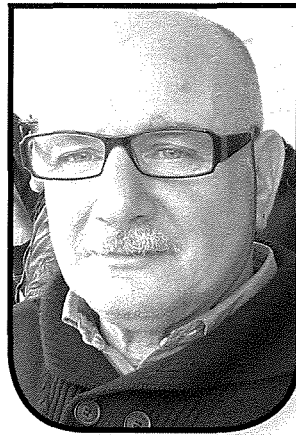


Operation Pedestal Saves Malta

Denis A. Darmanin



During the inter-war years Malta was used as a main fleet base for the Mediterranean Fleet, as it lay astride the main Imperial routes to the Middle and Far East theatres and provided a well-placed forward striking base for use against Italian submarines. After the First World War, Britain took little account of the rise of air power until after Italy entered the war.

Malta ceased to be a main fleet base, due to the close proximity of Italian air power which made it too vulnerable. British naval forces were then divided into two: the main portion, the Mediterranean Fleet, being based at Alexandria with a smaller British detachment, known as Force "H", based at Gibraltar able to operate in the Western Mediterranean and North Atlantic. Malta remained the lynch pin which connected these two strategic areas of the Mediterranean theatre. With the abandonment of the central Mediterranean as a main fleet area, the Mediterranean was effectively closed for the passage of merchant shipping to the Far East via the Suez Canal. With the rapid advance of the *Afrika Korps* and the consequent loss of airfields in Cyrenaica, further convoys to Malta from the Eastern Mediterranean would be very difficult to mount. The Prime Minister thought that the loss of Malta would be a disaster of a large magnitude to the British Empire. The heavy losses suffered during the June Mediterranean convoys and the small quantity of cargo delivered in no way weakened the Government's or the Admiralty's resolve to keep Malta supplied.

Malta entered the war sharply and suddenly. The day after Mussolini declared war, the 10th June, 1940, Italian bombers attacked Valletta and its harbours. The British had only four hastily assembled Sea Gloster Gladiator biplanes hastily put together from parts left in crates by the Royal Navy. The situation worsened when *Fliegerkorps X* (Flying Corps Ten) was sent to Sicily in January 1941, to strike at naval forces in and around Malta, as well as RAF positions on the island to ease the passage of supplies to North Africa.

The Axis resolved to bomb or starve Malta into submission, by attacking its ports, towns, cities, and

Allied shipping supplying the island. Malta was one of the most intensively bombed areas during the war. The *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force) and the *Regia Aeronautica* (Italian Royal Air Force) flew a total of 3,000 bombing raids over a period of two years in an effort to destroy RAF defences and the harbours.

By this time Malta had become the most bombed place on earth, and the situation was fast becoming serious with almost constant attacks by Axis aircraft based in Sicily and North Africa, and Malta's chances of survival were low. Not only were the military needs in a critical state but also those of the entire civilian population who faced starvation.

Supplies were sent and in September of 1941, eight of the nine merchant ships arrived in Malta bringing 85,000 tons of supplies. In February 1942, a convoy of three ships from Alexandria was unsuccessful and no supplies reached the island.

A convoy of 3 merchant ships plus a Navy oiler sailed a month later, accompanied by 4 cruisers and 16 destroyers, while another cruiser and its covering force sailed from Malta to meet them. This escort succeeded in keeping an Italian navy away from the convoy, but the freighters faced German bombers near Malta. One ship was sunk just 20 miles from Malta.

The oiler sank within 8 miles of Malta and the remaining two ships arrived to cheers by the Maltese, but were sunk in the harbour with only a fraction of their cargo unloaded. An attempt to run a re-supply convoy, MG 1, through to Malta from Alexandria in March 1942 ended in failure with barely one-fifth of the embarked cargoes being off-loaded in Malta.

In view of all this, the islanders and defenders were suffering the onslaught of the constant bombings, at times as much as three air-raids a day. Death and destruction was everywhere and the lack of food and supplies was being badly felt. After the heavy air attacks on Malta throughout the spring of 1942, King George VI bestowed the George Cross on the Island on 15 April 1942, so as to "bear witness to the heroism and devotion of its people."

