

SS *Ohio*

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The **SS *Ohio*** was an oil tanker built for the Texas Oil Company (now Texaco); she was the largest oil tanker in the world at the time of construction. The tanker was launched on April 20, 1940 at the Sun Shipbuilding Yard in Chester, Pennsylvania, USA. SS *Ohio* was capable of doing over 16 knots (30 km/h, 18.4 mph) at sea. The tanker would end up bound in the struggle for the re-supply of the island fortress of Malta, during the Second World War.^[1]

The tanker played a fundamental role in Operation Pedestal, which is considered to be one of the fiercest^[2] and most heavily contested convoys, in August 1942. Although *Ohio* reached Malta successfully, she was so badly damaged that she had to be effectively scuttled in order to offload her cargo, and never sailed again. The tanker is fondly remembered in Malta, where to this day it is considered to be the saviour of the beleaguered islands.^[3]

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Construction and Launch

Hull 190, as the *Ohio* was referred to before its launch, was a skillful compromise, promising broad cargo-carrying capacity to the merchant and speed, balance of stability to the mariner. Above the waterline, the construction echoed the outwards curve of a schooner bow, bearing the influence of



The *Ohio* discharging its cargo in the Grand Harbour.

Career (USA,
UK)



Name:	Ohio
Owner:	Texas Oil Company, registered to the British Eagle Oil Company preceding Operation Pedestal.
Laid down:	September 7, 1939
Launched:	April 20, 1940
Acquired:	Commissioned in the British Merchant Navy on July 10, 1942
Decommissioned:	15 August 1945, after irreparable damage.
Fate:	Towed and used for naval gunfire practice on September 19, 1946

General characteristics	
Tonnage:	9264 GRT
Length:	515 ft (157 m)
Speed:	16 knots (30 km/h) (Sea trials showed the Ohio could manage even 19 knots)
Complement:	77 men (24 to service the guns).
Armament:	1 5-inch low-angle gun (aft) 1 3-inch AA-gun (bows) 1 40□mm army Bofors abaft the funnel 6 20□mm naval Oerlikons
Nickname:	OH 10

the old American clipper ship design. The design of *Hull 190* was influenced also by the menace of a rearming Germany and a Japanese Empire bent on military expansion. The approach of war had influenced this design, and the unofficial conversations between military and oil chiefs resulted in a ship of 9,264 gross register tons, 515 feet in overall length, and capable of carrying 170,000 barrels of fuel oil, bigger and with a larger capacity than any other tanker previously built. The ship was completed in an unusually short period of seven months, fifteen days.^[4]

The Westinghouse turbine engines developed 9000 driveshaft horsepower at ninety revolutions per minute, which allowed a calculated drive of sixteen knots, a speed never attained before by any screw tanker. Her method of construction was controversial. For some years, the issue between welding versus riveting had been raging on both sides of the Atlantic. Hull 190 was built in the bottom shell and deck of the new-fashioned welded construction, hopefully to prove once and for all the reliability of this method.^[4] The ship had also a composite framing system with two longitudinally continuous bulkheads, which divided the ship into twenty-one cargo tanks.

The ship was launched the day after scheduled, prompting superstitious fear in the welders, steel-cutters and other craftsmen who had assembled to watch her launch. *Hull 190* was christened in a ceremony presided over by the mother of the President of the Texas Oil Company, Mrs. Florence E. Rodgers who, grasping the ceremonial bottle of champagne in her right hand pronounced the words:

I name this good ship *Ohio*. May God go with her and all who sail in her. Good luck...^[4]

As the ship rolled down Slipway No.2, the *Ohio* plunged in the waters of the Delaware river. The existence of the *Ohio* would, in its initial years, be uneventful and ordinary, plying between Port Arthur and various American ports; she did, however, set a speed record from Bayonne to Port Arthur covering 1,882 miles (3,029 km) in four days, twelve hours, an average of more than seventeen knots.^[5]

