

I, Donald A. Mosher, Second Officer of the s.s. WESTERN HEAD, am twenty-four years of age, a Canadian citizen, and reside at Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Canada. I have been going to sea for about seven and a half years and have been on the s.s. WESTERN HEAD since August, 1941. I hold a mate's home trade ticket for steamships issued by the Canadian government.

The s.s. WESTERN HEAD was built in 1919 by the American Ship Building Company at Cleveland, Ohio. Her gross tonnage was 2599, net 1650 and on the voyage under discussion she was loaded with 3710 tons of raw sugar in bags, consigned to the Sugar Administrator of Wartime Prices and Trade Board of the Canadian Government Montreal. The s.s. WESTERN HEAD is classed ALE by the American Bureau of Shipping and is registered at Nassau, Bahamas. She is owned by the Maritime Navigation Company, Limited, of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, a Canadian corporation.

About the middle of April, 1942, we loaded a full cargo of supplies for one of the army bases in Central America and arrived at the port of discharge early in May, 1942. After discharging our cargo at the base, we went in ballast to Port Antonio, Jamaica, arriving at that port on May 19, 1942. At Port Antonio we loaded a part cargo of sugar and then left for Kingston, Jamaica, arriving at 9 a.m. on May 24, 1942. We finished loading at that port on May 26th, bunkered on May 27 and sailed for Montreal on that day, dropping the pilot at 5 p.m.

The Captain had routing directions, the exact details of which I do not know, but we pursued a course through Jamaica Channel for the Windward Passage, steering a course northeast 36 degrees true, which course was the one taken at noon on May 28th

After leaving Jamaica, the weather was fine, northeast wind, smooth sea, visibility good, and the voyage proceeded uneventfully until 7.25 p.m. on the evening of May 28, 1942, when the WESTERN HEAD, then about 20 miles southeast of Cape Maisi, Cuba, was struck by a torpedo on the port side amidships, underwater, and about fifteen seconds later a second torpedo struck abreast the No. 3 hatch on the port side. The vessel immediately listed to port and actually sank within a minute.

The First Mate was on watch. I was in my room and when I heard the first explosion, I immediately ran on deck, climbed over the rail on the starboard side, amidships, and walked along the housing to the wireless room where the wireless operator, who was looking through the port, asked me to put up an emergency aerial. All this took a matter of seconds only. I advised the wireless operator to leave the ship as she was sinking rapidly. I dove from the housing into the water, a distance of about 15 to 20 feet. I then swam possibly 15 feet and in that space of time, the ship disappeared under the waves. The water was covered with oil and there were quite a few hatch covers floating around. Something less than a half-mile away, I saw a life raft which, undoubtedly, had been on the WESTERN HEAD. I reached the life raft in a few minutes and found Claude Henwood, one of the crew on board. I climbed on the raft and after a few minutes three others came on board, Lorne Henwood, Thomas Canning and Guaroa Carrasco. About five minutes later, Alvin Newcombe came on board. By the time the last of the six men was on board the raft, it was about 7.40 p.m. There were no signs of submarines, nor was any other vessel visible. We could see the loom of land of the Cuban coast. The sun had set and there was moonlight, very clear and bright.

The life raft drifted through the night with the current, how far I do not know, but we were out of sight of land the following morning May 29th.

At about 9 a.m. on May 29, an American patrol plane flew overhead and sighted us. The plane signalled to us in morse but we could not answer as we had no means of communication. The plane went towards land and returned about an hour later and circled around us in about a 30 mile radius, apparently looking for submarines. The plane, no doubt, had communicated with the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, for about 3 p.m. that afternoon, an American net layer coming from Guantanamo picked us up and took us to the Guantanamo Bay naval base. We arrived there about 7 p.m. on May 29th. Four of the men were placed in barracks and two in the hospital. The authorities took me to the office and I gave a statement as to what had happened. One of the men in the hospital had

