S E C R E T

H.M.S. LEDBURY

OPERATION PEDESTAL — LETTER OF PROCEEDINGS.

Sunday 9th August 1942

0300	Sailed from Gibraltar
1400	Sighted convoy.
1440	Took up station on screen of convoy.

Monday 10th August l942

2300	Left convoy and proceeded to oiler.

Tuesday 11th August 1942

	Oiled from 0700 to 0819 from DINGLEDALE, taking 101 tons.
0950	In station as starboard wing ship of screen.
1314	H.M.S. EAGLE was hit by torpedo/s.
1318	DERWENT ordered me to stand by EAGLE.
1225	EAGLE sank. There were many survivors in the oil patches in the water and one destroyer and the tug JAUNTY were stopped picking them up. As we reached survivors, we were ordered by D.19 to rejoin convoy.
1420	High level bombing attack.
2058	Shallow dive-bombing by Junkers 88s started. One plane was seen to be on fire. The port Oerlikon hit one plane. (Many other ships were firing at this machine).
2010	Ordered to A/A station. 1 cable on the starboard beam of No. 43.

Wednesday 12th August 1942

0627	Ordered by NELSON to investigate periscope reported on starboard quarter of No. 43.
0710	NELSON reported submarine periscope bearing north of her.

Single scare charges were dropped to cover INDOMITABLE from this submarine, and destroyers astern appeared to follow up this contact.

0900 An air attack by Junkers 88s developed on the convoy.

0915 One Junkers 88 crashed bearing 058 degrees. Four small bombs were seen to go by the bridge, landing on the starboard aide, and a large bomb near missed the port quarter.

0930 Ordered to fill in gaps in the screen caused by ships falling back on contact. On the way to this position three airmen were seen coming down by parachute. One was picked up and found to be German, so the other two were left. He stated that the last raid consisted of German airmen flying Junkers 88s from Sicily; and that he had been shot down by close range weapons from the convoy. The most interesting thing about him was that the nails of his boots were made of wood.

1215 An attack by dive-bombers. Two groups approached from ahead, but neither got over the convoy. Two were shot down by gunfire.

1238 Resumed station on the starboard side of the convoy

1240 Torpedo bombing attack took place from the port side and fourteen torpedo bombers were sighted on the starboard side. These were driven off by gunfire, one being shot down. There was no damage to the convoy.

1318 An attack by Junkers 88s started whilst our own fighters were landed for refuelling. One near miss off our port quarter.

One ship in the convoy was damaged. H.M.S. BRAMHAM stood by her.

1700 A submarine was forced to the surface astern and sunk by a Tribal class destroyer.

1857 Junkers 67s dropped parachute mines which all fell clear.

1859 12 torpedo bombers approached from the starboard side but were turned away by gunfire.

At the same time, Junkers 87s carried out dive-bombing attacks, and H.M.S. INDOMITABLE was hit.

1900 Force “Z” retired

1950 The convoy was in process of forming two lines with the three T.S.D.S. destroyers ahead, and the remaining ships in their A/A stations in the column of the convoy.

A signal, “Form two columns” was still flying, but most ships were anticipating the movement and moving to their new positions.

1956 H.M. Ships NIGERIA and CAIRO and the tanker Ohio were torpedoed.

The convoy carried out an emergency turn to starboard, and most destroyers turned back to stand by the damaged cruisers.

2000 We were in station on the starboard side of the convoy – about half way up – which was now roughly in two columns with MANCHESTER, KENYA and PATHFINDER ahead.

A cruiser reported aircraft detected by R/D/F on the port bow of the convoy and ship was taken through the convoy to get to the engaged side; but a heavy and sustained attack by Junkers 88s dive-bombing developed when we were in between the columns.

Things were very warm for a few minutes, two ships were hit, one blowing up and making a huge mass of burning petrol on the water, the other remaining afloat but on fire.

Torpedo planes were now sighted on the starboard bow very close.

The light was failing quickly.

We engaged the torpedo planes, but one delivered a very good attack, dropping two torpedoes. Another ship blew up, and I think the BRISBANE STAR was torpedoed at this time.

Told MANCHESTER we were standing by the damaged ships, but in the darkness sighted six ships steaming on various courses, mostly in a north or north-westerly direction.

I called up the nearest ship and ordered course 120^0 which I think she was turning round to. This ship was the MELBOURNE STAR. The other ships were follows and hailed by Ardente; told to turn to 120^0 ; to make their best speed that the Admiral and naval escort were proceeding slowly down the coast waiting for them. The ALMERIA LYKES was furthest to the westward and was the only one of the ships who queried this order.

I then returned to the OHIO intending to take her in tow, but she reported that she could steam with her steering aft but

had no compass. We switched on a brighter stern light and told her to follow us to Malta.

