

Statement of P.H.Rees, Chief Engineer, M.V. SUTLEJ, sunk 26 February, 1944.

(Vessel left Aden on Tuesday 15th February 1944, in convoy, bound for Australia. After being in convoy for 5 days we split up and continued the passage unescorted. Six days later (26 February) at 1820 hours we were struck by a torpedo between nos. 1 and 2 holds on port side.) It has since been reported to me by the Quartermaster, through the Purser, that at this instant the Master and Chief Officer were on the bridge and had seen torpedo approaching the ship. Engines were stopped, engineroom personnel cleared (5th Engineer Officer, donkeymen, greaser and fireman). I personally made sure of this before leaving the ship. The "abandon ship" alarm was ringing almost from the instant of being hit. She heeled over to starboard and sunk in about 3 to 5 minutes after being struck. Position is unknown but an approximate position of 9°S. 70°E. is given by the 2nd Engineer Officer. There was no foundation for belief that any S.O.S. message was sent out in this brief time limit. The master was last seen in the wireless room nevertheless.

All rafts got away (3). One raft had been previously lost in North Atlantic gale outward bound and was unable to replace at Alexandria. Darkness set in and confusion reigned for quite a time, whilst survivors were in the water.

I shall now proceed by recording what happened to me personally. I proceeded to try and take up my station in No. 1 boat (Boatdeck, starboard side). On getting amidships I was waistdeep in water, the vessel having sunk this deep already. I turned back to try another boat, No. 4 (port side engine room). I had no sooner mounted the ladder when the vessel started to drop away under me. I shouted to those around me to jump for it and jumped myself. I came up alongside the 3rd Engineer and we swam together to what turned out to be the only remaining small drum type auxiliary raft. We mounted and found one coal boy on it. We then picked up as many men as possible. This added up to (8) men, one of which died (chief cook). The submarine now appeared on the surface and stopped our efforts to save more men (about 10 minutes after the sinking). He came alongside and questioned us as to whether the master was amongst us, ship's name, destination and cargo. It was definitely a Japanese submarine, ocean-going type, mounting 8" gun and anti-aircraft armament. He attempted to ram all rafts and machine-gunned us at random. His aiming was poor. The exhausts of the submarine were sparking badly and showed up against the darkness very clearly. He appeared to have good speed and manouverability.

His anti-noise gear was good. After the submarine disappeared I set out to try and collect an upturned lifeboat that was in the vicinity so we decided to look for more men that maybe were still afloat on debris. It was then that we contacted two rafts tied together. These we made and found were occupied by (1) 4th Engineer Officer and naval rating and (2) Purser, Chinaman and 7 men. We made fast and waited for daybreak. Throughout the night it rained and blew continuously. Next morning another raft was sighted with men aboard. Owing to distance and weather contact was unable to be made. On the third morning this raft was lost sight of. Attempt was made to set a course N.E. with the prevailing weather. Progress was made in this direction the following 48 days. I stripped the small raft of all material and stores and cut it adrift. We then continued in tandem for the next 30 days.

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After 20 days we sighted land (two small islands) but could not make it with the prevailing offshore wind and set. Flares at night did not draw any attention so I assume they were inhabited. Rain water was plentiful. Fish and birds were caught and cooked and the condition of the men was good in general. We decided to part company after 30 days to allow for two chances of being sighted. This decision I may add went badly on the conscience. At about 11.30 on 13th April Catalina aircraft sighted one raft and dropped provisions. The next day both rafts were sighted and H.M.S. FLAMINGO picked up all survivors.

(signed) P.H. Rees, Chief Engineer

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