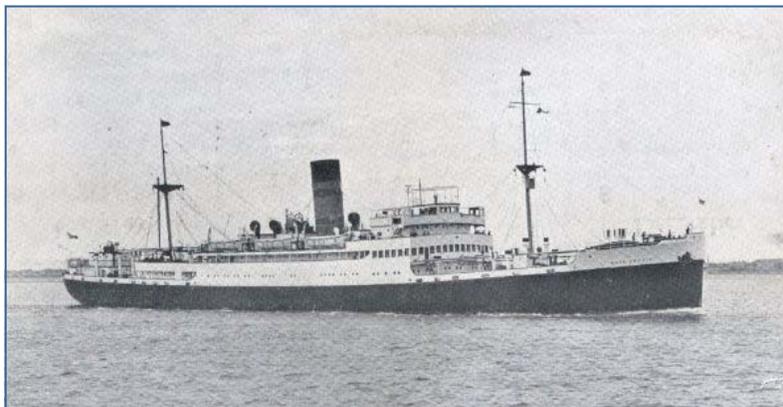


**ACTIVITY:** World War II  
**CASE:** GSAF 1942.11.14  
**DATE:** Saturday November 28, 1942  
**LOCATION:** The sinking took place in the Indian Ocean off St. Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

**SHIP:** *Nova Scotia*

**BACKGROUND:** The Cape route was a major supply route for the Allies, especially after Britain launched offensives in North Africa and Japan entered the war. In August 1942, Dönitz had sent four large type IX U-boats to the Cape of Good Hope (the Polar Bear Group), and in September four more U-boats followed to stalk the waters off Mozambique and South Africa.



*The 6,796-ton Nova Scotia was built in 1926 by Vickers-Armstrong in Barrow for the Warren Line. In 1941 she was requisitioned for use as a troopship. In 1942 she was transporting Italian prisoners of war when she was torpedoed by a German submarine and sank off St. Lucia with the loss of 750 lives.*

**NARRATIVE:** Sharks took numerous lives during World War II. Hundreds of ships were lost and, in many cases, there were no survivors. Some, however, lived to tell of their encounters. The largest mass shark attack in the Indian Ocean was precipitated by the loss of the *Nova Scotia* off the Zululand coast.

During the Second World War 93,000 prisoners-of-war were interned in South Africa and all but 4,000 of them were Italian. One of the vessels used to transport these people was the 6,796-ton British steamship *Nova Scotia*.

Some 765 Italian prisoners-of-war boarded the *Nova Scotia* at Masawa (Eritrea). Also aboard were 134 South African guards and troops plus her British crew. In all about a thousand people were on the *Nova Scotia* on November 28, 1942 when, at 09h30, she was torpedoed by the German submarine *U-177*, commanded by Kapitanleutnant Robert Gysae, less than 50 kilometres off St Lucia.



*Robert Gysae*

Three torpedoes struck the troopship: several oil bunkers caught fire, causing many burn casualties, and the port lifeboats were shattered. She sank within five minutes. There were hundreds of people in the water: some drowned, others were choked by oil and many were taken by sharks. It has been said that there has never been another shark attack of such proportions in the Indian Ocean. The [*Johannesburg*] *Sunday Times* recorded the tales of survivors Vic Davidson, Eric Manson and Nat Hermans who said, “*The sea was alive with sharks, and dozens of men were taken.*”

Another survivor, George Kennaugh of Johannesburg, reported:

*“There were hundreds of men around me in the water, swimming and clinging to bits of wreckage and rafts. Another South African swam over and clung to the oar. He was wearing a life-jacket. The two of us drifted on a strong current until next morning. Other survivors were visible around on rafts, gratings, etc. When it became light, my companion said he was going to let go and refused to listen when I told him not to give up. So I asked him to leave me his life-jacket. As he was loosening it, he suddenly screamed and the upper part of his body rose out of the water. He fell back, and I saw the water had become red with blood and that his foot had been bitten off. At this moment I saw the form of a shark swimming excitedly around and I paddled away as fast as I could. Then a number of sharks swarmed around me. I estimated their lengths at between six and seven feet (1,8 to 2,13 metres). Every now and then one would come straight for me. I splashed hard and this seemed to drive them away.”*

The submarine commander radioed Berlin for help to be sent to the survivors and instructions were sent to Mozambique. A Portuguese frigate commanded by Captain de Buto left Lourenco Marques 14 hours after the sinking, reached the site at 06h00 the following morning, and took 143 survivors on board. The rescuers had to club the sharks away. Most were oceanic whitetip sharks.

