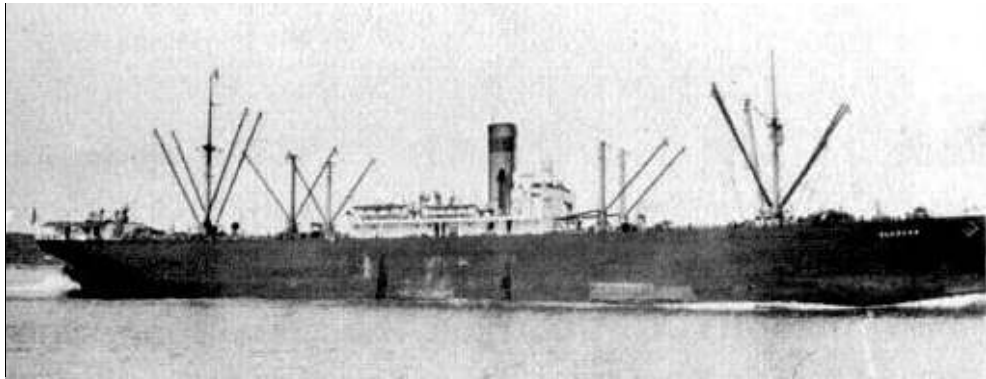


SS ALASKAN



The SS *Alaskan* was a 5,364 gross ton freighter, and had a former name of 'Wheaton.' She was built in the 1918-19 era in Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corp, Sparrows Pt. MD. At the time of her sinking she was operated by 'American Hawaiian Steamship Co, New York, NY, and this was her home port as well.

In a heavy rain on November 28, 1942 the *Alaskan* was unescorted, zig-zagging and en route from Capetown to Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana and then on to New York with a cargo of chrome ore. Her master was Earl E. Greenlaw, and she carried a crew of 42 with an additional 16 U.S. Navy Armed Guard.

At this same time German Submarine U-172, commanded by Kptlt. Carl Emmermann was lurking in the general area of the *Alaskan*. Kptlt. Emmermann lined up on the *Alaskan*, and released two torpedoes.

On board the *Alaskan* one of the lookouts spotted the wakes of these torpedoes, but unfortunately it was too late for the *Alaskan* to do any maneuvering. However one torpedo did miss the target, but the second one struck the ship amidships on the port side.

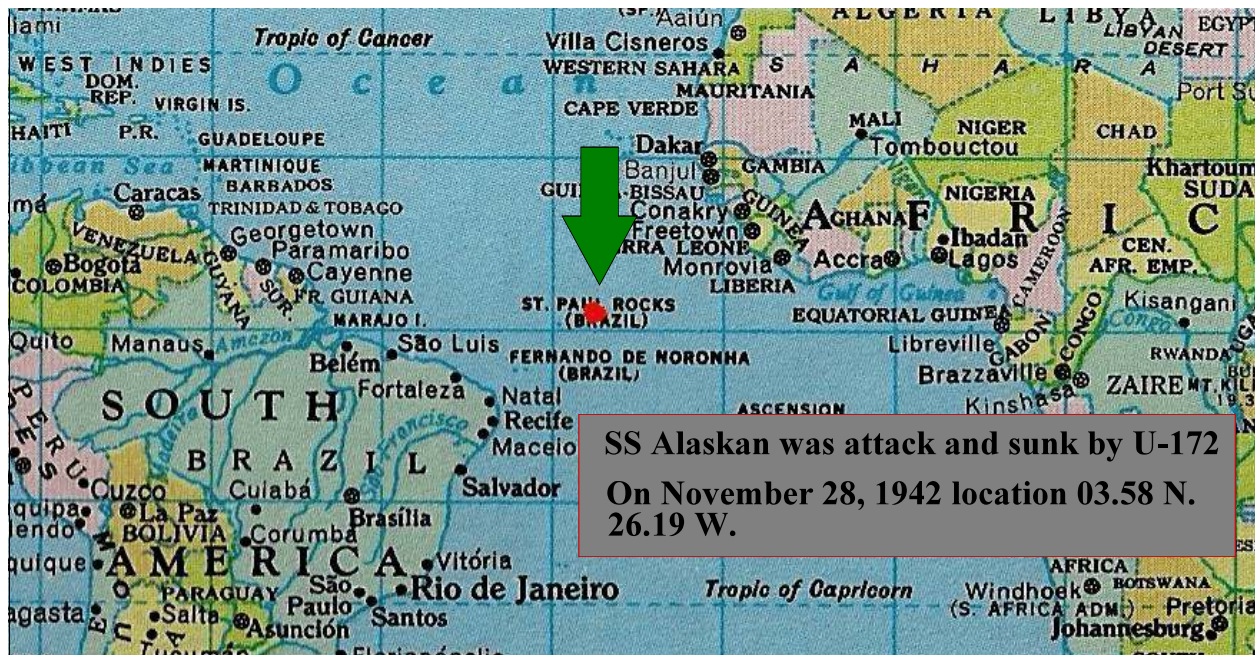
The damage was extensive to the *Alaskan*. The explosion destroyed the main engines, the steering gear, both port side lifeboats, knocked down both aerial antennas and the topmast. On top of all this it buckled the deck, destroying the deck gear and machinery.

