Subject: Submarine Activity around Curaçao during the first World War.

Because of its location Curaçao had been a port at which ships stopped from Europe going to Venezuela and Colombia and to Central America. After the building of the Panama Canal it became much more important as a port, as it became a favorite fueling port for ships, particularly from Europe. It had a wonderful harbor which could take care of a big fleet. It was natural, therefore, that the waters around Curaçao should become infested with German submarines. It was not, however, until the United States entered the war that the presence of German submarines began to be noted in the waters around Curaçao.

I got an instruction from the Department saying that an American cruiser would be at a certain point near Curaçao, some ten or fifteen miles off shore, on a certain night at a certain time, and that I was to find the ways and means to get out to the ship to have a talk with the captain who had instructions to discuss with me the information available which I might have concerning the movement of ships and the presence of submarines. The cruiser could not come into port because it had instructions to remain in those waters for some time, and according to the international practice, the ship could only come into port every so often and it did not wish to use one of these available permitted visits until it became necessary. Although the people of Curaçao, who are overwhelmingly friendly towards the United States, and had no sympathy with Germany in the war, I had no knowledge of anyone there whom I could trust in this matter or wish to trust. I therefore cabled to Harold Foss, an American living in La Vília de Coro in Venezuela. I knew that he had a good sized launch which was a sea-going craft and he often used it to come from La Vília de Coro in Venezuela to Curaçao. I asked him to come over immediately in his boat. He did so and I explained to him what we were to do. I said that on a given night we
would quietly leave after dark and meet this cruiser at sea. Foss was a relatively young man at the time who came from a family of New England skippers that sailed our big sailing ships on the seas for many years. He was intrigued by the whole matter and looked upon it as a great adventure. I frankly shrank from it. I asked him if he felt sure, from the information which had been given to me as to where the cruiser would be at this particular hour of the night on this particular day, he would be able to take me to the cruiser. He said it presented no problem at all.

On the particular night we left the port alone, that is, he and I, in his little sea-going craft. It did not take us more than an hour or two to get to the rendezvous. There was no cruiser in sight. For at least four or five hours of the night we cruised around the area. No cruiser appeared. We returned to Curacao before dawn.

It was some days afterwards that I got a message from the Department saying that the cruiser, for various reasons which I do not real, had not been able to keep the rendezvous but that it would be calling at Curaçao in the near future. It was not going to enter the harbor but would anchor beyond the three mile line so that the call at Curaçao would not count as a visit. This time no concealment was necessary as in any event everybody would know that this American cruiser was laying off the island. When the cruiser actually arrived I went out in a launch and the captain and I had a several hours conference aboard. We arrived at definite ways in which we would be able to communicate with each other.

There were no sinkings of vessels, Americans or others, in the vicinity of Curaçao. That the German government had sent submarines into that area and that it had intended to attack commerce there is no
doubt. The only reasons we could ever think of as having adequate basis for no vessels being attacked is that the presence of this American cruiser in the waters around Curaçao was an indication to the German authorities that our government was aware of the plans of the German authorities. The other reason, perhaps even more plausible, is that the number of submarines available to the German government was limited and they could use them more effectively in other areas.

I was delighted that there were no more night excursions to try to encounter a cruiser at sea. It is not a pleasant feeling to be out at sea on a black night in a small launch, not knowing exactly where you are. I never had a greater sense of loneliness.