

K.G.F.S. - The Royal & Merchant Navies at War

From a very early age I had made up my mind to go to sea, but with my father on the shore staff of a large Shipping Company and a grandfather who became a Master Mariner I suppose it was inevitable that I should be guided into the Merchant Navy.

I joined my first ship in June 1929, a coal burner carrying general cargo to South America. I had signed indentures for a four year cadetship. It was providential that my Company was keen on its officers joining the Royal Naval Reserve, which I did, and it was in September 1931 that a very apprehensive young midshipman RNR joined HMS Hood at Portsmouth for 6 months training.

It was not long before I realised that a career in the Royal Navy would hold far greater attractions for me than one in the Merchant Navy, but there was no way that a transfer was possible.

My time in HMS Hood left an indelible mark on me and particularly the encouragement I received from some of the officers and in particular the gunnery officer, Lt. Cdr. Longley Cook, later to become a Vice Admiral. In 1937, after my midshipman's training, the Admiralty introduced a scheme whereby junior RNR officers could apply for a permanent commission in the Royal Navy to the rank of Lt. Cdr. This was later changed to give them the same opportunities as the normal entries. This was the chance that I had always wanted but I was doubtful about my ability to make up the four years which I had lost and during which time I had been working in a Timber Firm, using my brawn rather than my brain. I was convinced, however, that even if I failed, I had to have a go and I was helped in this decision by the earlier encouragement I had received.

I was, to my surprise and delight, accepted and after qualifying courses covering gunnery, torpedo, signals and navigation I was appointed to my first ship, HMS Glasgow. During my year in the ship I was given command of HM Drifter Sundown for several months which included taking the vessel from Portsmouth to Rosyth. This experience made me appreciate what it was like to have the ultimate responsibility

for 'all that happened on board', and also the problems involved in handling a vessel under all kinds of conditions - I liked it - I enjoyed the challenge and I was a good sailor. This experience made me determined to try to get into destroyers. My Captain in HMS Glasgow helped me by recommending me for an appointment to a working destroyer in the Mediterranean. My appointment to HMS Hasty came in June 1939 and when war broke out the ship was in Malta. In October 1939 the ship was despatched to the South Atlantic to search for German raiders and blockade runners. In February 1940 we were back in home waters with the Home Fleet based in Scapa Flow until May 1940 when we were despatched back to the Eastern Mediterranean where Hasty remained, finally being sunk off Tobruk in June 1942. I was relieved from the ship in May 1942, just 3 weeks before she was sunk.

After Hasty's distinguished war service in a theatre of war where there was constant action and where 96 major war vessels and 244 Allied Merchant Ships were lost, mainly by air attack, it was sad that she did not survive. Admiral Cunningham said of her, 'Hasty had kept the seas in an astonishing manner'.

I was finally flown home in October 1942 after a few months in Alexandria standing by with a team of survivors from ships to immobilise the harbour should the Germans break through the Alamein Line - this fortunately never happened and from then onwards the defensive war which had been fought in the Mediterranean and North Africa turned to an offensive one.

Naturally this was most heartening for those of us who had been involved in this particular theatre of war for such a long time. However, the full impact of the appalling crisis that the West was facing as a result of the devastating losses of Merchant Shipping in the Atlantic was only brought home to me when I returned to England in October 1942. I had no idea then what appointment was in store for me so I made an early visit to the Admiralty to find out. I was greeted by Captain Biggs who said to me 'I suppose you want a command, Hart'. This completely floored me, I could hardly believe my ears, but there could only be one answer, 'Yes sir' and within a few days I was appointed in command of HMS Vidette, just completing a

major refit at Sheerness, having been converted to a long legger by having a boiler removed and fuel tanks put in its place. The ship was also fitted with the latest anti-submarine equipment, including a 10cm radar. She was not in her first youth having been launched in 1918 for service with the Grand Fleet. She had a displacement of 132 tons and was 312 feet long. She still had a speed of 25 knots, which was to prove very useful in the months to come.

When I first saw Vidette she was in dry dock and I thought she had the most handsome and business-like lines, and with two massive screws to drive her through the water and to give her the manoeuvrability so necessary for the anti-submarine role. She proved to be a wonderful partner and lived up to all my expectations. She rode out the worst storms and the regular battering of our depth charging of 'U' boats. From January 1943 to April 1944 when I left her, she never missed an operation.

