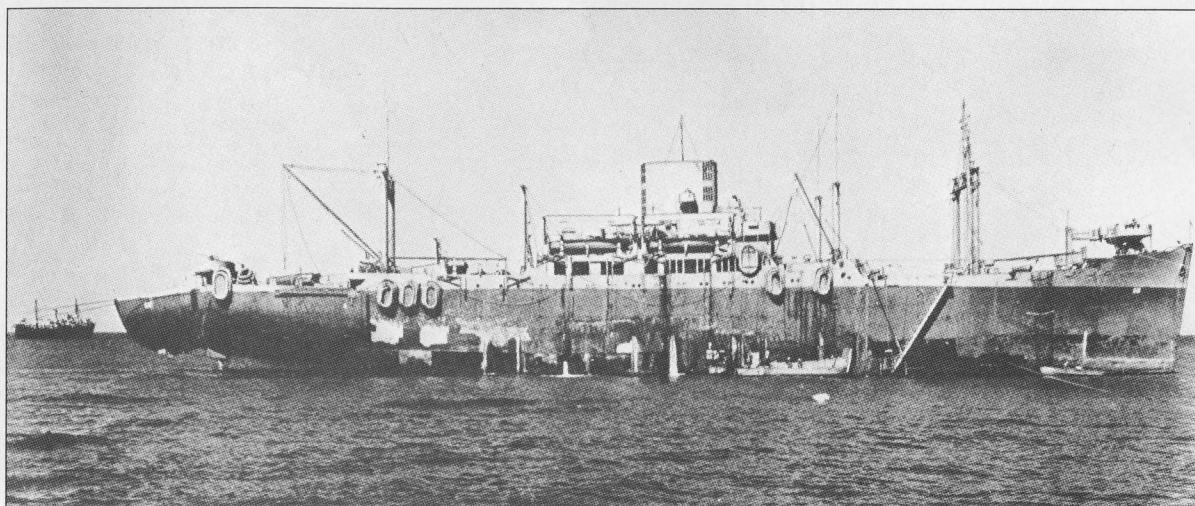


# The Old Navy

## The Strange Fame of *Thomas Stone*

By Captain Sam Meyer, Supply Corps, U. S. Naval Reserve (Retired)



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Time, place, and circumstances combined to put the U. S. Navy auxiliary transport ship *Thomas Stone* out of commission and into the history books when she was torpedoed off North Africa during World War II. (She is shown in Algiers Bay after the torpedoing; note her sagging stern.)

Consider: one auxiliary vessel disabled by a torpedo on 7 November 1942, out of a total surface armada of 500 warships and 350 transports and cargo ships. This armada was committed to an invasion of French North Africa, code-named Torch by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The USS *Thomas Stone* (AP-59) suffered only nine casualties in a military undertaking that

resulted in the deaths of 770 American and 240 British soldiers and sailors. Twenty-nine Allied ships, including a cruiser and two destroyers, were sunk during Operation Torch from 7 to 16 November 1942.

What, then, explains the remarkable attention that history has given to the *Thomas Stone*? This unpretentious ship's adventures are narrated at great length in monumen-

tal histories of World War II like those by Samuel Eliot Morison and Walter Karig. Considerable space is given to events concerning the transport in memoirs by General Dwight D. Eisenhower and by his naval aide, Harry Butcher. Two renowned British historians—Churchill and B. H. Liddell Hart—also wrote about the *Thomas Stone*. One finds, moreover, a complete record of what happened to the ship and her landing craft in a more recent work of popular history—*The Campaign for North Africa* by Jack L. Coggins.

The *Thomas Stone* has attracted such prominent notice because time, place, and circumstance conspired to place the transport in a unique position when she was damaged. The torpedoing of the vessel caused the first and only casualty prior to the landings of Operation Torch, which in itself had three memorable firsts to its credit:

- ▶ At the time, Torch was the largest force ever assembled to attempt a landing on a hostile shore.
- ▶ It was the first major venture of American arms in the European theater.
- ▶ It was the first crucial test of an Anglo-American coalition in combat operations of World War II.

The *Thomas Stone* was hit at 0535 on the morning before D-day, shortly after the Central Naval Task Force (targeted against Oran) and the Eastern Naval Task Force (against Algiers) had entered the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar on the night of 7–8 November. The attack occurred in the open Mediterranean some 33 miles off Cape Palos, Spain, and 150 miles short of Algiers. The sighting and attack by the enemy in this area, whether by submarine or torpedo plane, threatened to unhinge the operation's main premise: complete tactical secrecy about the precise locations and destinations of the huge convoys. (At this time, there were nine German U-boats and 20 Italian submarines inside the Mediterranean. Why the enemy did not follow up with more attacks is still unknown.)

