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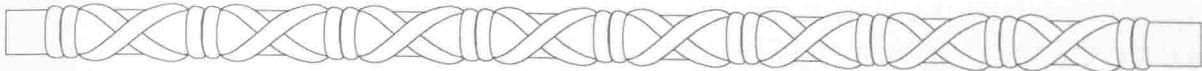
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The Battle for Convoy SC-121, 6–10 March 1943

DAVID SYRETT

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.

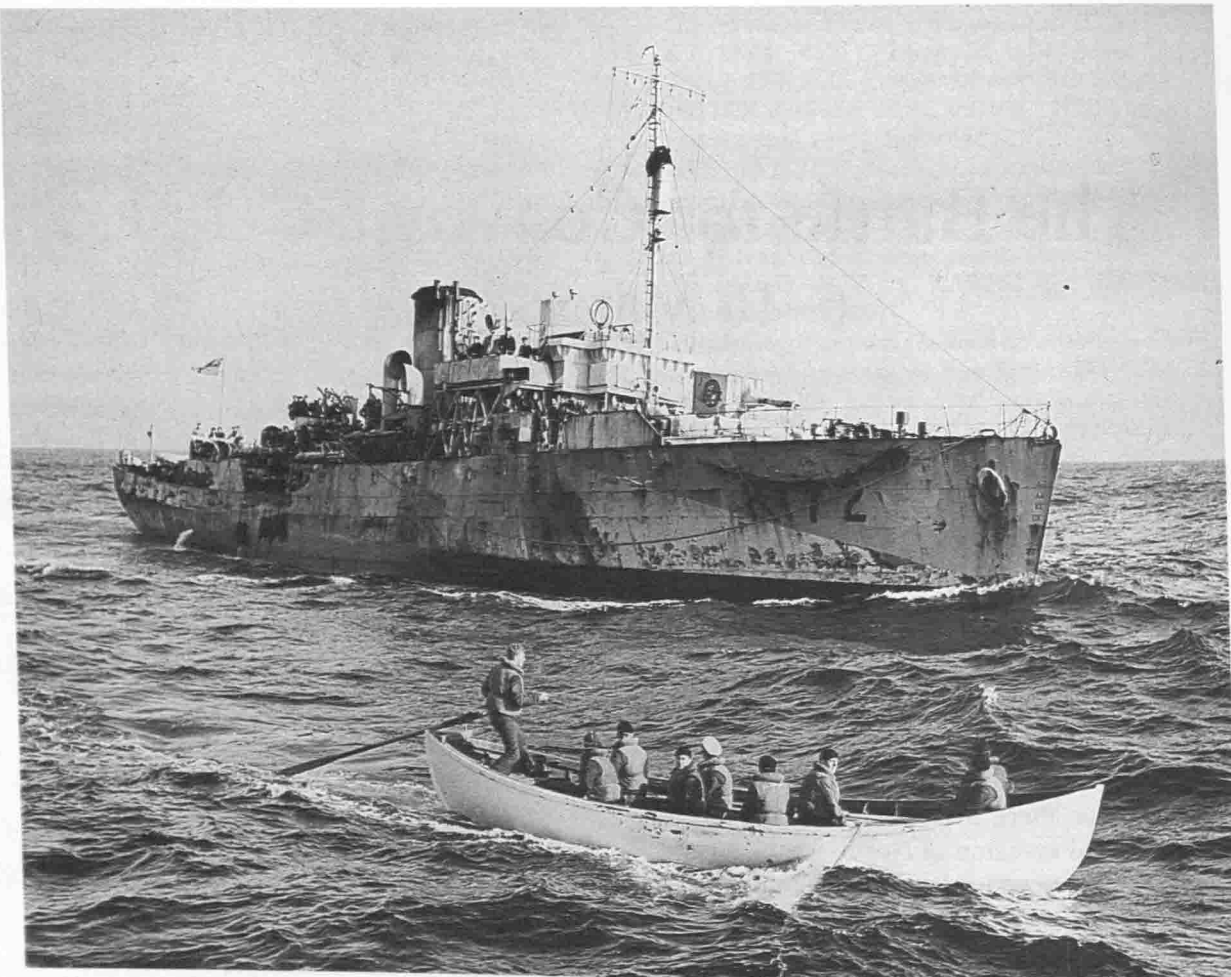
To the Allies at the time, there seemed to be no end in sight to successful German U-boat attacks on transatlantic convoys. On 1 March, Allied intelligence estimated that there were some one hundred U-boats at sea in the North Atlantic, and that seventy-five of them were thought to be operating against 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*



