

F RTRESSES Ag

BELOW
A U-boat comes under deadly attack from the air.

In 1943, RAF Coastal Command's air assets began to have significant successes against German U-boats in the North Atlantic. **Chris Goss** outlines the operations carried out across that period by B-17 aircraft.

The battle between the RAF and the U-boats in the Second World War was a bitter one which cost many lives on both sides. The first recorded combat came as early as 30 January 1940, when the U-55, commanded by Kapitänleutnant Werner Heidel, was attacked by a Short Sunderland of 228 Sqn captained by Flt Lt Brooks south-west of the Scilly Isles. Together with HMS *Whitshed* and HMS *Fowey*, Brooks and his crew forced the German commander to scuttle the submarine. As the war progressed, such combats became increasingly frequent with the RAF committing more and newer aircraft to counter the increasing U-boat menace - all of which came to a crescendo in 1943. One of the aircraft used by the

RAF was better known for daylight bombing attacks over Germany by the USAAF; the B-17 Flying Fortress.

In May 1941, 90 Sqn received the first Flying Fortress Mk I. The Fortress was intended to make up the shortfall of RAF heavy bombers and it first flew a bombing raid, in daylight and with three aircraft, against Wilhelmshaven on 8 July 1941. However, by September 1941, eight of the original Fortresses had been lost through various causes. With newer and more reliable heavy bombers coming into service by October 1941, the remaining aircraft were absorbed by 220 Sqn, RAF Coastal Command, and based at RAF Wick in northern Scotland to be used as long range maritime patrol aircraft. In July 1942, by which time

220 Sqn was based at RAF Ballykelly, Northern Ireland, it had received the Fortress Mk II, as did 206 Sqn based at RAF Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides; in December 1942, 59 Sqn based at RAF Thorney Island in Sussex, would also receive the Fortress II.

First Successes

It was not until 27 October 1942, that the first Fortress anti-submarine success came. Plt Off Robert Cowey of 206 Sqn was carrying out air cover to a convoy when, at 11:25, his crew spotted the U-627, commanded by Kapitänleutnant Robert Kindelbacher, mid-Atlantic, 120 miles south of Iceland. U-627 was a type VIIC submarine launched on 29 April 1942 and was on its first >>



ainst The U-BOAT



LEFT
An unidentified
RAF B-17 crew of
220 Squadron.
In total, RAF B-17
crews accounted
for a least
eight U-boats
destroyed.



war patrol which it had commenced on 1 October. The Fortress dropped seven depth charges which exploded 25 yards from where the U-boat had dived. Afterwards, just a patch of oil was spotted. There were no survivors from the 44-man German crew.

By the start of 1943, 59 Sqn, commanded by Wg Cdr Geoffrey Bartlett, was still based at Thorney Island, 206 Sqn, commanded by Wg Cdr James Romanes, DFC, was still at Benbecula and 220 Sqn, commanded by Wg Cdr Patrick Hadow, remained at Ballykelly. All three were experienced RAF



RIGHT
A rare colour shot of a 220 Sqn B-17 Fortress II over a rugged coastline.



ABOVE
An early B-17 Fortress I of 220 Squadron.

MIDDLE
RAF B-17 Fortress IIs. The aerial under the wing was for Air to Surface Vessel (ASV) radar.



maritime officers, as were many on their squadrons. Sqn Ldr Richard 'Butch' Patrick, for instance, was a good example of such experience. He had joined 206 Sqn in July 1939 when it was flying Ansons and then Hudsons. Two years later, and having been awarded the DFC, he was posted away to be an instructor but he re-joined 206 Sqn in March 1942. His logbook shows that by 15 December 1942, he had flown a total of 1,800 hours.

