

Interviews on U-156/U-502 Attack

TRANSLATED FROM PAPUMENTO TELEVISION INTREVIEW

BY
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The following stories I copied from a VHS video tape, "Chispa di Guera" (The Spark of War) made by Telearuba in 2002. I wish to thank Mr. Jorge Ridderstaat who loaned a copy to me so that I could provide you with the following information.

The people who were interviewed by Telearuba were: Messrs. Antonie A. W. (Tony) Hijmering, inhabitant of Tankfarm and son of Andries and Olga Hijmering whose house was hit; Arie and Fred Baptist, the Hijmerings' neighbors; Karel van Meeteren and Mooi Franken, both Infantry Corporals at the Savaneta Camp; Bruno Bremen and Serapio Thielman, both soldiers at the Savaneta Marine Camp; Alberto Thiel, a Government Radio Telegrapher; Vincente Provence, sailor on board of the Amazone lake tanker; William van Putten, a Fireman on board of the Pedernales lake tanker; and George Granger, a sailor on board of the Hooiberg lake tanker.

Antonie (Tony) Hijmering:

In the early days Lago built a block consisting of four wooden barracks and a Fire Station for the Policemen to guard Lago just outside of the Tankfarm. In those days there were no housing available for the policemen. The Dutch Policemen were guarding Lago's gates. The policemen and families who were living there during WWII were: Family Geerenstein (Bungalow #9); Family Pieter Baptist (Bungalow #10); Family Andries Hijmering (Bungalow #11); and Family Gerrit Lugthart (Bungalow #12).

The Hijmering family consisted of three children, Tony, Andries, and Evert; the Baptist family with three, Arie, Fred, and Nico; the Geerenstein with three children; and the Lugthart with two children, Pieter and his sister.

Our next-door neighbors who were adjacent to us were the Baptist family in Bungalow #10. These houses were separated by a wooden wall and as Fred says you can clearly hear everything that was going on at your neighbor's.

Tony says, one early morning while everyone was asleep, the alarm at the Fire Station went on and it was customary that whenever the alarm went, as young kids, they will immediately stop playing or get out of bed to go and see what was happening. The manual alarm is cranked by hand to alert the Policemen that something unusual is happening. On this particular morning, the alarm went on and we got out of bed and we saw several policemen running to the Fire Station. Some of the wives of the Policemen were running behind their husbands trying to put on their shirts, or others were running behind them with shoes in their hands. Why, because it was customary that the first policeman who reaches the station, would receive a prize.

For us that was just an action because we knew nothing about a war, as there were no television or radio and if two elderly people were talking about war, we had nothing to say. All of a sudden we heard a huge object fall on the roof of our house with a very loud noise. It kept rolling on the ceiling and we thought right away that it could not be a rock and we all got scared because we did not know what was going on. Everybody went running outside while the alarm was still on and we saw that some policemen were coming back to see what was going on at our house. My uncle, on my mother's side, Jules Reeder, was also there and it was decided to wait until morning to go look on the ceiling.

The following morning I heard the police tell Jules Reeder and our neighbor Arie Baptist to go look on the roof to see if there was any fire but there wasn't. Arie went to inspect and said that the hole was large enough that he could pole his head and shoulder right through it. He saw a lot of debris on the ceiling which had several holes. The largest part of the grenade went through our roof and other smaller parts were found in our neighbor's barrack #10. The grenade went through the ceiling and all the way to our bedroom. Mrs. Olga Hijmering who was in a rocking chair with her baby boy (Evert) on a pillow on her lap was trying to put him back to sleep, when all of a sudden the grenade hit, and a piece of metal drilled the pillow near her baby. She was also hurt on her leg by another piece of metal and suffered a long time after. Another piece landed on my father's pillow in the bedroom. We looked at the metals and found that they were either brass or copper. We gathered all the pieces and gave them to Hijmering and Baptist which they assembled and took to the Police Station. The experts who inspected it said that 75% of the grenade was recovered and it was approximately 7 cm long and 3 cm wide. Then we laid it on a cabinet which had a glass door in the Fire Station where shift schedules were placed for the policemen. Family Hijmering kept it for a long time but apparently it was lost afterwards.

Fred Baptiste says that the roofs on these houses were made out of wood and not shingles. I could see my brother's head sticking out as he was waving at us.

Both Messrs. Karel Van Meeteren and Mooi Franken said that only one shell was fired by U-156 submarine, scraped a tank which then hit the house. I presume that they are referring to Tank 112. But according to Captain Schram de Jong who stood guard at the Kustbatterij at Weg Kustbatterij in San Nicolas, sixteen 37mm grenades were fired and they glided between the tanks. "We lived behind the tank-farm and one hit the roof of our backdoor neighbor (the Hijmerings)". Another perforated the roof of an officer's car. (Dufi's Note: According to other sources, one hit Mrs. Geerman's house in Lago Heights but I am unable to confirm this at the moment. It could well be that it is this same house because all this area at that time was called Lago Heights, and the name Geerman could be wrong).

