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## Stan Mayes

### 6. San Emiliano

This page is focused on Stan's account of his voyages on the ship but there is a history of San Emiliano on the Benjdog website [HERE](#) which contains a number of Stan's photos from these voyages.

#### Joining

*Following my leave from **Adula** I reported to Tilbury Reserve Pool and producing proof of 4½ years service in sailing barges I was promoted to Able Seaman. **San Emiliano** was in Tilbury drydock and I signed on her on 18 September 1941.*

*Known to merchant seamen as the Western Ocean, I made four return voyages on the North Atlantic and each cargo was 12,000 tons of Avgas - aviation spirit. Three of the voyages were made during a 6 months running Agreement of Articles - a contract, and a seaman could only pay off with a good reason. My four voyages totalled 7 months and 23 days from 18 September 1941 to 23 April 1942. Master of **San Emiliano** was Captain J.W.Tozer.*

*Her Chief Officer for my first two voyages was Mr A.J.Hawkins O.B.E. who had been 2nd Officer of **San Demetrio** during her epic voyage in convoy HX 84 in November 1940 - "Jervis Bay" convoy. Her crew had abandoned ship after being shelled and set on fire by German warship Admiral **Scheer**. Later Mr Hawkins and some crew re-boarded the ship and sailed her to the Clyde in nine days. I have a pal Cliff Cottis of Tilbury who was Ordinary Seaman on San Demetrio and helped to salvage her.*

#### Voyage 1

*Sailing from Tilbury we joined convoy FN 521 of 10 ships and sailed North to Methil. The Channel was closed to shipping at this time. The convoy had air cover from Coastal Command with aircraft constantly overhead and all ships arrived safely. While at anchor off Methil, ships from East Coast ports began arriving and later convoy EC 76 of 90 ships was formed and we sailed for Loch Ewe.*

*Passing through Pentland Firth, a few German aircraft attempted to attack by were driven off by RAF fighter planes. The convoy arrive safely at Loch Ewe in NW Scotland. Loch Ewe was another major convoy port - always busy with many ship movements. On 28 September 1941 we sailed from Loch Ewe in convoy ON20 which was comprised of 57 ships and 12 escorts. The Commodore ship for this convoy was **Port Freemantle**. U-boats were in the vicinity for the first few days as we heard detonations of depth charges.*

*On 9 October the convoy was dispersed and all ships continued on to various destinations and, following a call into Halifax, we then sailed for New York and arrived there on 15 October. At Elizabeth NJ we loaded 12,000 tons or Argas and on 19 October we sailed independently for Halifax. Halifax was a large and busy convoy port with a natural harbour, and at times more than 100 ships could be seen there in Bedford Basin awaiting orders to join a convoy. There were also shipbuilding yards and facilities for ship repairing and it was a major base for the Royal Canadian Navy.*

*On 22 October we sailed in convoy HX156. This convoy consisted of 52 ships and 16 escorts - 10 of the escorts were of the US Navy although the Americans were still neutral at this time and they did not enter the war until 7 December 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. The Americans escorted our convoys to within 500 miles of the UK. The average British public were unaware of this great help in providing protection to our convoys but merchant seamen knew of it and will be eternally grateful.*

*The Commodore ship for HX156 was **Nestor**. There were also three CAM ships (Catapult Aircraft Merchantmen) in the convoy - **Empire Day**, **Empire Foam** and **Empire Rainbow**. It was an uneventful voyage until 31 October 1941 when an attack on the ships was made by **U-552**. The US destroyer **Reuben James** was torpedoed and she exploded into a huge fireball which lit up the sky and I witnessed her loess just before dawn from our position in the convoy a mile from her. **Reuben James** broke in two with a heavy loss of life. 115 crew were killed by 45 were rescued. **U-552** and **Erich Topp** escaped. The tragic incident occurred 600 miles SW of Iceland. Reuben James was a four-funnelled destroyer; the Americans gave us 50 of these in exchange for the use of Trinidad and Bermuda as naval bases.*

*The convoy dispersed in the Irish Sea and our ship entered Belfast Lough on 4 November 1941 to await a convoy Southbound to the Bristol Channel.*

*On 6 November we joined convoy BB97 - 19 ships and 2 escorts and sailed. We arrived and berthed at Swansea on 8 November and discharged cargo. There was much devastation in Swansea from the air blitzes during 1941.*

#### Voyage 2

*Following discharge of cargo we sailed to Milford Haven on 10 November 1941 and we joined a convoy for Bangor Bay and from here we joined Convoy ON 36 of 47 ships and 15 escorts.*

*The Commodore ship was **Glendale** and two sister ships of **San Emiliano** were also in the convoy - **San Cirilo** and **San Delfino**. CAMships **Empire Ocean**, **Empire Rowan**, **Kafiristan**, **Empire Day** and rescue ship **Zaafaran** were also in the convoy. The voyage was uneventful and the convoy dispersed at 49.24 N, 46.15 W on 25 November 1941.*

