

LCI (L) 33 - By Elmer Manick

The Story of LCI (L) 33

LCI (L) 33 was built in November 1942. I was her Chief Boatswains Mate, my name is Elmer Manick.

I joined the Navy in October of 1942 and was sent to boot camp in Newport, Rhode Island. At that time, there was such a demand for personnel to man the LCIs that training was limited to 3 weeks. During that short period of time we learned basic seamanship and did lots of marching. It was also just long enough to get in all of our immunizations. After boot camp, it was a brief 10-day leave then on to Little Creek Virginia for training aboard the LCI (L) 216. I reported there with the rank of Seaman Apprentice. I and the rest of the officers and seamen selected to man the LCI (L) 33 trained on the 216 as a unit. In January 1943, we took her on a shakedown cruise. We practiced landings, navigation exercises and anything and everything needed so that we could take over and safely operate our new ship. After 2 weeks of training, the navy said we were ready. It wasn't much more than a familiarization and a brief one at that, but time was of the essence and our real training would be "On the Job".

We proceeded to Philadelphia to pick up our new ship. For the next fewdays, we divided our time between practice landings along the Virginia coast, navigation exercises in Chesapeake Bay and just trying to shake out any bugs in the 33. We were a green crew and the navy was trying to jam as much "On the Job Training" into us before sending us overseas. Each day our seamanship skills, improved, each day we felt a little more confident in our abilities to handle our jobs. Then it was time to leave.

We were ordered to join a convoy assembly point just outside the Chesapeake. We had no idea where our final destination was. Our convoy consisted of hundreds of vessels, most were LCI's, some were sub chasers, and a few were tankers. One of these ancient tankers was our flagship. It was filled with thousands of gallons of some type of combustible liquid. The convoy commander was Captain Sabin.

After our convoy put to sea, orders were opened. Our first destination was Bermuda. Initially the weather was cold and the seas heavy. We crawled along at a 7-knot pace, making us easy targets for any near by U-boats. The heavy seas tossed our LCI's around like corks in a washing machine. The nearly flat-bottomed LCI's pitched and rolled from side to side in the turbulent waters. As we reached the crest of a swell our bow broke free from the water, exposing a portion of our keel. It was almost as if we had become airborne. Then, just as suddenly, we fell back into the trough of the wave, our bow hitting the water with a loud slapping sound. It was a very disconcerting sound. This was characteristic of LCI handling in heavy seas. We didn't know it at the time. This was a new learning experience for us all.

We were all sea sick beyond belief. Frenchy, our cook was by far the worst. For those of us who could tolerate food, we would make or stagger our way to the galley. There we would find Frenchy on the floor, too sick to move. When asked if there was any food prepared for us, he could only raise his arm from his side and point to one of the shelves containing canned goods. We all felt sorry for him. For the majority of our trip, all that Frenchy could eat was soda crackers.

We arrived at Bermuda a few days later. The docks were large enough to handle only a few ships so most of the convoy dropped anchor off the coast, including us. We anticipated shore leave and a chance to set foot on dry land. This was not to be. An LCVP returning 24 sailors from liberty on Bermuda, sunk in the heavy swells. All hands were lost. From that point on, all Liberty was cancelled. It was very disappointing since we hoped that a day on dry land would help to cure our seasickness. The next day we set sail. At first we thought that we might be headed to Europe but our southwesterly heading told us otherwise. It looked like the Mediterranean or Africa for us. Sure enough, after orders were opened, our next destination was North Africa.

Our LCI's were a new breed of ship. The navy had never tested them in sea trials. We found out later that the navy wasn't even sure our LCI's could make an ocean crossing. Good thing they didn't tell us.

We had taken on enough fuel at Philadelphia to make this transatlantic crossing without refueling. Our 8 Cummings Diesels Engines were reliable and fuel-efficient. Our machinist mates stored most common engine parts aboard so we were pretty much self-sufficient when it came to engine parts. Our only problem was fresh water. We carried a 500 gallon fresh

water tank aboard. It was used for everything from cooking to drinking to washing clothes. Early on in the convoy, we tried to conserve our fresh water supply by washing our clothes with seawater. That was a mistake. The clothes dried to a cardboard like consistency. They were rough, scratchy and smelly and just couldn't be worn. We quickly gave up on that idea.

