

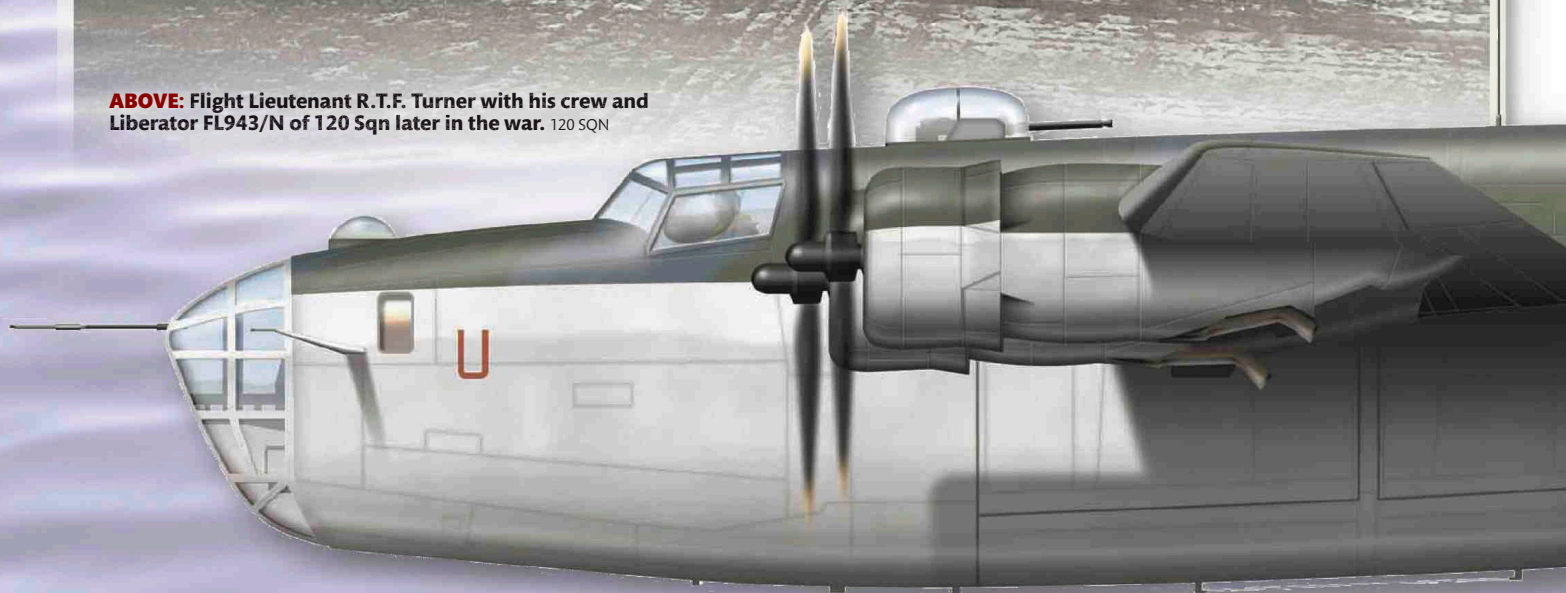
Ulster's U-b

Three months in a long

TOM DOCHERTY outlines the first three months of operations by Coastal Command Liberators and Fortresses from Aldergrove in 1943, when the war against U-boats began to succeed



ABOVE: Flight Lieutenant R.T.F. Turner with his crew and Liberator FL943/N of 120 Sqn later in the war. 120 SQN



Boat Killers

war

The New Year of 1943 was to see a change of role once again for the RAF airfield at Aldergrove in Northern Ireland, and during the week commencing January 21 Wg Cdr N.M.S. Russell of No 15 Group visited the station to discuss a proposal to operate Consolidated Liberators from there. This proposal would bring Aldergrove back into the forefront of Coastal Command operations in the Atlantic where the U-boat fleet was crippling Allied convoys. The units moving into Aldergrove would begin to change that.

On February 10, Wg Cdr P.A. Gilchrist DFC, the commanding officer of No 120 Sqn, and Wg Cdr L.H.C. Auys, the chief technical officer at Ballykelly, arrived at Aldergrove to discuss the move of 120 and 220 Sqn from Ballykelly to Aldergrove. Four days later the main parties of both squadrons arrived from Ballykelly and a Boeing Fortress of No 220 Sqn flew the first sortie from Aldergrove on the 15th landing at Nutts Corner on its return.

