The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

THE "SAN BOATS" - EAGLE OIL AT WAR

by Captain Ivor C. Little

Address to SAMHS Jhb branch on 16 August 2007

My curtain raiser this evening is a simple story of bravery and courage of an order that those of us present here tonight would be hard put to imagine. There is spontaneous bravery, bravery under fire, and another type of bravery in which one knows that one is going to an almost inevitable and horrendous death but one goes anyway and of one's own free will. It can be compared with "martyrdom" but the people I am going to speak about would laugh at that notion. In their eyes they were simply "doing their job".

However, before going on to them it is necessary, as in all stories, to set the background.

The oil transportation business today bears little resemblance to that of the 1930s prior to World War II. Today refineries are sited all over the world and the crude oil used to feed them is carried in mammoth ships, known as "super tankers", from its source in the producing countries to those refineries in the consumer countries. Anybody who has watched, read or heard a news broadcast will confirm that these oil laden giants are almost impossible to sink. Simply put, crude oil floats and is not highly inflammable. Think back to the well-documented Torrey Canyon, Exxon Valdez and other well-known tanker disasters.

Before World War II refineries were almost exclusively positioned next to the source of the oil and in places such as Abadan in Iran, Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles and the Gulf of Mexico. From there the refined product, in the form of petrol, kerosene, diesel, aviation spirit etc., was carried by sea to the consumer.

Shipbuilding technology had reached its zenith in the *Queen Mary* and *Normandie*, mere tiddlers by today's standards, and the oil tankers engaged in carrying these refined cargoes were between eight and twelve thousand tons, tiny ships now but big for their time. They were also slow, averaging 10 to 12 knots, as they were used as floating storage tanks, heading, say, for "Land's End For Orders" which meant "head for the English Channel and when you get there we will divert you to wherever your cargo is needed". Thus one had a host of small tankers trundling slowly back and forth between the producing and consuming countries. To keep the flow constant, vast fleets of these ships were needed and firms such as Shell, BP and Esso had such fleets. As an example, Shell had a fleet of over 208 ocean going tankers when World War II erupted. This fleet consisted of three main divisions - Royal Dutch Shell, the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company (more commonly known as Shell Tankers) and Eagle Oil Shipping. There were also a vast number of independent tanker operators, but our story concerns the last named - Eagle Oil.

The Mexican Eagle Oil Company (Cia Mexicana de Petroleo El Aguila SA) was founded in 1900 by an Englishman, Weetman Pearson, the first Viscount Courdray, and taking its name from the national symbol of Mexico, grew to become one of Mexico's largest oil firms. In 1909 Mexican

Eagle Oil became part of the Royal Dutch Shell Group, to prevent this valuable British asset falling under US control. It was registered as a Shell exploration company under the name of Aguila Oil. In 1911 it started shipping Mexican Oil in its own shipping fleet with the ships registered in London and all named in Spanish after Latin saints. These ships promptly became known to international seafarers as "the San Boats" and the large eagle appearing on their funnels as "the crucified budgie". By 1919 Mexico had become the worlds second largest oil producer and Porfirio Diaz, the Mexican president at the time, nationalised Aguila Oil. The fleet, under the British flag, escaped this fate, and became an independent subsidiary of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, being managed and run as a separate entity. At the start of World War II this fleet consisted of 24 ships, of which 16 were sunk and seven severely damaged.

As World War II recedes further into history and our judgement becomes less emotional and more focused on facts, it has become clear that, notwithstanding the glamour and daring of "The Battle of Britain" or the Pacific or North African Campaigns, it was "The Battle of the Atlantic" which was the dominating factor throughout that war. To quote Winston Churchill - "everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea or in the air depended ultimately on its outcome". In order to survive, Britain, an island economy, had to import food, weapons, ammunition and most importantly, oil. Without aviation spirit brought in by tankers from overseas the Royal Air Force would have been grounded.

The Germans were fully aware that petroleum products were the life-blood of the fighting services and of Britain's industry and German surface raiders, aircraft and U-boats were instructed "tankers before everything else".

