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99/802



H.M.S. "HECLA".

17th May 1942.

SECRET

No. 0190/1.

REPORT OF DAMAGE TO H.M.S. "HECLA" BY UNDERWATER EXPLOSION AND CASUALTIES TO PERSONNEL.

Sir,

I regret to report that H.M. Ship under my command suffered serious damage and sustained a large number of casualties by underwater explosion on 15th May 1942, the circumstances being as follows.

PRELIMINARY NARRATIVE.

2. Having completed a refit at Messrs. John Brown & Co., Clydebank, and embarked numerous personnel and stores for Far Eastern bases, I joined Convoy W.S.18 and left the Clyde on 15th April 1942, to join the Eastern Fleet.

3. The convoy proceeded without incident to Freetown where it arrived on 29th April and, after refuelling, sailed to the southward on 3rd May.

The convoy was organised in six columns, the port three columns being destined for Capetown and the starboard three columns for Durban.

Whilst at sea, I received orders from the Admiralty to proceed with the Durban portion of the convoy and thereafter as instructed by the Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet.

4. As the convoy was due to split at 0300 on 15th May, certain dispositions were made before dark on 14th May. The Vice-Commodore of the convoy in "Duchess of Bedford", who was astern of me, moved up and took my place as leader of the second column from starboard, whilst I moved across and took station as leader of the starboard column.

The Capetown portion parted company about 0330 on 15th May, when the Durban portion increased speed to 14 knots, course 136°.

During the forenoon of 15th May, the Vice-Commodore, now in charge, formed a fourth column with the rear ships and the convoy then consisted of four columns with three ships in each.

5. The convoy was routed to Durban through positions:-

(O) 34° 00' S  
17° 10' E

(P) 36° 00' S  
19° 46' E

(Q) 36° 12' S  
20° 25' E

(R) 34° 53' S  
25° 32' E.

6. During the forenoon of Friday, 15th May, the speed of the convoy was adjusted to allow stragglers to come up, and at 1200 (Z - 2) speed was set at 13½ knots.

At 1430 (Z - 2) in position 35° 56' S, 19° 30' E, course was altered to 111° to pass through positions (P) and (Q).

The Commander-in-Chief,  
H.M. Ships and Vessels,

NARRATIVE .....

*Copied with permission from the Public Record Office, New York*

NARRATIVE.

(All times Z - 2, all courses true)

7. The ship's company were organised in three cruising watches, which included A and Y 4.5" guns' crews, three Oerliken crews, one pom-pom crew, fore director and T.S. crew, submarine, anti-aircraft and masthead look-outs closed up and the plotting officer and R.D.F. rating keeping the plot in the chart-house.

8. At 1555 on 15th May, the Red Watch were piped to close up to relieve the Blue and, at 1559, whilst the watches were changing over, a heavy explosion shook the ship.

Very shortly before, I had left the bridge and was standing on the signal deck just below it, scanning the convoy on the port side.

I ran up the bridge ladder and, looking aft, saw clouds of smoke and fumes issuing from the welldeck. The Officer-of-the-Watch, Lieutenant Commander G.B. Herbert-Jones, R.N.R., informed me that he thought the ship had struck a mine.

The ship's company were immediately ordered to action stations.

POSITION.

9. The ship's position at 1600 was 36° 02.5' S. 19° 52.5' E., approximately 72 miles south of Cape Agulhas, about 3.5 miles inside the western limit of the Agulhas bank, in a depth of about 85 fathoms, (see the attached tracing from a portion of Chart 2095, in original only)

ACTION.

10. I gave orders for the appropriate sound signal to be made, flag signal to be hoisted and the Senior Officer Escort in "Gambia" to be informed by W/T, but it was immediately apparent that the force of the explosion had severed all steam and high power electrical connections with the fore part of the ship. The gyro compass went off the board, the steering gear broke down due to the telemotor piping being severed and the engine-room telegraphs were out of action.

11. Fortunately, the wheel must have been nearly amidships and as the wind and sea were on the starboard beam, the ship sheered out of the line to starboard whilst hand-steering arrangements were made and telephone communication with the engine-room established.

Meanwhile the ship remained on an even keel but took a trim of about eight feet by the head.

Preliminary reports by Commander J.R. D'Oyly, R.N., and the Engineer Officer, Commander(E) O. Gerard, R.N., revealed that the ship had been severely damaged below the water line and that a large portion of the midships section was flooded, three or four thousand tons of water being estimated to have entered the ship.

12. Damage control, fire and first aid parties were promptly at work and every effort was made to remove and attend to casualties and to shore up adjacent compartments.

