

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
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MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

5 January 1944

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors SS CAPE SAN JUAN, U. S. Passenger Cargo Ship, 6711 G.T., owners War Shipping Administration agent American-Hawaiian SS Company, chartered to U. S. Army.

1. The CAPE SAN JUAN was torpedoed without warning at 0530 Zone Time (1730 GCT), 11 November 1943, in position 22.01S - 178.13W. Ship sailed from San Francisco 28 October en route to Townsville, Australia loaded with U. S. Troops and 2,005 tons general cargo, draft forward 26', aft 32'. Ship remained afloat for 48 hours and sank at approximately 0615 Zone time 13 November.

2. Ship was on base course 270°, speed 15.4 knots, was just executing starboard turn on zigzag pattern #11, blacked out, radio silent, 3 lookouts - 1 merchant crew on bow, 2 Army officers on flying bridge, Armed Guard at General Quarters. The weather was clear, sea choppy; wind NW force #1-2, visibility good, daylight but sun not up. No other ships in sight.

3. At 0525 Zone time 11 November two water spouts were observed at an approximate distance of 2000 yards, relative bearing 120°. Simultaneously wake of torpedo seen in water 15 yards from ship. Torpedo missed stern by 20 yards. A few seconds later a second torpedo struck ship on starboard side abreast of the after end of #2 hatch, far below waterline. Immediately on impact a great flash of light came up over the gunwale on starboard quarter, reaching as high as the ship's bridge and over 20' wide, described as reddish-white or reddish-yellow. This was immediately followed by a volume of black smoke which rose slightly higher than the flash preceding it. Following the smoke a huge sheet of water cascaded over the flying bridge. Damage to hull not visible.

Simultaneously with impact ship shook and shuddered and bow raised slightly then settled and ship took an immediate 10° - 15° list to starboard and then settled to a 20° - 25° list within a few minutes. Engines immediately stopped and ship went dead in water. Ship began drifting to starboard, finally swinging completely around and then began a steady drift South by West at 1 knot. No. 2 hold began to fill rapidly and within 20 minutes was over half filled with water, debris and oil. It was again checked 2 hours after explosion and found to be over 3/4 filled. Distress messages sent and was heard repeated by radio Fiji. Radio was later destroyed and emergency set put in operation on deck. Counter offensive was opened immediately after torpedo struck, firing in the general direction from which torpedoes came. Approximately 250 rounds of 3" 50 calibre and 21 rounds of 4" -50 cal. were fired. About 2 hours after ship was abandoned, a dull thud was felt by the Armed Guard throughout the ship. Survivors in the water felt a strong vibration

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at the same time. Some survivors thought this was a third torpedo which struck the ship, glanced downward, and subsequently exploded. When ship was abandoned she was down by the head with water over the upper tween decks in #2 hold - about 32' draft. Ship remained afloat 48 hours after attack and finally sank in 1400 fathoms. All secret and confidential codes secured over the side.

4. Abandon ship order given immediately after torpedo struck. Army and Merchant Marine personnel left the ship by boats, rafts, diving over the side and descending lines. All boats got away successfully except #4 motor boat which was swamped by too many troops attempting to board it. At 0630 Zone time when all lifeboats, floats, and rafts were away with the exception of those retained for gun crew, there were some 200 persons still aboard. At approximately 0710 Zone time a Hudson type plane with New Zealand markings approached ship and flashed "Name of Ship?". Plane surveyed area for short while and left vicinity. Same plane reappeared in about 20 minutes and flashed message that aid was en route. At 1100 Zone time the EDWIN T. MEREDITH arrived and transferred part of the remaining Army and Merchant Marine aboard and picked up survivors. At approximately 1200 Zone time Master decided to make attempt to get ship underway but a few minutes later decided ship could not be saved and ordered "abandon ship" for all hands. Boats of the EDWIN T. MEREDITH then came alongside and took off Armed Guard enlisted personnel. At 1900 Zone time all survivors had abandoned the ship. Four hundred and forty-three survivors were rescued by EDWIN T. MEREDITH and landed at Noumea 16 November 1943. Other survivors were picked up by NATS Flight V2163, USS McCOLLA, the USS DEMPSEY and USS YMS 241, and landed at Suva, Fiji 12 November. Total personnel aboard ship was 1454 including 57 merchant crew, 41 Armed Guard and Naval Communications personnel; 21 U. S. Army, Ship's personnel and 1335 U. S. Troops. All the Merchant crew and Naval personnel survived. There are 15 U. S. Army personnel known dead and 100 missing and presumed lost.

5. Other than the torpedo tracks and water spouts, no further evidence of the presence or whereabouts of the submarine was seen.

A few seconds after first torpedo passed aft of ship, several Armed Guard lockouts saw two water spouts generally described as from 6-10' high and from 2-3' in width. Both spouts broke surface at a distance of from 1500-2500 yards on relative bearing 130°. They were described as egg-shaped by 1 witness, as fan-shaped by another; as being in the shape of a pine tree by another. Spouts did not rise simultaneously; second came up as first settled.

Following the sighting of these spouts or geysers, a wake was spotted bearing 130°. Some survivors claim wake originated almost at scene of water spouts; others say wake began when torpedo was $\frac{1}{2}$ the distance from water spouts to the ship. Wake was very straight, 2-4' wide, travelling at great speed, yet ruffling the water only slightly. When some 250 yards from ship this wake broke, an object broached the surface of the water, skimmed for some 20', then submerged. It travelled so fast that no one could identify color, shape or size. Explosion followed almost immediately.

6. On the afternoon before the ship was torpedoed she was escorted by a New Zealand patrol plane (Hudson-type) for several hours. About sunset the plane inquired for and received the 1700 GCT position of the ship for the following day. This message was sent in plain language and was confirmed twice by the plane. Second mate stated that it would have been impossible for an enemy submarine at that time to have intercepted the message due to the fact that plane was circling ship, necessitating a constant broken visual signal. Many survivors stated that the SAN JUAN had been letting out heavy black smoke from her funnels for several days. The smoke, described as being dark and very heavy, hung in the air aft of the ship for a considerable period before disappearing. Several crew members of the SS EDWIN T. MEREDITH stated they saw the CAPE SAN JUAN's smoke for some 24 hours before she was torpedoed.

Survivors made the following suggestions:

A thorough course of instruction should be given to all personnel regarding the use of ropes, rafts, and lifeboats. They should be given special advice on swimming in oily waters.

Persons responsible for the lowering of liferafts should be given special instructions regarding their release since some rafts were dropped on men going down the lines and on those already in the water. Breakers of supplies should be lashed to rafts rather than being loose on deck.

Some device should be used so that orders of the officers could be more plainly heard after the men have gone over the side into the water. Men could scarcely hear the orders of officers on deck who were trying to direct them.

Line attachments for lowering litters over the side should be installed as part of their permanent equipment.

Merchant crew members previously trained as ammunition and hot-shell carriers should not be allowed to abandon ship prior to the order being given by the Armed Guard officer. When merchant crew abandoned ship the gun crews were in a serious predicament. Inexperienced and untrained men had to be recruited from Army troops on board for this work.

Armed Guard crews should be given visual instructions in the general characteristics of periscope feathering and torpedo wakes.

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The Master stated that the display of courage and high morale by all of the survivors was admirable, especially the Armed Guard who were the last to leave and then were active aiding those temporarily blinded by oil still struggling in the shark infested waters.

B. A. CONARD,
Ensign, W-V(S), USNR

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