



USS Willis A. Lee (DL-4)

Mediterranean Cruise

10 January 1968 - 17 May 1968

LTJG David C. Mader

Served Aboard: June 1967 – January 1969

## Introduction

I received my commission in June of 1967 after graduating from OCS in Newport. After 4 weeks of gunnery school in Dam Neck, VA, I reported aboard the Lee a green Ensign in July. My first billet was that of Ordinance Officer, later Fox Division Officer, and eventually after the Med Cruise, First Lieutenant. After some brief training periods at sea off the East Coast in the fall of 1967, the Lee's departure for the Med in January of 1968 was an exciting event for me.

Memories tend to fade after almost 50 years. At the recent DLA reunion, comparing memories from the Lee's 1968 Med cruise with shipmates showed some conflicting remembrances of the itinerary and events of that deployment. Short of accessing the ship's log, documentation is difficult to find.

This chronicle is based on the best resource I could find – a series of 10 lengthy letters I wrote to my parents over the course of the cruise. As mothers often do, mine faithfully saved every letter, which I have today. In the letters, I included port calls and dates, shipboard and onshore events of significance, and some personal impressions of my first extended deployment.

Hopefully, the shared memories which follow will be of interest to the reader, particularly shipmates who shared the experience with me on the Lee. I should also point out that DLA shipmate Howard Dobson authored a similar commentary on this deployment spanning January, February and March, when he then departed the ship. It can be found at:

<http://destroyerleaderassociation.org/fromashipmate/MemoriesofDL4.asp>

### **1968 Med Cruise Port Visit/Anchorage Summary (Arrival Dates)**

14 January – Gibraltar	8 March - Naples
29 January – Naples	13 March - Naples
14 February – Argostoli Bay, Greece	29 March – Souda Bay, Crete, Greece
17 February – Sousse, Tunisia	8 April – Athens (Piraeus), Greece
22 February – Siracusa, Sicily, Italy	26 April - Naples
1 March – Porto Vecchio, Corsica	7 May – Malaga, Spain

## **The 1968 Med Cruise**

**10 January** – Departed Newport in temperatures of 10 degrees F with icy winds.  
Destination: Gibraltar.

- Headed southeast to rendezvous with 3 other DESRON 24 destroyers and an oiler.
- Encountered rough seas most of the way over, frequently taking water over the bow. Refueled underway several times.
- Encountered several engineering casualties on the trip, including leaks in the boiler rooms (limited shower hours for most of the trip), two short losses of steering control, and a gyro failure. No doubt these casualties meant little to me as I was still trying to figure out where my guns were!



**At Sea – Transit to Med**

**19 January** – Arrived Gibraltar early morning.

- Expressed my amazement at what the Straits of Gibraltar looked like on a radar scope during the night – a seagoing traffic jam!

- We moored to a pier with our bow facing south.
- A total of 10 US naval vessels in port – several of them transports with a total of 1500 Marines aboard.
- Several British naval vessels in port as well. Also, moored behind us was an Israeli submarine. It is possible it was the Dakar, a former British sub purchased by the Israeli's, which after departing Gibraltar, was last heard from on 25 January. The Dakar's wreckage was not discovered until 1999, at a depth of 9800 feet between the islands of Cyprus and Crete.
- On liberty, enjoyed dinners at both the Rock and Queens hotels, and a couple of visits to the casino. Took the cable car to the top of the rock, and stopped to see the ape's den on the way down.



**The Lee Moored at the Pier in Gibraltar**

**22 January** – Departed Gibraltar. Destination: Naples.

- Seven days of sea operations/exercises on the way, including ASW, gunnery, refueling and rearming.
- 20 hour days are the norm – I'm learning this is NOT a pleasure cruise!

