**The Wreck of the SS Richard Montgomery**

The SS Richard Montgomery started her life as the seventh ship in a production line of eighty-two Liberty Ships built by the St John’s River Shipbuilding Company in Jacksonville, Florida, and was launched in July 1943. She was named after an Irish soldier, who, after getting elected to American Congress, fought in the war against the British in Canada, and was killed in the final assault on Quebec in 1775.

Only a year after her launch in August 1944 the SS Richard Montgomery, on what was to be her final voyage, was loaded with over seven thousand tons of bombs and munitions at Hog Island, Philadelphia and slipped quietly from the Delaware River and crossed the Atlantic to the Thames Estuary where she was to await a convoy bound for Cherbourg.

At Southend she came under the orders of the Thames Naval Control and the King’s Harbour Master ordered her to anchor in a berth just off the north edge of the Sheerness Middle Sand. Considering the fact that at low water there was only about thirty feet of water at this anchorage, and the Richard Montgomery drew just over thirty-one feet, it became clear that the King’s Harbour Master had made a grave error of judgement. So obvious was this that the Assistant Harbour Master refused to carry out the order unless it was put in writing. A noisy argument ensued which attracted their superior officer who sided with the King’s Harbour Master and told him to confirm the order. The assistant stormed out and was posted to another position two days later. Significantly, his evidence was not heard at the resulting board of enquiry which also failed to mention his difference of opinion.

Early morning on Sunday 20th August lookouts on the ships anchored near the Richard Montgomery saw her swinging towards the shoal as the tide flowed in and frantically sounded their sirens in warning. Th Chief Officer who was on watch did nothing to save his ship, not even bothering to wake his Captain who was peacefully asleep in his cabin. Soon the tide pushed the Liberty Ship right onto the top of the Sheerness Middle Sand where she became stranded. As the tide ebbed the ship settled down more firmly on the silty bed and buckled some of her plates, causing them to emit cracking noises that sounded like loud gunshots. The crew, unsurprisingly being be apprehensive of the cargo they were carrying, deserted the ship in a flurry of lifeboats and rafts. Since the Montgomery had stranded on a neap tide, she could not be refloated for about two weeks, and even then, only if most of her cargo was removed.

Immediately an emergency operation was put together and the next morning unloading started using the Montgomery’s own cargo handling equipment which was still intact. At this stage there was little damage to the ship and all the cargo hatches were still securely in place. Twenty-four hours later, however, disaster struck when the strain on the hull became too much and the hull cracked at the front end of No. 3 hold. Flooding quickly swept through No. 1 and No. 2 holds and early the next day the Richard Montgomery completely broke her back. (Continues on rear, please turn over)

Salvage continued until all of No. 4 and No. 5 holds, which were still above water, were emptied. The unloading was abandoned when it became clear the ship was now a total loss. With the war reaching its final crescendo there were plenty of other ships that needed attention and the SS Richard Montgomery was deserted in the hope that something would be done after the war was over. Nobody ever did and the remaining cargo, some one and a half thousand tons of decaying, unstable explosive is still there to this day within her hull.

The remains of the masts are all that can be seen today above the water with a ring of buoys marking the exclusion zone.

More than 2,700 Liberty Ships were produced very quickly to help replace the tremendous losses to shipping from the U Boat menace.

Work begins in June 2022 to remove the masts following a survey which indicated the risk of the masts collapsing into the rest of the vessel had become too great.