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Court of Inquiry held at Naval Base, Milford Haven, in the presence

of:-

Commander N.A.K. Money, OBE., R.N. (retd) H.M.S. SKIRMISHER  
Actg. Ty. Lieut. Commander J. McLinden, R.N.R., H.M.S. SCARFELL  
Shipt. Lieutenant A. J. Cole, R.N. (retd) H.M.S. SKIRMISHER

regarding the loss of H.M. Paddle Minesweeper MERCURY at 2.15 on  
25th December, 1940.

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER B. A. PALMER, R.N.V.R. COMMANDING OFFICER  
H.M.S. MERCURY

(Caution read)

1. It is your opinion that there were two mines in the sweep at the same time?

Well it is a point I have not mentioned in my report. After the explosion occurred a piece of mine about 8 inches square was blown up on our deck, it was found to be a bit with bullet markings. It is possible that the mine in the otter was one of those which had been sunk and that it was submerged with sufficient buoyancy to keep it off the bottom.

2. Could you tell me, please, how this piece of mine arrived, did you pick it up?

It was blown on deck after the explosion and was picked up by the Leading Seaman.

3. Could you tell me how many bullet holes were in this piece?

I did not see it myself, but the Leading Seaman could probably give you more information. It was put in my cabin for evidence, but of course I had no time to obtain it when my ship foundered.

4. In your report you say that the kite was brought inboard and that a black object was observed in the otter. What distance was the otter from the ship at this moment?

When I went down to examine it I should estimate about 6 fathoms.

5. Could you tell me why you gave orders to stop engines when you had this object in view?

A request to stop engines from the Sweeping Deck was given to enable the sweep to be hove in. If the ship was underway the wash from the paddles disturbing the surface of the water would have made it extremely difficult to sight the otter.

6. Where your engines actually stopped before you, yourself, arrived on the sweeping deck?

Yes

7. When you got the cropesa in your float wire being sixteen fathoms, do you still say the otter was 6 fathoms from ship?

That is just my estimate, but probably the Leading Seaman in charge would have a better idea.

8. Do you always stop your engines when you are taking in your float?

Usually we go very slow ahead, but if the sea is rough and there is difficulty in getting it in-board I stop engines if requested to do so.

1. Do you think it wise to hoist in your float if there is any likelihood of their being a mine in your otter?

The only thing is that once we had the float in it was my idea to veer the sweep wire allowing the otter to hit the bottom and explode the mine in that way, or cutting the sweep wire and the mine would sink to the bottom and would no longer be dangerous to navigation.

2. How long would it be when you returned to the bridge that the explosion occurred?

I should think about a minute, I had just given a signal to the signalman to pass to the Senior Officer of the 11th Minesweeping Flotilla?

3. Would that give time to clear the sweeping deck?

Yes

4. Could you tell me please if you saw the kite clear before hoisting in as a safe precaution?

Yes, I confirmed that with the Leading Seaman at the first moment.

5. About how close to the eye of your sweep wire did you have the cutter?

The cutter is always used within six inches of the eye splice, whether sweep is a searching sweep or a clearance sweep. A bulldog grip is left on the sweep wire for this purpose.

6. How many cutters was the sweep armed with?

Six including one near the eye splice.

1. At what spacing were these cutters places?

Spacing in accordance with instructions received from the Senior Officer, 11th Minesweeping Flotilla.

6. When you say the engines were stopped on request from the sweeping deck, was the ship allowed to lose way altogether?

It would be a little time before the way came right off the ship.

17. Would the ship, in your opinion, still be moving through the water when the float was hove in?

I think the ship was under way when the float was taken in, but it can be confirmed by the Sweeping Officer aft.

18. You say in your report the position was reported by signal to the Senior Officer?

I told the signalmen to report to the Senior Officer that a black object was in our float. The signal never reached the "JEANIE DEANS".

19. After the explosion occurred at 1632, who made the examination to see what damage had been done?

I made a personal investigation of the ship myself. No visible damage. The ship had not been holed, but no doubt the seams must have been badly sprung.

2. How long was "MERCURY" afloat after the explosion?

5 hours.

21. How did she sink?

She stood right up on her stern.

