

FIGHTING SHIPS



**A STORY OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY
AND OUR MERCHANT MARINE IN ACTION**

*Presented to those who build ships
by The Department of Munitions and Supply*

FOREWORD

No single item in our production of war materials is more urgent than that of ships, both for the Navy and for the Merchant Marine.

If we are going to survive the drain on our merchant fleet, we must have more cargo vessels, more corvettes, more destroyers, more mine sweepers . . . without delay.

That you may better know the sacrifice, the long hours of nerve-tingling vigilance that is required to keep our lines of communication open among the United Nations, I suggest that you read this vivid picture of "Fighting Ships."

When you read it, bear in mind that these young men, these mere boys, and seasoned sailors of both our Navy and Merchant Fleet are calling for ships and more ships every day. They willingly, yes eagerly, man them and go out into the dangerous seas to dare the raiders. All they ask is that they may have the vessels and the armament to keep these vital supplies moving.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "C. D. Howe". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Minister of Munitions and Supply,
Ottawa.



FIGHTING SHIPS

BY CHARLES RAWLINGS

THIS IS a Navy tale of convoy. The ensigns of a dozen nations fly and some of them go down in its action. Its setting is outside in the middle longitudes of the North Atlantic Ocean, and they belong to no land, but it is a Canadian story.

A thin screen of Canadian ships faced Hitler's undersea wolf pack attacking in great force out there and brought their convoy through; battered, decimated, bloody, but on the course, steaming home in line of convoy still. It is known where such things can be known and talked, as *Skeena's* story—*Skeena* the destroyer. She was not alone. She had supporting corvettes, those plump, small, tumbling ship clowns in the Battle of the Atlantic's grim circus, and they fought like lions. She had S.C.X. under her lee, Slow Convoy X, and it was a brave

Reprinted from March 15th issue of Maclean's Magazine by kind permission of the Maclean Publishing Co. Limited, Toronto.

convoy manned by brave men who kept their weary merchantmen plodding on through more than two days and two nights of sustained *Rudelsystem* attack, as the Germans call it. But it is *Skeena's* story as you will see and we must begin with her, at the beginning.



Skeena was weaned on no bitter milk. Thornycroft built her in 1931 for the peacetime Canadian Navy. She came of Beagle class lines with modifications appropriate to Canadian conditions and approved by N.S.H.Q.

She turned out to be a splendid example of the destroyer type which, as you know, has been evolved for great speed and flexibility. She is 321 feet overall and 32,000 horse-power hurry her 1,337 tons ahead at better than thirty knots. She made thirty-seven knots in her trials. They named her *Skeena* after the river the Siwash named, and the present Naval Attache in Washington, Commodore Victor G. Brodeur, brought her over. All hands pitched in and gave her chromium-plated rails—because they could not see her shine enough. In 1939 she was chosen to be the first North American voice, out of all the millions of voices that were waiting, to swell into a roar like the shout of a planet welcoming Their Majesties, the King and Queen, to Canada. They were inbound on the *Empress of Australia* and *Skeena* was ordered to meet her at sea. Slicing precisely through a calm, rose-coloured evening ocean, using her range finder to judge

the closing yards, *Skeena* kept the rendezvous at the precise second of scheduled meeting, which was at 18.00—a Navy way of saying 6 o'clock p.m. Later she carried the Royal Party to Prince Edward Island and the King lived on her bridge for hours at a time, his Royal Standard above him at her gaff. You can see that regal bunting now as you go down into her wardroom for a pink gin. It is furled under a glass case screwed to a bulkhead.



War found her of course very fit. The battle paint of the northern water, that hue that resembles nothing so much as the shade of lead coffin sheathing slightly grave-weathered, but which bears the name North Atlantic grey, covered the chromium rails and her other bright work. She took on her camouflage like a trim,



hard little dance star pulling on a Navy boy's jersey and went out to the eastward to help Britain in the narrow waters about the Isles. She arrived in England the first day of Dunkirk and lived through action

there for a year, which has no place in this story but which will make gripping material for someone's typewriter some day. Then, as war-seasoned as plates and tubes and guns and turbines and officers and destroyermen can be and remain whole, she came back to Canada to help guard the western buttress of that great

overseas bridge of ships known as the Western Ocean Convoy. The men who fought her in British waters stayed in her for the most part.

