

# PEA-SHOOTER



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*Pea-Shooters, Feather-Merchants, Overgrown Fishing Smacks, Ashcans—What a Comedown from the Mighty “Lexington”*

THE truck from the Receiving Station rattled off down the pier and left Coxswain Johnson and Seaman Kelly standing by their sea-bags. Neither spoke for a moment as they scratched their heads. Kelly gave a low whistle and turned rounded eyes up to Johnson.

“Didn’t I warn you, Kel?” Johnson murmured sadly.

“Yeah, but I sorta hoped—” Kelly’s voice descended to a mumble, and the two men looked again at the object of their sorrowful comments. The U.S.S. SC 446, with Hampton Roads glittering in the sunshine behind her, was not a sight to bring sorrow to most men who have a feeling for ships, but to Kelly and Johnson the 110 foot subchaser was no cause for rejoicing.

“You could put the whole blamed thing on one wing of the *Lex*’s bridge and still have room for a couple of 50 foot launches,” wailed Kelly in a sudden indignant outburst.

“Some ship we draw—ain’t even got a name,” Johnson mourned. He gazed across the Roads toward Newport News and pointed fiercely. “And that beautiful big flat-top over there just waitin’ for us to take over when she’s finished.”

“Let’s go over the hill!” Kelly reached impulsively for his sea bag, but Johnson’s restraining hand on his shoulder halted him with his knees still bent. Slowly he straightened. “You’re right, John. We’re fixed for good. I never did trust Receivin’ Ships. You never know when they’ll pull your name out of a hat—and we was all set for that new queen—Aaah!” He spat in the water.

“At least they pulled us together, bud,” Johnson said a bit gruffly.

“Yeah, that’s something,” Kelly agreed, then burst out again. “But we don’t belong on these pea-shooters. We’re flat-top sailors. We want to pay ‘em back for the old *Lex*. Why can’t they let the feather-merchants drop their ashcans from these here overgrown fishing smacks

themselves?"

"The feather-merchants are doing some pretty good fishing these days, sailor," a deep voice burst in on their complaints, and their mouths clamped shut with the wise celerity of men trained to pipe down for authority. Chief Boatswain's Mate Mike McKee rose from his seat on a bollard by the bow of the *446*, slipped a pocket edition of "Tale of Two Cities" into his khakis, took off his heavy horn-rim spectacles and stepped forward to shake their hands. "I'm McKee," he offered without smiling. "Guess you're our new men. Needed you in sort of a hurry. We're pulling out and we didn't have time to send to Miami for some regular subchaser men." He stopped and eyed them closely. "Don't think much of our little ship, eh?"

"Well—" The two men shifted their glances from him and moved uneasily.

McKee chuckled. "I know how you feel boys. What ship you from?"

"The *Lex*."

"Yeah, it's a big change all right. I been out twenty years, and my last duty was commissioning the old *West Virginia*. Never thought I'd end up on something this size, either, when they called me back." He paused and cast his glance along the SC's graceful sheer and rakish bow. "Give her a chance, though, boys. You could do a lot worse. She can give a sub hell." His keen eyes again turned full on them. "Good bunch of 'feather-merchants' too," he said, emphasizing the regular Navy's term for the ready-made ratings handed out to wartime Reserve enlisters. "Come on, get your gear on board. We won't be here long."

The two men shouldered their bags and stepped down the gangway to the gently heaving deck of the *446*, saluting awkwardly. They halted, crowded against each other on the narrow deck, and Kelly

bumped his sea bag into the engine-room hatch, throwing them both off balance. They teetered their bags, and finally dropped them to the deck in a heap. Kelly muttered under his breath.

"Look out for that Grumman taking off. Let's go down to the hangar deck where it's safe."

"Up forward for both of you," McKee directed. The two men threaded their way behind him, ducking the machine-gun mounts and leaning outboard to clear the pilothouse with their bags on their way forward. Just as he got to the hatch, Johnson knocked into the three-inch gun on his blind side, spun around once, and crashed to the deck. As Kelly hopped out of the way, the life line caught him just above his knees, but McKee stepped forward in time to prevent bag and Kelly from taking a header into the water.

