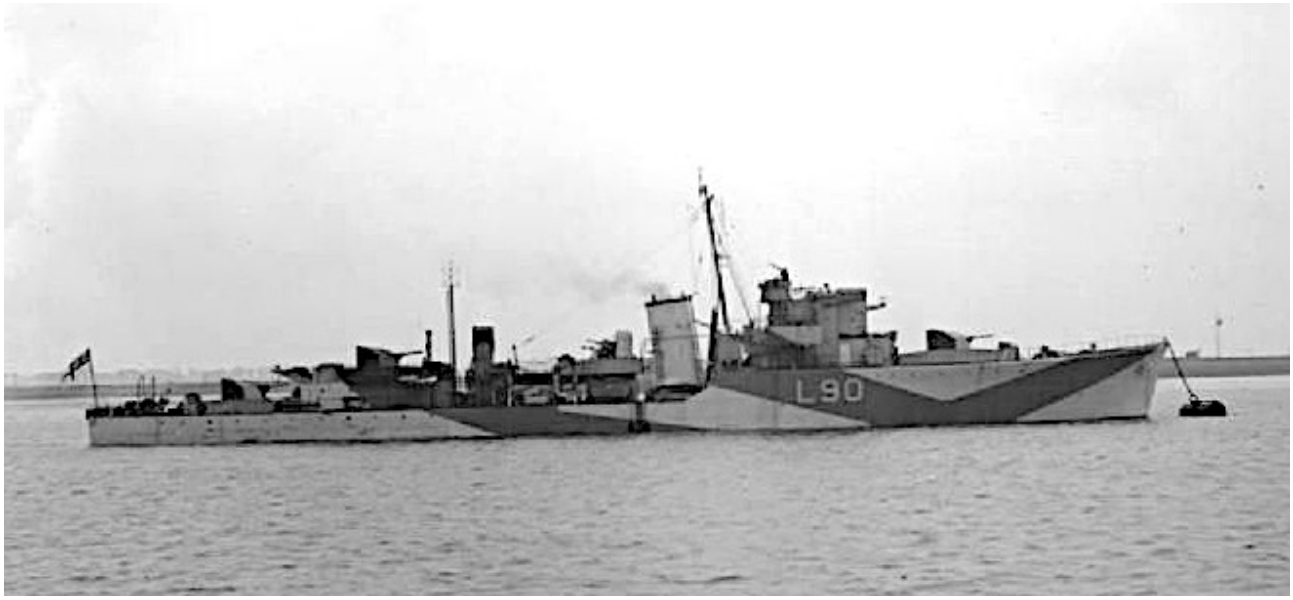
The Story of HMS LEDBURY and the Malta Convoy, August 1942

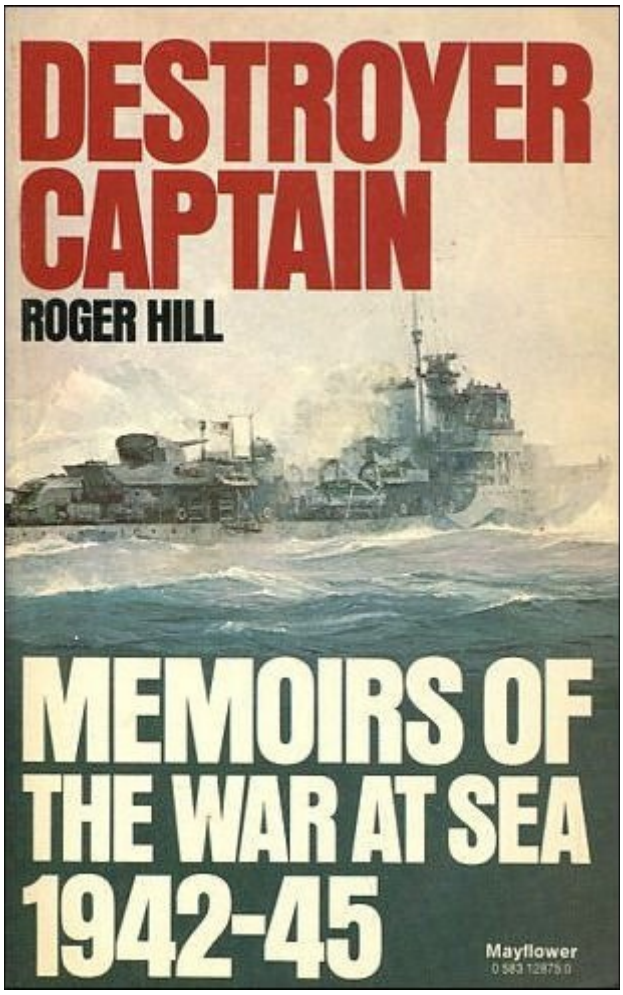


HMS Ledbury (L90) in camouflage paint moored at Sheerness [IWM].