In early February 1943 we sailed from Sheerness for Londonderry with a new Devonport Ships Company. The passage northabout was a testing one for all of us and it was particularly tough on the young hostilities-only ratings, many of whom were very sick. On arrival at Londonderry, Vidette joined B7 Escort Group under Commander P.W. Gretton who was embarked in HMS Tay as his ship HMS Duncan had not completed her refit. The other members of the Group were HM Ships, Snowflake, Sunflower, Alisma, Pink and Loosestrife.

On 14th March the Group sailed from Londonderry and joined Convoy ON173 bound for Halifax. The passage was uneventful which was fortunate as it gave the ships company a good chance to shake down and get used to the somewhat hazardous business of moving about the ship and getting familiar with handling the armament in bad weather.

After a short layover in Argentia, Newfoundland, the Group joined the homeward bound Convoy HX231 off St. Johns. On 4th April, Vidette had her first crack at a U-boat since joining the Group. We were stationed astern of the Convoy when at about 1630 a radar contact was obtained at 6000 yards, we immediately gave chase, the U-boat dived, but we managed to deliver a fairly accurate attack with depth charges, we

could not, however, continue with the action as we were ordered to rejoin the Convoy at best speed. This was my first attack on a U-boat since taking command and it made me realise how naked one was without a chum to assist in the hunt and also with the Convoy some fifteen miles ahead. At a time like this when it becomes a personal duel it brings home to one the vital importance of having a highly trained team.

The battle round Convoy HX231 lasted from 4th to 7th April and during this time, two U-boats were destroyed, one by HMS Tay and the other by a Liberator R/86, and as already outlined, Vidette damaged another and according to German records, caused sufficient damage to put U594 out of the battle. Only three ships in Convoy were lost, although three more which had belonged to the Convoy were also sunk, one of them became a straggler but the other two, a Dutchman and a Swede, broke Convoy at the first attack and paid the inevitable penalty.

I have dwelt a bit on this particular Convoy for several reasons; firstly it was the 'bleeding' for the recently reformed B7 Escort Group under the leadership of Cdr Peter Gretton and, secondly, it brought home to all of us the appalling inhumanity of war and the desperate decisions which at times had to be made to leave survivors in their boats or in the water. A particular example of this was the P & O Steamer Shillong which was torpedoed and sunk on the night of the 4th April. She had a crew of 78 but sadly owing to weather damage before joining the Convoy, two of her lifeboats had been badly damaged and could not be launched. The motor boat capsized when being launched and this left only one lifeboat to take the entire crew. Some rafts had been constructed and were launched, but all but five of those who got away on the rafts perished. The lifeboat, however, survived and eventually ended up with thirty eight on board, 11 British and 27 Asiatics. A cadet^{COLLETT} was in command, but died the following night, his place being taken by Cadet Clowe. On the 12th April a USN Catalina Flying Boat sighted the boat and dropped a parcel which could not be reached owing to bad weather. However, at 5pm that evening the Norwegian

destroyer St. Albans from Convoy ON177 hove in sight and stood by the lifeboat until the rescue ship Zamalek arrived. By a feat of fine seamanship the remaining 7 survivors were carefully hoisted on board. Only three of them retained all their limbs, three of them lost both legs and one both feet from frostbite. Words cannot possibly express one's feelings and admiration for the courage and conduct of these men. The two Cadets who survived, Moore and Clowe were only nineteen years of age. Clowe had already survived the loss of two ships, one by bombing and one by torpedo attack.

This tragic but inspiring story is just one of hundreds when one realises that over fifteen million tons of British Allied and Neutral Shipping were sunk in the Atlantic theatre alone and over thirty thousand Merchant Navy Seamen died. The particular story I have given exemplifies the courage and devotion and self sacrifice of those who died. This Island race of ours has depended for centuries on its merchant seamen and in this critical battle of the Atlantic they did not fail us, we have just cause to be proud of them.

To the reader this particular Convoy Battle may not appear very significant, but it was the first of three successive convoy actions fought by B7 Group, which started an ebb in the fortunes of the German U-boat arm, although, perhaps, not yet appreciated by them.