HMCS *Trillium* about to receive a boat with a medical officer from USCGC *Spencer*. Central Negative Library at the Canadian Armed Forces Photographic Unit, CN 6142 (USCG photograph).

groups and ordered to chase, intercept, and attack SC-121.¹¹ U-405, in spite of the poor visibility, continued with some interruptions to maintain contact with the Allied convoy.¹² At 2137 hours, the BdU informed the U-boats that the convoy's course was "northeasterly," and ordered the vessels to search for the Allied ships in that direction.¹³

The Allies had a general knowledge of the deployment of the U-boats in the North Atlantic from communications intelligence. In fact, the British, having broken the codes used by the BdU and the U-boats, had been reading their command radio communications since December 1942.¹⁴ However, there were delays and lags in the decoding process which, at the beginning of March 1943, resulted in the Allies reading German radio messages some six or seven days after

their transmission. For example, the BdU's order to U-405 to shadow SC-121 was not decoded by the Allies until 0446 on 12 March.¹⁵

Convoy SC-121 sailed from New York at 0800 hours on 23 February, proceeded northeast along the North American coast, and made a rendezvous with Escort Group A3 in approximately 49°58'N 47°13'W for the voyage across the North Atlantic to Great Britain.¹⁶ When SC-121 was joined by Escort Group A3, under the command of Captain P. R. Heineman, USN, the whole Allied force consisted of 56 merchant ships, including the rescue ship *Melrose Abbey* (HF/DF)¹⁷ escorted by the USCGC *Spencer* (HF/DF), the destroyer USS *Greer* (HF/DF), and the corvettes HMS *Dianthus*, HMCS *Rosthern*, and HMCS *Trillium*. The convoy and her escorts, pushed by "Continuous Southwesterly and West-

erly gales," proceeded eastward at an average speed of 8 knots towards Britain and the U-boats of the *Wildfang*, *Burggraf*, and *Neuland* groups.¹⁸

On 6 March, authorities ashore informed the escorts of SC-121 that the "U-boats were probably preparing for an attack." This was confirmed when the Allied ships obtained a number of HF/DF bearings on that date indicating that U-boats were making radio transmissions from the vicinity of the convoy. In an attempt to force the U-boats to lose contact, at 2135Z hours, Heineman ordered SC-121 to alter course 40 degrees to port. The U-boats remained in contact. Just before midnight, a number of red and white rockets, or flares, were sighted by the escorts. At this time, Heineman received no reports of any ship in the convoy being torpedoed or attacked. At 0200Z hours on 7 March, HMCS *Rosthern* sighted "bright lights bearing about 3 miles astern of the convoy." After an investigation, she came upon a merchant ship rescuing survivors from the merchant ship *Egyptian*, which had been torpedoed by U-230.¹⁹ The merchant ship sank quickly, leaving her crew in the water. *Rosthern* rescued three survivors. However, the merchant ship which also picked up members of the *Egyptian's* crew was not identified. It was thought afterwards by Heineman to have been the *Empire Impala*, torpedoed and sunk by U-591 shortly thereafter.²⁰ At 0433Z hours, HMS *Dianthus* and *Rosthern* ran down several HF/DF bearings on the starboard quarter of the convoy, but after an hour's search, nothing was found. The two escorts rejoined SC-121. No further contacts with the U-boats were reported during 7 March.²¹

