

## History Page

# The USS Lafayette Burns in New York Harbor

Referring to the fact that the two 1000-foot passenger liners each could transport an infantry division at speeds over 30 knots, Winston Churchill credited Cunard's QUEEN MARY and QUEEN ELIZABETH with shortening World War II by a year. Viewed in this light, the meaning of the loss of a third such ship, USS LAFAYETTE (AP 53), better known as the French Line's NORMANDIE, in New York Harbor before she could transport a single soldier becomes clear.

In the 1920s, the European powers were vigorously competing to dominate the transatlantic passenger market. When Germany and Italy introduced modern high speed ships such as the BREMAN and the REX, the pre-World War I passenger fleets of Britain and France were rendered obsolete. It was time for a leap forward -- the superliner.

Britain was the first to begin construction on a 1,000-foot high speed behemoth. However, when the Depression struck, work on the QUEEN MARY halted for more than 2 years. Consequently, NORMANDIE, begun about a year after the British ship, was the first superliner to be completed, making her maiden voyage in 1935.

While QUEEN MARY has been criticized as being a larger version of the pre-war AQUATANIA, NORMANDIE was a revolution in design with streamlined decks free of ventilators and other clutter. Although never as popular as QUEEN MARY, NORMANDIE and her rival traded the North Atlantic speed record throughout the 1930s.

When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, both ships were in New York. Rather than risk submarine and air attacks, their owners decided to leave them in the neutral port. In March 1940, they were joined by the newly completed QUEEN ELIZABETH and the three giants lay all but deserted at the piers that now comprise the Passenger Ship Terminal.

Eventually, the British decided to put their ships to use and NORMANDIE was left alone. Her fate was unclear

as both the Free French and the Vichy government claimed her.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States seized the ship. She was given to the Navy, renamed LAFAYETTE, and work began to turn her into a troop ship.

NORMANDIE was renown for her elaborate art deco interiors. While a burner was attempting to remove one of the decorations in the Grand Salon, sparks from his torch ignited a pile of kapok life vests that had been left nearby. The fire quickly spread through the ship.

Vladimir Yorkevitch, the designer of the ship, was in New York and attempted to persuade the authorities to open the seacocks thereby allowing the ship to settle a few feet to the bottom in an upright position. His advice was ignored and fire engines and fire boats continued to pour tons of water onto the ship. Eventually, the fire was put out and all appeared well except for the ship's distinct list.

Appearances were deceiving. All of the water that had been poured on the fire had made the ship top heavy. With the tide out, the bow of the ship had come to rest against a rock shelf that held her in a more or less upright position. As the tide came in LAFAYETTE rose off the shelf and the list grew. One-by-one the lines holding her to the pier snapped and the giant rolled over on her port side.

LAFAYETTE was too valuable not to salvage. Accordingly, the superstructure was cut away, the hull sealed and pumped out, and the ship was righted. Much of this work was done by Navy divers working in near zero visibility, often in near freezing water. However, by the time the work was finished in the fall of 1943, it no longer made sense to rebuild or to use the hull as the foundation for an aircraft carrier. American industry had been fully harnessed and it was easier and less expensive to build new ships rather than convert the old liner. LAFAYETTE was towed to Brooklyn and then, in November 1946, to Port Newark where she was scrapped.