Along about harvest time last fall as she led her corvettes out of a northeastern station and cleared its granite headland and turned her face to sea, to make rendezvous with Slow Convoy X, east bound, her roster read like this:

Lieutenant-Commander James C. Hibbard, R.C.N., Halifax; Executive Officer E. E. Boak, R.C.N., Victoria; Lieutenant W. Willson, R.C.N., Calgary; Lieutenant (E) J. S. Horam, R.C.N.R., Vancouver; Lieutenant F. Wilcox, R.C.N.V.R., Montreal; Lieutenant J. A. McAvity, R.C.N.V.R., Saint John; Surgeon-Lieutenant C. Oake, R.C.N.V.R., Oakville; Sub-Lieutenant J. MacDowell, R.C.N., Ottawa; Sub-Lieutenant J. A. Mitchell, R.C.N.R., Victoria; Sub-Lieutenant F. E. Barlow (Gunner-T), Halifax.

Twenty-five chiefs and petty officers.

One hundred and fifty-five ratings.

A typical destroyer's list they read, written down like that. They were better than a typical list last harvest time. The typewriter tapping out their names cannot show you their eyes,



squint-crinkled and cold and level from a solid two years and a half of war. Nor can it depict for you their lean hardness, or how they moved about their ship knowing her every corner and angle and camber of deck and

creak and lift and pitch. Or how they knew her weapons and her speed, and how she could stop

and knife and thrust. They knew all that because they had been small fighting parts of her great fighting whole through black nights of fight and gales filled with fight and fights in the snow and fog and blazing noons of running battle. They eased *Skeena* outside, running slow to let the corvettes keep station, and stood their watches and caught their sleep and ate as they always had, in action or safe jogging like this, down to the bottom of the cook's last pot.

They made rendezvous with S.C.X. and saw that it was a big convoy, sixty-odd bottoms. They studied it quietly, unemotionally, marvelling mildly, if at all, at its size in contrast with their own. It was like all the other convoys of the past war years—a trifle more weather-beaten, possibly, for each one as it came to



them was a little older. It was stretched out as far as a hoisted signal could be seen, and there were flush deckers there and three island freighters, and tankers and squat-rigged modern hulls all gear and hatches, and tall rigged old coasters, and a snub-nosed laker with her funnel seeming to pop up out of her very transom like a shanty stovepipe. They were weary ships, grey and dun with rust and soot and labour, unwashed, unpainted, unknown almost, unsung. They wallowed slowly ahead rolling out their vulnerable thin-plated, heavy bellies.

Making those bellies heavy was a half million odd tons of precious stuff to nurture and strengthen Britain in her island fortress. In the cold, greasy forecastles, or manning their faithful

engines and their decks, were men like themselves, men of the sea, enough of them to people a small village; 2,500 more or less, officers and men of the merchant navy.

The bunting signals went aloft on the commodore's flagship, just one of the merchantmen chosen as lay leader of the caravan. The western escort that had brought the convoy out from Canada, answered and departed. *Skeena* motioned her corvettes and they took station.



She made a short run off the convoy's flank and looked ahead and to the south, taking a wary scent of sea and sky like a guarding stallion on a herd trek with all his mares heavy with foal and helpless to run or fight, behind him. What

lurked out there? Nothing? Who knew? *Skeena* turned and slid back and took her lead station.

Where they were at this particular moment does not matter, for the whole North Atlantic Ocean was preparing right then to be exactly the same all over. A gale struck. In three hours it hove them to, escort and convoy alike. They lay, heads tucked under wing or heads tucked under stern whichever way their widely different hulls could best lay to. With engines just holding way they tussled with an old and honourable enemy, an autumn southeaster. In thirty-six hours it decided they had had enough and could go on. They had remained so well together that all but five ships and one corvette had been constantly within visual signal touch and these five, just over the horizon, were quickly located. All shipshape and on station, the great caravan set off on a course that carried them north and east

until they sighted a bold headland of basalt mountain and glacier and stark shore cliffs. It was a bright day with a long dead following sea heaving them along, and all hands came up into the morning sunlight to stare at the strange cold cape.

"TORPEDO! STARBOARD BOW!"

SURGEON-LIEUTENANT OAKE of Oakville, has written some verse for *Skeena's* ward-room scrapbook. He dwells on the scene.