The first Fortress success in 1943 was achieved by Plt Off Leslie Clark of 206 Sqn on 16 January 1943. Giving air support to yet another convoy, at 14:40 he spotted a surfaced submarine which was the U-337, commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Kurt Ruwiedel, south-east of Iceland. Clark attacked from 80 feet, dropped seven depth charges which straddled the U-boat after which the Fortress' rear gunner fired nearly 300 rounds of .50 calibre ammunition at the submarine. The crew then observed the U-boat sinking, stern first, until the bows were vertical. There were no survivors from the 47 man crew. It has since been suggested that this was U-632 which was not damaged in the attack, but it

would appear that the Fortress crew's report, and the fact bubbles and foam were still visible six minutes after the last sighting, would seemingly contradict this.

No Survivors

The next success came to 220 Sqn on 3 February 1943 when Plt Off Ken Ramsden spotted U-265, commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Leonhard Aufhammer, on the surface four miles from the convoy he was escorting. Seven depth charges were dropped from 50 feet, and on turning in for a second attack the U-boat had disappeared and all that was left was a spreading patch of oil. Again, there were no survivors from the 45 strong crew.

The next Fortress success came just four days later and again was credited to 220 Sqn. This time, Plt Off G Robertson managed to creep up on U-624 (Kapitänleutnant Ulrich Graf von Soden-Frauenhofen) almost undetected, and burst out of cloud less than a mile from the U-boat. Of the seven depth charges dropped, two effectively straddled the submarine which, again, went down with all 45 hands. Not all attacks were as successful, though.



On 12 December 1942, Sqn Ldr Richard Patrick had carried out an attack on a submarine and at 12:42 on 9 February 1943, was far more optimistic as his U-Boat Assessment Form records:

“...sighted U/B on surface bearing 360 degrees distant six miles in position 56 degrees 12 mins N, 20.59 W course 195 degrees 12 knots. U/B was German dark blue grey with one gun forward of conning tower... Aircraft attacked from U/B's port bow at 15 degrees to track releasing from 75 feet six Mk XI Torpex depth charges set to shallow depth spaced 36 feet whilst U/B was still on surface with decks awash. Evidence states that stick was seen to straddle U/B, four depth charges falling to port and two to starboard. Conning tower was right in centre of explosion and U/B was lifted bodily and slewed through 30 degrees to port. As spray subsided, U/B was seen several feet higher in the water and had lost forward way. Aircraft circled firing all guns which would bear at U/B which gradually settled and sank on an even keel; a jet of water rose from just forward of the conning tower to twice its height



LEFT
A B-17 Fortress of RAF Coastal Command swoops low over a British warship.

persisting for two to three seconds approximately two to three minutes after explosions. U/B left behind it a white foam patch with a mass of air bubbles in the centre and aircraft endeavoured to drop the seventh depth charge on it but was unable to straighten out of a turn in time before it dispersed. ...”

There were, however, no U-boats reported missing on this date.

‘A Disturbance in the Water’

