

Op-16-B-5

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON

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31 March 1944

MEMORANDUM FOR THE FILES
ALL TIMES GCT PM 4 14

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SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors SS FORT FRANKLIN, British Ministry of War Transport, 7135 G.T.

1. The FORT FRANKLIN was torpedoed without warning at 1150 GCT 16 July 1943, in position 22.36S-51.22E having sailed from Aden, 1 July to Durban, with 1500T salt ballast, proceeding independently. The ship sank in approximately ten minutes, plunging bow first.
2. The ship was on course 180° true, speed 7 knots, not zigzagging. The weather was fine and clear but cloudy, sea rough with heavy swells, SE wind, force #6, visibility good, no ships in sight, degaussing off.
3. At 1150, a torpedo struck under the bridge on the port side. About a minute later, a second torpedo struck the port side abreast of the stokehold. Track of torpedoes not seen. Both explosions were dull, no flash or flame. Huge quantity of water was thrown up. The first explosion blew off #2 hatches and beams, some of which collapsed into the hold; only slight damage was visible amidships. The second explosion caused extensive damage in the stokehold and engine room, both of which flooded immediately, and hatches and beams were blown off #3 hold. The iron gratings and stokehold ladders were thrown upon deck. Three out of four lifeboats were seriously damaged. After the first explosion, the ship took a heavy list to port, but she straightened after the second torpedo struck, then settled rapidly by the head. SOS and position sent out. No counter offensive possible. Confidential, including wireless codes, locked in weighted boxes, went down with the ship.
4. Captain ordered ship abandoned. Crew left in 2 lifeboats and one raft. Captain last to leave. Rafts and one lifeboat were later abandoned, and all personnel and stores transferred to large lifeboat. After 4 days at sea, survivors were landed at Mananjary, Madagascar, at 0915, 20 July. Total complement on board was 55, including 7 Navy and 2 Army Gunners. Four are missing and presumed killed by the explosion, one later died in the lifeboat, 50 survived.
5. Sub surfaced after ship went down and closed large lifeboat. Sub appeared to be German, was about 300' long, with two automatic guns on conning tower, one 4" gun forward, smaller one aft. Hull rusty and "grassy". Commander was bareheaded, fairhaired with ginger beard, medium build, wore an old blue Naval uniform, and spoke English fairly well. He asked a number of questions relating to the ship, cargo, passage. Also asked for Captain and was told he was lost with ship. Asked similar questions of crew of other lifeboat, received same answers. Meanwhile photographs were being taken with an expensive type of camera. Three or four of the sub crew were on the conning tower, one using binoculars, others manning the guns. Before leaving, the Commander gave survivors 6 packets of German cigarettes and some bandages, said he was sorry to have had to sink the ship but that Mr. Churchill and Mr. Roosevelt should be blamed for it. Sub left about 2½ hours after surfacing.
6. Captain had been ordered to stream A.N.D. nets south of a certain latitude but had not done so, due to extremely rough weather and because ship was running short of fuel, having made a wide diversion.

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Captain had received no intimation of subs operating in area but on 13 July had received diversion signal instructing him to pass outside of Madagascar.

/s/ Catherine Challenger

CATHERINE CHALLENGER

Ensign, W-V(S), USNR

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