

## THE EPIC OF THE EMPIRE PATROL.

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The date was the 29th of September, 1945, we were the Escort Carrier H.M.S. Trouncer en route to Port Said.

We had just left the Island of Malta three days previous and were now within sight of Port Said. We were in quite happy spirits that night as there was to be shore leave before proceeding on our way through the Suez Canal. We could see the city quite plainly now, it was my first sight of Port Said and struck me as being very funny, because all that was to be seen was the town itself, there was no land either to the right or to the left. Then I remembered as a schoolboy, which was not very long ago, how I had learned in my geography lessons that there was a vast marsh on either side.

We were getting much closer now, there was the usual signal from shore, and then a few moments later our course changed suddenly turning to port. I asked a nearby person if he knew the reason for this and he replied that he thought we had to wait a couple of hours on a pilot to take us in.

This was strange! If we were waiting on a pilot why should we leave Port Said away astern and increase speed. Then the flight deck handling party started bringing up hellcat fighters on the forward lift. We had never been in action during the war and I don't think I had ever seen that particular party work so fast. There had been six brand-new hellcats down in the hangar five minutes before and now they were being secured as far aft as they could go right next the - American Vulture Vengeances which we had reason to believe were being ferried to Colombo.

It was then that I realised something was afoot, so being a Radar rating I nipped quickly down to the Radar Room and was then told by a Petty Officer that a Greek ship full of refugees was on fire about fifty miles away and that we being the only available fast ship were on our way to pick up survivors.

I don't think that at any time had that ship ever moved so fast. I remember as I walked along the companionway leading to the engine room I was met by a wave of terrific heat, created by those labouring turbines. Tropical heat is severe but nothing compared to the heat of the ship at that moment. I was thankful then that I was not a stoker.

We were now but fifteen miles from the blazing Empire Patrol and as I ascended a ladder leading to the flight deck I saw a great fall of smoke just ahead of our bows. At that moment I heard aircraft engines and as I looked up saw a Wellington of Coastal Command, she was racing back and forward from the burning ship, then circling us and away back again, just as a little dog does when it is trying to tell you something.

Only two more miles to go!. There was a piped signal for all strong swimmer to muster in the forward end of the hangar. I was on the flight deck as far forward as I could get, the "Empire Patrol" was a blazing mass amidships, the paint was peeling off her outer hull as her holds became red hot. The bridge and midship superstructure was just a buckled shambles. Crammed as far astern as they could get were hundreds of refugees and as we passed them we heard women and children screaming, some were waving their arms frantically in the air. Floating in the water astern the Wellington had dropped her rubber dingy and there were about three very small children in it crying their eyes out. The/

The aircraft had also dropped her emergency radio on the Empire Patrol and there were three of the crew clustered round this sending out a last S-O-S. As an emergency aerial they were using a brilliant yellow box-kite which was now floating high about us. As we passed her I noticed that there were a few frightened souls crammed right up in the foc'sle clustered on an Orlik gun platform. The boats falls, of which there were four, dangled helplessly in the breeze, empty!

Meanwhile, the Wellington had been busy. She was doing what I believe is known to the R.A.F. as a square search, which role they perhaps had used against U-Boats during the war. Evidently, some of the children had either been cast adrift or jumped over the side in fear of being engulfed by the flames and the Wellington was dropping smoke canisters to mark their positions.

Our Skipper realised that rescue of these persons demanded immediate attention and as soon as he got clear of the Empire Patrol he lowered every boat we had, five in all, the sixth was getting a refit on the flight deck. We jettisoned about six Corley rafts, the boats took these in tow, and then proceeded in the direction of the ship while we carried on to pick up little odd groups here and there.

I realised now that this was very much the wrong kind of ship for manoeuvre, in the first place she was much too big as she took about three miles in which to turn and, secondly, she was much too high as our flight deck towered high above the Empire Patrol's shallow free board.

There were four separate batches of people altogether that we could see struggling in the water and as we got as near as possible, about twenty of our fellows dived off the starboard spenda and towed a Corley float to the nearest group of four young girls. They were panic-stricken and after a struggle got them onto the raft. We then towed them inboard but I had'n't realised before how bad the swell was and as they came alongside the gangway they were bumped and buffeted pretty badly. The main trouble was that instead of trying to help themselves the poor Greeks just lay in the raft and could'n't move from it. The result was that our own lads had to not only get themselves out, and they were pretty exhausted, but they also had to actually lift these girls onto the gangway, all the time being buffeted by the sea. One minute they would be under ten feet of water, the next they would be left dangling high and dry. Had they not used the gangway and used the net and jumping ladders instead there would have been fewer broken arms and legs. After this, lashed up hammocks were brought from the mess decks and secured to the gangway to form a cushion. The remaining groups were brought inboard with some difficulty with a few cuts and bruises. Out of the twenty sailors that swam to the rescue only eight came back. There were still twelve unaccounted for and for whom we were still searching.

