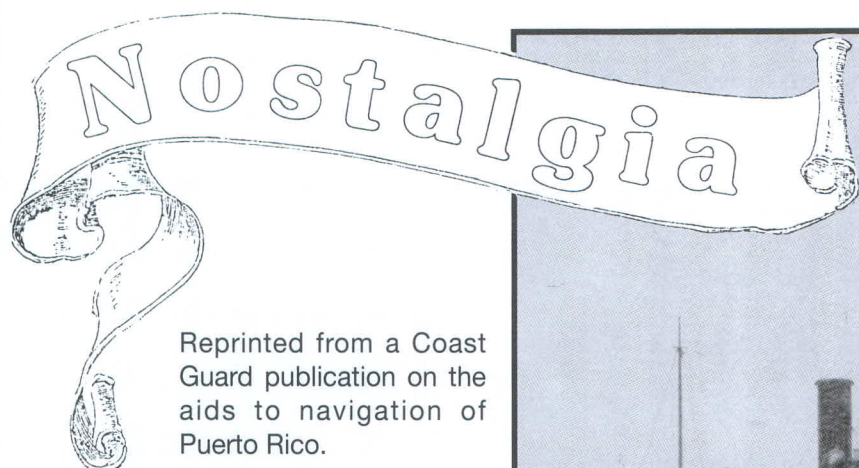
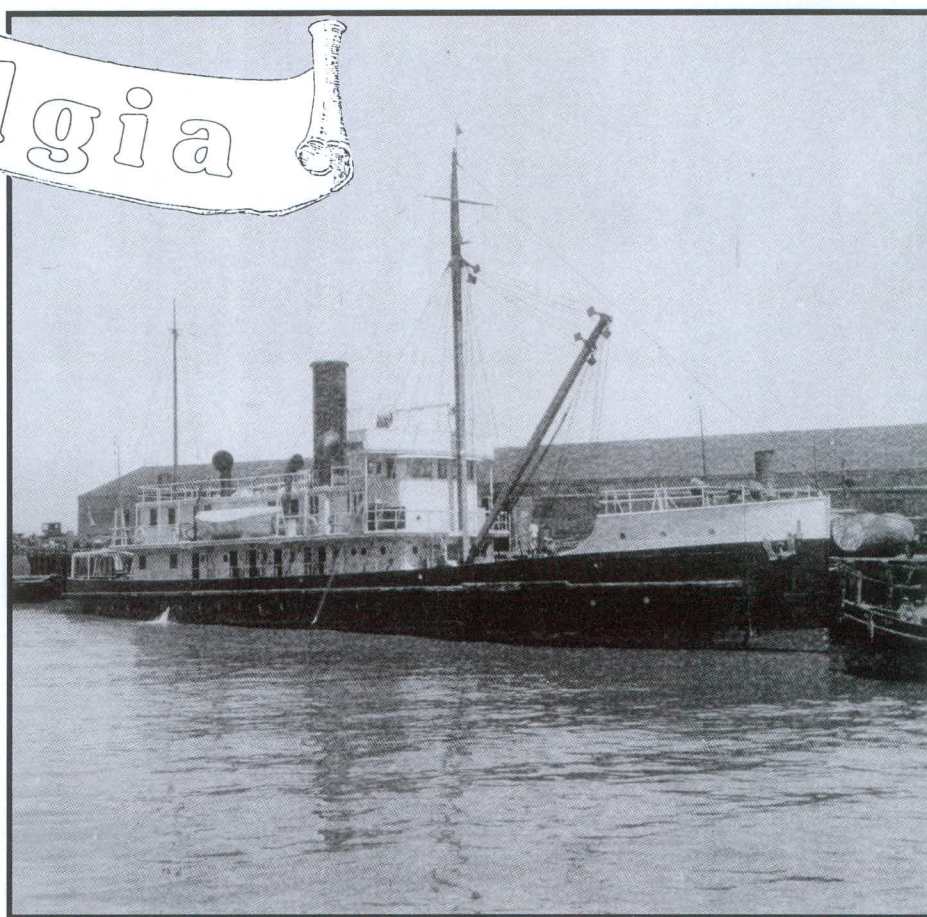




Reprinted from a Coast Guard publication on the aids to navigation of Puerto Rico.

