

Survivor recalls attack off R.I.

By David Arnold
GLOBE STAFF

AT SEA OFF RHODE ISLAND

Yes, time passes quickly, Raymond Tharl thought the other day. But he was not prepared for the speed at which 50-year-old memories can return — the smell of the torpedo explosions, the screams and death aboard his sinking ship so close to home, so close to the end of the war.

Tharl recalled frantically tapping out SOS on the emergency transmitter, then hesitating before boarding the life raft for a bizarre exchange of polite "after you's" with his captain.

A half-century old, the memories came back in the seconds it took for a wreath to land in the water at a memorial service over the wreck of the ship last Thursday.

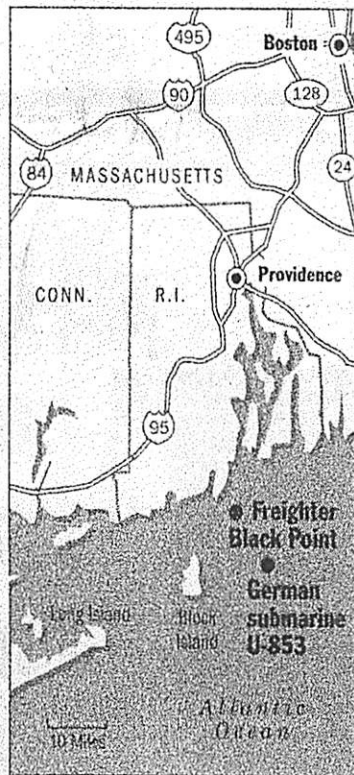
Tharl was the radioman aboard the freighter Black Point, torpedoed by the German submarine U-853 three miles off Point Judith on May 5, 1945.

World War II in Europe was basically over; the remnants of the German high command had ordered all submarine attacks against Allied shipping to cease. But 24-year-old Helmut Froemsdorf, commander of U-853, either never got the word or wanted last licks.

His action would cost the Americans 12 lives aboard Black Point, then ultimately the lives of all 55 men aboard his submarine as the Navy caught U-853 hiding in just 130 feet of water inside Block Island.

The hulks of both wrecks lie beneath waters where racing yachts from Newport now spar. The submarine, longer than a Boeing 747, is the destination for hundreds of scuba divers every summer, including this reporter on one occasion. There is an unwritten understanding between divers that they don't touch the bones because the remains of all the Germans are there, sometimes protruding from the silt of a silent tomb slowly becoming encrusted in sealife.

Black Point was the last merchant ship sunk by a German submarine, according to naval historians, and the only American ship sunk by a foreign power so close to the main-



GLOBE STAFF MAP

land since the War of 1812.

Last Thursday, some 160 members of the US Navy Armed Guard Veterans of World War II chartered the Block Island Ferry to hold a brief memorial service over the wreck of Black Point. The Armed Guard was a force of 144,000 trained to handle the deck guns mounted aboard merchant ships. Tharl was invited to join the group because he is one of the five Black Point survivors known to still be alive.

He is 77 years old, a resident of Attleboro and Fort Meyers Beach, Fla., a shy man with thick shocks of white hair. He hadn't given much thought to the events of 50 years ago until he watched the wreath of red, white and blue flowers drop to the sea, then playfully bob in the waves.

Full lives

Almost everyone around him was in their 70s, many of them moved that their lives had been so full compared to the friends and enemy below.

"I find I'm thinking not only of the dead from the Black Point, but the submarine as well," said Tharl. He stared at the wreath, rocking like

'I find I'm thinking not only of the dead from the Black Point, but the submarine as well ... What a loss.'

RAYMOND THARL
Survivor of torpedoed ship

a toy boat as it drifted away. "What a loss," he said. "What a day it was."

Most of May 8, 1945, had been foggy in Rhode Island Sound. The Black Point was forced to feel her way from buoy to buoy toward the Edison plant in South Boston with 7,700 tons of Virginia coal. As the fog lifted in the late afternoon, the rusty freighter, built in 1915, would have seemed a lonely duck meandering across the entrance to Narragansett Bay from periscope depth.

The late Helga Deisting, Froemsdorf's sister, was interviewed several years ago in Germany. She said Helmut was neither a fanatic nor a member of the Nazi party. He was, however, intensely loyal to what remained of the German Navy when he sailed from Norway three months before his death. It was late in the war, many of those aboard U-853 were teen-agers.

At 5:37 p.m., Froemsdorf had the Black Point in the crosshairs of his periscope. Ray Tharl was below, eating dinner in the galley amidships. It took him a good three seconds to accept that a torpedo had just blown away the stern-third of his ship.

Tharl raced for the radio room to start transmitting SOS as lifeboats swung wildly from their davits, crushing several sailors. Several minutes later he was ordered to abandon ship, and recalls getting into "one of the silliest exchanges imaginable" with the late Capt. Charles Prior, who insisted on being the last off the ship.

What Froemsdorf did not know

when he sank Black Point was that on the far side of Block Island, beyond sight and sound of the submarine's glass eye and electronic ear, were four American destroyers that had just dropped off a convoy in New York City. They were racing for Boston.

King Upton, of Cambridge, a retired real estate consultant, was the executive officer aboard Atherton when Black Point's SOS was forwarded to the American flotilla.

'Just a coincidence'

"It was just coincidence that we were behind that island when Black Point sunk. The Germans never would have tried something so crazy, so close to land, in such shallow water," Upton said.

For 16 hours after Atherton's sonar discovered the submarine, the Navy lobbed more than 200 depth charges onto the ship. A blimp crew even logged some combat time by dropping depth charges before the submarine was declared "secured."

Placement of the bones offers a glimpse of how life probably ended below. Just aft of the forward compartment, which had been airtight for many years after the incident, a pile of bones suggest men had been trying to reach the last good air when they drowned, but were locked out by crewmates.

The forward compartment was never breached by depth charges. The sailors here, perhaps insane from the bombings, may have lived another 24 hours before they suffocated as the Allies in the world above celebrated V-E Day.

These were some of the things that Raymond Tharl was thinking about as a wreath drifted out of sight in his 77th year.