

communications intelligence, which gave the BdU foreknowledge of the convoy route and enabled them to deploy a large number of U-boats. Bad weather at the time — strong westerly gales, snow, and hail — were cited by the Germans as hampering the operations of the U-boats.³⁸ In reality, the weather probably greatly assisted them, for the bad weather broke up the formation of SC-121, causing a number of ships to straggle. Indeed, of the twelve Allied ships sunk, the *Guido* was a romper, the *Empire Impala* had dropped astern of the convoy to rescue survivors, and five were stragglers (*Fort Lamy*, *Vojvoda Putnik*, *Leadgate*, *Empire Lakeland*, *Milos*). Thus, communications intelligence, bad weather in the North Atlantic, and the skill of the Germans had all combined to give the U-boats a major victory in the Battle for SC-121.

The Allies lost the battle for SC-121 due to a failure of communications intelligence. The delays in decoding German radio messages prevented the Allies from learning of the deployment of the *Wildfang*, *Burggraf*, *Neptun*, and *Neuland* groups, making it impossible to reroute so as to avoid enemy vessels. Compounding this failure of intelligence was the harsh weather in the North Atlantic during the passage of SC-121. Not only did poor visibility and westerly gales cause the ships of the convoy to straggle making them easy targets for the U-boats, but the weather also hampered the deployment of Allied aircraft. Owing to these conditions, a number of aircraft dispatched to assist SC-121 never reached the convoy. After the battle, Heineman cited the “urgent need for more air coverage.”

Further, the ships during the battle suffered from equipment failures which hampered their combat effectiveness. Heineman’s ship, the *Spencer*, had defective radio equipment which greatly impeded the ability of the commander of Escort Group A3 to communicate with the ships of his command. At one point, two of the three HF/DF sets on the ships of the escort were inoperative. At various times, the radio sets on the ships malfunctioned or broke down, as did

the sonars on three of the escorts.³⁹ From beginning to end of the passage, efforts to defend the convoy were hampered by lack of intelligence, bad weather, insufficient air support, and equipment failures.

The battle for SC-121 was neither the only nor the last defeat suffered by the Allies in the North Atlantic during March of 1943. Later in the month, they would lose, under circumstances similar to those encountered by SC-121, twenty-two ships to the U-boats in a battle fought over Convoys SC-122 and HX 229. A German victory in the battle of the Atlantic appeared to be at hand. During March of 1943, U-boats sank 108 Allied merchant ships amounting to 627,377 tons, while the Allies sank only thirteen U-boats during that same period. This was the climax of the German offensive against Allied transatlantic convoys. March of 1943 was the closest the U-boats would come to cutting the Allied convoy routes between North America and Great Britain. To the Allies, this was “the hour before the dawn.” In April and May 1943, they would overcome their problems and, in a series of hard fought convoy battles, would decisively vanquish the U-boats in the North Atlantic.⁴⁰



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