

*The Greatest Convoy Battle of all Time: the Battle for Convoys SC122/HX229
and the Crisis in The Battle of the Atlantic in March 1943*
Presentation given at the Crow's Nest Officers' Club, 9 March 2013
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When I initially proposed that we commemorate the Battle for SC122/HX229 in March 1943, I had no idea I would be speaking to you tonight. I noticed in the *Scuttlebutt* dinner schedule that there was no theme for tonight's dinner and thought this would be an appropriate subject. I e-mailed Margaret and suggested the topic along with a short rationale as to why it was important. She said she would pass it on to the entertainment committee, and that was the last I thought of it...until last week! I received an e-mail from Gary Green saying that the committee thought that my suggestion of the Battle for SC122/HX229 in March 1943 would make a great presentation for tonight's dinner and thanking me for offering to give one.

It reminded me of the old naval saying that a volunteer was merely someone who misunderstood the question. Apparently, I completely missed the question altogether. But, it is always an honour to speak at the Crow's Nest, so I am more than happy to be here this evening.

Tonight we are commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Battle for convoys SC122/HX229 in March 1943, and the subsequent crisis it created in the Battle of the Atlantic.

March 1943 really was THE critical month in the Battle of the Atlantic. During the first three weeks, 120 ships totalling over 600,000 tons were lost to U-boats. Even more disturbing was that most had been sunk while in escorted convoys, many in the North Atlantic. The British Admiralty despaired that their tried and true defence – indeed,

their only defence - against the German wolfpacks had been neutralized. British historians claim that it was during March 1943 that the Germans came closest to severing the lines of communication between the New World and the Old. To this end, the battle for SC122/HX229, running from March 16 to March 19th, was the largest convoy battle of the Second World War, and it had unexpected repercussions for the Royal Canadian Navy.

SC122, a slow convoy consisting of 60 ships, left New York under escort on March 5, 1943. HX 229, a fast convoy totalling 38 ships, departed three days later. Both convoys picked up their transatlantic escort from St. John's off Cape Race on March 13 and 14th, respectively, and headed for Liverpool. The first couple of days were uneventful but on the morning of March 16th, U-653 sighted HX 229, and sent a sighting report to U-boat Command. Admiral Karl Dönitz, head of the U-boat arm, immediately ordered the nearest wolfpack to intercept the convoy, while directing two more to form a patrol line further west to head it off. The first wolfpack caught up with HX 229 after sunset and mounted an attack, sinking three ships that night and another five the following morning. Two more ships were lost during the day but the escorts fended off any further attacks until evening. Meanwhile, U-338, a member of one of the wolfpacks blocking HX229's path, sighted SC 122. She called in her packmates and attacked, sinking 4 ships in quick succession; a fifth was damaged and sank later in the day. The attacks on both convoys, just 100 kilometres apart, continued throughout the night. U-338 sank one freighter from SC122 in the evening, and after midnight U-305 sank 2 more. HX229 successfully fought off its attackers that night but the next afternoon, U-221 succeeded in sinking 2 ships. By nightfall, the two convoys had merged, and all further attacks were repelled by the now

formidable escort forces. Even so, an American freighter from HX 229 which tried to make a run for it was sunk and a straggler from SC 122 was also lost. She simply disappeared without a trace.

By March 19th, air patrols from Britain reinforced the escorts and Dönitz called a halt to the operation. Of the 90 merchant ships that met their escorts off Cape Race ten days before, only 68 arrived at Liverpool on March 23. The four-day battle had pitted upwards of 17 warships against 38 U-boats in three wolfpacks from which only one U-boat was lost. In return, 22 merchant ships were sunk (13 from HX229 and 9 from SC122), totalling 146,000 tons, and more than 300 merchant seaman died. German radio reported it as "the greatest convoy battle of all time" whereas the Royal Navy's official history suggests that defeat stared the Allies in the face.

Despite this dire prediction, the battle for SC122/HX229 was actually the last great convoy battle of the Atlantic war. Two months later, the Allies went on the offensive and Hitler's U-boats were never able to regain the initiative. Never the less, the Battle of SC122/HX229 and the March crisis of 1943 have particular significance for Canadian naval historians such as myself: the Royal Canadian Navy was conspicuous by its absence in the North Atlantic at this time.

In December 1942, the British Admiralty charged that the serious losses suffered by RCN-escorted convoys during that fall were the result of poor leadership and inadequate training, and demanded the RCN be removed from the North Atlantic theatre. Naturally, the men of the hard-pressed Canadian navy felt betrayed. For 18 months, the RCN had - against incredible odds - battled convoy after convoy through to Britain. Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa correctly argued that the Canadian groups were at

the end of the food chain when it came to getting new technology such as radar, huff/duff and anti-submarine weaponry, but even more so, the RCN escorted the slow SC convoys which were more susceptible to interception and sustained U-boat attack than the fast convoys escorted by British and American groups. In fact, Dönitz's wolfpacks intercepted Canadian escorted convoys at twice the rate of the British ones. The Admiralty's own *Monthly Anti-Submarine Report* for January 1943 pointed out that the RCN had borne the brunt of wolfpack attacks in the Atlantic for the previous six months. Regardless, London insisted, and by early 1943, the RCN groups were undergoing refresher training in Britain. Consequently, it was the supposedly better led, trained and equipped British escort groups that were on the North Atlantic Run during March 1943, and it was they who suffered such severe losses that the Admiralty questioned the continued effectiveness of the convoy system.

Whether the Germans actually came close to winning the Battle of the Atlantic in March 1943 is debatable. But what is not in question is that, having unfairly blamed the RCN for the losses during 1942, and amply demonstrated by the Battle for SC122/HX229, British escort groups encountered the same difficulties and suffered similar casualties as Canadian escort groups when they took over the North Atlantic Run in the winter of 1943. And so tonight, we not only remember the last great convoy battle of the Atlantic war, but we also celebrate the Royal Canadian Navy's perseverance against tremendous adversities (not all of them the enemy) and its vital contribution to victory in the Atlantic during the Second World War