On 9th April the Group left the Convoy and proceeded to Londonderry. Unfortunately, after a few days there I had to take Vidette to Liverpool for a quick docking, the poor old girl had taken such a pounding in the Atlantic weather that a number of cracks had appeared in the shellplating covering the fuel tanks. The result was an embarrassing moment when leaving our berth in Argentia stern first, it became obvious that we were trying to fire the boilers with water, with no success, however with the aid of an anchor we managed to take the way off the ship. On the homeward voyage, however, it became necessary to pump the mixture of oil and water into a small tank and draw off the water, a tedious task. However, the dockyard in Liverpool patched up the cracks and we had no more trouble.

It was unfortunate that I could not be in Londonderry when the Group sailed to join Convoy ONS5 as I missed the pre-voyage briefing. I had to proceed direct to Reykavik from Liverpool on 21st April to pick up a small contingent of three ships and rendezvous with the main body. As we sailed for yet another Convoy escort duty, we appreciated that the situation was serious, but I don't think it even crossed our minds that we might lose the Battle of the Atlantic.

It was only after the war, when I read Captain Roskill's volumes on The War at Sea, that it was brought home to me just how desperate the situation had become in March 1943. In the first 20 days over half a million tons of shipping had been sunk and it must have been plain to the Admiralty that the Battle of the Atlantic was in the balance.

This then was, unbeknown to us, the background against which we sailed to join Convoy ONS5, nor did we know just what Admiral Donitz had in store for us. He must have been jubilant at that stage in the light of the slaughter his U-boats had performed in March. This state of euphoria, however, was to be shortlived.

On 22nd April, Commander Gretton in the recently refitted destroyer, Duncan, the frigate Tay, the Corvettes Sunflower, Snowflake, Pink and Loosestrife joined ONS5 off Oversay. The Convoy consisted of a mixed bag of 42 ships, ranging from 1000 to 10,000 tons. Nine were foreigners and four were American and as can be imagined, it took some time to get this convoy formed, particularly in the prevailing weather.

Having picked up my three ships from Reykavik, I proceeded towards the rendezvous, but it was apparent that with the Convoy's speed down to 1 or 2 knots at times in the north westerly gale blowing, I would not meet up with them by pm 26th April. I was beginning to get a bit worried that I might miss the Convoy altogether, however, with the help of a prayer and Duncan's HFDF equipment, we finally joined up during the afternoon of 27th April.

The Convoy had been experiencing such appalling weather that these slow ships, most of them in ballast or only lightly laden had great difficulty in keeping station. In fact two collided and one was badly damaged and had to be despatched to Iceland, the other managed to make the crossing. Another ship, unable to keep up with the convoy was also sent off to Iceland.

Fortunately, by midday on 27th April the weather had moderated which enabled the convoy, now consisting of 42 ships, to get back into a reasonable formation.

During the late afternoon, inspite of difficult weather conditions, Duncan, Vidette and Loosestrife managed to top up with fuel from British Lady. Duncan was particularly short and if fuelling had been impossible the alternative of going to Greenland would have been necessary. In the light of future events, it would have been most unfortunate for the Convoy and its escort to have been without its Commander and his ship.

Fortunately, all was quiet that night, but during the morning of 28th April, there was considerable U-boat radio activity, one detected by Duncan's HFDF and one of the U-boats was apparently quite close ahead of the convoy, which left us all in little doubt that we were in for a heavy attack.

We felt certain that Donitz would be out to repeat the success his U-boats had against our escorted convoys in March. We were by now aware that there were a number of U-boats in our vicinity, but there were no definite intelligence reports other than Amsel Group of 11 U-boats was patrolling east of Newfoundland; to the north east Specht Group of 17 U-boats had been in position since 21st April. The Star Group of another 14 U-boats was further to the east and north, placed to catch convoys such as ONS5.

In the late afternoon, Duncan sighted a U-boat near the convoy, it dived and was attacked, but contact was lost. By this time U-boats nightly reports indicated that a number of them were in contact with our convoy. We made all the necessary

preparations and waited for the attack with considerable apprehension. We had been warned to expect attacks to be made by surfaced U-boats as unbeknown to them, our 10cm radar was not detectable by their receivers - this gave us a badly needed advantage. If the convoy was going to be attacked by several surfaced U-boats at the same time, the plan was to approach the contact at one's best speed, make it dive and give it a pattern of depth charges, then dart back in to station on the convoy to preserve the radar integrity of the screen.

