

USS SERPENS
(AK-97)

COMMISSIONING The USS SERPENS (AK-97) was an EC-2 SE-1 (Liberty Ship) type of auxiliary cargo vessel built by the California Shipbuilding Corporation of Wilmington, California, and launched April 5, 1943. She was commissioned May 28, 1943. Her first commanding officer was Lt. Comdr. Magnus J. Johnson, USCGR. He was succeeded on July 22, 1944, by Lt. Comdr. Perry L. Stinson, USCG.

EXPLODES AT
GUADALCANAL The SERPENS was at Auckland, New Zealand, on April 4, 1944, according to available records and departed June 9, 1944, for Guadalcanal. She arrived at Manus Island on October 2, 1944, and returned to Guadalcanal January 16, 1945. On January 29, 1945, while at anchor off Lunga Beach, loading 350 lbs. of torpedo depth bombs, the SERPENS exploded. The explosion undetermined, was not enemy action. Out of a total complement of 206, 196 were killed. Lt. Comdr. Stinson who survived the explosion and seven others, one officer and 6 crew members, were ashore at the time of the explosion. Of the personnel aboard only 2 survived. "I felt and saw two flashes," Lt. Comdr. Stinson reported, "after which only the bow of the ship was visible. The rest had disintegrated and the bow sank soon afterwards." The two survivors who were aboard had been in the boatswain's locker when the blast occurred. "They showed a lot of savvy," Lt. Comdr. Stinson reported, "by grabbing a couple of water lights that we kept stowed in the locker. They used them to attract attention when they climbed out onto the floating portion of the bow." Both men were injured when rescued by a base commander in the area. In addition to the Coast Guard crew, 57 Army personnel, including one officer was killed in the explosion.

EYE WITNESS
ACCOUNT "As we headed our personnel boat shoreward" an eye-witness reported, "the sound and concussion of the explosion suddenly reached us, and, as we turned, we witnessed the awe-inspiring death drama unfold before us. As the report of screeching shells filled the air and the flash of tracers continued, the water splashed throughout the harbor as the shells ~~the ship~~. ~~We headed~~ our boat in the direction of the smoke and as we came into closer view of what had once been a ship, the water was filled only with floating debris, dead fish, torn life jackets, lumber and other unidentifiable objects. The smell of death, and fire, and gasoline, and oil was evident and nauseating. This was sudden death, and horror, unwanted and unasked for, but complete."