Kagnew Station 1973

Tract E

Tract A

Stonehouse

Chapter 3

U. S. Naval Repair Base, Massawa

This is the story of a few Americans who at a desperate time early in the war were by their country thrown into the worst hell hole on earth...

Commander Edward Ellsberg
Under the Red Sea Sun

It is difficult to imagine the chaos that Edward Ellsberg must have met in the Department of the Navy on the morning of December 8, 1941. In the frenetic aftermath of the «day of infamy», Edward Ellsberg, a retired naval salvage officer over 50, sought to be returned to active duty status. With the Pacific Fleet devastated at Pearl Harbor, he was more or less instantly reinstated. His qualifications made Pearl Harbor the logical assignment, but ironically, a senior naval salvage officer, enroute to Massawa, had been stranded in Hawaii by the Japanese attack. Amended orders left him to deal with the remnants of the Pacific Fleet and sent Ellsberg to the Red Sea «where the greatest mass of wrecks in the world (not excluding Pearl Harbor) then lay.»

The Eritrean naval project had been fostered under the aegis of Lend-Lease. Salvage operations in Massawa were to be directed by military advisors while the actual work was to be performed by contract civilians as a guarantee of U.S. neutrality. With neutrality no longer viable, the nation galvanized its forces to meet the Pacific crisis and left Ellsberg to his own resources. In short, Ellsberg himself represented the total commitment the U.S. Navy was in a position to make to the Middle East Theater. The grandiose Lend-Lease plans were abrogated by Pearl Harbor. For assistance, he was ordered to turn to the Army (who quite naturally had nothing to offer) or to whatever civilians he could hire. His orders were to report to Egypt and to MG Russell Maxwell (who commanded the entire Middle East Project from Cairo), to act as officer-in-charge of Red Sea salvage operations and as the commanding officer of such naval bases as might be established.

Along with the rest of Eritrea, Massawa's location became of paramount strategic importance, a fact which the Italians had long-since exploited to full measure. As a part of military preparations for invading Ethiopia, the Fascists funnelled millions into Massawa, until it «blossomed into a modern harbor. Everywhere sprouted massive stone quays, electric unloading cranes, substantial naval shops, warehouses packed with naval

stores, airfields, submarine piers, mine and torpedo depots, coast defense guns and — most sinister of all — a magnificent automobile highway leading inland over the mountains toward the Abyssinian frontier.» Once

Five rusting cannons still guard the North Massawa channel from the barren shores of Dohul, a diminutive island north of the seaport. The guns were sabotaged shortly before Eritrea's surrender.

Photo: Tom Ryan

the war started in 1939, German ships in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean flocked into Massawa (a friendly, yet neutral harbor) to await the eventuality of the eradication of British seapower in the Middle East.

Within six months of Italy's entry into the war, British forces had launched counterattacks and won major battles near Keren. «While they parleyed for surrender terms with the British advancing slowly through fields of land mines, they (Italians) carried through the most wide-spread program of organized destruction yet seen in any war.» In addition to thorough sabotage of all machinery, two huge steel dry docks and forty ships were scuttled in and around Massawa's three harbors. Fifteen of these were lined up bow to stern in order to block the entrance channels. The naval shops were systematically sledgehammered into uselessness and were thoroughly looted, even down to the most inconsequential hand tools.

Ellsberg's task was to make the base functional. The salvage operation was to serve a dual purpose — to clear the harbor and to recover the wrecks for future Allied use. Massawa not only had the best harbor conditions in the Red Sea, it was close enough to Alexandria (which was increasingly threatened by the *Afrika Korps*) to give direct support to the

British Mediterranean Fleet, yet far enough away to be safe from Rommel's short-range bombers.