In February 1943, No 86 Sqn was operating from Thorney Island with the Liberator Mk III. By February 23, the squadron was detaching aircraft to Aldergrove for operations, the Liberators returning to Thorney Island for inspections. The first No 86 Sqn sortie from Aldergrove was an anti-submarine escort flown by Sqn Ldr R.B. Fleming in Liberator Mk IIIa FL931/M.

No 120 Sqn flew its first sortie from Aldergrove on February 6, when Fg Off Goodfellow took Liberator Mk III FL933 on patrol. A U-boat was sighted but no attack was made. The squadron would not fully move into Aldergrove from Ballykelly until February 14, while maintaining a



Liberator Mk III FL913/E of 120 Sqn at Ballykelly. 120 SQN

detachment in Iceland. Five days later the squadron received a new CO, Wg Cdr Gilchrist.

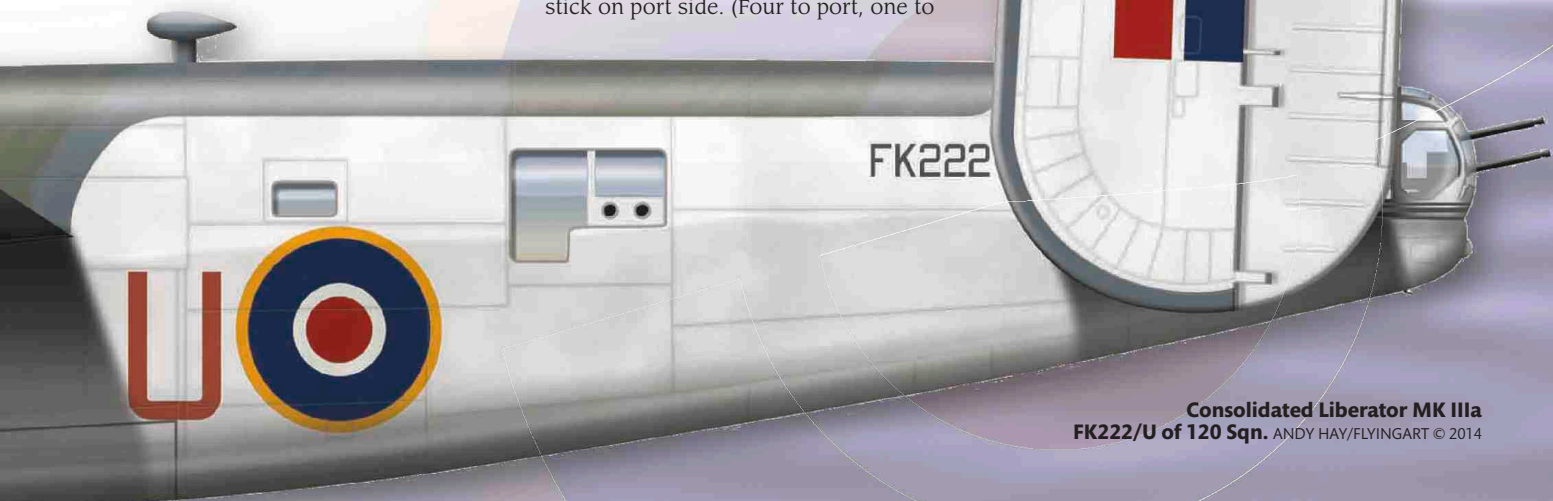
First "kill"

No 120 Sqn was credited with the destruction of U-529 in position 5545N 3109W on February 15 – an auspicious start to the squadron's sojourn at Aldergrove. The combat report and intelligence analysis of this sortie make interesting reading:

Combat Report Fg Off Turner

On A/S sweep flying on track 001 degs at 3000ft, in weather 10/10 cloud, bearing 030 degs Green distant 7-8 miles, in position 55 degs 45 mins N31 degs 09 min W course 260 deg 6 kts. U/B appeared to be German 517 ton type with gun forward of conning tower, mottled brown and grey camouflage. Aircraft attacked from U/B's port bow at angle of 40 degs to track releasing from 70ft 6 Mark XI Torpex depth charges, set to shallow depth, spaced 36ft, while conning tower and stern were still visible above surface. Evidence states that depth charges straddled U/B just aft of conning tower with centre of stick on port side. (Four to port, one to

starb). After depth charge explosion oil and air bubbles were seen, the oil was heavy and formed a streaked patch 150-200ft in diameter. Wreckage was also seen in the form of a dark cylindrical dome headed object of which about 2ft was showing in the oil patch, a rectangular box like object, black and 6 x 4ft together with numerous small pieces of dark coloured debris. Aircraft remained in area for 10min and then sighted 1 M/V, *Shooting Star*, in position 56deg 56min N30 degs 50min W course 270deg 10 kts, details of attack being reported to this M/V by V/S. At 1348 aircraft sighted another M/V, *Sidney Star*, in position 50deg 17min N 30deg 33min W course 215deg 10 kts, again details of attack were reported to this M/V by V/S. The ►



**Consolidated Liberator MK IIIa
FK222/U of 120 Sqn.** ANDY HAY/FLYINGART © 2014



Flight Lieutenant S.E. "Red" Esier seen later in the war. 120 SQN

position of U/B was 210deg 15 miles from *Shooting Star* and 235deg 37 miles from *Sidney Star*.

