

LUCKY WHITE HEATHER

H.M.S. HEATHER is a little ship with a big war record. She is a Flower class corvette.

When she docked recently she had steamed 50,199 sea miles during 19 months of escorting about 1,600 ships in 52 different convoys - without loss of, or damage to, a single one of her charges.

Merchant seamen call her the lucky mascot of the North Atlantic escort service. In all her time at sea she has never even sighted a U-boat or hostile craft, and the ships she has protected have been only attacked once from the air.

The anti-aircraft barrage from the convoy on that occasion drove the Focke-Wulf away and left the HEATHER with still another unbroken record - she has never fired her four-inch guns in action.

"We have had an amazing lack of adventures," said her Commanding Officer (Lt. Commander J.G.C. Gibson, R.N.) "Almost good enough for Ripley's 'Believe-it-or-not' feature. Day after day, week after week, month after month, without anything very much happening. No great excitement. No thrills. Just hard work, bad weather - and good luck."

This does not do justice to the corvette's war record in the Atlantic.

H.M.S. HEATHER has made 25 trips out into the Atlantic with convoys, and bringing a second group of merchant vessels back. All this through gales, blizzards and the worst weather of the year.

She has always sailed to time and "never let the convoy down".

One night, half-an-hour before sailing, the engineer reported serious trouble with the steering gear. Civilian engineers were called from their beds at midnight and taken in cars to the quayside to work on the machinery. By 4 o'clock in the morning the corvette was heading down stream to catch up with the convoy before it reached the first danger area for U-boats.

On another trip she helped to bring home a convoy of 31 tankers carrying enough petrol to run all the privately owned cars in Britain for a year. One of the officers, a keen motorist, worked this out with the petrol ration laws then in existence.

Her biggest convoy was one of 110 ships. Her "best customer" has been one tanker which she has escorted on six different occasions.

One trip took her backwards and forwards across the Atlantic dodging a U-boat concentration. She fetched up off Ireland four days overdue but the convoy was herded, unharmed, into the Scottish port which was its destination.

The HEATHER'S mascot is a five-foot figure of a witch riding a broomstick - relic of a Halloween party - which decorates the wardroom walls. In one hand the witch clutches a bunch of lucky white heather. The heather is not allowed to wither, but is regularly renewed.

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