## **29 January** – Arrived Naples.

- Our arrival was an exercise in how not to Med-moor! While implementing the typical Med-moor to the Naples jetty, the Lee lost power while backing down and drifted into another destroyer moored to starboard. I was on the fantail with the sea detail crew and observed from a front row seat. We scraped along about 20 feet of the other ship's port quarter, doing mostly superficial damage. However, we suffered about a 10'x10' buckle on our starboard quarter – at the ship's laundry as I remember. The damaged section was cut out and replaced at our mooring location. My letter says only one engine failed, but doesn't cite the cause.
- Other US vessels currently in Naples – 10 destroyers, a cruiser, a carrier, and several service vessels.
- 2 February – Took one of the available tours to Rome for the weekend. Sidenote: One of my collateral duties was Tours Officer! There was a possibility of cancelled liberty due to the North Korean seizing of the Pueblo, but it never materialized. Shared a hotel room in Rome with LTJG Tom Gnesda, CIC Officer at the time. Tom and I were impressed when the heavy rain suddenly stopped as the Pope stepped out on his balcony for his Sunday Morning Blessing. My letter says the entire trip – bus, hotel and tours – was priced at \$30, and was worth at least two or three times that!
- 6 February – Change of command ceremony. Cdr. William J. Moredock relieved Cdr. Peter J. Goldman. A copy of the Change of Command ceremony program will be provided in a separate document. If memory serves, the First Lieutenant's billet also received a change of command at this time as LTJG Rick Heaton left the ship and was relieved by the First Division Officer LTJG Mark Scully.
- My first impressions of Naples: dirty city, pesky peddlers who will follow you for blocks trying to sell you just about anything, and insane drivers. Found some good food, however, including beer and pizza at the Londres Hotel on the Piazza Municipio, near where the liberty boats landed.

**7 February** – Departed Naples at 6 am in a cold drizzle. Steaming in the Tyrrhenian Sea between Italy and Sardinia as plane guard for the Shangri La (CVA-38).

- Watching the carrier pilots bring their jets in over our ship and land them on a small moving target convinces you it is much safer on the bridge of the Lee!
- Captain Moredock, our new skipper, is making good initial first impressions on the crew – enjoys his job, cool head, good people skills, talented ship handler.
- Heard reports today that the USS Bache (DD-470) is aground and breaking up on the rocks just off Rhodes, Greece. She apparently dragged anchor. All her engineering spaces are flooded, and they are evacuating the crew. (She was declared a loss and scrapped there, and was decommissioned the following month.) The Bache had been moored with the Lee in Naples just one week before her disastrous grounding. LTJG Mark Scully vividly recalls having had to loosen our mooring lines to allow the Bache to get underway from her Med-moor berth two ships away from the Lee.
- Refueling is scheduled for tonight – I'm officer in charge of forward fueling station – I'm impressive in my life jacket and hard hat!

**10 February** – (Approximate). Transited south through the Straits of Messina just after midnight. Destination: Argostoli Bay, Greece.

- Observed the red glow of volcanic activity of Mt. Etna on Sicily.
- In the company of the Shangri La (CVA-38), a cruiser (probably Columbus (CA-74)), and other destroyers. ASW exercises, plane guarding for the remainder of the trip to Greece.

**14 February** – Arrived Argostoli Bay, Greece. At anchor.

- Argostoli Bay is located on the Greek island of Keffalinia, just west of the Gulf of Corinth, which separates the Peloponnese peninsula from the northern part of Greece. A peaceful little bay with a small fishing village.
- The crew took advantage of the overnight anchorage to relax and catch up on sleep. Movies were watched, and many were seen on the fantail listening to music and watching the stars. With only the Lee in the bay, it felt a little like being in another world.





**Fantail Sea Detail – Entering Argostoli Bay, Greece**

**15 February** – Departed Argostoli Bay. Destination: Sousse, Tunisia. Steaming independently.

**17 February** – Arrived Sousse, Tunisia after two day transit.

- As the first US Naval vessel to visit Sousse since WW II, there was concern about the narrow harbor entrance, currents across that entrance, and the depth inside the harbor. Ideally, we would have anchored outside the harbor, but with the objective of showing the flag and promoting goodwill with the Tunisians, the decision was made to enter.

- Several crewmen and I were sent into the harbor ahead of the ship in the personnel boat to take soundings in the harbor. We radioed back there was adequate depth to accommodate the Lee's draft of 26 feet with her bow mounted sonar dome.
- The Lee entered the harbor at a higher than normal speed to offset the currents across the entrance and maintain steerageway, knowing that the engines would have to be quickly reversed once inside because of the harbor's limited width.
- When the engines were reversed inside the harbor, they stirred up mud and debris from the harbor bottom which was sucked into the condenser intakes, and all power was lost. Certainly this included steam power to the engines, but may also have included electrical power.
- Fortunately, the ship had all but stopped, but then began a slow drift over a nearby harbor buoy and its chain. The buoy lodged between the screw shafts.
- Eleven hours of effort to free the ship from the buoy by both the Lee's personnel boat and motor whaleboat, a Tunisian PT boat, and several fishing boats failed. I spent those 11 hours in the P-boat playing both tugboat and taxi.
- Tunisian divers were called in that night, but to no avail. Navy divers were flown in from Naples, and by noon the next day had managed to free the buoy without apparent damage to the ship. The Lee was moved to the pier, and over the next two days we played host to 3500 locals who swarmed from boiler rooms to the bridge while the ship's band played rock and roll on the pier.
- Further efforts at good will creation consisted of delivering a complete dentist's office to the country, having the ship's band entertain in several resort hotels, and giving children's parties on board.
- On the first night ashore, several of us were invited to the home of a couple who worked for Texas A&M University setting up an agricultural school. Over a couple of drinks, they recommended the local attractions to take in.
- Sousse had an old quarter – a walled part of the city – but also had beautiful beaches with resort hotels frequented by Europeans.





