



The Battle for Convoy SC-121, 6–10 March 1943

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At the beginning of March 1943, German U-boats appeared poised to cut the Allied maritime supply lines running between North America and Great Britain. The effects of a German victory in the North Atlantic were beyond calculation. If the U-boats won the Battle of the Atlantic by severing the Allied transatlantic supply lines, Britain could be forced out of the war, there would be no aid to Russia, and the Allied invasion of Northwest Europe in 1944 would be impossible. During February, the Allies lost sixty-three merchant ships amounting to 359,328 tons to German U-boats, while the Germans had lost only nineteen U-boats to enemy action.¹ A German victory in the Battle of the Atlantic appeared to be within reach.

To the Allies at the time, there seemed to be no end in sight to successful German U-boat attacks on transatlantic convoys. On 1 March, Allied intelligence estimated that there were some one hundred U-boats at sea in the North Atlantic, and that seventy-five of them were thought to be operating against convoys running between North America and Great Britain.² In fact, the Allied position in the Atlantic had plummeted so far that the Admiralty in London was actually considering abandoning the strategy of convoys. To many, the situation in the Atlantic appeared to be out of control. For the Allies, “the grand crisis in the Battle of the Atlantic” had arrived.³

On 5 March, there were four patrol lines consisting of some 75 U-boats stationed across the convoy routes. The *Wildfang* and *Burggraf*

groups were deployed into an angled patrol line some 600 miles northeast of Newfoundland, running approximately from 50°N 38°W through 54°N 45°W to 55°N 49°W. To the northeast of the *Wildfang* and *Burggraf* groups, U-boats of the *Neptun* group were stationed in a patrol line stretching approximately from 56°N 30°W to 58°N 34°W.⁴ To the southeast, twelve U-boats of the *Neuland* group had just formed a patrol line running from 54°45'N 27°15'W to 50°57'N 23°45'W.⁵ These U-boats were deployed to intercept Convoy SC-121.

German naval intelligence had broken, and was reading, Allied codes.⁶ From this source, they gained foreknowledge of the course and speed of Convoy SC-121. The Germans thought that the *Wildfang* and *Burggraf* groups would intercept Convoy SC-121 on 5 March.⁷ On 4 March, the BdU [*Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote*] informed the U-boats of the *Wildfang* and *Burggraf* groups to expect the arrival of a convoy proceeding northeast during the evening of 5 March. However, owing to poor visibility caused by bad weather in the North Atlantic, SC-121 slipped by them. Nevertheless, the convoy was sighted by U-405 of the *Neptun* group at 1133 hours on 6 March, some 90 miles to the eastward of these two patrol lines.⁸ U-405 sighted only seven ships of the convoy.⁹

Upon receipt of her sighting report, the BdU ordered the U-boat to shadow and keep contact with the convoy, while twenty-seven U-boats¹⁰ of the *Wildfang*, *Burggraf*, and *Neuland* groups were formed into the *Westmark* and *Ostmark*