

# Coronet

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## *Six Subs in Twelve Hours*

*The Coast Guard Cutter Campbell was a ship fighting men could be proud of, for her ash cans spelled death to the lurking Huns*



by ALAN HYND

COMMANDER James A. Hirshfield was smiling as he stood on the forward deck of the U. S. Coast Guard Cutter *Campbell* on a marrow-chilling afternoon last February. He was thinking of the comic opera experiences he and other Coast Guard veterans had gone through while chasing rum boats in the Fabulous Twenties. None of them dreamed then that the very tricks they were learning from the rummies would make cutters like his such bad news for German subs 20 years later.

They had taught such men as young Ensign Hirshfield to develop cat's eyes and see in the dark, how to ride a punch when rammed, how to ram the other guy and how to spot a phosphorescent wake half a knot off with one eye closed. All good tactics for dealing with U-boats . . .

A furious gale had been blowing now for eight days, ever since the *Campbell* and other cutters and corvettes had met to run interference for a string of freighters plowing over the North Atlantic life-line. But the blow had let up this afternoon. The calmed sea and the increased visibility were made to order for Hitler's wolf packs.

Then it happened. Indicators on the *Campbell's* detection devices began to quiver over markings that screamed with meaning. Crisp orders went through the cutter's inter-communication system and the men rushed to open the ready boxes.

The *Campbell* pointed her nose east and picked up speed as she left the lumbering convoy. The sub's position was established, miles away. The *Campbell* was going out to tangle with the rattlesnake before it could get close enough to sting the convoy.

Commander Hirshfield's rugged, tanned features were those of a man holding three of a kind in a high-

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stakes poker game. He knew the *Campbell* was a good many knots swifter than the fleetest German sub.

The skipper looked at his watch and tackled some mental arithmetic. From the sub's position, he could deduce how long it would take them to reach it. Less than an hour if it were coming west at full tilt. But if the U-boat decided to high-tail it away on the surface, it would take a good deal longer before they could be over it with a pattern of ash cans.

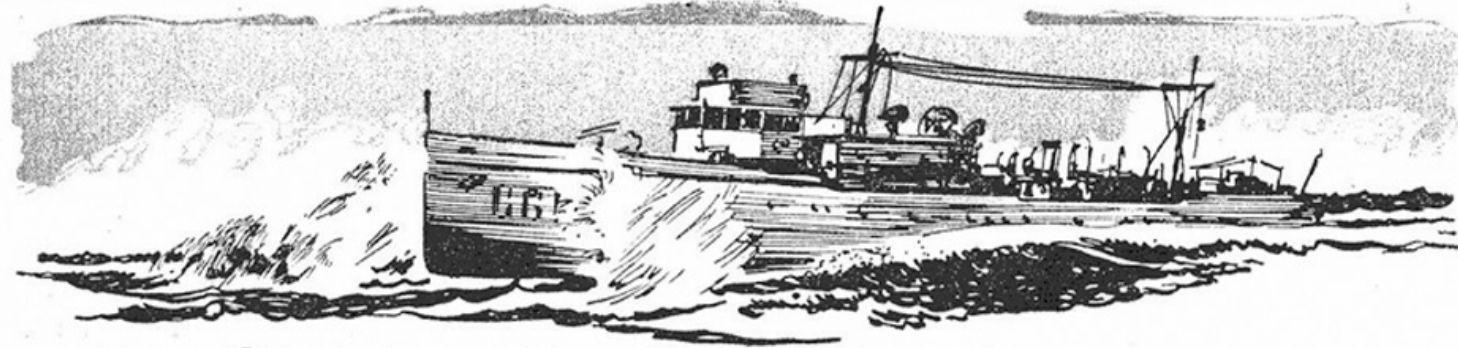
SUDDENLY THE RADIO crackled again. Word was flashed to Commander Hirshfield that two more subs had been detected in the general vicinity of the convoy. Everyone aboard knew what that meant. One sub had spotted the convoy, had tailed it, waiting for the blow to let up, and then shot out word to others. Now a whole wolf pack was converging on the convoy.

The detection devices on the *Campbell* indicated that the sub it was after was taking it on the lam, and going like a bat out of Hades. The skipper did a little more mental juggling of miles and minutes, arguing with himself as to whether it would be tactically sound to shoot all that time going after one sub when, if the *Campbell* turned back, she might run into one or more U-boats that were closer to the convoy. Maybe this sub was acting as a decoy to draw the cutter away from a bigger fight.

