

An Historical Vignette – Sinking of HMCS St Croix (I81) – 20 September 1943

Researched and written by William (Bill) Dziadyk, author of “[S.S. Nerissa, the Final Crossing](#)”

The *Gleaves-class* destroyer **USS McCook** was built by Bethlehem Steel in Quincy, Massachusetts. She was commissioned into the USN on 30 April 1919 and a couple years later, and after the armistice, she was placed in reserve. Years later, in Halifax, on 24 Sep 1940, (under the 2 Sep 1940 UK/US *destroyers-for-bases agreement*), the six USN destroyers: *USS McCook*, *USS Mackenzie*, *USS Haraden*, *USS Thatcher*, *USS Williams*, and *USS Bancroft* were transferred to and commissioned into the RCN as **HMCS St. Croix (I81)**, *HMCS Annapolis (I04)*, *HMCS Columbia (I49)*, *HMCS Niagara (I57)*, *HMCS St. Clair (I65)*, and *HMCS St. Francis (I93)*, respectively.

St. Croix's first operations were escorting eastbound convoys *HX-80* (12-13 Oct 1940) and *HX-82* (20-21 Oct 1940) through the Halifax approaches. On 30 November, *St. Croix* (Cdr Harry Kingsley, RCN), *St. Clair* and *Niagara* departed St. John's Newfoundland and were bound for the UK. However, storm damage caused by hurricane force winds and rough seas caused *St. Croix* to return to Halifax (arriving on 18 December) for major dockyard repairs. In March until mid-November 1941 she resumed local escorting of convoys through the Halifax and Sydney approaches:

- Outbound (HX-115, HX-117, SC-27, HX-127, HX-129, SC-33, HX-133, HX-135, HX-138, SC-41, SC-42 and SC-50);
- Inbound (ON-17, ON-19A and ON-32).

Mid-Ocean Escort Group C-2

Following a six months' refit in Saint John, N.B., in May 1942, *St. Croix* escorted convoys *SC-84* and *SC-89*, to the UK, in her first "*Newfie-Derry runs*". Over the next four months she served as a mid ocean escort:

- Westbound (ON-113, ON-127 and ON-137);
- Eastbound (SC-96, and SC-101).

Convoy *ON-113* (33 merchants) which departed Liverpool on 17 July 1942 is of particular interest. The next day, escorts of the *Mid-Ocean Escort Force Group C-2*: two destroyers *HMS Burnham* (Cdr. T. Taylor, RN, Senior Officer) and *HMCS St. Croix* (LCdr Andrew Hedley Dobson, RCNR); and four corvettes *HMS Polyanthus*, *HMCS Brandon*, *Dauphin* and *Drumheller* from Londonderry, joined the westbound convoy.

On the afternoon of 23 July, the convoy was more than mid-way across the Atlantic and about 600 nm East of Newfoundland ... and a persistent fog had lifted. *U-552* (Erich Topp) of group "*Wolf*" made the initial convoy sighting and transmitted a sighting report at 19:06. Follow-on convoy sighting reports were also transmitted by *U-379*, *U-90*, and *U-597*. Six minutes after Topp's signal, Canadian intercept stations had a Direction-Finding fix for the U-boat and the Admiralty followed-up with a submarine warning message. Prior to receiving the warning, *HMS Burnham* had sighted a U-boat and forced it down with gunfire. After dusk, Taylor ordered a large southerly course change. The U-boats lost contact with the convoy. However the seasoned Topp had anticipated Taylor's action and transmitted a convoy sighting update report on the 24th at 08:57.

Author's notes:

- On 30 April 1941, Erich Topp in *U-552*, sank the Canadian troopship *SS Nerissa*. In terms of tonnage sunk, Topp was the third most successful U-boat commander in WW2. Some details of his 18 patrols are included in my book referenced above.
- All times in this vignette are GMT unless otherwise indicated.

At 15:35, *St. Croix* was steaming ahead of the *ON-113* convoy when her masthead lookout sighted two distant U-boats ahead of the convoy, one to port at about 5 nm and the second to starboard at about 12 nm. Taylor in *Burnham* hunted the distant starboard U-boat, which escaped. Dobson in *St. Croix* chased the U-boat sighted on the port bow for about an hour until she submerged at a range of 3 nm. The destroyer achieved asdic (sonar) contact at 2,400 yards (1.2 nm) and fired two patterns of depth charges set deep. After the second pattern exploded at 19:00, some oil and splintered wood came to the surface. *St. Croix* regained asdic contact and at 19:22 fired a shallow depth charges pattern which resulted in a large quantity of debris and human remains surfacing from the sinking of *U-90* (Hans-Jürgen Oldörp) with no survivors (48°12'N, 40°56'W) about 480 nm East of Newfoundland.

