

localnews

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COMING UP

in tomorrow's Packet



Steve "The Canadian Kid" Molitor will be one of the combatants in a pair of featured main events when Casino Rama plays host to Rumble at Rama X on Saturday, Nov. 21. See Saturday's Packet for details of the full boxing card.

LIBERTY SHIP S.S. STEPHEN LEACOCK CHRISTENED AFTER FAMOUS AUTHOR'S DEATH



Citizen Newspapers-Fayetteville, Ga.,

John Calvin Graves of Fayetteville, Ga., holds his model of a Liberty ship, like the one on which he served, the S.S. Stephen Leacock.



Peter Carter

PETER CARTER Submitted photo

More than 2,700 Liberty ships like the S.S. Stephen Leacock were built by the Americans as war emergency transports in the Second World War. The John W. Brown — one of two operating in the world today — is based in Baltimore, Md.

Georgia native last surviving sailor

Following the death of Stephen Leacock in March 1944, the United States Maritime Commission christened a new Liberty ship in his name. The S.S. Stephen Leacock was built in Savannah, Ga., and launched on July 22, 1944. It sailed in eight Atlantic convoys in the Second World War and made two voyages to Murmansk, Russia above the Arctic Circle. All American merchant ships carried gun crews supplied by the U.S. Navy — Armed Guard. Gunners Mate — 3rd Class, John Calvin Graves served aboard the Leacock in 1944-45.

CAROLYN CARY
The Citizen Newspaper,
Fayetteville, Georgia

Fayette County, Ga., native, John Calvin Graves, 84, is believed to be the last surviving sailor who served aboard the U.S. Merchant Marine ship, the S.S. Stephen Leacock.

The ship was one of only two Second World War Liberty ships named for someone outside the United States. Stephen Leacock was viewed as Canada's "Mark Twain."

His summer home was in Orillia. The city is also home to a museum in his honour, where a model of the ship will be dedicated on Nov. 5.

Graves was born and raised near New Hope Baptist Church, just north of Fayetteville, and graduated from Fayette County High School in May 1943.

He entered the United States Navy in August of that year.

The Gunners Mate — 3rd Class, went into service at Bainbridge, Maryland where he was trained to operate a five inch-38mm gun. These guns were standard equipment on all Liberty ships and were positioned on the stern of the ship.

The United States Navy decided to train gunners in 28 different positions on a ship, as well as building more than 2,700 Liberty ships identical to each other. Sailors serving aboard any of them or being transferred to another one, would be instantly familiar with the ship.

After serving for several months on merchant ships trav-



Citizen Newspapers-Fayetteville, Ga.,
U.S. Navy Armed Guard, Gunners Mate — 3rd Class John Calvin Graves at age 18.

“The temperature stayed at -40F degrees and the ships had to keep their engines running day and night to keep the water churned up to keep it from freezing.”

elling in convoys to England and back, Graves was given a short leave. He had not been home more than three days when he received a telegram telling him to be in New York immediately.

Taking a train from Atlanta, he had just stepped off the train in New York when he saw someone waving a sign with his name and

serial number.

He was taken aboard a tender and transported out into the Atlantic Ocean to board the S.S. Stephen Leacock. The Leacock was filled with so many supplies and sat so low in the water that he could step directly from the tender to board the Leacock without having to step up.

Graves finally got to ask as to why he was singled out for this venture. He was told that the gunner that had been aboard the Leacock had heard the ship was headed over the Arctic Circle to Russia, and had jumped ship. Graves became his replacement.

The Leacock, in convoy with more than 50 other merchant ships, was carrying two locomotives with gondolas, and five refrigerated box cars with 10 diesel engines loaded into each boxcar. Steel and general supplies rounded out its cargo. Some of the ships also carried their own cranes, lighting and generators needed to unload the railroad cars.

The convoy left New York on Nov. 9, 1944, arriving at Liverpool, England 16 days later, then moved up to Loch Ewe Scotland on Nov. 29. The convoy left to cross the Arctic Circle and arrived at Murmansk, Russia on Dec. 7, 1944.

The temperature stayed at -40F degrees and the ships had to keep their engines running day and night to keep the water churned up to keep it from freezing.

Due to poor unloading facilities at Murmansk, only six ships could unload at a time. The

cranes had to be unloaded first to unload the rail cars. Graves noticed that most of the Russian workers were women, some wearing uncured hides, goat skins and blankets just to keep warm in the minus-40 degrees.

When the word would go out that German airplanes were headed their way, all lights would be doused. The Germans would drop flares to try to locate the anchored ships and Graves remembers that a few of them were hit directly.

He also remembers having to put on several layers of clothing before going on deck for duty. By the time you got through the ship and to your post, you were sweating. Shortly after reaching your post, you began to feel like you were turning to ice. Soon, however, your own body heat would level things out. Every hour, a bell would ring, and you would rotate back inside for 15 minutes.

Christmas Day was spent like the other days with one exception. The Leacock's cook told the crew that he would make them some chocolate. After melting the chocolate, he took the pan outside, sat it on a railing for less than a minute, took the pan back in and it had been instantly cooled and ready for cutting into pieces.

The convoy left the Kola Inlet, Murmansk, on Jan. 11, 1945, heading back to Loch Ewe, Scotland, and arriving 10 days later. On Jan. 26, the convoy then headed to New York.

Without a return cargo, the ships rode high in the water. Due

S.S. Stephen Leacock model being built

A model of the S.S. Stephen Leacock is being built for the Leacock Museum by master model builder Joseph Vella in Rimouski, Que. Donations are being accepted in support of this project and can be sent to: Leacock Museum, P.O. Box 625, Orillia, ON L3V 6K5. Tax receipts will be issued for all donations in excess of \$20. Cheques can be made payable to Leacock Museum — Model. For credit card donations, call 329-1908.

to rough seas, cracks began to appear in the hull. Graves remembers welding steel eyes on either side of the cracks and with the use of turnbuckles, holding the ship together.

Because of the rough seas, somehow the Leacock got separated from the convoy and arrived in Boston, instead of New York, on Feb. 17, 1945.

After the Second World War, the Stephen Leacock was placed in reserve and anchored with the U.S. Maritime Commission's Reserve Fleet in the James River. It was brought out for active service for a year in 1947, but returned to reserve status, this time in the Tensaw River Reserve Fleet near Mobile, Ala.

It was sold at a surplus auction for \$40,000 and towed to New Orleans in 1969 for scrapping.

Seaman Graves continued in the service and was discharged in March 1946. He returned to his home in Fayette County, Ga., where he still resides.

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