

## Prelude

Seventyfive years ago, in February 1941, ships of the British Merchant Navy and other allied vessels in the North Atlantic suffered terrible losses at the hands of a growing fleet of U-boats and surface vessels. With few escorts and poorly defended, some masters attempted to defend their vessels by ramming U-boats on the surface. We know that Churchill encouraged the practice but ordered that such action should NOT BE RECORDED IN THE LOG. In the smoke and mirrors world of both war-time and post-war propaganda and the need to show the armed forces in the best light, it is little wonder that the MN, even today, struggles to get recognition of its efforts and sacrifice. Here, Roy Martin relates some of the events that led to the Battle of the Atlantic.

Until early in 1941 the British convoy escort groups were assembled on a trip by trip basis. Warships concentrated on hunting U-boats away from the convoys; while the submarines sought them. In the second half of 1940 only nine German U-boats were sunk. In the four months from 3 November 1940 the Royal Navy did not sink one; though they did account for several Italian submarines.

Many convoys and independent ships crossed the Atlantic safely; mainly because Dönitz had only a fraction of the 300 U-boats that he needed to bring Britain to its knees. But the few boats that he had were able to wreak havoc when they discovered the convoys.

February 1941 was typical of the disastrous months of that winter. During the first week the enemy sank twenty vessels. The first convoy to be attacked was HG 53, bound from Gibraltar to the UK and escorted by the sloop *Deptford* and the destroyer *Velox*. It was sighted by *U-37* (Clausen) while on passage towards Freetown. He began the attack at 0400 on Sunday 9 February, just after the moon had set.

The *Courland* and the *Estrellano* were the first to be sunk. The Master, twenty seven crew and two DEMS gunners, went down with the *Courland*. The 1910 built *Brandenburg* stopped to recover the Master and twenty crew from the second casualty, six were lost. Clausen remained in contact and vectored in a group of Condors who seriously damaged the *Varna*, but she was able to continue. Then, in quick succession, they sank the *Britannic*, *Jura*, *Dagmar 1* and the Norwegian *Tejo*. When the *U-37* sank the *Brandenburg* only one person out of the two crews on board survived. On that night eighty six seafarers died, seventy three of them British merchant seamen. As the Convoy Commodore was among the casualties the Master of the *Egyptian Prince* took charge.

The *Velox* returned to Gibraltar to re-fuel and land survivors; leaving the sloop as the sole escort. Lt Cdr Thring was aware that the *Admiral Hipper* was at sea. Clausen directed the heavy cruiser to the convoy, where she sank the *Iceland*.

On the night of 13 February the damaged *Varna* sank in what Thring described as: ‘the most monumental gale ... the sea running was the heaviest I have ever seen’. All of her crew were rescued by the *Empire Tern*, a 2,600 grt cargo ship completed in the USA in 1919. Later Thring said: ‘How *Empire Tern* managed such a feat will always be a mystery to me, it must have been one of the finest bits of seamanship ever carried out.’

By 30 January 1941 sufficient ships had assembled at Freetown to make up another convoy in the series Sierra Leone for Liverpool – this was SL64. Nineteen of the ships were unlikely to be able to maintain the convoy speed of nine knots. The Navy could not spare escorts for two convoys, so once at sea the slower ships were left behind. A single Armed Merchant Cruiser stayed with the twenty eight ships of SL64. The remainder were styled as convoy SLS64, with the Master of the *Warlaby* as Commodore. This group were unescorted, though *Deptford* was charged with meeting up with them at a later date. So a single sloop was supposed to provide an escort for two convoys.



**The sloop HMS Deptford**



**The cruiser Admiral Hipper**

Early in the morning of 12 February the *Margot* of SLS64 sighted a strange Man-o-War, it was the *Hipper*. The Commodore signalled all ships to alter course and at 0625 *Hipper* opened fire on *Shrewsbury*. She then attacked in order: *Warlaby*, *Derrynane*, *Westbury*, *Perseus*, *Borgestad*, *Lornaston* and *Oswestry Grange*. *Derrynane*, *Borgestad* and *Lornaston* had opened fire on the enemy and received ‘very heavy punishment.’ The first two sank with all hands and *Lornaston* was badly damaged, *Borgestad* appeared to have hit the control tower of the *Hipper*. The *Margot* was next to be attacked.

