

OIL FOR NORTH AFRICA

By COMMANDER H. G. D. de CHAIR, D.S.C.*, R.N. (Retd.)

On the 8th November 1942, the Allies landed in North Africa. One hundred and fifty merchant ships and 460 warships took part, and this story of only one of the convoys concerned in the build-up for the operation gives some idea of its magnitude and of the extent of its effects, quite outside the force immediately involved.

TOWARDS THE END of August 1942, three British Destroyers, H.M.S. *Pathfinder*, *Quentin* and *Vimy* (in which I was serving) escorted the damaged battleship H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* across the Atlantic from Freetown towards Norfolk, Virginia. They were relieved by an American escort in longitude 40° West and themselves set course for Trinidad to fuel.

We three destroyers were steaming in line abreast at 17 knots, five cables apart, near the island of Tobago, when a whale appeared to blow astern of *Quentin*. Then the whale appeared to overtake her. It was a U-boat torpedo running on the surface. H.M.S. *Quentin* (Lieutenant-Commander A. H. P. Noble**) skilfully avoided it and then the hunt was on.

Each ship in succession made contact and delivered a full pattern of depth charges including one of 14 from *Vimy*, after which contact was lost. A search of some hours followed and Commander Gibbs†—the Senior Officer—decided to leave *Vimy*, who was running short of fuel, and with *Pathfinder* and *Quentin* try to surprise the U-boat on the surface after moon-rise.

All ships had kept a plot of the search and *Vimy* proceeded, zig-zagging with staggered revolutions on a course North West, in hopes of completing the search. Within a quarter of an hour the radar reported echo bearing red 80°, 2,800 yards, possibly a large surface vessel. The officer of the watch‡ ordered: "Hard a'port" increased speed to 18 knots and rang the alarm bell for action. The U-boat could be seen stern-on very soon afterwards and we decided to ram from the quarter.

The sea was rough and the submarine fired two blinding red flares

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in succession at our bridge. A red flare happened to be the current recognition signal for a British submarine, and when the searchlight illuminated the conning tower, the number had been painted out and a U.S. flag was reported to be flying from it. We were not deceived. We were doing 23 knots and estimated the enemy's speed at 19, but as we turned in from his starboard beam he could not have been doing more than 14, and it was obvious that he would shortly ram us near the stern. The Captain ordered: "Hard a'starboard. Full astern, both," but the rolling of the ship was too much for the two ordinary seamen on the telegraphs, and threw them both down on to the deck at the crucial moment. In consequence they only succeeded in ringing down half astern.

The U-boat rammed *Vimy* in the forward boiler room at a fine angle, striking her on the Fan bracket, the strongest part of the ship, and her hydroplane cut us open above the water line like a sardine tin. There was a flash-back, black smoke poured out of the ship's side and it looked as if water must be pouring into the boiler room. We were then left wallowing alongside the U-boat whose crew were on deck and wearing lifebelts, but the sea was too rough to board her. No textbook or anti-submarine course catered for a situation like this, but something had to be done quickly to prevent the U-boat escaping once more or doing us further damage.

The minimum speed recommended for dropping depth charges was 18 knots, but here we were, wallowing and stopped, bumping alongside our victim who was still very much alive and making no sign of surrender. The Captain decided to try an experiment. While the scene was lit up by a snowflake, he ordered the port depth charge thrower to be set to 50 feet, and fired over the U-boat, whereupon she heeled over and sank, leaving the crew in the water. *Vimy* went ahead at the same time and, although nearly stopped, suffered no ill-effects from her depth

charge as the U-boat provided the necessary cushioning effect. However, she seriously damaged our port propeller when grinding alongside and we had to steam 7,000 miles to Portsmouth before it could be repaired.

Meanwhile *Pathfinder* and *Quentin* closed as soon as they received a report. We fired more snowflakes and together picked up 49 survivors from the U-boat, all except the Engineer officer and one rating who may have stayed below to scuttle.

After handing prisoners over to the Americans at Trinidad, H.M.S. *Pathfinder* and *Quentin* duly escorted a convoy back to Freetown. We, in *Vimy*, after fruitless attempts to get at our damaged propeller, were ordered, with H.M.S. *Burdock*, a corvette, to escort a tanker convoy to Gibraltar. In view of considerable U-boat activity some extra escort for this valuable convoy was requested, at least whilst in the Caribbean. U.S. Naval air cover was promised and we duly set sail towards sundown 10 days after our arrival.

The Caribbean was reputed to be stiff with U-boats, and some 150 were understood to be in the Atlantic. The Admiralty carefully plotted them every night when they reported their position to Germany and generally managed to steer the convoys clear between packs.

