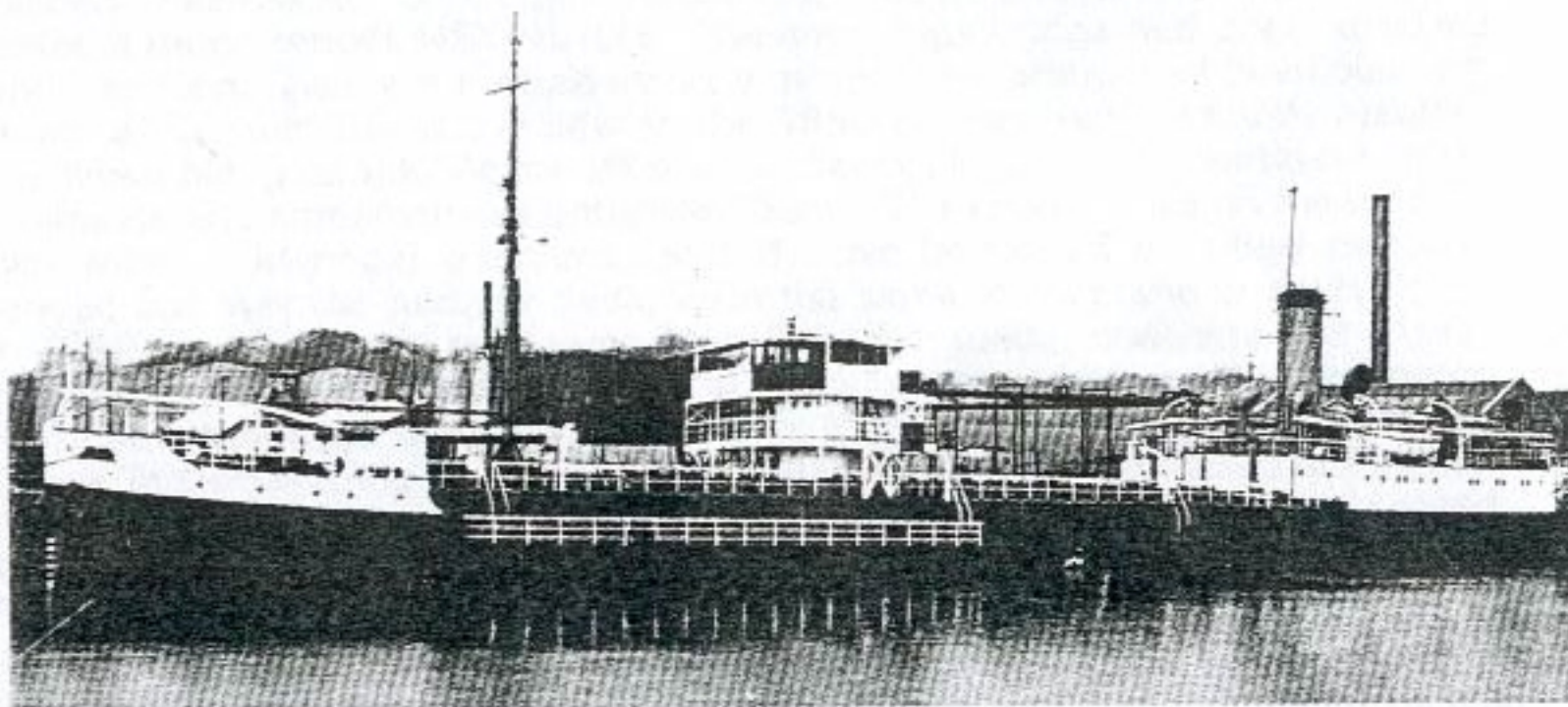


## MEXPHALTE — AN INTERESTING OLD LAKE MARACAIBO TANKER

by Michael Pryce

In 11/1928, Sir J. Laing & Sons Ltd., Sunderland, completed their Yard No. 704 as the tanker PAQUITA for N.V. Curacaosche Scheepvaart Maats, Willemstad, for a cost of £65,151. Ship details were: 2,578g, 954n, 3,089dwt, 302.5'(b.p.) x 49.6' beam x 13 '3" draft. Triple-expansion engines, twin-screw, 10 knots. One of a numerous class of sisterships, the tanker was designed to transport crude oil from the Lake Maracaibo oilfields in Venezuela to the Shell refinery on the Dutch island of Curacao. A shallow bar at the entrance to Lake Maracaibo prevented larger ships from entering, and a large fleet of shallow-draft "mosquito" tankers ran continuously back and forth, supplying the refinery with



