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# BEHIND THE LOG

*by*

**E. J. PRATT**

TORONTO  
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1947

PRINTED IN CANADA

To  
*Lorne Richardson*

## FOREWORD

This is mainly a statement of exposition and acknowledgment. In the spring of 1945 my friend, Professor Lorne Richardson (then a Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy), asked me if I should like to spend some time at sea in order to gather material and atmosphere for a poem. He said that his suggestion had met with the approval of his colleagues, and he felt sure that arrangements could be effected. In due time the invitation was ratified by Vice-Admiral G. C. Jones and I was granted every facility to go out with destroyers and corvettes, and collect from officers and crews facts, stories, moods, technical terms and the ever-maturing crop of nautical idioms.

I began searching for an action which would combine dramatic intensity with the eternal tedium of convoy—something in the early phase of the War when the Atlantic sinkings far outpaced the building of ships and when, after the fall of Paris, Churchill's frank and audacious admissions sobered Britain to a sense of her peril. U-boats were multiplying fast and moving ever farther westward to concentrate on Atlantic shipping. Convoys were being located and trailed across the ocean with a climbing ratio of loss, which sometimes came close to annihilation. Much has been written during and since the War upon the slimness of the margins between victory and defeat, and the failure of a given convoy to get through at this most critical phase could mean general catastrophe.

The story of those ships comprising the Royal Canadian Navy and "the fourth arm of the Fighting Forces", the Merchant Navy, is now a part of the history of Canada's growth as a sea power, for at the close of 1942 Canada had become responsible for more than half of the convoys moving towards Europe. Those two arms of the Forces worked

with the finest co-ordination, and in the spirit of mutual faith which was never betrayed, but rather reinforced, by the exercise of the democratic right to grumble—the antidote to the Fascist lockjaw.

One episode in the six-year-old drama of the waters, which possessed practically all the elements required for my special task, was the struggle of convoy S.C. 42 for survival. It is significant as being the record of the first display of "wolf-pack" strategy directed towards Atlantic shipping, and hence the experience of this convoy became invaluable in the subsequent working out of counter-measures. The odds against survival were tremendous—twelve U-boats (it was estimated) with the possibility of German surface raiders coming in for the kill. The target was sixty-six ships crawling at eight knots and protected by an all-Canadian escort of one destroyer H.C.M.S. *Skeena*, and three corvettes, *Kenogami*, *Orillia* and *Alberni*, which were later joined by *Moose Jaw* and *Chambly*. Had the faster *Skeena* been destroyed, all the heroism imaginable would not have availed against the U-boats, which had a surface speed of three or four knots more than that of the corvettes.

Another feature of the drama was the harnessing of physical science to human effort. Only two or three decades past, captains were blowing their ships' whistles to determine positions by echoes. It was always a wonder to us, as schoolboys in Newfoundland, how captains of coastal steamers and skippers of "fore-and-afters" could find their way into port through darkness or thick fog. A succession of blasts and even of shouts, striking cliffs and rebounding, would give them the rough basis for their calculation. Our wonder was more than a mere tribute to the practical skill of navigators. It was partly rooted in mystery over a dimly apprehended process of science working through an instrument, whether a whistle or a voice. We were constantly wavering between a sophisticated pose before a blackboard demonstration of an echo and a half-abashed acceptance of a scent or a sixth sense, supposed to be shared equally by mariners and Newfoundland dogs. And then as soon as the superstitions were hammered out of our heads by the schoolmaster's pointer, a new flock surprised us with the announcement of another scientific discovery. There are many of us who are ever standing on the thresholds of workshops, looking and listening, never completely rid of the feeling that one day a spirit will enter and planet-strike the machines.

To a layman, anti-submarine detection (asdic) looked like a miracle. It is true that its sensational performance in 1941 was in a year or two to be eclipsed by radar, as shattering to human credulity as radio and wireless were in their day, yet the physics of sound, or rather supersonics, seemed then to have reached the highest pitch of technical accomplishment. The picture, actual or imaginary, of such a mechanism in operation, especially in a life-and-death crisis, could be a source of eerie dramatic tension. The operator was the heir of a long promise. He came late in the line of the sentries and the coastal skippers with their calls and answers, but when he did come he had a range far beyond their voices, and when he challenged, the foe replied from under the sea.

Further acknowledgements are due. For his kind co-operation and for his final authority to use the files at Ottawa and to gather more recent information from a most obliging personnel, my thanks are offered to Admiral H. T. W. Grant, C.B.E, D.S.O., R.C.N., Chief of the Naval Staff. For the use of his Log and the Report of Proceedings, and for his personal narrative, I am deeply indebted to the commanding officer of H.M.C.S. *Skeena*, Captain James C. Hibbard, D.S.C. and Bar, R.C.N, who as senior officer of the escort was in command during this sixty-hour action off Cape Farewell. For securing access to officers, ratings and sailors generally, for checking data, for many courtesies on and off the ships, and for sharing so generously with me the wealth of his experience, I am very grateful to Commander William Sclater, author of *Haida*.

The names of the ships are authentic but the personal names in the story are fictitious. The Convoy Conference is synthetic, pieced from the *Forms* and *General Instructions*, from accounts of Masters and N.C.S.O.s present at various convoy conferences, and amplified a little. Apart from a few minor transpositions and enlargements for dramatic effect for which official indulgence is requested, the record follows the incident.

E. J. PRATT.

There is a language in a naval log  
That rams grammar down a layman's throat,  
Where words unreel in paragraphs, and lines  
In chapters. Volumes lie in graphs and codes,  
Recording with an algebraic care  
The idiom of storms, their lairs and paths;  
Or, in the self-same bloodless manner, sorting  
The mongrel litters of a battle signal  
In victories or defeats or bare survivals,  
Flags at half-mast, salutes and guards of honour,  
Distinguished crosses, burials at sea.

Our navigators trained their astrolabes  
And sextants on the skies in lucky weather,  
Or added guesses to dead reckoning,  
Hauled up their lead, examined mud or shell  
Or gravel on the arming—fifty fathoms,  
Now forty, thirty, twenty-five, shallowing  
Quickly! "Engines, astern, reefs, keep your lead  
Going. Have plenty of water under you."  
They did not wait till miracles of science  
Unstopped the naked ears for supersonics,  
Or lifted cataracts from finite vision  
To make night and its darkness visible.  
How long ago was it since sailors blew  
Their sirens at the cliffs while nearing land,  
Traversing channels, cocked their ears and waited?  
"Where did you hear that echo, mate?"

"Right off

The starboard quarter, Captain. Took ten seconds."  
"That's Gull Rock there a mile away. Where now?"  
"Two seconds for the echo from port bow."  
"That's Porpoise Head I reckon—Hard a-port!"  
With echoes everywhere, stand out to sea.  
But when the winds deafened their ears or cloud  
And rain blinded their eyes, they were shoved back  
Upon their mother wit which either had  
To find the exits to the runs and round  
The Capes or pile their ships upon the reefs.

