

The Pork Chop Express

We called ourselves the pork chop express. We carried meat and vegetables from Pearl Harbor all over the central Pacific. . . Sometimes we'd come back from an 1,800 jaunt, load up with "pork chops" and go right out again. We were so slow that almost anything could have caught up with us and sunk us.

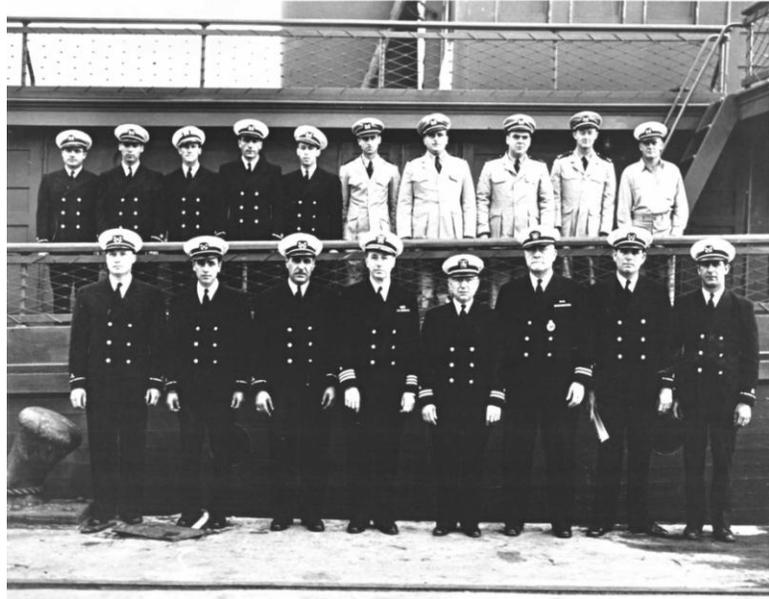
--Clarence Gonzales, tuna clipper Victoria (YP-350)

With the start of World War II, San Diego's prosperous tuna fishing industry found itself grounded. The tuna clippers were called home, canneries prepared to close, and idle tuna fishermen contemplated a grim future.

But two months after Pearl Harbor, on February 16, 1942, hundreds of fishermen gathered at the Naval Reserve Armory to hear a message from a retired Navy officer, Commander William J. Morcott. "The Navy needs the service of your tuna clippers," Morcott told the men. "The government will either buy your ships, or lease them for the duration."

Commander Morcott had another request. "The Navy needs men to man the ships. Experienced men like yourselves. . . Needless to say, duty in the war zones will be hazardous. Who will volunteer?" Six hundred fishermen raised their hands.

The volunteers--mostly Portuguese with a few Italians--were soon wearing the blue uniforms of the U.S. Navy. Officer commissions were given to the captains and sailor ratings for the crewmen. The requisitioned tuna clippers—forty-nine in all--were painted battleship gray and given YP numbers, the naval designation for yard patrol craft. Using their refrigerated fish holds the "Yippie" boats would now carry provisions and supplies of war instead of tuna.



Tuna boat captains and officers in 1943.

The diesel-powered, wooden boats ranged in size from 100 to 150 feet in length. Each boat had huge freezers designed to carry as much as 280 tons of fish. Vincent Battaglia, a machinist mate on the *Prospect* recalled: "the cargoes we were getting were already frozen, so we could really stack these tanks up with frozen food. The perfect vessel for a supply ship, perfect. Long ranges. Didn't take a lot of men."

The Yippies carried crews of about seventeen--mostly fishermen with a handful of "regular" Navy sailors added. The boats were only lightly armed. Battaglia remembered his boat carried "just a couple of 50 caliber machine guns; we had some depth charges, one machine gun on top of the pilothouse, and one where the bait tank used to be in the back."

The depth charges were mounted on racks near the stern. The “ash cans” provided little protection against submarines and made the men uneasy. A collision astern—always a possibility at night—could blow a boat to pieces.

Between 1942 and 1945 the Yippies traveled thousands of miles, delivering supplies to naval stations throughout the war zone. The boats were slow—ten knots was top speed—but the durable vessels were crewed by the most experienced seamen in the Pacific. The boats usually traveled in small convoys but occasionally ran singularly.

It wasn't always frozen food in the Yippie cargo holds. In June 1942 three tuna clippers at Pearl Harbor—*Victoria*, *Yankee*, and *Queen Mary*--prepared to load meat and vegetables for a run to Midway Island. Captain Manuel Freitas on the *Victoria* remembered “something unusual was up.”

“A fleet of trucks rolled down the dock and started unloading 50-gallon drums. Instead of meat and butter, they filled our fish holds with their drums. After they filled the holds and bait tanks, they piled drums up and down the deck. . . Just before pulling out, they told me the drums were aviation gas and be careful with cigarettes or sparks from the stack.”

The three clippers headed for Midway--1,300 miles away—with thirteen PT boats in escort. In the hot weather the nervous crews hosed down the gas drums every two hours to minimize the chance of explosion. Reaching Midway, the fuel was quickly unloaded. “When the last drum was off the ship, an officer jumped aboard and told Freitas, ‘Start steamin’, skipper. Put some miles between you and Midway. This place is going to get hot!”

The pivotal Battle of Midway began the next day. The three tuna clippers had delivered critical supplies of aviation fuel that helped Navy pilots find and destroy the Japanese fleet.

Captain Ed Madruga had a very different mission in December 1942. In New Caledonia, the Navy filled Madruga's *Paramount* and another Yippie boat, the *Picaroto* with boxes of cans. The clippers then headed for Guadalcanal, escorted by two destroyers. The little convoy reached its destination two days before Christmas.



Clipper *Paramount* in 1940, later YP-289

“Our holds were filled with boxes of turkeys and potatoes and cranberry sauce and all the fixins’,” Madruga remembered. “We delivered Christmas dinners to the Marines on Guadalcanal.”

Under a different skipper the *Paramount* would be lost later in the war. A transport ship, adrift in a storm, rammed the tuna boat in the stern. Exploding depth charges wrecked the transport and sank the *Paramount*.

Sixteen other Yippie boats were lost in the war: sunk by enemy fire or wrecked by storms or accidents. The *Triunfo* blew up in a minefield northwest of Hawaii, killing almost her entire crew. The *Yankee* disappeared on a mission with all hands.

Other boats and crews were welcomed home as heroes after the war ended in August 1945. The *Azoreana*, *Victoria*, *Normandie*, and other veterans would lead the tuna industry to unprecedented prosperity in the 1950s when San Diego emerged as the “Tuna Capital of the World.”



YP-282, the former *Yvonne Louise*. U. S. Navy photograph. NavSource Photo Archives.

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