



CHAPTER IX

M.A.C. Ships to D-Day

Best year for Allied merchant shipping was 1942, and the fleets of the war suffered excessively. From the military standpoint, however, it was a year of trial but also of triumph. It opened with disasters in the Atlantic and ended inspiringly with successful counter-strokes in the Middle East which gave promise of greater victories. Alamein was fought and won in October, and North Africa invaded by the Allies on 8 November, as a prelude to the overthrow of Rommel's Afrika Korps and the opening of the sea-gate for the invasion of Sicily and the Italian mainland. Then, in the New Year—by 2 February—the Russians completed the annihilation of the German Sixth

Army. Merchant shipping contributed in no small degree to the Red Army's victory at Stalingrad and the Allied Army's irresistible sweep through North Africa. Oil was needed in vast quantities to prepare for these operations, and coal and oil to maintain the war of movement after the initial successes.

Through 1942, means were sought for securing the safety of the merchant shipping. Patrols could be provided by the Allies off the American coast and the western approaches to Britain, but not so easily over the hundreds of miles of the mid-Atlantic ocean. One way of defending this gap in our defences was developed in 1941. Fighter aircraft were carried aboard some of the armed merchant ships in convoy. Hurricanes were catapulted from a launch rack built over the cargo-carrier's fo'c'sle-head, and were used for the interception of hostile bombers.

A difficulty with this technique was that, if the pilot could not reach land safely, he had to bale out and take to his rubber dinghy—thus a valuable

machine was lost and the airman himself placed in considerable danger. This service was operated by pilots of the Merchant Service Fighter Unit of the R.A.F., but all their valour could not compensate for the lack of aircraft-carriers for escorts—ships with full means for maintenance which could fly off planes and receive them back.

Shipbuilding yards were taxed to capacity with a wide variety of orders for wartime needs. It was hopeless to rely on getting new keels for aircraft carriers in time for convoy protection, and another means had to be found. At this period all merchant ships traversing the Western Ocean had defensive armament, and the suggested alternative to new keels was the conversion of some of the merchantmen into aircraft-carriers.

The subsequent development and operation of Merchant Aircraft Carriers was one of the most closely guarded secrets of the war. When the decision was made to proceed with the idea, the question arose as to which type of vessel could be adapted most efficiently. At first it was decided to convert bulk grain-carriers into M.A.C. Ships, but Mr. John Lamb, who had given close consideration to the subject, proposed to the Ministry of War Transport that tankers were more suitable for conversion.

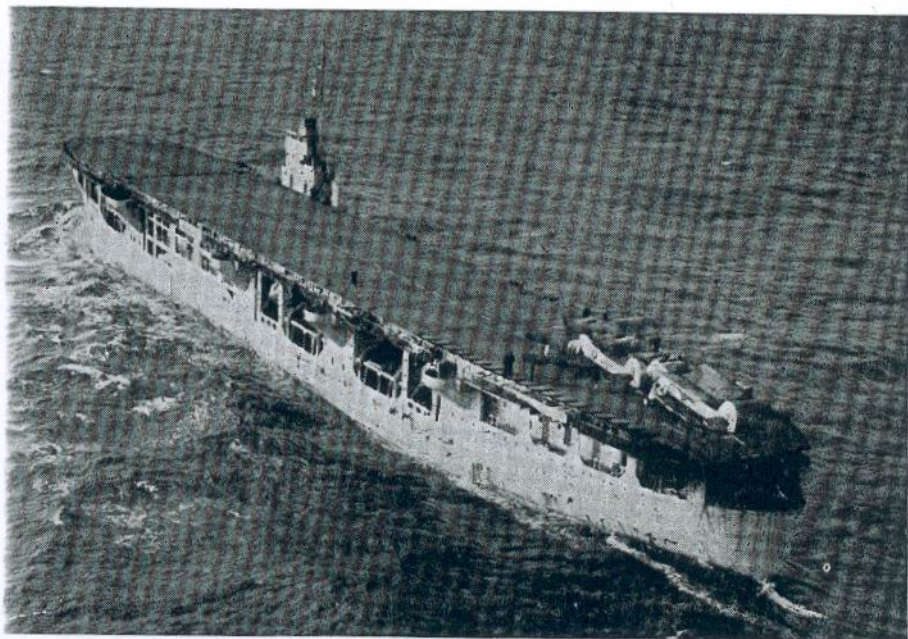
Like many another revolutionary idea, this received initially only a lukewarm reception. The ravages of U-boat packs continued, however, and so acute did the situation become in the North Atlantic that in September 1942 Mr. Lamb was requested to submit plans in detail.

