
SS BENJAMIN CONTEE



A Liberty Ship freighter

[Sorry no picture available of the SS Benjamin Contee]

VESSEL PARTICULARIZATION

Maritime Commission Emergency Hull No. 125; **Builder:** Delta Shipbuilding Co.; **Engine:** American Shipbuilding Co.; **Operator:** Mississippi Shipping Co.; **Type:** freighter; **Complement:** 42 crewmen, thirty Armed Guard; **Master:** Even Evenson.

TIMELINE

- ! February 2, 1942 - Keel Laid
- ! June 15, 1942 - Launched
- ! August 7, 1942 - Delivered to WSA then on to the above named operator.
- ! January 6, 1943 - Convoy **ON-187** *
- ! August 16, 1943 - Struck by aircraft torpedo
- ! January 24, 1944 - Arrived in New York from Gibraltar * see details of this below.
- ! February, 1944 - Departed New York, via Boston and Halifax to Southampton, England.
- ! March 14, 1944 - Convoy **SC-155** *
- ! June 8, 1944 - **Final Voyage** was towed and sunk as a Gooseberry I breakwater blockship.
- ! June 16, 1944 - Officially Abandoned.

[* See Convoy section below]

HISTORY, A LOANED VESSEL, DAMAGE, FINAL RESTING

The SS Benjamin Contee was one of those vessels that was American flagged, American crewed...but actually working for someone else.

Britain was always in dire need of ships, either to use to move supplies for her people, to maintain trade links, as well as move around war requirements. So Britain was always pushing to acquire new tonnage, and the United States was very accommodating.

In this category of ships that was more or less given to the British to use as they saw fit it just so happened *Benjamin Contee* was the first of the group to be converted to a troop carrying vessel that was in this allocation. One of the really weird things about this is the conversion took place long before the American Liberty ship conversion scheme had begun.

As near as anyone can figure out the conversion must have been carried out on board, perhaps at Suez, Port Said, or Alexandria....[but in truth...no one really knows]

So Britain used the *Benjamin Contee* for carrying Italian prisoners of War away from behind British lines at El Alamein.

This request for these ships in this category were made through the medium of what was called the American-British combined Shipping adjustment Board.

So in doing her job in transporting 1800 Italian POW's on August 16, 1943 she was just twenty-three minutes out of port, en route to Oran when she was hit by an aerial torpedo sixteen miles off Bone, Algeria [Lat. 37 deg. 07'N, Long. 07 deg. 50'E].



The "Green" arrow shows the approximate location where the SS *Benjamin Contee* was hit by the aircraft torpedo.

The torpedo struck holds No. 1 and No. 2 causing a hole fifty feet wide and Twenty-one foot deep hole on the port side...this of course causing immediate flooding. This of course caused the prisoners to fill with panic, they broke out of the holds and rushed the lifeboats, but didn't know how to launch them. As this was taking place the bow was sinking to the forty foot mark so the master counter-flooded No. 4 and No. 5 holds to bring the rudder and propeller into the water so the ship could be navigated. Once this was accomplished, and all the shouting and

screaming had subsided they were assured that there was no immediate danger.

The *Benjamin Contee* did not sink and she immediately returned to Bone under her own power of 4 knots. There were no crew casualties but 264 Italian prisoners were lost. She was temporarily repaired and sailed to Gibraltar for permanent repairs, then on to New York arriving there on Jan. 24, 1944. In February of 1944 she sailed from New York, via Boston and Halifax to Southampton, England.

The *Benjamin Contee* along with other Liberty ships such as the *James W. Marshal*, *James Iredell*, *George S. Wasson*, and *Matt W. Ransom*...and many, many more were all deemed none repairable due to pass damage....and were patched up enough to make one final voyage to Normandy to be used as a Gooseberry 1 breakwater blockship at the Mulberry Harbor A beachhead at Vierville, France.

Then on July 16, 1944 the SS *Benjamin Contee* was officially abandoned after she floundered and was destroyed in the storms of June 19-22, 1944.

CONVOY HISTORY

ON-187 = The **ON** convoys all sailed from Liverpool via the North Channel. Feeder convoys operated from Milford Haven with the Bristol Channel trade from Belfast, the Clyde, Oban and Loch Ewe, the latter two handling ships from the East Coast. The convoys were escorted from the UK, relieved by units from Iceland and, finally, from Newfoundland. There was therefore near continuous escort to Halifax NS, the usual terminal port.

These **ON** convoys were routed well to the north rather than using the most economic Great Circle route. This was due to the need to remain as close as possible to air cover from Iceland, and the re-fueling base there used by the escorts.

On **ON-187** this convoy left Liverpool on January 6, 1943...eventually this convoy totaled 75 ships....but there is a error in the "date" of arrival into New Yorkso this data will not be listed.

SC-155=This convoy was uneventful as were so many of the **SC** convoys were. On **SC-155** the convoy of 46 ships left Halifax on March 14, 1944 and arrived in Liverpool on March 29.

The **SC** convoys was a "slower convoy" series and usually consisted of slower, older vessels. This convoy series was actually the second eastbound trans-Atlantic convoy introduced in August 1940, and the ships that was scheduled for this convoy had to meet the minimum speed of seven and a half knots, which if you compare to the faster convoys there minimum was 9-kts.

It is this authors opinion that the *Benjamin Contee* was assigned to this convoy due to the fact she had suffered damage from her aerial torpedo and was not up to the standards of a 'high speed' convoy.

The **SC** convoys was seasonal in the route they took. During the winter season Halifax NS was used, then switch to Sydney, not due to ice, but due to navigation difficulties.

Another interesting fact that is noted about **SC** convoys is that merchant seamen hated being included in them...reason being they were slow convoy's and that slower, older and smaller ships are a good deal more susceptible to loss during a concerted attack.

FINAL VOYAGE

Actually the “Final Voyage” of Benjamin Contee was being towed to her resting place along with other Liberty ships as a Gooseberry. She was sunk...and this formed a breakwater effect...for the Normandy invasion.

Then the huge storm of June 1944 pretty much took care of any thoughts of the Benjamin Contee ever being seaworthy again.

It was at this time she was “officially abandoned”



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