

# The deadly perils of U-Boat alley

We managed to get a line to one boat, but with the swell still running we had to pass them under the counter, alas, in doing so the stern rose up and fell back crushing the boat and killing the men outright, so we had to cut them adrift. It was desperate work trying to drag others aboard as they were covered in oil and kept slipping back into the boats.

There were many boats, and we tried to reach them all. During this time we were under continuous attack from U-Boats, despite heroic efforts from the escorts to fight them off. Later in the day we were heartened by the arrival of five frigates from the 1st Support Group, Newfoundland.

We came across the SS Harbury still afloat, and the Master, a survivor, was asked if he thought the vessel was still serviceable, and he offered to go back aboard and check. A boat was launched, and he and some of our crew boarded the vessel, but found that the engine room was under water. Whilst aboard our men off loaded as much food as they could find. Once back aboard we fired some shells into the stricken vessel to help her go under. The rest of the day was spent picking up survivors, HMS Loosestrife dashed past us once to ram and sink a U-Boat that had surfaced close by, no doubt to rake us with fire, perhaps we were too small to waste a torpedo on. By now we had 143 survivors on board, we could hardly move for oily bodies. We were ordered by HMS Tay to proceed to St Johns to land them.

**6th April** We are now attending to the survivors, who appear in much better spirits. Last night the crew slept on deck, my bunk alone had three Lascars sleeping in it. The Captain said the men sleeping in his toilet hardly stirred as he put it to its appointed use. We have tried to muster as much clean clothing as we can find. The cook had to prepare nearly 200 dinners, he refused any help from some cook survivors saying 'I don't want strangers in my galley', although the galley was quite inadequate.

**7th April** The survivors from the various ships 'turned to' and cleaned the mess decks as best they could, without water, which is now rationed. The crew from the American vessel SS West Maximus went up and cleaned the four inch gun.

HMT Northern Spray eventually reached St Johns on April 8. She left on the 14th to escort the return convoy to Belfast. This time the weather was much improved, and they had superb air cover, with three U-Boats sunk and no ships lost.

On one occasion Northern Spray attacked a firm Asdic contact with her depth charges, but it turned out to be a wandering whale.

Convoy ONS 5 had eventually reached Halifax on the May 12. A total of eleven ships were lost with seven U-Boats sunk, five during the two days of fierce fighting.

The C-in-C Western Approaches signalled the Admiralty that HMTs Northern Spray and Northern Gem had rescued a total of 213 men and suggested that some recommendation for honours from these two vessels should be forwarded.

On his return Seaman Coder A E Howell was promoted to Probationary Temporary Acting Sub Lieutenant. It was wryly observed by the legally trained that the Admiralty had at least three ways of dismissing an unsuitable trainee....

Commanding Officers were made responsible for spotting potential candidates, testing their ability whilst at sea, which explained why Arthur was put to work about the bridge. He successfully completed training, and eventually became a Sub Lieutenant RNVR(Sp), spending the rest of the war at HMS Quebec, a Combined Operations Training Base at Inveraray, Loch Fyne.

He later returned to banking, becoming manager of a bank at Wimbourne in Dorset and a leading light in the local church and Rotary Club.



Crew members (including Arthur Howell, centre left) and a group of rescued seamen aboard the Northern Spray following the U-Boat battle of May 1943. Some of the survivors are still streaked with oil.



While researching his family history, **Glyn Howell** discovered the diary kept by one of his Pembroke-born relatives, Arthur Howell, while on convoy duty during World War Two.

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AT THE outbreak of World War Two, the armed trawler, HMT *Northern Spray* was sent to Milford Haven to assist in the defence of the harbour in submarine detection, and to act as a general dogsbody, bringing stores and personnel to the various warships anchored in the Haven.

The *Northern Spray* had been, before the outbreak of hostilities, owned by the British fishing company Northern Trawlers Ltd, based in Grimsby. She was one of 14 of the company's vessels to be purchased under the 'Government 1939 Supplementary Estimates', and commissioned as anti submarine vessels, doubling up as convoy rescue vessels.

Armed with a four-inch gun, *Northern Spray*, of some 700 tons, spent a year in Milford Haven, but in January 1941, joined the Londonderry Escort Group.

