

ROBERT ROWAN

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

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24 August 1943

SUBJECT: Summary of Statements by Survivors of the SS ROBERT ROWAN, American Freighter, 7176 G.T., owned by War Shipping Administration, chartered to U.S.A.T.S.

1. The ROBERT ROWAN was bombed from the air at 1345 GMT, 11 July 1943, while anchored in harbor of Gela, Sicily, having left Oran, Algeria 6 July in invasion convoy for Sicily, loaded with a cargo of ammunition, gasoline, guns, jeeps, Army personnel and equipment, draft 14' forward, 22' aft. Vessel sank on an even keel at 1420 GMT; superstructure still visible.

2. Ship was at anchor in Gela harbor, radio silent, 15-20 lookouts, located forward, amidships, bridge and aft; general alarm had been sounded. Weather was clear, sea smooth, slight swells, wind NE, force 1, sun bearing 68°W, visibility good, other ships in invasion fleet in sight.

3. Approximately 30 planes had been sighted before the ROWAN was struck approaching from the NW, altitude approximately 10,000 feet, speed 200 knots, they dropped bombs from a horizontal flying position. Anti-aircraft batteries of ships in convoy sent up a heavy barrage causing planes to divide their formation; 18 planes went in a Southerly direction and 12 went in a Northerly direction. About 70-80 bombs were dropped at the ships in convoy with some landing within 10 to 50 feet of the ROWAN. At the same time ships were under fire from enemy tanks about 3 miles away on shore, bearing North, no hits, nearest shell about 30' from ROWAN, 1 shell every 60 seconds, they did not explode when they hit the water.

At 1345 GMT, 3 bombs struck the ship almost simultaneously; the first penetrated main deck near #1 hatch, passed through 'tween deck, through starboard side about 6' above waterline and disappeared in the water. Did not explode. The second entered #2 hatch and the third entered #3 hatch. Fire was started immediately in both holds, hatch covers were blown off, 15-18' hole pierced in deck, ammunition began exploding. Bombs were 200 lb., 15" in diameter, delayed action type. No distress signal sent. Vessel was armed with 2-3", 8-20 MM, 2-40MM guns and 2-50 cal. MG. All guns were firing at all times at the planes and it was stated that tracers were seen to enter the fuselage of one of the planes, while other tracers fell short. Information codes were thrown into the burning hatch.

4. Ship was abandoned in lifeboats and rafts. Survivors went to the near by ships to be taken aboard. Total

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complement on board were 334 U.S.A. troops, 14 U. S. Naval Amphibious Force, 32 Armed Guard and 41 merchant crew. All were saved, no casualties.

5. The attacking planes could not be identified.

6. The boatswain organized a fire fighting crew and fought the fire in the holds until ordered to abandon ship.

Gun crews remained at their stations until ordered to abandon ship. Army personnel who had guns on deck unlash moorings and went into action against the attacking planes.

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