Chapter 5 **Part 1**

"IF WE LOSE THE WAR AT SEA, WE LOSE THEWAR":

THE ORDEAL, MAY - NOVEMBER 1942

Topping Up at Sea

A Town Class destroyer (unidentified in the caption but probably HMCS **St. Croix**) refuels at sea from a tanker, 7 November 1942. The introduction of refuelling at sea extended the range of "short legged" escorts but was a difficult operation in anything but a calm sea. At this stage, the process was fairly primitive -- the tanker simply trailed a hose which was picked up by the vessel waiting to refuel. Refuelling became more effective after the provision of pressurized hoses permitted the use of "along side" refuelling which allowed a tanker to top up two warships at the same time. (Photograph by G.A. Milne, courtesy National Archives of Canada, PA 116335)

Arguments in high places

By the late spring of 1942, shipping losses had risen to alarming levels. In December 1941, the U-boats had sunk 56,957 tons in the Atlantic – in July this figure rose to 513,937 tons. The reasons for the German success lay not just with Dönitz's offensive in North American waters and American reluctance to implement the convoy system but also because the Allied navies had lost their ability to read the German navy's Enigma code. Convoys could no longer be routed away from submarines while Dönitz, thanks to Germany's signal intelligence service, could follow his opponents' movements. Worse still for the Allies, Dönitz was receiving new U‑boats in greater numbers and he was now able to keep nearly 90 constantly at sea. When he decided in June 1942 to redeploy in the mid-Atlantic, Dönitz therefore possessed definite advantages.

The entry of the United States into the war gave promise of ultimate victory, but in the meantime the weight of the battle would have to be borne by the British and Canadian navies. American industry would eventually make up and surpass the crippling merchant ship losses of the first half of 1942, and new warships, foremost among them the purpose--designed ASW frigate and the escort carrier, were on the way. Better equipment and weapons were also being introduced into service, including Type 271 centimetric radar, in both sea and airborne versions, which could distinguish smaller objects from the background "clutter" of the sea; seaborne HF/DF apparatus; and Squid and Hedgehog, anti-submarine mortars that could be fired ahead of an attacking warship. But both ships and specialized technical equipment were in short supply in June 1942 when the U‑boats returned to the mid-Atlantic.

They headed for the "air gap," that area of the ocean not covered by air patrols from Newfoundland, Iceland or Ireland. Here, they could operate in comparative safety on the surface, using their greater speed to concentrate. The need to eliminate the "air gap" or "black hole" had long been recognized but all efforts by the Admiralty to obtain VLR (Very Long Range) aircraft from the Royal Air Force had been frustrated by that service's Bomber Command, which regarded itself as Britain's major offensive weapon and jealously fought to prevent its aircraft from being used for other purposes – including the preservation of Britain's lifeline. Bomber Command had a lamentable record of ignoring the naval war. When it became known in 1941 that the Germans were starting to construct bombproof submarine pens at their bases in France, Bomber Command refused to attack these targets on the grounds that its aircraft were better employed in "the air offensive to which we must look for winning as opposed to not losing the war."[1] As a result, nothing was done and by early 1942 the U‑boats were happily encased in shelters that could not be damaged by any weapon in the Allied arsenal. When Bomber Command finally began to attack these targets in late 1942, it lost 198 aircraft and their crews without doing any damage except to create a few very large dents in the reinforced concrete roofs.*

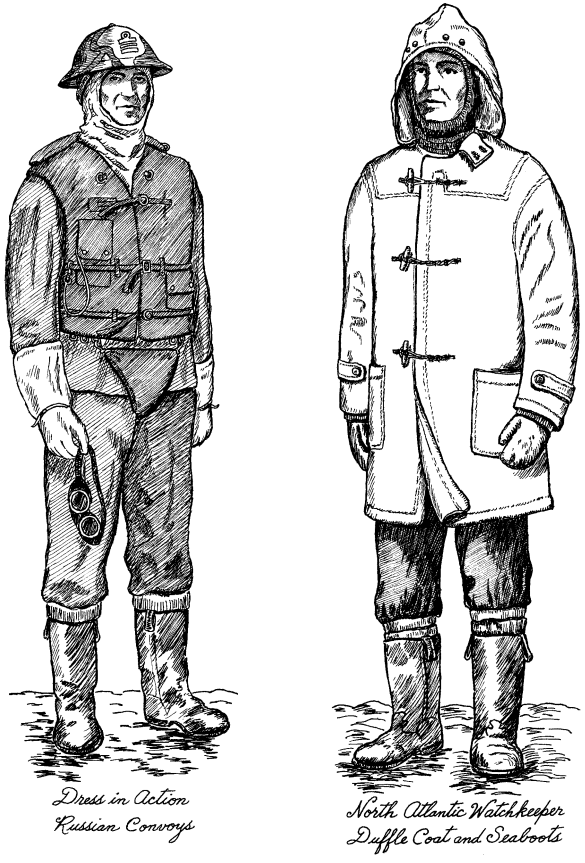
In the spring of 1942, American four-engine aircraft suitable for long-range maritime patrols, particularly the B-24 Liberator, began to enter service with the RAF. Any attempts, however, by the Admiralty to have even a small number of these aircraft placed under its control were frustrated by the RAF, which steadfastly refused to divert them from Bomber Command despite an admonition by Admiral Sir Dudley Pound that "If we lose the war at sea, we lose the war. We lose the war at sea when we can no longer maintain those communications which are essential to us."[2]

This warning had no effect on the RAF, which from March to December 1942 waged an obstinate bureaucratic struggle over the deployment of VLR aircraft. Despite a growing body of evidence that they were absolutely essential in the Atlantic, senior RAF staff remained obdurate and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, while generally agreeing with the naval case, was reluctant to make any decision that would reduce the strength of the offensive bomber force.

**The RAF had dropped 15,600 tons of bombs on the U-Boat bases in France by May 1943 and are thought to have damaged one submarine. Between 1941 and 1945 the RAF and USAAF also dropped 33,000 tons of bombs on submarine construction sites in Germany for the loss of 883 aircraft without especially affecting the rate of construction.*

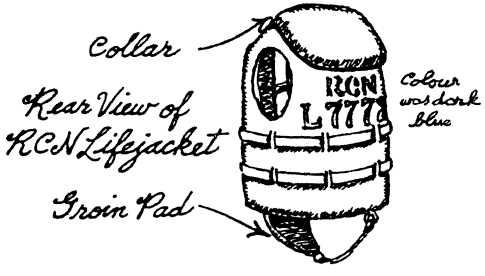
By November 1942, it appeared as though Bomber Command had won the battle and, thus, come perilously close to losing the war.

The VLR Liberators would remain under its control to join, as senior RAF officers exalted, 4,000 to 6,000 other heavy bombers in the task of the "progressive destruction and dislocation of the enemy's war industrial and economic system, and undermining his morale to a point where his capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened."[3] The Admiralty immediately seized on this fatuous statement to point out that such a massive air offensive would require four times the current fuel requirements, and since, under prevailing conditions in the North Atlantic, the RN was having trouble providing even the current requirement, it was doubtful that there would be enough fuel to carry out this gigantic aerial offensive. This irrefutable logic finally won the day and VLR aircraft were transferred to Coastal Command, but it was not until the spring of 1943 that enough were deployed to make a difference. In the meantime, convoys would have to sail without air cover in the mid-Atlantic.



Working Dress on the North Atlantic

Sea duty on the North Atlantic required specialized clothing and equipment. At right, an officer is shown dressed for arctic conditions with several layers of underclothing, a parka, life vest, anti-flash face mask and gauntlets, steel helmet, sea boots and thick socks.



Originally, sailors were issued a rubber life vest was inflated by means of a tube and a mouthpiece -- it was nicknamed a "Mae West" after the buxom film star of the period. In 1943, the RCN introduced an improved jacket type life vest fitted with a collar to keep an unconscious man's head out of the water, a groin pad to reduce injury from exploding depth charges, a lanyard and a hook to latch onto a floating object and a small, blinking red light operated by a battery so that men in the water could be seen.

The sailor on the right wears the traditional British naval duffel coat over his other garments and a balaclava, probably provided by his family. Heavy rubber sea-boots were a requirement on board warships but they were the first thing disposed of if a sailor had to abandon ship. (Drawings by L.B. Jenson, courtesy of the artist)

“She’ll never surface again, sir:” The battle for ON 115, July–August 1942

The re-organization of Allied naval forces resulted in most Canadian warships serving in either the WLEF (Western Local Escort Force) or the MOEF. By June 1942 the greater part of the RCN was in the WLEF although, in the months to follow, the hardest fighting would be borne by the A (American), B (British) or C (Canadian) escort groups of the MOEF. Although nominally organized by nationality, the composition of these groups was often mixed, depending on the ships available. In both the WLEF and MOEF, Canadian warships were theoretically under American control, although in practice they were more concerned with the RN’s Western Approaches Command at Liverpool which had overriding authority in the North Atlantic. This unwieldy command structure needed changing, but in the second half of 1942 plans for re-organization were overtaken by events.

In the early summer, Dönitz concentrated in the mid-Atlantic air gap, using a greater number of submarines than on previous operations but with mixed results. In late June and early July, he formed several U-boat groups to intercept convoys but their attacks met with limited success. In late July 1942, however, he was able to concentrate a large number of U‑boats against Convoy ON 115, escorted by the RCN.

ON 115 departed Britain in the third week of July and was picked up by C-3 Escort Group off Ireland on the 25th of that month. This group consisted of the destroyers *Saguenay* (Senior Officer) and *Skeena*, and the corvettes *Agassiz*, *Galt*, *Louisbourg*, *Sackville* and *Wetaskiwin*. During its first four days on passage, the escorts obtained a number of MF/DF (Medium Frequency/Direction Finding) radio signals, which they believed to be U-boat sighting reports. The Canadian escorts lacked the more precise HF/DF locating equipment which might have given an estimated distance to the source of the signal, but nonetheless the two destroyers “ran down” the bearings in the direction of the source of these signals. These chases yielded no results and on the night of 29 July the senior officer, Commander D.C. Wallace, RCNR, of *Saguenay*, stationed his destroyers astern of the convoy to intercept submarines he believed to be closing in on it. As it transpired, the first German sighting report of ON 115 was made only that day by *U-210* and Dönitz ordered six submarines to intercept the -convoy.

The German commander’s radio transmissions and his submarine commanders’ responses were picked up by the MF/DF on the escorts and, throughout 30 July, Wallace deployed his two destroyers and the corvettes *Galt* and *Wetaskiwin* on a number of “bearing sweeps” to

Seamen's Mess in HMCS Gaspé, July 1942.
Gaspé was one of four Fundy class minesweepers in service in September 1939 and performed minesweeping duties out of Halifax throughout the war. At this time, Canadian sailors ate in their quarters and they were usually crowded, in big ships or small, as this photograph by W.H. Pugsley illustrates. Note the bottle of Coca-Cola on the table -- the Canadian navy's penchant for mixing this beverage with their rum ration earned them the nickname of the "Royal Coca-Cola Navy" from their British counterparts. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 139294)

locate the origins of these signals. Again, this exercise yielded no results but that night *Skeena* sighted a surfaced submarine on the starboard side of the convoy. She was joined by *Wetaskiwin* and the two ships, having obtained a firm ASDIC contact, carried out a lengthy depth charge attack that lasted until late in the morning of 30 July when a pinpoint launch by *Skeena* resulted in a powerful underwater explosion, as distinct from depth charge detonations. A few minutes later, seagulls were observed circling a patch of ocean and *Skeena* lowered a boat to find that the birds were breakfasting on human remains floating on the surface. First score in the battle of ON 115 went to C-3 Group, which had just sunk *U-588*, a Type VII boat commanded by *Kapitänleutnant* Victor Vogel.

"Hearts of Oak are our Ships, Jolly Tars are Our Gals"
Led by Wren drummers Joan McMaster and Lorraine McAuley, members of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service march at their training establishment, HMCS **Conestoga** at Galt, Ontario. Although there were reservations on the part of conservative male officers, the WRCNS were an instant success and women sailors served at most major shore establishments, releasing men for sea duty.
(Photograph by G.A. Milne, courtesy National Archives of Canada, PA 107939)

The battle for ON 115, however, was just beginning. The five U-boats shadowing the convoy lost contact on 1 August, but the following day, -after Dönitz had positioned a dozen submarines into patrol lines off the coast of Newfoundland, they sighted it again. By this time C-3 Group was operating at reduced strength as the two destroyers were short of fuel and had to make for St. John's. *Wetaskiwin*, meanwhile, lost the convoy in heavy fog and not being equipped with radar that might have allowed her to find it, also sailed for Newfoundland. C-3 Group now consisted of only four corvettes with command vested in Lieutenant Commander B.D. Johnson, RCNR, of *Agassiz*, although late in the afternoon of 2 August reinforcements arrived in the form of two destroyers, HMS *Witch* and HMCS *Hamilton*. The captain of the *Witch* assumed command of the escort and, as darkness fell, deployed his six vessels around the convoy.

A few minutes after midnight two merchantmen, *Loch Katrine* and *G.S. Waldron*, were torpedoed and, losing way, fell out. *Agassiz* and *Hamilton* closed to take off survivors and were screened in this activity by *Sackville*. A few minutes later, *Sackville*, which possessed a SW1C set, secured a radar contact and, altering course to investigate, found a surfaced U-boat, which immediately dived. Lieutenant Alan Easton, RCNR, of *Sackville* attempted to ram with no success and then carried out what he thought was a very accurate depth charge attack with no apparent result. He was about to -order a second attack when one of his officers came to the bridge to tell him not to bother because, from his post at the stern of the corvette, this man had seen that:

The depth charge from the starboard thrower sank fifty feet and then exploded, as did the others. It must have touched the U-boat's after deck as it went off, for a moment later the bow of the U-boat broke surface a few feet astern. She rose up out of the water to an angle of about forty degrees exposing one-third of her long slender hull. Her momentum was still carrying her forward at right angles to our course. As she hung for an instant poised in this precarious position, a depth charge which had been dropped over the stern rail exploded immediately beneath her and she disappeared in a huge column of water.[4]

"She'll never surface again, sir," was the officer's conclusion on the matter. In actual fact, *U-43*, a Type IX commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Hans-Joachim Schwantke, had been heavily damaged but survived to limp back to its base at Brest.

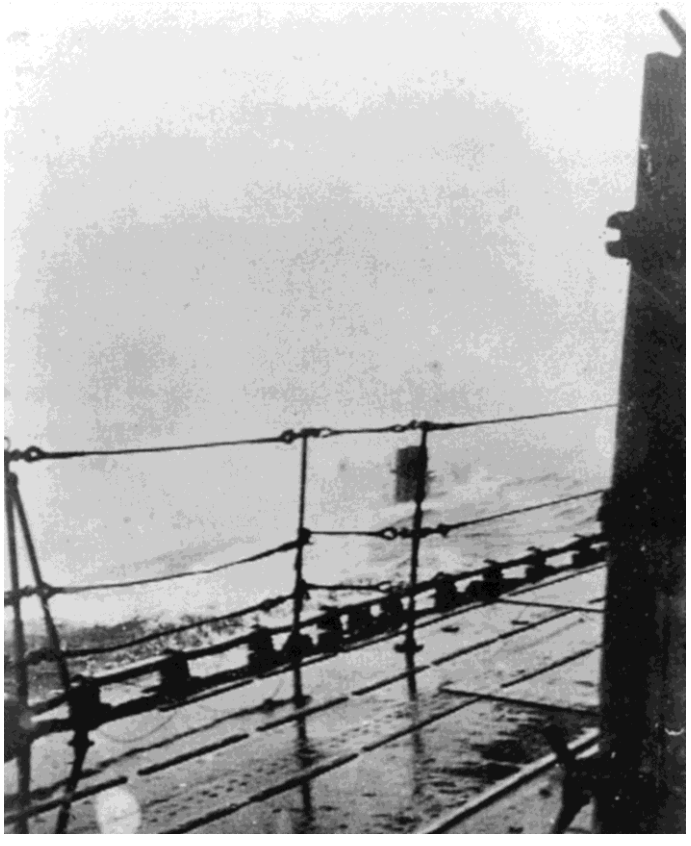
About three hours later, *Sackville* obtained a second radar contact – nothing short of a miracle given the unreliability of the SW1C – and set course toward it to sight a surfaced submarine on her beam. Easton altered course to ram, but the submarine dived in time to escape and he then carried out another depth charge attack. No ASDIC contact was made and, after spending a few hours in an unsuccessful search, *Sackville* rejoined the convoy. In doing so, she came upon the freighter *Belgian Soldier*, which had been torpedoed and abandoned by her crew. Easton sent a boarding party to the vessel, which found a survivor still on board, and then, leaving the stricken vessel low in the water, resumed her screening duties.

Pusser Rig
The gun crew of the corvette **Sackville** pose proudly by their 4-inch gun in "pusser rig," or best uniforms. Note the emblem on the gun shield. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

Working rig
Another gun, another gun crew, another corvette and this time the sailors are dressed in working rig for warm weather. There are splinter mats around the bridge structure for protection. Note the rails on the turret, used to fire illuminating rockets, and the perspex dome of the Type 271 radar, both of which indicate that this is a late war photograph. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

Heavy fog hampered the efforts of both escorts and attackers the next day, 3 August, but in mid-afternoon *Sackville*'s ASDIC operator used his equipment as a hydrophone and obtained a good contact. Easton altered course and, guided by his SW1C set which miraculously continued to -operate, saw a U-boat running on the surface. Once again, his attempts to ram were foiled but his 4-inch gun crew managed to put one round into the submarine's conning tower before it dived in the swirling fog.