### **Immobilized on the Buoy and Later at the Pier - Sousse, Tunisia**

**21 February** – Departed Sousse. Destination: Siracusa, Italy (Sicily). Steaming independently.

- Upon departing Sousse, it was determined our encounter with the harbor buoy was not without effect on the ship's performance. A distinct vibration surfaced as we increased speed, and we were unable to exceed 21 knots without severe gyrations. The Navy divers had noticed some screw damage, but didn't feel it would impact our performance. A replacement screw will be shipped from Boston to Naples, and when it arrives, we will go to Naples for the replacement, which should take 3-5 days. The screw weight is 10 tons, and its diameter is 15 feet.

**22 February** - Arrived Siracusa, Sicily. At anchor in the harbor.

- A quiet port, little night life, but many Greek and Roman ruins in and around the city to see.
- The Captain was somewhat annoyed at the engineering department for making smoke in the harbor.



**The Lee Anchored in Siracusa, Sicily**

**26 February** – Departed Siracusa. Destination: Porto Vecchio, Corsica.

**1 March** - Arrived Porto Vecchio, Corsica. Anchored in the harbor with 5 American and 2 French destroyers.

- Porto Vecchio is on the southeast coast of Corsica, just above the Straits of Bonafacio which separate Sardinia and Corsica. Today is the first day of a joint U.S./French exercise called FAIRGAME-6, which continues until 10 March. Much of the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet is anchored nearby – carriers, cruisers, subs, destroyers, oilers, etc.

**2 March** – Departed Porto Vecchio for the FAIRGAME-6 exercise. Steaming with other FAIRGAME ships down the east coasts of Corsica and Sardinia.

- During the exercise, encountered 3 anchored Soviet destroyers. More comical than exciting. Our crew ran to the rail, pointed at the Soviets, and took their pictures. Their crews ran to the rail, pointed at the Americans, and took *our* pictures!
- The word is that the Soviets currently have 50-55 ships in the Med compared to our 50.

**3 March** – Steaming with other FAIRGAME ships up the west coasts of Sardinia and Corsica.

- I was suddenly ousted from my stateroom for a few days by 2 French officers who are observing FAIRGAME – a captain and a commander. Back to my old home in the after Chief's Quarters!
- Schedule today: 7 to 11 am – bridge watch. 11 am to 1 pm – General Quarters for a gunnery shoot. 6 to 8 pm – refueling. 8-12 pm – bridge watch. Midnight – another refueling exercise. After refueling to 4 am – bridge watch. Am I having fun or what?

**8 March** – Arrived Naples.

- The replacement screw arrived in Naples, and we were pulled out of FAIRGAME-6 to come into port for the replacement. Unfortunately, after our arrival, it was discovered there was not a crane boom available that could handle the weight of the screw. A suitable one was ordered from somewhere in the States, and we were ordered back to sea until it arrived.

**10 March** – Departed Naples.

- We are heading back to sea to refuel, rearm, and take on supplies – seemingly things we could have easily done in Naples. One begins to challenge Navy efficiency at this point. We had just completed these tasks when we were ordered back to Naples to arrive on 13 March, as the boom for the crane had arrived.

**13 March** – Arrived Naples for screw replacement.

- Upon inspection by Navy divers, it was found that one of the starboard screw blades has a chunk out of it as expected, but also that the port screw has 3 bent blades. A waterborne replacement of the starboard screw is planned, and the bends in the port screw will be pounded out. Planned completion is 21 March. If successful, we will go back to sea. If not, a period in drydock may be required.
- This in port time offered opportunities to go ashore and see more of the area, including a trip out to Capri. Absorbed some culture by attending an opera in the quite beautiful Naples opera house.

- This repair period has also altered our operating schedule. We will miss a visit to Malta due to the repair. We have been cancelled out of Istanbul and rescheduled for Athens (Piraeus), Greece. I was looking forward to Istanbul, but Athens will be interesting as well.

