Operation Pedestal

On August 17th each year a Service is held at the Melbourne Shrine in memory of Operation Pedestal. It was said that Malta was a week or two off having to surrender to the Axis powers, if they did not receive food, ammunition and aviation fuel. Fifteen of the fastest merchant ships available were assembled off the Straits of Gibraltar.

On the night of August 10th, 1942 they slipped into The Mediterranean.

It was 1,145 nautical miles (2120 km) of attack from U Boats, German and Italian aircraft, and E Boats, as well as danger from a variety of sea mines, over five days. As far as I can ascertain there were four Australian DEMS members involved.

V.J. Morrow (S 2223) was on SS Waimarama, which was bombed and sunk at 0815 on August 13th. The aviation fuel caught fire, and the ship blew up and was gone in less than four minutes, leaving a burning sea of fire. Only 27 men survived. Unfortunately, DEMS Rating Victor James Morrow was not among them.

F.J. Spicer (W 16) was mobilized three days after war was declared, from his hometown of Williamstown, and Bill Gilpin (F2141), were on the M.V. Melbourne Star. William George Gilpin was killed on August 12th whilst the ship was under air attack. The Melbourne Star caught fire when SS Waimarama exploded, but the fire was brought under control and Melbourne Star entered the Grand Harbour Valetta at 1830 hours on Thursday August 13th. having suffered the loss of 14 crew, five of whom were DEMS. F.J. Spicer survived the convoy.Melbourne Star was torpedoed off Bermuda some 8 months later. It seems that Spicer was no longer on the ship, and survived the war.

Bill Anderson (PM 1698) had been called up for service the day that war broke out. Two weeks later he was on M.V. Dorset and going out through Port Phillip Heads. In late July 1942 Dorset was fitted with extra anti-aircraft guns, an extra 40 Navy Ratings, and Maritime Royal Artillery personnel. As Senior Gunner, Bill Anderson was in charge. After leaving Gibraltar the Dorset was soon under attack. Around 0930 on the second day out the ship was bombed and caught fire, the engine room flooded, and Dorset was abandoned. Bill and the rest of Dorset’s crew were picked up by HMS Bramham. She was involved in trying to protect the crippled and abandoned bulk tanker SS Ohio. The Ohio had been torpedoed, bombed fore, aft and amidships, had 2 enemy aircraft crash onto her, had caught fire numerous times, and still she chugged on. (Maybe those Yanks do know how to build ships). Bill volunteered to join a party to re-board the Ohio and man the guns. The Internet references, which are American based, make much of 2 American merchantmen and their bravery, which no doubt is true. Bill is merely listed in passing as “a British Gunners Mate”. This writer thinks that Bill was the most qualified and experienced of the crew, and could do with more of the credit.

With a British destroyer tied to each side, and one of them playing out Chattanooga Choo Choo over her P.A. system,(a good tension breaker) and making about 6 knots, the Ohio did make harbour, with her decks at the waterline.

A couple of days later when she was nearly unloaded, she broke in half ; a gallant ship with a broken back. Bill received a Distinguished Service Medal for his excellent service on Dorset, and a Lloyds Bravery Medal for his gallantry. He survived the war, and led the DEMS Anzac Day marches in Melbourne for many years.

Of the 15 merchant ships who started out, 5 (including the Ohio) arrived at the Grand Harbour, Malta. They had had an escort of 54 Naval ships over the five days. There were 30 DEMS members who lost their lives on this operation, made up from Royal Artillery, the Maritime Regiment, and Naval Ratings. We also lost 2 RAAF aviators, Robert Athol Buntine and Harry Donald Fox. No doubt there were other Australians involved also who were serving under other flags, and not easily identified from the lists.

Within 2 weeks of the ships arriving at Malta the tables were turned, and Rommel’s North African Corps was struggling for supplies. This is said to be one of the main reasons for Rommel’s defeat at the Battle of El Alamein.

Lee Molesworth

N.B. We are always keen to hear from ex DEMS or their descendants.