Malta, Pedestal Planned and the Ohio

Britain was, in 1942, waging an active war in the Mediterranean against the Italian forces in North Africa and Rommel's Afrika Korps. Critical^[6] to this theatre of operations was the island of Malta,^[7] sitting in the middle of Axis supply lines, capable of causing severe shortages to the German and Italian Armies in North Africa, if properly supplied with munitions, aircraft and fuel. Munitions and aircraft were, to a large extent, available to the island. In fact, British forces took advantage of a short lull in the heavy and continuous Axis attacks to fly in sixty-one Spitfire Mk V aircraft from HMS *Furious*, which immediately improved the aerial defensive situation. However, food, ammunition, and aviation fuel remained critically short in supply. Successive attempts to try to resupply the islands proved to be a failure; in fact, previous convoys such as *Harpoon* and *Vigorous* (from Alexandria, Egypt) had had most of their merchantmen sunk and their escorts damaged.^[5] Ohio's sister ship SS *Kentucky* was part of the convoy *Harpoon* from Gibraltar. She was crippled by German aircraft and eventually sunk by Italian cruisers.^[8]

On June 18, the Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet cabled the Prime Minister, expressing doubts on the possibility of attempting another convoy run after the disastrous failure of *Harpoon-Vigorous*.^[9] Three days later, the Ohio steamed into the mouth of the Clyde, under the command of Sverre Petersen, a former Master-in-Sail from Oslo, in Norway. One day, in early May 1942, a radio message had reached Captain Petersen which diverted the ship to Galveston, Texas, and then ordered the tanker to proceed to Britain. Before leaving for Britain, the *Ohio* was fitted with one 5-inch (130 mm) gun on its stern, and a 3-inch (76 mm) AA-gun in the bows. Then she moved to Sinclair Terminal, Houston, Texas, where the ship loaded a full cargo of 103,576 barrels of petrol, finally sailing on May 25. *Ohio* discharged her cargo at Bowling-on-the-Clyde, and then steamed out into the tideway and anchored, awaiting orders.^[5]

Here, the Captain received a letter from Lord Leathers, the head of the British Ministry of War Transport, bidding the master a personal welcome "...at your safe arrival in the Clyde with the first cargo of oil carried in a United States tanker." However, the euphoria that such a message brought to the crew was soon to be turned into resentment and anger. A telegram was received the same day by the head office of Texaco, from the War Shipping Administration, announcing simply that the *Ohio* was being requisitioned '*pursuant to the law*'. The immediate reaction was a cabled message from Mr. T.E. Buchanan, General Manager of Texaco's Marine Department to the firm's London agent, that on no account was *Ohio* to leave her discharging port of Bowling-on-the-Clyde. A period of indecision, meetings and debates between the highest American authorities and their British counterparts soon ensued. The master was told that further orders would arrive soon afterwards; however, the decision was finally taken two weeks later, when a launch sped out to the ship anchored in the Clyde and Texaco's London agent, accompanied by an official of the British Ministry of War Shipping came over the side. Here they met the Captain, who was informed that the ship was to be confiscated and handed over to a British crew. The American crew and the captain were exasperated by the seemingly outrageous order, but had no other option but to give in, and started to pack their kit whilst English

seamen started to take over the ship.^[5]

Finally, on July 10, Captain Petersen handed over the ship. There was no formal ceremony, and little goodwill. The American flag was run down, and *Ohio* henceforward sailed under the Red Duster. Overnight, she was transferred from American to British registry. For convenience in management, *Ohio* was handed over on July 25 to the British Eagle Oil and Shipping Company, which was warned of the importance of the impending convoy and that "...much might depend on the quality and courage of the crew."^[10]

As the British Eagle Oil crew started to assemble, it became obvious that there was a large convoy being planned. Command of the ship passed to Captain Dudley W. Mason, who at thirty-nine had already held other commands, while James Wyld was to be Chief Engineer. Forty-eight hours after *Ohio* had been transferred to British registry, her crew was completed. The ship's company numbered seventy-seven, and it included no fewer than twenty-four naval and army ratings to serve the guns. The ship was then moved to King George V Dock, and the Oerlikon and Bofors armament was placed aboard and fitted.

