

Op-16-B-5

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

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3 Feb 45

MEMORANDUM FOR FILEALL TIMES GCT

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors of the SS LEONIDAS MERRITT, U. S. Freighter, 7176 G.T., owned by War Shipping Administration, operated by United States Lines.

1. The LEONIDAS MERRITT was attacked by aircraft at 0325 GCT, 12 Nov 44, while at anchor off Dulag, Leyte Island (having arrived at Leyte on 24 Oct) loaded with approximately 3,000 tons bridge parts. Ship did not sink but returned to Astoria, Oregon, under her own power, arriving 5 Jan. 45.

2. Ship was at anchor in 10 fathoms of water; daylight; radio silent; 6 look-outs - 2 forward, 2 on bridge, 2 aft. The weather was clear; sea smooth; no wind; sun bearing 120°R; 60° off the horizon; visibility 15 plus miles. Approximately 20 Liberty ships in sight.

3. At 0325 a plane was sighted on course 200°T, travelling 250-300 mph. Plane approached at 100' altitude and at 45°R, made a straight-in run, and started strafing when about 400 yards from the ship. Plane dive bombed and crashed on the deck of the ship at #2 and #3 hatches. No bombs were released prior to crash but the plane carried 1 bomb under the right wing which exploded on contact when the plane hit the deck. Fire broke out in Nos. 1, 2, & 3 holds, on the bridge, and in #3 lifeboat. The main deck and bulwarks in the way of #2 hatch were holed in many places; wooden hatch covers at Nos. 1 and 2 hatches broken; #2 starboard double bottom fuel oil tank holed; #2 starboard deep tank punctured. The port frames in the forward spare room and saloon were broken and buckled. The cargo booms at Nos. 1 and 2 hatches, including the Jumbo boom, were broken; 2 starboard and 1 port foremast stay destroyed. Foremast damaged. Ladders, cargo lights, and running lights were destroyed on the foremast. Ventilators on foremast housing destroyed and mast house badly damaged. Main mast house at #3 badly damaged and the equipment therein destroyed. Cargo lights attached to main mast destroyed. Forward coaming at #2 hatch buckled. Both ventilators on main mast house destroyed. Steam and exhaust lines on fore deck badly damaged. "T" broken on exhaust line. Fire line badly holed. All wiring on fore deck destroyed. Two store room ventilators on main deck badly holed. Two forward life rafts destroyed. Forward fire and engine room ventilators on bridge badly holed. Ready boxes on port and starboard 20 mm guns forward holed; 3" forward gun tub holed; flying bridge 20 mm gun tub on starboard side holed. Forward spare room extensively damaged by fire. Ten tarpaulins at hatches #1, #2 and #3 destroyed. Main and auxiliary aerials carried away. Plane disintegrated on hitting ship. General Quarters were manned at time of attack but no counter offensive was opened. Distress signal sent after attack requesting assistance for fire fighting and care of wounded. By 0400 fire was under control and wounded were being removed from ship. Ship remained at anchor.

At 0925, ship was under another attack. Ship had been at General Quarters for 10 minutes - condition red alert. Eight planes came in from starboard bow at about 4,000' altitude flying 250-300 plus mph, course 200°T. One plane started strafing at about 800 yards and crashed into ship, hitting the deck at #2 hatch. No bombs or torpedoes were released. Port boiler and port engine room ventilators

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SS LEONIDAS MERRITT

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damaged; #3 lifeboat badly gutted. A number of wooden hatch covers of #3 hatch were broken. No. 3 port boom was destroyed while the starboard was badly damaged including the running gear. Engineer's accommodations destroyed; railing around flying bridge damaged; port and starboard ladders buckled; vertical support of starboard wing flying bridge carried away; port and starboard gangway lights destroyed; port and starboard side lights damaged. Fore part of bridge holed; Lyle gun box and gear box on bridge badly damaged. Light circuits damaged. Fore deck fire and steam line damaged; fresh water pipes broken. No. 4 hatch boom damaged. Fathometer and 10" signal lamp destroyed. Ship's #3-20 mm gun opened fire at 1800 yards and was empty when plane crashed. Bow guns, firing at planes attacking other ships close by, could not be warned of approaching plane due to previous damage to telephone system. Twenty-five rounds were fired by the 3"/50, 18 by #1 gun, 7 by #10, and an estimated 1000 rounds by the 20 mm. It is unknown whether or not plane was hit. Plane disintegrated on hitting ship. Distress signal sent requesting fire-fighting assistance and care for the wounded. Reply was received advising that wounded would be removed and that no fire fighting assistance was available. During both attacks all confidential documents remained aboard the ship.

4. Ship was not abandoned at any time. Total ship's complement 68, including 45 merchant crew and 23 Armed Guard. There are 66 survivors - 1 merchant crew dead and 1 Armed Guard missing presumed killed.

5. No description of the attacking planes was secured other than that they were Japanese. The Armed Guard officer commented that the planes came in so low they could not receive concentrated fire from the other vessels in the harbor because of possible damage to other ships at anchor and that this may have been the reason dive bomb attacks were made from a low level.

6. The LEONIDAS MERRITT was also attacked at 0150 26 Oct while at anchor in San Pedro Bay, Leyte. Seven Jap planes (apparently Zeros) made strafing runs of 8 minutes duration on ships anchored in the harbor. One plane strafed the ship at mast head level, firing 19 mm and 25 caliber guns. Ship was facing 360°T and plane approached ship from 270°R, travelling at least 250 mph and passed over #4 hatch. No bombs were released but at least 20 bullets hit the ship which sustained no damage except bullet holes. Ship's guns were manned and opened fire on the plane. The #5-20 mm gun made 2 or 3 hits on plane's right wing. Plane flew on after strafing ship on a course 90°T. Ship remained at anchor.

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