

## **The Jason A Greek Tragedy which started an Odyssey**

**A Greek Tragedy is a play in which the protagonist falls to disaster in circumstances with which he or she cannot deal; something out of their control. Typically it sets off a chain of events and complications.**

**The word odyssey comes from the Greek 'story of Odysseus' The Odyssey follows the Greek hero Odysseus, king of Ithaca, and his journey home after the Trojan War. A journey full of adventure and trials which should have taken less than a week but lasted ten years.**

**This is a story of a Greek tragedy in which turns into an odyssey. It is a story of bravery and cowardice, of fate, of luck, of dilemma, of human kindness and of resilience in the face of a supreme trial.**

**Jason and his crew of Argonauts set out on a quest for the golden fleece by order of King Pelias in order to place him rightfully on the throne of Iolcus in Thessaly, Greece. Like Odysseus, Jason and the crew of the Argo endured many trials before they found the fleece and returned home to their families.**



**Sebastiano Venier was the commander of the Venetian contingent at Battle of Lepanto in 1571 in which the Christian League decisively defeated the Turkish fleet. The battle of Lepanto was fought in the Peloponnese, Greece, not far from the Venetian fort at Methoni Point. The relevance of this will become clear. After the peace he returned to Venice as a very popular figure, and in 1577, at the age of 81, he was unanimously elected Doge. The Doge's Palace is of course in St Marks Sq Venice and strangely, replicated in the east end of Glasgow at Bridgeton where I used to work.**



**Jason from three thousand years ago and Sebastian from five hundred years ago lend their names to the main prop in a drama played out eighty years ago in the same place, the Mediterranean, more specifically, Greece.**

**By freighter standards at the time the MV Jason was a graceful and fast ship with a six cylinder FIAT diesel engine and a speed of 14 knots. She displaced 6310 tonnes with four cargo holds. Holds that would become tombs. Built at Trieste Italy she was sold to a Dutch subsidiary of the UK shipping company Blue Funnel Line. It was named Jason following Blue Funnel's policy of naming its ships after figures from Greek antiquity and mythology.**

**Jason began her sea trials on 9 May 1940, before Italy entered the Second World War. But the next day Germany invaded the Netherlands, and so Italian authorities seized her. She was renamed Sebastiano Veniero after the 16th-century Venetian admiral and Doge, Sebastiano Venier. 18 months later after crossing the Mediterranean she would lie broken on the rocks at Methoni Point, Greece battered by waves, high winds and freezing rain**



**The battle of Sidi Rezaegh was a shambles. British and commonwealth troops, mainly South African and New Zealanders were engaged with Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps to relieve Tobruk where Australian troops were besieged. Operation Crusader, commanded by General Claude Auchinleck, outflanked the Germans but would soon be outfoxed by the Desert Fox himself, Erwin Rommel. Auchinleck would later be replaced by Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery (Monty or Montgomery of El Alamein).**

**On 22nd November 1941 Sgt Harry Finlayson tank commander, 5th Battalion, 7th Armoured Corps (my dad) was captured near Sidi Rezegh airfield after his radio ariel had been shot off during an exchange with a German panzer. His American-built M3 Stuart light tank, nicknamed the 'Honey' by its British crew, was no match for its enemy, its 37mm 'popgun' against the Panzer's 75mm armour piercing shell and 88mm anti-tank guns. The second shot took out the engine, by out I mean blown out of the tank. Incredibly the crew**

survived and were taken prisoner, while what was left of the battalion retreated.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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**The M3 Stuart 'Honey'**



**The German Panzer III**

Posted missing, 'then killed in action' his father Colour Sergeant William Henry Finlayson received a telegram on Christmas day 1941. His new wife, Ivy Finlayson took a widow's pension and attended his memorial service at St Michael's Church Creech St Michael. It would be six months before she found out he was alive in a prison camp in Italy. There is a grave in the Libyan desert that still bears his name.

With the loss of the bulk of British armour, South African and New Zealand troops were being savaged by the Germans and Italians. The 24th and 26th NZ battalions met a similar fate at Sidi Rezegh on 30 November and on 1 December, a German armoured attack on Belhamed, practically destroyed the 20th Battalion. In the attacks, the New Zealanders suffered 880 dead, 1,699 wounded and 2,042 captured. The 5th South African Infantry Brigade suffered similar losses.

After being addressed by Rommel ("You have fought bravely but for you now the war is over. I have instructed my officers to ensure you are well treated. I wish you luck.") Harry, along with British, Springboks and Kiwis were marched and trucked around 300 miles to Benghazi on the Mediterranean coast. Waiting for them was MV Sebastiano Veniero (SV), which you may remember was previously named 'Jason'. The SV had brought vital supplies from Italy for Rommel's hard-pressed Afrika Korps, running the gauntlet of allied bombers, surface raiders and, as we will see, fatefully submarines. Of the five ships that left for Benghazi from Italy only the SV survived.

