



SECRET.
No.068/2008

H.M.S.DURBAN,

25th March, 1942

Sir,

I regret to report as follows concerning the encounter of H.M.Ship under my command with a merchant vessel on Friday, 13th March, 1942 which may have been the captured British Ship SPEYBANK acting as an enemy minelayer.

2. The ship was first sighted at 1925B 13th March bearing 255° , distance 11 miles. I was then in position $35^{\circ} 53'$ South $20^{\circ} 10'$ East steering 257° at 13 knots. Paravanes were streamed. The ship appeared to be steering 090° at about 10 knots and it was estimated she would pass fairly close and that an alteration of course to intercept her would be unnecessary.

I accordingly maintained my course and speed.

3. The light, which was in my favour, was failing fast and I do not consider I was sighted by her until I commenced signalling, using a red Aldis Lamp. She was then at a distance of about 6 miles.

On sighting me, she appeared to make a slight alteration to starboard but soon resumed her original course.

4. I first signalled to her the international signal NNJ ("You should make your signal letters"). She did not answer this. This was in no way unusual. It is my experience that only 25% of merchant ships answer this signal correctly and in any case most merchant ships delay considerably before answering when first called.

There was some light left and as the range was still considerable I now used a white Aldis Lamp and asked "What ship?".

This was answered at once in conformity with usual practice but the merchant ship's signalling lamp was bad and difficulty was experienced in reading her signals. Repetition was called for and she repeated her answers more than once.

Eventually the following information was obtained :-
"LEVERNBANK New York to Durban".

Her silhouette was then compared with that in "Merchant Ships (Talbot Booth)" and found to correspond. She then signalled "Good Night".

5. Throughout the whole encounter my suspicions had not been aroused for the following reasons :-

- (a) She was sighted within 15 miles of a traffic route at dusk, within 70 miles of land. She must therefore have been comparatively close to land for many daylight hours and in easy range of air reconnaissance. Reconnaissance aircraft had been sighted during the forenoon.

(b) When ...

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- (b) When sighted she was steering a normal course and made no suspicious movements throughout the encounter.
- (c) She answered signals willingly although her signalling lamp was poor.
- (d) Her silhouette corresponded exactly with that to be expected for a Bank Line ship. It was known that ships of this line might be encountered in this area. It was also clear that she was not in any way similar to any known raider. Her name was not in any shipping intelligence lists which were then onboard but these were incomplete and her omission was not remarkable.
6. As I was not suspicious, I did not consider boarding but in any case the weather conditions at the time were unfavourable.
7. At the time of the encounter my port engine was out of action due to a leaky main steam joint and I was proceeding on the Starboard engine alone.
8. At this point I was faced with a familiar situation. In order to elicit further information, it would be necessary to close the range to 3000 yards or less. At any greater range the merchant ship's signalling lamp was very difficult to read.
9. To close on the beam of a ship which has not been positively identified is obviously unwise and the correct method would therefore appear to be :- to turn, work round ahead of the ship to a position about 3000 yards on her bow and order ship to proceed on a certain course or to stop. In most cases it takes a long time to make merchant ships understand what is required of them and the procedure itself would occupy a considerable amount of time. Moreover, in order to be practically certain of the identity of the ship concerned, it is considered that such a procedure would be necessary in the case of many merchant ships sighted during dark hours.
10. Each merchant ship so treated would be delayed and a warship making a passage along a frequented traffic route might be considerably delayed by the necessity of making several of these identifications. I have therefore in the past considered it undesirable and impracticable when on passage to carry out this complete identification unless suspicious circumstances existed. As I had no suspicions in this case I allowed the ship to proceed.
11. The Merchant Ship Recognition Procedure was not carried out as this would have meant the alteration of course and the procedure mentioned above. It has also been my experience that about 50% of British Merchant Ships do not understand this procedure and the results obtained are therefore frequently inconclusive.
12. My failure to penetrate the disguise of this minelayer is very deeply regretted.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

P. G. Collett
Captain, Royal Navy.

