

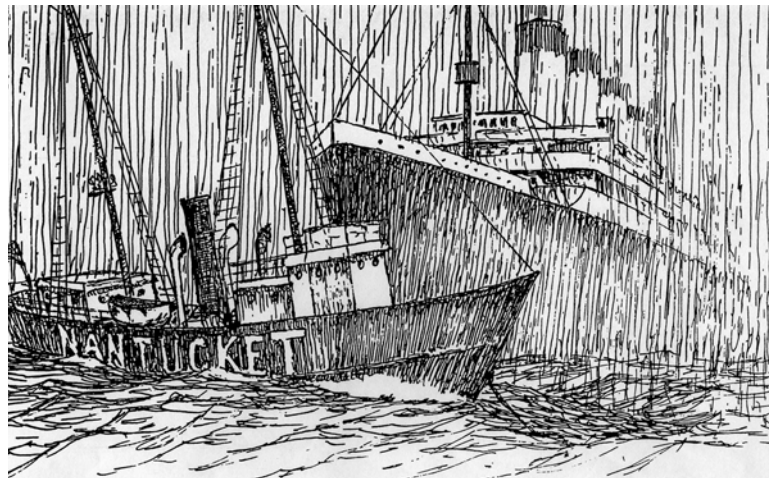
Out Of The Fog

by Tim Coleman

The headline on the front page of the May 16, 1934 issue of *The New York Times* read "Olympic Sinks Lightship in Fog; 7 Die, 4 Rescued off Nantucket." The day before, the White Star Liner *Olympic*, sister ship to the *Titanic*, 800-plus feet long, loomed out of a thick fog en route to New York and struck the 133-foot Nantucket lightship at anchor 40-plus miles southeast of the famed island, sinking her and taking four crew members down with her. Another three men were picked up out of the sea, but died later aboard the *Olympic*.

Lightship 117, built in Charlestown, SC and finished in 1930, was part of a six ship rebuilding program to replace older light vessels with more modern ones. According to the *Times* article, she took up her very dangerous station at 69-37 X 40-37 later that year, literally a target that all large ships inbound for Boston or New York aimed toward, drawn in the thick fog by a powerful siren. The Boston shipping would pass her on their port sides, New York ships on their starboard sides, sometimes coming all too close.

On January 6, 1934, the liner *Washington*, at the time the largest ever built in the U.S., side-swiped the 117, carrying away a boat davit, wireless rigging and mast grating, scraping against the 117 three times before moving past. Imagine the tension of that duty, alone on a foggy sea, especially at night



Artist rendition of the "Olympic" striking the Nantucket Lightship at roughly 10 a.m. in thick fog on May 15, 1934. Illustration courtesy of the late Paul Morris.

as ships many times your size moved past, all the while seeking your fog siren on a black night.

The *Olympic* hit the lightship about 10 a.m. Ten minutes later boats were lowered, picking up both the living and those either dead or almost so from the ordeal. By 11:30 no more survivors could be found, the boats searching that time in a still-thick fog that plagued the remainder of the voyage all the way east to the Fire Island Light vessel.

After being notified by wireless of the disaster, the Coast Guard dispatched the *Argo* from Woods Hole, MA to the scene as temporary replace-

ment for the stricken 117, which went to the bottom in about 200 feet of water, not to be seen by human eyes until 64 years later. As the years went by, commercial dragger captains found the wreck the hard way, dragging their nets on the bottom, snagging on to the wreck, losing their gear, and recording the obstruction in their log books.

As a side note to the lightship's lying on the bottom all those years, I've read two magazine accounts of Navy boats depth-charging a target on the bottom during WWII that they thought was a German U-boat. When oil and old debris floated to the surface, captains then assumed, by their approximate position, that they mistakenly had hit the wreck of the 117. But, diver accounts later proved this not to be the case. What they did hit, we think, was the Danish merchant ship *Blommersydk*, sunk by the U-53 back in 1916, that observation made by the mangled condition of that wreck versus that of the sunken lightship.

The next person to enter into the lightship's history, according to long-time party boat captain Frank Blount of Point Judith, RI, was legendary skipper Paul Forsberg of Montauk. Paul located a wreck with the help of Lorán A, nicknaming it the "Mitey Mouse" because like the cartoon character it saved what was a bad fishing trip, turning it into a productive one.

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