

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

Jan 19, 1943.

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors SS PRESIDENT COOLIDGE (U.S.) 21,936 G.T. American President Lines, owners.

1. The PRESIDENT COOLIDGE was sunk by the mines in a mine field, at 0935 ship's time, on October 26, 1942, while the vessel was proceeding from Noumea to the harbor at Luganville Bay, Santos Island, with 5050 U.S. troops aboard. The vessel was beached upon a ledge, several hundred yards from the beach, by the Master; listed over on her port side, gradually filled, slipped entirely off the reef and sank, at 10.45 ship's time. It is stated her bow was down in 70' of water and her stern in 270'.

2. The vessel, employed in transporting troops, was reported under orders to proceed to the "Buttons", as the waters of Luganville Bay are known, where she was to meet a small boat with a pilot outside the mine field. The location of the mine field was refused the Master. The vessel was reported by the 2nd Officer, who was on deck, to be making 15 knots but others believe that speed excessive. Weather fair and clear; sea smooth; wind not stated; visibility good; daylight. Ships in vicinity in the harbor.

3. The vessel approached Santos Island at about 0950, ship's time, stopped one half hour to talk to a destroyer, anchored at the spot marked "X" on Charter No. 2833. The destroyer instructed the Master to proceed into Luganville Bay to the east and around Tutuba Island. The vessel then proceeded, evidently following the destroyer's instructions, without waiting for a pilot and had reached the position marked No. 1 on the Charter (enlarged Pekoasegond Channel) when the first torpedo explosion occurred. The 2nd Officer stated the vessel did not wait for a pilot as it was not healthy outside. The first explosion, at 0935 ship's time, was amidships port side at the after fireroom, as the water rushed into that compartment first according to the men on watch. One half minute after the first explosion, there was a second explosion on the starboard side of the engine room. These explosions were not on the sides of the vessel but on her double bottom. Engines were at standby at the first explosion, but it is uncertain how long they had been at that point. The vessel

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had enough headway to permit the Master to turn her to the beach 300-400 yards away. In three minutes the water had entered the fireroom and had reached the operating controls. Water tight bulkheads had already all been closed. The Master immediately ordered right rudder and headed for shore. The vessel ran the distance to shallow water, pushed herself upon a ledge, several hundred yards from the beach and sank in one hour. As vessel now lies, she is completely out of sight upon coral reefs that drop off very fast.

4. Almost immediately, the Master gave orders to abandon ship. Life rafts and lifeboats were used; Navy vessels, of which there were a number in the harbor, gave assistance. Some of the men swam the short distance to shore. It is reported one in the crew and four among the troops were lost. The crew of vessel was ashore for 6 or 7 days, and then taken aboard the SS ISLAND MAIL and SS CAPE FAIRWEATHER. 26 of the crew "hitch hiked" on Army planes from Santos Island to Noumea, where they boarded the SS LURLINE, sailed November 6, 1942, and later arrived in San Francisco. Most of the cargo was aboard when the vessel sank; a small amount of the cargo only having been discharged at Noumea.

5. The Master; Third Mate, who was on watch; and the members of the Purser's Department, went to Noumea, where a hearing was to be held.

6. The Master of the SS JOSEPH STANTON (U.S.) in Esperitos Santos, on October 25, 1942, reports that at about midnight all hands were called to battle station and firing was heard in the distance. It was later ascertained this firing came from a Japanese submarine shelling the airport. When the PRESIDENT COOLIDGE entered Esperitos Santos the next day, the Master of the JOSEPH STANTON stated the PRESIDENT COOLIDGE was ordered to stop by the patrol vessel outside in order to pick up a pilot, but did not do so and steamed toward the wrong channel entrance at about 15 knots in a northerly direction, instead of a westerly direction which she should have followed. The signal tower operator at the Port Director's Office, is reported to have ordered the vessel to stop and go full speed astern in order to avoid the mines. But this order was likewise ignored. It is also stated that while the Navy tried its best to avert the accident, the commands were heeded too late. Because the cargo and side ports were open, a breach of regulations, the ship sank much faster than had they been closed.

H.V. STEBBINS
Lt. USNR