

E/ 2087

District Intelligence Office
Twelfth Naval District
Kamm Building, Room 608
717 Market Street
San Francisco, California

2 October 1944

I, Charles E. PYLE, make the following free and voluntary statement to V. C. DOWELL, whom I know to be a lieutenant in the U. S. Naval Reserve:

I was on 28 April 1944 appointed First Assistant Engineering Officer on the S.S. JEAN NICOLET, a U.S. cargo ship, owned by the War Shipping Administration and operated by the Oliver J. Olson Steamship Company on government charter to the U.S. Army. My home address is Route 3, Box 325, Lodi, California. I am married and have one adopted son and I am an American citizen, born in Alviso, California, 25 June 1920.

The S.S. JEAN NICOLET sailed from San Pedro, California, 12 May 1944, enroute independently to Colombo via Fremantle, and was torpedoed at 0707 (ship's time) or 1407 GCT, 2 July 1944, approximately 600 miles south of Colombo. The ship was making approximately ten and one-half knots, was blacked-out and the radio silent. The weather was overcast, with occasional clouds and with moonlight breaking through. Visibility was good and there were no other ships in sight.

I was standing at the log desk which is in the engine room amidships of the NICOLET, below deck on the floor plates, when the explosion occurred. I was blown to the starboard side outboard and aft. The portion of the vessel where I had been standing remained intact. I immediately went to the throttle which was located amidships, and then approximately four or five seconds later the second torpedo struck the NICOLET, throwing me again in the same direction, but, as before, I remained on my feet. I then went back to the throttle and waited for communications from the bridge which failed to come. A decided list to starboard immediately made itself apparent. For an interval of about five minutes, I waited down below at my post and, since no word came, I dismissed my men underneath me and secured the engine room, secured the main engine and the fires and I told them to proceed to their abandon ship station. I then went up on deck and looked for the Chief Engineer, but failed to find him; so I went out to my abandon ship station and I met the Mate there and at that time the order was given to abandon ship; so I placed my life preserver on, got some clothes and a few personal effects, helped lower the life boat away and got it in the water and then steered it around the area, picking up various members of the crew and passengers of the ship who had jumped overboard. We had adequate mobility as our life boat was equipped with a motor. Twenty-five people were finally placed in our life boat which was comfortably filled, but not overly crowded. These twenty-five people were composed of members of the

48020A

merchant crew, namely, the Chief Mate, Clem CARLIN; Radio Operator TILDEN; Deck Engineer, Paul M. MITCHEM; plus members of the Armed Guard crew and passengers of the ship. The Chief Mate, CARLIN, assumed command of the life boat and had directed that we pick up the various survivors. After accomplishing this task, he decided that we should go back and board the ship. When we were close to the NICOLET, we sighted gunfire on the horizon. We turned back and went away from the ship. On our course away from the ship, we sighted a couple of life rafts and drew alongside of them. The Captain of the ship, D. A. NILSSON, was aboard one of the rafts. We talked over plans with the Captain, and it was determined that we would take the Captain aboard our boat, who would direct us in picking up various other survivors and bring them to the centrally located place represented by the two rafts.

Shortly after he boarded our boat, the submarine made its appearance in the near vicinity, and the first questions that were directed to us from the submarine were in good English, although I was unable to determine who was uttering them. The first questions were concerning the name of the vessel and the whereabouts of the Captain or ship's officers, to which we answered the JEAN NICOLET, but advised the Japanese that the ship's officers were still aboard the vessel. Orders were given to us to come aboard the submarine. They threw us a line and we maneuvered up to the side when they ordered us to come aboard. We started going aboard and a Japanese crewman of the submarine helped us over the railing alongside the conning tower. After all the survivors had gained the deck of the submarine, the Japanese proceeded to fire upon the life boat with machine guns in an attempt to sink the same, which was apparently accomplished, as I never saw it again. The Japanese immediately stripped us of all our possessions, with the exception of clothes. Each one of the twenty-five members of our boat, including Captain NILSSON of the NICOLET, were bound with our hands tied behind our backs. We were then led forward and told to assume a sitting position with specific orders not to look back. During my entire stay aboard the submarine, I did not see any men that I assumed to be Japanese naval officers, but, instead, saw only Japanese crew members who were dressed in khaki shorts with a red patch upon their left sleeve, apparently designating their affiliation with the Japanese Imperial Navy, and later, when I was questioned at Colombo, I heard other members of my crew state that they saw a Japanese officer with a samurai sword aboard the submarine, but they did not know his rank.

