PERSONAL ACCOUNT

These is a first-hand account from a wireless operator on board the SS “Waimarama” a dry cargo ship. He witnessed the destruction of various ships in the convoy as well as giving an account of his amazing escape and rescuing from the flames by the crew of HMS LEDBURY.

EXTRACT FROM A REPORT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH THE 3rd WIRELESS OPERATOR MR. JOHN JACKSON

We sailed from the Clyde on 2nd August and proceeded without incident until, on 11th August, I was on watch in the Wireless Room and at 1315 the ship gave a jump and I thought there must be depth charges exploding in the vicinity. At that moment my relief appeared and I went up on deck and saw the Aircraft Carrier HMS EAGLE listing heavily to starboard, having been struck by 3 torpedoes and obviously sinking. The alarm bells were sounded and I went to my action station on the bridge, and from there watched HMS EAGLE sinking with a number of escort vessels standing by picking up survivors. HMS EAGLE was on our starboard beam about 3 cables away from us so I think we must have passed over the submarine. During the next hour we received many messages from the Admiral stating that submarines had been sighted and we carried out numerous emergency turns at such a speed that we completely lost track of our course and followed the rest of the convoy.

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at 2100 I sighted 3 enemy aircraft coming from the stern flying at a high altitude. Our fighters were up but these ’planes came in and as they started to dive on the convoy a terrific barrage opened up, the first ’plane tried to swerve out of the barrage but one of his engines was on fire and a second later I saw him crash into the sea, the second one was also brought down, and the third one badly damaged and flew off only just above water level and I am sure it could not have reached land. This success cheered us up considerably and we were all looking forward for the next morning to shoot down any further aircraft that might venture near the convoy.

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During the [next] day we had a number of alarms but again our fighter protection saved us from direct attacks. At 1700 we had another aircraft alarm and I saw about 10 Stukas diving on the Aircraft Carrier INDOMITABLE. The INDOMITABLE was on our Port Quarter and the Stukas came out of the sun at her. HMS NELSON opened up with her 16" guns and we all fired our guns, the ship rattled with the vibration. Nothing seemed to stop these ’planes and the continued to attack, dropping bombs which fell astern of HMS INDOMITABLE, but the last two ’planes scored direct hits, the bombs striking the ship one aft on the starboard side, another forward on the starboard side and another probably amidships. We saw terrific clouds of smoke and spray and HMS INDOMITABLE vanished from view in the smoke. At this point the heavy warships and HMS INDOMITABLE turned round and left us to carry on with the Cruisers MANCHESTER, KENYA, NIGERIA and the Light Cruiser CAIRO and a number of escort vessels including the LEDBURY, BRAHMAN, SPEEDY, PENN and 5 or 6 others.

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at about 1900 without any warning we heard a loud explosion and saw HMS NIGERIA, in column ahead of us, had been struck by a torpedo amidships, she heeled over to starboard in a cloud of smoke. A few seconds later HMS CAIRO was torpedoed and hit in her stern, she swung around to port, seemed to settle in the water, and stop, and a second later the tanker OHIO was hit amidships, and immediately caught fire. The whole convoy immediately took avoiding action and proceeded independently at full speed. The escorts were now considerably reduced as ships were standing by the NIGERIA, CAIRO and OHIO.

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About 2100 when there was another aircraft alarm. It was now very dark and all our guns opened fire, the sky was lit up with tracer shells. I saw a flash on our starboard beam as the EMPIRE HOPE was struck by an aerial torpedo in her No. 4 hold, she caught fire immediately. A few minutes later the CLAN FERGUSON was hit, probably by an aerial torpedo, she was on our starboard bow.
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We continued at full speed keeping in territorial waters to avoid the mines laid outside. For a long time the CLAN FERGUSON could be seen burning furiously and we saw several ships silhouetted against the light from her.
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At 2300 we nearly ran into HMS MANCHESTER, she had evidently been torpedoed or mined and was listing well over to starboard. We immediately put our helm hard to port and succeeded in avoiding her by a matter of yards. She looked as if she had been abandoned but I saw one flash of light from her. We passed HMS MANCHESTER and soon afterwards we passed close to 3 or 4 Merchant ships which we hailed, the nearest one appeared to have been hit and abandoned as we saw several boats in the water. At midnight we joined up with one cruiser and later several more escorts joined our party.
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The weather was fine and visibility good the sea calm and there were light airs, and we were making 13½ knots on a course of 110° (Approx.) and at 0800 when in position 36°25'N 12°0'E 3 enemy aircraft dived on us from the sun dropping 5 bombs, 4 of which hit the ship the other falling just off the bow of the MELBOURNE STAR. I was standing on the port side of the bridge and had been studying the chart with the naval Liaison Officer who reckoned we were 8 hours steaming distance from Malta. As the 3 'planes dived on the ship all guns opened fire, most of the gun's crews being then on the starboard side of the ship and I was on my way over to starboard when there was a terrific explosion as 4 bombs struck the ship, 2 aft, 1 abaft the bridge and 1 forward. The ship was immediately enveloped in flames and on looking to the starboard I could see nothing but a solid mass of flames. I looked across to the port side and could not even see the gun mounting which was about 2 yards away owing to the solid wall of flames. I could just make out the bulkhead of the accommodation at the after end of the bridge, I shouted to the Captain's Steward who was on the bridge with me to follow me as I dashed through the accommodation and down the stairs leading to the boat deck, passing through a hole in the bulkhead were the door had been and finally clambered over a pile of debris to the deck.