"Easy, boys," he chuckled. "This ain't the *Lex*'s flight deck now. You mind where you step on an SC. Down the hatch with you. Johnson, you're number one bunk, Kelly four. Your lockers have the same numbers." Smiling to himself, McKee walked aft, drawing "Tale of Two Cities" from his pocket, and adjusting his horn rims across his bull nose.

The two sailors huffed and puffed their bags down the hatch and stood in the middle of the cabin, panting lightly. Without speaking, they gazed around the narrow cabin and at four men lying on the bunks. They introduced themselves curtly and began stowing their gear.

"You guys been through the Miami School?" a machinist asked from his bunk.

"Nope," Johnson grunted, struggling with a lashing on the bag.

"We're off the *Lex*," Kelly offered. "We was at the Receivin' Ship here waiting for a new flat-top at Newport News, but they snagged us for this here detail in one awful hurry. Why'd they

need us so quick?"

"Supposed to be sailing today, and the cox and a seaman are in the hospital."

"Sick?"

"Nope. Got in a little mix-up on East Main Street last night. Seems they got arguing with a destroyer man about SCs, and first thing you know there was more tincan men than SC men."

"Oh—" Johnson and Kelly worked silently on their gear.

"All you guys been to that school in Miami?" Kelly broke the pause.

"Just about," the machinist answered. "Most SC men go through there."

"How long you been in?" Johnson asked, head down.

"About six months."

"Been to sea?"

"Only on this." He patted the bulkhead affectionately.

"Like it?" Johnson's head was still lowered.

"Can't be beat. Good ship, good officers. We're lucky."

The newcomers exchanged deprecatory glances and finished stowing their gear in silence.

"Let's look around, Kel." Johnson straightened up and the two men climbed to the deck and stood by the three inch, squinting at the scene around them.

"Three inch—huh!" Kelly muttered. "What kind of shooting do you call that?"

"A three inch and two twenties. Boy—what a battery! Oh well, I hope they got some good fishing tackle, Kel. This coastal cruising's going to have some points to it." His eyes wandered along the pier, where other SC's were nested, their square sterns slapping the harbor chop. "Sure got a lot of gear on these little babies," he added. "Look at all these food crates on deck."

"What do they need them for?" Kelly mused. "They only stay out a couple of

days at a time." He poked Johnson's arm. "Maybe we'll get some good liberties, John."

"Not in Norfolk, we won't!"

"Well, they're bound to get around some, even if they are pretty small. Might hit New York and Philly."

Johnson murmured assent, but his gaze was centered out in the harbor. "Look at them lovely ships! Even them little tin cans look good to me now." He pointed to two destroyers anchored in the Roads, and his sad eyes also rested on two cruisers, a battleship, and several large auxiliaries. "Them's *ships!*" he cried. "That's the Navy. When are we ever gonna see any action on this here pea-shooting, ash-can dropping yacht. And if we do see action—oh God!" For the second time that day they hastily clamped their mouths shut, as a young man in khaki pants and shirt, hatless and tieless, but with a junior grade lieutenant's bars on his collar, stepped out of the pilothouse and smiled at them.

"You the new men?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Rogers, the skipper—glad to see you; we've been waiting for you." He extended a browned hand, and they shook it awkwardly. "All stowed are you? Fine. We'll be underway in a couple of minutes." He turned from them and called to McKee. "Set the Special Sea Detail, Chief."

McKee bellowed out the order, and all hands came to their stations. There was an excitement in the air, and all up and down the pier the other SC's and a few larger PC's and minesweeps were getting underway, churning the water in the slip with their backing engine.

"Hey!" Kelly turned from his post at a fender to Johnson, handling the line next to him. "They're all pulling out, John; all these little pea-shooters at once."