The expected attack arrived about 8pm on 28th April. I think we all felt somewhat relieved as once the adrenalin started to flow there was no time to think of being frightened. Between 8pm and 1am on 29th April five attempts to break through the screen and attack were foiled by Duncan and Sunflower and the sixth attempt, half an hour later, was frustrated by Snowflake.

At dawn on 29th April the convoy, so far, was unscathed, but not for long. At 5.30am the American McKeesport was torpedoed and sank, all the crew except one, being taken off by the Rescue Trawler. There were no more attacks that day and we had the welcome news that the 3rd Support Group consisting of Offa, Oribi, Penn, Panther and Impulsive were to join us. Oribi arrived that evening, but the rest of them did not appear until the evening of 2nd May.

There was no respite from the appalling weather and by the evening of the 29th April, the convoy was battling its way through a full gale and some ships became separated from the convoy. The 30th April was quiet and apart from a brief easement, when Oribi was able to fuel, the gales still continued to vent their fury on us; the only comfort we could draw was that it made it virtually impossible for the U-boats to attack.

Apart from an attempt by one U-boat to close the convoy, which was driven off by Sunflower and Snowflake, the lull in enemy activity continued throughout the 1st May. The weather, however, got worse. It transpired that Donitz had called off the chase that day, but only temporarily, as we shall see.

By now, with the appalling weather conditions, the convoy had virtually come to a standstill. All ships were hove to and for the escorts, ship handling became a full time job. There was always the risk of disaster if one's ship got beam on to the sea, particularly with shortage of fuel and a lowered stability. Movement on the upper deck was strictly restricted. We had now suffered this weather for several days and the ships company were living under very grim conditions. Mess decks running with water, clothes wet through, sleep almost impossible with the ship performing acrobatics. There was just one saving grace - the enemy was not in evidence. He was no doubt several fathoms down in calm waters.

Accurate station keeping was impossible and in any case there was no formation to keep station on. The ships of the convoy were now spread over a large area of the ocean. In spite of the shocking flying conditions, some aircraft did manage to give us some very valuable help. On 24th April, a Flying Fortress of 200 Squadron attacked and sunk U-710, which was lying in the track ahead of our convoy and that afternoon the Admiralty signalled that ONS5 was still unreported by U-boats. Similarly on 3rd May, a Cause aircraft of the RCAF, which was unable to reach our convoy sank U-630 which was laying in wait well ahead of us.

On 2nd May, by which time the weather had eased somewhat, it was essential to get the ships back in to a more cohesive body if we were to be able to give them the protection that was obviously going to be needed; in this task, a Liberator from Iceland gave Cdr Gretton some very useful help in rounding up stragglers and by the end of the day 32 ships were back in some sort of formation; meanwhile the Pink was some

miles astern trying to bring her four charges back to the main body.

That evening the rest of the 3rd Support Group, the Offa (Senior Officer Commander McCoy), Impulsive, Penn and Panther joined to support the convoy - a very welcome addition to the defence. The weather had eased a little, but the visibility had decreased. This coincided with the convoy having run into a belt of icefloes and packs of small growlers, which made fuelling impossible in view of the need for the tanker to weave her way through. By the time the convoy was through the icefloes the weather had deteriorated again, making fuelling impossible. Duncan's fuel situation was now critical and our Senior Officer had to make the very unhappy decision to leave the convoy and proceed direct to St. Johns. At 6am on 3rd May, Gretton informed the Admiralty that Duncan's fuel remaining was 40% and Vidette 51% and if weather did not improve sufficiently to make fuelling possible by dusk on 3rd May, Duncan must proceed direct to St. Johns, followed by Vidette on Wednesday 5th May. He also said that British Lady had only 100 tons of fuel left for escorts. The significance of this did not immediately strike me. Cmdr Gretton handed over the Group to Lt.Cdr. Sherwood on Tay and left that evening for St. Johns, arriving with only 4% of his fuel remaining. Later that evening Impulsive left the convoy for Iceland to fuel. The night of 3rd May passed without any U-boat activity but the weather continued to make our lives a misery.

