



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving  
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IRISH NAVAL HERO

JEREMIAH O'BRIEN

AND WORLD WAR II

U.S. LIBERTY SHIPS

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### Introduction

They were called the "ugly ducklings" of World War II but the 2,750 Liberty ships built by the United States helped to keep open the vital shipping lifelines that enabled America to supply its vast Armed Forces and those of its Allies around the globe and eventually emerge victorious over the Axis Powers. They were the brainchild of U.S. industrialist Henry Kaiser of assembly-line and pre-fabricated ships which could be built in a matter of weeks, and eventually in a matter of days.

But mostly they were America's answer to the German U-boats which were sinking thousands of tons of Allied merchant ships and threatening the Allied war effort with defeat in World War II.

### Early Experience

As a young boy, this writer well remembers the building and launching of the Liberty Ships at the Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company across Newark Bay in Kearney, N.J. Years later, sailing up the Hudson River on excursion boats to Bear Mountain in New York State, our group passed large gatherings of them moored together in the ghostly spectres of our "mothball" fleet.

And now the ships mass-produced between 1941-45 are all gone except for the "Jeremiah O'Brien" which was refurbished and saved for posterity on the waterfront of San Francisco Bay in California. It stands proudly today in the U.S. Maritime Museum with other naval ships. It is both a national monument and a reminder of the largest merchant ship-building program in naval history.

Why the "Jeremiah O'Brien"?

But why was the "Jeremiah O'Brien" selected? The answer is simply part "Irish" luck and part determination. Thomas Patterson, Jr., regional director of the U.S. Maritime Administration in San Francisco, founded the National Liberty Ship Memorial group to dedicate some type of a monument to the builders, seamen, troops and all those who were part of the Liberty Ship saga during and after World War II.

Enough was known about the "Jeremiah O'Brien" to insure that it was a fitting symbol of represent all the Liberty Ships. Built in 1943 by the New England Ship Building Corporation in Maine, it hadn't been changed in any way since the day it was launched. Its ship log shows that the "Jeremiah O'Brien" served in both the European and Asian theaters of war, even participating in the D-Day Invasion at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France on June 6, 1944. It proved to be a gallant ship and crew.

But with the surrender of Japan in August of 1945, there was less need for the famous Liberty Ships, and so the "Jeremiah O'Brien" and many others were assigned to the Reserve Fleet at Suisun Bay in California.

As the Libertys were sent one by one to the scrap heap, Patterson and others decided to select one Liberty as an historical reminder of a great period in U.S. Naval History. The "Jeremiah O'Brien" was chosen because, as far as it could be determined, it is the last stock Liberty, with no alteration or modification of its design.

Who Was Jeremiah O'Brien ?

But who was the original Jeremiah O'Brien after whom the ship was named? Although much praise is deservedly given to Commodore John Barry of Wexford as the "Father of the American Navy," the honor of leading the very first ships into battle must go to Jeremiah O'Brien — even before the American Revolution had formally begun.

The son of a Corkman, Jeremiah O'Brien and his five intrepid sons were fishermen in the State of Maine. On June 12, 1775, off the coast of Machias, Maine, Jeremiah led his sons and other local patriots in their fishing boats to capture the British schooner "Margaretta" as the first American "prize of war."

And when the infuriated British sent two warships from Boston to punish the rebel upstarts and re-capture the "Margaretta," Jeremiah O'Brien and his "navy" obliged by capturing the two British ships, too!

So, it is fitting that the "Jeremiah O'Brien" should stand not only for an early naval hero but also for the thousands of ships which helped to bring liberty to a war-torn world in the 1940s.

"Ugly Ducklings" Name

It was actually U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt who dubbed the ships as "ugly ducklings" as a term <sup>(CF)</sup> admiration and affection for their great wartime service. Although the ships were not beautiful at all in a design sense, they were sturdy and dependable. Their crews, though living in very uncomfortable quarters, felt they were making a significant contribution to the Allied war effort. With an over-all length of 441 feet, 6 inches, a beam of 57 feet, and a depth of 37 feet, 4 inches, the Libertys had a total displacement of 14,000 <sup>(TONS)</sup> and could carry nearly 10,000 tons of cargo. To effect mass production, the ships were welded together rather than riveted.

The first Liberty Ship, the "Patrick Henry," was launched in Baltimore, Maryland on Sept. 27, 1941 amid little fanfare.

It and thousands of others were America's answer to the U-boats which were sinking cargo ships faster than they could be built. But within a year Liberty Ships were being built in  $3\frac{1}{2}$  months, and by 1943 three Liberty Ships a day were being completed. The battle of the sealanes in World War II was won by the Libertys and the men and women and built and sailed them.

#### Fitting Memorial

And now there is only the "Jeremiah O'Brien" left to represent the saga of the Libertys of World War II. The U.S. National Park Service planned a site for the ship in the Golden Gate National Recreation area in San Francisco. Piers were constructed between the city's famous Fisherman's Warf and Fort Mason as a fitting shrine to a great ship that represents so many others. By any measurement, the Liberty Ship program was an extraordinary feat in a time of great need. It is more than fitting that the ship should bear an Irish name to remind many of their contributions to Liberty.