- ⑥ ALVIN NEWCOMBE
 ① MOSHER
 ② HENWOOD, LORNE
 ③ HENWOOD, CLAUDE
 ④ THOMAS CANNING
 ⑤ GUAROA CARRASCO

See "RUNNING
 THE GANNIST"
 Survivor
 interviews

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A fractured windpipe, I understand, and the other had a lacerated foot. Our personal effects and all the ship's papers went down with the WESTERN HEAD so far as I know. We were furnished with clothing by the authorities and stayed at Guantanamo Bay until June 8, 1942, when five of us were sent to Havana by rail, arriving June 9. The man with the injured windpipe remained in the hospital at Guantanamo.

We remained in Havana until June 14, on which date I took a morning plane for Miami, Claude Henwood took an afternoon plane for Miami on the same day, and the other three men contemplate taking a plane on June 16, which will probably bring them to New York on June 17 or 18. At Miami, Claude Henwood and I took a plane for New York, arriving at about 7 a.m. on June 15.

The owner's agents in New York have shown me a duplicate of the crew list and I incorporate in this affidavit a list of the personnel on board the s.s. WESTERN HEAD marked Exhibit A. I know that these men were on board the ship at the time of the sinking. To the best of my knowledge and belief, I and the five men mentioned in this affidavit are the sole survivors.

Of my own knowledge, the s.s. WESTERN HEAD, was stout, staunch and strong, and had her cargo well and sufficiently stowed and secured; she was well masted, manned, tackled, victualled, apparelled and appointed and was in every respect fit for the voyage she had undertaken.

I procured the statistical data as to the dimensions and capacity of the ship from Lloyd's Register and data as to her class and ownership from the ship's agents at New York.

Sworn to before me this
16th day of June, 1942.

Donald A. Mosher.

J. B. KEARNS

Notary Public

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tanker]. We carried airplane gas down to Argentia, Newfoundland. I could tell you some stories about that. Our skipper was an old feller and he liked to drink quite a bit. He'd get brave when he was out in convoy. If it didn't suit him, the speed the convoy was goin' [in theory, convoys were supposed to maintain the speed of the slowest ship], he'd run away from 'em. I saw him one night, he said, "Give me that gun." We had sort of a Bren gun. They didn't want him to use it. He got into the porthole and started firin' at the corvettes. He was pretty well drunk up. It's a wonder they didn't sink us because we were a menace.

Then we'd go down to Newfoundland somewhere and he'd have to go over to St. John's to a [convoy] conference. We used to get some kick out of him. He had his uniform, all the stripes and everything. All the convoy skippers, they'd get their orders how the convoy was goin' to go. The only way to get him to stay in the convoy was to make him commander [convoy commodore]. If they didn't, you knew we were goin' to get in trouble. They'd put him in charge and he'd come back all puffed out, boys, I'm tellin' ya. A feller from Ontario; we had a lot of those [Great] Lake fellas down on the coast. There was U-boats out around us.... I'll never, never know why we ever made it. We weren't supposed to get it, I guess. When you think back of all the stuff a fella got away with in those days....

