

Tales Of WWII: Cool Under Fire MEBA

Every sailor's got a tale to tell and old salts can dazzle you for days with their sea stories of glory and adventure. This summer, MEBA's retiree conference at our training school in Easton, MD brought nearly 100 pensioners together for a fusion of education and fun. As they reacquainted themselves with their roots, the coalition of old conquerors of the sea soon began the inevitable swapping of sea stories. One of MEBA's elder statesmen, octogenarian Waldemar Semenov, took the time to share his story with the *Marine Officer* about the day his ship was marked for death by a Nazi U-boat...

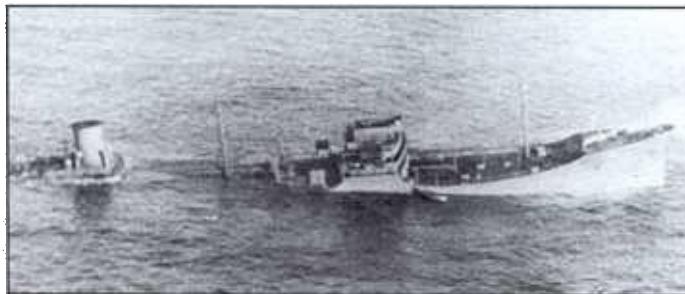
A week into April 1942, 28-year old Lieutenant Reinhard Hardegen, commander of German U-boat number 123, was on the prowl in U.S. waters. In the wee morning hours of April 8, his sub's torpedo ravaged the oil tanker *SS OKLAHOMA*. A direct hit from 500 yards sent the ship down to its watery grave just off the resort island of St. Simons Island, Georgia. Carrying 4.4 million gallons of oil, 19 mariners died in the blast. "The lights on shore were illuminated," Hardegen acknowledged. "She was a sitting duck." These were the days before blackouts were ordered up and down the coast and the enemy used it to their advantage. U-123 immediately raced away and soon stumbled upon the *ESSO BATON ROUGE*, with a load of 3.8 million gallons of heating oil. This new ship also tasted U-123's torpedoes and three men perished in the resulting explosion 13 miles from the Brunswick, Georgia sea buoy.

Two days later, U-123 was plying the Florida coast when it came across the *SS GULFAMERICA*, a tanker on its maiden voyage, laden with 90,000 barrels of fuel oil. Two torpedoes later, a fiery eruption sent 22 souls to the bottom of the ocean along with the ship, in sight of Jacksonville Beach. Again, the illumination from the shore aided the U-boat in the confrontation. Hardegen actually went to great lengths to avoid taking casualties from the hordes of civilians gathered out on the beach when the sub pumped cannon fire into the tanker to finish off the ship. "I went between the coast and the (tanker) so I could shoot in the direction of the sea," Hardegen remembered. U-123 would steadily add to its fevered kill total as it wound down its second war patrol of the Americas.

The sub was the first of the U-boats sent to wreak havoc on the eastern seaboard of the United States during *Operation Drumbeat*. At around 9 p.m. on April 16, U-123 was nearing the end of its ammo supply when a new prize sailed into its periscope sights. This was the *SS ALCOA GUIDE* with a certain Junior Engineer aboard who was destined for a long and colorful career with the MEBA.

They called him the "Mad Russian" but Waldemar was better defined by his grace under pressure. By 1942 he was already a veteran merchant mariner with 9 years of seafaring under his belt and had seen plenty of enemy action. Flying the Stars and Stripes, the *ALCOA GUIDE* was steaming away from Weehawken, New Jersey toward Guadaloupe, a small island lying southeast of Puerto Rico. The 387-foot freighter was loaded up with equipment destined for U.S. Army forces stationed in the West Indies as well as a cargo of flour for the little island that had been a favorite stopover for Christopher Columbus 450 years before. Three hundred miles off the coast of Cape Hatteras, NC, U-123 spied the freighter chugging along and decided to send her down to the deep.

This time, Commander Hardegen wouldn't waste a torpedo on the unarmed and unescorted *ALCOA GUIDE* and he ordered the sub to surface. Looking to add the freighter to a lengthy list of trophies deposited on the ocean floor, U-123 unleashed a flurry of armor-piercing incendiary cannon shells that blistered the ship and sent crewmen



U-123 sent the *SS OKLAHOMA* down to a watery grave. The lights on shore aided the German U-boat.

