

PG50/L11-1  
Serial 052

U.S.S. ERIE

79884

C O N F I D E N T I A L

December 11, 1942

From: Commanding Officer.  
To : The Secretary of the Navy.  
Via : The Commander All Forces, Aruba-Curacao.  
Commander Caribbean Sea Frontier.

Subject: Salvage Operations, and Capsizing of U.S.S. ERIE .

Reference: (a) C.O. ERIE Conf. ltr. PG50/A16-3/L11-1  
Serial 051 of December 9, 1942.  
(b) CAFAC Despatch 051903 to CCSF of December 1942.  
(c) CAFAC Despatch 132349 to CCSF of November 1942.  
(d) CCSF Despatch 141747 to CCSF of November 1942.  
(e) Cominch Despatch 141826 of November 1942.  
(f) CAFAC Despatch 142222 to CCSF of November 1942.  
(g) Buships Despatch 142141 to CCSF of November 1942.  
(h) CCSF Despatch 152245 to Cominch of November 1942.  
(i) Buships Despatch 192035 to CCSF of November 1942.  
(j) CAFAC Despatch 282238 to CCSF of November 1942.

Enclosure: (A) Detailed Account of Action Taken on U.S.S. ERIE  
on December 5, 1942.  
(B) Top Weights Removed, Condition of Tanks and  
Compartments.  
(C) Statements.

1. Report is submitted herein of the salvage operations of the U.S.S. ERIE resulting in successfully moving her into the inner harbor at Willemstad, Curacao, N.W.I., on November 28, 1942, and the subsequent structural failures which caused her to capsize at her moorings on December 5, 1942.

2. The ERIE was torpedoed on November 12, 1942, and beached two miles Northwest of Willemstad to prevent sinking. The damage to the vessel, as a result of the torpedo and gasoline explosions and subsequent fire, has been reported in reference (a).

3. On November 14 the ERIE was boarded and the remaining fires, above the second deck, were extinguished by a fire fighting party and equipment in Tug Parmo of Curacao Petroleum Industries Maatschappij. No inspections could be made below the second deck because of conditions on board.

4. On November 15, a fire fighting party consisting of Lieutenant E.E. Scanlon, Lieutenant E.A. Gaughan, and nine enlisted

PG50/L11-1  
Serial 052

December 11, 1942

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Subject: Salvage Operations, and Capsizing of U.S.S. ERIE.

-----  
man with fire fighting equipment arrived from Norfolk, Two days were required to extinguish fires which had reached a few of the compartments below the second deck. The work of this party, and use of their equipment was essential in connection with these fires which were still burning in inaccessible parts of the ship.

5. After the ship had been opened up, Commander Sweeton, Naval Constructor, Tenth Naval District, and Captain Peterson, Salvage Officer, Merritt Chapman Scott Co., made detailed inspections in company with the Commanding Officer. Consultations were held on board with officials of the C.P.I.M. in regard to local facilities for docking and repairs, necessary in preparation for towing to a Navy or repair yard, in case salvage of the vessel was decided upon. A conference was held by Commander All Forces Aruba-Curacao including the above mentioned officers and the representatives of C.P.I.M. It was decided that the ship could be salvaged and brought into the harbor of Willemstad, and that valuable material and equipment on board, and possibly the rebuilding of the vessel, warranted such action. It was stated that local facilities for the necessary docking and repairs were adequate and could be made available.

6. By order of the Bureau of Ships salvage operations were turned over to Captain Hughes, Salvage Officer of Merritt Chapman Scott, in Salvage Vessel Kellerig. The work was undertaken in cooperation with, and assisted by, the members of the ERIE crew remaining in Curacao. Salvage operations commenced on November 19.