There was no equipment on board to produce fresh water. Our convoy however, had a water tender, whose purpose it was to convert salt water to fresh water. When supplies ran short, we made arrangements to tie up to it and refill our tank.

For the next 18 days we crawled through heavy seas. Along the way I and a number of the crew got rid of our seasickness, Frenchy did not!

On April 12, 1943 we passed through the straits of Gibraltar and entered the Mediterranean Sea. The next day we landed at Nemours, Algeria. All

four of our holds were filled food, which we thought was ours. To our surprise, the Army came aboard and offloaded all of it. Unbeknown to us, our number one hold was not secured in Philadelphia by the army personnel when they filled it with food. Somewhere between Philadelphia and North Africa, the hold filled with water. When we opened it shortly after landing at Nemours we saw items floating in the seawater. All of the foodstuffs, including the canned items were ruined. We pumped out the hold and threw away the spoiled food. An experienced crew would have checked all hatches exposed to the weather before taking to sea. This incident taught us a valuable lesson. Afterwards, we made sure that all hatches exposed to the sea were always dogged securely. We were learning slowly.

On May 14, 1943 we docked in Bizerte in Tunisia. We had a tough time getting into Lake Bizerte because the Germans had sunk ships at the mouth of the entrance. Our quartermaster, Ed Sternett, who had worked on lake Michigan piloting ore carriers and was an experienced captain in his own right, piloted the ship through this maze of twisted wreckage. Our skipper, Captain Dekyner had asked Ed to do this because he had no prior experience with ships and felt that our passage through this junkyard would be safer with Ed at the helm.

Capt. Dekyne was a great skipper. He always took good care of us. When going ashore, if some of the men didn't have spending money for shore leave, he would take it out of his pocket and give it to them. He never

asked for nor expected it back. He was also great on promoting those who he thought deserved it. I achieved the rank of Chief in a brief 15 months. My dad (Jack Manick) was a seafaring man from the days of the wooden masted schooners. He sailed on many ships and taught his sons those seafaring skills that he could while living in the Smokey Mountains of western North Carolina. I knew how to tie knots, how to splice rope and other skills, that helped me to achieve my new ratings from the captain. He took good care of the crew and liked those who showed initiative. We all liked and respected him.

Thirteen days later (May 27) we picked up 255 German Prisoners and were ordered to transport them to Oran in Tunisia. During the trip, the German Luftwaffe dive-bombed us many times. During the bombings, the prisoners on deck waved at the planes, yelling and screaming for them to not drop their bombs on them. It made no difference. From the altitude they were bombing, the planes probably couldn't distinguish whose troops were on deck. Either their aim was off or we were very lucky that day. There were lots of near misses.

The prisoners were a tough bunch, having fought in the desert until captured in Bizerte. To our surprise, most spoke good English. They wanted to know about America and loved Camel Cigarettes. Their final destination was the Norfolk Naval Base in Virginia. There they would work (as prisoners) at the Naval Base.

During the first week in June, we were anchored off the North African Coast, waiting for orders to do some beaching exercises when a dust storm blew off the desert. The temperature rose to 115 degrees. It was so hot, you could hardly breath. Norm Holloway and I were on the 12 PM to 4 AM watch. I said "Norm, wouldn't a beer taste good". He said, "Elmer, I would kiss your ass at high noon in Macy's Window for a beer." I happened to remember that I had put 4 cans in the bottom of the refrigerator when we were in Philadelphia. Of course, no beer was allowed on board in 1943. While all others onboard were asleep, I went to the refrigerator. Hidden under layers of food that the crew refused to eat were the four cans of beer, protected and cold, just waiting for us. I brought them back up to the bridge to the astonished look on Norm's face. I have never seen him so happy. Of course, I enjoyed them too. Those were the greatest beers we ever had. (Norm and I lived close

together for many years in New Jersey and kept in touch until his death in 1983. He was a great joke teller and kept the crew loose, even during invasions.)