\* NOTE The Commanding Officer 11th Minesweeping Flotilla was in "HELVELLYN" not "JEANIE DEANS"

Is there a carpenter rating on board?

No

Was there any water entering the ship?

A little in the after peak.

Is that a watertight compartment?

Yes

What are the means of access?

I suggest the Chief Engineer should answer this.

Could you tell us if your engines were used after the explosion had occurred?

No, when we were taken in tow we told "MANGROVE" that we could assist with our engines, but when under way we sheared so badly that there was the danger of the tow rope being parted. The engines were not damaged in any way.

You state in answer to question 19 that some of the seams appeared badly sprung, in view of the light construction of your ship were no steps taken to get valuable stores on deck and ready to be taken off should it be necessary, and the crew mustered on deck in readiness to be taken off the ship?

As soon as it was realised that there was a possibility of the ship sinking, the time would be about 2000, efforts were made and necessary action taken to save the Confidential Books, and the majority were saved. During the period of time from the commencement of the tow to 2030 practically every member of the crew was employed in shoring the main bulkhead and working a chain of buckets to assist in keeping the water down.

1. Is it your opinion that the strain of the ship being towed opened up plating laps?

Yes, definitely.

2. Could you give the time of the request from the sweeping deck to stop engines?

I could give an approximate time. The explosion took place at 1632. I should think, approximately, at about 1610 to 1615.

3. Was the ship's log saved?

No.

4. What visible signs were there of the vessel making water?

There was a rise of water in the after part of the ship.

5. At what time was this noticed?

The water was rising the whole time whilst we were being towed and I did not consider that there was any danger until it reached the level of the ward room, and this information was signalled to the Senior Officer.

6. You say in your report that the rudder was badly bent and out of action. Could you tell us how you came to that opinion?

I inspected the rudder myself, and I could see that it was badly bent and also the wheel would not work.

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER B. A. PALMER, R.N.V.R.

Was this seen from over the side?

Yes, from over the stern.

(Lieutenant Commander Palmer remained in Court at his own request)

LIEUTENANT R. E. BLOWS, R.N.V.R., H.M.S. MERCURY

Were you the Officer of the sweeping deck of the "MERCURY"?

Yes

Tell me, please. In the Commanding Officer's report he stated "I received a request from the sweeping deck to stop engines". Why did you make this request?

The turbulations of the water set up by the paddles made it impossible for us to see the otter at any distance, but the water was very clear, apart from that, and when we had stopped we could see something of the otter.

Your idea was rather to stop the turbulence of the water in the wake of the ship?

Yes.

Was the way of the ship stopped when the float was taken in?

Yes

Could you tell me why you stopped ship to take the float in?

So as to be able to sight the sweep wire and grapple the float which was some distance away from the ship's side and we could only reach it with a very long grapnel throw.

Did you give orders to remove the cutters?

Yes

Could you tell me how many cutters you put on the sweep?

Six

Where they put on as paragraph 5 of the Senior Officer's Orders?

Yes, I measured the spacing myself.

Did you put one close up to the eye splice of the sweep wire?

Yes, we have a bulldog grip permanently fixed close to the eye of the sweep wire.

Could you tell me why you had that one there?

Experience of the Commanding Officer and he has passed it on to me. He **has** had more experience than I have. I consider that the idea was an excellent one.

What, in your opinion, was the position of the otter relative to the stern of the ship when your float was being hoisted inboard?

45 degrees on the port quarter, approximately 12 fathoms distant.

What do you estimate the distance of the explosion from the ship?

25 fathoms because that was the approximate amount of sweep wire out after we had got the float in.



LIEUTENANT R. E. BLOWS, R.N.V.R., H.M.S. MERCURY

47. Could you give an idea of the lapse of time between getting in your float and the explosion?

About 10 minutes.

LEADING SEAMAN ERNEST EASTMAN, R.N., H.M.S. MERCURY

48. What was your station when sweeping?

In charge of the sweeping deck in my own watch under Lieutenant Blows.

49. Give a short description of what happened on the sweeping deck after there was a suspicion that a mine might be foul of the otter?

