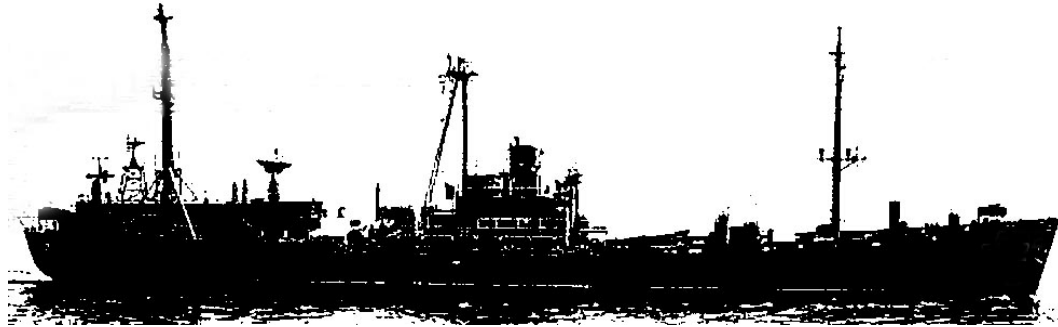


# SPY SHIPS



## ***Cold War Warriors Created at NNS***

**BACKGROUND:** During the 1960's, twelve vessels, officially called Technical Research Ships, were employed by the United States to gather intelligence and monitor electronic communications in troubled parts of the world. These ships' missions were covert and strictly classified. A cover story claiming that they were conducting research into atmospheric and communications phenomena was put forth. But their mission was pretty much an open secret, so these vessels were commonly referred to as 'spy ships'.

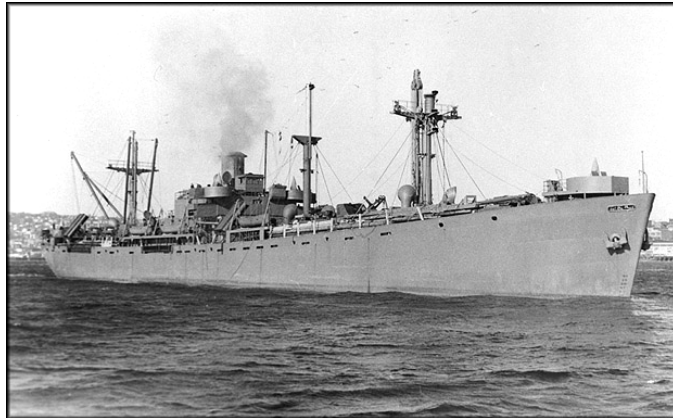
Two of the twelve were World War II Liberty ships, removed from idle fleets and with little fanfare, converted at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) in 1962/1963. Unlike other some other conversions at Newport News, these vessels were not given NNS Hull Numbers. Any information about them that was released was scant and general in nature.

The two spy ships that were created at Newport News were commissioned naval vessels, with all-navy crews. The details of where they roamed and what they accomplished five decades ago are still classified, for the most part. In 2010, the National Security Agency (NSA) declassified and released a document entitled: *A Review of the Technical Research Ship Program 1961-1969*. But it is so heavily redacted, that very little can be gleaned from it, other than data reflective of the basic characteristics of Liberty ships.

Some more insight into the careers of the two Technical Research Ships that NNS created, the USS GEORGETOWN and the USS JAMESTOWN, is randomly scattered in dozens of books, periodicals, Internet postings and old newspaper articles. This story is drawn from such sources, and provides at least an overview of their creation, capabilities and somewhat pedestrian service histories. Their naval careers were far more prosaic those of two other spy ships; the USS LIBERTY, which barely survived an Israeli attack in 1967, and the USS PUEBLO, which was captured by the North Koreans in 1968.

***BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SPY SHIPS:*** The two vessels selected for conversion at NNS to become Technical Research Ships had been completed late in World War II as modified Liberty ships. They featured four enormous cargo holds, and had been uniquely configured to transport boxed aircraft overseas. They saw little or no service in the war, and after short periods of civilian operation as grain-carrying cargo vessels, they were placed in two different National Reserve Fleets in 1947.

