

*Courtesy of Maria Pia Pizzali*

## **Extract from “Mediterranean Odyssey**

**Diary of Lt. Cecil C. Sanders, U.S.N.R., while serving with Motor Torpedo Squadron 15 as Captain of P.T. Boat 216 in the western Mediterranean during World War II**

### **FORWARD**

The following diary laid dormant for over fifty years, the diary in an office filing cabinet and the pictures in a cardboard box in a closet. My first wife, Viola Layton Sanders who died in 1979 and my present wife, Mary Elizabeth Gulley Sanders both urged me to put them in a form that my children and grandchildren could read, see and enjoy. It was not until sometime in 2001 that I finished them in the present form. The location of a ten thousand ton ship that was sunk by PT 216, on the night of July 24, 1943 and which was discovered in 2001 by amateur divers in over 300 feet of water off the coast of Palmi, Italy was the impetus that caused me to take the diary and pictures out of mothballs. One of the divers, Maria Pia Pezzali of Rome, Italy, traced me down and told me she and other divers had found the Italian liner Viminale lying on its keel in the sand at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea.

All events were entered by me within 2 or 3 days after they occurred.

The exhibits in the full diary are listed in consecutive numbered appendices at the end of the diary. This diary is dedicated to the memory of all officers and men who in any way served as a part of Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 15.

As I think back now, from my quarters on the PT 216, on the Island of Maddalena, Sardinia on this November 5, 1943, of my brief naval career, i believe this career must had had its beginning when I was in early high school and learned that one of my upper class idols, James Beatty Denny, had received an appointment to the Naval Academy. From that day I had a desire to follow in his footsteps and each time he returned on leave, this yearning grew in my mind. At present, oddly enough, this same Denny, now a Lt. Comdr., is n PT Ron 13, as C.O.. By a hair, I missed going to his squadron from Melville Training Centre, or I should add, by the fact I was an Ensign when he really needed a Lt. (jg).

Back to my original desire to go to the Academy. When i obtained the proper political backing to obtain an appointment I found I was to old by one month. At that time, 1934, I was a sophomore in Transylvania College, Lexington, Kentucky. Since that disappointment in my early life, the idea of Navy was dormant in my subconscious mind , but ready to come to the surface at once as evidenced by my always backing Navy against Army in their football series. In 1941 and early 1942 when i was working on an M.A. at U.K., teaching a half load, and a proof reader on the Lexington Herald Newspaper, i suppose I thought very little about the Navy as, added to all my duties toward making a living, i was supporting a new baby girl, Jerry Sue.

When Pearl Harbour took place, and one by one the draft took men from the News Office, I thought more and more about getting a commission in the naval reserve. I applied to the 9th Naval District, filed out the forms they sent me, and waited. On June 9, I received notification that my application had been selected and sent to Washington, with recommendation for approval. I was as good as in if my physical was O.K. later. I was

somewhat surprised later to learn I had been accepted and was to report to The Motor Torpedo Boat Training Center at Melville Rhode Island for a two months training course.

I managed to get home a couple of days with my family before reporting in Melville on **October 2, 1942**. As I look back on this training period, I see many things that were wrong with the school but on the whole, our small boat men were better qualified than other Navy groups I have been in contact with. When assignments to various squadrons came I found that several of my roommates went to Ron 15 at New Orleans with me. They were Fred Rosen, Knox Eldredge, Robert Boebel, and Hal Lerner. Since then, roommate Jack Kennedy, later our President, has attained great fame in the Pacific as a result of his experiences after having his boat cut in half by a Japanese destroyer.

I left Melville on December 2 and had almost a week at home with my family. I took my wife, Viola, and baby, Jerry Sue, to New Orleans with me when I left Kentucky.

We arrived in New Orleans and found several of the officers, selected from the previous two classes at Melville, already assigned to boats delivered from the Higgin's plant. Our squadron Commander, **Captain Stanley Barnes**, welcomed us and arranged for us to spend the interval, during which our boats were being finished, in going over them thoroughly and learning about the engine set-up, electrical wiring, etc. We soon found out that the first six boats coming out of the plant were to be taken over by the Russian Government. The first six boats were to go up the coast in short hops before Christmas. I was assigned as officer to "supply for the boats" at Algiers Naval Station. I was later put on the PT 211 as Executive Officer with Capt. Page Tullock. Capt. Tullock proved to be a splendid officer and an excellent friend of mine.

We left for New York with the other five boats, we being the PT 198, on January 16, 1943. We were three weeks in arriving and four days in getting rid of the boats. I returned by rail to New Orleans early in February. While we were away, the boys under Captain Barnes received several boats of Ron 15, and the squadron was officially commissioned January 20, 1943.

