

# THE VICTORY AT SEA

## AMERICAN DESTROYERS IN ACTION

By Admiral William Sowden Sims



A SUBMARINE RUNNING AWASH.

The U-boat, contrary to general belief, is really a surface boat and when hunting spends most of time with at least its conning tower out of the water. Its power to submerge is chiefly used for protective purposes or for getting unseen into a position to strike. The business of the escorting destroyers was largely to keep it constantly under water, for as long as it remained completely submerged, without its periscope above the surface, it was harmless.

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OUR first division of destroyers reached Queenstown on a Friday morning, May 4, 1917; the following Monday they put to sea on the business of hunting the submarine and protecting commerce. For the first month or six weeks they spent practically all their time on patrol duty in company with British destroyers, sloops, and other patrol vessels. Though the convoy system was formally adopted in the latter part of May, it was not operating completely and smoothly until August or September. Many troop and merchant convoys were formed in the intervening period and many were conducted through the submarine zone by American destroyers; but our ships spent much time singly, hunting for such enemies as might betray their presence, or escorting individual cargoes. The early experiments had demonstrated the usefulness of the convoy system, yet a certain number of pessimists still refused to accept it as the best solution of the shipping problem; and to reorganize practically all the shipping of the world, scattered everywhere on the seven seas, necessarily took time.

But this intervening period furnished indispensable training for our men. They gained an every-day familiarity with the waters which were to form the scene of their operations and learned many of the tricks of the German submarines. It was a strange world in which these young Americans now found themselves. The life was a hard one, of course, in those tempestuous Irish waters, with the little destroyers jumping from wave to wave, sometimes showing daylight beneath their keels, their bows frequently pointing skyward, or plunged deep into heavy seas, and their sides occasionally plowing along under the foamy waves. For days the men lived in a world of fog and mist; rain in those regions seemed to be almost the normal state of nature. Much has been written about the hardships of life aboard the destroyer, and to these narratives our men could add many details of their own. Yet the hardships did not weigh heavily upon them, for existence in those waters, though generally monotonous, possessed at times plenty of interest and excitement.

The very appearance of the sea showed that our men were operating in a kind of warfare very different from that for which they had been trained. The enormous amount of shipping seemed to give the lie to the German reports that British commerce had been practically arrested. A perpetual stream of all kinds of vessels—liners, tramps, schooners and fishing boats—was passing toward the Irish and the English coasts. Yet here and there other floating objects on the surface told the story. Now it was a stray boat filled with the survivors of a torpedoed vessel; now a raft on which lay the bodies of dead men; now the derelict hulk of a ship which the Germans had abandoned as sunk, but which perished in floating aimlessly around, a constant danger to navigation. Loose mines, bobbing in the water, hinted at the perils that were constantly threatening our forces. In the tense imagination of the lookouts, floating spars or other debris easily took the form of periscopes. Queer-looking sailing vessels, at a distance, aroused suspicions that they might be submarines in disguise. A phosphorescent trail in the water was sometimes mistaken for the wake of a torpedo. The cover of a hatchway floating on the surface, if seen at a distance of a few hundred yards, looked much like the conning tower of a submarine, while the back of an occasional whale gave a lifelike representation of a U-boat awash—in fact, so lifelike that on one occasion several of our submarine chasers on the English coast dropped depth charges on a whale and killed it. But it was the invisible, rather

than the visible, evidences of warfare that especially impressed our men. The air all around them was electric with life and information. One had only to put the receiver of the wireless to his ear to find himself in a new and animated world. The atmosphere was constantly sputtering messages of all kinds coming from all kinds of places. Sometimes these were sent by Admiral Bayly from Queenstown; they would direct our men to go to an indicated spot and escort as especially valuable cargo ship; they would tell a particular commander that a submarine was lying at a designated latitude and longitude and instruct him to go and "get" it. Running conversations were frequently necessary between destroyers and the ships which they had been detailed to escort. "Give me your position," the destroyer would ask. "What is the name of your assistant surgeon, and who is his friend on board your ship?" the suspicious vessel would reply—such precaution being necessary to give assurance that the query had not come from a German submarine. "Being pursued by a submarine, latitude 56 north longitude 15 west"—cries of distress like this were common.

