

An Historical Vignette – Loss of HMCS Alberni – 21 August 1944

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The Flower-class corvette *HMCS Alberni*, K-103 was built by Yarrows in Esquimalt, BC. Work commenced in April 1940. Less than a year later, she was commissioned into the RCN on 4 February 1941. The *Alberni* and two corvettes built by Burrard Dry Dock in North Vancouver (*HMCS Wetaskiwin*, K-175, commissioned 17 December 1940 and *HMCS Agassiz*, K-129, commissioned 23 January 1941), departed Victoria on 23 March 1941 and were south-bound for Halifax, via the Panama Canal. The ships stopped for fuel at San Pedro, California, where a party for ships’ officers was hosted by Hollywood movie stars Mary Pickford and husband Douglas Fairbanks. The three corvettes arrived in Halifax on 13 April 1941. Ten days later, they were north-bound, to join the recently formed Newfoundland Escort Force in St. John’s. *HMCS Alberni*’s first convoy duty was the uneventful **HX-128** (44 merchant ships) which departed Halifax on 20 May 1941 and was bound for Liverpool.

From May 1941 until May 1944, *HMCS Alberni* was an escort in some 29 convoys in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean. The most memorable (or catastrophic) convoy would be **SC-42** (64 Merchant Ships) which departed Sydney NS on 30 August 1941 and was bound for Liverpool. The escorts *HMCS Skeena*, I-59 (River-class destroyer, LCdr Jimmy Hibbard) and three Flower-class corvettes *HMCS Alberni*, *HMCS Orillia*, K-119, and *HMCS Kenogami*, K-125, rendezvoused with the convoy south of Newfoundland.

When south of Greenland, convoy SC-42 was steaming at less than five knots through high seas and gale force winds ... and was well beyond the range of any air cover from either Newfoundland or Iceland (in the “black pit”). Bletchley Park intelligence revealed that the Admiral Commanding U-boats (Hans-Georg von Friedeburg) had placed 14 U-boats in the path of SC-42. Other east-bound and west-bound convoys were rerouted further south, however SC-42 was too far on its easterly course to be diverted south. SC-42 was ordered to take a northerly course towards Greenland and then an easterly course north of the wolf-pack. However, while steaming north, an SC-42 straggler was torpedoed, causing the wolf pack to alter tactics and intercept the convoy on their northern flank in the Denmark Strait.

The corvettes *HMCS Moose Jaw*, K-164 and *HMCS Chambly*, K-116 were dispatched to join SC-42. At about 23:30 (GMT+2) on 10 September (before reaching the convoy), the two corvettes detected, and sank **U-501** (11 killed, 37 rescued) in the Denmark Strait. *HMS Leamington*, G-19 and *HMS Veteran*, D-72 arrived on the 11th and sank **U-207** (41 killed). Sixteen merchant ships had been sunk before the convoy was in range of air cover from Iceland, on 11 September 1941.

On 24 April 1944, *HMCS Alberni* and another sixteen corvettes sailed for the United Kingdom for escort and anti-submarine operations in UK local waters. These RCN ships were assigned to *Operation Neptune* - the naval component for the allied invasion of Normandy which included escorting troop and support ships to and from Normandy on 6 June 1944 (D-day). After the landings of allied troops in Normandy, *Alberni* escorted three supply convoys across the English Channel between Southend Pier (*HMS Leigh*, in the Thames estuary) and Seine Bay (on the Normandy Beach): 14-15 June (**FTM-7**: four escorts and seven merchant ships to Southend); 16-17 June (**ETM-11**: five escorts and ten merchant ships to Normandy); and 29-30 June (**ECT-22**: five escorts and ten merchant ships to Normandy).

After a short work period in the Southampton dockyard, *HMCS Alberni* (A/LCdr Ian H. Bell, RCNVR) was ordered to relieve *HMCS Drumheller* on anti-submarine patrols to the east of the swept channel leading to Normandy. At 11:34 (GMT+2) on 21 August, the **U-480** (Hans-Joachim Förster) was in naval grid position BF3274 (roughly equivalent to 50°15’N 00°55’W, or 23 nautical miles SSE of the Isle of Wright) when the *Alberni* and a second “frigate” were sighted working together and approaching U-480 on bearing 336°T at range 3000 meters. U-480 had witnessed *Alberni* relieving *Drumheller*. (U-480 was one of the first U-boats to be coated with a special rubber skin of anechoic tiles, which made it very difficult for ASDIC (sonar) systems to detect such U-boats.)

About six minutes later, *HMCS Alberni*, was sweeping on asdic, on a southerly course heading towards *U-480*, when Förster fired an acoustic GNAT torpedo (3 meters depth setting) at range 1000 meters. Another minute and 19 seconds later and the torpedo exploded low into the corvette’s port side, just aft of her Engine Room. The *Alberni* sank like a stone. LCdr Bell was washed over the side as his ship sank rapidly by the stern. There was no time for any damage control or to release Carley floats. Thankfully, depth charges did not explode during her descent. After 45 minutes of struggling to stay alive in the open sea, the captain, two officers and 28 men were rescued by HM motor torpedo boats **469** and **479**. There were 59 casualties.