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# Battle of the Atlantic Widens in All-Out Nazi War on Ships

## British Bomb U-Boat Bases as Luftwaffe Batters Seaports; RAF Air Output at New High

April 1917 was Britain's blackest month in the World War. The Kaiser's unrestricted U-boat warfare was at its height, taking a disastrous toll of British shipping.

On the 9th of that month—three days after America entered the war—Admiral William S. Sims of the United States Navy arrived in Britain to prepare combined naval policy. The following is his report of the interview with Admiral Jellicoe, then First Sea Lord:

After the usual greetings, Admiral Jellicoe took a paper out of his drawer and handed it to me. It was a record of tonnage losses for the last few months. This showed that the total sinkings, British and neutral, had reached 536,000 tons in February and 630,000 tons in March; it further disclosed that sinkings were taking place in April which indicated the destruction of nearly 900,000 tons. These figures indicated that the losses were three and four times as large as those which were then being published in the press. It is expressing it mildly to say that I was surprised by this disclosure. I was fairly astounded; for I had never imagined anything so terrible. I expressed my consternation to Admiral Jellicoe . . .

"It looks as though the Germans were winning the war," I remarked.

"They will win unless we can stop these losses—and stop them soon," the Admiral replied.

The losses were stopped. The convoy system did it.

### SOS

March 1941 seemed in many ways another grim month like April 1917, perhaps even worse. Once more Britain faced peril on the sea—a danger which struck home deeper than any defeat of their armies on foreign soil. Britons are islanders, with the sea in their blood. No one in the narrow British Isles is ever far from the ocean, from their Prime Minister, twice First Lord of the Admiralty, down to the humblest Cockney gobbling his (peacetime) Bank Holiday winkles at Southend or the Yorkshire millhand merrymaking at Blackpool. British sea power was a wall that kept away the Spanish Armada and Napoleon's barges. But again it was being seriously threatened by a powerful and aspiring foe.

Lloyd's of London painted a gloomy picture on March 17: During the first eight-

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*The Nazi bosses seem amused*

een months of the war to March 2, there had been lost 1,245 British, Allied, and neutral ships totaling 4,962,257 tons. That was some 600,000 tons more than had been sunk in the first two and a half years of the World War. (Berlin boosted the eighteen-month figure to more than 9,000,000 tons.) Next day the Admiralty issued its total of losses for the week ended March 9: 25 vessels of 98,832 tons, a drop from the previous week's 141,314—the war's third worst week—but still far too high for safety. And an Admiralty spokesman said such losses must be faced until the Battle of the Atlantic had been won.

Prime Minister Churchill was still more realistic in a speech the same day at a Pilgrims' luncheon welcoming the new American Ambassador, John G. Winant. The Prime Minister ranked the battle at sea as "one of the most momentous ever fought in all the annals of war." And he made the revelation that reverberated across the Atlantic: "Not only German U-boats but German battle cruisers have crossed to the American side of the Atlantic and have already sunk some of our independently routed ships not sailing in convoy. They have sunk ships as far west as the 42nd meridian of longitude." But Churchill, a noted gourmet of the dramatic as well as of food, rolled out the words with relish as he announced the "certain destruction" of three U-boats in a single day—the first time Britain had scored such a success since early in the war.

Confirmation of Churchill's statement that Nazi battleships had ventured into the North Atlantic sea lanes to prey on British shipping came from Berlin four days later. The German High Command claimed a battleship squadron under Admiral Günther Lütjens, who previously commanded the 6,000-ton cruiser Karlsruhe that was sunk off Norway last April, had sent 22 armed merchantmen totaling 116,000 tons to the bottom of the Atlantic and saved 800 survivors "during extensive operations." In one instance, the battleships were said to have sunk 33,000 tons of ships while operating "very near enemy battleships"—evidence of a new technique in cooperation between submarine scouts and surface raiders (see Admiral Pratt's War Week).

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## *The Battle of the North Atlantic*

As further confirmation that raiders were in the Western Atlantic, officers of two ships in a Canadian port said on March 22 that several days earlier they had had SOS signals from a tanker and cargo vessel being "shelled by a raider" 300 miles southeast of Newfoundland, along the Grand Banks about 1,200 miles from New York.

It was the first time in history that German naval units had operated in formation in the Atlantic. London first reported and Berlin subsequently confirmed that the raiders were the powerful 26,000-ton battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, armed with nine 11-inch guns, carrying four aircraft, and capable of doing more than 29 knots. The British had said both were damaged in the Norwegian campaign last April. British warships and bombers were immediately ordered out to hunt the raiders, one of the hardest and most nerve-wearing assignments in sea warfare.

Berlin boasted of other victories in the Battle of the Atlantic the same day. U-boats were said to have sunk eleven ships totaling 77,000 tons in an action during which they dogged a convoy for several days in waters west of Africa. Marshal Göring's Luftwaffe was credited with sinking another 31,000 tons. The commentary Dienst aus Deutschland called this merely "getting under way" operations that had not yet reached the "acme of effort." The playing of "We Sail Against England" after communiqué broadcasts, discontinued during the winter, was resumed.

