

World War Two

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

WORLD WAR TWO

In 1939 my father - then Lt.Cdr. John Pemberton Mosse, R.N. - took on Adolf Hitler. To date he seems to be winning.

How he did so is described in his memoirs of the period entitled, *Half a Lifetime*, Volume II, a copy of which has been deposited with the Imperial War Museum. The letter of acceptance for it which he received from Mr R. W. A. Suddaby, Keeper of the Department of Documents there, reads as follows:

"18th March 1987

"Dear Commander Mosse

"Thank you very much for your letter of 26 February and especially for sending us a copy of the second part of 'Half a Lifetime'. I have just finished reading the typescript and have found it a most informative account of your service in the Royal Navy from the time that your name was put forward for the anti-submarine branch. The highlight of your narrative is, of course, your description of the hunts leading to the destruction of *U 344* and *U 394* by HMS *Mermaid* and it must have been particularly satisfying to you to have achieved these successes on your first Russian convoys and at a time when there were doubts about the efficacy of asdic in Arctic waters. Your memoir also includes many useful details about the other operations in which you took part during the Second World War and I have been interested, too, to note how, although you were the representative of a relatively new branch, your specialist skills appear to have been readily accepted by all the senior officers under whom you have served even before their value was demonstrated in the war. This volume of 'Half a Lifetime' is therefore a significant addition to our holdings and I am certain that it will prove a rewarding source for any historian or research worker studying the events which it records."

Suddaby's expectation was justified at least by Julian Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of The War At Sea - The Royal Navy in the Second World War* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1996), who quotes from it liberally.

It is also quoted once in Harry Plevy, *Battleship Sailors - The fighting career of HMS Warspite recalled by her men* (London: Chatham, 2001).

The section of his memoirs treating his career in HMS *Jervis* between 31st December 1941 and 26th February 1943 was written initially in 1985 at the request of Gordon Connell as source material for his wartime history of *Jervis* ("that remarkable destroyer", as he described her).

Churchill's high tribute to The Few is in all the history books. The following comment, taken from the Author's Note prefacing *The U-Boat Peril* (Blandford, 1986), by Captain R. Whinney, D.S.C. and Two Bars, R.N., is less well known :

"The only thing that ever frightened me during the war was the U-Boat peril."

Bob Whinney was a lifelong friend of my father's since they trained together in the Anti-Submarine School at HMS *Osprey*, Portland, in 1938, after which their careers followed very similar lines. He described their task as follows:

"It was the job of the qualified A/S officer to teach the more senior operators, the A/S control officer in asdic-fitted ships and to advise senior and commanding officers on the

World War Two

formation of their ships for the best protection of big ships or convoys needing anti-submarine screening."

Referring to my father as "a reliable and qualified judge" of A/S matters (Arrow paperback edition, 1989, p.104), he described the sinking of U-344 (Kapitan Leutnant Ulrich Pietsch) in the following terms (p.196):

"The dice were, however, not favourably loaded when the frigate HMS *Mermaid* sank U-3[4]4 on 24 August 1944 by attacks with the well-tried 300-lb depth charges. The action took place in 72 degrees North, well inside the Arctic Circle and well north of the north coast of Norway. *Mermaid* was one of a group of ships supporting a convoy bound for North Russia when, at 3.30 am on 24 August 1944, the ship detected a U-boat by asdic. In all, *Mermaid* made nine separate attacks and then directed an unorthodox depth charge barrage together with two other ships which were unable to pick up the asdic contact. The asdic conditions were very difficult, as they so often were in those northern waters, and, though fitted with an anti-submarine depth-finding device, the variations in the temperature of the water made it unreliable.

"There were three points of special interest. First, a personal one, the ship was commanded by John Mosse, a member of the triumvirate with Gordon Luther and myself, who had lived in a caravan on Portland when we were qualifying for A/S officers. A second point was that the action against the skilfully handled U-boat lasted for just on twelve hours - a very long time, possibly a record. The third point of interest is that the skill, tenacity and confidence of Mosse, a trained A/S specialist, emphasised the fact that anti-submarine training had never had its fair share compared with, say, gunnery, in earlier years, essentially including those pre-war."

For this action, and for the sinking of *U-394* (Kapitan Leutnant Wolfgang Borger) on the return trip, 2 September 1944, my father was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross

"...for courage, skill, and determination shown as Commanding Officer of H.M.S. MERMAID in successful attacks carried out against enemy Submarines in defence of Convoys to and from North Russia".

