945.

I feel a need to write a proper obituary for this ship. She has been a part of my life since I first discovered her in rusting away in the James River Reserve Fleet in 1989. For the past twenty years she

has clung to life, a true ship that would not die. Few ships have given more to the historic fleet than GAGE, and for that she deserves to be remembered. But a proper obituary would take weeks of research and a lot more time than I have. But if I write the story into the gossip sheet called SLATER SIGNALS, no research is necessary, because everyone knows better than to believe what they read here. It's all gossip, hearsay and legend. Parts of the GAGE live on in many vessels in the current historic fleet.



The start of the GAGE's final voyage, July 23rd 2009.

Back in 1989, when I was Ship's Superintendent aboard the old KIDD DD661 in Baton Rouge, I made my annual call to Inactive Ships Portsmouth to inquire about ships available for stripping. I believe it was **Fred Hood** who I talked to. Fred mentioned that they had pallets of 20mm magazines on the pier coming off a WWII attack transport that was being fleet stripped, I nearly flipped out. The ship was the ex-USS GAGE APA-168, pierside in Portsmouth being readied for disposal. **Nate Bergeron** and I rented a 24' Ryder truck and put a trip together in record time. It was on this first trip that we enlisted the aid of Rear Admiral Alan Roby, KIDD's plankowner CO, who had retired to Portsmouth. He had arranged to bring in Navy volunteers from the cruiser SOUTH CAROLINA, and attended the meetings with the folks from Global and Inactive Ships Navy side to smooth things over. KIDD's WWII gunnery officer **George Wrocklage**, and former crewmembers **Eppa Barkley** and torpedoman **Russ Pribble** also volunteered.

As they'd say in Vegas, we hit the jackpot on GAGE. She was pierside in Portsmouth where removals were easy. She had not seen any service since 1946, and still had here complete WWII fit of radar electronics, radio gear, mess gear, a veritable time capsule. Treasures were palleted all over the wharf. While all the guns were gone, she still had all the 20mm magazines, tools, MK 51 directors, MK 14 gunsights, and something that haunts me to this day, an optical rangefinder and pedestal stowed in the wardroom. It was one of the most successful scavenging trips we'd ever been on. Among the GAGE items now on display on KIDD include all the WWII era spring bunks, mess tables and benches, the sky lookout chairs on the flying bridge, the SG radar console and horizontal plotting table in CIC, 6 20mm ready service ammunition lockers all filled with 20mm magazine troughs to restore the heads and enough WWII era incandescent light fixtures to convert the whole KIDD from fluorescent lighting.



Troop berthing aboard the GAGE.



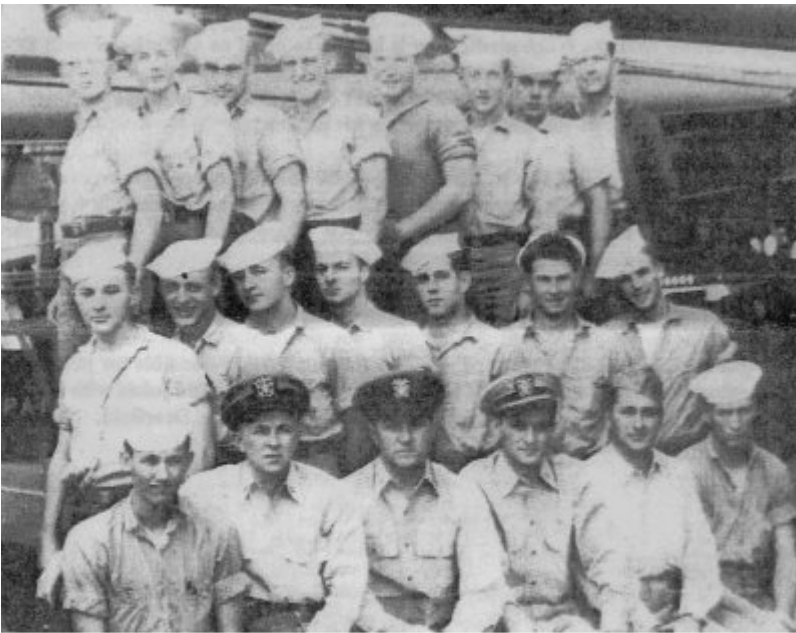
Troughs in one of the GAGE's many heads.