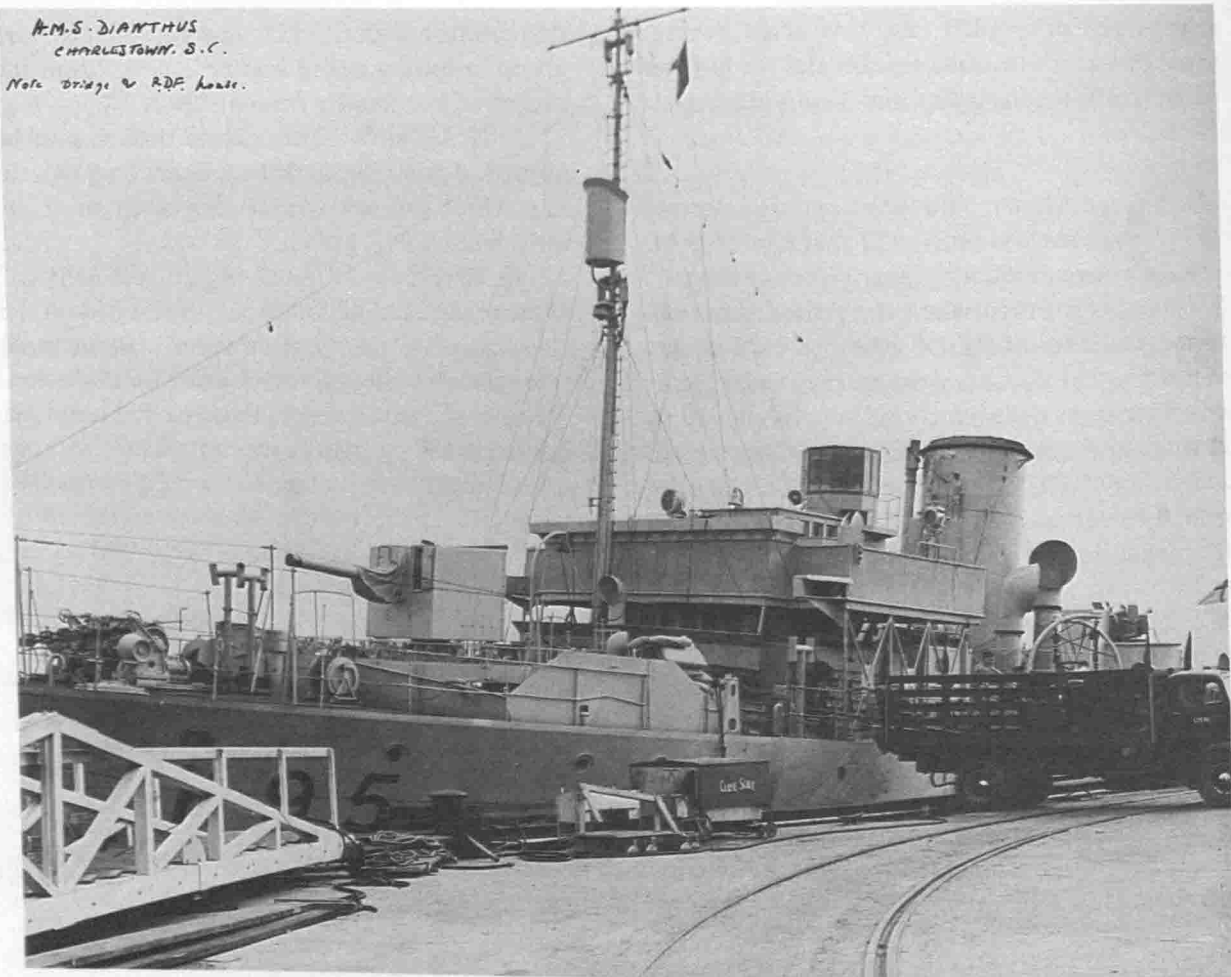
The operations of the U-boats during that day were considerably influenced by "unfavorable and difficult weather conditions." Wind strength was up to Force 10, accompanied by snow and hail which reduced visibility to between 100 and 500 meters. Six U-boats sighted ships of the convoy. The Germans concluded that SC-121 had been split up into several groups, which led the BdU to conclude that "maintaining contact was therefore out of the question."²² At 1158 hours, the BdU, in order to bring more U-boats

into contact with SC-121, ordered the *Ostmark* group to form a patrol line across the projected course of the convoy from 59°39'N 34°24'W to 57°51'N 31°48'W. This patrol line was to be formed, if possible, by 0800A hours on 8 March. The Allies did not decode this order until the early hours of 16 March.²³

At 0875Z hours on 9 March, the USCGC *Spencer* saw a cloud of smoke. A torpedo hit the merchant ship *Guido*, a "romper," about three miles ahead of the convoy, causing an explosion. The *Spencer* proceeded to the area and obtained a sonar contact which was attacked, without result. Several depth charges brought no results. After picking up thirty-five crew members of *Guido*, the Coast Guard cutter returned to her position in the screen of SC-121. The *Guido*, hit on the starboard side in the engine room, immediately begun to sink. The U-boat which torpedoed her is not known. Several hours after the sinking, and unknown at the time to the escort, the U-boats torpedoed and sank four stragglers from the convoy. U-257 torpedoed and sank the merchant ship *Fort Lamy*, while U-591 destroyed the *Vojvoda Putnik*. The merchant ship *Leadgate* was torpedoed and sunk by U-648, and the *Empire Lakeland* by U-190.²⁴ These four sinkings occurred astern of SC-121.

