

THE SS MONTEBELLO

Past Tragedy, Future Disaster

By Glen E. Julian

On December 23, 1941, on the central coast of California the Union Oil Tanker *SS Montebello* left Port San Luis with eight of her ten oil bays filled with crude. She was blacked out and heading to Vancouver, British Columbia, expecting rough seas on her way. Her trip though was to prove much shorter than planned because only a few hours after departure a Japanese submarine's torpedo struck her and she sank within sight of the little town of Cambria. The sinking of this one tanker may seem almost insignificant considering the vast number of sailors and ships lost during World War II. But it was not insignificant for the thirty-six men who survived it and the future impact the disaster may have on all Californians.

The Southwestern Shipbuilding Company built the *SS Montebello* in 1921 in San Pedro, California. She was a three-decked single screw steamer, 440 feet long and displaced 8,272 tons.¹ She had a cruising speed of 12 knots and it may be assumed that she was named after the once productive Montebello Hills Oil Fields near Los Angeles.

Captain Olof W. Eckstrom was on his first cruise as master of the *Montebello*. He was an experienced seaman who had served in the Swedish Navy during World War I and was licensed to master any size vessel internationally.²

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¹Department of Commerce Bureau of Navigation, Application for Official Number February 24, 1921, National Archives-Pacific Southwest Region, Laguna Niguel (hereinafter, records in the National Archives will be cited as RG and NA (Regions).

²Captain Eckstrom's testimony in *Union Oil Company of California v. War Damage Corporation* No. 24,101, vol. 9, RG 21, NA Pac. SW.

This is how Captain Eckstrom described the incident the next day, when interviewed by the *San Francisco Examiner*:

We left [Port San Luis]³ at 2:30 a.m.

We knew we were a target of enemy submarines and the ship was completely blacked out.

A heavy sea was running. I was on the bridge when we shoved off and I never left the bridge until we were hit.

Between 5:40 and 5:45 a.m. we were four miles off shore. This was ten minutes before the attack.

I saw a dark outline on the water close astern of us. It was the silhouette of the Jap submarine, a big fellow, possibly 300 feet long.

I ordered the quartermaster at the wheel, John McIsaac, of San Pedro, to zig zag. For ten minutes we tried desperately to cheat the sub. But it was no use. She was too close to us.

She let go a torpedo when we were broadside to her. It crashed into the *Montebello* amidships. There was a terrific explosion. The torpedo blast knocked out the radio and I could not wireless for aid.

I ordered the lifeboats lowered. I ordered the men to prepare to abandon ship. The sub began shelling us with her deck gun. There were from eight to ten flashes and that many shells whizzed near us.

One of the shells hit the foremast, snapping it. Another whistled by my head so close I think I could have reached out and touched it.

But there was no panic, no hysteria. The men obeyed orders quietly and efficiently.

We got all four lifeboats into the water. In the meantime the sub continued to shell us. Splinters struck some of the boats, but by some kind of a miracle, none of us was wounded.

I did not know whether the *Montebello* was going to sink, so I ordered the boats to lie off a short distance from the ship. But in about forty-five minutes, just as the dawn was breaking, she went down.