All the preliminary plans for the now famous M.A.C. Ships were prepared at St. Helen's Court, in London, by him and his assistants of the Technical Division of The Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company. With very few modifications they were approved by the Ministry of War Transport and the Admiralty, and the Company's Marine Department had the difficult task of arranging for nine selected tankers to arrive at United Kingdom ports precisely when needed for the work to begin.

First on the list was the motor vessel *Rapana*, 12,200 tons. She went into a Tyneside yard in February 1943, and emerged in her new guise five months later, forerunner of a flotilla of 'Baby Flat Tops' destined for an important role in the ultimate defeat of the Nazi sea-wolves.

Ships of one class and the same pre-war year of construction—*Amastra*, *Ancylus*, *Miralda*, and others—were chosen, because the reconstruction work could be simplified by the use of standardised parts for the necessary top-hammer. A vessel that was being built was also converted, to bring the total of M.A.C. Ships to ten.

That these British and Dutch tankers of the Group's fleet were transformed into aircraft-carriers within a total of twenty-one months was a remarkable achievement. More remarkable still, perhaps, was the fact that their usefulness as tankers was impaired only to a small degree. Henceforth, these converted



RAPANA, first tanker to be converted into a Merchant Aircraft Carrier.

could convey only black oil cargoes, their individual capacity reduced about 1,000 tons.

tribute has been paid to Mr. John Lamb and his co-workers for solving a host of intricate technical problems. Part of the 'midships accommodation including the bridge, the after superstructure and funnel, had to be cut down, and the essential flight-deck given solidity over-all from stem to stern, combined with a capacity for expansion and contraction. This was necessary to allow for changes of temperature and ship motion in heavy seas, and a special type of welding was employed to make the deck plating adaptable to all such stresses. The naval aircraft-carrier is designed with horizontal funnels—exhausts which would be a better description. These are well aft on the port and starboard sides of the hull, and a system of water-sprays damps down the smoke and gases that would otherwise swirl over the ship and prove a danger to an air-pilot coming aboard. An equally ingenious system was introduced to replace the tanker's funnel, and a further feature of the conversion was a neat structure on the starboard side that combined navigation bridge, aircraft control platform and flight-deck.

redistribution and increase of armament had to be made. The orthodox

four-inch gun was housed under the flight-deck aft, and steel sponsons were built out on either side of the ship to support the dual-purpose guns—two Bofors and six Oerlikons. Another structural problem solved successfully was the provision of accommodation for double the number of personnel normally borne in a tanker. The additional complement were officers and men of the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy or the Royal Netherlands Navy, and the increase necessitated extra space for galleys, bakeries and a sick bay complete, in the naval style, with a well-equipped operating-theatre for casualties.

All-British or all-Dutch crews were engaged, and officers had to take a short, intensive course of special training before commissioning. You had to become accustomed, for instance, to navigating from the diminutive bridge to starboard, which invariably proved awkward at first. You also had to become accustomed to finding your way about a tank-deck among the criss-cross girders supporting the flight-deck overhead, where at first you had the impression of wandering in the maze of a gigantic Meccano set.

The advent of the M.A.C. Ship caused both the naval authorities and the ship-owners to be apprehensive about the inclusion of equal numbers of men of the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy in a hybrid vessel commanded by a Merchant Navy Master. Some detected the seed of dissension, for it was the first time that personnel of the Fleet Air Arm and the Merchant Navy had been called upon to work in such intimate co-operation. But fears of any rivalry or jealousy were quickly dispelled. Contacts were cordial from the first.

The enlarged complement drawn from the two Services proved an advantage in more ways than one. Social life, which is limited in a tanker, blossomed under the changed conditions prevalent upon a M.A.C. Ship. The spacious flight-deck could be transformed, when convenient, into a 'recreational field' in a manner impossible with a tank-deck encumbered by numerous hatches and other obstacles.

Deck-hockey became a popular sport, and matches between teams representative of the seamen and airmen were arranged. When opportunity was afforded by a stay in port, a combined team would be selected and a challenge issued to other ships, the keenest enthusiasm being shown for 'internationals', such as the match played on one occasion in Halifax harbour between two M.A.C.s of the Shell Group, the British *Adula* and Dutch *Macoma*. And while the high open deck of the new-type escort provided facility for this and other sports, the ship's complement, amounting to about 115 officers and men of two Services, gave encouragement to such 'indoor' social activities as competitive games, the Brains Trust, 'Quiz' and Discussion Group.