I took charge of the sweeping deck at 4 p.m. The Leading Seaman of the afternoon watch informed me that he thought there was something in the sweep. I took charge and ordered the sweep to be hove in, removing the cutters and sleeves as each came inboard until the fifth one when I asked the Commanding Officer if he would come aft to investigate with me, stopping the ship so the sweep could be sighted. Heaving in very slowly we observed the otter about 5 fathoms deep and we then observed a black object in the otter. Consulting with the Commanding Officer, I went forward again to await instructions from the bridge. I cleared the sweeping deck of all ratings and awaited further instructions from my Commanding Officer, being cleared from the sweeping deck awaiting just forward of the sweeping deck when the explosion occurred.

50. Tell me, did you take the 6th, 5th, 4th, 3rd, and 2nd cutters inboard?

Yes.

51. Was the float got inboard before the explosion occurred?

Yes.

2. It has been stated in evidence that a bullet marked piece of mine was found on board "MERCURY" after the explosion. Did you see this?

Yes, I found it. I placed this, which I considered avaluable piece of evidence, in the Commanding Officer's cabin.

33. Were the bullet markings actually punctures or not?

There were several dents and there were two or three holes.

34. What was the spacing at which the cutters were placed?

Number one close to eye splice of sweep wire, number 2, 16 fathoms, number 3, 33 fathoms and remainder in accordance with instructions.

LEADING SEAMAN R. H. COPE, R.N., R.M.S. MERCURY

35. What were your minesweeping duties in "MERCURY"?

Leading Seaman on the sweeping deck in charge of sweeping watch.

36. What watch did you take on 25th December, 1940.

Afternoon watch.

37. It has been stated by your relief that when you turned over to him that you considered that something was foul in the sweep?

Yes.

38. What was your reason for this?

Owing to the erratic movements of the oropesa which was breaking surface and plunging again.

AFT  
PEAK

OFFICERS'  
Acc.

BUNKER

LEADING SEAMAN R. H. COPE, R.N., H.M.S. MERCURY

59. ④ Whilst you were on watch had any steps been taken to try and clear this obstruction?

Yes, efforts were made to clear the obstruction by veering the sweep wire.

60. It has been stated in evidence that a bullet marked piece of mine was found on board "MERCURY" after the explosion, did you see this?

Yes, I took this down to the Commanding Officer's cabin. I should like to say that in private life I work at the Royal Small Arms Factory, Enfield Lock, and I am firmly of the opinion that the punctuations and indentations in this piece of mine were definitely caused by .303 bullets.

ENGINEER LIEUTENANT A. HENDERSON, R.N.R., H.M.S. MERCURY

61. Were you the Chief Engineer of the "MERCURY"?

Yes

62. What is the watertight sub-division aft of "MERCURY"?

Sketch attached. Water entered the after peak and the watertight bulkheads apparently fractured at the bottom and allowed water to enter the compartment forward. It came through the main deck which is not water tight into the Officers' accommodation and thence into the bunkers through the main deck.

63. Are there any pumping arrangements at that end of the ship?

Yes, there are two two inch bilge pumps.

64. Was that operating?

Yes.

65. Was this the only hold damaged and were pumps functioning correctly?

Yes, but I could not hold it.

66. Did water enter anywhere else that you are aware of?

Yes, it was coming through the sponson wing doors which were not watertight due to change of trim aft.

67. You investigated the damage?

Yes.

68. What did you find?

From outside I could see that the seams had been opened up above water but from inside I could see nothing.

69. Is it your opinion that if the sponson wing doors had been watertight the ship would have remained afloat.

I definitely think so.

COMMANDER L. C. WINDSOR, SENIOR OFFICER, 11th MINESWEEPING FLOTILLA

70. Are you the Senior Officer, 11th Minesweeping Flotilla?

Yes.

COMMANDER L. C. WINDSOR, 11th MINESweeping FLOTILLA

71. Can you give a description as regards the sinking of "MERCURY"  
25th December, 1940?

Ships taking part in the operations on the 25th December were "HELVELLYN" (in which I was embarked) "SCAWFELL," "MERCURY" and "GOATFELL" all sweepers. "MANGROVE" and "ALMOND" dan layers, Dutch trawlers "ANDYK" and "ROTTERDAM" mine disposal vessels.