March 1943 would see a number of fruitless attacks, but there would

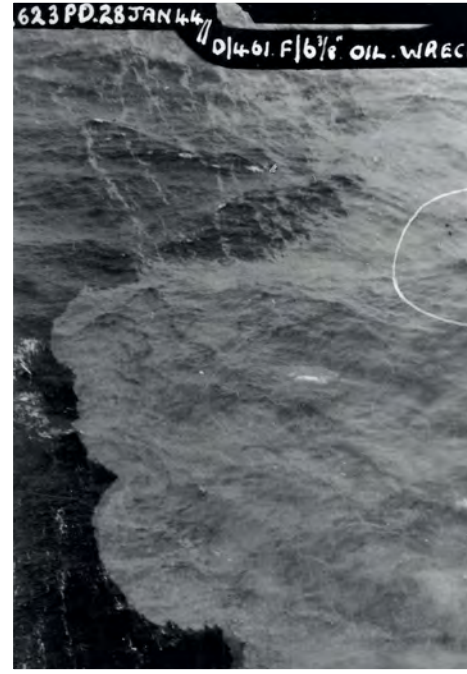
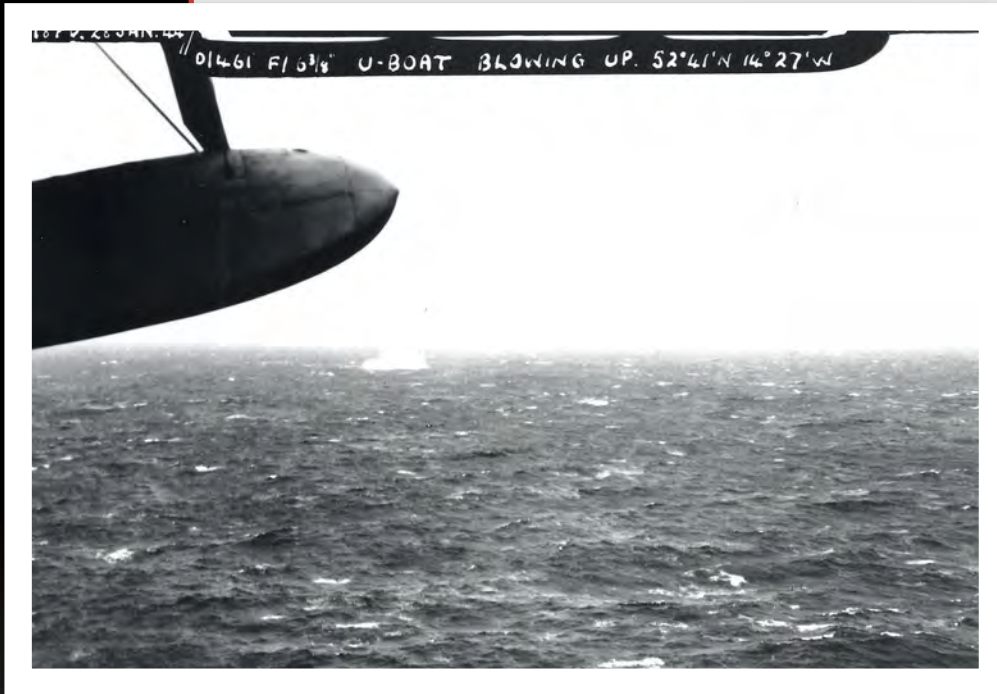
be three that were successful. First was the sinking of U-384 (Oberleutnant zur See Heinz-Achim von Rosenberg-Gruszczynski) by Fg Off Leslie Clark of 206 Sqn west of Ireland on 20 March 1943. This was Clark's second sinking which hastened his award of the DFC. This was followed by U-469 (Oberleutnant zur See Emil Clausen) which was credited to Flt Lt Bill Roxburgh of 206 Sqn south of Iceland on 25 March 1943, and whose report reads as follows:

“...At 09:59 hrs when flying at 3,500 feet a U-boat of the normal 500 ton type appearance and greenish grey colour was observed 10 degrees off starboard bow, and about four or five miles distant, fully surfaced and steering a course of 240 degrees at an estimated speed of five to six knots. An immediate attack was delivered and the aircraft released six depth charges from about 200 feet when in a steep-ish dive. The depth charges straddled the U-boat three on one side and three the other. In view of the dive bombing nature of the attack, the spacing was considerably less than 100 feet. The U-boat was still surfaced after the explosions and may have been listing to port, probably partly submerging before the stern reappeared after a few seconds in a sort of rolling motion and at a very steep angle. It hung in this position as the aircraft ran up to attack with its remaining depth charge from 50 feet, sinking straight down as the second attack was delivered along the length of the U-boat from stern to bows. A disturbance in the water in the estimated position of the bows followed...”

Finally, U-169 (Oberleutnant zur See Hermann Bauer) succumbed to Fg Off Adrian Samuel of 206 >>

LEFT
A U-boat leaves for another patrol in the North Atlantic, where the hunter would become the hunted by RAF Coastal Command aircraft.