MEXPHALTE

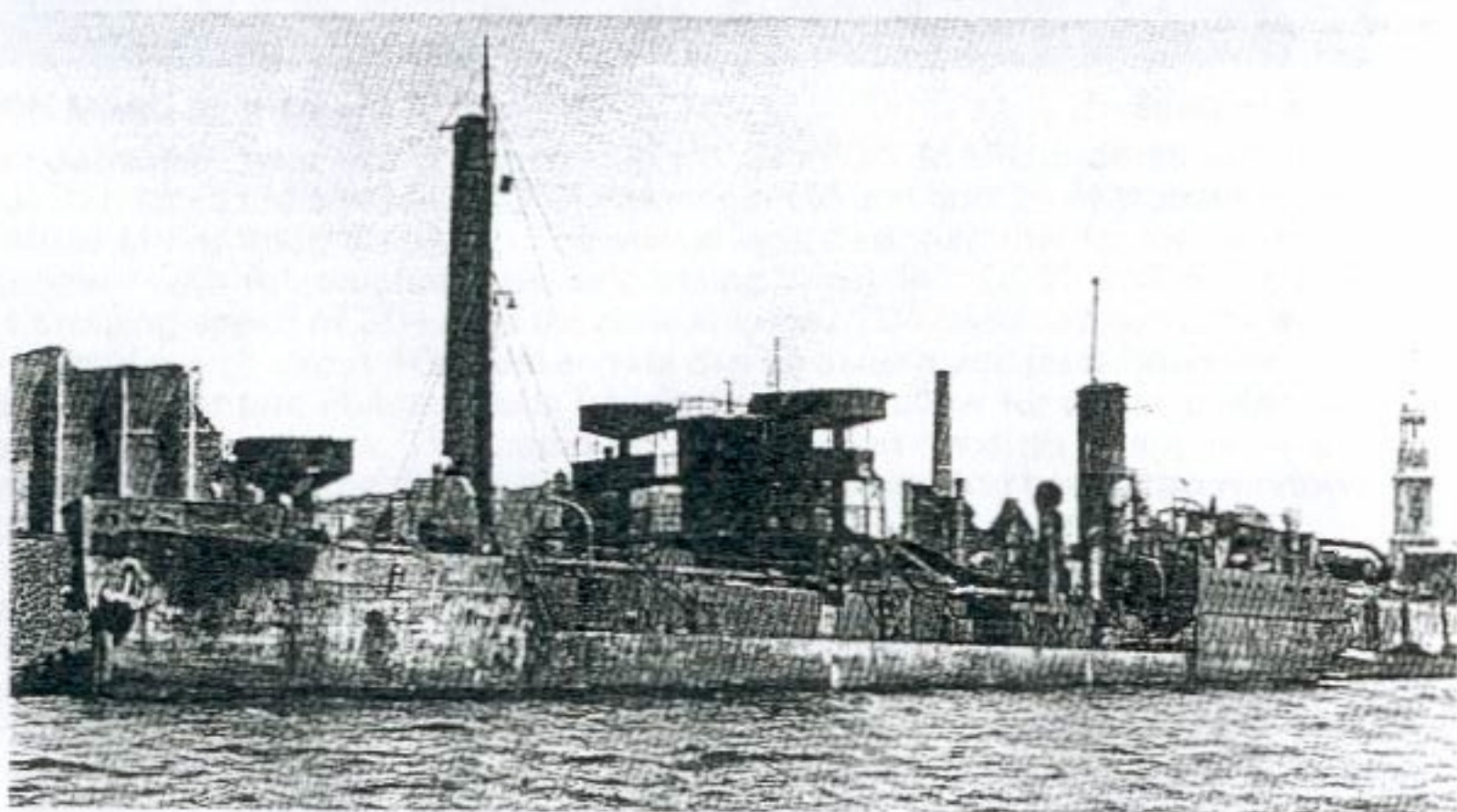
*W.S.P.L.*

crude oil. Many similar tankers spent all their working lives on this route, but PAQUITA was destined to spend only a short time on this service.