On the morning of 4th May, Penn and Panther had to return to St. Johns to fuel and as things stood, Offa, Oribi and Vidette might have to leave the convoy the following day; providence however, dictated otherwise.

Throughout the day of 4th May there was much U-boat signal activity not far from our convoy and it seemed certain that before long battle would be joined. It was perhaps as well that we were not aware of the magnitude of the plan that was being prepared by Admiral Donitz to annihilate convoy ONS5.

His timing was almost perfect, although fortuitous. Three destroyers of the Support Group had left the Convoy to fuel and would not be rejoining and three more, which included my Vidette, may have to leave on 5th May. At this stage we were left with the close escort consisting of Tay, a River Class Frigate, Vidette, an escort destroyer and three Corvettes, Sunflower, Snowflake and Loosestrife and the destroyers Offa and Oribi in support. The Corvette Pink was still some miles astern with her ships.

We had received information, however, that the 1st Support Group consisting of the sloop Pelican (Captain G.N. Brewer) with the frigates Wear, Jed and Spey and the US Coastguard Cutter Sennen left St. Johns on the morning of 4th May to join us.

The weather had improved during the day, giving the U-boats a chance to close the convoy and as night fell they moved in to the attack. The first to suffer was a straggler six miles astern of the main body. This was the beginning of what turned out to be the big battle. U-boats were reporting ships sunk, while the escorts counter attacked.

You will realise that B7 Group had joined the Convoy off Oversay on 22nd April and had therefore, been at sea, most of the time in appalling weather, for nearly two weeks and from 28th April until the beginning of this battle, ships had frequently been at action stations. The endurance of the ships and the ships companies had already been tested to the limits, but as the battle continued a super human effort of courage, will and stamina was required.

This then was the overall situation on the evening of 4th May as the crucial battle was about to start.

First blood was to our supporting aircraft, a Causo aircraft of the Royal Canadian Airforce which had taken off from Newfoundland in low visibility and in the early evening had sighted U-438 and then U-630 about 2 miles astern of the convoy. U-438 was damaged and U-630 was sunk by depth charges dropped by Catalina 9747 captained by Sqdn. Leader B.H. Moffit.

For my ship, Vidette, the night battle started at 2200 when a radar contact was obtained at 3600 yards. We closed at best speed and when within a few hundred yards the U-boat dived and we gave him a pattern of 14 depth charges and then returned to our station on the convoy. Half an hour later another radar contact was obtained and we gave chase again and when getting within a few hundred yards, and in the excitement of the moment, I gave the order to stand by to ram, but regretted it, the U-boat began diving when Vidette was only a short distance away, so I tried to avoid running over the top of him and delivered him instead, 14 depth charges. If I had succeeded in ramming, I would probably have seriously damaged Vidette and been useless as an effective escort and a liability if the ship was unable to proceed. I made a positive decision then, not to ram if the opportunity was offered again. This U-boat may have been U-270 which Vidette was credited with damaging.

During the night of 4th/5th May, five more ships were sunk bringing the total to seven, with two U-boats sunk by aircraft but none, so far, by escorts. We had little doubt, however, that there was much more to come from the enemy. By 0400 on 5th May it was broad daylight and there was still HFDF and radar activity warning us that U-boats were still in contact. At this time survivors from the torpedoed ships were still being picked up. The Northern Spray, one of our reserve trawlers, had one hundred and forty three on board and was sent off to St. Johns. Other survivors were being picked up by Escorts.

Ships of the convoy and escorts were busy getting back into station and as the weather had moderated the Tay, Offa and Oribi were able to fuel, their need was obviously greater than mine and in any case they would now be able to stay with the convoy through the rest of the dangerous area. My fuel state was sufficient to see me through for another 24 hours, even at action speeds, but I would have to get some fuel on 6th May in order to be able to steam to St. Johns.

There was still plenty of U-boat radio activity during the morning of 5th May. Oribi was sent off to investigate on a bearing obtained by HFDF and sighted a U-boat; after steaming another mile, a second U-boat was sighted and minutes later a third. The 3 U-boats were steaming in line abreast at high speed, obviously getting into position for an attack on the convoy. Oribi attacked the first U-boat several times and was then told to rejoin the convoy, but before she got back into station another ship in convoy was torpedoed - in this attack Offa and Sunflower carried out a promising attack on the U-boat.