ABOVE
This series of photos show an attack on U-571 by a Sunderland of 577 Sqn, RAAF (Flt Lt R D Lucas) in which all the U-boat crew were killed.

RIGHT
Caught on the surface, U-571 has but minutes to live.

RIGHT
Spray erupts around U-571 as Lucas and his crew make a second attack.

Sqn south of Iceland on 27 March 1943. In total, 147 U-boat crewmen had lost their lives in these three attacks.

Intercepted and Shot Down

March 1943 would also see a development in the air war of the Atlantic. In July 1942, the Luftwaffe had formed a unit of Junkers Ju 88 C-6 heavy fighters, normally used in the night-fighter role, to combat the increasing numbers of Allied anti-submarine and maritime patrol aircraft over the Atlantic. Armed with three forward firing 20mm cannon and three machine guns,



their first kill was a Wellington of 311 Sqn on 15 July 1942, and on 23 March 1943, they shot down their first of two Fortresses. 59 Sqn had by now moved to RAF Chivenor in Cornwall, but, to date, its Fortresses had not accounted for a single U-boat, albeit they had been credited with attacking and possibly causing damage to three. These were believed to be U-753 (Plt Off Stephen Duplooy) on 6 February 1943, U-223 (Fg Off Neville Barson) on 1 March 1943 - the Fortress was damaged by return fire in this attack - and U-441 (Fg Off Henry Kelvin) on 3 March 1943. April though, would see 59 Sqn starting to convert to the Liberator, still having not sunk a single U-boat with the Fortress. It was therefore tragic that Fg Off Richard Weatherhead and his crew, flying

WRECKAGE AND SURVIVORS. 52°41'N 14°27'W



discolouration of water about 40-50 feet across..”

May 1943 would be quiet for the Fortresses, but not for the other aircraft of Coastal Command. Sqn Ldr Richard Patrick of 206 Sqn reported just the one inconclusive attack on 30 May 1943; an extract of his report reads as follows:

“...sighted a large wake then U/B on surface bearing red 20 degrees distance eight miles in position 45.38N 10.55W course 270 degrees, 18 knots. U/B was not clearly seen but believed to be a German type, camouflage dark brown. It was noticed that U/B left faint trail of light blue oil with small patches of dark brown oil stretching for at least a mile before U/B dived. Aircraft dived to attack, but when four miles distant U/B was seen to be submerging. However, Captain decided to continue attack. Charges

set to shallow depth spaced 128 feet 45 seconds (timed) after U/B had disappeared. Aircraft continued on track then circled and when over position again a minute later...”

Enveloped by Explosions

There would be just the one sinking by a Fortress in June 1943 and this proved to be a spectacular combat. Wg Cdr Ronald Thomson DSO had just taken over Command of 206 Sqn the previous month. He had flown Whitleys with 612 Sqn and Wellingtons with 172 Sqn, and had been awarded the DSO as a Sqn Ldr with 172 Sqn for three attacks on U-boats by night using Leigh Light illumination during March and April 1943. However, on 11 June 1943, he had been in the patrol area south-east of Iceland for two hours when the crew spotted U-417 commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Wolfgang >>

in Fortress FK509, was intercepted and shot down by Oberleutnant Hermann Horstmann of 13 Staffel/ Kampfgeschwader 40 (13./KG 40). It was Horstmann's third kill of the Battle of the Atlantic and the following day he would shoot down a Halifax of 58 Sqn. In both combats, there were no survivors and all 15 aircrew are still listed as missing.

