

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR FILE

3 May, 1944

ALL TIMES GCT

SUBJECT:

Summary of Statements by Survivors SS WILLIAM B. WOODS, 7176 G.T. owned by WSA, operated by A.H. Bull & Co., on Government service.

1. The WILLIAM B. WOODS was torpedoed at 1521 GCT 10 Mar 44, in 38.36 N-13.45E, having sailed from Palermo 1030 10 Mar for Naples, routed independently with one escort, with 2115 tons of Army vehicles and ammunition and about 400 U. S. troops; draft forward 14'3", aft 21'6". Ship sank stern first at 1900 in 1078 fathoms.
2. Ship was on course 036 true, speed 10 knots, not zig-zagging, radio silent, at least 2 merchant crew lookouts--1 on bow, 1 on top bridge, Armed guard on condition #2 (one-half crew on watch), 93 amperes positive current in degaussing coils on M setting. Weather clear, sea smooth, wind force #1, visibility good. Italian escort vessel ARETUSA was zigzagging ahead of ship.
3. At 1521 explosion occurred on port side in #5 hold. A hole at least 12' wide and extending 4' above the waterline was blown in the port side.; the plates were bent in. After deck littered with debris from #5 hold. No. 5 hatch covers and beams blown off; deck in vicinity of #5 hatch was buckled slightly. No. 5 winches blown loose from the deck. Plates on the well deck by #5 hatch split. The shaft is believed to have been broken, the exhaust line and overhead discharge of the main condenser were ruptured. Telemotor put out of commission. Life raft on starboard side by #5 hatch not displaced. Bombs stored in #5 hold did not go off. Shaft alley door to #5 hold closed but may have been loosely dogged and was blown off by explosion. Immediate flooding in #5 hold and engine room from overhead discharge and the shaft alley. There was no fire. Engines secured within 2-4 minutes of hit and ship came gradually to a stop. Ship was settling very slowly aft. At times master believed ship might not sink and that she could possibly be towed to port. Several distress messages sent and replies from escort received. British ASL's arrived in about 2 hours apparently in response to messages. Guns were manned and 8 rounds fired by bow 3"50' and approximately a full magazine by the #1, #3, #5 20 mm in the direction of a smooth spot in the water but no sub was sighted and no damage is known to have been inflicted. When bulkhead between #5 and #4 holds gave way, ship sank plunging by the stern. Confidential codes dropped overboard in perforated metal boxes.

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4. Ship abandoned between 1530 and 1830. After way was off ship 4 lifeboats were launched and ordered to stand close by ship for further orders. Three rafts were carried away by explosion. One remaining raft and 14 Army rafts were put to use by Army troops upon orders from master, each raft remaining alongside until as many troops as possible could hold on to it or get on it. After all available rafts were filled it was evident that there was insufficient floating equipment for the 70 personnel remaining aboard ship. Orders were given to break out all available mattresses, hatch boards, life preserver boxes, etc., and troops fell to constructing make-shift rafts. Process of abandoning ship was stopped since it was doubtful as to whether ship would continue to settle. Two British Spitfires came out and circled the ship and then disappeared. At about 1730 radio operator picked up a message stating that assistance would arrive at 1830. Abandonment of ship was again begun. Messages were sent to escort vessel ARETUSA stating that 70 men were aboard with no life saving means and requesting her to come alongside, but this was not done. Remaining troops finally ordered to jump into water and to hang on to mattresses thrown overboard. Master was last survivor to leave the ship. Rafts and boats proceeded alongside the ARETUSA and survivors were taken aboard. The ship's motorboat made repeated trips picking up men from the water and transferring them to the ARETUSA. Master stated that the ARETUSA did not launch any boats. The moon was up making it an easy matter to find men in the water, several of whom were using their flashlights. Several red life preserver lights were spotted. During these operations 2 small British ASL's arrived on the scene and assisted in picking up survivors from the water. About 2010 motor lifeboats ceased operations. When it appeared that all survivors had been picked up escort proceeded to Palermo landing survivors at 2400 same date. Ship's complement included 43 merchant crew, 28 Armed Guard, 1 Army security officer and approximately 400 Army troops. Approximately 50 of the colored troops who were quartered in #5 'tween decks were killed by explosion. All of the merchant crew survived--1 Armed Guard dead, 7 of the Army troops known dead and 44 Army personnel missing presumed lost.

5. The attacking sub was not sighted before or after attack, but at one time after explosion a calm spot in the water which appeared different from surrounding water was observed from the bridge 2 points on the starboard bow.

6. Master stated that the escort vessel reported having sighted 2 torpedo tracks which missed the WILLIAM B. WOODS besides the one that struck the ship. The captain of the ARETUSA also stated that they had had no contact with their asdic device.