Their selection to become spy ships was based on their virtually new condition and their large cargo holds. They were better suited than conventional Liberty ships for extensive modification to facilitate the installation of a large amount of unspecified equipment and to provide greatly expanded crew accommodations.



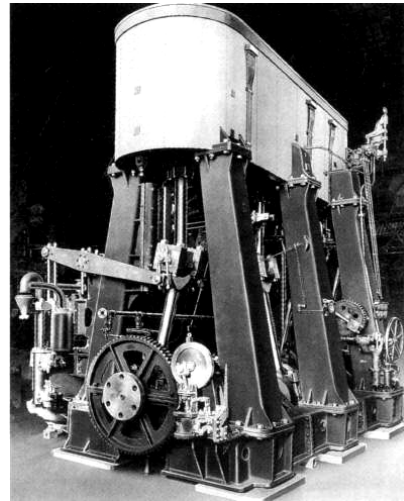
In early August of 1962, the US Navy took title from the Maritime Commission for the Liberty ships J. HOWLAND GARDNER and ROBERT W. HART. Soon thereafter, the Navy contracted with Newport News Shipbuilding for these vessels' conversion to military use. The contract value was a little over \$9 million, and an elapsed time of fifteen months was allotted for the work.

Both ships were moved to Newport News later that same month. The GARDNER, destined to become the USS JAMESTOWN, was towed to Newport News from a reserve fleet anchored near Galveston, Texas. The HART, which was renamed USS GEORGETOWN, was moved a much shorter distance; from the James River Reserve fleet to the shipyard.

***CREATING THE SECRET SISTERS:*** The Navy designations initially assigned to these vessels were AG-165 (for GEORGETOWN) and AG-166 (for JAMESTOWN). AG is the Navy's designation for a class of vessels identified as Auxiliary, General. In 1964, shortly after being commissioned, their designations were changed to AGTR-2 and -3, respectively. AGTR was a more descriptive, if not more enlightening designation, which stood for Auxiliary, General, Technical Research.

Once consigned to the care of Newport News shipbuilders, the two vessels were stripped of most of their Liberty ship features; both internally and externally. The largest internal change was the installation of two entirely new and air-conditioned decks below the main weather deck that ran almost the full length of the ships. In addition to providing space for equipment and storage associated with their new roles, their crew accommodations were greatly expanded. Originally, the two ships had crews of around 43 each. After conversion, they could handle a complement of more than 250 officers and sailors.

But their original, main propulsion 2,500 horsepower reciprocating steam engines were retained, and their underwater hull lines remain unchanged. The design of the vessels' sturdy 'up and downers' dated back to the late 1800's. While reliable they only permitted the spy ships to attain a maximum speed of 11 knots.



External changes gave them a very different profile. Almost all of the ships' extensive cargo handling gear was removed. Only two stub masts and light load cargo booms were retained; suitable for handling small stores and each ship's boats, which were stowed just ahead of the ship's superstructures.

A huge deck house was added near the stern, and her main deck was festooned with numerous antennae; large and small, and varied in shape and purpose. The most outstanding visible features they exhibited was two 90-foot tall antenna masts, positioned well forward and near the stern, and a slightly smaller, tri-pod mast located just aft of the superstructures of the converted vessels. Lastly, they were painted grey, with their identification numbers boldly emblazoned on their bows.



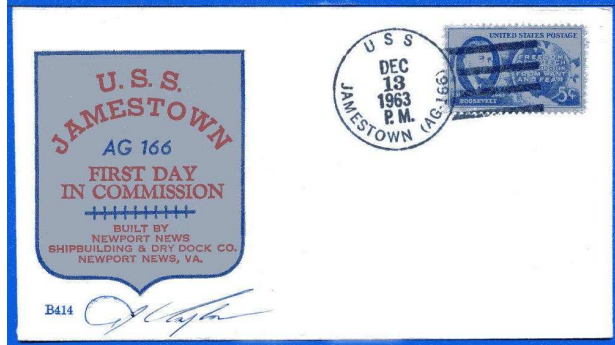
A few weeks before they became commissioned naval vessels, several photos and a carefully worded story appeared in the November 1963 issue of the *Shipyards Bulletin*. Before and after photos of one of the ships, lying alongside a shipyard pier, were accompanied by a half-dozen interior images. However the interior photos only revealed such non-sensitive areas as the 136-seat crew's mess, living spaces for officers and enlisted, and a fully equipped dental office.

