

A ship, two dreams and a coincidence.

From the 15th century Europeans venturing to India by sea soon realised that the seamanlike qualities of the inhabitants of the lands they “discovered” made them eminently suitable to engage in almost any seafaring capacity and, by the 17th. century, the number employed in British ships was so great that laws were enacted to restrict their employment.

The term “Lascar” was first used to describe “an Asiatic seaman, native of the British Empire” but soon the name was applied to seamen from any country east of the Cape of Good Hope. As global trade – and the Empire – expanded, more and more British companies recognised the obvious advantages of employing these loyal, versatile and hardworking seafarers – at a fraction of the cost of their UK counterparts –and eventually many British shipping companies established the practice of manning with lascar crew members and UK officers.

Thus it was that at the outbreak of World War 2 many of these seafarers found themselves serving in ships that ran the gauntlet of daily attacks by submarine and aircraft and many – with their lascar crews – were lost.

In October 1941, the general cargo ship “EMPIRE DEFENDER” of 5649 gross tons was requisitioned by the Ministry of War Transport to engage in a “special mission” to deliver much-needed stores and ammunition to the besieged island of Malta. She was an old ship: Launched in 1910 as the German “Freienfels” of the Hansa Line she became a “war prize” in Calcutta in 1914 and subsequently sailed under the Greek and Italian flag before being once again requisitioned for wartime service.

The ship arrived in Glasgow during the first week of October, 1941 and began to load a varied cargo of munitions and stores urgently needed for the continued defence of Malta. The MOWT handed her over to Stanhope Steamship Company for management and that company manned her with their own Officers – and a lascar crew.

It was proving notoriously difficult to ensure that ships bound for Malta arrived at their destination. The Italian airforce paid great attention to any ship entering Maltese waters and German U boats and surface craft had gained significant successes in recent attacks on convoys – even the most heavily escorted ones. In a desperate attempt to get a ship through to Malta the British Admiralty had adopted various “ruses de guerre” and, in the case of the “Empire Defender” every effort was made to make her look like a vessel from a neutral country. Her drab wartime paint was overpainted with brighter colours, her minesweeping equipment was removed and her blackout equipment modified to allow some light to escape. Great care was taken with the marking of the cargo and most boxes and cartons bore the legend “Cape Town” or “Durban” to make it appear that she was destined for South Africa.

Eventually, it was agreed that she would be “in all respects loaded, provisioned and ready for sea” by October 23rd. and that she would proceed downriver to Gourock to join up with a convoy that would see her clear of the Western Approaches.

On the morning of October 20th. the Serang (the lascar Boatswain) approached the Captain and told him, in no uncertain manner, that not one member of the crew was prepared to sail in the ship. He told the Master that he (the Serang) had had dreams on successive nights and in both dreams “Empire Defender” had been “calash (finished/sunk) before the next new moon”. He – and any member of the crew – would happily sail in any other ship from Glasgow or any port in the United Kingdom at any time and for any destination but they would, most certainly, NOT sail in “Empire Defender”.

The Captain was dumbfounded, the managing company thunderstruck, the MOWT outraged – and the lascars unmoved. Promises of more money and extra leave, visits from the mullah at the local mosque, the presence of the local police and threats of arrest and deportation – all were unavailing. Any other ship from any port to any destination at any time – but NOT “Empire Defender”.

As loading neared completion the entire crew moved their belongings – and their cooking utensils –to a nearby warehouse, prepared their sleeping equipment and made it absolutely clear that they were not going to be shanghaied on the ship when she sailed. The managing company finally accepted the situation and started to look for a new crew. Other lascars in the port refused to even discuss sailing in the ship and eventually the company turned to European manning and advertised for a large crew in the local shipping office.. Lascar accommodation was invariably not up to European ratings standards and as there was no time to carry out any alterations every man “signing on” was given a bonus – in cash – of £10.00 in notes. Big money in those days. As soon as they had signed the Articles of Agreement the crew, to a man, disappeared “up the road” to spend their newly found wealth but – next morning every man reported for duty. The Captain was the only person aboard who knew that the ship was bound for Malta and as the new crew prepared to “single up” and “let go” they were watched by a silent bunch of lascars still sitting on the floor of the warehouse. The ship cleared the berth but as she did so her stern contacted the vessel astern and tore her from her berth. As she steamed down river a newly constructed vessel was being towed to her berth and as “Empire Defender” approached, the steering gear failed and in the ensuing collision both ships were badly damaged.

Repairs were carried out and “Empire Defender” finally joined up with an outward convoy from Gourock and proceeded towards the Bay of Biscay and South Africa.