13. Subsequent .....



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15. Subsequent reports from the same officers revealed that the following compartments were completely flooded:-

82 - 103	Torpedo Parting Space (Hold)
82 - 103	Torpedo Store (Lower Deck)
103 - 121	Heavy Machine Shop (Hold)
103 - 121	Plate Shop and Smithery (Lower Deck)

*5 inch armoured steel*  
The armoured Middle deck over the Torpedo Store was badly buckled and torn and could not be rendered watertight or kept in place by shoring, so that the Lower Seamen's Mess deck (82 - 103) middle deck had to be abandoned and the Main Deck over shored and kept watertight between 82 - 103 Stations.

14. It was also reported to me that several men had been killed and a large number injured.

Meanwhile, the convoy was proceeding on its course out of sight and, as I had no electric power, I had some difficulty in communicating with the Senior Officer Escort in "Gambia", but eventually succeeded, when he returned to my assistance and I requested him to lead me off the Bank and in to Simonstown at 12 knots.

WEATHER.

15. The weather at the time was:-

Weather	- b
Wind	- South; Force 4 to 5.
Sea	- Slight, 3 to 4.
Swell	- Southerly, 4 (Long and low).
Barometer	- Steady at 1026 m.b.

16. About 2100, the Engineer Officer reported to me that the ship was working badly and that he thought her back was broken, and speed was reduced to 10 knots.

17. No difficulty was experienced keeping station astern of "Gambia", the night passed without incident, the weather fortunately moderating slightly, and, at 0802 on 16th May, I arrived and anchored off Simonstown.

DEGAUSSING.

18. Degaussing was switched on at the time. At 1430 on 15th May, when course was altered to 111°, the D.G. coils were reset as follows:-

M	- 400-
F	- 308-
Q	- 212+
A	- 380+

the necessary adjustments for change of latitude, etc., having been made since the ship went over the range at Greenock on 13th April 1942.

MEDICAL.- CASUALTIES.

19. A list of casualties has already been forwarded to the Commander in-Chief, South Atlantic (see my No. 31/1 dated 16th May 1942).

Killed	-	21
Missing	-	3
Injured	-	116

Some of the killed were only recovered after the ship had docked.

The large number of casualties is accounted for by the explosion occurring below the lower and middle mess decks at the time that the men were having tea.

The majority of the casualties were quickly rescued from the messes by Stoker's fire and rescue squads led by officers. A large number of men who could not get up through the hatches were rescued through the ship's side scuttles with ropes and hauled on deck. About 150 men were rescued in this manner from both sides of the ship. The absence of primary lighting, the thick smoke, fumes and oil fuel on the mess decks made rescue work very difficult and numerous cases of individual heroism were observed.

The dead included three cases of fractured skulls and five who died rapidly due to blast; the remainder died more slowly from the same cause.

The injured in 90 per cent. of the cases were rendered unconscious by blast for periods of from a few minutes to several hours. There was a marked absence of fractures, burns and surgical cases.

Although the sick bay accommodation is ample for this class of ship it was hopelessly inadequate for this large number of casualties, and the bakery, church, wardroom mess and wardroom ante-room were utilised as dressing stations.

COMPLEMENT.

20. The complement at the time, including officers and men taking passage, was:-

Officers	-	47
Men	-	934
	-	---
Total	-	981
	-	---

COMMENDATIONS.

21. Although it was quickly obvious that the ship had been very badly damaged and that the between decks over a large area were in an indescribable state, there was a complete absence of panic and poor morale, and the general behaviour of the officers and ship's company was beyond all praise and in keeping with the very high opinion I had formed of them in the short time I have been in command of this very happy ship. (see Appendix I for detailed commendations).

22. The ship remained at anchor off Simonstown until 1730 on 16th May, when I weighed and proceeded into the basin.

Whilst the ship was at anchor, the Engineer Officer was successful in running a steam pipe through a flooded compartment and extemporising steam on the capstan.

At 1900, I entered the dry dock.



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DAMAGE.

23. Examination of the ship in dry dock reveals that the following damage has been sustained:-

Outer and inner bottom, including keel, torn away from 90 to 105 Stations, over a distance of approximately 100 feet and all decks below the armoured deck (Middle deck) torn away in this area. The damage extends right across the ship from the inner longitudinal bulkheads on either side, but is more extensive on the starboard side.

All machinery in the Heavy Machine Shop has either gone through the bottom or has been badly damaged. The Plate Shop and Smithery machinery is probably repairable, together with the 8<sup>1/2</sup>" lathe and shaping machine in the Heavy Machine Shop.

CONCLUSIONS.

24. The damage was probably caused by a mine or mines. It is so extensive that it is doubtful if any single mine could have caused it, although only one explosion was felt, and it is possible that the ship struck a double mine.

