

SS ALASKAN

On 28 November, 1942, while en route, independently, from Capetown to New York with 800 tons of ore, the SS ALASKAN, a freighter of 5364 gross tons, was torpedoed, shelled and sunk, in position 02.38N, 28.58W. Fifty-three of the fifty-nine men on board abandoned ship in two lifeboats and two rafts. The next day nine men on one raft transferred to an empty lifeboat off the ALASKAN in which they spent thirty-nine days, from November 28 to January 5, 1943, before making a landfall in French Guiana. The Master proved to be an excellent seaman. He rigged a sail on two of the large oars in the lifeboat and used the third as a rudder. A water guard was erected forward and spray sheets along the sides. The sails were rigged with stays and halyards of whatever material was found available. With his improvised sail the master, by dead reckoning and without the benefit of any chart or instruments, sailed the lifeboat approximately 2000 miles. During the 39 days the conduct of those in the lifeboat was very good, undoubtedly due to the leadership shown by the Master, the Second Officer, and the Commander of the Armed Guard, who cooperated among themselves and had the cooperation of the balance of the crew. A 3 hour watch by 2 officers was stood to take care of the oar used as a rudder. The Ensign was placed in charge of the meager provisions, which he handled so carefully that they lasted for 34 days and the 9 survivors were only without food for the last 5 days. He served three meals by spreading them over the bottom of an empty pemmican cans because he said everyone thought they were getting more that way. He served these three "meals" every day consisting of half a square of chocolate, three ounces of pemmican. He used great care in cutting up the pemmican very fine and also in dividing the raisins into 5 parts. He also rationed the sea ration crackers and malted milk tablets. For two weeks it did not rain, but after that time there was considerable rain, which was caught into 30 gallon tanks, taken from the raft with other material, all of which were used during the voyage in the lifeboat. As a result of this rainfall they always had water.

On the day they landed at Cayenne, they had previously landed a few miles down the coast in a jungle, but as that point was a swampy morass, they put to sea again and proceeded along the coast until they came to the buildings of Cayenne. In coming inshore they grounded, but eventually made land with the assistance of a fishing craft. The Governor of Cayenne treated them kindly and placed them in a hospital but moved them within a few days by airplane out of Guiana in order to avoid creating an incident.

This case not only indicates the excellence of the lifesaving appliances on U. S. Merchant Ships, but also reflects the courageous leadership and seamanship that distinctly typifies our merchant seamen during the national emergency.