**On April 28, 1943**, we went out into New York harbour to Andron. The next morning we were at sea with a convoy of 50 ships escorted by the battleship Texas, the Carrier Tracker, and 10 destroyers. It is remarkable to see a convoy work at sea. The Texas gave all orders in day by signal flags and blinker lights and radio at night. All convoys used different zigzag plans underway so that subs could not easily intercept a course. All ships run a certain course and speed simultaneously. If one ship should make a mistake on a dark night, the result would be disastrous. All of our officers ate in the regular mess on board the ship. We had hot showers and movies every night. The PT officers stood regular Junior officer of the deck watches for which we were grateful as the information gained would be valuable if we ever got duty on a large ship. At night we could often feel the thud of depth charges going off as destroyers picked up sub contacts and patterned the area with charges. On a day the Texas lost one of her planes when it tried to land in a rough sea. On the 10 of May 1943, we sighted the African coast and the city of Casablanca. The French Battleship Jean Bart lay on her side in the harbour with a hole in her big enough to run a freight train through. We went on in and docked and I went ashore on liberty that afternoon. The Arabs in their picturesque garbs and the native section-the shops with their leather goods-fascinated me completely. The wine was very strong, having a drugging effect, which could knock one out very quickly. I managed to get in a trip to the Sultan's Palace, which was certainly a beautiful spot. There was not a crane at Casablanca big enough to unload our boats.

**On the 1 of May 1942** we were underway for Gibraltar with a small convoy and destroyer escort. The next morning when I came topside we were just entering the Harbour at Gibraltar. We anchored in the bay at 12.25. Gibraltar is truly what one would expect - a rock. The area is all British and the secrets there are closely guarded. Even with glasses it is difficult to see the gun emplacements. Page Tullock and I met some British friends of the Carrier Tracker and they were kind enough to show us around the rock. There is plenty of good whiskey and many cafes and entertainers from a nearby Spanish town but at 9 o'clock all such civilians must be off the rock until the following morning. On May 15 all 4 boats were craned off the ship and then got underway to test engines. For a few days afterwards while awaiting orders we were busy calibrating compasses, checking torpedoes and generally getting the boats in war condition. Radar was also installed at Gibraltar. On May 7 we left Gibraltar at 0700. The sea was as calm as glass and at 1730 we entered the harbour of Oran. We fuelled immediately and awaited further orders. On the night of May 19 1943, I was duty officer. At 10 o'clock the city's air raid sirens wailed a warning and our guns were barely manned when 4 planes carne over and dropped a string of bombs a hundred yards beyond. Never have I seen such a barrage of fire as came from the ships in the congested harbor. A ship next to us had been hit and was now burning furiously. The barrage Lasted for over an hour. The Base Commander had to issue an order to stop firing. At 2240 the 211 and 216 were ordered out through the nets for rescue work while all the firing was still going on. After searching out at sea for 2 hours and finding nothing to rescue we decided to return. Coming in we sighted a Trawler, which said she had previously shot down a JU 88, which had attacked her. She also had just been missed by a torpedo only few minutes before. When we attempted to come into the harbor the shore batteries mistakenly opened upon us. After several such repulses we felt it safer to come in at daylight. On May 24 we left Oran and arrived at Algiers and the next day arrived in Bone where we found out that the other boats who had come over were ahead of us. At Bone we made more changes on the boats as authorized by Capt. Barnes, had firing practice and ate ashore at Central Park or better known as Rosie's Kitchen. We also underwent a few air raids but none of them turned out to be serious. Cape Bon and Biserta had just fallen a few days before and we were anxious to get orders to move up there. On May 30 we entered Biserta harbor and just as we were coming in we passed Captain Barnes with three boats going out on a regular patrol. I found Biserta to be the most bombed place I had previously seen. Biserta was different. The harbor was almost blocked by submerged wrecks and very few of the buildings were left standing. We docked at the French Naval Facility of Kouruba, which was to be our base. Wrecked planes were strewn everywhere and German booby traps were very, very plentiful.