Another message would tell of a vessel that was being shelled; another would tell of a ship that was sinking; while other messages would give the location of life boats filled with survivors and ask for speedy help. Our wireless operators not only received the news of friends, but also the messages of enemies. Conversations between German submarines frequently filled the air. They sometimes attempted to deceive us by false "S. O. S." signals, hoping that they would thus get an opportunity to torpedo any vessel that responded to the call. But these attempts were unavailing, for our wireless operators had no difficulty in recognizing the "spark" of the German instruments. At times the surface of the ocean might be calm; there would not be a ship in sight or a sign of human existence anywhere; yet the air itself would be uninterruptedly filled with these reminders of war.

**Keeping Submarines Under Surface.**  
The duties of our destroyers in these earliest days were to hunt for submarines, to escort single ships, to pick up survivors in boats and to go to the rescue of ships that were being attacked. For the purpose of patrol the sea was divided into areas 30 miles square, and to each of these one destroyer, sloop or other vessel was assigned. The ship was required to keep within its allotted area unless the pursuit of a submarine should lead it into a neighboring one. This patrol, as I have described, was not a satisfactory way of fighting submarines. A vessel would occasionally get a distant glimpse of the enemy, but that was all. As soon as the U-boat saw the ship it simply dived to security beneath the waves.

Our destroyers had many chances to fire at the enemy, but usually at very long ranges. Some of them had lively scrapes, which perhaps involved the destruction of U-boats, though this was always a difficult thing to prove. Yet the mere fact that submarines were seldom sunk by destroyers on patrol—either by our own or the allies—did not mean that the latter accomplished nothing. The work which was chiefly expected of the convoy was to keep the U-boats under the surface as much as possible and protect commerce. Normally the submarine sails on top of the water, looking for its prey. As long as it is beyond the merchantman's range of vision it uses its high surface speed of about 14 knots to attain position ahead of the advancing vessel. Before the surface vessel reaches a point where its lookout can see the submarine the U-boat dives and awaits the favorable moment for firing its torpedo. It cannot take these