The years 1941 and 1942 had seen disastrous losses to the merchant ships, nearly three million tons gross, inflicted by some 250 German U-Boats operating in 'packs' in the north Atlantic.

But some light at the end of the tunnel could be seen, with the placement on board the escort groups of new anti-submarine devices, namely the 'hedgehog' - a pattern of depth charges - improved Asdic, and new High Frequency Direction Finder (HF/DF) radar which enabled the escorts to take cross bearings of enemy radio chatter.

Unknown to the Germans of course, the British were now reading all the coded messages to their fleet.

The scene now shifts to the port of Liverpool in April 1943. Overhead the storm clouds were gathering, but in the cramped forecabin accommodation of the ex Icelandic trawler HMT *Northern Spray*, with the coal fired bogey stove glowing red, it was snug and warm.

It was here that the seamen crew lay on their bunks, some chatting in sombre tones, others lying quietly, contemplating the horrors that might lay in store. Seaman Coder Ernest Howell sat at the small mess table, writing his daily thoughts in his diary, and no doubt along with the others, wondered what he was doing there.

Most of the crews on these trawler escorts were the original fishermen, a hard, independent bunch who treated the Royal Navy discipline with disdain. These ratings had a special allowance called 'Hard Lying' money, and alone in the Navy,



*The strain shows on the faces of the permanent naval crew aboard HMT Northern Spray. Arthur Howell is standing on the right at the back.*

along with Submarine Service, were issued with a daily neat rum ration instead of the 3 - 1 mixture.

Seaman Coder Howell felt slightly out of place with his shipmates, as he was not a natural seaman, being drafted into the Navy from his pre-war occupation working in a bank; however after a year or so was easily accepted amongst them.

The *Northern Spray* was in Liverpool waiting to escort the latest convoy to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The convoy had the code name ONS. 5, translated as Outward North Atlantic Slow. The convoy was to move up the Irish Sea, out to Iceland, and then arc round westward hugging the Greenland coast to Newfoundland.

Most of the way, the convoy could be supported with air cover, but between south Greenland and Newfoundland there was an 'air gap' between the extremities of the air cover. It was this air gap that the U-Boats exploited with deadly efficiency.

However this particular convoy was the beginning of the end of U-Boat superiority, as they began to suffer devastating losses.



The following story is Arthur Howell's handwritten daily account (when he was able) of the days endured in this gap.

But really his story begins much earlier. He, along with his brothers Henry and Colin and mother Sarah Ogleby, had left Pembroke in 1918 to join their father, Ernest Howell in Malta Dockyard.

Arthur returned with his family to Portsmouth Naval Dockyard in 1925, where his father, due to the closure of Pembroke Naval Dockyard, was to work for the rest of his life.

Arthur took up a career in banking, but was drafted into the Royal Navy, early in 1940. This is his diary of his days spent with Convoy ONS. 5.

**20th April 1943.** Here we are, waiting to put to sea. As usual the crew is slightly on edge, as we know what is coming, I wonder if it will be our turn this time? After a night ashore, one or two of my shipmates have sore heads.

Weather forecasts predict a storm, more wet bunks no doubt. I am unable to understand how fishermen can tolerate this all of their lives, we seem to be waist deep in water every day.

**21st April** Sailed. We met up with Escort Group B7 and proceeded up channel to pick up vessels for this trip. I seem to be lucky, the commanding officer (Lt J Downer RNR) has me working around the bridge assisting in plotting, radio watch, and preparing the convoy courses. Of course, at action stations, I am either on the depth charges or manning the A.A. gun, whichever is closer.

