

I WAS THERE




TO FACE
THE NIGHT OF
THE U-BOATS



When Hitler's Submarines Ruled
in World War II

PAUL LUND & HARRY LUDLAM



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Table of Contents

- [Dedication](#)
- [The Darkest Days](#)
- [The Admiral's Daughter](#)
- [A Ship Called 'Fritz'](#)
- [The Steaming Herd](#)
- [The Luck of the Lakers](#)
- [The First of the Hunters](#)
- [The Wolves Gather](#)
- [Don't Launch the Boats!](#)
- [The Night Explodes](#)
- [And Still the Slaughter](#)
- [The Bottomless Bluebell](#)
- [How Do You Feel, Captain?](#)
- [The Second Assault](#)
- [Last Ship to Die](#)
- [Your Sixpences, Please](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)

Dedication

SC7 was one of many convoys to sail the North Atlantic.

*This book is written to the memory of them all,
and the men who sailed and escorted them.*

The Darkest Days

October 1940. In this 14th month of the war with Germany, Britain stood alone with her back to the wall. After a winter of phoney war, the year had seen disaster after disaster: the withdrawal from Norway; the fall of Denmark, Holland and Belgium; the evacuation from Dunkirk and the capitulation of France, followed by Mussolini's entry into the war on the side of Hitler. Day by day, the rolling tide of Nazism had spread over the newspaper maps of Europe like some great black evil blot.

Young men had gone fresh to Norway and France and returned as veterans, disillusioned, though not beaten. The carefree notes of the popular song 'We're Going to Hang Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line' had gone sour.

Now, the imminent invasion of England by the German army seemed inevitable.

The first enemy onslaught in the skies had been beaten off gloriously by the RAF in the Battle of Britain. But every night now, up to 1,000 German bombers at a time were coming. On some nights in London, bombs fell every few minutes, and the sky raged red from the glare of burning buildings. Stabbing fingers of criss-crossing searchlights sought the high-flying bombers. As well as their deep drone, there was the *thump-thump-thump* of anti-aircraft guns and the whistle of bombs, as a cacophony of explosions, alarms and cries, and shrapnel filled the streets.

At this time of crisis, people anxiously scanned the newspapers and listened for the news on the BBC's sturdy reliable voice in a tumbling world. Grim communiqués filled the gaps between such reassuring programmes as *Hi Gang*, *Thanking Yew!* and Sandy Macpherson at the organ. Days of *Music While You Work* were countered by nights of misery, death and stubborn heroism. The great bombing blitz began in September, and by the end of that month, 17,000 men, women and children had been killed or seriously injured in the savage air raids. In an even bleaker October, the casualty numbers continued to rise.

Above it all hung the dark cloud of imminent invasion, despite the constant hammering of enemy Channel ports by the RAF. Churchill frankly admitted to the nation that Germany had ships and barges ready to transport an army of half a million men to the beaches of Britain – if they could make the crossing. 'We are waiting,' he said, pugnaciously. 'So are the fishes.'

Also waiting were 1,000 British fighting ships of all descriptions, some 300 of which were always at sea on anti-invasion patrol. Many of these ships had been withdrawn from duties in the Atlantic and the Western Approaches for the emergency, with the consequence that convoys crossing to Britain from Canada were desperately short of escorts for the ocean voyage. The warships that sailed out to meet the convoys and bring them safely home were also severely depleted.

Losses of merchant ships had risen alarmingly as the rampaging U-boats grew in numbers and daring. Since June 1940, the losses had multiplied, until in September, U-boats sank 59 ships of 295,335 tons, most of these off the northern coast of Ireland, well named the Bloody Foreland.

It was now the blackest period of the sea war, the zenith of four months' slaughter that the U-boat commanders were to look back on as 'the happy time'.

At first, only fast convoys had sailed homeward across the Atlantic from Halifax, Nova Scotia. These HX convoys were made up of ships capable of maintaining a steady 8 or 9 knots. But to increase the flow of supplies across the ocean lifeline and to make use of slower ships, a second type of convoy was begun. These were the SC convoys, which sailed from Sydney, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. The plan was to sail these convoys of old, slow, cargo vessels during the good summer weather, taking 16 days to complete the passage at a laborious 6 or 7 knots. But the urgency of the situation demanded that these ships had, for the first time, to risk the hard and turbulent waters of the North Atlantic in

winter. A special light loading line was drawn at the base of the loading marks on their sides: WNA which stood for for 'Winter North Atlantic'. Into the teeth of winter they sailed.

SC7, the seventh of the slow convoys, sailed from Sydney, Cape Breton, at 12 noon on 5 October 1940. It was a convoy of 35 ancient ships carrying vital but mundane cargoes of timber, grain, steel, scrap and iron ore. It was nothing special. It might have lost one ship or maybe a few, then won through to home waters and been quickly forgotten, just another convoy among the hundreds. But it did not happen that way. SC7 sailed into history as the victim of one of the biggest and most painful surprises sprung by the Germans in the war at sea.

This is the story of convoy SC7, and the men who were there.

The Admiral's Daughter



In the skies above America, a pretty little blue and red aeroplane was flying firmly on course for Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1,000 miles away. Inside were two young mothers: Mary King, an experienced pilot and owner of the plane, and her passenger, Fynvola James, for whom this was only her second ever flight. They had one parachute between them.

It was 2 October 1940. Fynvola James had received a telegram containing the glad news that her father, a retired admiral and now back in service as a Commodore of convoys, would be able to see her at Halifax before leaving for Britain with his next convoy. In the grim, uncertain days following Dunkirk, she had sailed out to Cleveland with her three young children. Now, with her father and her husband, a naval commander in the Admiralty, both far away in the war, this brief chance to see her father was not to be missed. Mary King had seen to it that within hours they were airborne.

The Stinson light aeroplane flew due east at over 100 m.p.h., following the shore of Lake Erie, then on to Schenectady to land and fill up with 30 gallons of fuel to take them on to Portland, Maine, by nightfall. On they flew, over tree-covered hills in the full glory of autumn reds, yellows and oranges, and bright blue lakes that reflected the white clouds above. After an overnight stop at Portland, the Stinson took off at dawn for Bangor, the last airport inside the United States. There it landed on a bumpy runway and filled up with fuel to the brim for the non-stop flight to Halifax. The two women had been warned that with Canada at war they were not to land anywhere other than at their permitted destination.