Paravanes.- Paravanes were not streamed at the time as it was assumed that the convoy had been safely routed to Durban.

Morale.- As previously stated, the morale of the officers and ship's company was magnificent and, since the occurrence, remains as high as ever.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

*E. J. P. P.*



CAPTAIN

APPENDIX I.

DETAILED LIST OF COMMENDATIONS.

I desire to commend the following officers and ratings for example, devotion to duty and courage, with complete disregard for their own safety, in entering flooded, damaged and smoke-filled compartments, directing repair work and searching for and rescuing unconscious and injured men:-

Acting Commander J.R. D'Oyly, R.N.

Acting Commander (E) O. Gerard, R.N.

This officer, by his intimate knowledge of, interest in and devotion to the ship, in which he has served since the keel was laid, was primarily responsible for saving her and I cannot speak too highly of him.

Lieutenant Commander (E) H.W. Findlay, R.N.

This officer most ably supported his chief and was untiring in his efforts to save the ship, never leaving the damaged area.

Mr. F.W. Barton, Gunner, R.N.

This officer's behaviour was outstanding and his bravery exceptional. On many occasions he went over the ship's side to assist men out of the scuttles and risked his life on their behalf.

Mr. W.F.M. Eddy, Warrant Shipwright, R.N.

This officer took the lead in dangerous shoring operations and by his knowledge, skill and personal bravery was, with Commander (E) O. Gerard, R.N., instrumental in saving the ship.

Temporary Sub-Lieutenant G.H.G. Cox, R.N.V.R.

Temporary Sub-Lieutenant G.S. Knight, R.N.V.R.

Temporary Sub-Lieutenant D.R.O. Jones, R.N.V.R.

Acting Temporary Sub-Lieutenant B. Spencer, R.N.V.R.

These young officers, although confronted with an alarming situation and without any previous experience, showed outstanding initiative and behaved with the greatest pluck.

Mr. R.L. Kirby, Warrant Engineer, R.N.

Mr. J.G. Farrow, Warrant Engineer, R.N.

These outstanding officers were of the greatest assistance to their chief and worked untiringly throughout the night to save the ship.

Mr. H. Edmunds, Warrant Electrician, R.N.

Mr. L.H. Farr, Warrant Ordnance Officer, R.N.

These officers, by their intimate technical knowledge, devotion and courage, were invaluable in numerous ways.

Acting Temporary Surgeon Lieutenant Commander C.de W. Kitcat, R.H.V.R.

Temporary Surgeon Lieutenant S.L. Hetherington, R.N.V.R.

These officers worked unceasingly for twelve hours without a break and their magnificent efforts were responsible for saving many lives and alleviating much suffering.

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APPENDIX I. (Continued)

DETAILED LIST OF COMMENDATIONS.

RATINGS.

