CONFIDENTIAL

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8th October, 1942.

SHIPPING CASUALTIES SECTION - TRADE DIVISION

REPORT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH THE MASTER - G. T. HODGSON

S.S. EMPIRE CORPORAL 6,970 GROSS TONS

CONVOY T.A.W.12 SUNK BY TWO TORPEDOES FROM U-BOAT on AUGUST 14th, 1942.

CAPTAIN HODGSON

We were bound from Curacao to Key West with a cargo of 4532 tons gasoline, 4,745 tons white spirit, and were armed with 1 - 4", 1 - 12 pdr., 4 Marlins, 2 Twin Hotchkiss, 4 P.A.C. and kites. We had a crew of 55, including 5 Navy and 5 Army Gunners. Six of the crew are missing, one of whom was Army Gunner J. Watson. The Confidential Books were in weighted boxes and went down with the ship. Degaussing was on.

2. We left Curacao on the 9th August at 1600 with nine other ships, and formed into a convoy, with an escort of Dutch fast motor boats and with Dutch aircraft as air escort. At 0600 on the following day, we joined up with the main convoy, bringing the number of ships in this convoy to about eighteen, and escorted by two destroyers and 2 American Patrol craft. We took position No. 41 as ordered by the American Commodore in the DAIMUNDA who signalled the rendezvous for the next day, and gave out a secret position which he called "Y". We had not been provided with any secret position at the Conference in Curacao, and therefore knew nothing about it. He also signalled an alteration of course during the night, using this position "Y", so I asked H.M.S. CHURCHILL, who was with the main Trinidad section of the convoy, to tell the Commodore that the Curacao section was using local time, and that we had no secret positions. The Commodore accordingly cancelled his signal, and sent his signals by flags; he adjusted the Convoy time and gave the rendezvous latitude and longitude by flags, continuing to use flag signals.

3. The Convoy proceeded without incident until the evening of the 13th, when 22 ships with escorts came out from Cuba and joined our Convoy in a position some 60 miles south of Guantanamo, Cuba. The convoy now consisted of some 40 vessels escorted by an American destroyer, which took charge of our convoy, and H.M.S. CHURCHILL went over to form this new section up. It was his intention to join them up with us at dusk. These vessels were accordingly kept about three miles to starboard of the main body. At dusk we were gradually altering our course to close the new section of the convoy, which continually flashed their position. There were several planes circling round the convoy, dropping flares about one mile ahead. There was an electric storm during this period and we could easily see these ships at least three miles away.

4. At midnight, the Commodore's ship was torpedoed on the starboard side, the submarine approaching through the gap between the two sections of the convoy. A small Latvian ship was also torpedoed and sunk. As there

/was then....

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was that no official Commodore, a great deal of confusion took place. The only escorts for all the united convoy, consisting of some 40 ships, were the two small patrol craft with which we left Cuba, the two destroyers having left during the night. The convoy somehow kept together, and at daylight we found ourselves off Cape Maysi, on the eastern end of Cuba, in the position of the noon rendezvous, for which we were apparently six hours early. As the Commodore's ship could not be seen, it was assumed that he had been sunk, not knowing, owing to the darkness, actually which of the ships had been torpedoed. A port line vessel put up a signal, and I informed him that I assumed the Commodore had been sunk during the night, so I hoisted the Commodore's flag, but apparently no-one took any notice of me. As the convoy was heading for the shore and was very close to it I hoisted a signal to alter course, and all the tankers followed suit and we went away to port on our own. There being no one in charge of the convoy the M/V PORT ALMA and the M/V PORT FAIRY both hoisted flag signals "1 section follow me", and I was asked whether I would act as Commodore to the Curacao tanker section. The remaining five British ships were called "2", and I signalled them to follow me, and I guided my section clear. Norwegian vessel then hoisted the Commodore's flag, and started to steer across the other section's bow, so at 1600 I decided to keep well clear of the main convoy until some kind of order was restored.

5. One of the port liners hoisted a signal saying that he would take charge of the convoy, so I turned my section right round and came up astern on the port wing, retaking up my previous position, so that the ships were again in some kind of order. My section was formed in two columns of five ships each, my ship being the leader in the port wing column.

6. At 1800 on the 13th, a submarine was reported eight miles to the starboard side of the convoy and later it was reported as being about six miles to the port side of the convoy. The Commodore gave the order to zigzag. In the meantime a Brazilian ship crossed over to my beam along with a little American ship, and as soon as he got the scare about the enemy submarine he dropped back to about the 4th place and would not come up into position again. The Brazilian ship had no zigzag diagrams, and was causing much confusion. He was a mile ahead of his station by the time we had finished a zigzag pattern, so he turned round and came back and got in about the 4th position in the line. The zigzag manoeuvre was not successful, owing to the mixed Nationalities in the convoy who were obviously not used to war conditions, and in consequence the Commodore ordered the convoy to proceed on the normal straight course of 289. Course and speed were maintained through the night, but several American Catalina aircraft were circling overhead with the lights on, and dropping flares, which must have shown the position of the convoy to any enemy craft in the vicinity, apart from the flashing signals used during our spell of zigzagging by the American ships reporting that they could not carry out the zigzag.

