

# DESTROYER ESCORT DUTY

THESE LITTLE WARSHIPS PLAYED A VITAL ROLE DURING WORLD WAR TWO

BY F.A. FREEMAN

At the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1951 at Newport, Rhode Island, I greeted the arrival of 1952 by ringing the bell, blowing the whistle, and sounding the siren aboard USS *Blair* (DE-147). Nearby ships did likewise.

I was an Ensign, one of 14 or so officers assigned to the ship, which had a total complement of 186. She was named in honor of Chief Machinist's Mate Eugen Blair, who was awarded the Silver Star posthumously for his brave actions when his ship was attacked and bombed by Japanese aircraft near Port Darwin, Australia, in mid-February 1942.

*Blair*, an *Edsall*-class destroyer escort, built at Orange, Texas, in

1943, had a standard displacement of 1200 tons, was 306 feet long and was powered by Fairbanks-Morse diesel engines. Its main armament consisted of three 3-inch/50 guns, one twin 40mm, eight 20mm guns, one triple 21-inch torpedo tubes, one depth charge (hedgehog) projector, and two depth charge tracks.

During World War II, *Blair* was principally engaged as an escort for troop convoys between the United States and Europe. After escorting the oiler USS *Kennebec* (AO-36) to Bermuda, the new destroyer escort sailed to Charleston, South Carolina, where, on 7 November, the ship's SA radar was removed and DAQ HFDF (High Frequency Direction Finding — "Huff Duff") equipment was installed. Departing Charleston on 14 November, *Blair* reached New York on 16 November. After shifting to New London, Connecticut, for exercises, she returned to Staten Island, New York, briefly before departing New York in a convoy bound for Hampton

Roads, Virginia.

From that location, the ship helped to screen Convoy UGS-25 to North Africa. Relieved of escort duties on 11 December, she put into Casablanca the same day; but tarried only briefly before heading home with GUS-24 on 18 December. She escorted the Norfolk, Virginia, and Delaware sections of GUS-24 to Chesapeake Bay on New Year's Day 1944. *Blair* then sailed to New York for upkeep. After refresher training at Casco Bay, Maine, the warship returned to Chesapeake Bay to join a "hunter killer"



*Blair's* first active duty sailing was to escort USS *Kennebec* (AO-36).

force that embarked on its mission on 24 January 1944. While crossing the Atlantic, she stopped briefly at Horta, in the Azores, to transfer her commanding officer to USS *Livermore* (DD-429) for medical treatment. He re-embarked as the two ships were catching up with their task group, TG 21.14, which they rejoined on 15 February. The group reached North African waters five days later.

For the next few months, *Blair* crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic, screening convoys to the United Kingdom, making a total of ten round trip voyages between the east coast of the USA and the ports of Derry, Northern Ireland; Liverpool,

England; and Cherbourg, France; also frequenting Portland, Portsmouth, and Plymouth, England. On several occasions, suspicious contacts prompted the ship to drop depth charges and make hedgehog attacks, but none of her targets proved to be a submarine. During her first cycle in 1945, she was detached from her convoy (UC-51B) to stand by the Army artillery transport *Lakehurst* (formerly APM-9) as she labored across the Atlantic, "having difficult with improperly secured locomotives."

*Blair's* last convoy was UC-70A, which left the Welsh coast on 28 May and reached New York on 8 June. Proceeding down to Guantanamo Bay for refresher training soon thereafter, *Blair* exercised in Cuban waters until 17 July, when she sailed for the Panama Canal Zone. After arriving at Coco Solo on 20



Zippo lighter carried by a *Blair* crewman.