7. In order to lighten the ship for floating and to ensure stability it was necessary to remove as much top weight as possible. This removal of weight included guns, mounts, stack, ground tackle, etc. A considerable top weight was removed in the form of wreckage and debris. A lighter with crane equipment was sent from Aruba for handling top weights. No crane was available with sufficient lift and reach to handle the main battery director. To further lighten the ship, and to correct the list and trim, fuel was removed from certain tanks, and other compartments were pumped or flooded. Enclosure (B) is a list of the principal top-side weights removed and shifted, and the tanks and compartments emptied and filled.

8. When first beached the vessel was lying at about a fifty-five degree angle to the beach line. When salvage operations started she had shifted to about a forty degree angle, indicating that she was not beached very hard or was resting on a small area of the bottom. The shelf dropped off so sharply that

U.S.S. ERIE

PG50/L11-1  
Serial 052

December 11, 1942

Subject: Salvage Operations, and Capsizing of U.S.S. ERIE.  
-----

one of the quarter anchors had to be dropped in about fifty fathoms of water. The cables from both quarter anchors were at a sharp angle to the deck, making the hauling off process slow and difficult. A bow anchor had been planted in the beach ahead.

9. The vessel had been beached with about a fifteen degree list to starboard. This list was corrected as she slid onto the beach, and she assumed a slight list to port conforming to the slope of the bottom. At some time after beaching her port shaft alley became flooded. No other shifting of weight due to involuntary flooding of compartments could be determined. As the ship was worked off the beach, inch by inch, she had assumed an increasing port list up to about eleven degrees. It was at first hard to tell how much of this was natural list, and how much was due to the slope of the bottom. Due to the working of the ship as her top weight was removed, it was rightly assumed that this list was natural. The ship appeared to be grounded at a point or area well aft, and not far forward of the ruptured area. The stern had drooped by an estimated amount of twenty-four inches. The plates showed some buckling in the weakened area, but appeared generally sound according to the report of the diver. At the weakened part the hull plate remained intact on the port side, and extended five feet from the keel on the starboard side. A spanish windlass of heavy wires had been rigged at the break in the hull and deck line, starboard, to help prevent possible further droop, and to tie the stern section to the rest of the ship. The stern section of the ship was buoyant and was not at anytime touching the bottom.

10. The Kellerig and two tugs were made available for towing, and when the ship slid off the beach there was no noticeable change in trim, and only a slight decrease in the port list. She was drawing about eight feet six inches forward and about twenty four feet aft, with about an eight and one-half degree list to port. She was moored in the inner harbor of Willemstad, Curacao, at buoys specially placed for her berthing, just off the Navy Section Base, Camp Parera.

11. The ship appeared in all respects to be in a satisfactory state of stability. She was taking comparatively little water which was being pumped daily. The work of correcting list and trim, which had not been completed during the salvaging of the vessel, and necessary in the preparation for dry docking, was being continued. The ship's auxiliary diesel generator had been started by the engineering force of the Navy Section Base, and lights had been rigged in machinery spaces to permit work on the preservation of machinery.

12. On December 4, an inspection board from the Canal Zone composed of the Industrial Manager, Fifteenth Naval District, the Superintendent, Mechanical Division, Canal Zone, and their two senior officer assistants completed a two day detailed inspection of the ship for the purpose of considering the feasibility of reconditioning her



U.S.S. ERIE

PG50/L11-1  
Serial 052

December 11, 1942

Subject: Salvage Operations, and Capsizing of U.S.S. ERIE.  
-----

and to determine the materials which would be required.

13. At a conference with the Canal Zone Board and representatives of the C.P.I.M. it was stated that if the draft could be reduced to twenty feet aft, which was thought entirely possible, and the ship put approximately on an even keel, the C.P.I.M. would undertake docking, realignment of the stern section, and make repairs necessary for towing to such repair yard as designated. The work of preservation of machinery was to continue as fast as possible. The ship was to be brought to the required list and trim by further removal of scrap metal and debris, by removal of depth charge racks and other gear above the main deck, by pumping out fuel remaining in A-418-F and A-4-F, by flooding of compartments forward, and by use of counter weights on deck if necessary. Most of the ammunition had been left in the forward magazines, and the heavy stores remained in the holds forward to increase stability and for correction of trim. The ship, at this time, appeared to be safe, and in no present danger from structural failures. No written report had been prepared, but verbal report had been made to Commander All Forces Aruba-Curacao.