In 1931 the tanker was transferred to Soc. Anon. Francaise des Petroles Shell, renamed MEXPHALTE, and registered at Algiers. She had extra heating coils fitted in the centre tanks to enable her to carry bitumen, but she could also carry a full cargo of fuel oil utilising the wing tanks. MEXPHALTE was converted for the coastwise distribution of bitumen from the French Shell refineries at Petit Couronne, near Rouen, and Pauillac, near Bordeaux, and included voyages to U.K. and North African ports, and the photo shows her discharging at Preston.

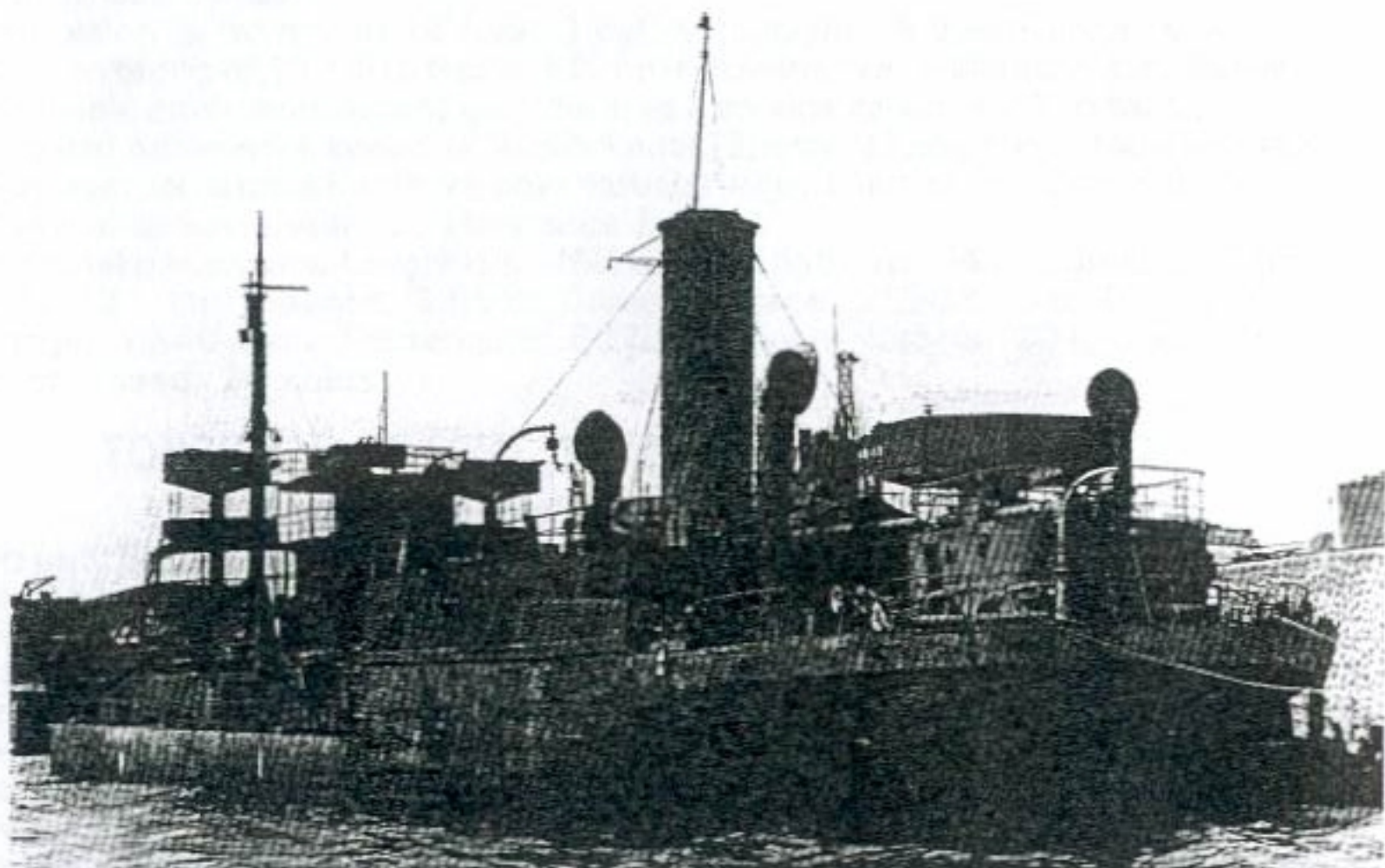
MEXPHALTE was taken in prize by the Germans on 6/11/1940, when France fell to invading German forces, and was placed in service as an oiler at the German Naval Shipyards at St. Nazaire. Later in the war, she was moved to Kiel, and continued in similar service there until 16/9/1944, when she was hit by aircraft bombs, burnt-out and sank. She was reported salvaged but not repaired, then was hit by aircraft bombs again on 3/4/1945 and further damaged, but reported as salvaged and repaired. She was later reported to have been "towed to Hamburg, following which she was retaken by the French, and later acquired by Belgian interests ("Fairplay", 11/1/1951).