THE SINKING OF THE TENDER ACACIA

by Richard White, Jr.



The USLH Service tender *Lupine* in 1927. She was a sister of the *Acacia*. USLHS Photo.

From 1927 until the early months of World War II, an ungainly buoy tender named ACACIA had maintained the lighthouses and buoys scattered about the waters surrounding Puerto Rico. Doggedly steaming back and forth across the Caribbean, ACACIA had carried out her unassuming but essential mission without incident, save for a couple of hurricanes. Her modest labors were abruptly ended, however, when in the pre-dawn hours of March 15, 1942, she happened across a German submarine. No match for the U-boat's 4.1-inch gun, the unarmed and militarily-insignificant tender was sunk within an hour. Unknown to her 40 crew members, ACACIA had the dubious distinction of being sunk by one of the more successful German U-boats of the war. The U-161, commanded by the redoubtable Kapitänleutnant Albrecht "Ajax" Achilles, had already begun to compile a long list of Allied shipping sent to the bottom of the Caribbean. The hapless ACACIA, the only Ameri-

can buoy tender ever to be sunk in combat, had become another addition to Achilles' marauding.

ACACIA was built in 1919 by the Army as a mine layer and originally named General John P. Story. She was one of six of her class (ILEX, LUPINE, LOTUS, SPEEDWELL, and SPRUCE) that was turned over to the Lighthouse Service in 1922 to be converted to buoy tenders. After reconditioning, ACACIA was sent in 1927 to San Juan, Puerto Rico, as the tender for the Ninth Lighthouse District. She replaced the 35-year-old COLUMBINE, soon to be laid up and scrapped. Her task was formidable, for she was responsible for the maintenance of over 250 aids to navigation. Her field of operations included Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Virgin Islands, and the Panama Canal, nearly 1000 miles from her homeport. Although not originally designed for buoy tending, ACACIA proved to be excellent at that task. Her powerful steam derrick enabled her to accomplish

efficiently the often dangerous lifting of multi-ton acetylene buoys. In addition to aids-to-navigation assignments, ACACIA was often called upon to perform construction and repair of lighthouses, piers, and other structures. After the San Felipe hurricane of 1928, she was so busy reconstructing lights that her crew dubbed themselves "The ACACIA Construction Company." Like all vessels of the Lighthouse Service (which became part of the Coast Guard in 1939), ACACIA was called upon on many occasions to render assistance to those in distress. She weathered two hurricanes, in 1928 and 1932, and after both of these disasters lent valuable assistance in supplying food and shelter to the victims. ACACIA herself was almost lost in the second hurricane, grounded for nearly a week at Ensenada Honda, Puerto Rico. She sustained considerable damage, costing \$3,675 to repair.

During 1939, when the Lighthouse Service became part of the Coast Guard, ACACIA's civilian crew was replaced by regular Coast Guardsmen. The first of these to command her was Warrant Officer John A. Anderson. When Captain Anderson was transferred to the Manzanita (Astoria, Oregon) in June 1941, his executive officer, Boatswain Ora C. Doyle, assumed command. Soon after Doyle took command, ACACIA was involved in one of the longest towing operations ever accomplished by the Coast Guard. A large Italian tanker, the *COLORADO*, was berthed in San Juan. In 1939, when Italy entered World War II on the side of the Axis, the crew of that tanker was interned — but not before they had irreparably sabotaged her engine room. As there were no repair facilities in Puerto Rico, ACACIA and the Coast Guard Cutter *UNALGA* tandem-towed the *COLORADO* (impounded by the U.S.) across 2,000 miles of the Gulf of Mexico to Galveston, Texas. In November, 1941, with war looming on the horizon, the ACACIA and the rest of the Coast Guard were transferred to the Navy. In early December of that year, ACACIA went to the aid of a tanker aground off St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. She was on that mission when war broke out on December 7, 1941.

