

North Atlantic and Arctic high seas wartime adventure, 1943.

THE GAUNTLET 1943 to 1945

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THE GAUNTLET 1943 TO 1945

R. Warren Smith

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Table of Contents

Synopsis	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I NAVAL ARMED GUARD ATLANTIC	3
CHAPTER II S.S. REYNOLDS, 12 September 1943.....	6
CHAPTER III SIZING THE ODDS.....	11
CHAPTER IV TO THE ROADSTEAD, 14 September 1943.....	17
CHAPTER V UNDERWEIGH	21
CHAPTER VI IN CONVOY, 16 September 1943.....	26
CHAPTER VII MORE COMBAT, 21 September 1943	35
CHAPTER VIII THINGS ARE TOUGH ALL OVER, 2150	42
CHAPTER IX CHAOS, 0330.....	48
CHAPTER X RESPITE, 24 September 1943, 0600.....	51
CHAPTER XI THE GAUNTLET, 28 September 1943, 0715.....	54
CHAPTER XII AIR ATTACK, 1 October 1943, 0415.....	58
CHAPTER XIII FORTUNES OF WAR, 0910	63
CHAPTER XIV AERIAL TORPEDOES, 1 October 1943, 0945.....	66
CHAPTER XV TORPEDO, 1255	70
CHAPTER XVI SCOTLAND, 5 October 1943, 0800	76
CHAPTER XVII GOOD NEWS AND BAD, 2010.....	85
CHAPTER XVIII A NEW HOME, 6 October 1943, 1100.....	91
CHAPTER XIX BACK AT IT, 0430	97
CHAPTER XX DESIGN FLAW, 0745.....	101
CHAPTER XXI THE SECOND GAUNTLET, 8 October 1943, 0800 ..	109
CHAPTER XXII AIR ATTACK, 10 October 1943, 1030.....	113
CHAPTER XXIII AFTERMATH	118
CHAPTER XXIV RUSSIA, 12 October 1943, 0930	122
CHAPTER XXV RUSSIAN LIBERTY, 13 October 1943, 1415.....	131
CHAPTER XXVI OUT OF HERE, 17 October 1943, 0900.....	144
CHAPTER XXVII HOMEWARD BOUND, 21 October 1943, 1545 ...	150
CHAPTER XXVIII ATTACK FROM THE CLOUDS, 24 October 1943, 0800.....	154
CHAPTER XXIX ANOTHER U-BOAT, 26 October 1943, 0730	158

R. WARREN SMITH

CHAPTER XXX HOME AGAIN, 2 November 1943, 1145	162
CHAPTER XXXI NEW YORK “CHOO-CHOO,” 3 November 1943, 1300.....	168
CHAPTER XXXII ARMED GUARD ATLANTIC HQ, 3 November 1943, 1810.....	177
CHAPTER XXXIII NAVAL COLLEGE EXTENSION UNIT, MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA, 21 December 1943, 0800.....	184
CHAPTER XXXIV INDOCTRINATION, 1 January 1944, 0815.....	190
CHAPTER XXXV ANOTHER HOME AGAIN	198
CHAPTER XXXVI LONG ISLAND, 4 November 1944, 0800.....	200
CHAPTER XXXVII THE WORM TURNS, 1730	209
CHAPTER XXXVIII A NEW LIFE, 14 February 1945, 0900.....	215
CHAPTER XXXIX SOUTH AMERICAN RETURN, 6 March 1945, 0230.....	229
CHAPTER XL OFF TO RIO, 19 March 1945, 0600	246
CHAPTER XLI CONTACT! 10 April 1945, 0500.....	253
CHAPTER XLII COUNTER ATTACK	272
CHAPTER XLIII RETURN TO BROOKLYN, 4 May 1945, 0830	285
CHAPTER XLIV CELEBRATION! 5 May 1945, 2250	288
REFERENCES	296
Author Bio	297

CHAPTER VI

IN CONVOY, 16 September 1943

As the night wore on, the watches were relieved in order, and the sunrise GQ came about on schedule. As daylight came, they found themselves on the outer edge of a large mass of ships, all steaming very slowly in a large circle approximately fifteen miles in diameter. There was a large contingent of various escorts in an outer circle, and patrol planes and two blimps circled overhead. Right after dawn GQ, the Convoy Commodore called a bridge fm radiotelephone conference and did a roll call. When he was satisfied all ships were present, he ordered the lead positions to assume the assigned course. As those assigned ships broke out of the mass, he ordered the others to assume their assigned positions. The convoy speed was at a reduced rate to allow the joining ships to maneuver around those already in position. About mid-day when everyone was in position and the escort screen was in place, the Commodore ordered incremental speed increases, allowing the slower vessels to keep up, until the entire convoy of one hundred five ships including the escorts, some six miles across and twelve miles long was systematically moving out across the sea. It was a sight to behold, as they did not maintain a straight course, but managed to zigzag the whole thing on a schedule known only to them, like a large, grotesque drill team.