By arrangement, as she approached the coast of Spain she detached from the convoy, hoisted Spanish colours and made her lonely way towards the Straits of Gibraltar.

Later, the Spanish ensign was replaced by an Italian one and “Empire Defender” steamed surreptitiously towards Malta, hugging the N.African coast as she did so.

All was going supremely well and the ship’s company started to prepare the ship for arrival – and a hero’s welcome.

On November 14th. 1941, off Galeta Island, as the sun went down on the day before arrival in Malta a lone Italian bomber –returning from a fruitless patrol – spotted the ship and scored a direct hit on her. Within minutes the ship was ablaze but, almost miraculously, there were only four casualties and as the surviving crew took to the boats and rowed away from their sinking ship there were two resounding explosions and “Empire Defender” slid beneath the waves of the Mediterranean Sea.

Next day the survivors were picked up by an Italian warship and landed to a French (Vichy) internment camp in El Kef, Tunisia. Some of the older ones were released in 1942 but most remained for a further year.

THAT is the end of MY story about “Empire Defender” but, as the result of an amazing coincidence, it is not the end of THE story about the ship.

Last year, at the B&ISS AGM and Annual Service in London, on October 23rd. (some two days after I read the story of “Empire Defender”) I met up with two old friends, both stalwart supporters of the Society, Bill McCarthy, a recently retired P&OCL Chief Engineer and his wife, Caroline. As we enjoyed our buffet luncheon Caroline said “My Grandfather was one of the two Second Engineer Officers serving in a ship called “ Empire Defender” and I am trying to find out about his ship”.

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Subsequent to Captain Kelso's submission of the above, Caroline McCarthy sent him the following narrative, which rounds off the story nicely. It is entitled:

REPORT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH THE 2nd ENGINEER, MR J.S. STRUTHERS, SS EMPIRE DEFENDER

1. We were bound from the Clyde to Malta with a cargo of 9,000 tons of military stores. The ship was armed with 6 machine-guns (Lewis), 2 P.A.C. rockets, and we had kites fitted but were not flying them. All the large guns had been removed before leaving Glasgow. The crew, including naval gunners, numbered 64 of whom 4 men are missing, the Wireless Officer was injured and 58 men are still interned in El Kef Camp, Tunisia. All confidential books were thrown overboard in a weighted bag. Degaussing was on.

2. We left the Clyde at 0500 on the 27th October 1941 in a convoy of 12 merchant vessels with a naval escort. We proceeded without incident until 11th November when, about 30 miles from Gibraltar, we left the convoy with the S.S. EMPIRE PELICAN, and continued together, escorted by one destroyer, the main convoy proceeding to Gibraltar. The EMPIRE PELICAN then went ahead and we reduced speed, going slow throughout the 11th for a period of about 16 hours to allow the EMPIRE PELICAN to get a day's steaming ahead. We increased speed again on the 12th and after passing through the straits of Gibraltar the ship's name was altered to JOSINA and we had the Spanish flag painted on the ship's side amidships. After two days the name was again changed to NEVADA, and the flag on the ship's side changed to the French flag, all machine guns being removed from the deck. A large aircraft sighted us at about 1100 on the 14th and shadowed us throughout the day, keeping well out of range, about 3 miles distant. The crew were told to keep below as much as possible, and when on deck to keep under cover.

3. Weather on the 15th November was fine with good visibility, moderate sea and Westerly wind force 4. We were steaming at 10 knots steering approximately East. At 1600 I went below to the engine-room, and at 1640 A.T.S. on the 15th November 1941, in position 18 miles South of Galeta Island, Tunisia, there was a tremendous explosion, which seemed to lift the ship out of the water. I understand a plane had machine gunned the decks, circled away, and 10 minutes later was again seen approaching, when he dropped a torpedo, the wake of which was clearly visible as it approached the ship, then it struck on the port side abreast of the foremast. I stood by in the engine room awaiting orders, and receiving none, I went to my room for my lifejacket and then on deck.

4. The two starboard lifeboats had already been lowered and the crew were jumping into them. The engines were still running, but labouring heavily, and the ship was turning slowly to starboard, so I went below to shut off the steam. I returned to the deck, by which time the engines had stopped, and grabbing a rope I slid down into the starboard after lifeboat. About a minute later the lifeboat pushed off, many of the crew had dived over the side into the water, and we started picking them up. The ship rose out of the water, turning as if on a pivot amidships, and plunged straight down by the stern, disappearing at 1655.