"That's right, sailor." McKee smiled

secretly. "You boys just got here in time for some fun. We're off for somewhere hot."

"In this little baby here?" Johnson's eyes were wide.

"All these little babies here," McKee chuckled. "All of these pea-shooters, fishing smacks, and feather-merchants; you're going to sea, boys."

"Where?" they chorused anxiously.

"Well—" the boatswain toyed with his words. "There's been lots of scuttlebutt. We got sixty days supplies on board—" he paused and watched the effect sink in on his slack-mouthed listeners. "Nobody knows for sure. May be the Solomons—may be the Mediterranean—may be—who knows? We're all set for anything."

The two men stared at each other in amazement, their throats choking. Slowly they relaxed and turned aside with sheepish chuckles. "Okay, 'Boats.' Okay. You got us."

McKee's smile faded, and his eyes narrowed. "I ain't kiddin', boys. Look how low we're settin'. Look at all these stores on deck. It's no overnight cruise."

"Cast off all lines," the captain's clear voice ordered from the flying bridge atop the pilothouse. Johnson's line trailed in the water as he and Kelly stared at each other. "Smartly there, Coxswain!" called the captain. "Get your line aboard." Johnson suddenly came to and hauled in his line without looking around. He could feel the captain, McKee, and the crew looking at the crimson tops of his ears, as curse after curse whirled through his brain.

The 446 backed easily out of the slip and took her place in the line of SC's heading out between Old Point and Willoughby. The little ships, despite being low in the water, stepped out smartly, the short bay chop curling up at their bows. The sun reflected dully from their gray paint, and the air was filled with the fumes

and rumble of their Diesels. Ahead were the larger 173 foot UC ships, and astern came the more cumbersome minesweeps. Off to port, a bulbous fleet oiler weighed anchor in the Roads and poked her flaring bows into the line of little ships like a fat old black lady breaking into a parade of street urchins.

McKee indicated her to Johnson. "The *Moodna's* not coming along for an overnight trip, Cox. She's where baby gets milk for a long time to come."

The two bewildered newcomers were off watch, but with the rest of the crew they stayed on deck to watch the long line of little ships file by Cape Henry. As the afternoon sun set over the Lynnhaven dunes, the last of the ships cleared the guard vessel, and the convoy began to form up. The *Moodna* moved serenely up to her place in the center of the formation, not showing any motion in the light swell. The PC's dashed about like pointers looking for a covey in the underbrush, while the SC's and sweeps formed in columns and lines around the *Moodna's* bulk. The clean bows of the SC's lifted on each swell, showing their sleek red underbodies, and the men on deck began to feel the quick, jaunty motion an SC has in any kind of a head sea.

JOHNSON and Kelly stood apart from the rest of the men and watched the strange sight of so many little ships heading due East together into the wall of night building up on the horizon.

"If it's still East in the morning, I guess it's Africa," Johnson finally managed. "Gee, did we hit it! We wanted action, but not on one of these things. What's this pea-shooter going to do when it gets hot, Kel?"

"What can we do? Oh just gimme one battery from the *Lex!* Even one gun bigger than three inch. Who're we supposed to

beat up with this?"

"I guess we go after the subs," Johnson muttered.

"Subs!" Kelly spat. "I like to see what I'm fighting. Maybe we do gotta go after the subs, but how about if we run into the *Tirpitz* or a Jap cruiser, or Stukas, or—oh hell!" He beat his forehead.

"Solomons!" Johnson wailed.

"Africa," Kelly moaned, shaking his head.

"What did you say about liberties in New York and Philly?"

"Get out your fishing tackle, buddy." They eyed each other sadly and went below.

The tight little group of ships plowed eastward through the blue welter of Gulf Stream seas, and above them at night the stars wheeled through a moonless sky. The *Moodna* loomed over them, moving sedately without pitch or roll, while the SC's had a pronounced motion, although the seas couldn't be called high.

