

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON

March 1, 1943

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MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors SS DORCHESTER, Passenger-Cargo Vessel, 5654 G.T., Merchants-Miner Transportation Co., Operated by AGWI Lines, Inc., Chartered to Army Transport Service.

1. The "DORCHESTER" was torpedoed without warning about 0355 GCT on February 3, 1943 at 59° 22'N, 48° 42'W., while enroute from St. John's Newfoundland, to Narsarssuak, Greenland with about 904 passengers and crew on board, about 1,069 tons general cargo and lumber, and 60 bags of mail and parcel post, draft forward about 19', aft 20'1". The vessel sank within 25 minutes (about 0420 GCT, February 3, 1943) in the position noted above, plunging bow first after having listed about 85° to starboard.

2. The vessel was on course 11° true, speed 10 knots in 1830 fathoms, steering evasive courses, (course changed at 2130 GCT, February 2, 1943 to 335° true, and at 0030 GCT, February 3, 1943 to 11° true, a further change was scheduled at 0600 GCT, February 3, 1943 to 55° true), but not zigzagging, no lights showing (some disagreement on this point), radio believed to have been silent, all radio operators lost, about 29 lookouts, one on forecastle head, one on port bridge wing, 4 on flying bridge, 2 on each side of each deck, and gun crew on guns and machine guns (Armed Guard had binoculars, also 2 pair on bridge). The weather was clear, sea smooth with slight chop, wind N.E., force 3, visibility good, no moonlight, 3 ships of convoy in sight. The escort Commander, upon receiving a report from Cominch (C&R) of submarines in the vicinity, warned the vessels in the convoy; in turn a warning was announced over the public address system of the DORCHESTER, advising personnel to wear life preservers and parkas. It is possible all persons aboard DORCHESTER did not hear this warning.

3. At 0355 GCT something exploded without warning just abaft of amidships in the vicinity of the engine room; the explosion was muffled; there was very little noise, but considerable concussion. The vessel swung to starboard and lost way, the engines having apparently been stopped by flooding of the engine room, the ship listed sharply to starboard. The shell of the ship was ruptured in the vicinity of the engine room, and just under the refrigerator plant a few feet aft of amidships; some of bulkheads were distorted since some of the doors tended to jam; both generators and an auxiliary gas generator above the water line shortened or failed to function. Flooding was very rapid; some flying debris, No. 4 lifeboat believed holed by fragments, #7 lifeboat reported smashed beyond use. Six(6) blasts were sounded on the whistle to indicate that the vessel had been torpedoed on her starboard side. No enemy craft was sighted from the ship, and no counter offensive was undertaken. The vessel was armed with one 3"/50 caliber gun forward, one 4"/40 caliber gun aft, and four 20mm machine guns. Confidential papers and registered publications were thrown overboard by the Navy Armed Guard on orders from the Master.

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4. About 0358 GCT, the Master ordered the ship to be abandoned. An attempt to blow abandon ship signal on the whistle was made, but only part of the signal was completed because of lack of steam. Some of the crew and passengers left the ship; many others remained aboard and apparently went down with the ship. No. 7 lifeboat was demolished beyond use by the explosion. No. 6 boat with about 51 persons in the boat and about 5 hanging on the boat was located and the personnel removed by the USCGC ESCANABA. No. 13 boat was found and the persons removed by the USCGC COMANCHE, Remainder of the survivors and known dead were on liferafts or in the water. Of the 14 boats aboard, only No. 6 and No. 13 were successfully used in abandoning ship. No. 2 boat was lowered successfully but was soon swamped by the excessive number of persons in or trying to get in it. No. 4 boat was capsized almost as soon as it was lowered. (It is not clear whether this was due to excessive crowding or damage to the boat). No. 9 boat was left hanging by a davit. No. 8 boat was probably not lowered (one of the seamen who was supposed to lower this boat found no one else to assist him so he joined No. 6 boat and assisted in lowering it). Apparently No. 2, 4, 6, 11, 13 and 14 boats were lowered. Some davits were damaged in the explosion. Several liferafts were cut loose by the ship's crew, but left on deck to float clear if the vessel sank. Other liferafts were reported to have been dropped over the side (probably by inexperienced personnel), and injured persons who were in the boats or in the water. Several liferafts were still aboard when the vessel sank. The USCGC COMANCHE rescued 97 persons between 0500 and 1230 GCT, February 3, 1943. The USCGC ESCANABA rescued 132 persons between 0430 and 1230 GCT February 3, 1943. All of these survivors and 13 bodies were brought to Narsarssuak, Greenland where they were landed at 0600 GCT, February 4, 1943.

