

D-Day: Stories from the Walls



The Loss of the The Tanker USAT Y-17

During the Maritime Archaeology Trust's National Lottery Heritage Funded D-Day Stories from the Walls project, volunteers undertook online research into topics and themes linked to D-Day, Southampton, ships and people during the Second World War. Their findings were used to support project outreach and dissemination.

This Research Article was undertaken by one of our volunteers and represents many hours of hard and diligent work. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our amazing volunteers.

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The Loss of Tanker USAT Y-17

The River Hamble discharging into Southampton Water, downstream of Southampton, was one of the many inlets in the area used by the invasion forces to assemble their equipment and anchor some of the small craft, and as a platform for troops to depart for the invasion. Hamble village, or Hamble-Le-Rice as it is now known, served as one of the tanker loading ports for Petroleum, Oil and Lubrication (POL) supplying invasion forces, via a tanker shuttle service to ports on the Continent after D-Day, although the actual jetty used for loading the fuel is in Southampton Water adjacent to the river Hamble. In this role, Hamble was under the jurisdiction of 14th Port and the American tanker, USAT Y-17, was one of the many tankers undertaking this task. The original fuel loading jetty dates from 1924 and was extended in 1943/44 to facilitate loading of more ships simultaneously – it was also the source of the PLUTO pipeline laid via the Isle of Wight to Cherbourg in the summer of 1944. The Maritime Archaeology Trust has undertaken considerable research of the river and its environs, which can be found at <https://www.maritimearchaeologytrust.org/hambletype>

The ship designation indicates that it was a US Army Transport ship and the ship type “Y” was for carrying liquid. It was the fourth of nine identical ships (Y-13 to Y-22 except Y-16) delivered on 27 May 1943 to the US Army by Levingston Shipbuilding Co., Orange, Texas, and was 49.4m long, with 8.2m beam, 3.9m draught and 484grt. [Levingston] With one six-cylinder diesel engine developing 400shp driving a single screw, the ship was capable of 9kts. Designed to be manned with 17 crew, it additionally would have included six gunners to man the 2 single 20mm AA guns, and it had a capacity of 280,000 gallons (1,059,915 litres) [NavSource Online].

A coastal tanker, the Y-17 was lost on 9 April 1945 en route Hamble to Ostend. Available records differ as to what caused the explosion that caused it to catch fire and sink, with all 18 on board losing their lives. Some websites indicate it was a mine, and one indicates it was a torpedo from a Seehund German midget submarine and four websites indicate that it due to a German Seehund midget submarine without stating by what method.

The mine theorists include:

- eBook: 107 – *Merchant Seamen Benefits/ “Protector” Memorial*. Full title is HEARING before the SUBCOMMITTEE ON MERCHANT MARINE of the COMMITTEE ON MERCHANT MARINE AND FISHERIES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDREDTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION May 7, 1987. Serial No. 100-32. [eBook:107]
- Wrecksite EU – [Wrecksite EU]
- Imperial War Museum – [IWM]

The midget submarine torpedo theorist is:

- eBook: Ch. 7 – *Hitler’s Secret Commandos Operations of the K-Verband*. [eBook: Chapter 7]
This sinking is repeated in WWIIForums quoting the same source.

The midget submarine theorists attributing the loss to a Seehund midget submarine without specifying the method used include:

- NavSource Online – Sunk by a Seehund midget submarine.
- US Merchant Marine – Cites the type as a “Harborcraft”, not as a tanker, and has 19 lost, being 16 crew, one AG, and two Army. [USMM]
- Battle of the Scheldt – Sunk by a Seehund midget submarine. [Scheldt]

- Uboat.net – States Y-17 sunk in Scheldt for the loss of 3 Seehund craft but also states the date is unknown. No ship of this name is listed elsewhere on this website as either being damaged or lost, presumably as the date is unknown and/or the cause from a German act is not confirmed. [uboa.net]

It is possible that the mine was British and had broken away from its mooring. However, the German publication Rohwer, Jürgen; Gerhard Hümmelchen. "Seekrieg 1945, April". Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart, reference (5) in Wikipedia [Wiki] gives the following (machine translation verbatim!) which lends credence to the probability it was a German mine:

"In April, the "Seal Dogs" undertake 36 missions. On 9 April, the small US tanker Y 17 (484 GRT) from the convoy TAC.90 will be sunk from 9 "seal dogs" operating against the Scheldt traffic.