scrambling around the vessel in terror and confusion. Reacting quickly, the ship's skipper, 43-year old Captain Samuel Cobb ordered the helmsman to turn hard to starboard and head straight into the U-boat. On U-123, Hardegen silenced his guns while the considerably outsized sub was forced to reckon with the very real threat of 4,800 gross tons of steel barreling down on its slender frame. Dashing the *GUIDE*'s lone defense strategy, the sub averted collision when she navigated around the onrushing ship. The desperate attempt to ram the submarine was quashed within 5 minutes. This set the stage for the German sailors to again train their weapons on the freighter and unleash a second torrent of gunfire and incendiary shells that

ignited the cargo piled up on deck in wooden cases. With the flames burning around him and continued fire-power being volleyed at the ship, Captain Cobb raced to his cabin to recover the vessel's codebooks and highly confidential papers that he cast into the ocean in a weighted sack from the ship's bridge. The continued bombardment began taking its deadly toll when an exploding shell blasted Cobb off the bridge onto a deck winch by the #3 hatch. Another seaman succumbed to the onslaught close by to where the master lay mortally wounded -



Lieutenant Reinhard Hardegen, commander of U-123.

Veteran Escapes Burning Freighter In Style

and unable to issue the order to abandon ship.

Junior Engineer Semenov had pulled himself off his bunk when the shelling began and soon realized the hellish predicament unfolding for the ship's crew. The *ALCOA GUIDE*'s engines had cut off and the vessel, beginning to list, was drifting. Without anyone to give orders, it was every man for himself. Most of the deckhands had managed to launch a raft and a lifeboat as they scampered off the dying ship for dear life. The ship's debilitated Master was placed in this lifeboat and would later die during the open boat journey. He was buried at sea two days later.

Twenty minutes into the one-sided firefight, most of the deckhands had managed their rescue and were paddling clear of the *ALCOA GUIDE*. In the early stages of the war, the Germans allowed crews to escape doomed vessels. As the war progressed, the U-boat sailors collected ship officers as prisoners of war to deny them the opportunity to restock new vessels.

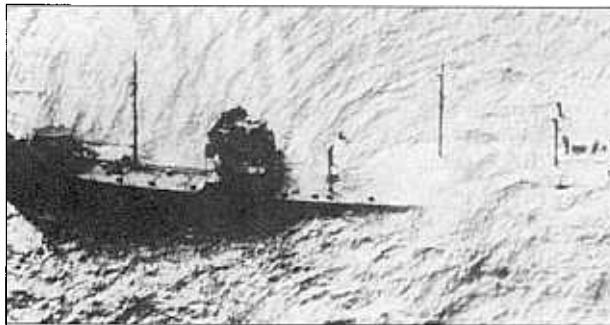
Waldemar watched the lifeboat pull away and made the decision to let it proceed without his company. The shelling had ceased and the Germans were satisfied that it was just a matter of time before the burning hulk was condemned to the deep.

"There wasn't much I could do," Waldemar recounted, "so I went back to my cabin." On his way below deck, he saw his remaining shipmates running around helplessly and decided not to join in on the panic. "I had seen gunfire and bombing before," he pointed out.

The apprentice engineer had endured German air raids in both Spain and France during the darkest days of the war. Shortly after Dunkirk and just before the fall of France, Waldemar's ship had loaded up wounded soldiers at the besieged port of Saint-Nazaire on the Bay of Biscay. With Nazi planes screaming overhead, the Luftwaffe bombing run picked off fleeing allied forces sending wasted ships down to their demise in the seabed. Half of the crew of Waldemar's ship chose to disembark at the embattled port rather than face a suicidal ship journey. They were left to face the advancing German troops who would secure the

area within two hours. The vessel, the *BRAND COUNTY* which successfully stole off to Cardiff, England, proved to be the last ship to escape Saint Nazaire as the mass evacuation of *Operation Aerial* helped allied forces live to fight another day.

As the German U-boat stood by her guns while the fires raged aboard the *ALCOA GUIDE*, a strange sense of calm overtook Waldemar. "I made up my mind that I was going to survive one way or another." Citing what happened next, the *New York Herald Tribune* called it "a record of all-time coolness under fire." "I had just bought myself a new suit in New York and I was not going to leave that behind," Waldemar related. "So I proceeded to dress up, picked my favorite tie, loaded my camera with film



The GULFAMERICA after an encounter with U-123. Forty-eight years later, Commander Hardegan visited Jacksonville and was actually received by the Mayor who thanked him for sparing civilians.

and took an extra pair of socks and a few papers." The U-boat had already connected with a shell just under his cabin below the "9" deck close to the waterline. Waldemar was confident that lightning wouldn't strike twice in the same spot. After he packed his necessities, he wandered over to the mess hall determined to fortify himself for his expected escape. "I didn't know when I would get to eat next, so I thought I might as well have a good sandwich and coffee while it was still hot - and then figure out how to get off the ship before it sank."