7. On the morning of the 14th, at 0600, the Mate was taking a sight when the Cadet on the bridge saw a torpedo passing across our bow from port to starboard which missed us by about twenty feet and struck the STANDELLA, who was slightly out of station and ahead of us in the next column.

8. Almost immediately afterwards our vessel was struck by two torpedoes; one struck in the after cross bunker and the second struck in the engine room, on the port side aft. Our position was 23° 30' N., 76° 15' W., course 289°. The sea was calm, with light airs, and there were occasional rain showers. Four gunners were on watch at the time. A fourth torpedo just missed us, and hit another tanker. The explosion from the two torpedoes was not very heavy; there was a considerable amount of smoke but we saw no flash, although one was seen by other ships in the vicinity.

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9. The port boat was blown clean in two by the explosion and the starboard after boat could not be used as the after end of the vessel was under water. I gave orders to the Senior Wireless Operator to send out distress signals but the shock from the explosion had not only put the electric gear out of action but had also destroyed the emergency set. The after end of the vessel submerged almost instantaneously, and after giving instructions that no rocket signals were to be fired, I ordered the boats (which were already swung out) to be lowered. The engine room was flooded. The Mate got the port midship boat away first, and I attended to the starboard midship boat. There were no sailors in this boat, all the crew being stewards, firemen and gunners. The greaser and the fireman on watch in the stokehold were trapped and probably killed but the remainder of the crew who were aft, including the Engineers, managed to scramble forward to the midship boats with the exception of one army gunner who slipped and fell down below owing to a grating having been blasted away by the explosion. The boats were away in about four minutes, but the starboard boat was dragged across the top of the after deck by the suction, and became jammed under the jumper stay close to the mainmast as the ship sank. This left the 2nd Officer, 2nd Steward and myself on board. We all jumped overboard, and succeeded in swimming to the starboard boat where we were pulled on board. I proceeded to search for survivors amongst the wreckage. The Chief, 2nd and 5th Engineers had climbed up the main rigging as the vessel sank. The 2nd Engineer succeeded in swimming to the boat but the Chief and 5th Engineers clung to the mast, and finally went down with the ship. We threw an oar to these officers, but as everything was covered with fuel oil they were apparently unable to grasp it.

10. Fortunately, we managed to push the jumper stay clear of our boat, and only got it clear in time to save the boat. The ship then reared up and remained in a vertical position for about twenty minutes with the windlass just above water. After getting clear of the jumper stay we were sucked up towards the forecastle head and the after bulkhead of the forecastle actually overlapped the boat. Several of the men jumped overboard but we succeeded in getting them back into the boat with the exception of one A.B. The vessel settled in its upright position and allowed our boat to be pulled clear of the wreck, which finally sank in about thirty minutes after being hit.

11. We rowed round the vessel searching the oily patch for survivors, and found the 3rd and 4th Engineers floating on a grating, and took them into our boat. The Chief Officer in the port boat rescued the 2nd Officer, who was floating on a small raft.

12. It was broad daylight by this time; it had rained steadily since the time we were torpedoed. The convoy had disappeared, but we were picked up by one of the escorts, who told us that the submarine had surfaced about 300 yards away, but that he could not take any offensive action as his full speed was only 9 knots and he had only one machine gun, but they did drop one depth charge. We were in the boats about four hours before being picked up, as the escort was busy picking up the crew of another vessel about half a mile away. The escort which picked us up was the P.C.498, one of the motor patrol boats.

13. At 1300 on this day, the 11th August, we were transferred to the U.S. destroyer FLETCHER, who then proceeded to hunt submarines in the vicinity without success, after which we were taken to Guantanamo Bay, where we were landed at approximately 1900. There was no British Consul at this place, and we could not send any cables. I told the Naval authorities about our loss, and all about the survivors, and was told that my owners would be informed through Washington, but on arrival home I found that this was not done.