Due to the explosion, and the extensive damage 7 crewmen and 1 armed guard were lost.

LOST CREW

Ambrose Balsa (Steward); Fred E. Herrling (Utility); Roy K. Johnson (Oiler); Raymond A. Jones (Messman); Thomas Stephenson (F/W); George C. Trahan (Chief Engr.); James E. Woosward (3rd Mate). George Inman Waters (S1c) U.S. Navy Armed Guard...made landfall but died in hospital at Salinas and was buried there.

At this point there was only one thing for the crew to do and that was to abandon ship as quickly as possible



The crew abandoned ship on the masters orders at 0715. A few minutes later Kptlt. Emmermann surfaced and began shelling the Alaskan..the U-172 pumped about one shot a minute into the Alaskan...total of about 60 rounds, and hitting her about 40 times...she sank at 0745 listing to port and then plunging bow first. The hulk settled downward about 800 miles northeast of Natal, Brazil.

During this confused situation of getting off the ship quickly the #3 life boat was swamped at launching. So #1 life boat was launched and when completed the crew then picked up a full load of survivors and then got away from the vessel as soon as possible so as to clear before the shelling began.

The master and 8 crewmen (Armed Guard Commander, 2nd Mate, Radio Operator, one Armed Guard and 3 merchant seaman) abandoned ship on a raft. Soon after the shelling of the Alaskan the U-172 came alongside this raft and master Greenlaw was taken aboard and questioned by the sub's intelligence officer about routing's, etc....before being released. Just before being released.....Kptlt. Emmermann stated to master Greenlaw that, "Sorry we sank you, but this is war. So why don't you tell America to get out of the war?"

The master returned to the raft and stayed in the area for the next several hours....and in doing so him and the raft survivors obtained the swamped #3 life boat...bailed it out and then transferred into it.

They spent about 39 days at sea before making landfall a few miles south of Cayenne, French Guiana on January 5, 1943....[as you can see by the map they had a long way to 'float in a boat' before reaching land...actually it was over 2,000 miles]

With the help from a fishing boat they all made land safely. They were hospitalized and treated well by the local government officials. A few days later they were moved out of French Guiana by plane.

Life boat #1 that got away from the *Alaskan* before the shelling proceeded on her way....and did so for seventeen days...finally making landfall at Salinas, Angola. One Armed

Guard [as listed above] that was among the 18 crew members and 10 Armed Guard died in a Salinas hospital.

Here is some general info on U-172....she was laid down on December 11, 1940....and she actually met her fate on December 13, 1943 in the mid-Atlantic after a 27 hour fight west of the Canary Islands. Her fate was all due to depth Charges and Fido homing torpedoes from Avenger and Wildcat aircraft (VC-19) of the American escort carrier USS *Bogue* and by some 200 depth charges from US destroyers USS *George E. Badger*, USS *Clemson*, USS *Osmond Ingram*, and USS *Du Pont*. As reported there were 13 lost and 46 survivors.

During the U-172's sub life....she sunk 26 ships.

Author: Bud Shortridge

Merchant, Liberty and Victory ship histories, sinking's and lost crew info available upon request

cshortridge@comcast.net