Analysis

"The excellent photo confirms position of entry of DCs and shows in the air just above the U/B's after deck an object which may be No 5 DC having bounced off the hull. No 4 and possibly No 3 should have been lethal if the 35ft advance underwater and the 19ft lethal radius are upheld."

Result

"Excellent attack. The results indicate severe damage or possible destruction. The good

"Knowles continued on course then turned to port and dived to attack from 80ft dropping seven depth charges 12 seconds after the U-boat submerged"

and very valuable photograph confirms the visual evidence of position of entry. This successful attack undoubtedly saved *Shooting Star* from later trouble."

The captain of Liberator S/120, Flt Lt R.T.F. Turner, was to receive a DFC in October 1943 for this success and two others. The citation read:

"This officer has completed three attacks on enemy submarines in recent months, one of which, in February 1943, was assessed as sunk. Since the beginning of 1943 he has been operating as Captain of an aircraft

on operations over the North Atlantic. His keenness, enthusiasm and devotion to duty have been of a high order and he has frequently demonstrated his determination to complete his duties in the face of adverse weather. Flt Lt Turner has, at all times, displayed a fine fighting spirit and great perseverance."

U-529, a Type IXC with a crew of 48, was launched on July 15, 1942, and was captained by Kapitänleutnant Georg Fraatz. The submarine was lost with all hands.

During this period the crews of No 120 Sqn were living a transient life, taking off from one base and landing at another. The squadron was in the process of moving from

Ballykelly to Aldergrove and maintaining a large detachment at Reykjavik in Iceland.

Hunting U-boats

On February 21, 1943, 120 Sqn made a U-boat attack from Aldergrove when Sqn Ldr D.J. Isted DFC, in Liberator Mk III FK223/T, escorting convoy ONS166, sighted two U-boats. Using cloud cover to approach he broke cover and attacked the first submarine stem to stern with six depth charges. The conning tower was still visible 1½min later. During the attack the rear gunner opened

fire, using 150 rounds, scoring hits. The U-boat was attacked at 20.18hrs and 50min later when Isted returned to the scene of the attack two very large patches of oil appeared on the sea. The attack was successful and U-623 sank in position 4868N 2915W.

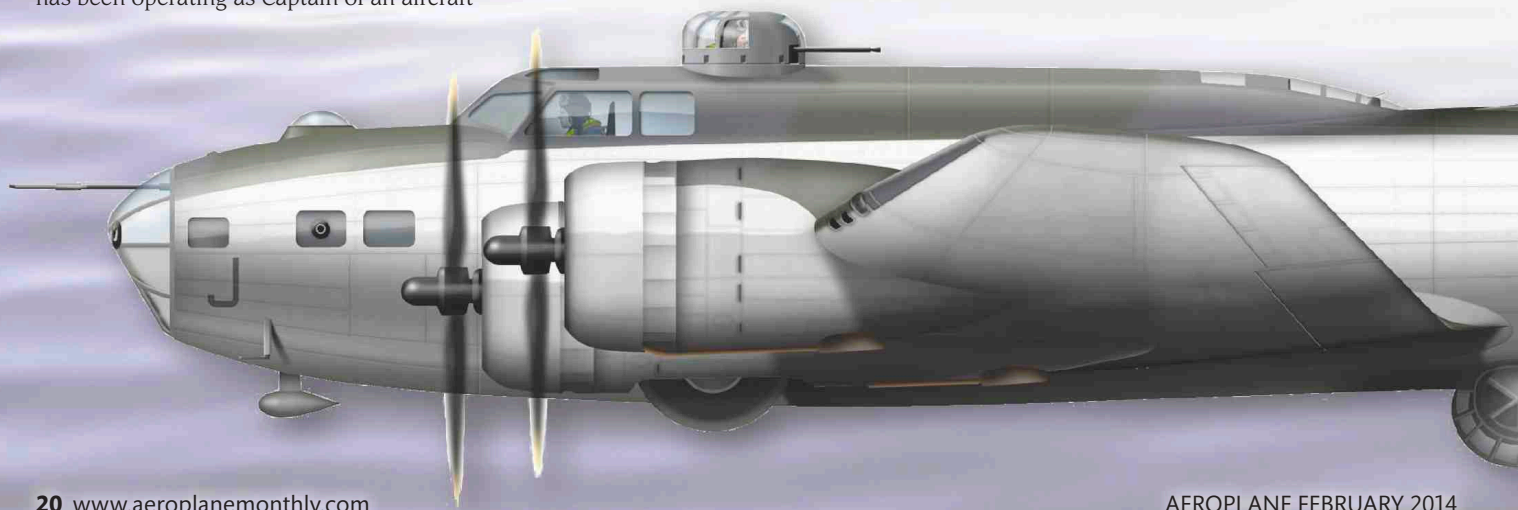
U-623, a Type VIIC U-boat, had been built by Blohm & Voss in Hamburg. Commissioned on May 21, 1942, it was on its second patrol under the command of Oberleutnant zur See Hermann Schroeder when it was sunk with all hands. The convoy SNO detached