Other survivors were found by a British cruiser and some of the shipwrecked were picked up five days after the sinking. The South African government heard of the disaster on November 30, 1942.

My request asking for information from *Nova Scotia* survivors printed in the M.O.T.H. Home Front magazine, October 1987 edition, resulted in a number of responses. Although not much more was learned about the behaviour of the sharks after the sinking, a letter written by Les De Lease of East London, tells us about one man who was lost to the sharks.

*“Private Sammy Levine was a soldier mate of mine on the staff of No.4 General Hospital, a field hospital serving the troops in Egypt. Sammy served as a handyman in the unit. He could always conjure up something out of nothing, and as was fitting to his calling in the Army, was a champion “scrounger” of articles not obtainable by the unit; as such he was invaluable and very useful. Sammy was a quaint phlegmatic character, and was much thought of generally; he was always on hand to conjure up anything required at short notice. Now, Sammy had a pal, a small monkey acquired in Kenya which accompanied him to Egypt when the East Africa campaign packed up. Wherever Sammy went the little pet was on his shoulder.”*

*“Some years after the War I met an ex-soldier and over a cup of tea this chap mentioned that he was a survivor of the torpedoed Nova Scotia, and in discussing the circumstances of the tragedy, we discovered that we both knew Sammy Levine and that the last he saw of Sammy was from a small raft on which a few survivors were clinging; there was no space for another person, and some yards away Sammy was swimming with his monkey on his shoulder when he was taken by a huge shark. Both he and the monkey disappeared.”*

*“So passed Sammy, not much of a parade-ground soldier, but a wizard at his own calling, and much loved by his comrades.”*

In all, 192 people survived, 43 of whom were South Africans. Approximately 750, including Sammy Levine, perished.

On February 6, 1944, the *U-177* was sunk in the South Atlantic west of Ascension Island (10°35'S, 23°15'W) by depth charges from a US Liberator aircraft (VB-107/B-3). Fifty men perished, 15 survived.

On December 3, 1942, less than three weeks after the sinking of the *Nova Scotia*, the 4,328 ton Panamanian steamship *Amarylis*, bound from Kosseir (Al-Qusayr), Egypt) to Durban, was torpedoed and sunk by the *U-181* east of Cape Vidal. The *U-181*, a new type IXD2 1800-ton ocean-going U-boat, commanded by Kapitän zur See Wolfgang Lüth, was one of the second wave of U-boats that prowled the sea off Mozambique and South Africa. A huge submarine, armed with 26 torpedoes, 3 deck guns and crew of 50, the *U-181* sank 12 ships along the South African coast before returning to port.

