

No matter how often one was torpedoed at sea it seems it was something that was difficult to get used to

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TORPEDOED AGAIN!

During World War Two's hectic early stages of the war at sea, it was not uncommon for many Merchant Mariners to have one, two, or even three ships shot out from under them. Surviving a torpedoing at best was enough to test the soul of the toughest seamen for even under ideal conditions in a calm sea with help in the form of a convoy escort nearby the experience of losing one's ship in a thunderous explosion was nerve-wracking. Few who survived this awesome trauma could be

criticized if they sought the sanctuary of a shore-side billet or "the beach," yet most who survived were soon back at sea in a matter of days or weeks; their spirits bolstered no doubt by the comfort of an old adage that proclaimed "Lightning Seldom Strikes Twice." For untold scores of Merchant Mariners, the old adage was to prove woefully incorrect for all too soon yet another torpedo, bomb or mishap at sea would once again challenge the very mettle of their being in the form of feeling another ill-fated



Framework of the *Robert E. Lee* covered with anemones.

For veteran sailors and novice passengers, nothing was more terrifying than being torpedoed.



Bow of the *Robert E. Lee*.



Anchor assembly on the *Lee*.



Robert E. Lee American steam passenger ship.

ship breaking up under them. This is the story of one such plucky wartime mariner. Third Officer Bart Holmes who survived the sinking of his ship, the *Stanvac Palembang*, by *U-203* in July 1942 only to abandon ship again a few weeks later when the ship he was returning to the States on, the *Robert E. Lee*, fell victim to *U-166* some 50-mi southeast of the Mississippi Delta.

The torpedo came from astern. Several passengers and crewmen watched the fast moving gray missile as it paralleled the ship's course on the starboard side. Since it was running close to the surface and appeared to have a snout-like head, those who saw it argued among themselves as to whether it was a porpoise or shark. Suddenly, the object made a 90-deg turn and struck the ship just aft of the engine room. The steamer *Robert E. Lee* was struck at 1630CWT, 30 July 1942, while *en route* from Tampa Bay to New Orleans. When hit, the ship was about 50-mi southeast of the Mississippi Delta. Carrying 47-tons of general cargo, 270 passengers, and 137 crewmen, the vessel listed first to port then to starboard and sank within 15-min, plunging stern first.

The *Lee* was built in 1924 for the Old Dominion Line by the Newport News Ship Building and Dry Dock Company. At the time of her sinking she was owned by the Eastern Steamship Company and operated by Alcoa Steamship Inc., which acted as agents for the War Shipping Administration. The steamer measured 375.5-ft long with a beam of 54-ft and displaced 5184-tons. The vessel was powered by two steam turbines which gave her a maximum cruising speed of 18-knots. Built for coastal trade, the *Lee's* deckhouses were made of wood which were covered by

canvas and paint. Survivors of the sinking related that the deckhouses had so many coats of paint on them that they just fell in after the torpedo hit. Rooms on the promenade deck had windows instead of ports. Most all of the ship's windows and side ports were open at the time of the attack to cool off the interior of the fast moving steamer. As the doomed ship listed, water rushed into these openings thus hastening the sinking of the vessel. The final chapter of the *Lee* started on 20 July 1942, when she

departed Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, for New Orleans as a part of a 10-kt convoy under US Navy escort. Her passengers consisted mainly of US construction workers and their families being transported from South American ports, and numerous survivors of merchant ships previously sunk in the Caribbean area. Conditions on the ship were almost unbearable. Four people were assigned to small two-man cabins and most of the passengers slept on the open decks to escape the intense heat of the ship's interior. Water for washing and drinking was closely rationed.

"Conditions aboard the ship were such that after a couple of days a group of us approached the ship's chief mate to make a deal — we would

