

Reflections on the Atlantic Convoy

by Bob Tessmer, 397-I

There has been a great deal of interest in the convoy that transported most of us to Europe. Since we were all very young, few of us had ever been on a large ship or sailed across the ocean.

To the best of our knowledge, at this late date, our convoy consisted of eight troopships carrying from 6,341 to 549 men each, for a total of 28,062. Both the 100th Infantry Division and the 103d Infantry Division were being transported. The convoy also had a Navy refrigerated ship carrying provisions, a British ship, a small aircraft carrier, a destroyer, and three destroyer escorts.

We sailed on 6 October 1944 and enjoyed good weather until 11 October when the convoy ran into hurricane conditions. The seas didn't moderate until the 13th. We made landfall on the 17th as we cruised through the Straits of Gibraltar. On 20 October, we entered the harbor of Marseilles, France. The invasion of southern France had occurred shortly before and there were many sunken ships in the harbor, making it impossible to dock, so we disembarked via rope ladders, down the hull, into waiting landing crafts.

Personal Reflections—USAT George Washington

Chester Frantz, 397/2d Bn HQ, remembers the storm very well but had found a passage that opened to the deck under the bridge, behind a stack of life rafts where he spent time to get fresh air. He says the salt water ruined his watch but saved his sanity. He also had the pleasure of returning on the George Washington with only 2,000 troops on board and made the trip in six days.

John Kingzett, 397/K, recalls visiting a friend in the brig at the stern when he noticed a big yoke and cog of the steering system was broken. Hasty repairs were made with chains that obviously held together through the storm. John and others watched the smaller ship beside us that did not take the wave very well and they would cheer when it reappeared after a huge wave, John later found his brother was on that ship.

Richard Tobias, 397/I, about boarding the ship late at night with a band playing "It's Three O'Clock in the Morning," and he was so excited about the adventure he wrote home about it. A buddy named Kowalski sang his favorite song over and over, "Did you ever think/When you climbed that plank/That you might be/The next dead Yank?" In a little more than a month, he was.

Francis Farrell, 397/2d Bn HQ, was recruited to work on the ship by the Chief Electrician. He had experience at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyard and he and Ted Ryley were accepted. The work consisted of oiling motors and generators and minor electrical maintenance. He says it was a good deal because he got to eat with the crew and shower with fresh water.

Jack Keelan, 397/I, recalls the high stakes card games on the stairwell landings. As the trip went on, the games became more intense, with piles of money being stashed in barracks bags to be sent home. Each participant had his retinue of men to rake in his winnings, bring him coffee and sandwiches, and generally look after his needs and guard his stash.

Daniel Capozzi, 399/G, also had a good deal. His company was in charge of security, fantail, and garbage detail. This got him three meals in the crew's quarters. His buddy, Harold Parisi, played a broken-down piano in "Herald Square."

C. S. Hartley, 397/I, remembers taking garbage to the fantail to be dumped, assisted by his buddy, John Hamm. While there, he noted the huge block and tackles which were holding the ship's rudder. Apparently this had something to do with the problem noted by John Kingzett in the story above—I guess we were lucky we made it to Marseilles.

William Braunhardt, 397/D, Medic recalls the storm and everyone getting sick. He headed off to the dispensary, up a ladder on the open deck, for pills. No one was in the Dispensary and he couldn't find any pills. With the storm worsening and night coming on, he didn't dare chance the open stairs again and spent the night in the dispensary. It was his best night's sleep on the trip.

Stan Clift, 399/AT, spent the trip on KP in the Officer's Mess. He was in charge of potato peeling (by machine) so the job wasn't too tough. His comments to the cooks about changing the greasy cooking to a balanced menu weren't appreciated, but on his way off the ship, one of the cooks gave him a big bag of FRIED chicken. After the long march to the bivouac area, it tasted pretty good.

Bob Glesby, 397/L, still has his original meal ticket punched for two meals a day. He remembers receiving breakfast and lunch at the same time with boiled eggs for a staple until they got rotten. Mess kits were loaded up and we had to eat, standing up, moving along the chest high tables. When you reached the end of the table you were "done" and had to wash your mess kit and leave.

Samuel Laird, 399/I, and his buddy, Bill Vielhaber, weathered the hurricane while everyone else was sick. They decided to strip down to shorts, shoes, and helmet liners and go on deck. They enjoyed watching the waves break over the bow until a Navy Lt. dressed them down for being on deck with no life jackets. Bill was subsequently killed by a sniper at the Maginot Line.