As he was chowing down in the mess hall he opened up a porthole to get some light which was provided by the flames on deck. The remaining crew was huddled together mid-ship against the bulkhead of the mess hall. While making his sandwich and drinking his coffee,

Waldemar listened to some of his shipmates crying and praying, scared mindless and without direction. "They were all afraid to come out and launch the lifeboat on the side of the ship facing the sub where by the light of the fire you could see the men manning the guns."

After he downed his coffee and finished up his late night snack, Waldemar strolled up topside outfitted in his new suit and overcoat, carrying his camera and a carton of cigarettes. His shipmates gaped in jaw-dropping disbelief as they absorbed the surreal vision of their Junior Engineer ready to go ashore. He asked the leaderless men if they cared to make their escape off the ship before it sunk down to Davy Jones' Locker. "They all said 'yes yes,'" Waldemar remembered.

Waldemar proved to be the calming influence the terror-drenched men required for salvation. He told them to follow him to the lifeboat and, clinging to his leadership, they finally made headway toward their evacuation. "Since I was a qualified lifeboatman, there was no problem directing the men who followed me," he recollected.

They swung the boat out and lowered it to the main deck where it was secured and the lifeless seaman, who'd been stricken minutes into the encounter, was loaded aboard. "I went around and picked up several loaves of bread," Waldemar recalled. "Then the rest of the men got in the boat

and two men on the boatdeck began lowering the lifeboat into the water." Those two crewmembers, the last men off the *ALCOA GUIDE*, shimmied down the ropes into the lifeboat. "Finally, we slowly pulled away from the ship in plain view of the sub which was drifting nearby," Waldemar confirmed. "There was plenty of light from the burning deck cargo. We were sure that a fire like that would be seen for miles and help would be coming soon...So much for that!"

If the Navy received the *GUIDE*'s frantic distress call before she was abandoned then they didn't let on. The ship's radio officer had hurriedly tapped out an S.O.S. but with the vessel under attack, the officer fled his station without managing to win an acknowledgment to his signal.

continued on page 12

Tales Of WWII continued

The *ALCOA GUIDE* would sink stern-first two hours after the first shells were fired. As the lifeboat began to drift, the displaced mariners scanned the horizon for their fellow shipmates. Suddenly, as morning light broke, a flare shot up in the distance and they thought they could make out the vague outline of a raft. Waldemar urged the boat crew to row toward the flare to investigate its source. But immediately, a deckhand leapt up from his seat and furiously argued that such a move would be foolhardy – that the Germans might be tricking them. He declared himself to be in charge and prohibited the crew from paddling in the flare’s direction. “Immediately he showed his incompetence by putting up the sail upside down, saw it was not working properly and started cursing everybody,” Waldemar recalled. Fortunately, soon enough the other lifeboat popped into their field of vision and began paddling over. When the two boats tied up together, Waldemar’s lifeboat crew decided it was a great opportunity to expel the loathsome seaman who had managed to penetrate their nerves with his cursing and hollering. By majority vote they managed to exchange the jackass for the Second Mate on the other boat. After Waldemar’s boat pulled off this winning trade, the lifeboats separated and slowly drifted apart.

By rank, the Second Mate was to take command of the small boat. However, the First Assistant Engineer, who happened to be the oldest man in the boat, made an eloquent speech declaring that without Waldemar the men may not have made it and therefore he should lead them the rest of the way. The Second Mate agreed and Waldemar, wary of the incompetent seaman’s exam-

ple, accepted on the condition that the boat would stay free of discord. “They all agreed and I assumed command of the boat,” he narrated. From the beginning he told the crew that since they didn’t know how close to land they were and because of their dwindling food supply they should rely on the sails instead of continuous rowing. “Luckily we had a couple of blankets which we used to enlarge the sail area and we made pretty good speed considering the weight of the boat,” said Waldemar. “We proceeded in the direction of West-Northwest.” The steward inventoried the remaining rations and announced that there were enough to be distributed for seven days. “Since we were relaxed and didn’t have to use our energy rowing we didn’t think about food too much,” the new lifeboat skipper recalled. Waldemar was still clad in his new suit but had given up his overcoat to a shipmate who had escaped the vessel dressed only in his underwear. Another crewmember admitted that he had left 300 dollars in his cabin because he was too frightened to go below deck to retrieve it.

