

A Good Morning: Malta 1942

Louis Phillips recounts another Relief of Malta Story

This most interesting story is reproduced from a series of articles on the BBC—People at War site - Editor

I cannot quite remember the month but the year was 1942. You will have to forgive my memory for I am of an age where all systems are beginning to fail. Some memories, however, are indelibly impressed on my mind and I think will remain so until everything collapses. In early 1942 Malta was in a bad state. Surrender was very close being forced upon the island by shortages of food, fuel and medical supplies. No convoy or supply ship had managed to get through for many months. The last naval ship, the *Penelope*, had managed to sneak out of Grand Harbour and for the first time in human memory there was no naval presence in Malta other than a few submarines. Submarines were based on the south of the island and though they came and went they could carry but little in the way of stores. Indeed they had the much more important duty of intercepting Rommel's supplies. They really could not supply or be spared to try and feed the island. This problem came to the notice of their Lordships of Admiralty who must have thumbed through their list of vessels to find a prospect likely to break the blockade. There they found the 'Welshman', the latest of the fast minelayers. Beyond annoying the Nazi by dropping several hundred mines in their swept channels every few days or so she was not doing a great deal of work. The fast minelayers were the fastest ships afloat in those days. Some 75,000 horsepower were driving a ship of less than 4000 tons. The mine decks gave ample storage space for supplies and they were well armed though the hulls were only millimetres thick. I was a snotty (midshipman), the most junior of officers aboard. We were pulled out of our routine and base at Milford Haven and sent to Plymouth dockyard. There, dockyard mates swarmed all over the ship. Each of our three funnels received a strange cap, a new, false deck line was painted in, our mine doors hidden and a false bow fitted. Apparently we were being camouflaged to look like the Vichy French destroyer *Le Tiger*. We still did not know what was in store for us but as our mine decks were stuffed with Bofors ammunition, baby foods, the odd aero engine and medical supplies some accurate guesses were made. These guesses firmed up as our magazines were filled to the brim and a couple of extra close range weapons fitted to the casing. We sailed just before dusk and steamed quietly down the coast until we got a fix on Lands End at dark. Then the throttles were opened, the stern dug-in and the ship positively planed through the night. The Bay of Biscay was fortunately a flat calm and Gibraltar came up in what must still be record time. We refuelled and then sailed again just before dawn. The early part of the day was just very pleasant cruising as our speed was held down by the knowledge that there was no fuel to be had in Malta. At noon we were closed up to action stations. Little happened until late afternoon, then the very primitive radar announced that an aircraft was approaching. Our radar was a masthead bedstead that could not be steered and only gave warning of things from about 45° on either bow. Whatever the plane was it obviously was not sure what we were. Perhaps the camouflage was working. A while later another blip appeared and this one stayed. We were south of Sardinia and soon due to turn across the Gulf of Tunis as night fell. Our disguise did not put off this second plane it hung around and soon called up reinforcements. Radar reported several flights approaching so we stood to and checked everything for the coming attack. It came in waves, first the Stukas, followed by high level Ju 88's and some Italian jobs. They did their best but twisting and turning at high speed and the amount of flak that we managed to put up resulted in a few near misses but no damage. Italian torpedo bombers then came in; they are nasty people. A lot has been said and written about the Italians avoidance of risk and danger but that does not apply to their torpedo droppers. They pressed their attack home with some vigour. I think that they had, fortunately, grossly underestimated our speed otherwise we would have had a very wet bed that night. In the dark we turned South east towards Malta and our interest was then in Pantelleria and the E-boat flotillas stationed there. Again I think that our speed surprised them and we were past before they could intercept us. Just before dawn we had to slow down to about twenty knots while we ran our paravanes. These are mine protection devices that run from the bow of a ship. In doing so we had problems with the false bow which had to be discarded. Fortunately so for within a few minutes the starboard paravane was screaming and cut free a mine which otherwise would undoubtedly have hit us. As the dawn broke we could just see the outline of Malta and soon the entrance of Grand Harbour. We did not take on a pilot but a small boat came out to lead us into the harbour and our berth. There were coastal defence batteries on the harbour arms and we exchanged waves with

