

Operation Pedestal A Thumbnail View

In 1942, Britain was waging war in the Mediterranean against the Germans and Italians in North Africa and Malta-a British military base from where British aircraft, submarines and cruisers were able to wreak havoc upon the Axis convoys. In December 1941 the Germans decided to neutralize Malta by means of a blockade and aerial bombardment.. Malta's strategic location was key to holding the Mediterranean, but food and oil had to get through past the Axis bombers and submarines. The 250,000 Maltese and 20,000 British defenders were dependent on imported food and oil. Convoys were not successful in getting thru and small amounts of food and oil was being brought in by submarine and fast minesweepers.

During the six month period from February to July 1942, only five supply ships had manage to get through and three of these were promptly sunk upon their arrival by the Luftwaffe, with the loss of virtually all their cargoes.

Due to the lack of food, the island faced starvation and a surrender date in September, 1942 had already been established. A decision was made in London to get a convoy through to Malta, no matter what the cost. This convoy would include one precious tanker. If all the cargo ships reached Malta but the tanker was lost, the effort would be militarily wasted since Malta's aircraft and naval ships would be useless.

The convoy was code-named 'Operation Pedestal' and was scheduled for the first two weeks of August, 1942, in order to take advantage of moonless nights. The cargo ships were selected to be fast, this would be a 15 knot convoy, because speed meant a better chance of survival. But no British tanker was available. In spite of the chronic shortage of tankers to the United States Navy, after Winston Churchill spoke to Franklin D Roosevelt, Washington agreed to lend a precious fast tanker for this convoy. The tanker chosen was the 'Ohio' for she was in Britain after delivering the 'first' load of oil carried in U.S. tanker. She was transferred to the British Ministry of War Transport on the 10th of July at Bowling-on-the-Clyde and was assigned to the British Eagle Oil & Shipping Company.

Immediately, special equipment and additional weapons were installed aboard. Most of her machinery was re-bolted on resilient mounts while the steam pipes were supported with steel springs and pieces of timber, in order to cushion the shock of near-misses. This was done because the 'Ohio's' sister-ship 'Kentucky' (Sun Ship Hull 223) was lost in the June Malta Convoy because a near-miss caused a fracture in the main steam pipe. The 'Ohio' and her 11,500 tons of oils was manned by a crew of 77 men, which included 24 naval ratings to arm the guns. In command was Capt. Dudley W. Mason. Besides the 'Ohio', the convoy comprised thirteen cargo ships.

'Operation Pedestal' was underway and the convoy with an escort left England on the 2nd August 1942 with Captain Dudley. Off NW Ireland additional escorts joined the convoy and finally, off Gibraltar the rest of the escort joined the convoy on Aug. 5th.

1. On the 8th of August, the battle fleet and escort array were as follows:
 - 1.1 Force "X" (Close Escort Group): 4 Cruisers and 12 Destroyers
 - 1.2 Force "Z" (Covering Battle Group): 2 Battleships, 3 Carriers, 4 Cruisers and 17 Destroyers.
 - 1.3 Force "R" (Oilers): 2 Tankers and 4 Corvettes
2. Other measures taken:
 - 2.1 August 10: a 'dummy' convoy left 'Port Said' with 3 cargo ships, 2 cruisers, 11 destroyers and 1 corvette
 - 2.2 August 11: a 'dummy' convoy left 'Haifa' with 1 cargo ship, 2 cruisers and 3 destroyers.
 - 2.3 5 submarines were strategically located to protect against the Italian battle-fleet.
3. Passage of the Convoy:
 - 3.1 August 10: The convoy passed into the Mediterranean
 - 3.4 August 11: Attacks by both submarines and aircraft. No damage to the 'Ohio'
 - 3.5 August 12: Attacks by both submarines, self-propelled mines and aircraft.
 - 3.6 August 12: 19:55: Submarine 'Axum' fired four torpedoes hitting the 'Nigeria', 2 hits on the 'Cairo' and 'Ohio'. The 'Ohio' had a 24 x 27 foot in the port side amidships, in the pump room. Boiler fires blew out due to the shock of the explosion. By 20:45, the 'Ohio' began moving at 7 knots towards the convoy, which was now approximately 10 miles ahead.
 - 3.7 August 12: 20:35: The convoy was attacked by 37 German aircraft. The primary target was the 'Ohio' who was still astern of the convoy.
 - 3.8 August 12 22:15: The 'Ohio' was joined by 'Ledbury' which had been sent back to lead the tanker since her gyro compass was not working to the shock of the torpedo explosion. The 'Ohio' was able to work her speed up to 13 knots and rejoined the convoy the next morning.
 - 3.9 August 13: 01:00-05:08: The convoy was attacked by Axis MTB's. The prime target was once again the 'Ohio' but by now she was some 20 miles astern of the convoy.
 - 3.10 August 13: 06:00: 'Ohio' and 'Ledbury' rejoined the convoy and had passed a quiet night, unseen and unmolested. It was an irony that the torpedo that hit the 'Ohio' saved it from further attacks by submarines, aircraft and MTB's.
 - 3.11 August 13: 09:30: One of the German Ju87's was shot down by the 'Ohio' and it hit the sea, bounced off a well, broke up in the air, and most of it ended up on tanker's deck forward of the bridge.
 - 3.11 August 13 09:45: The convoy was attacked by 20 German Ju87's and Ju88's. They obtained 6 near-misses on 'Ohio', which immobilized the tanker again.