Kelly and Johnson were kept busy standing watch, drilling with the crew, and getting used to life at sea on a 110 foot scale. They began to know the crew, among them Horton, the quartermaster, hardbitten from years on the George's banks out of New Bedford; Davis, a machinist who'd been a garage mechanic in Kansas; O'Mara, with an accent to suit his name and a great longing for Chicago; Kowalski, from a New Jersey factory, new to the sea but quick to learn; Groszciewski from Pittsburgh, who spent all his spare time washing and eating, and was proud of the life career the Navy offered him; Fleming, the slender, pale yeoman, who'd never seen the ocean before and was deathly seasick, but kept on faithfully with his duties — and above all McKee, who kept the crew in line with an iron tenderness, and was systematically reading pocket editions of all the books on a high

school reading list he'd got from his son. "Wuthering Heights" had followed "Tale of Two Cities" in his dogged off watch perusal.

On the third day out, Kelly and Johnson were lounging off watch, taking in the afternoon sun behind the canvas screen on the machine-gun platform. Fleming lay across the deck from them. He'd kept his noon-day meal down for two hours and was trying to sleep through the rest of the crisis. From time to time he opened one eye and smiled warily at them.

"Maybe he'll make it," Kelly grinned, as Fleming closed his eyes and changed his position.

"You wasn't so chipper yourself yesterday, my boy," Johnson sneered at him.

"And I suppose you was Father Neptune in person," Kelly bristled.

"I didn't lose anything."

Kelly hung his head. "I don't understand it. I never been seasick in two years at sea, till I got on this here bouncing bessie. The *Lex* never acted like this in a hurricane even, and they keep saying how calm it is."

"Wish I'd brung my spurs. Thought I'd given up bronco bustin' when I left the ranch, but maybe we'll get used to it. I hate to think what it's like when they call it rough."

"Look at that old *Moodna*. I used to call her a little ship and she ain't even twitchin'!"

They were silent and gazed at the wave crests swishing by the top of the opposite rail.

"Say," Kelly broke in, "doesn't it make you feel funny eating with the officers? They're nice enough guys but it makes me uneasy."

"Me too, but you got to get used to it. They're awful young, too, to be going way out here. I hope they know their stuff."

“What difference does it make when that *Tirpitz* comes around. What’re we going to do?”

“Or a whole squadron of Stukas comes diving at us—or one of them big new subs comes to the surface and starts potting at us.”

THEY looked at each other in sad silence till Kelly began to get a preoccupied look in his eyes, as his throat worked and his face paled. With a convulsive effort he leaped to the lee rail and was sick once again. Between gasps and moans, he cursed every SC on the ocean, and everyone on the staff of the receiving ship that assigned him to this blank, blank, blanking duty, while Johnson became very interested in a seagull flying overhead, and Fleming woke up and after one glance was influenced to give up the struggle for his noonday meal. Soon Johnson joined them, and when the worst was over, he sheepishly raised his eyes to Kelly and together they cursed aloud, as Fleming sank back to his lying position with a groan.

“It’s a hell of a Navy, Kel,” Johnson wailed. “You and me and a yeoman hanging on the lee rail.”

THE weather stayed good for another two days, and suppertime passed on the fifth day with Kelly, Johnson and Fleming all having managed three meals a day. Climbing into their bunks after the 8 to 12 watch, they caught sight of Fleming rubbing his stomach tenderly, and for the first time since they’d seen the *446*, both men burst out in a spontaneous laugh. Fleming looked up quickly as he saw why they were laughing and smiled back.

“Just wondering if it was still there,” he said.

The morning watch brought driving rain and a heavier wind, and through the

day the seas built up gradually. At nightfall the little fleet was plunging through good old Atlantic graybacks and for the first time the *Moodna* began to dip her stately bow. Spray flew across the 110’s with every crest, and there wasn’t a dry inch topsides on any of them. But all was secure, and each little ship held her station as she plunged along. The lookout watch on the flying bridge meant a constant shower of driving, icy spray, which, with the wind, cut through oilskins and heavy clothing, and the trick of the wheel was a steady fight to hold her on the course. Much to their surprise and relief the seasick sailors didn’t lose their sea legs again, and they turned in from the mid-watch tired, but not unhappy, falling asleep at once, despite the crash of the seas against the bow. Each time she dipped into a sea it sounded as if the whole Atlantic Ocean was battling its way into the forward compartment.