The only reference in that publication pertaining to their missions was a single sentence:

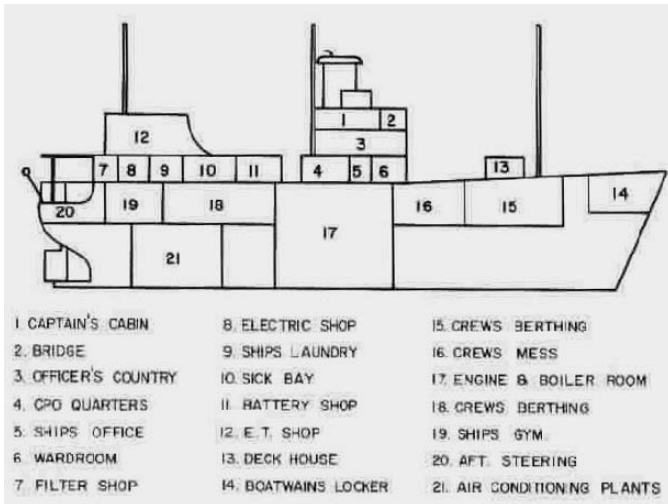
*"The colossal holds of the twin vessels now contain electrical and electronic instruments, receivers and transmitters, in addition to other sophisticated equipment necessary for research".*

**SPY SHIP SISTERS' SERVICE:**  
 GEORGETOWN was commissioned on November 9, 1963. JAMESTOWN joined the fleet a month later.

Each crew totaled 288 individuals. Roughly half of this number were traditional ship operational types. The rest were drawn from the ranks of a clandestine organization only identified as the Naval Security Group.



The recently declassified NSA document indicates that the operations' personnel assigned to each ship included nine officers and 151 enlisted. An additional six officers and 137 enlisted were also assigned to each ship, but their service designation is blanked out. But it was common knowledge, even during the Cold War years, that this second group was mostly composed of intelligence experts. But amongst themselves, and to those in the 'know', they were simply referred to as 'spooks'.



A 'Welcome Aboard' pamphlet for the GEORGETOWN that was handed out to visitors provided a little insight as to what was concealed within the grey hulls of the spy ship sisters.

The service lives of both of these vessels was relatively short. Both were decommissioned in 1970. JAMESTOWN was scrapped that same year; GEORGETOWN's demise followed in early 1971.

During their few years of service as Technical Research Ships, these vessels frequently deployed to seek intelligence about countries unfriendly to the United States. In order to transmit information gathered during such missions, a 16-foot diameter parabolic antenna, mounted on the aft deckhouse of each vessel, was utilized to bounce signals off the moon, and send them to Naval Communications Stations in Maryland or Hawaii. Gyro stabilization was employed in order to keep the antennae pointed at the moon as the ships pitched and rolled...as Liberty ships will do... in the open ocean.

This state-of-the-art 1960's communication system was officially called Earth-Moon-Earth (EME). But the ships' crews jokingly referred to the devices as "Death Rays". This nickname may have been taken seriously by at least one foreign power.

Once, according to a former 'spook', when one of the American spy ships was operating in International waters very near Havana, the Cubans dispatched motor torpedo boats armed with ship-to-ship missiles to harass the Americans.

Having no defensive weapons, other than a handful of small caliber machine guns; the ship's crew, perhaps somewhat in desperation, aimed the EME System's antenna at the threatening combatants. It worked; the intimidated belligerents turned away and sped back to port!



The Navy's official histories for the GEORGETOWN and the JAMESTOWN are very skimpy. But these data can and have been augmented from other reliable sources; primarily ones posted on the Internet by former crew members. Other postings...by persons unknown...are suspect. They smack of unsubstantiated intrigue, cannot be confirmed and therefore are not included. But they do make for interesting reading...

