

Rear Admiral Desmond Piers

Canadian officer at the centre of a wartime naval crisis

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The disaster that befell a transatlantic convoy in mid-ocean in November 1942 was unjustly blamed on the senior officer of its Canadian naval escort, the then Lieutenant Commander Desmond Piers, who has died aged 92 - but he was still awarded the DSC for his convoy work just a few months later.

The fate of SC (slow convoy) 107 precipitated a crisis for the Royal Canadian Navy and the allied convoy system as the German U-boat campaign reached its destructive peak. Neither side could see at the time that this was the dark before the dawn of the most important strategic victory of the war, when, in spring 1943, the submarines were forced on to the defensive by allied air and sea power. This opened the way to the eventual invasions of occupied Europe.

At the peak of the battle of the Atlantic, when SC 107 sailed, the British were providing 50% of the ocean escorts in the north Atlantic (the main convoy route), the Americans (preoccupied with the Pacific) 2% and the Canadians 48% - a huge proportion for a country which boasted barely a quarter of Britain's population and a tenth of America's. Local escorts were provided at either end of the voyage, but the main burden of protection was borne by the mid-ocean escort, for which task in late 1942 Canada provided four groups. Piers was captain of the destroyer HMCS Restigouche and simultaneously the senior officer, escort (SOE) of group C4, which also included six corvettes.

When SC 107 set sail, Restigouche was the only escort with both functioning radar and HF/DF (high frequency direction-finding) equipment. The Canadian corvettes were distinctly inferior to the British, and were usually assigned to the slow, most vulnerable convoys. Small wonder that 80% of sinkings occurred in convoys under Canadian escort.

On October 29, U-boat 522 sighted SC 107 with its 42 merchant ships. Another 17 boats were placed across its path and made contact two days later. Piers managed to fend them off until dark. By then, however, he was in the air-gap south of Greenland, beyond the reach of allied patrol aircraft (long-range bombers closed the gap in March 1943, changing the course of the struggle).

Four U-boats sank eight merchantmen in the first night of a running battle. A ninth was sunk next day. The Germans then lost contact with the convoy in rough weather. But Western Approaches command in Liverpool, which controlled the convoy system, failed to divert the stricken SC 107 out of danger, and Admiral Dönitz was amazed when his boats easily regained contact on November 3, sinking another six freighters in the next 24 hours for a total of 15 sunk, or 35% from a single convoy.

The British promptly forced most of the Canadians off the north Atlantic route, ordering ships and crews to British ports for retraining or assigning them to groups where the SOE was

British, and to other convoy routes also covered by air. Yet Admiral Sir Percy Noble, who commanded Western Approaches in the crisis period, had the grace to say later that "the Canadian navy solved the problem of the Atlantic convoys."

Desmond William Piers, nicknamed Debby from childhood, was born at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and joined the tiny Canadian navy in 1932 as a cadet, gaining experience with the Royal Navy before returning to Canada in 1937 as first lieutenant of the *Restigouche*. As such, he assisted in the evacuation of the British army from northern France in 1940. In 1941 he was promoted to command *Restigouche*, which he left in 1943 to head naval training at Halifax. He commanded a new destroyer at the D-Day landing and after the war held a series of staff posts in the Canadian navy and Nato before returning to sea as captain of a cruiser and of the 1st Canadian escort squadron.

He served for two years as commandant of the Canadian military college followed by a stint as chairman of the Canadian joint staff. On retirement as a rear admiral in 1967, he undertook community work, but in 1977 was appointed agent-general of Nova Scotia province in Britain, becoming a freeman of the City of London. He married Janet Macneill in 1941.

- Desmond 'Debby' William Piers, naval officer, born June 12 1913; died November 1 2005