Roused by the quartermaster for morning chow, Johnson opened one bleary eye at Kelly as he slid from his bunk, holding on against the pitching of the ship.

“Well, we’re still here, Kel.”

“Yeah,” Kelly mumbled grudgingly, “we ought to get submarine pay, but she can take it all right.”

They dashed for the after compartment, and found Pulaski, the cook, balancing cornbeef hash and coffee in the galley. Pulaski was an eighteen-year-old former short order cook in a hamburger joint, and had never been to sea before, but he fought seasickness, and the clattering confusion of his upside down, half pint galley to get something hot for the crew at every meal. He grinned palely as he handed them their hash, and they stumbled to the mess table, balancing their plates and cups. The captain was there, staring into a half-empty cup of coffee. The fatigue of his all-night vigil showed

around his young eyes, and a light stubble covered his jaw. He gave them a tired smile.

“Get any sleep, boys?”

“Yes, sir,” Johnson answered, “we managed to.”

“Guess I could sleep most anywhere,” Kelly added. His last words were drowned in a startled grunt, as the motion of the ship threw him to his seat ahead of schedule.

“Everybody’s doing pretty well,” the captain said. “All the ships are just about in position still, but it’s a miracle, with the visibility we had last night. Well, guess I’ll hit my sack and see if I can get a little sleep myself.” He heaved himself wearily to his feet and made for the ladder. An extra lurch of the ship threw him against a bulkhead, but he held on and laughed grimly. “I wouldn’t mind getting seasick, but I hope I don’t get beaten to death,” he growled as he started up the ladder.

“Little different than the Long Island Sound yacht racing the skipper used to do, I guess,” Johnson chuckled, as the captain’s feet disappeared from view.

“Oh this is lovely yachtin’ weather,” Kelly cried, as most of his hash leaped into his lap.

“But we’re getting there,” Johnson shook his head, “even if I don’t believe it.”

THE seas stayed high for the rest of the trip and on watch, in the bunks, or eating, it was a constant clutching for support to keep from being thrown across the deck. Nobody shaved, and the meals were sketchy, but even Fleming stood up to it and the 446 kept her position with the rest of the spray-covered fleet.

Several days later, just at dusk, as the wind dropped, and the sun sank redly into a moderating sea, the signal light of the leading PC leaped out at them across the dark water, blinking orders.

The captain stood on the bridge while the signalman flashed an acknowledgement to the senior ship, then he turned with a satisfied smile to the executive officer standing beside him.

“Here we are, Jim. Our voyaging’s over and the fun begins. Let’s get all hands together. You take the deck and bear off on the new course behind PC 340.” He indicated a 173 footer wheeling to port up ahead. “He’s our guide now.”

As he descended the ladder to the machine-gun platform, he watched the *Moodna* and her brood veer away on a divergent course. The blood of the low sun glowed along her counter as she steamed into the darkening east, and the small vessels around her were already becoming indistinct against the shadow of night. The captain waved in informal salute and muttered to himself.

“Thanks for the nourishment, old girl, and good luck to all of you.” He made sure of the 173 footer ahead and the other SC surging along in their wake as he waited for the crew to reassemble. The sides, decks and superstructure of all three little ships were streaked with ocean brine, and their paint along the waterline was chipped and scarred, but as they moved off on the new course they increased speed slightly.

The higher pitched drone of the engines, so evident because the steady hum of their cruising speed had become an almost unnoticed part of the noisy little world aboard ship, communicated an excitement to the crew as they gathered around the captain to hear him speak. He groped for words and began slowly.

