

## A Fight to the Death: The USS Borie, 31 October to 2 November 1943



She had been designed for an earlier war. Launched in 1919, the USS *Borie* had been the ultimate in destroyer design. She was fast – capable of up to 35 knots (40 mph) and well armed for the time with four 4" guns, a bank of 21" torpedo tubes and depth charges. By 1943, though, she was showing her age. *Borie* and her sisters could keep up with the new Fast Carriers in terms of speed but little else. Newer and far more powerful designs were coming out in flocks (the Navy would commission well over one hundred of the *Fletcher* class alone during WWII) and nothing else would do to escort the fast-stepping and long-legged carriers across the vast Pacific.

She did wind up as a carrier escort, though. She and two of her sisters, USS *Goff* and USS *Barry* were assigned to be part of a hunter-killer task group, Task Group 21.14. centered around the USS *Card*, an escort carrier. The escort carrier concept arose to fill in gaps in air coverage for convoys crossing the U-Boat-infested Atlantic. Unlike their larger and more glamorous kin, the escort carriers (CVE) were built on merchant or tanker hulls with a flight deck and a small "island" structure nailed on top. They usually carried 21 aircraft: nine or ten "Widcat" fighters and a dozen or so "Avenger" torpedo bombers rigged to carry depth-charges. Running flat out, with everything open but the toolbox, a CVE could make about 20 knots.

Since most convoys plodded along at less than 15 knots this was sufficient.

As more and more escorts became available, the CVEs and their escorts were given the freedom to roam ahead and around convoys to search for the elusive German subs and "prosecute" (attack and kill) any U-Boats they found. Many times they were vectored to U-Boats via ULTRA intercepts based on the fact that the Allies had broken the top-secret German ENIGMA codes. *Grossadmiral* Karl Doenitz, a devoted Nazi and Boss of all U-Boats, tended to be overly "chatty" with his subs shuttling them hither and yon using a map grid system which the Allies also had. Therefore if Doenitz ordered a boat to "such-and-such" grid the code-breakers could read his message, locate the grid on a map and dispatch destroyers or a hunter-killer carrier group to deal with the threat. By mid-1943, this system worked with such efficiency that Doenitz was losing more boats in certain parts of the Atlantic than the Allies were ships. For whatever reason, though, the Germans never suspected their codes had been compromised and such sub-sinkings were always credited to more conventional techniques (Sonar, radar, direction-finders, etc.) even as late as the 1960s. Not even the ship commanders were told. Most times the orders just read. "We think there may be U-Boats \*here\* so go and check." Escort commanders were flabbergasted how many times their bosses "guessed" right. The ULTRA secret was finally revealed in the late 1970s.

Halloween night 1943 found the *Borie*, under the command of Lieutenant Charles H. Hutchins, chasing one of these "guesses" that had already proven correct. One of *Card's* Avengers had caught a pair of U-Boats on the surface conducting a re-supply operation and sent *U-584* to the bottom. The other boat, *U-91*, escaped and since it was late in the day and the *Card* would have to shut down flight operations *Borie* was sent to deal with the German. *U-91* fled the scene but at 2000 hours (8PM) *Borie* got a radar fix on yet another German the *U-256* which she open fire upon. *U-256* was observed to go down rapidly and the sound men reported an underwater explosion. An oil slick and debris seemed to confirm the kill. Hutchins jauntily signaled *Card*, "Scratch one pig-boat!" Despite heavy damage, though, *U-256* returned to port but never sailed again.

At 0145 on 1 November, a radar contact revealed the presence of yet another U-Boat at 8000 yards. The boat dove as the range closed but *Borie's* sonarmen were up to the challenge and regained the contact at 2200 yards. Hutchins swung his ship toward the contact for a depth-charge run. As *Borie* passed over the contact a mechanical failure caused all of the charges on one rack to roll into the sea. The resulting explosions literally blew *U-405* under *Korvettenkapitan* Rolf-Heinrich Hopman to the surface and began one of the wildest sea fights in American naval history.

Hutchins ordered his ship's 24-inch searchlight switched on and illuminated

the German boat. The German crew literally boiled out of the conning tower racing to man the boat's deck guns. *U-405* boasted one 88mm cannon and four 20mm guns in a quadruple mount along with machine guns and small arms. 20mm shells slammed in to *Borie's* forward engine room and bridge but caused no casualties. *Borie* responded with 4" guns and her own 20mm guns. As the German 88mm spat defiance, *Borie's* gun barked once, twice, three times. The second shell landed close aboard and killed some of the 88's crew and the third shell blew the gun completely overboard.