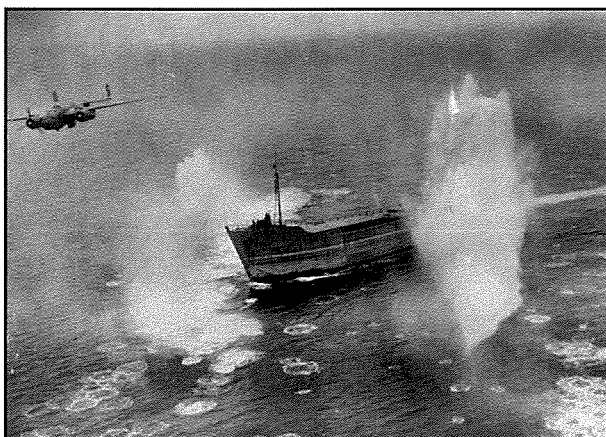
to Malta and turns back as planned. A Destroyer rams and sinks an Italian submarine. 40 German bombers and 20 Junker 88s attack convoy. Submarine also attacks the convoy.

Another 100 German & Italian planes attack. MV *Deucalion* sunk by aerial torpedo and HMS *Victorious* was hit by dud torpedo. An Italian submarine forced to surface by depth charges.

Another wave of 30 Junker 87s attack the convoy. HMS *Indomitable* hit three times; HMS *Foresight* damaged by aerial torpedo and had to be sunk, HMS *Cairo* and *Nigeria* torpedoed by Italian submarines. HMS *Cairo* abandoned, HMS *Nigeria* returns to Gibraltar and SS *Ohio* torpedoed by Italian submarine, caught fire but manages 13 knots.

A further attack by 20 Junkers 88s and two planes are shot down by Gunners on *Almeria Lykes*. *Empire Hope* bombed, its high octane gas goes on fire, abandoned and sunk by escort. SS *Clan Ferguson* is hit and explodes and an Italian sub rescues 53 survivors.

The *Brisbane Star* is crippled by an aerial torpedo and HMS *Kenya* is damaged by torpedo from an Italian submarine.



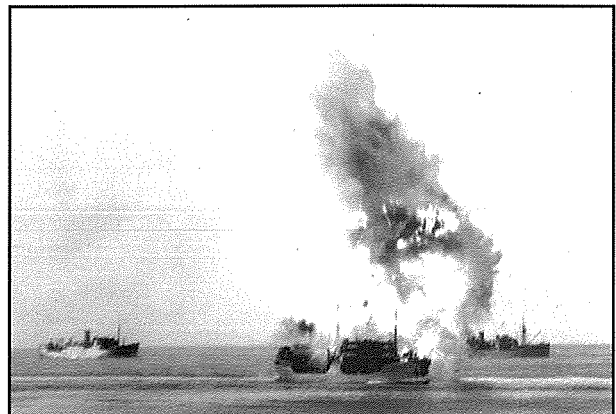
Aerial attack on convoy

August 12: The Italian cruiser divisions, consisting of three heavy cruisers; Gorizia, Bolzano, and Trieste, three light cruisers; Eugenio di Savoia,

Raimondo Montecucoli, and Muzio Attendolo and 17 destroyers sailed from Cagliari, Naples and Messina to intercept the convoy in the Sicilian narrows. Numerous aerial attacks on the convoy from Sardinia and from Sicily throughout the day by Italian torpedo bombers and German Ju-88s and Ju 87s (Stukas). The Axis used every form of attack including dropping mines ahead of the convoy, circling torpedoes and experimental radio guided bombs.

HMS *Indomitable* by three bombs on the flight deck and its airborne aircraft had to be landed on *Victorious*, although several aircraft were ditched overboard to make space for further landings. HMS *Victorious* was the only fully operational aircraft carrier. HMS *Foresight* was hit by an aerial torpedo and finished off by another torpedo from HMS *Tartar*. Vice Admiral Syfret orders Force Z to return to Gibraltar as planned, leaving Force X to continue with the convoy to Malta. As Skerki Channel the convoy changes from its four columns to a two columns formation and again heavily attacked by German dive bombers, Italian torpedo bombers and submarines.