Sackville's target was *U-552*, a Type VII boat commanded by *Kapitän-leutnant* Erich Topp. Topp had hit the *Belgian Soldier* and expended all but one of his torpedoes and that was the weapon stored in a pressure-resistant container on his submarine's upper deck. He surfaced in the fog and a working party undertook the laborious job of transferring the torpedo from the upper deck down a loading hatch to the forward torpedo room. They had just finished this task and Topp was resting in his bunk when *Sackville* arrived on the scene. As he recalled:



"Stand By to Ram!" U-210 as seen from HMCS Assiniboine, May 1942
On 6 May 1942, the destroyer HMCS **Assiniboine** (popularly known as "Bones") fought a gun duel with **U-210** after depth charge attacks brought it to the surface. This dramatic shot, taken from **Assiniboine**, shows her preparing to ram which was accordingly done, although the destroyer suffered severe damage in the process. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, *****)

… there was a shout on the bridge: Emergency! The alarm klaxon shrills out. I rush drowsily into the control room. The bridge watch keepers tumbled down onto me from the conning-tower hatch, one falling over the other. ……

What's up? …… A glance at the depth gauge shows that the boat is sinking slowly. The Engineer Officer rushes in and jumps to shut one of the vents. I see the horrified face of the warrant navigator, the last one tumbling down the ladder from the bridge. "Destroyer!" he yells.[5]

Unfortunately for Topp's crew, *U-552* had been damaged by *Sackville*'s fire and refused to submerge, causing them some anxious moments, but Topp's *Leutnant-ingenieur* finally got control of the situation and the boat descended to 178 metres.

Easton and *Sackville*, meanwhile, were joined by *Agassiz* and the two corvettes carried out an ASDIC search for the *U-552* but sonar conditions were made difficult by the presence of numerous shoals of fish and they were unable to re-acquire their target, and after two hours they gave up the chase. Easton was convinced he had sunk a U-boat although he was sure that the "true story would probably ever remain a mystery, to me at any rate, and my curiosity unsatisfied."[6] In fact, *Sackville*'s single 4-inch round had so badly damaged the air induction and exhaust pipes of *U-552* that Topp was forced to return to his base at Lorient. Topp was a lucky man – while crossing the Bay of Biscay, he was attacked by a British aircraft but escaped with only minor damage.*

**Topp survived the war as the fifth-ranking U-Boat commander in terms of tonnage sunk and later rose to flag rank in the post war German navy.*

The heavy fog which closed in around ON 115 on 3 August made it difficult for the U-boats and Dönitz called off the attack. Although C-3 Group had sunk one submarine and heavily damaged two more for the loss of three ships during the battle, there was some criticism of their tactics. Wallace's use of destroyer sweeps which resulted in fuel shortages was condemned by British but praised by American analysts, a reflection of differing tactical approaches in the two navies. What was clear was that crews of the warships in C-3 were becoming experienced and their defence of the convoy would have been enhanced if their ships had possessed some of the equipment in common service in the RN such as HF/DF. More importantly, Type 271 centimetric radar would have permitted *Sackville* to accurately locate surfaced submarines in the fog and manoeuvre into the best attacking position prior to visual contact. These deficiencies were noted in the post-action reports but little was done about the problem.

"There was no doubt we had sunk one:" Convoy SC 94, August

At the time *Sackville* and the escorts of ON 115 were battling U-boats in heavy fog, Convoy SC 94, 36 merchant ships, was outward bound for Britain. Escort was provided by C-1 Group consisting of the destroyer HMCS *Assiniboine*, the Canadian corvettes *Battleford*, *Chilliwack* and *Orillia*, and the British corvettes *Dianthus*, *Nasturtium* and *Primrose*, with the Senior Officer being Lieutenant Commander A. Ayer, RNR, of *Primrose*. For the first few days of its voyage, SC 94 was hampered by bad weather and heavy fog which prevented air cover from Newfoundland. It was sighted on 5 August by *U-593*, which reported its position and course and immediately attacked, sinking one merchant ship, but was driven off by the escort. On the next day, 7 August, however, the escorts were very busy investigating multiple radar contacts on all sides of the convoy.