5. We continued to pick up the men from the water, dividing them equally between the two boats, and extinguished the lights on the rafts. Shortly after this we saw a vessel passing ablaze with lights, so everyone stopped smoking and talking until she had gone, then we lashed the two boats together and rowed towards the coast, which was about 15 miles away. We pulled all the night and landed at a place called Dabarca at 0600 next morning, 16th. A number of officials met us, all of whom appeared to be quite young boys, dressed in some kind of uniform, they kept us for some time on the jetty, then marched us off to a large hall in the market-place where they gave us coffee and hot food, and at 1100 we entrained for Bizerta, arriving at 1900 the same day, 16th. We put into the Naval Barracks, and the Officers of our ship remained there for 4 days, until the 20th November, when we entrained for Tunis, the remainder of the crew having been sent on two days previously together with some members of the crew of the S.S. EMPIRE PELICAN which we learned had been torpedoed the day before us.

6. We slept that night in a Fort, and next day proceeded to El Kef Camp. I remember one incident particularly. When we were marching through the streets of Tunis to the station we passed a crowd of civilians who handed us packets of cigarettes. When we were on the train the Wireless Operator asked me if I had opened my packet, and told me to do so, but to open it carefully. I did so, and inside was a small piece of paper, no larger than a cigarette paper, on which was

written, "I am a pupil learning English at school and I say to you, all the French of Africa are with you. Long live England: Long live France: down with the tyrant Hitler". Another incident, which struck me very much, was that at the railway station there was an old lady with a little girl. They saw us waiting to get into the train and the woman handed the child a large parcel which she was carrying, and motioned her to give it to me. I accepted it, and when I opened the parcel found it was a lovely cake.

7. We left Tunis by train at about 0800 on the 20th and reached El Kef at 2200 that night, being marched to the Camps, where we were housed in wooden huts. We had mattresses, 2 blankets each and sheets. For the first three months in the fort we were in the control of the military authorities, and if anyone was ill they were sent to the Military hospital. The Military authorities were very friendly towards us but were obviously afraid of the Germans and Italians. After 3 months we were removed to another camp down the mountain, and housed in large wooden huts, under the control of the civilian authorities and they did their best to starve us, the only food we had being half a cupful of food a day, macaroni in the morning and "kush kush" - a mixture of canary seed and sawdust - at night. We were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded day and night by Arab sentries with fixed bayonets.

8. It was the Red Cross, which saved our lives, when their parcels arrived after about 5 months, and later, when we received our money allowances from England, we were able to buy some food. The U.S. Consul in Tunis was very good and sent up clothing for us, also the Maltese community in Tunis. They knitted us socks and pullovers, and sent us any small comforts they could, and the English Chaplain visited us once a month. The Maltese community in Tunis are very pro-British and there was nearly a riot when the men from HMS HAVOC were passing through the town. (*Havoc ran aground on coast of Tunisia on 6th April 1942 while bound for Gibraltar for repairs..Ed*) The Italian authorities had ordered that there were to be no demonstrations, but the Maltese lined up along one side of the street (with the Italians on the other side) and showered the British sailors with cigarettes, fruit, and gave them cups of wine.

9. There were about 120 of us in the camp, including the crews of the S.S. EMPIRE PELICAN and the S.S. PARRACOMBE. (*This vessel had been sunk in minefields off Cape Bon on 2nd May 1941, 18 of her 47 crew making it to the shore..Ed*) I was there for about 8 months, until the 3rd July 1942, when I, and a fireman who was supposed to be dying of tuberculosis, were both released. We left the camp at 0500 that morning and were motored down the mountain to the aerodrome at Tunis, under the guard of a Police Inspector. We were given breakfast at the aerodrome then given seats in a small 6-seater passenger plane, which took us to Algiers. We were given lunch at the buffet at the aerodrome and waited for the Casa Blanca (*flight*), but when it arrived there was not room for us, so we were taken to the Police Station in Algiers for the night. The pilots and other airmen were all very friendly, and so were the Police officers. Next morning, they took us back to the aerodrome and we boarded the plane for Casa Blanca, where we were housed for a further three days in the Institute, being kept under constant guard. We were then taken to the Shureti, where we met the American Consul who obtained parole for us and found us a hotel. At 1400 the following day, on returning from a stroll, the Consul telephoned to ask me how long it would take me to pack. I told him I was ready packed, so the Consul came round, took me to see some Shipping Officials, and booked our passage in a small Portuguese Schooner. He then took us back to the Police, wished us luck, and left, after which the police saw us safely on board the Schooner, and two days later we arrived at Gibraltar, on the 10th July. We were met by the Shipping Master and Captain of the port who found us a hotel, and after 14 days, during which we were interviewed by numerous officials and Intelligence Officers, we took passage in the LLANSTEPHEN CASTLE, arriving once more in this country, after a fine voyage of 6 days, on the 30th July.