

# "Christmas Festival"—birth of an era

The first of the guided missiles — the homing torpedo — was unveiled in the tragic event described first time here

THE CHOICE OF THE TITLE "Christmas Festival" for an account of one of the more tragic episodes of the Battle of the Atlantic is explained in the text. The story describes how, beginning on September 19, 1943, the enemy—to use his own words—"made a unique and surprise attack in the Atlantic on a convoy bound for North America." This assault, which lasted several days, was no surprise, but the circumstances were, indeed, unique. The Royal Canadian Navy was, to all intents and purposes, present at the birth of the era of the guided missile—the missile, in this instance, being the acoustic homing torpedo, whose steering mechanisms was activated by the sound of the ship's propellers. For this first attack with a new weapon, Admiral Doenitz probably sent his best team to sea and results were expected which, judging by the exaggerated claims later put out by the German radio, were not achieved. Sent to the support of the close escorts of the two convoys under attack was the newly formed Escort Group 9. This account of what happened, was written shortly after the action by Lt. A. F. Pickard, RCNR, commanding officer of HMCS Chambly, a corvette that had shared in the sinking two years earlier of the first U-boat to fall victim to the RCN. Now a captain in the regular force, he is commanding officer of HMCS Algonquin and senior officer of the First Canadian Escort Squadron. Captain Pickard's story follows:

Toward the end of August we were considerably elated to discover that we were temporarily allocated to the Bay of Biscay. Eastward we went then and on September 8 the ships forming this new group to which we had been assigned—E.G.9—reached Larne for a short work up with HMS Philante. Operations of the type we were to undertake in the Bay were practiced with full-scale air co-operation and the ships soon began to get to know one another. E.G.9 now consisted of five ships: HMS Ithen, frigate, in which was the Senior Officer, Commander C. E. Bridgman, DSO, RNR; HMCS St. Croix, Chambly, Sackville and Morden. On the 13th September the group arrived at Dev-

onport and was placed under operational control of Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth. Orders for an immediate job were received, a conference held and at 1700 on the 15th September E.G.9, reinforced by the sloop HMS Crane, slipped out of Plymouth Sound into the grey waters of the English Channel. Heavy support in the form of the cruiser Sheffield was already in the Bay.

At this very moment, unknown to us but suspected, it appears, by Admiralty, a number of U-boats were being positioned in certain areas of the North-Western Approaches by an organization whose heavily protected brain—U-Waffe HQ—was located at a point not far distant to the south of us. If in the manner of a character from the Arabian Nights we could have now projected our presence within the plotting room of this place there is no doubt that we would have found its occupants very preoccupied, and smiling to one another with malevolent and anticipatory smiles.

Four months before, that part of the U-boat arm which had pressed so hard and so long upon the vital Atlantic convoys was made to bleed with such profusion that it found itself forced to apply a tourniquet and withdraw. Since then things had been quiet for us but it is certain that there was activity unbounded in those enemy departments presided over by the wily Doenitz. Improvements were devised and certain new instruments and weapons provided for his banditti who, when they had been well worked up in the comparative quiet of the Baltic, were ready once more to do mortal combat. To and from the U-boat holy of holies then, there must now have been hurried and hopeful comings and goings. The sinister schemes and devices into the compounding of which so many thorough Teuton minds had poured their patience and skill had reached the stage where they could be used to tear into shreds the Roosevelt-Churchill convoys and with them arrogant British confidence. The patrol lines began to form. The Propaganda Ministry cocked an expectant ear.

On this same day there sailed from ports in the U. K. the slow convoy ONS 18, escorted by B3 Group,

whose Senior Officer, Commander M. J. Evans, OBE, RN, had had to transfer with his staff at the last moment from HMS Towy to HMS Keppel at Moville due to defects in the former ship. The circumstances of this transfer were lugubriously regarded by the staff as being portentous of dark things to come. The motor boat carrying them to Keppel broke down in mid-stream and in the darkness they were only saved from being carried out to sea on the fast ebb tide by drifting across the bows of HMCS Gatineau. This fortuitous contact with Gatineau might also have been looked upon as an omen.