He had already given the order to turn back when the message was radioed through that a corvette was slugging it out with a surfaced U-boat, miles nearer the convoy. Minutes later, he saw the two vessels on the horizon, going at it full tilt. The *Campbell* throbbed from stem to stern as she slashed her way to the scene. The sub was maneuvering for all it was worth, trying to get in a lethal blow. The *Campbell* was moving in closer and closer, and still the sub remained above water. Commander Hirshfield wondered how long his luck would hold out, for it's pure gravy when a cutter gets close to a surfaced sub already engaged in a scrap.

The *Campbell* was less than a knot away from the U-boat when the result of a quick Heinie decision became apparent. The sub crash-dived. That was okay with Hirshfield. He could be over the Huns in the steel monster in a matter of minutes.

The tension on the *Campbell* as she rushed in for the kill was almost visible. Some of her men had never

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actually dropped depth charges on a sub before. Their thorough Coast Guard training was about to be put through the crucible.

The seconds could be counted now before the detection devices would tell the men on the *Campbell* that they were right over the sub. Then the ash cans would go. But this was delicate and dangerous business, dropping depth charges. Nothing less than split-second timing would do. If the timing were off, the charges might go off so close to the sub-buster that they would blow her out of the water.

Ten seconds more to go . . . five seconds . . . two . . . one . . .

Hirshfield was on the aft deck now. His eyes were narrowed a trifle, but his voice was soft, his orders brief and explicit. The ash cans started to roll into the foam churned up by the speeding cutter, one after the other.

Their dull roar was music to the ears of the skipper and his crew. "I think we got it," said the Commander. For a moment, he couldn't help comparing the whole ash-can operation to athletics. What he had just witnessed was a stunning example of co-ordination of mind and muscle.

Hirshfield gave another order, and the *Campbell* swung around to look things over. What they saw was not a pretty picture, but it was a welcome one. Against the deepening green of the sea was a large patch of bubbling, brown oil slick—evidence enough that for the time being the sub had at least been put out of commission for further attack attempts. Even if a sub isn't sunk, it's usually banged around sufficiently by well-placed depth charges to knock its delicate instruments out of commission.

The Commander is not exactly a voluble man. So when he took his eyes from the oil slick and looked over his officers and men and said, "A nice job," he spoke a paragraph.

Not that there would have been time for detailed praise. The radio was chattering again. More subs had been either sighted or detected, and the other cutters and corvettes were fanning out to take care of them before they could sneak in close enough to the ungainly freighters to let go with a tin fish. One of the other subs wasn't very far from where the *Campbell* was. The flashes of light about it told the same story—a sub

The Coast Guard Cutter *Campbell* and a corvette were going to it.

THERE WAS JUST one thing to do. The *Campbell* pointed her prow in the direction of the newest slugfest and started out full tilt ahead. This time the sub spotted the cutter right off and crashed-dived. Dusk was gathering, so taking care of this baby was going to be more difficult.

The same tenseness that had preceded the first run-over enveloped the officers and men again. As they closed in on the fleeing sub, they had the hunch that was just the beginning. The quickening gloom had plunged the sea into darkness when Hirshfield announced, "Twenty seconds now."

Then the zero moment came again for the second time within the hour. In the half-blackness, the cans went over in a perfect pattern. Again the geysering foam showed white against the murky sky.

It was too dark now to see whether there was oil slick on the sea, and lights would court danger. But Hirshfield said once more, "A nice job." His nostrils were as acute as his eyes, and he smelled oil . . .

Toward eleven that night, when the *Campbell* was racing through the inky waters to take up her place as an escort for the convoy, another general quarters call came through. The wolf pack was converging again.

Hirshfield was still on deck, peering into the moonless darkness for the slightest untoward sign. Presently his eyes widened. What he saw was no mere feather kicked up by a diving sub. It was a white flare sent out by one of the ships in the convoy. That meant only one thing—the freighter had been torpedoed.

What the flare lit up was a nightmare to Hirshfield. Surfaced subs were darting away in different directions, like vermin scurrying away when a light is suddenly switched on. The action of the freighter was sound strategy; it broke up what might have been a sneak simultaneous mass attack on the entire convoy.

Other cutters than Hirshfield's went out after the subs. The extent of the damage they did cannot be disclosed here but the freighter that had been hit was done for. The *Campbell* raced to the illuminated area and found four packed life boats with 50 men in each silhouetted against the ghostly glow. All of them were taken aboard.