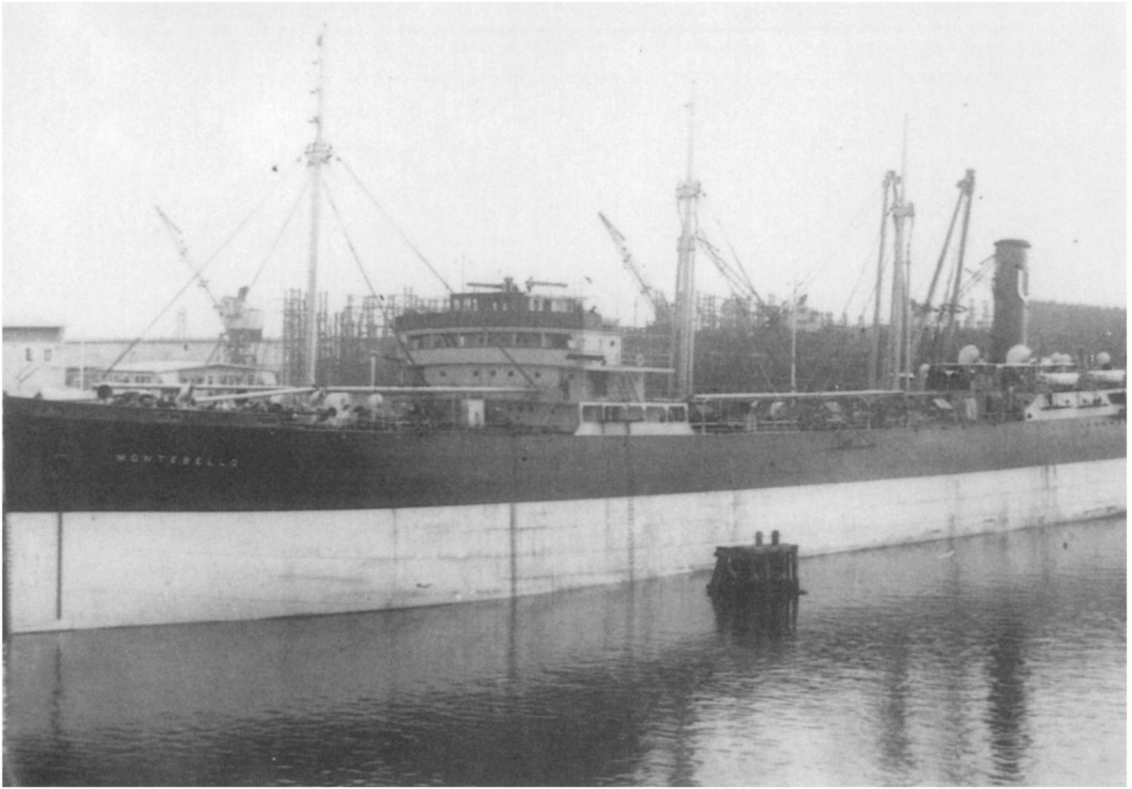
In the meantime the submarine had disappeared.⁴

The crew's troubles did not end with their escape from the sinking ship. The lifeboats had a tough time in the rough seas. Three of the lifeboats headed south, toward the town of Cayucos approximately 12 miles south of the attack. When it was learned that the *Montebello* had been attacked and that the crew were in lifeboats, two tugs were dispatched from Estero Bay.⁵ The cold, tired, wet crew had rowed in open lifeboats on rough seas for several hours before the rescue vessels could reach them. The tugs returned to town at about 11:00 a.m. with the survivors who were hurried to the Grill Cafe for

³Navy censorship prohibited use of port of departure. The *San Francisco Examiner*, December 24, 1941.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵The *SS Absaroka*, a lumber ship, was attacked off Santa Catalina Island the next day and severely damaged.



Union Oil Tanker *Montebello* moored at the dock shortly after launching.
Courtesy Robert Schwemmer Collection.

hot coffee, dry clothes and blankets, which were furnished by the army.⁶ (Tony Marsalek, a local resident twenty-years-old at the time, recalls the bar also supplied those who wanted it with whiskey to help them recover from their ordeal.)⁷ The fourth lifeboat, which contained the captain, could not head south toward Cayucos but rather had to head straight for the rocky shore because she was leaking from a hole made by a shell fragment. As reported at the time in *The Cambrian*:

Four men were seen straining at the oars. Another was bailing water. A sixth man, obviously the skipper of the torpedoed tanker *Montebello*, was sitting tensely at the stern of the lifeboat, using an oar for a tiller. On they came, slowly,

⁶*The Cambrian*, December 25, 1941.

⁷*SC Times Press-Recorder*, December 6, 1996.

laboriously. They were heading for the rocks, but they couldn't help it. With each mountainous swell it looked like the storm-tossed lifeboat would capsize . . . it looked like they were doomed to crack up on a jagged rock 50 yards from shore. . . . Another swell brought it within twenty feet of the outcropping. The skipper, for reasons unexplained, plunged into the sea and made it to the rock just as a big swell struck him. He was unable to grasp anything and the back-sweep of the swell carried him thirty yards out. Finally the lifeboat crashed into the shore rock . . . One or two of them made it after a drenching. Two others floundered in the sea but managed to hang onto the lines. A husky young man who turned out to be David Chase of Morro Bay, had stripped and plunged into the sea to take a line to the skipper who was held afloat by his lifebelt. The skipper was too exhausted to struggle and was just drifting in the swells. By using an oar Chase finally make contact and the two were towed in.

