

Following the story of the "Maunganui" as published in last week's issue of this magazine several people have asked for details of any occasions when the ship has encountered evidence of enemy action at sea. There have been many such. Some of these are described below by the present R. J. M. S., WO II W. M. Scully, who has been a member of the Staff since the "Maunganui" became a Hospital Ship nearly five years ago.

Whilst passing through the Mozambique Channel about four o'clock one afternoon a life-boat under sail was sighted and our course was changed towards it. Coming within hailing distance the person at the tiller of the boat reported that he was Captain of the "Johnston", a ship of Panamanian Register, bound for Karachi which had been torpedoed by a Japanese Submarine at 6 o'clock that morning. He waved to our Captain to keep on his course, for, as you all know, to heave-to in those waters would be extremely dangerous, especially as we were Durban-bound with a full complement of wounded. He further advised that he had set a course for the coast of Portuguese East Africa and thought that he would be able to make it within a couple of days. When it was observed that there was a female (the Captain's wife) and injured men amongst these survivors a line was thrown, the boat made fast, and then the difficult task of getting these people in-board commenced, a heavy sea running at the time. The first to attempt ascending the rope ladder was the Captain's wife, but past nervous strain proved too much and she collapsed. There was no alternative. A rope was lowered, the end of which was made fast under her armpits. Unfortunately just as the weight was taken, the sea surged and her foot was crushed between the ship and the lifeboat. Still she was hauled aboard per Curtis stretcher and transported immediately to the Theatre. By this time another boat hove in sight, and it was observed also with casualties; one as we could see, badly. Our Surgeon descended the ladder, and while we were bringing the rest aboard, gave medical aid to this unfortunate person, who afterwards proved to be the Chief Engineer who, when the torpedo struck, was in the stoke hold and was blown from there up onto the fiddley. He, had he not had timely attention, would have died that night. After the two lifeboats had been stove-in a course was set for Durban. That night a signal was received that two troopships had been torpedoed ahead of us. All ranks were then instructed to keep a weather eye for survivors, but I am afraid that I will have to confess that all we saw were a few pith helmets floating by, all that remained of those lost souls. To give some idea of the sinkings in that vicinity. A ship moored astern of us in Durban sailed one morning and her crew, as survivors, came back in another ship that afternoon! These submarines were operating from bases in Portuguese East Africa, and, as the Mediterranean was then closed, all shipping had to take the route to Egypt via South Africa, thus providing a harvest for the enemy.

Another interlude in our shipboard life was in the Indian Ocean en route for Colombo. . Early one afternoon a small type of native craft with S.O.S. scrawled upon its white (?) sail was sighted and on nearer investigation we found that it contained three men, who, as we approached, made weak attempts to paddle or row towards the ship. Never in my life have I noticed so many sharks. One could have walked the water on them as they thrashed about, snapping at the oars and biting at the gunwale. It almost seemed as if they were trying to jump into the boat. This goes to show that sharks must have some instincts re death as it was afterwards found that these men had had no food for some time and had been without water for at least five days. They were German internees who had escaped from Goa (India) and were trying to make the Andaman Islands, then in Japanese hands, and when picked up had travelled over a thousand miles. They were taken on board, their craft stove in, and then were put under guard until handed over to military authorities at Colombo.

One morning, about three days out from Fremantle, we were approached by a Catalina flying boat which circled, morsing to the bridge. Our course was changed and later we came upon a badly battered tanker. It had a huge hole on the water-line amidships and its superstructure and bridge were practically shot away, but it was making way slowly. Our action boat was immediately lowered, and two Medical Officers were rowed across. After some time they returned with two injured men to receive immediate hospital attention. These M.Os had given medical treatment to quite a number on the tanker and had decided this had been sufficient for them until they reached Fremantle, the port this crippled ship was making for. From the two wounded men on board we gained the following story. They had been attacked some time previously by a Japanese surface raider, who placed a torpedo right amidships, whereupon the tanker burst into flames and the order to abandon ship was given. When they had taken to the boats the raider closed in and machine gunned them, killing 19. Luckily dusk intervened and the Japs sheered off. Strange to say the fire on board the stricken ship abated and then died out completely. At this the survivors decided to return with the hopes that better attention could be given