At the same time, we pulled parts from two other sister APAs. moored in the stream with the James River Reserve Fleet, LAUDERDALE APA179 and LAVACA APA180, all three intended for rapid disposal. We made limited removal from those two, as well as the Gearing class FRAM WILLIAM C. LAWE DD763. But GAGE was the real prize. Between 1989 and 1997 we continued to make continual runs on the GAGE. We were indebted to Navy Lt. **John Gaffe**, Lt. **Ken Peldunas**, and STGCM **Bradshaw** who removed a great deal of additional equipment from the three ships and shipped it to Baton, including additional light fixtures, radio gear and radar parts. They even were featured in an article in the Newport News Naval Station Newsletter for their efforts.

>**In 1992 the GAGE crew held a reunion and presented KIDD with a plaque to identify the parts from their ship. At that time I learned I had a personal link with GAGE.** In 1969, I made my first ocean going voyage on the mighty ocean liner SS UNITED STATES during her last year of service. As a lowly mess attendant in the deck department mess, I never met the Captain, but he was **Leroy J. Alexanderson**, Commodore of United States Lines. It turned out that Captain Alexanderson had been the plankowner CO of GAGE in 1944 and commanded the *Gage* at [Okinawa](#), landing elements of the 6th Marine Division. Small world.

Sometime in the mid nineties, we were approached at the Louisiana Naval War Memorial by a private contractor who wanted to purchase the 40mm fire control amplifiers off the KIDD. It seems they had a contract with the Taiwanese Navy to overhaul their active 40mm directors systems. Having plundered so many other ships for parts, we were very protective of our own and I directed them to the GAGE, suggesting that the amplifiers they were seeking were no doubt in the forward and aft deck houses under the empty 40mm tugs. I later learned that they were successful in finding the parts and completing their contract. I should have demanded a finder's fee, but I guess this explains why I've spent my career in the not-for-profit sector.

In 1993 I was asked to come to New York to do a survey of the SLATER and make a list of all the items that would be needed to restore her to her 1945 condition. The ship was a stripped out shell on the inside, but outside she was still a World War II DE with all her ordnance and configuration. With fifteen years of ship stripping under my belt, I had a good idea of where all the parts the SLATER needed were, and most were on the GAGE. Over the next several years, I volunteered to help the Destroyer Escort Historical Museum identify parts from the GAGE that would be useful for SLATER's restoration. GAGE gave SLATER the same kind of material she gave to KIDD. They paid Global to remove the large parts and stored them in a facility in Portsmouth. The large parts included the SA air search radar console, the SA radar antenna, a VD-2 radar repeater, TDE and TAJ radio transmitters,



The GAGE's radar gang from the George Potter website.

two radio operator's tables, a sterilizer for sickbay, a portable sterilizer for the wardroom. Over the coming years, the smaller parts include radio receivers, antennas and patch panels, the four sky lookout chairs, troughs and trough seats, washroom mirrors, bunks and chains, the Hobart dough mixer, dozens of light fixtures, all kinds of speakers and amplifiers, compartment fans, desk lights, and MK14 gunsights and compressors. SLATER's whole radio room is restored with many of GAGE's radios.