During 8 March, the corvette HMCS *Dauphin* joined SC-121, and HMCS *Trillium* left the convoy.²⁵ The escort was reinforced on 8 March by the dispatch from Iceland and Northern Ireland of four VLR B-24 Liberator aircraft to provide air support. However, air operations were hampered by the inclement weather, which prevented several aircraft from making contact with the convoy. Aircraft E/120 did not sight the convoy and returned to base, although aircraft B/120 did sight several ships of the escort before ending the operation. Aircraft Q/120, while not making contact with SC-121, sighted and attacked a U-boat. As for aircraft R/120, it met the convoy and, while conducting a patrol, sighted and attacked a U-boat with depth charges.²⁶

During the morning of 9 March, SC-121 was again supported by the dispatch of three more VLR B-25 Liberator aircraft from Northern Ireland. Aircraft C/120 returned to base without sighting the convoy. Aircraft G/120 was also



HMS *Dianthus* at Charleston, SC. Central Negative Library at the Canadian Armed Forces Photographic Unit, PMR 83-1658.

forced to return to Northern Ireland without meeting the convoy because of heavy rain, snow, hail, and the "extreme probability of severe icing." However, aircraft N/120 managed to reach SC-121, and, on orders from Heineman, conducted a series of searches and sweeps from 0913Z hours to 1646Z hours, looking for U-boats and stragglers. Several ships but no U-boats were sighted by this aircraft before it returned to Aldergrove in Northern Ireland.²⁷ While aircraft N/120 did not sight any U-boats, several U-boats sighted the Allied aircraft. U-190 and U-641 were both "driven under water by aircraft," and several other U-boats even reported being attacked by an aircraft.²⁸

The escort of SC-121 was reinforced by the arrival of the USCGC *Bibb*, USCGC *Ingham*, and USS *Babbitt* from Iceland. This brought the

strength of the escort up to eight warships.²⁹ However, the effectiveness of the escort was somewhat reduced by a series of equipment malfunctions and communications failures which resulted in Heineman, who was on the *Spencer*, receiving comparatively little in the way of HF/DF information. The few HF/DF bearings which he did receive on 9 March tended to show that the U-boats "were definitely abaft of the beam" of SC-121.³⁰

The *Babbitt*, during the forenoon of 9 March, obtained two sonar contacts off the port beam of the convoy. Some twenty-eight depth charges were dropped by the warship, but these attacks were without result. At 1108Z hours, HMCS *Rosthern* obtained a sonar contact off the starboard beam of SC-121 which was attacked seven times with depth charges. Forty-four depth

charges were dropped by the Canadian warship. After the last attack, "a large oil slick" appeared on the surface, which was lost from view in a hail squall. Sonar contact was also lost. At 1430Z hours, a merchant ship in the convoy reported seeing a torpedo passing from port to starboard. Half an hour later, another merchant ship reported sighting a U-boat. The *Bibb* and *Ingham* conducted a two-hour search for this U-boat off the port quarter and astern without result. Just before dark, *Spencer* and *Ingham* conducted a series of sweeps ahead, while at the same time the *Bibb* and *Babbitt* made sweeps off both quarters and astern. After dark in heavy seas, with a strong westerly wind and conditions of poor visibility, SC-121 made an evasive turn of 25 degrees to port.³¹

Astern of SC-121, unseen by the convoy's escorts, U-530 torpedoed and sank the merchant

ship *Milos*, which was straggling. At 2115Z hours, *Rosthern* heard and then saw a torpedo pass down her starboard side about fifteen feet from the vessel. This torpedo appeared to have been fired from the starboard beam of SC-121. The Canadian corvette searched down the track of the missile but nothing was found. At 2127Z hours, Heineman, on the *Spencer*, heard an explosion. This was U-409 torpedoing the merchant ship *Malantic*. The ship, hit on the port side, dropped astern of SC-121, sinking. The rescue ship *Melrose Abbey*, screened by the *Bibb*, rescued twenty-one survivors out of a crew of forty-six. While the escorts hunted for the U-boat which had torpedoed the *Malantic*, the tanker *Rosewood* transmitted "SSS" over the radio at 2145Z hours: the signal that she was being attacked by a U-boat. The convoy was illuminated, but there were no indications, most