So much for the background. Think back now to where I started from. Imagine the officers and men manning a tanker in wartime. You load a cargo of 12 000 tons of aviation spirit, petrol or lube oil in some exotic clime and are now sitting on top of a potentially volcanic time bomb or giant cigarette lighter. The normal peace time regulations on those ships were no smoking on the upper deck or outside the accommodation, no hobnailed boots, no naked flames or welding and only brass tools to be used, such was the risk of fire. You are now faced with a 21-day voyage to Britain during which raiders, U-boats and aircraft are all waiting to intercept your convoy, in which you are the designated number one target. All it takes is a stray spark to blow your ship, and you with it, to smithereens or, worse still, to cause you an agonising death by incineration. And if you survive and arrive safely on the other side of "the pond", you have to turn around and come back and do it again and again until the war is finally over. But there is nothing forcing you to do it - Merchant Seamen were civilians and quite free to choose any other less dangerous occupation, yet these men and boys saw this as a job of being loyal to their company and in so doing set standards of courage, and more probably heroism, far beyond our own experience. In this respect the men manning the "San boats" set a particularly high standard, as the following examples will show.

Let us start with one of the more famous, the *San Demetrio*. Named after Saint Demetrius of Thessalonica who lived in 36 AD, she was a typical modern tanker of her time. Built by the Blythswood Shipbuilding Company at Scotstoun on the Clyde in 1938, she was 479 feet long and 61 feet wide, powered by a diesel engine which pushed her along at 12 knots and had a gross tonnage of 8 073 tons. Apart from her officers, her crew were all recruited from Barra in the Hebridian Islands.

In October 1940 she loaded 11 200 tons of aviation spirit in Galveston, Texas for Avonmouth in the UK. She joined convoy HX 84 in Halifax, Nova Scotia and the 38-ship convoy sailed from there on 28 October 1940. The convoy's sole escort was the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Jervis Bay*, a converted passenger liner that had been fitted with eight ancient 6" guns.

Marine diesel engines were still pretty crude in the 1930s and on the fourth day out the *San Demetrio*'s diesel engine broke down. For 16 anxious hours she lay stopped and alone until repairs were completed and she set off again to catch up with the convoy. The tanker was now a "straggler"

and easy pickings for any U-boat but her luck held, or so it seemed, for the convoy she rejoined on the evening of the 4th November was doomed to destruction by another cause.

The following afternoon, appropriately enough Guy Fawkes Day, in latitude 50 degrees 30' north and longitude 32' west, almost mid-Atlantic the convoy was intercepted and attacked by the German pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer*. HMS *Jervis Bay*immediately turned to engage the enemy, who returned her fire. Before long the *Jervis Bay*, outgunned and outranged, was silenced and on fire and the *Scheer* now turned her attention to the rest of the convoy, which had taken this valuable time gained to scatter. As the *San Demetrio* steamed away from danger she came under fire and after numerous hits fierce fires broke out amidships and aft and because of the highly volatile nature of the cargo, Captain George Waite gave the order to abandon ship while they still could. The Scheer then switched her attention to other ships in the convoy.

All the *San Demetrio*'s' crew managed to get away in two lifeboats that were soon separated as darkness fell. One, under the command of Captain Waite and carrying 26 survivors, was picked up later and the survivors landed at Newfoundland. The other boat, containing the Second Officer and Chief Engineer, plus amongst others an Apprentice (Cadet) named John Jones and Junior Engineer John Boyle, rowed as hard as they could to get to windward of the ship, which was leaking aviation spirit and seemed likely to explode at any minute.

After a long night of gunfire and pyrotechnics, daybreak of 6th November brought a full gale and a battle against swamping until late in the afternoon, when the wind and sea dropped and they saw a ship to windward of them, on fire and drifting down on them. It took them a while to realise that it was their own ship, the *San Demetrio*. They decided get closer and have a look, hoisting the lifeboat's sail and heading to cut the *San Demetrio* off, intending to re-board her. Arriving alongside her just as it was getting dark, they found that with the ship and lifeboat both rolling heavily and with heavy seas washing over the ship's decks, re-boarding would be a dangerous exercise, so they crossed to windward of the ship to wait for the next day.

At dawn on 7th November, the *San Demetrio* was about five miles to leeward. Sail was set and they were again close alongside at about noon. She was still on fire, but no one objected to re-boarding, which was soon successfully accomplished. Anything was better than remaining in the lifeboat, and it was obvious that further time spent in the boat was going to be a futile attempt to survive. They were only partially successful in recovering the lifeboat that was left hanging in the falls about two metres clear of the sea. From the boat it was seen that the ship was badly damaged; after boarding, the damage found was appalling. A shell had entered the port bow just above the waterline, exploded, and splinters had holed the collision bulkhead, resulting in the fore-hold making water, which was settling the vessel by the head. The bridge and all the midships accommodation was a mass of twisted steel, the main deck under the bridge structure was buckled with heat from the fire, which had been so intense that the brass and glass of the portholes had melted and fused, resembling icicles. Part of this mess was still burning. The main deck abaft the bridge had a number of splinter holes, and the aviation spirit cargo was flooding out from these as the ship rolled. All the after accommodation and decks on the port side had been destroyed and the area was still on fire. These fires were attacked with fire extinguishers and buckets to begin with, and with fire hoses when the Chief Engineer raised sufficient power to operate the pumps. The fires were extinguished in about five hours. It was now dark and as nothing further could be accomplished, watches were set for the night. Four cabins were intact and all enjoyed a few hours of luxurious sleep. The weather worsened during the night and the un-secured lifeboat was lost. The fire aft broke out again but was extinguished by the watch on deck.