There were no maps of Canada available in wartime, nor were there any radio weather reports or flight instructions. The plane's radio remained stubbornly silent to their every call, which was very disconcerting after the busy, friendly airwaves of neutral America and made the flight much more difficult. All Mary King had to navigate by was an ancient road map of very small scale, so as they flew on across wild, wooded country they hugged the one and only road for most of the time. This would have been their only hope of making a forced landing were the plane's single engine to fail them.

But it did not, and they successfully reached the port of Saint John, New Brunswick. Still without radio support, they circled round fruitlessly then headed east across the Bay of Fundy to Nova Scotia. They took this, the shortest and quickest route, instead of going north and swinging round to Halifax overland, because they were in a hurry. It was only a matter of hours before the Commodore was due to leave to join his convoy. But crossing the bay meant flying over 20 miles of open sea in their tiny plane. They held their breath, murmured a prayer and crossed their fingers.

They made it. Once they reached the far shore and resumed flying over land, the journey was easier. At noon they sighted Halifax harbour, but still with the radio eerily silent in spite of their repeated calls.

They were now at the end of their 1,000-mile trip. Looking down on the port where the ships gathered for the big convoys to Britain, they counted no fewer than 60 vessels waiting at anchor. But where was the airport? As the radio gave no help they looked again at the old road map. It indicated an airport on the north side of the harbour, and sure enough, on searching around they spotted what appeared to be

large, fine airport. They circled it once, then Mary King brought the Stinson gently down to land. Unbelieving eyes watched the little red plane taxi to a halt in the middle of the airfield, where great camouflaged bombers stood ready with their deadly loads. They had landed at the airfield of Eastern Air Command, Royal Canadian Air Force. Scarcely had the plane's wheels stopped before a plain clothes detective jumped in, shut the doors and windows and started to question the two women, while a Mountie stood guard outside. Crowds of curious airmen gathered round to see the plane and catch a glimpse of its two most unlikely occupants.

The plane had been silently tracked through the skies from the moment it had come wandering over the border, and had come very, very close to being shot down. Who were they, asked the detective, and where were their papers? The two spirited young women obediently handed over their documents. Everything had been planned for the flight and the necessary papers obtained from Washington as soon as Fynvola James had first heard by letter that her father would be coming to Halifax. Everything, they said, was in order.

But it was not. Some vital landing permits were missing, and Mary King realised, too late, that Washington had neglected to send them to her.

Now the questions came thick and fast. They were going to meet father? Who was father? Vice-Admiral Lachlan Donald Ian MacKinnon CB CVO. Where was he? Oh, er, he must be waiting at the civil airport. After a flurry of telephone calls, the little plane was taken away and locked up, and the two 'suspects' driven from the airport under police escort.

Fynvola James was eventually reunited with her father under circumstances that neither they nor the Royal Canadian Air Force were ever likely to forget. Fortunately the admiral's departure had been postponed by one day, so that he was able to accompany the two women as they went from office to office, swearing in triplicate who they were and answering a battery of official questions, while the authorities checked with Washington, and delighted newspaper reporters jostled for the story of the saucy flight. What a gift for the front page to relieve the gloomy news from the old country.

Even after the admiral had gone it still took his daughter and her friend another 24 hours to get things sorted out to the satisfaction of every official. Then, with smiles all round, the Stinson aeroplane, considerably polished until it shone, was released from its locked hangar and filled up with fuel. Fynvola James and Mary King climbed back in their 1,000-mile journey back to Cleveland, armed with navigation papers kindly provided. The airmen stood around and waved, and waved... but the plane did not move. Mary King had carefully put the main switch in a safe place and now could not find it. There followed a minute or two of deep embarrassment while everyone took a turn at searching the plane, then the switch was found. The Stinson took off, circled and vanished into the sky, and the Royal Canadian Air Force shook its head in wonderment and went back to war.

Admiral MacKinnon, meanwhile, saw the funny side of the affair in spite of all the fuss and bother. He was last seen by his daughter walking away, carrying a light suitcase containing all his personal belongings, as he headed off to catch a train to Sydney, Cape Breton, to take up his next convoy. Lachlan MacKinnon was the son of a parson. He had joined the Royal Navy as a 13-year-old cadet in the days of Queen Victoria. Now 57 and with greying hair, he had an eventful career to look back on. The First World War had seen him as gunnery officer of HMS Indomitable at the Battle of Jutland. This service earned him a special promotion and he went on to become the first commander of the proud new battle cruiser HMS *Hood*.

MacKinnon was always a man of the big ships, and always zealously on top of his job, whether as captain of a cruiser in the China Seas or, in later years, as a rear-admiral commanding the 2nd Battle Squadron, Home Fleet. He was awarded a multitude of honours, including the CVO for organising the King George V Jubilee review of the fleet in 1935. A lesser known but especially pleasing honour was the result of his service as an instructor to the Turkish Navy when a young lieutenant. The Turks

dubbed him 'Mac Kinnon Bey'.

MacKinnon was not a tall man, but he bore himself very erect and was a stickler for deportment. He could not abide to see a man with his hands in his pockets. He was a disciplinarian and liked to see things done just right. But he also had a zest for living, coupled with a deep sense of humour. He enjoyed lively company, and as a senior officer in the big ships was able to indulge in and organise the social round. Although used to having officers and men jump to his every need and command – and quietly enjoying the attention – he was extremely popular. He was a Navy man through and through, but possessed of a vivid personality that was not bound by the gold braid.

There had been a threat of war at the time of the Munich crisis in 1938. Had it become a reality, Admiral Lachlan MacKinnon was commanding the 2nd Battle Squadron and would have jumped straight into an important active service command. Instead, the threat of hostilities receded, and the following January, after 42 years in the Navy, he retired. When war came after all, only months later, he was quickly back to volunteer his services. But his situation had changed, and he was offered a post as Commodore of Convoys.

There could hardly have been a greater contrast with his past career. The commodore of a Convoy sailed in one of the merchant ships and was responsible for keeping the merchantmen in formation, passing them signals for altering course, zigzagging and other evasive manoeuvres, and generally keeping some order among the flock, working in liaison with the senior escorting warship. The commodore's 'flagship' could vary from a substantial cargo liner to a dirty old tramp, and his staff was never more than a handful of naval signalmen.

