

Claude Vandersee's memories of the sinking of his ship, "Chloe"

6 May 1942

At 10.00 am, while at the wheel of S.S. Chloe, a Greek ship with a cargo of coal and coke from Newcastle to Noumea, I sighted a vessel dead ahead.

Being alone on the bridge I used the bridge binoculars and noticed that the ship was headed in a southerly direction. This seemed odd, as the next land in that direction is Antarctica.

After some minutes the ship remained dead ahead which indicated she was not under way. Then I observed smoke coming from the deckhouse abaft the funnel. At about 10.30 am our Captain Nicholas Vaglianos arrived on the bridge and I reported on my observations. He ordered me to steer hard to starboard and reverse course as he suspected the strange behaviour of the ship could indicate that she was an armed merchant cruiser.

When the ship did not change position the Captain decided to circle her. At a closer range we were able to see that she was damaged in No 4 hold and that the midship deck housing was burnt out (*Picture No1 - white patch to rear of ship*). The lifeboat falls were over the side (both sides) indicating that she was abandoned (*Picture No2*).

The Chief Officer and Bosun boarded the ship to assess the possibility of taking in tow (*Picture No3*). They found that she was still burning in No 2 and No 3 holds. She was apparently on her maiden voyage and was a US Liberty ship named John Adams.





The only salvage that could be done was to rescue a tabby cat (*Picture No4*). During the afternoon No 3 hold blew up (*Picture No5*) followed shortly after by another explosion in No 2 hold (*Picture No6*). At about 7.00 pm Captain Vaglianos abandoned the idea of salvage and proceeded towards Noumea.



Note:

Pictures 1-6 were taken by me with a 40 mm camera which I should not have had on board.

7 May 1942

At 7.00 am the next morning (my 18th birthday) after being relieved of my wheel duties, I was required to hose down the decks. As it was raining I went to the crews quarters to get my oil-skins. On returning on deck at the stern, looking at the wake, I saw a white streak on the port quarter coming rapidly towards me - a torpedo!! When it hit the wake it came to the surface carrying away the log line, missing the ship and exploding with a time fuse.

Most officers, engineers, firemen and seamen left their places of work and went to the boat-deck. Only one stayed on duty - the wireless operator who went to the chartroom to find the ship's position and send a distress call.

The man at the wheel had evidently left some starboard helm on before walking off, precipitating a slow turn and bringing the submarine immediately astern. Another torpedo was fired going along the portside - once again exploding without making contact.

The submarine, seeing that we had no means of defending ourselves, surfaced, firing warning shots across our bows.

The crew, with their issued life jackets, assembled on the boat deck when it became obvious that the majority of the Arab firemen had used their life jacket tapes for boot laces. Consequently they were ineffective.

The first lifeboat to be launched was lowered incompetently and capsized with three men on board and the painter (rope that holds it against the ship) carried away because the ship was still going at full speed with no one in control.

The remaining lifeboat and a small work-boat were then lowered to accommodate the remaining crew. Because of the first accident, no crew member volunteered to go in the second lifeboat whilst it was being lowered, to keep it fended off the ship's side as the ship rolled, consequently, the lifeboat crashed against the side of the ship a number of times before landing in the water. Arab firemen were reluctant to slide down the manlines until a deck crew member volunteered how to do it. Then they followed one by one, without care, landing on top of one another.

After the small workboat was launched with the remainder of the crew we stood off the "Chloe" while the Japanese submarine I.29, which had torpedoed the John Adams two days earlier, proceeded to sink the "Chloe" by shellfire. This event took approximately two hours because of the difficulty to sink a ship loaded with coke and coal.

Lifeboats, traditionally, are checked and maintained at regular intervals with regard to the efficacy of their gear and life saving stores (high energy biscuits and water). It was discovered that the remaining lifeboat's stores were full of weevils, the water containers were almost empty and the boat's rigging was rotten.

When the ship finally went down the submarine proceeded towards the lifeboats with the crew beckoning us to row towards them. This struck fear in all hands because of the stories of machine gun fire. However, the Japanese crew threw three sealed canisters (about four gallons in size) into the water. Again our crew feared they may be bombs. They turned out to be life saving biscuits albeit hard and tasteless but nourishing.

When the submarine disappeared over the horizon, it was decided to attempt to rig the lifeboat mast and sail. This exercise resulted in me being knocked unconscious by the boom when the rotten rope carried away. I came to, vomiting over the side, when I then discovered the reason for the need for continuous bailing of water by the crew with hats and boots and whatever else they could put their hands on. The reason was a length of planking (about a metre long) had been smashed from the boat's side in the original lowering from the "Chloe". The carpenter retrieved light pine planks from the empty provision boxes and using kapok from life jackets was able to make a temporary, yet effective, patch to the side of the boat.



As a result of our distress signal a float plane from Noumea eventually sighted us. Our wireless operator had given a position of 30 nautical miles south west of Amadee Light (Noumea) when in reality we were 30 miles west. The sub-chaser HMAS "Willecannia" was directed to our position and rescued us seven hours after the first torpedo was fired. I souvenired the port lifeboat's compass before landing in Noumea (Picture: "Compass.JPG")

It was hair raising for "Chloe's" crew to have to remain on the "Wilcannia" whilst she searched unsuccessfully for the submarine.

8 May 1942

We arrived back in Noumea at 8 .00 am the next morning.

Picture Nos. 7 and 8 show the crew of the "Chloe" showing our lifeboat and workboat - I am the tallest one with a lot of hair on the lower deck in Picture No. 8. Picture No. 9 shows Captain Vaglianos and Lieut-Commander Livingstone of the "Wilcannia". Picture No. 10 shows Captain Vaglianos, an American Army Lieutenant and Lieut-Commander Livingstone. These were taken by US Army intelligence officers on our arrival in Noumea and given to me as a thank you for giving them my two reels of film of the "John Adams" episode.