The *Polyktor* saved twenty one from the *Perseus*. Other ships involved were the *Ainderbury*, which, with survivors, made Funchal escorting the *Lornaston*. *Clunepark* was damaged, abandoned and re-boarded, and with her rescuer *Blairathol* (also damaged) she also made Madeira for repairs. *Blairathol* had rescued eighty six crew from four ships.

The *Gairsoppa* (from SL64), whose cargo included three million ounces of silver, was sunk in mid-February. Of a crew of eighty five only the Second Officer survived after an epic voyage in a lifeboat. The *Nailsea Lass* was sunk on the 24 February; five of her crew died and her Master was taken prisoner – a common practice at that time.

Almost 250 seamen from convoy SLS64 lost their lives – sufficient to crew five ships; but the Admiralty regarded these ships as independents and did not count them in convoy loss statistics. The Master of *Warlaby*, was killed in action as was his Second Officer; the Chief Officer survived and made a report. George Medals were awarded to Captain D A MacDonald of the *Blairathol* and Captain I L Price OBE of the *Margot*.

Outward bound convoys to North America were prefixed OA and OB. OB285 had sailed from the UK on 11 February and dispersed on 17 February. On 22 February, when the ships were nearing Newfoundland, they were set upon by the battleships *Gneisnau* and *Scharnhorst*. *Gneisnau* sank the *Trelawney*, the tanker *Harlesden*, the cargo ship *Kantara*: plus the steamer *A D Huff*, which had been in convoy OB286. The *Scharnhorst* sank the tanker *Lustrous*. These ships were together in position 47° 12'N, 40° 13'W, with the exception of the *Harlesden*, who was reported to have been sunk about three miles away. It would appear that they had been together as a 'group', though the Navy avoids saying that they were in convoy. Normally they would have at least had an AMC as an escort. Ten crew members were lost in the attack, the rest were taken prisoner.

Convoy OB288 had originated in Liverpool. Other ships joined from Loch Ewe, including the fairly new motor ship *La Pampa*. She should have been in a previous OB convoy; but, after sailing from the Tyne with a part cargo of gas coke, she struck submerged wreckage and returned to dry dock. She had substantial bottom damage. A repair specification was drawn up and the vessel was booked to drydock in Baltimore, after discharging.

After a day at sea the *Empire Fusilier*, *Empire Steelhead* and *Kasonga* (*Kasongo*?) turned back with mechanical problems. The *Keila* and the *Kingston Hill* were bombed and were escorted back by the corvette *HMS Picotee* and the Smit tug *Thames*. Captain Walter Niven, the Master of the *Kingston Hill*, was killed in this attack. Now the convoy was reduced to 41 ships.

The other escorts were the destroyers *Achates*, *Antelope*, *Georgetown* (Senior Officer Escort), the corvette *Heather* and the trawler *Ayrshire*. An "Ocean Boarding Vessel" HMS *Manistee* was also with the convoy. Both the *Ayrshire* and the *Manistee* were requisitioned merchant vessels.

At 1623/21 the convoy was ordered to steer 270° after passing 59° 44' N 09° 00' W, to avoid a U-boat. At 0900/22 the escort signalled "HELP" when in 59° 40'N 12° 40' W, because of an air attack. At 1900/22 the convoy was plotted as being in 59° 20'N 14° 32' W. A further course alteration to 270° was ordered at 2100/22 [but not carried out?] and at 0900/23 to 300°. The C in C Western Approaches signalled OB288 'disperse at dark 23rd'.

Even though the convoy had been attacked by aircraft, and the C in C WA knew that it was being shadowed by one or more U-boats, the escorts left it to its fate on [the morning of?] the 23rd. From now on they had no defence against submarines. The Commodore was lost in the later attack, so we will never know why he kept the convoy in formation, on a north westerly course and at convoy speed, until the evening of the 23rd. It was tracked all day by a U-boat [*U96*] and six others were converging to form a patrol line running NW/SE through 59°N 21°W.