Family Hijmering was very fortunate or lucky that the grenade was most probably old and the gunpowder lost its strength, or that the explosive mechanism did not function any longer, based on the fact that the grenade did not explode on the ceiling, but only scattered little pieces through the roof. Also, Mr. Andreis Hijmering was also lucky that he had just got out of bed when a piece of metal hit his pillow when the alarm went on, as all the policemen and firemen had to report to the fire station.

The alarm was installed near the home of Policeman Mr. Gerrit van Balen and he was responsible to sound the alarm. He had to wind a handle and hold it for a few minutes. Also, when everything went back to normal he will again sound a shorter alarm to notify everyone that everything was back to normal. In case of fire, the alarm will be sounded and all the policemen who were on off duties had to report to the fire station to assist the firemen. Later on this alarm was replaced with an electrical.

The night of the attack, all the women and children who were living in the vicinity of the Police headquarter were taken to Santa Cruz, where they stayed with Aruban families. They slept on mattresses and bunk-beds. We drank water from the cistern, which was filled by lowering a bucket into it and we drank very cold water with a half-sliced dry shelled calabash which was used as a drinking cup. We still had some canned food which we brought along and furthermore we had to attend school. Our stay lasted for some weeks and we do not remember where we stayed at, but yet we wish to thank this family for their hospitality, as Arubans are known for.

The news of U-156 torpedo attack is well-known through the various media, through the dedication and determination of several people, especially by our friends, the Arucanos, but few people know of this grenade attack and the whereabouts of the others that were fired. Due to the continuous efforts by these

people, we wish to cooperate with this historical information on the grenade attack, which could have resulted in many lives being lost.

U-156/U-502 Attack as told by Messrs. Mooi Franken and Karel van Meeteren, both Infantry Corporals at the Savaneta Marine Camp; Alberto Thiel of the Radio Telegraphy; and Bruno Bremen and Serapio Thielman, both Aruban soldiers:

Mooi Franken (Infantry Corporal at Savaneta Marina Camp)

What I heard was a loud explosion and I told my colleagues who were awake that it must be the Scotch soldiers; most probably they had a celebration and those on shift must be horse-playing. But when I opened the windows, I saw a large fire all the way to Savaneta and I said right away that this could not be what I thought it was. I then went to the major on shift and explained to him what I saw. At first he did not believe me but when he saw the huge flames, he told me to take the motorcycle to go take a look because it was at the Lago refinery.

The attack happened just twelve hours before Aruba was going to test its first blackout. I remember that the headlight on my motorcycle was painted black and only a small opening, the size of a quarter, was left in the middle. Upon my return from San Nicolas I met all the vehicles coming with their unpainted bright headlights making it difficult for me to drive so I had to choose to ride along the sides of the road. It was rough riding.

Alberto Thiel (Government Radio Telegrapher)

Alberto says that Captain Werner Hartenstein of U-156 worked at the Lago Powerhouse before the war. He was a German, along with others, who were living and working in Aruba with liberty to move everywhere. Therefore it was easy for them to cooperate by sending letters and photos to the Nazis. As far as Mr. Hartenstein, he was a very social person who knew many people here and one of his dear friends was Mr. Jacobo (Cobito) Arends, a doctor in Oranjestad, Aruba. I heard that he had a map of Aruba and had all the strategic areas marked on the map, thus making it very easy for him to navigate to Aruba. It probably was just a hobby for him in the beginning but at the end it resulted in a great necessity for him. He was familiar with the Lago and the Shell refineries in Aruba and also the Shell refinery in Curacao and most probably had frequent contacts with the Germans residing in Aruba. He left Aruba just before the war and went back to Europe. These Germans were well prepared and when the U.S. War Department considered them as risks of sabotage on both islands, many of these potential saboteurs were interned on nearby Bonaire island.

Mr. Vincente Provence (Sailor on Amazone Lake Tanker)

We left Curacao heading for Maracaibo with Ramona, a Shell Lake Tanker to get crude. As we were navigating close to Aruba we saw a flash and we thought it was a Lago boiler which had just exploded. When the sun came up, we reached between Aruba and Macoya, Venezuela, and we found the Gulf tanker Monagas on fire. We immediately approached it to try to pick up anyone who went overboard. We met Mr. Jose Semeleer in his lifeboat and we immediately threw the pilot's ladder and fortunately he grabbed it and we pulled him on board the Amazone. He then told us that they were torpedoed and then we realized that the explosion we previously heard was from an exploding torpedo. Not even our Captain knew of the situation.

We then started to pick more survivors making it a total of 37 from Tia Juana, San Nicolas, and Monagas. We then continued to Maracaibo with all these survivors. But on our way, a submarine fired a torpedo on our ship, the Ramona, but they missed it. Again they fired another but fortunately they again missed. We saw the submarine with its telescope on top of the water going around us. Fortunately, two aircrafts arrived in our vicinity, they were the Oriols (KLM in those days) which made the submarine move away from us. Subsequently, there was another aircraft which came and we believed was an

American fighter plane because it had a star on it. They threw some bombs which really scared them off. We then continued our route to Maracaibo with the survivors. (Note: At 09.35 on May 6, 1942, the unescorted *Amazone* (Master J. P. Giltay) was hit on the port side by a torpedo from U-333 and sank within two minutes off Miami. 14 Crew members were lost, 12 from the Dutch Antilles, one Dutch gunner and one Swiss crewman. The survivors were picked up by the American submarine chaser USS PC-484.)