On July 6, 1943, we were anchored at Bizerte, our ships assembling for the Invasion of Sicily. There were hundreds of ships anchored in Lake Bizerte, everything from LCI's to destroyer escorts, destroyers and a few light cruisers including the Birmingham. The Germans knew that we were there and they also knew in what strength. Around the lake, the British had installed hundreds of large spotlights. That evening, the German Luftwaffe staged a large raid. As they came over our position, the British turned on the lights and lit up the sky. In the time it took to turn on the lights, night turned into day. Destroyers, cruisers, LCI's, LST's, every ship that had a gun opened fire at the targets that were now well lit. Tracers were everywhere. It looked like a Fourth of July Fireworks display. Afterwards, one of our ships picked up a German War Correspondent from the water after he bailed out of his crippled plane. He commented that he had never seen nor expected such firepower from the allied ships at Bizerte.

Later that month, we loaded 250 American troops of the 46'th Division at Bizerte and joined a large convoy for the Invasion Of Sicily. Our next stop was Licata, Sicily. The landings were virtually unopposed. A couple of Italian planes tried to bomb us and released bombs that landed close by but did no damage. After discharging the troops, we went back to Bizerte to await further orders.

On August 3 we were ordered to proceed to Palermo Sicily and transport American wounded to a hospital ship. One of the nurses on board gave me a Coca-Cola. It was probably the best one I ever drank.

We loaded troops of the 3rd division US on September 7, 1943. The next day we left Palermo for the Invasion of Italy at Salerno (Maieri). We had General Quarters at 1715 hours and stayed at General Quarters. At 2130 hours there was a massive air raid. The Luftwaffe was dropping flares everywhere. Some planes were dropping depth charges. Anti aircraft fire was rose from all of the ships. One plane was shot down close by our port bow.

On September 9 we landed troops at Maieri (Salerno) and returned to Bizerte. The time when we were not transporting troops or cargo or involved in an invasion, was spent waiting, usually anchored somewhere off the coast of North Africa. It was boring time, but we could never let up on our guard. Watches were always set should the Luftwaffe or the Italian Air Force choose to attack us.

On September 26 we returned to Salerno and transported wounded to a hospital ship. This time we ran into a large storm with heavy seas.

Four days later we transported and discharged German prisoners onto the beach at Salerno. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox was on the beach to greet us as the prisoners were unloaded. He made a statement about what a great job the LCI's were doing.

Our last trip back to Bizerte was on November 10, 1943. As a going away present, the Germans hit us with yet another air raid.

On November 22 we picked up British troops bound for Toronto, Italy. The next day, General Quarters sounded at 0500 hours. We awoke to find ourselves surrounded by mines the Germans had laid earlier. How we got through the minefield, I'll never know. The mines were everywhere. Lookouts were posted all over the ship trying to spot them and relay the information immediately back to the bridge so we could steer around them. While we tried to avoid them, our minesweepers were busy detonating them. Someone was watching over us that day.

We continued to make runs to Toronto Italy for the next few days.

Late the next month (December 19), on a very dark and rainy night, we collided with LCI (L) 14. Our damage was minimal but it was a frightening experience. For the next few days we were working out of Pozzouli, Italy, practicing beaching, in preparation for the Invasion of Anzio.

During January, 1944, the allied high command, in an effort to shorten the Italian Campaign and cut off the German's escape route in Italy, devised yet another invasion. It would come on January 22. We loaded a full contingent of US Rangers and deposited them on the beaches in Anzio. The landings were unopposed. We had caught the Germans by surprise. Rather than immediately breaking out of the beachhead, we

chose to reinforce it with men and material. After a few days of reinforcing the beaches and land immediately behind it, the fate of the ground forces was sealed. The Germans had isolated and imprisoned the beachhead. Then they opened fire. The troops could do nothing but dig in and hope our planes and ships could muster enough firepower to hold the beachhead. (Later that month we found out that the entire 1500 man Ranger contingent except for one man had been killed.)

We ran daily runs from Pozzouli to Anzio, carrying troops and supplies.

On Feb 22 German E Boats attacked us. We picked up two survivors from a sunken British destroyer. One of the crewmembers had his hand blown off. Our pharmacist mate, Doc Nichols, cleaned off the wound and had the wounded man transported to a medical facility. We think the sailor lived.