The Commodore ordered the convoy to disperse at 2100 [BST?] that evening - but told the ships to maintain convoy speed for 30 minutes after dispersal. The vessels fanned out on courses between North, through West, to South South East. The weather was fair with a light wind and a moderate North Westerly swell. There was no moon, but visibility was recorded as being about seven miles with the northern lights.

An extract from *La Pampa*'s log summarise what happened next:

Feb 23rd continued: -

- 2130 Convoy dispersed. (P. Log 67'). Set Co 237° [T] in accordance with convoy instructions.
- 2200 Encountered enemy S/M barrage. S/S Margalau torpedoed. Position 59° 31' N, 21° 02'W. Proceeded at utmost speed and varied courses accordingly.
- 2344 Observed enemy S/M at periscope depth close on starboard bow. Manoeuvred ship to ram it and passed immediately over S/M as it dived.
- Posn. 59° 26' N 21° 08' W (Radio). Clocks retarded 1 hour.
- Weather: Smooth sea. Mod swell. Fine and clear.

Nine merchant ships were lost in this encounter, plus the *Manistee*. In all 246 Allied and Neutral seafarers lost their lives, including 192 British merchant seamen. The bulk of these were from the UK, others came from as far afield as Canada and Aden.

*La Pampa* docked at Baltimore and the repairs undertaken were summarised in Lloyd's List. On the 21st March a signal was sent to London:

FOLLOWING FROM BALTIMORE BEGINS "MASTER BRITISH SHIP "LA PAMPA" IN DRY DOCK REPORTS MARKS ON THE BOTTOM INDICATES ATTEMPT TO RAM U-BOAT WHEN CONVOY (LOCH EWE FEBRUARY 20th) WAS ATTACKED FEBRUARY 23rd SHIPS 59° 26' NORTH 21° 8' WEST MAY HAVE BEEN SUCESSFUL, REPORT FOLLOWS". ENDS.

The extract from the log of the *La Pampa* was enclosed together with a letter written by the British Consul in Baltimore on the 25th March, which went on to say:

Captain Toder is of the opinion that the long score mentioned above was caused by contact with the U-boat, and as he was half loaded with coke at the time, he probably would not feel this contact - particularly as his ship vibrates a lot when not fully loaded. The U-boat was first seen 200 yards off on the surface (not at periscope depth as stated in the log) about two points on the

starboard bow. Engines were immediately put to full speed and helm put over to make for the U-boat, and they machine gunned her from the bridge. The U-boat crash dived, and the ship passed exactly over the spot where the U-boat disappeared and was doing about 13 knots at the time. No number was seen on the conning tower owing to the darkness, but the conning tower was very large”.

The interviewer added, "I attach hereto a sketch showing position of U-boat and ships. It seems to me that the action of the S.S. (sic) *La Pampa* probably saved the other ships in company from the waiting U-boat”.

On the 8th April 1941 the text of the report made by the British Consul in Baltimore was sent to the Director of Naval Intelligence in Whitehall. The day before this, Ottawa (?) wrote to F W Bennett in New York “BY SAFE HAND”



***La Pampa* in May 1949**

Thanks for your B/379 of 3rd April and letter of 4th April. I have sent your remarks, along with the Master’s report, to the Admiralty. I am sure they too will agree with your views but I thought it was as well to send the whole correspondence in case the Master starts making more reports when he gets home.

Bennett’s remarks have not been unearthed, but, reading the last line of this letter, one can assume that they were dismissive of the Master’s claim.

The Germans claimed to have sunk a large tonnage of allied ships in the week ending the 28th February. The British, unaware of the full extent of the calamity, dismissed the claim. In fact their total losses in that week exceeded 200,000 tons of merchant shipping – mostly from four convoys.