Sweeping was carried out in "G" formation to port taking new ground for laps from east to west and we were sweeping or searching on the run to the eastward whilst the mine disposal vessels were sinking mines. On completion of the penultimate lap "MERCURY" reported that her sweep was foul and asked permission to cut it. I replies "Yes". She moved out of line to do so and proceeded to the northward, "SCAWFELL" had parted her sweep on the run to the east whilst "HELVELLYN" was clearing a dan buoy from her sweep and so the ships still capable of sweeping were "HELVELLYN" and "GOATFELL".

When "HELVELLYN" and "GOATFELL" were about half way from the next lap, "MERCURY" approached from the north-north-west across the swept water, and as she had her sweeping ball on the port yard arm at the time thought she had cleared her sweep and was endeavouring to regain her position in the sweeping formation. When she was close to "SCAWFELL" and the mine disposal vessels she appeared to stop very slowly and there was an explosion close under her stern, and the ship was enveloped in spray, a few seconds later she began to emit steam aft and from the funnel. My first impression was that she had cut an antenna mine in water that was supposed to be swept 100%, but when the steam appeared I immediately ordered "SCAWFELL" and "MANGROVE" to stand by her as it appeared that she had been damaged and might sink. When the ships had closed her I made to "MERCURY" "Are you damaged?", he replied "Am making a little water aft, expect to be able to move engines in about 10 minutes" At that time "HELVELLYN" and "GOATFELL" were about two miles from her and getting in sweeps. I then told "SCAWFELL" to stand by to take her in tow to Waterford and informed "MERCURY", but at the same time received a signal from "MERCURY" to the effect that he thought he could hold out if they were towed to Milford Haven. "SCAWFELL" asked permission to carry on with her sweep recovery but I told "MANGROVE" to tell "ALMOND" to recover the sweep instead. As "MANGROVE" was now available and her towing apparatus were superior to "SCAWFELL" and "MERCURY" was in trouble, I told her, i.e., "MANGROVE" to take her, "MERCURY", in tow. In the meantime I closed "MERCURY" and talked with her captain and it was decided that an attempt should be made to take "MERCURY" to Milford Haven. Orders were issued for this and at 1800 "MERCURY" was in tow. Ships formed up and course was set for Milford Haven. "ALMOND" on her port side, remainder on her starboard quarter in line ahead. At about 1845 I asked "MERCURY" how she was and he replied that everything was satisfactory. The tow rope parted at about 2030 or 2040 and so I told "MANGROVE" to pass another tow. Whilst "MANGROVE" was endeavouring to do this I closed "MERCURY" and saw that she was well down by the stern. "MERCURY" also reported that water had reached the level of the wardroom deck. I then ordered "ALMOND" to embark all ratings who could be spared. "ALMOND" went alongside her starboard sponson and whilst she was there I ordered her to take everybody off. "MERCURY" also asked for trawlers to attend on her as she was making water rapidly. The disembarkation of ratings from "MERCURY" to "ALMOND" was completed by about 2150. "ALMOND" reported that he had the entire crew on board. This was subsequently confirmed after the crew had been re-mustered.

"MERCURY" sank at 2115 in position 51 degs. 58.3 mins. North, 6 degs. 24.2 mins West in about 35 fathoms.

A Dutch trawler salvaged a lifeboat that was floating bottom up and "HELVELLYN" recovered a motor boat that was floating correctly.

The force then proceeded towards Milford Haven.

The loss of the "MERCURY" was reported to the Flag Officer in Charge in my 0345/26 which was passed by V/S through St. Ann's Head Port War Signal Station.

72. Is it your opinion that, had the sponson doors been watertight, the ship would not have sunk?

No, in my opinion once water had reached the ward room level in "MERCURY" and overflowed the change of trim would have been so enormous that sponson doors being watertight would not have stopped the ship from foundering.

LIEUTENANT F.J.S. CRAWFORD, R.N.V.R., H.M.S. MANGROVE

73. Are you the Commanding Officer of H.M.T. MANGROVE?

Yes.

