

War Era Story Project 2012

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The 4,500-plus army troops who boarded the *U.S.A.T. (United States Army Transport) Uruguay* (a former South American cruise liner) headed for North Africa may have set a record for the length of time required to reach their destination.

I was part of a small contingent of members of the 18th Army Airways Communications Squadron. The *Uruguay* departed from New York on 8 February, 1943 in a convoy with other vessels. In the wee hours of 12 February, the *Uruguay* was rammed by another vessel in the convoy, the *U.S.S. Salamonie*, a navy tanker, whose rudder had jammed. Despite the efforts of the *Salamonie* to avoid the collision, the bow of the *Salamonie* crashed into the forward side of the *Uruguay* just under the bridge, causing extensive damage to both vessels.

A Sergeant from the 77th Field Artillery was in the sick bay of the *Uruguay*, which was immediately over the point of impact. As the tanker crashed into the *Uruguay*, he was knocked from his bed and dropped onto the deck of the tanker and knocked unconscious. It wasn't until later that he was aware he had changed ships during the night.

When the collision occurred, all troops were ordered to report on deck. It was cold and damp, and those who were bunked in the forward part of the ship and felt the crash scrambled on deck in their sleeping apparel. Some troops were more fortunate. Many of those who were bunked closer to the stern of the ship didn't feel the impact and, when the call to go on deck was heard, they thought it was a routine drill exercise, and they dressed and put on their coats.

Since no announcement was made as to what had happened, rumors flew about that the ship had been hit by a German U-Boat. It was some time later when the troops were informed as to what had happened. Despite the seriousness of the collision, historical records indicate that there were less than thirty casualties. The collision occurred about 800 miles northeast of Bermuda. As neither vessel was able to continue with the convoy, it was determined that both vessels should try to reach Bermuda. The crew of the *Uruguay* shifted cargo to help the vessel list to one side to try to keep the gaping hole as much out of the water as possible. A destroyer accompanied the two vessels as they limped their way to Bermuda, arriving there on 15 February.

The arrival of this many troops presented problems to the Bermuda Base Command, but they responded well, providing two meals a day to the arriving troops. The arriving troops were assigned to duties such as K.P. and other work details. The weather in Bermuda was pleasant, which helped to ease the trauma that the troops had undergone. Two smaller vessels, the *U.S.A.T. Santa Rosa* and the *J.W. McAndrews* were sent to Bermuda to pick up the troops from the *Uruguay* and join the next convoy. These vessels departed from Bermuda on 6 March, and the rest of the voyage was without incident. This convoy arrived at Casablanca, North Africa, on 18 March.