"THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC IS GETTING HARDER":

VICTORY IN MID-OCEAN, DECEMBER 1942 - MAY 1943

The Most Constant Enemy -- the North Atlantic

In the North Atlantic, warship decks were hazardous in anything but a calm sea. In this fine photograph by G.A. Milne, taken on the frigate, HMCS **Matane**, in January 1944, a sailor checks the depth charges in his ship's stern racks. The sea is rough but it could be a lot worse. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 134326)

"Keep the hell out of it:" Tempers flare in Ottawa

The tactful language in which Churchill phrased his message did not lessen its impact when it reached Ottawa. Having spent more than three years trying to respond to every British request for assistance, often to its own detriment, the RCN was now being asked to leave the main theatre of operations because the Royal Navy did not regard it as an effective fighting force. Some officers at NSHQ felt that the British were overlooking the fact that the Canadian navy, poorly equipped to do so, had only undertaken mid-ocean escort work in 1941 at the request of the Admiralty and had largely been stuck with escorting the slow convoys – the most vulnerable convoys which usually suffered the highest losses. But these same officers were ignoring the fact that prescient observers such as Murray had, for more than a year, been pointing out the difficulties faced by the escort groups, with little helpful response from either the Admiralty or NSHQ. Ottawa bore a large share of the responsibility for the situation it now found itself in because its insistence on the unbridled expansion of the navy had created deficiencies in training, equipment and, ultimately, performance. The snowball of expansion had now landed on Admiral Percy Nelles's desk – and he was not at all happy about it. Captain Eric Brand, RN, the British officer posted to Ottawa, -remembered what happened when he entered Nelles's office with an -offer to help by using personal contacts at the Admiralty and was abruptly told to "keep the hell out of it."[1]

One of Nelles's subordinates took a more balanced view. When the Chief of the Naval Staff learned that Horton's chief of staff, Commodore J.M. Mansfield, was coming to North America to explain the reasons for the change, he sent one of his senior staff officers, Commander Harry De Wolf, RCN, to attend a joint Allied conference on the trans-Atlantic convoys held in Washington in the last days of December 1942. De Wolf pointed out to the American and British officers present that the root of the RCN's problems was that, for two years, it had made every effort to meet continuous requests from Britain and the United States for more escorts in the North Atlantic, under the premise that "any ship is better than none."[2] He also told them firmly that a decision to remove the C-Groups from the mid-Atlantic would have to be approved by the Canadian government, whose view was that the RCN had "sort of grown up with this North Atlantic problem and feel we have a permanent interest in it." De Wolf was actually laying the groundwork for a goal long favoured by the RCN – the removal of the complicated command structure in the western Atlantic which placed it under nominal American control. It was time for Canada to secure control of its own waters.

When De Wolf returned to Ottawa, the question of the removal of the C-Groups was still under discussion but any possible Canadian grounds for opposing the transfer were demolished by the sad tale of Convoy ONS 154.

"The sea was dotted with lights:" Convoy ONS 154, December 1942

On 19 December 1942, Escort Group C-1 sailed from Londonderry to pick up ONS 154 coming out of Britain with 45 merchantmen. Consisting of the destroyer *St. Laurent* (Senior Officer) and the corvettes *Battleford*, *Chilliwack*, *Kenogami*, *Napanee* and *Shediac*, half of which were veterans of the MOEF, C-1 was relatively well equipped for a Canadian group. *St. Laurent* had HF/DF and Type 271 radar, while the five corvettes had been fitted with Type 271 just prior to sailing. The Senior Officer, Lieutenant Commander Guy Windeyer, RCN, a former British officer who had joined the Canadian navy at the outbreak of war, was new to the group, however, and had only served as Senior Officer for one convoy. Although Windeyer had planned a group exercise at Londonderry, it was cancelled because of bad weather and there was no time for further training, particularly on the new radar sets, before C-1 sailed. Another problem was that the group's second destroyer, HMS *Burwell*, was forced by mechanical defects to remain behind in Londonderry.

