

Op-16-B-5
CONFIDENTIALNAVY DEPARTMENT
Office of the Chief of Naval Operations
WASHINGTON10.F
1943 JAN 2 AM 1942
December 23, 1942MEMORANDUM FOR FILESUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors of MS FIRETHORN, Panamanian Cargo Ship, 4700 G.T., operated by the United States Lines.

1. The FIRETHORN was torpedoed without warning at 0830, ship's time, on October 7, 1942, at a point approximately sixty miles NW of Capetown, South Africa, while enroute from New York to Suez, Egypt, via Capetown. At the time of the attack, she was loaded with tanks, prefabricated airplane hangars, and general war supplies. The ship capsized and sank within one and one-half minutes.
2. She was on a southeasterly course, speed about 13.5 knots, not zig-zagging, daylight, radio silent, but the radio operator had been in contact with Capetown the evening preceding the attack; 5 lookouts--one at forward gun, one on each of the machine guns, one at aft gun and the third mate on the bridge. The weather was clear, heavy ground swells, no wind, bright sunlight, visibility excellent, no ships in sight.
3. First torpedo struck on the port side, tearing open the hull and exploding on contact. The second torpedo struck on port side approximately 12 seconds later and was apparently of the incendiary type, penetrating the hull before exploding. Extent of damage is not known; engines were not secured. Track of torpedo was sighted very close to the ship and no avoiding action could be taken. Distress signals were not sent, radio having been rendered useless by explosion. No counter offensive offered. Confidential codes went down with the ship.
4. The ship was abandoned almost immediately after the first torpedo struck and the survivors were collected on 4 rafts which had floated loose and also a whale boat which subsequently came to the surface. The rafts were lashed together and all remained in that condition until the survivors were picked up by a British corvette 46 hours later. They were then taken to Capetown, South Africa. Of the total of 61 men aboard, 12 are presumed to have died. Of this number, 2 were members of the armed guard and 10 were members of the merchant crew.
5. There was a marked disagreement concerning the description of the submarine. It was the consensus of opinion, however, that the sub was of medium size, probably of an Italian type with a mixed crew of Germans and Italians aboard. In addition, its color was generally stated to be grey-green without any irregularities or bulges on the hull. The survivors also differed as to whether the ship carried one or two guns. The sub was last seen on the surface, heading NW at 0910, October 7, 1942. One survivor definitely stated that painted on the conning tower was an insignia which appeared to be a figure of a seated Neptune holding a trident. Another insignia was also observed and it resembled a rather large square root sign containing inside a combination of letters and numbers as shown in the diagram below:

NOTE: Letters and numbers are not the ones actually observed by the survivor.

A623B7R621
DDL074216
XLYZ622C7

(over)

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Enemy officer interrogated survivors through a German crewman who spoke poor English asking ship's name, nationality, cargo, tonnage, route and destination. Survivors attempted to give misleading answers.

H. V. STEBBINS,
Lieutenant, USNR

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