



Operation Pedestal - August 1942

In August 1942 the situation in Malta had become so perilous, due to the lack of fuel and food, that a convoy of fourteen merchant ships headed through the Straits of Gibraltar to deliver much-needed supplies. Protected by a large fleet including battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers, hope was high for a successful passage.



However losses mounted and it was only after a tremendous effort that the oil tanker *Ohio* managed to reach harbour. It was enough to ensure the islanders were able to continue until further relief could arrive.

The covering force comprised the battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson*, together with the aircraft carriers *Eagle*, *Victorious* and *Indomitable*, the cruisers *Phoebe*, *Sirius* and *Charybdis* and fourteen destroyers. Operating as close escort were the cruisers *Nigeria*, *Kenya*, *Manchester* and *Cairo*, with another force of destroyers. *HMS Furious*, a further aircraft carrier, carried Spitfires to help in the defence of Malta and these were flown off the carrier some distance from the island.

Mr T A Currie described life on board ship while on constant alert for attack:

We slept in our clothes with a half-inflated lifebelt around your chest. We only washed our hands and faces and we slept at every opportunity. While in areas where enemy action was likely and ships were being sunk regularly everyone was in a constant state of half cocked. By that I mean that even before the alarm bells were sounded the crew would be ready because any unusual sound or movement to the ship created tension. I used to sleep on a mess deck stool which was about fourteen inches wide and six feet in length. I would wedge myself between the mess deck table and an ammunition slide, my pillow the inside of a steel helmet. If we heard say during the night a sudden hurrying of feet from the deck above, around the four inch gun, we would half raise ourselves waiting for the shattering clamour of the alarm bells. Then if the usual ship noises continued unbroken we would slowly relax into a half cocked sleep. When the alarm did crash out the whole mess deck leapt into a jumble of action with men running to their places at action stations.



'Near Miss' *HMS Indomitable* during Operation Pedestal from the papers of Laurie Conlon

He also described his role during an 'umbrella barrage' in protection of the merchant shipping participating in an earlier convoy to Malta:



The umbrella barrage was designed to put a barrage of high explosive shells into the air over the merchant ships. All the escort ships aimed their guns at a set elevation and the fuses of the shells set to explode over the ships. Our ammunition was passed up and down below by ammunition teams consisting of cooks and stewards and off watch stokers. My job along with others was to load the shells into the breech. Before loading a shell it had to be fused. This was done by rolling the shell on to a fusing machine. The fusing machine turned a handle and this turned the nose of the shell to determine the range the shell would explode so when the order was given, "umbrella barrage. Commence, commence, commence", this was the sequence, fuse, load, wham, fuse, load, wham. There was no time to gape about. Just grabbing a shell. Rolling it on the fusing machine. Slamming it into the breech and to hear the ringing clink, clink as the rim of the cartridge tripped by two levers which caused the breech block to slide shut with a metallic clunk. Then almost immediately the breech recoiled and ejected a red hot cylinder. It leapt out with shimmering ringing clank after the gun had given its deafening crack. Soon the deck was littered with hot brass cylinders and two other men had to keep clearing them away with a thing that looked like a pitchfork. Sometimes we were burnt when one touched our bare ankles. The sweat poured out of us from a combination of physical action, heat and fear.



Gun turret wiped out.
HMS Indomitable. Good pal lost. L Conlon.

Mr T Currie would like us to mention that he is still a member of the British Ex Services Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Serving on board one of the aircraft carriers, *HMS Indomitable*, was **Laurie Conlon**:

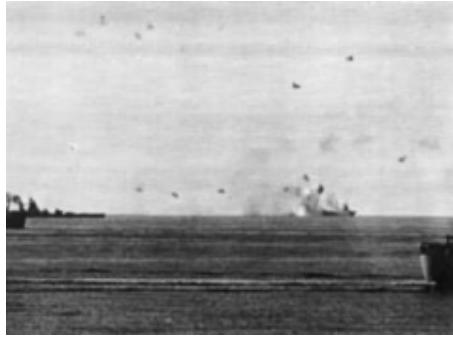
I joined her on 26 August 1941 and believe me to join a carrier is really a challenge in finding your way around. Which ladder to climb, or passage to take, what level deck etc. It takes a while before you can get from A to B by the quickest route. I was Leading Seaman of 23 Mess, 1st Starboard Watch and my abandon ship station was No 52 Carley Float.

