



Veteran ship of Persian Gulf fame moored at shipyard

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S.S. Westward Venture moored at local shipyard

by Tad Wayne Taborn

Sparrows Point Shipyard is home to a distinguished guest for six months – the cargo ship S.S. Westward Venture.

The ship is there under a lay berth contract with the shipyard's owner, Boston-based Barletta Willis Inc. Westward Venture is owned and operated by Totem Ocean Trailer Express, Inc. (TOTE), shipyard owner Vincent Barletta said.

The Westward Venture is U.S.-flagged and Jones Act-certified and waits on the East Coast to be put into service. The federal Jones Act, which was enacted in 1920, defines the rights of sailors who are injured or killed while in maritime service.

TOTE plans to contract for U.S. flag work or use the vessel in TOTE's sister fleet run by Sea Star Line, which operates from Florida to Puerto Rico, TOTE's Director of Government Services Claudia Roberts said.

The Westward Venture is perhaps best known for its 2008 altercation with two Iranian speedboats in the Persian Gulf.

Navy personnel aboard the ship fired 50-caliber machine guns and M-16 rifles at two speedboats that approached the ship and were deemed a threat.

Referring to piracy on the world's high seas, Roberts said that there has been a "very significant increase" of incidents and that those who attack ships are "more or less organized" now.

TOTE ships carry protection and use diversionary tactics when traveling through contested areas like the Persian Gulf, Roberts explained.

TOTE operates a fleet of roll-on/roll-off cargo ships between the ports of Tacoma, Wash., and Anchorage, Alaska and contracts government and military shipping work. RORO shipping refers to the ability to drive materials on and off the ships.

TOTE began with one ship according to the company's website. The Westward Venture is the firm's second Ponce-class ship, and in 1977 the ship began serving Alaska's transportation needs, according to the TOTE website. The firm's first Ponce-class ship, the S.S. Great Land, currently operates on the U.S. west coast. TOTE operates the Ponce-class ships and has added larger Orca-class ships to its fleet.

The Westward Venture was under contract to the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command when the Persian Gulf incident occurred.

Sparrows Point Shipyard also has a storied legacy with military contracts. The shipyard built 385 Liberty Ships for service during World War II. Liberty Ships were cargo ships used to transport supplies and materiel for the war effort.

"Nice legacy there. Nice place," Roberts said referring to Sparrows Point and its shipbuilding history.