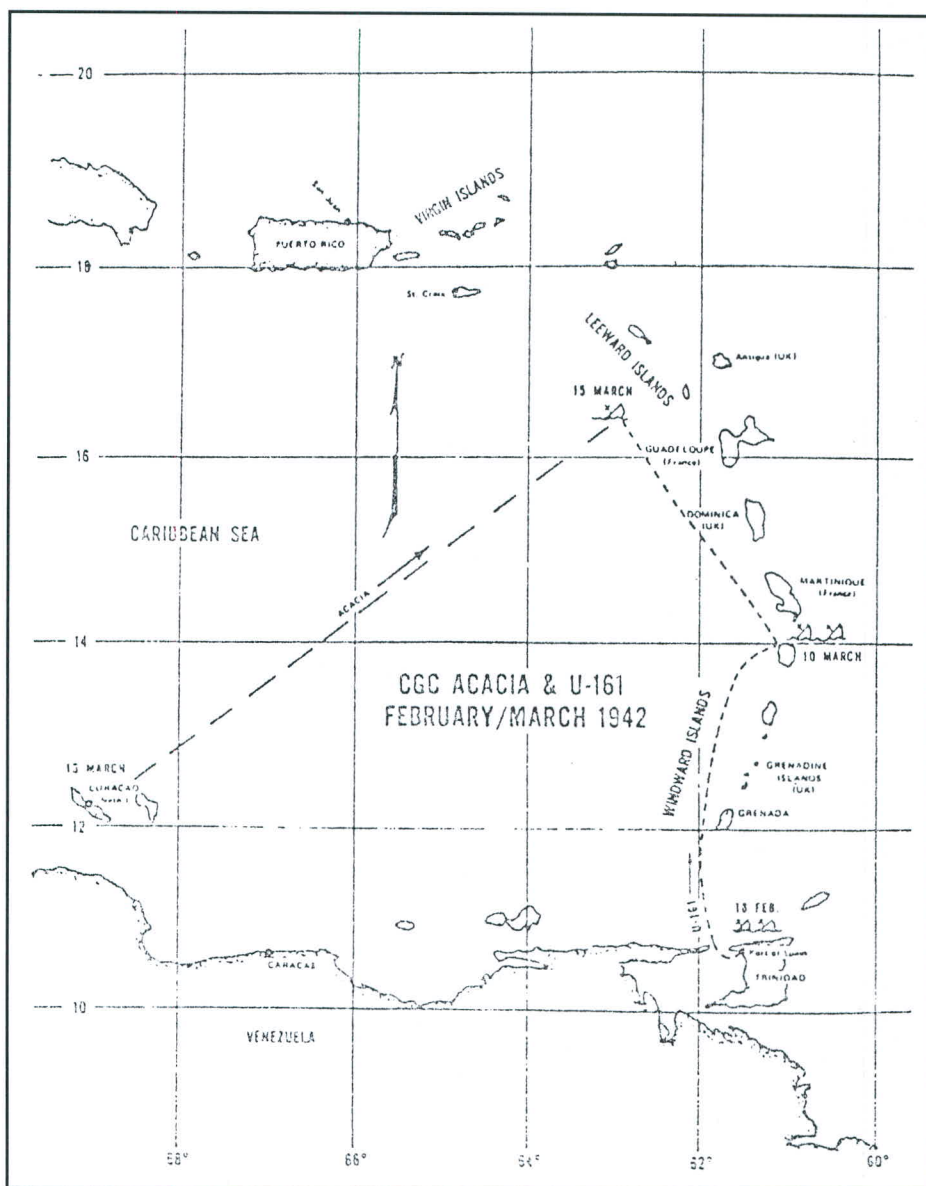
Shortly after the outbreak of war, she was ordered by Commander, Tenth Naval District, to supply several U.S. air bases with aviation fuel and to perform her normal aids to navigation duties. While in Antigua, a Gulf Oil tanker was disabled in the middle of the Caribbean with a broken propellor shaft, and the small commercial tug that was attempting to tow the tanker was unable to make headway due to heavy seas. ACACIA was dispatched to take over the tow, and an antiquated Navy four-stack destroyer steamed from San Juan to provide escort. ACACIA located the tanker and towed her without incident into Curacao, the nearest port. In Curacao, the British port captain would not release ACACIA without escort, due to the submarine menace. ACACIA was assigned to tend the submarine net that guarded the entrance to the harbor. For

a month she performed this thankless but necessary task, until the port captain felt the submarine activity had subsided enough to allow a ship to sail unescorted. At 0530 on March 13, 1942, ACACIA departed Curacao, steaming northeast en route to Antigua to finish the work that she had started a month before. ACACIA never reached her destination.