**"BORIE's 20mm battery was extremely effective and in a matter of seconds wiped out every exposed member of the sub's crew topside. The effectiveness of this battery was an outstanding feature of the next hours running battle. The submarine made continuous effort (sic) to man their deck guns, but as each man emerged from the conning tower hatch to the bridge, he was immediately met by a hail of 20MM projectiles."** - *Addendum to Report of Action By U.S.S. Borie*

Hutchins now ordered a left turn and closed to ram the sub on its starboard side. A storm was brewing and seas were running at 15 to 20 feet. Hopman saw Hutchins' play and initiated his own left turn to avoid the ram and turn parallel to *Borie*. The U-Boat made it about halfway through its turn before *Borie* slammed into her. However, instead of striking the U-Boat directly, *Borie* hit a glancing blow as the sea simultaneously lowered the sub and raised the destroyer. *Borie* came to rest atop the forecastle of the U-Boat about where the 88mm had been. Now the Germans opened up with everything they had. The men of *Borie* rushed topside with rifles, Thompson sub-machineguns, shotguns and pistols and returned fire. It was a scene more suited to the days of sail, of Wooden Ships and Iron Men, of John Paul Jones' day than the 20th Century.

The most immediate need was to keep the Germans away from the 20mm mount as those four guns would wreak fearful slaughter among the exposed Americans. German after German tried and died to get to those guns. In one instance a *Borie* crewman, Fireman 1/c David Southwick, pulled his sheath knife and flung it at a German rushing to man one of the machine guns. The blade buried itself in the man's belly and he fell over the side. In another instance, Chief Bosun's Mate Walter Kurz, the Gun-Captain of the Number Two 4" gun mount, with little to do since his gun would not depress enough to hit the U-Boat, saw a German sailor heading up the ladder to the 20mm mount and tossed a spent 4" shell casing at him, hitting the man on the head and he, too, fell overboard. Going overboard in this fight was a death-sentence as not only were the seas running high but the water temperature was about forty degrees.

The close-quarters battle raged for ten minutes and accounted for roughly

half the U-Boat's crew. The straining engines of the two vessels and the action of the waves finally wrenched the two vessels apart and the rattle of musketry died away. Both combatants had suffered grievous injury. The U-Boat's superstructure was a wreck and half her crew was dead. *Borie* had suffered no crew casualties but the grinding of her thin hull against the tough pressure hull of the submarine had opened holes and seams in her hull all along the port side. The destroyer was taking on water and her engine room crew under Lt. Morrison Brown was working in chest-deep water in the forward engine room to keep up steam and keep her in the fight. A drain fitting was stuck open and the sea was flooding in. The valve was closed by MM2C Irving Saum who dove down under ten feet of water to shut it. Pumps were brought in to dry out the compartment.

One thing which materially aided *Borie* in this action was a training regime established by her Executive Officer, **"On 27 October, during the routine battle drills, wherein a submarine rammed the ship in the port side of the forward engine room. When this action, then, presented almost exactly that situation, every man acted immediately without orders."** - *Addendum to Report of Action by U.S.S. Borie*

*Borie's* Action Report laconically noted, **"Forward engine room was seriously flooded by this time, thus hampering movements."**

Hutchins maneuvered to pursue *405* as she gradually increased speed to 20 knots and tried to get away. Now the 4" guns could again come into play and began banging away finally putting a shell into the starboard exhaust and possibly damaging the aft torpedo room.

With her engineering spaces once again fit to work in, *Borie* bent on 27 knots in pursuit. This whole time the 24" searchlight held the German in its blinding grip. The stern of *U-405* was now pointed directly at *Borie* and Hutchins realized the searchlight would give the Germans a perfect torpedo solution for their stern tubes. He ordered the light put out and steered clear. No torpedoes were fired.

Once clear of the "stingers" *Borie* now rigged her depth-charge projectors and rapidly closed to attempt another ramming. *U-405* then turned in an attempt to return the favor. By judicious use of rudder and engines, Hutchins turned the destroyer left. Now *Korvettenkapitan* Hopman had his chance to strike *Borie* in the stern and disable her steering but Lt. Hutchins played his hole card and fired a perfect pattern of depth charges directly into the path of the U-Boat. Set shallow, the 500lb charges went off underneath the conning tower and lifted the sub completely out of the water and stopped her dead with her stern six feet from *Borie's*.

The sub quickly restarted her engines and backed away as *Borie* also drew clear while keeping up a lively fire from her main battery and adding a snap-

shot torpedo which missed. During this part of the action a 4" shell hit the sub's conning tower and probably killed *Korvettenkapitan* Hopman. Another 4" round hit the main exhaust and *U-405's* engines died for the last time. Once again the German crew came out of their hatches, but as some fired white flares to indicated surrender others ran to the guns and *Borie's* guns kept firing until cries of "*Kamerad!*" were heard across the deep.

