

A Day of Destruction

by Tim Coleman

It was a day that would create headlines in all the major papers in the northeast and it started when a U-boat, the U-53, sailed into Newport, RI. The date was October 7, 1916.

Thanks to documents from Lloyd's of London, the world's maritime insurer, various newspaper accounts and a copy of the log of the submarine obtained by Capt. Eric Takakjian of Quest Marine Services in Fairhaven, MA, we can construct an accurate picture of events that occurred during those amazing 24-plus hours.

On the afternoon of the seventh, the sub's skipper, Hans Rose, steamed into Newport to inquire as to the whereabouts of the German commercial submarine *Bremen*, which left the homeland weeks before, but was "never heard from again." After asking questions that triggered no answers, Lt. Cdr. Rose paid a courtesy call on the commandant of the Naval Facilities there as naval etiquette required. He and his ship stayed a total of three hours, and then left, bound for the Nantucket Lightship, the main transit point for traffic in and out of busy New York Harbor.

While this country had yet to enter the first Great War, German and Great Britain were locked in conflict. The U-boat's mission was to stop any ship in the area and look for contraband that could be used for the British war effort. Finding such they were to sink any vessel so laden. From the log of his war machine, *Bremen*, here are the events that would shake the country and rattle the windows in Washington. Please keep in mind the times given are military.

05:35 a.m. The submarine arrives around the lightship on the morning of the eighth, roughly 90-plus miles southeast of Newport. She stops the American steamer *Kansas* with a shot across her bow from her deck gun, but lets the ship go on her way when it's found she has no controlled goods.

06:50 a.m. Stopped British steamer *Strathdene* after six shots fired. Signaled captain and crew to leave the ship, then gave the lifeboats directions for the Nantucket Light vessel where the crew found refuge until picked up later by destroyers sent out from Newport in response to wireless traffic about the ongoing attacks.

07:10 a.m. Hit the ship with torpedo in the aft cargo hold. The stern drops, but she does not sink.

08:00 a.m. Stopped the Norwegian steamer *Christian Knudsen* carrying diesel fuel to London. Issued orders to skipper to follow us toward sinking *Strathdene*, there to abandon ship, lower boats and head for light vessel.

09:50 a.m. *Strathdene* "sunk by firing grenades." The *Knudsen* follows to about four miles from *Strathdene* and abandons ship. We fire torpedo that hits aft, but does not sink vessel. (We) opened up with fire from the deck gun, but the buoyancy of the oil keeps her afloat.

10:50 a.m. (We) finished her off with second torpedo, then turned to face another ship approaching from the east.

11:30 a.m. Stopped the *West Point* with shot across her bow, then allowed crew to leave in two boats. Made sure steamer carried no hidden guns by firing several shots into her hull, then ended by sinking her with blasting cartridges. (We) towed the lifeboats from *West Point* to lightship, sailing right over the wreck of the recently sunk *Christian Knudsen*.

16:15 p.m. Searched for lifeboats from the *Knudsen*, found them near the light vessel and watched as they headed to safety. By now, wireless traffic is very busy because of the attacks.

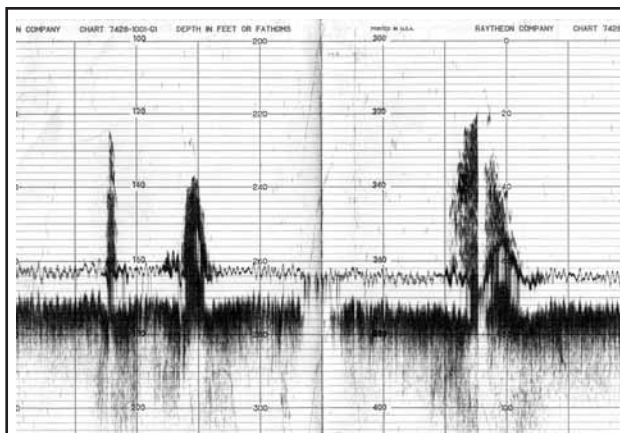
16:55 p.m. Stopped Danish steamer *Blommersdyk* and examined her papers off and on because of another steamer approaching from the east also. She is stopped with a shot off her bow, but found to be neutral. In the meantime, American destroyers are approaching to take crews from lightship to safety.

17:40 p.m. Careful inspection of Danish ship documents show she is trying to hide a port of call in Kirkwall, England, therefore under the Laws of Capture, the ship is subject to seizure and sinking.

17:45 p.m. By this time 16 American destroyers from Newport are on the scene, all of us in rather small area, requiring careful maneuvering. Captain and crew of Danish ship are given 25 minutes to leave their charge and to signal such by lowering their flags after all have left. Signal one destroyer to move away to commence attack. Destroyer complies and we hit ship with torpedo in one of her cargo holds. She drops down significantly, but does not sink.

