

BEAUFIGHTERS TORPEDO TWO SHIPS

Two large merchant ships which were heavily protected by minesweepers and flak ships were torpedoed off the Dutch coast yesterday evening by a Coastal Command Beaufighter wing led by W/Cdr. H.G.N. Wheeler D.F.C., and escorted by Spitfires of Fighter Command and Mustangs of Army Co-Operation Command.

Other Beaufighters raked the minesweepers and flak ships with cannon fire, silencing several of the enemy guns and leaving one of the Nazi boats on fire. Only one enemy aircraft was seen over the convoy - a Ju.88.

The convoy was first sighted and reported yesterday morning by Mustangs of Army Co-operation Command, and shadowed later by a Coastal Command Beaufighter.

Although there were six or seven smaller ships in the convoy, the Germans clearly attached the greatest importance to the safety of the two larger merchant ships, since the three minesweepers and six flak ships were all grouped around them.

On reaching the convoy, the Beaufighter torpedo formation divided, each of the two flights concentrating on one of the large ships.

One torpedo was seen to strike the leading merchant vessel amidships. It was later found to be on fire.

The second of the large ships, which was torpedoed on the stern, was left listing and had turned out of line. Both ships were also attacked with cannon fire.

As the torpedo aircraft launched their attack, other Beaufighters sprayed the flak ships and minesweepers with cannon and machine gun fire, diverting most of the enemy's fire from the torpedo attackers.

None of the torpedo aircraft was lost and only one of the escorting Beaufighters is missing.

"The sky seemed filled with our aircraft and alive with flak burst and tracer bullets as we swept in towards our target," said one of the pilots of a Beaufighter torpedo aircraft. The muzzle flashes of the enemy's guns seemed to raise a curtain of flame along the decks of the vessels as we came in to drop our torpedo."

The observer of another torpedo Beaufighter, F/Sgt. Batty, said that on going into the attack his aircraft was hit in several places. "One shell burst almost turned us over, but we carried on and dropped our 'fish'. Then we pulled out, raking the vessel with our cannon and machine guns."

F/Sgt. Norton, another torpedo observer, said his pilot made straight for the leading ship. "We dropped our torpedo and slithered away, banking steeply and firing all our guns. There was a big explosion followed immediately by another one. It may have been our torpedo or someone else's. The action was so swift and there were so many torpedoes running that we couldn't follow our own."

W/Cdr. Wheeler, a Londoner, led the wing into the attack. "We raked one of the minesweepers at the head of the convoy with cannon fire and saw its bridge fly in pieces into the sea," he said.

"The minesweeper then sailed round in circles. My tail unit was hit by flak but we managed to get home all right. I think we must have caught the Germans by surprise as they had only one aircraft over the convoy."

The leader of the City of Manchester Auxiliary Squadron of Mustangs of Army Co-Operation Command which formed part of the escort said: "It was a most exciting affair but was all over in a space of a couple of minutes. As the Beaufighters, flying through A.A. fire, went in to make their various attacks we kept a good look out for enemy opposition. None was forthcoming. When we arrived the enemy aircraft hovering about near the convoy disappeared. We saw the decks of the ships being raked with cannon and machine-gun fire and later saw the torpedoes being fired. One Beaufighter scored a direct hit on one of the larger ships and within a few seconds there were columns of smoke pouring out of the vessel."