14. On arrival at this place, we were obliged to see the Doctor, then we were housed in a barrack building. Another Merchant Navy Captain and myself were given single beds, but the men slept in two-tier bunks, and officers and men were not segregated. The following morning we were awakened by a man in naval uniform, who, we subsequently discovered, was a mess room boy, and he told us he was assisting the American Naval authorities. We were ordered to line up, officers in front and men at the rear, and were marched across to the food house. This was run as a cafeteria, we were all given a tray with a knife and fork, and had to walk round collecting our food, during which time we were mixing with Asiatic and West Indian Seamen, all of whom were survivors from other vessels. The food was reasonably good, consisting mainly of baked beans. We were given meat twice a week, and during our stay of fourteen days we were regimented and had to keep our own quarters clean, make our own beds, stand to attention during the daily inspection of sleeping quarters, keep the lavatories and wash-houses clean, and if late for meals (breakfast was at 6.30), we had to go without. The whole atmosphere under which we lived was that of a prisoner of war camp, and not what one would expect for survivors from ships of a friendly nation.

15. We arrived with practically no clothes, and were issued by the American Naval authorities with a suit of underwear, a suit of dungarees, a pair of canvas shoes, a pair of socks, a towel and a toilet outfit. No money was, or could be, advanced and the only tobacco or cigarettes we received were given to us. The clothing issued was all alike and did not make any distinction between Officers and ratings, and the attitude at the picture shows was to treat officers the same as the men, which made it very difficult for us to keep discipline. When shown to the Officers' seats in the Camp Picture House we were generally ordered into the ratings part of the theatre.

16. The Lieutenant Commander came round on inspection about twice a week, and I told him that Europeans should be put together, and kept separated from the Negroes and Chinese. After about a week the officers were separated and put together in one flat, and all the European seamen in another, with the Negroes and Chinese also kept separated. The American and Dutch survivors received no better treatment, and the Dutch officers asked many times to see the Commander of the Base, without success, and we were not allowed to see him either.

17. On the 28th August we were sent to Key West, where it was difficult at first to obtain permission to land, but I finally saw the British Consul, who immediately made all necessary arrangements. Thirty-six of my men landed here, as some of the other survivors had gone on to New York. We received very good treatment, Officers being put in Officers' quarters, and the men in Crews' quarters. After telephoning to the Ministry of War Transport in New York I was able to draw some money from the ship's agents at Key West. The British Consul also arranged for us to receive clothes to the value of 45 dollars in the case of Officers, and 20 dollars in the case of the men. We could only obtain tropical outfit, there being no heavier clothes available. All personnel were given facilities at Key West to cable their relatives of their safety.

18. Later I was informed that there would be two buses which would take us all to Miami, a five hour run. We were due to leave at one o'clock, and I had to go round to all the taverns to get the men out in time to catch the buses. We were eventually only provided with one bus, which meant that the officers were forced to travel along with the crew, who by this time were drunk and very objectionable. On arrival at Miami I told the Consul in Miami very plainly that the officers would not travel in the same coach as the men, but conditions on the train were not good as although we had been promised that the Officers would be kept separated from the men, we were all put close together in the train. The men

/became.....

became very troublesome, two of them missed their passage and got lost in the middle of the States somewhere, but were eventually rounded up and sent on by the police. We were still wearing the dungarees given to us at the Guantanemo camp, and this made things very difficult for all the officers as they did not like to mix with the American citizens in the dining car in these clothes.

12. We arrived at New York 36 hours later, and were met by the British Consul. Our clothes being tropical and unsuitable for the New York climate, I enquired about heavier clothing and was informed that we had already been issued with all we were going to get from the Consul Authorities We therefore had to draw money against our wages from the ship's agents in order to buy necessary clothing. We were put into a very good hotel, however, and the crew also were provided with very good accommodation, but I believe they were asked to leave, as their conduct left much to be desired.

20. It seems to me that better arrangements, and more in keeping with our position and circumstances should be made to prevent a repetition of conditions such as exist at Cuba, and secondly, that something should be done to improve the clothing arrangements, where obviously unsuitable clothing for Northern climates is supplied at a place in the tropics where survivors may first be landed.

21. I also feel very strongly about the American organisation of the convoys. No one knew which convoy was which, or who the Commodore was. I suggested to the American authority that in the event of the Commodore's vessel being sunk, one of the Escort ships should choose another ship in the convoy to take charge, and inform the ships in convoy accordingly, as otherwise a position might arise where three or more different ships would be giving the orders. I am quite sure that if I had been able to proceed as I wished to, my vessel would not have been torpedoed. The convoy conferences were also very unsatisfactory, the whole procedure being extremely vague. The speed of a convoy was not determined by the speed of the lowest vessel, and consequently some vessels would be well ahead, whilst others had to strain their engines in order to keep up, and some of the slow vessels were left behind altogether, and no one appeared to take any notice. There was also no proper organisation with the ships' numbers, and the American vessels were very lax in the matter of lights, and many port holes were not blacked out, and there was continual flashing of torches about their decks during the night. I feel sure that the reason for so many vessels being lost in this area is the extremely bad organisation of the convoys.