Liberty Ship Mark Twain

The Liberty ships were one of the Allies' war-winning assets. Designed for quick production using pre-fabricated sections that were transported to construction sites by railway, 2,751 were produced in American shipyards between 1941 and 1945. They more than balanced the heavy wartime losses in merchant tonnage. The cargo capacity of a Liberty ship was 9,140 tons dead weight, equivalent to 300 railway freight cars -- one ship could carry 2,840 jeeps or 440 light tanks or 230 million rounds of small-larms ammunition or 3.440.000 dailv rations. (Courtesv. National Archives of the United States. NA

Unfortunately for ONS 154, it was routed south toward the Azores to give it some respite from the stormy winter weather. This not only meant that it had to transit the "air gap" at its broadest point; it also brought the convoy within reach of two U-boat packs with 20 submarines in total. On Boxing Day 1942, *Gruppe Spitz* sighted the ONS 154 and Dönitz guided all available submarines to intercept positions. The first attacks came that night – three merchant ships were sunk and a fourth left drifting and abandoned – but Windeyer did achieve an early success. At 0330 on 27 -December, *St. Laurent* sighted the surfaced *U-356*, a Type VII boat commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Günther Ruppelt, and raked it with 20mm Oerlikon fire which drove it down and then delivered a shallow pattern depth charge attack on the surface swirl where the boat had dived. Ten detonations followed, and then an eleventh which was louder, and a large oil slick appeared. *U-356* was no more although its destruction by the RCN was not confirmed until well after the war.

About three hours later *St. Laurent* sighted another surfaced enemy and drove it off with gun fire. After that, there was a near respite for about 30 hours as many of the U-boats lost contact but HF/DF operators in the convoy picked up multiple radio signals and it was clear that the Germans were massing for a major attack. One submarine, *U-225*, did manage to maintain contact and torpedoed the tanker *Scottish Heather* as she was refuelling *Chilliwack* astern of the convoy. Fortunately for the tanker, her cargo did not ignite and, although damaged, she was able to make for a British port. *Chilliwack*, with less than a full load of fuel, returned to her escort tasks and, early on the morning of 28 December, drove a surfaced sub down with gun

Behind the Battle -- Plot Room, Naval Service Headquarters, Ottawa
This photograph, taken on 29 November 1943, shows the Plot Room at NSHQ in Ottawa. On both sides, the Battle of the Atlantic was controlled by headquarters and intelligence from all sources -- agents, radio direction finding, prisoner of war interrogations and decoding -- was funnelled to Operational Intelligence Centres in London, Ottawa and Washington and then transmitted to the relevant naval commands. The Plot Room kept track of all friendly and enemy ship movements so that naval staffs could follow the course of operations. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 134337)

fire before launching a depth charge attack that produced no results.

As the day wore on, 12 submarines manoeuvred into position and in the early evening the onslaught began. At 1920, *Battleford* gained a distant radar contact and while steaming away from the convoy towards it, sighted no less than four submarines on the surface moving in line abreast, about a mile apart, in the direction of ONS 154. The two nearest boats dived but *Battleford* was able to engage the more distant vessels with her 4-inch gun. Unfortunately, the blast from this weapon knocked out her 271 radar and *Battleford* lost contact in the dark. Even worse, when she tried to regain the convoy, her captain could not find it because Windeyer had not informed him of an important course change. *Battleford* searched all night but only rejoined the next morning.

This was unfortunate because ONS 154 was definitely in harm's way and every escort was needed. Admiral Sir Max Horton, following events from his headquarters in Liverpool, realized this and ordered two British destroyers to proceed at high speed to reinforce the escort. Meanwhile, in the late afternoon of 29 December Windeyer made an attempt to balance the odds. HMS *Fidelity*, the special service ship attached to the convoy, possessed two float planes and tried to launch one to drive away the surfaced submarines following in the convoy's wake. The sea was so rough that it crashed although, happily, the aircrew were rescued by *St. Laurent*. As darkness fell, it was clear to every sailor on every ship in ONS 154, naval or merchant, that the coming night was going to be a terrible one.

At 2005, a mass attack was launched seemingly from all directions – in the space of less than four hours, nine merchant ships were sunk, including that of the convoy commodore. The escorts fought back gamely but were unable to prevent the slaughter – three of the corvettes sighted and attacked U-boats and at one point *St. Laurent* came close enough to ram a surfaced submarine but Windeyer could not risk damaging the only destroyer in C-1 Group and sheered away at the last moment. The darkness was lit up by the fires of burning wrecks and the continuous firing of illuminating shells – the commanding officer of HMCS *Napanee*, Lieutenant Stuart Henderson, RCNR, later remembered the scene:

> *All ships appeared to be firing snowflake [illuminating shells], and tracers crisscrossed in all directions, escorts firing starshells. The sea was dotted with lights from boats and rafts, and two burning wrecks which had hauled to starboard helped the illumination.*[3]

The attacks ceased around midnight, bringing a welcome lull.