These six survivors were loaded into waiting automobiles and brought to the Cambria Pines Lodge (which still exists today) where they were given first aid and an opportunity to get warm. It may be interesting to note that it was two young Japanese-American soldiers who were driving the army ambulances that went to pick up the survivors.⁸ They were then taken to Camp Luis Obispo for further treatment.⁹

As is the case with any dramatic or traumatic event, the stories told by the survivors and eyewitnesses tend to vary, often considerably. To further complicate matters the news reported by the popular press very even more so. Some discrepancies may be attributable to post-Pearl Harbor war hysteria and unofficial war propaganda. In this instance the basic account given by all sources is the same, a Japanese submarine sank the *Montebello*. It is in the details that the accounts differ.

For example, did the Japanese submarine fire on the lifeboats as they headed for shore? In a report dated December 23, 1941, Mr. E. F. James, Deputy Collector, Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, reported in his interview with Captain Eckstrom: "In rowing away from the sinking vessel the life boats were shelled by the submarine with what was thought to be a 5 inch deck gun; no person was injured but one boat was hit and badly wrecked."¹⁰ The *San Francisco Chronicle* interviewed the captain the same day and quoted him as saying, "While the crewmen were trying to free the lifeboats the submarine fired eight or ten shells at us. We got four boats away. Thirty of the men went in the first three and I went with five others in the

⁸*The Cambrian*, December 25, 1941.

⁹*The Call Bulletin* (San Francisco), December 24, 1941.

¹⁰E.F. James, Deputy Collector, Port of San Luis, California December 23, 1941, RG 36, NA Pac SW.

fourth boat. I went over the side about 6 a.m. and at 6:30 I saw the ship go down. She stood up on her bow and slid under." The account continued: "The submarine fired at two of the boats with a small caliber gun after they were on the water."¹¹ The *San Francisco Examiner* reported, "Some members of the crew reported that the sub machine gunned the lifeboats, but others denied such an occurrence. Other crewmembers said the Japs fired at the lifeboats with their deck gun. Captain Eckstrom seemed to think that the shells were intended for the sinking tanker, and that only the flying shell splinters menaced the lifeboats." Later the captain is quoted as saying, "The sub did not machine gun my boat."¹² Yet Edgar Smith, who was in the same lifeboat as the captain, stated in an interview, "The submarine opened fire on the lifeboats with its deck gun and at least one machine gun."¹³ The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the captain's boat "was holed by a shell fragment."¹⁴ Even considering the natural variations in accounts given by witnesses, there is a big difference between a 5-inch deck gun, which is a cannon, and a small caliber machine gun. In addition, shooting at a lifeboat in open water is a violation of international law and would be an incredible breach of maritime ethics and tradition.

The submarine that sank the *Montebello* was *I. 21* under the command of a Captain Matsumura.¹⁵ It was a variation of the Kaidai-type long-range submarine. It had a maximum surface speed of 23.6 knots which gave it a significant advantage over the *Montebello's* 12-knot cruising speed. The submarine carried an armament of six 21-inch torpedo tubes, one 5.5-inch deck gun, two 25mm cannons and a folding winged sea launched surveillance aircraft.¹⁶ The submarine was 356 feet long, displaced 2,581 tons and carried a crew of 101. Properly provisioned, with a 14,000-mile range it was fully capable of reaching the California coast. The Japanese Navy had between ten and twenty of these submarines at the time the *Montebello* was sunk.¹⁷

¹¹*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 24, 1941.

¹²*San Francisco Examiner*, December 24, 1941.

¹³*San Diego Union*, December 23, 1996.

¹⁴*Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 1941.

¹⁵Captain Arthur R. Moore, *A Careless Word . . . Needless Sinking* (New York: The American Merchant Marine Museum, 1983), p. 197.

¹⁶It is possible that a surveillance aircraft launched from one of these submarines was responsible for the battle of Los Angeles where anti-aircraft fire lit up the sky over the Los Angeles basin. However, there is no direct and substantive evidence as yet in hand to prove this conjecture.