***San Emiliano** sailed on to her destination New York and arrived on 1 December 1941 and berthed at Bayway NJ. During our visits to New York we found the people to be very friendly and sociable and many of them came to ships with invitations to visit their homes and we were entertained at theatres and restaurants and were given food parcels to take how to our families. We were also given books and magazines. On one occasion, three shipmates and I were taken to see a performance of Frank Sinatra and as it was in his early career as a singer we experienced the mass hysteria of his numerous young fans - an unforgettable experience.*

*Normally a tanker is on a quick turnaround and way to sea, but during the war years there was a period of waiting at anchor until enough ships had assembled to form a convoy. And so it was in New York with 3, 4 or 5 days to enjoy shore leave after loading a cargo. There was a large seamens*

#### Basic Data: San Emiliano

**Type:** Tanker  
**Registered owners, managers & operators:**  
 Eagle Oil and Shipping Co  
**Builders:** Harland & Wolff Ltd.  
**Yard:** Govan, Glasgow  
**Country:** UK  
**Yard number:** 1015G  
**Registry:** Glasgow UK  
**Official number:** 167216  
**Signal letters:** N/K  
**Call sign:** GRGL  
**Classification society:** N/K  
**Gross tonnage:** 8,071 tons  
**Net tonnage:** 4,818 tons  
**Deadweight:** 12,152 tons  
**Length:** 479 ft 5 in  
**Breadth:** 61 ft 2 in  
**Depth:** N/K  
**Draught:** 27 ft 0 in  
**Engines:** N/K  
**Engine builders:** Harland & Wolf  
**Works:** Belfast Engine Works  
**Country:** UK  
**Power:** 4,300 bhp  
**Propulsion:** Oil engine  
**Speed:** 12 knots  
**Cargo capacity:** 12,000 tons  
**Crew:** 48 at time of sinking

club in South Street. This time we sailed on 3 December independently for Halifax to join a convoy there, and arrived on 6 December. The following day while we were at anchor in Bedford Basin we heard of the attack on Pearl Harbour by the Japanese. Next day, 8 December 1941, convoy HX 164 was formed. This convoy had 46 ships and 12 escorts - 5 of them were US destroyers now officially at war. The Commodore ship was **Glenaffric** and we had CAM ship **Empire Day**.

Although there was much activity by U boats in the North Atlantic at this time, we had an uneventful voyage and the convoy was dispersed in the Northern Irish Sea and our ship entered Belfast Lough on 23 December 1941. Here we lay at anchor Christmas Day and on Boxing Day we joined convoy BB 116 for Milford Haven, arriving there on 27 December 1941. BB 116 consisted of 9 ships and the Dutch destroyer **Heemskerck** was the only escort.

We discharged cargo at Swansea and Chief Officer Hawkins was relieved by T.J.Finch.

### Voyage 3

We had New Year in Swansea - I remember a pub named "Red Cow", and on 4 January 1942 we sailed for Milford Haven arriving the same evening. On 5 January 1942 we joined a convoy, sailed North and later rendezvoused with convoy ON 54 from Liverpool - the Commodore ship was **Melmore Head**. The tanker **British Destiny** was in this convoy - 2nd column/2nd ship and we were 2nd column 4th ship. After 10 days sailing the convoy dispersed and all ships continued on to various destinations: **San Emiliano** and **British Destiny** both for Aruba.

We arrived at Aruba on 28 January 1942, loaded and sailed for Halifax on 30 January 1942. After passing through Mona passage we began to receive calls from ships reporting the sighting of U-boats off the East Coast of the USA. This was the beginning of the period known to U-boat crews as "The happy times".

More than 500 ships were sunk off the East coast of the US before Admiral King of the US Navy introduced a convoy system. One of the ships sunk there was Canadian passenger ship **Lady Hawkins** on 19 January 1942 by **U-66**. About 250 passengers and crew were killed.

On hearing an SOS from a ship ahead of us we diverted course and entered Hamilton Bermuda on 6 February 1942. When darkness fell we sailed for Halifax on 10 February 1942.

At Halifax, the Master of **British Destiny** stopped shore leave for the crew as many of them had been logged heavily in Aruba for various reasons. During darkness some of the crew launched a lifeboat and went to the shore where they were soon arrested and imprisoned in Halifax. I did not know this at the time but some weeks later a brother of one of the seamen told me of it. Three of them were from my home town Grays.

While at Halifax another shameful incident occurred concerning British seamen. The American passenger ship **George Washington** had been loaned to us and was undergoing repairs. Many of her crew went on the rampage and caused havoc and damage in the town. A seamen's club which had been recently opened by Gracie Fields was wrecked.

At Halifax, convoy HX 175 was formed and sailed on 13 February 1942. It consisted of 27 ships and 12 escorts. The Commodore ship was **Norwegian** of Donaldson Brothers.

