

In 1959, with the Seaway era commencing, Colonial Steamships Limited was wound up and the ownership of its vessels, including ROYALTON, was transferred to the newly-formed Scott Misenner Steamships Limited. Apart from the painting of the new company's name on ROYALTON's bows, there was no change in her livery. But 1959 was to hold much more in store for ROYALTON than just a change in ownership.

With the opening of the Seaway, there came into the Great Lakes a large number of salt-water tramp steamers, a few of which came in with cargo, but most were running light, seeking U.S. or Canadian grain cargoes to take overseas. Many of those ships were standard-built World War Two hulls, including "Victory" ships built in the U.S.A. and "Liberty" ships of various classes built in the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom. Many of them were flying flags of convenience and were manned by Greek or Far Eastern crews, and a great many of these ships were in absolutely deplorable condition, as could plainly be observed close-hand as they passed through the canals.

At 0615 on June 25, 1959, ROYALTON passed DeTour Reef Light at the northern end of Lake Huron, downbound from Duluth for Montreal with a cargo of 10,670 tons of grain and steaming at 11.4 m.p.h. At 1145, heavy fog set in and fog signals were commenced and a lookout stationed at the bow. Speed was reduced and at 1305, Thunder Bay Island light was passed abeam 9.6 miles distant. The ship's position was some 1.4 miles west of the westerly limit of the downbound course recommended by the Lake Carriers' Association. At 1320, a radar target was detected at a distance of 13 miles, 2 degrees on the starboard bow. ROYALTON made several course changes to port to widen the gap between her and the other vessel, and the speed was reduced to 3 m.p.h. ROYALTON intercepted radio information to the effect that an unidentified salt-water vessel was upbound on the downbound course and, assuming that the radar target was the unidentified ship, ROYALTON's master, Capt. Albinson, tried several times to contact the other ship by radio, but received no response.

Fog whistles continued to be sounded and, as the ships drew closer together, ROYALTON twice sounded a two-whistle passing signal for a starboard-to-starboard pass. On the last occasion, a one-whistle signal was received in return, indicating that something was majorly wrong. The danger signal then was blown and ROYALTON's engine was rung full astern and then double (emergency) full astern. At about 1357, the other vessel appeared out of the fog, 45 degrees on the starboard bow and swinging on a hard right rudder. ROYALTON was swinging right but was almost stopped in the water, and her bow hit the other vessel's port side just abaft the bridge.

The other ship proved to be the 430-foot, 6700-ton steamer MONROVIA which was owned by the Eastern Shipping Corporation, of Monrovia, Liberia, of which the agent was John Livanos & Son Ltd., London, England. This ship had been built by Lithgows Ltd. at Glasgow, Scotland, in 1943 as (a) EMPIRE FALSTAFF for the British Ministry of War Transport. She had been sold French in 1945, then becoming (b) COMMANDANT MANTELET, and in 1951 she again was sold and became (c) COMMANDANT LE BIBOUL. Her last owners acquired her in 1954, when she became (d) MONROVIA. When she entered the lakes on that fateful voyage, she was registered in Monrovia, had a Greek crew headed by Capt. Stefanos Svokos, of which only the master and the radio officer spoke any English at all (and even then not well), and she was not equipped with radar. They had only a few lake charts and publications, acquired when they entered the Seaway. She was bound from Antwerp, Belgium, to Chicago with a part cargo of 4,000 tons of sheet and bar steel, from whence she intended to proceed to Duluth for a cargo of grain.

MONROVIA dropped her Canadian pilot at the Huron Lightship at 0215 on June 25, 1959, and thereafter was totally operated by her mostly Greek-speaking crew, with no lookout posted even in dense fog, using charts with which they were totally unfamiliar, aided only by radio direction finder and fathometer. It is quite clear that while trying to give Thunder Bay Island light a wide berth, they did not understand the signals they heard from ROYALTON and at 1354 sounded a one-whistle passing signal for a port-to-port pass and turned hard right, despite the fact that ROYALTON was ahead and on their starboard side. They only saw ROYALTON when she was 100 feet away and at an angle of about 90 degrees. A collision was unavoidable under those circumstances.

What happened thereafter was very strange. ROYALTON, damaged at the bow and with flooding only in the forepeak, stood by but drifted out of sight of MONROVIA in the fog. On the sal-tie, the engineers were ordered to start pumping No. 2 hold, and opened the ballast suction line valves to No. 2 and No. 3 holds, but then were ordered on deck to abandon ship, without actually starting the pumps. This then allowed back-flooding as the ship took on water.