

An Historical Vignette – Convoy XB-25, Massachusetts Bay - 15 June 1942

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On 14 June 1942, **XB-25**, a convoy of eight merchant ships departed Halifax, with four escorts: the destroyers **HMS Veteran** and **HMS Montgomery** (former USS Wickes), and corvettes **HMCS Halifax** and **HMCS Nanaimo**. Two of the merchantmen would be leaving the convoy south-east of Yarmouth and would be steaming independently for Saint John NB. The six ships bound for Boston were: the British **SS Port Nicholson** (convoy commodore), **SS Cathcart** and **SS Milcrest**; and the American **SS Cherokee** (an armed US troopship), **SS Norlago** and **SS Pan York**.

Author's Note: In records of the attack on convoy XB-25, the allies used GMT (aka Zulu time) and the U-boat log used Berlin time (GMT+2). In this vignette, times have been converted to local time (GMT-4).

Three days earlier, on 11 June (2:00 AM), the German U-boat **U-87** (Joachim Berger) had arrived in Massachusetts Bay. **U-87** would be laying mines and attacking convoys in the approaches to Boston. On the evening of 11 June, Berger waited for full darkness to cloak his operations, before the 1st mine was deployed at 10:55 PM, within sight of Boston. The 6th and final mine was deployed early the next morning at 1:10 AM. Later, at about noon on 12 June, an attack on an approaching convoy of 15 steamers and 4 destroyers was aborted when a flank destroyer appeared to have sighted the U-boat. At about 5:00 PM, a dense fog bank (visibility 100 meters) descended over Massachusetts Bay until it lifted in the early evening hours of 14 June.

The next day (15 June), because of patrolling aircraft and fish boat traffic, **U-87** stayed submerged on the bottom, for most of the daylight hours. At 7:14 PM, Berger sighted mast heads and then a destroyer "*of the GLEAVES Class*" at high speed on course 80 degrees. **U-87** had sighted the **HMS Veteran**, which had a profile similar to that of a US Navy GLEAVES Class destroyer. The 9:35 PM entry in the U-87 log recorded:

Convoy in sight bearing 90°T, course 300°, speed 8 knots, light zig zags. 6 large freighters and 4 destroyers. I will wait until complete darkness, because I am positioned on the bright horizon. The sky darkens quickly. Cape Cod lighthouse in sight.

About 35 minutes later, **U-87** was between the lead escort (**HMS Veteran**) and the six merchantmen steaming in two "*disorderly*" columns. At 10:17 PM, torpedoes were fired from Tubes I and II. Hits were observed on the **Port Nicholson** at a range of 800 meters and on the troopship **Cherokee** at 1100 meters. At 10:21 PM, at a reduced range of 600 meters another two torpedoes were fired from Tubes III and IV into the **Cherokee**, followed by a loud explosion and the rapid sinking of the troopship. The U-boat then crash dived ... and escaped.

The **SS Port Nicholson** crew abandoned ship and were taken off by **HMCS Nanaimo**. The next morning, she was still afloat with **Nanaimo** standing by. With daylight, the Master wanted to further assess the damage. **Nanaimo** lowered a boat for the Master, the Chief Officer and four naval personnel to board the freighter. Less than an hour after boarding the ship, she started to settle at the stern. The boarding party rushed back to their boat and started rowing away ... when the **Port Nicholson** quickly sank and took **Nanaimo's** boat down with her. The Master (Harold Jeffery), the Chief Officer (Philip Munday) and Lieutenant John Molson Walkley and Able Seaman Leslie Horne of **HMCS Nanaimo** went down with the ship. Of the freighter's crew of 91, there were six killed and 85 survivors.

The troopship **SS Cherokee** had a crew of 123 (9 officers, 103 crew members and 11 gunners). 46 US Army passengers were also embarked. Three officers, 62 crew members, one gunner and 20 passengers were killed.

Post scriptum

In the 20 June 1942 post-action report to **Captain 'D'** in Halifax, the Commanding Officer of **HMS Veteran** (Commander William E.J. Eames, RN) concluded it with:

"I would like to place on the record the courageous behavior of Captain Jeffery and Chief Officer of the "Port Nicholson" and Lieutenant Walkley and Able Seaman Horne in the very courageous efforts to salvage a valuable ship and cargo."

Some six decades later, the wreck of the **Port Nicholson** was found by a salvage company, with the objective of recovering a cargo of 71 tons of platinum. In a US federal court case, no evidence was found to support claims that the ship's cargo included any platinum, and the salvage operations were ended by a federal judge in 2015.