The United States was not prepared for the onslaught of German submarines in the Caribbean early in World War II. The only antisubmarine defense consisted of a handful of Coast Guard cutters (165 and 125 footers) and a couple of antique World War I Navy destroyers. As most of the U.S. naval power was concentrated in the North Atlantic con-

voy defense, the Caribbean was left relatively unprotected against German submarines.

The German plan was to concentrate on two particularly vulnerable areas. The first was off Trinidad, adjacent to the shipping lanes of the South American bauxite trade, the second was the Curacao/Aruba area whose large refineries were the terminals for Venezuelan oil. Throughout the war these areas were the "happiest hunting grounds" for Admiral Doenitz' U-boats. German submarine commanders had been cruising the Caribbean during the years immediately prior to World War II, gathering intelligence and acquainting themselves with the waters of the area. One such commander was "Ajax" Achilles,



who had taken especially keen interest in the geography of several Caribbean harbors during these intelligence missions. This knowledge was soon put to use, when, two months after Germany was at war with the United States, Achilles guided the *U-161* into the Gulf of Paria and torpedoed a large tanker and freighter anchored off Port of Spain. Surfaced and showing running lights, he then steamed boldly out through the Bocas. A week later, Achilles repeated this daring maneuver. He entered Castries Harbor, Santa Lucia, and torpedoed a freighter and the Canadian passenger steamer *LADY NELSON*, both brilliantly lighted at the docks.

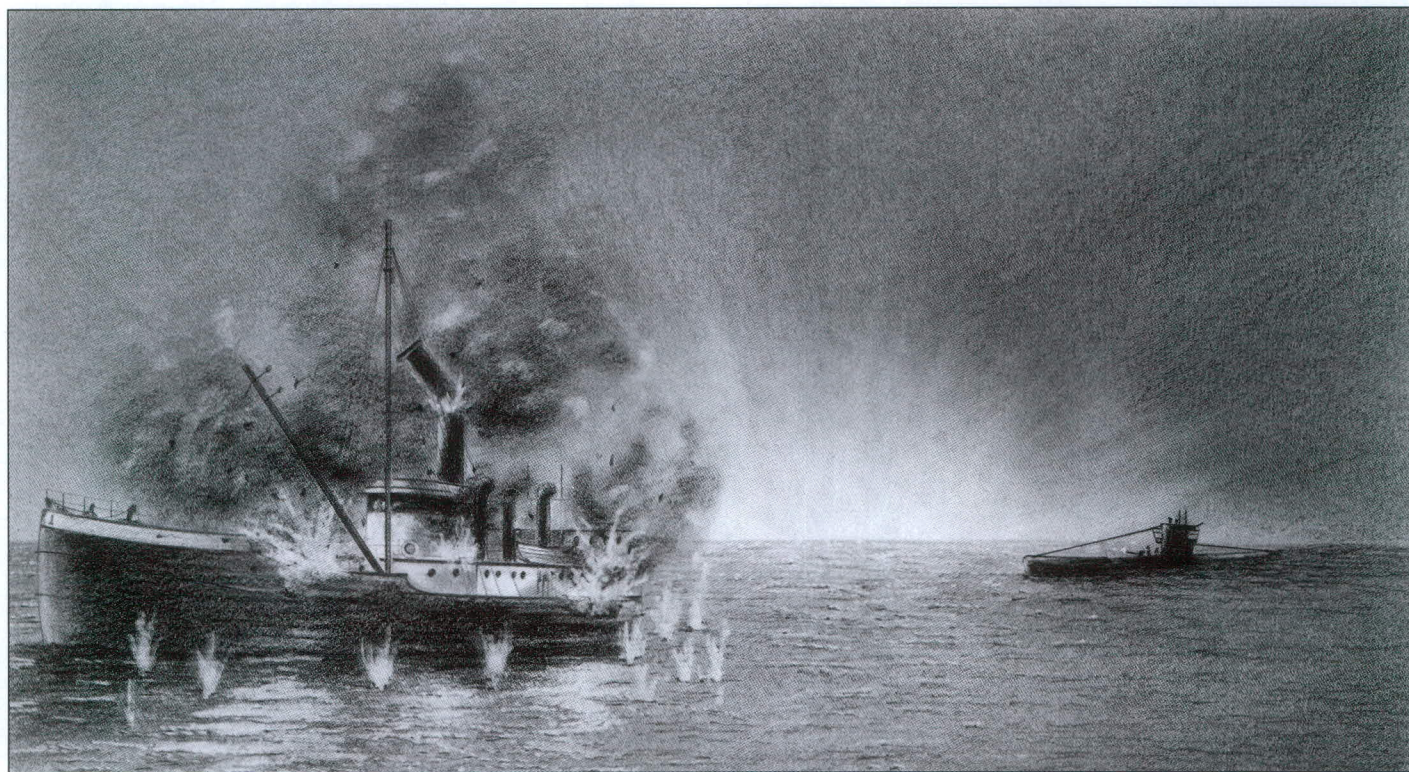
After leaving Santa Lucia, Achilles continued north. By the evening of March 14, 1942, he was west of the island of Guadeloupe. Unknown to him, he was now on a converging course with the *ACACIA*, plowing through the Caribbean at her standard 10 knots.

