



## LEONIE SPEAKS TO MARK THE 65 ANNIVERSARY OF OPERATION PEDESTAL

Immediate NCWA Past President MLC was invited by the Maltese Australian Association to give the Commemorative Address at the Shelter of Peace at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne on Sunday 12th August 2007 to mark the 65th Anniversary of Operation Pedestal in honour of all those lost at Sea during the convoys to Malta.

Picture on the right depicts the 'Ohio' being assisted by destroyers Ledbury and Penn into Malta in 1942 sourced from Operation Pedestal website.

On this very special anniversary, while honouring all those who took part in Operation Pedestal – let us pay a special tribute to the women of Malta.

They are your mothers and grandmothers, wives, sisters, aunts and cousins, who all earned the George Cross during those difficult and dark wartime years –

Who nursed and nurtured their families and who somehow managed to put food on the table during the severe shortages.

Visualise a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean – 116 square miles in extent – with several other islands close by. Napoleon captured it on his way to Egypt – but with the help of Nelson, the islanders rebelled and then CHOSE to be part of the British Empire – In 1803 Nelson said 'I consider Malta as a most important outwork of India... it will ever give us great influence in the Levant...I hope we will never give it up.' and in 1942 this beleaguered nation was the one unconquered British bastion in the Med.

Its population was a quarter of a million – plus 18,000 troops.

And they were starving. Staples such as flour for bread and pasta, fuel oil for fighting and kerosene for cooking, lighting and heating were in critically short supply. The ration of kerosene for two people for a week was two pints. The coffee issue (everyone's favourite drink!) was one and three-quarters of an ounce per week between three people. Housekeeping was a daily battle in Malta – as the islands cannot grow enough staples and had to be supplied by sea. Flour, fuel oil and kerosene being the most important. But somehow the housewives managed to put some bread on the table, often going without themselves. They literally kept the home fires burning.

They were like the rock that comprises the islands of Malta. Soft limestone becomes as hard as granite when exposed to air. Maltese women become as hard as granite when exposed to adversity. Had it not been for the many caverns in this type of rock, giving safe shelter and storage, many more lives would have been lost. Even the schools were taught underground.

Crunch time came in August 1942 – A month away from starvation, Malta barely survived 10,000 enemy sorties, it was the most bombed piece of earth in Europe. If Malta could not be resupplied it would have to be surrendered. There would be no base to blockade supplies to North Africa and Rommel would have triumphed instead of running out of petrol. He said himself "Malta... has the lives of many thousands of German and Italian soldiers on its conscience."

Through every sort of privation, difficulty and danger, through fire, ruin and death, the Maltese, so well supported by their women, held fast.

We pay tribute to the heroes of Operation Pedestal with gratitude today – when the crippled tanker OHIO limped into Valetta's Grand Harbour on August 15<sup>th</sup> – jubilant crowds lined the port – and the brass band played 'Rule Britannia'. A gunner on the supporting destroyer HMS Penn said 'We did not ask for praise. We had only done what we set out to do.' OHIO's fuel supplies were rapidly pumped into two other waiting storage-tankers only minutes before she settled on the bottom.

With renewed vigour – and supplies for ten more weeks - Malta led the shift in the North African balance - preceding the second Battle of Alamein and THAT is why we stand here today in freedom..

I'm very proud to be able to tell you that the national tradition of caring for others continues today in Malta through its very active National Council of Women.

This dedicated group of volunteers continues the caring role of our fore-mothers during the siege of World War II.

They advise their government on how the Sustainable Development of the Maltese Islands can continue successfully, they are working to balance gender issues. They are endeavouring to eliminate poverty. To promote health for all and to ensure education for everyone - and achieve economic independence for women by creating jobs.

So on this very special day- in addition to thanking all the men of Operation Pedestal - let us all pay tribute to all the wonderful women in our lives both here in Australia and in Malta. God bless them!

Leonie Christopherson AM