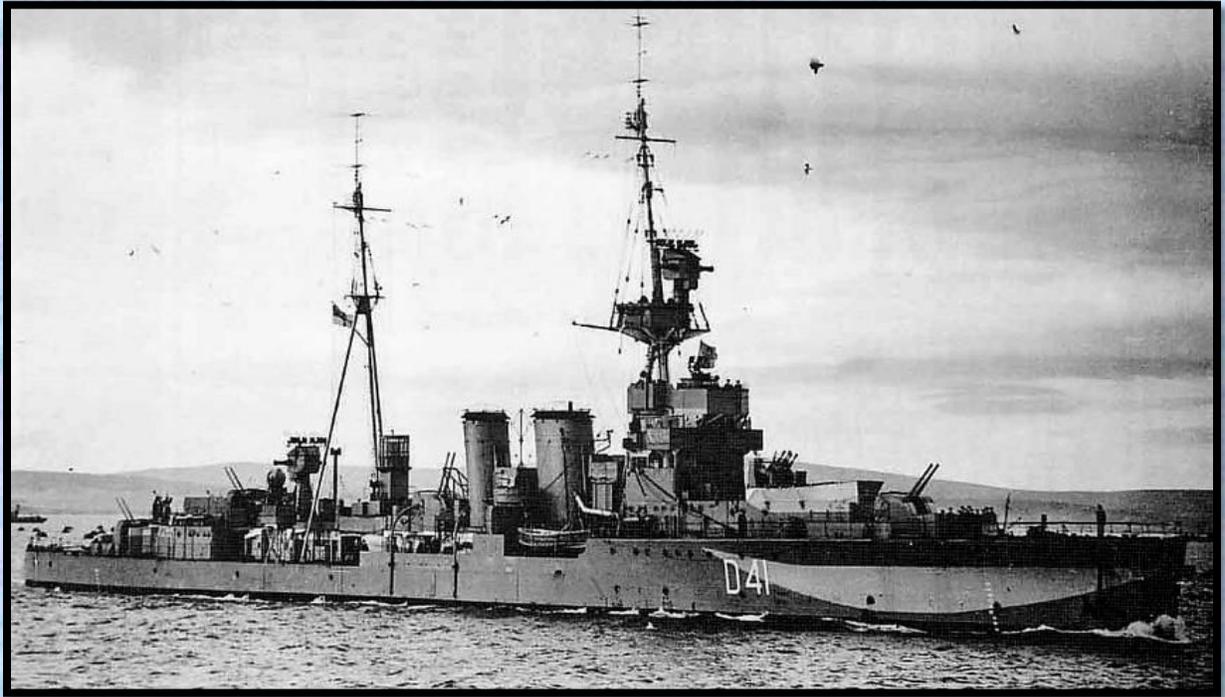


## THE CURACOA AND THE QUEEN'S DEADLY MEETING



**The HMS *Curacoa***, a Royal Navy C-class light cruiser launched less than a year before the end of WWI, saw limited combat in the Baltic. Thereafter she struck a naval mine and was forced to return home for repairs. She served with the British Atlantic Fleet until 1929 before being transferred to the Mediterranean Fleet where the *Curacoa* served until 1933. That same year she became a training ship.

As war clouds once again gathered in Europe, the HMS *Curacoa* underwent a conversion in 1939 into an anti-aircraft cruiser. In April of 1940, she was damaged by German aircraft during the Norwegian Campaign. Again returning home for repairs, she was eventually assigned escort duty around the British Isles for the

next two years. In late 1942, *Curacoa* pulled escort duty for the luxury liner RMS *Queen Mary*.

The RMS *Queen Mary* and her sister ship, RMS *Queen Elizabeth*, were both built for a planned two-ship weekly express service between Southampton, Cherbourg, and New York. The luxury liners were Britain's answer to the superliners being built by Germany, Italy, and France during the late 20s and early 30s. *Queen Mary* captured the coveted Blue Riband for the fastest Atlantic crossing on her maiden voyage in May of 1936, losing the title the next year to France's SS *Normandie*. *Queen Mary* recaptured the Blue Riband in 1938 and held the title until the brand-new SS *United States* earned the honor in 1952.



**HMS *Queen Mary*** was indeed a queen of the seas for her time. She featured an Art Deco interior, two indoor swimming pools,

separate nurseries for first, second, and third class passengers, dog kennels, tennis courts, beauty salons, libraries, a lecture hall and music studio, and telephone service to anywhere in the world. To counter Nazi anti-Semitism, the *Queen Mary* was the first luxury ocean liner to offer a separate Jewish prayer room.