Captain Roger Percival Hill DSO, DSC, RN was captain of HMS Ledbury aged 32 at the time of the Malta convoy.



He tells the story of HMS Ledbury, her role in the Second World War including the Russian Convoys and the famous Malta Convoy, known as 'Operation Pedestal', in his book "Destroyer Captain" first published in 1975.



HMS Ledbury (L90) specifications

Class and type	Type II Hunt-class destroyer
Built by	Thornycroft (Southampton, U.K.)
Ordered	5 Sep 1939
Launched	27 Sep 1941
Adoption	Following a WARSHIP WEEK National Savings campaign during December 1941 the ship was adopted by the civil community of Ledbury.
Commissioned	27 Jan 1942
Displacement	1,050 tons standard; 1,430 tons full load
Length	85.3 m (280 ft)
Beam	9.6 m (31 ft 6 in)
Draught	2.51 m (8 ft 3 in)
Propulsion	2 Admiralty 3-drum boilers, 2 shaft Parsons geared turbines, 19,000 shp
Speed	27 kn (50 km/h; 31 mph) (25.5 kn (47.2 km/h; 29.3 mph) full)
Range	3,600 nmi (6,670 km) at 14 knots (26 km/h)
Serving Captains	Lt. Cdr. R.P. Hill RN 30/12/1941 to 6/10/1942 Lt. D.R.N. Murdoch, RN 6/10/1942 to 14/4/1944 Lt.Cdr. J.H. Higson, DSC, RN 14/4/1944 to May 1945
Complement	164
Armament	6 × QF 4 in Mark XVI on twin mounts Mk. XIX nicknamed - forward 'Pip', aft 'Squeak' and Wilfred'

	4 × QF 2 pdr Mk. VIII on quad mount MK.VII pom-pom
	2 × 20 mm Oerlikons on single mounts P Mk. III
	10 depth charges, 2 throwers, 3 racks
Scrapped	Rosyth in May 1958.

Backstory

The PQ17 convoy, which left Iceland at the end of June 1942, is known particularly for the tremendous losses among the merchant ships. It was thought by the Admiralty that the convoy faced imminent attack from the *Tirpitz*, *Hipper*, *Scheer and Lützow* and a series of signals were issued, culminating in the order to 'Scatter'. Believing that they were steaming to intercept a bigger force, in order to protect the convoy, the destroyers and cruisers headed west. However the supposed threat failed to materialise and the merchant ships, now scattered, came under U boat and air attack resulting in the sinking of 23 ships. In a 1996 interview Captain Roger Hill explained his feelings.

> "There were 23 ships sunk in that PQ17, 190 seamen killed, 400-500 aircraft were lost, about 300 tanks and 100,000 tons of war material. That's what resulted from that Admiralty signal. It was really terrible, even now I have never got over it, because for the Navy to leave the Merchant Navy like that was simply terrible. The American cruiser people ashore, of course they just said 'The Limeys are yellow' and they all had fights and had to have leave on different nights and so on, and the *Tirpitz* was not within three or four hundred miles of the convoy. She came out eventually, but not that day, the next day I think, or the following day. She was sighted by a submarine which made a signal, the Germans intercepted that signal and called her straight back to harbour. There was no threat to the convoy at all except from the air and all these poor merchant ships, one merchant ship signalled 'I can see 7 submarines approaching me on the surface' and there was continual air attack. It was simply awful".