By the early morning of the 16th E.G.9 had passed south of the Scilly Isles but instead of now altering course to the southward remained on a westerly track, as ordered a short while previously. By this time we had begun to receive definite indications that the U-boats were out again, and later that day suspicions that we would not, after all, be going into the Bay were confirmed when a signal was received from Admiralty placing the group under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief Western Atlantic to act as a Support Group for North Atlantic convoys. Crane was detached to join Starling and E.G.2. Later that night E.G.9 was ordered to proceed to support convoy HX 256. The day also marked the departure of fast (9 knots!) convoy ON 202 and its escort C2 group (from which we had been detached but a month), whose senior officer, Commander P. W. Burnett, RN, was in HMCS Gatineau. With their sailing the pieces were all upon the board and each hour that passed brought nearer the resumption of that struggle which had been described by Admiral Lutzow as the "Battle of Battles."

HX 256 was briefly supported during the early hours of the 19th but as there appeared to be no further signs of submarines in its vicinity, the group left shortly after dawn to close ONS 18 which at that moment was some 125 miles to the north and entering a dangerous area. (HX 256 had been attacked late in the evening of the 18th, but the one ship that had been torpedoed was fitted with Mark

27 anti-torpedo gear, and, with the assistance of a tug, was able to stay with the convoy.

During the day submarines were indicated astern and on the port quarter of ONS 18 and evasive courses were steered in closing, as it seemed probable that the group had also been seen by the enemy. That evening of the 19th September, as the sun sank beneath a saffron-hued horizon, we had in the fading light our last sight for all time of the five ships together. In a few hours a fickle and inscrutable fate made her irrevocable decisions and the coming of another night would see a memorable battle joined. By 2200 the group was enveloped in the inky blackness of a cloudbanked, moonless night, steaming on a course of 040 degrees at 12 knots across a sea left restless from the recent convulsions of a storm. Ships were in line ahead 7,000 yards apart, with ourselves in the lead and ONS 18 about 60 miles ahead steering approximately 285 degrees. This would bring us across the convoy's port quarter, well clear, and thence astern of it.

About half an hour earlier HMS Escapade of B3 group had been heard over radio telephone (R/T) reporting radar contacts with first one and then another submarine close to ONS 18, one of which she was still attacking when at 2324 we ourselves obtained a radar contact 20 degrees to starboard at 3,900 yards, which gave fast hydrophone effect, classified as submarine when the range had closed to 3,000 yards. He was closing us at high speed but at 1,500 yards made a sharp turn to starboard and dived, his very large conning tower being observed at the same moment in the light of starshells. Good asdic contact was obtained and at 2331 he received the benefit of what was considered to have been an accurately placed 10-charge shallow pattern, which he seemed to do very little to avoid. We were a little disappointed that there were no apparent results from this attack, but at any rate it would have considerably reduced his eagerness to go snooping around the convoy. Itchen, who was next in line, had now closed but a search by both ships failed to produce a decent contact. The other three ships were ordered to continue on to ONS 18 under the orders of St. Croix who subsequently closed Escapade, which ship had received damage and fatal casualties from an explosion and escorted her to the convoy.

At 0142, a few minutes after we had abandoned the search, Itchen illuminated a radar contact of a U-boat, which was either the pal of the



SOLE SURVIVOR of sinking of HMCS St. Croix (by acoustic torpedoes from U-boat) was Stoker W. Fisher, Black Diamond, Alta. He is greeted by Wren Jill Humphreys. Fisher was rescued with 80 shipmates by the British frigate HMS Itchen which then was sunk the following day with only three survivors; the other two were British.

one we attacked or the same one endeavoring to make a getaway. (When located he was steering away from the convoy). This one dived almost at once, but was attacked by Itchen. Eventually he had to be left as the Senior Officer considered it essential to get to ONS 18 without further delay. A shadowy and pale moonlight had now come to our assistance, improving the visibility. This was fortunate for our radar had broken down and could not be repaired for the want of a particular tube. The R/T traffic, which had been quite heavy, and to which the escorts of ON 202 had been heard contributing, somewhat died down at this point. ("Quiet, Thank God!" states the R/T log cryptically about 0330. If only the telegraphists and coders could have listened ahead they would have regarded what had been recorded so far as a mere bagatelle). ON 202, with C2 group, were considered to be at this time to the north-northeast of ONS 18, slowly overtaking on a course of 290 degrees and perhaps about 40 miles away from them. And it was this convoy indeed, that was to bear the brunt of the enemy's attacks, both now and later. With the approach of dawn, while Itchen and ourselves were still following up ONS 18, HMS Lagan, a frigate of C2 group, was deprived of 30 feet of her stern by what was considered to have been an acoustic homing torpedo. Twenty-eight of her crew and one officer were killed in the explosion, features of which were the arrival on her fore-

castle, and in the whaler, of a fully primed depth charge, and the showering of the commanding officer with quantities of corned beef from the after store. Not long after this event ON 202 was itself attacked and two merchantmen, both in ballast, were torpedoed and eventually sank. Lagan was successfully towed back to the U. K.

