

On My Way to Sicily

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It was dawn. In the early light I saw this vast armada all around me. Ships of every size and shape holding their positions in the convoy sailing north. It was July 1944.

During the few weeks prior to this, one by one, these ships gathered in the huge Lake of Bizerte, in Tunisia, North Africa.

Two nights past, the German Luftwaffe rained havoc upon this anchorage and port facilities. Every gun from every ship and shore installation was firing in defense, including our four 20-mm antiaircraft guns and our three-inch 50-caliber mounted forward. The millions of tracer bullets outshone the stars.

I was a teenaged 3rd-class petty officer, fresh out of signal school, assigned aboard the U.S.S. Nauset, a sea-going tug. She was brand new.

I was a plank holder, as they called it, because I was part of the skeleton crew that put her into commission while still in the Camden Naval Shipyard, where she was built. The signalman I two-blocked the long, narrow commissioning pennant to the top of the aft mast where it would permanently fly.

This ship was 100 feet, stem to stern, 30 feet abeam, with a crew complement of 130 men. Our captain was a lieutenant, an old mustang who came up through the ranks and, as we later learned, mean.

A few days later, with the rest of the crew aboard, we sailed down the Delaware into the Atlantic and north to Casco Bay, Maine, on our shakedown cruise, hugging our coastline. Casco is the second largest bay on our East Coast, with an island for each day of the year—360; it was, at that time, the primary refueling point for our North Atlantic Fleet.





It was January 1944 and bitter cold. Here we trained and drilled to prepare the crew for hostile waters. Then south to Norfolk Navy Yard for a few minor modifications; continuous crew training, taking on stores, adding additional personnel: specialists in deep-sea diving, underwater welding, underwater demolition, extra fire fighters, etc.

Here, too, a little stray dog appeared aboard. The cook fed it. It was a friendly little pooch. The crew adopted it and named it Snatchblock after a piece of block and tackle. She went to war with us.

Scuttlebutt of our duty assignment was rife. Finally we got our orders. Underway again we took up our position in a convoy forming in the Chesapeake, our

largest bay. Late that night, the convoy proceeded into the Atlantic. Destination: the European Theater of Operations (ETO).

Off duty in the crew's quarters below deck, I heard and felt the reverberations of exploding depth charges. I visualized German U-boats shadowing, lurking, ready to pounce. I didn't like it. I went topside. In complete blacked-out conditions, I could barely make out a hazy shape astern. I spent the night, mostly awake, above the waterline on the boat deck with my Mae West on; I didn't know how to swim. The next day I obtained a canvas folding cot and a large piece of canvas (in case of rain) from the ship fitter. Without permission, I hauled that and my sack up to the flying bridge, my general quarters (GQ) battle station, as a lookout.

No one complained. I got away with it and never slept below again.

The crossing was slow because the speed of a convoy is the maximum speed of the slowest ship. We only lost a couple stragglers. Just before Gibraltar, a part of the convoy turned northward. The rest of us sailed into the Mediterranean. Gradually, all dropped off at Oran, Algiers, and a few lesser ports in North Africa.

We sailed alone the rest of the way to Bizerte. As the invasion fleet formed, we did various minor repairs and adjustments to needy ships, returning pier-side each evening. On the night of the raid, we had been ordered to remain tied to the ship we were working on to complete the job during the night.

The next day we learned the harbor tug that normally tied up alongside us for the night, this night tied pier-side in our spot, had taken a direct hit and was utterly destroyed with all hands.

That day, too, all ships in the lake slipped out through the narrow isthmus, one at a time, to form up in the bay before heading for Sicily.

On the morning I first saw our invasion convoy, later, far ahead, I saw a wisp of smoke. My first thought: a U-boat attack. That night, about the same spot far ahead, was a reddish glow. The next day there was smoke ahead again, this time clearer and more black. That night, a bright red glow. Could it be? We were being led by a column of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night...just as the ancient Israelites on their escape from Egypt.

Amazing! It was the next day when all hell broke out, I learned our guide had been Mt. Etna.