This was a far cry from MacKinnon's previous military career, but he gave the job his all, as did so many another retired senior naval or merchant officers of the Royal Naval Reserve who took on this onerous job. Though the standard of signalling among the merchant ships was enough to try the patience of a saint – to say nothing of their station keeping! – MacKinnon adapted to the job with a keenness and level temper that brought good results.

Only once in several convoys was he known to air a mild complaint: about the master of his 'flagship' whose bilious delight it had been to stuff himself with steak and cabbage for breakfast every day. Long before Commodore MacKinnon caught the train for Sydney, the ships that were to form convoy SC7 had been loading their cargoes in readiness for the homeward passage. Some went to ports of the United States for their loads: New Orleans in the south for grain and aluminium ore; Baltimore in the north for strip-steel, pig-iron and scrap. Some of these vessels then continued on to New York to top up their cargoes with more loads of food, pitprops, railway lines and scrap.

It was hardly a wildly exciting cargo: a load of junk iron and steel dumped aboard by a giant magnetic grab; but it was precious enough. As some United States Army ordnance officers had worked out very precisely, from every ton of American scrap iron, Britain could manufacture either one 75 mm field gun, 12 machine guns, one 16 in battleship piercing shell, or nine 500 lb bombs. Then all they had to do was to get those precious tons across the U-boat infested Atlantic.

However, the great majority of ships destined for SC7 went to load up at Canadian ports, some so small and outlandish that ships' captains had never heard of them and had to call in at other ports first to ask the way. But it wasn't long before vessels were busy taking aboard their cargoes at various points in an area stretching high up the eastern coast of Canada.

Some ships loaded up at Saint John, the familiar chief port of New Brunswick, on the Bay of Fundy. Here they took on timber, copper ore, steel, grain and trucks. Others went up to Campbellton, the hunting, fishing and lumber centre, to take on a full cargo of rough-sawn planks of varying lengths. Still other journeyed even further north to Gaspé, on the Gulf of St Lawrence. Here the locals came down to watch as great bundles of pitprops were swung aboard. The winches worked in pairs, one doing the lifting and the other the swinging of the cargo. Once the holds were filled, additional logs

were stacked on top of the steel decks of the steamers, like thousands of giant matchsticks. Some vessels had to make the journey into the St Lawrence river itself, up past Anticosti Island. They were often accompanied on their way by great schools of whales, leaping spectacularly from the water before plunging deep out of sight, and all just a stone's throw from the ships. One of the busy river loading ports was Quebec, city of a million lights spread out on both sides of the river. Another was Rimouski, the pilot station of the St Lawrence. Here pitprops rushed down the hillside in long troughs into which local streams were diverted high up the slopes. After their spectacular flume ride, the logs were cut up into shorter lengths at sawmills in the valley, amid puffs of white steam and screaming industrial noise that could be heard for miles around.

Farther up the St Lawrence at Three Rivers, ships loading grain anchored alongside a gigantic grain elevator served by cylindrical storage buildings more than 200 ft high. A discharge tunnel ran down to the quayside and from which came four large pipes that swung out over the holds of the ship to be loaded. A huge torrent of grain would start pouring in a dusty golden cascade into four holds at once, to the accompaniment of a distinctive hissing. The dust this operation stirred up settling over the ship like grimy snow.

Ships also came to Three Rivers to load steel and timber, including the *Beatus* and the *Fiscus*. These huge steamships, each of nearly 5,000 gross tons, were built in the 1920s and hailed from Cardiff, where they were among the best kept ships in and out of that port. Each was fine floating advertisement for her owners, the Tempus Shipping Company.

Captain Wilfred Brett took the *Beatus* into Three Rivers for a load of oblong steel ingots weighing 5 tons each. Once these were safely stored down in the lower holds, a load of timber was lain on top, piled 12 ft high on deck. The cargo for the *Fiscus*, on the other hand, was composed almost entirely of the steel ingots, with a number of large crates containing aircraft repaired in Canada for return to the UK. Captain Ebenezer Williams, master of the *Fiscus*, looked on with sad eyes as the two ships were loading. With much feeling, he observed, 'I wish I had your cargo instead of mine.'

Captain Williams did not seem his usual self. At 48, he was nine years older than Captain Brett of the *Beatus* and had done his turn at sea during the First World War. Never a talkative man at the best of times, he now seemed full of the gloomiest forebodings. He was due for leave on his return to the UK but seemed convinced that he would never see his home in Anglesey again. He confided these fears to other masters, too, and would not be consoled. In truth, there was not much they could say. It was common knowledge that a ship loaded with steel could sink like a stone, so the best encouragement he was offered was to have faith in God and the convoy.

Far to the north, round the eastern hump of Canada on the coast of Labrador, other ships steamed in to collect their cargoes of timber, two which found their way to the little-known port of Francis Harbour at the mouth of the Alexis river. The *Scoresby* and the *Clintonia* were smaller and older ships, the *Clintonia* having braved the assaults of U-boats in the last war. Francis Harbour had little to recommend it. There was hardly anything there except the church of St Francis after which it was named.

For the *Scoresby*, the load was 1,586 fathoms of pitprops slung. Many of these had been heaved up straight from the river where they lay after spilling out from a ship that had come to grief on rocks near the coast. The props had been secured by chains on to rafts that were brought alongside the *Scoresby* and then winched aboard in slings. Then they were stowed below and on the decks: everywhere, in fact, including the cross-bunker hatch. This meant that the only way to see the horizon was to climb a makeshift ladder outside the crew quarters aft, the apprentices' quarters for'ard or the saloon entrance, and clamber on top of the cargo. But despite being so well loaded, the *Scoresby*, and others like her, was not laden to danger point, and had to take in water ballast to counter top weight for seaworthiness for a normal sea journey.

The *Clintonia*'s load was pulpwood, also fished straight out of the water. The pulpwood floated at an anchorage in the sea near the beach, enclosed by big booms, from where it was towed out to the ship and winched into her holds.

And so it went on.

The ships that were to join SC7 took on their loads at a dozen different ports. There were not only British ships, but also those that had either been taken over by the Ministry of War Transport after the collapse of their home countries, or that came from countries that were still neutral but chose to sail in a British convoy rather than cross the Atlantic alone. Neutrals were always offered this choice, and the majority wisely decided that there was more safety in numbers. Hitler had yet to make his stormy declaration: 'Every ship, with or without convoy, which appears before our torpedo tubes is going to be torpedoed.' Nevertheless, in complete disregard of international law, U-boats had been doing just that for months, regularly sinking neutral as well as Allied merchant shipping round the coasts of Britain. Huge national flags painted on the sides of a neutral vessel never stayed the passage of a death-dealing torpedo.