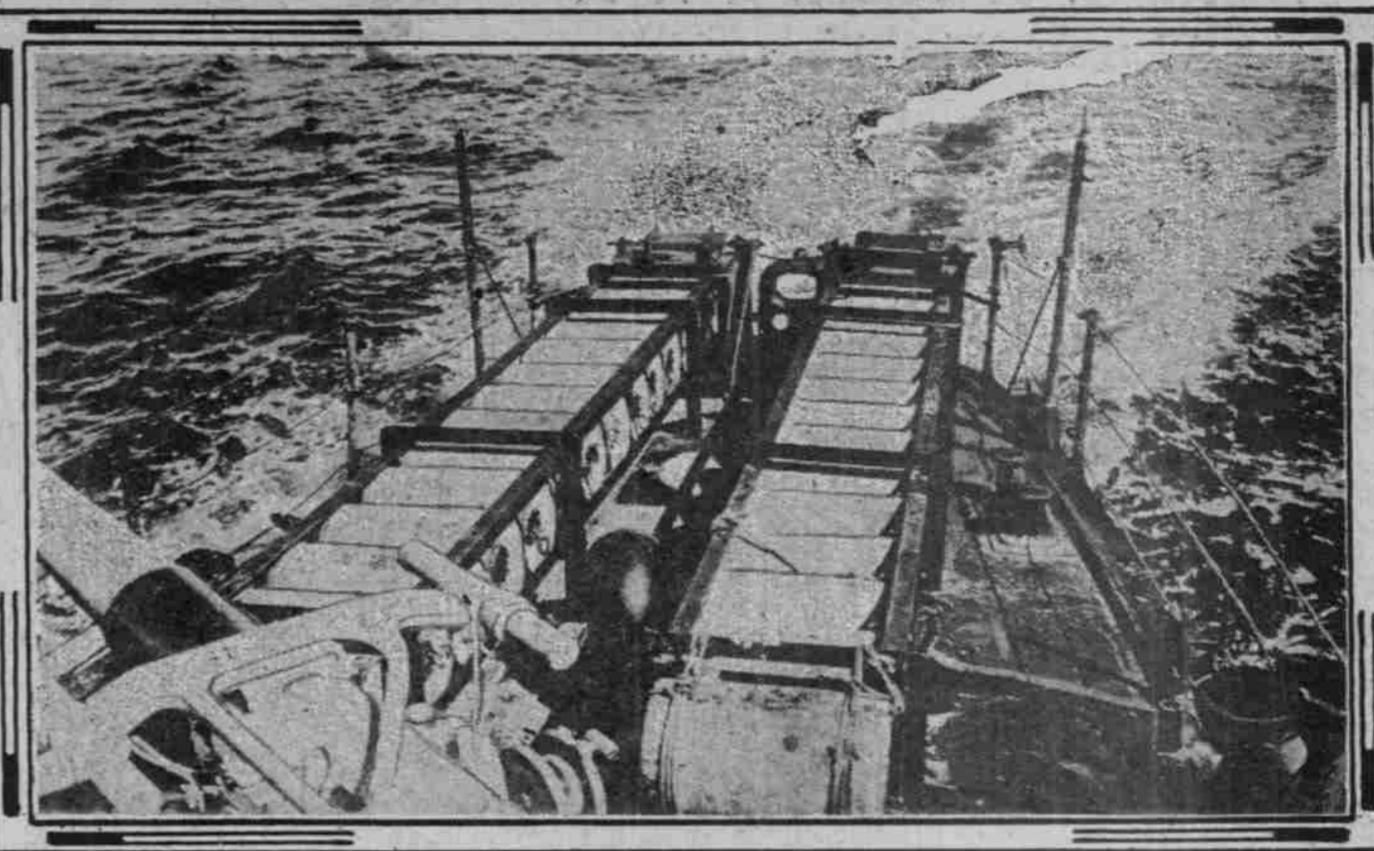


CAPTAIN BYRON A. LONG.  
The member of Admiral Sims' staff assigned as American convoy officer at the British admiralty in London. The convoy room at the admiralty was the center from which ships were routed from all parts of the world.

preliminary steps if there is a destroyer anywhere in the neighborhood. The mere presence of a warship therefore constitutes a considerable protection to any merchant ship that is within sight. The submarine normally prefers to use its guns on merchant ships, for the torpedoes are expensive and comparatively few in number. Destroyers constantly interfered with these gunning operations. A long-distance shot usually was sufficient to make the underwater vessel submerge and thus lose its power for doing harm. The early experiences of our destroyers with submarines were of this kind; but chasing U-boats under the water, escorting a small proportion of the many cargo ships and picking up survivors, important as this work was, did not really constitute effective anti-submarine warfare. It gave our men splendid training, it saved many a merchant ship, it rescued many victims from the extreme dangers of German ruthlessness, it sank a small number of submarines, but it could never have won the war.

This patrol by destroyers and light surface vessels has been criticized as affording an altogether ineffective method of protecting shipping, especially when compared with the convoy system. This criticism is, of course, justified. Still, we must understand that it was the only possible method until we had enough anti-submarine craft to make the convoy practicable. Nor must we forget that this Queenstown patrol was organized systematically and operated with admirable skill and direct energy. Most of this duty fell at this time upon the British destroyers, sloops and other patrol vessels, which were under the command of Admiral Bayly, and these operations were greatly aided by the gallant actions of the British Q-ships, or "mystery ships." Though some of the admirable exploits of these vessels will be recorded in due time, it may be said here that the record which these ships made was not only in all respects worthy of the traditions of their great service, but also that they exhibited an endurance, a straight line and a tactical skill that has few parallels in the history of naval warfare.

**Mainpring of System.**  
The headquarters of the convoy system was a room in the British admiralty; herein was the mechanism by which lead it into a neighboring one. This patrol, as I have described, was not a satisfactory way of fighting submarines. A vessel would occasionally get a distant glimpse of the enemy, but that was all. As soon as the U-boat saw the ship it simply dived to security beneath the waves. Our destroyers had many chances to fire at the enemy, but usually at very long ranges. Some of them had lively scrapes, which perhaps involved the destruction of U-boats, though this was always a difficult thing to prove. Yet the mere fact that submarines were seldom sunk by destroyers on patrol—either by our own or the allies—did not mean that the latter accomplished nothing. The work which was chiefly expected of the convoy was to keep the U-boats under the surface as much as possible and protect commerce. Normally the submarine sails on top of the water, looking for its prey. As long as it is beyond the merchantman's range of vision it uses its high surface speed of about 14 knots to attain position ahead of the advancing vessel. Before the surface vessel reaches a point where its lookout can see the submarine the U-boat dives and awaits the favorable moment for firing its torpedo. It cannot take these