In the hours that followed, the *Campbell* made darting probes of the waters all around the convoy. She

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didn't get a rumble. The other cutters and the corvettes had scattered the Huns.

About dawn, Hirshfield was having a cup of hot coffee on deck. Suddenly he laid the cup down. In the mist to starboard he saw the bulky outline of a sub. His orders were out in a minute. The *Campbell* was close enough to the U-boat to start blasting with her deck guns when the Hun craft suddenly crash-dived. But its gesture was futile. Once again a full pattern of depth charges tumbled from the after-deck. Again Hirshfield and his officers and men smelled oil.

The *Campbell* was going back to re-join the convoy when Hirshfield spotted the phosphorescent sparkle of another sub. It was practically the same story all over again—a crash dive, a perfectly-dropped pattern of ash cans, and more oil slick.

HAD THERE BEEN any doubts in his mind that the wolf pack that had been scattered the evening before had re-assembled, those doubts would have been dispelled a few minutes later when the *Campbell* sighted its fifth sub. The cutter forced it to crash-dive and everybody went into his routine again. "This," said one of the enlisted men, "is gettin' monotonous."

Hirshfield almost wished that one of the subs would remain on the surface and slug it out. He got his wish sooner than he expected. In the half light, not 13 hours after the *Campbell* had dropped her first ash cans, the skipper and his officers spotted a big sub close up to starboard. It was a question of who saw the other first.

The *Campbell* opened up with her deck guns. "Steer a collision course!" Hirschfield ordered, raising his voice for the first time to be heard above the firing. The sub started to turn to go, not having time to crash-dive. The *Campbell*, now really pouring on the coal, was given a full right rudder in an attempt to smash into the sub broadside, her guns still blazing. The Huns had really been caught with their fins down, and were not even attempting to return the fire.

As the *Campbell* moved in, the sub kept turning away. But the Heinies were too slow, and the cutter too fast. She plowed into the U-boat at a 25-degree angle. The sound of wrenching metal split the air, and then, just as the stern of the *Campbell* passed near the sub's prow, the boys on the aft deck of the cutter let go with another pattern. The sub was lifted clean out

The Coast Guard Cutter *Campbell* of the water.

The *Campbell* slowed down, and turned to come back. She was just picking up speed when a wound that she had suffered in the collision became apparent. Water poured into the engine room and flooded everything. The sub had settled back on the water, apparently not too badly injured after all. Hirshfield ordered the firing to start up again. Then the discovery was made that the *Campbell's* best guns had been knocked out by the collision, too.

The cutter, still moving on momentum, was getting closer to the sub. The rudder was knocked out, too, so there was no way of altering or stopping the forward lunge. Nor was there any way of knowing in what state the sub's guns were. If the sub was not badly injured, the deck gun Huns would find themselves in the enjoyable position of shooting at a duck on a pond.

As the *Campbell* got closer and closer to the sub, with every man aboard holding his breath, the silhouette of the sub against the semi-darkness seemed suddenly to grow smaller. It was sinking! In less than a minute, it was entirely below the surface.

THE *Campbell* was done for—but only until repairs could be made. Her skipper, too, was in need of repairs. The only man aboard the *Campbell* who had been injured, he realized now that some flying metal had ricocheted and penetrated one of his arms and his back.

His ship still remained a duck on the pond. With the coming of bright daylight she became a delicious invitation to the first undersea prowler that came along. The convoy was now a considerable distance away and the *Campbell's* radio wasn't working. Four of the men went over the side into the icy sea to look at the damage. There was a 12-foot slit in the cutter's side below the waterline.

Hours passed. Then, from over the horizon, came a Polish destroyer. It was the *Burza*, a veteran of Dunkirk.

The destroyer screened the *Campbell* until other assistance arrived. Eventually, the *Campbell* was towed to an Eastern port by a little tug that churned its way through 800 miles of open sea without an escort.

There was a sad ending for four officers and one hundred members of the *Campbell's* crew. They weren't on her when she was finally towed in, battered but proud and still in command of her wounded skipper. When the

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*Burza* had first come along, Commander Hirshfield had been forced to issue what to him was a most unpleasant order. To lighten the wounded cutter as much as possible, all available extra weight was jettisoned, and Hirshfield had found it his sad duty to order the four officers and the hundred men transferred to the Polish ship. Even today, those men have heavy hearts when they remember leaving the ship they had come to love with a love only a man of the sea understands. As for Commander Hirshfield, he would rather not talk about that part of the fabulous voyage of the *Campbell*.

