

CONFIDENTIAL

215
TD/139/1328. R/JMK
10th June, 1942.

SHIPPING CASUALTIES SECTION - TRADE DIVISION

REPORT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH THE MASTER, CAPTAIN E. RICHARDSON

S.S. DERRYHEEN.

7,217 Gross Tons.

CONVOY: Independent.

Sunk by torpedoes from
U-Boat on 22nd April, 1942.

CAPTAIN RICHARDSON.

I sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, in command of the S.S. DERRYHEEN with a crew of 45, which included 4 Naval and 4 Military Gunners. We were carrying a cargo of 6,400 tons of Military stores, including a good consignment of beer and nitrate, and our Port of destination was Cape Town. The Confidential Books were in a weighted box in the chart room and they together with the wireless went down with the ship. There were no casualties on board. Degaussing was off.

2-3004
2. We sailed from Norfolk on the 19th April, sailing independently and proceeded without incident until 22nd April at 0300. During this time we received no instructions by wireless although I learnt later that a diversion had been signalled to us. The ship was zig zagging by day and during moonlight hours. I knew there were submarines off the coast but had not heard of any ships being torpedoed in the vicinity of this area and on the night of 21st/22nd April I undressed for the first time and went to bed. The weather was fine and clear but very dark, there were light variable airs and a smooth sea with a slight swell and we were making a speed of 14 knots on a course 150°. At 0300 T.S.T. when in position 31° 20' N 70° 55' W about 500 miles from the land we were struck by a torpedo in the after end, No. 5 hold, on the Port side. There was a consignment of Nitrate stored in this hold and it immediately caught fire. The after section of the No. 5 Hatches were blown off and on fire but there was no visible deck damage. The torpedo exploded directly underneath the Gunners' accommodation which was situated in the after two decks on the port side and caused all the bunks to collapse. There was only one exit from this accommodation, and although all the gunners managed to scramble out over piles of debris I do not consider that one means of escape is sufficient.

There /

DISTRIBUTION:-

C. in C. (America & West Indies.)

I. M. N. C.

D. T. D.

D. T. D. (D. B. M. S.)

D. A. S. W.

D. E. S. D.

There was no water thrown up by the explosion, nor was it very loud. Nobody appears to have seen either the torpedo track or heard the torpedo approach, but after the explosion there was a strong smell of cordite and burning nitrate.

3. Directly after the explosion I hurried on deck and assembled the crew amidships. I shouted down the Engine Room for the Engineers to come up on deck. On the boat deck I saw the crew preparing the boats for lowering in charge of the Chief Officer. The Chief Engineer reported that one of the junior engineers had shut off the engines, but this was not true as the propellor shaft was broken and the engine still raced, so the Chief Engineer went down and stopped them. Meanwhile Nos. 2, 4 and 3 boats had been lowered and manned and cast off, No. 1 boat remained fiercely I decided to abandon ship and climbed into the lifeboat and cast off - the whole crew being clear of the ship in about 10 - 12 minutes. No sooner had I left the ship's side when a second torpedo hit her amidships on the Port side in the Engine room, under the funnel, but I was not in a position to estimate the damage. There was a column of water thrown up by this torpedo, but again we did not see any flame. It was noisier than the first torpedo, but was not nearly as loud an explosion as I expected. The ship settled rapidly by the stern. The submarine must have still been in the vicinity because we could distinctly hear her engines close to the boat but could not see her.

4. I called the boats together and instructed them to lie to their sea anchors and to keep together till daylight in case the ship did not sink, in which case I intended to reboard and send out a wireless signal for a tug to tow us. However, this was a false hope and at 0350 we saw the ship sink. The Wireless Operator told me that he had sent out a distress signal before leaving the ship. We had our emergency wireless in the boat with us. The boats remained together until daybreak when I called the roll and found everybody present with no casualties. I then divided the survivors amongst the 4 boats putting 8 in each of the two small boats and the remainder equally divided in the other two. The rafts were floating close to my boat so I rowed over and took all the provisions from them and divided them between the larger boats. Some of the provisions were stowed under wooden planks on the rafts and this meant chopping the planks to get the food out.

5. I decided to keep the boats together and steer a course of N 30 W as I thought we would drift to the North but actually we drifted in a South Westerly direction. At 1200 we sighted a plane, so each boat burnt one smoke float. The plane came towards us, circled round, dropped 2 bombs in the sea, one of which exploded and the other did not, and finally landed on the water near the boats. I was in charge of one of the small boats and the 3rd Officer in charge of the other, as the plane could only take 8 men I detailed the men in the 3rd Officer's boat to go aboard the aircraft. A few hours later the plane returned but this time the sea was too rough for him to land. We tried to contact him with the wireless but could get no reply and after circling round several times he flew off.

6. On the 23rd the sky was dull, a heavy sea was running and a strong wind blowing, making it impossible flying weather. I had previously secured my boat astern of the Chief Officer's boat but the heavy sea parted the painter and my boat was swamped. We had to bale hard all the time in order to keep her afloat. The Chief Officer tried to signal to us by means of a whistle but we were too busy baling to take in his message and I did not see either his or the 2nd Officer's boat again. During the night I rode to the sea anchor and fortunately for us the dawn of 24th April brought fine clear weather. I decided to steer to the W.S.W. which was the course arranged with the other two boats. These boats were equipped with motors. I had given them instructions not to use their engines until they were near the shore as they might have to cruise along the coast in order to find a suitable landing place. Apparently the magnetoes in both boats were so saturated the engines could not be started.

7. We continued on our W.S.W. course all day of the 24th the weather being fine with a fair fresh wind blowing enabling us to sail well but during the 25th the wind dropped and we had to pull during the morning the Chief Engineer called my attention to a floating bottle, and as I turned round to look at it I saw two masts and a funnel of a ship on the horizon which appeared to be coming toward us. I altered course slightly to cut her off and hoisted our red sails but with so little wind I did not think they would be noticeable, however the ship saw us and altered course toward us. The Captain said that during the early morning they had passed several rafts about 20 miles from the position in which our ship was torpedoed, which appeared to have been recently chopped about. I identified them as ours. As a result of sighting the Rafts the Captain had ordered a special lookout to be kept for survivors. He came alongside and picked us up, the whole operation only taking 7 minutes. The ship, the S. P. 1080, wanted to hoist our boat on board but she had not got her derricks rigged so we abandoned the boat and continued on our course making for the Straits of Florida and landing us at Havana on the 29th April.

8. All the crew behaved very well. I have not seen or spoken to the members of the other two boats, both of which were picked up within 60 miles from the Coast by local Patrol Vessels. One boat was 10 days and the other 11 days adrift before being rescued.