The first sign of air cover was a bomb on our port beam near the horizon at about 9 a.m. the following morning and *Burdock* went off to investigate. No sooner was she hull down than a conning tower appeared on the same bearing but much closer. *Vimy* sounded six blasts on the siren and turned to attack, whilst the convoy went off smartly in the other direction. We could not exceed 15 knots and that only with excessive vibration from the port propeller, and stern steam on the port engine. We opened fire.

The radar was out of action and control was difficult owing to vibration, but some of the U-boat's upper works disappeared and she seemed to



A reproduction of a water colour by the author showing U-162 just before she rammed "Vimy."

be stopped. Then a dirty white flag was seen waving; we ceased fire and reduced speed. Somehow the conning tower looked rather too small and when within a mile, definitely odd. Not until we had slowed down did we realise that the conning tower was people packed tight, standing on a raft whose sail we had shot away.

As we drew alongside, this ragged party made a brave but pathetic sight. There were 17 Americans including two women and three children with virtually standing room only on their raft. Their clothes were tattered and faded but they looked fit and tough. Their ship, S.S. *West Lashaway*, had been torpedoed 19 days earlier over 500 miles to the South East whence Mr. Peiffer, the Bo'sun, had sailed them.

Three rafts got away from the ship and the Master and Chief Officer had started off in this one only to leave it when they realised how overcrowded it was. They were eaten by sharks almost as soon as they entered the water. We never heard the fate of the other rafts.

Apart from a severe swelling of the feet and ankles, known as immersion foot, caused by standing so long in salt water, the survivors were in remarkably good shape and bore us no malice for firing at them. According to the Bo'sun, they were relieved and delighted we did. He said he knew they would be mistaken for a U-boat because two four-stackers had already sighted them and sheered off.

A missionary lady in the party later wrote a book* which rightly thanked the Almighty for a wonderful deliverance and described her feelings about the destroyer which fired at her in the following words: "Never shall I or those with me on that frail raft, that had been our home for the past 19 days, be able to erase from our minds and memories the tragic emotions of those few moments, or forget the hope, the joy, the anticipation of rescue that was suddenly turned into deadly fear and black despair when the destroyer that we thought was coming to save us suddenly turned her guns upon us, and almost wrote the 'fithis' of death to that nightmare voyage. Etched in one's memory are the terrible events of those days, and particularly that last day, when death roared over the waves to meet us! There was a world of sensation packed into those few moments as shells fell around us and we felt sure our final hour had come. Our last reflections were certainly not helped by the consciousness that death was being visited upon us through a ghastly mistake by our own friends, whom for a brief but terrible period we seemed unable to warn."

We gave the ladies our concert party dresses and rigged the survivors up somehow before transferring them all to a Dutch ship bound for Barbados, the only ship in the convoy

* Mrs. Ethel Bell in *Adrift*. Edited by J. H. Hunter. Evangelical Publishers. New York and Toronto.

which was not a tanker. The actual transfer at sea in rough weather without using boats was rendered somewhat tricky by the language difficulty and a high wind.

We now headed for Gibraltar happily avoiding the U-boat packs. The weather probably helped, for we had a northerly gale for three weeks. Our steady roll, sometimes about 40° either way, with wind on the port beam, became tedious and there was not much to look forward to except the Daily Joke produced by each escort in turn. After a fortnight the time came for *Vimy* to fuel, and the convoy hove to. We succeeded in embarking 67 tons of oil fuel by trough method before the hoses parted, and tried again on two successive days before giving up the unequal struggle. Indeed, but for the encouragement of Captain Edwards of R.F.A. *Abbeydale*, the task under prevailing conditions might have seemed hopeless. We had spent a whole day in a final attempt at fuelling and wasted a good part of two more hove to. He complained that the hoses recently issued to him were inferior and we told him the Minister of Production would be informed. The scene between the ships was alarming and sent hearts to mouths every time the tow with its serpentine cargo came whipping out of the water. Captain Edward's reply was characteristic: "I wish I had the Minister sitting on the tow now!"

The question now was, when would *Vimy* have to leave the convoy and go to Ponta Delgada for fuel? The decision was left as long as possible until we were well past the Azores and then the miracle happened. The gale backed four points to the port quarter which gave us a wonderful opportunity to sail the ship.

All awnings were got up, lower booms rigged and fo'c'sle and quarter deck awnings set as water sails like stunsails. These we hoisted on the wireless yard with light yarns holding the upper earring cringles, reminding one of the leech lines in a Chinese junk. Other sails were used on the fo'c'sle to prevent broaching to, and for over three days we kept station on the convoy at 10 knots with engine speed for six, using one engine only and trailing the other. The wind gave us four knots and we got into Gibraltar with 35 tons of oil fuel remaining.