**21 March** – Screw replacement and repairs completed. We left port for a couple of hours for a test drive. The repair experts aboard claim the remaining shaking and vibration is not excessive. The crew is not so sure. Some swear that the radar antennae are “doing the Watusi.” Regardless, we will return to sea.

- After the test drive, we anchored outside Naples for the night as we will get underway tomorrow morning.

**22 March** – Underway from Naples anchorage.

- Steaming down the West Coast of Italy and through the Straits of Messina. We are doing 15 knots, and the vibration is not too noticeable. The week’s schedule includes anti-aircraft and anti-ship gunnery exercises. Afterwards, we will be headed to Souda Bay, Crete for a weekend anchorage – no liberty.
- I was awakened at 2 am one night this week by a call from one of our radiomen. He had a telephone connection to my folks in Pittsburgh via shortwave radio. It was difficult to have a meaningful conversation when, for security reasons, you couldn’t say where you were or what you were doing!

**29 March** – Arrived Souda Bay, Crete. At anchor with many other 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet vessels.

- The last week’s gunnery exercises went well. In 4 days we fired 120 rounds, more than in the past year in total. Shot down two aircraft towed target sleeves. Fox Division was ecstatic!
- Souda Bay is on the north coast of Crete, toward the western end of the island. Only a few small towns are visible between the hills. No liberty, but I managed to get ashore for an hour on some ship’s business.
- Hopes for some shipboard rest and relaxation were dashed when the Commodore scheduled a surprise personnel and materiel inspection. - a morale building exercise in disguise!
- Some of the enterprising locals approached our ships in small boats trying to sell Ouzo (a potent Greek alcohol) to the crews.



**USS Columbus (CA-74) – Anchored at Souda Bay, Crete**

**1 April** – Departed Souda Bay.

- In company with about 15 other ships participating in a 2 day anti-submarine, anti-aircraft exercise. In Readiness Condition 3, which means we keep gun mounts and gun directors manned, and are standing 1 in 3 watches. My Condition 3 watch station is in CIC as Gunnery Liaison Officer (GLO).
- After this exercise, we will go to a small island off Malta for a few days of groundfire support exercises.

**8 April** – Arrived Athens (Piraeus). Anchored in the harbor.

- Given the lengthy at sea period ahead, the liberty schedule was liberal. I was able to see most of the sights of Athens including the Acropolis, Constitution Square, the Placa, and eat an exorbitant \$15 lobster dinner at the Hilton Hotel. Also took a day long bus tour to the Apollo Oracle at Delphi.

**15 April** – Departed Athens. Headed west to join the USS Franklin D. Roosevelt (CVA-42) task group.



- Just learned that we will be going back for one final visit to Naples. Seems we need access to a crane to repair some electronic gear high on the mast. The plan is to go in on 26 and 27 April.
- After refueling in Augusta Bay, Sicily (just north of Siracusa) on 18 April, we will be operating with the Roosevelt group in the western Med until we return to Naples, and then until we head home.
- Joined the Roosevelt task group on 24 April.
- Had my first opportunity to take the Conn as the JOOD on the bridge during an underway refueling operation. Pretty exciting taking the Lee alongside the oiler, then maintaining an 80 to 100 foot distance between them at 12 knots by steering with course corrections of ½ degree or so. First opportunity was in daylight, then had a second one at night.

**26 April** – Arrived Naples for electronic gear repair.

- Although not in my letters, I recall seeing and talking with crew members of the ill-fated USS Scorpion (SSN-589) while ashore in Naples. We would later have ASW exercises with her before leaving the Med. She was lost on 22 May (some records say 30 May) with 99 men aboard. The book **Scorpion Down: Sunk by the Soviets, Buried by the Pentagon: The Untold Story of the USS Scorpion** (By Ed Offley and published by Basic Books in 2007) carries the following quote:

“The loss of the nuclear submarine USS Scorpion (SSN-589) on Memorial Day, May 27, 1968, has been commemorated by an American admiral as ‘one of the greatest unsolved sea mysteries of our era.’ To this day, the U.S. Navy officially describes it as an inexplicable accident.”

**27 April** – Departed Naples.

- Rejoined the Roosevelt task group to participate in Exercise Dawn Patrol – an approximately week-long NATO exercise in the western Med. Involving ASW exercises among others, this is where we would operate with the Scorpion.

**7 May** – Anchored off Malaga, Spain for only a couple of hours to leave the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet (Outchop) and rejoin the 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet administratively.

**8 May** – Departed the Mediterranean. Destination: Newport.

**17 May** – Arrived Newport.