

WHEN THE MUSTANG WENT TO WAR

EVEN THOUGH BEHIND SCHEDULE, PRODUCTION EXAMPLES OF THE MUSTANG BEGIN TO REACH THE RAF AND ARE PUT INTO SERVICE - PART THREE

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

With Mustang Mk. Is now coming off the production line and flight testing proceeding, the fighters were being signed off for shipment to Britain and use by the final customer, the Royal Air Force. There were two ways of getting the Mustangs to the East Coast, the crated planes could be placed on cargo ships in Los Angeles Harbor and shipped via the Panama Canal or placed on rail cars for a cross-country trip. Whichever way they would be shipped, the boxed-up fighters would have to face a common hazard besetting all cargo vessels leaving American ports for the United Kingdom — marauding packs of German U-Boats.

Getting supplies to Britain was absolutely essential but when France surrendered in June 1940, the fight

in the North Atlantic took a dramatic turn. The Low Countries had also fallen and Italy had entered the war on Germany's side. Thus, the British lost the large French naval support at a time when the Royal Navy had been damaged by defeats in Norway and the evacuation from Dunkirk. British planners were worried about long-range Axis airpower in the Mediterranean and this forced British cargo ships to use the very long route around the Cape of Good Hope, which cut total cargo-carrying capacity

of the British merchant marine nearly in half. This took place as German victories and acquisition of naval and air bases on the Atlantic coast foreshadowed a massive and destructive attack on

shipping in the northern waters. To the Germans, now that they had rolled up western Europe, it seemed completely feasible that Britain could be cut off — and thus defeated — by destroying the North Atlantic shipping lanes. However, combined attacks by airpower, surface ships, and U-Boats failed to force the British to surrender and by revising tactics, a fully escorted transatlantic convoy system was in place by May 1941 — the same month that German surface attacks collapsed with the loss of the battleship *Bismarck*.

During 1940, the Roosevelt administration had worked the “destroyers for bases” deal that saw 50 WWI “four-stack” destroyers swapped to the British for 99-year leases on bases in a variety of British holdings. Also, the Royal Canadian Navy was doing a superb job in the difficult escort mission — guarding the vulnerable cargo ships as they crossed what the Germans referred to as the “Happy Hunting Grounds.” As 1941 progressed, US Navy warships became more fully engaged in escorting the cargo ships across the northwest Atlantic in company with

the Canadians and the British and American warships even fought pitched battles against several U-Boats west of Iceland. Germany's invasion of Russia meant that some of the U-Boats were drawn away from the Atlantic and sent to

the Mediterranean and Arctic to support this new war front. Anti-submarine warfare systems were constantly improving and the introduction of longer-range aircraft meant U-Boats were coming under the threat of constant attack and by the latter part of 1941, it seemed the North Atlantic situation had gotten a bit quieter. But that was also deceptive. During October 1941, the US Navy destroyer USS *Reuben James* (DD-245) was blown out of the water by a marauding U-Boat with a resulting heavy loss in life and causing international repercussions (the full story of this sinking may be found in the May 2022 issue of our companion magazine *Sea Classics*). In distant sunny southern California, this dark and cold war seemed very remote indeed.

Hollywood was churning out a whole variety of pot-boiler WWII movies and anything to do with the British pilots stationed in southern California soon became “glamorous.” Chris Clarkson, Michael Crossley, and the other pilots associated with the British Purchasing Commission were soon being feted by a variety of stars as they were swept along to the hotspots of the time period including *Ciro's*, *Mocambo*,

Nighttime testing of the four 20mm cannon fitted to later RAF Mustangs. Installation of these weapons will be covered in the next part of the story.