Depth Charge Attack from the Stern

A depth charge pattern dropped from the stern racks of a Canadian frigate detonates in this photograph by G.A. Lawrence taken in January 1944. Depth charges, either dropped astern or launched sideways, interfered with the operation of the Asdic and often caused loss of contact with a U-boat. The answer to the problem was ahead-throwing weapons such as Hedgehog and Squid but these did not enter Canadian service until 1943. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 133246)

During the daylight hours of 30 December the enemy finished off the damaged survivors which had fallen behind. Sadly, they also sank *Fidelity*, which was astern of the convoy and she went down with the loss of 334 crew members and survivors. That afternoon, HM Ships *Meteor* and *Milne*, the destroyers sent by Horton, arrived and managed to drive off three submarines shadowing the convoy. However, their fuel state was such that, after a quiet night, they had to be detached to the Azores, along with *Shediac* and *Battleford*, to refuel as C-1 had lost its tanker when *Scottish Heather* had been hit. This reduced the escort to only four vessels (*St. Laurent, Chilliwack, Kenogami* and *Napanee*).

By this time, Windeyer was verging on physical and nervous collapse. He fully expected that the coming night would witness "the final carving" of ONS 154 and advised the captains of the fast steamers, *Adrastus* and *Calgary*, who were carrying many civilian passengers, to use their own judgement about whether or not to stay with the convoy.[4] Both opted to continue with ONS 154 and the night of 30 December was fortunately a quiet one with no attacks. The following day, the destroyer HMS *Fame* -arrived and her captain, who was senior to Windeyer, assumed command. This was a good thing as by now Windeyer, "seeing torpedoes at every turn," was in such a state that he had to be sedated by *St. Laurent*'s medical officer.[5] The battle for ONS 154 ended that day when the U-boats broke contact.

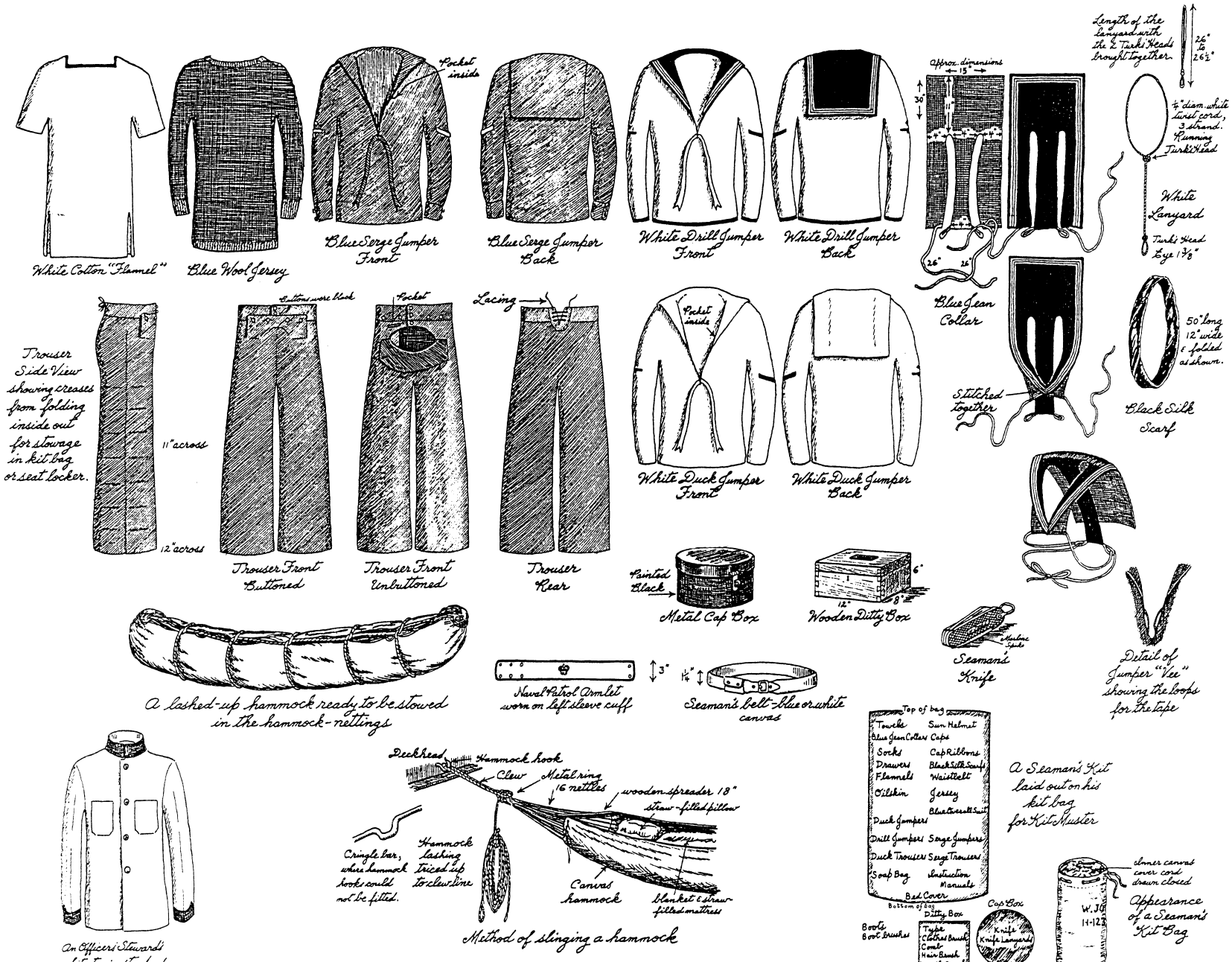
"Another real good turn you have done us:" The RCN leaves the mid-Atlantic

There was no doubt that ONS 154, which had lost 14 of its 45 ships, was a catastrophe and it was also clear there had been a failure in the leadership of the convoy escort. The debacle destroyed any opposition that NSHQ could put up against the transfer of the C-Groups and it was now simply a question of arranging the details. This was done when Horton's representative, Mansfield, arrived in Ottawa on 2 January 1943 and, after discussion, it was agreed that the four C-Groups would leave the mid-
Atlantic for a period of four months. During that time they would undergo intensive training and have their equipment upgraded before joining the Britain-Gibraltar convoy route, which, compared to the North -Atlantic in winter, would seem almost like a tropical cruise. The Canadian Cabinet War Committee agreed to the transfer on 6 January, subject to three conditions: the four groups would be returned to the MOEF not later than May 1943; the RN was to continue its commitment in terms of ships to the Western Local Escort Force; and the Canadian corvettes detached for Operation TORCH were to be returned as soon as possible.

In communicating these conditions to Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, his British opposite number, Nelles stressed the importance of the North -Atlantic for Canada and its navy:

> *It has been our policy to build up Canadian escort forces for the specific purpose of protecting North Atlantic trade convoys in addition to our coastal communications. Public interest in the Canadian Navy is centred on the part it has taken in this task, which is without question one of the highest and enduring priority upon which the outcome of the war depends. We are satisfied that the Canadian Navy can serve no higher purpose than to continue to share this task, which we have come to look upon as the natural responsibility for Canada.*[6]

There was a certain amount of relief in Britain when this message was received. Senior officers at the Admiralty were aware that Horton had placed them in a very awkward situation with a nation that had done its utmost, despite very inadequate means, to support Britain since the outbreak of the war. Attempting to smooth ruffled feathers, Winston Churchill sent a personal message of thanks to Mackenzie King which concluded with the phrase: "This is another real good turn you have done us."[7]