Seven days later (February 29) we were anchored off the coast of Italy with a number of other ships. Every night destroyers laid a smokescreen over the ships, to obscure them from being seen and attacked by the Luftwaffe. We, however, had lost our stern anchor and had drifted far out to sea, out of the protective cover of the smoke screen. That night we had the worst air raid I'd been in. Our orders were not to fire on any aircraft, but our mid ship gunner made a mistake and fired. Since every third bullet was a tracer, the Germans had no trouble locating us. I counted 16 bombs that landed within a few yards of the ship. How they missed us, I'll never know. We were darned lucky that night.

From March 2nd to April 17th we were busy transporting American Troops from Pozzouli to Anzio. On our return trips we transported civilians refugees from Anzio to Pozzouli. On one occasion, an old lady wanted to bring her cow aboard. We laughed and politely told her no.

April 18 we went back to Algeria, filled our holds with candy and left for England. Since most of the troops had pulled out of North Africa, there was a surplus of candy. We had Baby Ruths, Butter Fingers, Mounds, etc. Everyone had a locker full of candy. While in North Africa, I came down with a case of jaundice but wouldn't tell anyone for fear they would leave me behind. Our pharmacist mate gave me lots of orange juice. There was no other treatment for it. By the time we reached Cardiff, Wales, I was feeling better, but I was put in the hospital anyway.

During my three day stay there, I was again given lots of orange juice. While there, my shipmates visited me and brought me several boxes of candy. That made me the most popular patient in the hospital. I had more doctors and nurses come to visit me than any other patient. Candy was very scarce in England so I was the center of attention. I hated to leave the hospital and they were sad to see me go.

On May 15, I caught up with my ship at New Haven. For the next two weeks we prepared for the Invasion of Normandy, practicing landings along the English coast. New Haven was a small town and was relatively quiet, so most of us spent our Liberty time in the larger city of Brighton. There were 2 nice dance halls there and we were treated very nicely by the British.

In the early evening of June 5, 1944 we loaded about 255 troops of the British 50th Division. About 10 PM we unhooked our dock moorings and set sail for our mid channel rendezvous with the Normandy Invasion Fleet. There were ships everywhere, of all sizes and shapes. Our destination was Gold Beach, a British designated landing area. The crossing was rough, since the English Channel was still churning from the storm that had abated only a few hours before. No one slept that night. Five hours later and shortly before 7 AM we made our final approach to the beach. Minutes before, LCVP's had discharged their troops and had pulled off, making way for the next wave of landings, the LCI Landings. About 100 feet out from the beach, we dropped our stern anchor. The tide was coming in and dead soldiers were already being washed up upon the beach. There was a hotel standing near the beach that was being destroyed by incoming German artillery . Each round that hit the hotel knocked off another section of the brick structure. They were very efficient at knocking down the building but less effective at hitting the troops or the landing craft. There were bodies floating everywhere. Our ship moved through the water pushing them aside until we grounded. The ladders were lowered and the troops, some with bicycles debarked. We tried to hurry the British soldiers off the ship and into the chest high water but they paid us no attention and unloaded at their own pace. We were on the beach for no more than 15 minutes , then we reversed engines, reeled in the stern anchor and pulled ourselves off. All around us there was heavy gunfire, smoke and death.

We headed back to New Haven, hoping to get a day off and go into the town. That wasn't to be. On the dock we were given another load of British Troops to transport back to Gold Beach. We made 17 crossings from New Haven to Normandy in 20 days, each time carrying troops.

On October 11 we sailed to Weymouth, England. Our captain informed us that we would be going home between October 15th and November 1st. The LCI (L) 33 was to continue to transport troops and supplies from England to the continent, only this time with a British Crew. The crew of the 33 was to be split up and head for other locations. Some of us were assigned to stateside duty, others, like me, were sent to the Pacific. I would serve aboard the LST 1103 and participate in yet another invasion, the Invasion of Okinawa and survive the two month Kamikaze Ordeal of the ships around Okinawa.

After the war I returned to work for Merck and Company in Rahway New Jersey where I worked for 45 years.

Today, I am retired and living in Marion North Carolina.
Elmer Manick