"The day dawns fair and cool, the sea is blue,
As this land's icy mountains come in view;
Bathed in the Arctic air, sunlit, serene,
Their bleak serrated peaks, an awesome scene.

"But look! a foamy wake approached now
The right wing of the moving convoy's line;
A lookout shouts, 'Torpedo! Starboard bow!'"

It was the first shout of all the shouting that was to follow. The first warning cry. *Skeena*, far ahead at the front of the fleet, closed at twenty-four knots.



"That way!" the right wing ships cried to her. "Periscope! Torpedo! Something! It sank and is gone."

She followed their pointing arms and searched and listened with those long mysterious tentacle ears called Asdic that can hear beneath the water farther than any shark can hear or eavesdropping cod down on the bottom mouthing his thick lips. Nothing! *Skeena* turned and surveyed the convoy drawn ahead. It had no vacant station, no limping ship. The alarm might have been

nerves, a bonita school knifing their fins. She pretended that was what she thought and stormed back into the line and scolded one ship who had lost her head and broken radio silence.

"Break silence only if you see and are sure of what you see," she ordered. "That—why, that was nothing."

Nothing it remained for an hour. A short crisp message broke the air. It came from the Commander in Chief, Western Approaches.

"Enemy in your vicinity," it said.

The commodore heard it and could read its official code. *Skeena*, too. Together they decided to change course, and the great flotilla, still unaware, made its swing and settled down due north with the icy coast abeam, forty miles. The evening, late and lingering in those latitudes, came drifting down. Sunset tinted the white mountains rosy pink. Overhead, faint luminous rays in the still light sky like alabaster shafts glowing from within, aurora borealis started the first display of its celestial neon sign that was to fire into a wild display until midnight that great night. Dead in the east the harvest moon heaved up his fat upper limb and broke the sea. Then ruddy and obese as Jack Falstaff drunk on wine, he floated free. Supper over, the convoy came on deck and pipes were lit, for it was still not dark enough to see a match flame. Each man in his fashion put the moon where he wanted it to be and dreamed his dream. In fancy, it shone on little *setor* cottages nestled in Norwegian valleys and drifted through spotless window curtains to lie on white tiled stoves in Holland houses. It shone on Athens once again as some Greek seaman dreamed. Clean western cities, filled with lights and homes and peace

brought close by yearning, saw that moonlight patterned through coloured maple leaves on playing children. It shone on small back stoops where broad-hipped women sat alone, their tired hands folded in aprons still wet from supper dish-water. It bathed a farmyard in its soft light and horses, tired with haying, stirred a hoof in stall, and on the air was the humid smell of barn and beasts and harvest.

At 9.37, just good dark, a warhead blew the belly out of the fourth ship in the port wing and she went down in the moonlight like a stone with all hands. The next ship in the line signalled the



attack with white rockets. *Kenogami*, one of the corvettes who was nearest, carried out a sweep in the rear of the convoy and at 9.42 she was heard to drop a single depth charge. At 9.48



she sighted a torpedo track that passed her starboard bow and at 9.50 she sighted a U-boat at 1,000 yards steaming away at high speed. She opened fire with her four-inch gun but she needed more light on the target

and at ten o'clock she lost all contact. *Skeena* near her now, illuminated the port side of the convoy by star shell, and realizing *Kenogami* had lost contact, ordered her to search for ten minutes and then come back. When returning herself, the commodore far in the front of the convoy reported to her that he had sighted a U-boat on his port bow very close to the time

of the opening explosion. He thought there must be two Huns attacking. At 10.10 two merchantmen sighted what was considered to be a third submarine, and within a few more moments four ships were crying out by megaphone and firing machine-gun tracer at a U-boat that was inside the convoy running down between the seventh and eighth column. *Skeena* thought of ramming, but when this proved



impossible owing to the number of ships in the way, she again fired star shell and closed the position and dropped depth charges. After twenty minutes another sinking called her away and one minute later a tanker exploded. The

corvette *Orillia* reported that out of the three ships she had rescued ninety-five survivors.