April 1943 would see just the one success by a Fortress and this was credited to Fg Off Robert Cowey of 206 Sqn who sank U-627 on 27 October 1943. This was U-710 captained by Oberleutnant zur See Dietrich von Carlowitz. Despite being engaged by the 20mm gun to the rear of the conning tower, the Fortress dropped six depth charges which straddled the submarine, lifting it out of the water, after which 25 crew were seen in the water. However, it has been assessed that U-710 had also been attacked 20 minutes earlier in almost the same location by Sqn Ldr Richard Patrick from the same Sqn, who reported the following:

“...Aircraft attacked from U/B's starboard quarter at 15 degrees to track releasing from 100 feet. Six Mk XI Torpex depth charges set to shallow depth spaced 100 feet 15 seconds (timed) after U/B had disappeared. Evidence states that depth charges exploded 400 feet ahead of swirl straddling track.... No after results were seen apart from brown scum and a slight



LEFT
Oil, wreckage and survivors (ringed) of U-571. None of the 52 crew members were rescued.

LEFT
A B-17 Fortress II of 220 Squadron patrols a convoy as its crew search for any threatening U-boat activity.

BELOW
A U-boat viewed from a low-flying RAF Coastal Command attacker.





RIGHT

The Junkers 88 C-6 aircraft of V./KG40 became something of a game changer when they started to range over the Atlantic looking for aircraft that were threatening the U-boat packs.



dinghies separated at night, which was unfortunate as it was not until 14 June 1943 that a Catalina of 190 Sqn, captained by Sqn Ldr Jack Holmes DFC, found them. After dumping fuel, he picked them up and took them to Sullom Voe in the Shetland Islands after they had been three days, two hours and 24 minutes in the dinghy. As for the American dinghy, this was not picked up by the USS *Symbol* until 17 June 1943, by which time only one occupant was alive, the remainder having succumbed to exposure. Both Ronald Thomson, his navigator Flt Lt John Clark and Wireless Operator Fg Off John Humphries were awarded the DFC and Jack Holmes was awarded a bar

BELOW

A B-17 Fortress of RAF Coastal Command arrives at its new base in the Azores, October 1943.

Schreiner which had set sail on 1 June 1943 on its first patrol. Thomson attacked at 11:10, and despite the Fortress taking heavy and accurate fire in the nose, cockpit, wings, bomb-bay and rear turret, he dropped four depth charges perfectly and the submarine was completely enveloped by explosions and sank with her bows rising to vertical; all 46 crew lost their lives.

However, the Fortress had been hit in two engines and shortly afterwards Thomson carried out a ditching, the eight crew getting into one dinghy. The Wireless Operator successfully transmitted an SOS and an American Catalina flying boat of VP-63, commanded by Lt Douglas Viera, USN, tried to land to pick them up only to crash - although its nine crew managed to get into a dinghy. Both



to the DFC for bravery and feats of airmanship.

Thomson's Fortress was not the only one to be lost to enemy action that month; on 14 June 1943, Fg Off Charles Callender's Fortress from 220 Sqn was intercepted and shot down by a Ju 88 C-6 flown by Leutnant Lothar Wolff of 15./KG 40 55 miles north-west of Cap Ortegal; all nine crew were reported missing. Charles Callender's Fortress would be the last one lost to German aircraft over the Atlantic in 1943.

Underwater Explosion

There were no further confirmed Fortress successes until November 1943, by which time both 206 and 220



LEFT
The crew of Fg Off Neville Barson (centre) of 59 Squadron attacked U-223 on 1 March 1943.



Sqns were operating from Lagens in the Azores. The strategic importance of the Azores had become increasingly obvious in 1943, and after protracted negotiations, Portugal granted Great Britain use of the Azores for a base in return for warlike materials and protection from Germany. The Anglo-Portuguese agreement was effective from 8 October 1943 when the RAF took over Lagens airfield on the island of Terceira and began setting up 247 Gp HQ at Faial.