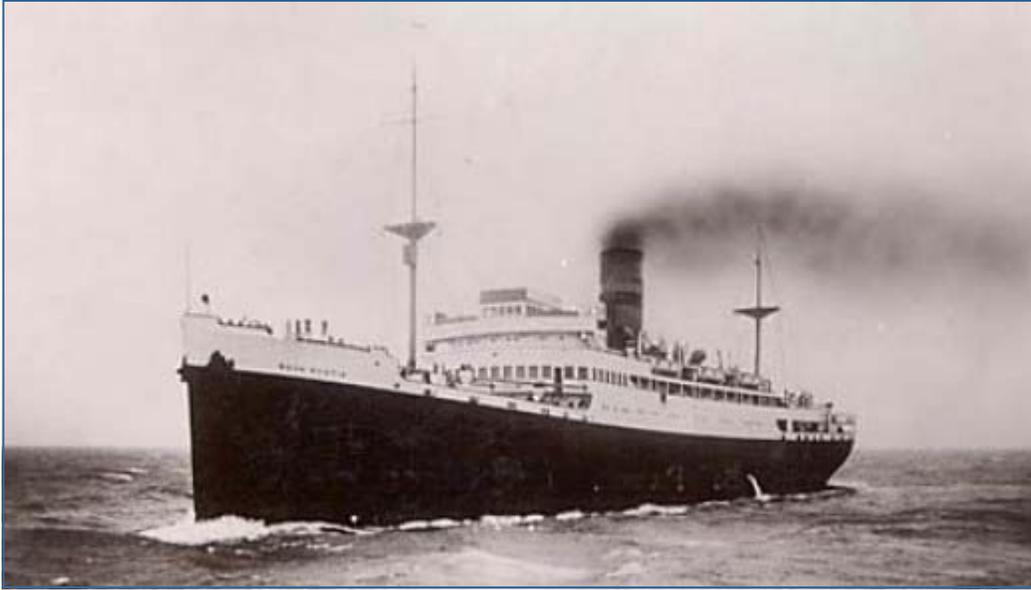
**SHARKS TAKE TOLL OF WAR PRISONERS**  
PRETORIA, Saturday.—Six survivors state that when the *Amarylis* which was bound from Suez to Durban, was torpedoed on December 2 off the Natal Coast, sharks took a terrible toll of the swimmers. Italian war prisoners screamed to the U-boat commander for help but only one was taken aboard.

*The Canberra Times, Monday December 14, 1942, page 3*

**NOTE:** Coordinates of the sinkings of the *Nova Scotia* and *Amarylis* are taken from *Axis Submarine Successes 1939-1945*, by Jürgen Rohwer.

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Marie Levine

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*The Nova Scotia*

**NOTE:** The Memorable Order of Tin Hats (M.O.T.H.) was founded in 1927 by Charles Evenden as a brotherhood of South African former front-line soldiers to help fellow comrades in need, either financially or physically; and to remember all ex-front line soldiers, of all ranks.

The membership of the M.O.T.H. movement grew into thousands. Men and women of two world wars, of the Second Anglo Boer War (1899–1902) and even those of former enemy forces streamed into its ranks. All who were prepared to keep alive the memories of comradeship and self-sacrifice were welcomed and made at home in shell holes as the meeting premises are called with colourful and meaningful names of war-time memories and occasions. M.O.T.H. shell holes have been opened in Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Membership was extended to those who had participated in the South African Border War. <http://www.moth.org.za/general.htm>

P.O.Box 920, East London, 5200,  
28th October 1987.

Dear M/S. Levine,

Your request was duly printed in the M.O.T.H. Home Front Magazine of October, and if the under mentioned data is not of any use to you for record purposes it may perhaps be of interest to you, for it is co-incidental that the subject of the matter related is or was a name-sake of yours:

Pte. Sammy Levine was a soldier mate of mine on the staff of No. 4. General Hospital, a Field Hospital serving the troops in Egypt. Sammy served as a Handyman in the Unit. He could always conjure up something out of nothing, and as was fitting to his calling in the Army, was a champion "Scrounger" of such articles as were not obtainable by the Unit. As such he was invaluable and very useful. Sammy was a quaint phlegmatic character, and was much thought of generally, he was always on hand to conjure up anything required at short notice. Now, Sammy had a pal, a small monkey acquired in Kenya which accompanied him to Egypt when the East African campaign packed up. Where Sammy went the little pet was on his shoulder.

Some years after the War I met an ex-soldier and over a cup of tea this chap mentioned the he was a survivor of the torpedoed S.S. Nova Scotia, and in discussing the circumstances of the tragedy, we discovered that we both knew Sammy Levine and that the last he saw of Sammy was from a small raft on which a few survivors were clinging, there was no space for another person, and some yards away Sammy was swimming with his monkey on his shoulder when he was taken by a huge shark, both he and the monkey disappeared.

So passed on Sammy, not much of a parade ground soldier, but a wizard at his own calling, and much loved by his comrades. VALE SAMMY.

Yours faithfully,

Les. De Lease (ex S.A.M.C. U.D.F.)

*The Portuguese frigate  
found 183 people and  
took them on board.*



P.S. Please pardon the scrappy typing, the two fingers used are getting arthritic through "Anno Domini".