¹⁷Erminio Bagnasco, *Submarines of World War Two* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1973), pp. 190-191. The *I. 21* was later sunk on November 29, 1943, in the vicinity of the Howland and Baker Islands, over 3,000 miles from California, by aircraft from the escort carrier *USS Chenango*. Moore, *A Careless Word*, p. 197.

A Japanese report reads: "12/23 22:50 off Estero Bay, oil tanker/big, serious damage, 2 torpedoes, 7 rounds ammo."¹⁸ This would indicate that the submarine left the scene soon after the attack and did not stay around long enough to even see if the ship actually sank, let alone fire at the lifeboats heading for shore.

Inconsistencies with the crew's stories, the location of the wreck and the loss of the ship's charts and logs means that the story of the *Montebello* does not end with her lying at the bottom of the deep cold sea and the crew sipping hot coffee or whiskey in town. The charts, logs and other papers went down with the ship and thus her exact location when she sunk was not known. All of this information would later prove to be important in legal cases involving insurance coverage for the tanker.

Even before Pearl Harbor, underwriters in London were concerned about war losses, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to insure ships. After Pearl Harbor President Roosevelt signed the War Damage Act.¹⁹ This created a new agency, the War Damage Corporation, to bolster American confidence and to protect American business interests. The War Damage Act stated that the government would pay all losses from enemy attack sustained in the continental United States. The War Damage Corporation was created to handle the claims under this act.²⁰ In 1942 Union Oil Company made a million-dollar claim against the War Damage Corporation for loss of the *Montebello*. The claim was denied because the ship was not within the United States territorial 3-mile limit when it was sunk. The case went to United States District Court in San Francisco in September 1946. With the technology of the time it was difficult to locate accurately and positively identify the wreck of the *Montebello*. War Damage Corporation investigators did search and find a wreck which they believed to be the *Montebello*. It was just beyond the 3-mile limit. But because all of the ship's charts and logs had been lost, the court also relied on reports made just after the attack and testimony given in court by the captain and other members of the crew. At the end of the trial the charge to the jury was: "Union Oil must establish by a preponderance of evidence that the *Montebello* was lost within the continental United States or situated in the United States you must find and return a verdict for the defendant, War Dam-

¹⁸Defense Studies Document, Tokyo, Japan, with English translation, the file *Montebello*, at San Luis Obispo County Historical Museum.

¹⁹"War Damage Act": Act of March 27, 1942, section 5g, 56 Stat. 174 (1942).

²⁰*Admiralty Law in Action Selected Cases from US District Court For Northern District of California* (San Francisco: Published by U.S. District Court Historical Society. 1984).

age Corporation.” The jury found in favor of the War Damage Corporation.²¹ Of course, Union Oil appealed. The fair value of the ship and her cargo had been determined to be \$1,001,031.72. This appeal was also denied.²² It is interesting to note that on Monday, December 22, 1941, Union Oil Company did find and obtain insurance for seven of its vessels, including the *Montebello*. They insured the *Montebello* for 1.5 million dollars. The insurance was to take effect on December 23, 1941, at 1:00 p.m., but as the ship was sunk that morning it was excluded from coverage.²³

Interest in the fate of the *Montebello* resurfaced, at least in part, due to research done by Suzzane Dewberry from the National Archives in Laguna Niguel. She wrote an article, “Perils At Sea: The Sinking of the SS *Montebello*,” that was published in the National Archive’s journal *The Prologue* in the Fall of 1991.

The *Montebello* made the news again in 1996 when a research submarine was sent down to investigate the wreck. Jack Hunter, president of the Central Coast Maritime Museum Association, wanted to survey the ship for historical as well as environmental reasons. Hunter, a San Luis Obispo resident and archeologist for the California Department of Transportation, received a grant from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration to survey the sunken ship. According to Hunter the *Montebello* is an important part of the Central Coast’s maritime tradition and could have an important impact on the coast’s environment and ecology. When the ship went down she had over three million gallons of crude oil in her tanks. The torpedo hit her near the bow, in one of the only empty tanks. The likely reason the bow tank was not full was to make it easier for the ship to run through the rough seas that were expected on her way north. Thus, the remaining tanks appear not to have been damaged and may well still be full of oil.²⁴

Officially the exact location of the ship was not known but with a little investigation it was found that the local fishermen had known the *Montebello*’s final resting place for years. The tanker had turned into an artificial reef and prime fishing area. But it may also be an ecological disaster just waiting to happen.²⁵

²¹Civil Case #24101-R, vol. 9, RG 21, NA Pac-Sierra.