Ellsberg's immediate problem was a stateside scarcity of salvage gear, divers and salvage craft. For two frustrating months, he canvassed the United States only to find that most of the equipment and virtually all of the divers had already been detailed by the Navy for salvage work at Pearl Harbor. For equipment, he had no choice but to place orders with the already deluged manufacturing companies in hopes that his high procurement priority would eventually bear fruit. Divers were extremely hard to find. In Ellsberg's words, «Not even the seductive inmates of Oriental harems were more jealously guarded by their lords and masters from predatory males than were these civilian divers from any contact with seekers after their services elsewhere.» He finally did ferret out four divers working for Hollywood film studios, plus a diving master, too old for Navy conscription, and a few small tugs. After making those arrangements, Ellsberg set off alone for Africa, leaving the tugs and equipment to face the 13,000 mile voyage to the Red Sea.

As with most of the hastily-impressed transportation at that time, Ellsberg's vessel for the Atlantic crossing was an aging passenger ship not really up to the standards of the job for which it was contracted. All surface travel was also threatened by German U-boats which had abandoned the wintery waters and British patrol boats of the North Atlantic and were, at the time, busy sinking hapless ships along the vulnerable U.S. southern coast. When Ellsberg's ship steamed out of the New York harbor, it was accompanied by an Army blimp for submarine protection and armed with .30 caliber anti-aircraft guns. Within a few days, the passengers had re-named the ship the *S.S. Pigs Knuckle,* a sobriquet in keeping with the cook's obvious penchant for that particular delicacy which appeared at every other meal. In Ellsberg's words, «This cruise of the *S.S. Pigs Knuckle* was right out of *Alice in Wonderland.*» The captain was a veteran of many years serving the ports scattered along the eastern coast. As a consequence, neither he nor his junior officers were at all proficient at celestial navigation and to his torpedo-wary passengers, his hugging-the-coast tack all the way to Brazil seemed most foolhardy. The rest of the crew was as intractable as the captain. When the cause of an incipient flu epidemic was attributed to the unsanitary conditions in the galley, pistol-wielding Army sergeants supervised the cooks to insure that dishes were properly washed. And so it went aboard the *S.S. Pigs Knuckle.* While the captain imperiled them from the bridge, the military passengers attended to seasickness, lifeboat drills and navigation. Forty days later the ship berthed unscathed in Lagos.

The Army Air Corps was running all air transportation across Africa using Pan American planes and pilots. It took Ellsberg four days to reach Cairo where he reported to MG Maxwell for final instructions. By the time he arrived, the deteriorating situation in Libya was the cause of general alarm. Rommel had overrun El Agheila and Benghasi and was driving closer and closer to Cairo. The British were entrenched at Tobruk to meet the onslaught.

Even though the British held nominal control of the Mediterranean, their hegemony was a myth. The flagship of the British fleet had been torpedoed and lost in November, 1941, and the two sister ships, the Queen *Elizabeth* and the *Valiant,* had scurried to sanctuary behind the submarine nets in the Alexandria harbor.

A few weeks after losing the flagship, a midnight patrol picked up two Italian frogmen on a buoy near the *Queen Elizabeth.* The scenario which followed could well have been inspired by any number of second-rate movie plots. The two swimmers were taken aboard and questioned. Although they steadfastly refused to talk, they were obviously uneasy and grew more so as time passed. They were then separated and placed deep in the holds of the ship and told they would be allowed to come out if

and when they became willing to answer questions. At quarter to five, both clamored for the chance to talk. They admitted they had attached a mine to each ship and detonation was set for five o'clock. Hurriedly, the crews of each ship sealed all the internal watertight compartments, extinguished the boiler fires and then massed on the decks to await the outcome. At five o'clock two explosions ripped through the hulls of the dreadnoughts and crushed the boilers. Although the ships didn't sink, they slowly settled into the sea until the decks were nearly awash. But from the air, it was business as usual. To maintain the illusion of normalcy, the crews continued to muster on the decks for inspection, bands played and life in general appeared unchanged. The Italians never did discover the success of their daring harbor raid. Little did they know that their own fleet could ply the Mediterranean with impunity. The long term significance of the attack was that Alexandria's only large dry dock was used exclusively to repair the two battleships which left only a small dock to service the cruisers and other ships of the fleet. Massawa was desperately needed.