two of the escorting warships following the attack, but they found nothing except two large oil slicks and its loss was reported by the commander of the second U-boat, U-91. A successful U-boat hunter, Isted had attacked and damaged U-465 earlier in February while flying from Iceland.

By March 1943 the Fortresses of No 220 Sqn were ranging far and wide in the hunt for U-boats and in addition to patrolling from Aldergrove were also operating from Benbecula and from Reykjavik in Iceland. No 220 Sqn was to see action on March 7



The final attack on U-529 by Fg Off Turner and crew in Liberator FK232/S of 120 Sqn on February 15, 1943. 120 SQN



BELOW: Liberator 2-Q of 120 banks to port during a patrol over the Atlantic.

120 SQN

when three aircraft flew a parallel track offensive sweep. Two of the Fortresses returned to base without incident, but Fortress Mk II FL459/J, captained by Fg Off W. Knowles, flying at 2,500ft sighted the track of a U-boat at five miles distance at 09.28hrs.

Knowles continued on course then turned to port and dived to attack from 80ft dropping seven depth charges 12 seconds after the U-boat submerged. The depth charges straddle-landed ahead of the swirl and shortly after the last had exploded a dark object, possibly the stern of the U-boat, appeared for about five seconds, followed by considerable quantities of oil. The aircraft remained in the vicinity of the attack until it reached its fuel limit and returned to base. The attack was made on U-633 which was thought to have sunk at position 5714N 2630W. (Recent research has cast doubt on the identity of the U-boat and it is suggested that U-641 was, in fact, the target and was not sunk). U-633 was sunk three days later – rammed by the SS *Scorton*.

Knowles returned to Aldergrove via St Angelo, where he landed to refuel.

Later the same day, at 16.13hrs, another Fortress sighted a U-boat in the "Rovik 1" patrol area. The Fortress dived to attack opening fire with its machine-guns, but the U-boat managed to crash dive before a suitable attack position was reached.

U-boats sighted

On March 11, it was No 120 Sqn's turn to battle the U-boats. Liberator Mk III FK214/H, captained by Sqn Ldr Isted, was on convoy patrol when, at 10.15hrs, a fully surfaced U-boat was sighted. It dived but the attack was pressed home with depth charges, unfortunately overshooting the target. Just 20min later a second U-boat was sighted partly submerged. Once again the U-boat was able to submerge before the Liberator could get into an attack position. A marine marker was dropped to mark the

