PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

These are two first-hand accounts from sailors on board the tanker SS “Ohio”. They give a different perspective to the RN operations to assist the “Ohio” to reach Malta.

The first is a report by letter from the Naval Officer assigned as liais on SS “Ohio”. The second is an article written by a young merchant seaman, an Assistant Steward on SS “Ohio”.

One formal, one informal making an interesting pair of accounts

REPORT FROM THE NAVAL LIASON OFFICER ON BOARD THE "OHIO"

LIEUTENANT DENYS E. BARTON RN

SECRET. S.S.OHIO
15 August, 1942.

OPERATION “PEDESTAL”
(All times are Z-2 and very approximate)

Sir,

I have the honour to report as follows:—

S.S.”Ohio” sailed from Greenock at 2130-31 and formed up with the convoy at dawn next morning. The voyage until one day east of Gibraltar (D2) was without incident. The exercises at altering course and changing cruising dispositions were invaluable.
(2) On 11th August at about 1315 HMS “Eagle” was hit by four torpedoes fired by a S/M on her port side, which must have passed down the centre of the convoy. She capsized and sank at 1325.
(3) At about 1600 “Nelson” and “Rodney” opened fire at an A/G which passed over the convoy at a great height. It was not seen by “Ohio” At sunset a number of J.U. 88's attacked the convoy -one was shot down by”Cairo's” first salvo. Two more were very heavily engaged on the port side of the convoy and one was shot down by gunfire. The other appeared to get away.

At dusk more J.U.88’s attacked and were engaged by H.M. ships. Bombs were dropped but none fell nearer “Ohio” than about 3 cables. Mines were also dropped.
(4) On 12th August during the forenoon a large number of Savoia T.H. planes attacked the convoy but only one pressed home his attack. No damage was suffered by ships. At about 1830 3 or 4 J.U.87’s carried out a rather halfhearted attack from the south dropping bombs and some parachute mines, then a much larger force of J.U.87’s attacked “Indomitable” from astern, scoring at least two hits. "Indomitable" disappeared in smoke, still firing and circled away to port. The angle of dive appeared to be about 50^{o} and bombs released at about 2500 feet. “Deucalion” was also hit and stopped in this attack.
(5) At 1900 Force F parted company and the convoy formed into 2 columns. At about 1940 “Nigeria” leading the port column was hit by an underwater explosion, about one minute later “Cairo” had an explosion which blew her stern off and as the remainder of the force turned to starboard away from these two, "Ohio” was hit by an underwater explosion on the port side amidships in the pump room. Kerosene in adjacent tanks started a large fire. Preparations were made to abandon ship but as fire did not appear to increase all available Foamite extinguishers were directed down the pump room and fire was put out in about five minutes. The explosion had put out the fires in the boilers and ship lost way and stopped. The explosion tore open deck from ships side to centre line but appeared to be only about five feet below surface There was very little noise, my main recollection was an enormous flash. Both the master and I came to the conclusion later that the explosion was probably caused by a mine and not torpedo as was first thought. Amongst other damage was fore steering and gyro compass put out of action. Whilst steam was being raised again “Ashanti” passed close to starboard and asked if we were able to steam. On being told that we probably could he ordered us to take the inshore route and make our utmost speed. Shortly after this when it was getting dark the remainder of the convoy were attacked. by J.U.88's. One or two A/c attacked. "Ohio" and several bombs fell within 100 yards of the ship.
(7) By about 2045 the ship was once more under way and course was set, for Cani Rocks. The remainder of the convoy were 'being attacked and one ship *was* blazing furiously. Course was altered to give them a wide berth. After consultation it was decided that “Ohio” should make for the coast and then stop whilst a more thorough examination of damage was made. It was decided not to attempt to rejoin the convoy but to keep to French territorial waters as long as possible and then proceed independently to Malta - it was not thought that the ship would be able to do more than slow speed. However at about 2215 a Hunt class destroyer approached and told us to steer 120.

Since the compasses were unreliable - there was no compass in the after steering position - the destroyer - believed to be the “Ledbury” - was asked to lead us. This she did and “Ohio” slowly worked up to about 13 or 14 knots, There was no wheel indicator at the after position but fortunately the rudder indicator on the bridge and the telephone the after position were still working and the ship was conned from the bridge.

