

USS MENGES – DE CLASSIFIED Script

Hello everyone, and welcome to DE Classified, a podcast showcasing the history of destroyer escorts. Each month, a member of the USS Slater's education crew will highlight a specific destroyer escort, and share the stories of the sailors who served aboard these trim but deadly ships. My name is Jo Ann , and it is my pleasure to tell you the story of USS MENGES, DE-320, a ship with an amazing story of tragedy and triumph.

Herbert Hugo Menges was born on the 20th of January, 1917 in Louisville, Kentucky. He was one of six children to his father Charles, a cooper, and his mother, Lena. Upon graduating high school, he attended the University of Louisville with a major in engineering. On the 3rd of July, 1939, he enlisted into the Naval Reserves, and in 1940 was promoted to Naval Aviator, becoming a fighter pilot and learning how to fly a F4F Wildcat. At this point He was assigned to the USS Enterprise and put into squadron 6, and would later be promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade.

After the events of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, ENTERPRISE, who had possibly found the carrier from which the strike could have come from, had sent out Menges's squadron as an escort for a strike group consisting of 18 torpedo TBDs and 6 VB-6 Dauntlesses armed with smoke generators. Upon not being able to find any targets, the strike group went back to ENTERPRISE, and Menges's

escort squad made its way to Oahu to land. While their arrival was expected, upon approaching the island an anti-aircraft battery began to fire at them, and Menges was the first to get hit. He died immediately, and became the first naval fighter pilot to lose his life in US service. He was buried in the Halawa Naval Cemetery on Oahu, but was later reburied in Louisville per request by his father.

The commissioning of MENGES occurred on the twenty sixth of October, 1943, by Consolidated shipping company in Orange Texas. She was an Edsall class, one of 47 built by Consolidated. This class was very similar to the Cannon class such as Slater, consisting of diesel-electric power, However, what differed the Edsall from the Cannon was the use of Fairbanks-Morse diesel engines, which made use of reduction gears, which allowed the Edsall to maintain higher torque while using less fuel. For armament, MENGES consisted of an anti-air complement of 40mm and 20mm guns, three 3 inch/50cal guns, three 20 inch torpedo tubes, and an anti-submarine complement of eight k-guns, two stern racks, and one hedgehog launcher. Another notable feature of MENGES was that she did not have an air search radar, only surface radar and sonar, so the crew would not be able to directly spot air targets until they were in their view. In addition, she would be one of 30 destroyer escorts to be given to the Coast Guard, consisting of 5 escort divisions. Her skipper was commander Frank M. McCabe.

Before doing convoy duty the ship had to go through shakedown in Bermuda. There they would make sure that the crew and equipment were ready for the treacherous voyage across the Atlantic. The ship also went to Chesapeake Bay, where she would go through scholarship duty before getting her first convoy assignment on the 31st of January 1944, going from New York across the Atlantic. This convoy duty would carry on for 3 months, and for that time the ship would not see combat.

That is, until the night of April 20th. MENGES was part of escort division 46, consisting of herself, USS Mosley DE 321, Newell DE 322, Pride DE 323, Falgout DE324, and Lowe DE 325. Their job was to protect convoy UGS-38. Consisting of 85 ships, the convoy was on its way to Bizerte when it was beset upon by several JU-88 torpedo bombers. *Sunset Serenade*, written supposedly by one of the crew in Algiers, is an account of this attack. According to the sailor, they had some of the men even excited to see their first bit of action. The JU-88 “junkers” attack, utilizing the cover of a nearby mountain range to get close to the convoy before pouncing on their prey. He describes the “zigzagging pattern” that MENGES utilized to escape the torpedoes and observes how the ship becomes more noticeable as it moves faster and creates a trail of seafoam. In addition, the sailor was a part of a crew of one of the 20mm Oerlikon guns, and talks about the

barrels for the gun turning orange and his crewmates complaining about how long its taking to reload the magazine.

The planes, being attacked by anti-air cover from the ships, are able to get several torpedoes through the screen of lead, successfully hitting three freighters, only one of them going down, the USS Paul Hamilton. Paul Hamilton, being a ship filled with munitions and a demolition team, exploded in a huge fireball, the sailor saying that “its flames rocketed skyward several thousand feet”, and sank seconds later. In addition, a destroyer was also hit, USS Lansdale DD 426, Lansdale had taken a severe blow and began to go down almost immediately upon being hit. The sailor describes seeing men “blown into the sea”, “screaming in agony”, and others drowning.

