

# An Historical Vignette – MV Amerika sunk - RCAF casualties – 21 April 1943

Researched and written by William (Bill) Dziadyk, author of “[\*S.S. Nerissa, the Final Crossing\*](#)”

The *MV Amerika* (465 foot, 10,110 gross tonnage), a passenger / refrigerated cargo ship, was built in Copenhagen Denmark in January 1930. She was powered by a pair of 2-stroke cycle double acting 6 cylinder diesel engines (cylinder bore 24 3/4” and stroke 55 1 / 4”). After Germany invaded Denmark in April 1940, the United Kingdom “*requisitioned*” her on 8 May 1940. She was placed under the control of the *Ministry of War Transport* and operated by United Baltic Corporation, London. The diesel engine powered *MV Amerika* would become an important long distance logistics asset.

*Author’s Note: In this vignette, local times (GMT-3) are used unless otherwise indicated. Distances are in nautical miles (1.85 km), and abbreviated “nm”.*

In her first deployment, with cargo and passengers, the *MV Amerika* departed Liverpool on 8 June 1940 and sailed independently with stops in Capetown (29 Jun – 7 Jul), Port Elizabeth (9 Jul), Durban (11-17 Jul), Mombasa (23-25 Jul), Colombo (2 Aug) and finally Calcutta (7 -19 Aug). Her return journey to the UK included stops in Capetown (9-20 Sep) and Freetown (30 Sep – 3 Oct) where she joined Liverpool bound convoy **SL-50**. After 140 days, *Amerika* returned to Liverpool, on 25 October 1940.

In her second deployment, she sailed independently from Liverpool on 10 Dec 1940 with stops in Newport, Rhode Island (15 Dec – 1 Jan **1941**), Freetown, Sierra Leone (19 Jan – 20 Jan), Capetown (31 Jan – 1 Feb), Port Elizabeth (3-6 Feb), Durban (10-15 Feb), Mombasa, Kenya (7-9 Mar), and Aden (15-18 Mar) where she joined convoy **US-9/2** to Port Sudan (20-25 Mar). After transiting the Suez Canal, she joined convoys **MW-7A** to Malta, **MG-1A** to Gibraltar and finally **HS-34FA** to Liverpool. After 327 days, the *MV Amerika* arrived back in Liverpool, on 1 November 1941.

On 13 Nov 1941, the *MV Amerika* departed Liverpool in convoy **ON-36**, in her third deployment. After clearing the western approaches, she sailed independently with stops in Bermuda (30 Nov), British occupied Dutch Curacao (4-11 Dec), the Panama Canal (13-20 Dec), Melbourne, Australia (15-22 Jan **1942**), Sydney (23 Jan – 1 Feb), Newcastle (1-5 Feb) and Wellington (10–19 Feb). She then headed east for transiting the Panama Canal (15-23 Apr). She sailed independently up the coast to Halifax (2 -8 Feb) and joined convoy **HX-184** to Liverpool. After 159 days, she arrived in Liverpool on 20 April 1942.

In her fourth deployment, she departed Liverpool on 6 Aug 1942, in convoy **ON-19** which arrived in New York City on 20 August. On 3 September she departed New York in convoy **NG-302** which was bound for Guantanamo, Cuba where she joined convoy **GZ-3** to the Panama Canal. She sailed independently from the canal to New Zealand with stops in Auckland (11-22 Oct), Littleton (8–16 Nov), Port of Bluff (18-22 Nov) and Wellington (27 Nov – 1 Dec). She then headed eastward and through the Panama Canal (22-28 Dec). In Cristobal she joined convoys **ZG-17** to Guantanamo and **GN-32** to New York City, and finally convoy **HX-223** to Liverpool. After 181 days, the *Amerika* returned to Liverpool on 2 February 1943.

In her fifth deployment, the *MV Amerika* departed Liverpool on 21 Feb 1943 and arrived in a Belfast shipyard on 22 February for needed engine maintenance. These repairs were completed about a week later. *MV Amerika* with a general cargo and 43 passengers, then joined convoy **ON-170** which had departed Liverpool on 3 March, and was westbound to Halifax. She arrived in Halifax on 19 March 1943.

On 14 April 1943, the *MV Amerika* departed Halifax with a complement of 140 persons with 72 Merchant Navy crew members (*majority being Danish*), 15 DEMS gunners (*drawn from Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Royal Artillery 4th Maritime Regiment*) and 53 passengers (*Royal Canadian Air Force, flight crew officers – Pilots, Navigators, Observers and Bomb Aimers*). Her 8,844 tons of general cargo, included metal, flour, wheat and 200 bags of mail.

*MV Amerika* (and 14 other merchants) from Halifax joined the eastbound New York to Liverpool convoy **HX-234** at the *Halifax Ocean Meeting Point (HOMP)* at latitude 61°W, about 100 nm east of Halifax.

On 18 April, at the *Western Ocean Meeting Point (WESTOMP)* at latitude 49° W (about 200 nm SE of Cape Race Newfoundland), the convoy escorts for the mid-ocean transit became: the two destroyers **HMS Highlander** (H44) and **HMS Vimy** (D33), and five corvettes **HMCS Rosthern** (K169), **HMS Anemone** (K48), **HMS Asphodel** (K56), **HMS Clover** (K134), and **HMS Pennywort** (K111).

