

Liberty Vessel the SS Richard Montgomery

Seventh (7) in a production line of eighty two (82) Liberty Ships built by the St John's River Ship Building Company in Jacksonville, Florida. She was named after an Irish Soldier who getting himself elected to American Congress fought in the war against the British in Canada and was killed in the final assault on Quebec in 1775

Launched in July 1943 a year later in August 1944 loaded with 7000 tons of bombs and munitions at Hog Island, Philadelphia on what was to be her final voyage, she slipped out of the Delaware River and crossed the Atlantic to the Thames Estuary where she was to await a convoy to Cherbourg

At Southend she came under the orders of the Thames Naval Control and the Kings Harbour Master who ordered her to anchor off the Northern edge of the Sheerness Middle Sand. With only thirty foot (30') of water at this point and the 'Montgomery' drawing over thirty one feet (31') it was obvious the Kings Harbour Master had made a grave error of judgement, so obvious the Assistant Harbour Master refused to carry out the order unless put in writing

A noisy argument ensued which attracted the attention of the superior officer who sided with the Kings Harbour Master and told the assistant to confirm the order. Storming out the assistant was re-posted two days later. Significantly, following the disaster his evidence was not heard at the board of enquiry that didn't even mention the difference of opinion

Early on Sunday 20th August lookouts on a ship moored close to the 'Richard Montgomery' noted her swing towards a shoal on the flood tide. Sounding sirens the duty Watch Officer ignored the warnings even failing to wake his Captain. The rising tide pushed the Liberty Ship further onto the sand bank where she became stranded. When the tide ebbed the ship settled more firmly, noises like gunshots emitted from the vessel as some of her plates buckled. The crew aware of her perilous cargo deserted taking to the life boats

Stranded on a Spring tide even with most of her cargo removed it would be some two weeks before she might be re-floated. With the hatch covers still secure a state of emergency operation commenced on Monday 21st August using the ships own handling equipment to remove the munitions. However, twenty four hours later disaster struck when the strain on the hull proved too much, the front end of hold number three (3) cracked like an egg, flooding swept through holds one (1) and two (2) and by Wednesday 23rd August the 'Richard Montgomery' had broken her back

Holds numbers four (4) and five (5) above water were emptied, but further salvage abandoned when it became clear the ship was a complete loss along with the remainder of her explosive cargo. In the final throws of WWII priority was given to other matters and the 'Richard Montgomery' deserted as someone else's problem at a later time. The remaining cargo of 1.500 tons of decaying unstable explosives remains in her silted up holds to this day. Periodic surveys are conducted and an exclusion zone with yellow Buoys marks the wreck on the sand bank close to the Medway Approaches

Liberty ships the 'Ugly Duckling' workhorse of WWII represents the largest number of ships to a single design with 2,710 speedily built to replace ships lost to the German U boat menace between 1941-1945. 2,400 survived the war and four (4) examples have been preserved