6.-8.4.1945

North Sea Dt. 2. S-Flottille (Kptlt. Wendler) carries out a mining company in the Smith's Knoll maritime area on 6/7.4. with S 174, S 176, S 177, S 209, S 210 and S 221. At the end of the battle with brit. MTB 494, 493, 497, 781 and 5001. In the process, S 176 sinks MTB 494 by ramming thrust and has to be abandoned. S 177 sinks after ramming by MTB 493, which is able to return to its base. MTB 5001 is sunk by artillery fire. Last use of the 2nd S-Flotilla.

In the following night from 7./8.4. the 4th and 6th S-Flotilla (KKpt. Fimmen or Kptlt. Matzen) with S 205, S 219, S 202, S 703 and S 705, S 223, S 704, S 212 and S 706 throw mines on the replenishment route between the Thames and Schelde. In battles with brit. MTB loses the 4th S-Flotilla S 202 and S 703 after collision. S 223 of the 6th S-Flotilla sinks after mine hits before Ostend. The 9th S-Flotille (KKpt. von Mirbach) has to stop an advance with S 206, S 168, S 130, S 175, S 207 and S 214 to the Scheldt for the transport of "spreng-lenses" for the KK units due to the bad weather conditions".

Smith's Knoll is a shallows some 50-odd km east of Cromer – perhaps Y-17 hugged the English coast from the Hamble for safety before crossing to Ostend, and if so, these mines if laid between there and Ostend/Antwerp some 24 hours previously would have posed a threat.

The location of the sinking is also unclear. The book *Hitler's Secret Commandos* quotes 9 April at 05.31, with a Seehund torpedoing tanker Y-17 in convoy TAC 90 eight cables off North Foreland Buoy NF5. Wrecksite EU quotes "off Ostend" and uboa.net quotes the "Scheldt". The Scheldt is a substantial river discharging via Antwerp to the North Sea, some 50km north of Ostend. As seen, two of the sources includes Y-17 being part of convoy TAC.90, for which details have not been found. All sources, except the US Merchant Marine who quote 19 lost, quote 18 lives lost. The above IWM reference states that the tanker was lost off the coast of France indicating that it was en route Hamble to Port-en-Bessin at Omaha beach but this is significantly different from any other source, and the date of sinking suggests that it would not be sailing to Omaha at that date.

The US Merchant Marine quotes one AG on board, taken to be an Armed Guard (according to their website terminology) and this would appear to be consistent with the Commemorative Board overleaf. Wrecksite notes (undated) that the wreck is broken in two sections, lying on its port side, between 22 and 29m deep without giving a more precise location.

If indeed a Seehund caused the sinking, it is notable how small it was, 17 tons displacement, a crew of two with two torpedoes, and a range of 300km [uboa; Seehund]. Details may be found via the referenced bibliography below.

During its short life, USAT Y-17 was entitled to the American Campaign Medal, the Europe-Africa-Middle East Medal and the World War II Victory Medal.

USAT Y-17 was commanded by Alexander P. Farrar from North Carolina and all on board were Americans, as below. The commemorative board mounted within the Priory Church of St Andrew the Apostle (Church of England), High Street, Hamble-le-Rice is inscribed:

*THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED BY THE PARENTS OF
ALEXANDER P. FARRAR IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE
OF THEIR SON AND OF THE CREW OF THE Y-17*



Source: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/21142>

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