14. On the evening of December 4, a large fuel barge, Luetta, was alongside the ERIE and had been pumping fuel from A-418-F and A-4-F. About 15 to 20 tons was taken from these tanks. Pumping was completed at about 1930. These tanks had been pumped during salvage operations, for buoyancy, and correction of list, and the remaining oil was being taken out for further list correction. At the completion of the pumping, the list of the ship was about 5 degrees to port. During the operations since the ship had been brought into the harbor various accumulations of rain water and seepage had been pumped and anchors and chain replaced. The anchors were secured in the hawse pipes, the chain temporarily on the deck, starboard side, forward. The list had been gradually corrected from about 8 1/2 degrees port, upon arrival in harbor, to about 5 degrees port.

15. The ship remained in this condition from 1930 in the evening until sometime shortly before 0300 in the morning, when the guards on board noted that she had righted herself and was commencing to take a starboard list. No work of any kind had been going on onboard since 1930. There had been no leaks in the ship which had not been handled by a small amount of daily pumping, and the free water onboard had appeared to be almost negligible. Some structural failure appears to have occurred suddenly which brought about a condition of instability and caused the ship to take the starboard list which finally reached a maximum of about 10 degrees.

U.S.S. ERIE

PG50/L11-1  
Serial 052

December 11, 1942

Subject: Salvage Operations, and Capsizing of U.S.S. ERIE.  
-----

16. Oil was immediately pumped into fuel tank A-418-F, an estimated amount of about 15 or 17 tons. The tank was overflowed with 2 or 3 tons. This did not check the list of the vessel. With an increasing starboard list of about 6 to 10 degrees, water was being taken into C-201-L through an undetermined leak in the vicinity of the engineers' washroom at the forward starboard side of the compartment. A gasoline handy billy which had been rigged gained slightly in removing the water. A trunk door to the engineroom spaces C-1 was closed after water from this compartment had filled the engineroom bilges about up to the floor plates.

17. Reserve Feed Tank D-1-W of about 40 to 45 ton capacity had been kept pumped during salvage operations. Three or four hundred gallons had been pumped about every second day. On the first inspection on the morning of December 5th this tank was found to be flooded.

18. Counter-flooding of A-4-F checked the increasing starboard list at about 10 degrees. The vessel remained in this condition for 10 to 15 minutes, then commenced righting herself. She continued on over until she capsized to port at about 0615. The estimated time from even keel to capsizing was about twelve minutes.

19. The stern section of the ship, aft of the area of the torpedo hit, had about a twenty-four inch droop which had shown no change, by appearance or soundings from the time the fires were extinguished until the morning of December 5. As the ship listed to starboard the stern section leveled off to normal position. When the ship took the final list to port, the stern section, which was still buoyant, was in such a position as to show a pronounced sagging of the vessel, centered in the weakened area.

20. The condition of instability developing suddenly during the night of December 5 was unquestionably due to the structural failures which resulted in the flooding of the reserve feed tank D-1-W and possibly one or more other compartments aft of bulkhead 99, and the buckling or severing of the hull plating in the area of the torpedo hit. The sequence in which these failures occurred could not be determined. A more comprehensive analysis of the causes of this condition of instability, which resulted in the capsizing of the vessel, will probably be found in the reports of the inspecting officers from the Fifteenth Naval District.

U.S.S. ERIE

PG50/L11-1  
Serial 052

December 11, 1942

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Subject: Salvage Operations, and Capsizing of U.S.S. ERIE.  
-----

21. The Commanding Officer was quartered in Willemstad, and did not reach the ERIE until after she had capsized. Apparently everything possible was done, with the equipment available and obtainable, to prevent the loss of the vessel. If the counter-flooding of A-4-F and A-418-F had not been accomplished she might have capsized to starboard and wrecked the valuable fuel barge Luetta with possible loss of life.