²²*Matson Navigation Company, and Union Oil Company of California v. The United States*. Cong. No. 7-54 United States Court of Claims. June 5, 1956.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Telephone interview with Jack Hunter, of Morro Bay, California, April 1, 1998.

²⁵*San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, November 30, 1996.



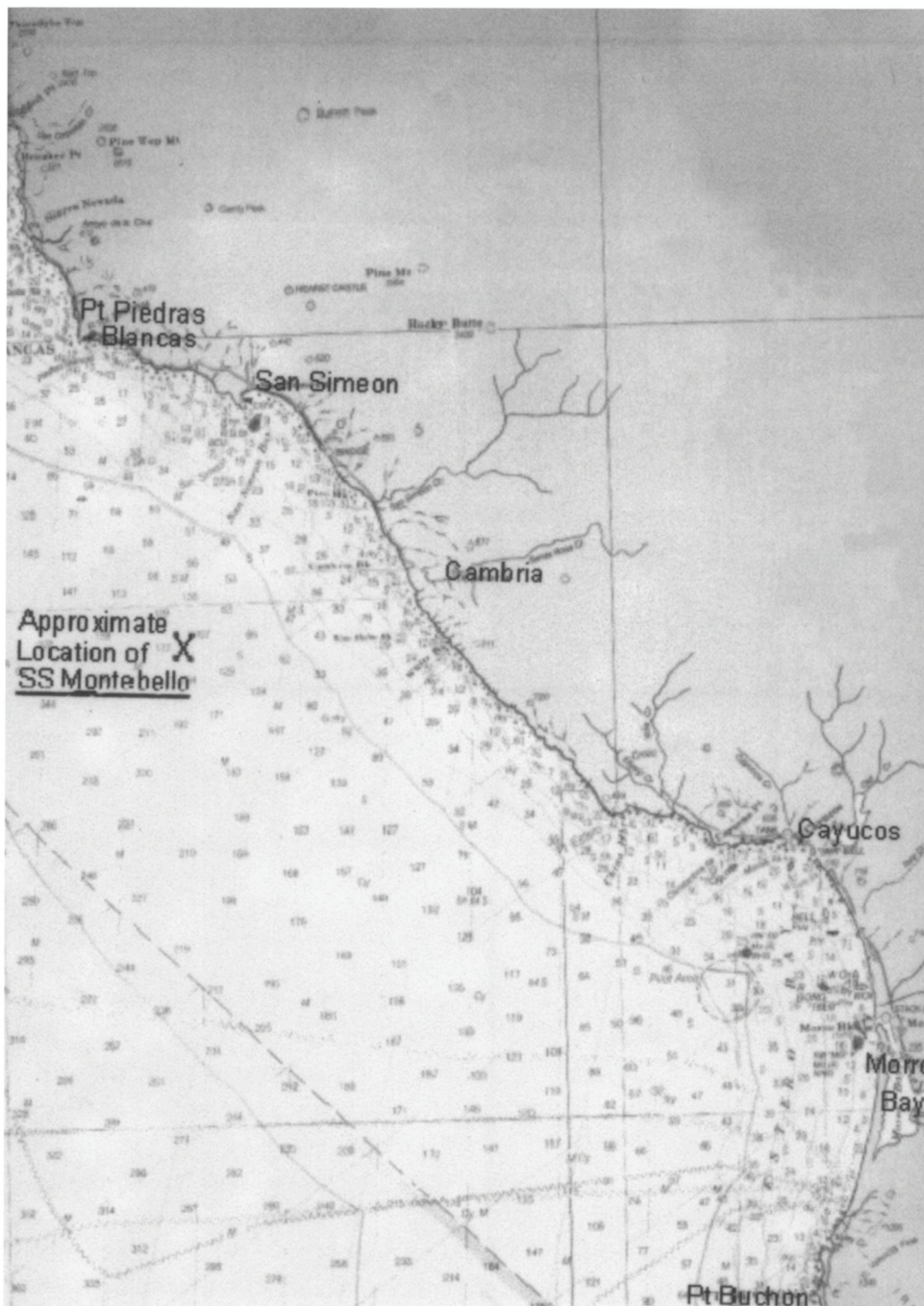
Montebello's single four-blade propeller visible nearly 1,000 feet underwater.