The first man to be bound was William MAUSER, utility messman (phonetic), who was led forward and, for no apparent reason at all, was shot and shoved over the side and I watched his body float by me into the sea. I sat down, as I said before, and while I was sitting down, I was struck over the head and around the shoulders with a blunt object and kicked in the ribs. Later, a crewman came along and decided he wanted a pair of shoes. He tried to take mine off, but my working shoes were too large for him, so he cracked me in the ankles and went on about his business. During this period, the submarine continued to pick up survivors from the S.S. JEAN NICOLET and bring them aboard in much the same fashion as our group and at one time I would

estimate there were approximately ninety survivors aboard the submarine, although most of them were aft of my position and I was unable to see them or identify them, and the only ones whom I can positively state were aboard the submarine with me are the following:

Captain NILSSON
Clem CARLIN, Chief mate
James THURMAN, Chief Engineer
Archie HOWARD, naval technician
Boatswain of the JEAN NICOLET
Bill TIDEL, Commercial Radio Operator
Carl ROSENBAUM, fireman and watertender
Robert WALKER, fireman and watertender
One Army doctor (name unknown)
Army air officer (name unknown)
One Armed Guard member (name unknown)

Shortly after coming aboard, Captain NILSSON, First Officer Clem CARLIN and Radio Operator TIDEL identified themselves to the Japanese commander and were taken back to the conning tower for questioning and I did not see them again. Of the above indicated people, the only one that I can positively state survived this experience is Carl ROSENBAUM, fireman and watertender of the JEAN NICOLET, who was picked up by the rescue ship S.S. HOXA.

All expressions that were directed at me were in Japanese, but I heard some English being spoken by members of the submarine crew and one directed a question to an unidentified person as to whether or not he had ever attended San Francisco Junior College. During this time I was sitting down, I was able to see other members being subjected to the same treatment as I, namely, they were being beaten up with clubs, pipes and other metal and wooden instruments. The Boatswain (name unknown) of the JEAN NICOLET was stunned and rendered semi-unconscious, but the others sustained the blows as nuisance attacks. After becoming weary from sitting in one position, I leaned back on my elbows and was severely beaten upon the head by some object and momentarily lost consciousness from the blow. I tried to assume my original sitting position again and failed to have energy to do so and was again beaten on the shoulders and the head with some heavy object which I could not see. After this, I decided to keel over on my side and I was subjected to a few more blows and a couple kicks in the ribs and left to lay there.

Shortly after this, the portion of the submarine deck where I was on became awash, as we were underway in the swells of the sea, and the sky was still overcast with the moon shining through broken clouds. At this time, which I estimate to be about 2230, we were ordered to watch the firing by the Japanese submarine upon our burning ship, the S.S. JEAN NICOLET, with a twin five-inch gun which was mounted on the foredeck of the submarine. If we failed to heed their command, which was in Japanese, they would jab us in the

face with their bayonets to enforce their demand to turn our heads. Two shots were fired from the submarine which struck the stern of the NICOLET. Somewhere around midnight, I was picked up and led aft, at which time I noticed the deck guns being secured and that thirty or thirty-five survivors of our vessel were still sitting on the submarine deck. I learned then that the Japanese crew were employing a tactic somewhat similar to the old Indian practice of running the gauntlet wherein they force survivors to pass between two lines of men armed with clubs, bars and other blunt objects and, when reaching the end, being either shoved or knocked into the sea to drown. Apparently this process had been going on for sometime before I was called to take my turn and I estimate that approximately sixty people had been handled in this fashion prior to my adventure. Then I was led to the front of two lines composed of Japanese submarine crew members facing one another and forming the gauntlet line with approximately eight men on the inboard line and four or five on the outboard. When I momentarily stopped to survey the situation, I was struck a terrific blow at the base of my head which caused me to feel a sensation similar to a bouncing ball. From there on, I was shoved down through the two lines of Japanese who rained blows upon my body and head with various objects which I was too stunned and dazed to identify, although I was later advised by my doctor that I had been cut with a bayonet or sword in the process.