And of that lineage are the men today.  
They still are calling to the rocks: they get  
Their answers in the same hard terms: they call  
To steel gliding beneath the sea: they pierce  
Horizons for the surface hulls: they ping  
The sky for the plane's fuselage: even  
The moon acknowledged from her crater sills.  
But though the radio bursts and vacuum tubes  
And electronic beams were miracles  
Of yesterday, dismissing cloud and rain  
And darkness as illusions of the sense,  
Yet always there to watch the colours, note  
The V-break in the beam's straight line, to hear  
The echoes, feel the pain, are eyes, ears, nerves:

Always remains the guess within the judgment  
To jump the fire perfection of the physics  
And smell mortality behind the log.

As weird a game of ping-pong ever played  
Was on the sea—the place, off Cape Farewell,  
With the back-curtain of the Greenland ice-cap:  
Time—'41 autumnal equinox.

The crisis was the imminence of famine  
And the cutting of the ganglia and veins  
That vitalized the sinews, fed the cells  
Of lungs demanding oxygen in air.  
The wicks were guttering from want of oil,  
And without oil, the bread went with the light,  
And without bread, the will could not sustain  
The fight, piping its courage to the heart.

Grey predatory fish had pedigreed  
With tiger sharks and brought a speed and power  
The sharks had never known, for they had been  
Committed to the sea under a charter  
Born of a mania of mind and will  
And nurtured by a Messianic slogan.  
They were not bounded by the parallels.  
They found their habitats wherever there  
Was open sea and keels to ride upon it.  
Off the North Cape they had outsped the narwhals,  
The sawfish off the Rios and the Horn.  
They did not kill for food: they killed that food  
Should not be used as food. They were the true  
Expendables—the flower of their type.  
They left their mothers for self-immolation,  
The penalty the same for being on  
Or off the target—for the first to join  
Their own combustion to that of the ships,  
And for the second, just to go the way  
Their victims went—a drunken headlong spiral,  
Shunted from an exhausted radius  
Down fifteen thousand feet or more of sea,  
Engines, propellers, gyros, rudders, dead.

The S.C. 42 was being groomed  
To match a new suspected strategy.  
The sleuths till now had surfaced, stabbed and dived  
In lone attack. This convoy had to face  
The risk of concentrated ambush, meet it  
By leaving beaten sea-lanes, east and west,  
And in the ambiguity of the wastes  
To seek the harsh alliance of the ice  
And fog, where Arctic currents were more friendly,  
And long nights blanketed the periscopes.

In the Conference room the language dripped with brine.  
Veterans, who nearly half a century  
Ago had flown their flags on battle cruisers,  
Were busy grafting some new sprouts of Gaelic  
And Newne-Irish on an English stump.  
They had saluted Fisher as cadets,  
Heard Open Fire under Jellicoe,  
Outridden typhoons off the Solomons  
And at the Falklands cancelled Coronel.  
'Twas time they had a spell of garden peace,  
A time to trim their briars and colour Meerschaums.  
Those old days were the real days—now, by God,  
They had to tread the decks of merchantmen,  
From flagships to dry cargo-ships and tankers.

*The Naval Control Service Officer addresses the Masters.*

"Good morning, gentlemen. It is a pleasure  
To see familiar faces here today.  
To such of you who have commanded ships  
In earlier convoys what I have to say  
Will be just dishing up the old instructions.  
But since to many it is the first adventure,  
I know you'll pardon me if I should cover  
With some precision the important points.  
Let me begin by saying that your convoy  
Has, in its Commodore, one of the most  
Renowned men in the Service. It is not  
For me to talk at length about his fine  
And honourable record. It is known  
To all of you. He has of his free choice  
Issued from his well-earned retirement  
To place at the disposal of the Allies  
His knowledge, skill, and practical seamanship.  
Here at this table, gentlemen: Rear-Admiral  
Sir Francis Horatio Trelawney-Camperdown!

"The Senior Naval Officer will have  
Escort and convoy under his command.  
An able and distinguished officer,  
He is through long and personal experience  
Well-versed in enemy tactics, and your safety  
Will be the escort's first consideration.

*N.C.S.O. thumbing the pages of "General Instructions"*

"Being in all respects ready for sea,  
The ships will have steam up and hoist pennants  
At daybreak. Note—The Commodore will sound  
A prolonged blast. The ships will leave anchorage  
In single column and at intervals

Of three minutes, and in the following order,  
The Commodore leading...

You will shorten cables  
XX minutes before you heave up. Note—  
You will be making seaward on the ebb.  
You start two columns after dropping pilots.  
Notice in Form A1 all the instructions  
Governing matters of sequence, columns and speed.

"May I now draw your most thorough attention  
To that important fire page, section B  
Of General Instructions' (a voice—'regular page  
of *bumph*'); that *complete*  
*Blackout at night*. Only last week reports  
Came in of a ship sunk because she showed  
A light, and that despite the most emphatic  
Warnings at the conference prior to the sailing.  
Remember—have deadlights and scuttles closed,  
The blackout curtains checked, no cigarettes  
Or pipes lighted on deck and every measure  
To conceal the convoy put into effect.

"And likewise of the first significance,  
Page 3 at section D concerning 'Smoke'.  
Advice is being received of ships making  
Black smoke which with good visibility  
May be observed for many miles at sea,  
And I may add for hours after a convoy  
Has passed a given point. I must repeat  
This warning—Do not make black smoke in daylight!

"Again. Your route has with the greatest care  
Been chosen by the Admiralty experts.  
But may I point out that such care and judgment  
Could be offset by so simple a matter  
As refuse-dumping over rails. Do not—  
(Voices—'Wrap it around the bully beef.'  
'No, put it in the soup to give it body.'  
'God, that tomato soup needs body and flavour.'  
'I'd put it in the kye to take the stink out.')

Do NOT throw garbage in the sea in day time.  
That's a dead give-away. A crate or carton  
Floating astern a convoy might betray  
The existence and position of the ships.  
That practice must at all cost be avoided.

"And most important for internal safety  
Of convoy lines is that of station-keeping.  
A ship that's not in station is out of control;  
The turns in moments of emergency  
Cannot successfully be executed,  
Unless this measure strictly is observed.  
I do not need to emphasize this maxim.

"These measures are of front-line urgency.

W/T silence must always be maintained  
Along the route. Occasionally it's broken,  
Not wilfully indeed but carelessly,  
By operators fresh from the radio school,  
Whose fingers have not lost the itch to tap  
The keys to break the tedium by listening  
To crackle on 500 kilocycles.  
A random da da dit dit dit might be  
An invitation to the U-boats ready  
To accept it. They are ever listening  
In on our frequencies and you know well  
The manner the Direction Finder Loop  
On a surfaced U-boat will follow a signal.  
It's like a human ear alerted, which  
Will turn to the source of a sound to get a bearing.  
You must remember that the enemy  
Will not relax his efforts to pick up  
Those waves, that German D/F stations even  
As far away as Occupied Europe  
Are taking bearings, plotting out our ships.

"Now, gentlemen: here is the Commodore."

