

ACONIT TOOK QUICK REVENGE

Descriptions of the action in which the destroyer H.M.S. HARVESTER (Commander A.A. Tait, D.S.O., R.N.) was lost, and two U-boats destroyed, have now been given by officers of the HARVESTER and the Free French Corvette ACONIT (Lieutenant de Vaisseau Jean Levasseur) which took a leading part in the action.

It was one night in March when the ACONIT received a signal from the HARVESTER that the destroyer had rammed a U-boat, was stopped and disabled. On the way to help the HARVESTER, the ACONIT sighted this U-boat on the surface. She switched her searchlights full up to blind the German crew, who could be plainly seen standing on the deck, and opened fire with her light armament.

"I rammed her immediately on the conning tower, dropping depth charges as my corvette passed over her," said the Commanding Officer of the ACONIT, a 32-year-old Frenchman. "She sank on the spot".

Though the HARVESTER had been severely damaged, her Commanding Officer's first thought was for the safety of the convoy and he ordered the ACONIT to leave him and rejoin as the HARVESTER was able to steam at 11 knots on one engine. This engine failed later, and being then disabled, he accordingly recalled ACONIT. She returned just in time to see the crippled destroyer struck by two torpedoes. Most of the HARVESTER's crew, taking to the boats watched the corvette exact a speedy revenge.

"I was closing in to pick up survivors", said the ACONIT's Commanding Officer, "when I saw a U-boat on the surface. It dived. As the weather was calm and many of the HARVESTER's crew had taken to rafts, I decided to counter-attack the U-boat before going to their assistance.

"I dropped two patterns of depth charges and those blew the U-boat to the surface. I engaged it with all the armament I'd got.

"My third shot from the four-inch gun hit the U-boat and we scored three more hits in rapid succession.

"The enemy was so obviously hors de combat that I put my engines full astern to avoid ramming and damaging my ship. But we had too much way on her, and the U-boat's crew jumped into the water. We rammed her right on the conning tower. The shape of the U-boat gave way to a huge patch of oil.

"We picked up 20 prisoners on the spot. When they declared that it was their U-boat which had torpedoed the HARVESTER, it was a great pleasure to me to learn that I had avenged my senior officer so quickly."

Lieutenant D. Lukin Johnston, R.C.N.V.R., of Vancouver, was on board the HARVESTER. He told how the destroyer, after attacking a U-boat with depth-charges earlier in the night, engaged another on the surface at midnight.

"The Jerries in their brilliant yellow-life-jackets were lining the deck everywhere. We picked the boat up in our searchlight and then we rammed," he said.

"We felt her bump right along our keel, and she got jammed somewhere under the stern.

"She stayed like that for about ten minutes and then disengaged herself. Shortly afterwards the ACONIT sent her cheering signal - 'I have rammed U-boat.'"

Though the HARVESTER was unable to go astern and only the starboard engine was working, she managed to pick up more than 40 survivors of a merchantman. "All right - then we'll sail," remarked the Commanding Officer of the destroyer.

In the forenoon of the next day she stopped entirely and sent her signal for the ACONIT to return from the convoy. The corvette was just a wisp of smoke on the horizon when the first torpedo hit the destroyer.

"very coolly," went on Lieutenant Johnston, "the captain ordered 'Abandon ship'.

"The second torpedo came as we were pushing away from the side. There was no justification for it, as it was obvious the ship was heeling over and sinking rapidly.

"All the boys were joking and full of beans. Most of them saw the ACONIT sink our attacker."

The French corvette cruised around for the remainder of the day on rescue work.

"The first man we fished out of the water," said Lieutenant J.E. Sheppard, R.N.V.R., of Balham, who was British Liaison Officer in the ACONIT, "couldn't speak from shock and fright".

The ACONIT eventually turned for home with survivors from the HARVESTER and the Merchant Vessel, and 25 prisoners from the two U-boats.