The day broke fine and clear and with it arrived Liberator aircraft from Iceland, one of which attacked a U-boat on the starboard quarter of ONS 18 at 0937. This submarine — as most of them were to do later and as they had been doing recently in the Bay — refused to dive and instead enthusiastically pelted the aircraft with 20 millimetre shells. Itchen was left to deal with it and we went on alone. From the numerous reports it was obvious that both convoys were under enemy observation and at 1000 a signal was received from C-in-CWA ordering them to effect a junction during the day. Present but certainly uninvited at this meeting were a number of U-boats whose constant heckling and often vicious behaviour — to which the escorts replied in kind — had the proceedings in a continual uproar.

In the early afternoon ONS 18 was sighted at last, but almost immediately afterwards began indulging in a number of rather weird contortions which culminated in its bustling away off to the northeast. However, we outflanked it, though attempts to estab-

lish what was likely to happen next were complicated by the spectacle of escorts coming and going in all directions about the merchant ships who themselves seemed to be of varying opinions as to the objective. Finally Northern Foam, the trawler who was later to do a lot of good work, came our way. "Can you," he signalled, "make out what my night station is supposed to be?" As, so far, we have been unable to think of a suitable reply the matter has been referred to Mr. Ripley. We passed through the middle of the convoy looking for the Senior Officer and though we did not then see any sign of him we were very glad to see the other corvettes of E.G.9, refueling. Morden kindly lent us a tube for our radar, which made it go again. The radio-telephone, which was now going strong, was enlivened at this stage by an aircraft who, over a submarine near ON 202, was spotting Drumheller's fall of shot around it and exhorting him to "give the — — one for us!"

Keppel was finally seen on the port bow of the convoy but just as we were

about to contact him he became very busy with a submarine a yard of whose periscope he had caught in the act of ramming his quarter. A few minutes later, as it was obviously going to be impossible to get any information in the middle of all this activity, we turned back into the convoy to look for an oiler. As we were doing this we saw St. Croix on the horizon acting as a link between the two convoys, and this was the last we ever saw of her. Hull down beyond were the approaching ships of ON 202. SS Beconstreet obliged with some oil and also with some high old manoeuvring as, the convoy having just turned round again, he was full of zeal to regain his proper station. "Going to take another round turn out of her," he would shout over his loud hailer as we were getting connected up, and around we would go — 360 degrees, ships of all kinds shaving our sides and stern. Thanks to his efficiency 129 tons of fuel was fed into the tanks in record time without a mishap.

At 1900 the Commodore of ON

202, who was the boss and whose radio-telephone call sign was "Festival" called the Commodore of ONS 18, whose call sign was "Christmas" and ordered "Join me astern!" adding rather imperiously, exactly one minute later — as if he expected the poor old seven-knotter to come charging up in a mass of boiling wakes — "What is delay?" "Christmas" politely held his tongue. He was doing all right, and by the time darkness fell had brought his party neatly astern of "Festival's." Though this formation was not the most desirable it was the best that could be accomplished before dark.

At 1906 an aircraft reported attacking a U-boat 20 miles to the eastward, and St. Croix, followed shortly after by Itchen went toward the position. Almost 90 minutes later St. Croix was heard to ask Itchen if he had seen his snowflake, and then about three minutes after this he called all stations to say he was "leaving the office." Our suspicions that something nasty had happened to him were confirmed when at 2046 Itchen reported to Keppel: "St. Croix blown up." It appears that two submarines may have had a hand in his destruction, one luring him on into a position where the other could torpedo him. At 2041 there was another aircraft report: "Another U-boat coming to the surface; going in to attack." It was somewhere about this time too, that a large piece of periscope stuck itself up near Morden and was attacked by him for its pains. At 2125, by which time it was dark, Itchen signaled that St. Croix was abandoned, though her forecastle was still afloat and that a torpedo has been fired at him while doing full speed in the vicinity. "Will not attempt to pick up survivors," he added, "until Polyanthus (C2 group) arrives." Polyanthus, however, would never arrive. On his way to the assistance of Itchen he obtained a radar contact of a U-boat which he reported as diving at 2226. He was not heard from again. One survivor later recovered by Itchen confirmed that Polyanthus had been torpedoed and had sunk very quickly. Narcissus was immediately sent to Itchen's aid when this unfortunate loss had been confirmed, added interest to his progress being provided by two submarines which he met on his way.