*Sir Francis Horatio*

"Gentlemen: I shall be very brief and I hope  
To be as brief after we get to sea.  
I shall keep my signals to a minimum,  
But when a hoist does go up I shall  
Expect immediate acknowledgment.  
Many of us have sailed together already,  
And gone through several trying situations.  
But our success, such as it is, has sprung  
From absolute obedience to instructions  
And from endurance which must be assumed.  
While it is true that for the navigation  
Of his own ship each master must be held  
Responsible, there is but little room  
For rugged individualists. Elsewhere  
Perhaps the Nelson touch may be applied,  
And a captain's intuitions exercised,  
But not within the stations of a convoy.  
(Chuckles amongst the older masters.)

"The N.C.S.O. has referred to the matter  
Of showing lights. A match, lit on deck, has  
Been spotted by an escort at two miles,  
And last crossing, a thoughtless biped left  
A port open and failed to notice the signal  
From a destroyer. It required a burst  
From a machine-gun to close it. I am sure  
We shall require no such emphasis  
In this convoy but I should urge each master

To make the business of lights a top concern,  
Particularly at the change of Watch.  
Men dropping in to a stuffy galley to make  
A mug of tea before going below  
Are the principal offenders.

"Do not wait

Till you are deep in fog before you stream  
Your fog-buoys. That is generally too late.  
Your next astern by that time has lost touch.  
Good seamanship and team-play should prevent  
Avoidable collisions in thick fog.

"If you are new to convoy you may be  
Tempted to flash on at full brilliancy  
Your navigation lights when another ship  
Closes you. DON'T. You are as visible  
To him as he to you. Keep closed up. Keep  
Lights dimmed except in an emergency.

"I shall say little here about the stragglers.  
The record of the losses says it much  
More clearly, and the escort cannot help  
You if you leave the family. They are good;  
They can work wonders but not miracles.

"And now if you're uncertain of anything—  
Emergency turns, for instance—come and have  
A chin with me at the close of the conference.  
And to repeat, we're in this business all  
Together, and in it up to the neck:  
For my part, I am bloody proud of it.  
Good morning, gentlemen, and a good voyage.'

*N.C.S.O.*

"Questions?"

*Chorus*

"Plenty."

*Harvey Butt*

"I'm in the wrong position.

Too far astern. I have a 12-knot ship.  
I want a place in first or second line  
To save me bumpin' into 6-knot tramps."

*Jim Burdock*

"This convoy got no tramps."

*Butt*

"Well, all I know  
The last one had 'em, and I knocked the sterns  
Off three of them, and I was always goin'  
Full speed astern to save my goddam neck."

*"John Knox" O'Flaherty*

"I could make 8 knots if I didn't have  
Such lousy coal. The bloody stuff won't steam.  
A half of it is gravel—wouldn't boil  
A kettle: looks like salvage from a wreck  
Picked up from sweepings left on Sable Island."

*Charlie Shipline*

"And I don't like my place—gummed up between  
A couple of tankers. God, if I'm not fished  
I'll be run down."

*Jack Doucette*

"Why should I be back there?  
Never did like the stern of columns. Suppose  
I'm in there just for picking up survivors.  
What do you take me for—an ambulance?"

*Jerry Payne*

"8 knots would tear the guts out of my tub.  
I haven't had a refit for three years.  
Can't execute a turn of forty-five degrees.  
We'll be colliding every fifteen seconds."

*Robert Fitzsimmons*

"My pumps were out of gear when she was built;  
Still out of gear; complained a hundred times,  
But can't get any action."

*Michael Saltaway*

"I have this  
To say. I only got one boiler workin';  
And that one's on half-time—the other half  
Is restin'—and I've only half a crew."

*Norwegian captain, leaning heavily on native speech*

"I kan ikke forstaa fordommt ord.  
How in helvete tink dey dat I kan  
Faa 8 knots ut of my old vaskelbalja.  
Har ikke hatt fullt mannskap for two year.  
I lar mig fan ikke fortelle what I  
Skal do. You go helvete alle mann."

*N.C.S.O.*

"What did he say?"

*'Arry Stubbins*

"'E says the bleedin' hinstructions  
Are fine and quite clear to 'is hunderstandin'."

*Robin MacAllister*

"Nae, nae, he canna' thole thae English turms.  
He'd ken a' richt, gin you gae him the Gaelic.  
I wad respectfully suggest the wurrds  
O' the Generral Instructions be convairted  
Into a ceevilized tongue so that a chiel  
Micht hae nae doots. Noo, let me spik mi thochts."

(Voices: "Now, what did *he* say?" "Noo's the day  
and noo's the hour." "Is this St. Andrew's Night?"  
"Pipe in the haggis.")

*A Danish captain*

"No, no. He sess he do not *ikke* know  
One word. His vaskelbalja—tub-tub, washtub,  
Das iss he mean his ship, can't make 8 knots.  
No crew *mannskap* full up for long long time.

Ship had no refit since she left Bergen  
In 1894. He tol' me dat  
Himself. He not quite clear. He sess ve can  
All go to hella. Don't care damn.

I got

Complaints also. Want get dem off my chest.  
Goddam nuisance, I seh, dose para-a-vanes.  
Muss up de vurks. Crew don't like dem damn bit.  
Dey seh put hex on ship—a buncha Jonahs.  
And more also I seh. No compass checks.  
Dose D/G coils play hell wid compasses.  
De gear get loose on deck. Dey come adrift."

*Cyrus Bumstead*

"I don't want anyone to tell me how  
To run my ship—been in the Services,  
Merchant and Navy, nigh come forty years.  
I was a Master when the most of them  
Were spottin' patterns on their diapers."

*Mark Knee to Cyrus*

"I squeezed the Atlantic from my mitts before  
Those Juniors had their birthday buttons on."

*Captain, The Honourable Guy Brimblecombe*

"Well, sir, you needn't worry about *my* ship.  
She went through this before: she'll go again.  
She's in good trim. I have a splendid crew.  
Signals will be acknowledged to the letter,  
And in the sea tradition, I assure you."

*N.C.S.O.*

"Now, gentlemen, since it is quite apparent  
That we are all in utmost harmony  
On the main grounds, it is just left for me  
To wish 'good-luck'. Never have I attended  
A Conference where there was such fine feeling  
Combined with insight and rare technical grasp  
Of the problems of a convoy operation.  
Let me congratulate you. May I now  
Invite you, on behalf of a great friend  
Of the R.C.N., to the Periwinkle Club  
At Lobster Point where you may hoist a couple  
to take the chill from the September fog."

\* \* \*

In a few hours from the time the blinds  
Were drawn upon the jags and the last lisp  
Against the universe and things marine  
Was but a reminiscence lapsed in rum,  
Those men were on the Bridge peering through fog  
And moving towards their ordered rendezvous.

\* \* \*

One half a million tons were in the holds,  
Cramming to the last precious cubic inch  
The slow-keeled merchantmen—the sixty-six.  
No longer were those ships an industry  
Run for peacetime returns upon investment.  
They took their line positions for defence.  
Against them mainly was the warfare waged—  
Bulk cargo carriers with box-like sections,  
Ship side to ship side and the main deck to keel,  
Carrying their gross of ore and coal and grain;  
The ships with 'tween decks running the full length;  
Tankers equipped with special pumps for oil;  
Refrigeration ships, holds insulated  
For storage of the perishable goods;  
And hybrid types that had their bellies full  
Of oranges, aluminum and lint.