At 01:00 on 21 April, about 235 nm SW of Greenland (56°27’N 47°30’W), the corvette *HMS Pennywort* (A/LCdr. O.G. Stuart, RCNVR) stationed on the starboard rear quarter of the eastbound convoy, detected and

unsuccessfully attacked a U-boat. Later that day, the convoy encountered strong Northerly gales with snow blizzards and high seas. It had become very challenging for the merchant ships to maintain their assigned positions within the convoy. The convoy's rate of advance on an easterly course was reduced from 9 to about 3 or 4 knots.

**Some operational context** – The Admiral Commanding U-boats (Karl Doenitz) War Log entries for 19-21 April 1943 confirm that convoy HX-234 was a priority target and 19 U-boats of Group "Meise" were under Doenitz's direct operational control. All times are GMT+2.

19 April 1943, para IV b) 1):

*The HX 234 convoy expected by Group "Meise" should arrive at 1900. There was, however, no contact up to dusk. Owing to the small distance between the boats (15 sea miles) and bright moonlight, the groups remained in the former patrol channels. The present uncertainty concerning the convoy cycle still makes the appearance of the HX convoy possible.*

20 April 1943, para IV b) 1):

*According to a special Radio Intelligence report received today, the HX 234 convoy was in BB 9653 at 2100 on 17.4 and had orders to proceed on a course of 359 degrees to approximately BC 4110. This proportionately large detour might mean that the enemy was aware (as a result of aircraft location) of the disposition of the Group "Meise". Probably, however, this ties up with a U-boat situation report of 18.4 in which the Americans presumed the presence of 10 U-boats in the area between 53 and 580 N and 35 - 410 W. Group "Meise" will therefore, be withdrawn to the N. at high speed and disposed in patrol channels from AJ 1684 via AJ 6117 to AJ 6982 at 1000 on 21.4.*

21 April 1943, para IV a) 2):

*Convoy No. 28: At 0600 on the morning of the 21st, U 306 (Northern section of Group "Meise") sighted a northeast-bound convoy in AJ 2771. The first message from the convoy was not received until 0930. The boats belonging to the Group "Meise" were detailed to operate on the convoy if they were not more favorably placed to attack the southwestward-bound convoy further to the E.*

*U 306 continually reported contact with the convoy up to 0200 in the morning, in AJ 2696. This boat sank a ship of the type "Sibajack" (12.000 GRT) at this time and lost contact. U 598 reported a convoy hydrophone bearing at 0100. Other boats did not come up. 2 boats reported flying boats with the convoy. Visibility deteriorated during the night and fog and snow drifts came with a N.N.E. wind strength 8.*

*Up to now 7 U-boats are operating on the convoy, U 306, 631, 108, 598, 134, 552 and 189. In addition, a group of 5 more boats in waiting positions further to the E, are detailed for this - U 378, 732, 648, 209 and 934.*

*Operations on the convoy continue. According to the plot and convoy reckoning this should be the expected HX convoy No. 234.*

The "type Sibajack" ship, which was sunk by U-306, was the MV *Amerika* which in profile, resembled the then well-known "MS Sibajak". It was during dusk on 21 April and the winds were still very strong with snow and high seas. The *Amerika* was the fifth and final ship in the convoy's 7th of 11 columns. The corvette *HMS Asphodel* (Lt H.P. Carse, RNVR) was patrolling aft of the convoy. From the deck of *Amerika*, some RCAF passengers had been watching the corvette "pitch and roll", and often only her masthead was visible. **U-306** (Claus von Trotha) had been shadowing convoy HX-234 for many hours. At 20:20, with some dusk-light remaining, von Trotha quickly fired two torpedoes into the *Amerika*. The first torpedo exploded into her port side amidships and the second exploded into her port side further aft. Thirty minutes later at 20:50, the MV *Amerika* sank (57°30'N 42°45'W) 145 nm SSE of Cape Farewell, Greenland.

The Norwegian freighter *MV Washington Express* (the fifth ship in the adjacent 8th column) and *HMS Asphodel* were the only ships in the convoy to have witnessed the torpedoing. The freighter reported to the Convoy Commodore that there were three flashes and a siren was heard. The corvette was quick to react. She quickly passed through the convoy and participated in anti-submarine sweeps around and within the convoy.

At 21:30 the corvette returned to the debris field and rescued the remaining survivors. Of the complement of 140 persons, there were 86 casualties (42 crew, 8 gunners and 37 RCAF flight crew officers). The ranks and occupations of the RCAF casualties were;

- *Flight Lieutenant* Edward Blake Thompson, (Pilot);
- Three *Flying Officers*: John William Borum, (Pilot), John Hugh Hetherington (Pilot), and Richard Scott McCloskey (Pilot); and
- Thirty-three *Pilot Officers* (4 Pilots, 7 Navigators, 1 Observer and 21 Bomb Aimers).