I realised now that if the stragglers continued on 120^0 they would pass to the east of Zembra and the minefield. I made an emergency signal informing C.S.10 that stragglers had been ordered to steer 120^0.

I also informed HMS PENN with whom I was in V/S touch at this time, that the survivors from the damaged ships had not been picked up and I was going on with the oiler.

It seemed a very long time before we got clear of the glare of the burning ships. The oiler was grand. She yawed heavily at the beginning, but was soon steadied and we had worked up to 15.5 knots before reaching Cape Bon.

During the night, four spectacular E Boat battles were sighted just ahead around the next corner (At 0204, 0332, 0345 and 0431).

Thursday 13th August 1942

0304 Three merchant ships were sighted whilst rounding Kelibia. I think one of these was the BRISBANE STAR. ALMERIA LYKES was told to follow.

0250 Sighted small patrol boat apparently towing a target inshore off Kelibia. Fire was withheld as our policy was evasion.

During the morning three abandoned merchant ships were passed, some of them with boats with flares close by. (One passed at 0330 and two at 0431).

I did not feel very happy leaving these crews, but knew PENN was astern of me and I would not risk stopping or losing sight of the tanker.

0514 A glow was sighted from which no R.D.F echo could be obtained. The glow suddenly blew up leaving a small petrol fire which only lasted about ten minutes. This was thought to be a damaged E boat blowing up.

0540 Convoy sighted

0350 Led the tanker in astern of the line.

I informed C.S.10 in ASHANTI that there were three stopped merchant ships between there and position “R” and three more under weigh astern of that.

0730 I also informed him of the tanker's condition. Torpedo planes flew in to distract attention from Junkers 88s which were coming in from a height. We had detected these by R.D.F. but could not sight them and were slow in opening fire on them.

The WAIMARAMA was hit, probably by about three or four bombs, and blew up with a tremendous explosion leaving a great pylon of flame on the sea. ASHANTI signalled me to pick up survivors. I went to the scene, but did not think it possible that anyone could survive such a terrific explosion or mass of flames, but on approaching, men were seen in the water.

I cannot speak too highly of the sheer guts of these men. They were singing and encouraging each other, and as I went through them explaining by Ardente that I must get the ones nearest the flames first, I received answers of “That's alright, sir. Go and get the other chaps”.

The flames were spreading outward all the time – even to windward – and at one time spread the whole length of the ship while picking up two men close to the after nets. I had to go astern, and these men were supported by my rescuers who themselves were clinging onto the nets.

I twice had to pass a merchant seaman who was some way away from the fire, and each time we passed he said, “Don't forget the diver, sir”.

The last man to be picked up was on a raft which was anchored to some sunken debris in the middle of the fire. Owing to fatigue an order was, repeated wrongly, and I had to go around again to get this man. I am deeply conscious that owing to this mistake I increased his suffering and serious burns.

45 survivors were picked up, one of whom was dead. He was buried that evening with military honours.

Some time later it was discovered that we had survivors from the WAIMARAMA and the MELBOURNE STAR onboard.

When the WAIMARAMA blew up, it happened so suddenly that the MELBOURNE STAR steamed right through the flames. Those aft – quite understandably – thought that their own ship

had gone up and jumped over the side. It was a fine thing to find this ship in harbour at Malta when we arrived.

My cause for anxiety during this retrieving of survivors was the parachute mines which we had seen fall all around the burning ship, but no mines or parachutes were sighted in the water.

The ship was attacked by Junkers 88s during this period but the attack was not pressed home after we opened fire. The director claimed one plane shot down, but I did not see it.

0934 Completed picking up survivors. By this time I estimated that we were about 30 miles astern of the convoy and would have to go very fast to catch them up before we turned around and went home.

I knew that my fuel was the limiting factor for the speed home of Force "X".

A signal was made to C.S.10, "30 miles astern of convoy – interrogative rejoin or go home?". Course was set to rejoin the convoy.

1050 An attack was made on LEDBURY by Junkers 88s. Near misses as usual.

1115 Found OHIO and DORSET with BRAMHAM standing by DORSET and PENN dropping depth charges.

The convoy was about ten miles away being attacked from the air.

C.S.10's reply to my signal was received very corrupt, apparently ordering me to go home, but I considered it had been made before OHIO was stopped.

I suggested to PENN that I should take OHIO in tow was coming up to do this, when I received a signal from V.A.M to C.S.10 (R) LEDBURY suggesting that I should stand by MANCHESTER in the Gulf of Hammamet.

A signal originated from S.O. Cruiser Force, had previously been received, saying "Engine room flooded. Afire".

In view of the delay in signals, and as PENN and BRAMHAM were standing by these two ships, I proceeded at 24 knots to look for MANCHESTER in the Gulf of Hammamet.