Frank Hancock, 399/M, describes the destroyer escorts during the hurricane, "Destroyer escorts are amazing; they climb vertical walls of water and slide down to crash into the depths; they disappear from sight and then bob up again like corks to ride another crest. Their crews must be black and blue from such tossing about."

Kenneth Brown, 397/I, waxes lyrical with his reminiscences: The beautiful sunny days, with the calm blue seas (until the storm hit), watching the Rock of Gibraltar slide by in the twilight and seeing the coast of Morocco at the same time, watching porpoises jump the waves, and recalling the same song played over and over on the ship's loudspeaker, "Holiday for Strings."

Myles Johnson, 397/I, enlisted in 1943 and was sent to a medical unit and had some experience on the open ocean when his unit ferried troops to the S. Pacific and brought home casualties. After transferring to the Air Force, he was suddenly caught up the "manpower shift" and, like most of us, ended up in the Infantry and in our convoy. His company was originally billeted on the deck until the hurricane hit, when they were hastily moved inside to a lounge area. As his men became sicker, he realized that food was the answer, so he and First Sgt. Roy Simmons brought food from the Mess Hall to the men in his company. That did the trick and his comrades recovered quickly.

John Gelderman, 399/F, had a favorite spot on the ship. He would spend hours at the starboard companion-way at the top of 20 steps leading down to the cargo deck. This was right behind one of the two circular anti-aircraft emplacements at the bow of the ship. He has vivid memories of the ship's bow plunging down into the water and the "whump! whump!" of the propellers when they came out of the water. Then the bow would rise and the water in the turrets would shoot 100 feet into the air.

Paul Mosher, 397/I, grew up during the Depression and his favorite treat was syrupy fruit cocktail. Money was tight so the servings were small. During the storm, Paul's stomach revolted, so he appealed to Joe Orosz, 397/C, who was on KP duty, for something that he could keep down. Joe supplied him with large cans of fruit cocktail and that seemed to do the trick for his days of discomfort. Paul says that killed his craving, and he can't stand to look at it now.

Norman Redlich, 397/I, remembers wandering the crowded decks watching the crap games and card games. He recollects an incident where the dice shooter backed up to shoot, and a voice from the crowd said, "I hope you make your point." He turned and it was General Burress, our commanding general.

James Blackwell, 397/I, recalls that his Company was billeted on "E" deck right at torpedo level. He was nervous about this and spent as much time on deck as possible, especially at night when he felt the darkness was a benefit. One night, he talked to a sailor who was looking through night vision binoculars and Jim couldn't see anything until he took a look through them and could clearly see the ship next to us and even read its signs. Now, he got even more nervous know that darkness was no benefit.

Aboard the U.S.S. General Gordon

Arthur Cott, 925th FA, recalls an incident after we landed. An MP approached a Frenchman smoking a cigarette and yelled, "Defense de fume!" and then fired two rounds over his head when he was slow to put out the cigarette. This got his attention and he complied. Art goes on to say that he returned on the George Washington and when they entered the harbor at New York, the ship had a 15-degree list. It got much worse when everyone went to the same side for a view of the Statue of Liberty and the ship's captain had to plead with the passengers to move to the other side.

Robert Flohre, 398/M, had a bunk near the bow of the ship and was doing fine in the hurricane until going to the latrine and finding all of the heads backing up and flooding the floor with waste. That did it and he spent the next few days in his bunk, sucking lemons and eating crackers and feeling the bow rising up and slamming down.

Richard Babbitt, a medic, 398/1st Bn, managed to stay well during the storm and volunteered to work in the Sick Bay. It was a messy job cleaning up after his comrades suffering mal de mer. He remembers one buddy who did not have a BM for two full weeks.

Lou Orlin, 398/F, had his bunk only a few feet away from the open door of the movie projection room. The capacity was only twenty men so there was continual movement of groups in and out. The only movie starred Deanna Durbin singing "Songs My Mother Taught Me" and Lou says he'll go berserk if he ever hears it again.

Jack Petersen, 398/B, was on the deck below the movie projection room and immediately under it. He remembers when the storm first hit, all of the men and projectors slid across the room and back again. After this happened a few times, the men left and crawled headfirst down the ladders. He also remembers being able to look at the men in the latrine at the bow and watching them go up and down a good twenty feet while seated at the toilets. The salt-water showers were provided with blocks of soap that looked and acted like blocks of wood and did about as much good.

William Shoemaker, 398/C, relates a story about his company performing guard duty for an AWOL in the brig of the ship. There was also a Marine guard for a sailor in the same brig. The Marine was equipped with a sidearm and live ammunition. When the shift change occurred, there was an inspection of arms. One time, a Marine discharged a live round accidentally and in the steel-hulled room, it ricocheted several times and did not hit anyone. The Marine thought it was immensely amusing.

