

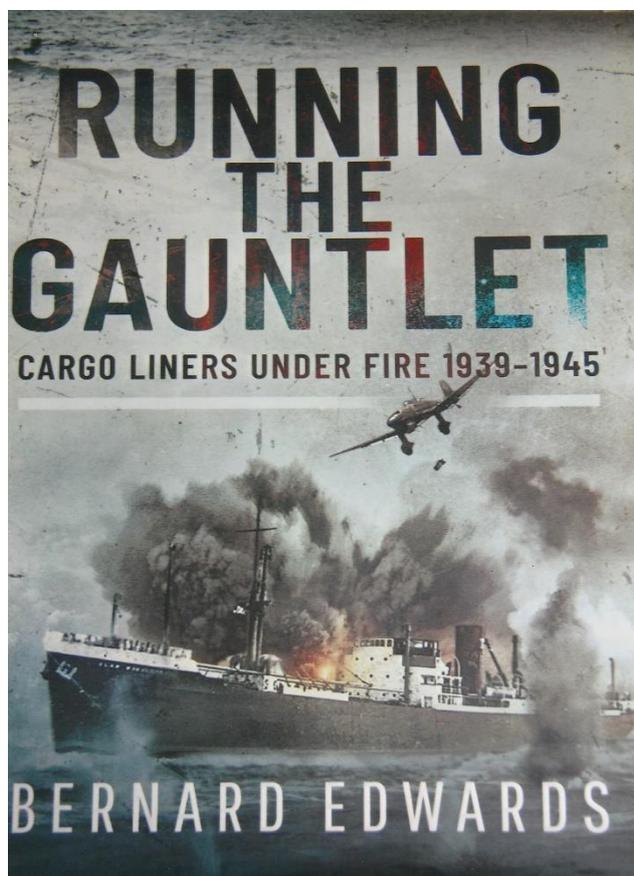
BOOK REVIEW

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET ~ CARGO LINERS UNDER FIRE 1939-1945
BY BERNARD EDWARDS PUBLISHED BY PEN & SWORD MARITIME
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This excellent book guides the reader around the oceans and seaways of the world from the beginning of the Second World War to the D-day landings in June 1944. As the title suggests the emphasis is on fast cargo liners, of prominent shipping companies, which were capable of sailing at speeds in excess, of twelve knots enabling them to sail independently. However, that did not make them immune from attacks by enemy submarines and surface raiders.

Merchant vessels particularly in the early phase of the war, were unarmed and on encountering the overwhelming superiority of German warships, their chance of survival, was minimal. The captain of the 5,000-ton steamship *Clement*, wisely abandoned his vessel after sending out a distress signal when challenged by the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* in September 1939. Treated respectfully the captain and chief engineer were taken aboard the battleship and watched the *Clement* sunk by gunfire. The crew were later rescued, and the former two merchant navy officers mentioned were transferred to a Greek merchant ship. In March 1941 the battleship *Gneisenau* intercepted and sank the motor vessel *Chilean Reefer* with the loss of twelve men. The experiences of the survivors of these two incidents are related to the reader within the text.

Readers of maritime history would be aware of the exploits of the 'little ships' during the Dunkirk evacuation in May 1940, not so familiar maybe is that of the 6,787-ton *Clan Macalister*. As an auxiliary transport ship, she had been loaded with Assault Landing Craft to bring off troops from the beaches. Having successfully negotiated the sandbanks and shoals of the approaches to Dunkirk she was shelled and bombed. Amid the chaos and horror, the landing craft were discharged, except two which had been accidentally damaged. The captain then



decided to manoeuvre his ship closer inshore to take aboard evacuees from the smaller craft. Inevitable the Clan Macalister became a target for enemy bombers and was sunk. Eighteen of her crew were killed and others wounded. The captain was among the survivors.

A victim of the U-99, commanded by Otto Kretschmer, in July 1940 was the 12,382-ton Auckland Star, of the Blue Star Line, when sailing with an unescorted convoy off the coast of Ireland, fortunately without loss of life. Kretschmer was a successful U-boat commander sinking 117,637-tons of shipping. Quoted within the text is Kretschmer's description of the sinking of the Auckland Star from his biography *The Golden Horseshoe* by Terence Robertson.

