

The Man Who Does the Impossible

Tell Captain Ellsberg, of the Navy, that anything can't be done — and he goes right ahead and does it

by DALE CARNEGIE

I RECENTLY interviewed a man whose specialty is accomplishing the impossible. His name is Ellsberg — Captain Edward Ellsberg of the Navy. For years, Captain Ellsberg has been doing the things that the experts said couldn't be done. Let me illustrate:

Example No. 1. Back in 1926, the submarine S-51, weighing a thousand tons, was sunk in 132 feet of water off Rhode Island. No submarine had ever been raised before from that depth in the open sea; and most of the experts said it couldn't be done; but Captain Ellsberg did it.

Example No. 2: When Edward Ellsberg graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1914, no midshipman up to that time had ever gotten a perfect grade in navigation. The experts said it couldn't be done; but he did it.

Example No. 3. When the United States Navy asked Captain Ellsberg to salvage the sunken drydocks and the sunken Axis ships in the Italian naval base at Massawa in the Red Sea, the experts said — well, let me give you one sentence from a letter written by no less a person than Admiral Harold

R. Stark, Commander of U. S. Naval Forces in Europe. Admiral Stark said: "At Massawa Captain Ellsberg, by great skill and unflagging energy, raised the two Italian floating docks, in spite of considerable weight of opinion that this was impossible."

Captain Ellsberg's extraordinary feat of salvage at Massawa was so outstanding that the United States Navy awarded him the Medal of the Legion of Merit. Many newspapers have declared this salvage work was an important factor in the war in the Mediterranean.

THAT HAPPENED two years ago last spring — six months after Pearl Harbor — one of the darkest periods of the war. The Germans under Rommel had already driven to within 200 miles of the Suez Canal and they were bombing the daylight out of Britain's great naval base at Alexandria. The British knew that unless the Germans were prevented from capturing the Suez Canal and the Middle East, the allied nations might lose the war.

The British ships were penned

up in the Eastern Mediterranean and they needed overhauling and repairs badly. In fact, many of their ships were reduced to half speed because of the thick crust of barnacles on their hulls. But the nearest drydock and repair station was 4,000 miles away in South Africa — a distance greater than that between New York and London.

To be sure, the British had conquered an Italian naval base that was only 900 miles away from Cairo — the base at Massawa on the Red Sea. That base had once had excellent drydocks and naval repair shops. But the defeated Italians swore that if they couldn't use these naval repair shops themselves, they were going to wreck them so completely that nobody else could possibly use them. So, before retreating, they smashed the machines with sledge hammers; bombed and sank the great drydocks; and scuttled 26 Axis ships, sending them to the bottom of the harbor.

THE BRITISH knew that if they could repair the naval base at Massawa, it might mean all the difference between defeat and victory.

But how could they? The job meant men and materials and they then had neither. So they appealed to us for help; and we sent them Captain Edward Ellsberg, of the United States Navy.

Certain British experts considered that the raising of the large drydock was not practicable. It was obvious that all the divers that could be brought to the task would take years to patch the holes in that drydock and pump it dry, but Captain Ellsberg, with 13 men, raised it in nine days!

It sounds incredible; and it is incredible — especially when you consider all the hardships under which they worked. They worked under the same hardships in reconditioning the sabotaged Italian machine shops.

First, there was a lack of tools. The defeated Italian army not only wrecked the machines but they also carried away all the tools. "We were so desperate for tools," Captain Ellsberg said, as he told me the story, "that whenever a ship came into the harbor, we would beg the captain to give us even a hammer or a screwdriver." Captain Ellsberg drove 80 miles to get a couple of handsaws.

The captain found that the Italians had not smashed the same parts on every motor in the machine shops and that by matching up undamaged parts, he could reassemble about 25 per cent of the original power plant. He and his men set up a crude foundry of their own to replace broken parts. In two months, he had nearly every machine in the machine, carpenter and steel-plate shops back in operation.

ANOTHER big obstacle was the blistering heat. The Red Sea is the hottest ocean in the world. The sea water was so hot at Massawa that men couldn't go swimming to cool off. Captain Ellsberg told me that the iron plates on the ships sometimes reached a temperature of 160 degrees. An iron tool in the sun would get so hot that a workman would have to put on a glove before he could pick it up; and he would then have to douse it in the sea before he could use it.