The next two photographs were taken in the Elbe in the summer of 1950, and show MEXPHALTE in damaged condition alongside at Hamburg. Most interesting



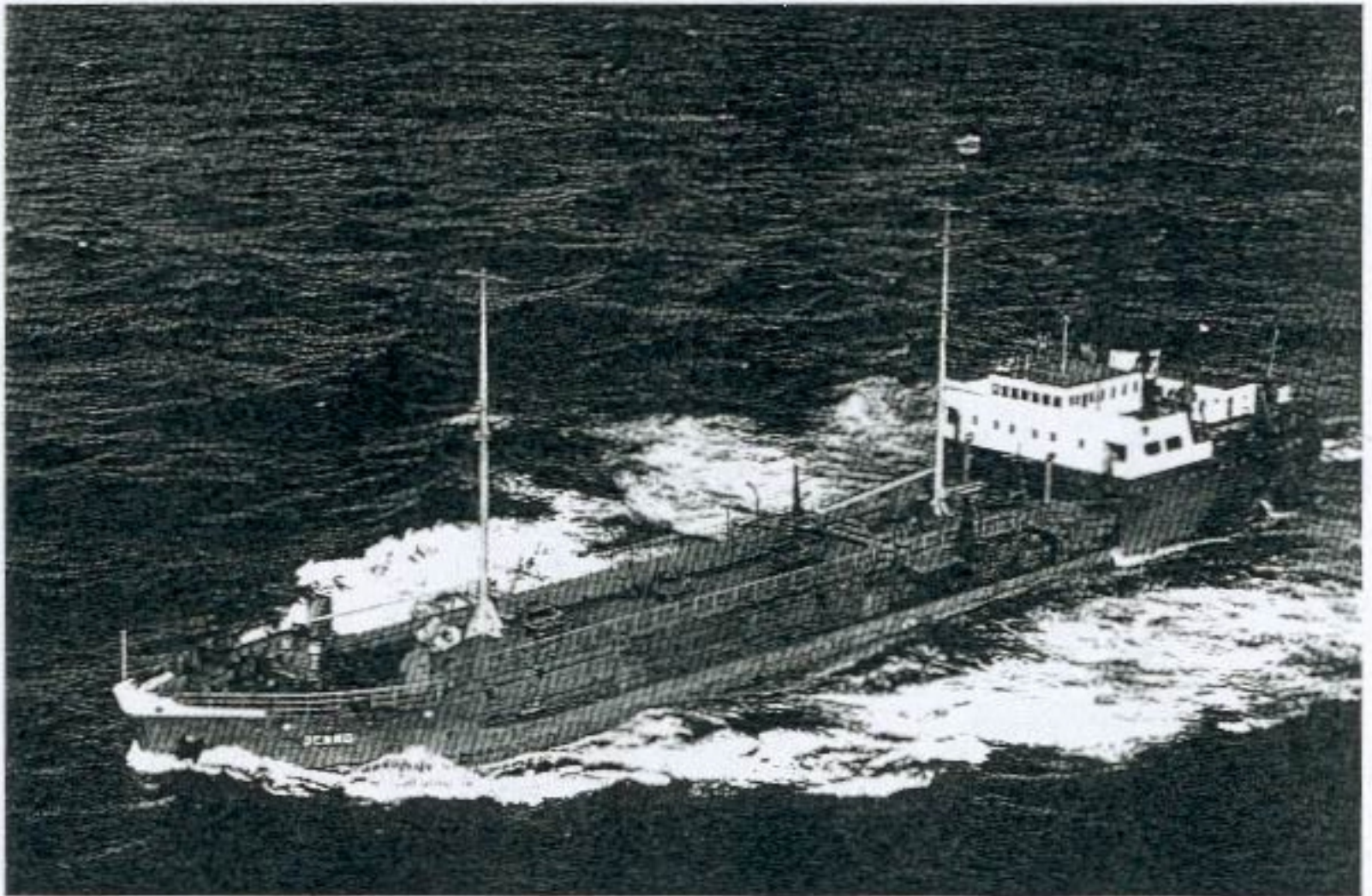
Two views of MEXPHALTE in the Elbe in 1950