On the second day at sea they made the decision to bury the dead seaman. “I tied the only piece of iron that we had to his leg,” said Waldemar. “We put the body on the edge of the boat, the steward said a prayer and we let it fall into the water. I know everyone was looking at it as it slowly sank down. For a while we all sat quietly and then gradually went on to the sort of routine we had in the boat.” They sailed toward shore over the next two days. “I was steering



Waldemar Semenov refused to allow his new suit to go down with the ship. In the photo he is in the lifeboat drying his shoes after a heavy rain.

the boat at night and sleeping during the day.”

On the third day their rescue finally became attainable. A roving plane searching for survivors of any of the half-dozen vessels that had been sunk that week flew overhead and spotted the tiny lifeboat. The radio officer signaled with a mirror and the plane acknowledged them by flying low and dipping its wings. “Everybody was very excited that help would finally be coming,” Waldemar recounted. It was just a matter of time. That night there was a heavy rain. “We all got soaking wet but we had a chance of getting fresh water to drink. The water we had in the boat was in a wooden barrel and was very stale. We had to strain the water because of sediment being disturbed by the rolling of the boat.”

Deliverance arrived on the fourth day after the Navy destroyer *USS BROOME*, sweeping the vicinity for the survivors, appeared on the horizon. The sea was calm and they guided the little boat up to the destroyer where they were hoisted aboard. The lifeboat was left drifting



The ALCOA GUIDE before the hellish night of April 16, 1942.

where it was soon shot to pieces and sunk by the ship's machine guns. It took almost an hour and a half for the destroyer to hunt down the other lifeboat after which "the same procedure was carried out." The ordeal was over and the men safely steamed off to Norfolk, VA. Three weeks later, the *ALCOA GUIDE's* raft, which departed the ship with seven men, was discovered with one man alive. The ship's crew must live with the knowledge that they could have saved those six men if not for the actions of the ill-tempered seaman.



Some of Waldemar's shipmates in the lifeboat before they were swept from their plight by the USS BROOME.

After returning to New York, Waldemar served as a relief engineer and combined fireman/oiler for the Alcoa Company. Relief work kept him busy as crews, anxious to get off as they pulled into port, created a manpower shortage. Soon enough, he registered for the draft and was classified as "1A." He passed the physical and enlisted instead of waiting for Uncle Sam to come calling. Waldemar wound up working for the U.S. Army Transportation Service and later the Navy. Sailing out of New York, he aided his adopted country's war effort on various troop ships in the Atlantic until the German surrender in May 1945. He then shifted to the Pacific as the war was coming to a close. Waldemar continued the seafaring life for another 45 years after the U-boat incident. A rich and vibrant career carried him across the world many times over. He also shipped out on a hush-hush Government mission (on a ship flying the Liberian flag) in the early 1960s when he sailed in support of the CIA's Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba.

Waldemar held onto the suit for several years after its rescue from the *ALCOA GUIDE*. However, his favorite hat that survived the loss of the ship couldn't survive a gust of wind that blew it into the harbor shortly after he and his shipmates were put ashore in Norfolk following their ordeal. He still has the life jacket and the compass from the lifeboat as well as the photos of the open boat journey. In 1987, he stepped off the *STONEWALL JACKSON* and filed

for retirement - following 54 years of plying the waves.

For his valor under fire, Captain Cobb was posthumously awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal by President Franklin Roosevelt. A Military Sealift Command transport tanker bears his name as well. The *M/V SAMUEL L. COBB* went into service in 1985 and is still sailing today.

U-123 wrapped up its reign of terror on the eastern seaboard soon after the sinking of the *ALCOA GUIDE*. The sub had doomed 19 vessels during its two tours before sailing back to occupied

France for repairs. Commander Reinhard Hardegen retired from the sea with a medical condition and headed up training at a torpedo school in Germany. "The Drumbeater" as he was known had received the distinguished Knight's Cross after the U-boat's first mission to which was added the "Oak Leaf" after his second tour.

Over 400 ships were sunk in the first six months of 1942, including 82 U.S. merchant vessels. Only three German U-boats were destroyed during that time. After Spring '42, the German submarines receded away from the U.S. coast and journeyed much farther out to sea to wreak their havoc. U-123 continued to cause mayhem under a new commander. It was taken out of service in June 1944 and scuttled off of Lorient, France in August of that year. The sub was eventually raised and refurbished by the French who continued its operation under the name *BLAISON* until its serviceable life expired in 1959.

GOT YOUR OWN SEA STORY TO TELL??

The Marine Officer would love to hear it!! Call Editor Marco Cannistraro at (202) 624-1668, shoot him a fax at (202) 638-5369 or whisk off an e-mail to mebaeditor@hotmail.com.



Waldemar, reflecting on his colorful career, at the recent Retirees' Conference held at the Calhoun MEBA Engineering School.