After the war, the Viale Mussolini became Haile Selassie Avenue. The three American soldiers in the foreground of this 1944 photo aren't quite as rakish as the paroled P.O.W.'s Ellsberg encountered two years before.

Ellsberg's reception by MG Maxwell was brief and urgency was the keynote. Within a day, he was on his way to Eritrea. In Asmara, he reported to Maxwell's deputy, an Army colonel, and was advised that the naval aspect of Massawa's operations were to be exclusively Ellsberg's. He could offer little in the way of assistance since he was concerned with the logistical problems of transforming Eritrea into a massive war support complex. All he could offer in way of manpower was Italian P.O.W.'s and all the Eritreans Ellsberg desired to hire. After the discouraging briefing, Ellsberg retired to the Asmara Officers Club for a shower and later, a stroll down the Viale Mussolini. The following excerpt from his book describes the scene:

«Asmara was something. All the wealth that could be wrung out of impoverished Italy had been lavished on producing there on the plateau bordering Abyssinia a Fascist showplace. There were, I was told, 40,000 Italians in Asmara, not to mention 100,000 Eritreans. All the Italians at least were out for a stroll also on the Viale Mussolini and most of them were in uniform.

«Not even in Rome, when I had been there in 1936... had I seen so profuse and so gorgeous a display of the products of the Italian military tailors' art...

«Apparently every Italian officer captured in the East African campaign the year before was out, magnificently caparisoned, strutting along the Viale Mussolini that afternoon. I had heard these officers had all been paroled by the British and were now free to live privately anywhere in Asmara, but at the sight of them, I could hardly restrain a gasp.

«I was unarmed, so was every other of the few British and American officers forming a drab blotch on that otherwise brilliant military spectacle. But every one of these prisoners of war was armed—clinging from his waist was an automatic pistol protruding from its holster! There were enough armed Italian officers in sight easily to take over the country in view of the few soldiers the British had left in Eritrea and the slight handful only that I knew we had.»

He received an explanation that evening at dinner from another officer:

«When the Italians surrendered their forces to General Platt after he'd smashed them at Keren, they insisted on surrendering with the honors of war. So long as there wasn't any more fighting, nobody gave a damn what they surrendered with. Well, when Platt and his troops had moved back to Libya and they brought all the Italian officers who promised to behave into Asmara as paroled prisoners of war, imagine what happened. The sensitive Italian P.O.W.'s claimed that as they had surrendered with the honors of war, precedent all the way back to the Crusades gave them the right to retain and to wear their side arms. And as swords have now gone as symbols of chivalry, they claimed the right to wear pistols instead as side arms! Unless they retained and wore their pistols, their honor as soldiers would be grievously wounded. Of course, the British just couldn't bear the idea of wounding their soldierly honor, so they acquiesced. They did insist that the honorable P.O.W.'s agree to leave the cartridges out of their automatics, and maybe they do, but nobody ever searches one to see whether his pistol is loaded or not... We've got Eritrea, they've got their honor and everybody's happy!»

The next morning found Ellsberg enroute to Massawa:

«My driver for the trip was an Italian prisoner of war, an ex-enlisted man evidently, who had no honor to preserve, since he wore no pistol. It was a strict Army rule that no American officer should be permitted ever to drive a government car himself; only the driver assigned to the car might drive it. Since in Eritrea there were insufficient enlisted men for such service, various P.O.W.'s had been impressed for the job, and I had one. Had I known what I was in for, I should have walked the seventy miles to Massawa, leaving only my bags to go in the car.

«About five miles out of Asmara, we ran off the 7500-foot plateau and started down the precipitous mountain road to the sea. That beautifully paved road was a triumph of Italian engineering, and for scenery it was marvelous.