A. R. MACK.

Copy to:  
SecNav (Advanced Copy) ✓  
Comfifteen  
File



ENCLOSURE (A)DETAILED ACCOUNT OF ACTION TAKEN ON U.S.S. ERIE DECEMBER 5, 1942.

1. At about 0300 the Sentry on watch on the ERIE called the Corporal of the Guard stationed onboard, and brought his attention to the fact that the list of the ship had changed, and that she was now commencing to list to starboard. They heard loose water on the second deck shifting across the deck. It is thought that this was a small amount of accumulated rain water in the after port side of the crew's messing compartment, A-206-LA. They called to the watch on the Luetta who replaced the oil which had been pumped during the previous day from A-418-F. The pumping overflowed the tank with two or three additional tons. This apparently did not check the list to starboard which was steadily increasing. A Marine guard and one man from the Luetta then came ashore in a boat and called Ensign Madsen and the Erie's Chief Carpenter's Mate, stationed at the Navy Section Base, Camp Parera, and notified the Officer-of-the-Day. A party of men was assembled and proceeded immediately to the ERIE.

2. Upon arrival on board an inspection was made. Considerable water was found in C-201-L which was commencing to run into the engine room, through door 2-89 which had been left open for electrical light and power leads from the diesel generator, recently placed in operation. One man was left to caulk and tighten the door. The Chief Carpenter's Mate and Chief Machinist's Mate went forward and inspected the filling of tank A-418-F, and found things normal except for the over flow of oil previously mentioned. A man inspecting the engine room, fire room, and auxiliary spaces, reported water in the bilges of the engineroom C-1 about up to the lower floor plates. Bilges in B-1 and C-2, boiler room and auxiliary machinery space, were normal, containing only a few inches of water which could not be taken by hose suction. It was noticed that the ship was continuing to list to starboard, and resting on the main deck guard rail of the Luetta. She now had a starboard list of about 10 degrees. Handy billy pumps were immediately rigged to counter-flood A-4-F in an endeavor to check the list. The Luetta was requested to assist in counter-flooding A-4-F with her pumps. Continued inspections showed that other compartments were normal, except D-1-W which had been practically empty since floating of the vessel, and had now become filled. This reserve feed tank had a slow leak, but was easily controllable by daily pumping. The tank was of about 40 to 45 ton capacity.

3. It was noticed at about this time that the spanish windlass between the stern section, and the forward part of the ship had slackened considerably; that the stern section appeared to have about the usual amount of buoyancy, but that instead of the droop the stern had practically leveled off into alignment

PG50/L11-1  
Serial 052

ENCLOSURE (A)

with the rest of the vessel. In general, it appeared that the part of the ship just forward of the rupture had settled about 3 feet. Inspection showed that the bow had risen considerably. Some change of trim had been noted by the ERIE party when passing the bow to board the ship.

4. Ensign Madsen had reached the ship shortly after the rest of the ERIE party, and had received reports of conditions as shown by the first inspections. He then proceeded to the beach to request from the C.P.I.M. the immediate services of a high capacity pump, and a crane lighter and to arrange for a larger working party and more lines and equipment.

5. A man was sent aft to caulk door 2-141 to the steering engine room. This door had been previously caulked but was leaking under an increased pressure. A second handy billy pump had been rigged to remove loose water from C-201-L. The pumping in this compartment was gaining slightly. Due to the extreme starboard list, water was being taken in from an undetermined source in the vicinity of the fireman's washroom, forward starboard side of C-201-L. There was no great amount of water in the compartment. At about day light, A-4-F had been filled, the list checked, and counter-flooding operations ceased. The list was now about 9 degrees starboard. List measurements had been taken from an inclinometer constructed on an amidships bulkhead.