In August of 1999 Pat and Frank Perrella, DE-326 traveled to Baltimore to make a cruise on the restored Liberty Ship JOHN W

BROWN. They found that the BROWN crew has squirreled away the optical rangefinder from the USS GAGE, a four-foot model as opposed to the seven footer the DE's used. Unfortunately, the rangefinder pedestal that I saw in the GAGE's wardroom was never found. Frank and Gordon Lattey made a run down there after the BROWN crew donated it to us and in 2002 we hoisted it aboard. The rangefinder tube sat on the 01 level under canvas for a long time until **Hal Hatfield** had the guys in his shop fabricate the platform for the rangefinder based on dimensions **Cliff Woltz** got from the USS STEWART in Galveston, and a sketch **Dick Walker** worked up. Well, along came the late

Roy Lustenader, a former fire control man off USS STORMES DD780. **Roy**



Volunteer Dick Engler by the restored TAJ transmitter.

took all the data we had on the rangefinder, sketched up a plan for a pedestal and found a good Samaritan to build it for us out of three-eighths-inch plate. **Doug Tanner** arranged for a crane to hoist the rangefinder tube, pedestal and platform to the flying bridge when we were pierside n Rensselaer.

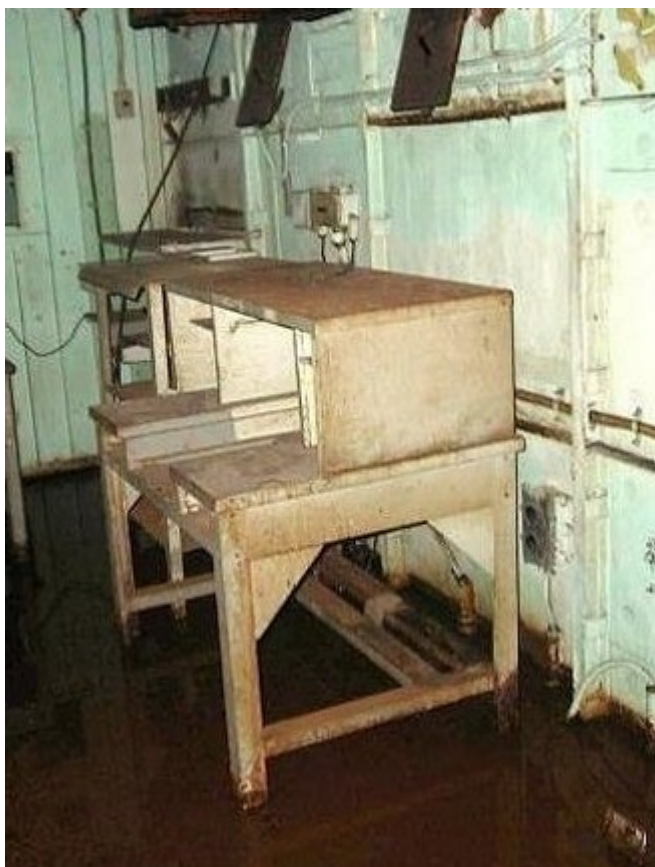


Les Beauchaine and Chris Nardi riding out to the GAGE.



Les Beauchaine, Tom Lowney, Chris Nardi and Hack Charbonneau removing lockers in 2000.

In May 2000 we sent the late Hack Charbonneau, Les Beauchaine, Doug Tanner and Jerry Jones back down to the GAGE. Jerry Jones described the experience of being aboard the GAGE as "Being on board in the total dark and silence was almost a spiritual experience for me, especially below in the troop berthing compartments where too many of the soldiers and marines spent their last days. The pictures can't begin to capture it. I cannot begin to really describe the experience of being there." They came back with a truckload of needed electrical fittings, a copper for the galley, and 25 bunk frames, hooks and chains needed for the aft crew's quarters. It took until May of 2001 for the Michigan Crew to do the sanding and painting on all the steel frames. By August 2001 **Russ Ferrer** took charge of rebuilding the mast-mounted bullhorn that enabled the IMC to project over the water to other ships. He restored the eight speakers, which were a mass of rust and replaced the entire housing, which had holes from years in storage in the pilothouse of the old **USS GAGE**. In August 2003 we finally got around to installing the GAGE's big autoclave that we had salvaged about ten years earlier. This piece of equipment had been in storage in Virginia for several years, before trucking it to Albany in 1998. It was stored at the Port until they tore down the shed, then **Bob Cross** kept it at the City water tower until we were ready for it. **Paul Czesak** picked it up that month, and **Larry, Don Shattuck, Dave Floyd** and the big guy **Tommy Moore** got it aboard and managed to get it down the ladder and into sickbay. That's the last big piece of gear to make the space complete. We and many other historic ships continued to make trips and find treasures.



