

KANSAS CITY LAUNCHES LCT's FOR WAR

Darby Corporation of Kansas City, Kansas, produced two models of Landing Craft for Tank, the Mk5 and Mk6. The LCT 856 was a 119-foot-long Mk6, mounted with two 20mm guns. Mk6s, redesignated as Utility Landing Ships were used in Korea and Vietnam. Mk5s, 112 feet long, were mostly scrapped after World War II. Other LCTs were built in Leavenworth; Omaha; Quincy, Ill and Buffalo, NY.

"January 1944, The low, icy Missouri River made Allied commanders nervous. Plans for "Operation Overlord" had been under way about a month. But up in Kansas City, Kansas, a dozen new landing craft, including LCT 856, were stuck in the shipyard of the Darby Corporation. Local gauges indicated the river was too shallow to carry the boats to the Mississippi River and on to the Gulf of Mexico for military exercises.

Darby had been producing small boats and bomb casings since the outbreak of war, despite early fears within the War Department that Midwest farm boys wouldn't be up to the rigors of heavy industry. By 1944 nearly 40 percent of Darby's laborers were women, capable of pounding out an LCT in three days--each craft containing 32 watertight compartments. Building some 1,400 craft, they managed to win for the factory five coveted "E" flags, awarded by the Army and Navy for excellence in production.

As General Dwight D. Eisenhower prepared in England, Army Col. R.E.M. Des Isles in December 1943 ordered that dam gates be opened at Fort Peck, Montana. He hoped that would give landing craft built along the Missouri in Kansas City, Kansas, enough water to travel.

A lucky streak of warm weather followed, loosening ice upstream. The river at Kansas City rose 2 feet on January 18th 1944, according to news reports. "River Up For War," a front-page headline in the Kansas City Star declared.

Defense officials crowed about their decision to open the Fort Peck dam. But a popular account published later suggested they came close to taking more drastic steps. In their 1950 history book City of the Future, local newsmen Henry Haskell and Richard Fowler claimed that the Navy high command at one point in the crisis ordered that landing craft be put on wheels and trucked along U.S. Highway 40. That would have meant tearing down every overpass blocking their way. Just one day before the demolition was to start, the river rose like magic, Haskell and Fowler wrote. By a few hours U.S. highway bridges were saved.

An embellished version, perhaps. but this much is known: As the river gauge showed a crest past 6 feet, LCT 856 slid into the water from the Darby skids on January 21, 1944. In less than five months it would be hauling a Sherman tank, some jeeps and three dozen men to the shores of Nazi-occupied France."

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Editor's Note: LCT-856 was part of LCT Flotilla 26 commanded by LCDR William Leide and was assigned to the Eastern Section of Omaha Beach. LCT-809, attached to Flotilla 17, served as HQ for the Group Commander and had no beach assignment.



The LCT-809 was also a Mk-6 craft built by another Kansas City contractor, Kansas City Structural Steel Company. Shown here, the 809 is on its shakedown cruise on the same icy Missouri River in 1944.