

## CHAPTER 21

### ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROLS 1944-45

**E**NEMY submarines sank no Allied shipping off Australia in late 1943 and the early weeks of 1944. On the 12th February 1944, therefore, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock issued an operations instruction<sup>1</sup> ordering a reduction in anti-submarine air patrols flown by R.A.A.F. aircraft. Close escort of shipping during daylight hours was to be given only in waters north of the 24th parallel of latitude. Hitherto R.A.A.F. squadrons had given close air escort in areas north of the 32nd parallel. In water south of the 24th parallel, air officers commanding were given power to declare temporary "areas of probability" or to order standing patrols "in the vicinity of focal points or along shipping routes as the situation requires".

Two months later, in April 1944, there were still no indications of enemy submarine activity, and Bostock ordered further reductions in close escort. This kind of protection would now only be given along the shipping routes between Darwin and Thursday Island and in the waters of the Solomon Sea to the north of 11 degrees south latitude.

Even with these reductions, squadrons engaged in anti-submarine patrols were finding it difficult to meet their commitments. They were overstraining their maintenance and too much of their effort was going into patrolling and too little into the training of crews for squadrons engaged in the forward battle areas. However, with still further reductions in patrol requirements, the situation eased, and, in July 1944, two reserve squadrons, Nos. 71 and 73, were released from anti-submarine patrol work and declared non-operational.

The success of the offensive, which was taking the war farther and farther from Australia, and the lack of enemy submarines off the Australian coast, had led to a slackening which was deplored by Air Commodore Charlesworth, Air Officer Commanding, Eastern Area. He reported: "It is apparent that both the Navy and merchant ships are fairly complacent about the submarine risk in Eastern Area waters. This has resulted in a general slackening off in procedure; ships are seldom where they should be, and a minority of merchant ships identify themselves to aircraft. . . ." However, on the 20th September 1944, organisations concerned with the protection of shipping from submarine attack were placed on the alert again when they were warned that German submarines might appear in Australian waters "in the near future". It was expected that they would operate off Fremantle, but their range was such that they could operate along shipping routes within the boundaries of Southern and Eastern Areas.

In mid-1944 Patrol Air Wing 10 of the United States Navy was withdrawn from its base at Crawley, near Perth, from which it had operated since 1942. As a result of this move, Western Area after July 1944 was

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<sup>1</sup> No. 17/1944.

unable to maintain long-range reconnaissance. The withdrawal of the Americans placed additional burdens on the R.A.A.F. in Western Area and much of the extra work was carried out by the Beaufort crews of No. 14 Squadron. When the reports of the possibility of German submarines operating off Australia came through, No. 14 Squadron was called on to provide special patrols because it was believed that the Germans might attack Allied submarines operating in the exercise area and proceeding to and from base at Fremantle. The special patrols required 22 hours flying daily by the squadron and it was found necessary to withdraw detachments from Pinjarra and Learmonth in order to maintain this effort. In October the patrols were reduced again, but doubled in December, when a German submarine attacked off the South Australian coast.

This submarine attacked the Greek motor vessel *Illois* on 9th December. The vessel was steaming through a haze off Kingston in the south-east of South Australia, when, at 2.15 p.m. it encountered the submarine. Apparently surprised in the haze, the submarine fired four shots in quick succession, one falling twenty yards astern, one flying overhead, while the other two were wide. A few seconds later, before its nationality could be determined, the submarine crash-dived.

Radio signals quickly brought R.A.A.F. planes to the scene and searches were ordered by Southern Area. Beauforts of No. 1 Operational Training Unit, East Sale, and Ansons and Beaufighters from Laverton hunted exhaustively but failed to find the enemy submarine. The submarine concerned was *U.862*, commanded by Korvettenkapitan Heinrich Timm. On this occasion, the U-boat was frustrated in its attempt to sink the *Illois* by the arrival of R.A.A.F. aircraft.<sup>2</sup>

It was calculated that the submarine which fired on the *Illois* could be in Eastern Area waters by 11th December, and on that day Eastern Area patrols were altered to cover Sugarloaf Point to Bateman's Bay and forty miles to seaward. By 14th December a careful watch was being kept in the Brisbane area in case the submarine appeared there.

Eastern and Southern Areas were therefore on the alert when, on 25th December, an American Liberty ship, *Robert J. Walker*, was attacked off Moruya, just outside the southernmost extremity of the then covered area. *U.862* attacked with torpedoes, the first of which damaged the *Robert J. Walker* amidships. The second was exploded by gun fire. After the third struck, at 5.58 a.m., the vessel was abandoned. A Beaufort of No. 15 Squadron, based at Camden, arrived over the ship at 6.8 a.m., ten minutes after the last and fatal torpedo had struck home.