No one was more acutely aware of the hazards of Operation Torch (which had been opposed by most of the U. S. military leaders but favored by political leaders President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill) than General Eisenhower, who was appointed Supreme Allied Commander of the operation in August 1942. From the outset, Torch had many more than three strikes against it. Most notable were:

- ▶ The hasty assembly and inadequate preparation of the combined forces
- ▶ The lack of anything more than token landing exercises by the small-boat teams
- ▶ The seasonal roughness of the surf along the African littoral in November
- ▶ The threat of the Vichy-controlled French fleet breaking out at Toulon
- ▶ The danger of discovery and attack on the convoys by German and Italian undersea and air power
- ▶ Uncertainty as to the reaction of the large French defense forces in Africa

On the morning of 7 November, General Eisenhower, at his dank, uncomfortable headquarters in one of the dripping tunnels behind the Rock of Gibraltar, dictated a long

secret letter to his boss, General George C. Marshall, in Washington: "Dear General: It is now 9:30 Saturday morning. Tonight we start ashore . . . we cannot foretell with certainty what is going to happen."

Near the end he inserted:

"While [I was] dictating this letter, the *Thomas Stone*—one of the combat loaders for the Algiers attack—was torpedoed about 300 miles east of Gibraltar. The flash report gives some hope that the ship may not sink, since she was hit in the stern. However, she is out of the operation and that, of course, is a definite blow to us."

General Eisenhower's concern was well-founded, since the *Thomas Stone* carried an entire battalion landing team as well as much-needed landing craft, and was the best trained of the transports.

General Marshall was also extremely interested in the fate of the *Thomas Stone* and of the 800 assault troops of the 39th Infantry, who had been dispatched from the transport in 24 amphibious craft at 1852 on 7 November after the ship was hit and became unable to accompany the Algiers convoy under her own power.

The commanding officer of the *Thomas Stone*, Captain Olton R. Bennehoff, in a confidential ten-page letter to his immediate superior, Captain Campbell D. Edgar, Commander Transport Division Eleven, gave the most detailed account of the dramatic adventures of the flat-bottom flotilla which was launched by the *Thomas Stone* after dark on the day of the torpedoing. He reported that even though all of the boats of this detachment eventually were lost or scuttled because of mechanical, weather, navigational, and other difficulties, the troops and their equipment were intermittently taken aboard the British escort HMS *Spey* and landed on the main quay at Algiers at 0700 on 9 November, after the French had surrendered.

Captain Bennehoff stated that he, along with Army Major Walter M. Oakes, the commanding officer of troops, made the difficult decision to disembark the troops in the mechanized landing craft and the personnel landing craft even though these small craft were never intended for long voyages, especially under difficult weather conditions. However, the urgent need for the 39th Infantry to join the Group Charlie assault on the beach east of Algiers had kindled hope that they would somehow arrive in time to accomplish their mission. As things turned out, such hope was doomed to frustration.

General Marshall evidently considered the exploits of the *Thomas Stone* and her amphibious boats sufficiently important to include them in the first communiqué he gave to the newspapers, relayed from General Eisenhower's headquarters. On the front page of its 9 November edition, the *New York Herald Tribune* offered the first public version of what the newspaper called "a full-scale invasion of the crucial zones of the war." Also on the front page but without mention of names for the sake of security, the *Herald Tribune* reported that, "One of our transports was disabled by a torpedo hit" and devoted a full paragraph to the daring dispatch of the amphibious craft.

A week later, the *Herald Tribune* quoted on its second

page part of a communiqué from Allied headquarters. It said, "Every ship arrived and disembarked their assault troops punctually, except for one which was damaged by a torpedo and which subsequently reached harbor."

By this time, the spectacular success of the North African expedition was quite evident. As early as 10 November, in a speech at the Lord Mayor's luncheon at the Mansion House in London, Churchill uttered his famous epigram on Operation Torch: "This *must* not be considered as the end; it may possibly be the beginning of the end, but it certainly is the end of the beginning."