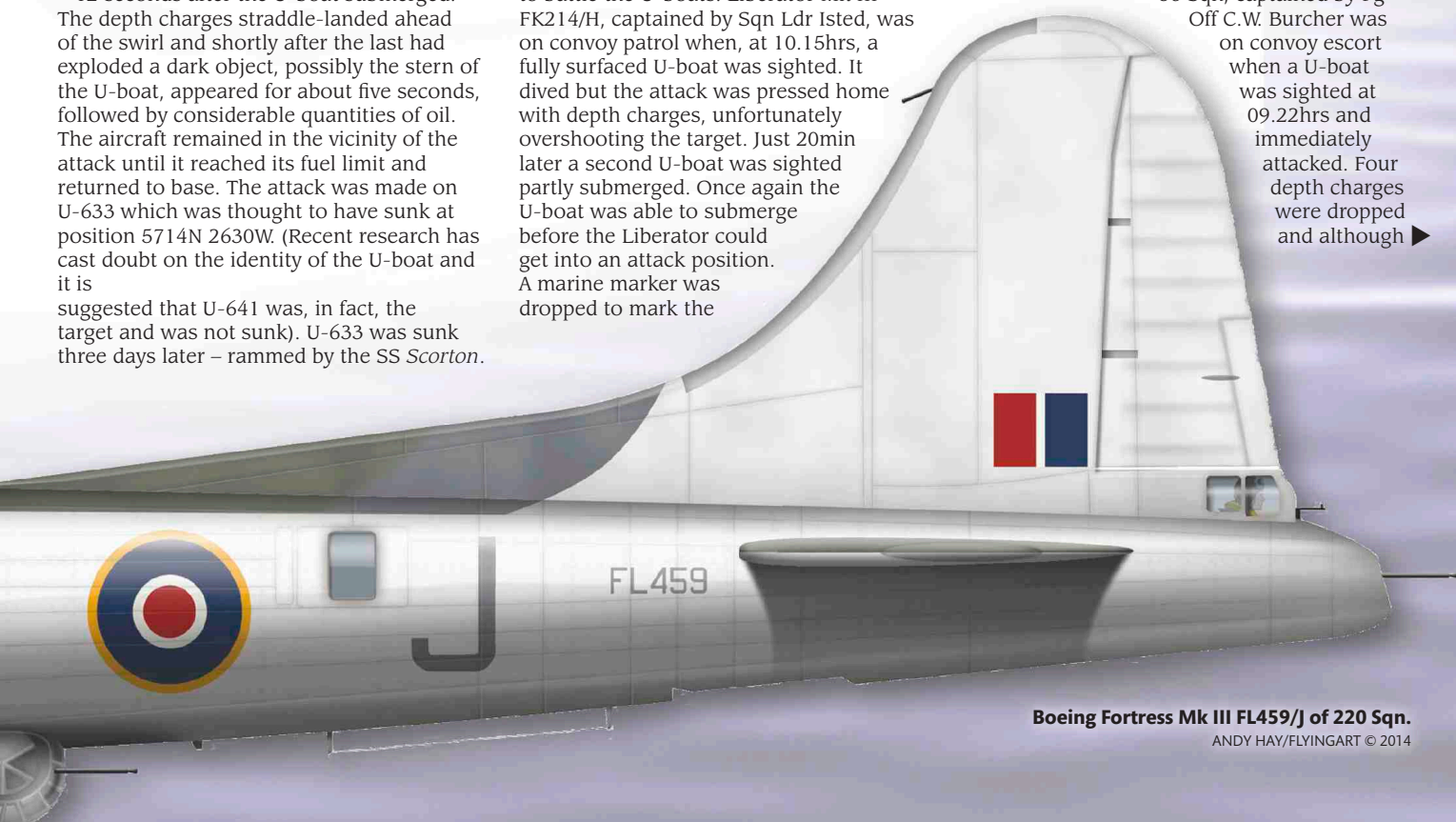
last known position of the U-boat and the Liberator continued on patrol.

Forty minutes later a v-shaped wake was spotted. Presumed to be a periscope, the Liberator closed on the target but it disappeared before a closer investigation could be made. The Liberator's eventful patrol continued and at 12.22hrs another U-boat was observed. This one was fully surfaced and H/120 attacked dropping two depth charges. Although no wreckage was observed, a long streak of oil covering an area three miles long and 60yds wide was observed. Yet another U-boat was sighted at 13.28hrs, but Isted was unable to attack it as all of their depth charges had been expended on the other targets. The U-boat was not aware of this, however, and immediately crash-dived. On completion of the patrol H/120 returned to base safely.

The Liberator equipped No 86 Sqn moved to Aldergrove from Thorney Island in March 1943, the whole squadron being in place by March 18, and was soon in the thick of things. On March 11 a Liberator of No 86 Sqn, FL930/R captained by Plt Off B.F. Gaston, sighted a fully surfaced, stationary, U-boat while on convoy patrol. The U-boat was lying ahead of the Liberator and dived so quickly that the attack was aborted.

By this period of the Battle of the Atlantic the U-boat fleet was being severely harassed by the long-range Liberators and Fortresses. The range of these aircraft operating from Ulster, Scotland and Iceland was such that, coupled with similar aircraft patrolling from the United States and Canada, U-boats had to take increasing risks to remain on the surface during daylight to close with and attack convoys. On March 12, less than a month after arriving from Ballykelly, No 220 Sqn began to move out to Benbecula leaving the Liberators of Nos 86 and 120 Sqn to continue the fight from Aldergrove.

