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UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

REC'D APR 24 1945

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WASHINGTON

21 APR 1945

MEMORANDUM FOR Liaison Officer.

War Shipping Administration.

Subject: Armed Guard Incident - Puerto de la Cruz,
Venezuela.

Enclosures: (A) Excerpt from A.N.A. Puerto de la Cruz, Venezuela,
Ltr. Serial PLC-91-45, dated 15 March 1945.

(B) Excerpt from N. A. Caracas, Venezuela, Ltr. Serial L-22-45, dated 28 March 1945.

On 13 March 1945, four members attached to the Armed Guard Crew of the U. S. Tanker CORNELL, bound for Halifax, were jailed in Puerto de la Cruz, Venezuela. Enclosure (A) is an excerpt from a letter of the Assistant Naval Attache, Puerto de la Cruz, giving details of the incident.

Enclosure (B) gives an account of the Naval Attaché's activities in behalf of these crew members. The Naval Attaché states in the last paragraph of enclosure (B) that he has restricted shore liberty for naval personnel for the reasons enumerated by him, and that he believes the same restrictions should be applied to merchant crews, at least until assurances are given by Venezuelan authorities that a more cooperative policy will be pursued and that cases of this nature will be handled with promptness, equity, and justice.

The above is forwarded for information and for such attention as may be deemed desirable.

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To safeguard the security of the information contained herein please read and return to Intelligence Unit when it has served its purpose.

Mr. Huntington

/s/ H. W. Baltazzi
H. W. BALTAZZI
Captain, USNR

Head of Intelligence Branch

Mr. Huntington T. Morse,
War Shipping Administration,
Room 4833, Commerce Building,
Washington 25, D. C.
CC to: Comdt. USCG

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TO SERIAL 09

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Excerpt from ltr. A.N.A. Puerto de la Cruz, Venezuela, PLC-91-45,
dated 15 March 1945:

".....The Naval Attaché directed that details be furnished in regard to an affair previously reported by despatch from this post in regard to the subject incident.

"The four members of the crew detained are as follows:

Robert SELBY Slc 856-26-72
Willy St. ONGE Slc 573-12-91
Antone D'Aguiar Slc 803-99-86
Charles S. KOPELJA Slc 865-02-73

"They were attached to the Armed Guard Crew of the U. S. Tanker CORNELL, bound for Halifax. The Assistant Naval Attache was first informed of the incident when the ship was ready to sail at about 0300 on Wednesday the 14th. The men had been in the jail since about 1600 of the previous day. It was impossible to raise the authorities at this hour although the attempt was made at the time. After visiting the jail the Assistant Naval Attache returned to the ship. He left it to the Captain whether to wait or to sail immediately, taking into consideration the safety of the ship if it sailed with a reduced gun crew. The Captain decided to remain at anchor until 0900 that morning and the Assistant Naval Attache agreed to do all possible to secure the release of the men. At 0600 the Assistant Naval Attache found the Jefe Civil in his house, (He had been previously informed that the Jefe Civil was in Barcelona). After consultation the Jefe Civil ordered a rapid investigation (none had been previously been made) and on finding that there had been personal injuries to a Venezuelan in the affair, he telephoned the President of the State in Barcelona. The President gave orders that the men should not be released under any circumstances. The Assistant Naval Attache then sent a note aboard the CORNELL and the vessel sailed.

"Thereafter Caracas was informed by despatch of the incident. Details of the incident are as follows: The four crew members hired a station wagon for a trip from Barcelona. The driver of the car could not speak English and they could not speak Spanish. When they arrived in Puerto La Cruz, the driver stopped in the Paseo Colon to let them off. They desired him to carry them to the dock within the Oil Company property, and from the ensuing argument arose the affray that followed. The truth is difficult to determine. The crew members say that they don't know how the fight actually started or the man who struck the first blow - that they had an argument with the driver and that suddenly they were surrounded by natives and the fight started. The Ass't Naval Attache thinks it is quite clear that there was an affair approaching the proportions of a race riot. All four of the crew members were injured slightly indicating that a number of natives were involved. SELBY was knocked out when he was struck in the head by a board, ONGE was struck on the head by an automobile crank, D'Aguiar has a black eye, and SKOPELJA was struck in the mouth, and his teeth loosened and lip split.

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"The police have not yet been able to locate the station wagon or driver, and his name is not known. However, the main difficulty raised by the police is in regards to Pedro ZEA, one of the natives who jumped into the fight. He received a broken arm as he fell after being struck, and has now had the arm set in a cast. ZEA was in a botiquin near to the place at which the car stopped and the police informed the Assistant Naval Attache that he came out of the botiquin when the fight started. In other words, he 'butted in,' presumably because he saw some of his fellow Venezuelan sailors involved in a fight. One friendly police officer privately told the Assistant Naval Attache that ZEA was drunk and in view of the fact that he came out of the botiquin, this is considered very probable, although it might be difficult to prove."

"It is interesting to note that as soon as the police arrived on the scene, the Venezuelan mob disappeared, and the sailors let themselves be conducted peacefully to the jail. The sailors were relieved that they had been saved by the police, and the same police officer above mentioned said that the mob would have killed the sailors if the police had not intervened."

"This is not the first time that a near-race riot has occurred, but the Ass't Naval Attache has been able to smooth them over previously."

"The crew members say that they handed the driver Bs 5.00 and then he returned Bs 1.00, prior to the time the fight started. This the Assistant Naval Attache has not been able to verify, since the police have not found the driver."

