

CONFIDENTIAL

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

Op-16-B-5

26 April 1944

MEMORANDUM FOR FILEALL TIMES GCT

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors SS FORT LAJOIE, 7134 G.T.
British Ministry of War Transport.

1. The FORT LAJOIE was attacked by enemy aircraft at 1830 GCT (-1 time zone), 2 December 1943, while at anchor in Bari Harbor. Ship did not sink but proceeded to Augusta under her own power, arriving at 1600, 5 December.

2. Ship was at anchor in the harbor awaiting a convoy, degaussing was off. No information on lookouts or blackout. Weather was fine and clear, wind SW, force 4, sea smooth, dark with 3/10 high clouds, other ships anchored in the harbor.

3. At 1830 harbor was attacked by enemy aircraft. Bombs exploded in the harbor, one of which near missed ship on port side inflicting no damage. Flare dropped by planes fell into starboard amidship Oerlikon nest, setting it on fire. Fire party organized but flare burned through iron deck and set fire to gunners' accommodation below. At about 2100 two terrific explosions occurred from the direction of the outer end of mole and ship was peppered with red hot splinters and several small fires started. Full force of blast appeared to pass over ship. Pieces of red hot metal blown into #4 hold setting fire to rubbish. Forepart of lower bridge was also alight which, together with fire in the Oerlikon nest, made 3 separate fires burning at the same time. All hatches, fore and aft, blown off and tarpaulins ripped to shreds. There were several large dents in the decks; one piece of plating 10' x 6' x 4' wrapped itself around one of the winches. A large anvil weighing about 6 cwt landed on deck and an ammunition box fell from about 200' cut through #4 derrick and fell into #4 hold. Decks were covered with unexploded ammunition apparently blown from other ships. Six 2 pounder shells found buried in the lagging of the boiler fronts—no damage to boilers. Fires were fought and an attempt was made to shift ship out of danger of flames from oily waters, but it was impossible to knock steel pins out of cable shackles. Fires aboard ship under control by 2100. Oerlikons fired throughout attack, also 2 rounds from the 12 pounder. Confidential books retained on board.

4. Ship was not abandoned. Injured were taken ashore about midnight. Total ships complement 55, including 8 naval and 4 military gunners. There are 54 survivors, 1 killed and 8 injured.

5. Planes dropped several white flares which descended slowly lighting up the whole harbor. Master believed that only a few planes took part in attack and that not many bombs were dropped. He did not believe many bombs were dropped in the town since the only damage observed was superficial and there were no buildings demolished.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

Op-16-B-5

26 April 1944

CONFIDENTIAL

6. Ship's gunners stated that the Italian machine guns on shore which were supposed to fire white tracers to indicate position of planes did not do so, consequently ship's firing was blind.

See Summary of Statements by Survivors of the JOHN BASCOM for additional details of the attack.

NOTE: The following merchant ships were sunk as a result of the attack at Bari:

- U.S. JOHN BASCOM, JOHN L. MOTLEY, JOSEPH WHEELER, JOHN HARVEY, SAMUEL J. TILDEN.
- BRITISH TESTBANK, LARS KRUSE, FORT ATHABASKA, DEVON COAST.
- NORWEGIAN LOM, BOLLSTA, NORLOM.
- ITALIAN BARLETTA, FROSINONE, CASSALA.
- POLISH PUCK, LWOW.

The following merchant ships were also damaged in the attack:

- U.S. LYMAN ABBOTT.
- BRITISH CRISTA, BRITTANY COAST.
- DUTCH ODYSSEUS.
- NORWEGIAN VEST.

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

16-E-2, 16-P-1, 16-Z (5 copies), Op-20-G-M, Op-23-L, Op-30-M, Op-39-P-3 (2 copies), COMINCH F-20, F-21, F-41, F-42, FX-37 (C&R), FX-43, FX-45, AFASU, BuOrd, BuShips, CG (4 copies), Coord Res & Dev, JAG, DIO 1,3,4,5 (2 copies), 6, 7 (3 copies), 8 (2 copies), 10 (4 copies), 11 (3 copies), 12, 13, 14 (4 copies), 15 NDs, Op-16-1-V, Op-31.

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
NAVY DEPARTMENT

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL