



**MY  
WAR**  
EYEWITNESS  
HISTORY  
ACCOUNT

To the Luftwaffe, “**SINK VERDAMMT THE DELTA!**”  
the order of the day was “Sink the Delta!”  
But to the hard-working, hard-fighting crew of that dauntless Navy Repair Ship, the watchword to the Nazis was “See the Delta and Die!”

BY FRED EVERETT SOLLIE

On a warm summer night during June 1943, a *Luftwaffe* Junkers Ju 88 was shot down just minutes after a routine bombing mission over Lake Bizerte, Tunisia. On fire and disabled, the twin-engine aircraft splashed down in the Mediterranean coastal waters less than a mile from the charred ruins of what was once the Tunisian town of Bizerte.

The pilot parachuted into the sea and was eventually rescued by the crew of a small American patrol boat, and like any military pilot at such a moment, the dripping, humiliated Nazi, even though being saved from drowning, was in no gay mood. Upon being questioned, he momentarily brightened and confided to his rescuers, “Anyway,” he boasted, “our raid was successful — tonight we sank that *verdammt* repair ship!”

Routinely, the next day Berlin Radio repeated the same boast. For the sixth time up until that date the US repair ship, which was classified the *Luftwaffe’s* number one target was sunk. But Berlin and the downed Nazi pilot were both mistaken — for the USS *Delta* (AR-9), the “*verdammt* repair ship” reported

This view of the *Delta* displays the purposeful lines of the vessel to advantage. As can be seen by the helmets and life jackets, the crew is at General Quarters.



USS *Delta* (AK-25) photographed arriving on 8 July 1942 at the Cramp Shipbuilding Company where it would be converted into a repair ship. She sailed as a cargo ship for nearly a year before being placed in commission in ordinary at the Philadelphia Navy Yard before being sailed to the Cramp yard. The Matson Navigation Company’s design for this class of C-3 cargo ships included a flash deck and seven pairs of kingposts.

sunk was not even scratched and, as a point of historical interest, remained in service until 1983.

Being a member of *Delta’s* repair force at that time in history and looking back over the years, I can easily see now why that pilot may have honestly thought he had scored a hit on the *Delta* for she did indeed weather many a near miss.

Bombs have drenched her and concussion has slammed men down like ten-pens on her trembling steel decks, but in war — as in poker — near misses don’t count and 24-hours a day, seven-days a week, her repair force went right ahead with their work.

Conversion completed, USS *Delta* (now AR-9) was surrounded by tugs when photographed on 2 March 1943 at the Cramp Shipyard.



Wayne Scarpaci did this painting titled *South Pacific Advanced Base* that illustrates the USS *Mississippi* (BB-41) in floating dry-dock USS *ABSD-2* during 1944 with USS *Delta* next to her.

The mission in the Mediterranean for *Delta* was two-fold: First, to insure the readiness of the thousands of boats and landing craft needed to mount a successful invasion, and, secondly, to repair any battle damage or other repair work needed after their return. She was not only a Florence Nightingale to the ships and boats of the Amphibious Forces but larger vessels such as cruisers and destroyers of the American and Allied Navies. She had the trained artisans to tackle any job at hand; the tooling, equipment, and material available and the capacity and will to get the job done as well as the pride in her profession of getting the job done right the first time around.

Taking care of the repair problems of the Invasion Fleet, the hundreds of LCIs, LSTs, and all the other gallant little assault craft whose mission was to grind their bows up on the murderous enemy beaches of Sicily, Italy, and southern France, was no small task but *Delta’s* “can do” spirit always prevailed.

At first glance, the *Delta* definitely lacked glamour. She did not have a torpedo boat’s waspish dash or a destroyer’s litheness, a cruiser’s trim lines or a battleship’s awful might. She had, instead, a deeper glamour — the glamour of an American assembly line — a floating Detroit, a seagoing Navy yard. In her own way, she was the heroine behind the heroes. She was not designed to go out and shoot it out with enemy



capitol ships but effectively protected herself and her brood under enemy aerial attack with her batteries of 20mm and twin 40mm anti-aircraft guns against the *Luftwaffe* that made a sustained effort during the most crucial months of the offensive into southern Europe from June 1943 to blast the *Delta* demon into oblivion.

In all honesty, I will surely give the Nazi airmen a big Red “E” for effort.

They never quit trying; night after night (almost always at night) they dropped their flares, brilliantly illuminating the hundreds of American amphibious ships and boats and other Allied vessels anchored in Lake Bizerte. They dropped their bombs and sometimes torpedoes, and in turn they were always met with a crimson tide of anti-aircraft fire from American A/A guns that sounded a veritable Fourth of July crescendo of ear-splitting staccato sounds across the normally peaceful waters of Lake Bizerte and the quiet Tunisian countryside.



Although a bit slow and ponderous, the Focke Wulf Fw 200C *Kondor* exacted a heavy toll of Navy ships. Later versions carried the first variants of German cruise missiles.

Always the number one target of German airmen, *Delta* proved herself a first-rate fighter as well as a workhorse. During her blitzing in Tunisia, she splashed four of the attacking *Luftwaffe* bombers on their night air raids and sent her own excellent team of divers out to retrieve the downed aircraft and brought them aboard ship to be

disassembled, analyzed, and to find a use for salvaged parts and metals suitable for re-use.

My shop, the heavy machine shop for instance, in our spare time, fashioned from the engine nose section and propeller hub assembly of a bomber *Delta* shot down, one of the most original sun dials ever conceived and presented it to Capt. Colin D. Headlee, *Delta’s* Commanding Officer, on his birthday.

*Delta* was built in 1941 by Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company at Newport News, Virginia, to become the *Hawaiian Packer*; one of America’s larger cargo ships and was intended to carry sugar from Hawaii — but she never carried a cube. The Navy grabbed her instead on 4 June 1941, and she was commissioned USS *Delta* (K-29),