“Well—that’s the trip over with, men. We’re headed for business now, and it’s a tough assignment after a passage like this one. You all should know your battle stations pretty thoroughly by now, and you’re going to be at them soon. We’ve got a rendezvous with a landing force

about dawn tomorrow and we're to provide antisubmarine and aircraft protection for the landing on the coast later in the morning. We can expect enemy subs, ships and planes from here on, so you know what kind of watch I want stood. Sleep in your clothes, have your helmets and life jackets handy, and be ready for general quarters. Anybody friendly we might run into will have a pretty itchy trigger finger, too, so keep your eyes open. And 'Flags'," his eyes searched out Kowalski, the signalman, who raised his head solemnly, "you have the challenge light ready all the time." Kowalski mumbled assent, his face serious, and the captain paused, passing his gaze across their tired faces, grotesquely intent through their stubbled beards. "And, ah—well, that's all, I guess," he finished lamely, his face suddenly showing its worried youthfulness.

**K**ELLY and Johnson weren't on till the midwatch, and they made slowly for the forward compartment, as the 446 and the SC behind swung up in position abreast of the guide. The sound gear began to give out its familiar piercing ping.

They paused at the hatch and looked through what was left of the twilight at the little ships to port and starboard.

"I bet the *Tirpitz* is scared now," Johnson muttered.

"Maybe we'll get a sub, John—maybe," Kelly burst out hopefully. "I'd like to get one of those babies."

"I like to see what I'm blowing up," Johnson answered. He looked again at the sleek shape of the SC to starboard, barely visible against the eastern horizon, and shook his head, "but at least we got here on this bucking bronco."

When they stumbled out of the hatch for the midwatch, the 446 was coasting

along through the last of the swell. The night was a deep black calm, with only a few stars here and there in the overcast. Their sleep-filled eyes took several minutes to make out the white at the waterline of the ships on either side of them.

Johnson took the watch beside the starboard machine-gun, and Kelly climbed to the flying bridge, where the captain stood, keeping a ceaseless vigil from beam to beam. The tenseness of the night filled all of them, and as they stared into the black all sorts of shapes loomed up ahead. At each false alarm of his eyes, Kelly felt a quick piercing in the pit of his stomach, and was about to cry out a hundred times, but always the shape dissolved into nothing. His eyes ached with the strain of staring at nothing, but he couldn't relax.

They rotated the watch on the guns and the wheel, and the four hours finally dragged their interminable length. Still nothing had appeared out of the ominous black, and the watch was relieved.

It seemed as though they had hardly touched their bunks when the raucous beep-beep-beep of the general alarm wrenched them up in a staggering, sleep-ridden dash for the ladder. As the cool air on deck hit their faces, the first thing they heard was the captain's voice echoing through the darkness above the swish of the bow wave.

"Can you see it now, McKee?"

"Not sure, sir," came the gruff answer. "It was bearing about three-thirty."

The crew scrambled to their stations, and in less than a minute the 446 had all guns and depth charges manned and ready. Johnson stood by as plug man on the three-inch, and Kelly crouched behind him as first loader. All hands stared tensely ahead, ducking their heads under the occasional spatter of spray flying across the bow.

"There it is!" Kowalski's voice was urgent. "On the port bow. Shall I challenge, sir?"

"Not yet." The captain raised his glasses to the spot. The first faint luminescence of dawn spreading over the water, and his straining eyes finally picked up a shape against the indistinct horizon. "There is another ship behind that," he muttered, his glasses still up. "One—two—three—four—" The tenseness left his voice. "Must be the convoy. Give them the challenge, Kowalski."

The thin beam of the night signal light shot into the blackness and after a nervous interval, the correct answer blinked back. A faint cheer rose from the deck, and the atmosphere relaxed as the little ships surged toward the bigger ones, exchanging call signs and orders.