Lagens, now called Lajes, was home to a small number of Portuguese Gloster Gladiators used for air defence and convoy escort. The RAF intended to use the airfield for anti-submarine operations and the first such aircraft, a 220 Sqn Fortress arrived from

Benbecula on or about 18 October 1943. The Author's late father-in-law, then Cpl Ronald Sherwood, had been posted to 220 Sqn at Benbecula in July 1943 and his personnel records show that he was then posted to 247 Gp, Azores 1 October 1943, disembarking from a troop ship at Angra on 8 October. He remembers the first 220 Sqn Fortress arriving, and the work which then followed to lengthen the runway. Sqn Ldr Richard Patrick, still with 206 Sqn until March 1944, recorded in his logbook that on 18 October 1943, he flew Fortress serial FA707 coded 'S' from Thorney Island to St >>

LEFT
Having sunk U-461 on 30 July 1943, this Sunderland of 461 Sqn (Flt Lt Dudley Marrows) was downed by Ju 88s of V./KG40. All the crew were picked up the next day.

BELOW
Oblt Hermann Horstmann who shot down the first RAF B-17 Flying Fortress over the Bay of Biscay on 23 March 1943.





RIGHT

The Ju 88s of V.KG40 sporting their new camouflage for operations over the North Atlantic, Summer 1943.



RIGHT

Not even the Mosquito was safe from the patrolling Ju 88s. Here, a 192 Sqn aircraft is shot down by Lt Gerhard Blankenberg of 15./KG40 on 11 August 1943. Fg Off E W Salter and WO R C Besant, DFM, were both killed.

Mawgan. The following day, he and his crew took off for the Azores only to be recalled, landing nearly two hours after take-off. He eventually made it to the Azores on 23 October 1943, the flight of 1,300 nautical miles being flown at 11,000 feet and lasting seven hours. He would fly his first mission, a convoy escort, seven days later.

206 Sqn would remain in the Azores until March 1944 when it returned to the UK to convert to B-24 Liberators, whilst 220 Sqn would remain in the Azores until June 1945. During this time, only three U-boats were credited to Fortresses of 220 Sqn. Two successes came in 1944, but the first was on 9 November 1943.

U-707, commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Günther Gretschel, had set off on its third patrol on 19 October 1943. It was spotted by Fortress 'J' of 220 Sqn, captained by Flt Lt Roderick Drummond, which had taken off from Lagens at 05:00. When 40 miles from the convoy, the captain ordered the guns to be tested:

"...Front lookout sighted a surfaced U-boat almost underneath the aircraft. U-boat immediately opened fire, Flak was heavy and fairly accurate. Tail gunner fired long bursts at the conning tower. Aircraft circled to port and attacked from stem to stern scoring many hits on the conning tower with mid-upper turret. Four depth charges were dropped from 40 feet. After this attack U-boat was seen to be stopped and down by the stern with bows well clear of the water and with a list of some 45 degrees to port. Aircraft circled again to port and made the third attack dropping three depth charges from 30 feet completely engulfing her. Several members of the crew saw a mild glow underwater amidships as from an



underwater explosion after which the U-boat disappeared stern first. Several members of the crew thought they saw survivors, 10 to 15 in the water. Large oil patch appeared over sunken U-boat with plenty of wreckage. Half an hour after the attack a man was seen swimming among the wreckage and observed climbing in to a dinghy. A parachute bag with rations was dropped by the aircraft..."

U-707 sank with the loss of all 51 crew. For this attack, Roderick Drummond was awarded the DFC.

Sadly, 1943 did not end on a positive note for 220 Sqn when, at 03:26 on 4 December 1943, Fortress FK206, captained by Fg Off Desmond Morris, ditched in the sea two and a half miles west of Lagens. Although four bodies were recovered, Morris and the remaining three crew were reported missing believed killed.

The Flying Fortress has generally been overlooked due to the successes of many other types involved in the war against the U-boats, such as the Sunderland, Liberator and even the Wellington. Nevertheless, it had more success than when it had briefly served with Bomber Command and, because of that, the significant part that it and its crews played in the Battle of the Atlantic should not be forgotten. ☉

RIGHT

Fg Off Richard Weatherhead and his crew were shot down and killed in Fortress FK509 during April 1943. The broken wagon wheel formed the basis of the 59 Squadron badge.

