

*Diary of Louis R. Padula, Gunners Mate Third Class
about the sinking of SS SAM HOUSTON, a World War II Liberty ship, on June 28, 1942, by a
German U-boat torpedo, 160 nautical miles northeast of the Virgin Islands
(edited from typed and handwritten notes for readability)*

May 7, 1942 Thursday

After staying in Galveston for four days we returned back to Houston. All the passengers got off and the workers came aboard to finish the rest of the work. It didn't take them very long and they were through. We then started up the river to get loaded. They tied the ship up to the dock, about 11:30 that night. Our ensign then took us ashore for something to eat, because we had not eaten all day.

May 17, 1942 Sunday

The longshoremen have been working all day and night, and the ship is all loaded and we are ready to go. We left the dock that morning at 10:00. I sure hated to leave after making so many friends. We started down the river and reached the shipping yards at 2:30 that afternoon. And were there people there, I guess the news that the ship was leaving. Being the first ship to leave I guess everybody wanted to see it off. People lined the river for at least 20 to 30 miles down the river.

May 19, 1942 Tuesday

Well, we are off and on a journey that should take us 10 to 12 months if everything goes alright. While going through the Gulf we received quite a few warnings that there are subs ahead of us. That didn't stop them, they kept right on going. We would see an American patrol bomber once in a while, so that gave us a little confidence. At 8:30 that night the shaft went on the fritz and they had to stop to fix it. We laid there for seven hours before it was fixed. That sure was a nice feeling.

May 20, 1942 Wednesday

The ship was going swell all day and that night at 10:30 when the third mate was on watch we ran aground. It took five hours to get it going again. There were a couple of planes and a Coast Guard patrol boat around us all the time so we didn't have to worry so much.

May 21, 1942 Thursday

After having a good night's sleep, I awoke and there we were under way again. Thinking that our jinx is all gone, we are all kidding around. But that night there went that shaft. And there we stood alone for five more hours, until they got it fixed.

May 24, 1942 Sunday

After limping through the Gulf for three days, we finally pulled in to Mobile, Alabama. And was that ever a good sight to see. It wasn't a long trip but it was a touchy one.

June 19, 1942 Friday

Had a nice time in Mobile the last few weeks and we are all ready to shove off again. The shaft has been replaced with a new one. I was glad to leave Mobile because I knew I was getting sick. Too much night life. I didn't think I'd ever get aboard ship.

June 21, 1942 Sunday

We left Mobile and were standing watch four hours on and four hours off. After getting off watch at four in the morning, I didn't feel good at all so I went right to bed. That morning when they tried to wake me I couldn't get up. I had a high fever and they moved me in to sick bay.

June 28, 1942 Sunday

It was going on seven days that I had been sick. I wanted to get up and take a watch but they said no, that I was to stay in bed another day or two. At 9:00 I got up and took a shower. I thought I would dress up and go out on the deck for a little fresh air.

I had just finished combing my hair when all of a sudden there was a dull thud and the ship lay over on its side a little. It knocked me over. I got up right away and went in the room to wake up a shipmate who was in sick bay with me. From there we went on the gun deck but we could not see anything. The ship was on fire and the smoke was choking us on the gun deck. Being as we could not stay and fire the guns if the sub came up, the captain told us to abandon the ship. There were a few fellows burned and a few who were in the engine room at the time. We went in the engine room but it was full of water and we could not help them at all.

After getting in the life boat was when I noticed how many were really burned. There were five burned real bad and two with minor burns. The sailors who had been on watch were shaken up and the explosion took all the strength out of them. There were fourteen in our life boat and only three of us able to do anything.

The sub that torpedoed us came to the top about 30 yards away from us. My heart was in my mouth. I think I said the fastest prayer that anyone ever said in their life when the first fellow out of the sub pointed a machine gun at us. He waved his hand and we waved back. They didn't stop, they kept right on going toward the ship that was really burning.

The second cook, who was blown in the water, was between the sub and the ship, and the captain of the sub waited until the life boat went over and got him. As soon as they got away the sub opened fire. They fired 31 times at the ship before she went down. The ship was torpedoed at 9:45 in the morning and she sank fifty-five minutes later.

The sub then came back and we tied up alongside of her. They could speak pretty good English. The captain asked us if anybody had any broken bones. If they had he would send a doctor aboard and he would do the best he could. We told him there were a few who were burned but he could not do anything for them. The chief engineer had to go aboard and they left us taking him along to the other life boat that the captain of our ship was in. The other life boats, being as they didn't have anybody who was hurt left, and they were out of sight by the time we had started to set sail.