How desperate the strait which would commit  
A treasure of this price to such a journey!  
Where find a steward who would risk his name  
To close the page of such accountancy  
When every mile along the ocean highway  
Was calling for protection, and in calling  
Demanded life and life's expenditure?  
And here the call was answered with a guard  
Whose substitute for numbers was its courage—  
Four terriers slipped from the Canadian kennel:  
But one destroyer, *Skeena*; three corvettes,  
*Kenogami*, *Orillia* and *Alberni*.

Upon their vigil hung the life of all,  
Of ships and men. Of sleeker, faster breed.  
The *Skeena* ranged a far periphery  
At thirty knots, now out of sight and now  
Closing the convoy as her nose tried out  
The dubious scents in narrowing ellipses.  
The slower guards kept closer to their broods,  
Pushing their way within the column lanes,  
Emerged to pace the port and starboard flanks  
Or nuzzled with a deep strategic caution  
The hulls of those whose tardy engine beats  
Brought down the knots of faster ships and made  
The gravest risk and worry for the fleet.  
They kept a special watch upon the tankers.

No ships, no aeroplanes, no jeeps could stir  
Without this source of power and lubrication.  
Even the merchantmen must flank these ships,  
Herded like buffalo young inside the ring.

\* \* \*

*Commodore to signalman*

"Signal to pennants 73, relay  
To pennants 103, Stop Pouring Smoke!"

*Internal murmurings*

"Look at it tossin' like a Texas twister.  
That smoke is blacker than an Afghan's whiskers.  
I'd like to tell that Captain of the Heads  
He should have stayed at home with the kind of job  
That suited him—housebreakin' his Angoras."

*Official*

"And pennants 114 is out of station."

*Unofficial*

"That flappin' penguin from the Auckland Islands  
Has been a week on route, yet needs more time  
To get rid of that Newfie-Crowsnest screech.  
He'll lose it when he's doused. Get back in station,  
For if you don't, the canaries will stop singin'."

*The Master's thoughts*

"I told those sculpins at the conference  
I couldn't make that eight—a half a knot  
Above a six would blow my stinkin' boilers.  
I haven't had a cleanin' for a year,  
And there's a beach of sand inside the gears,  
And yet that bargee yells—GET BACK IN STATION!"

*Commodore*

"And pennants 74 by the Diet of Worms!  
He's waddlin' like an old barnyard merganser.  
Another hour by the way he's goin'

He'll be out on the flanks duckin' his feathers,  
Or lost in fog and stragglin' back to Sydney.  
Keep pumpin' Morse into his ruddy blinkers.

*The Master in question*

"I've got a twisted rudder—like a corkscrew,  
And if that poopin' punk there on that flagship  
Imagines he's Paul Bunyan or the devil,  
Tell him put on his shorts and straighten it."

*P.O. to galley-boy*

"Gallagher, did your mother tell you nothin'  
On the way home? Stop pitchin' gash in daytime.  
Handin' the convoy on a platter to the subs.  
As bad as smoke to give the trail away.  
Just one more bad tomato over there,  
And all the ships will quit this lovely Service,  
And you'll go with the galley, do you hear?"

*Gallagher*

"Why won't that windpipe slitter tell me what  
I got to do with all that mouldy gash?  
'Twas gash when it was brought aboard, 'twas gash  
When it was crated: now its maggoty.  
Can't eat it and can't burn it and can't dump it.  
I'd like to foul his beak in those tomatoes."

North of the sixtieth, they had, it seemed,  
Found refuge in a sea-berth where the foe,  
Finding the chill enter his crop, might seek  
More southern fodder. Least of all the hazards  
Were winds and waves: for these the ships were built.  
Their bows could bull the heavier seas head-on.  
Their hulls could stand the shock beam-to. The keels  
Had learned the way to bite into the troughs:  
Such was their native element. The acts  
Of God were taken as their daily fare  
Received alike with prayers or curses. These  
Were as the dice fell—whether luck of devil  
Or luck of God spilled on a shifting floor  
Close to the steady fringe of the Arctic Circle.

For seven days and nights without attack!  
The asdic operator in his hut  
Had sent his ultra-sounds out and reported  
Echoes, but only such as might return

As the dull, soft reverberation notes  
From seaweed or low forms of ocean life  
Or from a school of porpoises or whales.  
His hearing was as vital to the ship  
As was the roving sight in a crow's nest.  
His ear was as the prism is to light,  
Unravelling meanings from a skein of tone.  
Each sound might hold a threat, a Bremen slur,  
An overture to a dementia  
Of guns and rockets and torpedo hits  
Competing with the orders from the Bridge.  
He had to know that threat and not mistake it.  
For that his body was a sounding-board.  
Even his knees must feel it and his face  
Become a score for undetermined notes,  
As if a baton in his cortex played  
Wry movements on his neurones fiddle-taut.  
Twitched his reflexes into spasms, narrowed  
His pupils, kicked his heart into his throat.

He had an instrument in his control  
Attested by the highest signatures of science.  
The echoes had traversed wide spans of time:—  
Helmholtz and Doppler tapping to each other  
Through laboratory walls, and there was Rayleigh  
Calling to Langevin, he to Fresnel,  
The three hymning Pindarics to Laplace,  
And all vibrating from their resonators  
Salutes to Robert Boyle, halloos to Newton.  
And here, his head-phones on, this operator.  
Sleeve-rolled mechanic to the theorists,  
Was holding in his personal trust, come life,  
Come death, their cumulative handiwork.  
Occasionally a higher note might hit  
The ear-drum like a drill, bristle the chin,  
Involving everything from brain to kidneys,  
Only to be dismissed as issuing  
From the submerged foundations of an iceberg,  
Or classified as "mutual interference".

The hopes were running higher the farther north  
The convoy steamed. Would this one get its break?  
The Arctic pressed into the human service,  
The Circle which had caught the navigators—  
The hardest in the annals of The Search,  
Willoughby, Chancelor, Hudson, Bering, Franklin—  
Impounded them, twisted and broken them,  
Their ships and crews upon its icy spokes:  
This time through the ironic quirk of War  
Changed to an allied *cordon sanitaire*.

The evening of the eighth day and a moon,  
High-sailing and impersonal, picked out  
The seventy ships, deriding the constrained

Hush of the blackout. Was the latitude  
Itself not adequate watch? The sea was calm,  
Although with a beam swell the wallowing rate  
Was but five knots. The moon illuminated  
The *Empire Hudson*, leader of port wing,  
Loaded with grain, the *Gypsum Queen* with sulphur,  
The *Winterswyck*, the *Garm*, the *Scania*,  
*Muneric* (iron ore—sink like a rock  
She would if hit), *Bretwalda*, *Baron Ramsay*,  
*Gullpool*, the *Empire Panther* and *Macgregor*,  
The *Lorient*, *Arosa*, *Hampton Lodge*,  
And others with the same high names and pennants,  
Carrying at the load-water line their freight—  
Twelve columns of them in their blueprint stations.  
A half an hour to dusk the bo'sun's mate  
Had piped his strictest order—*Darken Ship*.