Photograph by Robert Schwemmer.

With the exact location of the ship determined, Hunter set out with a research team of nine that included archaeologists, historians, and biologists. Reaching the *Montebello* was not an easy task. The wreck lay in over 900 feet of water. The researchers used a Delta submarine for this project, which has a maximum working depth of 1,000-1,200 feet. What they found when they reached the bottom was a living artificial reef. Fishnets dangled from the ship's rails and ladders, sea anemones were blooming on the decks, crabs were crawling and fish were swimming everywhere. The ship's bow had broken off and lay nearby, half buried in the sand. The rest of the ship though looked intact and in surprisingly good condition considering it has been on the ocean floor for more than fifty years.²⁶

Hunter believed there are two likely scenarios concerning the *Montebello's* future. The ship may slowly decay gradually leaking out the oil, or a cata-

²⁶Video "SS Montebello" Shipwreck, Dives 2 and 4, November 7, 1996, and interview with Jack Hunter.



Portion of National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration Navigational Chart number 18700 with approximate location of SS Montebello and towns highlighted.

strophic occurrence, such as an earthquake, could break the ship apart spilling the oil all at once. The second scenario is particularly disturbing because the ship is located only a few miles from the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

No one now knows for sure how much oil remains in the ship. According to crewmen, there were vents on each of the tanks, which were open, so it is possible that some of the oil has gradually seeped out over the last fifty years. There is also some debate as to what the consistency of the oil will be after such a long period at that depth and temperature. Its viscosity could be anywhere from that of Jell-O to a thick tar-like substance.²⁷ In either case it would be a tragedy to have this kind of polluting substance washing up on the pristine beaches of California's central coast.

With this in mind, Hunter proposed another deep-sea expedition. This time he wanted to ascertain not only the structural integrity of the *Montebello* but also determine how much oil is still on board. There have been several proposals made for carrying out this aspect of the exploration. One would be to use ultra sound or acoustics to literally see inside the ship to determine how much of what is in the tanks is water and how much is oil. This is at least theoretically possible because this particular crude oil is much denser than water. Another possibility would be to actually puncture the hull with some kind of harpoon with a tube in order to take physical samples from the tanks. Neither of these options would be easy considering the depth at which the researchers would have to work. A third proposal that would only give advanced warning should the ship develop a slow leak would be to attach underwater sensors that could be remotely released at regular intervals so that water samples could be tested for carbon compounds.

Determining the amount of oil and the integrity of the ship would only be one half of the researcher's job; what to do with the oil would be the other. Ronald Tjeerdema, a chemistry professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, suggested puncturing a small hole in the ship and allowing the oil to leak slowly out. This would allow the ocean to naturally break down small amounts of oil over a long period rather than a large amount over a short period, the idea being that the dose determines the poison. He has admitted that this option may not be very popular with the general public and environmental groups.²⁸ If it turns out that the oil has achieved the con-

²⁷Interview with Jack Hunter.

²⁸*The Orange County Register*, December 9, 1996.



Robert Schwemmer prepares to make a reconnaissance dive to the *Montebello* aboard the submersible *Delta*. Photographed by Patrick Smith.

sistency of tar, then it would be almost impossible to pump it out from the wreck's depth. Most would agree that further research needs to be conducted, but accomplishing it will no doubt be difficult and costly.

Tragically the *Montebello* was not alone. Many ships were attacked along the California's coast during the early days of World War II, including the tankers *Larry Doheney*, *Storey*, *Idaho* and the *Emidio*. Ships were lost, men died, yet these events went underreported and are little remembered even though they occurred within sight of California's beaches, bays, and coastline. It is possible, as with the case of the *Montebello*, that someday we may be forced to remember.