When I reached the end of the gauntlet, I fell into what appeared to me to be a white foamy sea. Apparently I lost consciousness briefly and was under water for a few seconds, but shortly I came to the surface and attempted to gain my bearings. I saw that the submarine was going away from me about fifty or sixty yards from my position at approximately five or six knots and from there I was unable to tell what had happened to the other twenty-five or thirty survivors aboard the submarine deck. I assumed that I would drown, but a natural desire to live kept me afloat, which I did by floating and treading water for approximately eight hours with my hands tied behind my back. During my struggle to keep afloat, I heard cries for help from dying and drowning members of the NICOLET's complement. With increasing visibility due to daybreak I heard two men apparently in the water talking to one another, who did not seem to be helpless, so my hopes were immediately buoyed and I began calling to them. Finally my calls were acknowledged and our identities made known. They were Stuart VANDERHURST, A.B., and a Navy Armed Guard enlisted man by the name of Teofil Stanley WROZUMSKI, G.3c, who were swimming towards the JMW NICOLET, which, although listing and burning badly, was still afloat about a mile and a half from our position. Finally, we sighted one another and they came over to me and succeeded in untying my hands which were bound behind my back. We then started out swimming again in the general direction of the ship in search of floating debris or some means of gaining buoyancy. I also noted that the submarine was not in sight, as it had apparently submerged, with the remaining survivors on board being washed off of its deck in the process, when it was warned of the approach of a British patrol plane which flew over the burning vessel at 0130 that morning, which I heard, but did not see.

While we were swimming towards the NICOLET, I noted that WYROZUMSKI was weakening rapidly and helped him for a period, but saw that we would both be lost if I spent too much of my strength in this fashion, so I told him I would swim on to the ship and attempt to get some help and retrieve him, while he was proceeding more slowly towards the vessel. This was agreeable with him and I proceeded on. VANDERHURST agreed to stay with WYROZUMSKI and, while swimming towards the NICOLET, I came upon a U.S. Army captain by the name of GUSSACK, who was also in a weakened condition and I advised him that I would attempt to gain help for him also around the vessel which was still approximately a mile and a half away on a comparatively smooth but a swelling sea. I continued to swim for another half hour towards the NICOLET and came upon a member of the Armed Guard crew whom I believe to be either Robert Calvin BUTLER, S1c, or William Earl SIMONS, R13c, whose hands were still bound behind his back and who was suffering from a severe gash over his eye. I attempted to release him from his bonds, but was unable to do so, so I advised him I would proceed on for help and rescue him at the earliest opportunity. During this interim, I noted that at least three scout and observation planes had been flying over the area. I continued swimming for approximately an hour when one of these planes dropped me a life preserver with slight provisions attached and on the return sweep, they dropped me another life preserver. At this time, I debated whether to continue on or take this help back to the fellows I had left behind, as I noticed that the S.S. JET NICOLET had sunk beneath the surface of the sea and would only offer debris as possible buoyancy. I then determined to return to them and offer assistance. Finally after an hour or so of swimming, I ran into VANDERHURST and WYROZUMSKI, who had been seen by the plane and had been dropped one life preserver. I gave my spare life preserver to WYROZUMSKI and then we made plans as to what to do. They decided to stay in one spot and shortly afterwards we sighted an object on the horizon, about 0130, which later we identified as a life raft with men upon it. We decided to swim to it and upon reaching it, we discovered Robert Floyd MUVILL, Armed Guard member; Paul M. MITCHELL, Deck Engineer; Captain GUSSACK, U.S.A.; and BUTLER or SIMONS. They invited VANDERHURST, WYROZUMSKI and myself aboard, which we accepted. We remained in this raft during the remainder of the afternoon and all through the night, during which time we noted that a patrol plane was dropping flares and also a searchlight was seen on the horizon which we assumed to be a submarine, but since we had no means of illumination, neither saw us.