The radio operator's table on the GAGE.



The restored radio operator's tables on SLATER.

By Feb 2008 we knew that time was running out and Greg Krawczyk organized two trips to the James River Reserve Fleet. **Bill Siebert** and **Will Donzelli** went down on our behalf. Since the USS GAGE was a dead ship, it was one of the few chances to obtain electrical fittings such as fuse boxes and more light fixtures. That April **Barry Witte** and **Gordon Lattey** led a group of volunteers to the Fleet for the spring strip trip. They were assisted by a group of sailors from the carrier USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT CVN71. The parts ranged from mess benches to light fixtures, to old style lockers.

In September 2008 **Gordon Lattey** led a final expedition to the James River to the USS GAGE. The Maritime Commission gave us permission to take some watertight doors off the second deck, something that is very rare indeed. In the past, we have never been allowed to disturb a vessel's watertight integrity. We had to work fast, because the ship was open for bid inspections on September 15th, and that left us with one week to put the trip together and grab the doors. Once bid inspections begin, no removals were permitted. The GAGE has the same style quick acting doors as SLATER, so MARAD relented and let us take a six prior to the vessel being bid for scrap. **Bill Siebert**, **Bill Houghton**, **Dave Mardon** and **Angelo Bracco** joined Gordon for the trip down. In one day they staged six doors on the fantail for removal.

LAVACA was sold for scrapping in 1992. Around that time the rules changed. Congress ruled that all hazardous materials had to be removed from ships before they could be scrapped overseas. Since remediation was so expensive, and scrap prices were so low, the market dried up and ship scrapping ground to a halt. It took Congress several years to fund the scrapping program that in effect paid the remediation costs from ship recyclers. Thus ships that should have been long gone were left rusting at their moorings, GAGE among them. LAUDERDALE had an odder fate, bid out to a "recycler" who was to remove all the "Valuable Material" and return the hull to the fleet for future scrapping. This



Angelo Bracco, Gordon Lattey and Dave Mardon lunch aboard GAGE on one of our last visits.



The Falcon's nest

particular "Recycler" was only interested in all the steel he could get without raising the HAZMAT issue, and the hulk that was returned to the fleet represented the most dangerous vessel present. We were never again permitted aboard. It took several more years to dispose of her, and she was finally scrapped in the spring of 2005 by North American Ship Recycling, in Sparrows Point, Maryland. My Friend **Chris Nardi**, Curator of the Battleship Massachusetts made one last run on her while she was at the breakers.

The Navy decided that GAGE would make an excellent target ship, and plans were made to tow her back to Portsmouth for additional remediation.

At that point, a peregrine falcon, on the endangered species list decided that the GAGE's mast would make an excellent nesting point, and homesteaded the GAGE. Movement of the ship was postponed until the eggs were hatched and a new generation of peregrines went winging away. Here's where the wheels of government turn slowly, and before the ship could be moved again, the peregrines were back. I can't remember if it was the third or fourth year that the maintenance crew told stories of climbing the mast and tossing the nesting material down to the deck. I believe it took four years for the Navy to beat the falcons at get the ship down to Portsmouth again for another round of remediation. Prior to her departure from James River, I made a run up there and staged a pile of scarce 40mm gun parts in an officer stateroom in the superstructure. I tagged the lot by placing one tag on a sound powered phone box that said "Hold for USS KIDD."