Ohio and Pedestal

Main article: Operation Pedestal

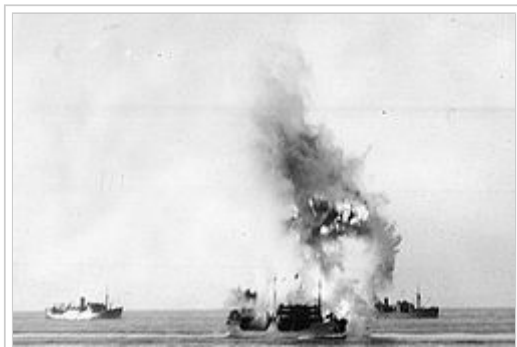
After the disastrous failure of the mid-June convoy, it was questioned if Malta could hold out on the meagre supplies rescued from 'Harpoon-Vigorous', until another convoy could be organized. Running a convoy in the brilliance of a Mediterranean moonlit period was to court inevitable disaster, and this limited operations in the immediate future to the moonless period in July or August between the 10th and 16th of those months. July was out of the question, since the tanker *Ohio* could not be fitted out in time. Once the due planning had been made it was decided to begin the operation in August. *Ohio* sailed down to Duglass in the Clyde and loaded 11,500 tons of kerosene and diesel fuel oils. She was the only ship carrying these supplies which were so vital to the survival of Malta. Before she sailed, however, special strengthening was given to the tanker to protect her against the shock of bombs exploding near her. In the previous convoy, the tanker *Kentucky* had been sunk with only a few hours' repair work needed on a steam-pipe, which had been broken by the force of such explosions. The Ministry was determined that this should not happen again, and so the *Ohio's* engines were mounted on rubber bearings, to reduce shock, and all steam-pipes were supported with steel springs and baulks of timber. While the merchant ships were gathering in the Clyde, the naval forces had already reached Scapa Flow. Admiral Syfret joined HMS *Nelson* there on July 27 and held a convoy conference on August 2, the same day all leave had been stopped. At eight o'clock that evening, two hours before dusk, the convoy sailed. The fourteen ships, led by HMS *Nigeria* formed up, it was dark by the time they reached the open sea.^[11]

The Convoy entered Gibraltar in heavy fog on August 10. The day after, four torpedoes from German submarine *U-73* sank the aircraft-carrier HMS *Eagle*, killing two-hundred-and-sixty men, and losing all but four planes. On this day, German bombers attacked the convoy.^[11] On August 12



Rear-Admiral H M Burrough, CB, who commanded the close escort, shaking hands with Captain Dudley Mason

twenty Junkers 88s attacked the convoy, while a further combined strike by one-hundred German and Italian planes attacked the merchantmen. It was during the ensuing mayhem that the tanker was torpedoed by the Italian submarine *Axum*^[12] and caught fire. The *Ohio* was torpedoed amidships, where a huge pillar of flame leapt high in the air above mast height. *Ohio* seemed to be out of control; Captain Mason ordered the engines to be shut down, with all deckhands available putting out the fire with the deck water-lines. Lighted kerosene bubbled up from the fractured tanks, while little goutts of flame spattered the deck on to a distance of thirty yards from the blaze. Fortunately however, the flames were put out and the tanker managed thirteen knots after being repaired. The blast destroyed the ship's gyro and brought the magnetic compass off its bearings, while the steering gear was lost, forcing the crew to steer with the emergency gear from aft.^[13]



The Italian submarine *Axum*'s torpedo strikes the tanker on her port side.

A hole, twenty-four feet by twenty-seven feet, had been torn in the port side of the amidships pump-room. The blast had also blown another hole in the starboard side and the compartment was flooded. There were jagged tears in the bulkheads and kerosene was bubbling up from adjoining tanks, seeping in a film up through the holes in the hull. The deck had been broken open, so that one could look down into the ship. From beam to beam the deck was buckled, but the ship held together. Another sixty Stuka dive bombers attacked the convoy, focusing on *Ohio*.^[10] A series of near misses ensued as the tanker approached the island of Pantelleria. Bombs sprayed the decks of the tanker, while aircraft machine-gunned the deck. One exceptional near miss occurred when a bomb buckled the tanker's plates and the forward tank filled with water. The three-inch (76 mm) gun at the bows twisted in its mountings and was put out of action. A formation of five Junkers 88 was broken up by the tanker's anti-aircraft guns, with the bombs falling harmlessly in the sea. Another plane, this time a Junkers 87 was downed by an *Ohio* gunman, however the plane crashed straight into *Ohio*'s starboard side, forward of the upper bridge, and exploded. Half a wing slammed into the upper work of the bridge and a rain of aircraft parts showered the tanker from stem to stern. The bomb of the plane fortunately failed to explode.^[11]

