



Early History of the USS KENNEBEC AO-36

08/22/2003 By CAPT William J. "Bill" Meagher

I was the original 3rd MATE on this ship and was with it from "day one". The KENNEBEC was originally the SS CORSICANA built at the BETLEHEM STEEL SHIPYARD near DUNDALK, MARYLAND and completed in August 1941. I was aboard for the builder's acceptance trials. It was the first of six ships of this class built for the STANDARD OIL COMPANY and named after a town in TEXAS. The FEDERAL GOVERNMENT aided in the cost of the ship so that in time of war they would have the right to take it and put it in FEDERAL SERVICE. The first MASTER of the SS CORSICANA was T. O. JONASSEN, a NORWEIGAN.

Our first trip started on AUGUST 15th, 1941 was to BEAUMONT TEXAS to load gasoline and take it to NEW YORK. The SS CORSICANA was the "FLAG SHIP" of the SOCONY VACUUM fleet. The ship was engaged in the coast wise run from TEXAS TO NEW YORK making the run in 4 days 7 hours. AS 3rd mate I stood the 12 to 4 watch. I was 21 years old at that time. I was a graduate of the NEW YORK STATE MERCHANT ACADEMY AT FORT SCHUYLER NEW YORK CLASS OF 1940.

In APRIL 1941 I accepted a commission as ENSIGN in the UNITED STATES NAVAL RESERVE. On DECEMBER 7th, 1941 the ship was in a BROOKLYN shipyard for some minor storm damage when the attack at PEARL HARBOR occurred. WE were informed the NAVY would take over the ship and we were to take it to the KEY HIGHWAY PLANT BALTIMORE, MARYLAND to turn it over to the NAVY.

ON arrival in BALTIMORE the NAVY came aboard to see if there were any NAVAL RESERVE OFFICERS aboard. Both the chief engineer and I the 3rd mate were NAVAL RESERVE OFFICERS. He was a full Lieutenant and I was an ENSIGN. WE were immediately ordered to active duty and to serve on the same ship now to be called the USS KENNEBEC AO – 36 named after a river in MAINE. As the SS CORSICANA the entire ship complement was 39 total which included the officers and men. As the KENNEBEC we had about 250 in our complement. We added guns, cargo deck, and fueling at sea gear to round us out as a FLEET OILER.

Our first trip was from NORFOLK to BATON ROUGE to pick up a load of fuel oil and take it to "BAHIA" SOUTH AMERICA for fueling a task force operating in the SOUTH ATLANTIC chasing

GERMAN RAIDERS. OUR first trip was quite eventful. This is now MARCH 1942 and the SUBMARINE MENACE is now making itself noteworthy. On leaving BATON ROUGE headed for BAHIA we had the DESTROYER JEWETT as our escort. On our first day into the CARIBBEAN the JEWETT suddenly blew the danger signal on her whistle and signaled us that a torpedo had just gone across our bow and that she was circling us at 32 knots. We went to flank speed and the JEWETT dropped several patterns of depth charges while we got out of there.

When we reached RECIFE the JEWETT left us to continue on into the SOUTH ATLANTIC alone. That evening just as the 8pm watch was being changed we had a collision with a YUGOSLAVIAN ship carrying bauxite. We had a strong following sea, fully loaded, and making turns for 17 knots so with the following sea we must have been making about 18 or more when we hit. She was crossing our bow from starboard to port and we hit her amidships and went right through her. Her bow went down our portside and her after section passed down our starboard side and when they reached our stern they had sunk out of sight. With no radar and running with no lights it was just one of those unfortunate accidents. We saved 7 out of a crew of 24. Most of the ones saved had been on the bridge when we hit.

We had considerable damage to both sides of our bow which became apparent when we reached BAHIA and were able to pump out our load of oil and raise the ship to see the damage. We had a large round hole on the port side and along gash down the starboard Side of the bow. You could look through the hole and the gash from one side to the other. We went up to RECIFE and with the experience of our FIRST LIEUTENANT V.J.BANKS we made temporary repairs went on to ARUBA took on a load of oil to take back to NORFOLK and underwent permanent repairs from our collision. From then till OCTOBER 1942 we made numerous runs from TEXAS to BERMUDA, NORFOLK, and BOSTON carrying oil for shore tanks.

In OCTOBER 1942 the buildup of ships in HAMPTON ROADS, NORFOLK was such that it did not take that much imagination to realize something big was in the wind, but just what no one knew. The troop trains came into NORFOLK all night and day. The troop ships came into the piers loaded up then went out to the anchorage in HAMPTON ROADS. The 2nd week of OCTOBER the convoy sailed out of NORFOLK with the USS KENNEBEC AO- 36 as part of it, and what a convoy it was. When we finally formed up off of the VIRINIA CAPES we had Nine columns of ships with about six ships in each column.

The number one ship in the 1st column was the BATTLE SHIP TEXAS and the number one ship in the 9th column was the BATTLE SHIP NEW YORK. Five miles ahead of the convoy was a Division of light cruisers and three miles astern of them or two miles ahead of the main body was the heavy cruiser AGUSTA, FLAG SHIP of the TASK FORCE. Trailing the main body about 10 miles astern was 4 aircraft carriers. The RANGER and 3 CVE'S the BLOCK ISLAND, SANTEE, and the BOSE. Surrounding this entire convoy was an inner ring of DESTROYERS and an outer ring of DESTROYERS. Operating within 200 miles of the convoy was the new BATTLE SHIP MASSCHUSETTS with their own destroyer escort.

On the 2nd day out we learned our destination was NORTH AFRICA. The task force was made up into three Task groups. The SOUTHERN GROUP WAS TO LAND AT "SAFI" THE CENTRAL GROUP AT CASABLANCA and our group THE NORTHERN GROUP AT PORT LYAUTEY. If you review your history you will know that we did not know whether we would be Opposed or not because of the POLITICAL situation with the "FREE FRENCH"!!!!!!!!!!!!. THE voice code word for commence firing because the landings were being opposed was "PLAY BALL".

On arrival off PORT LYAUTEY the KENNEBEC off loaded the two 50 ton control boats we carried on the cargo deck. After the landings were completed we proceed to CASABLANCA and offloaded our oil into shore tanks retaining enough to refuel our destroyer escorts on the return home. From then OCTOBER 1942 till about JULY 1943 the KENNEBEC made a number of convoy runs from NEW YORK to CASABLANCA.

In JULY 1943 The KENNEBEC was assigned to TASK FORCE 22 and was on 8 hours sailing notice for 4 months while at ARGENTIA, NEW FOUNDLAND. This TASK FORCE was formed to assist the BRITISH in case the GERMAN FLEET tried to break out of TRONDHEIM. Nothing ever happened so the TASK FORCE was dissolved in DECEMBER 1943.

In the middle of DECEMBER I received orders to proceed to NEW ORLEANS and put in commission a brand new ship as commanding officer and to proceed to the SOUTHWEST PACIFIC and join the 7th FLEET for operations in that area. After 26 months and the war over I was relieved and returned home. After 4 months leave I was assigned as navigator of the USS MT OLYMPUS AGC 8 FLAGSHIP OF OPERATION HIGH JUMP the NAVYS ANTARCTICA EXPEDITION to the SOUTH POLE with ADMIRAL BYRD. On our return from this trip I went to inactive duty staying in NAVAL RESERVE and retiring in 1980.

AO-36 Life Member #132
CAPT William J. "Bill" Meagher, USNR
Aboard 1942-43 as LT
LCDR when separated from active duty