

Joe Shoebridge
WWII Veteran
Empire McAlpine



At some time after the Royal Air Force had saved Great Britain from almost certain defeat by Nazi Germany in the Autumn of 1940, Winston Churchill observed that the only way the country could be defeated would be by the U-Boats in the battle of the Atlantic. This was indeed true, and if the German Submarine Force could cut the 'Atlantic Lifeline' then the United Kingdom would be starved of food, weapons, and supplies of all kinds. By late 1941 and carrying on into most of 1942 the situation was serious indeed. Certainly thanks to the shipyards, more escorts-Corvettes- were becoming available for escort duties. Ships crews were rapidly becoming highly effective in convoy work and equipment, especially radar, was improving all the time. Even so, Merchant Ships were still being sunk at an alarming rate and of course the Merchant Navy crews were irreplaceable.

Maybe the biggest unsolved problem at that time was lack of air cover. The R.A.F. did fine work with their Sunderlands, Catalinas and Liberators flying from Northern Ireland and the West Country as did the R.C.A.F. from their Canadian Bases. But of course it was just not possible to provide air cover for long periods and in addition there was the 'Atlantic Gap' of some 750 miles in the middle of the ocean where it was impossible to provide shore based air cover of any sort. The obvious solution to this problem was Aircraft Carriers but at that time they were just not available. Of the big Fleet Carriers probably only some three or so were serviceable and in any event they would have been a prime target for the German U-Boats. The smaller escort carriers operating some 18 aircraft, were also too few in number. Then somebody had a very bright idea. Why not convert a number of existing Merchant Ships to Aircraft Carriers. A much quicker method than building new carriers and so the Merchant Aircraft Carrier was born.

The two companies selected to have existing ships converted were The Ben Line, a Scottish Company and The Anglo-Saxon Shipping Company (absorbed after the war, I believe, to B.P.). In the event 6 grain ships (Ben Line) and 13 Tankers (Anglo-Saxon) were converted to the new M.A.C. Ships. It was understood that, even after conversion, each type of ship would still carry some 80% of its original cargo.

Tankers had four arrester wires and a crash barrier but no hangar. They carried three aircraft which had to be shunted to and fro during flying

operations. As can be imagined corrosion problems arose with the aircraft and they were often replaced on return to base in Northern Ireland.

The Grain Ships has a hangar but no barrier and they carried four aircraft. If more than one aircraft was airborne then the first one to land had to be struck down before the second could land. The deck crew got very adept at this manoeuvre but inevitably delays did occur.

The flight decks of M.A.C. Ships were some 400 feet long by 55 feet wide and the ships had a top speed of about 12.5 knots. The aircraft used were the Fairey Swordfish MK 111. This was fitted with a 'state of the art' RADAR. These days it would be considered extremely primitive. The MK 111 was fitted with a fine pitch propeller to enable take off to be accomplished from the very short flight deck. This fine pitch propeller did limit top speed to some 100 knots and the cruising speed on patrol was 70 knots and Deck landing approach speed 58 knots. To save weight both front and rear machine guns were removed and for flight purposes only two thirds capacity of fuel was carried. This gave an endurance of three hours maximum. Crew was Pilot, Observer, and Wireless Operator.

A Naval Air Squadron No. 836 was re-allocated in the spring of 1943 for manning the M.A.C. Ships that came into service, and, as a matter of record, the first Deck Landing was made on M.V. 'Empire McAlpine' (a grain ship of the Ben Line) on 7th of May by Lt/Cdr Ransford W. Slater, OBE DSC. RN and this was followed by experimental flight escorting the first M.A.C. convoy from Liverpool to Halifax, Nova Scotia. One further double crossing was undertaken and by this time the Squadron was installed at its new base at Royal Naval Air Station, Maydown, near Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

As and when the M.A.C. Ships came into service so new flights were formed to meet them. The Squadron eventually comprised some 25 flights of 3 and 4 aircraft each (all Swordfish of course) together with the H.Q. Staff at Maydown and a very small maintenance unit (perhaps not more than 12 personnel) at Dartmouth, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