We made our way back to the Empire Patrol which was now a blazing inferno and the licking flames were scorching the people who were crammed tightly in the foc'sle. One of our whalers was standing by, while women and children were being lowered down in a very rough makeshift manner. There were many bad burns during this operation as the plates on the lower decks were almost red-hot and licking flares could be seen omitting from the open parts. One particular Englishman stood right up in the forward gun platform passing children bodily over the side as fast as he could, no one ever saw him again after that. As the last woman came up she made to jump into the water beside the whaler but at that moment the swell carried the whaler into the ship's side and instead of jumping into the water she hit the boat and was killed outright.

The Skipper, Captain Rathoham, R.N. by name, now attempted to bring our ships alongside, we approached from the stern coming up <sup>on</sup> from her port side, but as I said before our bows were towering high above the Empire Patrol and although we managed to secure two wire hawsers the swell drew the two ships apart and the wires snapped like two pieces of string. There was also a danger of getting a hole knocked in our bows and although all forward watertight doors were shut this would have made the ship unseaworthy and we could not risk that with our human cargo.

Finally, we gave up trying to go alongside and instead lay about 200 yards astern while our boats ferried overloaded boats back and forward.

Everyone was now crammed in the stern of the Empire Patrol and our boats were lying off the leeward side where the swell did not affect them so much. It was horrible to see women getting half way down the jumping ladders and then falling headlong into the boats, some getting badly hurt, others getting off with a few scratches. At last! all the remaining women and children <sup>still</sup> ~~that were alive somehow~~ were brought aboard where they were immediately taken, ~~some carried~~, into the hangar by more than willing hands. When the very young children were brought aboard a human chain of sailors was formed and they were passed from hand to hand just as carefully as I have often seen live ammunition pass to the guns.

Inside the hangar hundreds of camp beds had been arranged along the deck and everywhere jack tars were getting dry clothes for survivors, quieting nerves, giving medical aid where possible and being as useful as nurses in a hospital. Our quack (medical officer) was having a busy time attending to the more serious cases and one old woman was being given oxygen and artificial respiration but I think she was dead before she came aboard. All babies were taken to sick bay where they were cared for, I think the youngest could not have been any more than a week old and was taken below by a Petty Officer who by the look of him did not quite know what to do with it.

Only the crew and members of Maritime Artillery who formed the gun crews <sup>now</sup> remained <sup>on</sup> the board the ~~most~~ <sup>hot</sup> ~~ship~~, <sup>EMPIRE PATROL</sup> even the deck upon which they were standing showed signs of caving in and must have blistered their feet. However, unlike the women they remained perfectly calm and orderly and awaited their turn to enter the boats. By this time, it was quite dark as at this time of the year in the Mediterranean whenever the sun goes down darkness follows close on its heels about 7 p.m. In the nick of time every living soul had been taken off the burning ship, her Captain being the last to leave.

We hauled in our own boats, no one had to be told to work, every man aboard did the best he could even although they had had nothing to eat for close on twelve hours. We all gladly gave our supper to those who needed it more than us. One of our own whalers was adrift but we soon found him as he was only a few hundred yards astern where the tide had carried it. Soon we got under way as we now had a long job of searching to do.

We searched all that night and a good part of the following day during which time we picked up a good few more. <sup>SURVIVERS!</sup> The first was about 12.30 a.m. when a ~~corley~~ raft came into the beam of <sup>our</sup> 24" search light - they were the sailors ~~that~~ <sup>who</sup> had been missing from earlier in the day, all were now accounted for. The second incident was about half an hour later when we picked up two life boats laden with people.

people. We managed to get them aboard alright as the swell <sup>having dropped</sup> ~~had gone~~ ~~down a good bit.~~ Almost at the same time as this, we picked up a faint cry from our starboard quarter and when we turned a searchlight in that direction we discovered a very small boy floating in a white life belt. Just lying astern of us, I saw what I thought was a patrol boat going to pick him up but when she came along side I discovered it to be the coastal going submarine "Sark". She came alongside our starboard sponson and for a few brief moments we had a look down her coming tower while we hauled up the little boy from within the submarine's deck. He had a big grin on his face as we pulled him over the side. Previously, we had cast one of the lift boats we had picked up adrift but had kept the other as a fender to take the weight of the submarine and as she pulled away there was a rending crash and the lift boat was reduced to matchwood against the ship's side.

By now, other ships had appeared on the scene notably the County class cruiser "Devonport" and the sloop "Mermaid". They patrolled with us all night. In the morning we passed many dead bodies floating face down but one woman we fished out still alive and kicking after being 23 hours in the water. One old woman whom we had brought aboard the previous day was buried at sea while her two daughters looked on and the Padre read a short service.

As we returned to Port Said we could see the Empire Patrol just a smudge of smoke on the horizon. Eventually we arrived at the mouth of the Suez Canal where we safely disembarked 429 people to a fleet of ambulances awaiting on the quay side.

An eye witness account

By Stanley M. Scott

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H.M.S. Trouncer.