

***Comanche*, WPG-76**

On 29 January 1943, the *Comanche* was underway with the *Tampa* and *Escanaba*, out of St. John's, Newfoundland, escorting convoy SG-19, consisting of the *Dorchester*, SS *Biscaya*, and SS *Lutz* for Greenland. During the early morning of 3 February, 1943 the U-223 fired five torpedoes at the convoy. One of the first torpedoes struck and exploded against *Dorchester*, on her starboard side in the machinery spaces. The escort vessels' first indication of trouble came from the convoy at 0102 on that morning, when a white flash was observed to come from the *Dorchester*, just abaft her smokestack. This flash was followed by a clearly visible cloud of black smoke and the sound of an explosion. There followed immediately two blasts from the whistle of *Dorchester* and lights were seen to flash on in numerous spots on the ship. At 0104 the officer of the deck of *Comanche*, which was approximately 2500 yards on the port beam of the *Dorchester*, sounded the general alarm and all stations were manned. At 0112, the *Comanche*, in accordance with pre-arranged instructions, commenced maneuvering to intercept and destroy any enemy submarines in the vicinity. At this time all lights left burning on *Dorchester* went out and it is believed she sank immediately after this at 0120.

At 0226 instructions were received from the escort commander, aboard *Tampa*, for *Comanche* to proceed to the scene of the sinking and cooperate with *Escanaba* in the rescue of survivors. Upon arriving at the scene at 0302 *Comanche* passed through an oil slick in which numerous red life jacket lights were seen burning, but upon attempting to pick up some of these, it was discovered that the men in the jackets, close aboard, had already perished or had become unconscious and were unable to respond or act in any way. At 0345, forty survivors from a lifeboat were brought aboard the *Comanche* as she screened *Escanaba* against submarine attack. Altogether *Comanche* rescued a total of 97 survivors, mostly through utilizing a new rescue technique involving the use of a "retriever." This technique involved having a crewman, dressed in a special suit, jump overboard with a line tied around him. The "retriever" would then grab a hold of a survivor and

crewmembers on board the cutter would then haul both men on deck. With the survivors suffering from hypothermia and therefore unable to climb aboard a rescuing vessel, the retriever method proved to be the only way to save lives. Three officers and nine enlisted men from *Comanche* acted as "retrievers" that night. A contemporary report noted:

"Three officers and nine enlisted men from the Coast Guard cutter COMANCHE went over the side of their ship in the icy North Atlantic last February in a desperate attempt to rescue the survivors of a torpedoed U.S. transport. Ninety-three men were saved by the quick action of the volunteers under conditions extremely hostile to rescue operations. The COMANCHE was part of a convoy escort when the transport DORCHESTER was torpedoed at mid-night, February 3rd, 1943, and went down in less than twenty minutes with a crew of 150 and 850 Army passengers aboard. The Coast Guard craft was about a mile away at the time of the explosion and immediately rushed to the scene, attempting to get the enemy submarine responsible. Instructions were then received by the escort commander to proceed to pick up survivors in the heavy seas. Numerous men were seen floating in their life jackets, but nearly all were dead. The cutter consequently concentrated on life boats and liferafts, the occupants of which apparently were all alive. The cutter hung a cargo net overside, in order that the men afloat on the life boats and rafts could climb aboard. However, it was soon discovered that the men were too weak to make their way up over the side of the ship.

Despite a rapidly mounting wind and an increasingly heavy sea, the COMANCHE was so maneuvered as to get alongside every life boat or raft afloat. In each case the cutter's officers and men went over the side with lines, which they used to hoist the survivors aboard the cutter. Every man who had made his way to a life boat or raft observed by the COMANCHE was taken aboard the cutter, which stayed on the scene throughout all the night and into the morning. In reporting the action, Lieut. Commander Ralph R. Curry, commanding officer of the cutter, named the men who had gone overside repeatedly

to rescue survivors of the disaster. The three officers were: Lt. Langford Anderson, USCGR, Ensign Robert W. Anderson, USCGR, and Ensign John W. Simmons, USCGR. The enlisted men were: Arthur E. Backer, Jr., Boatswain's Mate, First Class; Harry P. Billos, Electrician's Mate, Second Class; Richard N. Swanson, Store Keeper, Second Class; John P. Harrison, Coxswain; Harold G. Koreta, Seaman, First Class; John N. Gardner, Apprentice Seaman; James R. Gould, Apprentice Seaman; Thomas A. Vitale, Apprentice Seaman; and Charles W. David., Jr., Mess Attendant, First Class."

The *Escanaba* managed to rescue 132 survivors. The rest of the passengers and crew of *Dorchester*, four officers, 98 crewmen, and 558 passengers (primarily Army personnel as well as 16 Coast Guardsmen), perished. The sinking gained international attention due to the loss of four U.S. Army chaplains who perished after voluntarily giving up their life jackets to other *Dorchester* survivors. Their courage, calm attitude, and sacrifice were later recognized by Congress. The *Comanche* and *Escanaba* landed the *Dorchester* survivors at Blue West One on 14 February 1943.