

THE BATTLE FOR CONVOY OG 69, 20–29 JULY 1941

By David Syrett

For Britain during the Second World War the year 1941 was a time of defeat. The British Isles were blockaded and were being bombed by the German Air Force (GAF). Hitler's Germany controlled all of Europe and everywhere the German army was victorious. Germany had already expelled a British expeditionary force from Greece and defeated another British army in Libya. And in July 1941 German armoured forces were attacking deep into Russia and appeared to be on the verge of destroying the Red Army. The only exception to this otherwise gloomy strategic picture was the war at sea. In the North Atlantic, in particular, it was Britain which, on the contrary, appeared to be on the verge of victory in 1941. The German battleship *Bismarck* had been sunk and the Royal Navy at last seemed to be gaining the upper hand in the conflict with the U-boats.

The reasons for Britain's good fortune in the North Atlantic during 1941 were due to a complex series of events and circumstances which are not yet wholly understood by historians.¹ Undoubtedly among the major elements that contributed to British successes against the U-boats in 1941 were the increasing effectiveness of the strategy of convoys and communications intelligence. Britain had broken the German naval codes² and was reading, within a few hours of transmission, the coded radio messages that were being passed back and forth between the Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote (BdU) and the U-boats at sea.³ For it was the BdU's standard operating procedure to send a U-boat orders and instructions, by radio, after the German vessel was already at sea. This system of command and control generated an almost endless flow of radio communications between the BdU and the U-boats at sea. Employing information obtained from such cryptographic intelligence, Britain had successfully adopted, during 1941, a strategy of evasive routing whereby convoys of merchant ships crossing the North Atlantic, between the British Isles and North America, were successfully routed away from known concentrations of U-boats.⁴

The BdU, in July 1941, owing to the increasing difficulties encountered by the U-boats in locating British transatlantic convoys, decided to undertake a series of operations in the eastern North Atlantic, to the south of Ireland and to the west of the Bay of Biscay, against British convoys proceeding from the British Isles to the Iberian peninsula and the South Atlantic. It was believed, with some justification, by the BdU that these convoys could thus be successfully located and attacked. U-boats operating in the region to the south of Ireland and west of the Bay of Biscay enjoyed several advantages. Not only was evasive routing nearly impossible for British convoys sailing to Lisbon and Gibraltar, but U-boat operations in this region could also be supported by GAF aircraft operating from western France. Four days after the first U-boats started being deployed into the eastern North Atlantic, along the British