Now the men of *Borie* began to transition from agents of destruction to Angels of Mercy as she closed to rescue survivors. The U-Boat's crew was already taking to life rafts. *U-405* was seen to sink by the stern. Two or three minutes later there was an underwater explosion, possibly of the sub's scuttling charges. From their rafts the sub's crew continued to fire flares. The bridge crew of the *Borie* saw an answering set of flares in the distance and almost simultaneously the sonarman Lerten Kent picked up the high-pitched *screeeeeeee* of torpedoes in the water. There was yet a THIRD U-Boat in the area and by slowing for the rescue, *Borie* was a sitting duck. Hutchins had no choice, he rang for flank speed on his remaining operational engine to clear the area running over several of the rafts in the process. He turned toward the incoming tin fish and the crew watched as it whizzed past leaving a phosphorescent wake.

The killing was over, the dying would go on for a while.

The German boat that fired that last Parthian Shot never came to look for *405's* crew and *Borie* quickly cleared the area only to lose power and generators some distance away. The entire crew of *U-405* perished.

*Borie* was also on her last legs. At 0900 she went dead in the water and the generator for her radio also died. Enough flammable liquid was found to get the radio working for one brief, last message from Lt. Hutchins to *Card* at 1100, "Commenced sinking." The carrier got a radio fix and launched a pair of Avengers on that bearing to find *Borie* which they located some 14 miles away. Captain Arnold Isbell of *Card* dispatched his remaining escorts, *Goff* and *Barry*, to render aid to their sister. However the ocean swells were now running FORTY feet and neither destroyer could get close enough to *Borie* to help without risking catastrophic damage.

It was getting on toward sunset, it was time. Captain Isbell ordered Lt. Hutchins to abandon ship lest she capsize in the dark with grievous loss of life. The abandonment began at 1644 and proceeded well but there was a significant problem: the men of the *Borie* had been in combat with one submarine, in close-quarters action and a running gun battle with another, conducting life-or-death damage control AND battling mountainous seas for the better part of 24 hours. They were spent.

As the men took to the rafts some men were clearly addled and in shock from the recent events. Ignoring the pleas of their shipmates, they let go

and tried to swim to the other destroyers. Others simply let go of the rafts. The forty-degree water ensured they never made it. Others, also clinging to the sides of the life rafts were killed when the huge waves bashed them against the hulls of the other ships.

FC1c (Fire Controlman 1st Class) Robert Maher found himself clinging to a raft that night. He had earlier been caught between two rafts and his life vest was smashed so he discarded it.

"There I was, life jacketless, and darkness meant we would not be able to see a rescue ship, even if one came along, nor could it see us. What was worse, our raft was so full of men that we had to hold on to each other like a bunch of grapes while the raft rode up and down in the large waves. No one seemed to realize the trouble we were in. We even joked about it and occasionally broke into song.

Suddenly someone saw the silhouette of a destroyer bearing down us. We all started to cheer. But we soon stopped when we realized that no one in the ship had seen us. She was going to hit us with her bow dead center. About thirty men were in (or holding onto) our raft, with about four in the middle, one of whom was Tom Neary. Tom was one of those nice quiet guys who never appeared to be around but always got his work done. Fortunately, for all of us, he was around that time. He reached into his jacket and calmly pulled out one of those cheap flashlights (that never worked) and flashed it toward the destroyer. It worked. The ship was *Barry*; it veered to port, but not soon enough. The starboard side of its bow hit our raft on the side opposite me. It was a terrible sight. Some men scrambled up the side of the ship – many were killed between the ship and the raft. I attempted nothing. Without a life jacket I knew I would only get one chance, and not a very good one at that." - Robert Maher, *A Sailor's Journey into War*.

Maher was picked up when *Barry* returned about midnight. An officer on the raft with him was killed when the destroyer rolled into the raft and his head was crushed between the raft and the ship's propeller guard.

*Goff* and *Barry* conducted rescue operations until about 0200 on 2 November then secured and returned to rendezvous with *Card* and transfer the survivors to her. When the roll was called, a total of 7 officers and 120 men were counted present. 3 officers and 24 enlisted men were lost.

**"These two ships did a magnificent job of rescuing, the seamanship was tops. However, the conditions were such that these men who had had no sleep since the previous night, who had fought the action all night, and then had spent the balance of the night and day in controlling damage, many of them lost were just unable to get over the side."** - Narrative by: Lt. Commander Hutchins, 15 November 1943

*Borie* survived only hours longer. Abandoned and heavily damaged, some consideration was given to trying to get her back under control and tow her to safety. However, the nearest port was 500 miles away and the nearest harbor that could actually do anything to repair her was over 2000 miles distant. Added to this was the knowledge that there was at least one U-Boat still in the area and an estimated fifty within a couple of day's sail.

It was time.

*Barry* was sent to sink her with torpedoes but all failed. Finally an Avenger from *Card* dropped four depth-bombs close aboard and sent *Borie* to the bottom.



