

## AMERICA'S STEEL-LINED FOXHOLE

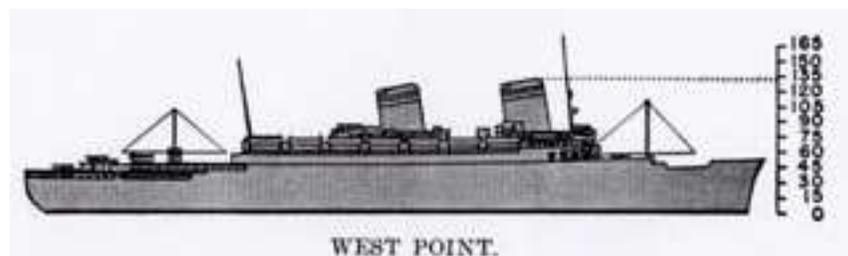
**Official USN Name: Forward Fire Control Station - USS WEST POINT**



When the two smoke stacks of the SS AMERICA were raised to alleviate a smoke/soot deposit problem on her aft passenger decks in 1940, an advantage was inadvertently created that served the ship extremely well during her years of wartime service. Fitted with numerous antiaircraft armament in the Fall of 1941, the liner-turned-troopship also had two range finder stations installed to control the operation of these weapons. Her designated forward fire control station, which conveniently doubled as a lookout post, was created in what was a most unlikely place; atop her forward stack.

But, that very location was optimal, for her forward stack was actually a 'dummy' and largely existed for aesthetic design and balance purposes. After being raised 15 feet in height, it became the highest structural part of the vessel. Higher, even, than her

enclosed and heated crow's nest on the foremast, positioned to allow merchant seamen to keep a sharp lookout ahead of the ship's track



before radar was available. Even better, the top of the otherwise underutilized forward stack provided an unrestricted 360-degree vantagepoint of the surrounding sky and sea.

The smooth metal cap of this stack was easily pierced by navy cutting torches to create a large oblong opening, with major axis placed fore-and-aft. About four feet beneath this new opening, a sturdy platform was welded in place, essentially creating a steel-lined foxhole. Access was provided from the emergency diesel generator room, which was located inside the base of that fake forward smokestack, via a shaky, vertical ladder stretching upwards some 30-35 feet.

**Walt Tobin** became a plankowner when the USS WEST POINT (AP 23) was commissioned in June of 1941. He normally worked in an office space created by the Navy on the port mezzanine of the ship's former First Class Lounge. According to Walt, in typical Greatest Generation understatement: *"My duties on board were that of a Storekeeper. Pay Rolls and allotments for the crew."* Again, in his own taciturn words: *"General Quarters duty was that of Fire Control on top of the dummy stack. Many times I climbed that damned ladder."*

A large optical rangefinder, including a 1940's vintage mechanical 'computer' for calculating distances and directions to aim the guns was installed on a raised foundation towards the front of the stack's abnormal aperture. A seat that was integral to this device placed the operator's head (and the business end of the rangefinder) about four feet above the top rounded rim of funnel. This allowed the rangefinder to rotate 360 degrees and prevented any one standing on the recessed platform from blocking its field of vision.

And there were often quite a few other heads up there as well. During General Quarters (or Battle Bill, Condition I – according to AP-23's Ship Organization Manual) as many as 14 men had their action station in that windy, exposed position; unshaded in summer and unheated in winter. In addition to the Gunnery Officer, a chief and a dozen sailors manned telephone circuits to the WEST POINT's bridge – and to the array of armament she carried. Plus, they provided vital, visual lookout using their God-given Mark I Eyeballs, further aided by over-sized, fixed-in-place, swivel-mounted binoculars.



Even in more relaxed times, this station was manned around the clock by at least four sailors and a watch officer whenever the ship was at sea. Positioned almost chest high to the rim of the forward stack, sailors were stationed there in pairs – a lookout and a telephone talker – and they stood two-hour watches, taking turns at those assigned duties.