Captain Howard-Johnston, Director, Anti-U-Boat Division, in a minute dated 12 September 1944, commented:

"The MERMAID'S hunt in the Arctic on the 24th August shows that her CO has the right ideas and will be a real threat to U-Boats wherever he goes."

This submission bore the handwritten comment by Admiral J. H. Edelston, ACNS (U-Boats and Trade),

"Good work. Why the hell don't they do this in N.W. Approaches !"

Edelston wrote in a minute of his own:

"A grand story of pertinacity which should be shouted from the housetops to all Group Commanders. There is no moss on Mosse."

My father kept proudly the following letter from Howard-Johnston in response to a report he had sent him about asdic operating conditions in northern waters:

"Ref:D.265

SECRET

"DIRECTOR OF ANTI-U-BOAT DIVISION,
ADMIRALTY,
S.W.1

"26th October, 1944.

"My dear Mosse,

"Very many thanks for your letter of the 21st enclosing a copy of your report on operating conditions on the Russian convoy route. It could not have arrived at a more opportune moment because I have just been called upon to produce a paper for the Vice Chief of Naval Staff to show that it is still, at times, worth while sending an A/S hunting force on anti-U-boat operations in Arctic waters. Apparently the opinion was gaining ground that it was quite useless to send A/S hunting vessels to work in these waters as they never had any hope of getting results with the asdic. Your successes produce the facts which speak for themselves.

Good luck,

"Yours sincerely,

"Howard-Johnston."

Lieutenant Commander J.P. Mosse, R.N.,
H.M.S. MERMAID,
c/o G.P.O.,
London.

However for my own money it is the following excerpt from *Half a Lifetime* Volume II which says it all. In late 1941 my father, having played a key role in setting up the anti-submarine procedures that had proved so highly effective in the Western Approaches, was sent out to Alexandria to try his skills there. On arrival he found to his intense disappointment that his original posting to *Kandahar* had been cancelled, and instead he had been grabbed for a shore job on the staff of Rear Admiral Alexandria (RAL).

His howls of anguish at being removed from the front line being ignored, he soon found that ignorance of A/S warfare in the Mediterranean was proving little short of catastrophic.

"I found that U-boats had indeed been attacking the Tobruk convoys and getting away with it, and I decided to go on a Tobruk run to see what was going on.

"The Senior Officer of one such convoy was Peter Withers, an old Second DF colleague. He was CO of *Avonvale*, a small Hunt class destroyer, and agreed to let me join him as an observer.

"I found that everybody's eyes and thoughts were up in the sky which had for so long been the main source of enemy threat. The Hunts were strong in AA guns and excellent ships for this job.

"Secondly, A/S training had been given very low priority, and ships had been lulled into a false sense of security by the rather timid performance of the Italian U-boats with which they had previously had to contend.

World War Two

"In an effort to stimulate some interest in A/S matters I gave two lectures on The Battle of The Atlantic which were well attended by the Destroyer Command including two Captains (D), by officers from the local flotilla, and by RAL's staff. I was also asked to give the lecture to the Joint Intelligence Centre in Cairo.

"Another source of weakness was a complete lack of emergency plans like those in the Western Approaches Convoy Instructions, which were being used with such success in the Atlantic. Thus, for example, if a ship in the convoy were torpedoed the Escort Group CO would give a brief coded order such as RASPBERRY STARBOARD and everyone would know exactly what to do.

"I adapted some of these operational plans to suit the very different conditions of the North African coast, and we soon had our first success.

"A German U-boat attacked a Tobruk convoy and was sunk by an escorting destroyer which picked up the crew and brought them back to Alexandria. I went onboard to congratulate the CO and he was generous enough to say 'I followed your convoy instructions and they worked!'"

History does not record how many times that accolade might justly have been repeated.

Footnotes:

(1) We calculate that if anything my father did during World War II helped to shorten it by just five minutes it will have saved the lives of perhaps nine or ten European Jews. That must have been quite a lot of Jews.

(2) It has been suggested that it was at this juncture in world history, during the defence of the Western Approaches, that Liverpoolian Southport first came to the attention of the Mosse family as a haven of warmth, refreshment and hospitality.

M. B. Mosse, M.A., B.Sc,
7 July 2001.