One of three Swedish ships destined for SC7, the small vessel 1,500-ton *Gunborg*, was outside the enemy blockade when the Germans swarmed across Norway. Like so many vessels, she had been chartered by the British authorities, but her arrival at St John's, Newfoundland, to pick up a cargo of pulpwood was of fateful importance to one young Swedish seaman, Sture Mattsson.

At just 16 years old, Sture Mattsson was still recovering from the shock of having his ship go down beneath him on the voyage across to Canada. He had come out in convoy in a Swedish ship that was torpedoed and sank in two and a half minutes, with the loss of many of his shipmates. Young Mattsson was among the survivors picked up by a British ship called the *Empire Soldier* and brought to St John's, where he had been for six weeks when the *Gunborg* called. He had lost all his possessions, but had been kitted out and told he could go home to Sweden by a Swedish ship sailing from New York to Petsamo, in Finland. This was a fine offer, and yet the lad could not bring himself to accept it. It had a lot to do with something he had heard the master of the *Empire Soldier* say. The master, Captain H. A. Lego, was an old man in his 70s, drawing a well-earned pension. One day Mattsson heard someone ask him why, at his time of life, he should still be at sea, to which Captain Lego quietly replied, 'If there is something I can do for old England, this I want to do before I die.'

It was a modest remark that made a profound impression on the young Swede, as did another incident involving the old captain. When the *Empire Soldier* picked up Mattsson and the other survivors, her crew threw a wooden-runged rope ladder over the side for them to climb up. But the ladder struck the wife of the Swedish ship's engineer, splitting open her head. Calmly, Captain Lego set to and expertly sewed up the wound. It was a fine piece of work that earned the congratulations of doctors at St John's. Sture Mattsson chewed it all over, then went over to the anchored *Gunborg*, which was bound for the Clyde, and found they needed an able seaman. His friends all advised him to take passage home to Sweden, but he firmly did not heed them. He shouldered his seabag, collected his pet dog and stepped aboard the ship due to sail with SC7.

The first of the motley ships of SC7 began to arrive shortly after the departure of convoy SC6, on 27 September.

Back home, Britain was used to the blackout, but Sydney wore its lights at night, and an intermittent heavy glare came from a point on shore near the steelworks, where white-hot slag was tipped at the water's edge. Some ships of the SC convoys took on their loads of steel at Sydney and went on to top up with timber elsewhere, then return.

It was no hardship to leave Sydney. It was unprepossessing place, and the seamen who went ashore found only a ramshackle main street of wooden houses where they could wait for a bus into the shantytown itself, which boasted only a few substantial brick buildings. But they weren't there for the sights

The best thing about Sydney was that it was the last stop on the way home. When the weather turned warm, some seamen were tempted over the side for swim. But despite the sun, the depth of the water made it icy cold and they soon clambered out again. In the depths of winter, the harbour iced over and the pack-ice was so solid that the locals drove their cars over it. Shame, really, because a swim would have been most welcome after the business of coaling up. Ship bunkered at the coaling station of St Pierre across the bay, where trucks ran out to supply the chutes from great wooden towers. Coal was spilled all over the decks, and a fine black dust invaded the whole ship and literally got up everyone's nose. It was a mercy if it rained.

After a hard day's work, the crews ventured ashore in search of fun, but the best that was on offer was a dancehall where strong men in lumber jackets swung girls around in the air in true lumber-camp style, while the band played nothing but variations of 'Blueberry Hill' all night.

As the ships earmarked for SC7 were entered in the official lists, the structure of the convoy began to take shape. There would be about 35 ships in all, half of them British, the rest comprising three Swedes, six Norwegians, four Greeks, a French tanker, two Dutch ships and one Danish. Several of the 'foreigners' were British built or formerly British owned.

'Old wrecks and barnacled tramps' was the laconic description unofficially applied to the greater part of the convoy, and it was not far from the truth. What the convoy papers did not show was that half the ships of SC7 were old vessels dating back to the First World War and some even to the turn of the century. The four venerable Greek ships, for instance, had sailed the oceans under a total of 10 different names, the oldest vessel among them having carried her first cargoes way back in 1906. But the Norwegians had the oldest ship of all. She was the small and ancient steam tanker the *Thoroy*, built way back in 1893! The *Thoroy* was a credit to her British builders, Armstrong Mitchell of Newcastle, who had constructed her in the pioneer years of tanker-building. Launched as the petroleum tanker the *Snowflake*, she had become a veteran of the high seas long before the Boer War began, and had sailed for 47 years under four different names and nationalities. She drew the admiration of other SC7 masters, mainly for the fact that she was still cheekily afloat.

At least two ships in the convoy should have sailed with the previous SG convoy, but to their shame had missed it. Two others had been directed to one of the fast HX convoys from Halifax, but had to drop out when found woefully incapable of keeping up the required speed. They were then shuttled off to join 'the slow buggers' at Sydney. There were no illusions about the vessels sailing in the SC convoys, least of all among naval control. As one senior officer admitted, ships were sailed from Sydney that would never have been given a seaworthy ticket during peacetime.

Among the British ships of SC7 was one that had actually lain under water for some time. Several vessels had been resurrected from rusting graves pegged out for them during the great shipping depression of the 1930s, and this was especially true of the tramp steamers. In normal times, these vessels had no fixed routes, but touted their way around the seas from one port to another, available to any merchant who could provide a cargo, lifting cheap and handy bulk loads, such as they were now carrying for war. The Depression had laid up hundreds of tramps and other cargo vessels to idle away their days at desolate moorings until, in December 1939, the Ministry of War Transport began requisitioning them. Overnight, almost any vessel that could still ride the water became vital to the country's war effort.

Such a ship saved from a rusting eternity was the *Corinthic* from Hull. She had been laid up for years in the river Fal in Cornwall, which, during the Depression, had held as many as 80 unwanted ships, a never-ending line of silent, ghostly vessels inhabited only by nightwatchmen. On her earlier voyage out to the United States, the *Corinthic* had arrived 12 days overdue, having spent many days quite motionless at sea, while her engineers sweated to repair various peculiar breakdowns. This was a hair-raising experience, as the crew knew that at any moment she could become the target of a scavenging

U-boat.