They were almost totally exposed to the elements. The weather they experienced was magnified by the WEST POINT's speed as she dashed – often alone – across the world's oceans without escort, primarily depending on her 23-knot maximum speed for protection. At an elevation of 135 feet above her waterline, these sailors experienced far more pitch or roll motion than any one else onboard the ship. During violent storms, the 'stack watch' – as they called it - sometimes had to be secured.

That was not the only discomfort they endured. **Claude Williams**, whose normal duty station was in the Executive Officer's office, remembers being bothered by stack gas when on watch. *"When we had a strong wind astern and its direction was near 180 degrees relative, our Watch Officer would ask the Office of the Deck for a slight change in heading, or a zig-zag course."* Compliance with these requests was not granted for the comfort of the crew, but to ensure that their lookout capability was not compromised. In addition, watchstanders atop the WEST POINT's forward stack occasionally experienced the deafening sound of the ship's twin steam whistles from a very close position, plus being doused by the resultant steam vapor that sometimes enveloped them.



Claude, a lowly seaman apprentice at the time, joined the ship's company at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard on April 25, 1942 while 'this beautiful ship' was in dry dock. Assigned to duty as a yeoman striker because of two year's of high school typing experience, he managed to escape the traditional all-hands' evolution of scraping and painting the vessel's underwater hull then taking place.

In his own words, six decades later: *"It's really a kick to remember that during my first few months as an Apprentice Seaman my salary was \$21.00 per month; however, I had a 10,000 dollar government life insurance policy with a monthly premium of three dollars. That reduced my monthly pay to \$18.00. So my total pay each payday was \$9.00. I don't recall that there was ever a time that lack of funds kept me from going ashore at every opportunity; perhaps one reason for this is that I remember liberties in San Francisco and other ports where any bar we might visit would not permit us to pay for our drinks."*

Claude also recalled standing watch 'up there' at night. *"I had the mid-watch (2400 to 0400) many times. The bad part was being roused from sleep at 2330; however, there was a good part about that watch. Every night at 0200 "midrats" were available in the galley for those personnel on watch. So at 0200 one of the lookouts was sent to the galley and would return with a large brown paper bag and hot coffee--fresh slices of bread that only a ship's cook could make to perfection that sandwiched a thick slice of meat.*

*"Sometimes it was fresh cinnamon rolls hot from the oven; but to a hungry sailor who had last eaten at 1700 and turned in early because of his mid-watch, it was good stuff and more importantly, it made eyeballs more alert. The best part of the mid-watch was being able to report by phone circuit to the Officer of the Deck: 'Forward Control properly relieved, Sir' and then climb down to your bunk. Another good part--if you were on good terms with your Division Officer, you were allowed to sleep past reveille."*

After the war, the Navy removed the ship's wartime equipment before decommissioning her. When this war-weary vessel returned to her birthplace, Newport News Shipbuilding, in early 1946 for reconversion to a luxury liner, the Forward Fire Control Station 'fox-hole' had disappeared completely. Aerial pictures of AMERICA in her postwar glory show a completely smooth, dark blue metal crown on the forward funnel; any tangible evidence of that once-all-important watch station had been eradicated forever.



Years later, both Walt Tobin and Claude Williams had the opportunity to individually make voyages to Europe on the SS AMERICA – but as very indulged First Class passengers – and accompanied by their families. Walt, and his wife – a former navy nurse – and three of their five children occupied a suite on Main Deck for this memorable experience. A highlight of that trip, Walt relaxed on the very same port side Sun Deck mezzanine where he once handled a non-ending stream of navy paperwork...and undoubtedly contemplated the past while gazing to port at the sea.