Thousands of sailors under decks were sealed  
As in vast envelopes. They ate and worked  
And slept within a world self-quarantined  
Against the pestilence of light by bolts,  
Bulkheads and battened portholes, for each cell  
Was like a tumoured brain, danger within,  
Danger without, divided from the world  
By an integument of iron bone.  
What chance for life the moment when a shell  
Trepanned the skull? What would release the pressure  
Of that stampede to reach the for'ard hatch—  
That burial hole in the deckhead—and come up  
When the plates buckled in the lower mess?

Danger within? Could not the magazines  
By a raffle flirt of fate be made to turn  
Against the convoy, striking through the escort,  
With final undeliberated measure,  
When the oil tanks would join the magazines  
To the last ton, to the last gram of blunder?  
The fires that warmed the galleys could cremate:  
For oil and fulminate of mercury,  
Nitrated cellulose and T.N.T.  
And the constituents of our daily bread,  
Fresh water and fresh air, could by a shift,  
Sudden and freakish in the molecules,  
Be transubstantiated into death.

Added to this might come the blows where friend  
Struck friend with utmost shoulder energy—  
Blows just as murderous as torpedo hits  
Where in the darkness, executing turns,  
Or in the fog, the convoy ships would find  
Their plates as vulnerable as cellophane:  
Or from excess of their protective zeal  
The fighting units with their double rate  
Of convoy speed might plough their sinuous way

Up through the narrow lanes and turn too sharp,  
Presenting their full beams across the bows  
Of leading merchantmen. Lucky they were  
If they escaped with nothing but a blast  
Of roaring basso from the Commodore's lungs—  
"Those lousy, noisy, nattering sons o' badgers,  
Where do they think they're going—to Miami,  
Harpooning porpoises or flying fish?"

The Silent Service never won its name  
With fairer title than it did this night.  
Evening at half-past nine and a fresh sound,  
An instant octave lift to treble pitch  
From the dull datum of "reverbs" startled  
The ear. "An echo bearing green four-O,  
Range 1500."

"Hold and classify."

The ping-g-g with its death's head identity!

#### *C.O. to Officer-of-Watch*

"Increase speed 250 revolutions."

*(Officer-of-the-Watch repeats, calls down voice-pipe to  
coxswain who sets engine-room telegraph to speed. The  
Engineer Officer-of-Watch acknowledges. His chief  
E.R.A. swings wheel-throttle-valve open to make  
required revolutions. Engine-room telegraph confirms  
to wheelhouse and coxswain calls up  
voice-pipe—"Wheelhouse-Bridge: 250 revolutions on, sir."  
Bridge Officer-of-Watch repeats to captain.)*

The *Skeena* heeled to port on "starboard ten"  
To keep the target on the bow. "Steady  
On *two-four-seven*." (Harry one at the dip.)  
"Left cut on *two-four-six*.... Right cut  
On *two-five-three*." (Reporting Doppler)  
"Echo high and inclination closing."  
The range 1200. "Target moving right:  
Centre bearing, *two-five-five*."  
One thousand yards: "extent of target—*ten*."

Not ice this time but moving steel submerged—  
Two hundred feet of longitudinal plate.  
Forged at the Krupp's and tested in the Baltic,  
Were answering the taps.

"Stand by depth-charges."

#### *Captain to Chief Yeoman*

"Take an emergency report to shore:

'In contact with classified submarine'."

(Chief Yeoman repeats to W.T. office.)

A crackle of Morse, and in bare space of seconds  
The warning goes to Admiralty, from there  
To allied ships in threatened area,  
And on the walls in *Operations*, where  
The swastikas and shadows of the U-boats  
Follow in replica the Atlantic movements,  
A red peg moves along the chart to plot  
The first of the disease spots that would pock  
The body of the S.C. 42.

Whatever doubt the eye might have imposed  
Upon the ear soon vanished with the signals.  
*Jedmore* reported two torpedoes passed  
Ahead. *Muneric*, fourth ship in port column,  
Attacked, dragged instantly, sank with her iron.  
The Commodore—"Saw U-boat on port bow."  
*Kenogami* in contact with another,  
A third, a fourth. Suspicions which had wormed  
Their way along the vine were proved. The first  
Wolf-pack engagement of the Atlantic War  
Was on! A fifth ... a seventh! They had trailed  
The ships to Greenland waters. Moonlight full,  
Without the mercy of clouds, had turned  
A traitor to the convoy, cancelling  
The northern length of nights. Like teal not yet  
Surprised to wing, the silhouetted ships  
Awaited leisured barrels from the hunters,  
And the warheads drilled them as from open sights.

*Orillia*, detailed to sweep astern,  
Picked up the few survivors, took in tow  
The S.S. *Tachee*, badly hit but still  
Afloat: rockets were seen in midst of convoy:  
A signal from the flagship—"Empire Hudson  
Torpedoed on port side." The triple task—  
To screen the convoy, counter-attack, and then,  
The humane third of rescuing the sailors,  
Seemed far beyond the escort's hope or effort.  
To save to kill, to kill to save, were means  
And ends closely and bloodily allied.  
Hundreds of sailors un-lifejacketed  
Clawed at the jetsam in the oil and water.  
Captains and Commodore were well aware  
Of how a lame one in a chase could spatter  
With blood the entire herd. High strategy  
Demanded of the brain an execution  
Protested by the tactics of the heart.  
And there was only half an inch or less  
Of a steel skin upon the escort's hulls—  
Not for self-safety were those ships designed.  
Just here the log with its raw elements

Enshrined a saga in a phrase of action.  
The *Empire Hudson* listing badly, crew  
And officers were disembarked. Someone  
Reported—"Secret papers have not been  
Destroyed, mersigs, swept-channels, convoy route,  
And codes, the CODES!" And as there was a chance  
The steamer might not sink, *Kenogami*  
Was ordered to embark an officer,  
Return him to the listed deck to find  
And sink the weighted papers—*which was done.*"  
This stark undecorated phrase was just  
An interlinear item in the drama,  
Three words spelling a deed unadvertised,  
When ships announced their wounds by rockets, wrote  
Their own obituaries in flame that soared  
Two hundred feet and stabbed the Arctic night  
Like some neurotic and untimely sunrise.  
Exploding tankers turned the sky to canvas.  
Soaked it in orange fire, kindled the sea,  
Then carpeted their graves with wreaths of soot.  
The sea would tidy up its floor in time.  
But not just now,—gaskegs and rafts and mops,  
Oilskins, sou'westers, sea-boats, duffel coats  
Drifted above the night's burnt offerings.  
Only the names remained uncharred—*Muneric,*  
*Ulysses, Baron Pentland, Sally Maersk,*  
*The Empire Crossbill, Empire Hudson, Stargard—*  
Merely heroic memories by morning.

