

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON

Aug. 13, 1942

CONFIDENTIALMEMORANDUM FOR FILECopy

SUBJECT: Summary of statements by Survivors of SS ROBERT E. LEE U. S. Cargo-passenger vessel, 5184 G.T., owner: Eastern Steamship Co., Operated by Alcoa Steamship Inc., as agents for War Shipping Administration.

1. The ROBERT E. LEE was torpedoed without warning at 1630 CWT, July 30, 1942, at 28° 40'N - 88° 30'W, while enroute from Port of Spain to New Orleans (see note below) with 47 tons of general cargo consisting largely of the personal effects of the 270 passengers on board, most of whom were survivors of ships previously torpedoed; drafts 14' fore, 17' aft. The vessel listed first to port, then to starboard, and sank within 15 minutes, plunging stern first.
2. The ship was on course 287° true, speed 16 knots in 940 fathoms; not zigzagging, radio silent (see note below) 4 lookouts stationed one each on the bridge, fore-castle-forecastle head, wireless shack, and gun stand. The weather was clear, sea smooth, wind east, force 1, daylight attack with perfect visibility. The ship was escorted by PC 566 which was 1/2 mile ahead and 1/2 point off ship's port bow at the time of the attack.
3. The track of the torpedo was seen by several of the passengers and crew for approximately 200 yards before striking the ship. The torpedo was seen to approach the ship from the stern and paralleled the ship's course on starboard side. It was running close to the surface and those who saw it argued among themselves as to whether it was a porpoise or shark. After paralleling ship's course the torpedo made a 90° turn and struck the ship just aft of the engine room. The explosion completely destroyed No. 3 hold, extending up through the "B" and "C" decks, the engines were put out of commission, steering gear damaged, and radio wrecked. Although armed no counter offensive offered. The escort vessel sighted the sub's periscope, also established sound contact, and dropped several depth charges with unknown results, although a small oil slick was observed in the vicinity where the periscope was last sighted. Distress signals were sent by the escort vessel and replies received. Confidentials sank with the ship, the codes being locked in an iron box.
4. The ship was abandoned in 6 lifeboats and 16 life-rafts; the survivors picked up by the escort vessel, and by SC 519 and the tug UNDERWRITER, and were landed at Venice, La. then transported by bus to New Orleans, where the injured were hospitalized. The ships complement was: 131 crew, of which 2 are known dead and 8 are missing; 6 armed guard, all survived; and 270 passengers, of which 3 are known dead and 12 missing. Total aboard: 407 of which 5 are known dead and 20 missing, the rest being saved.

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5. The sub was not sighted by any of the survivors. The torpedo was described as about 20 ft. long, and 18" to 20" in diameter, with a very pointed nose and was painted light grey. A piece of pipe about 4" or 6" in height, with the end of the pipe bent forward was affixed near the nose of the torpedo, and extended above the surface like a miniature periscope, creating a splash as the torpedo proceeded through the water at a speed estimated to be 20 knots. The torpedo was not running in an arc but after paralleling ship's course made a "sharp" turn into the ship.

NOTE: The ROBERT E. LEE was originally destined for Tampa, was met by the escort PC 566, at 1051 EWT, July 29, 1942 and arrived at Tampa at 2144 EWT where she lay to off the Edgmont Key Light and tried to secure a pilot. None being available, the LEE and the escort held a conversation in Morse code by visual blinker lights, and the LEE stated she was proceeding to New Orleans. At 2325 EWT, July 29, 1942 the escort broke radio silence to advise Com Gulf Sea Frontier that the LEE could not get a pilot at Tampa and they were proceeding to New Orleans and requested instructions as to whether to continue to escort the LEE to New Orleans or return to Tampa. Reply was received to escort to New Orleans. At 1645 CWT, July 30, 1942 the escort began a radio message to the Port Director, New Orleans, intending to advise arrival time at Southwest pass, requesting a pilot, and advising of bunker requirements; but this message was only partially sent; being interrupted to send the first distress signal on the torpedoing.

end.

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