On board *ACACIA*, Machinist Mate First Class Frank Lau was manning the engine room on the mid-watch (midnight to 0400). Like the previous two nights underway, this mid-watch appeared to be another uneventful one.

The weather was clear and the usual Easterly wind and sea made the tender roll pleasantly. At 0330, Lau was called from the bridge by Captain Doyle, who stated that they were being followed by an unidentified vessel. Full speed on both engines was ordered.

Lau was relieved of the watch but couldn't sleep. He, like most aboard *ACACIA*, was sure that they were being followed by a German submarine and that soon they would be either torpedoed or fired upon. At 0535, as the first rays of dawn were breaking in the east, the *U-161* opened fire with her deck gun. Achilles had shrewdly been waiting for enough light to confirm that his prey was unarmed. He could then conserve his valuable torpedoes and sink *ACACIA* with his deck gun. When the first shot rang out, Captain Doyle immediately ordered an SSS ("I am under attack") message to be sent out. He had prepared this message earlier when he discovered the submarine following him, and had kept a close update of their hourly position in his pocket at all times. The SSS message was acknowledged by five ships, as well as the Tenth Naval District Headquarters in San Juan.

The first few shots missed *ACACIA*, but after a couple of minutes the German gunners found their mark on the upper deckhouse, the first hit striking the smoke stack. In minutes her entire wooden superstructure was completely aflame. Doyle's first command was to turn the tender's bow toward the submarine with the intention of ramming, but it was soon apparent to *ACACIA*'s captain that the lumbering tender could neither attack by ramming nor retreat. *ACACIA*'s top speed was 10 knots, the *U-161* could make over 18 knots while surfaced. Being unarmed, Doyle knew it was impossible to fight back. His ship already in flames, Doyle ordered both engines stopped, the lifeboats lowered to the rail, and the abandonment of ship. Four men were hit by shell fragments flying about the boats, although only one was to receive minor medical treatment. One motor lifeboat was not rigged out for lowering and had to be lifted from its cradle by a power winch located on the after deck. Fireman Clifford Reeves, despite the German shells whizzing over his head, crawled along the starboard deck to the stern, and operated the winch while



USLH Tender *Acacia* under fire. This drawing and the drawing on the opposite page are by District Inspector Linda Menges of Lenexa, KS.

sprawled below the gunwhale. Despite the steady and accurate German gunfire, all the tender's crew miraculously boarded the lifeboats and were safely away from the *ACACIA* by 0540. From the lifeboats, the crew watched the *U-161* slowly circle the tender, raking her superstructure with machine gun fire. While several of the German sailors waved to the tender's crew, the heavy 4.1-inch gun was also finding its mark on *ACACIA*'s hull, concentrating on the waterline near the stern. One shot ruptured an acetylene buoy on the forward deck and soon the ship was a blazing inferno from stem to stern. *ACACIA* then took on a starboard list, the stern settled, and she went down stern first. It was now 0625. Still surfaced when *ACACIA* sank, the *U-161* headed east, and slowly submerged. The lifeboats moored to a buoy that had parted the ropes securing it to the sinking tender's deck. The buoy had shot 30 feet into the air when it surfaced.

