

SS Anselm

Toward the end of June 1941 Anselm left Britain for Freetown. She was heavily overloaded with about 1,200 British Army, Royal Marines, and Royal Air Force personnel: more than twice the 500 she had been converted to carry. There were 175 RAF personnel, posted to serve in the North Africa Campaign.

In the early hours of 5 July 1941 Anselm and her escorts were in mid-Atlantic, proceeding south through fog about 300 nautical miles (560 km) north of the Azores. Challenger was leading the troop ship in line ahead; Starwort was stationed in line astern because her sonar was out of order. Lavender and Petunia were in screening positions ahead, either side of Challenger's bow. At about 0350 hours the fog cleared, and the convoy began to zigzag as evasive action against possible attack.

However, a Luftwaffe Focke-Wulf Fw 200 had reported the convoy's position and at 0426 hours the German Type VIIC submarine U-96, commanded by Kptlt Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock, fired a spread of four torpedoes at Challenger and Anselm. None hit Challenger but one struck Anselm's port side amidships, causing extensive damage and momentarily lifting the troop ship in the water. U-96 dived and the corvettes counter-attacked, Lavender firing six depth charges and Petunia firing 20. When the attack drew too close to the survivors it was broken off, but the submarine was seriously damaged and broke off her patrol to return to Saint-Nazaire submarine base in occupied France for repairs.

Anselm launched all her lifeboats except no. 6, which had been damaged by the explosion. Challenger had been half a nautical mile (930 m) ahead but manoeuvred close to Anselm's port quarter and took off 60 or more survivors as the troop ship's bow settled in the water.

Officers from the passenger accommodation were able to reach the boat deck, but the impact caused extensive damage below decks, where collapsed overheads and wrecked ladders injured or trapped many of the men in one of the converted holds.

One officer who stayed aboard to the end was an Air Force chaplain of RAF Bridgnorth, Squadron Leader Cecil Pugh, who *"seemed to be everywhere at once, doing his best to comfort the injured, helping with the boats and rafts... and visiting the different lower sections where men were quartered. When he learned that a number of injured airmen were trapped in the damaged hold, he insisted on being lowered into it with a rope. Everyone demurred because the hold was below the water line and already the decks were awash and to go down was to go to certain death. He simply explained that he must be where his men were."*

The ship sank 22 minutes after being hit, and four crew and about 250 troops were killed. Pugh went down with the ship, and in 1947 was posthumously awarded the George Cross.

Most men aboard, including the majority of other ranks, did survive. Anselm's Master, Andrew Elliot, 92 of her crew, three DEMS gunners and 965 troops were rescued. Many were at first in the water, but were picked up by Challenger, Starwort or the ship's own lifeboats and rafts.

One leading aircraftman, Wilfrid Marten, recalled being in the sea for a few hours and being "near death's door" before he was rescued by a lifeboat. An officer in the boat then ordered him to row, but was silenced by a Naval rating or petty officer who threatened to throw the officer over the side.

Most of the survivors in the boats and rafts were transferred to the escort ships, ascending the sides by scramble nets. This left Challenger and the corvettes badly overloaded, so the survivors were transferred again to HMS Cathay which landed them at Freetown. The escorts may have missed one lifeboat, as one survivor reports that after the sinking he spent 18 days in a boat with neither food nor water.

Information from Wikipedia