

Isles – the Lisbon and Gibraltar convoy route – operations were begun against Convoy OG 69.⁵

The voyage of Convoy OG 69 began at 07.30 on 20 July 1941 when three merchant ships first sailed from Liverpool. As OG 69 proceeded north through the Irish Sea, additional ships from British ports such as Milford Haven, the Clyde and Oban joined the convoy.⁶ When all the ships had joined the convoy and OG 69 was completely formed, the force consisted of 26 merchant vessels escorted by nine corvettes and one armed trawler.⁷ There was nothing unique about Convoy OG 69 other than the fact that its escort consisted only of corvettes and an armed trawler and that no larger vessel, such as a destroyer or sloop, was assigned to the task.

On 21 July OG 69 proceeded on a westerly course from the North Channel, between Ireland and Scotland, out into the North Atlantic. On 22 July the convoy steered a course of 260 degrees and then at 00.30 on 23 July the British ships turned onto a course of 210 degrees.⁸ It was originally intended to route OG 69 southward along 22°W but the convoy was diverted and turned southward to run down 15°W and subsequently 17°30'W to Lisbon.⁹ The decision to sail OG 69 southward along 17°30'W was governed by a number of factors. From communications intelligence Britain had learnt that there was a patrol line of some ten U-boats to the west of Ireland, at approximately 30°W.¹⁰ Britain also knew that it would be nearly impossible to hide a convoy bound to Lisbon, steering to the southward, from German reconnaissance aircraft based in western France. Besides, the further to the west a convoy sailed, to avoid German aircraft, the less protected it would be by British anti U-boat aircraft based in the British Isles and Gibraltar for this purpose.¹¹

Aircraft of the Royal Air Force's (RAF) Coastal Command did in fact escort the ships of OG 69 from 20 July until dusk on 23 July. They were able to score an important victory, early on, against the enemy.¹² One of these British aircraft during the morning of 23 July prevented Germany from gaining knowledge of the location and course of OG 69. At 08.01 on 23 July a GAF FW 200 aircraft appeared astern of OG 69 and then passed along the starboard side of the convoy being pursued by an RAF Hudson aircraft which shot down the German machine.¹³ The British aircraft not only achieved the unprecedented feat of overtaking and shooting down the faster German aircraft but, more importantly, prevented the German aircraft from reporting by radio the existence of OG 69.¹⁴ To the German command authorities the FW 200 aircraft, for reasons unknown, just went missing off Ireland.¹⁵

Not only had Germany started the redeployment of its U-boats; it was also enjoying another advantage in the area of communications intelligence. For it was not only Britain which would decode the all-too-frequent German radio messages; Germany also had a similar capability. The interception and analysis of British radio communications during the U-boat campaign against the Lisbon–Gibraltar convoys proved, indeed, to be one of the best sources of intelligence available to Germany.¹⁶ On 24 July the BdU, from just such a source, learned of the approximate position, course and speed of OG 69. As a result eight U-boats¹⁷ to the south and west of the estimated position of OG 69 were ordered to search for the British convoy.¹⁸ At the same time preparations were made to dispatch from western France, during the morning of 25 July, an FW 200 reconnaissance aircraft to further locate OG 69 and then to home the U-boats by means of radio bearings on to the British force.¹⁹ Previously Germany, as in the cases of convoys HG 53 and OB 290, had employed