The rest of the night, which was for the most part clear, calm and moonlit, was filled with alarms of all kinds, though nothing but starshell from a rather fidgety destroyer came our way. We were still a little fogged by not knowing where everyone was. Like the rest of E.G.19, we



"WET SUIT" self-contained diving equipment tests in depths of 175 ft. were carried out in November, 1959, by these members of the RCN Operational Diving Unit. Water temperature (off Alaska) was 30 deg. F. General purpose of experiment was to prove practicability of the gear under extreme conditions.

had arrived bang in the middle of a flap, with absolutely no chances of exchanging situation reports, to find ourselves amongst a lot of strange ships the policy and ideas of whose Senior Officer were quite unknown to us. However, everyone played the game, it seemed, by ear and what was necessary in the way of information was acquired as we went along. There was one R/T call sign that bothered us for a long time — "Toasted Cheese" — which always seemed to be on the air when we were at our hungriest. It was a little while before we discovered that this belonged to the trawler Northern Foam. His proper call sign had been Tallow, but the Senior Officer had deprived him of it because it was too like the one belonging to the MAC ship. (The S.O. got it from "Alice in Wonderland," so he told us afterwards; "Some had Tallow and some had Toasted Cheese." So far I have not been able to find such a line in either of the "Alice" books. Can anyone?). (See note below).

By daybreak on the 21st the weather had become misty. Itchen and Narcissus were now some distance astern, though Towy was to overtake by evening. During the afternoon and evening, with the other two ships of E.G. 9 we swept the stern and quarters of the convoy, but without any luck. ONS 18 managed to get itself more or less on the starboard beam of ON 202 to form a broad front, and by the time darkness had settled down once again we had taken up a position three miles ahead of the starboard column. Escorts now present with the 65 remaining merchant ships were: 3 destroyers — Keppel (S.O.), Gatineau, Icarus; 1 frigate — Towy; 3 French corvettes — Lobelia, Roselys, Renoncule; 1 British corvette — Orchis; 5 Canadian corvettes Kamloops, Drumheller, Chambly, Sackville and Morden; 1 trawler — Northern Foam: total 14. During the night there were many encounters and, enveloped in thick fog and intense darkness, one had the eerie feeling that U-boats were pressing in from all sides. Approximately nine attempts were made by the enemy to penetrate the screen during the night, all quite unsuccessful. Shortly after midnight we forestalled one creeping in from ahead, and chased him well out of it. During the pursuit, when we managed to get within 1,400 yards, the engines were turning 198-200 revolutions, but in spite of this the U-boat was able to open the range fairly easily. However we are sure we hit him with one of the high explosive shells. He started to zig-zag furiously and discharged

a torpedo whose very slight hydrophone effect was picked up ahead and followed down the port side to the quarter where it seemed to hesitate (!!) a few seconds before disappearing into the wake as the ship swung to starboard under full helm. A depth charge was dropped to disorganize its undoubtedly acoustic ideas. At 0440 Northern Foam detected a U-boat nosing about close astern which she depth charged and probably destroyed. Some amusement was provided when, a little later, one of the French corvettes broadcast indignantly: "Someone ignite me," — then "I am the hearse," he was heard to say, annoyed by the furious antics of one of his compatriots who insisted that he was U-boat and was doing his best to assault him. Not to be outdone, a poaching destroyer, sometime afterward, thinking we had a sure thing, rammed a corvette. "Having no submarine, partner?" queried the corvette coldly, who was fortunately not severely bent. However, in the middle of all this play Keppel, on the starboard quarter, rammed and sank a real U-boat.

With the coming of dawn it was discovered that we were back with the wrong convoy; Christmas and his ships had managed to drop well back and get four miles away from the boss's party, thus considerably confusing the screen. (We could imagine Festival stomping his bridge and muttering a lot of un festive remarks about slow convoys. Judging by his signals he did a lot of this, and we didn't blame him). There were some contacts by other escorts, but the enemy was repulsed that night on every occasion he attempted an attack. E.G.9 swept astern in the morning and early noon, and Sackville, who was alone, attacked and damaged a U-boat, using the remainder of his charges in the process. However, he and others that ran short were able to replenish from the escort oilers.

