

The Captain Wouldn't Run

THE S.S. *Aghia Marina* did not really belong in World War II at all.

A seagoing derelict, she was a 9,000-ton flush-deck tramp built in a British shipyard in 1905 and traded to the Greeks in the 1920s. Always relegated to the slowest convoys, she continued to chug earnestly back and forth across the North Atlantic long after she should have been broken up. In this ship, I had the honor to serve through the great U-boat holocaust of 1942-43. In her, too, I acquired the philosophy which sustained me through the war and which has guided me since.

The *Aghia Marina* and other ships like her were a joke among Allied sailors during the war. Her hull was as thin as tinfoil, and every time a depth charge was dropped in her vicinity she sprang leaks. She had no refrigeration and took her meat along with her on the hoof.

The master of the *Aghia Marina* was Captain Giorgios Chrysochos, to whose gallantry this article is a tribute. The captain, given to dramatics, was in his early 40s, dazzlingly handsome—and he knew it. Under him served a polyglot crew of infinite eccentricity. There was an old fireman who shared his bunk in the fore'st with 15 cats. There was an engineer who groaned all night from frightful diseases. There was a mate who had a fancy, wherever the ship docked, to insert an ad in the local newspaper offering himself in matrimony. He spoke almost no English, but he had a collection of hundreds of letters, many from girls as pretty as Veronica Lake or Betty Grable.

We set out from Halifax, Nova Scotia, one morning in the late fall of 1942. We were in a slow five-knot convoy bound for Loch Ewe in Scotland, carrying general cargo, including six U.S. Army tanks. Probable length of the voyage: two or three weeks, U-boats permitting.

Our maximum speed was 10 knots. On the second day at sea, one of those white Newfoundland fogs which used to be the mariner's nightmare rolled over us. In fogs like this, convoys tended to keep together by will power more than anything else. The ships' radios were silent so as not to attract U-boats. The only communication was by foghorn and by fog buoys trailed out behind the stern to give the vessel following an indication of its distance.

AFTER THREE DAYS of fog, we realized the worst. We heard no more foghorns. The lookout saw no sign of the fog buoy of the ship ahead. We continued at half speed, the fog now being our only protection from the U-boats. When it dissolved into blue skies on the fourth day, we were alone in the Atlantic. I was a wartime sailor, and I had never sailed out of convoy. To be alone at sea for the first time was a sensation that made one almost dizzy.

Captain Chrysochos stood with his chin in his hands at the rail of the bridge, deep in thought. A desperate decision was his alone. Behind us, a few days away, was the safety of Halifax where we could wait for a new convoy. Ahead of us was a 2,000-mile gauntlet of danger.

The U-boat war was at the peak of its intensity, draining the strength away from the Americans and British. The Allied tonnage lost at sea in the North Atlantic every week was so sickening that the British Broadcasting Company had stopped issuing figures.

The captain straightened from the rail. He pushed his cap back on his curls, lit a cigarette, and took a long, luxurious puff. It was a dramatic moment, and he had no intention of throwing it away lightly.

A deadly U-boat lurked beneath the sea, but this decrepit ship and its eccentric crew had an obligation—one all men face and few meet



By
**GEOFFREY
BOCCA**

Author of "Bikini Beach,"
"Life and Death of Sir Harry Oakes,"
"Kings Without Thrones," and
"The Adventurous Life of Winston Churchill"

"Full speed ahead for Scotland," Chrysochos said.

One or two of the Greek seamen crossed themselves, but a feeling of exhilaration consumed us all. I believe that a decision to return to Halifax would have thrown us into a deep depression.

"Do you think we will ever get there?" I asked my relief watch.

He pointed to heaven: "It will be decided up there."

My own feeling was that it would be decided from quite the opposite direction, but that was the Greeks for you!

Watches were doubled. We carried our lifebelts even to walk 10 yards. Day after day, the *Aghia Marina* steamed ahead. Our ship's radio was silent, but the radio operator, who suffered from ulcers, reported a depressing number of signals starting, Morse code for the letter U, sent by ships that had been torpedoed.

Even the weather was against us. Rough seas would have afforded a certain protection. But the weather, which should have been bad at that time of year, was glorious, the smooth silver sea merging almost without horizon into the blue sky.

The exhilaration of the crew continued and even increased. The fine baritone of the chief steward rose to the sky as he neatly slit the throat of a sheep and cut the head in two as delicacies for the captain and chief mate. Although we had not realized it consciously, we had become fed up with the mirth that the *Aghia Marina* always aroused when she was in port. We joked about it ourselves, but we really loved the old tub and her new heroic role.

Suddenly the idyll ended, and before we realized it we were in the middle of a scene of pure horror. One moment we were in blue water. The next, we were surrounded by