The *ON-113* convoy's series of course changes were largely successful in avoiding the "*wolfpack*", however Topp in *U-552* had maintained contact. On 25 July at 01:59, he torpedoed and disabled the tanker *British Merit* and at 02:12 from inside the convoy he torpedoed and disabled the freighter *SS Broompark*. Both merchants were taken under tow. The *British Merit* was towed to St. John's and the *Broompark* sank, while under tow about 20 miles off St. John's.

Canadian 1st Escort Group – EG-C1

In October 1942, *HMCS St. Croix* was assigned to the *Canadian 1st Escort Group (EG-C1)* of the *Newfoundland Escort Force*. In November and December, she had needed maintenance in the St. John's dockyard. In January 1943, *EG-C1* (11-22 Jan) escorted convoy *HX-222* from New York to Liverpool. The *EG-C1* escorts then participated in four weeks of intensive anti-submarine team training (workups) at *HMS Western*

Isles at Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, Scotland.

The Gibraltar bound convoy **KMS-10** (62 merchants) departed Liverpool on 26 February 1943. The escorts, the destroyer *HMCS St. Croix* (LCdr A.H. Dobson, Senior Officer), corvettes *HMC Ships Napanee, Battleford, Kenagami*, and *Shediac* from Londonderry, joined the convoy on the 27th. Also from Londonderry, the destroyer *HMS Burwell* (the former *USS Laub*) and four minesweepers *HMS Fort York, Parrsboro, Qualicum*, and *Wedgeport*, joined the escorts.

On 4 March, the convoy was on a southerly course about 100 nm off the coast of Portugal and about 250 nm north of the southern tip of Portugal (Cape St Vincent) when the convoy came under attack by two Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft. An RAF Catalina patrolling aft of the convoy engaged with and drove off the German aircraft. At 12:40, the corvette *HMCS Shediac* (Lt. J.E. Clayton) detected a U-boat about 6 nm aft of the convoy. Clayton carried out five depth charge attacks over three hours... and no evidence surfaced of a successful sinking of a U-boat. At 14:00, *HMCS St Croix* left the convoy screen and joined *Shediac* which had very few depth charges remaining. At 14:30, *St Croix* detected a contact and fired a six-charge pattern of depth charges, followed by second six-charge pattern on a weak target. No evidence of a sinking surfaced, however later evidence indicated the *U-87* (Joachim Berger) was sunk in this action ... and credit for the sinking was given to *Shediac* and *St. Croix*. On 8 March, in Gibraltar, the *EG-C1* escorts joined convoy **MKS-9** (63 merchants) to Liverpool.

After some time alongside in Londonderry, *EG-C1* escorts (including *St. Croix*) headed west and joined eastbound convoy **SC-127** for the mid-ocean (20 Apr – 2 May) transit to Liverpool. The *EG-C1* escorts next joined eastbound convoy **ON-184** for the mid-ocean leg (16-25 May) to Liverpool.

Canadian 9th Escort Group – EG-9

The *Atlantic Convoy Conference*, which was held in Washington in March 1943, resulted in changes to allied responsibilities for North Atlantic convoys. The main results being: (1) the RCN would exercise control over North Atlantic convoys west of 47°W; (2) the RN would exercise such control east of 47°W; and (3) the USN would look after tanker routes between the West Indies and the UK. One result being the need for a *Canadian 9th Support Group - SG-9*, which was quickly renamed the *Canadian 9th Escort Group – EG-9*.

In July 1943, *HMCS St. Croix* (LCdr A.H. Dobson, DSC, RCNR), the destroyer *HMCS St. Francis* (A/LCdr Harold Victor William Groos, RCN), the frigate *HMS Itchen* (A/Cdr Clement Edward Bridgeman, DSO, RNR, Senior Officer), and three corvettes *HMC Ships Chambly* (A/LCdr Antony Fenwick Pickard, RCNR), *Morden* (Lt Erin Claude Smith, RCNVR) and *Sackville* (A/LCdr Angus H. Rankin, RCNVR) were assigned to the *Canadian 9th Escort Group – EG-9*.

During July and August 1943, there were very few U-boat attacks on North Atlantic convoys. Maritime air support had finally been implemented across the convoy routes. The anti-submarine action was in the southern waters and in the *Bay of Biscay* (location of U-boat ports in occupied France) ... where in July alone, 38 U-boats were sunk with 23 due to shore-based maritime air support. With changes in U-boat operational policies to stay submerged during daylight and only charge batteries at night ... and with many equipped with the new acoustic homing torpedoes (*G7s* aka *Zaunköning T5*), U-boats returned to the North Atlantic in September. Twenty-one U-boats would be targeting convoys **ONS-18** and **ON-201**.

Convoys ONS-18 and ON-202

On 12 September, slow convoy ONS-18 (27 Merchants) departed Liverpool and was bound for Halifax. The British **3rd Escort Group (3-EG)** escorts: two destroyers (*HMS Keppel* (Cdr M. B. Evans, RN, Senior Officer) and *Escapade*; three corvettes (*HMS Lobelia, Narcissus* and *Orchis*; two Free French corvettes *FFS Renoncule* and *Roselys*; and ASW Trawler *HMS Northern Foam* joined the convoy, on the 14th, from Londonderry.