Meanwhile, HMS Porpoise, a Grampus class mine-laying submarine was patrolling the sea lanes used by the Italians looking for prey. It would soon find a target. Launched in 1932 and commanded by Lt Cdr E F Pizey, the boat distinguished itself ferrying essential supplies to the besieged island of Malta. Its long distinguished career would end at the bottom of the Straits of Malacca in 1945 with the loss of all hands, just eight months before the end of the war.



Lt Cdr E F Pizey



**HMS Porpoise**

**2000 British and Commonwealth troops boarded what was now a POW ship. It bore no flags identifying it as such, making it a legitimate target. Benghazi to the coast of Italy was a relatively short hop but a perilous one, suicidal in fact. At that time almost 60% of Italian merchant ships crossing the Mediterranean were being sunk.**



**Benghazi Harbour Circa 1941**

**Unbeknown to the Germans, Bletchley Park had cracked German Naval Codes early in 1941 so the location and status of Axis shipping was often known. The Admiralty knew that the SV carried allied POWs but did not signal HMS**



**Porpoise for fear of compromising 'Ultra', the code breaking system devised by Alan Turing and his team of code-breakers. The Admiralty received the decoded German naval signal at 0540 GMT on the 8th December, just after the SV embarked from Benghazi. The decision not to signal was probably made directly by prime minister Winston Churchill.**

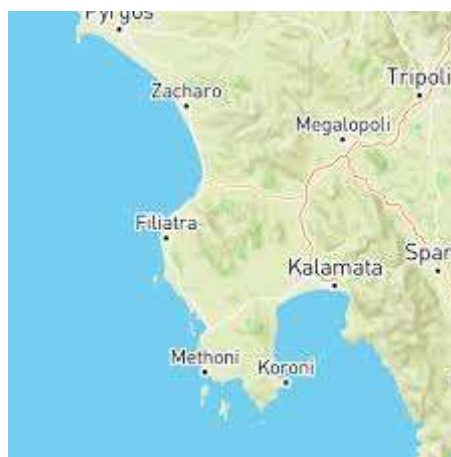


**The Mediterranean**

**The Italian crew of the Sebastiano Veniero were rightly terrified at the prospect of another crossing. Lifeboats were readied on their davits and hung out. A small contingent of Germans were onboard, one of whom would save around 1500 lives through his skill, bravery and sense of honour.**

**There was a swell as the SV left Benghazi harbour on the 8th December 1941, with a strong westerly breeze, with just an ageing Italian torpedo boat as escort, the TP Centauro (Centaur). The weather would deteriorate with gales, freezing rain and two metre waves. The ship was festooned with lookouts seeking the tell-tale spindrift from a periscope.**

**As Porpoise patrolled 3 miles west of Methoni Point on 9th December Captain Pizey raised the periscope high to get its lens above the driving spray. The spindrift from the scope could easily give away the submarine's presence to the Italian Calypso-class destroyer acting as escort to the SV. The shape of the merchant ship came into view and her fate was all but sealed. Porpoise moved into the attack position.**



At 1435 Porpoise fired four Mk V11 and Mark V111 torpedoes in a spread pattern at the target. With a payload of 900 Kgs of high explosive, just one well placed torpedo could sink a ship the size of the SV. However, with four watertight holds she could take a lot of punishment.

Three torpedoes missed, the fourth struck forward between #1 and #2 holds, around four hundred men died some instantly from the blast, many others



drowned. The force of the explosion hurled the heavy hatchway covers to mast height, the falling timbers killing dozens of men trying to escape from the hold. From the flooded No.1 hold only five men survived. Most of the panic stricken Italian crew abandoned the ship taking all the lifeboats, leaving the passengers to their fate; the ultimate crime on the high seas. The Italian hospital ship Arno later appeared on the scene but ploughed its way through the men struggling in the water and kept on sailing, its priority being the rescue of the crew of a German ship sunk nearby.