In thirty miles by road (less than ten miles in a straight line) we dropped 7000 feet. The switchbacks cut into the solid rock of the mountainsides were terrific — regularly as we came to one of those hairpin turns, I was certain we were going to take off straight into empty space. In one spot, Nefasit, within only an airline distance of perhaps half a mile but a vertical drop of Heaven alone knew how many feet, there were seven hair-raising switchbacks.

«All this would have been enjoyable to me since I grew up in Colorado and like rugged mountains and mountain scenery, had it not been for my driver. He drove like mad down that mountain road. I doubt that we ever went below fifty miles an hour, and I am certain we never dropped below forty, even on the worst switchbacks.

«I expostulated from the back seat, but it was hopeless. I knew no Italian, the driver knew no English. In what

The Nefasit curves

Photo: Mike Hoffman

little I could remember of my Spanish, I ordered him to slow down. I was in no hurry to get to Massawa. Evidently my involved Spanish phrases did not register. There was no effect.

«'Lento! Lento!!' I shouted next, trying single words this time while the tires fairly shrieked and I smelled burning rubber as we hurtled round a switchback.

«There was no slow down. Instead, I caught something in Italian which, from the intonation, I judged was meant to convey to me there was no cause for alarm, everything was all right. We speeded up on the ensuing brief stretch of straight road heading for the next turn. It wasn't all

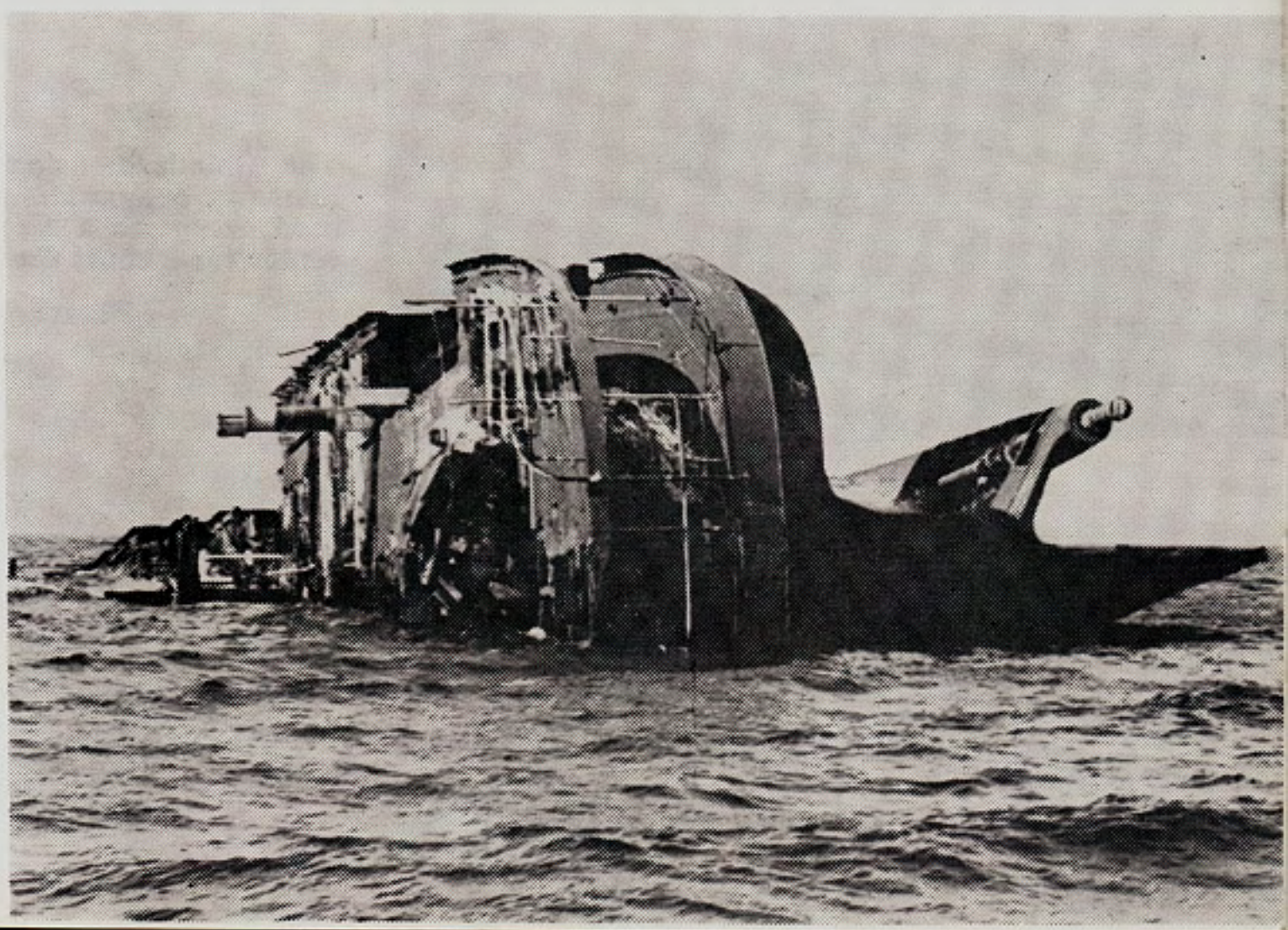
right, either with me or with those priceless tires, which were irreplaceable 13,000 miles from home.

