

Op-16-B-5

NAVY DEPARTMENT

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MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

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ALL TIMES GCT

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors of the SS ALEXANDER MAJORS, American Freighter, 7176 G.T., owned by War Shipping Administration, and operated by the Isthmian Steamship Company.

1. The ALEXANDER MAJORS was damaged by enemy aircraft at about 1030 GCT, 12 Nov 44, while at anchor in Dulag Harbor, Leyte, P.I., having sailed from Hollandia, New Guinea 29 Oct in convoy arriving at Leyte 4 Nov; loaded with 407 U.S. Army troops as passengers and a cargo of 1,222 L.T.; cargo consisted of trucks, tractors and other air force equipment stowed in all lower holds and #2, #4 and #5 'tween decks; 375 tons of gasoline in drums stowed in #4 and #5 lower holds, deck cargo comprised of one bomber trailer stowed between #4 and #5 hatches; several trucks around and on #2 hatch; and approximately 20 drums of range fuel stowed on deck under #1 and #2 life rafts. At the time ship was damaged, all of the troops, with the exception of 13, had been discharged. Vessel did not sink but returned to San Francisco under her own power.

2. Ship was at anchor approximately 3500 yards off shore, northerly heading, in 14 fathoms; crew at general quarters. The weather was clear with scattered clouds; wind Easterly force 2; sun setting; visibility very good. Other ships in the harbor were in sight.

3. At 1030 a radio warning was received reporting enemy planes approaching and immediately thereafter about 10 planes were sighted converging on the anchorage from various directions. Of the 10 planes, one group of 3 planes was sighted about 6,000 yards to the East, circling southward. One of these planes was shot down by a P-38 when 4,000 yards off and 3 points to the starboard quarter. Second plane continued until almost dead astern, then turned back on its course and when an estimated 3,000 yards off and at a height of 5,000', went into a 40° dive from a bearing of 160° R. Fire was opened with the 5"38 caliber aft gun, range 3,000 yards and 20 mm fire commenced as plane came into range. Numerous other ships in the area were firing at this target also, and many 20 mm hits were observed. Speed of plane was estimated to be in excess of 300 knots, motor was silent upon approach, no attempt was made to strafe and pilot was believed to be dead when plane struck. Plane approached in an undeviating dive until she passed astern when a blast from the 5" gun lifted the plane and tilted it in an angle to starboard. Plane cleared the starboard wing of the bridge at the bridge deck by a few feet, and crashed into and sheared off the main mast about 3' above the mast locker. Upon striking the mast, the plane and a bomb it was carrying exploded, showering the deck house and forward portion of the ship with flaming gasoline and bomb and plane fragments. Entire ship shaken by the blast; #2 and #3 hatch covers, #1 and #2 life rafts were blown off; deck cargo shifted and the range fuel stowed on deck ignited. Deck forward was immediately enveloped in flames and the fire soon spread to #2 and #3 'tween decks and lower hold. Explosion and shrapnel fractured and pierced the forward steam and fire lines rendering them useless, and the fire hose which had been stretched on deck the night previous in event of fire, was immediately destroyed by flames. Fire lines were brought up from aft end of the ship but due to the fractured fire main forward, sufficient pressure could not be raised. Within 30 minutes, however, an LCI fire boat

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SS ALEXANDER MAJORS, Contd.

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came alongside the starboard quarter and foamite lines were brought aboard and fire was under control in less than an hour but persisted until 1415 among 700 kapok jackets stowed in #3 'tween deck and among equipment in the lower holds. Fire was limited to the forward portion of the ship where practically all cargo was a total loss from fire and water damage. Ship damage is as follows: Mainmast and ventilators on the mainmast locker completely destroyed. Fire main and exhaust steam line to the foredeck, port and starboard winches at #3 hatch, several sections of steam pipe casing on aft end of #2 and forward end of #3, forward side of midship house, and 3 ventilators on boat deck, and several main deck plates and several plates in #3 'tween deck were pierced by shrapnel fragments. Four beams under main deck between #2 and #3 hatches sagged. 'Tween deck hatch beams in #2 hatch distorted; bulwarks both sides of deck from after end of #2 to midship house distorted and pierced by shrapnel. No. 3 'tween deck collision bulkhead dented. Shock from the explosion knocked the steering compass in the wheelhouse off of its pedestal; main antenna broken and numerous windows and lights in the wheelhouse broken. Fire seriously damaged and the degaussing coils; convoy emergency lights and control box, gyro azimuth and the flag locker and the doger around the standard compass on the signal bridge. No information was secured concerning the confidential codes but it is assumed that they were retained on board the ship.

4. Ship was not abandoned but the men in the forward gun tubs were forced to jump overboard to escape the flames. Total complement on board was 76, including 37 merchant crew, 26 Armed Guard, and 13 U.S. Army troops; 2 merchant seamen killed, 74 survived. One merchant seaman injured by shrapnel, one Armed Guard hospitalized at Leyte for injuries, 2 U.S. Army men burned, and 11 Armed Guard burned. The one injured merchant seaman and 11 burned Armed Guard were repatriated aboard the MAJORS.

5. Plane was described as a single-engine fighter.

6. Ship's officers reported that the 2 men killed were standing immediately forward of the deck house by the port rail and that their deaths could have been avoided if they had been at their correct battle stations which were within the deck house structure. The officers added that these men had received two reprimands earlier that same day for similar offenses.

The Master suggested that fire hose should be kept on reels rather than stretched on deck and the reels kept in various parts of the ship so as to minimize danger of their loss from fire.

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