Strafing Chesapeake Bay’s ‘Target Ship’

Recreational boaters need to steer clear of the mysterious bullet-riddled ghost ship off Smith Island

By Stephen Blakely

If you’re ever cruising the middle part of Chesapeake Bay, just above the Maryland-Virginia state line and a bit northwest of Smith Island, you will see what appears to be an old tramp steamer — dead in the water.

And if your binoculars are good enough to pick out the details, you’ll see just how dead it truly is: The bullet-riddled hull shows daylight through gaping holes at the waterline. Red rust bleeds heavily through faded and stained white paint. Parts of its smokestacks, bridge, and other features are shot away or falling apart. The superstructure is perforated like Swiss cheese, the holes jagged and violent. It seems a wonder the vessel is still above water, this far out in the bay, given its ghostly condition.

Silent, abandoned, and slowly rotting into the sea, the bones of this rusting old bulk are exposed for a reason: It’s the Navy’s only live-fire target ship on Chesapeake Bay. Several times a month, helicopter gun ships, fighter-bombers, and other war craft take off on training missions from the Patuxent River Naval Air Station about 20 miles across the Bay, and carefully practice strafing the ship with machine-gun fire or drilling it with rockets.

After more than 40 years of being pounded by gunnery crews, there’s hardly a square foot of steel on the ship that hasn’t been hit. If the U.S. Navy is the most powerful on Earth, it’s partly because its aviators learned weapons-delivery precision on targets like this decaying old rust bucket in the middle of the Bay.

Two ships in one

The target ship being used today is actually the second that the Navy has placed on this spot near Smith Island.

The first, long since blasted beneath the waves, was named Hannibal — a 274-foot coal freighter built in Britain in 1898 and bought by the U.S. for the Navy’s Atlantic Fleet. In 1911, Hannibal was transferred to the U.S. Survey Squadron to make deep soundings and hydrographic surveys for the opening of the Panama Canal, and, later, throughout the Caribbean.

During World War I, the ship became a tender to submarine chasers in England, sailing to Portugal and France. After being mothballed in Philadelphia briefly after that war, she returned to survey operations in the Caribbean until World War II, when she was transferred to Norfolk Naval Base for duty on the degaussing range (to demagnetize ships as a defense against mines, a process still used today). Hannibal was commissioned in 1944, and a year later grounded as a bombing target on a shallow little sand bar between Point Lookout (the mouth of the Potomac River) and Smith Island. It is marked on navigational charts with the half-sunken boat symbol of an “exposed wreck,” about seven miles northwest of Smith Island.

The aging Hannibal lasted 21 years as a Navy target ship before it was pretty much obliterated. In 1966, the Navy brought in a replacement ship — American Mariner, a 442-foot World War II Liberty Ship — and carefully scuttled it near Hannibal, pointing north. The water at that point is only about 20 feet deep, roughly the ship’s draft, so American Mariner settled to the bottom so little and so level that it looks like it’s still floating.

By custom and for convenience, this “new” target is still called by the original ship’s name (the Hannibal or “the old Hannibal”). This can be confusing, since, in fact, the ship there now is actually American Mariner, its name still visible in peeled and faded paint on the stern.

Although built as a Liberty Ship, American Mariner never served in the war; instead, it was fitted out as a training ship for the Merchant Marine and later used as a radar platform to track rockets. There is a certain irony in the fact that the vessel began its life as a standard training ship (teaching cadets how to sail a vessel), and ended its life as a very different kind of training ship (teaching aviators how to sink one).

While most of its working life was spent chasing rockets, in death the ship is routinely hit by rockets: Navy fixed-wing aircraft out of Pax River pound it with unguided air-to-ground Zuni missiles, in addition to the .50-caliber cannon fire from helicopters.

Also of note: During the early days of the Cold War and space race, when the United States was struggling to catch up to and surpass the Soviet Union in missile technology, American Mariner played a small but significant role collecting radar signature data on intercontinental ballistic missiles in the Atlantic Missile Range. During this time, from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, the ship was passed down successively to the Army, Air Force, and Navy. American Mariner is said to be the only ship to have been commissioned in all three major branches of the U.S. armed forces after starting service for the Merchant Marine.

