



Lightburne: The Bones of a Tanker in Rhode Island



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The waters in and around New York City, New Jersey, Long Island and New England are littered with the remains of untold numbers of ships, each with its own story waiting to be explored by divers who wish to connect with the past. Ships that have broken their backs on rocky reefs, or succumbed to the snarling waves of ferocious storms or lost their way in pea-soup fog or collided with other vessels all lie on the ocean floor, the secrets of their tragic endings locked away in their watery graves.

Often times the crumbling hulks of these once proud vessels lie unrecognizable on the sea floor, little more than piles of rubble and twisted metal encrusted with years of marine growth slowly being consumed by the inexorable forces of nature.

The skeletal remains of the Lightburne, however, present a different picture for the exploring diver.

The story of the Lightburne begins in 1919 in Bath, Maine, where she was built. The tanker measured 419 feet in length, with a 56-foot beam and a 31-foot draft. She weighed 6,429 gross tons at the time she was launched. A steel-hulled tanker belonging to Texaco, the Lightburne enjoyed a rather workmanlike career ferrying cargo of fuel and oil to fog and ran aground on the rocks just offshore from Block Island. Ironically, the ship came to rest within sight of the Southeast Lighthouse sitting atop a bluff on Block Island.

After the grounding, several ships in the area came to render aid but the poor visibility and heavy winter seas prevented them from getting close. It took several more hours for a Coast Guard lifeboat to reach the stricken vessel, evacuating the crew, the captain and even the ship's dog shortly after midnight.

The next day saw the Lightburne breaking up on the rocks. Some of the tanker's cargo of 72,000 barrels of kerosene and gasoline leaked into the surrounding water and ignited, but thankfully the winds and currents took the flames away from the vessel and the rest of its flammable cargo. A professional salvage company eventually removed the remaining fuel on board but the ship itself was doomed. Later, in order to reduce the hazard to other boats in the area, the Lightburne was dynamited and crushed into the sands of the ocean floor.

Interestingly, on September 25 1941 the steamer Essex; built in 1890, ran aground right on the remains of the Lightburne, which had grounded itself on the same site two years earlier. Captain Anderson chose to run the Essex aground rather than back off and sink in deeper water. The wreck of the Essex can now be found in 25 to 30 FSW just west of the Lightburne wreck.

Today, the wreck of the Lightburne is a favorite spot for local divers. Sitting in 30 FSW less than ¼ mile from the Southeast Lighthouse, the wreck is an ideal shallow second dive for divers returning from some of the deeper shipwrecks in the area. It is also an excellent site for divers new to wreck diving or for those who wish to brush up on their skills.

But the Lightburne is more than just an easy training dive. The site is a fascinating jumble of ship bones that spreads across almost 400 feet of ocean bottom. Although much of the ship was demolished and has disintegrated over time or lies buried beneath the sand, the remaining skeleton that is still visible provides a rich haven for marine life in water that often features excellent visibility. Much of the ship's metal plates and decking have long vanished, but divers can still find parts of the ship's machinery, engines and other interesting elements of the vessel.

For divers who seek local marine life, the Lightburne features a wide array of colorful creatures. For photographers, the ghostly remains of the sunken tanker provide dramatic possibilities for creating beautiful images. And for divers looking to touch history, the story of the Lightburne and the fateful night she ran aground off Block Island is yet another tale of tragedy, heroism and maritime adventure right here in our own backyard.