On March 17, Liberator FL931/M of No 86 Sqn, captained by Fg Off C.W. Burcher was on convoy escort when a U-boat was sighted at 09.22hrs and immediately attacked. Four depth charges were dropped and although ▶



Boeing Fortress Mk III FL459/J of 220 Sqn.

ANDY HAY/FLYINGART © 2014



Liberators of 120 Sqn between patrols at Aldergrove in April 1943. Nearest the camera is FK228/M. CROWN COPYRIGHT

M/86 remained in the area for 30min, nothing further was seen of the U-boat.

At 10.35hrs another U-boat was sighted and once again M/86 dived to attack. The U-boat quickly submerged but the Liberator pressed home the attack with the remaining depth charges. After the attack an oil patch about 40ft in diameter was seen in the swirl caused by the explosions. On the return leg M/86 had to divert to Eglinton due to poor weather at Aldergrove.

The same day Liberator Mk III FK225/G, piloted by Flt Sgt Stowes of No 120 Sqn, was tasked with a convoy escort and while flying this spotted a U-boat in position 5136N

3014W. Stowes dived attacking it with four depth charges. The U-boat crash-dived 12 seconds before the Liberator reached the swirl and the depth charges were dropped from 60ft straddling its track 150ft ahead. A light oil patch appeared in the explosion area. Later a second U-boat's periscope was seen and Stowes made a steep diving turn, but the attack failed due to the depth charges failing to release.

Flying Officer S.E. Esler was also on patrol in a No 120 Sqn Liberator that day. Flying Liberator Mk III FK224/J, Esler and his crew sighted a U-boat ten miles off the starboard bow at 20.05hrs. On the run up to attack

this U-boat another was spotted on the bow at a range of ten miles. As the first U-boat submerged, Esler attacked the second dropping five depth charges from 100ft eight seconds after it had submerged. The depth charges landed 80ft ahead of the swirl and the U-boat re-surfaced in the explosion area, bows first at a steep angle. The conning tower broke the surface for a few seconds and the U-boat appeared almost stationary before submerging. Esler was in luck this day and sighted three more U-boats 40min later.

Selecting the centre U-boat he attacked from 200ft with the remaining depth charge,

BELOW: The 220 Sqn crew of Fortress II FL452 prepare to board their aircraft for a sortie circa 1943. VIA MARTYN CHORLTON



BELOW:
Liberator
KH265/OH-X
of 120 Sqn.
120 SQN



“By this period of the Battle of the Atlantic the U-boat fleet was being severely harassed by the long range Liberators and Fortresses”



it entered the water and exploded at the still surfaced U-boat's stern. Esler's gunners opened fire on the submarine for 30 to 40 seconds before departing. A sixth U-boat was sighted and attacked with machine-gun fire and marine markers scoring hits all around the conning tower. One of the marine markers scored a direct hit and a sailor on deck was probably killed. The U-boat quickly submerged after the attack and the Liberator left for Benbecula.

Sightings continue

On the afternoon of March 18, Liberator Mk III FL913/E of No 120 Sqn, captained by Fg Off J.K. Moffat sighted a U-boat while on convoy patrol. The U-boat was attacked with four depth charges, but owing to the rough seas it was impossible to estimate the damage. Four hours later Liberator Mk III FK214/B of No 120 Sqn sighted another U-boat on the surface and attacked with two depth charges. No results were observed but 40min later a further U-boat was located by Plt Off A.W. Fraser and crew and attacked with the remaining depth charges.

Again no results were observed. B/120 was to sight yet another U-boat at 21.38hrs. The 750-ton

U-boat was fully surfaced, but no attack could be made as they had expended all of their depth charges.

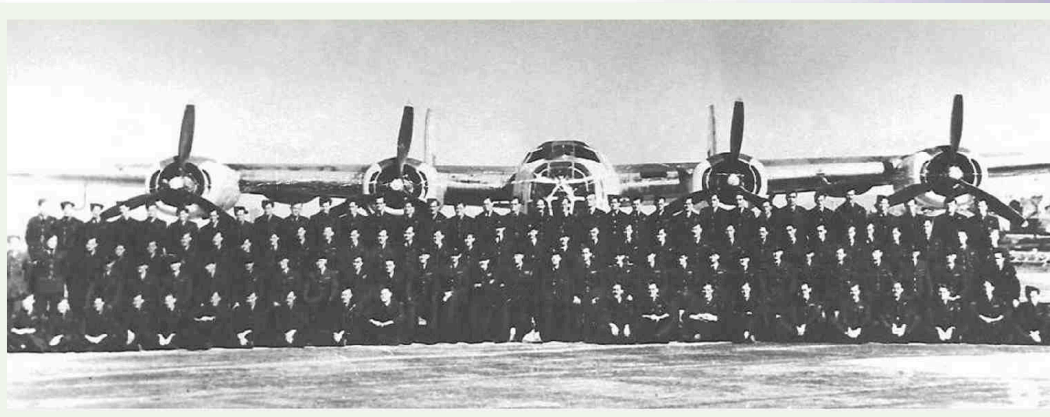
Liberator N/120 was also patrolling on the 18th and sighted a U-boat while trying to contact a convoy. The U-boat submerged, but later the top of a conning tower was seen. Unfortunately this also disappeared before an attack could be made. A third