**On the 6 of June** I took my boat out on its first mission. Captain Barnes had been sending the squadron out on sweeps along the south coast of Sicily anywhere from Marettimo Island eastward beyond Marsala. We drew the Marsala run. It turned out to be uneventful except for a few flares and bomb flashes in the direction of Italian held Pantelleria. I recall that at one time we lost sight of the boat ahead of us. On dark nights we usually travel in column keeping station by the preceding boat's shadow and wake. I increased speed, holding the same course, and overtook the rest of the formation in a very few minutes. We passed beyond Marsala about midnight and moved to within two miles of the coast, then headed back westward toward the harbor breakwater. As we approached the town, we could see lights and buildings plainly and had to veer to port to keep from running into the mole

which extended out to seaward. The Italians even had the courtesy to keep a blinking navigation light at the entrance jetty. No attempts were made to fire upon us and no enemy shipping was sighted. The unusualness of the fact that the many boat divisions who came so close in were never molested was later explained by a captured Italian from the area. He said that each night we went into Marsala Harbor, we were watched from shore by many powerful gun batteries. They did not fire, thinking we were advance boats of an invasion attempt, and wanting to let us almost touch the beach before opening up and wiping out all of our forces. This explanation, to my mind, goes far in explaining why our American landings far on eastward met with no heavier opposition. The Italians, seeing our activity off Marsala and Marettimo, figured these were invasion points, and moved their greater share of beach defences to these areas. On the Marsala and Marettimo trips, we always had a searchlight looking around for us. The sound of our motors when turning up to cruising speed, carries 6 to 8 miles, and obviously sounds much like aircraft, as these searchlights as often searched the sky as well as water. Although I have never run into any Lights, which were backed up by guns, they always caused a prickling sensation to play along my spine when they sweep across our decks. I came back from my first mission with confidence that I could handle the command and reasonably sure that my crew was capable enough to meet Captain Barnes' standards for the squadron. When we go on an average run, we use up 1/2 to 3/4 of our gas capacity of 3,000 gallons. The biggest headache until dark as we take departure from the base, is the amount of daylight left.

**Up to June 21**, when the days were still getting longer, this problem was serious, as there was twilight until ten p.m. or later. Our boats are good targets for light bombers and fighter planes and the closer it gets to dusk the further away we are going from our own fighter protection. Going out we kept half our men on Condition #2 watch, that is, a man on the wheel, one in the charthouse to watch navigation, radio and radar, an engineer on engine room watch, a lookout in the 50 cal. turrets, and an aft lookout by the 20mm No. 1 Oerlikon gun. Any aircraft sighted before sunset called for a general quarters in which we manned all stations fully ready for a fight of any kind. PT boats are veneered plywood. Our greatest protection beside our speed is our alertness. We must either see the planes first and be prepared for them or be hit hard by the first wave to come over. Planes have a usual habit of attacking from the sun, which is practical, as we are blinded looking in to the sun for planes.

Dusk is a usual time for planes to attack as visibility is limited to those on water although above at the heights the planes can attain, there may still be a lot of light left. The new radar equipment has been as useful against planes at night as it is against ships. With it we can tell how fast the plane or planes are approaching and from what bearing to the Bow of our ship they are coming in. On our way out on missions we usually test our guns before dusk. There is good reasoning behind this procedure as jams are often detected and corrected. The men don't like the idea any too well as it definitely means they have to be cleaned the next day in port. Squadron 15 undoubtedly put more emphasis on guns than torpedoes, which is just the reverse of the policies followed by squadrons in the Pacific. I will never forget the remark by Captain Barnes previous to one of our most important missions. "When you fight with torpedoes," he said, "you are fighting for fun, but when you fight with guns, you are fighting for your life." This statement has proven to be true as far as any fighting I have done in the squadron. It is true in the Pacific, too. The squadron that Gambie was in had one man injured in eight months operations against Japanese ships. I understand that man sprained an ankle when the boat he was on ran aground after being chased by a Jap destroyer. Yet his boat nailed 4 or 5 Jap destroyers at 1200 yards with torpedoes. That was