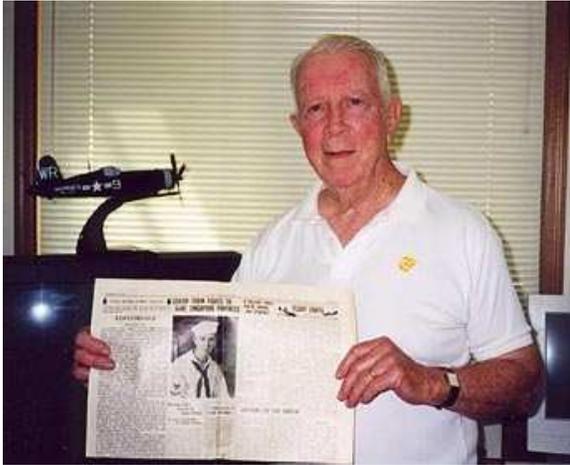
As one might expect, once these two navy veterans identified themselves as such to the AMERICA's peacetime crew, they were given the run of the ship. According to Claude, who made the military a career: *"In late 1962 I received orders to duty with SHAPE in Paris, France. I was asked to select my mode of transportation--air or surface. I called the Travel People in DC and told them of my three years as a young sailor aboard U.S.S. WEST POINT; since reclaimed by U.S. Lines and providing commercial passenger service as SS AMERICA on the run from New York to France. As you might expect, the result was that I and my family (W2DC) were booked as first class passengers in SS AMERICA for travel to Le Havre, France.*

*"Well! The expression, deja vu, just doesn't quite capture the experience. To have been aboard for three years as a young sailor and then 17 years later as a Naval Officer traveling First Class in the same ship was strange indeed. The word traveled around and one evening we even had dinner at the Captain's table. I roamed around the ship during the six day trip and I visited my old bunk compartment which was a very small (approximately six feet long and four feet wide) Tourist Class stateroom with one bed. Always designated as Stateroom A-23, I slept there for three years when it held three bunks, one above the other. And three lockers and a sink; little more."*

But, of course, their well-remembered action station was no longer there to revisit, and Walt could not make one last climb up 'that damned ladder' – even if he had wanted to...

~ *POSTSCRIPT* ~

As I have listened and learned so much from the crewmembers of the WEST POINT in recent years, none of their sea stories have been more intriguing to me than the ones associated with the ship's unique 'steel-lined foxhole'. Portions of this story was happily contributed by Walt Tobin in the spring of 2002 in his home near Myrtle Beach.



I snapped this photo of him at that time, holding a 1940's vintage newspaper that included his picture as young seaman in it. Walt also graciously gave me a number of artifacts he had retained from his time onboard WEST POINT. I initially and politely declined the offer of his treasures.

But he insisted, so I respected the wishes of this great guy...and accepted them.

Less than six months later, he was gone.

Beginning in 2003, a relationship was established between Claude Williams and myself that has since grown considerably. In 2004, Claude, a native of Kansas, wrote his autobiography with major emphasis on his thirty years of service in the Navy. It was my pleasure to provide him some background information about the WEST POINT and two other ships he served in. All three, interestingly enough, were built at Newport News Shipbuilding. I also made some suggestions for expanding his recollections where Claude had been too modest in his original draft, and then I edited his completed work.

The resultant book, of some privately published 200 pages, is entitled *The Wake of a Hay Baler*. I told Claude all I wanted for helping was an autographed copy. I received that, of course, and much more – as evidenced by his major contributions to this account of one of the more unusual watch stations in navy history. In addition, I enjoyed seeing my friend installed as President of the USS WEST POINT Reunion Association in 2005 (the day after this picture of us was taken).



Walt, Claude and their shipmates had some great adventures while serving in the USS WEST POINT. In addition, and most importantly, they kept her safe, allowing the ship to resume her civilian career and – at least in the case of Walt, Claude and their families - to enjoy her ambiance in peacetime, along with hundreds of thousands of other passengers.

Eventually, inevitably, but hopefully at some time far into the future, Claude will join Walt in an even more elevated watch station to serve the spirit of WEST POINT.

But they will leave behind many, many memories of their youth, their service and their 'can-do' spirit. This is but one of those memories.

*Bill Lee*  
May 2006