Every one of them performed the three times daily GQ exercises, at sunrise, midday, and sunset. This crossing was expected to take fourteen days, allowing for the zigzag courses, because some of the older ships were not able to make more than 10 knots.

On the fourth day out at 1100, an RCAF PBY Catalina patrol plane operating out of Goose Bay, Labrador who was watching over the convoy made visual contact with at least two and a possible third U-boat some twenty-five miles ahead of them.

“Convoy Queen Uncle twenty-two, this is your RCAF Eagle One bearing Three Zero Zero at fifteen miles. We have two bogies and a

possible third submarine twenty-five miles dead ahead of your position. Over.”

The convoy escort commodore replied, “Roger, Eagle One. Thanks for the warning. I shall take the necessary action. Out.”

The sub’s all dove out of sight when the aircraft appeared. The Convoy Commodore ordered a hard left turn to an alternate route closer to Greenland. Meanwhile, the Escort Flotilla Commodore sent three destroyers on a hunting expedition to the area where the sighting had occurred. Thirty minutes later one of them made sonar contact with a submarine, and after making contact by oscillograph, determined it to be a very old “friendly” S-type US boat. The commander of the US submarine replied, “Am tracking two bogies, but cannot close as they’re faster than I.”

Using the vectors provided, the surface ships ran off in that direction and ultimately made contact with another submarine. There was no reply to their oscillograph challenges this time, and they initiated an attack. Their sonar and hydrophone readings indicated the U-boat was diving ever deeper. All three ships made one pass over the spot, each of them executing a different depth charge pattern, with positive results.

At 1215, no sooner had the third destroyer dropped its modified diamond pattern of ashcans (depth charges), and cleared the spot than the damaged U-boat broke the surface in the midst of the still-roiling water. The first destroyer had already come about for another pass and was in position to ram her. Just as she sounded her collision siren and went to flank speed, the German crew started piling out on deck, some of them waving white towels and shirts. A few of the crew came tumbling out of the conning tower. The destroyer went into a crash stop maneuver and ended up alongside the sub, hoping to take her prize. The German sailors were diving into the water as soon as they got on deck, and it was obvious the boat was sinking before their eyes. The destroyer’s crew grimly watched the U-boat go down stern first, dragging with her some twenty or so of the crew still struggling to get out. Those in the water were picked up, taken prisoner, and hustled below as the two circling ships resumed the search and pursuit of the other U-boat suspected in the area.

Meanwhile the convoy commodore received the news of the sunken U-boat and maintained his new course, pending more information on the remaining bogie.

At the sundown GQ at 2030, everyone was especially alert throughout the convoy. U-boats were noted for their surface attacks in the dark, and all hands were anxious. In this case, the remaining U-boat had indeed escaped detection by just stopping dead, deep down in the water, and attaining neutral buoyancy below the thermo cline, a layer of cooler-temperature water at a depth where the sonar signals are deflected.

As the escort's search pattern took them farther away from his U-boat, KorvettenKapitan Braun of U-398 remained quiet until his soundman could no longer detect them. He then slowly picked up speed so as to make as little noise as possible. Being one of the newer Type XXIV boats, he could make fifteen knots submerged for a short distance, and twenty-eight knots fully on the surface. Then taking a clue of the destroyers' course away from him, he took up a course to the northeast. As soon as it was dark he surfaced and tried to make contact with his consort U-boat. Underwater communication in this case was deemed risky since the enemy might hear it.

By 2045, unable to contact the other U-boat and having heard the multiple depth charge patterns earlier, he correctly assumed the worse. At the same time he was running his diesel engines at maximum speed, hoping to intercept whatever convoy the escorts had been protecting and top off the charge in the batteries at the same time. U-boats running on the surface generally had only the peak of the bow and the conning tower sticking out of the water, to provide as small a radar target as possible. This also completely muffled the underwater exhaust of the two big diesel engines, although an alert DD soundman might hear them.

He had two course options. To intercept an eastbound convoy with a strategic load, or one that was westbound with some ships riding in ballast. As his mission was the interdiction of strategic supply to Great Britain or Russia, the northeast course was the logical priority.