The situation was now working up to a crescendo; more and more U-boats were concentrating, and the air was charged with reports and signals of every kind. The extent of the traffic (and the amount of rest obtained by the hard-pressed wireless and coding staffs) can be judged by the fact that during the ensuing 36 hours there were over 3,000 radio telephone signals, but it is believed that no essential signal failed to get through.

In the early afternoon, the rescue ship Rathlin, who really belonged to ON 202, but who had by mistake got astern of ONS 18, created a diversion by sighting a rather surprised submarine between himself and the con-

voy. He gallantly went after it, whereupon the submarine dived and made no attempt to attack the convoy, evidently being just as astonished to find himself where he was as Rathlin was to see him. Gatineau made a hair-raising dash at high speed through the mist enshrouded convoy to the position, while everyone held their breath wondering if he would emerge in one piece. The recurring low visibility, until late afternoon, thwarted efforts to get the two convoys on a broad front, with the unfortunate result that, in the daylight available when the weather cleared, the best ONS 18 could do was to get itself astern of ON 202. The resulting narrow front was to prove a serious handicap to the forward escorts during the night. By early evening the weather had cleared, and aircraft both from the carrier and shore were able to take a hand once more in hampering the enemy's attempts to concentrate. Itchen and Narcissus rejoined, Itchen attacking a U-boat on the port quarter, while there were numerous duels between the aircraft and the enemy, one of the Liberators having an engine shot out of action. Indeed, the evening air was overflowing with action reports, and it was impossible to keep up with them all.

At dusk, as we were assuming our night station, 12,000 yards on the port beam of the port column leader, a U-boat astern of the convoy was engaged by a Liberator and for a few moments there was a fine display as the white tracer going skyward from the submarine passed the red ones on their way from the aircraft. It was a black though clear night with a low, heavy ceiling. The enemy was contained until just before midnight, when a U-boat who had got in close ahead was detected and illuminated by Gatineau. A minute or two later, when a number of escorts seemed by the reports to be converging on the same spot, a tremendous mushroom of orange flame leapt momentarily out of the darkness followed in an instant by an ear shocking explosion. In those few seconds, Itchen had been utterly destroyed, only two of her crew and one of the many she had rescued from St. Croix surviving. It was a sad and heavy loss. No merchant ship was torpedoed on this occasion, though a U-boat was seen close to the convoy.

As the reverberations of the explosion died away, a radar contact was obtained by us which was quickly determined to be a U-boat, closed and chased well clear where it finally dived and was attacked. Escorts all round the convoy seemed to be having con-

(Continued on page 124)

## Christmas Festival

(Continued from page 87)

tacts off and on, but it was not until two hours after midnight that the first successful attack was made on the convoy, three ships being torpedoed. At the very same instant we obtained a radar contact of another U-boat, which, when it had been closed a little, was seen to be showing a dim red light for some reason as yet unascertained. This went off when the range had decreased appreciably. At 1,700 yards he dived and it is certain he could see us clearly silhouetted against the snowflake then being fired (against

orders) by a few naughty boys in the convoy. As the radar contact faded, the ship was rocked by a heavy explosion, the disturbance from which was seen close astern, and which was undoubtedly caused by a torpedo. (Another bad shot). However, the asdic attack was not upset, and this one got a pattern that, from a resulting smell of oil, we were convinced damaged him. Unluckily the asdic broke down at this point, and could not be repaired in time to be of any further use on this submarine.

At 0653, Ship Eleven was damaged by a torpedo exploding in her bow wave, and though not by any means sinking, was abandoned. About half

