

The Queen Is Hailed

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The Queen Elizabeth 2, flagship of the Cunard Line and the last of the great passenger liners of the North Atlantic, was less than a day from Southampton last week on a trip out of Philadelphia when its owners received an urgent message from the British government: the 67,500-ton liner was being requisitioned immediately for military service.

Its likely mission: to carry to the South Atlantic some 3,000 to 4,000 men of the Fifth Infantry Brigade and support units, a force that would probably become the nucleus of a permanent garrison in the Falklands if the British proved able to recapture the islands from the Argentines.

Like its legendary predecessors, the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, which served as troop transports during World War II, the QE2 thus became a symbol of British resolve in a moment of national crisis.

A Defense Ministry spokesman explained that the liner's size, speed and facilities made it "uniquely suited to carry a substantial number of troops, who must be kept fit and ready for operations should they be required." Few people, even among the 1,700 would-be passengers whose 13-day cruise from Southampton to the Mediterranean had been abruptly canceled, quarreled with that assertion. The QE2 can make the 8,000-mile voyage to the Falklands in about ten days at a speed of 28.5 knots (or 32.8 land miles per hour). Its speed gives it the capability of escaping from an attack by a conventional diesel-powered submarine, which can do 19 knots on the surface and 16 when submerged. The QE2 would still be vulnerable to the kind of air-to-surface missile attack that last week sank the destroyer Sheffield, but at least it would be fairly secure against an assault by Argentina's diesel subs.

The British government had earlier taken over two passenger liners of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Co. (commonly known as the P. & O. line), the 16,907-ton Uganda and the 45,000-ton Canberra, and fitted them for military duty with astonishing alacrity. The Uganda, an "educational cruise liner" that normally carries 900 or more students around the Baltic and the Mediterranean, needed only modest modifications to be transformed into a floating 1,000-bed hospital. At a British navy dockyard in Gibraltar, 300 workers fitted the ship's stern with prefabricated steel helicopter pads. A smoking room and veranda were converted into operating theaters; a dance hall was turned into a 100-bed ward. Within a week, the Uganda was on its way to the South Atlantic, the strains of Rule Britannia blaring from its loudspeaker system. Similarly, the Canberra was outfitted with a helicopter deck atop its swimming pool. Marine commandos were instructed to take off their boots in the public rooms until the carpeting had been covered with plywood. Within three days the Canberra was headed toward the war zone with 2,000 troops aboard.

Conversion of the QE2, a floating luxury hotel with seven cocktail bars, four swimming pools and a casino, was a somewhat more complicated task. Most of the luxurious furniture and fittings from the public rooms were removed. Cunard decided to store ashore the bone china, the crystal glassware, the potted plants, the 17,000 bottles of champagne and the half-ton of caviar. Passengers had hardly disembarked at Southampton before vases and linens, cycling machines and weight-lifting equipment

from the ship's gymnasium, and countless other items were packed in crates and hauled away. The paintings were taken down, but the walls of smoked glass and the polished chrome bar tables were left in place.

Helicopter pads were installed to supplement the one the ship already has. Some 5,000 sheets of particle board were used to cover paneled walls and carpeting. Truckloads of such rations as chocolate and ice cream, as well as an estimated 100,000 pints of beer, were being loaded aboard. With the refitting going on day and night, the liner could be ready to sail by midweek. About a third of the ship's regular crew of more than 700 was expected to sign up for the hazardous trip south, with pay jumping 150% once the ship sails seven degrees beyond the equator. The man at the helm will be the ship's master, Captain Alexander Hutcheson.

By last week the government had taken over some 50 private vessels under a legal procedure known as the Queen's Order in Council. These ships included everything from freighters and tugboats to four deep-sea fishing trawlers, which the navy planned to use as minesweepers in the vicinity of the Falklands. The trawlers are better suited to the cold waters of the South Atlantic than the navy's minesweepers. Moreover, the fishing boats are designed to travel long distances and are equipped with fish-detecting sonar equipment that is also capable of tracking enemy ships. One of the trawlers hastily unloaded a cargo of mackerel last week, then left for the battle zone.

According to some unofficial estimates, the price of Britain's war in the South Atlantic has gone past the \$1 billion mark—a huge expense currently covered by a \$4.5 billion defense contingency fund. The QE2 alone is costing the British government \$225,000 a day to operate, while the Uganda and the Canberra are running about \$175,000 apiece. Cunard lost \$3.5 million in revenues from the Mediterranean cruise it was forced to cancel but, like the other ship owners, expects to be fully compensated for whatever losses it incurs. Says an aide to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher: "This has been very good for the merchant navy. They haven't had it so good for years."

The whole British maritime operation has been handled with remarkable speed and efficiency, but the British point out that they were lucky. They benefited from a contingency plan, formulated in 1978 by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, for the speedy commandeering of 300 specific merchant ships from member nations in time of emergency. The British were even luckier that a substantial portion of the Royal Navy was participating in NATO exercises off Gibraltar at the time of the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. This meant that a number of vessels, almost certainly including a nuclear submarine, were stocked, manned and ready to sail. It also meant that some of the ships were already as much as 1,000 miles from the British Isles along the route to the South Atlantic.