Karel van Meeteren (Infantry Corporal)

The morning after the U-156 fired three torpedoes on *Arkansas* which was tied at the Eagle Pier, one hit the empty *Arkansas* with hardly any damage, one disappeared into the ocean and one landed on the beach at the Eagle Pier. At a certain moment I was instructed to go patrol along the beach from Savaneta, Balashi to the Eagle beach. As we all know the Eagle Refinery was also doing its share in this war. I met with a young man by the name of Sloterdijk. When we got to the Eagle Pier, Mr. Sloterdijk whose hands were dirty decided to go to wash his hands with water at the incoming waves. When he got closer to the water he saw something like a piece of pipe and did not worry too much because of the numerous pipes from the Eagle refinery. He then climbed it in order to wash his hands. Suddenly he jumped and yelled: "Jesus Christ, it's a real torpedo". We then realized that it was a torpedo and we immediately reported it. It was immediately decided to disarm it. A request was sent to Curacao to send a Dutch demolition team to disarm it.

Bruno Bremer (Aruban Soldier)

I went to the airport to pick up four Dutch Marines from Curacao. They were Lieutenant Pieter Joose, Major Dirk Andrianus Cornelis de Maagd; and two soldiers Leonardus Kooyman and Johannes Vogelenzang. When I picked them up I told them that we will go to the Savaneta Camp and they told me to go to the Eagle Pier instead. We went there where the torpedo was, they got out of the car. First thing they did was to take a picture of the torpedo. One of them pulled out a wrench and told me that I could start unscrewing the bolts on the torpedo. I sat down on the torpedo and started to unscrew two bolts, while the Lieutenant started to dress himself with a plastic suit. He then took over to continue to unscrew the bolts. That disarmed piece was tied with a rope to be pulled apart. Meanwhile there was a flatbed truck waiting for the pulling.

The Lieutenant said that he was going to put a dynamite underneath the torpedo to blow it up. We ran a distance of one thousand meters from the spot. When he inserted the dynamite, he lit it, and he also ran to where we were standing. Apparently nothing happened when the dynamite exploded, except sand was going everywhere. At that moment the Lieutenant went to get a cable to pull it. The moment that he bent over to hook up the cable I started to walk towards the truck. All I saw at that moment was like a lightning, I didn't know if there casualties, all I knew was that I was lying in the hospital with bleeding ears.

Mr. Karl van Meeteren said that the moment the Lieutenant shook the torpedo to take the part off, it exploded. All four members of the Dutch Marine demolition team died on the spot. Mr. Bremen and another Aruban, Mr. Kock, who was there at the time, suffered severe problems with their sense of hearing.

Mr. Franken said that he had just arrived to tell the Commander that he had to return to Curacao to get more instructions. I arrived at the south gate at Eagle and I saw Bremen underneath a pipe and Kock was close to the beach and then I heard a loud explosion. When the people from Oranjestad saw all these soldiers near the beach, quite a few came to look what was going on. Fortunately, they were not allowed to come too close.

Mr. Thielman who was at the Dutch Marine Camp said that later on they brought the nine-foot long torpedo to Savaneta Camp. It had lots of instructions on it in German, had 36 batteries in it, and with firing instructions on it...

Mr. William van Putten, Fireman on board of Pedernales

I was on watch the early morning when the Pedernales got hit by a torpedo. In all the oil and fire, we got down a lifeboat. The Captain, Chief Engineer, and others got into the lifeboat and started drifting with no direction because everything that was on board got lost. We kept praying for daylight so that we could see where we were. Later we were picked up.

Mr. George Granger, Sailor on board of Hooiberg

Sixty years ago, I was a Lago employee and working on the lake tankers bringing in raw crude from Venezuela to Aruba. I did that since 1937 and when WWII came I was working on the lake tanker Hooiberg. That particular day we got the pilot who was going to guide us into the lake of Maracaibo. But we were turned back because they told us that Aruba was attacked. After four hours we went back to Maracaibo, we were told that one ship ahead of us was attacked and torpedoed and that many people lost their lives. I lost a brother and a cousin who died on one of the torpedoed ships in front of the Powerhouse. His ship was anchored awaiting orders to go in because there were no storage available at that time. Nevertheless, from that day, in 1942, I continued as a Sailor bringing in crude and picking up ships, going to Key West, Florida and Quantanamo Bay to bring crude to Aruba. It was a great experience, in the heart of the war, and I did not worry too much because we had to fight for our country.

Note: Mr. Serapio Thielman later worked in the Lago Police Department until his retirement.

Mr. Antonie A. W. Hijmering later became an Aruba Policeman until his retirement.

**Dufi Kock
Savant 125-G
Aruba
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