Now here she was, reporting for SC7 laden with another 8,000 tons of scrap and steel. This time, though, her crew were feeling quite swanky, for the heavy junk cargo was topped by a somewhat more respectable load of railway lines, plus a pile of strip-steel for plating aeroplanes. The *Corinthic's* fiercer master was Captain George Nesbitt from Hull, who had reason enough for not being very fond of Germans. When the First World War broke out, he had been in a British ship lying in a German port, and was promptly interned for the duration of that war. Captain Nesbitt was resolved that Hitler's war would not find him so easily removed from the fight.

Another British ship rescued from the scrapheap was the *Botusk*, from London. This unusual name was not the one with which she had started out in life. In common with other vessels, her name had been changed to give her the prefix 'BOT', standing for Board of Trade.

Meanwhile, the dubious honour of being the oldest British ship in the convoy was shared by two hard-worked vessels dating back to 1912. One was the *Creekirk*, now loaded with iron ore for Cardiff, and sailing under her third name since leaving the Glasgow shipyards. The other was the *Empire Brigade* which after an eventful career had been sold to Italian owners, but was now back in the fold, having been taken in prize by the Royal Navy on Italy's entry into the war and given her third, resoundingly English, name.

Among all this odd assortment of ships, however, the strangest by far were three British vessels from the Great Lakes of North America. All the other ships of SC7, even the smallest and rustiest old tramp, pitied the Lakers: 'Too bloody slow to get out of their own way!'

The Lake boats – never ships – were weird-looking vessels with a high bridge house set almost on the bow, and a funnel placed well aft, above the engines. With their long, flat midships in between, it was as if the people at each end of the vessel would never meet. Nor did they, except at mealtimes in the mess rooms aft. In the bow section lived the captain, his deck officers and crew, while back in the stern section lived the engineering staff and stewards. But it was all to a purpose in the Lakers' natural habitat, where the curious forward bridge house gave the captain maximum visibility when negotiating the narrow channels connecting the Great Lakes.

Even if the Germans did not pounce on these 'sweet water' vessels, the winter storms of the Atlantic must surely break their slender backs, thought the ocean seamen. But in fact all three boats, two of them less than 2,000 tons, had been built in Britain and sailed across the Atlantic to begin their life on the Lakes. Admittedly, this ocean voyage had been made in the best of weather conditions, in high summer, and they had not tasted salt water since, nor ever been intended to. Yet now, after long years spent carrying cargoes round the inland ports of the Great Lakes, here they were, facing the uncompromising Atlantic at the stormy time of year: and this with puny engines of around 100 horse power or less, compared with the 300-plus horse-power of the most elderly ocean freighter.

Masters and crews had been sent out from Britain to bring over the Lakers. It was to be a once-and-for-all crossing for the vessels, carrying timber cargo to help keep them afloat, because on reaching Britain they would be put to work round the coast, mainly as coal-carriers. But whether they could make the journey was another matter.

The unexpected antics of the first Lakers to attempt the passage, sailing in the calmer days of August with SC7, left the commodore of that convoy totally bemused: 'I had five Lake boats,' he said, 'which appeared to yaw 60 degrees each side of their course, but later I discovered that this is their method of advance if they think they are closing ahead.'

One of the five was so helpless she had to return to Sydney only hours after SC7 sailed, while another had to turn back the next day. The harassed commodore thought he would also have to write off the remaining three, but to his surprise they were still in sight next day and gradually took up their correct stations, though their steaming eccentricities continued throughout the voyage. Two other Lakers that

set out with SC4 in September found it difficult to keep pace with the convoy even in a smooth sea, and in rough seas later could hardly move. Yet to everyone's astonishment and delight they still won through. But it was now October, and how SC7's three Lakers would fare in this month's wild seas was anybody's guess.

This, then, was the motley collection of ships that Commodore Lachlan MacKinnon was to lead across the Atlantic. The British steamer the Assyrian was to be his 'flagship'.

So Commodore MacKinnon was on the train for Sydney. Meanwhile, the Assyrian's captain was ploughing his ship there along the east coast of Nova Scotia. Neither of them knew what they would meet, nor could they have had any idea of the arduous course that fate had in store for them.

A Ship Called 'Fritz'



The *Assyrian* was actually a vessel from the 'other side'. She had been built in Hamburg in 1914 as the *Fritz*, but at the end of the Kaiser's war she was handed over to Britain as a reparations ship. When the Ellerman and Papayanni Lines acquired her, they renamed her the *Assyrian*. But it was more than just her name that was changed.

The Germans had built the *Assyrian* as a diesel-engined motorship, one of the first of her kind ever to be put to sea. But on joining the Ellerman fleet she was very soon converted to a more conventional steamship. In the hard costing of a British cargo vessel, pared down to the smallest fractions of a penny, there was no room for newfangled diesels. For one thing it was difficult to get spares for the engines, and for another, they needed to be operated by 12 engineers! So out came the Sulzer diesels and in went the steam engines.

To save expense, it was decided to keep the *Assyrian's* original propeller shafting and propellers, even though this complicated matters by limiting the choice of suitable engines. Eventually, she was fitted with two trawler-type steam reciprocating triple-expansion engines. Old-fashioned and slower they might be, but infinitely more reliable.

So the *Assyrian* became a coal-fired twin-screw steamship, albeit it with at least one tangible reminder of her revolutionary origin. Her mainmast was still fitted with the running gear that had enabled her former German crew to hoist a sail whenever her experimental diesels became troublesome.

For the next 20 years, the *Assyrian* set out from her new home port of Liverpool to travel the oceans of the world on different trades, striving but never quite managing to achieve a 10-knot average for at least one voyage. In calm seas and light winds, she might be able to maintain 9 knots steaming flat out, but in heavy weather her progress was likely to be no more than 4 or 5 knots.

Having been requisitioned for war service, the *Assyrian* first worked in the Mediterranean, carrying general cargoes. Then when Italy came into the war, she was transferred to the Atlantic. She had no such refinements as a refrigerator, so any perishable food had to be carried in an ice box. This made feeding the crew difficult as the ice dwindled; but despite all her limitations, the *Assyrian* was a well-loved old tub.