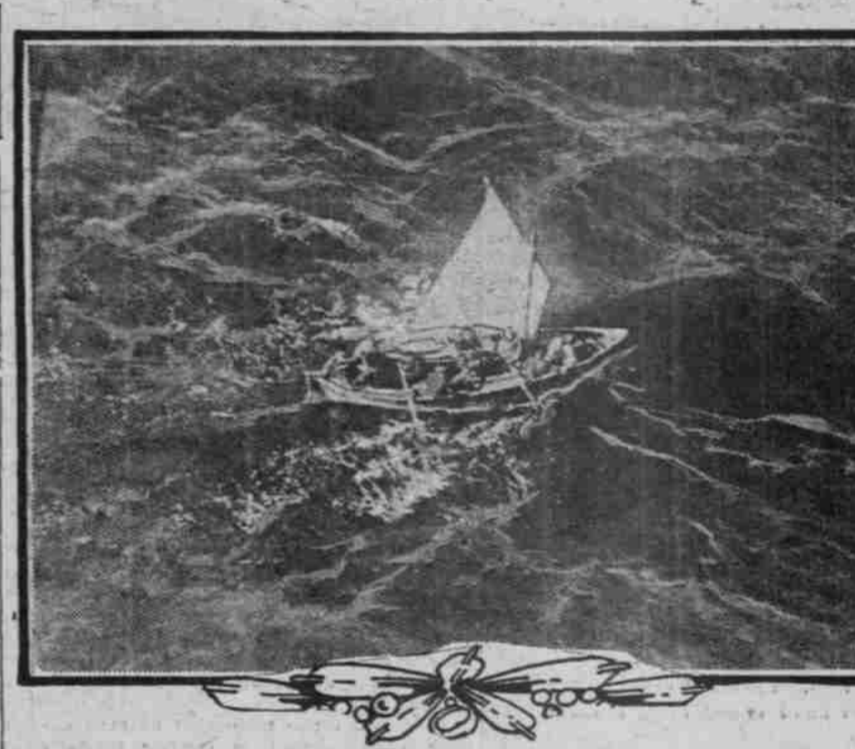


"PREPAREDNESS" ON A DESTROYER.  
At first, when there were not enough depth charges, the destroyers kept two at the stern, ready to drop on U-boats. But this scheme was presently enlarged upon, until it was not unusual to carry from twenty to thirty. The destroyer commander thought nothing of expending all these charges, one after another, on the supposed location of a submarine.

to the most serious consequences. Possibly also the solitary submarine fell lonely; at any rate, as soon as it reached the channel or the North sea it started an almost uninterrupted flow of talk. The U-boats communicated principally with each other and also with the admiralty at home; and in doing this they gave away their positions to the assiduously listening allies. The radio-direction finder, an apparatus by which we can instantaneously locate the position from which a wireless message is sent, was the mechanism which furnished us much of this information. Of course, the Germans knew that their messages revealed their locations, for they had direction finders as well as we, but the fear of discovery did not act as a curb upon a naturally loquacious nature. And we had other ways of following their movements. The submarine spends much the larger part of its time on the surface. Sailing thus conspicuously, it was constantly being sighted by merchant or military ships, which had explicit instructions to report immediately the elusive vessel, and to give its exact location. Again it is obvious that a submarine could not fire at a merchantman or torpedo one, or even attempt to torpedo one, without revealing its presence.

The wireless operators of all merchant vessels were supplied at all times with the longitude and latitude of their ships; their instructions required them immediately to send out this information whenever they sighted a submarine or were attacked by one. In these several ways we had little difficulty in "shadowing" the U-boats. For example, we would hear that U-53 was talking just outside of Helligoland; this submarine would be immediately plotted on the chart. As the submarine made only about ten knots on the surface, in order to save fuel oil, and much less under the surface, we could draw a circle around this point and rest assured that the boat must be somewhere within this circle at a given time. But in a few hours or a day we would hear from this same boat again, perhaps using its wireless in attacking a merchantman; or perhaps one of our vessels had spotted it on the surface. The news of new location would justify the convoy officers in moving this submarine on our chart to his new position. Within a short time the convoy would be scattered, an astonishingly intimate knowledge of these boats and the habits of their commanders. Indeed, the personalities of some of these German officers ultimately took shape with surprising clearness, for they betrayed their presence in the ocean by characteristics that often furnished a means of identifying them. Each submarine behaved in a different way from the others, the difference, of course, being the manifestation of the human element in control. One would deliver his attacks in rapid succession, boldly and almost recklessly; another would approach his task with the utmost caution; certain ones would display the meanest traits in human nature; while others—let us be just—were capable of a certain display of generosity, possibly even of chivalry. By affixing the individual traits of each commander we could often tell just which one was operating at a given time; and this information was extremely valuable in the game in which we were engaged.

