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COASTAL COMMAND "COVERS" CABLE SHIP IN MID-ATLANTIC

More than 1,000 miles from Britain, with cloud and fog down to sea level. nearly all the time, very long range aircraft of Coastal Command, working in relays, gave almost continuous air cover to a cable ship which was recently ordered to undertake urgent repairs to a trans-Atlantic cable.

This cable, carrying thousands of vital war messages, had been damaged at a point halfway between Britain and Canada during a heavy Atlantic gale. A cable ship, escorted by two destroyers, was despatched, and in co-operation with the Royal Navy five Liberators from Coastal Command Squadrons, which have played an important part in the Battle of the Atlantic, were detailed to provide air protection for the ships from dawn.

Bad weather persisted throughout. Fog and dense clouds with visibility "nil", for hundreds of miles made the air operation both hazardous and difficult, but with sound teamwork by pilots, navigators and wireless operators the ships were located by four out of the five aircraft, and although only two of them actually sighted the vessels, close escort was given for 7 hours 18 minutes, while the repairs were being carried out. The five V.L.R. aircraft were airborne for a total of 79 hours.

A few minutes after midnight on the day of the operation the first Liberator took off from base in the United Kingdom. The crew searched for almost four hours but failed to contact the convoy in the unbroken cloud. A second aircraft, taking off nearly three hours later, was more fortunate, though it was unable to establish radio communication with the ships and returned to base.

The third Liberator, "G for George", sighted the ships through a break in the clouds. "The sea was dead calm and we could see sharks basking on the surface", said the pilot. "It was a tricky job keeping track of the convoy, however, for we lost sight of it with so much sea fog and cloud about us."

The next relaying aircraft also saw the convoy, in a thin patch of low cloud, and patrolled around it for some three hours. Last in the relay was a Squadron Leader D.F.C. When he arrived on the scene cloud was down to the surface, but he established radio communication with the ships, and patrolled a certain area on directions from the senior naval officer of the convoy. Once he attempted to go below cloud, but abandoned the effort when his instruments showed that he was in danger of hitting the sea.

The cable ship did the repairs - though to find it from the air had been comparable, in the words of one of the pilots, to "looking for a halfpenny in Piccadilly Circus in a pea soup fog."