HMS *Nigeria* was torpedoed by the Italian *Axum* and returns to Gibraltar with escorts HMS *Bicester* and HMS *Wilton* and HMS *Cairo* was torpedoed also by the *Axum* and abandoned and sunk. Another torpedo from the *Axum* struck SS *Ohio*, blowing a large



Cargo ship hit by a torpedo

hole in the port side, but managed to continue after repairs.

HMS Charybdis, HMS Eskimo and HMS Somali from Force Z ordered to reinforce Force X. The Italian submarine *Cobalto* attacked with depth charges by HMS *Ithurial*, forcing it to surface and was rammed and sunk by the *Ithurial*.

MV *Clan Ferguson* was hit by bombs, then torpedoed by the *Bronzo* and sank,

MV *Empire Hope* was hit by bombs and sank and MV *Deucalion* was hit

by an aerial torpedo and sank.

MV *Brisbane Star* was also damaged by a torpedo but managed to limp to Malta.

The German Air Command in Sicily withdrew air coverage for the Italian cruiser divisions already at sea, preferring to use the aircraft for direct attacks on the convoy.

Consequently, the *Supermarina* ordered the cruisers to return to Messina and Naples just before midnight. They passed through an area north west of Messina, patrolled by the British submarines HMS *Safari* and HMS *Unbroken* and were attacked.

HMS *Unbroken* torpedoed the *Bolzano*

and the *Attendolo* and damaged both enough to remain out of action for the rest of the war.

August 13: Passed through minefields between Africa and Sicily around midnight. 15 attacks by 8 Italian torpedo boats HMS Manchester hit and sinks by evening. SS *Santa Elisa* is hit by torpedo, entire ship on fire and abandoned, SS *Almeria Lykes* is torpedoed and sinks immediately, MV *Wairangi* and *Glenorchy* also torpedoed, on fire and no survivors from *Glenorchy*. *Rochester Castle* torpedoed but continues.

Fighters from Malta erroneously fired upon by convoy due to communication silence.

12 Junkers 88s attack convoy; *Waimarana* hit, aviation gas on deck

catches fire, ship explodes and sinks. Wreckage starts fires on Melbourne Star.

A wave of 60 Stuka dive bombers attack the *Ohio* and near-miss buckles plates and forward tank fills with water. *Ohio*

avoids mines, torpedoes and circling torpedoes. Two bombs straddle her, lift her out of the water and her boilers blown. She is dead in the water by mid-morning. A Ju-87 was shot down, bounced off the water, and crashed into her side. The ship is abandoned once more with her back broken and is now sinking slowly.

HMS *Dorset* disabled by three near misses, its engine room flooded, her high octane gas on fire and abandoned.

12 Italian torpedo bombers attack.

Port Chalmers catches torpedo in paravane. A bomb nearby sets HMS *Kenya*'s forward engine room on fire but is extinguished.

Fighters from Malta provide some air cover.

Rochester Castle, *Port Castle*, *Melbourne Star* steam on to meet escort from Malta and reach Grand Harbour at 6 PM.

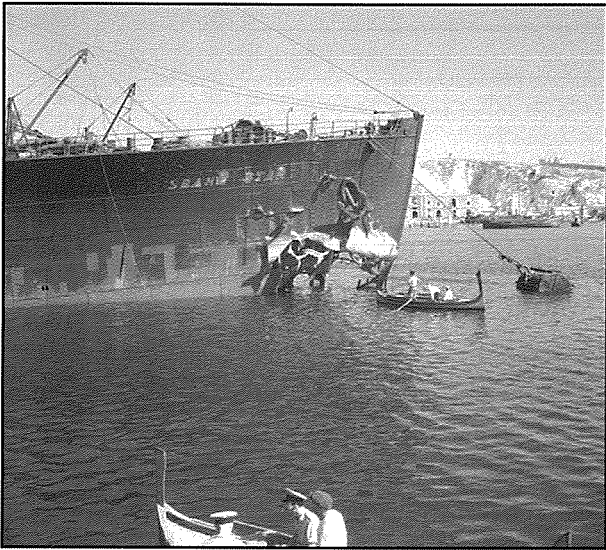
Junkers 88 attack SS *Ohio* and nearly split in two as bomb hits in same area as the torpedo. Destroyer tries to tow *Ohio*, but lists sideways and crew abandons the ship.