Another story, told by an eyewitness, describes how one of the sailors had been pinned to the bulkhead of Lansdale upon it being hit by the torpedo. Fellow crewmates tried to help him escape the ship but his leg was stuck, so they got hold of the ship’s doctor to possibly amputate him. However, as he got to the unfortunate sailor, the ship began to list and turn over, and so the sailor told him to leave him behind.

The planes came in for a second attack, MENGES continuing her fire at the incoming planes, when the unknown sailor recounts how he believes that the ships anti-aircraft weapons managed to take out one of the planes flying at them from the

ship's starboard side. The plane, upon being hit with so much fire, began to wobble and eventually fell out of the sky.

Another sailor, who due to his wishes is unnamed, was a radar operator in the combat information center of the ship until its unfortunate tragedy later in the story. His account of the actual combat is rather slim, due to being stuck in the superstructure of the ship and manning the surface radar. However, he could hear the action outside, the sound of guns and explosions like thunder.

More important to his recollection, however, is his telling of how MENGES and NEWELL, a fellow Coast Guard DE, came to LANSDALE's rescue, saving many of the survivors from the attack. According to the sailor, by the end they had rescued 113 live sailors from LANSDALE, 2 dead, 2 men from SS Stephen Austin, 4 from SS Royal star, and 2 nazi airmen, assumedly the two that were flying the plane that they had shot down. Some of the crew, such as Carl M. Dize, actually jumped right into the water to save some of the crew. Dize, for his actions, would be commended for his efforts. They also managed to transfer over 15 of the LANSDALE crew to NEWELL, who had herself picked up 119 of the crew.

He heard the calls for help that the victims of the attack were crying out, and even heard several people singing "God Bless America ". The author who wrote *Sunset Serenade* also heard these screams, stating that "they were more than a mere mortal could bear". When the men got aboard they were exhausted, fighting

for their lives in the mixture of oil and water, and covered with grime. The radarman describes how the crew gave their long underwear and dungarees to the survivors, stating “The only dungarees that I have now are the ones that I have on now.” Many of the crew were unconscious, but due to the efforts of the ship’s doctor and some helpful sailors they were saved.

The captain of Landsdale, Lieutenant Commander *Swift*, held much praise for both NEWELL and MENGES, stating “On behalf of myself and my crew, I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation for the excellent work performed by all hands aboard the NEWELL and MENGES in rescuing and taking care of the survivors of USS LANSDALE the night of 20 April - Prompt action and many heroic deeds on the part of your crew contributed greatly to the saving of many lives of my shipmates.”

After the attack, and into the next day, the crew was on alert in case more planes came to attack the convoy. The radarman stated in the journal that he had been up all night saving people and standing watch. He only got to go to sleep at 1100 the next day. Fortunately for the crew of MENGES, though, there would be no more air attacks as the convoy continued on its way to Bizerte. Once there she would drop off the survivors that were saved and prepare for another convoy. This was convoy GUS-38, essentially the return trip to Brooklyn. Consisting of 107

merchant ships, 12 DEs, a coast guard cutter, and anti-aircraft cruiser DELHI, it was quite a large return trip.

The convoy did not have any trouble until the night of May 3rd, which would result in tragedy for MENGES and her crew. The 16 columns of merchant ships, screens around them, had reached the Southeastern coast of Spain, and had not seen any signs of trouble. Menges was around three thousand yards out, patrolling the water for any signs of u-boat activity. It was just past midnight when suddenly, the radarman mentioned previously had picked up a target five miles astern of the ship. After a few minutes battle stations were announced and MENGES began to move to investigate the target. As the ship began to move towards the target, it was beginning to move at a speed of 15 knots away from them. This was at a stage in the war in which the Germans had been using acoustic torpedoes so Commander McCabe ordered the use of “foxers”, noise boxes made to disorient the acoustic detection of the torpedoes. After a period of time, the target got lost on the radar. Robert (Bob) McMichael, a soundman who was on duty at the same time as the radar operator, spotted the target right before catastrophe struck at 0118.

Moonlight Vengeance is another work written by an unnamed member of MENGES’s crew. The author recounts how quiet the ship was, and the subsequent “suddenness beyond imagination” of the torpedo hitting the stern of the ship. The

whole ship reverberated at the explosion. In addition, the explosion managed to tear off the propellers and rudders, making the ship dead in the water. There are pictures showing the aftermath, and its amazing to see. The stern is curved into a sort of v shape, the metal rent as if fabric. Everything else is just clutter, a complete whirlwind of disaster.

The author of *Moonlight Vengeance* shows the immediate reactions of the crew at this time, showing how some of them let out liferafts and others even jumped off the ship without flotation, trying desperately to abandon the ship. However, Commander McCabe, unwilling to give up and realizing that the situation at the stern could be contained, refused to give orders to abandon ship, and began to give orders for damage control.