6. For a period of from 10 to 15 minutes no change in list was noted and stability appeared to be regained. No further action was being taken while awaiting equipment from ashore. No water was entering the ship at the time as far as visual inspection could determine. At the end of this period a man on the barge, Luetta, watching the chaffing of the two vessels noted and reported an apparent decrease in starboard list of the ERIE. The inclinometer was again checked and it was noted that the ship was commencing to steadily right herself. A gush of water was heard below decks, apparently in the machinery spaces. This did not sound like loose water shifting position, but more like a break of some sort. Before any action could be taken to determine the source of the water, the ship had righted itself and commenced a port list. The movement of the ship had been steady and continuous since the report from the man on the Luetta.

7. Bulkhead 99, the last bulkhead between dry and flooded spaces, had been inspected twice daily, and usually more often since salvage operations had commenced, and was found to be still intact on the morning of December 5th. There had been no evidence of undue stress or strain at any time on this bulkhead.



C O N F I D E N T I A L

8. The listing of the ship to port became so accelerated that it was inadvisable to allow any further inspections below deck. All men were ordered from the ship to the Luetta. The man caulking door 2-141-1 had not heard the call to leave the ship. Chief Machinist's Mate Schiller returned aboard the ERIE, crossed the decks and down the port side to the stern section. Passing over the section of the ship at the break, he noticed that the water was knee deep, that the stern was still buoyant, and out of water even on the port side. This indicated that instead of the droop of the stern formerly mentioned, the ship's hull had buckled or broken and that the ship now sagged at the broken area. The spanish windlass was now completely slack.

9. Men were standing by to cut the lines to the Luetta, but as the ship heeled over the manila lines were cast off and the wires forward and aft parted. The ship capsized and the stern sank to the bottom. The bow slowly settled with the liberation of air from forward compartments assuming an angle of 115 degrees to the upright position. From the time the ship reached the position of even keel until she capsized is estimated at about 12 minutes.

U.S.S. ERIE

ENCLOSURE (B)

WEIGHTS REMOVED FROM U.S.S. ERIE DURING SALVAGE  
(This includes boats and losses by fire)

Topside:

16 - 171 guns  
3 - 171 carriages  
4 - 20 mm guns and mounts  
4 - 6" guns, slides and shields  
2 - 6" gun carriages  
1 - 75 mm pack howitzer  
1 - 6" gun loading machine  
1 - OS2U-3 airplane  
1 - stack  
5 - boats  
3 - boat skids  
2 - boat davits  
29 - depth charges (300 lb.)  
15 tons ready ammunition (burned)

Second Deck:

Debris from living compartments and office spaces.  
One ton miscellaneous from machine shop.

Stern Section:

Sail locker--sewing machine and other equipment.  
Fire control spare parts from diving gear locker.  
Radio spare parts from trunk stowage.  
Cordage, rigging, aircraft spares, boat and mooring gear from after hold.

Platform Deck:

Dry Provisions Storeroom - All dry stores.  
Refrigerating spaces - All fresh provisions (normal capacity).  
D-410-A - Miscellaneous engineering stores (negligible).

Tanks Emptied:

A-406-W  
A-3-F  
A-4-F) - As noted in text.  
A-418-F)  
D-1-W (Until morning of December 5)  
D-2-W

U.S.S. ERIE

ENCLOSURE (B) (Continued)

WEIGHTS REMOVED FROM U.S.S. ERIE DURING SALVAGE

COMPARTMENTS

Pumped During Salvage

Pumped Periodically

A-2-C	Yes
A-305-1LA and 2LA	No
A-6-V	No
C-1 (Bilges)	No
C-2 (Bilges)	No
D-412-E	Yes
D-206-A	Yes
D-208-A	Yes
Several compartments on Second Deck	Yes - Rain and water from fire hoses.

The above compartments were being kept dry by daily pumping as necessary.

//



U.S.S. ERIE

December 5, 1942.