**British Destiny** was also in the convoy. A fairly uneventful voyage of 12 days hearing a few detonation of depth charges and the convoy dispersed in the Irish Sea on 25 February 1942. Many ships including **San Emiliano** entered the Mersey and we berthed at Stanlow. Following discharge of cargo we entered a dry dock at Birkenhead and here the 6 months Articles were ended. The crew were asked if they would sign on again. Some of us agreed on condition it would be for single voyages only and the Master concurred. So we signed off on 2 March 1942 and signed on again the following day.

### Six Months Articles - Running Agreement

The forced rule was a travesty on the part on the shipping companies in forcing a seaman to remain with a ship for six months - especially tankers carrying extremely hazardous cargoes. Also there was a considerable gain financially for ship owners in not having the expense of signing off and on so frequently and not having to pay for fares so often.

If my pals and I had signed another 6 months Agreement there is no doubt it would have been our final voyage as **San Emiliano** was torpedoed and sunk with a heavy loss of life a few weeks after we had left her.

### Voyage 4

This voyage was entered as "Admiralty Orders". Leaving dry dock after a few days we went to anchor and later joined convoy ON 79 and sailed 23 March 1942. The convoy consisted of 39 ships and 11 escorts; the Commodore ship was **Lochkatrine**.

Occasional detonations of depth charges were heard and all ships arrived at Halifax on 7 April 1942. We loaded at this port and next day sailed in convoy HX 184. This consisted of 32 ships and 12 escorts; the Commodore ship was **Cristales**.

There was very little activity by U-boats and the convoy was dispersed in the Irish Sea on 20 April 1942. **San Emiliano** entered Belfast Lough to anchor and on the following day we joined convoy BB 165 for the Bristol; Channel. This convoy consisted of 20 ships and one escort **Pozarica** - an ex MacAndrews ship converted into and anti-aircraft vessel. We arrived at Swansea, discharged cargo and paid off ship after 7 months 23 days.

The cargo capacity of **San Emiliano** was 12,000 tons and she delivered many cargoes of aviation spirit to various ports in the UK during the first three years of WW2 - up to her tragic loss on 9 August 1942. An estimated of in excess of 250,000 tons of aviation spirit carried would have enabled many warplanes to operate during those eventful years.

### The loss of San Emiliano

Sailing together for four voyages were four pals from Grays. Myself (AB), Pat Cousins (AB), Mick Snashall (AB) and his brother Ron Snashall (Steward). We three seamen paid off at the end of voyage 4 but Ron signed on again on promotion to 2nd Steward.

**San Emiliano** sailed from Swansea on 29 April 1942 and later joined convoy OS 27 Southbound towards Freetown. OS 27 consisted of 48 ships and 11 escorts and the Commodore ship was Elder Dempster; **Sobo**. Before Freetown, **San Emiliano** detached and continued on voyage independently for Curacao arriving there on 27 May 1942. She loaded petrol and sailed in convoy to Trinidad on 29 May 1942, then sailed independently for Takoradi arriving 16 June 1942. After discharging cargo she sailed independently

for Curacao arriving 17 July. On arrival at curacao Ron Shashall was taken off ship to a hospital suffering from malaria. **San Emiliano** loaded high octane and sailed for Trinidad on 29 July and arrived on 31 July. On 6 August she sailed independently for Capetown.

On 9 August 1942 she was hit by two torpedoes from German submarine **U-155** and exploded in a huge fireball. There were 8 survivors from a crew of 48. Captain Tozer was among those lost.

Chief Office Finch a survivor was awarded the George Medal and Donald Clarke was awarded the George Cross posthumously.

### **Postscripts**

Following a spell in a Curacao hospital with malaria, my pal Ron Snashall, ex. 2nd Steward of **San Emiliano**, boarded **San Fabian** for his return home as a D.B.S. **San Fabian** joined convoy TAW 15 consisting of 19 ships and 4 escorts and sailed from Curacao for Key West on 25 August 1942.

On 28 August 1942 she was torpedoed by **U-511**. Of her crew, 26 were lost - many of them died after swallowing fuel oil whilst in the sea. Ron survived this disaster by being fortunate in taking to a lifeboat before the ship sank. A US destroyer rescued them and they were landed at Guantanamo in Cuba. Ron arrived home safely after another spell in hospital.

The Shashalls were a well known Tilbury family and father and sons were a credit to the Merchant Navy.

- Father Sid was a Pumpman with many years service with Eagle Oil Co
- Arthur (Mick) was an AB
- Charlie was a greaser
- Ron was a 2nd Steward
- David was a cadet and 3rd mate with Eagle Oil
- Fred served in the Royal Navy.

Apart from sinking **San Fabian** in convoy TAW 15, **U-511** also sank the Dutch tanker **Rotterdam** and damaged **Esso Aruba**.

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