The Flag Officer North Atlantic and his staff were very pleased to get the oil tankers, but not disposed to dock *Vimy* for a new propeller. Instead, we were sent home alone to Portsmouth, a lame duck, feeling we deserved more notice. Our best speed was 11 knots, and we regretfully had to decline to screen a Dutch cruiser on passage to the U.K. We spotted a Portuguese vessel bound for Casablanca but saw nothing else on the way.

Blockade runners were breaking into the Atlantic from Biscay ports and we heard that a signal had been sent us to try and catch one, but the message was never received. After hunting for a U-boat we made the

Scillies an hour early and reached Devonport in time for fuel and a night in. Next day we escorted a convoy from Dartmouth through a so-called minefield to Portland, and were granted permission to proceed direct to Portsmouth. We reached the Needles at sunset and anchored on the Solent banks where we spent an uncomfortable night in a rising westerly gale. After some difficulty in weighing, we romped up the Solent at about 20 knots, gale and tide with us. The Yeoman's father-in-law was waiting with his tug to berth us at Pitch House Jetty, but we managed it ahead of some minesweepers without assistance. Our stern missed them by a

few feet and we rang off main engines as the flare took the Jetty, with a full gale blowing us on. Not for some time did we appreciate our contribution to the North Africa landings and the reason why every dry dock at Gibraltar had to be kept clear for emergencies.

To quote the official account:—

"Seven convoys, containing in all some 800 ships, carried the Allied Expeditionary Force to North Africa. All our resources were stretched to their very limit to protect this huge Armada."*

* *The Battle of the Atlantic*. The official account of the fight against the U boats, 1939-1945.

THE NAVAL SITUATION

An Address by Rear-Admiral G. P. Thomson, C.B., C.B.E., at the Annual General Meeting of The Navy League on 11th October 1956

THE NAVY LEAGUE has no easy job in pressing for a strong Navy in this age of hydrogen bombs.

There is little doubt that the majority of the British people now pin their faith on the deterrent. If it fails it seems to them that it will be the end of everything and they cannot fit the Navy into the picture or understand the need for a strong Navy.

You, on the other hand, who remember that Britain became great through seapower and is only likely to remain great through seapower, must be careful not to make exaggerated claims for the Navy's capabilities with atomic power.

What is really required is to get the public out of an attitude of mind very similar to their outlook in the Hitler years before the war. There was no deterrent in those days. But there was conciliation. And we made full use of it. War was too awful to contemplate. If conciliation failed, our only hope was a counter bomber offensive. The cry was for bombers and still more bombers.

Frightening Expectations

We expected 100,000 casualties from air bombing in the first three weeks of the war. But that just

didn't happen. A year later, when we had no guns, no tanks and very few rifles we all stood behind our Prime Minister, determined to fight on the beaches with sticks and stones. Yet when the deluge came it wasn't nearly as bad as anticipated. At the worst period of bombing the casualties never exceeded 5,000 a month.

I am not suggesting that a hydrogen bomb war wouldn't be infinitely worse than the Second World War. Indeed, it would be appalling. But throughout history, there has been a constant struggle between offence and defence. And the defence is now beginning to catch up. At any rate, it is by no means completely ineffective. Guided missiles with nuclear warheads are now becoming available which would completely destroy a whole formation of bombers.

If you believe that a global war would be all over in a few hours or a few days, you will not find my talk either relevant or interesting. All I can say is that it is not the view of the Chiefs of Staff, it is not the view of the British Government, nor of the American Government.

Now that we have discussed this general picture, let me remind you of the Defence White Paper of 1955 which laid down British defence

policy. Having justified the need for this country to manufacture the hydrogen bomb, the White Paper went on to refer to the great advantages gained by the Power which first uses it.

It warned the nation not to rely only on strategic air power. We must show that a sudden attack would not be decisive. We must show that we have the will to survive and the power to ensure victory.

A year later, the emphasis changed. The 1956 Defence Paper told us that the cold and limited war had become the main threat to our freedom and security.

Global War is Remote

The Prime Minister and the Government became convinced, particularly after their talks with the Soviet leaders in London, that the danger of global war is remote—that neither East nor West are ever likely deliberately to embark on a war that would bring nothing but complete destruction and devastation to both sides.

It may well be that they are justified in this belief. But it has most unfortunate consequences. It tends to make the British people feel that they themselves need take little interest in defence and they turn with relief to the television.