Now that the lifeboat was gone they had no choice but to remain aboard. During the forenoon on 8fh November all hands were employed in plugging the splinter holes in the main deck and salvaging any food etc. remaining. They had ample potatoes and onions and a little condensed milk. The freezer was full of ready-cooked meat, thanks to the fire, but inedible as it was found to be

contaminated by ammonia. During the afternoon the Chief Engineer announced that the engines were once again operable and that they could get under way.

The bridge and chartroom were completely destroyed and the after emergency steering wheel had been half shot away, but at least they could move even if they could not navigate. If they shaped a course to the west they were bound to make the coast of the USA or Canada and thus safety, but this would entail heading into the prevailing weather and, with the damage forrard, it was considered that the ship would probably sink. This left no alternative but to take the route Eastward through U-boat infested waters, hoping to reach the coast of Ireland or Scotland, running with the weather astern. Steering by the stars and "By guess and by God" they felt that they were bound to hit something between Narvik and Gibralter as long as they kept the wind astern. Moving eastward in heavy weather, the ship became very sluggish which they rectified by pumping cargo around. This continuing bad weather was having its effect on the damaged ship that was slowly coming apart and sinking, but had the benefit of causing such poor visibility that they were cloaked from the U-boat menace. On the morning of 13th November they sighted land which they hoped was Ireland but which could just as easily have been occupied France. In fact it was Scotland. They sighted a bay, entered and stayed there the night. Early on 14th November an aircraft flew overhead and soon a vessel approached which was the French tug *Rene le Besnarais*. The *San Demetrio* refused her aid and instead followed her towards the Clyde, being joined by HMS *Arrow* and *Cyclops* on the way. Further destroyers joined and continuous air cover was provided until the *San Demetrio* anchored at Port Barradyne on the Clyde. She then moved to Rothesay, where to the greatest satisfaction of all, and particularly the Chief Engineer, Mr Charles Pollard, was that they were able to discharge the valuable cargo through the ship's pipes and with her own pumping equipment, putting ashore 11 000 tons out of the original 11 200 loaded, an amazing achievement.

There are a few interesting sequels to this tale. Chief Engineer Charles Pollard was subsequently awarded the Lloyds' Medal for Bravery At Sea, as well as the Order of the British Empire (OBE). The Second Officer, who brought the ship home with the aid of a school atlas, Mr Hawkins, was awarded the OBE, as was Apprentice John Jones, both for meritorious service. The story so captured the imagination of the British public that a book titled "The Saga of the *San Demetrio*", written by F. Tennyson Jesse was published by Penguin Books in 1942 and made into a film titled "San Demetrio - London" in 1943. This latter was produced by Ealing Studios and directed by Charles Frend. It starred Walter Fitzgerald, Ralph McLane and Mervyn Johns as John Boyle, a Junior Engineer who was the only casualty of the sinking. He was injured in the original attack and died on the voyage home, being posthumously awarded the King's Medal for Bravery. The Technical Adviser for the film was Chief Engineer Pollard. The film is considered a classic war movie and is still available on the Internet.

All the above-named participants returned to sea and survived the war, Second Officer Hawkins enlisted in the RNR and served in rescue tugs in the North Atlantic, later becoming a London Trinity House pilot. Apprentice Jones attained command in the Shell fleet and retired in 1971. The 15 crew who brought the *San Demetrio* home were awarded 14 700 pounds to share between them, by Eagle Oil, as a salvage award. Hawkins got 2 000 pounds and 1 000 went to the estate of Joe Boyle. A 26 year old US volunteer for the RAF's Eagle Squadron who had taken passage in the ship also got 1 000 pounds, plus the ships tattered Red Ensign.