Another attack by Italian torpedo bombers.

August 14: MV *Brisbane Star* arrives at Malta. Under constant air attacks by 20 bombers and bomb destroys rudder and makes hole in her stern.

Her decks are awash. Frederick Larsen, Jr., third mate and Francis Dales, Cadet Midshipman from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, crew members on the *Santa Elisa* volunteer to man guns on *Ohio* during tow.

SS *Ohio* was taken in tow by the minesweeper HMS *Rye*, from Malta, assisted by HMS *Penn*, but her weight keeps breaking tow lines. They were then joined by HMS *Bramham* and HMS



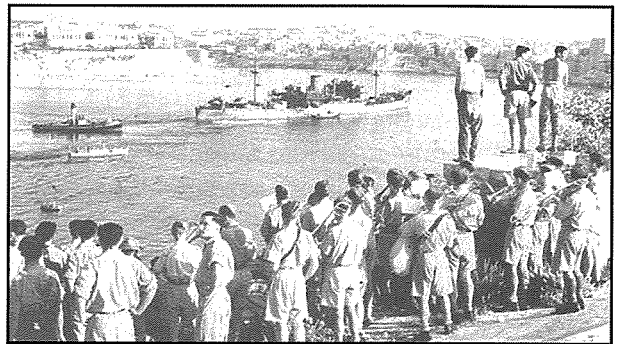
Brisbane Star with hole in stern

Ledbury. HMS Penn attached itself to the starboard side to support the tanker, with HMS Rye towing and HMS Ledbury acting as the stern tug. They tried towing again with HMS Bramham assisting HMS Rye, but with the damaged rudder jammed the Ohio is impossible to steer. After trying various towing combinations, finally, with HMS Penn lashed to starboard, HMS Bramham secured to port, HMS Rye towing and HMS Ledbury steering behind, acting as the rudder, they start to make a steady 5 knots. Further aerial attacks are broken up by RAF Beaufighters and long-range Spitfires from Malta patrolling overhead, and she suffers no further damage. But, some 45 miles from Malta, the Ohio is sinking relentlessly at the steady rate of about 6 inches an hour. Although by late morning *Ohio* was again hit and this time disabled, while two other merchant ships were seriously damaged. There were only three surviving merchant ships, *Port Chalmers*, *Melbourne*



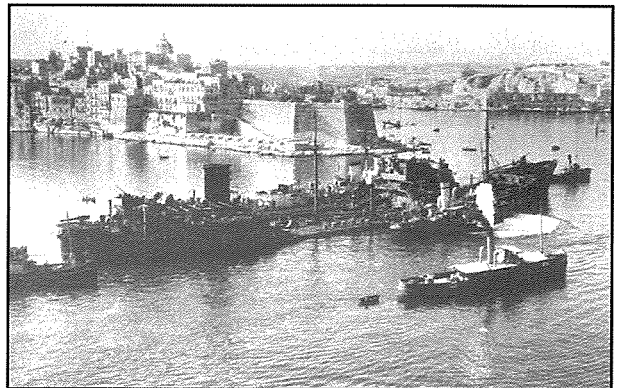
Ohio being towed past the Boom Defence

Star and *Rochester Castle*, each struggling towards Malta, now under the protection of the short-range Spitfires from the Island. *Brisbane Star* arrives in Malta at 16.15. Three more damaged ships, *Ohio*, *Dorset* and *Brisbane Star* were still some distance from Malta but great efforts were being made to get them in. Some of these attempts were frustrated, for *Dorset* was again hit and later sank. *Brisbane Star* however managed to struggle into Malta. The destroyer *Penn*, and the minesweepers *Rye* and *Ledbury* took it in turns to fight off further enemy attacks and to tow *Ohio* to Malta.