«'No pronto, no pronto!'» I tried again in Spanish negatives, hoping to make my meaning clearer. No answer. We skidded sickeningly round that mountain hairpin like a racing car, straightened away for the next stretch with hardly any speed lost. We had before us now perhaps half a mile of steep but straight downgrade to go until the next turn. The Italian P.O.W. must have concluded he had not wholly succeeded in making the foreign officer understand. Now he seized his opportunity to make himself understood beyond any doubt. To my horror, he let go the wheel turned round and with both hands gesticulating meaningfully started to explain in Italian again apparently that everything was under control!

«I seized both his wildly waving wrists, twisted him sharply round forward, and let go. Possibly he understood from that the crazy American for some strange reason had no desire to listen. He grasped the wheel again. Thank God, we were still on the road!

«Completely limp, I subsided; it was safer. Had I had a pistol, I should have shot that P.O.W. in the back of the head on the next straight stretch and dived over the back of the front seat, trusting to bring the speeding car to a stop before it crashed the mountainside or dropped off the bordering precipice. But failing a gun, I didn't dare try taking control; in the struggle for the wheel it was certain we should plunge off the road.

«For thirty nerve-shattering miles this went on while we dropped from 7500 feet to 500 feet above the sea. As a final aggravation, in Eritrea we were under the British Rules of the Road — that is, all traffic keeps to the left — and try as I would consciously to keep that in mind, subconsciously I could not escape the terrifying impression that always we were hurtling down those mountains on the wrong side of the road, bound to crash head-on into the next car we met toiling up those grades.



One of forty ships which littered Massawa and Dahlak harbors

Photo: Ron Hoekstra

«When we finally leveled off on the desert, even though our speed promptly jumped far above sixty, I breathed a sigh of relief. No matter how bad Massawa proved to be the less I saw of that road to Ghinda and Asmara, the happier I should be. My leg muscles, till then tensed to jump for my life from whichever side of the car offered at the moment the best chance, gradually relaxed, we had made it safely.»

The driver deposited Ellsberg at the old Italian Naval Base (present day Ethiopian Naval Base) then pretty much occupied by the British. The area still bore dramatic reminders of the fairly recent destruction with bomb-cratered piers, electric cranes tipped into the sea and «across the entrance to the harbor from the sea lay a string of scuttled ships. Two which had capsized in going down, lay on the near edge of the entrance with the waves breaking over their now horizontal sides stretched away, vast flat rusty steel islands a few feet above the water, to form a resting place for innumerable gulls fishing from these convenient newly man-made reefs. Farther away lay several more large wrecks, these erect, with only their masts and smokestacks and the tops of their bridges showing above the surface.»