THE WOLF PACK

THE MOON was still aloft but hard and white now, coldly staring down. Overhead the aurora had flamed into wild pastel, orange and electric-blue and crimson. The moonlight was hard on the white mountains. When the star shells shone, an answering glow, that was thought at first to be distant fire from big guns, showed ahead. It was a pair of icebergs coldly reflecting back the light from their sheer ice. All warmth had left the sky, had left the world. It was what it had been all the time, a battle place, and the enemy was not one, or two lurking submarines. It was the wolf pack. Naval headquarters estimates the attacking force at this time at twelve submarines.

Shortly after midnight a cloud bank mercifully moved in from the northeast and covered the mocking moon. The aurora flickered and went out. In the first of the darkness that seemed like the blackness of a pit, there were shouts and then suddenly the jangle of machine guns spitting white hot tracer.

"Here!"—"Here's the swine!"

Skeena was close enough to hear and she swung into the convoy and raced down lane to ram. The submarine crossed her too far ahead and, like a ki-yi-yi-ing dog in flight, it skidded around a corner and raced up the next lane over. They passed going in opposite directions and *Skeena* could see the wet conning tower of the Hun shining in the darkness and, as she watched, it slid under in a crash dive. At that moment the convoy, acting on orders from the commodore who had full charge of ordering such manoeuvres, made an emergency turn to port and *Skeena*, caught in the changing traffic, was suddenly surrounded with



danger of collision. Her people say that it was the direst moment of all the night. In the absolute darkness, where to turn? She knew one thing sure—she of all of them must not be put out

of action that night. Without her there could be no hope. The corvettes alone could not hold off the wolves. If she went down or out, nothing remained for days but a slow relentless slaughter of the helpless; and here she was in horrible danger from the very ones she had to live to protect. A black hulk leaped out of



"She had supporting corvettes, those plump, small tumbling ships and they fought like lions."



Late that afternoon a single Lockheed-Hudson winged out from the northeastward.

the darkness—one of the merchantmen—and just in time the 32,000 horse-power in her engines reared her back and away in full reverse. Then she wheeled and drove on and on until at last she was free and the convoy was inside of her and outside was nothing but darkness and sea and enemy. While she was still sweat-soaked



and panting from the terror, the ship nearest her, a tanker carrying fuel oil, exploded. It shot an orange geyser of flame a hundred feet into the black sky. Around the base of the column of flame was billowing smoke and at its top was a downy smoke cushion.

"Why, I could sit on it," Gunnery Lieutenant Wilcox remembers he marvelled to himself.

The blast blew a hot wind in their faces on *Skeena* and they blinked their eyes in the glare. Wilcox remembers he reached up and snatched off his earphones and from behind him on the bridge came a voice, a young rating's voice filled with stark, wide-eyed awe

"If my folks," it rasped as if talking to a ghost, "could be here to see me now."

Surgeon Oake's verse condenses the rest of that night as only a poet can.

"Dante's Inferno loosed from out of hell
As flames from stricken ships lit up the blue;
Brave men are dying here but dying well;
Ne'er so much owed by many to so few . . .

"As undersea explosions pierced the dark,
Corvettes and *Skeena* hunted through the
lanes
Avoiding oft destruction by few yards;
Their aim: to ram the U-boats, crush their
frames."

At last they brought up morning and the sun. U-boats with anything against them do not like the light. They draw off to horizon where they can see yet cannot be seen themselves, and run the surface there paralleling their prey in truth like wolves stalking a timbered trail. This time there was but one horizon, for inside to the westward gloomed the ice-covered coast.

In the convoy there was the creak of bunks as men flopped down in their boots. The eternal smell of breakfast coffee scented the air as it will on judgment daybreak at sea. Tobacco blued the forecastles, for now relaxed nerves could suck it down in a deep inhale and it would taste. The steady engines beat away the yards, the cables, one by one the slow, slow knots. Bunting spoke and a ship here, another there, quickened engine beat and closed an empty rank, then slowed down to the common pace again. Before the sun had burned away the morning clouds the herring gulls that flew out from the coast and wheeled overhead to look down with black shoe button eyes for garbage, saw an orderly convoy, staunch in station, running well.