the troops there. All was peace as we steamed slowly in but then there was a noise. The only similar noise I have ever heard is that of surf breaking on a reef. It could not be that, what was it? Then we looked up and there on the heights that surround the Grand Harbour were people. Hundreds, thousands of people all shouting, cheering, waving and creating a terrific hullabaloo. We got the firm impression that they were rather pleased to see us. Then came the smell: I've smelt nothing like it since except on later occasions when we entered the Grand Harbour. It was a terrible stench of powdered sandstone, cordite, TNT, burning and carrion, all generated by the constant bombardment and destruction. It is a smell I still carry with me and doubt if I will ever lose, even when visiting Malta since the war it haunts my nostrils. We berthed in a flood dry dock. Before our mooring lines were made fast the hatch covers were off and the ship was swarming with dockyard mates, sailors, soldiers and airmen. Strangely it all worked like clockwork. The cargo, ammunition first vanished from the mining decks to waiting lorries. All went well for about an hour and then the sirens sounded. The locals, knowing what was coming, instantly took to their heels in the direction of the shelters. Orders had been issued that in the event of an attack we were not to fight the ship but clear off to the shelters. We were all a little blasé and set about a little tidying up before leaving. Then all hell was let loose as every ack-ack gun in the neighbourhood let fly. I gave the order "Run" to my party and we all set off at a brisk trot for the nearest shelter. Hardly were we down the brow when the scream of a falling bomb sent us diving for any cover available. Four of us made it under a lorry, which seemed the safest, place available. There we lay for what appeared to be hours. We cursed, smoked endless cigarettes and waited. The guns and bombs stopped suddenly and very shortly the all clear sounded. We scrambled out from under the lorry and turned to thank it for the shelter. Then we realised that it was full of the Bofors ammunition just unloaded. Not quite the safe shelter we thought. Despite many more aerial interruptions unloading was completed well before dark and we prepared for sea. Special sea duty men were closed up and 'All ashore' piped. As duty boy I was at the head of the brow as the ship emptied. All left with a cheerful word, 'Thanks mate - Have a safe trip - Buy you a pint sometime.' Almost the last was an old Maltese dockyard matey, he paused at the head of the brow and said, as he lent over and deftly removed the nearly full packet of Gold Flake from my shirt pocket, **'That was a good morning for Malta.'** 'Bloody hell, said my bosun's mate, if that was a good morning what is a bad one like.' Over the coming months we were to learn that it had indeed been a good morning. We slipped our mooring just before dark, paused outside the entrance to run the paravanes again and then headed towards the Gulf of Tunis. Once clear of the minefields the paravanes were brought in and the throttles opened. I think that the Chief had calculated our oil to the last teacup full so that our speed was maximal for just reaching Gibraltar. By dawn we were clear of the Gulf in open water where we could manoeuvre freely and did not have to worry about E-boats. The first attack came in at first light. The planes must have taken off in the dark. The format was the same as before, Stukas, Ju88 and a variety of Italian jobs. They came in at intervals for the rest of the morning. Fortunately we were soon out of Stuka range and for some reason there did not appear to be any planes from North Africa. Things quietened down by mid-day which was just as well for we were beginning to run short of ammunition. I have no idea how long these attacks lasted but when they started we had shells on the fusing machines, the ready use lockers stuffed and the magazine hoist full. By the end of an attack the magazine crew (very brave, unsung heroes are they) were struggling to keep the guns supplied. We made it safely back to Gibraltar and moored with a happy crew, that is except for one man. The Chief Buffer, responsible for the general appearance of the ship in addition to other duties, was most upset. All the paint on our main armament was burnt and blistered. It was going to be a major repaint job.

I Joined the Royal Naval Patrol Service in October 1940 - First ship, as an asdic rating, H.M.S. Man 'o War, in the North Atlantic. Commissioned as a Midshipman RNVR mid 1941. Served in HMS Welshman until September 1942-minelaying and Malta ferry. Then HMS Sennen, North Atlantic thence to the Indian Ocean. Then to HMS Cumberland -invasion of Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia and back to UK. Training the Chinese navy in HMS Renown in Plymouth until invalided out in 1947. Medical School, 15 years or so in Fiji, Pharmaceutical industry until retirement in 1986. GP since. If dates and age don't add-up I put my age up by 3 years and joined Man 'O War before my 16th birthday.