The *San Demetrio* was repaired and sent back to sea but was torpedoed by U404 under command of Otto von Bulow. The ship, which was under the command of Captain C. Vidot, OBE was part of convoy HX 178 and 80 miles east of Chesapeake Bay on 17th March 1942 when she was sunk. She went down with the loss of 16 men, including two DEMS gunners, out of her crew of 48. Captain Vidot survived.

Other ships were also horribly unlucky. The *San Calisto* was mined and sunk off Margate, the San Fernando was sunk by U-boat ace Kapitanleutnant Gunther Prien in *U47*, the *San Alberto* was lost in

convoy and the *San Victoria* was lost with all hands on her maiden voyage, when she was torpedoed by *U-155*. The *San Gerardo* suffered a similar horrific loss of life when she was torpedoed by *U-71*, going down in three minutes with only two survivors from a crew of 57. By contrast, the *San Elisio* was simultaneously attacked by two U-boats, *U-45* and *U-156* over a period of two days. She had five torpedoes fired at her, of which three were hits. Her crew kept her afloat and brought her home without a single person being injured.

When the *San Emilia* was torpedoed in 1942 by the same U-Boat that sank the *San Victoria*, the *U-155*, the Master and most of the crew perished in the blazing tanker. A few, mostly badly burnt, and including an apprentice named Donald Clarke, managed to get away in a lifeboat. Most of the men were too badly injured to row but Clarke who was terribly burnt about the arms legs and face rowed uncomplainingly with the burnt flesh of his hands sticking to the oars. When he finally collapsed, his hands had so stuck to the oars that they had to be cut away with scissors, and it was revealed that for two hours he had been rowing with the bones of his hands. He died at noon the following day, having tried to raise the spirits of the crew by singing as he lay in the bottom of the boat. Six out of the crew of 46 survived and two were awarded the Lloyds Medal. Clarke was posthumously awarded the George Cross, one of only two earned by the Merchant Navy in World War II. This is the British civilian equivalent of the Victoria Cross and both were awarded to officers of Eagle Oil.

The other George Cross was earned in vastly different circumstances by Captain Dudley Mason, the youngest Master in the Eagle Oil fleet and whose ship gained a place in posterity in the film "Malta Story". This film was made by British Film Studios in 1953 and starred Jack Hawkins and Alec Guiness and I am sure that many of you must have seen it. The Eagle Oil ship in this movie was the tanker *Ohio*. She was launched in 1940 at the Sun Shipbuilding Yard in Chester, Pennsylvania, to the order of The Texas Company (Texaco) and was the largest tanker in the world at a gross tonnage of 9 263 tons and was 515 feet in length. Her Westinghouse turbines drove her at 16 knots, an unheard of speed for a tanker, and on trials she actually achieved 19 knots, about 30 miles per hour. For the first two years of her life she was engaged in the US coastal trade from Port Arthur in Texas to various East Coast ports such as Bayonne in New Jersey.

In 1942 the war in the Mediterranean was not going well for the Allies and grave doubts were being expressed over the continued retention of Malta in Allied hands. Convoys were not getting through and the island was close to starvation and surrender. There was also a critical shortage of oil and aviation spirit, as well as food and ammunition, and it was decided, mainly by Churchill, to mount an operation to be known as "Operation Pedestal". This would be an attempt to force a powerful and high-speed convoy through to Malta.

The British Admiralty had been extremely impressed by one of the *Ohio*'s sister ships, the *Kentucky* and, as the British had no large tankers of a similar type, requested the US Shipping Board to make one of these Texaco tankers available. There was a lot of reluctance on the part of the Americans to send such a valuable ship to almost certain destruction, but it was eventually agreed to make the *Ohio* available. She was fitted with two anti-aircraft guns, a 5" aft and a 3" forrard, loaded with oil at Houston, Texas, and dispatched to Bowling on Clyde, carrying the first shipment of oil delivered to the UK by an American flag tanker during World War II. She was then transferred to the UK registry and taken over by Eagle Oil. Her new crew consisted of 77 men under the command of Captain Dudley Mason, an experienced Master of 39 years of age. Among her crew were 24 naval and army ratings to serve her guns, which were augmented by a 4Omm Bofors abaft the funnel and six 2Omm naval Oerlikons. Her engines were remounted on rubber bearings and all her steam pipes were supported by steel springs and baulks of timber, to prevent damage because of shock.