Skeena's commander slouched down in his chart-room chair, boots stretched out, and

stared far away into the coming night. It was the time for plans. They would have to be his plans. He had talked with his admiral back on the Nova Scotia beach. In a wide office there, with high windows streaming the same sun that filtered through the salt-encrusted deadlight of his chart-room and glinted on the rough wool fibres of his duffle coat, his superiors, his countrymen, his friends, were together knowing where he was and what he faced and what, as soon as ever could be, he must have. But all their hopes and prayers and all the power of the greatest Navy upon earth that they had hours ago set into motion toward him could not shrink by the distance of one wave to another the miles that isolated him. To-day, to-night, to-morrow, how long after that he could only guess, belonged to the odds-on Hun and to him and *Skeena*—and his brave corvettes.

He grinned grimly when he thought of his corvettes. "My hat's off to them," are the words he uses when he talks of his corvettes. He swung his boots under him and stepped out to look at his corvettes in the daylight, this morning's new daylight. *Kenogami* was there. A man who had been city engineer of Calgary had fought her through the night. *Orillia*, that was her there off port wing. A CBC announcer was her commander. They had done damn well. They had all done well. All they could. There was nothing tangible accomplished, nothing they could bite and chew on, enter in the log as one thing begun and ended. Final!—Period! End sentence!

But they had given the Hun a pounding, had hurt him down deep, bruised him with the ash cans. When water was as thick with U-boats as it had been last night the mere sum of

ash cans that his morning report had told him had been dropped was guarantee of that. They could have been dumped blindly and some of them would have found a mark. And they had not been blindly dumped. They had been carefully laid on good targets that signal had proved. Even if there had been no certain killing hits, sub crews could only take so much ash-can strafing. In Britain it was a mandatory two weeks leave for sub crews who had been ash-canned no matter how ineffectually. Their nerves needed two weeks' rest just because they had been in the same neighbourhood with ash cans.

British sub crews were as tough as the Hun. There were some Hun nerves on ragged edge out there on the horizon. But still—he wished there could be more than just the thought of unnerved Huns to comfort his boys, to comfort the city engineer there astern and the "Voice of the Air" on *Orillia*, and the convoy. A convoy cheered and forgot its troubles when it learned a Hun had died. He'd relish the smell of some Hun oil himself, enjoy watching it opalescing, rainbowing as the sure slick rippled and spread and proved the kill.



THE KILL

AT NOON he killed. The wolf pack teased a hard luck ship, or made a bet, or in their humourless way, ordered a single U-boat to try a desperate sneak attack. The single sub sneaked in. It caught a ship named *Thistle Glen* and hit her amidships with one

powerful war-head. And, then, not satisfied at the mere sound of the well-aimed shot going



home, it stuck its periscope out to have a gander. Curious! Greedy! It wanted the name and size of its victim for some swagger.

"Periscope!" raised the cry. "There's the b—!"

Skeena closing fast was close enough to look. It was a light grey periscope, sneaking slowly under. There was no need for instruments to divine range and depth. Pounce attack! Ten depth charges, 5,000 pounds of TNT with shallow fuse settings, blasted the water into geysers which sloshed back to make a hellish patterned doily of foam. *Skeena* drew off to 1,700 yards and those long mystic ears, the Asdic, groped and found the fool. He was on the bottom frozen with terror, wounded more or less. This time slowly, with check and counter-check of every move, with engines slowly turning and the detection routine going on as still and studied as in an examination drill, the exact spot where he lay on the sea's floor was found. The German could hear the hunt, count the slow beat of *Skeena's* heart, her engine. The sound of her pulse came down through the water to him and his whole hull was like an amplifier magnifying it.

"Round! Round! Round!" He could hear the big flywheel turn as she idled, making her computation. "Around! Around! Around!" it



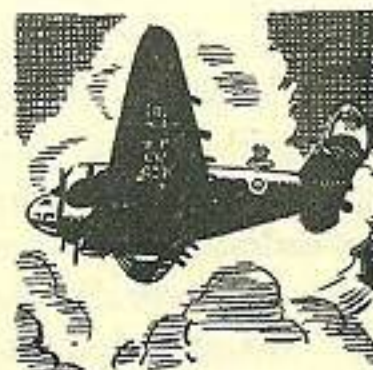
talked to him as she slowly gathered way, her mind made up. Then "aroundaroundaround—" She came up to fourteen knots and held that beat as true as fate's watch ticking, and he could hear that rhythm coming closer—closer. He closed his eyes and stopped his ears with the heel of his palms, trying to shut out the sound, but it came on until it was straight overhead and then—"Gott"—it seemed to blur. And at that instant the depth charges were in the water and plunging, turning, falling, streaming silvery bubbles of air that floated back up into the light and sun that he would never see again and they plummeted—straight—down—on—HIM.