The early hours of daylight drove the subs  
To cover though the escort knew that eyes,  
As sleepless as their own but unobserved  
Behind the grey-green mesh of swell and lop,  
Were following the convoy's desperate plunge.  
All knew that no restrictive rules would hedge  
This fight: to the last ship, to the last shot,  
To the last man, for fair was foul and foul  
Was fair in that mêlée of strength and cunning.  
Tirpitz and Fisher thirty years before  
Had scanned the riddles in each other's eyes.  
What was the argument about the belt  
That drained the sophistry of principles  
Inside a ring? "Hit first, hit hard, hit fast!"  
Tirpitz had trumped him with—"Hit anywhere."  
And here today only one point was certain—  
Sailors above the sea, sailors below,  
Drew equally upon a fund of courage.  
No one might gamble on the other's fear  
Or waning will. Commander Schmidt might flood  
His tanks and dive when something on his mirror  
Called for discretion, but in his own shrewd time  
He could be reckoned on to blow the ballast  
And frame that picture on the glass again.  
He would come with Botterschult and Rickert,

Von Braundorff, Niebergall, Schippmann and Fritzsche.  
They knew their crews would never fail the switches  
Or rush the conning towers before the orders,  
Though the depth-charges pounded the blood vessels,  
Though combing rams just missed them overhead.  
In what proportions did the elements  
Combine to move those individual pawns  
Of power in their massed flesh-and-nerve formation  
Across a board? Grit human; bruinine;  
Habits that would not heckle a command,  
Obedience that sealed the breach of fear,  
A frenzy that would spurn the slopes of Reason  
Under a rhetoric of Will which placed  
Before the *herrenvolk* historic choices—  
To scramble up a cliff and vandalize  
The sunlight or else perish on the ledges.

These were the enemies the convoy fronted:  
Metal to metal, though in this arena  
The odds lay heavily with the pursuers,  
Even by day—for what were periscopes  
At distance of three thousand yards, that reared  
Their tiny heads curved like swamp moccasins?  
What was their smothered wake compared with that  
Propeller wash, that height and drift of smoke,  
Those lines of funnels with their sixty hulls?  
And so it was a safe bet on the sub  
When at high noon one left her nest and sped  
Her charge right at the S.S. *Thistleglen*,  
Dead at the waterline and full amidships.  
It took three minutes for the merchantman  
To dock her pigiron on the ocean floor.

"There, there he is!"

Seven cables from the spot  
Where suction swirled above the foundering,  
The periscope light-grey—one minute only!  
The *Skeena* carried out a pounce attack  
Of ten depth-charges fired with shallow settings.  
The asdic trailed the sub proceeding north  
At three-knot speed. *Kenogami* confirmed  
Echoes. Depth-charges with deep settings dropped,  
The echoes ceased, and a great patch of oil  
Surfaced, and a huge bubble like a blister  
Broke, close to the position of explosions.  
"This time for keeps we pinged his bloody hide, sir:  
We've sent him down to join the *Thistleglen*."

With this by day, what could another night  
Not call forth from the cupboard? Afternoon  
Wore on till dusk with that dramatic lull.  
Which acted like narcotics on the heart,  
Yet put high-tension circuits in the brain.

"The *Sally Maersk* went down with bread enough

To feed an army for a month."

"But what

A job the corvettes did in rescuing  
Them all—the fifty-four under that fire."

"Most of the *Baron Pentland* too."

"Her back

Was broken though her lumber kept her floating."

Could the same chance be taken the next night?

An hour after nightfall and the convoy  
Had pierced the sixty-second parallel.  
Twelve shortened columns tightened up their gaps,  
All ships under instructions—(You will not—repetition—  
Not break W.T. silence without deep suspicion of  
U-boat presence.) Owing to moon  
Rear ships of the port column were instructed  
To drop smoke floats should enemy appear  
On the port side. Each minute passed, each mile  
Northward were credit items on a ledger.  
And now quickening the heart, two friendly shadows,  
Corvettes, steamed into shape—*Moose Jaw, Chambly*—  
Two added to the four. But still the hope  
Was on evasion—on the North—to kick  
Them with their wounded heels and merge the spoors  
Within the Greenland-Iceland ocean tundras.  
And so the last night's vigil was repeated.  
Although more ominous the silences:  
More broken, too, the sleep as the ears buzzed  
Still with the dental burr of the point-fives.  
And the yellow cordite from the four-point-sevens  
Kept up its smart under exhausted eyelids.  
The average rate was lowered by three knots.  
The *Tachee* was in tow of the *Orillia*,  
Fumbling her rudder. From the *Chambly's* deck,  
Two miles away, the ships seemed fated targets.  
Silent and slow and dark as, clothed with crape.  
They journeyed on like mourners, having left  
The Saxon burial of their sister ships,  
And bearing on themselves the same contagion.  
The air was breathing out its prophecy.  
So was the water. There was mockery  
Within the sea's caress—the way a wave  
Would clamber up the bow of the *Moose Jaw*, scout  
Around the shadows of the foc's'le,  
Tattoo the face of the Bridge and lazily  
Slither along the deck and then hiss through  
The hawse-pipes as the corvette dipped her nose  
To the slow anaesthetic of the swell.  
Mockery it was on face and lips and fingers,  
For, after her reconnaissance, the sea,  
As urging death with a forensic fury,  
Would shed her velvet syllables, return

With loaded fists to thunder at the gun-shields,  
Trying to crack defence before the battle  
Was joined between the "patterns" and the "tubes".

Eleven-thirty, and the navigator,  
His coat and boots on in his bunk, completes  
A nightmare with a steady mumbling curse.  
He thought the order was *Abandon Ship*—  
It was an O.D. calling Middle Watch.  
He wakes, turns over, and again turns over,  
Yawns, stretches and turns out, proceeds to Bridge,  
Peers through the blackout curtains, and in dim  
Blue battle-light he squints and notes night orders,  
The toughest order of the toughest Watch  
(Maintain tail sweep from two to four thousand yards),

He focuses binoculars to range  
The horizon arcs. "A lot of whales about  
Tonight." The echoes picked them up. Four hours!  
He has to fight that Middle Watch fatigue,  
And as the minutes crawl he sucks life-savers,  
Or cracks one on his teeth for company.  
A line of spray leaps up above the dodger  
And like rawhide cuts him across the face.  
Then, too, that phosphorescence on the sea  
Is easily mistaken in its darts,  
Flashes and curves for what the lookout fears.  
Two hours are gone: another two to go.  
(That wrist-watch ticks off hours instead of seconds.)  
His eyelids blink to ease the strain that falls  
Like mist upon a telescopic lens.  
A starboard lookout yell jerks back his senses—  
"Torpedo bearing green-four-O." Lookout  
Recoils from an expected blow that does  
Not strike. "Damn porpoises: they always home  
In on the bow."

*(The navigating officer wipes the sweat from  
his forehead with his sleeve, tells the  
sub-lieutenant to take over for a few minutes  
as he wants to go to Heads. Then he calls to  
a stand-by.)*

"Say, Spinney, what about  
A mug of kye?"