Liberator, Mk III FK228/M of No 120 Sqn, captained by Sqn Ldr Isted, was on patrol over a convoy at 21.07hrs when a surfaced U-boat was observed. Isted dived from 900ft and attacked with six depth charges, dropping them at 75ft. The stern was still visible at the time of the attack. The first depth charge exploded 55ft ahead of the conning tower swirl, the remainder overshot. The tail gunner reported seeing the stern at a steep angle before diving.

At 15.50hrs on March 19 Liberator Mk III FK244/J of No 120 Sqn was requested to patrol 10 miles astern of a convoy by the Senior Naval Officer (SNO). The patrol bore fruit for Fg Off Esler's crew when a U-boat was sighted at 19.16hrs. Esler dived from 4,000ft to 90ft at 280 m.p.h. Pulling up to 200ft the Liberator attacked with two depth charges. These appeared to straddle 350ft ahead of the swirl 30 seconds after the U-boat disappeared. No results were

observed. The Liberator continued to circle the convoy and at the request of the SNO investigated a persistent shadower to starboard.

A fully surfaced U-boat was sighted and attacked at 00.30hrs in position 541 7N 2124W. Esler dived in the moonlight, but the attack was aborted when the bomb doors failed to fully open. The rear gunner, however, managed to fire 1,000 rounds at the 700 ton U-boat, many of which hit it in the area of the conning tower. At 06.12hrs on March 20 Liberator Mk III FL933/O of No 120 Sqn set out to find the convoy it was to escort. Several hours later the SNO reported the sighting of two Heinkel He 111s and the Liberator crew, captained by Flt Lt McEwen sighted them 700yds away and 2,500ft lower. The rear gunner fired two five-second bursts at them but no hits were observed. Ten minutes later two Focke-Wulf Condors



A group photo of No 120 Sqn at Reykjavik circa 1943. 120 SQN

were reported ahead of the convoy and, lacking adequate defensive armament to deal with them, the Liberator took to cloud cover. On its return to base O/120 lost two engines on one side and warned base to prepare for an emergency landing, but it managed to land safely on two engines.

Flying Officer E.C. Hammond and crew in Liberator Mk IIIa FK222/U, were also on patrol on March 20, providing escort to convoy SC122. At 23.30hrs they were diverted to Benbecula but Hammond found himself to be considerably west of his assessed position due to a change of wind. At 03.50hrs, their estimated time of arrival at Benbecula, there was no sign of land. Hammond decided to jettison the depth charges to save weight and they finally made landfall at 05.30hrs. Two and a half hours after their planned ETA

“The U-boat crash-dived 12 seconds before the Liberator reached the swirl and the depth charges were dropped from 60ft straddling its track 150ft ahead”


their position was still undetermined and Hammond circled until dawn. Fuel was now running short and at 06.15hrs one of the engines cut. Thirty minutes later dawn broke with 10/10ths cloud cover. Hammond endeavoured to find a landing place clear of cloud and at 07.45hrs found a possible landing place and force-landed the Liberator on Eglinton Marshes.

No 86 Sqn entered the fray again on March 28 when Liberator Mk IIIa FL932/H, piloted by Fg Off C.W. Burcher, sighted a Type 517 U-boat on the surface, ten miles from convoy HX230 during an escort patrol and attacked it with depth charges. Two of the four depth charges failed to release

and owing to the rough sea they were unable to estimate the damage. On the same day D/120 had to return to base having failed to find its convoy due to its D/F aerial being

struck by lightning. J/120 was also on patrol and sighted a U-boat. A diving turn to attack was made but the U-boat was able to crash dive and escape.

During this period of operation the squadrons based at Aldergrove had made 32 U-boat sightings attacking 23 of them and sinking two.

Thus ended the first three months of operations by Coastal Command Liberators and Fortresses from Aldergrove. As the year wore on the number of successful attacks on U-boats would increase and by the end of 1943 the crews from Aldergrove had played a large part in the defeat of the U-boat scourge. 