On the surface *Skeena* turned and, very sure, or she would not have dared to make a sitting target, she stopped her engines. The Asdic like a doctor's stethoscope confirming death went out and pressed against the corpse and there was no life for it to hear. A large air bubble appeared, then smaller air bubbles for ten minutes and then a small patch of oil.

"When this good news," says the Surgeon-Lieutenant's verse, "through *Skeena* was announced"—

"The whole ship's company broke out in cheers; Tired eyes and bodies did appear revived. Their fighting spirits soared, their nerves were steeled."

Late that afternoon there was another good omen. A single Lockheed-Hudson winged out from the northeastward. To reach them she had had to unload her bomb rack and take its weight aboard in extra fuel, but there she was, a



lone friend up against the blue. There was still a world beyond the horizon and it had not forgotten them. She saw the enemy and dropped two flares on the convoy's port bow, and heeding her, an emergency turn was made to starboard. The escort closed. The U-boats fled.

At midnight came another cheering break. Two newly-commissioned Canadian corvettes, the *Chambly* and the *Moose Jaw*, had been sent sometime earlier up into the northeastern water on a training cruise. They had been contacted by the Admiralty or by their own superiors back in Nova Scotia and ordered to move at once to reinforce S.C.X. This order they were hastening to obey.

Shortly before midnight two merchantmen in the convoy sighted a U-boat on their port bow and a moment later another was sighted by a third vessel 3,000 yards away. *Skeena* coming up fired star shell.

At that very moment the two corvettes were within sight of the convoy and, according to the surgeon, this is what they saw.

"Gunfire and rockets belching from convoy,
Star shells and flares descending from the sky,
A merchantman ablaze, torpedoes, doomed,
Its killer speeding by into the gloom."

They were young, these corvettes, and green if you will, but what they saw—the sky rosy with violence ahead and then suddenly, close alongside, that "killer speeding by into the gloom," did not scare them in the least. They co-ordinated well and closed the startled Hun, who certainly did not expect to find them there. He was one of those sighted in the convoy and, frightened away by *Skeena's* star shells, was

fleeing for his life. He made a crash dive like a startled frog and the two young corvette clowns closed over his water and dropped a shower of ash cans right on top of him.

Up he came gasping for air, completely at bay. He was so close to *Chambly* that in two lengths she was hard alongside and the first thing anybody knew the Hun *oberleutnant* came flying through the air like the young man on the flying



trapeze. He had made a long desperate leap for *Chambly's* decks and safety. His crew followed him, thirty hands, and forgot the ignominy of defeat in snarling their rage at their *kapitan*. He wanted to shake hands

with them in mutual congratulation on their escape, but they turned their backs and spat in hatred and disgust.

Chambly, crowded with Germans, and *Moose Jaw*, empty and envious, continued on and jointed the escort under *Skeena*. The wolf pack reduced to nine effectual submarines now, according to Naval estimate, still pressed the attack. A merchantman sighted a U-boat on her starboard bow, steering a reciprocal course. The merchantman altered course to ram, at the same time opening fire with her total armament of three machine guns. The master estimates that seventy rounds found their mark and the U-boat dived. It was the third time in twenty-four hours that this same ship had engaged an enemy

RESCUE

A RESCUED master aboard a corvette observed red lights in the water and heard voices. He asked if a boat might be lowered. The corvette's boat was lowered with the master and an officer and four ratings from the corvette. Despite a nasty swell nine men were rescued. Others were seen in the water but the small boat could hold no more. It regained the corvette and unloaded and went



back for the rest. The area was searched for two more hours but no further survivors were found.

Aboard *Skeena* that night, empty star-shell cases made a drift of blackened brass around her forward gun. She was counting her depth charges, and her star shells now with worried surmise. Her fuel gauges made her commander and her engineer lieutenant grim. A day, a night, another day of solid action and now this night that seemed to have no end, had taken a heavy toll of stores and fuel. She was getting a bit thin, a bit drawn. Not her men, mind. Her men were still top-hole. You can shoot away star shells and dump your last depth charge and burn up the fuel, but you can't wear down good men. not in two days' fighting.