(8) At about 2345 there appeared to be shell splashes silhouetted against the flames of one of the burning ships ahead. “Ledbury” switched on fighting lights for a few seconds and then led away from the remainder of the convoy who seem to be being attacked by some form of surface craft. More flares and gunfire observed about 0300/13. There were no further incidents until daylight except for a considerable amount of **“**flack” and large fires away to the north which was subsequently surmised to be an attack on Pantellaria.

(9) At dawn on 13th “Ohio” and “Ledbury” were just in sight of the remainder of the convoy and they reduced speed until “Ohio” caught up at about 0900. Since our steering was erratic the master requested to take one of the rear positions of the convoy and when subsequently another ship rejoined and was taking station astern of “Ohio” the master requested her to take station ahead of “Ohio”.

(10) At about 0800 three Savoias were sighted out of range to the south flying very low - they made no attempt to attack but diverted attention from a number of J.U. 88's which attacked from another direction. The ship ahead of “Ohio” — I think the Waimarama was hit by 3 bombs and disappeared in a sheet of flame. I saw the bows sink about 30 seconds later. “Ohio” had bombs falling close enough to shake the ship severely. The engines stopped but were soon got going again.

(11) In a later attack by J.U.87's “Ohio” shot one down which crashed alongside- the wing hitting the after part of the bridge and other large pieces being flung all over the ship - he had already dropped his bomb which did not explode. Short1y after this another heavy attack took place by J.U.88's. “Ohio” got about four or five near misses and the ship stopped.

(12) On investigation both electric fuel pumps were found to be broken. The ship was once more got under way us1ng the steam fuel pump but the condensers were also damaged and could not maintain a vacuum. Speed was now down to 20 revs - about 4 knots. This was maintained for a short time then reduced to 2½ knots and finally stopped altogether, At the time steam was being kept and the ship could have been towed satisfactorily since emergency steering gear was still working. “Penn” then approached to take “Ohio” in tow and “Ohio’s” 10inch manilla was passed. Whilst this was being done both “Ohio’s” boilers broke down and the ship was left with no power of' any sort and no means of steering. It is believed that the failing of the boilers was due to the water tubes blowing out.

(13) “Penn” commenced to tow but was unable to get “Ohio” straight and only succeeded in towing “Ohio” slowly round in circles. It became apparent that towing under these conditions was hopeless and a signal was made to “Penn” suggesting that the only hope was for the “Bramham”, who was standing by “Dorset” to try and steer the tow by being towed astern of “Ohio”", but apparently she could not be spared. Attempts were made to work the rudder by hand but were too slow to be any use.

(14) An enemy Aircraft was sighted soon after this and “Penn” went ahead fast to part the tow and manoeuvre. This aircraft did not attack but its presence betokened further attacks to come.

(15) By this time everyone was feeling the strain of the last 48 hours, and it seemed impossible under the present conditions that any progress could be made unless some other ships could assist in the tow. It seemed that the ship was nothing more than a sitting target. A signal was therefore made to "Penn" suggesting that the crew abandoned the “Ohio” and transferred to “Penn” until dark by which time other ships might arrive to assist with the tow. “Penn” replied that she must have another attempt to tow and preparations were made. However “Penn” later signalled that she was coming alongside to transfer "Ohio's" crew and this was done about 1330.

(16) At about 1700 “Penn” returned to “Ohio” and the crew returned to the ship and she was again taken in tow using “Penn's” wires. "Rye” and M.L.121 and 168 arrived to assist. The rudder was disconnected from the steering engine and relieving tackles fitted which made it possible to keep