White Cotton "Flannel"
Blue Wool Jersey
Pocket inside
Blue Serge Jumper Front
Blue Serge Jumper Back
White Drill Jumper Front
White Drill Jumper Back
Approx. dimensions
15"
30"
11"
26"
26"
Blue Jean Collar
Length of the lanyard with the 2 Turki Heads brought together.
26" to 26½"
¼" diam. white tinsel cord, 3 strand. Running Turki Head
White Lanyard
Turki Head Eye 1⅞"
50" long 12" wide folded as shown.
Black Silk Scarf
Stitched together
Trouser Side View showing creases from folding inside out for stowage in kit-bag or seat locker.
11" across
12" across
Buttons were black
Pocket
Lacing
Trouser Front Buttoned
Trouser Front Unbuttoned
Trouser Rear
Pocket inside
White Duck Jumper Front
White Duck Jumper Back
Painted Black
Metal Cap Box
6"
12"
8"
Wooden Ditty Box
Seaman's Knife
Detail of Jumper "Vee" showing the loops for the tape
A lashed-up hammock ready to be stowed in the hammock-nettings
3"
½"
Naval Patrol Armlet worn on left sleeve cuff
Seaman's belt-blue or white canvas
Top of bag
Towels
Blue Jean Collar
Socks
Drawers
Flannels
Oilskin
Duck Jumpers
Drill Jumpers
Duck Trousers
Soap Bag
Sun Helmet
Caps
Cap Ribbons
Black Silk Scarf
Waistbelt
Jersey
Blue Overall Suit
Serge Jumpers
Serge Trousers
Instruction Manuals
Bed Cover
Bottom of bag
Ditty Box
Boots
Boot Brushes
Cap Box
Knife
Knife Lanyard
Comb
Hair Brush
Tooth Brush
A Seaman's Kit laid out on his kit bag for Kit Muster
Inner canvas cover cord drawn closed
W.J.
14-12
Appearance of a Seaman's Kit Bag
An Officers' Steward's white tunic, standard design with blue trim & white horn crown & anchor buttons.
Deckhead
Hammock hook
Clew
Metal ring
16 nettles
wooden spreader 18"
straw-filled pillow
Cringle bar, where hammock hooks could not be fitted.
Hammock lashing triced up to clew line
Canvas hammock
blanket & straw-filled mattress
Method of slinging a hammock

Pusser Rig

More to the point, a previous Canadian request for the transfer of modern destroyers from the RN to the RCN, which had been delayed pending the decision on the removal of the C-Groups, was approved and the RCN could look forward to getting a badly-needed increase in destroyer strength in the coming months. In saying farewell to the C-Groups, the Admiralty did acknowledge their contribution in its *Monthly Anti-Submarine Report* for January 1943 by stating that the Canadians had carried "the brunt of the of the U-boat attack in the North Atlantic for the last six months, that is to say, of about half of the German U-boats operating at sea."[8] However the *Report* also warned that "the critical phase of the U-boat war in the Atlantic cannot be long postponed."

Wi nter battle in the Atlantic, January–February 1943

At the beginning of 1943, Allied naval planners compiled the statistics for the preceding year – 5,471,222 tons or 70 per cent of global Allied shipping losses – had been lost in the North Atlantic. Still worse, of the 1,050 naval escorts estimated to be necessary to successfully defend the Atlantic lifeline, only 445 were available and a quarter of those were obsolescent vessels dating back to the First World War.

There was, nevertheless, guarded reason for optimism. Shipbuilding capacity had expanded tremendously in the previous year, meaning that the loss of much of the merchant tonnage would soon be replaced, while hundreds of new escort vessels were being built in Britain and North America. The other encouraging feature was that new weapons and equipment had passed the prototype stage and would soon be reaching the frontline forces. An airborne version of centimetric radar, accurate enough to pick up the periscope of a submerged submarine at a distance, was now being fitted into aircraft. The USN was building escort carriers, small aircraft carriers that could accompany convoys and provide air cover throughout their passage and, until these entered service in large numbers, Britain had converted a half dozen merchantmen into temporary aircraft carriers that could fly off four aircraft. The lengthy argument over the deployment of VLR aircraft having finally been won, these were on the way, as were new weapons such as Squid and Hedgehog. Finally, the designs of three advanced types of escorts – an improved corvette, the Castle Class, and the River and Loch Class frigates – had been approved and they would soon be entering service. Until that time, however, the war in the North Atlantic would have to be waged with the forces, ships and equipment on hand.

But the enemy was also gathering his strength. On 30 January 1943, Dönitz was named the commander-in-chief of the *Kriegsmarine* and from this point until the end of the war, the *U-Boot-Waffe* would have priority in the German naval war effort. By this time, Germany's construction programme was in full flow and in January 1943 Dönitz had enough strength to keep nearly 200 boats at sea and more than 100 in the North Atlantic alone. His crews also received new equipment, including a radar detector which warned them of Allied detection attempts and a new torpedo that could be preset to change its course after running a certain distance and was therefore almost certain to score a kill among the crowded columns of large convoys. An even more deadly weapon – an acoustic torpedo that could home in on the noise of a ship's propellers – was in the final stages of development. Perhaps the U-boat service's greatest asset in the next phase of the struggle was that Allied code breakers were still unable to crack the *Kriegsmarine* cyphers introduced in early 1942. Some success had been achieved but it was not consistent, and in the meantime the German *B-dienst* was still able to read much of the Allied signal traffic.