As the convoy approached, the visibility increased, till the silhouettes of all the ships could be seen stretching across the gray sea. The high superstructures of the transports and supply ships formed the center group with several old four-pipe destroyers and corvettes ranging on the beams, and out ahead was the businesslike bustle of a cruiser. Far to the rear, behind the low shape of the tankers, an auxiliary carrier sat on the horizon like a flat building. A formation of dive bombers from the carrier roared out of the gray and ranged on ahead, low over the water. The three subchasers broke their formation and began to take position ahead of the leading transport. They were close enough now to see the landing barges ready to launch.

**S**UDDENLY a dull report echoed from astern, and all eyes turned to see a column of smoke and spray rising on the starboard side of one of the transports. It was followed by a burst of orange flame, and a pillar of black smoke shot into the

lightening sky, ever growing thicker at the base.

"Torpedo!" echoed the cry over the 446 and questioning eyes turned to the captain.

"Keep your lookout," he snapped. "There'll be more than one of them. That destroyer has a contact."

The fourpiper nearest the stricken ship was making a radical course change, heeling as she turned, and astern of her, accompanied by an ominous thudding, rose the depth charge geysers.

"Periscope to starboard!" Johnson's battle-trained eye spotted the thin plume about a thousand yards off the bow, and he called out the information.

The captain jumped to the voice tube. "Full right rudder. Come right fifty degrees. Stand by for depth charge attack. All engines ahead full."

The 446 leaped ahead as the Diesels roared smoke, and the depth charge team under McKee stood by on the stern. The periscope disappeared at once, but the captain gauged the spot, and stood tensely, watch in hand. Spray splattered across the gun crew and beat on the pilothouse, as the 446 surged toward her prey. The captain dropped his upraised hand and cried:

"Roll one!"

The dirty gray cans rolled off the racks on the stern.

"Fire two."

**W**ITH a deafening "*whoosh*" the K guns shot their hammers of death into the air on each side. After what seemed like a lifetime the keel of the 446 shivered to the crack of the explosions and the whole sea rose up to fill the sky astern. As the second explosion from the K gun cans rose up, they sighted the track of a torpedo further astern, headed for the leading transport. But the jarring of the 446's cans had done their job of spoiling

the sub's aim, and the torpedo disappeared harmlessly.

On all sides of the convoy, depth charges thudded, and escort vessels veered to the attack. The subs had struck with their savage wolf-pack tactics, and every vessel had her hands full. The *446* described a wide circle away from the slick of the explosion, and all eyes watched the spot for signs of damage to the sub. The captain called down the voice tube to the sound machine where the executive officer was coordinating the information.

"Can you pick him up yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Let me know."

"There he is, sir," Kowalski cried, as the black nose of the submarine poked sluggishly through the surface.

"We flushed him up!" the captain cried. "Head right for him, Horton," he ordered the helmsman.

The sharp blast of the three inch cracked over the foredeck, as the alert gun crew tried to put a shot in the low target, but it had already disappeared. Again the depth charges rolled and thudded, and this time the sub was forced all the way up. As soon as she cleared the surface the three inch cracked again, and this time the shell crashed home in the conning tower. The starboard machine-gun began spitting tracers at the sub's gun mount.

"Stand by to ram," cried the captain, and again the *446* headed in for the kill. The sub's machine-guns sputtered back and pock-marked the *446's* bow. Her heavy gun fired one shell, which whistled close overhead, and then O'Mara's machine-gun found its mark, and the sub ceased firing, her gun crew falling away from their positions like broken dolls. Seeing this, the sub's commander crash dived once more.

Full speed ahead the *446* bore down on the spot, as the stern of the sub went under

the churned water. All hands braced themselves for the crash, which threw the bow into the air and off to one side. The little ship shuddered from stem to stern, and slewed wildly to starboard. The captain ordered the port K gun fired, and the can shot away from the careening hull, to burst under the sub.

The, savage duel had not ended yet, for the sound machine picked up the crippled sub, and the *446* rounded in for a new attack, still able to keep underway despite the crash. This time the depth charges completed the work, and the ugly black hull of the submarine rose bubbling to the surface, capsized sluggishly and began to sink, while the three inch punched shell after shell into the exposed bottom.