By 1939 Europe was on the brink of another World War. The battleship HMS *Hood* escorted *Queen Mary* into Southampton in late August of 1939 where she reloaded and set sail for New York on September 1. By the time she arrived in New York, the Germans had invaded Poland and the world was once again in the midst of war. Three luxury liners, The *Queen Mary*, *Queen Elizabeth*, and the *Normandie* would eventually be sitting idle in New York Harbor until the powers-that-be decided what to do with three enormous, sleek, fast, dripping in extravagance, and pretty dang snooty ocean liners.



These Blue Riband competitors were fast, that was a given, and they were spacious, another given, so conversion to troop ships became a common sense given.

***Normandie* was destroyed by fire during her conversion under suspicious circumstances**, but *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth* soon became the fastest and largest troopships of WWII. Their

speed superseded the need for military escorts or the necessity to convoy, and by zig-zaging it was nearly impossible for German submarines to catch them, much less sink them.

In the process of *Queen Mary's* conversion, her superstructure, hull, and funnels were painted navy grey. Due to her speed and new grey coating, she became known as the "Grey Ghost." On the outside around her hull, a degaussing coil protected "Grey Ghost" from magnetic mines. Luxurious furniture was removed and replaced with triple-tiered bunks. Six miles of carpet, 220 cases of crystal, china, and silver services, celebrated paintings and tapestries were removed and put in storage. *Queen Mary's* lavish woodwork was covered with leather. With enough space to accommodate 15,000 soldiers, the elaborate kitchens were refitted, they never closed, and operated on a 24/7 schedule.

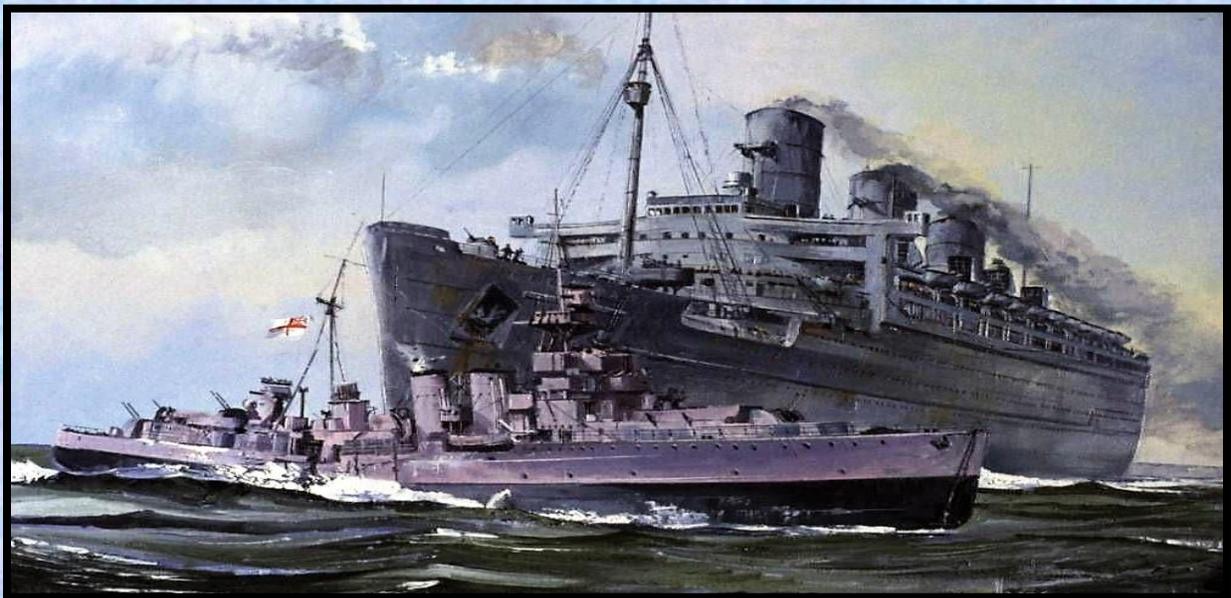
On October 2, 1942, RMS *Queen Mary* and the WWI era anti-aircraft cruiser HMS *Curacoa* rendezvoused north of Ireland. What transpired as *Curacoa* escorted the *Queen* was one of the deadliest and most dreadful sea disasters of the Second World War, an incident which the powers-that-be secretly suppressed for three years.