Donald Mosher

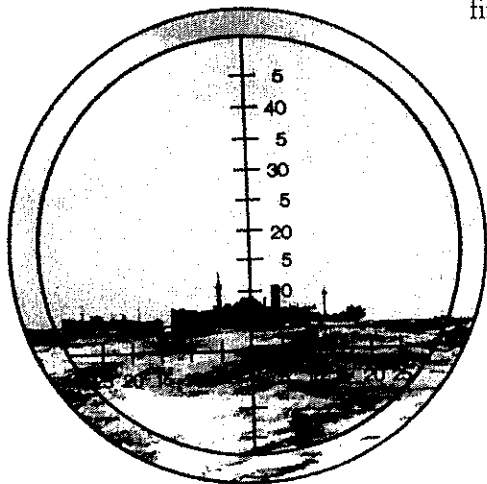
On a Saturday morning I went down to the shipping office to pay off as chief officer on the *Maid of Sterling*. What you used to do in those days, leave your name, address and telephone in case somebody wanted you. They were always lookin' for merchant navy fellas, they'd grab you off the street during the war, especially if you had a ticket. I got home to my friends around quarter to twelve. I used to stay on Henry Street in the South End when I was in Halifax. First thing the telephone rang and it was a Captain Ogilvie from Liverpool, Nova Scotia, and he offered me a job as second mate on the *Western Head*, which was coming up at that time from the West Indies. You know, steamship companies had to be ahead of themselves during the war because merchant navy officers were hard to get. Maritime Navigation Company, but she was registered in Nassau [because] you don't pay income tax. You can live in Canada, you can be Canadian, but if you got your ship registered in these countries you don't have to pay income tax. He told me the salary, which was better than the Canadian National [Steamships] and a few of the companies paid.

I went up Monday and stayed four or five days in Liverpool till the ship got into Montreal, then I went up and joined her. She was only small, about 6,000 ton, what you call a tramp. We went all over the place with that ship, down to three or four ports in Brazil, British Guiana, Panama Canal, Montreal, St. John's, Newfoundland. I never did like running around the Canadian coast—lot of thick fog, bad weather and so forth. Goin' to foreign countries, yes, I loved it. I'm used to the West Indies where there's nice sandy beaches and things like that. I liked that ship, she travelled around a lot; you never knew where you were goin'.

We had two coloured fellas on board from San Domingo had stowed away on the ship about two or three months before that. In those days the Canadian government was pretty strict with the immigration, a little different from what it is now. When we got to Montreal, the boss who owned the ship was responsible for these two fellas, so he had to put them in jail. We were in Montreal for about a week. Then he had to get them back to San Domingo. Well, how the heck do you get 'em there during the war? No planes runnin' to San Domingo. So he signed them on the ship as mess boys and they turned out to be two good men. One fella used to be a barber. The night we got torpedoed, I said to him around 5:30, "John, would you give me a haircut?" He said, "Mr. Mosher, I got to work till about 6:30. I'll get my work done, then I'll give you a haircut." So around 6:30 I went out on deck in a chair and he give me a haircut.

We were on our own. We had left Kingston, Jamaica, finished loadin' raw sugar for Montreal. About two days out, we were off Guantanamo Bay when we got torpedoed. After I got the haircut, I took a shower and went to bed. It was so darned hot, I just had a pair of shorts on, layin' in bed, two portholes open in my room and the screen door open. It was dark, because down in the West Indies it gets dark at six o'clock, there's no twilight. There was a bit of a moon. About 7:20, 7:25, I heard a torpedo hit in the stokehold. All you could hear was dishes go. The officers' mess was right above the stokehold.

I made a jump and I was all ready for being torpedoed; had a lifebelt on my settee in my room, a light and whistle onto it. I decided not to take it and I'll tell you why. Seems like a funny thing but it wasn't. In those days lifebelts were made out of cork. I never learnt in my life to dive head first—I was afraid to—I always went feet first. I figured when I jump



A doomed merchantman enters a U-boat's cross-hairs.

over the side of the ship, it's goin' to be twenty, thirty feet high, and if that thing comes up, that cork hits me in the chin, it's liable to knock me out. So for that reason I didn't take it.

The lights went out right away. When I went out of my room it was pitch dark. There was a little alleyway that ran out on deck and the cook was there. I couldn't see him, but I knew him by his voice. He said to me, "Mr. Mosher, I can't get the door open," a wooden door for the main deck. So I said, "Stand aside a little bit, I'll try." I put the flat of my foot against the door and opened it. The two of us got out on deck. I said to the cook, he was an older man than me, from Parrsboro, "Get your lifebelt on right away and get over the side." With that I climbed over the starboard side—she had a port list—and I walked back to the superstructure.