In March the British had decoded the German Ultra reports for February and knew that no U-boats had been lost. However the Italian submarine R. Smg. *Marcello* had failed to respond to signals after the 22nd February and had been posted as missing. The British tried to credit her sinking variously to HMS *Periwinkle*, HMS *Hurricane*, HMS *Montgomery* and a Sunderland. By 1949 they had to admit that three of their claims were not possible. They therefore informed the Italian authorities that the remaining claim, made on behalf of H.M.S. *Montgomery*, an old ex- American four stacker, must have been the correct one. The *Montgomery*’s logbooks could not be traced at the Public Record Office; but a report filed in ADM199/2040 states ‘1550/22 HMS *Montgomery* attacked firm contact with six depth charges, there was no evidence of destruction’.

In contrast the Master of the *La Pampa* is quite specific about the time and position of his attack on a submarine. It will be remembered that he says that ‘No number was seen on the conning tower owing to the darkness, but the conning tower was very large’. The conning towers of Italian submarines were unusually large and not numbered, so I started by assuming that she had sunk the *Marcello*. But examination of the Kriegstagesbuchs of the U-boats who were involved gives the following translation for *U-69*:

Commenced stern tube attack on Norwegian heavy lift carrier [M Div 900 is the book “Marine-Dienstvorschriften” part 2 picture 45]. During the approach the Northern Lights intensified, so that the water surface was coloured as if illuminated by searchlights.

The steamer turned towards the boat, increased speed and opened fire with 2 cm guns at 400 meters around the boat. Was only able to avoid damage through emergency dive AK at full speed.

0135 underwater cruised away and surfaced”.

Thus by causing the *U-69* to dive *La Pampa*, whose sisters were under the Norwegian flag, saved herself and the three ships that were with her.

Jost Metzler [the commander of the *U-69* – a former merchant service officer] spent about 100 minutes underwater, after which the *La Pampa* and her group had disappeared. He attacked another ship, which saw the torpedo trail and avoided it [*Harberton*?] and finally he was heavily depth charged.

On 25.2.41 he made the following entry in his KTB: -

Clear for Reloading.

When opening the on-deck container it was ascertained, that the tail end of the torpedo was totally collapsed. Torpedo unusable. Upon inspection of the container it was noted, that one arm of the lid closure was broken and the watering valve evidently leaked. The leakage of the valve must have been caused by concussion of aerial bombs and depth charges.

Continued return passage

Considering the reports from the *La Pampa* and the *U69* together it would seem that the score on the bottom of the *La Pampa* was probably caused by contact with the closing mechanism of the upper deck torpedo hatch on the *U69*. Bombing and/or depth charging is unlikely to have caused such localised damage. It follows that not only did the *La Pampa*’s action save the ship and

possibly the others with her; it also prevented the *U69* from reloading his torpedoes. Thus the trip had to be abandoned, maybe saving other ships.

It is interesting to note that the *U-69s* logs [and the other U-boat KTBs] are stamped "This document is Admiralty Property-". So both the *La Pampa's* report and the Kriegstagebuch were with the same establishment and should have been available to the post war committee who ploughed through these records in an effort to credit U-boat sinkings.

We are left with several questions including: who did sink the *Marcello*, and for that matter the *U-47*, and were other attacks by merchant ships ever properly investigated? Why was the convoy left by the escorts and why were the vessels kept together in formation all day giving the submarines ample time to converge and mount an attack? Even though the British could not decode the messages between the U-boats until later, the chatter should have alerted them to their presence. Unfortunately the March decodes of February signals, filed in TNA DEFE3/1' only begin on 26/2.

No escorts returned to assist the merchant ships: but the *Heather*, *Churchill* and *Leopard* came back to rescue the crew of HMS *Manistee* when she sank at daybreak. Presumably these were the vessels that depth charged *U69* and the *U96* around mid-day on the 24th. Could they have accounted for the *Marcello* also, or was she sunk by a merchant ship?

In May 1941 Captain Toder was hospitalised in Montreal with stomach ulcers, having handed over command to the 1st Mate Mat Frame in mid Atlantic. Toder had been in command of the *La Pampa* for 18 months, without more than a few days break. He died in October of that year and is buried at his home village of Heswall, Cheshire, yet another unacknowledged casualty of the war.