THE GAUNTLET 1943 TO 1945

On 19 September at 0015, the forward lookout on the surfaced U-398 called, "Convoy dead ahead." 'Kapitan Braun entered the conning tower, ran the periscope up for maximum surface surveillance, and made a full 360-degree swing to cover his horizons. He then zeroed in on the ships before him, noting their range and speed.

Keeping his lookouts and junior officer of the watch topside, he ordered a slight course change, and all torpedoes readied for firing.

At 0045 he altered course again in order to intercept the starboard center of the convoy. He had been mulling over the attack plan in his mind, and had decided to reverse the normal mode of attack. Instead of firing the four forward tubes, then coming about 180 degrees and firing the stern tube and then diving deep to escape the almost certain attack by the escorts, he decided to fire the stern tube first, then do a 180 degree turn and fire the forward tubes, then turn slightly to the right and dive under the convoy to rearm. The escorts would all run amok, looking where he wasn't.

At 0105, when the range was right, he ordered, "Bring the helm around to one two zero degrees." As he turned away from the convoy, he said, "All hands man your submerged battle stations and rig for diving."

The alarm bell jangled three times. He took several last minute observations! "Bring the helm left to three zero zero degrees!" As the indexes aligned... "Torpedo los!"

He then turned one hundred eighty degrees left, fired the four forward tubes, and dove directly toward the convoy in a slight starboard turn.

He had no sooner fired the forward tubes than the aft torpedo struck a gasoline tanker, creating a large, brightly lit area right in the middle of the convoy just as he had planned. At the sound, a loud cheer went up in the U-boat. Then another, as the forward torpedoes struck two other ships. As soon as he was sure he was well under the convoy, he turned hard right to parallel their course. Another advantage to being under the convoy was that their noise overwhelmed his so the escorts' hydrophone operators couldn't hear him.

At 0115- the U-boat was running at near maximum speed on batteries to try to keep up. The rearming noise needed cover too, as the torpedo cable hoists made a lot of racket. His crew was very proficient and had all of the tubes reloaded in less than eight minutes. As soon as "Attention! Torpedoes ready!" came from both torpedo rooms, he ordered them back up to periscope depth.

Meanwhile the Escort Commodore was scratching his head, trying to figure out why the escorts on the starboard side of the convoy couldn't detect a submarine that he knew had to be there.

A new Reserve Ensign on his staff said, "Perhaps the sub's now under the convoy. The tanker took a torpedo, and then there was about a one-minute pause followed by more hits. I think he fired the stern tubes first and then turned and fired the forward tubes and dove right under the convoy."

The Commodore shook his head. "I don't know. That sounds plausible, but he'd have to worry about running under a sinking ship or two, I think." There was nervous laughter from the others present, and the Ensign kept quiet. He was thinking, Jeeze! That's what I'd do. He wouldn't have to parallel his torpedo courses!

At 0130 Kapitan Braun had other targets computed. Firing both fore and aft tubes together he hit four more ships. Again they rearmed, right at periscope depth this time. He also had more targets computed and was ready for firing. When word came, he fired again, and hit two more ships. The submariners cheered, with a comment. "Kom Kommeraden, (C'mon guys,) only six more eels left, and we can go back to France."

At 0140 the Escort Commodore finally decided the ensign was probably right, since twice now, four ships were hit, followed by other ships some distance behind them. This would most likely indicate a submarine firing both forward and aft tubes simultaneously. "I want the two destroyers at the aft end of the convoy to proceed forward through the formation with their sonar to find and destroy this monster."

There were two of them at the aft corners of the formation, so two DEs dropped back to cover those screen positions, and the DDs came charging up through the formation with their advanced sonar. The U-boat

skipper heard the pinging and ordered, "Surface the conning tower. Maintain rig for diving." The burning ships were not close enough to make him conspicuous, and he hung in fairly close behind a large freighter's wake so that his conning towers wake somewhat blended in. As long as he was running at the surface with just the tower protruding, the sonar operators on the destroyers could not detect him. Also, with all of the excitement going on within the convoy, the lookouts aboard the vessel he was following failed to see him in the dark. Running on batteries, he made no engine noise.

Aboard the SS Reynolds, Hal had already deduced the U-boat was under the convoy.

Captain McWhorter asked, "What do you make of this, Lieutenant?"

"I think that rascal is somewhere under the formation, and maybe just barely surfaced behind some ship." He turned to Bill Manning. "Ensign, I want all lookouts to double their effort to observe everything going on out there and report any strange wake."

"Aye, Sir," he said, and keyed his headset mic' to repeat the order.

