

Official report on the sinking of the EBER

Apia, 20 March 1889 —

To the Right Honourable Imperial Commander Fritze, senior officer of the Pacific station, Knight of several orders,

Your Excellency, I have the honour to dutifully report the following about the stranding of His Majesty's Gunboat EBER in Port of Apia:

After I had delivered the guard ashore at eight o'clock on the morning of 5 March, I returned on board His Majesty's Gunboat EBER. The sky was overcast and the wind came from a southeasterly direction, accompanied by heavy rain squalls. The barometer stood at 747.5 millimeters [29.43 inches].

His Majesty's gunboat EBER had struck topmasts and yards and lay to both bow anchors with 100 meters chain paid out.

We had steam up in one boiler. Until two o'clock in the afternoon, nothing changed except for the barometer. The barometer had fallen down to 742.0 [29.21]. At two o'clock in the afternoon it started to rise again. At the same time the wind backed eight points and now came from the northeast. After the ship had swung around the commander came to the conclusion from the position of our mooring buoys and the location of the American Corvette NIPSIC that both the EBER's bow anchor cables were twisted around the NIPSIC's larboard bow anchor and the gunboat now lay to the NIPSIC's bower anchor.

At half past three in the afternoon we let go the starboard *Rüstanker* * with 45 meters of chain and both bower anchor chains were let out so far that all three chains contributed equally. The American Corvette NIPSIC now lay about four points off the starboard bow 200 to 300 meters distant. The wind gradually became stronger and the ever-increasing sea ran into the harbour from the north. The barometer rose rapidly and about half-past eleven at night reached its highest level at 749.2 [29.5]. Meanwhile, the NIPSIC had dragged somewhat and thus had come closer to the EBER.

Therefore, the commander was at half past nine in the evening let out both bow anchor chains to the end and the *Rüstanker* chain correspondingly. Both bow anchor chains were lashed to the bits, then unshackled and hawsers were attached to the ends.

Steam was raised in the second boiler. At ten o'clock in the evening the NIPSIC steamed about 200 meters forward and to port and then let fall an anchor so that it now lay about 150 meters ahead of the EBER.

At twelve o'clock we had full steam in the second boiler. Shortly after the first two breakers came over the top with a heavy blow. Depending on the onset of gusts the engines ran faster or slower from then on. Gangways and scuppers were opened so that the water which was temporarily a foot deep on deck, quickly ran off again.

The wind slowly backed to the north-northeast and blew from midnight at force 12. The barometer fell: the last observed reading at five o'clock early on the 16th March was 746.0 [29.37]. The EBER slowly drove astern and was by five o'clock still a hundred meters from the reef. Shortly after the command was given to "batten down the hatches" because two ships had collided nearby, probably SMS OLGA and the American Corvette NIPSIC. The NIPSIC therefore slipped dangerously close to the EBER.

After the bulkhead doors were closed, I received from the first officer the order to let go cables. The lashings were cut and the aft hawsers carefully veered by the team under my supervision. The port cable parted. After about 20 meters of the starboard cable were paid out, I received the order to make the hawser fast.

The engine was running "full ahead" and "full steam". Moments later came the gunboat struck the reef for the first time at the stern, but came right off again. I hurried aft to see for myself if the rudder was working, and found it inclined at an angle of 45 degrees to the vertical plane and at the same angle from the ship, so it was completely useless.

I reported the loss of the rudder to the commander. The engine was running "full steam" and

brought the ship about 20 meters off the reef. Right after the first strike the commander gave the order to haul in the chain, but while the crew were still freeing the winch the ship was thrown on the reef for the second time, at the stern and then with the whole portside aft.

Bringing her off was no longer possible and the engine was stopped. There were no further orders. SM Gunboat EBER rolled 30 degrees to port and 45 degrees to starboard, then about 45 degrees to port and 90 degrees to starboard, then again 45 degrees back to port. Finally, the EBER capsized to starboard.

I was standing on the bridge and as the ship overturned I held on firmly to a speaking tube, but let go again when I was drawn too deep into the water. Then I was probably swept by the next great wave over the ship onto the reef. I remember glimpsing the keel of the EBER. My head hit the reef, and I came to my senses again. I swam towards the shore and reached it at about six o'clock in the morning. Of our gunboat EBER there was nothing more to be seen. Shortly after me Seaman Otto Stein, Helmsman Jeczawitz and Seamen Ehlert and Piel reached solid land under their feet. Boatswain's Mate Eilart was thrown unconscious onto the beach. I could not bring him back to life in spite of all efforts. Five other men of the EBER's crew, namely Master's Mate Bassendowski, Seaman Brost, Leading Stokers Henkels and Thiele and Stoker Boldt dragged themselves to the shore during the night, so that a total of 10 members of the crew were saved.

On 16 March, about 10 o'clock in the morning I saw part of the stern of EBER with a revolver cannon mount thrown up near the shore. The next day there was a piece of the forecastle with the stem washed up on the beach. Above that there were no other traces of SMS EBER in sight.

(Signed) Gaedeke, Sub-Lieutenant

* *Rüstanker* - the meaning of *Rüst* in German is something like 'massive' or 'heavy'; I am not sure of the correct nautical term for the heaviest anchor. Best bower anchor perhaps, or is that a throwback to the sailing-ship era?

Translated extract: Golf Dornself, *Naturgewalt und Matrosentod an Bord des Kanonenboots EBER*