Convoy OB 290 left Liverpool on 23 February, with a six ship escort. The convoy was not detected until Prien, in the *U-47*, chanced on it on 25 February. He called in six FW 200 bombers, who attacked repeatedly. Aircraft sank the *Beursplein* (Dutch), *Llanwern*, *Mahanada* and *Swinburne*. The *Amstelland* (Dutch) was taken in tow, but sank on 28 February; they damaged the *Leeds City*, *Blankaholm* (Swedish), *Suriname* (Dutch) and *Melmore Head*. *U-47* sank the *Borgland* (Norwegian) and *Kasango* (Belgian) (from OB288). Her third victim, the *Rydboholm* (Swedish) sank on 28 February. *U-47* also damaged the *Diala*. The Italian submarine *Bianchi* sank the *Baltistan*. There were fifty two deaths; lost cargoes included aircraft, military stores and vehicles.

The next merchant ship to attack a submarine was the ss *Merchant*, which machine gunned one on 1 March 1941. This report has not been seen, it might help solve the mystery of the *U-47*, who was never heard of again. Another merchant ship initiated the next known sinking of a submarine, the *U-70*, on 7 March. After being torpedoed the Dutch tanker *Mijdrecht*, with an enormous hole in her side, swung and rammed the U-boat which was forced under the full length of the ship. The crew tried to surrender to the *Mijdrecht*, but three Royal Navy ships claimed the credit for the sinking, as the submarine had 'only been lightly damaged by the *Mijdrecht*.'

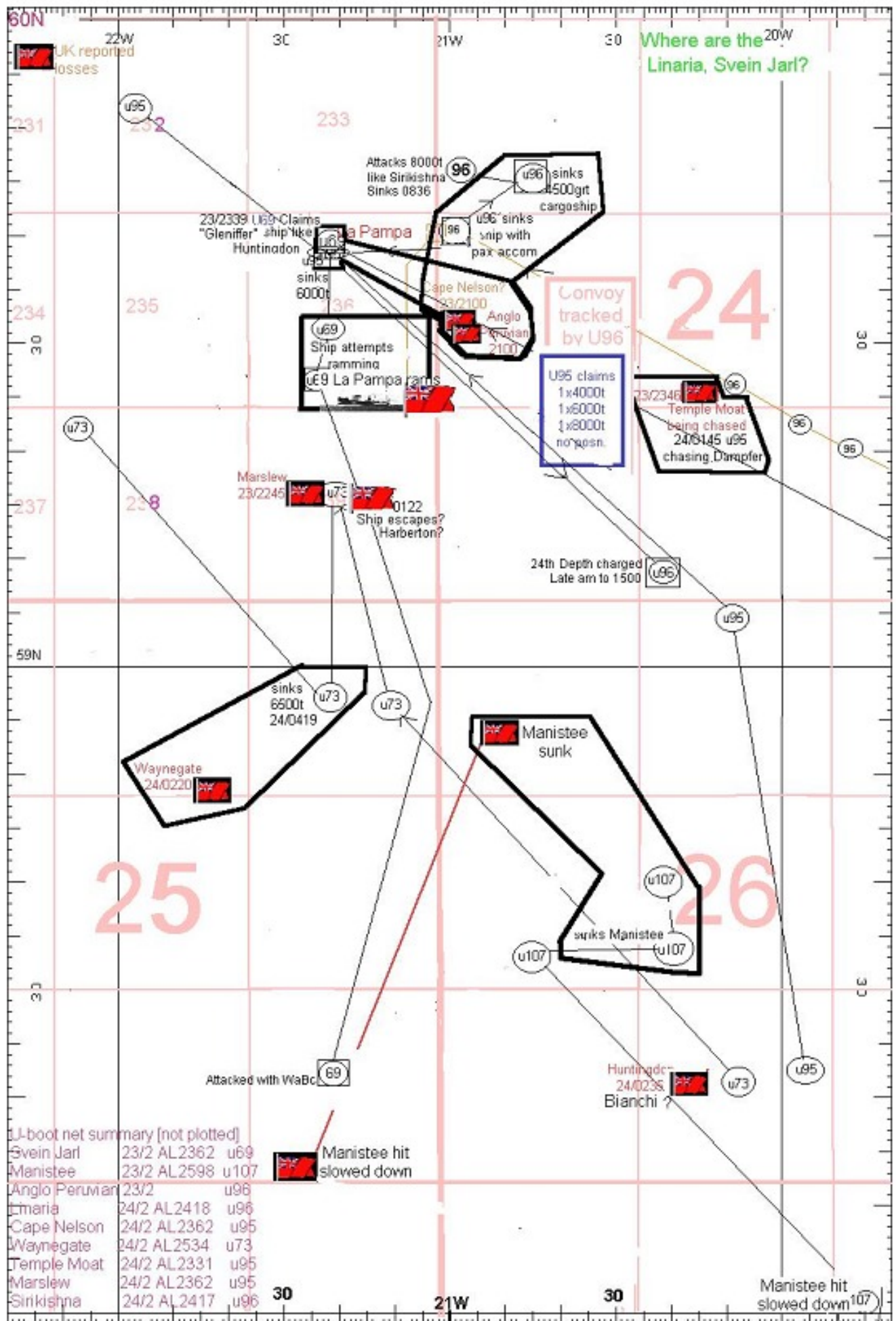
In a telegram entitled 'Report on military situation' dated 2/3/41, the British told the Americans 'Since commencement of hostilities 54,693 ships have been convoyed, out of which 192 British ships and 31 Allied ships and 19 neutral have been lost.' The Americans must have wondered why the Limeys were bleating about only having a few weeks food and fuel left, when they had lost so few ships in convoy. For the Germans this was the first 'Happy Time'