fun! After one of our missions was over, the crews used the following day to sleep. We usually got in between 8 a.m. and noon the next day, although I have been underway as long as 27 hours of continuous operation without sleep for any hands aboard. During our operations from the main base at Biserta, the Captain thought it advisable to anchor out in the lake at night as the boats would be dispersed better from bombing attacks than when laid two and three abreast as they are during the day at the dock. Our 80 foot long boats carry 4 tanks of 100-octane aviation gas and this stuff is literally dynamite. When we gas up, every precaution is taken to avoid static electricity causing fires and explosions. If a boat is hit and set on fire, we have CO tanks that can flood the gas tank areas. After my first operation with my new boat and crew, several days followed in which I had a chance to indoctrinate the men. On June 10 1943, Captain Barnes called a meeting of all officers in his office. Is this the much-heralded invasion we asked ourselves? We soon learned it was only a preliminary. At the meeting the Captain explained that we were to leave the following morning in company with five British MGB's and proceed to Pantelleria which was being invaded at noon on the same day. One task force was to keep enemy E boats from approaching the islands and any boats then at the island, from escaping. A few hours prior to departure the next day at noon, I learned that Captain Barnes was riding aboard my boat and that I was to be the Lead boat. As I had a new and inexperienced crew, this came as quite a shock to me. Lieut. Dick O'Brien also came aboard with the Captain. My first slip came as we were going out the channel from our base at Karouba. The quartermaster did not have the swept channel chart down the coast towards Tunisia. When I so informed the Captain, he very efficiently laced me up and down for inattention to my job as a boat captain. When we cleared the breakwater, Martinez, who I thought would be my best helmsman, turned out to be the worst in following a compass course. Mr. Hal Nugent, my exec., was below laying out courses and speeds. He called up the first course. I passed it on to Martinez. The boat, instead of heading out to sea on the correct heading did a right about face towards the breakwater and at the same time the Captain was blowing up again. I covered up as best as I could, replacing Martinez at the wheel with Mitchell, the Radioman. Mitchell managed to keep a fair course and do better as time went by. The Captain, seeing that our course was apparently kept right now, even went below for a few winks of sleep. At about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, when we were approaching Pantelleria, a formation of twelve fighter planes appeared from the direction of the Island. From our general quarter stations, we watched several peel off and for a few seconds I was sure we were in for a strafing attack. They turned out to be British Spitfires looking us over. We didn't know then that the island had fallen without offering resistance to our landing forces.

**Up until July 9 1943**, when we left for our part in the invasion of Sicily we had been in a beehive of activity getting our boats "ready for war". Our entire group proceeded to a point above Licata with the destroyer Ordroneux. The destroyer left us at 2200 and proceeded around the enemy's off shore mine fields six miles above us where she bombarded the beach. We laid too eight miles off the coast and watched the fireworks. We were supposed to protect the flanks of the invasion against E boats. The next morning at daylight we left for Pantelleria and stayed there several days, thence coming back to Biserta. Up until July 23 we were at Biserta and waited for Palermo to fall. We made two trips to Northern Sicily but saw little except a very bright moon. On the 23 of July 1943 we had news that Palermo had fallen and six boats were sent on their way there. We were to enter the harbour cautiously as the city might have been retaken or our own batteries might open up on us. At 0630 on July 24, we sighted a small vessel hightailing from the general direction of Palermo towards the Italian mainland. We closed in and five boats stood by while the 209 took off several Italian

Naval and Army Officers. Martinez, SC 2C of my crew spoke Italian and Lt. Mutty ordered him and Polk QM 2C to go aboard and help run the captured vessel into Palermo. Three boats, including ours, acted as escorts. At 0900 just outside Palermo Harbor while scanning the horizon with my binoculars, I sighted a small boat to seaward. Lt. Mutty gave me permission to investigate. We captured seven German Air Force personnel who were trying to escape. They threw their rifles overboard but I managed to salvage one, which I now have. We brought them into Palermo and turned them over to Army authorities.

I had an opportunity to spend part of the afternoon inspecting the ruins of the city. At 1910, I was ordered on **July 24, 1943** to go on a mission to the straits of Messina. Arbuckle was in charge, riding on PT 209 and with him was the 216, and the 204. At Messina the enemy covered us with searchlights and we withdrew up the Italian coast. By radar we picked up a target off the town of Palmi. We closed in slowly and by the half moon that was coming over the high cliffs of the Mainland, directly ahead we saw the outlines of a large transport. The 209 fired twice and missed. My starboard torpedo first hit squarely astern and the port one ran erratically. We turned and let the 204 have a crack. She missed twice. Arbuckle ordered us to shell a nearby escorting tug near by. We came in at column formation but I was too close and while the other two boats raked the tug I swung parallel with the decks of the ship raking her with fire from bow to stern to knock out any return fire. We were so close that I could see the super structure clearly etched against the night sky by our shellfire. The tug had no chance to escape and just as she was getting small guns into action we came in on her at 150 yards and raked her with devastating fire. The 204 followed and gave her a terrific blasting. One of my gunners was so intent on his shooting that Ens. Nugent, unable to stop him by shouting and perceiving his fire was arching dangerously close to the 204, struck him with a megaphone to stop him. We sped quickly from the scene in formation as shore batteries were already firing shells uncomfortably close. Soon we were out of range and looking back, I saw the large transport stand bow up and slide quickly beneath the surface. A mighty cheer went up from my crew.