From: Ensign D.H. MADSEN, USNR.  
To: Commanding Officer, U.S.S. ERIE.  
Subject: Capsizing of U.S.S. ERIE - Personal account of.

The ERIE had been moored at its buoys in about thirty-five feet of water off Camp Parera since the afternoon of November 28, 1942. Her list to port had been gradually corrected from day to day in order to release pressure on her weakened bulkheads. On December 3, the "LUETTA", an oil lighter, was brought along the starboard side by the tug "PARMO". The lighter had taken off a considerable amount of oil and was to finish the pumping December 5. Attempts to correct the port list had been most successful on December 4, there being a comparatively slight list when pumping stopped at about 2000.

I was awakened at 0445 by the C.D.'s messenger who said he had been told to report that the ERIE was taking on water fast and that a working party had already gone aboard. I immediately dressed and was soon aboard. The ship had a severe list to starboard and was leaning against the "LUETTA". Chiefs SCHILLER and ROY had already started pumping and counter-flooding. I went below with SCHILLER. The barge was refilling the port fuel tanks it had just finished emptying, and two of our ship's handybillies were also in operation.

Two immediate items for righting the ship's list were: (1) securing a steam pump and (2) removing the anchor chain from the port bow. I came ashore at about 0545. The ship had apparently steadied somewhat at this time. I telephoned C.P.I.M., finally getting Mr. MALI, and was promised the immediate use of a crane with which to snake the anchor chain from the starboard to port side, and a steam pump. I then opened the Material Storehouse for the men detailed to secure line and marking buoys for the chain in case we felt compelled to drop it over the side. Before the tackle could be removed, a glance at the ship showed that she was on an even keel. I immediately telephoned Mr. MALI for cancellation of the crane order, and asked that the pump be rushed to the ship. My next glance at the

U.S.S. ERIE

- 2 -

ship, at about 0615, showed her with about a 20 degree port list. The motor whaleboat was standing by to take off the working party, and was soon standing clear with all crew and guards aboard her or the LUETTA. As the ship's list gradually increased, loose scrap metal slid across her decks, making considerable noise and falling over the side. Her superstructure seemed to take charge as the list increased. She eased into the water with air whistling through her ports, hatches and open spaces, debris floating around her. She swung like a pendulum until her keel was above water, and then settled back slowly with her starboard side out of water, her stern well below water and a port list of about 118 degrees. The LUETTA's lines with which she was tied to the ERIE were drawn taut and snapped one by one. The lighter was apparently unharmed in the operation, for the PABMO towed her away as soon as she was free.

D. H. MADSEN,  
Ensign, U.S.N.R.

ENCLOSURE (C) TO C.O. ERIE CONF. LTR. PG50/L11-1 Serial 052  
of December 11, 1942.

U.S.S. ERIE

December 5, 1942.

Report of Corp. J.L. CORBIN, U.S.M.C. in charge of guard aboard U.S.S. ERIE.

At 0300 I was awakened by Pfc. VETTER who was on guard at that time. At this time the ship had changed from a 6 degree port list to a 3 degree starboard list. At about 0330 I reported to the crew of the LUETTA alongside, of the change in the ship. About 0400 water could be heard running below decks. About 0410 I sent Pfc. VETTER and one member of the LUETTA ashore to notify the O.C.D. Around 0420 Pfc. VETTER reported to the O.C.D. the condition of the ship and arranged to have Mr. MADSEN notified also personally notified CCM ROY. Around 0445 an emergency working party from U.S.S. ERIE crew came aboard and took charge of operations. A few minutes later the list had reached to about 13 degrees starboard. At about 0620 the ship leveled off and listed sharply to the port side at which time we abandoned ship. Approximately at 0630 the ship capsized and sank in a few seconds with only the bow protruding out of the water.

James L. Corbin, Corp., U.S.M.C.

Benjamin F. Vetter, Pfc., U.S.M.C.