HMCS *Rothstern*. Central Negative Library at the Canadian Armed Forces Photographic Unit, CN 3529.

likely owing to the lack of visibility and the confusion of the situation, that the *Rosewood* had been attacked. The commodore of the convoy reported to Heineman that the *Rosewood* "was still with the convoy." In fact, the ship had been torpedoed by U-409.³²

The last incident on 9 March occurred at about 2153Z hours, just after the *Rosewood* reported having been attacked. The *Dauphin* had sighted a U-boat. The Canadian corvette illuminated the area and headed for the position of the U-boat which had disappeared. No contact with the German vessel was obtained.³³

At daylight on 10 March, the *Rosewood* was absent from convoy. At 1150Z hours, it was learned that the tanker was astern of SC-121 and had "requested assistance." The *Bibb* was despatched astern of the convoy to search for the *Rosewood* and found the ship broken into two drifting hulks. There were no survivors. The American warship sank the remains of the *Rosewood* before returning to the screen of SC-121. Later, Heineman mistakenly concluded that the *Malantic* had been torpedoed by a U-boat which had gotten inside the screen from ahead or from the port bow, while the *Rosewood* had been attacked by another U-boat which had approached from astern or the port quarter.

By 1200 hours, SC-121's escorts, with the exception of the *Bibb*, which was astern of the Allied force, had all returned to their stations in the convoy's screen. At this time, numerous HF/DF bearings were being obtained by the Allied ships, but none of the transmissions appeared to be coming from positions close to SC-121. Most of them were thought to be coming from astern of the convoy. Nevertheless, at 0005Z hours, the merchant ship *Nailsea Court* reported over the radio that she was torpedoed, and an explosion was heard from within the convoy. She had been torpedoed by U-229. Three minutes later, U-405 torpedoed the merchant ship *Bonneville*. At 0010Z hours, another torpedo from U-229 hit the bow of the merchant ship *Coulmore*. At 1025Z hours, the merchant ship *Scorton* reported ramming a U-boat. This

was U-665, which escaped without damage. The convoy was illuminated and the escorts began to hunt for the U-boats. Nothing was found. The only contact occurred when the *Dauphin* heard on her sonar what was thought to be a torpedo. The Canadian warship altered course towards the location from which the torpedo was thought to have been fired and attacked with two depth charges, but no contact was established.³⁴

After the escorts had completed a search for the attacking U-boats, they returned to their stations. The *Dauphin*, screened by the USS *Greer*, was later sent astern to rescue the survivors from the torpedoed merchant ships. The two Allied warships were joined by the *Bibb* and the rescue ship *Melrose Abbey*. Ten members of the crews of the *Nailsea Court* and *Bonneville* were rescued, as were eleven men from the *Coulmore*, which was still afloat. The commander of the *Greer* believed that the men on the *Coulmore* had panicked and "had unnecessarily abandoned the ship." Later, tugs would be sent to salvage the *Coulmore*. The ship was successfully towed to Britain.³⁵ By 0937Z hours, the three warships and the *Melrose Abbey* had returned to SC-121.

There were no successful attacks on SC-121 during 10 March, although the U-boats remained in contact with the convoy. At 1807, U-336 reported being driven away from the convoy by a destroyer. At 2100, U-447 informed the BdU that her attack periscope and one of her electric motors were damaged. At 2350, U-229 radioed "convoy not found." Even though a number of U-boats were still maintaining contact with SC-121 during 10 March, the battle was over. The German command authorities decided to end the operation.³⁶

The U-boats were, no doubt, victorious in the battle for Convoy SC-121. The Germans believed that they had sunk nine Allied ships and damaged two others,³⁷ when in fact the number was twelve (*Egyptian*, *Impala*, *Guido*, *Fort Lamy*, *Vojvoda Putnik*, *Empire Lakeland*, *Leadgate*, *Milos*, *Malantic*, *Bonneville*, *Nailsea Court*, *Rosewood*), while the *Scorton* and *Coulmore* were damaged. No U-boats were lost. German success was in great part owing to

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



David Syrett received his doctorate from the University of London and is presently a professor of history at Queens College, The City University of New York. He is the author of The Defeat of the German U-Boats: The Battle of the Atlantic (Columbia, SC, 1994). His articles have appeared in The American Neptune, The Mariner's Mirror, The Northern Mariner, Historical Research, and others.