CONFIDENTIAL

5 December 1943

From: Commanding Officer.
To: The Commander in Chief, United States Fleet.
Subject: Anti-Aircraft action against the enemy - Report of.

Reference: (a) O'Brien, Restricted Itr. 171/13, 16/14-
Serial 3699; October 19, 1942.

Enclosure: 1. Port Berthing Plan, showing disposition of shipping.
2. Copy of letter to Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Northwest African Waters, describing action and recommendations for awards to personnel.

1. At 1927 to 2100, December 2, 1943, this vessel was in action against the enemy, suffering considerable minor damage, when a large force of enemy bombers, estimated at about fifty (50) in number, type unknown, inflicted a surprise attack on shipping and harbour installations in the port of Bari, Italy. Direct hits were scored on many ships, resulting in damage either by sinking, burning, or explosion, or a combination of all three, of an estimated eighteen (18) to twenty-one (21) ships out of a total of probably thirty-eight (38) to forty (40) ships of various types, mostly merchantmen, concentrated in the harbour and port.

2. The U.S.S. AROOSTOOK, loaded with a cargo of approximately 19,000 barrels of 100 octane gasoline, was lying at anchor in the harbour in the position shown on enclosure (1), with forty-five (45) fathoms of chain to port anchor in four (4) fathoms of water, wood bottom.

3. At 1928, without previous warning or alert, several flares were dropped over the harbour, and approximately fifteen (15) seconds later the first firing was opened by one of the shore batteries. At 1937 the U.S.S. AROOSTOOK opened fire with all guns, following the lead of the master gun on when until that gun was silenced by a near-by explosion at about 1938.

4. At approximately 1931, direct hits were scored on one or more merchant ships in berth 29-31, and on an oil tanker, about 1,100 feet distant from the supermarket, and until
About 1950, direct hits were scored on other merchant vessels, including a tanker and ammunition ship, near berth 28-30, and a ship of war and a merchant ship at anchor in the harbor, causing great fires and terrific explosions. Fuel oil and gasoline from the sunken and damaged ships ignited and the fire spread over much of the harbor and parts of the city. The spraying from the spraying tankers, the fires set by the bombers, and the resulting explosions caused great damage to property and the loss of many lives.

Any bombs were seen to explode in the waters of the harbor, three or four of which fell approximately ninety (90) yards astern of the U.S.S. AROOSTOOK, seeming to lift her entire stern out of the water. Judging from the force of the explosions, the intense fires started, and the rapid sinking of at least four medium and large sized merchantmen anchored in the harbor, it is believed that most of the bombs dropped were of five-hundred (500) to one-thousand (1,000) pounds in weight. It was later learned that from five (5) to seven (7) heavy caliber bombs were dropped at scattered points in the city, causing great damage to property and the loss of very many lives.

The “All Clear” was sounded at 2100 and, although two additional “All Clear” alerts were subsequently sounded, it is believed no enemy planes returned to the harbor area.

At about 2130 the ammunition ship, at berth 28 or 29, exploded, sending flame, debris, and smoke that appeared to be at least 6,000 to 8,000 feet into the air. This explosion was felt as far as sixty-two (62) miles away, and the damage to ships, harbor installations, and buildings throughout the city as a result of this explosion was great. Explosions of a lesser intensity occurred throughout the night and following day as the fires reached the magazines and explosive cargoes carried in the burning ships. All of the ships in berths 11, 12, 17-31, and to a lesser extent at different points in the harbor as shown on the plan, were either sunk, burned, or severely damaged, as a result of direct hits by bombs or fires started from adjacent burning ships. The entire outer mole, berths 18 to 31 and adjacent waters, was a solid mass of fire and explosions, as well as in several areas among the anchorages.

The U.S.S. AROOSTOOK maintained effective and consistent barrage throughout the entire action. All guns performed ex-
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collectively, thirty-nine (39) rounds having been fired from the 3" 50 caliber without mishap, and 1,200 rounds fired from the four 20 mm guns, with but two (2) minor jams, which were quickly cleared. All personnel performed in a highly commendable manner throughout the entire action. There were no casualties, other than concussion and partial deafness, sustained by personnel, which fact is considered nothing short of miraculous in view of the great amount of shrapnel and other missiles which fell on and about different parts of the ship. Approximately forty-five (45) pounds of this shrapnel and metal debris was collected from the decks and various other parts of the ship, some of the pieces weighing from six (6) to eight and one-half (8½) pounds.

The ship suffered no serious damage which would impair her fighting ability, though considerable minor and superficial damage was inflicted, which, until rectified, renders her uncomfortable, and unfit to perform fully and safely her present duties as a cargo gasoline carrier. Following is a summary of the damage sustained:

(a) Both bellies life boats pierced by shrapnel and means opened in one (1) boat. (Temporary emergency repairs have already been made.)

(b) Hole (1½ x 5½) in deck, amidships, overhead of officer’s ward room and shower, caused by shrapnel or other falling object from great height. (Temporary patch in place.)

(c) Practically all plumbing fixtures, brackets, pipes, etc., throughout ship damaged. (Being repaired as time and material permits.)

(d) All doors, officer’s quarter, passenger and staterooms, blown off. (Ship’s force can probably make temporary repairs to two (2) doors and will canvas in place to serve satisfactorily on the others until permanent repairs can be effected.)

(e) Six-inch fueling hose pierced by shrapnel. Must be replaced with new hose.

(f) All windows in lower deck house blown out.

(g) 20 mm. ammunition tray not pierced by shrapnel.

(h) All deputy cooling line to heat exchanger carried away. Various other lines throughout ship ruptured and broken. (Ship’s force repairing as time and material permits.)

(i) Numerous shorts in electrical circuits. (Being cleared by ship’s force.)

(j) Suggested desire to starboard main diesel engine and engine foundation.
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10. Availability for the purpose of effecting permanent repairs to ship, and to do other necessary work, has been requested by despatch to Commander, U. S. Naval Forces, Northwest African Waters.

11. In the opinion of the Commanding Officer, the barrage put up by the entire port and ships, as a whole, was very poor. Some ships and shore guns were firing directly across other ships at low level. Some damage and even casualties to personnel might have occurred from this cause. Fire discipline and control was very poor. This might have been, in part, due to the complete surprise with which the attack came and due to the fact that many of the guns on the ships were put out of action as a result of direct hits, even before they were manned. Not one single searchlight was manned, although the entire port was lighted at the time of the attack, and subsequent fires from the burning ships and gasoline lit up the entire port area.

12. The Commanding Officer has, in the past, expressed disapproval of lying at anchor, fully loaded with 100 octane gasoline, for as many as three (3) to five (5) days, in a port so crowded that ships frequently touch each other whenever the wind shifts. Of all the ships lost in this action, most of them were either waiting berths to discharge their cargoes, or had already discharged and were moored or anchored in the crowded outer harbor, no apparent effort having been made to segregate loaded tankers, ammunition carriers, or other highly dangerous and vulnerable cargoes from the concentration of other shipping.

13. By separate letter to the Commander, U. S. Naval Forces, Northwest African Waters, copy of which is enclosed, Enclosure (3), a similar description of the above action is given, with recommendation for suitable awards to deserving officers and men for outstanding performance of duty during action.