A 4 aircraft flight comprised 4 pilots, 4 observers, and 1 Deck landing control officer (batsman) all of whom were commissioned and 4 telegraph wireless operators. Normally the 9 officers consisted of 8 sub-lieutenants and 1 lieutenant who would be C.O. of the flight. The batsman was a qualified pilot and this duty was rotated each double-crossing of the Atlantic. The maintenance party consisted of a Petty Officer and 16 Ratings. As will be seen a flight was self-sufficient and, except for major maintenance, was expected to look after itself.

Based at Maydown, the H.Q. comprised the C.O. of the Squadron who was a Lieutenant Commander, Senior Pilot and Senior Observer (both Senior Lieutenants) and the Squadron Engineer Officer together with Maintenance Personnel adequate for major overhauls and repair work. The H.Q. was responsible for supply of Flights to Ships, overall training and discipline, store, pay and records etc.

The M.A.C. Ships themselves were purely Merchant Ships with a flight deck fitted. Tonnage as I recall was about 8000-10000 tons and speeds between 11.5 to 13 knots. They were commanded by a Merchant Navy Captain and Deck and Engineer Officers and crew were all from the Merchant Navy. To make things legal and to avoid the aircrew being classed as 'pirates' if captured, all R.N. Officers were signed on the Ships books as Deck Officers and were paid the princely sum of one shilling per month! On a personal note I recall that, after a year on 'Empire McAlpine' we calculated that we were due twelve shillings - a lot of beer in those days! A deputation visited the captain who stated that he would gladly pay us but that we would then owe some fifteen shillings in Trade Union dues. We retired defeated. If memory serves me right there were, 19 M.A.C. Ships in operation at the end of the war.

Each M.A.C. Ship had attached to her a Royal Navy Lt/Cdr (who was a qualified observer). This Officer was directly in command of the Naval Flight aboard the ship for both discipline and control of the flying operations (as required by the Senior Officer Escort). The Merchant Navy Captain was in command of the ship in all respects other than those concerning aviation matters. In practice this arrangement worked exceptionally well and relations between R.N. and M.N. remained most harmonious. In fact the M.N. crew grew rather proud of being part of the crew of an aircraft carrier.

There is little doubt that the Battle of the Atlantic was well on the way to being won by the time the first M.A.C. Ship 'McAlpine' came into service. However by closing the 'Atlantic Gap' they made a significant contribution to the successful conclusion to the battle. The very fact that the Senior Officer (Escort) had an aircraft immediately available was of prime importance. Following the two testing/proving crossings the first 'routine' crossing took place in September 1943.

This convoy (with 'McAlpine' and 'B' Flight-836 Squadron) was heavily attacked by U-Boat wolf packs. 4 Escort vessels 8 Merchant ships were sunk. After this though only two more ships were lost in M.A.C. Ship escorted convoys and by Autumn of 1944 virtually every Atlantic convoy would expect, and have, a M.A.C. ship as part of the escort. Although no submarines were sunk by 836 Squadron the primary job of keeping

submarines 'heads down' was most successful thus preventing them from tracking and assembling wolf packs around a convoy.

The M.A.C. Ship operated in a 'Channel' immediately astern of the Convoy Commodore. Provided the wind was from ahead it was normally possible for the ship to remain within the convoy when operating aircraft. Should the wind be from astern then the ship invariably dropped well to the rear of the convoy and it was thus important for the aircraft to land on with the minimum waste of time. With a 'fast' convoy (10 knots) the 'catch up' rate was only some 2 knots and if the ship was 2/3 miles astern one felt very lonely and vulnerable.