HMS Indomitable formed part of the carrier support of the convoy to Malta:

On day three *Indomitable* was the main target of Junkers 87 dive bombers. We received direct hits and damage from near misses. We buried 47 shipmates and returned to Gibraltar. I saw a gun crew dead at their posts including a pal of mine from South Elmsal, Yorkshire and Lt Cunliffe Owen, a well-liked daring young pilot was lost too.



Leading Seaman LTC Laurie Conlon with a Geordie shipmate either side. Photo taken while serving on *HMS Anguilla* 1944/45



HMS Indomitable during Operation Pedestal. L Conlon

MARK	Part	Sub.	Special Duty	Quartermaster	Pay Rate	Leading Entry	Special Duty
59	23	Fx	Fx				
			Q.M.				Q.M.

Laurie Conlon's record for *HMS Indomitable*, showing his additional job as Quartermaster.

On board *HMS Victorious* as a Naval Air Fitter in the Fleet Air Arm, was **Douglas Hamby** who wrote in his memoir for 10 August:

Throughout the afternoon we were aware of shadowing aircraft keeping close watch on our movements and submarines were also dogging us waiting for another chance to strike. Around dusk, 30 JU88's and 6 Heinkel torpedo bombers attacked. I was in the hangar working on a Fulmar at the time and our first intimation of an attack came when our 4.5 inch guns opened fire, first one or two guns and finally what sounded like all 16. The 8-barrelled pom-poms then joined in with their drumming fire (they were a short range weapon) so we knew we were being singled out for attack. To be in the hangar when this racket was going on was quite frightening and noisier than being on deck. One of our pilots remarked that he felt safer in the air.



Douglas Hamby

On 12 August:

The next wave of bombers then came in, led by an experimental radio controlled aircraft loaded with high explosive which was controlled from a mother plane but this lost control of its charge and the un-piloted plane flew on, crashing in Algeria. Two Italian fighter-bombers detached themselves from this attack and approached *Victorious*. I was on the flight deck at the time watching one of the other attacks develop, only seeing what happened at the last moment. These planes came in as if making a normal landing approach and deceived the lookouts into thinking they were ours, then released their bombs from a height of about 50 feet over the deck - about 250lb bombs I would think. One hit the deck with an almighty clang about 50 feet away from me, broke into pieces and went over the side without exploding. One piece hit a trolley which carried batteries for starting the Hurricane engines, wrecking it. The



other bomb went skidding off the deck into the sea also without exploding. . . The next attack from the air was building up and the two carriers put up 24 fighters to meet it, *Victorious* with some difficulty as our lifts had started giving trouble.... The dive bombers looked as if they intended to concentrate on the two carriers and *Victorious* and her A.A ship, cruiser *Syrius* (which had 10 5.25 inch guns for main armament) put up a furious barrage. I was on deck at the time and the result was spectacular, *Syrius* astern of us was firing all three turrets forward which was great encouragement to us.... For us it had been a very long day, man-handling aircraft in the hangar and on the flight deck, carrying out repairs and checks as soon as our fighters had returned.

As part of Force Z, *Victorious* left the convoy at the entrance of the Sicilian Narrows, a mined stretch of water too narrow for a large fleet to continue onwards.

Victorious returned to Scapa Flow and the Home Fleet, her reputation as a 'lucky ship' firmly established. 809 Squadron disembarked and went by train to St Merryn in Cornwall on preparations for we knew not what. A lovely late August and September spent at St Merryn in 1942 proved ideal for nerves a bit shattered after the excitement of August on Operation Pedestal.



HMS Victorious (at Leyte, Philippine Islands, May 1945, with the aircraft, Corsairs and Avengers, on deck)

Image from [Telegraphist/Air Gunner Derek Foster](#)

Another ship which left the main convoy was *HMS Kenya*, damaged during a torpedo attack. Aboard *Kenya* was Lt Brian Prendergast who recalled his experiences in a tape recorded interview with Richard Campbell-Begg in March 1998:

We sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar on the 9th of August which was a Sunday. My cruising station was on the bridge as bridge messenger and on the Monday I could see a huge convoy extending outwards in all directions with ships as far as the eye could see sailing in formation. This pleasant state of affairs continued for another 24 hours, until very suddenly the aircraft carrier *Eagle* took on a list and began to sink. She had been hit by 4 torpedoes and she sank in 8 minutes.