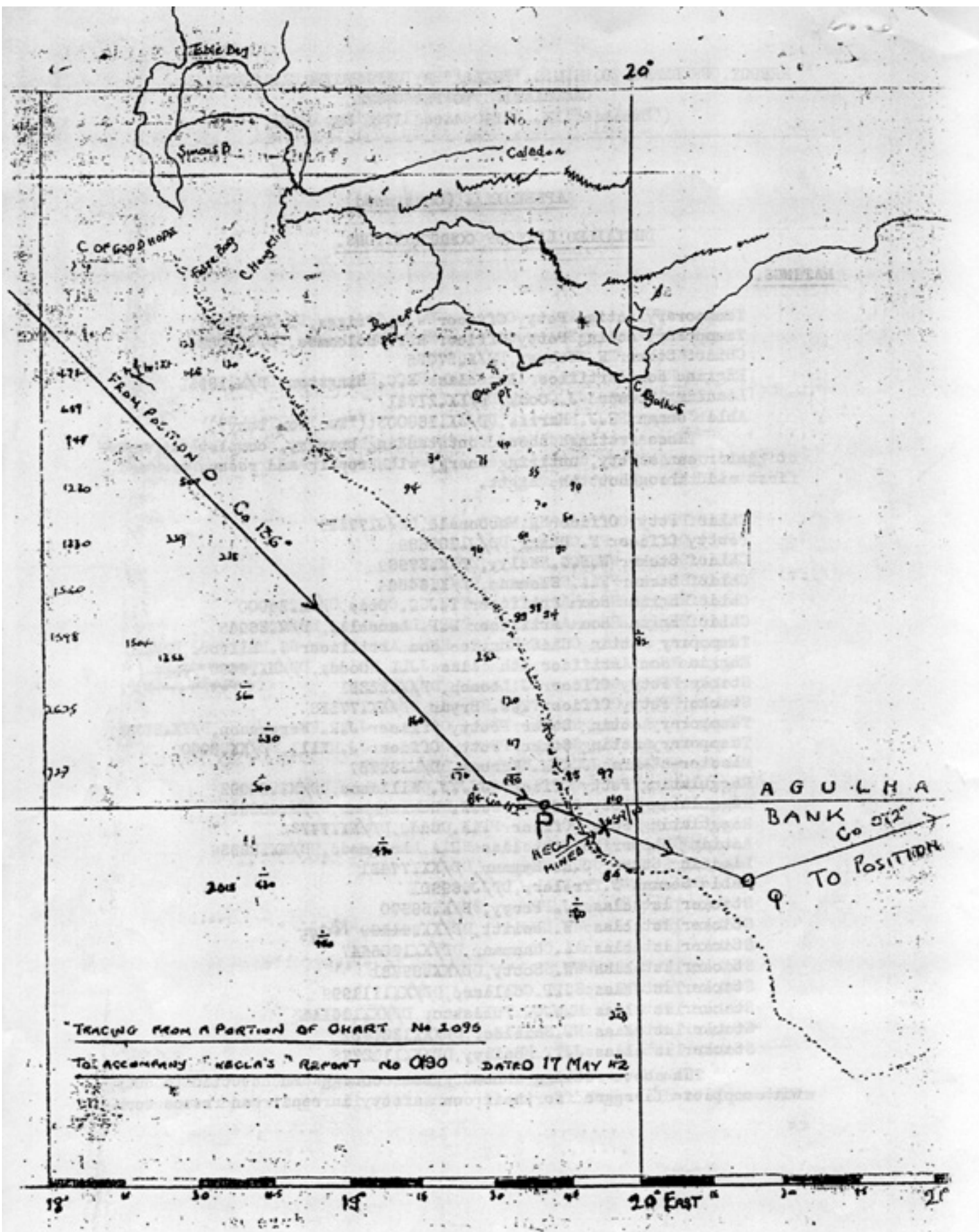
Temporary Acting Petty Officer W.J. Triggs, D/JX.138571  
Temporary Acting Petty Officer H.P. Holcombe, D/J.108244  
Chief Stoker R. Webber, D/K.57075  
Engine Room Artificer 1st class E.C. Hingston, D/M.18951  
Leading Steward J. Cook, D/LX.21781  
Able Seaman R.J. Harris, D/JX.188003 ("Two Ton Tony")

These ratings showed outstanding bravery, complete disregard of their own safety, untiring energy with repair and rescue work and first aid throughout the night.

Chief Petty Officer H. McDonald, D/J.77519  
Petty Officer F. Ching, D/J.109869  
Chief Stoker W.H.C. Kelly, D/K.57969  
Chief Stoker F.A. Sleeman, D/K.64884  
Chief Engine Room Artificer T.J.C. Opie, D/M.24900  
Chief Engine Room Artificer D.P. Landells, D/M.26945  
Temporary Acting Chief Engine Room Artificer S. Milford, D/LX.  
Engine Room Artificer 4th class J.L. Dodds, D/MX.7400 ~~5167~~  
Stoker Petty Officer J. Leech, D/K.21281 (K. R. P.)  
Stoker Petty Officer T.W. Bryan, D/KX.77518  
Temporary Acting Stoker Petty Officer J.R. Fergusson, D/KX.87370  
Temporary Acting Stoker Petty Officer J. Hill, D/KX.80400  
Master-at-Arms J.C.H. Harber, D/M.39787  
Regulating Petty Officer J.J.W. Williams, D/MX.54092  
Regulating Petty Officer J.R. Buckingham, D/MX.63547  
Regulating Petty Officer P.A. Cudd, D/MX.74722  
Acting Shipwright 4th class H.A. Langmead, D/MX.52936  
Leading Stoker G.H. Hayman, D/KX.77491  
Able Seaman W. Treloar, D/J.69901  
Stoker 1st class J. Percy, D/K.59670  
Stoker 1st class W. Hewitt, D/KX.94100 ~~14095~~  
Stoker 1st class A. Chapman, D/KX.105647  
Stoker 1st class W. Scott, D/KX.89781  
Stoker 1st class S.P. Collard, D/KX.111999  
Stoker 1st class M.W.G. Puleston, D/KX.104143  
Stoker 1st class N. Shields, D/KX.120781  
Stoker 1st class J.T. Healey, D/KX.110276

The above ratings showed great courage and devotion to duty with complete disregard for their own safety in repair and rescue work.





TRACKING FROM A PORTION OF CHART No 1095  
 TO ACCOMPANY RECLA'S REPORT No 0130 DATED 17 MAY 42