## Hell's Corner

Earlier in the war, the area around Dover, where the English Channel narrows to a bare 20 miles or so, was dubbed Hell's Corner because it is within easy range of the Germans' bombers and their big guns mounted along the French coast. Now, with the great battle extended to the high seas, all Britain became a "Hell's Corner" in the larger field of operations. In last fall's blitz, Coventry was a synonym for utter and appalling devastation. The name of almost any British seaport would have served the same purpose last week. Scots in Glasgow, Lancashire folk in Liverpool, the Welsh in Cardiff and Swansea, West Country people in Bristol, the citizens of Southampton and Portsmouth, all had to "take it." Their docks, shipyards, and naval bases became prime air objectives, since crippled ports and docks did Britain as much damage as ships lost at sea. Actually, however, because the German bombers fly blind, following a radio beam and bombing when it meets an intersecting beam over the target, the brunt of the attacks fell on homes, shelters, businesses, pubs, and hospitals.

For two nights in succession, on March 20 and 21, the historic southwest Channel port of Plymouth, once the place where incoming transatlantic liners stopped, had its turn. The result was conceded to be about as bad as the Coventry raid or anything experienced anywhere in Britain.

King George and Queen Elizabeth had gone there on March 20, being welcomed by Lady Astor, American-born M.P. whose husband, Mayor of Plymouth, was ill at Cliveden, their Buckinghamshire home.

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A few hours after the King and Queen had left, the raid began. It was estimated that some 12,000 incendiary bombs and many hundreds of the "heaviest" high explosives rained down. Lady Astor, like everyone else, had to douse incendiaries as they fell. All next day she went around the town to encourage those who had been bombed out of their homes. That night the raiders returned and attacked with increased fury, dropping at least 20,000 incendiaries. While the raid was in progress Lady Astor visited the shelters. The Australian Prime Minister, Robert G. Menzies, was her guest that night and experienced his first big raid.

On March 19, London had its first bad bombing since the winter lull. A number of hospitals were hit—116 patients were moved from one during the raid. Afterward Londoners put up more signs showing their spirit was unchanged: "Just a slight case of murder" and "The bloke who did this can't fight." The east-coast port of Hull also was attacked.

Britons, however, were getting tired of merely "taking it" and wanted to see the Germans repaid in kind. The RAF kept busy, but, like the Luftwaffe, concentrated mainly on ports and naval bases. Kiel, Wilhelmshaven, and Rotterdam were heavily bombed for two nights straight, while the U-boat base of Lorient, France, got three successive night raids. And Cologne on the Rhine also had a short but severe bombing.

## Significance

There was no doubt last week that the Battle of the Atlantic was on in earnest. Both the British and Germans indicated that still greater shipping losses must follow. The announcement of the successes scored by the German battleships at large in the Atlantic, coming so close on the heels of the passage of the Lend-Lease Bill and President Roosevelt's promise that help would arrive, was undoubtedly timed for its psychological effect both on this side of the ocean and in the Balkans. The Germans wanted to show that American assistance cannot come in time to turn the tide as it did in 1917. They will be certain to do their very utmost to prevent it.

This time, too, Britain has some difficulties it did not have in the last war. For one thing, the Irish bases that were so useful for anti-U-boat operations in the World War are lost and there seems no hope that Eire will abandon its strict neutrality by making them available again. Then the Germans have their own new bases right on the Atlantic and are finding the long-range bomber a powerful weapon to supplement the work of the undersea and surface raiders.

In 1917, the danger which Jellicoe showed Sims finally was overcome by introduction of the convoy system, with the U-boat toll falling as the number of ships convoyed rose. But convoys have been used since the beginning of this war. The difference is that the dispersion of British sea power has left a serious shortage of escort vessels—the cause of the British need for American aid to fill the breach (see page 15).

Meanwhile, the possibility of an imminent invasion of the British Isles, which at

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one time seemed in the cards, now appears to be receding. A successful prosecution of the Battle of the Atlantic would make the attempt unnecessary. But there are several things in Britain's favor. One is that its people are not now faced with starvation or anything like it, having food stocks on hand sufficient to last some time. Instead, the most acute danger is to the supply of war materials. Another hopeful sign was the announcement in a broadcast this Sunday by Lord Beaverbrook, Aircraft Production Minister, that British air production had reached a new high,* that numbers of American long-range Consolidated bombers—renamed Liberators—had reached Britain, and that the total of British air power, dispersed in "storage houses" up and down the country, had reached a point "surpassing anything in the history of aviation." And the Canadian-born Beaverbrook, not habitually overoptimistic, predicted that this accumulation of power would assure victory, to be followed by a close cooperation of Anglo-Saxon peoples to maintain peace.

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