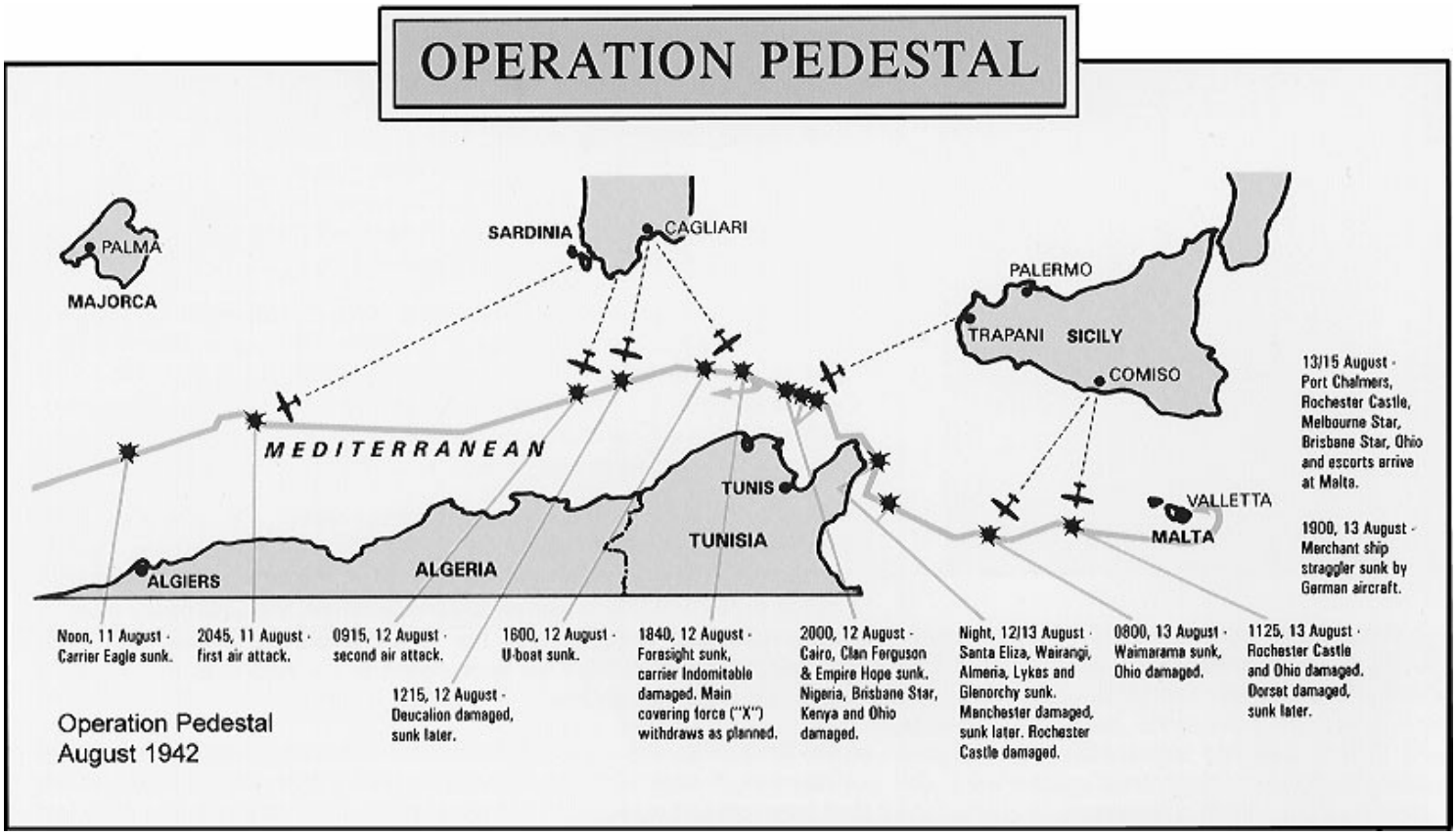
The Malta Story

In the Second World War Malta was a key location for British aircraft and Royal Navy ships to use as a base to support the war in North Africa. There are many books written about the circumstances that led to Malta being was awarded the George Cross by King George VI on 15 April 1942.

> *To honour her brave people I award the George Cross to the Island Fortress of Malta to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history.*
>
> *George R.I*

The island had effectively been under siege by German and Italian air and sea forces and at the time of the George Cross award, military resources and food rations were practically depleted. Fuel was restricted to military action and heavily rationed, the population was on the brink of starvation, and even ammunition was running out, such that Anti-Aircraft (AA) guns could only fire a few rounds per day.

After earlier failed convoys 'Operation Pedestal' was launched with a mighty Naval support escort on 9th August. There were 3 aircraft carriers with a total of 86 aircraft on board, 2 battleships, 7 Light Cruisers 32 Destroyers, 4 Corvettes, 4 Minesweepers and 2 Ocean Tugs with 2 Fleet Oilers (which refuelled the other ships). Nearing Malta there was support from 7 Motor Launches and 8 submarines based in Malta. The largest ship was the tanker 'SS Ohio'. This was a fast ship on loan from the Americans with a British crew and a RN Liaison Officer on board.



Two interesting facts.

- The authorities on Malta reckoned they had only 16 days of supplies left before they would be forced to evacuate the island.
- The Admiralty reckoned the operation would be a success if only one merchant ship made it to Malta.

As it happens out of the 14 merchantmen 5 battered ships reached Malta. But the Royal Navy lost an aircraft carrier, two light cruisers and a destroyer.

35 aircraft were lost in the action, 22 from HMS Victorious and 13 from HMS Eagle.
The Siege of Malta was finally broken by the Allied reconquest of Egypt and Libya after the Second Battle of El Alamein in October/November 1942.

