

November 29, 1996

Contact: John Robinson (831) 647-4237 or 4201

Oil Filled Tanker Found On  
Sea Floor Near Sanctuary

An oil tanker, sunk by a Japanese submarine off the southern Big Sur coast in 1941, has been found - apparently still filled with crude oil - resting on the sea floor in 900 feet of water adjacent to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

The 440-foot tanker, the Montebello, was located by a team of marine researchers who surveyed and filmed the wreck in a small two-person submarine earlier this month. The ghostly vessel is sitting upright, teeming with sealife, and littered with webs of snagged fishing lines and nets, some of which billow above the ship

According to researchers, two of the Montebello's 10 onboard storage tanks were ruptured at the time of the sinking. The remaining eight tanks appear undamaged and may hold thousands of barrels of heavy crude oil.

Although the ship has been submerged for 55 years, the tanker's overall condition appears quite good - considering the circumstances - with little sign of hull deterioration. No leakage from the remaining storage tanks was observed.

"We are very concerned," said Terry Jackson, manager of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. "This is a large amount of oil sitting in an aging tanker on the bottom of the sea."

Should it rupture, it could cause a major oil spill. But due to the extreme depth of water it was found in, it will be very difficult to attempt any salvage or removal of the oil."

The Montebello was built in 1921 in San Pedro and was owned by Union Oil Co., making West Coast and trans-Pacific crossings with cargoes of crude and refined oil products.

On Dec. 23, 1941, just 16 days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Montebello was loaded with 75,346 barrels (4.1 million gallons) of crude oil at Port San Luis near Pismo Beach. It set sail at 1:20 a.m. for Vancouver, British Columbia.

At about 5:45 a.m. the tanker was a few miles off Cambria when a lookout on the bridge spotted an Imperial Japanese Navy submarine surfacing about 100 yards away. The Montebello, whose top speed was 11 knots, tried to outrun the submarine but was unable to.

At 5:55 a.m. a torpedo slammed into the tanker's bow, hitting the one empty storage tank, according to crew members. The submarine continued to shell the tanker with a deck gun as the 38-member crew scrambled into lifeboats.

The Montebello sank a short time later, plunging bow first into the bottom and settling squarely on its keel nearly 1,000 feet below. All of the crew made it safely to shore, many being rescued by two Chevron Oil Co. tugboats, the Alma and Cayucos which steamed through heavy seas to aid the stricken tanker.

Although the general location of the sinking had been known - and fishermen had marked where they lost nets and rigging on a submerged object - it had never been precisely located or examined.

The expedition to the ship's final resting place was led by archeologist Jack Hunter, and organized by the Central Coast Maritime Museum Association. Funding was provided by the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the National Undersea Research Center, both of which are programs of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The expedition left from Santa Barbara Nov. 6 aboard a Delta Oceanographics research ship with carried the Delta, a 16-foot submarine which has previously been used to explore the shipwrecks of the Lusitania in the Atlantic Ocean and the Edmund Fitzgerald in Lake Superior, among others.

The team members included Roy Pettus of Geoarch Consultants, Stacey Kim of the Moss Landing Marine Laboratory, Robert Schwemmer and Patrick Smith of the Los Angeles Maritime Museum Research Society, John Ljubenkof of Marine Ecological Consultants, and Steven Maddex, Robert Pavlik and Fred Novy, all of the Central Coast Maritime Museum Association.

After arriving at the rough coordinates of the Montebello, the submarine was launched and quickly guided to the wreck by echo sounders aboard the mother ship.

As they approached, the dark bulk of the Montebello took shape in small sections of illumination, as the submarine's searchlights could only penetrate about 30 feet in the murky water.

The lights revealed a tangle of rigging and sealife covering nearly all surfaces of the corroding steel ship. Carpets of white anemones clung to gangways, while crabs scuttled about the deck and hung from webs of fishing line like spiders, and schools of fish swam by.

-It was like the blind men describing an elephant," said Hunter, who was on the initial dive. -All the fragile parts of the ship were crushed, such as the smokestacks which were made of thin metal. But we could see there were no holes in the deck and we inspected the hull very closely."

A total of four, two-hour dives were made, with the submarine crews being very careful to avoid becoming entangled in the rigging and lines draped about the ship.

3 of 4

Detailed reports of the investigation are going to the various federal, state and local agencies involved in oil spill response and ocean protection.

-Any attempt at salvage would be extremely costly," Jackson said. -We will have to evaluate the condition of the ship, the threat of a spill and what our options are."

The threat of a spill depends partially upon what type of petroleum product the tanker was laden with. Due to the cold temperature of the sea at 900 feet, heavy crude oil would become very dense and flow slowly, if at all, from any hull breach. A lighter crude, or refined product, however, would surface much more quickly and pose a greater threat.

The cold water also slows down the corrosion process, although the sea will eventually eat through the hull of the Montebello.

The Montebello may also be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as a significant historical resource associated with the West Coast and the United States entry into World War II.

Video tape of the Montebello taken from the Delta submarine is available, after 11 a.m. Friday at the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary office in Monterey.

Additional contacts will be provided.

4 of 4