Early in August 1940, she loaded up at Liverpool with a cargo for the West Indies. She had by now been fitted in the Barry Roads with a gun, an old four-pounder of 1914-18 vintage, set up on the after deck. Some of her crew went ashore for brief instruction on how to use it, but the first time they fired the gun it shook everything up both above and below her wooden decks, and – disaster! – broke the bottom of the ice box. Ah well, maybe it would cause bigger discomfort to the Germans. All hands eventually had some rudimentary training, so that in an emergency situation they could double as members of the gun crew.

Although based in Liverpool, the *Assyrian* had many men from Cheshire and North Wales in her crew of 39, as well as men from Bristol, Hull and Devon, and some Irishmen.

Her master was Irish. Captain Reginald Kearon was a youthful 35 years old and came from a large seafaring family in Arklow. Stocky and well built, with black wavy hair and a healthily ruddy clean-shaven face, he was a crisp professional mariner with a very likeable personality. Reg Kearon was respected and was respected by all hands. He did not pull rank and enjoyed mixing freely as 'one of the

lads'. His chief officer was Irish, too. John King came from Rush, in County Dublin. He was touching 60 and had served the shipping line for many years. Although to the younger elements in the ship's company he seemed a ripe old age, he lacked nothing in vigour and enthusiasm, and, like his captain, was popular with everyone. The other two deck officers, the second and third mates, were also well experienced men in their 30s and 40s, while at the other end of the age scale, the youngest crewman aboard was a cadet of 16.

It was to Captain Kearon's credit that he kept a happy ship. Most of the crew got on well and they all knew their job. One or two among them were men who had been forced by the great shipping slump to quit the sea and find a job ashore, but now war had called them back. One such man was Robert Stracy, the ship's quietly spoken radio officer. After being laid off during the slump, which rendered one in every four British seamen unemployed, Stracy took a shore post, but remained in the Merchant Navy Officers' War Reserve, and so was hurriedly recalled for service at the outbreak of war.

The *Assyrian's* fateful passage to SC7 began when she left Liverpool in August. Just five days out she lost her convoy and had to steam on alone south to Barbados. Happily she reached her destination without incident. Her next call was at Georgetown, British Guiana, where there came the opportunity for a touching interlude that became a poignant memory for Chief Officer John King.

King had a sister who was a nun in a convent far out in the wilds of Brazil whom he had not seen for 20 years. By pulling a few strings for a faithful employee, the ship's agent arranged that King be flown from Georgetown to a midway point several hours away to meet his sister, who had been flown to meet him. He was a very happy man when he returned to the ship two days later.

From Georgetown, the *Assyrian* steamed north through the Caribbean to New Orleans, to load up for her return voyage across the Atlantic. Grave news had reached them from home of hundreds of people dying nightly under the rain of enemy bombs as Britain faced an aerial invasion by the might of the German armies. In the light of this, it seemed strange for them to be sailing through the sunny Caribbean playing deck quoits to while away the hours, Captain Kearon joining in with everyone, cook, firemen and all. To some, in fact, it seemed altogether wrong to be idling their time away in this manner while their country was in such desperate straits and urgently in need of supplies. But the *Assyrian* was forging on to do her bit in the best way she could.

After loading up with grain and other cargo at New Orleans, she made ready for the long voyage home. She was ordered to join a convoy going north from Bermuda to New York, there to top up her cargo, but in spite of the willing work of her twin screws she was quite unable to keep up with the convoy's fast speed of 8 or 9 knots and had to drop out. Forced to plod alone on the long journey to New York, she ran into tumbling weather that through the vessel about so much that most of its crockery was smashed and they were left with barely enough cups to go round. Despite battling on, there was disappointment when she arrived at New York too late to catch another convoy sailing to Halifax on the next stage of the journey home.

However, she made it to Halifax, and her arrival there brought particular joy to three French naval men. They were billeted in the *Champlain*, a French ship that had lain for a long time in the Bedford Basin, her crew undecided which side to be on after the fall of France. The three men had finally opted to throw in their lot with the Free French, and were accepted for passage to the UK aboard the first available ship. So Lieutenant Gabriele André Sauvaget of Bordeaux, and ratings Oliver Paupon and Marcel le Meur, an exuberant trio, happily joined the ship for the last leg of her voyage to join SC7. This was a journey some 230 miles north-east along the coast of Nova Scotia to Sydney.

The *Assyrian* only just made it, arriving the day before the convoy was due to sail. But this was one convoy she would not – *could not* – lose, for to everyone's surprise they learned on arrival that they were to lead it. The old *Assyrian* was to be Commodore ship! Never in her 26 years had she known such an honour.

Down below, bespectacled William Venables looked over the engines on which he had lavished so much care during seven contented years as her Second Engineer. At only 2,962 tons, the *Assyrian* was one of the smallest British ships in the convoy, besides being one of the oldest. But she could do it; of course she could!

Commodore Lachlan MacKinnon boarded the *Assyrian* late that evening, together with his staff of five naval petty officers and ratings: a yeoman of signals, two telegraphists and two signalmen. He was to share the captain's cabin, while his staff were found accommodation in the ship's four passenger cabins, where the Frenchmen, too, were berthed.

Chief Steward James Daley went ashore by naval launch to order the essential provisions needed to make good the ship's depleted stores, including a much-needed crate of crockery! He was promised that the stores would be alongside by 10 a.m. the following morning, two hours before sailing time. Just before midnight, the big, dark shape of the last of the British ships destined for the convoy nosed its way into Sydney harbour. She was the 5,000-ton *Somersby*, a West Hartlepool vessel carrying a cargo of grain.

The next day, Saturday 5 October 1940, dawned clear and bright and a warm morning sun poured over the groups of anchored ships. But with everyone due to move out on the stroke of noon there was little time to enjoy the weather. Breakfasts were cut short as launches picked up the merchant masters and an accompanying officer, and took them ashore for the official convoy conference.

It was not a very long conference. The masters were given the by now usual pep talk about keeping good station according to their allotted numbers in the convoy, which would take the general formation of six columns of five or six ships each. They were urged to act smartly on the commodore's signalled instructions, and warned against lagging behind. The dire consequence of becoming a straggler was likely to be collecting a torpedo from a prowling U-boat.

