

This story is an unpublished manuscript written by Allan Riley of Toronto, Ontario who served on HMCS Assiniboine with Kenneth Watson.

As told by Allan Riley:

On July 29, I was drafted to Assiniboine, then tied up in St. John's Harbour awaiting her next convoy. This sleek gray-painted destroyer was the former Royal Navy flotilla leader H.M.S. Kempenfelt, and had been launched on October 29, 1931. She was re-commissioned as Assiniboine on October 19, 1939, arriving in Canada on November 17, the same year. Earlier in the war, along with a Royal Navy cruiser, she had shared in the capture of the German freighter, Hannover after an arduous battle and a storm. Captain of the destroyer now was Lieutenant-Commander John Hamilton Stubbs.

We departed St. John's and on August 02 our task unit picked up the 30-ship convoy (SC94) to be increased the next morning to 33 ships by the addition of three merchant ships from St. John's escorted by the corvette Battleford. At 1800, in foggy weather, an alteration of course was given to the convoy.

After a cease of previous operations against convoy ON115 (a group of) U-boats formed into the Steinbrinck Group, consisting of U-71, 379, 454, 593, 597, 607, 704, and the erstwhile U-210. They were positioned east of Newfoundland, waiting to intercept more convoys.

On the morning of the 4th, the fog cleared around our convoy. The preceding days had been relatively quiet for the ship's crew, except for our daily exercise action stations which we practiced each morning and evening. Another training occupation, not entirely desirable, was the Physical Training period conducted each day after evening quarters.

U-Boats were in the area. Everybody became tense. U-593 had torpedoed S.S. Spar. The corvettes Orilla and Nasturtium dropped depth charges although no firm contacts were made. Two U-boats were driven off.

In the morning I was on forenoon wireless watch. The ship was still on the prowl in weather that was overcast but clear with a visibility of eight miles.

"Action stations!" The alarm came ringing half-way through my watch. U-boat sighted! We revved up to 22 knots. The ship shook from the increase in speed.

WHAM!!!

One, two, three I counted; our 4.7 inch forward guns were firing. But the U-boat, U454, was too distant for our guns to be effective.

The U-boat dived. When we arrived in the area we made asdic contact and, with Dianthus in support, dropped several patterns of depth charges. U-454 was damaged and was forced to break off, though we were not aware of it at the time.

With no obvious results we sped off to rejoin the convoy – now about 20 miles ahead to starboard with Dianthus five miles on our port beam. Then excitement boiled again!

It was shortly after 17:00, and we had just finished our Physical Training exercised; Yeoman Cavanaugh sighted a U-boat in the distance. Our speed increased. I was down in the mess with the action stations alarm sounded.

I rushed up through the hatch through the seaman's mess deck to the wireless office. I snatched up a pencil and rushed up to action station on the bridge. When I arrived on the bridge I hopped into the RCO and, while I waited, the U-boat disappeared into a patch of mist.

In the U-boat (U-210), the watch had just changed and the commanding officer, Kapitanleutnant Lemcke, believing his boat safe in the fog, went below for his supper.

Suddenly everyone on the Assiniboine bridge was shouting excitedly. “There it is! There it is!” At this I scampered out of the RCO to see what the commotion was.

It was very foggy. I dashed to one side of the bridge and looked over. There it was, as the captain said later: “Not a stone’ throw away” and cutting across our bow towards starboard. Black, silent, and deadly the U-boat appeared as it knifed swiftly through the water. Then, supplemented with cursing and swearing, came the yells of the men: “Fire! Fire!”

I thought the U-boat would get away. Then our forward guns began to fire. The U-boat was close and the barrels of our guns were trained low.

U-210, churning up water, left a well-defined wake as it turned in its course on our starboard side. It was running nearly parallel with us and appeared to be submerging to get away. Then somehow I lost sight of it.

The next minute brought a “pup-pup-pupping” sound and everybody on our bridge flattened out. Not knowing the reason, I did likewise. Suddenly it dawned on me -- the U-boat was firing back at us!

On board U-210, excitement and confused shouting had reigned also. Lemcke and Tamm raced to the bridge above where the Quartermaster was returning Assiniboine’s fire with a 2-cm gun firing explosive bullets.

