Tales Of WWII: Cool Under Fire

E
ev
eysailor’s
got
tales
to
tell
and
old
sailors
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
collection
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
early
morning
hours
of
April
8,
his
sub’s
torpedo
raided
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
fuel,
19
men
perished
in
the
blast.

“Tales
of
WWII: Cool Under Fire MEBA

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
graduate
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
herself
down
to
the
depth.

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
trophy
deposited
on
the
ocean
floor,
U-123
unleashed
a
flurry
of
armor-piercing
incendiary
cannon
shells
that
blistered
the
ship
and
sent
crewmen
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
outized
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
deck
in
wooden
cases.
With
the
flames
burning
around
him
and
continued
firepower
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
blew
Cobb
off
the
bridge
onto
a
deck
winch
by
the
#3
hatch.
Another
seaman
succumbed
to
the
onslaught
close
to
where
the
master
lay
mortal
wounded
-

Lieutenant Reinhard Hardegen, commander of U-123.
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 scrambled 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 actually sank and 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 mangling 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
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 example, 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 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-a-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.
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.

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

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.

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