One thing that should be mentioned is how MENGES, with 8 k-guns hit at the stern, did not explode. Bob McMichael recounts the USS LEOPOLD, sunk on the 9th of March, 1944, and their tragic fate by the hands of their own depth charges. If you would like to learn more about LEOPOLD, please check out episode 3 of *DE Classified*. Regardless, due to this the Navy announced that ships were to only go off safety with their charges once within 200 yards of sonar range. It is thanks to this that the crew of MENGES did not suffer a similar fate.

At this point, the submarine that had hit MENGES had resurfaced, and was soon about to hit the ship with another torpedo, spelling doom for the ship, when a

passing Wellington bomber managed to frighten it back into the waves. If it were not for that plane, the story of MENGES could have ended much sooner than it did.

With the submarine running away, the crew got to saving the ship and the injured and dying crew. The author describes the “moans” and “sheer agony” throughout the quarters of the ship, as the Pharmacist's mate began his tending to the wounded and dying. Unfortunately, there was no doctor on the ship, as he was sent to a freighter that afternoon to set a seaman's broken arm back in place, so “Doc”, as the crew referred to the Pharmacist's mate, was on his own trying to help these poor souls.

Another big problem was the torpedoes, which had been dislodged from their tubes and had become armed due to the force of the explosion. Through the efforts of the crew they were disarmed, and afterwards they had managed to re-establish watertight integrity for the whole ship, an astounding job considering the speed of the action.

The ship had been saved. Unfortunately, 31 of the crew were killed, and 25 others were wounded. The ship also could not move, so it stayed there till morning when she was found by USS JOSEPH E. CAMPBELL DE 70 and USS PRIDE DE 323, accompanied by several ships from a nearby port. JOSEPH E CAMPBELL

and PRIDE would go on to capture the crew of the u-boat, U-371, after it had managed to torpedo the French DE SENEGALESE.

MENGES was then taken to Bougie, Algeria to disembark her wounded and dead. 14 of the dead were never found, so their names are on the Memorial Wall in the North African American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunisia. This would also be the resting place for three of the crew.

Then the ship was towed to Oran, Algeria, for quick repairs before beginning its journey back to Brooklyn Navy Yard. She arrived on July 22, 1944, and thus began the question of what exactly they should do with the ship. They found the answer with USS HOLDER, DE-401. The story of HOLDER is told in episode 19 of *DE Classified*, if you wish to learn more, but to cut to the chase she had suffered a torpedo in her midships, and if it were not for MENGES's timely arrival, it would have most likely been scrapped. Thus a plan was devised to take the stern of HOLDER off the ship and essentially slide it over onto the MENGES, where then it would be welded back on. They did this by putting the ships in the same drydock, and constructed a system involving cranes and hydraulics to pull the piece to MENGES. Since it was a piece of HOLDER going onto MENGES, it was decided to maintain the latter ship's name. All of this was done in the later half of August, and by September she was ready for action once again.

After a second shakedown cruise, this time in Casco Maine, MENGES was ready for duty, beginning her return being assigned to guard convoy CU-47 bound for Plymouth England. She would continue convoy duty after this until February 1945, when she would be assigned to the first and only hunter-killer group in the North Atlantic to be entirely manned by the Coast Guard. This group consisted of PRIDE DE 323, MOSLEY DE 321, and LOWE DE 325. Their operations went until Germany surrendered in May, but MENGES and LOWE would manage to sink a u-boat, U-866, on March 18th.

MENGES would then tag along her last convoy CU-73, bound for England, from May 30th to June 8th, and returning to New York on June 21st. Her last act of actual service was serving as a training ship, doing two cadet cruises, going all the way to the West Indies before returning to New London Connecticut on the 7th of September.

In March 1946, she was moved to the 16th fleet, which was inactive, and in January 1947 she was decommissioned. She would stay in the ST. Johns River until 1971, at which point she was scrapped.

The story of MENGES shows just how meaningful these trim but deadly ships were. She managed to save a multitude of sailors and fight against the u-boat and luftwaffe menace. Unfortunately she suffered at the hands of U-371, but thanks to the sacrifice of HOLDER she was able to set sail once again. She

represents the strength and determination of her crew, and shows that these tin cans are more than they seem. Thank you for listening to DE Classified. This podcast is brought to you by the Destroyer Escort Historical Museum aboard USS SLATER. You can find a transcript of this episode, accompanying photos, and a bibliography at USSSlater.org/de-classified. I'm Jo Ann, and I hope you'll join us next month when we DE Classify another Destroyer Escort.