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*On the Battle of the Atlantic*

The stakes for which the Battle of the Atlantic was fought were nothing short of the continued survival of the British nation, the last major free outpost of resistance in Europe; had the Germans managed to sever the vital supply link between Britain and the outside world, Britain would have had no choice but to surrender, cementing Hitler’s grip over a staggeringly huge portion of the world. Though it is impossible to say what effect the fall of Britain would have had on the eventual outcome of World War II, it is more than reasonable to argue, as Captain Stephen Roskill does in *White Ensign*, that “ the repercussions would without doubt, have been tremendous,” (262). Over the course of the conflict, the degree to which Britain found itself imperiled fluctuated for myriad reasons, but at every point along the way until the close in spring 1943, the eventual outcome was uncertain. From the start, the Royal Navy and its allies found themselves playing a never-ending game of catch-up with the German navy, be it in point of technology, numbers, or tactics. It is truly a testament to the men of the Royal Navy and the allied command that the battle was won after such an arduous fight against what seemed to be an enemy with limitless reserves.

At the outset of the Battle of the Atlantic, the British suffered from several major disadvantages which they strove to correct over the next three and a half years. First, search and destroy tactics took precedence over convoy and escort tactics. Such tactics had been proven ineffective against a force comprised primarily of U-boats during World War I, yet for some reason the lessons of history were neglected, as in the case of the fleet carrier *Courageous* which was destroyed while engaged in submarine hunting. Eventually, unrestricted submarine warfare on the part of the Germans “eliminated the last doubts regarding the need to introduce convoy,” (45). Second, the bases the British had access to early on in the war severely limited the range of outbound convoys. Instead of being able to base convoys out of bases in Eire as they would have in 1938, they had given up their rights to use those bases and were forced to stage operations out of Plymouth and other comparatively eastern bases, reducing the range that they could convoy ships to approximately 200 miles west of Ireland, nowhere near to seeing them clear across the Atlantic. Third, ASWACs (Anti-Submarine Warfare Aircraft) did not have a viable AS weapon until 1941 when the widespread distribution of depth charges deployable by air came into service, and the initial distribution of AA and ASW weaponry on surface ships was extremely limited. This naturally restricted Britain’s ability to defend shipping against German attack, leaving them at a distinct disadvantage. The British were also at a significant technological disadvantage as well, for instance British minesweepers were not capable of sweeping German ‘influence type’ mines until after 1939.

Following the occupation of the French coast by Germany, convoys needed to be brought in by the North Channel, rather than south of Ireland; new convoys were needed that could be routed to the north of Scotland, and channel convoys needed to be very heavily protected. Sadly, despite the significant and growing threat to British shipping, convoying had not yet become a sufficient priority for the British to allocate adequate ships in anything like adequate numbers to the task. Furthermore, British ASW tactics and technology were not adapted to fighting surfaced ships, so the U-boat “aces,” who specialized in surface-to-surface commerce raiding, enjoyed a significant advantage early on as the British raced to adapt. Even as convoying became more commonplace, German U-boats had a significant ‘coverage gap’ in the North Atlantic in which they were able to operate outside of the range of convoy escorts. Fortunately for the British, German U-boat production had not yet become a priority for the German navy, which allowed the British time to build up their forces before the true onslaught began. Early attacks were by individual U-boats, and the number of U-boats actually operating in the North Atlantic at any time was limited.

In September 1940, the British received 50 American destroyers and an influx of newly constructed British ships. This allowed the numerical strength of the rudimentary escort groups currently in service to be increased. During this early building phase, British naval command also took steps to organize and train permanent escort groups, as well as to establish ASW training bases for those groups and to establish closer ties with the Royal Air Force, “which was to make the decisive contribution to victory in the Atlantic Battle,” (94). As British convoy tactics began to improve as a result of training and practice, night attacks from German forces became increasingly common, and the British were forced to develop new tactics to counter this new development. Convoy and escort efforts begin to pay off significantly in March 1941 with the destruction of U. 70, U. 47, U.99, and U. 100, amounting to one-fifth of the German submarine fleet. Perhaps more importantly, along with the destroyed boats, Prien, Kretschmer, and Schepke, the last of the U-boat aces under Dönitz’ command were killed or captured. This marked the end of individual U-boats engaging in attacks of opportunity and the beginning of the shift to ‘wolf-pack’ tactics. In light of the heavy losses suffered by HX 126 at the hands of a wolf-pack in May 1941 and the growing number of available escort vessels, the Admiralty, with the help of the Canadian Navy, instituted a policy of providing continuous escort for convoys returning across the Atlantic. As part of this effort, advance bases were established in Greenland which trimmed a significant portion of the ‘air gap’ that the U-boats were able to operate without fear of air cover, however there still remained an 800 mile area which could not be patrolled from the air.

The destruction of the giant German battleship *Bismarck*, which had moved into the Atlantic with the intent of bringing overwhelming force to bear on the convoys, led the Admiralty to move in force against German supply ships capable of supporting a surface fleet in the North Atlantic, the loss of which, “greatly shortened the time that [U-boats and disguised raiders] could remain at sea, and seriously dislocated all the enemy’s plans for the prosecution of…our merchant shipping,” (139) as well as putting an effective end to the use of large surface ships by the Germans in the Atlantic theater. In late 1941, the Americans begin escorting convoys to and fro between the east coast and the Mid-Ocean Meeting Point at 22°, providing long-range air support to bases in Newfoundland (further reducing the ‘air gap’), and dispatching surface ships to reinforce the patrol groups stationed off Iceland. As a result of the increasingly powerful presence of escort ships in the Atlantic and victories in Africa and Italy, Hitler was forced to redeploy a significant portion of his U-boat force to the Mediterranean theater, which resulted in a corresponding lull in German commerce raiding in the Atlantic. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Americans diverted a large number of ships from the convoy effort in the Atlantic in order to reinforce the war effort in the Pacific and protect against the U-boat attacks of “Operation Roll on the Drums” directed at the practically undefended shipping off the east coast.