Fine weather in port gave opportunity for the rare luxury of a shipboard dance, and there is many an ex-Wren formerly stationed at Halifax, Nova Scotia, who prizes a souvenir in the form of the 'Shell gong'—a scarlet ribbon decorated with Shell buttons.

The air staff of the tanker converted to Merchant Aircraft Carrier consisted, the main, of pilots, air-gunners, observers and maintenance men; and a few extra D.E.M.s were appointed for helping to man the ship's additional armament. The aircraft carried were three to five Swordfish biplanes, and these were lashed snugly on the flight-deck when not in use, since no provision could be made for hydraulic lifts and below-deck hangars, as in a naval carrier.

Sometimes more than one M.A.C. Ship with a black-oil cargo would be included in one of the large convoys on the regular northern route between Halifax, Nova Scotia and the Clyde. Their planes would afford protection by aerial reconnaissance, usually making a dawn, midday and dusk patrol in search of any U-boats that might be in the vicinity. These scouts could also be highly offensive. Each Swordfish was armed with two depth-charges and four small bombs, or, alternatively, with rockets of great destructive power. It was aimed that a rocket-shell would penetrate right through a surfaced U-boat, and, indeed, several hostile submarines were destroyed in this way during the latter part of the war.



Work in progress on the conversion of the RAPANA as a M.A.C.

Patrols were arranged by the S.O.E.—the Senior Officer of the Escort. He was the unwilling cause of the Ship-Master losing a good deal of sleep in the course of a voyage. Whenever he deemed it advisable, he would request a patrol, and the Master of the M.A.C. Ship, hastily roused from a cat-nap, maybe, would immediately call his Air Staff Officer (an R.N. or R.N.V.R. Lieutenant-Commander) into a conference. The pair would confer on the request with special regard to weather conditions, and if agreeable to it, would signal the S.O.E. to inform him how many planes they would fly.

Inevitably there were accidents and a few tragedies in the new campaign against U-boats on which the M.A.C. Ships embarked. These were due chiefly to unexpected changes of weather after the planes' take-off, such as sudden fog reducing visibility, and, in minor degree, to the comparatively small size of the vessels for Fleet Air Arm operations.

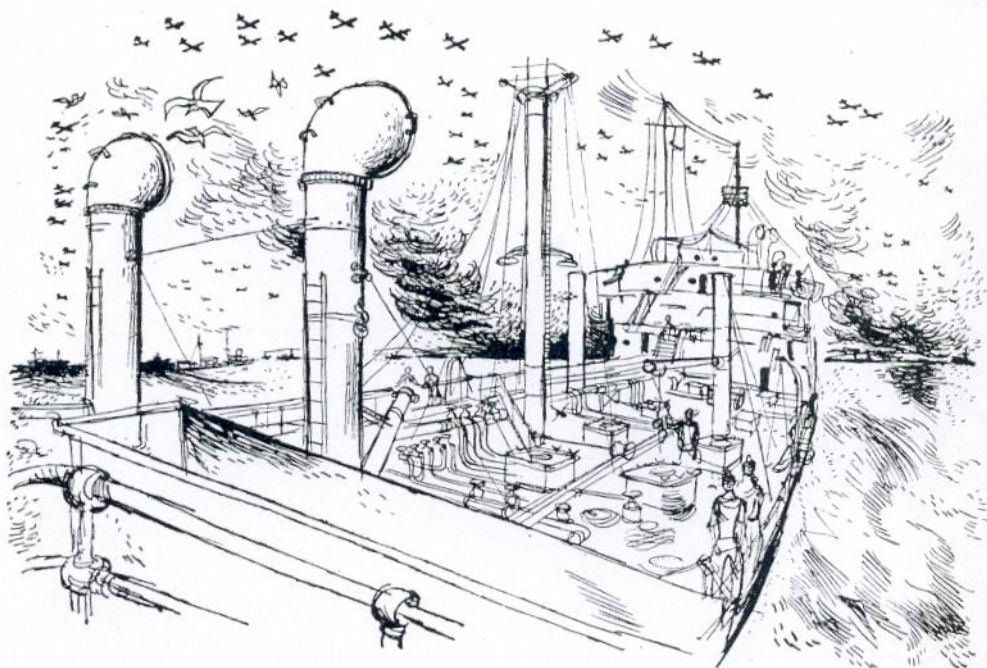
The new-type carrier had a flight-deck space of about 460 by 60 feet, which gave a fair margin for error in taking-off and alighting in conditions when patrols were flown. Seen from a height by the returning pilot, a Baby Flat Top looked about the size of a floating matchbox, and, indeed, nice judgment was needed by him and the controlling officer aboard the ship—invariably known as 'Bats' from the shape of his signalling apparatus—to effect a neat landing on a none-too-spacious deck of a rolling, pitching ship. Nevertheless, the usual kind of mishap was nothing worse than an undignified encounter with the safety-nets, if a plane did not bring up smartly on the arrester-wires stretched athwart the deck.