Ellsberg's first days in Massawa were spent acquiring quarters, a car, a houseboy and a complete Massawa uniform — sunglasses, pith helmet, khaki shorts and a khaki shirt with appropriate rank insignia which meant nothing to anyone but the rank, conscious British.

The immediate impasse in Massawa was the complete absence of skilled labor. In addition to the Gura Air Base, there were major construction projects in Asmara and Ghinda where commodious living quarters were being built to house the labor force eventually intended for the Massawa Naval Base. (Although construction of the Ghinda housing project was completed, it was never used.) Despite Ellsberg's offer of a 20 per cent bonus, Massawa's reputation as a «bloody hell-hole» kept prospective employees at a distance. The temperate climate of the highlands proved more attractive than the bonus. The sole source of skilled labor

The Ghinda housing complex for Massawa commuters was never used except as a Kagnew R&R center for a short time in the fifties.

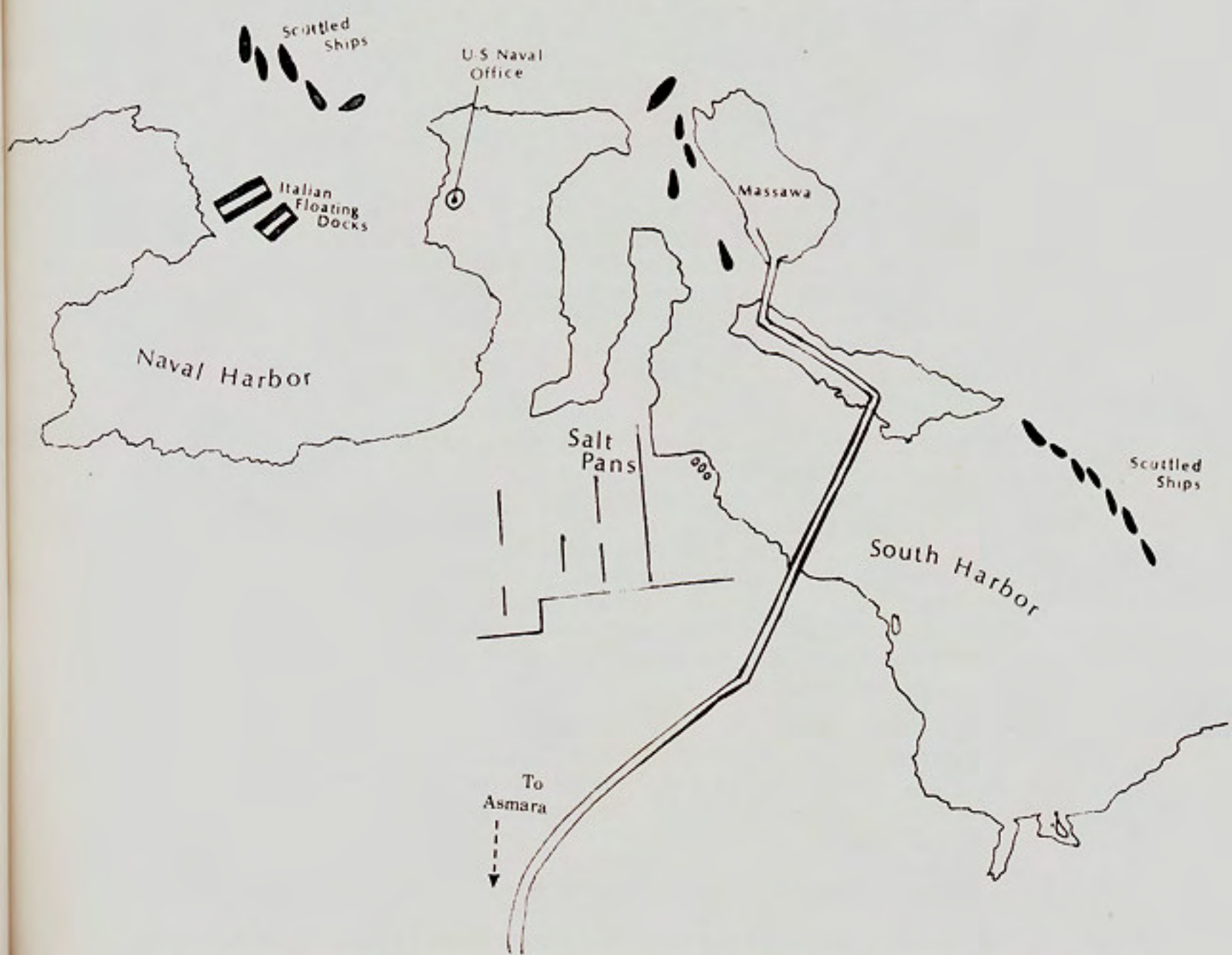
Photo: Mike Hoffman

available to Ellsberg was the Italians (now P.O.W.'s) who had operated the base as Fascist soldiers. These P.O.W.'s were quite willing to swap their concentration camps for the wages and meals Ellsberg offered, so they were hired and set to work repairing the very damage they had inflicted the year before.

A sufficient quantity of hand tools borrowed from contractors in Asmara enabled the new employees to begin salvaging the damaged equipment in the naval shops. By interchanging parts, many machines were put back into service, and as each successive machine went back in operation, the capacity to manufacture parts for the others increased. Many of the missing parts to lathes and mills were «found» by the P.O.W. machinists when rewards were offered, and in that manner, the operation snowballed toward full capacity.

An unexpected windfall put Ellsberg's base into business. The British had previously siezed a floating steel dry dock (the Italians had built it for the Iranian government) and towed it to Massawa. Ellsberg's predecessor, a British salvage officer who was killed when his boat hit a mine near Dahlak, had concluded that salvaging the two dry docks sunk in Massawa's North Harbor was an impossible undertaking. In light of his findings, the appropriated Italian dock and its 6,000 ton capacity was priceless. Once it had been towed gingerly through a gap between the sunken ships and anchored in the North Harbor, Ellsberg was ready to begin servicing the British Fleet.