The German gunfire was having its desired effect. Not over ten feet away from me was a strip of plate glass on the edge of the bridge where the captain usually stood. It became a web of cobwebs from shrapnel. On the forecastle, two shells penetrated the protective shield of the “A” gun, while the ship’s side and bridge structure were riddled with shells.

Through the opening of the door I could see Lt. Cdr. Stubbs shouting orders; his voice could be clearly heard coming down the voice pipe into the wireless office. He was very cool, popping up and down between bursts of gunfire to give orders. He could even see his adversary; Kapitanleutnant Lemcke was equally cool as he bent down occasionally to give orders on the U-boat.

The battle was fought at close range, with the captain keeping our ship always on top of the U-boat, which seemed to be on our starboard side during most of the firing. To keep the men busy, he kept the larger 4.7 inch guns firing, even though the barrels were depressed as low as possible but most of the time over-shooting U-210.

The U-boat maintained constant evading movements while we were forced to go full astern on the inside engine to prevent the U-boat from getting inside our turning circle. It was expedient that we did so because during the action an attempt was made by the U-boat to fire one torpedo. The U-boat’s torpedo crew was told to stand by but the order to fire was never given.

Ordinary Seaman Kenneth Watson of Revelstoke, BC, a member of “A” gun’s crew on the forecastle, dashed up the hatchway to his post. He was immediately clipped in the arm and knocked down. He scrambled to his feet and was intent on passing a shell to the gun-loader when an enemy shell smashed into him in a direct hit. Ken fell to the deck, there to die. He was but eighteen.

Our chugging Oerlikons and our booming large guns kept firing rapidly. A German gun’s crew appeared on deck, but fire from our 3-inch gun aft and our .5 inch machine guns prevented the enemy sailors from reaching their larger 8.8 cm gun forward. Our gun crews worked magnificently. Some were able to stand their posts throughout the action... but a number of them were knocked out of the fight by bullets and flying shrapnel.

German explosive bullets caused a fire to break out on the starboard side of Assiniboine near the flag-deck. Smoke enveloped the bridge structure and flames reached three feet above the bridge railing. At the outbreak of the fire, the captain yelled for a fire-party and the First-Lieutenant... quickly organized his men and with hoses snaking along the starboard waist, eventually had the fire extinguished. I can still see the captain standing on the bridge giving orders, his back towards me and his hat shining and dripping wet from the spray of the hoses.

It is believed that the volume of smoke instilled in Lemcke a feeling of over-confidence and instead of trying to escape through the fog, he procrastinated too long – for indeed our own gunfire was taking its toll, damaging the U-boats trimming tanks, ...the conning tower, the diesel intake, ...(and) the bridge. (The U-boat) attempted to dive.

As the boat was submerging the opportunity was seen by our bridge personnel and someone yelled, "Shall we ram her, sir?" The concurring orders were given. I soon felt the ship hit; it went up in the air a little, then quivered and settled down in the water again, speeding on its way. Inside the U-boat the electric motors had failed and water was flooding in through the damaged air-intake. The U-210 remained stopped and slightly down by the stern. It was in this position when we rammed it again, at the same time firing a shallow pattern of depth charges as we passed the battered U-boat.

Not long after the second ramming, the crew of the U-boat was observed on its deck and from our men a cheer went up. At this I ran to the side of the bridge and looked over, just as there came a flash of flame and the sound of a last shell tearing its way towards the U-boat.

After the U-boat sank, the corvette Dianthus pushed her nose through the fog and picked up 28 survivors. We picked up ten, and later took six off the hands of the corvette. In the battle six U-boat crew members lost their lives.

The boy who was killed on Assiniboine (Watson) was buried on the way to port. Those who were not on watch fell in on the starboard side of the torpedo tubes, while on the other side an armed guard was fallen in, dressed in full rig. We stood with our heads bared while the captain, standing on the torpedo tubes, said prayers, adding, and "He was a brave man. He died doing his duty for his country and his ship. Could any man do more?"

The prayers soon were finished, three volleys were fired, and the body of Kenneth Wiley Watson slipped into the sea. It was over.