The first intimation of the submarine attack had arrived in the form of a signal from the vessel to the navy which was sent at 2.52 a.m. It was not until some thirty minutes later that the navy advised the R.A.A.F. Air Operations Room. The R.A.A.F. ordered No. 15 Squadron to increase its stand-by to three aircraft and shortly afterwards Rathmines was ordered to send its stand-by aircraft to the scene of the attack.

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<sup>2</sup> This information is contained in a captured German Naval Staff Diary.

Some weeks later the United States Liaison Office in Sydney asked for "particulars in connection with the delay in the dispatch of the aircraft" to cover the *Robert J. Walker*, and Air Vice-Marshal Bostock in a letter to General Kenney pointed out that the total time from receipt of information about the ship in Eastern Area until the first aircraft was airborne was 91 minutes. "After considering all circumstances and allowing for the time taken to brief the aircrew fully for the operation," he wrote, "I do not consider this delay excessive." He asked that the information should be forwarded to the Commander, Allied Naval Forces.

The first Beaufort to find the ship reported that it was sinking and that the crew had taken to the life-boats. Air crews watched over the life-boats constantly, until the survivors were picked up by naval vessels some twenty-four hours later.

On 25th-26th December five Beauforts of No. 32 Squadron, Lowood; three Catalinas of No. 11 Squadron, Rathmines; and five Kingfisher aircraft of No. 107 Squadron, also from Rathmines, carried out searches for the enemy submarine without result. A Kingfisher reported seeing a "cigar-shaped object" on 26th December, but the captain of the aircraft did not consider it was a submarine and did not therefore drop depth-charges. On 27th-28th December eighteen aircraft continued the search and one of these, a Beaufort, captained by Flying Officer Stone,<sup>3</sup> was lost soon after take-off from Lowood.

Searches were continued until 4th January 1945, by which time a total of 1,128 day and night search hours had been flown. During the whole period, odd, but not strongly reliable, sightings were reported and depth-charges were dropped on two occasions, once by a Kingfisher and once by a Catalina.

The presence of an enemy submarine, perhaps more than one, in Australian waters, coupled with the fact that the British Pacific Fleet was to move to its base in Sydney before operating against the Japanese to the north, pointed to the need for anti-submarine defences to be constantly alert. Following the attack on the *Robert J. Walker*, Bostock reviewed R.A.A.F. policy for the air protection of shipping "to determine the manner in which available air forces may best be employed to counter any future attacks". On 3rd January 1945 he wrote on the subject to the Air Officers Commanding Eastern, Southern and Western Commands. "As far as can be foreseen at the moment," he said, "enemy submarine activity in Australian waters must be limited to sporadic raids only. This leads to consideration of the aim which the enemy may hope to achieve by his effort. In my opinion, this is likely to be two-fold—firstly, to attack and sink specially important ships, the movements of which have become known to the enemy through Intelligence sources; and secondly to create considerable nuisance value. In either case I feel that, apart from any material damage which he may inflict on our shipping, the enemy hopes to induce us to withdraw naval and air effort from forward to rear areas."

<sup>3</sup> F-O A. R. H. Stone, 412039. 13 and 32 Sqns. Clerk; of Bondi, NSW; b. Duntroon, ACT, 11 Oct 1916. Killed in action 27 Dec 1944.

Ships of "special importance" which it was thought likely that the German submarines would attempt to sink were classified in an R.A.A.F. Command Operation Instruction<sup>4</sup> of 11th January 1945 as: aircraft carriers and capital ships; troopships carrying more than 2,000 troops; naval auxiliaries and other ships which in the opinion of the Area Commander concerned, fell into the category of "specially important".

Force "Aintree", consisting of H.M.S. *Achilles* (escort) and the *Rimutaka*, carrying the Governor-General of Australia (H.R.H. the Duke of Gloucester) and members of his staff, entered Eastern Area waters in January 1945. This convoy came within the category of ships of "special importance", but unfortunately a Catalina which was assigned to cover the convoy on 27th January, as it entered Eastern Area, could not find it. The Catalina was still searching for the convoy at 10 p.m. when its radar became unserviceable. The relief Catalina took up the search but at 3 a.m. next morning it also reported that its radar was unserviceable. As a result of this double failure the convoy was without close escort during the night. Bostock, when he learned of this incident, directed that the radar maintenance in No. 11 Squadron should be investigated.