For a lengthy voyage a destroyer or corvette would need 'topping-up' with fuel oil, and on many an occasion the M.A.C. assumed the role of parent-ship. A thirty-fathom line with a buoy attached would be paid out, and the escort would glide into the M.A.C. Ship's wake to pick it up with a grapnel. By means of the line the naval craft could haul in the end of a thirty-five-fathom length of oil-hose, through which the fuel oil would be pumped while the two vessels steamed on parallel courses.

Thanks to the M.A.C. Ships, and many other devices of war, and thanks to the men who handled them with such courage and skill, the Allies were able to build up a war potential sufficient to strike and finally to crush the enemy. The dawn of the brighter part of the war dates from the landing in North Africa on 8 November 1942. Less than a year later, on 3 September 1943, General Montgomery's redoubtable Eighth Army went ashore in Italy. Among the shipping in support were the ubiquitous Shell tankers, some equipped with spar decks for the conveyance of aircraft beside their normal oil cargo.

Thence onward, the Allies' transition from the gloom of repeated set-backs continued almost uninterruptedly. The fiery ordeal at sea continued, but on the whole became less severe as the Allies gathered strength and prospects of victory grew brighter. Casualties to Shell tankers became fewer after the black

TANKER FLEET



year of 1942, but 'incidents' were widespread and occurred spasmodically right up to the threshold of victory.

The drama of the last stages of the war mounted. Interest in the advance through Italy was eclipsed by news of the D-Day Landing in Normandy on 6 June 1944. The Nazi-enslaved peoples of Europe began to see the dawn.

A number of Shell vessels were among the tankers detailed for the task of ferrying oil to the air and land forces once the invasion was well under way, and also for bunkering the imposing array of naval craft engaged on the operations. Several ships, including *Goldshell*, *Goldmouth*, *Opalia* and *Juliana*, were equipped with filters and other special means to enable them to transport and supply fresh water, in addition to their task of bunkering landing craft. Another tanker, *Dolabella*, left Southampton on D-Day Plus One, and continued in the role of water-carrier for three months, time and again running the gauntlet of mines and the Luftwaffe in common with other vessels participating in the historic invasion.

The tankers were operated solely under instructions of the Admiralty and the Sea Transport Division of the Ministry of War Transport. Every man who embarked on service for the D-Day period, from captain to galley boy, did so voluntarily in knowledge of the danger. The British signed special 'V' articles,

and the Dutch signed on for service according to conditions embodied in what was termed a 'Liberator Charter'. And it is a tribute to tankermen and to the Merchant Navy that the volunteers far exceeded the number required to man the ships.

Once the German enemy had been bottled-up in the U-boat bases of Lorient and St. Nazaire, losses of Allied merchant ships further decreased. Yet now and then a cloud in the glowing dawn of victory threw a dark shadow over the seascape. The motor vessel *Daronia*, commanded by Captain J. B. Ritchie, was torpedoed in waters north-east of Durban on 20 August 1944—five days before the liberation of Paris. Despite heavy weather, this vessel was saved by seamanship of the highest order.

On the first day of January 1945, the s.s. *San Roberto*, which had been involved in two previous incidents, was attacked in the River Scheldt. The ship's gunners shot down a German aircraft, the second credited to this Eagle Oil vessel in her adventurous career.

Darkest interlude for the Shell fleet in this final period of the war was the loss of the Anglo-Saxon's motor vessel *Goldshell*, which had survived two damaging air attacks in earlier days to give long and valiant service. On 16 April 1945, while the Allies were overrunning Germany, this fine ship was mined and set on fire in the North Sea with tragic loss of life. She was the last Shell vessel to be lost in the Second World War, which ended in Europe on VE-Day—8 May 1945.