I asked the gunner's mate what he had done for sleep. His name is Dow, Petty Officer Dow, and he tips the bar at very close to good light-weight with about ten pounds of it in his hands, five pounds for each hand.

"Oh," he said, "you find a bit of cover somewhere forward. You curl up on somebody's duffle coat. Comes a little quiet spell and you curl up."

Leading Seaman Yourke remembered two of the meals they had. One was Maconochie stew and the other was roast beef.

"The cooks had time to roast beef?" I wondered.

"Sure! They put it in the oven and go run and have a look between goes."

"Go run, from where?"

"From the ammunition hand-up. Cooks are ammunition passers in action stations. They're great lads for hearing what's going on topside. You have to give it play-by-play to satisfy the cooks."



The gun-sight setter, he explained, is usually the Foster Hewitt in a destroyer battle. He is out in the clear on the bow deck where he can see the whole show. He gives it play-by-play into the mouthpiece of his telephone and the transmitting room passes it on by word of mouth and from there, by the same method, it climbs down inside the ship to the magazine men and those cooks who have traded cordite smears for flour dusting. Finally, sometimes half an hour late, it reaches into the deepest depths where the stokers and engine-room hands live. They can set the words to the music they have heard of engine speeding, slowing down, then speeding fast again.

At 5.15 in the morning the position, longitude and latitude, was entered in the log and the fact that the visibility was two miles, the convoy speed five miles an hour, sea light, and that it was generally cloudy. Also that there was more attack. Star shells were fired again. All through, they had fought the Hun with light as well as TNT. Soon there was a world filled with light brighter than a million star shells. The second day broke. *Skeena's* empty star shell cases were stowed below, the cordite smears were wiped off the forward gun and the cooks put on their white aprons and cooked breakfast.

Lieutenant Wilcox had the bridge and Commander Hibbard settled slowly into his chair in the chart house and stretched out his boots again. It was another morning and this was the time to do the thinking. To plan! He could go on fighting them with star shells—as long as there were star shells left. It hadn't worked so badly, shining the light down on them, lighting up the *Rudelsystem*, the wolf-pack system. The devils were going to sneak in and get inside the convoy, there was no avoiding that. But he could light them up before they could get set. Let the convoy see them and rattle the machine guns against their slimy hides.

Lord, didn't those old freighter skippers love to rattle a German's hide when they got the chance. That grand old man who had attacked three U-boats in the last twenty-four hours. His voice as he reported through the megaphone, "At least seventy rounds struck home in my last attack," was like an eager boy's. There was one thing he was going to plan on doing—to the first one that asked—some damn reporter probably. He was going to take his hat off to the merchant navy. Listen, he would say, my hat's

off to the merchant navy. These ships have had it hard. They've helped me fight. They've answered every signal like ships of the line. Do you know who's winning this war? The women of Britain and the merchant navy. I'm glad I had men like these merchantmen with me. Glad I had——? Glad I have——.

"Object sighted ahead, sir," a seaman saluted standing in the doorway.

What is it? he almost said, the *Deutschland*. The way things were going it should be the *Deutschland*. Instead he simply nodded and stood up and pulled on his hat and hurried to the bridge.

"Object bearing red forty-five, sir," said Lieutenant Wilcox, binoculars fast to eyes. "Appears to be a destroyer. Yes! A destroyer! No! Two destroyers! Three destroyers, sir! Four destroyers! Five destroyers!"

They were fanned out wide on the horizon, sweeping westward. As he watched, the outside specks closed in for the flotilla had sighted him. They changed from black to grey. Their spars became distinct from their funnels. The white tulle at their bows ravelled steadily away. Their leader closed with *Skeena* and hailed through the loud hailer. It asked questions of technic. What screen had they been using? It asked that. What night technic? Quickly it asked and seemed to jerk the answers inboard as if they were something sprawling scandalously in mid-air. There was no compassion, no mercy in that bloodless, nettled voice.



"When did this begin?" it snapped.
Skeena told him.

There was a pause. The air, the strip of sea between the two ships seemed to hold still for a long eloquent moment. Then the voice, human now, gentle with understanding, said,

"I did not know that it had been as bad as that."