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COMMEMORATIVE FEATURE

Operation *Pedestal*

Operation *Pedestal*, which was undertaken in August 1942 to re-supply the island of Malta, is illustrative of the vital role played by the Merchant Navy in World War II.

Malta was a British naval and air base in the Mediterranean from which the British had been interdicting German and Italian supply convoys maintaining Axis forces in North Africa. By mid-1942, Malta had been under Axis siege for several months. It was critically short of munitions, food, fuel and other military supplies; and two attempts to re-supply the island by sea had failed.

In late July, the British assembled a convoy of 14 merchant ships in British waters under the command of Vice-Admiral E. N. Syfret, CB, RN, and escorted by two battleships, five aircraft carriers, seven light cruisers (the Tenth Cruiser Squadron, including HMS *Nigeria*, flagship of the convoy), 27 destroyers, three fleet oilers and a rescue tug¹. The convoy passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on 9 August 1942 and came under sustained attack from German and Italian aircraft, surface ships and submarines. Over the course of the next six days, nine of the merchant ships were sunk and the remainder were damaged, two severely. One aircraft carrier, two cruisers and one destroyer were also sunk and several warships were damaged. Nevertheless, on 13 August, three merchant ships, *Melbourne Star*, *Port Chalmers* and *Rochester Castle*, reached Grand Harbour, Valletta (capital of Malta); *Brisbane Star*, its bow torn off by a torpedo, limped in on 14 August; and *Ohio*, then the world's largest fuel tanker, arrived badly damaged, under tow and held upright by escorting destroyers and tugs, on 15 August. The 32,000 tons of general cargo plus the fuel delivered were enough to sustain Malta for 10 more weeks and keep her in the war. Though tactically disastrous, the convoy achieved a strategic victory.

¹The number of escorts varied during the course of the convoy. These figures are derived from the ships named on 23 July 1942 in the log of the Radio Officer of the *MV Melbourne Star*.

²The Radio Officer was the late Mr D. W. (Doug) McDonald, for many years a member and councillor of the Institute. He played a key role in the Institute's study in 2003 which established that rebuilding the Australian merchant navy should be a defence imperative. These extracts from the log were provided by Flight Lieutenant Stuart Doyle, a long-time friend of Mr McDonald.

The significance of the convoy to the British is evident from the following two messages recorded in his log on 23 July 1942 by the Radio Officer² of the *MV Melbourne Star*.

To: *MV Melbourne Star*

From: Admiralty

Before you start on this operation, the First Sea-Lord and I are anxious you should know how grateful the Board of Admiralty are to you for undertaking this difficult task.

Malta has for some time been in great danger. It is imperative that she should be kept supplied. These are her critical months and we cannot fail her. She has stood up to the most violent attack from the air that has ever been made, and now she needs your help in continuing the battle. Her courage is worthy of yours.

We know that Admiral Syfret will do all he can to complete the operation with success, and that you will stand by him according to the splendid traditions of the Merchant Navy.

We wish you all "God speed and good luck".

Signed: A.V. "Alexander"

To: *MV Melbourne Star*

From: Flag Officer Force "F"

For promulgation to officers and men

The garrison and people of Malta, who have been defending their island so gallantly against incessant attacks by the German and Italian Air Forces, are in urgent need of replenishments of food and military stores. These we are taking to them, and I know that every officer and man in the convoy and escort will do his utmost to ensure they reach Malta safely.

We may be sure that the enemy will do all in his power to prevent the convoy getting through, and it will require every exertion on our part to see that he fails in his attempt.

During the next few days, ships will be in the first and second degrees of readiness for long periods. When you are on watch be especially vigilant and alert; for this reason, when you are off duty, get all the sleep and rest you can. Everyone of us must give of his best.

Malta looks to us for help. We shall not fail them.

David Leece