"Old Hans is out again," the officers in the convoy room would remark. They were speaking of Hans Rose, the commander of the U-53; the same submarine officer who, in the fall of 1916, brought that boat to Newport, R. I., and torpedoed five or six ships off Nantucket. They never saw Hans Rose face to face; they had not the faintest idea whether he was fat or lean, whether he was a blonde or a brunette, yet they knew his military characteristics intimately. He became such a familiar personality in the convoy room and his methods of



SURVIVORS IN A LIFE BOAT.  
Part of the business of the destroyers was to hunt for and rescue survivors of merchant ships, left adrift on the ocean by the U-boats.

operation were so individual, that we came to have almost a certain liking for the old chap. Other U-boat commanders would appear off the hunting grounds and attack ships in more or less easy-going fashion. Then another boat would suddenly appear, and—bang! bang! Torpedo torpedo would fly, four or five ships would sink, and then this disturbing person would vanish as unexpectedly as he had arrived. Such an experience informed the convoy officers that Hans Rose was once more at large. We acquired a certain respect for Hans because he was a brave man who would take chances which most of his compatriots avoided; and above all, because he played his desperate game with a certain decency. Sometimes, when he torpedoed a ship, Rose would wait around until the lifeboats were filled; he would then throw out a tow line, give the survivors food, and keep all the survivors together until the rescuing destroyer appeared on the horizon, when he would let go and submerge. This humanity involved considerable risk to Captain Rose, as a destroyer anywhere in his neighborhood, as he well knew, was a serious matter. It was he who torpedoed our destroyer, the Jacob Jones. He took a shot at her from a distance of two miles—a distance from which a hit is a pure chance. The torpedo struck and sank the vessel within a few minutes. On this occasion Rose acted with his usual decency. The survivors of the Jacob Jones naturally had no means of communication, since the wireless had gone down with their ship; and now Rose, at considerable risk to himself, sent out an "S. O. S." call, giving the latitude and longitude, and informing Queenstown that the men were floating around in open boats. It is perhaps not surprising that Rose is one of the few German U-boat commanders with whom allied naval officers would be willing today to shake hands. I have heard naval officers say that they would like to meet him after the war.

We were able to individualize other commanders; acquiring this knowledge, learning the location of their submarines and the characteristics of their boats, and using this vital information in evicting convoys, was all part of the game which was being played in London. It was the greatest game of "chess" which history has known—a game that exacted not only the most faithful and studious care, but in which it was necessary that all the activities should be centered in one office. This small group, composed of representatives of all the nations concerned, exercised a control which extended throughout the entire convoy system. It regulated the

dates when convoys sailed from America or other ports and when they arrived; if it had not taken charge of this whole system, congestion and confusion would inevitably have resulted. We had only a limited number of destroyers to escort all troops and other important convoys arriving in Europe; it was therefore necessary that they should arrive at regular and predetermined intervals. It was necessary also that one group of officers should control the routing of all convoys, otherwise there would have been serious danger of collisions between outward bound and inward bound convoys, and no possibility of routing them clear of the known positions of submarines. The great center of all this traffic was not New York or Hampton Roads, but London. It was inevitable, if the convoy system was to succeed, that it should have a great central headquarters, and it was just as inevitable that this headquarters should be London.

On the huge chart already described each convoy, indicated by a little boat, was shown steadily making its progress toward the appointed rendezvous. Eight or nine submarines, likewise indicated on the chart, were always waiting to intercept it. On that great board every prospective tragedy of the seas was unfolding. Here, for example, was a New York convoy of 29 ships, starting toward Liverpool, but steering straight toward the position of a submarine. The thing to do was perfectly plain. It was a simple matter to send the convoy a wireless message to take a course 50 miles to the south, where, according to the chart, there were no hidden submarines. In a few hours the little paper boat representing this group of ships apparently headed for destruction, would suddenly turn southward, pass around the appointed rendezvous submarine, and then take an unobstructed course for its destination. The admiralty convoy board knew so accurately the position of all the submarines that it could almost always route the convoys around them. It was an extremely interesting experience to watch the paper ships on this chart deftly turn out of the course of U-boats, sometimes when they seemed almost on the point of colliding with them. That we were able constantly to save the ships by sailing the convoys around the submarines brings out another fact— even had there been no destroyer escort, the convoy in itself would have formed a great protection to merchant shipping. There were times when we had no escorting vessels to send with certain convoys; and in such instances we simply routed the ships in masses, directed them on courses which we knew were free of submarines, and in this way brought them safely into port. (Another article by Admiral Sims next Sunday.)