

## The Battle of the Atlantic

As World War II raged into the early 1940s, the war went quickly devolved from Blitzkrieg on the mainland of Europe, to a war of sea and air attrition with Great Britain. However, the British Isles were just that, islands surrounded by a hostile force of German airplanes and submarines. Once America joined the war in December 1941, the merchant convoys supplying the effort in Britain were then given convoys to protect them. Leading these convoys were Escort carriers and their fellow smaller vessels. Soon, there defensive convoys would evolve into hunter-killer groups, with the sole intent to hunt down the U-boats that were threatening these supply convoys. Their efforts would help propel the Allied cause enough to allow for them to land at Normandy, and then take the fight to Hitler's front door.

The beginnings of the escort carriers' tasks in the Atlantic started at first defending the convoys of supplies America being sent over to the British during the early years of the war (Escort). The infamous wolfpack tactics of the German Navy however, were used to track down these supply convoys and send them to a watery grave (Wolfpack). Ironically, the escort carrier was originally a merchant ship hull, fitted with a flight deck. These vessels began service as early as 1941, before the Attack on Pearl Harbor. The first of these merchant-ships-turned-carrier was the *USS Long Island*, completed in 1941 (Merchant). As the war moved into its third and fourth year, Allied commanders looked towards removing the threat of U-boats in the Atlantic by force, rather than skirting around them. What finally allowed for such offensive operations to take place was the cracking of the Enigma code, opening the Allies to access of the current locations of the U-boats. A Fleet was then created on the sole grounds of destroying the U-boat threat, under the name of the 10<sup>th</sup> Fleet – it would be deactivated soon after the war. The first offensive

contact of U-boats was by the *USS Bogue*. The squadron, known as VC-9 found their first submarine pack in early June, but was unable to do much with their fight squadrons to make much damage (Barlow). It was only later into the patrols was the fighting group able to remove a U-boat.

With the power of the escort carrier being that of a floating airfield in the middle of the vast ocean, it allowed for a cover of air support around convoys as well as scouting for enemy ships and subs. These aircraft for the VC-9 were F4F Wildcats, a strong and capable fight, with torpedo bombers being the slower TBF Avengers (Barlow). A carrier's offensive and defensive arms, outside of its naval guns, were the aircraft squadrons that laid on and below the decks (carrier). These squadrons took to the work of depth charging the U-boat known as U-217, sinking it. Thus, the first blood against U-boats on an offensively driven mission by the escort carriers was given. Such missions like the VC-9 task force's continued through much of the Atlantic theater, giving them the name of Hunter-killer groups (Barlow). These Hunter-killer groups were built around the carrier as anti-submarine vessels, fitted with mines, depth charges, and torpedoes, with the carrier leading the group with their squadrons of Wildcat fighters, loaded with depth charges as well (Hunter-killer). These were not groups to attack ships like the *Bismarck*, or other Wehrmacht surface vessels, but rather focus and hone in on the U-boat. However, hunting season would open to the rest of the war.

Results from this summer of U-boat hunting soon gave way to the fall of 1943 being open for the hunt as well. The results continued to impress the admiralties of both the United States and the United Kingdom, letting loose their newly-minted carrier groups into the waters for the continuation of the Atlantic war. In 1943 alone, through only half of the year, 24 U-boats sunk to a watery grave at the bottom of the Atlantic. Chief of Staff for the 10<sup>th</sup> Fleet, Admiral Low once

stated that, “It is important to note that the CVE support groups accounted for about 60% of all U-boats sunk by U.S. forces in the Atlantic and Mediterranean during the six months April through September 1944” (Barlow). The escort carrier and their fighters provided a key dagger into the heart of the German navy and allowed the supply lines of the Atlantic theater to stay open until the surrender of the Germans in Berlin in 1945.

The Battle of the Atlantic was a battle for the heart of western democracy in Europe and America. If the battle was lost, Nazi Germany would have taken Britain and possibly even the Soviet Union. The efforts of the escort carriers, both defensively and offensively helped to turn the tide towards the Allied powers. Through defensive measures such as defending the convoys of Lend-Lease supply ships to the offensive tactics of hunter killer squadrons, the escort carriers in the Atlantic destroyed multiple U-boats that stalked under the ocean. With their work, the Battle of the Atlantic swung in the favor the Americans and her allies and gave them the needed effort to go onto Mainland Europe and win the Second World War.

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