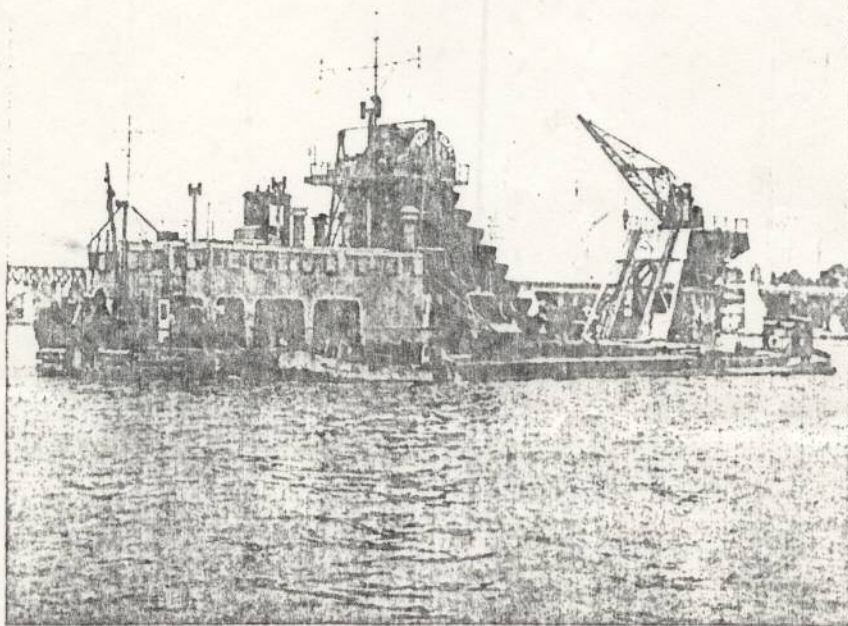
an hour after this unfortunate incident, the after lookout reported a red light on the port quarter from which the radar, on being directed on to the bearing, obtained a contact with a range of 5,000 yards. The light was clearly visible, but was extinguished upon our nearer approach. At 4,000 yards just as the range began to open again, the conning tower of a U-boat was seen against the eastern twilight and fire with high explosive shells was opened. One salvo was sufficient to make him dive. As he had been chased well clear we were called off for another job.

Following this we carried out a dawn sweep astern with one of the other ships of E.G.9, meeting Renoncule with ship number Eleven fifteen miles back and with Rathlin, the rescue ship, hovering round. The other corvette was detached to assist Renoncule while we took Rathlin back to the convoy. Rathlin who had his share of survivors for one trip, signalled: "This submarine business is getting monotonous now. What price a glider? We already have 107 survivors, including a slight yellow tart, who was a stowaway (pretty nice, too)." On telling him he seemed crowded and offering to relieve him of the stowaway, he replied: "We have room for forty more. Stowaway and I make a fine team! We can, however, spare you an Alsacienne (but 'mean a dog of course)." The episode of the stowaway made the headline in the English tabloids some week later and also the Halifax papers on December 9th. She got all this unfortunate publicity because of her love for a colored U. S. citizen whom she was determined to join. The authorities of course were "amazed that she was able to stowaway in war time. (Authorities, I think, must partly be chosen for their elastic facial qualities — otherwise how can they go on registering confidence, alarm, mystification, consternation, apprehension, and infrequently, pleasure with out getting to look like Mr. Hyde).

During the remainder of the day the aircraft succeeded in locating and attacking submarines in and around the convoy and "Christmas" finally formed on the starboard beam of "Festival." Through the night submarines were attacked astern and on the port quarter by escorts and were prevented from torpedoing any more ships. On the day of the 24th, which was intermittently misty, activity tapered off sharply and by nightfall it was apparent that the U-boats had withdrawn and that the battle was over. There were a few dashes about by one e

# NEW DREDGING ECONOMY

THROUGH WORLD-WIDE EXPERIENCE  
AND VAST EQUIPMENT RESOURCES



- ★ 3 Generations of Experience in 19 Countries.
- ★ One of a large group of dredging companies spread over three continents.
- ★ Resources include 41 dredges and 112 supporting vessels of every type and size.

Beaver Dredging will be pleased to provide information and preliminary estimates.



## Beaver Dredging

COMPANY LIMITED

Harbour Commission Bldg.,  
Toronto 1, Ont. EM 3-7219

Harbour Commission Bldg.,  
Hamilton, Ont. JA 2-3932

Cable Address "Filling"

(Concluded on page 126)

cort who got the fixed idea that U-boats were surrounding him, but beyond this the ensuing night was without incident.

At dawn on the 25th, as the three surviving ships of E.G.9 detached for St. John's, the following signal was addressed to them by the Senior Officer: "Thank you for the admirable support you have given us. Before you leave I should like to say for myself and the group how truly sorry we are for you in the loss of your senior officer and all the ships' companies of gallant ships."

Editor's Note: With reference to the call signs "Tallow" and "Toasted Cheese" attention is drawn to the following lines from "The Hunting of the Snark," the First Fit:

While for those who preferred a  
more forcible word

He had different names for these;  
His intimate friends called him

"Candle-Ends"

And his enemies "Toasted Cheese."