the ship from shearing too far on either side, and “Penn” assisted by “Rye” began to tow once more.
(17) At about 1700 the ship was attacked again and hit the engine room which flooded. The Chief Engineer and Master both considered that ship was now sinking and she was therefore abandoned the crew getting away in the lifeboat going to the “Penn” and the two M.L.’s. I was picked up by M.L.121 with the Master and Second Mate and 12 others. The ship did not sink but since she was settling slowly and any method of steering was out of the question now that the engine room was flooded we did not return as there was nothing more to be done to assist the towing ships.
(18) Later in the evening at least two more attacks were made on “Ohio” by J.U. 88’s and more near misses were observed; in one of these the tow was slipped by “Penn”. After dark M.L. 121 went alongside “Penn” to transfer a working party to “Ohio” to make fast the tow again and I went on board again to assist the 1st Lt. of “Penn”in making fast the tows, “Rye” towing ahead and “Penn” astern. When this had been done at about 2350, the working party wee returned to “Penn” by M.L.121; I returned to M.L.121 remained there until arrival at Gibraltar since I did not consider I could be of any further assistance in “Ohio”. I noticed that, further damage to the ship had been done and that the deck was now buckled right across the ship where the mine had struck. She had obviously broken her back and was well down aft, having settled some six feet since leaving her at about 1730. It sneered unlikely that she could remain afloat much longer.
(19) Next morning at about 1000/14 the Master and Second Mate who were still in M.L. 121 returned to “Ohio” when Bramham and Penn were towing alongside and remained until she entered Grand Harbour.
(20) I would like particularly to recommend the conduct of the Master, Mr. Mason, the Mate – Mr. Gray, and the Chief Engineer Mr. Wyld. Up to the time when the ship was abandoned after being hit by bombs at 1700/13 they made every possible effort to keep the ship going and only when nothing more could be done to assist the towing ships and they considered. the ship was sinking did the Master give the order to abandon ship. The Chief Engineer, Mr. John Wyld, showed. outstanding ability and tenacity in getting the ship under way, after the mine explosion and again twice more when near misses had broken fuel pumps and caused other damage - including putting out all lights. The Mate, Mr. D.H. Bray, tried every possible method to steer the ship, working the steering winch by hand, disconnecting the rudder and working it by relieving tackles.
(21) A further tribute should be paid to the shipbuilders - all ship’s officers were unanimous in their opinion that no ordinary ship could have withstood the amount of damage sustained and remain afloat.
(22) The only recommendation for improvements noticed in “Ohio” is that some form of hand steering should be fitted. There were several alternative methods of steering, but all relied on there being steam in the ship.
(23) It would have been better had the ship been provided with full guns crews for all weapons. Though the Merchant Seamen crews were excellent, they had not the same skill as the Army and Navy gunners.
(24) DISPOSAL OF CONFIDENTIAL BOOKS. Confidential Books were returned to Distributing Authority, Malta on arrival.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your obedient Servant,

[Signed] D.E.Barton
LIEUTENANT, ROYAL NAVY.

THE VICE-ADMIRAL,
MALTA.

Information provided by the late Donald Sydney “Darby” Allen, a member of HMS Ledbury’s ships company at the time. Later chairman of Ashford branch of the Royal Naval Association.

PERSONAL MEMORIES OF OPERATION PEDESTAL AND THE "OHIO"

RAY MORTON

I had turned 18 in June 1942 while on a trip home from Mellila (Algeria) via Gibraltar after discharging a cargo of coke (not the drink) and bringing home iron ore in a battered old rust bucket called “Camerata”. Shipping was quite quiet on Tyneside and the Merchant Navy Pool in Newcastle sent me to Glasgow to join an oil tanker called "Ohio" or as the crew said it, “the Oh Aitch 10”. Nobody seemed to know anything about her but I soon found out. “Ohio” had arrived in the Clyde in June 1942 and was immediately ‘requisitioned’ by the British Ministry of War Transport.

She was luxury compared with the ships I had sailed in. Two berth cabins and food we had only dreamed about. She had been provisioned in the U.S.A. and had grapefruit in the cool rooms and a dozen varieties of cereal for breakfast followed by bacon and eggs! A whole variety of meat, fish and ice cream! Once in the warmer weather iced coffee was the order of the day. So much for creature comforts. I was making my first trip as an Assistant Steward after six months as a deck boy then twelve months as a cabin boy.

Rumours were rife as to where we were going but we all knew such comforts would carry a price tag. Shortly before sailing Captain Mason gave us all the “good news” and said anyone who wished to leave could go ashore but, full credit to the boys, no one did. Then it was off to sea. Being a “gung ho” 18 year old I wasn't going to miss the biggest game of Cowboys and Indians ever played and with the biggest and strongest escort ever waiting for us offshore what was there to be scared of? Britannia Rules The Waves!