As the Navy strove to ram home its advice, the masters digested it all impassively in that deceptively casual manner that had caused an earlier commodore to complain testily: 'Little notice was taken of points made by the officers speaking.' But there was another side to it. The SC briefings were by no means as well organised as the conferences at Halifax for the HX sailings, and it was still sorrowfully remembered how one SC Commodore had missed the conference altogether through being given the wrong orders.

The masters of SC7 learned that they were to have just one naval escort across the Atlantic, a little sloop smaller than the smallest tramp steamer among them. For the first two days, there would also be an armed yacht and an aerial escort, a seaplane, but these would then turn back. The convoy would be on its way with only the sloop for protection until they reached the Western Approaches. No amount of pep talking could make the one small warship seem any bigger, especially when considered against the limited, and in some cases ludicrous, armament of the merchant ships. Perhaps a dozen among them had an old four-incher or four-pounder mounted aft, two or three of these vessels having the added advantage of a Naval Reservist gunner to lead the merchant gun crew. But other ships had only a machine gun, or perhaps two, mounted on the bridge, while yet others had merely the odd rifle. The British *Carsbreck's* sole defensive weapon was a rifle in charge of the chief officer. The more fortunate *Beatus*, which boasted an old four-incher on the poop, had also possessed two rifles – until these were taken away for anti-invasion use.

So SC7 would have to sail on for 10 days until it reached the point of rendezvous. There, warships of the Western Approaches would come out to meet it and escort it in. With Hitler's big new ocean-going U-boats already reported to be ranging farther and farther west across the Atlantic, this seemed to be cutting it rather fine. But that's how it was.

A much more optimistic note was struck when Commodore MacKinnon, drawing calmly on his pipe, was introduced as one who had never lost a ship in convoy, and who had no intention of losing that

record. The masters liked what they saw: a fit, precise and clear-thinking man, obviously well on top of his job – even if he was a retired admiral.

And that was that. 'Best wishes for a safe passage, gentlemen.'

After the conference, most of the masters had a drink and a chat before returning to their ships. Captain Ebenezer Williams of the steel-laden *Fiscus* was still full of gloom. He had heard nothing in conference to alter his conviction that this was to be his last voyage and that doom was staring him in the face. Could it be the Welshman's aptitude for second sight that had given him this persistent, nagging premonition of disaster? It was going to need great effort for him to hide his feelings from his crew.

Meanwhile, aboard the *Assyrian*, Chief Steward Daley was a very worried man. Ten o'clock had come and gone, and there was still no sign of the promised stores. At 11 a.m., with the captain and commodore now returned to the ship, he was called to the lower bridge. Commodore MacKinnon demanded to know where in heaven the stores had got to. Daley told him of the assurance he had been given, but still the minutes ticked by and nothing arrived. At 12 noon, the naval escort sloop slipped out of harbour and the *Assyrian* was due to start leading the ships of the convoy. Daley was again summoned to the bridge. This time Commodore MacKinnon was pacing to and fro in exasperation. He was very displeased.

'Mr. Daley, can we proceed without the extra supplies?'

Daley quickly ran his mind's eye over the ship's reduced stores, now required to feed an extra nine mouths. Yes, he said, they could just about get through if they used, in rotation, fresh, canned and salted meats. Luckily, the ship had stored to capacity on canned meats at New Orleans, but bread was the big problem and the stock of flour would never last the journey. However, if they used part-bread and biscuits &

Ships around the *Assyrian* had now begun to move off. A naval launch hove into sight and the commodore took up a loud-hailer and cracked an order to its officer in charge. 'Take an urgent message ashore,' he said, grimly, 'that if this ship's stores are not alongside in 15 minutes, someone's head will roll!' The launch shot off at speed.

To the consternation of the chief steward, the *Assyrian* then started to get under way, the commodore determined to make up for precious minutes lost and sail the ship to schedule. But after an anxious interval there came a gladdening shout from one of the crew: 'Chief, the stores have come!'

In response to the commodore's fierce warning, a hurried flotilla of motorboats chugged alongside the slowly moving ship and into the welcoming arms of Daley and his staff sides of meat, bags of potato and flour, and a precious crate of crockery, were delivered, just in time before the *Assyrian* increased speed and steamed out of harbour to head the convoy.

The good weather continued throughout the afternoon, as the 35 ships ponderously took up their positions in the convoy formation, with the *Assyrian* at the head of the centre column and the escort sloop out in front, together with the armed yacht. Then, in the early evening, and unlike an earlier SC7 convoy that had taken no less than 29 frustrating hours to form up, they were off.

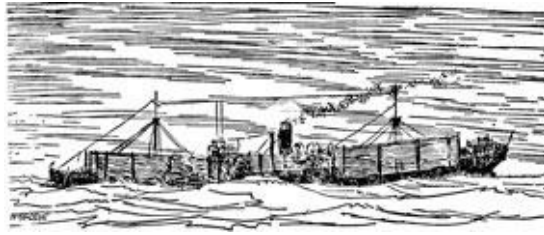
Meanwhile, back in Sydney harbour a latecomer for the convoy had arrived in the shape of the little Norwegian tramp the *Sneland 1*. Her passage to Sydney had been a laborious one. After loading aluminium ore at New Orleans, she had gone north to the Hampton Roads, Virginia, to get concrete protection for her wheelhouse. She was delayed there for a long time and when she came to leave she was so heavily encrusted with barnacles that she was unable to keep up with a convoy. So she was forced to steam on to Halifax alone. Once there, the ship was made to list with the aid of her ballast tanks so that a team of shore workers armed with long scrapers could remove some of the offending barnacles. Then on she ploughed to Sydney to join SC7.

As the *Sneland 1* dropped anchor, her master and chief officer went hurriedly ashore to the convoy

office for instructions. Sorry, they were told, the office was short of convoy documents, but they could get a set from a naval launch in the harbour. Captain Laegland and his chief scoured the water for the launch but could not find it. They decided the best thing they could do was to carry on and try to catch up with the convoy – and just hang on to it.

So the *Sneland 1* set off in pursuit of SC7. After some determined steaming, she managed to catch up with the dark ranks of the convoy during the night. She crept in on the starboard wing as the last ship of that column, and steamed on in comfortable station for all the world as if that had been her rightful position all along. She had no knowledge of the convoy and no papers, and would not be able to understand a single signal from the commodore, whoever that might be. But she had caught her convoy!

The Steaming Herd



Sunday 6 October, the second day at sea, and SC7 had already suffered its first casualty.