THE convoy had moved along its course, carrying on to the landing, in spite of the attack. The captain gave orders to close up on it, and sent McKee to inspect the damage to the bow.

Johnson, his clothes plastered to him with sweat, spray and grease, turned to look at Kelly, who was rubbing his oily hands on his dungarees. Johnson winked and Kelly grinned back.

"Bring on the *'Tirpitz,'* my boy."

"I don't think we've any bow on us, but we're still afloat." Johnson shook his head incredulously, and patted the hot gun. Kelly interrupted with a startled shout, as up ahead a plane swooped low over one of the transports and strafed the decks.

"Air attack, Captain!" he cried, and Johnson yelled to Davis to break out the AA shells.

McKee emerged from the fore peak and hurried to the captain. He reported breathlessly, "She's taking it, Captain. We glanced off—didn't hit square. She's pretty bad, and she's worked some but the pumps can handle it. I've shored it up. She'll be all right."

“Very well,” the captain smiled. “We’re lucky, because we’re not through yet.”

Slowly the 446 forged up on the convoy. Near a patch of burning oil one of the corvettes was taking survivors from the water, and the subchaser moved in to help. Suddenly the sky rained zooming death, as a swastika-ed wing swept down, flashing in the new light of the sun. The AA guns of the two ships spit back at the plane, whose bullets spattered through the struggling heads in the water. The depth charge crew began hauling oil-covered swimmers from the water, while the gunners tried vainly to bring down the tormenting plane, which made run after run. Bullets splintered into the pilothouse and along the deck, and Groszciewski fell from his post at the three inch gun sights. Kelly jumped into his spot, and kept the gun firing into the sky. Fleming, streaked with oil, ran forward to Groszciewski, pulled him out of the way, made him comfortable, and then returned to care for the wounded, water-logged survivors.

As quickly as they’d come the planes disappeared into the distance, pursued by fighters from the carrier, and as he followed their flight to the horizon, the captain made out the rocky hills of the coast where already the first transports were launching their barges. Deep flashes of gunfire came from the east, and only two miles away the American cruiser could be seen belching steel at three ships further out.

“Enemy destroyers,” the captain cried.

“Look at that cruiser,” Johnson yelled, at his gun. “Listen to them guns. He got one!” he crowed, as a sheet of flame burst around one of the destroyers.

The drone of an airplane engine could be heard again between the gunfire’s roar, and Johnson’s sharp eyes picked up the

plane skimming in low over the water from astern.

“He’s after the cruiser,” he cried.

“Torpedo plane,” the captain added.

He turned the ship to bring the three inch and starboard machine-gun to bear on the plane, and already O’Mara’s tracers were arching over the water. The three inch cracked rapidly. Just as it passed abeam, a stream of smoke burst out from the plane and a moment later it disintegrated in the air.

“That’s his torpedo!” Johnson gave a bloodthirsty yell. “We stopped him. Keep on firing, you cruiser.”

THE captain stretched luxuriously in his bunk and opened an eye at McKee.

“What’s the matter, Chief?”

“Sorry to bother you, sir. It’s a slip from the shore patrol. You’ve got to sign it.”

“Shore patrol!” The captain sat up. “You mean we made that landing just to put the shore patrol on the beach?”

“Well, they’re functioning already, sir.”

“Who is it?” “It’s Johnson, Kelly and Kowalski, sir. They’ve been in a little rumpus on the beach.”

“Good Lord. What’s their story?”

“Well, sir, it seems they was talking to a couple of sailors from our friend the cruiser, and the cruiser lads asked them their ships. They told them the 446 and one of the cruiser men asked which transport brought us over on its deck. And, er, well, the shore patrol brought them in.” McKee paused, his face a mask of solemnity.

The captain rose. “Bring them below, Chief.” He winked broadly. “I’ll—er—attend to the prisoners myself.”