The Germans converted nine fast cargo liners into heavily armed commerce raiders, disguising their appearance as ordinary merchant vessels, in a similar way to Q-ships used by Great Britain in the First World War. The voyages of four commerce raiders, the Orion, Atlantis, Pinguin and Kormoran who scoured the seas off Australia, in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans for opportune targets is ably told. These vessels had to be self-reliant to remain at sea for long periods by confiscating food, fuel, and useful equipment from intercepted merchant ships, before sinking them. Although they inflicted death, destruction, leaving survivors adrift often in adverse weather conditions or taking them as captives, the voyages of these commercial surface raiders are remarkable, and ultimately paid a high price for their piratical activities.

Malta was an important and strategic island base for the British in the Mediterranean, inadequately defended, it became a ravage battleground, bombed, and blasted by Italian and German warplanes. This period in the island's history is known as the Siege of Malta, which lasted from June 1940 until November 1942. Churchill was determined that Malta should not fall to the enemy and instructed the island be kept supplied at whatever cost. This task could only be achieved by ships and men of the merchant navy. Their heroic endeavours on three separate occasions are described in compelling detail. Both merchant ships and their heavily armed Royal Navy escorts were subjected to co-ordinated and targeted bombing by Italian and German aircraft, attacks by motor gunboats and submarines as they sailed through the Mediterranean. Despite severe losses, merchant ships managed to deliver their vital cargoes to the battered island's population.

An amazing occurrence occurred after dark off the coast of Brazil in the autumn of 1941 when the Union Castle Line's, Richmond Castle practically collided head on with the British owned S.S. Bangalore. The latter was in contravention of the rules preventing collisions at sea and was so badly damaged, she was sunk by gunfire from the Richmond Castle. Although repaired she latter was sunk by U-176 in August 1942 off Newfoundland. There were no casualties sustained

by torpedoing of the vessel, but the survivors had to endure the riggers, of cruel sea of the North Atlantic for nine days. Fourteen died of exposure in the lifeboats before being rescued.

The Ellerman Lines passenger-cargo liner City of Cairo was torpedoed by U68 on a voyage from Table Bay to Pernambuco with 311 passengers and crew. Eighty-two of her crew and twenty-two passengers, loss their lives. The survivors took to lifeboats and their heart-rendering battle for survival is movingly told. An article about the loss of the City of Cairo appeared in the Daily Express in September 1981, prompting a reply from the captain of the U-68 which in turn was responded to by the City of Cairo's ships surgeon. At the time of her sinking amongst her cargo was 100-tons of silver rupees, some of which salvaged in 2013.

The gallant conduct of the captain and his crew of the Blue Star Line's, Empire Star is another story of heroic endeavour and fortitude. After evacuating over 2,000 from Singapore in November 1941 the ship was subjected to repeated and intense Japanese air attacks, before reaching the safety of Batavia. Another account of survival, by members of the crew from Melbourne Star, which was torpedoed and blew up is an emotional story bringing into focus the terror of war.

Over 800 merchant ships from Great Britain and America were involved in the invasion of Normandy in June 1941, loaded with cargoes to maintain the momentum of the troops advancing into France. Graphic descriptions and personal recollections describe the fate of some of these merchant ships during the landings.

This book by Bernard Edwards is a memorable tribute to ships of the Merchant Navy, their crews and passengers of fast cargo liners who became embroiled in the war at sea. Unflinchingly the crews sailed loaded with cargoes of every description into an uncertain future where an unseen enemy from below or above the waves could strike a fatal blow. If fortune was not in their favour, survival in open boats or on rafts in often very poor weather conditions required an element of luck and an iron will determination to cling onto life. It will be forever a stain on unsympathetic the shipping companies records that at the stroke of a pen their employees pay was stopped on the day the ship was sunk. Days cast adrift awaiting were counted as 'survivors leave.' On return their sufferings were ignored and were given a stark choice to sign on for another voyage. That fact that they did sign on ensured that the United Kingdom was kept supplied, with food and essential materials. The book contains eye-witness accounts both of friend and foe reinforcing the reality of what seafarers encountered during the Second World War. There are also black and white photographs, a bibliography, and index.

The author in his conclusion laments the passing of the era of the British merchant fleets. The Red Ensign which once proudly flew on British ships has become a flag of convenience for foreign owners. His extensive research of the merchant ships and of their crews keeps alive for future generations the often forgotten and unpaid debt the country owes to the Merchant Navy.

Roger Coleman