Ensign Schott called down, "Bridge from Control. Why don't we shoot some star shells to light up the place to help the look outs?"

Bill Manning relayed this to Hal, who replied, "We do not fire without the convoy commodore's direction. Got that?"

He was powerless to do anything, as the convoy escort commodore had command and would call all of the shots, if there were to be any, except for a point blank opportunity. Fred Schott was itching to have his 3" gunners fire star shells to illuminate the area back there. He knew he had to wait for orders that would never come as long as there were Navy men of war maneuvering with them. Hal added, "Those escorts have search lights, if they really wanted to light up the place."

At 0150, as the destroyer nearest to the U-boat's side of the convoy came up the ranks, der Kapitan set his sights on him and fired his remaining stern torpedo. Aboard the destroyer, a lookout spotted the wake and called, "Torpedo on the starboard bow."

The captain ordered, "Crash stop." The response time wasn't quick enough because of the short range, and the torpedo slammed into the starboard side just Aft of the forward engine room. This caused a

secondary explosion in her starboard torpedo battery, and the gallant ship rolled over and capsized. She went down by the bow in less than five minutes. As she went down, her armed depth charges went off at their assigned depths, killing some of the survivors in the water. This also gave the U-boat a series of shocks. Even though they were at the surface, the hull was under water, and it gave them quite a surprise.

As soon as he'd fired all but his last eel, the U-boat skipper ordered his ship to dive to one hundred meters, and then stop and rig for neutral buoyancy, with silence throughout the ship. As the convoy moved on, he lay right there, not making a sound.

There was pandemonium on the surface as the other destroyer attempted to rescue the few survivors of the first, and some of the escorts were picking up survivors of the torpedoed freighters and tankers.

Two and a half hours later, Kapitan Braun ordered the boat silently trimmed up and, with the extended periscope just a few feet below the surface, he could see the sunrise effect on the surface. There had been no ship noise for about half an hour, when they had heard a diesel-powered vessel go by.

Der Kapitan ordered the ship trimmed silently to ascend to periscope depth and ran the 'scope up for a quick look around. After a 360-degree scan of the horizon, he was shocked to see an old 1920's era American S Class submarine laying on the surface half a mile away. The convoy was long gone, and two severely damaged freighters without escort were attempting to make repairs and get underway again. Retracting the 'scope a few feet out of sight, he pondered his options.

The old submarine was a real threat to him. He still had one eel, and had decided to take out the sub with it, and then surface and finish off the freighters with his deck gun. He took another quick look at the other sub and gathered the necessary data for a shot. He didn't dare miss or all hell would break loose. There is no greater fear to a submariner, than an enemy sub on the hunt nearby. He fired, and counted the seconds. There was an explosion, indicating the fish hit the target. A tremendous explosion followed this, as some of the torpedo warheads on the old sub went off in a secondary explosion. It rocked the U-boat even worse than the depth

charges from the sinking destroyer. All of this, and except for vertically, he hadn't even moved from his suspended floating hideout. It was now necessary to take on some water to trim the boat and maintain the hideout, as he couldn't see very far without bringing the boat very near the surface and risk being seen by any escort that might just be over his horizon investigating the big explosion.

He waited half an hour to see if any escort would come to investigate the old sub's demise. When no one came around, he surfaced, and with the scope head now way up in the air he could scan the area well over ten miles. Seeing nothing but the two damaged freighters, he ordered, "Battle surface." The officer on the control center ordered her decks to the surface, and the boat came all the way up, exposing her decks, hatches, and her 88-mm deck gun.

The gun crew manned her in ready fashion, and were loaded and locked as the boat maneuvered to a quarter-mile range on the first ship. Along the way, he captured four survivors of the old S-boat who were bobbing on the surface.

The survivors aboard the freighter saw what was coming and waved a white flag, and at the same time started lowering the two lifeboats. As soon as they had them in the water and were aboard, the first of five shells struck her at the water line at the opposite end of the ship, and the gunner walked the rounds aft. Whatever her cargo, there was no fire or explosions, and she just listed and slowly started sinking.

Kapitan Braun then headed over to the lifeboats, and discharged his prisoners over to them. He then maneuvered a mile or so toward the other hulk, whose crew was already pulling away in their boats. Again, they fired into her waterline, but this time on the third round there was a huge secondary explosion as that hold was loaded with now-ruptured drums of sodium, and the mix of salt water sank her in a hurry. In fact, the gun crew took shelter behind the conning tower for fear some of the debris would hit them from half a mile away. Some junk in fact did pass over the boat, giving Herr Kapitan a tense moment or two. As the big white smoke cloud cleared, there was nothing left to indicate there ever was a ship, except for the life boats surfing away, and the U-boat bobbing up and down in the

R. WARREN SMITH

ring of swells from the blast washing over her deck and nearly taking some of her gun crew with them.