"Yes, Sir."

Spinney had not  
Yet found his legs. Less than six months before  
He had been learning Latin and the class-  
Room smell had not been kippered from his system.  
To him the ocean was a place of travel,  
A blue-green oriental boulevard  
Round unknown continents—up to this year;

And even to last night the illusion stayed,  
When for his benefit the Borealis  
Staged a rehearsal of the Merry Dancers  
Before the blood-red footlights till it paled  
The myth upon a tracery of starshell.  
He now goes to the galley, fills a jug  
With kye, picks up a half a dozen mugs,  
Stumbles, skates, splashes half of it on deck.  
Some drops of rain and sea-foam tincture it.  
Along the way a leading-hand of the Watch  
And a rheumatic coder cadge a drink,  
And by the time that Spinney finds his balance  
On the bridge only a soapy seawash greets  
The navigator's throat. "What in the name  
Of all buck goats is this? Where did you get  
This swill?" (He hands it to the sub to drink.)

"Go back and fill her up again,

And keep her clean."

Spinney steps down from Bridge,  
Staggers, makes for the ladder, cracks the jug  
Against the signal-box before he slides,  
Reaches the galley and returns, tries hard  
To wean his legs from the quadrangle walk,  
Does a Blue Danube on the deck, and then  
Revokes his quondam heroes (what a bunch  
Of fools those ancients were to travel,  
Aeneas was the biggest ass on earth!)  
And flinging out his last accusative  
At what is limned on the horizon, he  
Remeasures his Virgilian cadences  
In terms of stresses gliding queazily  
Along the black ramps of the North Atlantic.

At ten to four Lieutenant Snell takes over,  
And the two victims of the Watch slope down  
With brains of fog and eyes of fractured glass.  
Their legs go aft by instinct to their bunks.  
Their minds well in advance entering a coma  
Beyond gun-cotton shock or Gabriel's horn.

'Twas only in a stupor that O'Leary  
Recalled his reprimand. When did it happen?  
"Yeoman, you dropped no markers with that pattern.  
That's standing orders now—smoke-floats to mark  
Areas attacked. Ever heard it? Don't you know  
Your drill? You'll be in my report in the morning."  
O'Leary gagged upon his chewing quid,  
Hiccapped, sending a spurt of nicotine  
And hydrochloric acid on the sea.  
"He said to me, said he, 'O'Leary, don't  
You know your drill?'—Say, how the hell would I know?  
Nobody tells me nothing in this Navy."

A bo'sun caught the Peggy with a fag.

"Gripes, do you want to bitch this midnight show?  
That lighted butt is visible for miles,  
And on the starboard wing, too. Don't you know  
The one and only moral law of Moses  
Is never light a fag on deck at night?  
A law you got to learn while in the Service.  
A light can be machine-gunned by the escort.  
They'd ping your fag and teeth at the same time."

*Peggy, out of earshot*

"I didn't light it on the deck. I cupped  
My hands and took three drags and that was all.  
That jockey groomed for donkeys thinks he's got  
The whole world by the tail in a down pull.  
When I get back to Civvy Street, I'll call him."

O'Meara, Steele and Casey had a lot  
To say. They'd gab it when the day came round—  
The day the *Stargard* reached her port—but somehow  
The water and the salt got in their throats  
The moment when the *Stargard* took them under.

The dark was sedative and irritant.  
How easy was it for an interval  
To muffle the senses with a hushed blackout,  
And the diminuendo of the run  
Could well delude the reason. This was not  
The rate that marked the fever of pursuit,  
And nothing from the decks was visible  
To show the way the trimmest escort unit  
Could be in shackles to a lubber keel,  
And have to be replaced in precious moments;  
Nothing to show how gyros and magnetics  
Could be ungeared by submarine explosions.  
For this was information undiffused  
Among the crew or countered by illusions,  
Or by resumption of the normal tasks.  
No one from the *Ulysses* lived to cite  
The witness of the E.R.A.s and firemen,  
Pounding the steel rungs in that inner trap  
When the torpedo struck her gas and oil.

The drama of the night before was over.  
No headlines would record as news the toil,  
As stokers every hour took temperatures  
Of bearings, scribbled them on pads, transferred  
Them to the logs and then resumed their rounds  
To watch for popping valves, to check the flow  
By turning wheels when the full head of steam  
Was hitting the square inches of the boilers.  
There was no spotlight on the items when  
A leading seaman of the watch reported

"The temperature of the sea forty degrees.  
The lowering falls are clear, boats off the pins,  
The watertight compartments are all closed."  
No one would mould the linotype for such  
A mass that might survive or not survive  
Their tedium of watches in the holds—  
The men with surnames blotted by their jobs  
Into a scrawl of anonymity.  
A body blow at the boilers would untype  
All differentiations in the blood  
Of pumpmen, wipers, messmen, galley boys  
Who had become incorporate with the cogs  
On ships that carried pulp and scrap to Europe.

Desire invoking for the memory  
Amnesia for the nightmare that had passed,  
It might have been a run in peaceful times.  
The sounds seemed casual enough—lookouts  
Reporting to the officers on watch,  
Got back the usual laconic answers.  
The turbine notes ran up from C to C  
And down according to the scale of speed.  
The scraps of speech from duffel-coated forms,  
Huddled beneath the after-canopy,  
Had by tacit agreement in the eyes  
Nothing to do with present urgencies.  
A rating "in the rattle" salved his mind  
By giving his opinion of a buffer,  
Casting suspicion on the buffer's birth  
And pedigree. His *b*'s and *g*'s and *s*'s,  
Delivered through his teeth in confidence  
To the high winds and seas from A-gun deck,  
Had all the symptoms of a normal trip.  
Only the action-station gongs could jar  
That gentle wishful thinking—and they did.

Horse-power to the limit on the engines,  
Levied for scout assault and close defence,  
Was routed quickly to defence, for short  
Beyond believing was the interval  
Between the echoes and torpedo hits,  
Between them and the spotted periscopes.  
The Commodore reported, "*Gypsum Queen*  
Torpedoed and sunk." *Alberni* gets an echo.  
Five hundred yards, *Kenogami* confirming.  
*Chambly* and *Moose Jaw* get a definite kill  
With prisoners, and then a "probable".

The peril of the night before was doubled.  
This time the subs had dived within the convoy,  
"Attacking from within the lines"—the fear  
Above all fears, for, out to sea, the lairs  
Might be discerned and the protective screens  
Be interposed between them and the convoy.

But now the hazards of the fight were weighted  
In favour of the foe. Seven or eight  
Out of the estimated twelve were there  
Inside or hanging on to flank or rear.  
Even blindly they could not miss—on port  
And starboard bow, amidships, on the quarter.

Upon the *Skeena's* Bridge the judgment fought  
With chaos. Blindness, deafness visited  
The brain. Through a wild paradox of sight  
And sound, the asdic echoes would not fall  
Within their ribbon-tidy categories.  
They bounded in confusion from the hulls  
Of tankers and corvettes: the ash-can sounds  
Were like those of explosions from torpedoes.  
Wake-echoes and reverbs, and *quenching* caused  
By pitch and roll of a heavy following sea,  
Had blended with the sharper pings from steel  
To give the effect of a babel and a brawl.