74. Give a short description of what happened when "MERCURY" was sunk on 25th December, 1940?

At about 1730 whilst lying in a position about 2 miles south-by-east of Coningbeg Light I heard and saw a loud explosion apparently close to the stern of "MERCURY", who was about a mile and a half away from me. I immediately proceeded at full speed to close "MERCURY" and see if she required assistance. At about 1755 I was instructed by M/S 11 to go alongside "MERCURY" and take her in tow to Milford Haven. The tow was passed and at 1800 we set course 125 degrees true, engine revolutions 130 (speed for 10 knots). We continued on course until approximately 2030 when the tow parted. I was instructed by M/S 11 to go alongside "MERCURY" and take her in tow again as quickly as possible. I passed across "MERCURY'S" stern and together we got three heaving lines aboard. We were ready to take her tow when "ALMOND" told me that she had orders to go alongside and take off as many of the crew as could be spared. I then saw "MERCURY" was very low in the water by the stern and proceeded to turn ship round to port with the intention of going alongside the port side of "MERCURY" to hold "ALMOND". In turning I came in collision with Dutch trawler believed to be "ROTTERDAM" and was some time turning. I then got a signal from M/S 11 saying that all the crew of "MERCURY" were now on board "ALMOND". I replied that it was not possible to carry on the tow as she was too heavy aft and we stood off until approximately 2115 when she sank.

75. During the first two hours "MERCURY" was in tow was she towing quite easily?

Yes, we experienced no particular drag at all. She was tending to veer out on our port quarter but otherwise she was towing quite comfortably.

76. When did you first notice that "MERCURY" was going down by the bows?

The first indication of anything of this nature was when the tow parted.

77. What hawser was being used for towing?

Standard towing hawser supplied, consisting of 30 fathoms of six inch manilla with 35 fathoms of three inch wire each end.



78. Give a brief description of what occurred when "MERCURY" was sunk on 25th December, 1940?

When I saw the explosion we were just laying a line of dan buoys. We laid the dan and proceeded on to the first dan buoy laid. As I was proceeding to the first dan buoy I received a signal from "MANGROVE" to recover "SCAVFELL'S" sweeping gear. When this was carried out "MANGROVE" received the signal to take "MERCURY" in tow. "MANGROVE" was towing "MERCURY" for approximately 2½ hours. I was on the bridge at about 2040 and heard "MANGROVE'S" tow rope part. I had orders previously to keep station one cable from "MERCURY'S" port beam. When the tow rope parted I immediately stopped the ship and stopped for approximately 5 minutes. I then received a signal from the Commanding Officer, M/S 11 to proceed alongside "MERCURY" and take on board all ratings who could be spared. I proceeded then by the shortest possible way to get alongside "MERCURY". I saw the position she was in and she seemed to be settling very low in the water aft. "MERCURY" put a line aboard "ALMOND" and I was crossing her bows. I then rung "ALMOND" full steam astern and so came stern on to "MERCURY'S" starboard sponson and the crew of "MERCURY" were able to board "ALMOND". I put the ship full speed ahead to get clear of "MERCURY". We were laid off exactly 4 minutes from "MERCURY" when she sank, time 2115.

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER A. B. PALMER R.N.V.R. Recalled

(Caution read)

79. Were any efforts made to make use of the collision mat?

The collision mat was taken aft a few minutes after the explosion but as no damage was visible either above or below decks it was not possible to place it.

*Rafusey*

Commander R.N. (Retd)  
President

*J. Mc Linden*

Actg. Ty. Lieut. Commander, R.N.R.

*A. J. L.*

Shipt. Lieutenant R.N. (Retd)

COMMANDER N. A. K. MONEY, OBE., R.N. (Ret'd).  
ACTING TY. LT. CDR. J. MCLINDEN, R.N.R.  
SHIP. LIEUTENANT A. J. COLE, R.N. (Ret'd):

For information and guidance.  
Please note and return.

(Sd) P. E. PHILLIPS

REAR ADMIRAL,  
FLAG OFFICER IN CHARGE,  
MILFORD HAVEN.

H. M. Naval Offices,  
Milford Haven.  
17th January, 1941.

IV.

No. 0102/3105 H. H.  
THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF,  
PLYMOUTH.

Noted and returned.

H. M. Naval Base,  
MILFORD HAVEN,  
6th. March, 1941.

*P. E. Phillips*

REAR ADMIRAL,  
FLAG OFFICER IN CHARGE.