These German assets, however, were not evident during January 1943 when fierce winter gales hampered Dönitz's efforts to concentrate against a major convoy. Only 15 ships were lost in the Atlantic that month and seven of those came from one convoy, TM 1, whose route had been discovered by the *B-dienst* in time for Dönitz to lay an ambush across its path from Trinidad to Gibraltar. Losses continued low in February with 34 ships being sunk but almost all of these were in just two convoys: SC 118 and ONS 166.

Convoy SC 118 of 63 merchantmen was escorted by the British B-1 Group, heavily reinforced to a total of five destroyers, four corvettes and two US coast guard cutters. This was nearly twice the number of warships available for the slow convoys the RCN had escorted in 1942 and, from this strength and the fact that British ships were better equipped than their Canadian counterparts, it was reasonable to expect that SC 118 would suffer fewer losses. This, however, did not turn out to be the case. The convoy left Halifax at the end of January and Dönitz, forewarned of its existence and route, was able to intercept it on 4 February. Over a period of four days, his U-boats sank 11 ships for the loss of two submarines. These losses prompted Horton to formalize an idea that had been suggested before – the use of support groups (what the USN called "hunter killer" groups) that could reinforce the escorts of any heavily threatened convoy – and, by taking vessels from British local escort forces and the RN's Home Fleet, five such support groups were formed. Another important decision made after SC 118 was to increase the allotment of VLR aircraft to close the air gap.

These measures were not available for Convoy ONS 166, which was escorted by A-3 group in late February. Consisting of two American coastguard cutters, two British corvettes and four Canadian corvettes (*Chilliwack*, *Dauphin*, *Rosthern* and *Trillium*), A-3 fought a six-day battle against 18 submarines only to lose 14 of 49 merchantmen under its protection. These losses were offset by the destruction of one submarine by ramming but it was clear that MOEF escorts, whatever their nationality, were having problems handling the large numbers of U-boats now operating in the Atlantic. Ironically, British escorts newly assigned to the MOEF were complaining about the weather, short rest periods and lack of numbers – all conditions familiar to the RCN for nearly two years. At the end of February 1943 the situation was such that Horton decided to return the four Canadian C-Groups to the North Atlantic earlier than planned as it was clear that the crisis of the Battle of the Atlantic was fast approaching.

The Northwest Atlantic: Canada's own theatre of war

While the now predominantly British MOEF suffered from the blows of the U-boats, the four Canadian C-Groups experienced a relatively peaceful time. One after another, each group went to Londonderry where, following a long leave for its crews, new equipment was fitted and a period of intensive training, lasting from ten days to two weeks, was undertaken. As a group finished this programme, it was assigned to a Gibraltar convoy which, since these convoys were more heavily escorted and covered by aircraft throughout almost the entire length of their voyage, were far different from their North Atlantic counterparts. While on this duty, the -destroyer *St. Croix* sank her second submarine and the corvette *Prescott* got her first. Added to the three German or Italian submarines sunk by the Canadian corvettes assigned to Operation TORCH, this made a respectable total of five submarines killed by the RCN in southern waters in three months. As the C-Groups were enjoying this respite, however, important decisions were taking place on land and at sea.

The first of these had been prompted by the Casablanca Conference of January 1943 at which Churchill and Roosevelt had plotted long-term strategy against Germany. A successful invasion of the European mainland first required a massive build-up of American forces in Britain, but before that could take place, the security of the trans-Atlantic shipping lanes had to be established. One of the problems in the previous 18 months had been the overlapping commands in the Atlantic, a complicated structure that had led to the ultimate irony that much of the RCN was nominally under American control. Britain wanted the appointment of a super commander-in-chief for this vital theatre and, not unnaturally, the Admiralty was pressing for this to be a British officer. Admiral Ernest King, the commander-in-chief of the USN, would have nothing to do with this proposal but did agree that command matters had to be simplified.

Toward this end, he called a conference in Washington in early March 1943 aimed at thrashing out issues relating to the convoy system. Amazingly enough, given the national aspirations and egos involved, it went fairly smoothly and the result was to give the three navies in the Atlantic their own

distinct spheres of operations. Britain would assume responsibility for the North Atlantic from a point just east of Newfoundland to British waters, including the MOEF. The United States would assume control of all convoys crossing the Atlantic farther south from American ports to the Mediterranean and Britain. Canada, meanwhile, would assume control of the northwestern Atlantic giving the RCN control over operations in its coastal waters from a point just south of Nova Scotia east to the limit of the British mandate. These changes were implemented almost immediately, and on 30 April 1943 Rear-Admiral Leonard Murray was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Canadian Northwest Atlantic, with complete authority over all Allied naval and air forces operating in his area. Murray would be the only Canadian to command a major theatre of war between 1939 and 1945.