"Operation Pedestal" began in August 1942 when 14 merchant ships, including the *Ohio*, laden with 11 500 tons of kerosene and diesel fuel oils, sailed for Malta with a powerful naval escort. This is not the place to recount the subsequent travail of Convoy WS - 21S (Winston Special - 21 Southbound) that consisted of a covering force of 38 warships and 14 specially chosen merchantmen. Suffice to

say that the enemy was waiting for them. Once past Gibraltar on 10th August 1942, the convoy was under continuous attack and on 12th August was attacked by 132 German and Italian aircraft. During the melee the *Ohio* was torpedoed amidships by the Italian submarine *Axum* and a huge pillar of flame leapt up to mast height, putting her out of control. Mason stopped engines and the crew set about putting out the burning kerosene bubbling up out of the fractured tanks. The steering gear and compasses were also out of action but the crew put out the fire and, steering from the emergency position aft, the *Ohio* set off again after the convoy but trailing well behind.

The ship had a gaping hole right through her middle but held together. She was promptly attacked by Stuka dive-bombers. She was bombed and machine-gunned but only one bomb did any damage, a near-miss that buckled the bow and flooded the forrard tank. Her crew fought back and a Junkers 87 was shot down, crashing into the *Ohio*'s starboard side and exploding. Half a wing slammed into the bridge and a rain of aircraft parts showered the ship. Under continuous bombing and slamming near misses, including having to comb torpedo tracks, the ship was eventually brought to a stop when her boiler fires were blown out. The engineers got her going again after about 20 minutes and she now worked up to 16 knots in a dash for Malta. The attacks continued until eventually her engines became so badly damaged through shock and vibration that she could go no further. She was now a sitting duck and HMS Penn came alongside to take off her crew.

However, after consultation the Penn put up a tow rope but she was not powerful enough to tow the heavily laden tanker. Under the next wave of attacks, a Stuka was shot down by the *Ohio*, in the act of releasing its bomb that dropped smack bang into the previous torpedo hole and broke the *Ohio*s' back. The plane ended up on the *Ohio*'s foredeck, the towline snapped and the Penn was blown flat alongside the *Ohio*. Meanwhile, the remnants of the convoy had reached Malta, now only 45 miles away, and more and more British warships came to *Ohio*s' aid. At the same time, enemy attacks intensified, jamming *Ohio*'s rudder and wiping out part of her engine room. She was now sinking slowly, but in a moment of inspiration by the captain of HMS *Penn*, it was decided to lash the Penn alongside while HMS *Bramham*, another destroyer which had arrived on the scene, was also lashed to the opposite side of the *Ohio* and between them the two destroyers now set off carrying the *Ohio* at a steady five knots towards Malta. Close air support now also arrived from Malta but a last determined air attack buckled the *Ohio*s' stern plates, forming a large hole. The *Ohio*'s main deck was now almost awash but she was still afloat as the two destroyers hauled her bodily through a British minefield while the air cover, shore batteries and additional escorts scared off a prowling U-boat and a group of Italian E-boats. At the harbour entrance the destroyers handed over to the local harbour tugs and *Ohio* entered the Grand Harbour, to the tune of "Rule Britannia" played by a military band and the cheers of crowds of onlookers. Another race began to discharge the *Ohio*'s cargo into the *RFA Boxall*, before she sank completely and with the *Ohio* sinking lower and lower she finally settled on the bottom as the last gallon left her and then broke completely in half. Captain Mason was awarded the George Cross for bringing his ship in and in 1946 the two halves of the *Ohio* were taken out to sea and sunk by naval gunfire.

Now if this were not an example of unmatched courage then I do not know what is! Working upon a burning, leaking, oversize Primus stove, which is also busy falling apart and sinking, and at the same time to be engaged in shooting down dive bombers, putting the fires out and keeping the engines going is not one's idea of a normal day in the life of a sailor!

There are other incidents I could elaborate on, such as the ordeal of the crew of the *San Gaspar*, who were attacked by sharks as they abandoned ship, but this is a curtain raiser and the main speaker for the evening is waiting in the wings so I must now close.

Eagle Oil Shipping lost two-thirds of its fleet to enemy action and suffered 314 casualties. It's officers and men garnered over 100 decorations, including two George Crosses, the civilian equivalent of the Victoria Cross. Those who lost their lives are commemorated at the Merchant Navy Memorial at Tower Hill in London where the names of the deceased among the "San-boat's" crews

are also proudly displayed, among those others of the 24 000 Merchant Seamen who lost their lives in World War II and who have no known grave but the sea. Finally - the Eagle Oil fleet was absorbed into Shell Tankers as a result of a corporate re-shuffle in 1963, much to the consternation of both fleet crews, and the "San" names and "crucified budgie" both quietly faded away.

Return to Society's Home page

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