**Methoni Castle Today**



**The Jason on the Rocks Methoni Castle 9 December 1941**

Launching lifeboats at 12 knots is a dangerous manoeuvre, but on seeing the tracks of the first three torpedoes the Italian captain, who would later be court-

**martialed for cowardice and it is thought, executed, panicked and abandoned ship with his officers and deck crew.**

**Within five minutes of the attack Centaur would drop 22 depth charges none of which fell near the escaping sub.**

**Undamaged, the engine continued to throb and the steering gear was still serviceable. The main problem was water in the now flooded forward holds lifting the stern. If the propeller was raised above the water level the ship would be unsteerable and at mercy of the now westerly gale-force winds. The German officer, believed to be a marine engineer, took control of the ship. Waving his Luger pistol he ordered the remaining Italian crew to keep the engine running and set a course for Pilos Harbour some 5 kilometres to the north-east. Crucially, he ordered everyone available to move to the stern to try to force the now exposed propeller lower into the water.**

**Meanwhile all hell had broken loose below, with countless acts of courage to save lives. Some stories are too gruesome to repeat here. As is sometimes the case in tumultuous events strange things happen, one such instance was when a Zulu, blown out of a hold into the sea found a liferaft and clung on for more than 24 hours, eventually being rescued. The rescuers must have been astounded.**

**By skill, luck and courage the German officer (who has never been identified) beached the ship on rocks in the lee of the Venetian castle at Methoni Point, not far from where its namesake Admiral Sebastian Venier fought a sea battle four-hundred years before.**

**The first instinct of those on board a ship in clear danger of breaking up on rocks or of sinking is to get off. After several hours one brave man managed to swim ashore with a rope. It took him 90 minutes to get 20 metres to shore. The Italians at first treated him roughly before realising what he was doing. The equivalent of a breeches buoy was rigged and with great effort around survivors were able to get off, but not without casualties, many fell into the**

boiling surf and were drowned or battered to death against the sharp rocks surrounding the castle. If they had just waited. The ship was fast on a rock shelf and held together. The next day, though cold, was calm and dry. The remaining 1500 POWs and crew were evacuated by tenders. The brave man was Lance Corporal Bernard Friedlander of the 3rd Transvaal Scottish Regiment. A German officer who witnessed his bravery put him forward for a bravery award and in 1947 King George VI presented him with the George Medal at a ceremony during the King and Queen's visit to South Africa. Friedlander died in 1986.

All prisoners who managed to reach the shore were confronted and most manhandled by hundreds of Italian occupation troops. They were taken to a makeshift camp, a warehouse with a cold concrete floor where during the next few months many died from frostbite and disease.

The Italian occupiers were poorly led, poorly fed and not happy to see their uninvited guests. Treatment of the POWs was appalling. By contrast local people, themselves verging on starvation, gave the allied troops clothing, food and cigarettes. Some managed to hide POWs who had slipped away from the Italians and others helped tend wounds. All this with the threat of beatings or worse from the occupiers.

From the warehouse at Methoni the POWs were taken to the castle at Pilos and then to a makeshift tented camp they nicknamed 'Dysentery Acre' then on to Patras in the North and from there across the Ionian Sea to Italy; many died, the luckier ones ended up in hospital where treatment and food were far better. In May 1942, the prisoners were transferred to Campo 85 at Turrano in Italy, five months after the attack. Thereafter each POW had his own story, my father included. For him the odyssey would last another three years of unimaginable hell.

The drama that played out before, during and after the events on that fateful night was an epic involving a cast of thousands from the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, the UK, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand Greece and other

Commonwealth countries. Now eighty years on the drama is being replayed. The lessons have not been learned, we have forgotten the insanity and the tragedy of war, the sacrifice. It reminds me of the poem 'Recessional' by Kipling. It was for Queen Victoria's Jubilee; one verse seems particularly apt.

*The tumult and the shouting dies;  
The Captains and the Kings depart:  
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,  
An humble and a contrite heart.  
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget - lest we forget!*

## Epilogue

My father told me almost in passing that a POW ship he was on foundered at Methoni. He made no fuss about it. As I researched the event, its enormity and the enormity of events before and after became apparent.. The battle at Sidi Rezegh was one of the fiercest and bloodiest of the North African campaign, if not the 2nd world war. The attack on the Jason resulted directly and indirectly in the death of hundreds of allied POWs, made worse because it was perpetrated by their own side in the full knowledge of the British Admiralty and probably the prime minister. Two more similar attacks took place two months and six months later, first HMS Torbay in February 1942 then another submarine, HMS Turbulent, torpedoed the Nino Bixio carrying allied POWs.

Whilst researching I came across a reference to an obscure book 'No Honour No Glory' written by New Zealanders Spence Edge and Jim Henderson which provided eye-witness accounts of the attack. I couldn't find a copy in the UK. I half-jokingly asked one of my then Board members who was visiting his daughter in New Zealand to see if he could find a second-hand copy - he did. Upon reading the book and researching himself he realised that his father had also been on the same ship at the same time. It didn't end there. It turned out that another board member's father had also been aboard the escort, the Centaur, on that fateful journey - a truly unbelievable set of coincidences.

In September 2023 I travelled to Methoni Point to meet local people to thank them belatedly on behalf of my father and those who survived that terrible night. A plaque presented by Australian veterans was erected in Methoni and another in Pilos. The graves of many of those who lost their lives now lie in a cemetery in Athens.

