

8 March 1945

MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors of the SS BENJAMIN IDE WHEELER, U.S. Freighter, 7176 G.T., owned by WSA, operated by the American-Hawaiian Steamship Company.

1. The BENJAMIN IDE WHEELER was damaged by enemy aircraft at 0205 GCT, 26 October, at 1045 GCT, 27 October and at 2320, 17 November, while at anchor between Palo and Tacloban, Leyte, P.I., having sailed from Hollandia 18 October in convoy arriving at Leyte Gulf 25 October, carrying equipment for U.S. Army Engineers stowed on deck and throughout the holds. About 250-300 U.S. troops were quartered in #1, #3 and #5 'tween decks. There were also about 500 drums of gasoline in #4 lower hold together with trucks and about 500 drums of gasoline and trucks in #5 lower hold. At first attack nearly all of the troops had been removed, longshoremen were aboard working cargo, but of the deck cargo only a few small boats stowed on #1 hatch had been discharged. Draft about 12' forward, 13' aft. Vessel settled by the stern and was resting on bottom. Ship was later refloated and moved to the inner harbor at Tacloban where it will be used as a storage vessel. Ship requires drydocking and will eventually be returned to the U.S.

2. At time of first attack ship was anchored about 1/2 mile South of the LST beach slots, about 1/2 mile off shore. The weather was clear, sea smooth, light breeze, other vessels were observed in the area. Three AG lookouts, one forward, one aft, and a signalman on the bridge. At time of second attack ship was anchored in the same approximate position, headed away from the land, blacked out, entire personnel at their battle stations. The sky was overcast, intermittent rains, just about dusk, sea small, light wind. At time of third attack ship was moored alongside the SS AUGUSTUS THOMAS about 1/4 of a mile closer to shore, crew at general quarters all men reported to battle stations. It was daylight, slight wind, sea smooth, scattered clouds.

3. At 0205, 26 October a Jap plane approached from the West and dropped one or more bombs, which landed in the water about 20' from the forward port side of the amidship house. No warning was received prior to the attack. Bomb or bombs exploded, the blinker light on the flying bridge was knocked out; there were shrapnel marks on #4 gun tub and alongside the bridge deck on the port side, small holes along port side of ship, and #2, #4, and #6 lifeboats were punctured with fragment holes. It was believed that counter offensive was not offered.

About 0845, 27 October 3 red tracers were fired ashore indicating an impending air attack. At about 1045 a Jap bomber which was on fire and was believed to have been hit by a pursuit plane, appeared out of the clouds at a distance of about 4 miles, altitude 1500-2000', and headed toward the ship. Starboard 20mm guns opened fire when plane came within range. Plane dived towards the bridge at an angle from 10-35°, bearing 020° relative and strafed as it approached. When about midway in the dive plane's starboard wing was torn off by gun fire, causing it to swerve to port, miss the bridge and strike the vessel. Some survivors thought plane hit the #5 hatch and others said it hit on the starboard quarter just above the water line at #5 lower hold where a round hole was made from the 28' line to the 19' line about 9' in diameter. An explosion occurred as plane struck and men were thrown to the deck by its force. There was also a large hole, about 8x10', in the port quarter below the water line. It was believed that this was caused when plane entered #5 hold and the remaining engine went through the shell plating on the port side. It is believed that the damage on the starboard quarter was caused by bombs released close aboard the starboard quarter just before plane crashed into the ship. No parts of the plane, except small pieces of aluminum were ever found. Fire broke out im-

CONFIDENTIAL

Op-16-B-5

SS BENJAMIN IDI WHEELER (US), Cont.

8 March 1945

mediately in #5 lower hold in which there were approximately 400 drums of gasoline. Magazine was flooded in about 20 minutes. Within 10-15 minutes several small Navy craft came alongside to assist in fire fighting, but their efforts were of limited effectiveness. Ship's water lines were also used to fight fire in #5 hold and #4 hold was intentionally flooded to prevent fire from breaking out there. About 1/2 hour after fire commenced, the salvage tug USS CABLE came alongside with foamite which was very effective and by 1400-1500 fire was out. Ship was damaged as follows: hole about 8' in diameter in the hull on starboard quarter by the waterline at #5 lower hold, long jagged tear below the turn of the bilge commencing 10' below the above described hole and continuing to keel plates and about 15 to 20' long, width undetermined; shaft tunnel badly holed and flooded; many smaller holes in the hull, decks and coamings in the area of #4 and #5 holds, #5 'tween deck badly holed and buckled; abreast of #4 and #5 on both sides hull plates badly buckled; steam line to steering engine severed; battle phones in #8, #9 and #10 guns and after ship's phone out of commission and aerial down. Considerable fire damage was caused to #5 hold and cargo stowed there, and cargo in #4 was damaged by flooding. Between 1400-1500 ship had settled by the stern and was resting on the bottom in 28-30' of water, with the aft well deck about 2 or 3' above the water and bow at a sharp angle. The USS CABLE pumped out most of the water from #4 hold, a few temporary repairs were effected and on 11 November ship was moved and moored alongside the SS AUGUSTUS THOMAS which was resting on the bottom in 24' of water about 1/4 mile inshore of the WHEELER.

At 2320, 17 November while ship was still moored alongside the THOMAS, three shots were fired ashore, indicating an expected air raid. After a few minutes a plane approached from the port beam, altitude about 600' and dropped about 50 small bombs, apparently anti-personnel type. Most of the bombs fell in the water, but one hit the lower step of the ladder leading from the boat deck to the bridge deck on the starboard side at the aft end of the boat deck and at the same time, another small bomb, apparently from the same plane hit the THOMAS and went through the deck into the galley, causing a small hole about 4" in diameter. Intermittent counter-offensive had been offered with unknown results. Unknown whether or not plane was strafing. The only effect of the bomb was to pepper the bulkheads and cause a small hole a few inches in diameter in the ladder step. Survivors stated that there was a definite explosion at the time the object hit the ship, which sounded not unlike a large firecracker. A few pieces of aluminum were later found and presumed to have come from the bomb. On 22 December ship was moved to the inner harbor at Tacloban. Confidential publications were turned over to the P.D. at Tacloban 15 January 1945.

4. Ship was not abandoned but the majority of the Armed Guard crew left 27 October. Merchant crew left the ship on 2 January 1945 for repatriation. At first attack no one was killed, a few men received very minor shrapnel wounds and one longshoreman was believed injured. As a result of second attack one merchant seaman and one Armed Guard killed, one merchant seaman injured. At third attack there were no casualties.

5. The first plane was described as a single engine plane; second plane was believed to be twin engine Jap "Betty"; and the plane making the third attack was of an unknown type.

6. On 28 October, after the majority of the gun crew had left the ship, an air raid occurred and although the WHEELER was not directly attacked, the forward 3"50-caliber gun was manned by the Armed Guard Officer, 2 members of the Armed Guard and merchant marine personnel. The gun crew was credited with shooting down one

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Op-16-E-5

SS BENJAMIN IDE WHEELER (US)

8 March 1945

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