It was during one of these investigations that *Assiniboine* (known in the RCN as "Bones") got a contact on her Type 286 radar and making toward it, came out of a patch of mist to see the Type VII boat *U-210* moving on the surface. As one of the destroyer's officers, Lieutenant R.L. Hennessy, RCN, remembered, the submarine "suddenly swam out of the mist" and "then everyone says, 'Whoops!' and starts pushing buttons and firing guns."[7] *Assiniboine*'s captain, Lieutenant Commander J.H. Stubbs, RCN, accelerated to full speed with the intention of ramming his opponent but the U-boat's commander, *Kapitän-leutnant* Rudolf Lemcke, -realizing he did not have enough time to dive, opted to fight it out on the surface and manned his deck guns. *Assiniboine* was too close to use her main guns and so, for nearly half an hour, the two vessels exchanged -automatic weapons fire from their anti-aircraft armament as they moved in and out of patches of mist. Lieutenant Hennessy recalled that the U‑boat's 20mm guns

> *did a lot of damage around our bridge and set a fire at the back of the bridge, where we had our upper-deck gasoline storage. It was hit and of course started a big fire. The submarine never fired a round out of her main armament. A couple of times, when they tried to get a crew up [to the deck gun], our own boys just shot them off with the half-inch [.50 calibre] machine-gun. That kept the German's heads down.*[8]

Assiniboine's captain later reported that "we were so close that I could make out the Commanding Officer [Lemcke] on the conning tower bending down occasionally to pass wheel orders."[9]

Lemcke managed to avoid three or four ramming attempts and was just about to dive when Stubbs hit the U-boat aft of the conning tower, damaging it so severely that it could not submerge, and circled around to find the enemy still on the surface and firing. *Assiniboine* therefore rammed it again and, for good measure, fired a pattern of depth charges over her stern rail before putting several rounds from her 4.7 inch guns into the conning tower which killed the determined Lemcke. This took the fight out of the crew of *U-210* and they abandoned their sinking vessel – 38 prisoners were hauled out of the

water. *Assiniboine* suffered one man killed and 13 wounded in the engagement but, with her bow heavily damaged, had to leave for Newfoundland. As one of her crew later commented, everyone on board had behaved well including the destroyer's mascots – her puppy "lay at its moorings throughout the tumult with every hair in place" while the cat "being a cat, found a comfortable hide-out within the vitals of the ship."[10] Lieutenant Hennessy remembered it this way – it "was one time there was no doubt that we had sunk one."[11]

Good Shooting -- Damage on HMCS Assiniboine, 1942
On 6 May 1942, the destroyer HMCS **Assiniboine** engaged in a running surface battle with **U-210** which ended when the Canadian vessel rammed her opponent. The German U-boat gunners were good shots as this photograph of **Assiniboine**'s A turret testifies. One round penetrated the hatch, which was open during the action and made an indentation in the corner of the turret. A second round went through a small service hatch and entered the interior, leaving the square hole on the right. (Courtesy, Directorate of History and Heritage, DND, DHH NF 778)

Although the escorts of SC 94 were busy during the remainder of 7 and 8 August investigating evasive ASDIC and radar contacts, there was no further action until the early afternoon of the latter day when two U-boats launched a submerged attack firing spreads of torpedoes. Five merchantmen were hit and the explosions from one stricken ship, SS *Kaimoku*, were so powerful that they frightened the crews of three other merchant vessels into abandoning their vessels. Two of the crews re-boarded but the third refused, and their ship, *Redchurch*, dropped astern of the convoy to be sunk later by a U-boat. SC 94 had now lost seven merchant ships although the score was evened somewhat around midnight when HMS *Dianthus* engaged *U-379* with depth charges, blew it to the surface and sank it by ramming. By now, however, no less than 18 German submarines were in contact.

Fortunately, on 9 August 1942, SC 94 came within range of aircraft operating from Iceland and the escort was strengthened by three British destroyers, two of them equipped with HF/DF. Late in the morning of that day, two U-boats carried out a submerged attack from a position ahead of the convoy, firing spreads of torpedoes that sank four merchant ships but this was the last casualty the convoy suffered as air patrols forced the Germans to

break contact. The loss of 11 merchantmen in return for two U‑boats was regarded by some Allied commentators as an acceptable rate of exchange -although the enemy's use of submerged attacks, in contrast to the previous favoured tactic of surface attacks, did not bode well. Dönitz, on the other hand, noting that many of the submarine commanders involved were relatively inexperienced, was satisfied with the results.