At 0810, a Navy PBY was sighted, soon followed by another. These aircraft stayed constantly over the survivors until they were rescued that afternoon by the *USS OVERTON*, a destroyer dispatched from San Juan. On board the *Overton*, Radioman Second Class Johnson, the only man seriously injured, was

stitched up by a Navy doctor. Another *ACACIA* crewman was hospitalized, but not due to the German gunners. Fireman Warren Riley, rescued in only undershorts and life preserver, later spent three days in a hospital with sun blisters. Two of *ACACIA*'s lifeboats were also taken aboard the *Overton*, but there being no room for the third, it and the buoy were sunk by the destroyer's guns. *ACACIA*'s crew was returned to San Juan the following morning.

Achilles returned to Germany soon after his encounter with *ACACIA*, where he was decorated for his successful patrol. His fellow submariners even nicknamed him "the Trinidad well borer" for his exploits in the Caribbean. Achilles and the German submarine force were at their peak — but the war was soon to catch up with them. Allied anti-submarine efforts were finally proving effective in late 1942 and early 1943. Three months after *ACACIA* was sunk, the 165-foot Coast Guard Cutter *THETIS*, operating with a squadron of Navy-Coast Guard anti-submarine vessels in the Gulf of Mexico, sank the *U-157*, a sister of the *U-161*. It was not the surface vessel, however, that proved to be the "coup de grace" to the submarine; it was Allied air supremacy.

Achilles and the *U-161* returned to the Caribbean in the fall of 1943. Meeting stronger submarine defenses this time, he turned south to the safer waters off the coast of South America. On September 20, 1943, he sank a freighter, then turned north and lay in wait off the mouth of Rio San Francisco, near Maceio, Brazil. On the 26th he sank an unescorted Brazilian freighter. The next day he was spotted on the surface by a PBM flying boat, part of Navy Patrol Squadron VP-74. The pilot, LTJG Harry Patterson, USNR, attacked the *U-161* in position 12-30S, 35-35W, east of Bahia. The *U-161* and "Ajax" Achilles were never heard from again.

Two years after the *ACACIA* was sunk, in late 1944, the Coast Guard launched a modern 180-foot seagoing buoy tender armed with a 3" 50 deck gun, depth charges, and several machine guns. Originally named the *THISTLE*, the vessel was renamed *ACACIA* upon commissioning in keeping with the Service's tradition of preserving the names of vessels of the past.



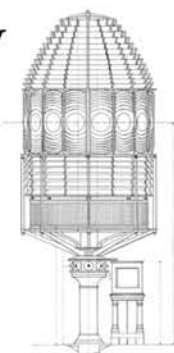
U.S. Lighthouse Service Tender *Acacia*

The *Acacia* proved to be an excellent lighthouse tender, although she was not originally designed for that purpose. She was acquired and assigned to the San Juan area in April of 1927. Her field of operations included Puerto Rico and adjacent islands, Virgin Islands and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Her 255 aids to navigation included light stations, minor shore lights, lighted and unlighted buoys and two radio beacons. *Acacia*'s crew was also occasionally called on to perform small construction and repair projects.

While in the San Juan area the *Acacia* weathered two hurricanes, one on September 13, 1928 at Jobos Harbor, P.R. and the other on September 26, 1932. She sustained no damage in the first but during the second storm she was aground for a short period and lost her main mast.



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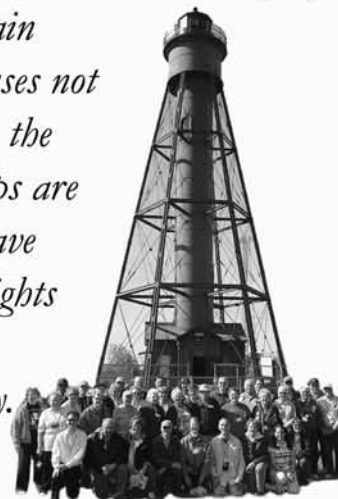
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