On the 15th, convoy **ON-202** (41 merchants) departed Liverpool and was bound for NYC. The next day, **Canadian 2nd Escort Group (EG-C2)** escorts joined the convoy from Londonderry: two destroyers *HMCS Gatineau* (Cdr P.W. Burnett, RN, Senior Officer) and *HMS Icarus*; one frigate *HMS Lagan*, and four corvettes *HMCS Drumheller, Kamloops* and *Morden*; and *HMS Polyanthus*.

Also on the 15th, the **Canadian 9th Escort Group (EG-9)**, including *St. Croix*, had sailed from Plymouth, to the approaches to the *Bay of Biscay* for anti-submarine operations.

On the 19th, **EG-9** was escorting convoy **HX-256**, when ordered to leave that eastbound convoy and augment the **3-EG** escorts in convoy **ONS-18**, located about 125 nm north. As **EG-9** ships headed north, shore-based maritime patrol aircraft confirmed that the greater U-boat threats were to the two westbound convoys to the north. Also, an **RCAF Liberator**, in transit from Iceland to Newfoundland and only a few miles from the convoys, sank *U-341*.

Before midnight on the 19th, **EG-9** was nearing convoy **ONS-18**, when *HMCS Chambly* and *HMS Itchen* unsuccessfully attacked two radar contacts. Convoy **ON-202** was about 30 nm to the NE. Twenty-one *Leuthen*

“wolfpack” U-boats were stalking the two convoys while **RAF Liberators** patrolled overhead. The two convoys had been ordered to merge.

On the 20th at 02:59, the **EG-C2** frigate **HMS Lagan** was taken under tow after being hit in the stern by an acoustic homing torpedo (from **U-270**). **U-238** took advantage of the gap in the escort screen and torpedoed two American freighters, one was sunk and the second was damaged and later sunk by **U-645**.

HMCS St. Croix and HMS Itchen

During the daylight hours of the 20th, **RAF Liberators**, out of Iceland, provided air cover and sank **U-338**. Later at dusk, **St. Croix**, **Itchen** and corvette **Narcissus** were patrolling aft of the merged convoy, where an aircraft had earlier sighted a U-boat. At 17:05, the surfaced **U-305** (Rudolf Bahr) sighted a steamer at range 25 km and bearing 200° (SSW). As the range decreased, two ships were visible: a destroyer (**St Croix**) and a steamer (likely the corvette **Narcissus**). At 19:05, an **RAF Liberator** seemed to fly straight out from the bright sun and attacked **U-305** with gunfire and four bombs which all landed in the water to starboard of the target. The aircraft was seen too late by **U-305** lookouts for the crew to effectively use their AA guns. **U-305** did an emergency turn and fired 80 rounds from the twin AA guns, to no effect. (It is very likely that **St. Croix**'s masthead lookout had sighted the surfaced U-boat long before the two ships were visible to the U-boat.)

U-305 crash dived to 100 meters. A depth charge likely from **St Croix** exploded astern of the U-boat at a depth of about 80 meters. At 19:33, Bahr took his U-boat up to periscope depth and at a range of about 6,000 to 8,000 meters was a 4-stack “Churchill class” destroyer - **HMCS St Croix**. Eighteen minutes later, Bahr had reduced the range to 1,500 meters and he fired a T5 acoustic torpedo at the destroyer. **U-305** dove to 160 meters and two and half minutes later, a series of explosions were heard. **U-305** returned to periscope depth and at 20:44 a *Coup-de-grâce* torpedo was fired into the **St. Croix**.

A few minutes later, **U-305** detected another destroyer (**HMS Itchen**) approaching. At 20:53, a T5 acoustic torpedo was fired at the destroyer. The torpedo exploded harmlessly in her wake.

Many **St. Croix** crewmembers had abandoned ship after the first and second torpedoes struck. However because of other sinkings and anti-submarine operations throughout the merged convoy, it was 13 hours before **Itchen** was able to pick up survivors (5 officers and 76 ratings) after their cold ordeal in the North Atlantic. The next day, **Itchen** rescued a few more survivors from a swamped whaler and a couple carley floats.

On the 23rd at about 02:00 GMT+2, **U-666** (Herbert Engel) in naval grid location AK7147 (53°09'N 39°55'N) fired a T5 acoustic torpedo into and sank **HMS Itchen** about 420 nm SSE of Greenland. There were only three survivors who were rescued by the Polish steamer **SS Wisla**:

- Petty Officer William George Clark, RN, **HMS Itchen**,
- Able Seaman Peter Flood, RN, **HMS Itchen**, and
- Leading Stoker William Allen Fisher, RCN, **HMCS St. Croix**.

An aside

The return of U-boat operations to the North Atlantic in September 1943, resulted in:

- Six merchants (36,400 tons) sunk,
- Three escorts sunk and one badly damaged, and
- Three U-boats sunk and three damaged.