"Ship disintegrated completely in flames:" The scales begin to tip, March–April 1943

While these decisions were being made, the battle moved to its climax. During March 1943, the Allies suffered the worst shipping losses, 108 vessels of 627,377 tons, since the previous November with one convoy alone, SC 121, losing 13 ships to a mass attack by 17 U-boats. The heaviest actions occurred when 38 U-boats, the largest concentration Dönitz had yet achieved, attacked Convoy SC 122 at the very time it was being overtaken by a fast convoy, HX 228. The battle began on 16 March and lasted four desperate days. By the time it was over, despite the appearance of VLR aircraft for the first time in the mid-Atlantic area, 21 merchantmen had been lost, with another 10 heavily damaged, for the loss of one U-boat. The fury of these March battles is captured in the report of *Kapitänleutnant* Hans Trojer of *U-121*, describing his attack on Convoy HX 228:

> *In a snow squall came up at right angles to course of the enemy, surfaced as soon as latter emerged from the snow squall …… fired two torpedoes at two large, overlapping merchant ships. First torpedo hit. Ship disintegrated completely in flames and a vast cloud of smoke. Hundreds of steel plates flew like sheets of paper through the air. A great deal of ammunition exploded.*
>
> *Shortly afterwards scored another hit on a freighter, which also exploded. From bows to bridge the ship was under water. Heavy debris crashed against my periscope, which now became difficult to turn. ……*
>
> *Then I myself heard the noise of the destroyer's propellers where I stood in the conning tower and at once gave the order: "Dive! – full ahead! Both!" Depth charges, two patterns of four, were already falling, and pretty close to us. The conning tower hatch started to leak, and a mass of water came down into the boat. The boat plunged and jumped, but she gained depth steadily.*[9]

By the end of the third week in March, Dönitz's commanders had sunk 87 merchant ships totalling more than half a million tons and the U-boats seemed on the verge of cutting off Britain's lifeline.

It was at this moment that the battle turned in the Allies' favour. The code breakers at Bletchley Park were now able to read more of the *Kriegsmarine*'s improved cyphers at shorter intervals and convoys could be routed away from enemy concentrations, or at least be warned about them. More important was the appearance of the first escort carrier, USS *Bogue*, in the mid-Atlantic and *Bogue* was followed by two British counterparts. For the first time, some convoys had continuous air cover throughout their passage and aircraft flying from them could be sent to check out radar and HF/DF contacts at a distance, sparing the escorts and forcing the U-boats to submerge far from their targets, which made it difficult for them to make contact with their slow underwater speed. Although Dönitz had 120 U-boats available for service in the North Atlantic in April 1943, the escort carriers tipped the balance and, during the first week of that month, the *Bogue* beat off a concentrated attack by 40 submarines against convoy HX 230 with the loss of only one merchantman. In three convoy battles later in the month, three submarines were sunk for the loss of only four merchantmen, a bad rate of

exchange for Dönitz. Not surprisingly, the statistics for April showed a marked improvement – the Allies lost 56 ships totalling 327,943 tons but sank 15 U-boats, about 10 per cent of Dönitz's operational strength.

"As if a steel gauntlet had relaxed its grip:" Victory, May 1943

In the end, the crisis point of this seemingly unending struggle was the battle for ONS 5, which departed Britain in the last week of April with 42 merchantmen escorted by eight British warships. The convoy was sighted by a German patrol line and Dönitz attempted to bring no less than 41 submarines, about a third of his strength in the North Atlantic, against it. The shadowers briefly lost contact when the convoy encountered bad weather in the first few days of May, but on 4 May 11 U-boats attacked ONS 5, which itself had been somewhat scattered by gales. During that day two RCAF flying boats from Newfoundland arrived and, while searching ahead of the convoy, managed to sink *U-630*. That night, the Germans closed in and sank five merchantmen, but with dawn on 5 May came a VLR aircraft from Iceland operating at extreme range. It managed to stay with ONS 5 for much of the day although four more ships were lost in return for one enemy submarine.