> «On May 8, 1942, five and one-half weeks after my arrival in Massawa, the United States Naval Repair Base, Massawa, commenced operations. The only thing naval about it was its Commanding Officer. The only things American about it were, in addition to the Commanding



Massawa, 1942: Commander Ellsberg moved in with his British counterparts in the Naval Harbor. The first ship raised by personnel of the U.S. Naval Repair Base opened a channel into the South Harbor. The dikes connecting Massawa with the mainland were built by Egyptians in 1865.

Officer, one Army officer as assistant and six civilian supervisors on loan. We had none of the new American machinery, we had no American mechanics, either military or civilian. We had only the refitted Italian equipment and the Persian dock seized from Italy, with the Naval Base working force composed now of a few Englishmen, a fair number of Italians, hundreds of Eritreans, and a conglomeration of Sudanese, Arabs, Maltese, Persians, Somalis, Greeks and Hindoos (sic).»

The first order of business was the freighter fleet that was supplying the British Eighth Army entrenched in the desert west of Tobruk. Since most of the ships hadn't been serviced for two years, their hulls were encrusted with barnacles and grasses and many were leaking badly as a result of near-misses by Axis bombs. As a consequence, their top speed had been halved and they were rapidly losing the ability to outmaneuver enemy bombs and torpedoes. Ellsberg scheduled one of these ships into Massawa every three days.

From the end, a dry dock resembles a huge capital U. The horizontal steel bottom is hollow and is 15 feet thick, 100 feet across and 600 feet long. It is amply braced from within to hold the weight of the ship it lifts out of the water. The vertical walls run the entire length. They, too, are hollow, 15 feet thick and rise 35 feet above the floor of the dock. To service a ship, the hollow chambers are flooded until the dock sinks to the point that a ship can be towed in between the vertical walls. The water is then pumped out and the resultant buoyancy raises the ship to a point where the bottom is entirely exposed, at which time, 200 Eritreans would feverishly scrape off the barnacles and paint the entire hull, and usually, in two short days. Eighty vessels were thusly repaired in the first 120 days of operation. The Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Forces was ebullient.

