

Extract: The Sinking of HMS Eagle

FD: We were part of the Pedestal Convoy, at the time we didn't realise the significance of it, to us it was just another convoy, we didn't know that Malta was desperate. So they cobbled this convoy together, it was essential that at least some of the ships got through to Malta. There were 14 merchant ships protected by 50 war ships and the outcome was that 9 of the merchant ships were sunk, we lost an Aircraft Carrier and two Cruisers; about 500 men were lost getting the convoys through.

We had been down to Malta on several runs because The Eagle flew aircraft off to Malta – so I knew that most of the time we would be at Action Stations, at the beginning of the convoy about the 11th August, I said to Bill Maurey, I used to sit and play drafts or chess with him some lunchtimes I said well I'm going to the bathroom to do my dobbing – that's washing and having a shower - because we will be closed up at Action Stations for ages. So I went down there, in fact one of the things that annoys me is that I'd finished my dobbie – a nice pile of clean laundry, when the torpedoes hit. I was just having a shower then everything went black, there was one blow and then there were three others. I came out of the bathroom and it was pitch black and I got to a hatchway that was heeled right over and somebody hoisted me up and immediately I turned round and did exactly the same; and after a couple of decks I managed to get up to the Waste and there was everybody on the Waste nobody was in the water. I know I've said this before but there was no panic, no panic at all.

And when I got up the top on The Waste one of my abiding memories is that to me it was beautiful sunny day and I thought to myself it looks like a beach, everyone on the beach and all the ships in the distance that's all I thought of at the time when I got up there, I never thought I was in the middle of a battle, it came to you beautiful sunshine everybody walking up and down waiting to be told to go in the water, all the ships criss crossing because they were all over the place, it just looked like a sunny afternoon on a beach anywhere, that's fantasy.....and the fact that it happened at the time I don't think occurred to me because at that age you don't die only the old people die.

But it became pretty obvious that the ship couldn't be saved so it was every man for himself and I leapt in. I don't know how many feet I dropped in, I didn't have a stitch of clothing on, and I jumped in, I wasn't a very strong swimmer. One of my recollections was that I was going down and I was swimming and it was so black, I thought I wonder whether I was swimming the right way up or going down; and eventually I broke surface and there was lots of rubbish and I managed to cling on to a roll float.

.....you saw people still on there who were obviously afraid to jump in, they just went down with the ship.....Up here there are probably people who couldn't swim or who perhaps weren't strong swimmers and who were just terrified to jump into the water, and that's it, that's all you can say, and they hang on and hang on hoping, hoping perhaps it won't sink, but it was impossible for it to survive.....the further away you were the better, I was quite a good distance away when it happened.

I think looking back it's difficult to...recall what you were actually thinking, I think the fact that you were still alive was paramount and you just hoped eventually you would be picked up and of course there were three or four of us on the net.....

So I just floated around and you could understand the skippers on the small ships not wanting to stop because there was a submarine down there, there were one or two of them going round dropping depth chargers whilst we were in the water which was a bit uncomfortable. It was after three or four hours I was eventually picked up by an ocean going tug called The Jaunty. We were absolutely covered with oil and I tried to get onto the gunnels and I kept slipping outboard. And I can always remember a young canteen assistant Mano Borg I think he was, when he saw me struggling, he had a pair of socks on his feet, and he said Scribe, because that was what writers were called, he said, hang on to my socks so I hung on to his socks and I was able to get onboard.

And when we got onboard they opened the rum tub, and some chaps had swallowed so much oil that they were pouring rum down to make them sick, some of them didn't survive.

I had nothing on and a couple of stokers on board, one gave me an old set of overalls that I put on, I had nothing on my feet, there were some old dishcloths that I managed to make something to wrap around my feet, because the steel decks were quite hot, we slept on those at night, no space down below because of the ships company..... at the time we were only too happy that we were still alive, we were still there

I can remember one destroyer that passed it that said all it could see was this one little tug all covered in bodies. They transferred us all to other ships in the convoy

In the middle of the night The Wolverine struck a submarine and we were detailed to escort The Wolverine back to Gibraltar. And it was during that day that we heard over the radio that they had announced that The Eagle had been sunk. They never did that during the war, they waiting until all the next of kin had been informed and so there we were, and my mother heard it as well, she was out cleaning her doorstep and this chap came along and shouted to her 'oh I see they've got The Eagle Mrs Dav.'

We were allowed to send telegrams when we got back to Gibraltar – and my mother was a devout catholic she used to go to mass every morning and she had gone round to church, and she told me afterwards that the telegram had been delivered to my brother and my brother had the telegram and my mum said all she could see was nothing, just a big telegram and she thought oh God, and she looked at my brother and he was smiling and she knew that I was ok, until then they didn't know.