The ship's crest for the GEORGETOWN includes a carefully selected motto that at least hints at her true purpose; unlike the Navy's terse official history for this ship, below:



- Commissioned **USS Georgetown, (AG-165)**, 9 November 1963, at Norfolk, VA., CDR. W. A. Gleason in command
- Redesignated *Technical Research Ship (AGTR-2)*, 1 April 1964
- Decommissioned and struck from the Naval Register, 19 December 1969
- Returned to the Maritime Administration, 24 June 1970, at the National Defense Reserve Fleet, James River
- Final Disposition, sold for scrapping, 24 July 1970, for \$185,001, scrapped in 1971

Other sources of information reveal a bit more about her short service life. Following commissioning, GEORGETOWN made a shakedown cruise to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba in late January, 1964.

Under her new designation as AGTR-2, she was placed in full operation on April 1, 1964. She plied the waters of the Caribbean until June of that year, then left her home port of Norfolk, Virginia for a four-month deployment along the east coast of South America, where she conducted what were publicized as ‘electronic research programs’.

GEORGETOWN departed Norfolk on January 5, 1965. Passing through the Panama Canal, she then conducted research operations off the coast of Chile. In 1966, she deployed to trouble spots in both the Atlantic and the Pacific; transiting the Panama Canal four times in the process. That same year she made two rescues at sea, passed through the eye of a hurricane and won the Navy’s coveted Battle Efficiency “E” award.

Similar activities took place over the next four years. Once-young sailors who were embarked in AGTR-2 during those interesting times in world history have posted a lot of sea stories on the Internet in recent years, including the following sampling:

*“We left Key West shortly after I got onboard in June of 1968 and spent the next three months off Havana. We returned to Key West for provision and fuel about three times. Our cruise book does not mention our Cuban Deployments, but they were filled with excitement.*

*“One day, we rescued a raft full of Cubans fleeing Cuba. This was not the only time this happened. The Cuban military hassled us quite a bit by running circles around us and throwing out fishing nets to try and tangle our propeller. At one point we intercepted a speech by Castro stating he was going to sink the CIA spy ship GEORGETOWN. Taking no chances our skipper pulled us well away from the twelve mile limit.”*



In response to that entry, another former GEORGETOWN crew member offered another 1968 vintage sea story:

*“We were warned by the BBC of a bombing run to be made by Russian TU-95s in the Eastern Mediterranean. Unfortunately, the announcement was 24 hours after the fact. I was topside when they flew over. All I could see was three tiny dots, high in the sky. That was all there was to it. But the wives in Norfolk were having a fit because this was a month after the PUEBLO incident and they knew we were the LIBERTY’s replacement in the Med!”*



JAMESTOWN spent most of her time far from the shores of America. Her career included nine deployments off the coast of Viet Nam. She earned nine campaign stars and a Meritorious Unit Citation for her Vietnam War service.

AGTR-3 left Norfolk on a shakedown cruise to 'Gitmo' in January, 1964. While she was there, conducting training exercises, Castro cut off the fresh water supply to the US Navy base; necessitating her to standby in case military dependents had to be evacuated.

In April of that year, JAMESTOWN made her first overseas deployment, visiting ports in the Mediterranean and the continent of Africa before returning to Norfolk in August. By November, she was back at sea, operating up and down the west coast of Africa for three months. In 1965, she made her first of several Panama Canal transits and then operated along the Pacific coast of South America for a short period of time.

After returning to Norfolk for an upgrade of her secret electronic eavesdropping devices, AGTR-3 got underway for the Far East. By the end of 1965, she had reached the Philippines. Starting in January of 1966 and continuing through mid-1969, JAMESTOWN operated in the Viet Nam war zone, gathering vital information for America's fighting forces ashore and afloat.



The JAMESTOWN, and another AGTR almost continuously monitored North Vietnamese and Cambodian communications. Based on information recently made public, electronic transmissions from Thailand, Laos and China were also intercepted.

In December of 1969, both of these spy ships were decommissioned and laid up in Japan. The following May, they were sold to the Mitsubishi International Co. and scrapped in Japan the next year..