The next morning, 4 July 1944, at approximately 0730, a vessel was seen on the horizon by us, but who apparently had not seen our craft, as it remained in our vicinity approximately a mile away and then proceeded to steam away. Approximately 0800, a liberator patrol craft flew over us and dropped smoke flares in our vicinity and shortly thereafter, a PB4Y plane flew over and dropped a large number of smoke bombs in our area which this time apparently caught the attention of the lookouts on the rescue vessel which later turned out to be the HOXA, which turned back and picked us up at approximately 1000, 4 July 1944.

After being taken aboard ship, we were given first aid and food, clothing and all the necessary resuscitants and were not questioned until arrival at Addu Atoll, where British naval authorities interrogated us concerning the torpedoing and subsequent sinking of the S.S. JEAN NICOLET. This vessel had, in all, rescued twenty-three survivors who were being questioned at this port and in the process of the interrogation relative to the conversation had on board the submarine between the Japanese crew members and the survivors of the NICOLET, one of the parties being interviewed, whom I believe to be Captain GUSSACI, U.S.A., volunteered the information that he had overheard a conversation between a member of the Japanese submarine crew and a survivor of the NICOLET concerning whether or not an Alvin T. PARKER was a passenger aboard the S.S. JEAN NICOLET and he was unable to tell whether or not the reply was in the affirmative or the negative. I personally know that Alvin T. PARKER was a passenger aboard the S.S. JEAN NICOLET, but I did not see him, as far as I know, after the torpedoing of the vessel and do not know what became of him and was not personally interrogated by the Japanese concerning his identity or whereabouts.

After a week's stay at Addu Atoll, we were transported to Colombo, Ceylon, where we were again interviewed and interrogated by U.S. Naval authorities and in the process of the interrogation, I was, as well as the other twenty-two survivors, again questioned whether or not I had been asked by the members of the Japanese submarine crew if Alvin T. PARKER was a passenger aboard the S.S. JEAN NICOLET, to which I replied in the negative.

The following are the names of the surviving members of the merchant marine crew of the S.S. JEAN NICOLET who were interrogated with me at Colombo, Ceylon:

Charles E. PYLE, First Assistant Engineer.
 Jack C. VAN HESS, Carpenter.
 Paul M. MITCHELL, Deck Engineer.
 John McDAUGALL, A.B.
 George K. HESS, A.B.
 S. W. VANDERHURST, A.B.
 Carl ROSENBAUM, fireman watertender.
 William B. FLURY, Third Cook.
 Harold H. LEE, utility.
 Lloyd B. WATH, wiper.

I was the first member of this group to leave Colombo aboard the S.S. MOSES G. FARMER, arriving in New York 8 September 1944, where I was again interrogated by naval and U.S. Government agencies. Since arriving in the United States, I learned that five members of this group are aboard a liberty ship, name unknown, which is proceeding towards the east coast of the United States, port unknown. The remaining four are bound for the east coast of the United States as passengers aboard another unknown ship. Of the three surviving

passengers of the S.S. JEAN NICOLET, Archie HOWARD, naval technician, was attached to the Naval Liaison Office in Colombo, Captain GUSSACK, U.S.A., proceeded on to New Delhi, India, and the enlisted Army man, name unknown, was flown to some advanced Army base in the Asiatic theatre of operations, place unknown.

I have read the foregoing statement, consisting of seven (7) pages, including this page, and it is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

/s/ Charles E. Pyle
Charles E. PYLE

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 9th day of October 1944, at San Francisco, California.

/s/ V. C. Dowell, Lt. USNR
V. C. DOWELL
Lieutenant, U.S.N.R.

WITNESSES: name illegible

/s/ R. J. Halbert Y lc, U.S.N.R.