Within six months after Captain Ellsberg had raised the drydock at Massawa, he had repaired three of the four cruisers comprising the whole British fleet operating in the Mediterranean, and reconditioned 80 other ships in time for the November offensive against Rommel.

Captain Ellsberg told me that the nearest he ever came to death was the day he went down in water 110 feet deep to examine the sunken submarine S-4, 17 years ago. The S-4 collided with a Coast Guard destroyer off the coast of Massachusetts in 1927, and was sunk in 110 feet of water. Forty men were trapped inside that submarine.

The news of that disaster 17 years ago caused a national sensation. Although Captain Ellsberg was no longer in the Navy then, he was one of the nation's outstanding authorities on deep-sea diving, so he volunteered his serv-

ices and was rushed to the scene of the sunken submarine off Cape Cod.

For three days, a storm raged over the sea, making it impossible for divers to descend. By the time the storm subsided, the 40 men trapped inside the submarine were dead, but Captain Ellsberg put on his diving suit and descended to the bottom of the ocean anyway to see if the submarine could be lifted without breaking it in two.

SUDDENLY, while inspecting the submarine, Captain Ellsberg lost all sense of direction. He knew he was still standing on the rounded hull on top of the sunken submarine, but he was surrounded by a cloud of mud. He couldn't see any part of the submarine itself. One step in the wrong direction might mean death.

"I stopped instantly," he said as he told me the story. "I was afraid that, if I took a single step the wrong way, I would go sliding overboard from the round hull on which I stood.

"I was completely lost. I stood there motionless, afraid to move.

"Then the Falcon, the ship to which my lifeline was fastened on the surface of the sea, took a sudden lunge on a wave and my lifeline tightened. I was thrown off balance and down I went, over the side of the sunken submarine.

"I was terrified because I had cut open my watertight glove and

rapidly losing air. As the air went out, the sea began pressing on my chest. I could hardly breathe. I knew my chest would be crushed. I hit bottom, but instead of stopping, I shot down rather into the soft mud. I was in total darkness and I was lying on the twisted wreckage which had been torn from the keel of the ship at the sunken submarine. I feared that if I moved, those jagged steel plates would cut my suit wide open and that would mean almost certain death.

"Finally, in desperation, I signaled my helper on the surface to pull up my lifeline. Four men were on the lines, but I couldn't get the slightest pull. My lifeline was fouled in the wreckage above. I could feel the pressure of the mud antic numbing my brain. I kept thinking of the 40 dead men inside the sunken submarine and I knew I could soon join them in death.

Then gradually I became aware of a persistent murmur. I was still getting some air through my air hose. So I opened wide the inlet valve and suddenly the air started to inflate my suit. Then, as if a giant hand had seized me by the shoulders, my body started to rise upward through the mud. The next moment and I was free of the bed of sharp torn steel plates. The next moment and my helmet was through the ooze of the ocean and into the water and into the air.

"I looked up. My lifeline and air hose were floating straight above me. I was clear at last. I was saved."

Such is the story as Captain Ellsberg told it to me.

EVERY DAY for two and a half years, while attending Annapolis, Edward Ellsberg passed a flag-draped coffin which lay under the stairs in the barracks. This coffin contained the body of one of America's greatest naval heroes, Captain John Paul Jones. Edward Ellsberg became so interested in the life story of John Paul Jones that he read about every book that had ever been published about this great naval hero of our Revolutionary War, and finally wrote a book himself about Captain John Paul Jones. He told me that his own life had been deeply influenced by the spirit of this young Scotsman who became a sailor at 12 and Captain of the U. S. Frigate Ranger at 27.

Captain Ellsberg was inspired — as every American ought to be inspired — by the fighting spirit of John Paul Jones, the spirit which inspired him to answer the enemy's demand for surrender with these immortal words: "Surrender? Never. I have just begun to fight." And those words seem to have been Captain Ellsberg's lifelong motto, for when anyone says to him, "It cannot be done," Edward Ellsberg just goes ahead and does it.