As the ship turned slowly to comb torpedoes, two sticks of bombs fell on either side of the tanker. The ship lifted, and went on lifting until she was clean out of the water. Cascades of water spray and bomb splinters lashed the deck, and finally she fell back with a back-breaking crash. The *Ohio* had differential gearing which slowed the propeller automatically; on other ships, the same effect would have shaken the engines out of their rooms. Continuously bombed, the tanker kept on steaming until a gigantic crash to starboard sent her reeling to port. The engine-room lights went out, and they were in darkness. The master switches had been thrown off by the force of the explosion, and they were quickly switched on by an electrician. This time, the ship had not escaped damage. The boiler fires were blown out, and it was a race against time to restore them before the steam dropped too low to work the fuel pumps. The engineers lighted the fire starter torches to restart the furnaces.^[14] The complicated routine of restarting went forward smoothly and within twenty minutes, the *Ohio* was steaming at sixteen knots again. Then another salvo of bombs hit the ship, shaking every plate, and once more the engines slowed and stopped. The electric fuel pumps had been



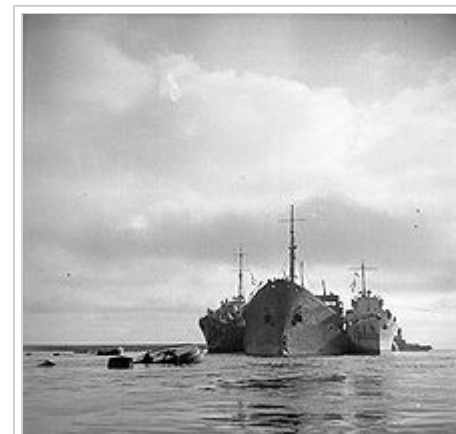
The *Ohio* being nursed by a flotilla of destroyers and minesweepers

broken by the concussion. Desperately trying to reconnect the electrical wires, and restart the engines via the auxiliary steam system the engine-room was filled with black smoke until the engines were properly re-lit. The ship was making alternate black and white smoke, and with oil in water pipes and a loss of vacuum in the condenser (steam turbine) the *Ohio* started to lose way slowly, coming to a stop, a sitting duck, at 10.50 AM. The crew abandoned the ship, boarding HMS *Penn* that had arrived to *Ohio*'s aid alongside another destroyer, HMS *Ledbury*, which was however soon to leave the stricken tanker after being ordered to go in search of the cruiser^[15] HMS *Manchester*, crippled by Italian motor torpedo boats.^[16]

The *Penn*'s commanding officer, Commander J.H. Swain RN, suggested to Captain Mason to tow the tanker with a heavy ten-inch manila hemp rope. With the tow line in place, HMS *Penn* towed the tanker, straining its engines to the limit, however the *Ohio* continued to list to port; the ships were not making any progress, and were in fact drifting backwards due to the easterly wind. Now both ships were sitting ducks, and as another serious attack developed the destroyer went to full speed to part the tow, snapping the manilla rope in frayed ends. A bomber came down the tanker and was shot down by the *Ohio*'s gunners, but just before exploding the German airmen had released their cargo.^[17] A bomb hit the tanker just where the initial torpedo had hit her, effectively breaking her back, just as night was setting in. The ship was abandoned for the night. The day after, HMS *Penn* was joined by the minesweeper HMS *Rye*. The two ships towed the tanker and succeeded in gaining a speed between four and five knots, overcoming the tendency to swing to port. However, another attack blasted the group of ships, snapping the towing lines and immobilizing the *Ohio*'s rudder. Another bomb hit the fore-end of the front deck, forcing the engineers out of the engine room. Once more, Mason gave the order to abandon ships, as two more air attacks narrowly missed the tanker. A superficial examination showed that the rent that had developed in the amidships section had widened and that the ship had almost certainly broken her back.^[18]

