

## COMANCHE

The Tug of the Month: COMANCHE, Olympia Harbor Days (OHD) Races and Festival.

by Les Eldridge

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Photograph Courtesy ATA-202 Collection

COMANCHE is the most recent US Navy or Coast Guard vessel to bear the name, a name that frames a storied nautical tradition. She was built by Gulfport Boiler and Welding Works of Port Arthur, TX in 1944, commissioned, and designated an ATA (Ocean Tug, Auxiliary) with no name, as USS ATA 202. She supported the Okinawa campaign in 1945 during WW II, and towed battle-damaged ships to Ulithi Atoll for repair, earning a Battle Star for Combat. At war's end, she reported to Naval Base San Diego, and then to the Reserve Fleet's Texas Group in Orange TX. In 1947, she was placed out of service, and in 1948, given a name, USS *Wampanoag*, ATA 202.

In 1959, she was loaned to the US Coast Guard as WATA 202, USCG Cutter COMANCHE. Ten years later, her transfer was made permanent. As a CG Cutter, she was home-ported at Morro Bay and San Francisco before being transferred to Corpus Christi, TX where she engaged in many of the same activities plus piracy patrols in the Caribbean. In the late 1960s she returned to the Pacific and was stationed at Eureka, Ca until her decommissioning in 1980. When at Eureka, COMANCHE gave the first ever notice of violation to a foreign fishing ship. COMANCHE was decommissioned in 1980, having won the Coast Guard Meritorious Unit Commendation and the Coast Guard Battle Efficiency ribbon.



Photograph Courtesy LG Evans Maritime Images

Previous “Comanche’s” include the USS *Comanche*, a 200-foot long, 1300 ton *Passaic*-class US Navy monitor armed with two 15-inch guns in turret. During the American Civil War, in 1864, *Comanche* was disassembled, shipped from the East Coast to San Francisco aboard the sailing ship *Ariel*, reassembled and commissioned in 1865 specifically to guard the city and San Francisco’s US Mint from attack by the Confederate raider CSS *Shenandoah*. *Shenandoah* was in the Pacific, and planning such an attack when she learned of the Civil War’s end in August 1865, whereupon she headed to Liverpool on a 14,000-mile journey and surrendered the ship to the British.



Photograph Courtesy ATA-202 Collection

Another “Comanche” was a 165-foot icebreaking Coast Guard Cutter of the *Ossipee* class, launched in 1934 and performing extensive convoy, anti-submarine and rescue duty throughout the duration of WW II in the North Atlantic including the heroic rescue and saving of lives when the troopship [SS \*HYPERLINK "https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS Dorchester"\*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Dorchester) of “the Four Chaplains” fame was lost. USCGC *Comanche* (WPG 76) was decommissioned in 1947.

COMANCHE is 143 feet in length, displaces 754 tons, and is powered by her original two General Electric GM diesel Cleveland 278A V-12 engines, powering her at 750 horsepower each. Her wartime complement was 47 men and in the USCG, 43.

After she was decommissioned, she served as a commercial tug from 1990 to 2001. In 2007, COMANCHE was given to the COMANCHE 202 Foundation, 403 Garfield St. S., Tacoma WA 98444. This occurred in Olympia and thus her USCG Documented Home Port is Olympia, WA. She is crewed and maintained by Foundation volunteers, and cruises Puget Sound, welcoming 3,000 to 5000 visitors a year, including many youth groups such as the Boy Scouts of America. She is being restored to her pre-1970s appearance, and can accommodate 25 overnight guests with two working heads, a galley, library, and museum spaces. 2017 is the tenth anniversary of COMANCHE becoming a museum ship. On board are several museum spaces, one dedicated to World War II with a special display about Pearl Harbor (75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary). A display of uniforms, which visitors are welcome to try on and a display about COMANCHE's service as a Coast Guard Cutter.



Photograph Courtesy Karla Fowler 2013

COMANCHE has been a frequent participant in Olympia Harbor Days festival and races. Director of Operations Joe V. Peterson brought her to the, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2013 events. Harbor Days was the first public open house for COMANCHE as a museum ship in 2008.



Photograph Courtesy Karla Fowler 2013

COMANCHE is the most complete 'as built' ATA known, with original equipment now 73 years old. In 2014, she experienced trouble with her auxiliary electrical system, an expensive repair item. Efforts are still ongoing to raise the necessary funds for continued refurbishing of the auxiliary DC system and **to rebuild the auxiliary generator**. Some funds raised thus far have been from her many Olympia fans. She sent her crew (but not the tug) to the 2016 event. Visitors and Harbor Days volunteers alike are hopeful she'll be able to participate in 2017. All contributions are tax deductible. Says Director Peterson, "*We have plans to be there if all continues going well with the DC system. It's our favorite event!*"

*COMANCHE is a member of the Historical Naval Ships Association, the Retired Tugboat Association, and Museum Ships on Facebook.* Quite a bit of information and photos can be found at Tug Comanche Facebook site: <https://www.facebook.com/COMANCHE202>  
The public can visit COMANCHE and even ride on her at no charge.

**Sources:** Civil War Navies by Paul H. Silverstone, Naval Institute Press, 2001. US Coast Guard History Program, [www.uscg.mil/history/cutters](http://www.uscg.mil/history/cutters). COMANCHE 202 FOUNDATION, [ata202@live.com](mailto:ata202@live.com), edits by director Joe V. Peterson.

**About Les Eldridge:** Les is president of South Sound Maritime Heritage Association, and is author of a number of maritime histories and five novels of the American Civil War at sea. His maritime articles have appeared in several on-line and print outlets, magazines and journals. He lectures frequently ashore and afloat, and narrates the OHD Races each Year. For more, see [EldridgeSeaSaga.com](http://EldridgeSeaSaga.com).

**Tug of the Month** is sponsored by Olympia Harbor Days Tugboat Races and Festival, an Olympia Kiwanis Club event. The articles are edited by Carol Riley, Executive Director, OHD, with many illustrations by noted marine artist Karla Fowler. The free community event takes place every Labor Day weekend on the Olympia waterfront. It is in its 44<sup>th</sup> year. For attendance information, see [www.HarborDays.com](http://www.HarborDays.com) or go to Facebook@OlympiaHarborDays. Questions to the Executive Director at [info@HarborDays.com](mailto:info@HarborDays.com).