1345 Passed wreckage of WAIMARAMA.

1545 Two three-engined Italian bombers approached on the port beam. 4" cease fire bells were rung in order not to discourage them, and short bursts from Oerlikon and pom-pom shot them both down in flames. The second one had time to drop his torpedo whilst we were dealing with the first. This was small, slow and a "W" type.

This success came at a very apt time as the ship's company were showing signs of very great fatigue, and the survivors were, most understandably, jumpy. The whole ship was cheering hard, and everything after this went with a swing.

1630 Landfall was made.

1700 Identified as Ras-Mahmur.

Course was set to follow the coast line looking for the MANCHESTER. When we were almost certain that she was not in the bay, the coast was closed, in case there might be any survivors on the beach.

The signal station at NEBOEL started calling up "VHM - VHA". We did not reply.

The signal station at Hammamet made a flag signal, "Show your signal letters". We hoisted an Italian group consisting of flag "I" and three other flags tied in knots so as to be unreadable. This apparently satisfied the shore station as they hoisted a large French ensign.

During this period I was showing no ensign. Unfortunately we do not carry an Italian ensign.

I went on down the coast until 12 miles south of Hammamet.

During this time there were enemy reports of a cruiser near Zembra and two destroyers making for Pantellaria. I felt very lonely, particularly as a signal from C.S.10 was intercepted saying that LEDBURY was standing by OHIO.

1900 Course was set to pass 5 miles south of Linosa. We altered course after dark to rejoin OHIO.

I could not get a D/F bearing from PENN or BRAMHAM but sighted their gunfire at first light the next day.

Friday 14th August 1942

OHIO was stopped with no hope of getting her engines going as she had been hit again whilst in tow of PENN.

A 6" manilla was passed from the tanker's stern to my midship oiling bollard, my idea being to take the stern to port, whilst the minesweeper RYE towed her; but I put on too much weight and RYE's tow parted, PENN then ordered me to take the tanker in tow from ahead, which I did, using the tanker's tow and a shackle of my cable. RYE took me in tow to keep the ship from falling off, whilst PENN went alongside the starboard side of the tanker to act as a drag to keep her straight.

My gunner, who was in charge of the towing party onboard the tanker tried out all the tanker's guns, which was as well since at 1044 we were attacked by nine Stukas (Junkers 87s).

We received a near miss within a few feet of the foc'sle, which fortunately was an oil bomb and caused no casualties. There was also a near miss astern.

The following is an extract from the ship's narrative: -

> "Mr. Musham, Gunner of H.M.S. LEDBURY whilst acting master of the OHIO (unpaid) fired six magazines of Oerlikon ammunition at the dive bombers, and claimed that he shot down one of them. The gun's crews of PENN confirmed this. He complained that he was forced to use hosepipe firing instead of eyeshooting, as the sights had already been stolen by the gunner of H.M.S. "LEDBURY".

This was the last attack, and PENN and BRAMHAM secured either side of the tanker, by magnificent seamanship and endurance brought OHIO into Valletta Harbour.

Saturday 15th August 1942

0315 Took oiler in tow in order to get her straight for the channel.

With the help of an M.L. pushing my bows. I managed to turn her 140^0 in three hauls, turning her about 45^0 each time.

No damage or casualties were sustained in the ship. The behaviour of the ship's company throughout the operation was exemplary, and no Commanding Officer could have wished for a finer ship's company.

(Signed) Roger Hill
LIEUTENANT COMMANDER
COMMANDING OFFICER – H.M.S. LEDBURY

[From https://www.world-war.co.uk/ledbury.php July 2024]

Glossary

Ardente — A make of loudhailer manufactured by Ardente Acoustic Laboratories in Guildford. [IWM]


THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1941.

"CAPTAIN TO CAPTAIN"—THE COMMANDER OF A CORVETTE AT SEA GIVING ORDERS BY MEANS OF THE ARDENTE "LOUD HAILER," WHICH HAS A REMARKABLE ACOUSTIC RANGE.

Our readers doubtless have read with interest in the issue of September 20 the article "With a Corvette on Convoy Escort Duty" written by our special artist C. E. Turner, and illustrated with his own drawings. This picture, made on the same occasion, shows messages passing between naval escort vessels at sea, with a corvette captain speaking by the Ardente "Loud Hailer," upon receiving orders—taken down by the gleeful and duffle-coated signalman (right)—from the captain of the senior ship, a destroyer, which has taken the windward position, for naval Watchkeepers. (Drawn by C. E. Turner)

Courtesy Mary Evans Picture Library

Oerlikon — A Swiss-designed autocannon originally used in aircraft. British-made Oerlikon 20 mm cannons were delivered to the Royal Navy in March or April, 1941.

Pom-pom — A 2-pounder gun, officially the QF 2-pounder and universally known as the pom-pom, was a 40 mm British autocannon, used as an anti-aircraft gun by the Royal Navy.