

Deadly Saga of CONVOY SC-118

It seemed that this Atlantic Convoy was holding its own against U-Boat attacks — until one U-Boat Ace arrived and began to systematically destroy the Allied ships one by one

BY JAMES WATERS

Acting Commander F.B. Proudfoot, Royal Navy, had every reason to be pleased as darkness fell on the evening of 6 February 1943. As he stood on the bridge of HMS *Vanessa* and looked at the 61 ships of Convoy *SC-118* stretching over a front of seven-miles, the screening ships of British Escort Group B2 had things under firm control. But for one of the finest escort performances yet seen in the Battle of the Atlantic, disaster could have overtaken them, for *SC-118* had encountered one bad break after another.

The convoy, consisting originally of 44 merchant ships and tankers, had departed New York on 24 January. Off Newfoundland on the last day of January, Proudfoot's Group B2 had taken over from the Western Local Escort, and 19 more merchantmen from Halifax and St. Johns joined the convoy. B2 was a

strong force numerically for a slow merchant convoy, and consisted of three British destroyers, three British corvettes, the Free French corvette *Lobelia*, and the Coast Guard Cutter *Bibb* (WPG-31). However, the group had not worked together as a team.

Late in January, B Service, the cryptographic section of the German Navy High Command, intercepted and broke an enciphered Allied routing message concerning Convoy *SC-118*, scheduled from New York to the North Channel, with valuable cargoes for Russia. U-Boat Command had its first clue.

The second soon followed. At the end of the month, *U-456* had sighted eastbound Convoy *HX-224* in a heavy westerly gale, and set out in pursuit. Five other boats were available, but all were astern of the convoy and would require several days to catch up. The *U-456* went in alone and attacked, sinking three ships on 2 February. It was not a heavy kill from a large convoy, but the sinking of one tanker was to have far reaching implications. Two-days later, *U-632* picked up a survivor from this tanker who gratuitously informed the U-Boat commander that another slow convoy was following on the same route two-days behind *HX-224*.

This incredible act of carelessness — or treason — was to cost the lives of hundreds of seamen and soldiers.

When Adm. Karl Doenitz, Commander-in-Chief, Navy, received the information, it erased the last doubts from his mind. He had the proposed routing of *SC-118* from the deciphered message, but had been doubtful that the slow convoy would adhere to the route because of the attacks on *HX-224*. With the latest confirming information from *U-632*, he decided that they would and acted accordingly. Concentrating all available boats into a group, designated *Pfeil* (Arrow), he ordered them on to the estimated track of the oncoming

convoy, to patrol to the westward. His reasoning was faultless and, the following night, *SC-107* ran into the middle of Group Arrow, then passed on to the east undetected!

No one on either side was the wiser.

But early in the morning

darkness, despite specific warnings that had been passed, a careless merchant seaman on the *SS Annik*, tinkering with a snowflake projector, fired it! The brilliant pyrotechnic display burst in the sky over the convoy. Startled men on 71 ships stared as the burning embers fell and, 20-miles away, the alert watch on *U-187* also witnessed the event. The *U-187* was a new boat, and this was her first contact after 22-days on an uneventful maiden patrol. She closed the convoy, determined its course and speed, and in the early dawn darkness, began transmitting a sighting report.

U-Boat Command copied the message. However, it was also received by the rescue vessel *Toward* at the stern of *SC-118*, which had high-frequency direction finder gear (HF/DF). The *Toward* obtained a bearing on the U-Boat signal and promptly transmitted to HMS *Vanessa*. HMS *Beverly* was ahead of the convoy at the time and, with commendable alertness, changed course and started out on the bearing



Even though a convoy was well protected, a skilled and aggressive U-Boat commander still could wreak havoc on the unarmored cargo vessels.



HMS *Vanessa* docked at Blackwell during WWII. She was a V-class destroyer commissioned on 21 June 1918. After brief service in the Great War, she was decommissioned and placed into storage but brought out and reconditioned in 1939 as Great Britain neared war once again.

The Free French corvette *Lobelia* was commissioned on 16 July 1941 and performed heroically in defending the convoy as it headed east.



without awaiting orders from the *Vanessa*. She would, she informed the *Vanessa*, search out 20-miles.

Less than an hour later, she sighted *U-187* on the surface and went after her at 22-knots. When the range had closed to 5000-yards, orders were given to commence firing. The *Beverly*, however, was an old ex-American four-stack flush-decker, and her fire control equipment was antiquated. The gun pointer, unable to see the U-Boat in the troughs of the heavy swell, could not fire. When the range had closed to 4000-yards, *U-187* dived.