*USS Borie abandoned and sinking 2 November 1943 (US Navy)*

Upon reaching Norfolk, the survivors of *Borie* gathered on the deck of the *Card* for one last formation as a crew. They conducted a memorial service for their lost shipmates.

Three Navy Crosses were earned by *Borie* men: one to Lt. Hutchins, the second to MM2C Irving R. Saum and a third, posthumously, to Lt. Morrison R. Brown. There were also two Silver Stars (CMM William J. Green and MM2C Mario Pagnotta) and one Commendation Medal awarded to the men of *Borie*.

The *Card* carrier group as a whole was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. Lt. Hutchins was promoted to Lieutenant Commander. The skippers of the *Barry* and *Goff* were awarded the Legion of Merit for their work rescuing the crew of *Borie*.

Steel ships can still be manned by Iron Men.

**"The Borie's final two actions exemplify the finest fighting traditions of the Naval Service. Only the loss of three officers and twenty-four men after the Borie was abandoned mars the joy in these two splendid victories."** - Capt. J. A. Isbell, endorsement of *Borie's Report of Action*

Captain Isbell would return to sea in 1945 as a Prospective Commanding Officer on board the USS *Franklin* (CV-13). Isbell was aboard the "Big Ben" when she was hit by two Japanese bombs while operating off Iwo Jima on 19 March. The bombs exploded among fully armed and fueled aircraft and caused massive damage to the carrier. Over 800 of *Franklin's* crew perished. One of those was Captain Isbell.

On the 4th of July, 1944 a new destroyer, DD-704, was launched. She bore the name USS *Borie*.

### **The Presidential Unit Citation flag awarded to USS Borie's crew for their 1 Nov 1943 battle against the U-405 on 10 Nov 1943**

USS Barry (DD-248). The Presidential Unit Citation flag, awarded to USS Borie's crew for their 1 November 1943 battle against the German submarine U-405, is examined by some of the officers involved, during awards ceremonies held on board USS Card (CVE-11) on 10 November 1943.

Those present are (from left to right):

Lieutenant Commander Herbert D. Hill, Commanding Officer, USS Barry (DD-248);

Lieutenant Commander Howard M. Avery, Commanding Officer, Squadron VC-9;

Lieutenant Charles H. Hutchins, Commanding Officer, USS Borie; and

Lieutenant Commander Hinton Ira Smith, Commanding Officer, USS Goff (DD-247).

Lieutenant Hutchins had just received the Navy Cross for his part in the action. The other three officers had received the Legion of Merit.

### **Sailors lost during the abandonment of USS Borie, 1-2 November 1943:**

Seaman, 2nd Class Opal ALFORD

Seaman, 2nd Class Max G. BLANE

Ship's Cook, 2nd Class Warren H. BLOUGH,

Seaman, 2nd Class Charles T. BONFIGLIO

Lt. Morrison R. BROWN

Pharmacist's Mate, 1st Class Frank J. CITUK

Ship Fitter 2nd Class Domingo CONCHA

Chief Water Tender Harold M. DeMAIO

Radio Technician 1st Class Frank J. DUKE

Fireman 1st Class James H. FIELDS

Seaman, 2nd Class Lawrence R. FRANCIS



Water Tender, 2nd Class Joseph Stanly KISZKA  
Fireman, 1st Class Joseph D. LOMBARDI  
Chief Commissary Steward Ralph W. LONG  
Lt.(j.g.) Robert H. LORD  
Yeoman 2nd Class Francis X. McKERVY  
Fireman, 1st Class William MEDVED  
Ship's Cook, 2nd Class William E. MULLIGEN  
Fireman, 2nd Class Daniel J. POUZER  
Coxwain Aguinardo PRUNEDA  
Chief Quartermaster William J. T. SHAKERLY  
Ensign Richard E. ST. JOHN  
Fireman, 1st Class Frank J. SWAN  
Seaman, 2nd Class Richard E. TULL  
Seaman, 2nd Class D. L. TYREE  
Fireman, 1st Class Andrew WALLACE  
Seaman, 1st Class James H. WINN

*"Eternal Father, strong to save,  
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,  
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep  
Its own appointed limits keep;  
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,  
For those in peril on the sea!"*  
- Traditional Navy Hymn

## **Sources**

Samuel Eliot Morison, History of U.S. Naval Operation in World War II, Volume X: The Atlantic Battle Won

Robert A. Maher and Capt. James E. Wise, Jr., USN (Ret.), Sailor's Journey into War

E. Andrew Wilde, Jr., The USS Borie (DD-215) in World War II: Documents and Photographs

A great deal of info on the *Borie* is available here: <http://www.destroyerhistory.org/flus.../danfs215.html>

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"Being a Tennessee Volunteer is not just an academic and athletic commitment - It is honestly the only way I see fit to live." - Paul Adkins

Photo # NH 56518 USS Borie underway