But blindness was the worst. To find the foe  
By starshell served indeed to spot the target,  
But carved in white the escort's silhouette.  
The need called for the risk. A megaphone  
Informed the *Skeena* that a sub was seen  
Between the columns seven and eight, its course  
Marked by a steady hail of tracer bullets.  
The *Skeena* tried to ram; the sub escaped  
To an adjacent lane and turned right angles  
In opposite direction to destroyer.  
The shelter of the dark was now a threat  
Holding collision as the convoy ships  
Made their sharp turn of forty-five degrees.  
Her fighting and her navigating lights  
Were switched on to identify the *Skeena*,  
Scratching the paint upon the merchant hulls.  
As orders pelted down the voice-pipe, helm  
And engines answering—"Full speed ahead ...  
Starboard twenty ... Stop both ... Half-ahead port ...  
Half-astern starboard ... Stop starboard ...  
Half-ahead starboard ... Full ahead both ..."

This was infighting at its grizzly worst.  
The issue grew more leaden as the night  
Advanced, and what relief could daylight offer  
Against the weary arithmetic count?  
The *Winterswyck* blown up, sunk with her phosphate;  
*Stonepool* torpedoed on both sides, gone down  
With general cargo and a fleet of trucks.  
And matching the confusion on the decks  
Was the confusion in the ether, ships  
Torpedoed, burning, sinking, hammering out  
Their cryptocodes. What listeners could sort them,  
Solve those recurring decimals of dots

And those long dashes when the operators  
Screwed down the keys—their last official acts—  
To give the drowning wails of instruments?  
What rescuers could hurry to position?  
Only the fighting ships—and they were fighting.

"Which one was that?"

"A tanker bad enough,  
But not as bad as that; a flame that would  
Frizzle a glacier."

"*Aviation gas?*"

"It could create that light but not that roar,  
'Twould cause stokehold concussion miles away,  
And wake up Julianehaab."

"'Twas ammunition."

The *Garm* and *Scania* with their lumber lost!  
Rockets observed from *Randa* and *Benury*—  
The signals ceased—both missing in the morning!

The fourteen sunk and others just afloat,  
The remnant staggered on still north-by-east.

\* \* \*

Last night, the second night, and must there come  
A third? The ratio of loss had climbed  
Beyond all normal fears. The logs themselves  
Might not be legible on that third morning.  
So far the tale was grim enough—but six  
Saved of the *Jedmore's* crew; eight from the *Stonepool*;  
Less than half from the *Garm*; six from the *Stargard*;  
Two from the *Winterswyck*; and a great blank—  
The fate of crew unknown—was logged for *Scania*,  
The *Empire Springbuck*, *Crossbill*, *Thistleghen*,  
*Muneric* and *Ulysses*. The third night  
To come! Those hammerheads were off there still,  
Hiding, biding. How many? How those freighters  
Foundered! How fast? Minutes or seconds?

"Did

You see the way the *Crossbill* took her dive?  
Her cargo steel, she went down like a gannet."

"The *Muneric* beat her to it. A life-belt  
Would have no chances in that suction-hole,  
Say nothing of a man. I saw her blades  
Rise, edge themselves against the *Alberni* gunfire."

Why should those phobias of speed, colour  
And shape belonging to the night alone  
Return to plague the mind in open daylight?  
Would those fires start again? A chemistry  
That would incinerate its own retort

Raged round the *Stonepool* when she sank. Water  
And fire, water and oil, blood, fire and salt  
Had agonized their journey through nerve-endings  
To char themselves upon a graphite-grey  
Precipitate. Survivors from the *Stargard*,  
Who would for life carry their facial grafts,  
Told of the scramble from the boiler rooms,  
Up canted ladders and the reeling catwalks,  
Only to find their exit was the sea,  
And there to find their only exit from  
Its cauldron surface was its drowning depth.  
Where find the straws to grasp at in this sea?  
Where was the cause which once had made a man  
Disclaim the sting of death? What ecstasy  
Could neutralize this salt and quench this heat  
Or open up in victory this grave?  
But oil and blood were prices paid for blood  
And oil. However variable the time,  
The commerce ever was in barter. Oil  
Propelled the ships. It blew them up. The men  
Died oil-anointed as it choked the "Christ!"  
That stuttered on their lips before the sea  
Paraded them as crisps upon her salver.  
This was the payment for the oil designed  
To sleek the gears and punch the pistons in  
And over Alamein and Normandy.  
And blood mixed with the sea-foam was the cost  
Of plasma safely carried in the holds  
Across an ocean to a continent,  
There to unblanch the faces on the fields,  
There to reweave the vines for fresher fruits  
In a new harvest on a hoped tomorrow;  
And over all, the purchase of the blood  
Was that an old dishonoured postulate,  
Scrubbed of its rust, might shine again—*Granted*  
*That what the mind may think, the tongue may utter.*

\* \* \*

Three morning hours were gone and no attack.  
Were the U-boats destroyed or shaken off  
Or still awaiting night? What mattered it?  
What mattered the rotation of the earth?  
The clock had struck in seasons those two nights.  
And Time was but a fiddler off his key.  
Treading the youth through middle age towards death.

From the lookout a signal—*Smoke ahead!*  
Was it a surface raider? This would mean  
Extinction, still another word for sleep.  
The smoke took shape—five funnels pouring it.  
Binoculars from the crowsnests and bridges  
Of all the ships, escort and convoy, swept  
The horizon: dots turned into lines, the lines

To hulls and decks and guns and turrets—five  
British destroyers making thirty knots.  
This was the restoration for the hearts  
Of fifty ships—the maimed, the blind, the whole.  
Around them raced the fighters, plotting out  
Suspicious zones whenever asdic sweeps  
Reported doubtful contacts, searching far  
Afield, then closing to resume position  
On screen. And so the S.C. 42,  
With mutilated but with fashioned columns,  
Covered the lap across the Denmark Strait  
With that same chivalry of knots which meant  
Rescue for hundreds in the Greenland battle.  
For with the battered *Tachee* still in tow  
Of the *Orillia*, they reached the two  
Most northern outposts of the Old World havens,  
Rock-armoured Hvalfjord and Reykjavik,  
Then took their southern stretch until the convoy  
Sighted Inishtrahull and there dispersed.  
And the fighting ships, miraculously unscathed,  
Proceeded to Moville, to Lishahally,  
Thence up the winding Foyle to seek their berths  
Around the crowded docks of Londonderry.

\* \* \* \* \*

## BY E. J. PRATT

*Newfoundland Verse*  
*The Witches' Brew*  
*Titans*  
*The Iron Door*  
*The "Roosevelt" and The "Antinoe"*  
*Verses of the Sea*  
*Many Moods*  
*The Titanic*  
*The Fable of the Goats*  
*Brébeuf and His Brethren*  
*Dunkirk*  
*Still Life*  
*Collected Poems*

[End of *Behind the Log*, by E. J. Pratt]