In February the Western Approaches Command, under Admiral Sir Percy Noble, had been moved to Derby House in Liverpool. Admiral Noble appointed Vice-Admiral Sir Gilbert Stephenson to train the escorts at a base on the island of Mull. Admiral Stephenson became known as the 'Terror of Tobermory'; but the rigorous training he organised, and weeding out the incompetent, meant that the escort groups at last began to reach the standard needed.

On 6 March the Prime Minister Winston Churchill declared the start of the Battle of the Atlantic. In doing so he was admitting that the hunting groups that he had keenly supported were ineffective. As Minister of Defence he chaired the Battle of the Atlantic Committee. He presented a thirteen point action plan to the committee, to achieve a successful outcome in this desperate fight. In addition to the obvious need to hunt and kill U-boats and Condors at sea and bomb building yards, bases and airfields, his points included:

- Fitting 200 merchant ships with catapults to launch fighters, so that every convoy would have four such ships. (Only thirty five were modified)
- Concentrate the aircraft of Coastal Command over the Northwest Approaches, where the main convoy routes were moved.
- 'Allow' all merchant ships that could steam at 12 knots or more to sail unescorted. (*this resulted in even more losses and was later cancelled*)
- Give priority to arming merchant ships with anti-aircraft guns and improve AA defences at the main seaports.
- Improve the turn round of merchant ships at home and abroad and substantially reduce the number of damaged ships awaiting repair at British shipyards.

Immediately after the SLS 64 disaster the convoys SL65 and SLS65 were combined; their escort included a light cruiser, seven destroyers, a sloop and two corvettes. The much needed improvement in standards took longer to take effect and allied merchant ship losses were: March, 139; April, 155 and May, 124. When the improvement came it came was dramatic, in July only forty four ships were lost; and in the ten months from March 1941 the Kriegsmarine lost a total of thirty five U-boats.



U-boat net summary (not plotted)

Svein Jarl	23/2 AL2362	u69	Manistee hit slowed down
Manistee	23/2 AL2598	u107	
Anglo Peruvian	23/2	u96	
Linaria	24/2 AL2418	u96	
Cape Nelson	24/2 AL2362	u95	
Waynegate	24/2 AL2534	u73	
Temple Moat	24/2 AL2331	u95	
Marslew	24/2 AL2362	u95	
Sirikishna	24/2 AL2417	u96	

The pink figures are the U-boat block numbers