A couple of hours after we got going one of the burned fellows died. We wrapped him in a blanket and tied him up, figuring that we could keep him as long as possible and that we would be able to see land before we were supposed to.

June 29, 1942 Monday

There were only a few of us able to do any work at all. The rest either being burned pretty bad or full of smoke. All they could do was heave. Felt sorry for them. I took the toll of the life lost while the three able fellows left oiled up the boys that were burned. This was the first time I'd noticed how bad these fellows were burned. And after looking them over don't think they have long to go. Eyes and ears burned practically out and off. All the sailors started coming around. They started to relieve us at the till and also taking care of the wounded. Not much sleep was gotten by any so the only thing we did was talk. One of the boys that was burned passed away and we held him until the rest started complaining about the smell. We put an anchor on him and wrapped him in a blanket then over the side. A prayer was said by the first mate. Couldn't have been an hour later when another passed away. We kept him as long as possible hoping to reach land, but had to dispose of him in the same way as the first.

June 30, 1942 Tuesday

This morning most everyone able is feeling OK which makes it about 8 able men in fairly good condition. So we started to work in shifts. As the time went by we all noticed we were getting weaker. For where it was only taking one to lift the 15 gallon barrel of water it now was taking two of us. This was no morale builder. It couldn't have been an hour or two when another one passed away.

July 1, 1942 Wednesday

I woke up this morning with everyone trying to talk at the same time. There ahead of us about forty miles were mountains. What a sight! Getting to wonder how many would be left when and if we did reach land. We kept our course right for them and reached there in the afternoon. Spotted a patrol plane. The mate gave me orders to fire a couple of flares which I did. The plane saw them and flew toward us.

Now we all felt quite a bit better. The plane disappeared then came back. The first mate talked with him by Semaphore. They said they would be back.

Now we were about one block from this small island, going against the current. The first mate had two men to an oar and would row till we got to about 40 or 50 yards. Finally the mate said two men would have to take lines secured around the waist and swim the rest of the way. The waves were just pushing us in then pulling us out. A ship's mate Noonan and I figured we're still strong enough to swim the 30 or 40 yards to the beach. So over the side we went (and) reached the beach OK. And as they rowed in the boat we would pull it and hold it so it would (not) go back out to sea. It took us about two hours and finally got the boat on the beach and rolled it over so the two fellows that were in bad shape would have some protection from the sun. The plane came back. The first mate signaled them, (so) that the two sick men would have a chance if they could get to a doctor and hospital.

The lieutenant landed his plane which was a sea plane and we put the two men in. The sergeant who was with the lieutenant stayed with us for there wasn't enough room for him in the plane and it would be too much weight. The lieutenant also dropped his depth charges to lighten the load. Finally he

taxied his plane out and started to take off. And just as he got off the water a large wave seem to reach up and touched his plane, just enough to make him crash. I didn't see him hit the water. We all took off and ran that way. But when we got to the spot, the pilot had both men out and on the beach. We just saw the plane sinking beneath the waves. Another plane finally came out piloted by a major. In the meantime one the two fellows passed away. The crash, I guess, finished him. We just put the last one in the plane and the major took off. About 10 or 12 hours passed.

When a mine sweeper picked us up they also had the other boys from the two other life boats from our ship. It sure was good to see them. Our lifeboat was the only one hitting land. The other two were picked up at sea. We started for St. Thomas.

July 2, 1942 Thursday

We arrived at St. Thomas. The Red Cross met us at the pier with fresh milk and what have you. Went to the Navy barracks and took about five showers to get the grime off. Finally hit the sack for some much-needed rest.

July 10, 1942 Friday

Had eight (days off) just getting drunk and believe you me we did just that.

July 11, 1942 Saturday

They woke us up at 2:30 to eat and got aboard a sub chaser which took us to Puerto Rico and then aboard a Navy transport which was taking us back to the States. We arrived in Norfolk, VA, on July 14, 1942.

[Details of the sinking of SS SAM HOUSTON can be found at <http://www.uboa.net/allies/merchants/ships/1866.html>]

Louis R. Padula served in the US Navy on the USS Porterfield as a Gunners Mate Second Class, participating in the following battles

Marianas Campaign

Marshall Island

U.S. Navy 3rd Fleet and 5th Fleet

Task Force 34 in 1944

Battle of Saipan

Guam

Tinian

Kwajalein Campaign

Leyte Gulf Battle

Philippine Sea Battle

North Africa Campaign

Invasion of French Morocco, November 8, 1942