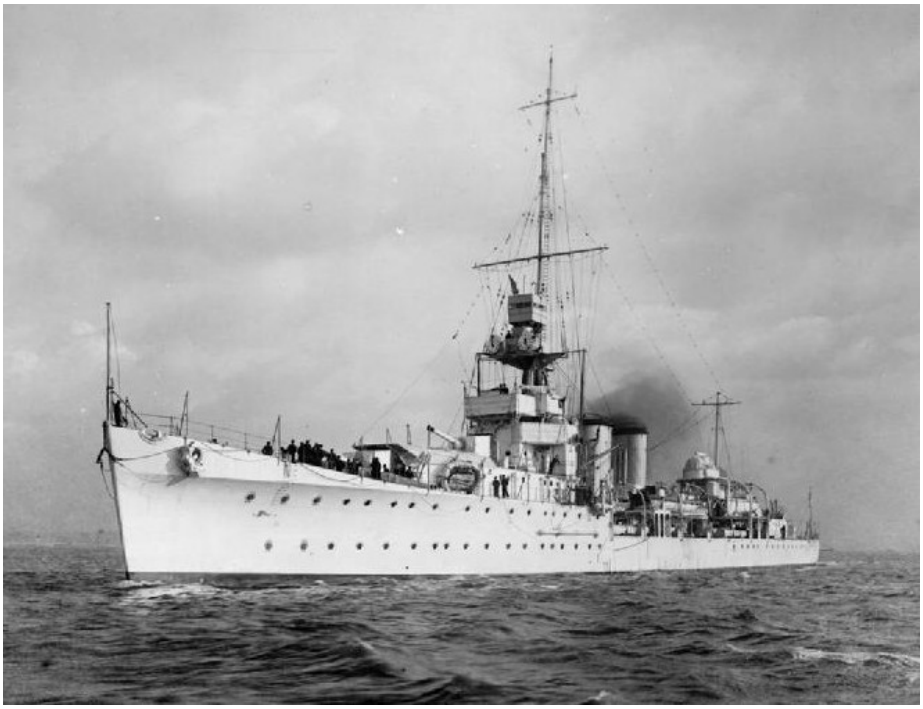
In the following pages we have a list of the ships in the convoy, eyewitness reports from the Captain of HMS Ledbury and two men on board the SS Ohio, some photographs and the casualty list compiled from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and other sources.



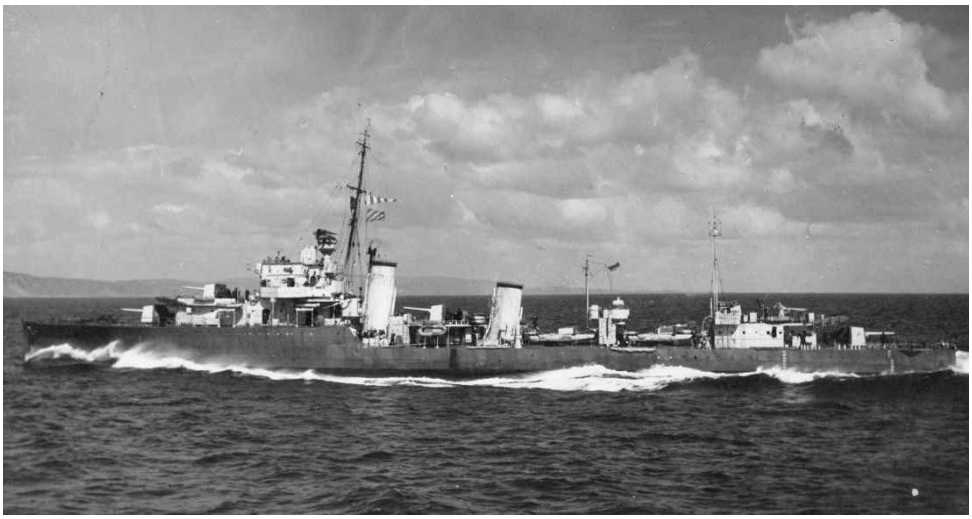
Aircraft Carrier HMS EAGLE Sunk



Cruiser HMS MANCHESTER Sunk



Cruiser HMS CAIRO Sunk



Destroyer HMS FORESIGHT Sunk



MV BRISBANE STAR Damaged



SS OHIO is brought into Valletta harbour



A general view of the convoy under way



The Santa Marija Convoy Memorial Anchor is located in a traffic circle at Quarry Wharf along the Lascaris Waterfront in Valletta, Malta.

It was inaugurated in 2012 to record the 50th anniversary of the convoy arriving at Valletta.The wording on the memorial is in Maltese but this is the translation with thanks to Leanne Ellul.

And there arose a great storm on the sea
And the boat was covered with waves.
And Jesus said: "Why are you afraid?"
And he rebuked the winds and the sea
And it became perfectly calm.

The words are from the gospel of St. Matthew and the portrait above refers to the significance of the date, Saturday August 13th 1942, which was the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.