The weather was near perfect, no fog, good visibility, no reason to believe two ships would collide due to both captains feeling snug in their 'right of way' as described in *The Rule of the Road*. The 81,000 ton RMS *Queen Mary* continued an evasive zig-zag pattern at the incredible speed of 28.5 knots (32.8 mph) as she met up with the older and slower HMS *Curacoa*. The old 4,290

ton WWI light cruiser remained on a straight course at her top speed of 25 knots (29 mph) as she struggled to keep up with the speedy luxury liner.

The *Curacoa's* commander, Captain John Boutwood, thought the luxury liner would 'give way' and deviate from the required zip-zap pattern. Commodore Sir Cyril Illingworth of the *Queen Mary* fully expected the escort ship to 'give way' since he was under strict orders to zip-zap and stop for absolutely nothing since the *Queen* had around 15,000 innocent souls of the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division aboard.

At 13:32, the *Queen's* officer of the watch realized the cruiser was too close and ordered a turn to avoid the *Curacoa*. Upon hearing the change of course, Commodore Illingworth refuted the change of course and ordered the officer of the watch to: "Carry on with the zig-zap. These chaps are used to escorting; they will keep out of your way and won't interfere with you."



Luxury liners and warships are not blessed with power steering. It takes time and sea-miles to change course. At 14:04, *Queen Mary* began a starboard turn from a position slightly behind the *Curacoa* at a distance of approximately 400 yards. Captain John Boutwood watched in horror as the unstoppable gigantic luxury liner approached his light cruiser. No time remained to make a critical course change, and time had run out for the *Curacoa*.

Excerpts from an eyewitness, Alfred Johnson, aboard the *Queen Mary*: “I said to my mate, she’s right in front of us, and I’m sure we’re going to hit her.”

The *Queen* not only hit the *Curacoa* but sliced the light cruiser in two amidships at full speed, like a hot scalpel through a stick of butter. The disparity in tonnage was so great that thousands of soldiers and seamen aboard the *Queen* felt nothing as the huge liner cut the warship in half. No doubt Commodore Illingworth



aboard the *Queen Mary* was sick to his stomach as he watched the aft end of the cruiser sink almost immediately with the men inside trapped and doomed to a

watery grave. The other half of the *Curacoa* sank a few minutes later. Adding even more misery to the tragedy and Commodore Illingworth, **the *Queen Mary* sailed on with a damaged bow**, still

under strict orders to stop for nothing, even for sailors freezing to death in the ice-cold ocean after their vessel was sliced in half by the ship he commanded.

Other destroyer escorts were radioed to give assistance to the survivors, but the closest ships were 8.1 miles away. The lead escort, *Bramham*, and one other ship arrived on scene about two hours after the incident. Two officers, including Captain Boutwood, and 99 seamen were pulled from sea. Of the crew, 337 officers and men went down with the *Curacoa*. Not all the survivors lived; many died later from their injuries, they and the bodies recovered were buried in Arisaig or Chatham Cemetery in Invernesshire. Those not recovered were commemorated in two Memorials. *Curacoa's* wrecksite is designated a 'protected place' under the Protection of Military Remains Act of 1986.

All witnesses to the disaster were sworn to secrecy – a war still raged, and national security took precedence over everything, including a light cruiser cut in half by a luxury liner. The tragedy was made public after the war in Europe was over, three years after the disaster. Future battles were fought in courts of law to assign blame. In the final ruling, one-third of the blame was assigned to the *Queen Mary* with two-thirds assigned to the ill-fated *Curacoa*.

By the end of WWII, RMS *Queen Mary* had transported more than 800,000 soldiers. She made her last voyage on September 27, 1967 and was retired from service after 1,000 crossings of

the Atlantic. During her time as sea, the *Queen* carried over 2,112,000 passengers approximately 3,792,000 miles.

*Queen Mary* still holds the record for the most passengers ever transported on one vessel. From July 25-30, 1943, she carried 15,740 soldiers and 943 crewmembers (16,683 total). On this same trip, while sailing through a gale 700 miles from Scotland, a rogue wave estimated to have been 92 feet high, hit the ship broadside with such force the *Queen* rolled 52 degrees, a mere 3 degrees from capsizing. The near-catastrophe inspired Paul Gallico to write his best-selling book in 1969 and was later the inspiration for the 1972 movie by the same name: **The Poseidon Adventure**. Many of the movie scenes were filmed aboard the *Queen*.