*D. N. Brigham*



are the anti-aircraft gun tubs added during the war on her bow, stern and bridgewings. The stem-bar at the bow is damaged and bent, and the tanker appears to be derelict, but it is difficult to make out if she is fire damaged, rusty or grey-painted. Another addition since the Preston photo was taken is some form of manifold platform just aft of the bridge, extending out over the harbour deck, with an early type of small crane or davit fitted at the aft end of the platform, no doubt to assist with the handling of refuelling hoses. It would appear that the tanker lay unused for 5 years with war damage while her fate was decided.

In 8/1950, she was reported sold to Messrs. Eveling & Poeppel of Hamburg, but later reports state a 1951 sale to J. A. Reinecke, Hamburg, by whom she was renamed BENNO, with registered owners as Nordtank G.m.b.H. (Atlantic-Rhederi F. & W. Joch), Hamburg. The 1952-53 L. R. records that two new 6-cylinder oil engines, 4S.C.SA, made by Blohm & Voss in 1942, were fitted in 1950. Possibly, these were built for naval use. Dimensions in 1952 were noted as 309.3' x 50.2' x 13.0' draft, with the notation "alterations 1951". Tonnages were 2,637g, 1,282n, and she was classed for carrying asphalt in bulk, registered at Hamburg. In 1955, she was fitted with two new 6-cylinder oil engines, 4SA, made by Masch. Kiel A.G., Kiel. A recent acquisition from Fotoflite of an old Skyfotos photo of BENNO also revealed other changes. At first, I assumed it must



BENNO, ex MEXPHALTE, much rebuilt

*Fotoflite*

have been a different ship, with all accommodation aft, modern squat funnel, and soft-nose bow. However, the foremast attached to the deck with an old-fashioned "tabernacle" didn't quite fit with the modern image, and closer scrutiny revealed a much-rebuilt MEXPHALTE. The amidships bridge had been removed entirely, and a new superstructure incorporating a new bridge had been built aft. The damaged stem-bar at the bow in the 1950 photos had obviously resulted in the bows being rebuilt. At the aft end of the focsle, port and starboard, were the same dated companionway entrance "huts". The tankhatches on the harbour decks were in identical positions, and the old-fashioned manifold platform extended out over the harbour deck, with the same small crane or davit fitted.

In 1960, she was sold to Citerna Mar. S.A., Bordeaux, and renamed ALIZE, thus reverting to the French flag after an absence of twenty years. Registered at Bordeaux, tonnages were 2,619g, 1,347n, 2,955dwt. In 1971, she was resold to Greek Tankershipping Co. Ltd., renamed ARKADIA, and registered at Piraeus. In 1988, she was sold to Gemi Sokum Ticaret A/S, renamed KADI, and arrived in tow at Aliaga on 17/4/1988 for demolition, at the ripe old age of 60!

A newer MEXPHALTE was another source of confusion, building in 1943 for French Shell by builders at St. Nazaire, but before engines could be fitted, she was scuttled incomplete in the Seine. In 1946 she was refloated, and was completed by the yard at Quevilly by 10/1948 as an asphalt tanker. She did not

enter service, however until 1950, for Soc. Shell d'Algerie. Her "1950" date of build in some later L.R.'s was always confusing! Sold in 1966 and renamed PETRO BASSENS, she was resold in 1966 and renamed BITUMAR under the Italian flag, finally being broken up at La Spezia in 1/1985. The older MEXPHALTE thus outlived the newer MEXPHALTE.