

Contributed by David Bradley

"I came across my late father's WWI diaries (which I'm not sure he was supposed to keep) and he mentions a particular ship which I was delighted to find in your archives - Tank Landing Ship LST. He describes a journey which is not mentioned in the service history of the ship, perhaps because of the rather ignominious docking in Taranto!"

Excerpt from diary of John Bradley – a signaller in British 5 Corps – who sailed from Bizerta in Tunisia, North Africa to Taranto in Italy. He was a keen entomologist, and after the war worked at the Natural History Museum in London, hence the comments about moths seen on the trip.

14 September 1943

Left the Transit camp at Bizerta 08:00 and usual trial form up we entered docks. The boat was a Yank TLC – No 61 and an all metal welded job. It had large doors opening at the bows with an inner ramp lowered to the quayside. The lorries etc were run on the lighter one being taken to the deck by a lift and the remaining heavier one stored below. We weighed anchor in the evening and sailed down channel towards the sea with the sun setting. At the mouth of channel we anchored till midnight. It was a brilliant moonlight night and very warm. Below deck was like an oven and we decided to sleep atop in the bows. It was very crowded and a job to move about, but sufficient space for everyone to lay down somewhere. I was asleep when we set sail and only awoke in the early hours to find spray coming over the bows backed by a strong headwind. We were then heading due south.

15/9/43 Wednesday

The ship was well built and laid out with a few showers (7) and washing basins and to avoid the crush we got up about 05:00. Breakfast was at 08:45 and after this we sighted Cap Bon and later Pantelleria which we passed on Eastern side only a few miles off and set an easterly course.

16/9/43

Excellent sunny weather and a dead calm sea. No land sighted. We must be in line with Tripoli by evening and still sailing east. Several pigeons and birds passed us – Greenfinch and Swallow. A Convulvous hawkmoth in excellent condition settled on a chap's khaki shirt hanging out to dry and a little later a humming bird hawkmoth buzzed down the ship. At lunch time a school of porpoise approached up and played with the boat swimming just in front of our flat bows letting the ship catch up with them and them leaping out the water and dashing ahead – we were doing 10 knots. They were about 6 ft long – fawn coloured with large dorsal fin cutting the surface and a hole in their heads. One of the sailors saw a shark but I had no such luck. We saw odd porpoises later and occasionally fish jumping the waves.

17/9/43 Friday

Entered Taranto Bay in morning and passed into canal to Mare Piccolo – the inner harbour. A marvellous harbour and in good condition. Plenty of precautionary torpedo nets. No doubt after our air torpedo raid by F.A.A. counted many Italian destroyers and various larger ships anchored around the docks. Only one or two wrecks were to be seen. We cruised up the inner harbour and neared the dockside and were only 10 yards out when the Yanks fouled a torpedo net. Not very surprising considering their seamanship. Previous to this a destroyer had signalled them with lamp then flag with no answer so had to come alongside and hail. It took till sundown to free the boat so it was decided to remain aboard for the night.

18/9/43 Saturday

The transport was successfully shored and we formed up on the docks duly heading over the canal bridge and a few miles out of town to a farm