The two ships around the tanker were joined by HMS *Bramham* and by HMS *Ledbury*, returning from her search for HMS *Manchester*. Meanwhile *Rye* had again begun to tow *Ohio* with the newly arrived *Ledbury* acting as a stern tug. With less pull from *Ledbury*, a fair speed was maintained, but steering proved impossible. A stabilizing factor was needed, and this Commander Swain edged *Penn* to the starboard side of *Ohio*. *Rye*, joined by the *Bramham* slowly got under way again, with the *Ledbury* acting as a rudder. Another Axis air attack started just as the group of ships was heaving at six knots. At 10.45 AM the first wave of dive bombers came streaking over the water. Only one oil bomb crashed close to the bows of *Ohio*, showering her with burning liquid. Then came three more echelons of German planes. This time, however, close air support from Malta was available.^[19] Sixteen Spitfires, of 249 and 229 Squadron from Malta had sighted the enemy.^[20] The first enemy formation wavered and broke. The second formation also broke, but one section of the Junkers 88 formation succeeded in breaking free, making for the tanker. These were swiftly followed by the Spitfires. Three of the German planes were shot down or maneuvered to evade the Spitfires, however one bomber held its course, and a 1,000-pound bomb landed in the wake of the tanker. The *Ohio* was flung forward, parting *Rye*'s tow, buckling the stern plates of the tanker and forming a great hole.^[21]

Ohio was sinking not much more than forty-five miles west of Malta. Under the protection of the Spitfires, the



The damaged tanker, supported by Royal Navy destroyers HMS *Penn* (left) and HMS *Ledbury* (right)

danger of enemy attacks receded. After the tow line was parted, the *Ledbury*, still secured to the *Ohio* by a heavy wire had been pulled round by the heavy yawing tanker, and had ended up alongside *Penn*, facing wrong way. After a quick analysis of the possibilities, it was decided to tow the tanker with a destroyer on either side of the tanker. *Bramham* was immediately ordered to make fast to port, while *Penn* remained coupled to the starboard side.^[22] The speed was increased and kept to five knots, while the deck of the *Ohio* was awash amidships. Now under the protection of the coastal batteries of Malta, the group of ships were slowly heaving around the island, approaching the Grand Harbour. The coastal batteries fired on a creeping U-Boat conning tower, and scared off a group of E-Boats. Slowly, the group approached the tricky approach towards the harbour, near Zonqor Point. Here the group ended in the approaches of a British-laid minefield.^[23]



SS *Ohio* entering the Grand Harbour of Malta
lashed between two destroyers

At 6 AM, with *Ohio* still hovering on the edge of the minefield, the situation was eased by the arrival of the Malta tugs. With destroyers still linked on either side of the tanker, these sturdy ships made fast ahead and astern, and the tanker was soon proceeding up the channel to the Grand Harbour entrance.^[24]

There, a fabulous welcome awaited them. On the ramparts above the wreck strewn harbour, on the Barracca, St Angelo and Senglea, great crowds of Maltese men and women waved and cheered and a brass band on the end of the mole was giving a spirited rendering of Rule Britannia. Captain Mason, however, standing at the salute on the battered bridge of the *Ohio*, could spare no moment's thought for the pride of bringing the ship to harbour, since the creaking plates showed that the *Ohio* might still end at the bottom of the Grand Harbour.^[25]

Pipes were now hauled aboard and emergency salvage pumps began to discharge the kerosene. At the same time, a fleet auxiliary, the *Boxall*, began to pump the 10,000 tons of fuel oil into her own tanks. As the oil flowed out, the *Ohio* sank lower and lower in the water. The last gallon left her and simultaneously her keel settled on the bottom.^[26] Her captain, Dudley William Mason, was subsequently awarded the George Cross.^[27] After *Ohio* reached Malta, the ship broke in two from the damage it had sustained. There were insufficient shipyard facilities to repair the tanker, so the two halves were used for storage, and later barracks facilities for Yugoslavian troops. On 19 September 1946, the two halves were towed ten miles (16 km) off the coast, and sunk with naval

gunfire. The aft section sank first, followed by the forward half.^[28]

Epilogue

The final ship built for the Texaco fleet was the *Star Ohio*, in honour of the famous ship of the Second World War. She is operated by Northern Marine Management on behalf of Chevron.