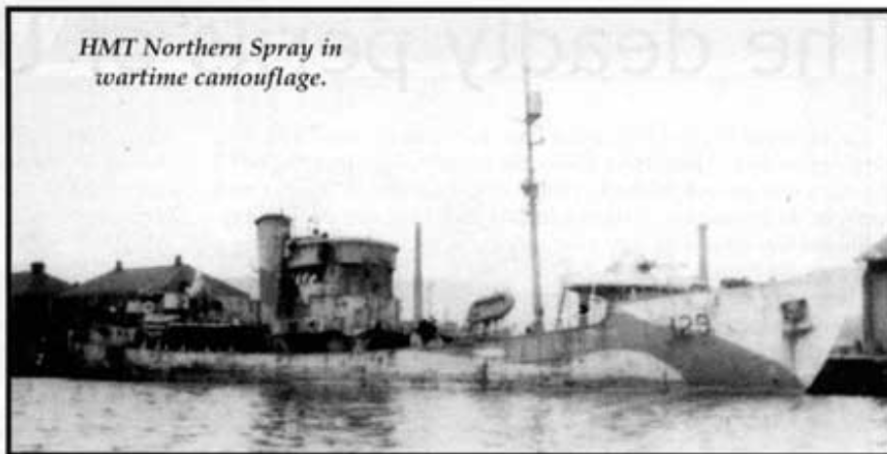
**22nd April** Forming up the convoy all day. There are 42 vessels, formed up into ten columns and five cables apart. The inner escort screen consists of HM ships Duncan, Tay, Loosestrife, Snowflake, Sunflower, Northern Gem and us.

The outer screen is HMS Offa and Oribi. There are reports of vessels with mechanical problems already, this sounds most ominous.

**23rd April** Bad news! We find, for some reason or other, that insufficient food has been ordered, short rations all round I suppose. For the first time we have a sick berth attendant, a worthy sort, straight from training school and full of enthusiasm, but also incapable of acquiring sea legs. His first self appointed task on joining, was to issue, before we sailed, a generous supply of French letters - most strange. However I underestimated my fishermen colleagues, who, I found when I went below, had inflated them and festooned the mess deck as for Christmas, with odd shaped balloons hanging from the deckhead. The SBA has been in his bunk for two days now. We have been detached from the convoy to escort a straggler, the SS Penhale, to Iceland for repairs.

**24th April** We passed HMS Vidette plus three merchantmen en route from Reykjavik to join the convoy. Weather deteriorating. Two U-Boats have been sighted, and one was sunk by a Flying Fortress air cover.

*HMT Northern Spray in wartime camouflage.*



**27th April** Rejoined the convoy. Weather now bad, green seas and decks under water all the time. Life almost intolerable on a small ship, nearly impossible to get to the galley. Difficult to write.

**28th April** Many interceptions on the HF/DF, it appears that the enemy is waiting. Weather bad, even the crows nest lookout post is under water.

**29th April** There were eight U-Boat attacks during the night, but all were successfully repelled. However one ship was sunk, our sister ship Northern Gem picked up survivors.

**1st May** Mountainous seas. Serious problems for destroyers, they are unable to refuel from fleet oilers. HMS Duncan, with convoy Commander on board, has to leave and make her way to Halifax, and the departure of further escorts is likely. The convoy is to all intents and purposes 'hove to', as our speed is only one knot. It is reported that the route is blocked by icebergs and pack ice.

**3rd May** Extreme gales for three days. The convoy has become scattered, and the task is now to gather up some thirty ships and reform convoy. Two escorts have had to leave convoy due to shortage of fuel, and Northern Gem ordered to Nova Scotia to land sixty survivors.

**4th May** After a Herculean effort, the convoy is now reformed, but six stragglers are hopelessly astern. HMS Pink, a corvette, was sent to round up these ships, and has formed a separate convoy with her as escort. There is high density HF/DF chatter which indicates many U-Boats getting into position and waiting.

A Catalina flying boat from Gander reports sinking one U-Boat. We are still in the Denmark Strait, but weather moderating. We were ordered to sweep astern of convoy and came upon a straggler attempting to catch up, it was the SS North Britain, but as we approached at 22.30 she was torpedoed and sank in two minutes. We went straight into a search pattern, but without a contact. Later we went to search for survivors.

**5th May** At 01.00 we sighted lights in the water, they were survivors aboard a waterlogged life raft. The raft was brought alongside time after time, but the men seemed unable to help themselves. Eventually we pulled aboard 10 survivors out of a crew of 40. Some other lights were spotted but disappeared one by one before we could reach them.

Reports from the convoy stated that they were under attack from seven U-Boats, and we were requested to proceed to pick up survivors from three sunken ships. These turned out to be the SS Harperly, Harbuty and WestMaximus an American ship. The rescues were heart breaking, from one set of boats we heard the men calling 'Tender, tender' as we approached. The sea was awash with black fuel oil, and the stench from this was overpowering. All the survivors were covered in oil from head to foot.

Cont.

*Torpedoes sink a cargo ship.*

