

POTRERO DEL LLANO

In reply refer to
Initials and No.

NAVY DEPARTMENT
Office of the Chief of Naval Operations
Washington

Op-16-B-5

June 16, 1942

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~
DECLASSIFIED

MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

Subject: Summary of Statements by Survivors of SS POTRERO DEL LLANO, Mexican Tanker, 3992 G.T., owned by Petroleos Mexicanos, a Mexican Government Subsidiary.

1. The "POTRERO DEL LLANO" was torpedoed without warning at 2355 EWT on May 13, 1942, at approximately 25°33' N - 79°56' W, while enroute from Tampico, Mexico to New York with 35,000 barrels of Diesel oil. The vessel sank at 0120 EWT, approximately 25°15' N - 80°00' W, May 14.

2. The tanker was on a course of 29 degrees true, speed 9½ knots in 243 fathoms, not zigzagging nor observing any blackout precautions whatsoever. To the contrary, the vessel was brilliantly lighted, with four spotlights illuminating the Mexican flag which had been painted on a canvas frame and mounted amidships. It was believed that because Mexico was a neutral nation, prominent display of the vessel's nationality would obviate any danger of attack. Radio silence had been maintained throughout the trip, only the receiver having been in operation, to the best of survivors' knowledge. Only the watch officer and helmsman on bridge were acting as lookouts. Weather was fair, sea calm, no moon out, visibility fair, no ships in sight.

3. At 2355 EWT, a violent impact was felt from starboard to port, accompanied by a loud explosion amidships which completely demolished the bridge and gutted the surrounding area with fire. Apparently torpedo struck directly under bridge amidships on starboard. The Chief Engineer ordered the engines stopped and assumed command of the crew members that had congregated on the after deck. No distress signals sent, confidential codes consumed by the fire.

4. Separated into two groups by the flames amidships, the survivors of the explosion congregated in the bow and on the after deck of the vessel. The group in the foredeck quickly tied some planks together, fashioning rafts, and threw some overboard, jumping in afterwards themselves. Those on after deck first released the starboard raft, which had not been secured to the side of the ship and consequently floated away. Fearing an explosion, Chief Engineer ordered all survivors on after deck to jump overboard and swim away from vessel's side as soon as possible. Remaining aboard, the Chief Engineer released the port raft but could not release the line that held same to vessel's side. He thereupon jumped overboard and swam away from the scene as fast as possible. At 0300 EWT 22 survivors were picked up by two Coast Guard patrol boats and brought into Miami, May 14, 1942, one later expired at the hospital. The remaining 13 members of the total crew of 35 are believed to have perished.

5. No description of attacking submarine could be obtained inasmuch as all deck hands on watch perished. Some of the survivors claim that the helmsman on watch had noticed a periscope and conning tower of a submarine following the vessel on the starboard quarter for over an hour previous to the attack. After the attack several of the survivors saw what they thought to be the dim outline of a conning tower and periscope circling the ship for a few minutes, to completely disappear in a southerly direction.

A. J. POWERS
Ensign, U.S.N.R.

CC: ONI B-8, 16-D-4, F-9 (4 copies), F-10, Cominch, Cominch F-22, F-252, F-353, F-37 (C&R), Op-23-L, Op-28, Op-30, Op-39, BuShips, BuOrd (Ensign P. L. Vis-sat), BuOrd, Atlantic Fleet Anti-Submarine Unit.

248