At this point a few words concerning the actual operation of the aircraft would not come amiss. The 400 foot long flight deck was adequate although in light winds only just! Aircraft operations were directly controlled by the Sen. Officer (Escort) and normally dawn and dusk patrols were daily routine. These were code named 'Cobras' and consisted of circling round and round the convoy with the object of keeping submarines under water and thus unable to sight the convoy. These patrols were normally of 2 hours duration. The other main type of sortie was code named 'Mamba' and this was when a suspected submarine had been detected by HF/DF from the escort vessels. This involved proceeding on a direct bearing to a distance of say 75 miles. Weapons carried by the Swordfish were either 8 armour piercing rockets or 2 depth charges. The M.A.C. Ships were good sea boats and we could fly in most weathers although obviously there were occasions when the sea was just too rough and the ship was pitching and rolling far too much to permit flying operations. On one occasion an R.N. Escort Carrier was with the convoy and they made it very clear that we were most inferior and very much a junior partner. One day it was too rough for them to operate but, surprise surprise, we could still fly our aircraft. That put them in their place and we felt 10 ft. tall.

I would add that the M.N. Captains and Officers grew highly skilled at ship handling and took a great pride in their performance. Their ships had far less maneuverability than their R.N. counterparts. Our relations with the M.N. Officers was superb. We were accommodated in double cabins and the flight would be in a separate section of the Officers living quarters. The ship had no Ward Room bar and Dining Room as the R.N. Carriers, but a separate dining room and separate 'smoke room' - this latter room served as a 'drinking area'. Bottles of spirits/beer would be ordered from the Chief Steward at the beginning of a trip and paid for at the time. Supplies kept in our cabins could be replenished! In the evenings, operations permitting, bottles would be brought into the smoke room and a party would ensue - very often joined by off-duty M.N. Officers.

Halifax, Nova Scotia we found great fun in. the city was much derided by Canadians but to us it was an oasis of bright lights and good food, both of which were not, of course, obtainable in Great Britain. We were all made members of the Canadian Naval Officers Club which was as well because the city itself was 'dry'. The club I would add was 'very wet'. We normally flew off the ship to the R.C.A.F. Base at Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and stayed there for 8/9 days before returning to the UK with another convoy. The requirement was for us to complete 1 hour flying for each day in port. This task was normally completed in the first two days and the remaining time was spent golfing, partying, and accepting the local hospitality. (Most generous).

Life at Maydown, Northern Ireland followed a similar pattern to that at Dartmouth except that, being right under the noses of Squadron 'Big Wigs' we were more circumspect. Londonderry in those days was a friendly and happy place.

I will conclude these reminiscences (because that is really what they are) by mentioning that I served with 'B' Flight, No. 836 Squadron from June 1943 to the end of the war in May 1945 when the Squadron was disbanded. That is nearly 60 years ago, but I trust that my memory (assisted by Flying Log books) has served me faithfully. Just in case though, please do not be too hard on the pianist!!

Lt/Cdr John Shoebridge RNVR/RN. (Rtd.)

John Shoebridge was born in Cosham and attended Portsmouth Grammar School. He enlisted in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve for aircrew training at Lee-on-the-Solent in September 1941 as a Naval Airman and quickly moved to St. Vincent to undertake part 1 training on No 31 course, no doubt under the watchful eye of the notorious CPO Wilmot.

Flying training was carried out in Tiger Moths at Luton and Sealand RAF Elementary Flying Training Schools, followed by sea passage to Canada and advanced training on North American Harvards at Kingston.

On completion of this phase of training he returned to the UK on the Queen Elizabeth, together with thousands of GIs, and was posted to Errol Flying Miles Master Is and IIGs, then to Crail for torpedo training on Fairey Albacore and Swordfish, thence to HMS Condor at Arbroath for Dummy Deck training (ADDLS) with deck landings on HMS Argus. There was then a period at St. Merryn prior to posting to the M.A.C. Ships Squadron No. 836 flying Swordfish at Maydown, Northern Ireland as a Sub/Lt. (A) RNVR.

After the war John obtained a permanent commission in the RN FAA, with various appointments including maintenance test pilot, and operational flying in Firebrand and Skyraider aircraft among many other types, completing his service as Lt/Cdr.