

Op-16-B-5

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON 25 D C

CONFIDENTIAL

9 JAN 45

MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

ALL TIMES GCT

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors of the SS AUGUSTUS THOMAS, American Freighter, 7176 G.T., owned by War Shipping Administration, Operated by Coastwise Line (Far East), chartered to U.S. Army.

1. The AUGUSTUS THOMAS was struck by a bomber and damaged by under water explosions from the plane's bombs at 0040 GCT, 24 Oct 44, while at Anchorage #16, San Pedro Bay, Leyte Gulf, Philippine Islands, with the USS SONOMA (ATO-12) along the starboard side taking water. Vessel was loaded with 3000 tons of ammunition in #1, #3, and #5 holds; 1000 barrels of aviation gasoline and diesel oil in #4 hold, and approximately 2500 tons general military equipment; draft 16'8" forward, 22'3" aft. Vessel did not sink; draft after damage 9' forward, 30' aft, and with the aid of U.S. Navy tugs #100 and #169 was beached one mile East of Palo River mouth in four fathoms at 0130, 3 November.

2. Ship had been at anchor for two days, in 42 fathoms of water, all hands had been at general quarters since morning. The weather was clear, sea smooth, wind South force 1-2, sun bearing 110° relative, height 40°, visibility very good, approximately 80 other ships at anchorage in the area.

3. At 0039, while shipping in the area was under attack by 4 Jap twin-engine bombers, one of the bombers, approaching ship from the starboard side at a distance of approximately 1/2 mile, was seen to catch fire in one engine and shortly thereafter in both engines, apparently having been hit by fire from ships in the vicinity and shore batteries. Plane headed toward the THOMAS flying at a height of approximately 30', struck the stack of the USS SONOMA with one wing, and then crashed against the starboard side of the THOMAS aft of midships. One engine struck approximately 2' below the main deck and the other engine approximately 6' below the main deck. The SONOMA sustained the brunt of the damage from the exploding plane and was ignited from stem to stern. Bomb load of plane spilled out between the 2 ships and was detonated upon striking the bottom of the bay, which had the effect of a depth charge, causing considerable damage to ship's hull and engine room. Three or four holes from 2-3' in diameter and numerous small holes were made in the vessel's hull at the turn of the bilge, starboard side, and several seams were split. The vessel was also sprained to port; part of the welding of the main deck bulwarks abreast of engine room was split in two places and opened up to 1/8" indicating that vessel was bent amidships; engines made inoperative; steam lines to the generator were knocked out; steering gear was inoperative due to lack of steam; standard and steering compasses were torn out of gimbals; and minor fires ignited on deck originating from the exploding plane. A yellow powdery substance adhered to hull of ship in vicinity of explosion. Vessel flooded in engine room to outside water level in one hour; #4 hold flooded at the rate of 2" per hour, and #5 hold at the rate of 1" per hour. All hands were at battle stations and all guns were firing at various ranges at the planes in the vicinity. Information is not available on number of rounds fired and number of times enemy was hit. Confidential codes were retained on board and subsequently turned in to the Australian R.N. Port Director at Hollandia.

*Pl Index
See SS Augustus Thomas
& Survivors (17)
& Navy Correspondence
Imu (18)*

file me

CONFIDENTIAL

Op-16-B-5

SS AUGUSTUS THOMAS

9 Jan 45

4. Immediately after plane struck ship approximately 20 merchant crew and an undetermined number of passenger troops abandoned ship without orders by jumping overboard. . None of them were seriously injured by this action and subsequently all were recovered aboard. Two merchant crew suffered minor injuries and one of them was hospitalized aboard a Navy hospital ship. Numerous U. S. Army Troops received burns and minor bruises; however, all were evacuated ashore along with the other troops. After ship was beached it was ordered abandoned by all hands. Armed Guard crew was transferred to a U.S. Navy watertender at San Pedro Bay and the remaining complement was taken ashore. Total complement on board was 548, including 41 merchant crew, 27 Armed Guard, 480 U.S. Army troops as passengers; all 548 survived.

5. The attacking plane was described as a twin-engined Jap bomber, painted olive drab, identified as either a Sally or Betty type, speed when first sighted approximately 180 M.P.H., and on course 090° relative bearing to ship. The bombs dropped by the planes were estimated to be 100 lbs. in weight.

6. Air raid warnings were given by flag hoists from the ship and flares from shore. The all clear sounded at 0800.

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