Kenya went at once to action stations and I went to my station in a shell room in the foremost 6 inch gun turret. My job was to lift the 6 inch shells from a rotating ring and place them on a lift which hoisted them up to the gun house where a seaman loaded them in to the breech of one of the guns. I remained at this station for two days with very little information as to how the battle was going. We could hear the guns firing almost continually. Some time on the Wednesday night there was a tremendous bang and the bow of the ship lifted and then fell before resuming equilibrium in a bow down position, with the decks sloping downwards a few degrees, so it was still possible to move about without much difficulty.



After a few minutes the Captain broadcast that we had been torpedoed forward but would continue to Malta at reduced speed. We carried on loading shells and during the night we were given a tablet which we were told was a keep-awake tablet which must have been an amphetamine. Some time the next day, Thursday, we left the convoy and set course for Gibraltar. The air attacks continued and a bomb exploded close to the ship's side and caused some damage in the engine room. On Friday the air attacks gradually ceased and we were able to stop loading shells. When we reached Gibraltar we could not anchor because of the damage and tied up alongside another ship.

There was time off watch to sleep but I was still wide awake from the amphetamines and it was only gradually over a day or two that I managed to return to a normal sleep pattern. We went in to dock at Gibraltar for some temporary repairs to the bows. The anchors, cable lockers and stores compartments had been completely blown away. Fortunately they were unoccupied during action stations and there were no casualties.

On board *HMS Manchester*, as she was hit by two torpedoes, was **Alan Smith**, who described his experiences in an interview with the Director of the Centre [Dr Peter Liddle](#):

I saw the flash actually. I must have been turning in that direction and I saw this column of flame. The ship then obviously leaned over to the starboard side. It was hit on the starboard. It had missed the armour belt unfortunately which was about 6 inches, but it was a protection. It had missed that entirely . . .it had shattered three propeller shafts out of four, which meant that the ship was slowly turning in a circle.... The ship wasn't in danger of sinking and I remember that one time there was an announcement. They said "Oh, can anybody go down and assist below" where the damage was done and I went down towards the officers' quarters. . . They were sort of shattered and I saw an officer sort of staggering, you know he had been bruised or whatever.... The Captain made the announcement. He said "Well, we have considered everything", and he said that "if you see that light over there, about 12 miles away", he said, "that is Cape Bon, that is the tip of Tunisia". "Now", he said, "that is where you aim for". He said, "we are going to abandon the ship and you will hopefully steer towards that light"....

We jumped into these floats and we paddled with bits of driftwood or whatever we could get hold of. There were six or seven of us, I can't remember, and we paddled away from the ship and I thought "Well, if this goes down I don't want to be sucked under in the turbulence"... The ship was scuttled. This is a very important point to make because you didn't scuttle ships in the war.... It had been your home. All your personal belongings were there but apart from that you thought it's very sad to see a ship that size suddenly sink beneath the waves. Yes, it is an emotional feeling.



Alan Smith aged 18, taken in April 1942.



Alan was taken by Vichy French forces to a fort, La Guat:

There were about a thousand men there when we had arrived. The conditions were primitive to say the least. Twelve holes in the ground were what was used as latrines.... Water was very scarce. It was in short supply because of the climate. It was on a couple of times a day. You could wash in the morning. It was like a horse trough that you washed in, with a tap. I mean you didn't have a basin or anything and that is about all you could do. I mean you were lucky if you brushed your teeth....



Working party in camp at Laghouat, Algeria. Alan Smith 3rd from right, interned after loss of *HMS Manchester*.

Released shortly after the Torch landings, Alan returned home for an extended leave, before joining *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and serving in the Far East.

One ship which remained in close escort of the convoy was *HMS Ledbury*, commanded by **Roger Hill DSO, DSC, RN**, who was interviewed by Richard Campbell-Begg in 1996:

Well at last we had some lovely shooting because we had those high level Italian bombers coming over on an absolutely steady course and we were plonking away at them and my station with the convoy was alongside the starboard hand column and I was quite close to the third merchant ship in that column. He made me a signal "If my owners could see me now they would all have kittens!" And actually he had all his aerials shot away, I know, but the fire going up from the convoy was terrific and, of course, the fighters were up there and one of the interesting things was that I saw the bombs going by. I saw a cluster of bombs going past the bridge and when you see the planes up there you think the bombs are coming straight down, but they are not, they are coming at a very sharp angle coming at about 40 degrees and the bombs went past the bridge, they were landing in the sea alongside our stern and going off, which is very interesting.

