

Escanaba, WPG-79

DORCHESTER SINKING & USE OF THE "RETRIEVER METHOD"

Early into the next year, *Escanaba* participated in a remarkable and historic rescue operation. During the early morning of 3 February, 1943, *Escanaba* had been one of three escort vessels in Task Unit 24.8.3 which was escorting a convoy of three vessels, composed of the ill-fated SS *Dorchester*, which carried the convoy commodore, the freighter SS *Lutz*, and the freighter SS *Biscaya*, from St. Johns, Newfoundland, to Greenland. The 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 CGC [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 due to hypothermia 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 93 survivors.

As *Escanaba* moved in to pick up survivors, the men designated for this operation got the rescue equipment ready. Lines were cut and made ready for hauling helpless men aboard. Sea ladders were placed so that they would be readily available when needed. Heaving lines were made ready, the cargo net was dropped, ready for use and *Escanaba's* retrievers were put into their rubber suits with lines made fast to them. All these things had to be done beforehand because no illumination could be used on deck and confusion would have resulted if the required equipment could not have been readily found in the dark, once rescue operations had been started.

The sea was smooth due to the heavy oil slick and the wind was light. The ability to see objects in the water, however, was very poor due to darkness and overcast clouds.

The ship was stopped and drifted down into a mass of survivors. Some of them were trying to stay on doughnut rafts, others were staying afloat only with the aid of their life jackets. As was expected from previous experience gained in rescuing survivors from SS *Cherokee*, the majority of the men were suffering from severe shock and exposure and could not climb up the sea ladders or the cargo net. In fact, they could not even hang on to the lines with running bowlines on them long enough to secure the lines under their arms so that they could be hauled on board. It was for this reason that the retrievers were put over the side. They would get hold of the men or of the rafts and the men tending the retrievers lines could pull the group close to the ship. The retrievers could then quickly put lines around the survivors and they were hauled aboard in short order. This system saved much valuable time and many lives. The ship did not have to wait until it drifted the last twenty yards or so to a raft but the retrievers got the raft to the ship immediately. Thus the ship was able to contact that many more groups before exposure could freeze them to death. At the same time it made it possible to haul on board unconscious survivors, many of whom later recovered. Even when a victim looked dead he was brought on board and only 12 out of 50 apparently dead thus rescued, were actually found to be dead by the ship's doctor, Assistant Surgeon Ralph R. Nix of the U.S. Public Health Service. He worked valiantly, with the assistance of member of the crew and of those survivors who had recovered, on those who showed signs of life and was posthumously awarded a Letter of Commendation on 18 August 1943.

Ensign Richard A. Arrighi, USCGR, who was posthumously awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal on 18 August 1943, was the first to go over the side as a retriever. This act boosted the morale of the whole crew and gave confidence to the other retrievers. During the early hours of the rescue operations, one lifeboat, was contacted which was in fair condition. This boat had picked up the other survivors and was fairly crowded. As the lifeboat was made fast to *Escanaba's* side, one of its helpless members fell in between the cutter and the lifeboat. This poor man was covered with oil and the men in the lifeboat simply could not extricate him from his perilous position. Arrighi, who was working in the water at the time, swam in between the boat and the ship, pulled the man out so that he would not be crushed, held him up so that a line could be put around him and helped the men in the boat get him on aboard. Arrighi was in grave danger of being himself crushed between the boat and the ship's side, but due to his

disregard of his own safety and to his quick action he was spared, only to lose his life in June when *Escanaba* sank. Arrighi was in and out of the water rescuing survivors, working in the dark with a rough sea running and quitting only when his, rubber suit became worn and filled with water. After that he had to be hauled on board and treated for exposure.

The Navy and Marine Corps Medal also went posthumously to Forrest O. Rednour, Ship's Cook, Second Class, and Warren T. Deyampert, Steward's Mate, Third Class, who worked between three and four hours in the water during darkness, pulling rafts in close to the ship, securing them with lines from the ship, securing bowlines about the survivors so that they could be hauled aboard *Escanaba*, and at times keeping helpless survivors afloat until they could put lines about them. They, too, were often in danger of being crushed by the life rafts as they brought them close to the ship's side. Rednour stuck with a raft loaded with survivors as it drifted under the ship's counter and the propeller had to be backed to get the raft in position where the survivors could be unloaded. Deyampert stuck with a single floating survivor as he drifted astern under the counter, in order to keep him clear of the propeller, just in case it turned. He disregarded this danger to himself, in order that the survivor might be kept clear of it. Rednour worked the longest of all retrievers and accounted for the greatest number of survivors, but finally had to quit when his rubber suit became torn.

Lieutenant Commander Carl U. Peterson, USCG, commanding officer of *Escanaba* was awarded the Legion of Merit posthumously. He and Executive Officer, Lieutenant Robert H. Prause, to whom a Letter of Commendation was awarded, did outstanding jobs of organizing and supervising on the scene all the rescue operations. The handling, by Prause, of the survivors and crew members in the water while the ship was maneuvering, plus the prompt recovery of two crew members who were pulled overboard as they tried to keep the survivors alongside, displayed sound judgment and excellent seamanship. Despite the lack of illumination there was no confusion. Everyone worked with grim determination to cheat the enemy out of as many victims as possible, despite the constant threat of submarine action. Prause had previously planned the retriever method of rescue and had gone into the icy water off the dock at Bluie West One, Greenland, in a rubber suit with a line attached. The experiment paid great dividends. The total number rescued by the *Escanaba* was 133 alive, of which one died on board. Twelve bodies were also recovered.