It was a fine morning sea, with excellent visibility. But gradually, the ships became aware that one vessel was missing. She was the *Winona*, the oldest and biggest of the three Lakers, and therefore the most conspicuous. What had happened to her?

It turned out the Laker had turned back in the early hours of darkness of the previous night. Despite the efforts of her chief engineer and his staff, her dynamo had failed to operate, so much to his disappointment, Captain John Stevenson of Newcastle had to turn his ship and head back to Sydney for essential repairs.

Aboard the *Assyrian*, Commodore MacKinnon put a cross beside the name of the *Winona* on his official convoy list. So now there were two. Eyes went to the other Lakes, doggedly struggling along in their erratic fashion.

In a clement sea, the convoy steamed steadily along at its planned speed of 7 knots, sometimes in good order and sometimes in rather haphazard fashion after a change of course had been ordered by the commodore. Already he was busy making signals and reflectively watching their effect.

The seaplane droned through a clear sky overhead, and close at hand was the armed yacht, HMCS *Elliot*, a converted mercantile vessel known in more tranquil days as the *Arcadia*. Out ahead, the escort sloop HMS *Scarborough* led the way. The convoy moved along like a smoky, steaming herd and covered a sizeable piece of ocean. Each column of ships was some three miles long, and the six columns sailing abreast presented a broad front three or four miles across.

It was a workmanlike formation, and yet the scene did not at all resemble an illustration from a textbook of war. Far from hiding their identities in drab anonymity, most of the ships, British and foreign alike, sported the colours of their shipping lines on their funnels. At the start of their war service, the British ships had been painted an anonymous grey with buff superstructure, in accordance with Ministry of War Transport regulations; but when next they were painted, they had promptly put their peacetime colours back on the funnels, and many had reverted to their more familiar black hulls. Now it seemed to add that extra touch of defiance.

HMS *Scarborough* herself was hardly a textbook warship. She had been launched in 1930 as a naval survey vessel, and had spent practically all her pre-war life in the China Seas. She still had a large charthouse built out over the quarterdeck as a continuation of the foc's'le deck, so that although the after gun mounting remained, there was no after gun. Her only big gun, mounted for'ard, was an old low-angle four-incher of Japanese make that she had picked up off the jetty at Hong Kong. Stamped with the date 1920, it was, to put it bluntly, a bloody awful old thing, yet it worked and had been put to good use on more than one occasion.

The *Scarborough* just topped 1,000 tons, rather more than half the size of the smallest freighter in the convoy. She was a good seaboat, though with a bit of a list to starboard, and a tendency to buck and roll alarmingly in heavy seas. At such times, the helmsman steadied himself by putting his arms over a rope stretched across the wheelhouse so he could keep an even course. Painful on the arms, but effective. The sloop's top heaviness was partly due to another legacy of her peacetime occupation, because she still carried an extra large motorboat used for surveying, hung on big davits on the port

side. The cumbersome boat was a great nuisance, and as offensive to her good lines as the unsightly charthouse.

She had wooden decks, which a former commanding officer had demanded should be kept scrubbed and burnished bright. At that time she had no deck hydrants and no means of pumping up water for scrubbing the decks, so the crew had to lower heavy wooden buckets over the side and haul them up filled with sea water. This was a long and arduous process that was agony on the muscles of the scrubbers, none of whom would forget the weight of those buckets as long as they lived. War or no war, they were kept hard at it holystoning the decks until one day the tell-tale shine from the sloop's decks was reported by an aircraft. To everyone's immense relief, the practice was ordered to be stopped at once.

Since being recalled for war, the *Scarborough* had at least managed to scrounge two stripped Lewis guns, which were mounted each side of the bridge as a token defence against aircraft. Her only other artillery was a saluting gun, a ceremonial piece that fired at a fixed angle from one side of the ship only.

She had also kept the sensitive hydrophones used for surveying – not for her the newer asdic equipment for detecting the underwater enemy! – but she did carry a good quota of depth charges. But she had seen one major change: gone, along with the burnished decks, was the commanding officer who had believed in the little sloop observing big ship 'bull', with the blowing of bugles and all the rest. Her commander now was a tall, athletic Dartmouth-trained man who, as the lower deck soon concluded to their satisfaction, 'really knew his stuff'. As almost all the *Scarborough's* crew were naval regulars, this was no small accolade.

Forty-year-old Commander Norman Vincent Dickinson had already fought one war. He entered the Royal Navy as a cadet in 1915, and during the First World War served in the Grand Fleet as a midshipman in the battleship *Royal Sovereign*, being awarded the DSC. After the war, he specialised in physical training, putting cadets in the *Erebus* and at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, through their paces, as well as seaman boys at Shotley. Later, back at sea, he was squadron PT officer with the 1st Cruiser Squadron, and with destroyer flotillas in the Mediterranean, before becoming assistant superintendent of the Physical and Recreational Training School at Portsmouth.

Quick, firm and decisive in manner, Commander Dickinson was a popular commander not only because it was plain he knew how to handle a ship, but also because he had a good sense of humour and was eminently more approachable than his predecessor. From the moment he took command there was a new and better spirit among the *Scarborough's* company and a happier atmosphere.

Before taking up duties in the North Atlantic, the sloop had acted as the lone escort for several convoys from the UK to Gibraltar. In the early months of the war this had been a comparatively trouble-free passage, with the U-boats concentrating nearer Britain's shores, but lately the *Scarborough* had seen a good deal more action. On the outward bound convoy she had helped to bring out of the Western Approaches, there had been a very hot time during which several ships fell victim to U-boats. The rest of the convoy continued on independently to Sydney.

The *Scarborough's* duty now was to get SC7 safely to the rendez-vous in the Western Approaches where other escorts would meet them. There were no special plans of action arranged between the sloop and the Commodore ship other than the general tactics laid down for the convoy. Commander Dickinson and Com-modore MacKinnon had met only briefly at the Sydney conference, and their sole communication now would be by means of flag and lamp. Wireless telegraphy (Morse transmission) was to be avoided, and no ships were yet equipped with radio telephony.

Sunday continued fine, and late afternoon found the convoy sailing eastwards below Newfoundland in position 45 degrees 17 minutes N, 55 degrees 43 minutes W. Next day they could expect to sweep round the far eastern corner of Newfoundland and begin the slow, steady passage north and east across

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