

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

6 Nov. 1943

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SUBJECT: Summary of Statements By survivors of the SS WILLIAM W. GERHARD, U. S. Liberty Ship, 7176 G.T., owned by War Shipping Administration and operated by American South African Lines.

1. The WILLIAM W. GERHARD was torpedoed without warning at 0830 GCT, 21 September 1943, in 40.07N - 14.43E, having sailed from Malta on 19 September in convoy bound for Salerno, Italy, with a general Army cargo including guns, gasoline and ammunition stowed in #1,2,3,5,6, holds and a deck cargo of field pieces and mechanized equipment, draft 16' forward, 21' aft. Ship broke in two, position 40.07N - 14.15E, forward section sank immediately at 0840 GCT 22 September, aft section remained afloat and was sunk by friendly shellfire at 0955 GCT, 22 September.

2. Ship was on course 290° True, had just completed an emergency 45° turn to port, speed 8 knots, convoy position #13, not zigzagging, radio silent, all personnel were at battle stations following a general alarm given by convoy Commodore 5 minutes before attack. Weather was clear, sea calm, wind force 2, direction unknown, daylight, visibility good, other ships of convoy in sight; 14 merchant ships escorted by 4 British destroyers.

3. At 0830 GCT a torpedo struck the port bow about the center of #1 hold causing a tremendous explosion which raised the bow out of water and caused ship to buckle just forward of the bridge. Vessel shook violently, engines were secured immediately. A large crack appeared on each side of ship extending below the waterline. Hole in hull on starboard side extending about 2' above waterline and 10' long. Deck over #1 and 3 holds ruptured and distorted. Small holes in hull on port side at #3 hold. Steam and water pipes ruptured, #1 and 3 holds flooded immediately. Ship was taken in tow by salvage tug USS MORENO at 1200 GCT; at 1445 GCT fire broke out in #1 hold, it was fought by USS NARRANGANSETT and HMS WEAZEL, later when towing wire broke MORENO assisted. After two hours fire got out of control and ship burned throughout the night. Explosions resulted and ship broke in two at 0840 GCT, 22 September. Forward section sunk at once, aft section was sunk at 0955 GCT by shell fire from tugs. No distress signals sent, no counter offensive offered. Mersigs, Camsi, Amsi, confidential register, radio code signals turned over to Oran office of War Shipping Administration. All other confidential documents thrown overboard in weighted box.

4. Immediately following the explosion ship was abandoned in a fairly orderly fashion in boats and rafts, although abandonment was begun before actual order to abandon was given, and there was considerable panic among the Army troops on board. On orders from an escort vessel, Captain and part of his crew returned aboard about 0945 GCT to determine whether ship could proceed. Engines were not damaged and could operate, however, as ship started to settle more and took a list to starboard from 10-15°

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Captain ordered his men to stand by in the boats to await arrival of tugs. They were taken aboard the MORENO at 1200 GCT. Other survivors were picked up by escort vessels; all survivors were landed at Salerno. Total complement on board was 267; including 193 U.S. and British Army personnel, 44 merchant crew, and 30 Armed Guard. All survived except two members of the Armed Guard; one killed instantly and body went down with the ship, the second died aboard the HMHS VITA on 23 September and was buried at sea. Three merchant crew and 6 Armed Guard injured and hospitalized.

5. The submarine was not sighted at any time.

6. Armed Guard Commander stated that it was possible that the fire which started in #1 hold was caused by the smoke floats carried in the bottom of #1 hold. It was reported that the Captain and Armed Guard Officer left the ship before all personnel had been taken off, but subsequently reboarded and the Armed Guard Officer directed the removal of the wounded.

Captain stated that he gave order to abandon ship immediately after hit. Other survivors reported that the Army troops on board rushed to boats before the actual order to abandon was given and caused more confusion than otherwise might have resulted.

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