



Independence Seaport Museum

Guide to the George Betts Collection

Creator: George Betts

Dates: 1942 – 2002

Quantity: 1 box

Call Phrase: Betts Collection

Provenance: Donated by George Betts. ISM number: 2003.33

Processed by: Greg Giuliano

Scope and Content: The George Betts collection consists of letters, photographs, clippings, maps and other materials gathered in the course of his search for information about the fate of his father, William W. Betts. William Betts was a merchant seafarer and captain of the tanker SS *Muskogee* when it was lost at sea in March 1942. At the time, the *Muskogee* was en route from Trinidad to Halifax, expected to arrive on March 25, 1942. After the ship failed to appear, she was presumed lost at sea with her crew of 34, the result of enemy action. Little was known about the fate of the ship or her crew.

George Betts began investigating the case of the *Muskogee* after reading Wolfgang Frank's *Sea Wolf* in 1955. It mentioned that *U-123*, a German submarine, sank a ship named the *Muskogee*. In 1978, Betts obtained declassified copies of *U-123*'s logbook. The log confirmed Frank's story. *U-123* encountered the *Muskogee* at 4:47 a.m. on March 22, 1942. Her position was 37 degrees north latitude and 62 west longitude, roughly 600 miles off the coast of Virginia. She fired one torpedo that struck the *Muskogee*, the damage sinking her in 16 minutes.

A few weeks earlier, on February 7, 1942, William Betts had written a letter (a copy of which is included in the collection) to his wife from the *Muskogee*, telling how he witnessed the torpedoing of two merchant vessels:

We were in the vicinity of the "Japan Arrow" and the "Sargil" when they were torpedoed but can not explain at this time why the sub did not get us too. We saw the distress flares from the boats of the Sargil but would not take a chance on going near them as we have been torpedoed too. If I live to have grandchildren I will have plenty of exciting stories to tell them.

Through the course of his research, Mr. Betts learned that Reinhard Hardegen, the German naval officer who commanded *U-123*, was living in Bremen, Germany. Also included in the collection are letters they exchanged and photographs of their meeting in Quebec City in October of 1987. The two men became friendly, continuing to correspond in the years following their meeting. Asked by the *Boston Sunday Globe* what it was like to meet the man responsible for his father's death, Betts answered, "I understood. I don't hate. We are both war veterans. It was his duty to sink our ships."ⁱ Hardegen, an exceptional German naval officer (who was not a Nazi), commanded *U-123* in Operation Drumbeat, the German attack on the U.S. coast in early 1942. He sank 25 vessels, totaling 133,000 tons.ⁱⁱ In a letter to Betts, he expressed a similar sentiment about the position of fighting men at war:

I'm glad that you are not angry at me and have the right idea, that all soldiers did their duty. The single persons were not our enemies and when we sunk a ship, the sailors, etc. were comrades and we tried to help them as much as we could.ⁱⁱⁱ

Through his contact with Hardegen, Betts learned that several of the *Muskogee's* crewmembers managed to make it onto lifeboats. Not only that, but Hardegen's boat, having surfaced after torpedoing the tanker, approached them. He conversed with the men and provided them with cigarettes, water and provisions. He also gave them navigational assistance, informing them of their position and the direction and distance to the coast. In his letter to Betts, Hardegen writes:

In the case of the *Muskogee* I was not able to take the crew on board because we were westbound and had no room for so many people. I write this only to show you that u-boat men were no devils, but normal men with human feelings and we did all we could.... [W]e hoped they could succeed in reaching the coast or another ship. But the weather was bad and it was bad for us all to let them alone with the wind and the sea.^{iv}

Hardegen also informed Betts that the ship's captain, Betts' father, was not on the life rafts. He assumed that the torpedo hit had come as a surprise and that Captain Betts had most likely been on the bridge at the time.

Contacting Hardegen offered another valuable piece of information for Betts: photographs. *U-123* had on board a propaganda photographer. He snapped photographs of the *Muskogee* sinking, and of the men on the life rafts, showing seven surviving crewmembers speaking with Hardegen.^v Minutes later they were left to the face the elements in the North Atlantic. None of the men survived.

The story of the *Muskogee* was later told in an episode of the NBC television program "Unsolved Mysteries." A documentary film based on the *Muskogee* story and Betts' research was also produced for *National Geographic*. Through the exposure provided by these programs, as well as Betts' own tireless efforts, many surviving family members of

the crew came to learn of their loved ones' fates. The collection contains a binder filled with correspondence from the family members, many of whom express their gratitude for George Betts' efforts to seek out the answers to the questions about the fate of the 34 men who served on the *Muskogee*.

ⁱ *Boston Sunday Globe*, November 8, 1987.

ⁱⁱ Gannon, Michael. *Operation Drumbeat* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), p. xxi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reinhard Hardegen to George Betts, October 3, 1986, George Betts Collection

^{iv} Ibid.

^v This photograph served as inspiration for artist Marisol Escobar's sculpture at the American Merchant Mariner's Memorial at Pier A on Battery Park in Manhattan. Letter, Marisol Escobar to George Betts, September 15, 1989, George Betts Collection.