The wireless operator, who was a young fella about seventeen, eighteen years of age from New Brunswick, had his head out, "Donald, can you get an emergency aerial up?" I said, "Never mind the emergency aerial. We're half sunk now." Well, we were half sunk before the torpedo hit us, we had a full load of raw sugar. Seventy-five percent of the ship was under water anyway when we left Jamaica, so it didn't take much to sink her. I was standing in the waterway holdin' onto the railings along there. "Sparky, get your lifebelt on, I'm goin'!" He hauled his head back in and I haven't seen him since.

In the meantime, while I'm talkin' to Sparks, we got the second torpedo back around number four hatch. I'll tell you what. The Germans were no different from the rest of us. They liked to get home and see their wives and their girlfriends and all this stuff. If they could use two torpedoes instead of one, they had an excuse for getting home that much faster when their torpedoes were out. So he gave us two; one would have done it.

What I had in mind when I jumped over the side was to get the heck away from the ship. She was sinkin' and the water was boilin' and sucking, [could] haul you under water. As soon as I came to the surface, I only swam twenty-five feet and I looked back and she was gone. It took about a minute and a half for the ship to sink from the time we took the first torpedo. A minute and a half is a long time when you got to save your life. I was young and I could travel.

I saw something floating and it was the top of the wheelhouse—the top was wood—and I started swimmin' for that to get on it. I looked to my right and I thought I saw somethin' in the dark, so I altered course and swam up to it and it was this life raft. We had four life rafts and one broke loose, thank God. The Lord God Almighty does some wonderful things. The two coloured fellas pulled me aboard; there was five aboard already, and myself. The next morning a seaplane came out of Guantanamo....

We lost twenty-four of the boys; there were six of us saved. I was the only officer on the ship saved. The captain, Joe Faulkner, was from Falmouth, Nova Scotia. He shouldn't have been goin' to sea 'cause he was damn near as old as what I am now [75]. He had retired from the Canadian Government Merchant Marine, and because the war broke out, I guess he thought he'd do his little bit towards the war. The man was too old to be goin' through that.

Elbert Coldwell

When I was through high school, I started going to sea; this was in 1941. I went with the gypsum company out of Wentworth, the Gypsum Packet Company just outside of Windsor [Nova Scotia]. I went on the second one of their ships early in December [1941] and I was on that until it was sunk in March 1942. That was the *Gypsum Prince*. I think they had four initially. They were running to the east coast of the States, that was their original run, but I think the Ministry of War Transport took, I believe it was, the *Queen* over and, if I'm not mistaken, she was sunk off Iceland on her way overseas in a convoy. The *Prince* was sunk off the States and the *Empress* was sunk down in the West Indies. The *Queen* and the *Empress* were both torpedoed. So only one survived the war, the *King*.

I was A.B. We were on our way to Philadelphia with a load of gypsum and we had just picked up the pilot for maybe a half hour or so off Cape May; you have to go up the Delaware River. It's my understanding that an English tanker had come down the river the night before and because of the weather and submarines and so on, he decided that he'd stay at anchor inside a breakwater until just around daylight. I think it was a lend-lease tanker that the Americans had given to the English. He hove anchor and was on his way out and he hit us on our port side at about a forty-five-degree angle and roughly just about at the bulkhead between the two holds. It was a beautiful morning, the sun was coming up over the horizon and I don't know what happened. She just backed away; they didn't even [try to help]. Even if she had kept a little bit of weigh on her engines to keep the hole plugged until we could get the boats off, why, it would have been beneficial for us, but she didn't, she backed away from us.

I understand at the time that it was roughly three minutes and she [the *Gypsum Prince*] was down and out of sight. I think they carried somewhere around 8,000 tons, those ships. I was sleepin'. I didn't hear the other ship when it struck us and I didn't hear our abandon ship signal. There was an