USAT J. W. McAndrew

Harry Curtis, 399/D, remembers being on deck guard day when the storm hit. No one relieved him, so he stayed at his post in the ship's forecastle and watched the bow bury itself beneath the waves and shower him with cold Atlantic water. Finally, someone realized he was on deck alone and went to get him below.

Harry Steingrubey, 399/C, thought it would be “exciting” to go to the bow of the ship, beyond the Off Limits signs, and ride the “elevator” as the ship pitched to the height of a four-story building before plunging into the trough of the waves. Finally, someone with a lifeline guided him and his buddy to safety. He also recalls the ship came within five degrees of capsizing and later that night almost collided with the George Washington, which was three times larger.

Dan Krajcik, 399/Cannon, remembers when we sighted the coast of Morocco and a large plane was seen heading our way. It turned out to be a B24 Liberator on submarine patrol. He also enjoyed watching porpoises leaping in front of one of our destroyer escorts.

Convoy UFG-158—Transport Ships

US Army Transport (USAT) George Washington

Specifications: 721 feet long; 23,788 tons displacement.
6,341 troops embarked.
Built in Germany in 1908.
Operated by a Merchant Marine crew.

United States Ship (USS) Monticello (AP-61)

Specifications: 652 feet long; 23,000 tons displacement.
6,890 troops embarked.
Built in Italy in 1928.
Operated by a US Coast Guard crew.

USS General Gordon (AP-117)

Specifications: 622 feet long; 17,833 tons displacement.
5,196 troops embarked.
Built in New Jersey in 1944.
Operated by a US Coast Guard crew.

USS General J. R. Brooke (AP-132)

Specifications: 522 feet long; 13,000 tons displacement.
3,456 troops embarked.
Built in California in 1943.
Operated by a US Navy crew.

USAT Henry Gibbins

Specifications: 489 feet long; 12,097 tons displacement.
1,948 troops embarked.
Built in Mississippi in 1943.
Operated by a Merchant Marine crew.

USAT J. W. McAndrew

Specifications: 491 feet long; 7,997 tons displacement.
1,891 troops embarked.
Built in Maryland in 1940.
Operated by a Merchant Marine crew.

Steam Ship (SS) Mooremac Moon

Specifications: 492 feet long; 7,939 tons displacement.
549 troops embarked.
Built in Mississippi in 1940.
Operated by a civilian crew.

SS Santa Maria

Specifications: 459 feet long; 6,505 tons displacement.
1,791 troops embarked.
Built in United States in 1942.
Operated by a civilian crew.

USS Merak

A US Navy refrigeration vessel carrying food to the European Theater.

His Majesty's Ship (HMS) Engadine

A British vessel; cargo and passengers unknown.

Combatant Vessels

USS Solomons (CVE-67)

An escort carrier, or "baby flattop" of the Casablanca class.
Displacement: 7,800 tons
Length: 512' 3"
Beam: 108'
Draft: 22' 4"
Speed: 19 knots
Armament: 1 x 5" gun (Caliber length 38), 28 airplanes
Complement: 860
Propulsion: Reciprocating engines.
Built at Kaiser S.B. Co., Vancouver and commissioned 21 Nov 1943

USS Dewey (DD-349)

Farragut class Destroyer
Displacement: 1,375 tons
Length: 341' 3"
Beam: 34' 2"
Draft: 8' 10"
Speed: 36.5 knots
Armament: 5 x 5" inch guns (Caliber length 38); 4 x 1.1"
Automatic Antiaircraft Guns; 8 21" torpedoes fired from quadruple tubes
Complement: 251
Propulsion: Geared turbines with twin screws, 42,800 h.p.
Built at Bath Iron Works and commissioned 4 October 1934

Destroyer Escorts

All three destroyer escorts on this convoy were members of the John C. Butler class. As such, their characteristics follow:

Displacement: 1,430 tons (1,811 tons with full load)

Length: 306 feet Beam: 37 feet

Draft: 11' 2"

Speed: 23 knots

Armament: 2 x 5" guns (caliber length 38); 4 x twin 40mm

AA guns; 10 x single 20mm AA guns; one triple 21" torpedo mount; two stern-mounted depth charge racks.

Propulsion: 2 x Combustion Engineering or Babcock & Wilcox boilers driving 2-shaft Westinghouse turbines with electric drive

Complement: 156

USS Naifeh (DE-352)

Destroyer Escort

USS Gentry (DE-349)

Destroyer Escort

USS Maurice J. Manuel (DE-351)

Destroyer Escort

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