

An Account of the Submarine Attack

April 10th, 1942

By Martin G. Williams, Jr.

14 years old on this date

On April 10th, 1942, an astonishing event for a young 14-year old took place. Between approximately 9:00-10:00 p.m., while I was at my father's Bingo Parlor on the Boardwalk on the oceanfront at Jacksonville Beach, Florida, I heard a strange thudding noise. I looked out in the ocean and noticed a red glow to the southeast, far out in the ocean. Shortly thereafter, another noise occurred and a bright yellow flame appeared to rise upward. Then people gathered on the boardwalk.

In front of the Bingo Parlor was located the Jacksonville Beach Pier. On the pier there was a dance going on, the Fireman's Ball, which was held annually. People attending the dance ran to the railings and out on the fishing pier to get a better look.

After much shouting and confusion the word was passed that a German submarine had torpedoed a freighter off the coast. In the glow you could see the sub had surfaced and was shooting from its deck gun. It fired approximately 12 to 13 shells before it began to shoot tracer bullets from its machine gun. These tracers were aimed at the crew and lifeboats as the abandoned ship. With binoculars some could see the flaming ship and water and the poor crew struggling with the lifeboats.

Shortly, the city officials cut off all electric power in order quench all light sources. The sub had already used the light to its advantage by putting the ship in between it and the lighted coast which created a fine silhouette target. Of course, the damage was already done.

Within the hour you could see ships, assumed to be patrol craft or coast guard vessels from Mayport Naval Station, heading toward the disaster. They were blinking their code lights between the various vessels.

Military personnel were ordered back to their bases, especially naval personnel stationed at Mayport Naval Station 10 miles away at the mouth of the St. Johns River. Special buses and taxis were offering free rides to the base. The city was in the dark and there was general chaos with people trying to drive home in the dark.

The next morning more details were in the newspaper and there were many rumors. It was learned the Coast Guard or Navy vessels were able to rescue a few of the survivors, but many were dead and missing. Over the next few days a few of the bodies washed ashore and, along with some of my young friends, we began to see what happens when you are at war. After that night there was complete blackout at Jacksonville Beach and we knew the war had come to our coast. For the next three years there were many more sinkings. It was a night that I never forgot.

Martin G. Williams
P.O. Box 1855
West Jefferson, NC 28694