The men who sailed in JAMESTOWN, like nearly all ship's crews, gave her a nickname:

***"JIMMY T"***

A short poem posted on a JAMESTOWN crewmember's web site is reflective of the vessel's perceived shortcomings and her crew's demeanor...both afloat and ashore. The poem also reveals their grudging dependence on her...their home away from home.

***THE JIMMY-T***

*She hasn't the power of the Hawk named Kitty,  
The oilers outrun her and she's not very pretty,  
She's never been called a ruler of the sea,  
But she's all we've got, she's the Jimmy-T*

*Her engines drink oil with unquenchable thirst,  
She's got sick generators which have to be nursed,  
Her paint is as thick as the bark on a tree.  
But she's all we've got, she's the Jimmy-T*

*We curse and we cuss and we rant and we rave,  
About chow, or pay, or how we all slave,  
We'll work it all off on the beach with a spree,  
Then stagger back home to the ole Jimmy-T.*

**POSTSCRIPT:** The full story of what the crews of America's spy ships accomplished during the Cold War are slowly being revealed as documents become unclassified and as former National Security Agency employees write about that organization.

One of these 'spooks', in a book entitled *The Puzzle Palace*, offers an interesting and humorous view of what various groups considered the initials NSA denoted:

"To outsiders, its initials stood for **No Such Agency**. To its employees, they stood for **Never Say Anything**. Today, following numerous releases of information, the agency's initials can be considered to stand for **Not Secret Anymore**."

Be that as it may, the NSA still grudgingly releases information. As an example, the next page is a copy of one small part of the recently declassified document identified on the first page of this article. It pertains to the operational history of the GEORGETOWN.

The spy ships of the 1960's surely played a significant role in the NSA's ability to successfully eavesdrop on the rest of the world and break foreign crypto systems. But it's probably going to be a while longer...if ever...before we find out exactly how much of a contribution to national security these well-worn warriors actually made. In the interim, their motto will have to suffice:

***"In God We Trust - All Others We Monitor"***

***Bill Lee***  
June 2013



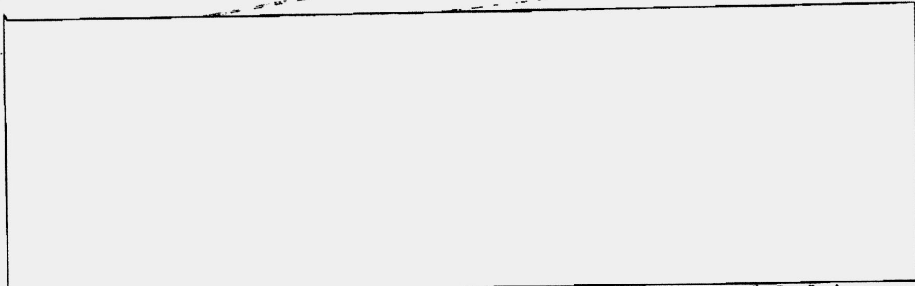
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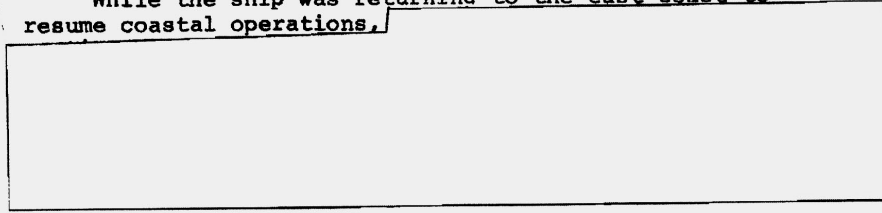
The GEORGETOWN departed Norfolk enroute [redacted] on 17 September and operated in the [redacted] area until 27 October when she sailed for the east coast of [redacted]

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(b) (3) - 50 USC 403  
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A port call was scheduled in [redacted] on 27 November for badly needed waterside/fireside cleaning of boiler and maintenance of the auxillary equipment.

While the ship was returning to the east coast to resume coastal operations, [redacted]



~~TOP SECRET UMBRA~~