There was apparently no panic during the abandoning ship operations. Some lifeboats swamped due to overcrowding. Many of the passengers did not realize the seriousness of the situation. When the vessel went down, many persons were standing motionless on deck and apparently making no effort to leave the ship. The best estimate of the total number of persons aboard is 904; of these there were 130 in the crew and 24 Navy Armed Guard. Survivors reported to date; 4 U.S. Army officers; 131 U.S. Army enlisted personnel; 28 Merchant Marine; 44 contractors' civilian employees; 3 Danish citizens enroute to Greenland; 12 U. S. Navy personnel; 7 of U. S. Coast Guard personnel. Total survived 229 of whom 73 were admitted to U. S. Army Hospital at Narsarssuak, Greenland, 14 known dead, 13 of whom were buried at Narsarssuak, 1 at Ivigtut. Balance of 661 missing and unreported.

5. Some survivors believe that they sighted the submarine on the surface after they had abandoned ship, but this is considered doubtful.

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From the position of the other vessels in the convoy and the reported position of the torpedo hit, it is assumed the submarine was abaft of beam of the DORCHESTER when the torpedo was fired. The DORCHESTER was the center vessel in the line of the 3 vessels in convoy; all 3 vessels in line not in column.

6. Vessel was proceeding under "dark ship" conditions; however, some survivors reported that occasionally some light could be seen when doors were opened and closed. After the attack the single-celled flashlights carried by the survivors could be seen. No navigation lights were burning. The red-lensed, single-celled flashlights with which DORCHESTER personnel were equipped were very valuable in locating and rescuing the survivors. It is unknown whether these lights were of any benefit to the enemy.

The S/S LUTZ on starboard beam; SS BISCAYA one point abaft port beam; USCGC ESCANABA patrolling to starboard. After the DORCHESTER was hit the SS LUTZ and BISCAYA apparently slowed down or stopped, then resumed the basic course zigzagging, with the USCGC COMANCHE screening them. After firing star shells, the ESCANABA began picking up survivors with the USCGC TAMPA searching and screening. Just prior to the attack the watch officer of the DORCHESTER stated that he could not pick up the COMANCHE and TAMPA in the darkness.

Although none of the survivors interviewed had ever been on a vessel when it was torpedoed, one of the survivors who had been in another convoy where vessels had been torpedoed, reported that there was much less noise in this case than when he had heard these other vessels torpedoed. None of the escort vessels heard the explosion. The second officer of the DORCHESTER who was asleep at the time the torpedo hit and was awakened by the explosion, stated that he thought at the time that the ship struck a piece of ice and had no idea that it was a torpedo. All of the survivors that were interviewed stated that the explosion was muffled, that it apparently occurred well under water; that there was considerable concussion but very little noise. The vessel was lifted by the explosion and began to list to starboard almost immediately. After the explosion there were strong ammonia fumes; some fuel oil was seen along the starboard side. It is believed that the ammonia fumes came from the refrigerator plant which was located just above the engine room on the main deck.

Survivors reported that there were no rubber life suits aboard the DORCHESTER and that the life preservers were Kapok and Cork. It is believed that had all or part of the personnel aboard the DORCHESTER had rubber life suits a much

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larger percentage would have been saved. It was recommended that passenger vessels operating in North Atlantic Ocean be provided with rubber life suits if practicable.

Survivors spoke of the calm attitude of the Army Chaplains who were passengers aboard, all of whom were missing. It was reported that the Army Catholic Chaplain gave his life jacket to one of the men, and that the Army Jewish Rabbi supplied one survivor with a pair of gloves.

H. V. STEBBINS
Lieutenant, USNR

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