At 0810 as the crew secured the gun and the ready ammunition was stowed below, they were given a cheer by the rest of the crew. Kapitan Braun lauded all hands for a job very well done in the attack on the convoy. He also announced they would now be headed back to port after a successful hunting trip. With that he ordered the helmsman to take up a heading that would take them to Lorient, France. He also ordered the engine room to give them standard speed ahead. He had already told the radioman to send in the last position, direction and speed of the convoy. Hopefully another group of hunters could intercept and take some more ships out of it.

CHAPTER IX

CHAOS, 0330

Aboard the B-24 Liberator, the crew was alert and ready for the intercept. Their plan was to spot the sub, make the run, and scam before the Luftwaffe fighter command could react.

Even though they were flying right on top of the marine layer at 500 feet, the German coastal radar picked them up after an E-boat on channel patrol alerted them to a large four-engine aircraft passing directly overhead in the overcast. Four Me-109G fighters were scrambled and vectored in that direction.

As the B-24 neared the area, it descended into the overcast, hoping to break out under it and make their run on the U-boat.

At 0340 the bomber's radar picked up the U-boat's conning tower, and there was some confusion over the size of the blip on the screen, as to whether it was the U-boat or a French fishing smack. The pilot decided to make a run on it anyway, light it up with the searchlight and make the attack if indeed it was their target.

About two miles out they turned onto the run, descending below the clouds, and lit the light. "Voila!" There was the U-boat, which had already gone to AA GQ. About the time the aircrew recognized the target, it erupted into a wall of AA fire from two batteries of multiple rapid-fire cannon on the conning tower aft superstructure. The flak was very accurate, taking out the Plexiglas nose panels and the search light, crazing the right windshield and wounding the co-pilot, bombardier and nose gunner as well as shooting up a lot of the rest of the airplane.

At what he thought was the right moment; the pilot hit the override switches and jettisoned the bomb load. He trailed a string of bombs and depth charges right across the U-boat's path, scoring several hits on her topsides. Since the bombs were jettisoned, they weren't armed and failed to explode.

As he pulled up through the clouds, he was greeted by the ME-109s, who proceeded to riddle his airframe with a lot more gun and cannon fire. His surviving gunners were firing back, and the whole episode lasted less than a minute.

The bomber pilot dove back down into the clouds and prayed they would cover him clear of the area. He was there but a moment when he realized the damage to his bird included his inability to fly on the gyro instruments because of the U-boat inflicted damage behind his instrument panel. His copilot was wounded and not much help as he reverted to "Needle, Ball, and Airspeed," the fundamental instruments to blind flight in that era.

He also had two engines that had taken cannon fire, and he was trying to feather their propellers and limp back to base. His crew in the waist section was reporting lots of fuel trailing off of both wings and hoping they wouldn't catch on fire.

The Engineer Gunner returned to the cockpit to assist the pilot, and address the co-pilot's wounds. As crew chief, he directed the two waist gunners to come forward and help him.

The bomber barely made it back to home base near Plymouth, groveling through the cloudbank except for the last ten miles. The ME-109s were radar vectored and had stayed right above the clouds with him, until the RAF Fighter Command interceptors engaged and dispersed them.

Aboard the U-552 there was pandemonium, with sirens, klaxon horns, bells and whistles and a lot of yelling going on. Kapitan Popp was beside himself trying to restore order. The noise finally quieted down as electric circuits were opened to isolate the problems.

A quick survey revealed no pressure hull damage, but there was a 325-pound depth charge lying in the deck wreckage, and the crew was desperately trying to tie it securely to prevent it from being knocked overboard where the hydrostatic pressure fuse could cause it to detonate. Should that happen, with their speed handicap, it would blow them out of the water for sure. The signalman on the bridge reported contact with the harbor control tower.

R. WARREN SMITH

At 0415, lots of message traffic was taking place, and Kapitan Popp said, "Request immediate entry ahead of the outbound vessels because of our extremis."

The harbor command mulled it over and finally agreed.

At 0450, U-552 entered the harbor, and the small waiting crowd was appalled at how severely battered the boat appeared. The other ships sounded their horns and whistles in salute, as the U-boat's crew manned the rail, or what was left of it, and the boat limped on into the bombproof cavern it called home.

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