19:50 p.m. Another steamer has stopped, and with the help of lights from one of the destroyer looking to see what ship it was, we are able to see she was the passenger liner *Stephano*, British registry. Sailed between her and destroyer back to Danish ship. Hit her with second torpedo in cargo hold number three. She goes down, but bow remains above the water. **Editor's note:** she would later sink like the other four.

20:20 p.m. Destroyers head back towards Newport except for two that followed us to *Stephano*.



Piece of chart paper from the fish finder on the party fishing boat Yankee Cpts. shows cod and pollack hovering over one of the U-53 wrecks.

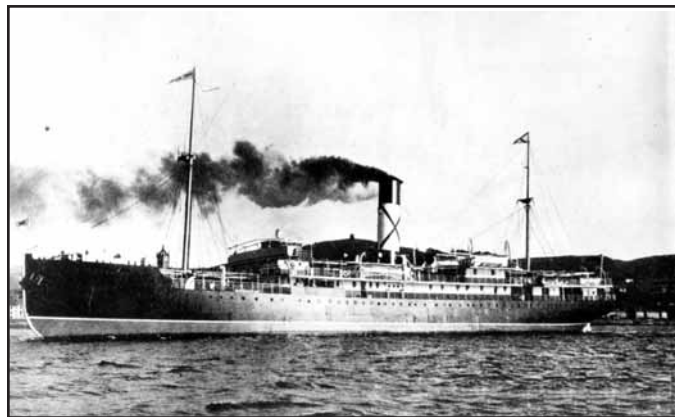
Photo courtesy Capt. Greg Mercurio.

Sent prize crew aboard now abandoned ship to set blasting cartridges. She does not sink so opened fire with deck gun without observable results.

22:30 p.m. Sank last ship of the day with last torpedo then headed east while last two American war vessels sailed to west.

The uproar over the sinkings hit the front pages of the *Providence Journal*, *Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* the next day. Some of the details were clouded in the fog of war with one paper headlining that nine ships had been sunk. In time, the details were corrected, but the country was aghast at the thought of so many ships sunk close to our east coast.

Over the years, the wrecks of the five ships began the attrition that follows years and years on the bottom, saltwater corrosion taking its toll. Probably the first to find the wrecks were draggers, towing their nets along the bottom then losing the expensive



The steamer Stephano was the last of five large ships to be sunk by the U-53 around the Nantucket Lightship on October 8, 1916.

Photo courtesy Steamship Historical Society.

bottom gear when it could not be pulled free of all the tangled metal.

In the confusion of the day, not a single accurate position was taken of the wrecks. The *West Point* was plotted on an offshore chart a long way to the east-southeast of the lightship and another mark made on the same chart for the *Stephano* about 2-1/2 miles northeast of the lightship position. Neither was accurate.

In 1961, a ship from what is today the National Ocean Service surveyed the *Stephano* site, but found nothing after searching 1.2 square miles and 18.3 meters of soundings around the wreck symbol. The complete search took 2-1/2 hours.

The second group to find the wrecks were the captains of long-range party boats, looking for offshore spots for cod and pollack trips. One of these was Capt. Steven Forsberg out of Montauk who found the *Christian Knudsen* and Captain Greg Mercurio of the *Yankee Captains* out of Gloucester, MA, who we suspect found another of the wrecks, but at this point we are not sure which one. Still a third skipper, Captain Frank Blount of the *Lady Frances* out of Point Judith, RI located the steamer *Stephano* and the *Blommersdyk*, the former a full six miles from where she was marked on a chart. In each instance the skippers used information supplied by dragger captains to locate the sunken structures.

Another group of people to explore the "U-53 Five" were divers lead by Captain Eric Takakjian. To date, he and his groups of advanced amateur and professional divers have visited the *Stephano*, *Blommersdyk* and the *Knudsen*, in depths ranging from 120 to 250 feet. The Danish ship was in the worst condition, blown apart not only from the U-53 attacks, but was in such gnarled condition compared to the others that it was surmised she was depth-charged repeatedly during WWII by our anti-submarine forces thinking they had contact with a submarine lying on the bottom.

Other wrecks await exploration in this area, a hub of shipping for decades. Capt. Eric and his crew plan on diving on what they hope in the wreck of the freighter *Oregon* sunk during WWII after a collision during blackout conditions with a U. S battleship. Also on the list to be found and identified are the iron steamers *New Castle City* and *Lyonnais*, both larger passenger ships sunk somewhere "near" the work of the U-53 before the turn of the 20th century.

Given the determination of today's marine explorers, I'll bet all will be found in my lifetime.