Ellsberg then divided his crew leaving part to continue the dry docking operation while he and the remainder devoted their collective energies to raising the scuttled Italian docks. The British Admiralty was particularly interested in their salvage since the additional docking capability they offered was urgently required to repair the bomb-damaged warships of the Mediterranean Fleet. The Italians had recognized the potential value of the docks to the enemy and had blown seven 20 foot holes in the floor of each of them.

The procedure for raising the first dock was painstaking and protracted. First, the walls of the dock were made airtight by pounding wooden plugs into the many holes. Next, compressed air was pumped into the walls from the bottom until the dock floated to the surface. Ordinarily, the procedure would have been fairly routine, but Ellsberg faced a number of complications. The temperature on the steel plating oftentimes topped 150 degrees which, in turn, wreaked havoc with the small, tired compressors he had to rely on. The first was raised after 1,116 hours of continuous pumping. Once the dock was floating, work began to repair the gaping holes in the floor.

Raising the sunken ships was an even more elaborate procedure. The first ship to be raised was a German vessel which was obstructing the channel leading into the South Harbor. The job was assigned to the salvage tug which had lately arrived after 90 days at sea. Divers had to fill the 20 foot hole in the ship's side with 30 tons of concrete, then seal off the internal compartments of the ship and afix cofferdams to the hatches. The cofferdams were basically wooden tunnels which linked the sunken hatches with the surface. Seven pumps, with a capacity of 6,000 gallons a minute, were then used to pump the sea water out of the submerged holds. As the water level dropped in the ship, however, the pumps had a greater lift to overcome so they had to be gradually lowered into the ship. Nursing these pumps in the slippery interior was difficult enough, but the heat, humidity and exhaust fumes exacted a toll on men and

machinery. It required five days and four nights of continuous pumping to float the ship. When the ship was finally raised, it was efficiently secured in the captured dock and repairs were begun. Ellsberg radioed an urgent request for 100 tons of American steel to patch the hole. As long as the dock was tied up with the German ship, there could be no service for the British fleet. Ellsberg's request was rebuffed. In short, the U.S. shipbuilding industry was using 10 million tons a year and had none to spare. Ellsberg was advised that since he was located in an area of British responsibility, the British should rightfully see to his needs. Unhappily, the British had no steel either, or what little they did have was being used in Alexandria. Ellsberg managed to complete repairs of that first ship with steel obtained by ripping up underground Italian bomb shelters.

The port at Alexandria closed when Tobruk fell June 21, 1942. With the retreat of the British ground forces to El Alamein, Alexandria was a convenient target for German bombers who took daily advantage of its vulnerability. If El Alamein fell, Rommel's tanks would be in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria within a matter of hours. In the face of this, a mass evacuation got underway. Massawa, then, became the single operative Allied base in the Middle East.

The British not only held at El Alamein, but attacked and sent the *Afrika Korps* retreating into Libya. On November 8, 1942, Allied forces under Eisenhower landed at Casablanca and Algiers, thereby cutting off the escape route and effectively closing North Africa as a battle zone.

About the same time as the Allied landing in North Africa, when the contingent of British shipbuilders for whom Ellsberg had been pleading since his arrival finally arrived, the U.S. Naval Repair Base had salvaged six ships, one enormous floating crane, both Italian dry docks and had repaired over 100 British vessels. For his incredible success, Ellsberg was promoted to captain and awarded the Legion of Merit.

On November 24, just as he was relishing cooler Massawa weather, Captain Ellsberg was ordered to leave Massawa and report to General Eisenhower's headquarters in Algeria to begin salvage operations in the newly-won ports of North Africa.