- 3.12 August 13 10:00: While the four surviving cargo ships were completing their voyage to Malta, the 'Ohio' had been damaged by numerous near-misses. Power was regained after about 20 minutes, but stopped again after another near miss wrecked the fuel pumps. Attempting to restart their boilers, No.1 backfired and damaged its casing, Boiler No.2 fired, but after a short time, it ceased operation. The 'Ohio's' engine would never work again. The steering gear was disabled. The effect of the torpedo hit and the multitude near misses was that the tanker had almost broken her back. The immobilized 'Ohio' was left behind by the convoy and about 110 miles from Malta.
- 3.13 August 13 10:30: 'Ledbury' came to assist the 'Ohio' and drove off a number of air attacks.
- 3.14 August 13 13:30: With approaching a flight of Ju88's, 'Penn' tossed off her tow and beat back the attack, but with one near 'Ohio's' port side adding to the torpedo damage.
- 3.15 August 13 14:15: Because the 'Ohio' was immobilized, the crew went on the 'Penn', which stood by the 'Ohio' offering AA protection.
- 3.16 August 13 15:00-17:30 During this period there were four separate attacks. The 'Ohio' was not hit due to 'Penn's' AA fire and support from RAF Beau fighters and Spitfires.
- 3.17 August 13 18:35: Tow commenced again 'Penn' and 'Rye' and 'Ohio' began moving successfully towards Malta at 4 knots.
- 3.18 August 13 18:40: Four Ju88's attacked from the stern. The German's obtained 2 near misses and 1 direct hit on the engine room. It shook the ship's side-plates so hard that they began to leak water into the engine room. The 'Ohio' began to sink and Malta was 110 miles away. The 'Ohio' was abandoned again.
- 3.19 August 13 20:00:20:05 : 'Ohio' was boarded again with 'Penn' and 'Rye' taking up there towing positions and worked up a speed of about 5 knots.
- 3.20 August 13 20:52: A flight of Ju88's managed a surprise attack. 'Penn' and 'Rye' once again threw-off their tow lines.
- 3.21 August 13 22:30: Tow was resumed with a speed of 4 knots with 'Bramham' carrying out anti-submarine patrols.
- 3.22 August 14 01:05 Towing wires part.
- 3.23 August 14 05:05: Various towing arrangements were attempted by 'Penn' and 'Rye' since dawn with no luck.
- 3.24 August 14 07:15: 'Ledbury' rejoined the group with Malta less than 80 miles away. 'Ohio' was slowly settling by the stern, with the foreword end of the ship buoyant, she had started to hog putting a strain athwart ship in the area of the torpedo damage on the port side. But by now, the flotilla was within effective range of the Malta-based Spitfires.

- 3.25 August 14 09:00: Tow resumed, with 'Penn', 'Rye' and 'Ledbury'. Portable pumps from 'Penn' were shipped on the tanker and put work to stem the inflow of water into 'Ohio's' engine room.
- 3.26 August 14 10:45: The flotilla was attacked by 24 Ju88's. This attack was broken up by a force of 16 Spitfires, but a few bombers got through. This was the last attack that the 'Ohio' was to suffer but it was near the end of her. A near-miss at the stern buckled more plates and added more water to the stern part of the tanker. Yet, they were still 50 miles from Malta.
- 3.27 August 15 08:00: 'Ohio' was dragged into Valletta harbor. Her deck was nearly awash but she was still afloat-just!
- 3.28 August 15 09:30: The 'Ohio' was moored alongside the wreck of the sunken tanker 'Plumleaf'. Unloading commenced immediately.

Epilogue

The British had lost; 1 aircraft carrier, 2 cruisers, 1 destroyer, 9 cargo ships and 34 aircraft. However, after 'Operation Pedestal' and with an ample supply of fuel, the British were able to return with ferocious offensive actions. During the September of 1942, more than 100,000 tons of Rommel's sorely needed supplies were sent to the bottom and October, there was even more. Starved of supplies, the Axis lost the crucial battle of Alamein during the last week of 1942.

The 'Ohio' during off-loading developed a hog as the forward section rose and the stern settled straining the hull in the area of the port torpedo hit. Further off-loading was followed by adding sea water ballast to the forward tanks which leveled the ship and she slowly rested on the sandy bottom with her stern barely afloat. After unloading and careful deballasting, she was towed down the harbor and beached off old Fort Ricasoli, a quiet backwater of the harbor. But this effort proved to be too much for 'Ohio's' tortured hull; she broke in two and sank in very shallow water with her deck awash but her superstructure above the water. During 1944/1945, the tanker's hulk was used as a base/accommodations by the Yugoslavian Navy, when their coastal craft came to Malta for overhauls.

After the war, the 'Ohio' was towed in two pieces out of the harbor. The forward half of the tanker was floated and towed 10 miles NE of Valletta; this forepart was sunk by gun fire from the destroyer 'Virago' on September 19, 1946. The stern section was made water tight and was towed out of the harbor by the tugs 'Salventure' and 'Robust'. During the dawn of October 3, 1946 her scuttling charges were exploded and the 'Ohio' stern went down.

'Ohio' was no more, but she had reserved a name in maritime history for an unparalleled epic of survival.

Note 1. Our grateful thanks to the magazine 'Warship International No.4, 1992 and the article "Ohio Must Get Through" by J. Caruana for this abbreviated history of our S.S. 'OHIO' Sun Ship-Hull No. 190 and her association with 'Operation Pedestal'. We would highly recommend obtaining this article to read the 'Rest of the Story'. D.Kavanagh 1/10/2017