The ship was listing well over to starboard and as I went down on the forward well deck and clambered onto the bulwarks I saw about 20 men swimming around in the water. The ship was obviously sinking rapidly and was completely enveloped in flames except for the small patch where these men were swimming about so I jumped overboard into this patch. For the next few minutes everything was decidedly vague. I cannot swim and I seemed to swallow a considerable amount of the Mediterranean Sea. In a sort of haze I saw the ship had swung round and her bows appeared to be falling down on top of me. I turned and struggled away as best I could and when I dared to look round the ship had disappeared. I lay on my back for a few minutes trying to collect myself and decide what to do. I could see dense clouds of black smoke and flames on the water which was completely ablaze. At this moment the Junior Cadet [Frederick] Treves knowing I could not swim came to my assistance and swam with me for about 5 minutes when on sighting a piece of wood he pushed it towards me and told me to grab it. I am quite sure that I definitely owe my live to this cadet. The cadet swam on whilst I rested on the piece of wood and to my horror I saw the flames sweeping towards me – not more than 10 yards away. I decided if the flames came much nearer I would take off my life jacket and go under. The heat was terrific but somehow I managed to struggle on and as I looked back the flames appeared to have receded a little.

After two hours in this perilous position I was picked up by HMS LEDBURY. I realised later that I had been extremely luck by jumping into the sea in the only patch of water that was not burning. As I struggled away from the ship so the flames closed up behind and I don't think any more of the

crew could possibly have got away. HMS LEDBURY put up a wonderful show in trying to rescue more of our crew, first she put her bows towards the ship and steamed right into the flames lowering a whaler [*see photograph below*] which went right into the flames to pick up survivors. No word of praise is too high for these men who manned the whaler and who picked up some men from a raft on the edge of the flames and even then searched around the burning sea looking for further survivors.

All the survivors were picked up between 0930 and 1000 by HMS LEDBURY who then received orders to search for survivors from HMS MANCHESTER, and proceeded near the coast when a Vichy ship signalled to us to find out who we were. Lieutenant Commander Hill of HMS LEDBURY hoisted a number of Italian flags which were completely unreadable and so misled the Vichy French ship which allowed us to proceed without interference. During that day we received a message saying that Italian Destroyers and Cruisers had been detected some 30 miles away. I think the Commodore of the Convoy had sent out some false signals which put the Italian fleet off the scent, anyway nothing was seen.

Next morning Friday 14th at 0600 HMS LEDBURY received instructions to pick up the SS OHIO and take her in tow. The gunner and 12 volunteers from the LEDBURY boarded the OHIO, the tow rope was secured and the LEDBURY commenced towing at a speed of ¾ knots with the PENN and BRAHMAN tied up alongside to steer and steady her. The towing continued during Saturday morning and a dive bomb attack was made during which HMS LEDBURY had a near miss ahead. Our fighters were overhead during this attack and did a wonderful job. Later another attack was made by two torpedo carrying aircraft. The sub Lieutenant RNVR of HMS LEDBURY manned the starboard Pom Pom and in a very few minutes shot down one of these aircraft, as this gun could not be brought to bear on the remaining enemy ’plane he immediately rushed over to the port gun and brought down this machine after a few rounds were fired. We arrived at Malta at 0830 that morning.

I would like to pay very special tribute to Captain Pearce for his fine example of courage and devotion to duty which was an inspiration to all and I feel sure no ship’s company could ever sail under a finer man. I should also like to mention Lieutenant Commander Hill of HMS LEDBURY who did remarkable work rescuing survivors from the flames, nothing was too difficult for either him or his crew and never have I seen such a splendid crew. I would also like to mention the Gunner of HMS LEDBURY who took the whaler into the flames rescuing and searching for survivors.

The full report is given in “Merchant Ships of the Pedestal Convoy” *published by the Merchant Navy Association 2022 on https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA519338.pdf accessed 18 August 2024.*



A Montagu whaler (rowboat) as fitted on the destroyer HMS LEDBURY.