THE SINKING OF THE WARWICK CASTLE
R Valentine

R.M.M.V. Winchester Castle (the ship on which I was serving in at the time) and the R.M.M.V. Warwick Castle were sister ships and in the summer of 1942 both ships, together with others, were engaged in training Commandos at Inverarary for assault work and while we were at Greenock and Gourock, both crews got to know each other very well. I knew quite a lot of them they were great pals and shipmates. So it was not a coincident when we spotted her in our convoy, heading for the Algiers on Operation Torch.

The Fort guarding the entrance to Algiers Bay and manned by French Troops, surrendered at 14.30 hrs. on D.Day plus one which allowed the Assault Fleet who had landed their Troops at Sidi Ferruch, (which was eight miles west of Algiers) to moved into Algiers Bay.

H.M.S.Broke and H.M.S.Malcome which had been sunk by French (our allies) gunfire from the Fort, while trying to breach the boom defence barring the entrance to Algiers harbour the previous day (D.Day), and had received a considerable amount of wounded personnel. The transportation of these men started immediately to the Winchester and Warwick Castle. This was only to be interrupted in the early evening by a lone enemy aircraft and was duly shot down by two Spitfire aircraft, an hour later by a very heavy air raid, consisting of a large quantity of German heavy bombers. The first attack was at sea level spraying the convoy with machine gun bullets then a high level attacks with bombs.

An anti-Aircraft Cruiser which was anchored quite near and abreast of us (I've forgotten the name), took a direct hit on her stern and was one massive inferno on the afterend, amazingly her Forward Guns were still firing. She too added her large quantity of wounded to the pool. Other ships too sustained some damage.

The main bulk of the wounded was put on board the Warwick Castle, she kept her LCA's (Landing Craft Assault) for the purpose of using them as Life Boats on the return trip to the U.K. The Winchester Castle also had quantity of the very seriously wounded men, mainly American service men.

The Assault Fleet then proceeded to return in convoy KMF 1 (*) back to the UK the same way as we came and as we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, it was quite obvious that bad weather was on the way. As we rounded Cape Finistare and proceeded up the Portuguese coast the weather worsened to a force 8 to 9 storm.

I was on the Morning Watch on the return journey and when I came off at eight o clock this particular morning, I had my usual wash and breakfast, before going on the main deck to smoke my last cigarette before retiring to my bunk for a couple hours sleep. I came coming down the starboard companionway to the Weldeck, to my utter amazement, just off the Starboard Bow I saw what I thought was a U-boat, brought into view by the very heavy swell, at the same time I heard the Commodore Ship sounding an emergency turn to Starboard. Within a short while, I heard the old familiar thud of two explosions, which meant only one thing, someone had been hit with torpedos.

As we swung to starboard, I heard a further three more explosions which came from the rear of the convoy, looking back I saw the foremost of the Warwick Castle falling back on the front of the bridge, the top half bending and crashing onto Monkey Island. Of all the empty ships in the convoy, why in hells name had it to be the "Warwick", I remember closing my eyes and muttering to myself, "God, for Christ sake help them", if that doesn't get them, the sea will. How do you leave people in such a predicament?. I can tell you, with great difficulty a very heavy heart and tears in your eyes.

The remainder of the convoy made the Holy Lock, known as "Tail of the bank" without further casualties only minor skirmishes. After a couple of weeks the "Winchester Castle" paid off, most of the crew resigned and had their allotted leave.
When I returned from leave, I was most surprised and extremely pleased to see some of my old pals from the Warwick Castle. They too had signed on, to replace those of the crew who had left. It was then that we (the old Winchester's crew) heard the true epics of what happened when we left them, that fateful day in the Bay of Biscay.

One of the very first fatal casualty was Capt. H Shaw struck by the foremast when it fell on the Bridge, by far the majority of the remaining fatalities were caused by drowning due to the Life boats overturning when they were being launched. Sixty three of the crew where lost that day.

The L.C.A. which was a flat bottomed craft and was loaded with the wounded, took the sea much better and made for the Rescue Ship. The sea was extremely rough and the going was bad, some of the Crafts where swamped and didn't make it, but for those who did, another hazard laid in store.

The Rescue Ship (I think her name was the "Larucks" or a similar sounding name) had been a cross channel steamer and was used on the Holy Head to Ireland run, still had the wooden fender attached to both sides of the ship. The failure to remove of these fenders proved to be a costly and disastrous mistake, in fact it was responsible for most of the appalling loss of life. When the L.C.A's went alongside for the survivors to be picked up, the high seas held them against the ship side and on the rise of the swell, they became lodged under the wooden fender which turned them over, spilling all the men in the L.C.A's into the sea.

There was little chance of picking up anyone in that storm, especially wounded men. Bearing in mind what these men had already been through, in the first instance, the action which resulted in their ship being sunk and wounded, transhipment for the journey home only again to be sunk by enemy action. The terrifying experience of being helpless in a life-boat in a force eight storm and at the last moment when the safety of a ship was in sight, to be thrown into sea. They must have known that their hopes of rescue had now gone, how could God be so cruel ?.

These are just some of the men, that has crossed the bar to anchor in calmer waters, that I remember, when I stand in silence, with my head drooped, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. God Bless you all. We shall never forget you.

The official Report

The RMMV Warwick Castle was struck by torpedoes at 08.50 hours and sank at 10.15 hours on the 12th. NOV. 1942. U-413 claimed the honour

(*) How convoys were named and numbered

Take the last letter of the destination area or port and the first letter the embarkation area or port add "F" for fast 1 for first convoy = UK Mediterranean Fast 1)