"At the present writing the Jefe Civil informs the Assistant Naval Attache that he is still awaiting instructions from Barcelona, but that he believes that they will be able to turn the crew members loose if the damages for personal injuries are paid, plus a small fine. He will not yet say how much either the damage or the fine will be. Only one man has his partial pay card and on this he can draw only some \$50.00. ZEA was in the hospital at Barcelona yesterday, but is reported to have returned to Puerto La Cruz, today. However, the Assistant Naval Attache has spent 2 hours in the police station this morning while the Police attempted to locate him, and as yet they have not found him."

"Comment: Captain CORNER, the British Vice Consul has terminated the British Liberty in this port. He also has a British gunner who has been in jail 10 days as the result of another riot. In view of the proportions that private fights assume when the natives start joining in it, it is suggested that the U. S. Naval Attache consider the possibilities of joint-American-British orders permanently suspending the Liberty of both merchant and Naval personnel in the Port."

A resume of the case to the Ambassador, who discussed it with Sr. Parra-Pera, Minister of Foreign Affairs, at a midday appointment. The Foreign Minister indicated that he would initiate inquiries and do what he could to obtain the release of the men involved. Several days passed without further developments, and on Monday, 26 March, the Ambassador mentioned the matter to President Medina.

*Note: Enclosure (B) is A.N.A. Puerto La Cruz
Ltr. Serial PLC-91-48, attached hereto.

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ENCL. (B) TO SERIAL 0931916

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Excerpt from ltr. N. A. Caracas Serial L-22-45, dated 28 March 1945:

".....As the information transmitted was not sufficient for the Naval Attache to present the matter informally to the Venezuelan authorities, the Assistant Naval Attache was directed by dispatch to compile a complete report on the case to be handed to Lieutenant Cottrell, pilot of the Naval Attache's plane, who was scheduled to make a courier trip to Barcelona, Venezuela, the following day. A copy of the Assistant Naval Attache's report, Enclosure (B)*, was delivered to the Naval Attache, 15 March. On Friday, 16 March, this report was shown to the Ambassador and it was decided that the Naval Attache should discuss the case informally with the Director of the Navy or the Minister of War and Marine, with a view to having these men released. On Friday afternoon, an appointment was made with Captain Picardi, Director of the Navy, and the facts as conveyed to this office by the Assistant Naval Attache were presented to him. He stated that he would appraise the Minister of War and Marine of the circumstances and do whatever he possibly could to obtain release of the men involved. He also sent a telegram on the same day to the Acting Director of the Port of Puerto la Cruz, requesting additional information.

"As no action had been taken up to Thursday, 22 March, the Naval Attache flew to Puerto la Cruz, enroute from Trinidad, and called on the Captain of the Port and the Jefe Civil of Puerto la Cruz. He also talked to the four men in jail. It was ascertained that the local magistrate had interviewed all the Venezuelans who could be identified as involved in the incident, and that his report had been sent to a superior court official in Barcelona, on the previous day. It had, however, been returned to him for additional facts. It was also revealed that the injured Venezuelan, Pedro Zea, was then in custody. He had been put in jail a few days previously, presumably following the receipt of the wire by the Captain of the port from the Minister of War and Marine. The four seamen, on being interviewed, reiterated their statements that the argument had started over a difference as to where the station wagon should deliver them, although it was the Venezuelan contention that they had refused to pay their fare. Arrangements were made to obtain clean clothing for the four men (all their gear having been left aboard ship), and permission was asked and granted for their release in custody of the Assistant Naval Attache to bathe, shave, and change their clothes. On the departure of the Naval Attache from Barcelona, in the afternoon of the 22nd, he talked with a police officer who was then leaving for Caracas. The police official stated that he had a copy of the magistrate's report for delivery to the officials in the Ministry of the Interior. If this were the case, the report contained only the depositions and allegations of the Venezuelan parties, as the four Americans involved had not been questioned up to that time by the local magistrate. On the following day, 23 March, the Naval Attache gave a resume of the case to the Ambassador, who discussed it with Sr. Parra-Perez, Minister of Foreign Affairs, at a midday appointment. The Foreign Minister indicated that he would initiate inquiries and do what he could to obtain the release of the men involved. Several days passed without further developments, and on Monday, 26 March, the Ambassador mentioned the matter to President Medina

*Note: Enclosure (B) is A.N.A. Puerto de la Cruz
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in the course of a conversation which he had with him. The President advised the Ambassador that as a Venezuelan was injured in the fight, court action would be necessary, but that he would direct the proper officials to expedite the trial. On 27 March a dispatch, reference (c),* was received from the Assistant Naval Attache, Puerto de la Cruz, which would indicate that the President had intervened for prompt action.

"It is the usual and customary practice, according to the American Vice Consul, the Assistant Naval Attache, and various oil company executives, for the police to arrest American naval personnel and merchant seamen whenever incidents of this kind occur, to hold them in jail and subject them to a fine while the Venezuelans involved are not molested. As there are two or three tankers now calling daily at this port, and the police force is very small and thoroughly inefficient, there is always the danger that serious incidents may occur. For this reason, the Naval Attache has restricted shore liberty for Naval personnel. He believes that the same restrictions should be applied to merchant crews, at least until such time as assurances can be given by proper authorities that a more cooperative policy will be pursued and that cases will be handled with promptness, equity, and justice."

*Note:

Reference (c) stated that the four members of the Armed Guard Crew were being moved to Barcelona on 27 March 1945 where they would be bound over and held for trial. It was suggested that a lawyer be obtained for the crew members. The trial date had not been set at that time.

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