On 6th February *U.862* struck again, this time in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Western Australia. It torpedoed the motor vessel *Peter Silvester* at 2.40 p.m. 800 miles from Fremantle on a bearing of 259 degrees. The vessel was then on a north-westerly course en route from Melbourne to Colombo. It was hit by six torpedoes, the third and fourth of which struck home about forty minutes after the first two. The vessel broke in half forward of the bridge, the stern portion remaining afloat while the part forward of the bridge sank. There had been no warning of the attack. After the torpedoes had struck the ship the submarine surfaced about 400 yards away.

Four days later the Royal Australian Navy received a signal from the motor vessel *Cape Edmont* that it had picked up fifteen survivors from the *Peter Silvester* at dawn on 9th February. The Navy informed Western Area and a search for survivors was carried out by Liberators of No. 25 Squadron and two Catalinas of No. 205 Squadron R.A.F.

One of the Liberators sighted twenty survivors on rafts and dropped rations and a "Gibson girl" (emergency radio transmitter). The aircraft remained airborne for sixteen hours and a half, and during the search visibility was limited to two miles with a ceiling of 500 feet. The survivors sighted were on two rafts lashed together.

On 13th February another Liberator sighted two rafts containing at least nineteen survivors and one life-boat with eleven survivors. The Liberator remained in the area for forty minutes and, after dropping supplies, it guided the American vessel *Corpus Christi* to the craft, and these survivors were rescued. The following day one of the two No. 25 Squadron Liberators detailed to search east of the original area of the sinking of the *Peter Silvester* crashed and burned while taking off. Five of the crew were killed but the remainder escaped with slight shock and abrasions.

<sup>4</sup> No. 14/1945.

On 28th February (twenty-two days after the submarine attack), a life-boat with twenty survivors from the *Peter Silvester* was picked up by H.M.S. *Activity* some 580 miles from the position of the sinking. Thirty-two days after the attack the last remaining life-boat, with fifteen survivors, was found by an American submarine, twenty miles west of Vlamingh Head light, North-West Cape. This life-boat, under sail, had drifted 1,100 miles in a north-westerly direction before being found. The occupants had been out of food for several days but still had sufficient water. A final reckoning revealed that a total of 143 people from six rafts and four life-boats had been rescued. Between 24 and 34 were posted missing, believed killed, by the torpedo explosions or from drowning when the forward part of the vessel went down.

Crews of searching Liberators stated that a metal mirror with sighting hole was the most effective means of attracting their attention. An officer of the *Peter Silvester*, describing the use of the mirror, said: "On Tuesday, 13th February, we sighted an aeroplane. It was just a pin-point. It circled around for half an hour. We got out a metal mirror with a hole in the centre and kept it on the aeroplane. The aeroplane flew directly over us and then circled and dropped supplies. We got a supply of two breakfast units, two dinner units . . . the aeroplane came back and dropped a box. We could not recover it." (It was explained later that the box contained an automatic radio transmitter.)

The sinking of the *Peter Silvester* and the subsequent rescue of most of its complement was the last incident in the submarine war off the Australian coast. Anti-submarine air patrols continued until the end of the war, although on a reduced scale. Routine anti-submarine patrols by No. 14 Squadron in Western Area were discontinued after 23rd May 1945. However, Bostock warned Western Area that, although the European war was over, a number of U-boats was known to be in the Indian Ocean and, while they were still at large, there was a possibility they would continue to operate until their resources gave out. Therefore it was desirable that No. 14 Squadron should be immediately available to take up its duties of shipping protection.

Southern Area was finding it difficult to meet its air cover commitment and the Air Officer Commanding (Group Captain C. Eaton) blamed the lack of accurate information concerning the apparent alteration of course and speed of ships after leaving Western Area. "The greatest trouble," he wrote in his Tactical Appreciation for April 1945, "is experienced with units of the British Pacific Fleet, which at times have been sighted by aircraft between Mallacoota and Yanakie, up to 260 miles ahead of datum. This is the main reason for the forces not being met and also a great wasting of aircraft hours."

It was disconcerting for aircrews to have to fly over many miles of water looking for shipping which was not there. Bostock took the matter up with the British Pacific Fleet Headquarters and asked for better intelligence about ships' movements. The view of the British Pacific Fleet, however, was that the submarine risk at this stage of the war (June 1945) was

small. "It is therefore suggested for consideration," wrote the Admiral to the Commander, South-West Pacific Sea Frontier Force, "that A/S escort may not be in fact necessary, except in the case of movements of the most important B.P.F. Units, and then only if incapable of providing their own Air Patrols." The R.A.N. promised that, in case of necessity, where the provision of air cover was required, instructions would be issued to the ships concerned to enable a more satisfactory plotted position to be maintained. On 9th August, however, the R.A.N. advised Air Vice-Marshal Bostock that it was closing down the war ship plots at air operations rooms and withdrawing personnel. The following week the war ended.