Having assisted the damaged oil tanker *Ohio*, *Ledbury* headed in the direction of the *Manchester* to look for survivors:

So we went off to look for the *Manchester* and we steamed down the Gulf of Hammamet, lovely flat calm, blue sky, no wind, beautiful and looking on shore and looking at the sea, seeing if we could find her, there was no sign of her anywhere so I said I must really have a few minutes sleep I haven't slept for goodness knows how long. So I went down to my sea cabin and had hardly got there when I got called "Captain Sir, Captain Sir, two aircraft coming", so I rushed up on the bridge and there were two Italian torpedo bombers coming straight at us, so I told the big guns, the four inch guns to stay fore and aft and the guns' crews to stay in the shields and I got the pom pom and the oerlikon to stand by. The pom pom crew were a marvellous lot of



villains, they always used to wear pyjamas, I don't know why, and caps, very large caps and I had the loudspeaker in my hand and I said "Wait, we will take the right hand one first, stand-by, stand-by", then when I thought it near enough I said "Fire" and off the pom pom went and the oerlikon and you could see the little shells hitting the front of the plane and all the way along and then plonk, the plane just went straight down into the sea, on fire and very light brown smoke went up. Then I had them shift target to take the left-hand one and we shot her down too. Everybody was cheering and shouting and laughing and I forgot that she had had time to drop a torpedo and suddenly everyone shouted "There's a torpedo" and there was a torpedo coming straight for us. So I went hard a-port and the torpedo missed our stern by, well it looked about six inches but it could have been a foot, and I thought I would like to pick these people up because they will be picked up by an Italian submarine and taken back to Italy, but I thought the submarine risk was so strong I had better leave them. There was no sign of life in the first one. In the second one you could see them climbing over the side and getting into a dinghy. The pom pom's crew were very bloodthirsty and as they had been up in the Arctic "Come on Sir, just one short burst" I said "No, you can't kill a beaten enemy, we would be up for war crimes if we did".

Returning to the convoy, Hill witnessed the bombing of the *Waimarama*:

You never saw anything like it. The flames were hundreds of feet in the air, black smoke, it was a terrible sight and she went down in about five minutes and, see all its petrol was in five gallon drums on the upper deck and of course they all went off and then the heat exploded all the rest of it and the whole sea was covered in flames, as far as you could see. It really was an inferno and I had said to the lads that as long as there was a merchant ship afloat, we were going to stay with it, we weren't going to have any [PQ17](#) stuff on this convoy, and I reckoned, that by going into the flames, I was sort of redeeming myself for the terrible leaving of the merchant ships in [PQ17](#). So we dived into the flames. It was an extraordinary experience for the whole sea was on fire. What struck me so much was the heat, it was terrific. I was leaning over the side looking for survivors and I was holding on to my beard because I was frightened it would catch on fire. So we went in and started picking up survivors and the boys were absolutely marvellous. They put a rope around themselves and over the side they went.. .we finally joined up with the convoy and the coxswain, who was steering the ship was one deck below me, he had a porthole in front and he said "There's a man over there in the flames Sir". I said "Coxswain, all I can see are flames and smoke", I didn't want to go back again. He said "No I saw him move his arm Sir". "Alright we will go and get him", and this was



Letter to Alan Smith from his mother 10 Sept 1942. He had written to his mother that fruit was plentiful and he was enjoying life at the camp. In reality fruit consisted of a few dates and the primitive conditions resulted in an outbreak of beri-beri.



John Jackson who was the Wireless Officer of the *Waimarama*, who was the only officer survivor of that ship. He couldn't swim and he was on a sort of large bit of wood, so I put the ship right alongside him and he came up the netting.

Having assisted the *Ohio*, by now very badly damaged, on its tortuous journey, *HMS Ledbury* finally approached Malta:

The entry into Malta was really amazing. We stopped just outside the entrance to the main harbour and went and pushed the *Ohio's* bows, I pushed her right round 140 degrees and had her pointed for going into harbour. A tug came out from Malta and she went in and the whole of the battlements were black with people. There were bands playing everywhere, people cheering, children shouting "We want food, not oil" and I think it was the most wonderful moment of my life was when we went into Malta and everybody cheering.