During the night of 5 May, the convoy was subjected to two dozen separate attacks but the escort, now down to six ships because of the need to detach vessels to refuel, fought back hard and sank four U-boats, one of the kills being made by the destroyer HMS *Vidette*, which was equipped with Hedgehog. Continuous RCAF air patrols arrived on 6 May, as did an RCN group from the WLEF, and Dönitz was forced to call off the attack. The U-boats had sunk 12 ships but had lost 7 of their own (including 3 by aircraft) with 5 boats being badly damaged – more bad news for Dönitz.

The German commander, however, was not a man to be beaten easily. Although Allied code breakers could read enough of the *Kriegsmarine*'s Enigma messages to divert convoys away from known submarine concentrations, the *B-dienst* was still reading enough Allied code for Dönitz to re-deploy his packs against Convoys HX-237 and SC 129 in the second week of May. Both convoys enjoyed almost continuous air cover from escort carriers and VLR aircraft. Convoy HX 237 traded 3 merchantmen for 3 U-boats while SC 129 lost 2 ships in return for two submarines. To Dönitz, these losses represented "unbearable heights" because they equalled one submarine for 10,000 tons of merchant shipping – in 1942 the ratio had been one U-boat for 100,000 tons.[10]

Even so, it took two more defeats before he gave up the struggle. Convoy SC 130, proceeding under the protection of continuous air cover, crossed the Atlantic without losing a single ship despite being attacked by 33 submarines – the German losses were five U-boats. By this time, U-boat commanders were understandably getting somewhat twitchy and, faced with many instances where submarines failed to make contact or, having made contact, lost it in good weather, Dönitz's staff recognized that the U-boat commanders were exhibiting a particular "concern for vulnerability to air attack."[11]

On 22 May, just before he ordered an attack on Convoy HX 229, Dönitz therefore sent a stern signal to all his commanders in the North Atlantic:

> *If there is anyone who thinks that combating convoys is no longer possible, he is a weakling and no true U-boat captain. The battle of the Atlantic is getting harder but it is the determining element in the waging of the war.*[12]

Dönitz then concentrated 22 submarines against HX 229, which was -accompanied by two escort carriers, USS *Bogue* and HMS *Archer*, throughout its voyage – their aircraft sank two U-boats but the convoy did not lose a ship. A similar phenomenon took place with the next large convoy, SC 130, which crossed the Atlantic without loss under the protection of VLR aircraft, which sank two submarines.

Having lost 33 submarines and nearly 1,500 of his highly-trained personnel (including his own son) in just over three weeks, Dönitz finally -admitted defeat on 24 May 1943. That day he recorded that the situation "now forces a temporary shifting of operations to areas less endangered by aircraft" and pulled his submarines out of the mid-ocean area to redeploy them against the Britain-Gibraltar convoy route.[13] The German commander, however, had not entirely given up on the North Atlantic as he knew it was the crucial operational area and he anticipated that, once the equipment of his vessels had been upgraded, the battle "will be completely resumed once more."[14]

To the amazed victors, however, the North Atlantic was suddenly free of the enemy – "as if a steel gauntlet had relaxed its grip on the Allied throat."[15]

Hollow victory for the Royal Canadian Navy

The C-Groups returned to the Atlantic in mid-May just in time to play a small part in the final battles. C-2 Group, consisting of two British warships and four Canadian corvettes, *Chambly*, *Drumheller*, *Morden* and *Primrose*, were part of the escort for HX 237, which beat off continuous attacks with the help of the escort carrier HMS *Biter* and VLR aircraft. In the fight to get this convoy through, *Drumheller* shared in the destruction of *U-456* with the British destroyer *Lagan* and an RCAF aircraft. A few days later, C-1 Group, consisting of a British destroyer and six Canadian warships (the destroyer *Skeena* and the corvettes *Bittersweet*, *Eyebright*, *La Malbaie*, *Mayflower* and *Pictou*), took Convoy HX 238 unharmed across the Atlantic with assistance from the escort carrier USS *Bogue.*

That was the extent of the Canadian navy's participation in the climactic battles of the spring of 1943. The struggle had largely been borne and won by the RN, with assistance from the USN and the Allied air forces, and it had been won by good training, signal intelligence, air power and modern equipment – all assets conspicuously lacking in previous years when the RCN had struggled valiantly to guard the Atlantic sea lanes. While Canadian escort sailors applauded their British comrades, there was a growing resentment that, condemned by the deficiencies of their ships and equipment, they would forever remain the Cinderella of the Allied navies.