Navy officials say American Mariner is expected to last many more years, but when there’s no longer enough metal to shoot at they will bring out yet another target ship, probably from the ‘Ghost Fleet’ of mothballed vessels in the James River near Norfolk. A book about the ship, “American Mariner: A Documentary Biography of Her Role As Liberty Ship, Training Ship,” is out of print, but still available online.

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The rusting, bullet-pocked carcass of the former training ship American Mariner sits on the shallow bottom of the mid-Chesapeake, awaiting the next attack.

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The prohibited zones

A glance at a navigational chart shows that the Hannibal target is just one of several circles that appear in the mid-Bay area between the Patuxent River to the north and Tangier Island to the south. These are “prohibited zones” — 1,000-yard-wide exclusion circles around Navy targets or testing markers. That means they are off-limits at all times to recreational boaters, for seemingly obvious safety reasons.

But “seemingly obvious” has never applied to the sometimes oblivious boaters who can be found in any waters. Occasionally before the start of live-fire exercises, Navy range safety crews have had to chase away anglers who raft onto Hannibal to catch fish.

In one instance in the 1990s, they found crews have had to chase away anglers — 85 percent of the Hooper operations occur at or around the Hooper target, with the remaining 25 percent at the Hannibal target. About 85 percent of the Hooper operations are said to remain within the bounds of the circular prohibited area.

By an hour before starting any exercises, the Navy conducts a series of range clearance procedures to evacuate the area, by doing visual or radar sweeps of the area, using chase aircraft, and (most commonly) sending range boats down to clear the target areas. Recreational boaters, fishermen, or watermen are requested to exit the restricted areas via radio, signs, hand signals, or other appropriate methods. Helicopters equipped with loudspeakers are sometimes used. Should individuals refuse to leave the area, the Coast Guard can be called in to take them out of the area.

As an additional safety measure, the test pilot flies over a target to perform a visual check to make sure the target is clear before shooting begins. All involved Pax River NAS parties (range clearance boats, Chesapeake Test Range flight controllers, range control
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engineers, control tower staff, and other range safety personnel are linked together by radio. Commercial ships in “established steamer lanes” are not required to halt and wait for the exercise to be completed.

(Almost) in the line of fire

A few years ago I had the opportunity to witness these procedures first-hand, when a couple of friends and I were sailing down the Bay to Smith Island in my 26-foot Island Packet named Bearboat.

Just as we were clearing American Mariner perhaps two miles away, we noticed a powerboat on the southern horizon with a flashing red light. Since I usually sail with my “ears” on (a handheld VHF radio at the helm), I heard the range boat’s hail on the first call.

“Navy range boat to white sailboat west of Smith Island, come in white sailboat. Over,” the voice said.

“White sailboat to Navy range boat, over,” I replied.

“U.S. Navy firing exercises are about to begin on the target ship you are passing to port. Request you change course due east and exit the area immediately. Over,” he said.

“Roger, changing course due east,” I answered, surprised at the news.

To which came the reply, “The helicopter just left base at Pax River and is en route now.”

As I nudged up the throttle, the Navy range boat came back on the air to thank us for having our radio on — apparently a rare occurrence — as it saved them the time and trouble of coming over several miles to chase us off. The helicopter, when it arrived, patiently circled the area for almost an hour until we were just entering the western channel to Smith Island and out of sight of the target ship; only then did we begin to hear the dull, rapid, far-off thunder of automatic cannon fire.

Staying out of trouble

As unusual as the target ship is, and as interesting as the Navy operations may be, boaters in the mid-Chesapeake should be aware of these military facilities, where they are, and how to avoid them. These are not amusement parks — to state what should be obvious — and deserve to be treated with caution.

Navy officials say it’s a simple matter to stay out of trouble in this area: Look at your charts to see where the prohibited zones are. Do not enter them.

Keep your radio on and keep an eye out for Navy range boats — those would be the ones that are painted orange, with flashing red lights, and have “Range Boat” written in big letters on the side.

And if they invite you to leave the area, take the hint and go.

Stephen Blakely is an editor and freelance writer in Washington, D.C. He also writes a sailing blog, www.travelbeat.net/sailing

American Mariner in her glory, under way as a radar tracking vessel, and as a liberty ship in drydock for painting in Baltimore.
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