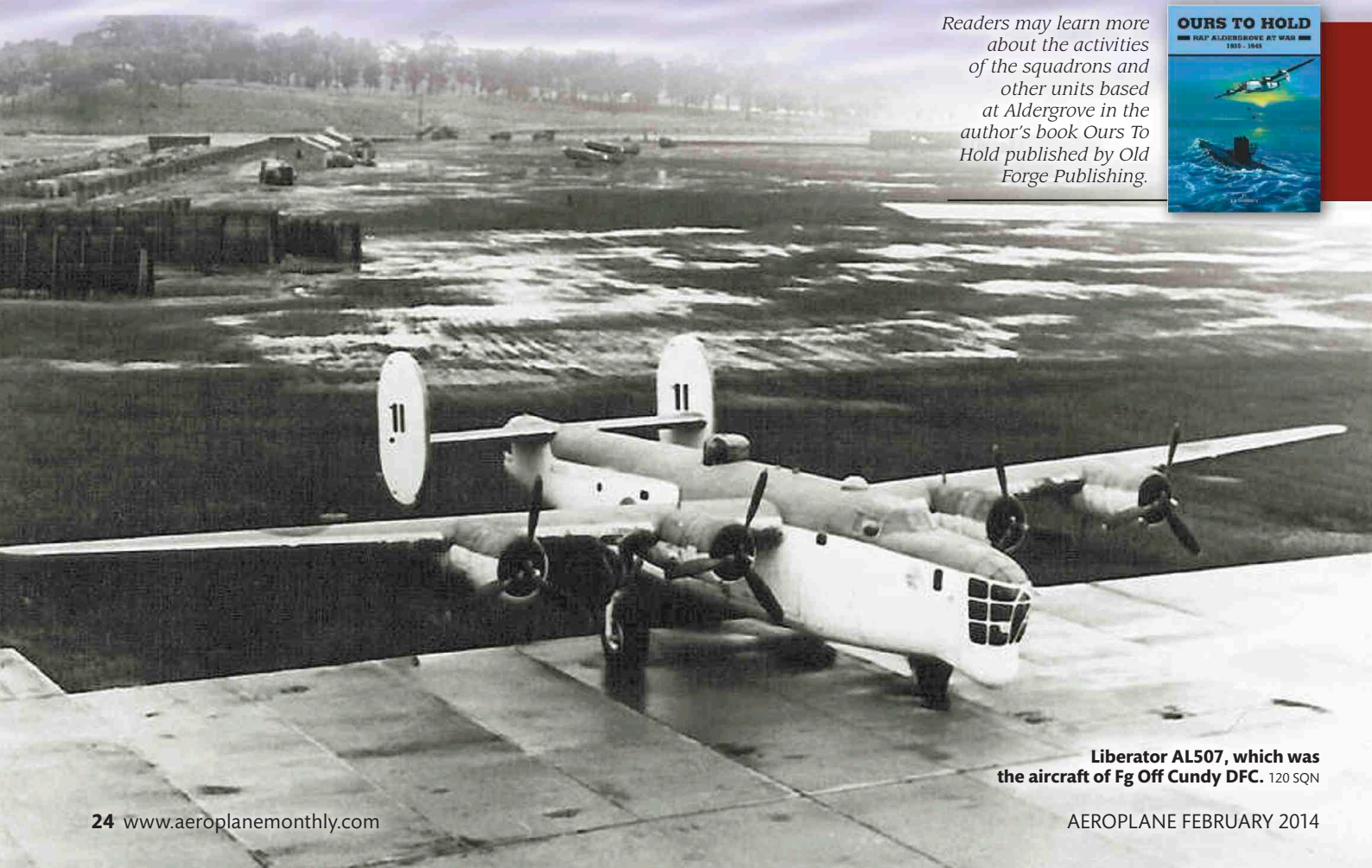
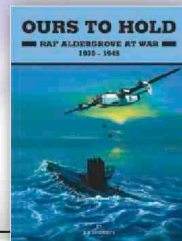


The nose-art of Liberator D-for-Donald, depicting Donald Duck smashing a U-boat with a large hammer. VIA MARTYN CHORLTON



A Fortress of 220 Sqn flies past Benbecula to head out to sea for a patrol.

*Readers may learn more about the activities of the squadrons and other units based at Aldergrove in the author's book **Ours To Hold** published by Old Forge Publishing.*



Liberator AL507, which was the aircraft of Fg Off Cundy DFC. 120 SQN