The next time I saw her, she was pierside in Portsmouth, and all the rules had changed. All of a sudden my beloved old ship was an active hazardous waste site. The ship was crawling with workers fully suited out in Tiveks and respirators. Large tanker trucks were on the pier and forty years

of pigeon droppings were pressure washed from her decks. I wanted to get up to that stateroom to receive the parts we had staged, but was denied entry until I was trained and fitted with a respirator. I explained that I'd been aboard the ship many times before and had somehow lived through the experience, but that didn't cut it with the yard safety officer. The final straw was when I was told that I'd have to shave the poor excuse for a beard I've worn since 1976. It just wasn't worth going back aboard. I directed one of my clean-shaven compatriots to the stateroom where I had staged our treasure, and there he found a lone sound powered phone box with the Hold for USS KIDD" tag on it, and all the other material had been removed and disposed of. That was 1997, and we did pick up additional 20mm ready service lockers, including several for the Battleship Texas.



GAGE lookout chairs on SLATER flying bridge.

The story might have ended there, but I was later told that the peregrine falcon found the GAGE pierside in Portsmouth and set up housekeeping on the aft radar platform. Whether it was the same bird or not, whether the story is true or not, I'll never know. But the next part of the legend is that it was at that point that the environmental cost of preparing the ship for sinking grew to the point that all the commands that had been funding the conversion of GAGE to a target ship threw up their hands and walked away. When this last group of peregrine chicks were old enough to fly, back to the anchorage went the GAGE. And now new federal regulations came into play. The Maritime Commission was now to do historic reviews of the

ships that were being disposed of. A group started an effort to save the GAGE, and she was placed on donation hold, a timely idea in 1989 but by 2004 it was way too late. Municipalities were now realizing the true cost of maintaining these relics and there were no takers.

I've never kept a complete list of all the ship's I've stripped to restore KENNEDY, KIDD and now SLATER, but among them in addition to GAGE, LAVACA and LAUDERDALE are CAPERTON, GLENNON, ROBERT L WILSON, WRIGHT, SPRINGFIELD, NORTHAMPTON, RALEIGH, TOLMAN, DONNER, WABASH, NEMASKET, SAUGATUCK, CHIPPEWA, WILLIAM C. LAWE, WILLIAM WOOD, NELSON M. WALKER, GENERAL MAURICE ROSE, GENERAL POPE, LORRAIN COUNTY, SPHINX, CLAMP, NEWPORT NEWS, DESMOINES, PETREL, KITTIWAKE, SUNBIRD, PRESERVER, BASILONE, FORRESTAL, VULCAN, MOSOPELEA, STRIBLING, HARRY E YARNALL, LASALLE, RANGE SENTINEL, SANTA BARBARA, SPERRY, SPIEGAL GROVE, HOWARD W. GILMORE and two ATA's that I never could learn the names of. I present their names here only so that they are remembered for their contributions to the historic fleet. The ones that stand out in my mind are the time capsules; the ones that laid up right after the war and never saw any postwar service. Those are the ones I felt most guilty about. I didn't feel guilty about the GAGE when I first found her, but the longer I stripper her, the worse I felt. She lasted twenty years longer than she should have, given a reprieve by environment regulation and the legalities of the historic review. No ship gave more to the historic fleet than GAGE. For those interested in learning more, our friend Russ Padden has a webpage devoted to her at <http://www.rpadden.com/168/168gage.htm>

We will always be indebted to the Navy and Maritime Commission who supported out operations over the life span of the GAGE. It is a sad thing to see her go the last of her breed, and she deserves

to be remembered as a ship that kept on giving long after her service days **were over**. USS GAGE will always have a special place in my heart.

Finally, a reminder that we'll be holding our fall field day week September 27th to October 2nd. If you want to see where all these parts have ended up, come a join us. You can plan for the week or just a day or two. We're flexible. Drop me an email at shipsde766@aol.com and I'll send you the info.

See you next month