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CONFIDENTIAL

TD/139/1351
7th July, 1942

SHIPPING CASUALTIES SECTION - TRADE DIVISION

REPORT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH THE MASTER, CAPTAIN R. BRIDSON

H.V. LA PAZ.

5,546 gross tons.

INDEPENDENT

SUNK BY TORPEDO FROM II-BOAT
ON 1st May, 1942.

CAPTAIN BRIDSON:

We were bound from New York to the Panama Canal with a general cargo of 4,400 tons. We were armed with a 4", 2 Twin Marlins, 1 Savage Lewis, 2 P.A.C. rockets and kites. Our crew numbered 57, including 3 Naval and 2 Army gunners; there were no casualties. The confidential books, including the wireless, were all thrown overboard in a weighted box. Degaussing was on.

2. We left New York on the 22nd April, routed independently to the Panama Canal. We sailed from New York harbour routed to Delaware, then on to Chesapeake Bay. I was instructed that I must leave Port Henry only at daybreak. I anchored during the 24th April intending to sail in the early hours in order to reach Cape Henry at daybreak. The American Authorities informed me that all south bound traffic was stopped and I must remain at anchor until permission was given for me to leave. During the 27th April the American Naval Authorities asked me what time I would like to sail as south bound traffic had been released and I told them that I would leave in time to be off Cape Henry at daybreak on the 28th April. Later during the day of the 27th, I received orders from the Naval Authorities to sail at 2000 that day (27th). On leaving up the anchor it was found that my anchor had an over haul knot in it and it took a considerable time to clear this cable. It was 0200 on 28th April when I finally arrived off Cape Henry and then I proceeded to keep close inshore to Cape Canaveral as routed. My orders from Cape Canaveral were to pass close by Redial Shoal Buoy and then on to Petrel Shoal Buoy; however, we were torpedoed before we reached the latter point.

3. We proceeded without incident until 1st May when a signal was received saying that submarines were operating in the Florida Straits some 150 miles away.

4. It was a fine moonlight night, visibility was good, sea smooth, with light airs. Our course was South true and our speed 8.7 knots; we reached position 28.15 N. 80.20 W. at 0540 on 1st May when a torpedo struck the ship in the middle of No. 5 hatch on the port side. I was resting on the settee in my cabin, and suddenly found myself lying in the doorway in a semi-conscious state, but realizing that something had occurred I jumped automatically towards the door.

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5. A huge column of water was thrown up, but there was no flame or smell, and in the moonlight I saw what appeared to be foam on the port side of the poop. No. 5 hatch covers were blown off, the hold flooded, and the top of the tunnel was torn away, so the engine room and No. 4 holds flooded immediately. The Second Engineer was in the engine room cleaning and oiling the engines having just emerged from the tunnel. We had only one door for the two tunnels and this was only half shut when the torpedo struck the vessel. Had the tunnel door been closed, I think the ship would have been saved.

6. I ordered the 3 boats to be lowered with 42 of the crew. (There were 4 boats originally but one had been damaged in a gale). The remaining 15 members of the crew I kept on board in case a vessel came out to tow us, and also to man the gun. A W/T distress message was sent out, rockets and two snowflakes were fired. I sighted two merchant ships in the vicinity; one of these - the m.v. WORDEN of Nicaragua - came within hailing distance and asked if I wanted any assistance. I replied that I would like my ship to be towed to the beach, so the m.v. WORDEN took us in tow. She passed us a 5" wire and started to tow, but this wire carried away. She then passed a hawser, but this also carried away. I then gave her a new 3" rope and with this she towed us to the beach in 6 1/2 fathoms. The ship had taken a port list whilst towing. All confidential books were put into 2 perforated iron boxes and thrown overboard along with two Marlin guns. I saturated the two sacks of confidential mail marked 617/13 Colon 627/11 Calls with petrol and destroyed them by fire.

7. At 1325 the ship was beached in latitude 28 19 N. longitude 80 33 1/2 W. and shortly afterwards the crew returned on board. At 1400 the m.v. WORDEN left us and proceeded on her voyage, and about 1700 an American patrol yacht, the Y.P. 240, which had come out in answer to my wireless message, left for the shore, which was about 1 1/2 miles away, taking 20 members of the crew, and a message to the C. in C. Bermuda.

8. The following day, 2nd May, as the ship was settling down and No. 3 hold was filling, soundings showing 5 1/2" of water, the breach block of the 4" gun was thrown overboard and a further 35 members of the crew were landed with the remainder of the mail and a request for assistance, leaving the Extra Third Officer, 2 A.Bs and myself on board.

9. The crew were landed at Fort Pierce, the Second Officer leaving Fort Pierce on 3rd May for New York with the mails, accompanied by Cadet Garrett.

10. At 1500 on 3rd May a civilian Salvage Officer named Mumford, from Key West Naval Station, boarded the ship in order to ascertain what could be salvaged, returning ashore to report. At 1545 on the 4th May, having heard nothing further, I went ashore in a yacht with the three remaining men and asked the American Naval authorities to take charge of my ship. I met the American Naval Intelligence at Fort Pierce and they took full particulars from me and referred me to Commander Tuck, R.N.R. Liaison Officer, whom I contacted by phone. The latter told me that he had stopped my message to the C. in C. Bermuda, and

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that he had informed all necessary authorities. He told me that I was to call on a Mr. Findlay of the Salvage Department on reaching New York.

11. I got through to this Mr. Findlay, he referred me to a Mr. Rees, who informed me that there was no hope of salvage, and that I was to go to New York. I therefore travelled to New York, called on Mr. Rees and gave him a cargo plan and a plan of the ship.

12. The Extra Third Officer T. Beamish and the 2 A. B. Dalglish and Clapham who remained behind with me on board are to be recommended for their very valuable assistance and for carrying out their many and difficult duties efficiently until the end.