A few things stick in my mind to this day and always will. Like the escorts, seeing those bloody great 16-inch gun battleships and the aircraft carriers, to say nothing of the cruisers and all those destroyers made me feel ten feet tall! But on August 11th constipation was cured. Sitting on a bollard on the after deck, having a smoke and an iced coffee after lunch and talking to the galley boy (Mario Guidotti, a 15 year old from Glasgow on his first trip) we watched the aircraft carrier Eagle on the starboard quarter of the convoy. She had planes up on patrol when we saw four huge spouts of water along her port side. It was exactly 1.15 p.m. She started listing to port and for the next seven minutes we watched men and aircraft slide off her flight deck as the list got worse and by 1.22 p.m. she had disappeared! Phew!!

As the holder of the AA gunners ticket my action station was on a machine gun on the boat deck. The severity and continuity of the air attacks that followed was ferocious with a capital F. You just stayed at action stations - you didn't have time for anything and you didn't sleep. Wherever you pointed the gun there was an enemy plane and you just kept pulling the trigger except when you were re-loading. The sky was like a huge lace curtain with the shell bursts from close to a hundred ships and it just stayed that way. Bombs were raining down and planes were falling out of the sky and ships disappearing in a flash of blue light. Many of the ships were carrying aviation fuel in drums in the 'tween decks and how that reacted to a torpedo or a bomb I will leave to the reader's imagination. And near misses were two a penny.

At one stage both Nelson and Rodney were being attacked by torpedo bombers flying in low quarters. Each battleship turned to steam right at the planes, each elevated A turret of three 16" guns and let loose a salvo. When the smoke cleared not one torpedo bomber was left. Some time later R.N. Gunnery Officer told me “that with a time fuse the blast from each shell would clear a square mile of sky”. The pilots would never know what hit them!

On 12th August we copped it. Around 6.00 pm while I was trying to shoot down aircraft a torpedo struck Ohio in the summer tanks, loaded with kerosene. With a 24 foot by 27-foot gash in her side, tank lids flying off, flames shooting mast high, a fountain of kerosene soaked me at my gun on the boat deck.

What happened next I don't know but when reality hit I was in the oggin, bobbing up and down in my life jacket complete with red light and whistle. I can't swim and watching ships steam past without even a wave didn't do anything for my morale. I soon felt a bit better - but not much! - when I realised there were three others in the water in close proximity, one of them Mario, the galley boy. By this time the convoy was disappearing in the distance. But we weren't alone for long - enemy planes flew over and used us for target practice. Fortunately their bullets missed.

After about three hours of bobbing aimlessly about in the drink a destroyer came in sight and headed for us. After picking up my three comrades in distress she headed for me. It was L34, H.M.S. Bicester, one of His Majesty's Hunt Class destroyers. Heaving lines were hurled at me, all dropping short, and finally my dull brain registered the fact I was supposed to strike out and grab one. I yelled, "It's no good dropping the bloody things there — I can't swim!" A three badge good conduct AB standing on deck pushed back his cap to the back of his head and in a West Country accent "Well I'll be f....., I've 'eard everything now!" The destroyer was swinging her stern closer to me and a Petty Officer on the quarterdeck ripped off his uniform and dived in after me just as the screws were beginning to pull me under. He dragged me to the side of the ship and up a scramble net and on reaching the deck two big burley AB's got on each side of me, arms round my shoulders saying "Come on son, you're OK now." I pushed them aside saying "I know I'm OK" and hit the deck like a sack of spuds.

Somebody carried me below deck and put me in a hammock. The ship's doctor came round, checked me to make sure I was all in one piece and gave me a mug full of Pusser's Rum to drink. I slept like a log and when the doc came round the next morning to see how I was, I brashly demanded to know why I had been "knocked out."

While we were being picked up Bicester had had to fight off some enemy planes. Some pom-pom shells. Some pom-pom shells had deflected downwards into X and Y turrets and put their own gun crews out of action. I remembered hearing calls for stretcher parties as I was taken aboard and the doc said "You were in no condition to know what went on around here last night, lad."

A couple of days later we landed back at Gibraltar (but that is another story). After a month we sailed back to U.K. as Distressed British Seamen on a Union Castle boat, the Llanstephan Castle. On arrival back in the UK I learned two facts of life. One - your pay stopped the day you hit the drink, and two, if you spent four weeks getting home or in a life raft or in a lifeboat that was your month's survivors leave.

Operation Pedestal and Ohio — I will never forget them.

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