Among the large group of former doubters was General Marshall. In his Second War Report to the American People, however, covering the two-year period ending 30 June 1943, Marshall succinctly summarized his view of the tactical outcome of the combined Anglo-American invasion, in which the transport *Thomas Stone* had played such an original role, in these words: "The landings were carried out in accordance with plans and with a boldness and efficiency which secured the initial objectives, the major airfields and ports in North Africa, within a period of 48 hours."

On 11 November, the *Thomas Stone* was moored to the Quai de Falaise, Algiers, where she discharged the remaining troops and equipment. The next day, she was moved to the outer harbor. On the night of 24 November, an air raid severely damaged the ship. A bomb penetrated two decks and the hull, and exploded beneath her. On the 25th, a high wind and heavy swells drove her aground,

inflicting further damage to her hull.

For a while, even though beached, she was still manned and used as a barracks as well as temporary quarters for officers visiting naval headquarters in Algiers. One of these happened to be the commanding officer at the huge naval supply depot at Oran, then-Captain George W. Bauernschmidt. He requested and got 200 of the *Thomas Stone's* enlisted complement for duty at the depot. Her officers were reassigned. Salvage operations continued for more than a year, and all equipment and stores were removed. Efforts to refloat the ship continued until the spring of 1944, at which time she was finally placed out of commission. Her name was struck from the Navy list on 6 April 1944. On official Navy records, the *Thomas Stone* is credited with one battle star for World War II service.

In the fall of 1944, orders went out from the Chief of the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts in Washington to sell the beached vessel "as is and where is." These orders percolated down the chain of command until they reached one Naval Reserve lieutenant (junior grade). I was that "j.g." I sold the former transport to a salvage firm in Algiers for the sum of \$12,000.

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Captain Meyer served close to five years on active duty in the Navy during World War II, mainly in Cuba and North Africa, first as an intelligence branch yeoman and then as a supply corps officer. From 1948 until he retired in 1975, he was attached to Naval Reserve Supply Company 9-7, Chicago. He holds a Ph.D. from Loyola University in Chicago and is Professor Emeritus of English at Morton College in Cicero, Illinois.

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#### Supplies and Demands in North Africa

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In 1943, when I received orders to command the new naval supply depot at Oran, Algeria, in North Africa, I spent two weeks in Washington assembling a staff, making plans, and ordering equipment and supplies. Among the things I requested were a library, 3,000 cases of Coca-Cola, 3,000 cases of beer, an ice cream machine, an assortment of small home-type power tools, various vehicles, and several portable cranes. The officers who were assigned to me were quite imaginative and energetic, and their plans were very well conceived.

I had collateral duties as the claims officer for the Navy in the port of Oran. One of my first cases was when the French pilots' association submitted a claim after the hapless joint U. S.-British effort to attack Oran in November 1942 failed. The French quoted their laws, which said that every vessel coming in to port had to pay pilot fees; these Allied ships came in to port before they were sunk, therefore they had to pay. I refused. Incidentally, after this unsuccessful operation, the French paraded the captured American and British officers and sailors through the streets of Oran in their underwear, a most humiliating experience, and quite contrary, as I later learned, to the Geneva Convention.

The French, oddly, had much sympathy for the Germans, and said that while they got "things" from the Americans, they got "money" from the Germans. They didn't seem to realize that the French money they were given was run off on German printing presses.

Over time I had 400 Italian prisoners. I was feeding them the same rations that I gave my own enlisted men, minus ice cream and luxury items of any sort. The Army told me to cease this practice, and to feed them prisoner of war rations. The Army was quite emotional about this and said, "Only a few weeks ago these SOBs were shooting at us, and now our guys are out on the front lines living on K rations while these characters are living better than our own people." When I declined to change, I got a call from a Navy captain in Algiers informing me that the Army wanted to prefer charges against me because of this, and suggesting that I comply. So I did. I drew the prisoner of war rations—gruel that looked like dirty Cream of Wheat—and offered it to the Italians. At the same time I made available to them the leftovers from my crews' galley, and always saw to it that there were enough leftovers so that the prisoners ate as they had before. Had I known the provisions of the Geneva Convention, I would have welcomed a court-martial, because what I had been doing was exactly what that agreement said. Strangely enough, none of our people, even the professionals like myself, knew anything more about the Geneva Convention than the term, and that it meant that you were to treat prisoners humanely. Not so with the Germans. They knew their rights down to the last crossed "t" and dotted "i".

From the Naval Institute oral history of Rear Admiral George W. Bauernschmidt, Supply Corps, U. S. Navy (Retired)