At the same time the Pink, Lt.Cdr. R. Atkinson, still shepherding his little group of stragglers, gained asdic contact with a U-boat, which he pounded to destruction, it was later identified as U-192. While this was going on, one of her charges was torpedoed, but Pink managed to pick up survivors.

Pink carried out an attack on another U-boat only 1000 yards ahead of her little convoy. Having put the U-boat's head down, Pink wisely returned to her position ahead of the convoy. At this time Lt.Cdr. Atkinson asked B7 for some help; the Sennen was despatched but could not meet up with him until the evening of 6th May. However, Sennen ran across a U-boat a few miles astern of Pinks party, on the surface, and attacked. This had the effect of preventing this U-boat and another, which had been shadowing, reaching Pink's little party. Sennen finally joined Pink at 2300 on 6th May and the whole party arrived safely at St. Johns pm on 9th May.

The main body of the convoy, in the meantime, was steaming in reasonable formation in low visibility, in a moderate sea. It transpired that on 5th May the U-boats were ordered to make full use of daylight hours for submerged attack and to be as far ahead as possible by nightfall. Donitz had sent an exhortation to all U-boats operating round ONSS, 'Immediately after onset of night the drum roll must be timed to begin.

'Make haste as there are 40 of you there will be nothing of the convoy left. The battle can't last long as the sea space left is short, so use every chance to the full with all your might'. Chilling words if we had known of them at the time !

By a strange twist of fortune, Donitz intended this large concentration of U-boats to attack the homeward bound Convoy SC128, but it somehow managed to get through the patrol line undetected, one of the U-boats, however, detected our outward bound convoy ONS5 and no less than 30 U-boats found themselves favourably placed to attack us. Donitz's orders were followed and that afternoon a submerged attack on the convoy succeeded in sinking three more ships in the space of half an hour.

During this attack Vidette gained contact with a U-boat and attacked, but was ordered to return to station. We were naturally disappointed not to have another chance at destroying the intruder, but it was right that with the threat of more attacks, the convoy should not be left wide open.

We need not have worried as there were going to be plenty more opportunities of striking at the enemy.

Offa also detected and attacked a U-boat which turned out to be U-266, which suffered damage; it also transpired that it was the U-boat which torpedoed the three ships.

In poor visibility and falling darkness we prepared ourselves for the inevitable onslaught with a determination to match our skills against a wily enemy. The U-boat radio activity at this time was such that Captain McCoy in Offa made the remark that ONS5 seemed threatened with complete annihilation. Little did he know of B7 Group's fighting spirit and high standard of training.

The Pink also arrived on that day with her four charges. After 7 anxious days, with no support at hand, during this period Pink had gained contact with a U-boat which, after a long and difficult hunt was finally destroyed. Sadly one ship of Pink's little group had been sunk whilst he was hunting the U-boat, but with considerable skill, Pink managed to pick up all the survivors and got the rest of his charges safely to St. Johns.

At last all ships of B7 Group were safely alongside in St. Johns Harbour, fortunately none had been sunk and none were badly damaged. This was quite surprising, considering the number of torpedoes that had been fired at the escorts and also when one remembers that Vidette, Sunflower, Snowflake and Loosestrife had each intended to ram a U-boat. Sunflower was lucky to get away with it, considering he actually mounted the hull of a U-boat. Oribi, of the 3rd Support Group also succeeded in ramming one and did himself considerable damage. It is questionable whether ramming, in these circumstances, is desirable - it could be disastrous for the defence of the convoy.

During the few days in harbour there was obviously much to be celebrated and much to do before joining our next convoy.

On reflection, the most rewarding phase of this battle, as far as the escorts was concerned, was the period between 2100/5th May and 0500/6th May, when the convoy was attacked no fewer than 25 times. All these attacks were repulsed by the escorts without the loss of a single ship of the convoy. What an end to a battle which had been a great victory for the defence, although tragically thirteen ships of the convoy had been torpedoed, but against this could be set ten U-boats