By July 1942, the U-boat assault had been renewed in the North Atlantic, and the toll that their operations had exacted to that point made it obvious to the Admiralty “that if such an unfavourable [sic] “exchange rate” continued, [the British] would be brought face to face with disaster within a comparatively short time,” (195). In order to prevent this, the Admiralty called for the R.A.F. to take a more deeply involved role in the air effort over the Atlantic. This call to action was met with significant resistance by the Air Ministry, as it would require planes to be shuffled out of squadrons bombing German positions and into the Coastal Command instead. As a result, the transition of planes to the Coastal Command was very slow, and it was almost a year before the new air strategy began to have any real effect. At around the same time, the Americans and British divided the Atlantic into two “strategic areas” divided by a “Change of Operational Control” or “Chop” line, creating “the full partnership in the Atlantic which was to last until the end of the war,” (196).

In September 1942, the first of the highly trained escort “Support Groups” was deployed to the Atlantic, equipped with 10cm radar and heavier, more accurate ASW weaponry than had yet been applied to the U-boat problem. However, even in the face of new technology and new ships, the U-boats were still enjoying an overwhelming kill to death ratio in the less-adequately protected areas which Dönitz had discovered. On a more positive note, by the end of 1942, “the days of the disguised raider were plainly numbered. By putting most of [their] shipping into convoy [the British] had deprived them of easy targets, and by catching [the German] supply ships, [they] had severely limited their sea-keeping capacity,” (227). British convoying had effectively shifted the burden of commerce raiding in the Atlantic entirely to the shoulders of the U-boats.

As 1942 waned, it was apparent that the conflict was approaching its critical juncture. Both Hitler and the Allies had significant forces deployed in the Atlantic, and due to the depletion of British oil stockpiles, it was certain that if the British could not stave off the U-boat menace in short order, the Germans would succeed in their efforts to strangle British shipping, if for no other reason than that the British could not sustain their navy much longer at such a high pitch. On January 30th, 1943, Dönitz assumed control of the German Navy following Grand Admiral Raeder’s resignation after the sinking of the *Eckholdt* and the driving off of the *Hipper* by a significantly outgunned British force. Dönitz wasted no time. By early February, 100 U-boats were patrolling the Atlantic (37 of which were lying in wait in the ‘air gap’) playing havoc in the North Atlantic. During the course of the month of February alone, the U-boat patrols were responsible for sinking 360,000 tons of shipping. As Cpt. Roskill observes, “[t]he crisis was plainly upon us, and the Admiralty and Admiral Horton at once instituted far-reaching measures to meet it,” (271).

By March 1943, the plan to deploy special “Support Groups” to assist convoys in the North Atlantic was finally being enacted on a major scale. Unfortunately, this was not enough to halt U-boat operations altogether, and Dönitz took advantage of that fact. In March, Dönitz’ U-boats sunk an additional 627,000 tons of shipping, and it was at this point “that the enemy [came] ‘very near to disrupting communications between the New World and the Old,’” (274). In May, at what seemed like the last possible moment, the Support Groups began to have a measurable effect, reducing losses to half the number sustained in March. Then, on April 28th, Dönitz misinterpreted an intercepted Allied transmission and ordered his U-boats to remain surfaced while crossing the Bay of Biscay, an order which remained in force for a period of 94 days, during which time the newly bolstered Coastal Command was able to inflict massive losses. The Battle of the Atlantic finally drew to a close in May 1943. First, the 1st Support Group under Cmdr. G.M. Brewer brought about the resounding defeat of U. 192, U. 638, U. 125, U. 531, U. 438, and two others at the hands of the 1st Support Group on the 6th of May. Five days later, 5 more U-boats were destroyed by the 1st Support Group acting in conjunction with B7 Group under Vice Admiral Gretton and 120 Squadron (composed of newly obtained Liberator “Very Long-Range” aircraft based in Iceland under the control of the Coastal Command) on the 11th of May. Shortly thereafter, convoys HX 239, SC 130, and HX 239 arrived in Britain safe and sound. Dönitz had no choice but to withdraw his forces from the North Atlantic, as he had suffered “insupportable” losses totaling some 41 U-boats over the course of the month, almost half of the total number deployed in the Atlantic at the time. As Cpt. Roskill puts it, “it is absolutely plain that it was the escort and support groups, the few ‘Very Long-Range” aircraft of Coastal Command, and the tiny force of anti-submarine aircraft embarked in the escort carriers which won the victory,” (277).

Despite the fact that the British spent much of the Battle of the Atlantic at some kind of disadvantage with respect to the German naval presence, the resourcefulness and determination of the Allies in adapting to new challenges as they came proved to be of paramount importance in the end. The British made the best of what they had, and stuck to their guns even in the face of total collapse. Obviously, the technological and tactical developments which culminated in the battles of May 1943 were what finally tipped the scales in the Royal Navy’s favor, but all of that was only made possible by the steadfast determination of the Navy and its leaders to win out, even in the face of adversity.