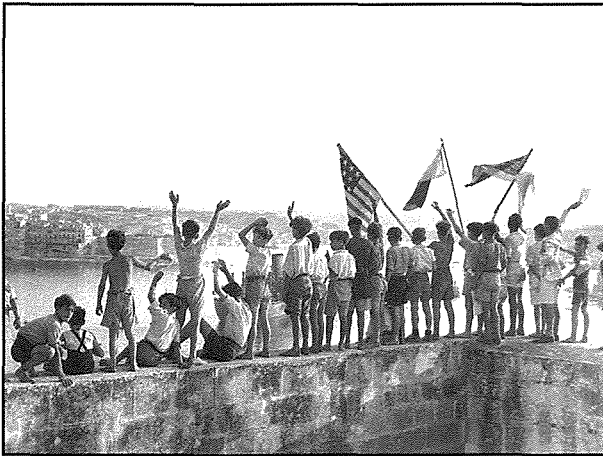
A military band celebrating the arrival of a cargo ship

August 15: The efforts and sacrifices were met with success when SS *Ohio* finally entered Grand Harbour 9:30 a.m., to the cheering crowds along the bastions. By this time, four other merchant ships from the convoy had been brought in. This day the



Ohio hit by torpedo from Axum

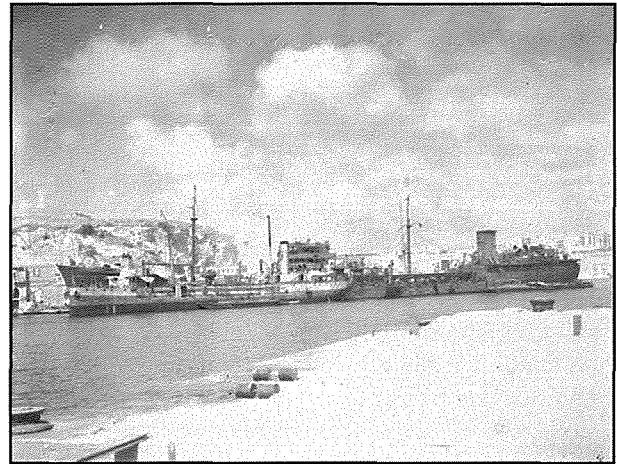
convoy is known as "*Il-Konvoj ta Santa Marija*" because it arrived on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, a cherished feast all over the island. These limited supplies served to maintain Malta's defences



Maltese children welcoming Ohio from the bastions

for another few months. But more significant to the overall situation in the Mediterranean was the arrival of the tanker *Ohio*. Her cargo was the critical to the future of Malta's strategic value as a striking base.

In August 1942, 35% of Axis convoys to North Africa did not get through. Germany reports that all the tankers in a recent Mediterranean convoy were sunk and not one of the transports reached their destination in Egypt. In September 1942, Allied forces sank 100,000 tons of Axis shipping, including 24,000 tons of fuel destined for Rommel, leaving him desperately short of supplies during his assault at El Alamein on October 26, 1942.



The tanker OHIO discharging oil into the oilers BOXALL and PLUMLEAF.

A Note on Ss Ohio

The tanker SS *Ohio* was launched on April 20, 1940 at Sun Shipbuilding Yard in Chester, Pennsylvania for Texas Oil Company (now Texaco). In anticipation of war and due to unofficial conversations between the American military and the oil company, the *Ohio* was the largest tanker built at that time. At 9,263 tons, 485 feet long, she and her sister ships, *Oklahoma*, *Kentucky*, *Colorado*, *Montana*, *Georgia*, *Delaware*, *Indiana* held 170,000 barrels of oil. With 9,000 shaft horsepower Westinghouse turbine engines, they were rated at 16 knots, but in sea trials *Ohio* made 19 knots.

All photos are being used for educational purpose only. Due credit to the Imperial War Museum, the Royal Navy Archives, Wiki Commons and others.