

“THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY COMES OF AGE:

JUNE 1943 - APRIL 1944” (cont’d)

Continued from Chapter Seven Part 1The decimation of the escort must be the first objective. The destruction of a few destroyers will have considerable moral effect upon the enemy and will greatly facilitate the attack on ships of the convoy in addition. I expect of all commanding officers that each chance of a shot at a destroyer will be utilized. From now on, the U-boat is the attacker – fire first and then submerge.⁴

The stage was now set for the last of the great Atlantic convoy battles.

“Beasts of prey were gathering:” The battle for ONS 18 and ON 202, September 1943

Bletchley Park was able to provide timely intelligence of the German commander’s intentions and deployment. At risk were two westbound convoys, slow convoy ONS 18 with 27 merchant ships and, coming up astern, fast convoy ON 202 with 40 ships. The escort for ONS 18 was provided by B-3 Group with two destroyers, a frigate and five corvettes assisted by a MAC (Merchant Aircraft Carrier) ship, *Empire MacAlpine*, which carried eight obsolescent Swordfish biplanes. ON 202 was under the guard of C-2 Group which comprised the destroyers HMCS *Gatineau* (Senior Officer) and HMS *Icarus*, the Canadian corvettes *Drumheller* and *Kamloops* and the British corvette *Polyanthus*. Available to reinforce either convoy was Canadian Escort Group 9 with the frigate HMS *Itchen*, the destroyer HMCS *St. Croix* and three Canadian corvettes, *Chambly*, *Morden* and *Sackville*. The commanding officers and crews of all three groups were experienced and they were backed up by no less than 73 VLR aircraft flying from Ireland, Iceland and Newfoundland.

It was a Canadian aircraft that got first blood. At 0855 on 19 September a VLR Liberator of 10 RCAF Squadron was covering ONS 18 when it sighted a submarine on the surface 160 miles ahead of the convoy but moving toward it. The Liberator attacked but the U-boat commander, *Oberleutnant zur See* Dietrich Epp, elected to stay on the surface and use his heavy AA armament to defend himself – that proved to be a mistake as well-placed depth charges blew his vessel’s bows out of the water and *U-341* was no more. Just before midnight, *U-402* of *Gruppe Leuthen* sighted ONS 18 and, at 0155, 20 September, *Oberleutnant zur See* Paul-Friedrich Otto of *U-270* sent a Beta-Beta, what Allied code breakers called a “B-Bar

signal” or sighting report giving the convoy’s location and heading: “beta/beta. Convoy square 1944, AL, 270 degrees, Otto.”⁵ Almost -immediately, the reply came back from Dönitz’s headquarters: “Leuthen at ’em. Otto report contact. Manseck [commander of U-758] report weather at once.” The battle was joined.



The Chiefs and Petty Officers had it no better

The Chiefs and Petty Officers' messdeck on a corvette was no more spacious than those of the ordinary sailors -- as this photograph demonstrates. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

aircraft, which stayed over the convoy the entire day.

The loss of three ships in a few hours prompted Admiral Max Horton to -order the two convoys to merge and their escort to be reinforced by the RCN's Escort Group 9. On receipt of this signal, Commander M.B. Evans, RN, the Senior Officer of B-3 Group with the slow convoy, later recalled that, although the fast convoy astern of him “was the centre of attraction around which the beasts of prey were gathering,” he “felt rather a brute in leading my poor little ONS 18 into the turmoil,” although his crews expressed “delight at a chance of activity – with handsome escort – after months of dreary ocean plodding.”⁶ However, combining 65 merchant ships and three escort groups into a new and defensible formation proved to be a very difficult task and, as the commander of C-2 group later commented, throughout most of 20 September ONS 18 and ON 202 “gyrated majestically about the ocean, never appearing to get much closer, and watched appreciatively by a growing swarm of U-boats.”⁷

As this cumbersome elephant dance took place on the face of a calm sea, VLR aircraft and the convoy escorts were keeping the prowling enemy at bay. Several attempted attacks were foiled and in the early evening an RAF Liberator sank *U-338*. When another aircraft reported a surfaced U-boat a

Otto's signal was picked up by the HF/DF equipment on board the vessels of C-2 Group, which was with ON 202 coming up behind the slow convoy. The group's Senior Officer, Commander P.W. Burnett, RN, obtained a fix for *U-270* and dispatched the frigate *HMS Langan* to investigate, and when *Langan* acquired a firm radar contact, reinforced her with *HMCS Gatineau*. The target was Otto's *U-270* but at 0259 Otto fired an acoustic torpedo at *Langan* which blew the frigate's stern off and killed 29 of her crew – a spectacular debut for the new weapon. *Gatineau*, coming on the scene, responded with a depth charge attack that damaged *U-270* and forced Otto to withdraw from the attack. The tug *Destiny* took the shattered *Langan* in tow and got her safely back to a friendly port but the frigate's career was finished.

Unfortunately, while the escort group was diverted by this incident, *U-238*, commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Horst Hepp, made contact with ONS 18 and, maintaining strict radio silence, manoeuvred into a -position ahead of the convoy. At 0732, as the lead ships were approaching his position, Hepp sank the merchantmen *Frederick Douglas* and *Theodore Dwight Weld* before diving deep and passing under the convoy. C-2 Group carried out ASDIC searches and attacked suspected contacts but *U-238* escaped unharmed and remained in touch. The escorts, however, were -assisted in their work by the arrival of VLR

few minutes later, HMCS *St. Croix* of Escort Group 9 steamed toward the area, right into the periscope sights of *Kapitänleutnant* Rudolf Bahr of *U-305* who fired an acoustic torpedo that blew off her stern. While his crew struggled to keep *St. Croix* afloat, her captain, Lieutenant Commander A.H. Dobson, RCN, ordered her boats lowered and the wounded placed in them as a safety measure and then signalled HMS *Itchen*, which was coming to his rescue, that he was “leaving the office.”⁸

Almost at that same moment, *U-305* fired a second, standard torpedo at *St. Croix* that cut the vessel in half. When *Itchen* arrived on the scene, she found only the destroyer’s bow above water and the sea around it dotted with the heads of survivors. Presented with a new target, Bahr fired an acoustic torpedo at *Itchen* which detonated in the frigate’s wake and her captain wisely decided to wait for support from the corvette HMS *Polyanthus* before attempting to pick up survivors.

Unfortunately, *Polyanthus* never made it. While she was standing by *St. Croix*’s survivors, *Itchen* fired starshells that drew no less than four U-boats toward her. *Polyanthus* had just carried out an attack on one of these - opponents when another submarine, *U-952* commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Oskar Curio, fired an acoustic torpedo that immediately sank the corvette, taking down her entire crew except one survivor who was rescued the next day. It was now quite dark and the night that followed degenerated into a confused series of separate actions as the escorts tracked down and attacked several U-boats, which responded by firing acoustic torpedoes without success.

Just before dawn on 21 September, a thick blanket of fog descended on the two convoys which had finally managed, more by luck than skill, to position themselves abeam of each other. Thirteen hours after *St. Croix* had sunk, *Itchen* finally found time to return and rescue her survivors who had spent a long and cold night in the oil-soaked Atlantic. Many had drowned or succumbed to hypothermia, but through the diligent efforts of Dobson, just over half the destroyer’s complement of 147 men were plucked from the sea.

The fog continued throughout 21 September and into the next day. In such weather, the radar-equipped escorts had the advantage over the U-boats that were trying to manoeuvre into positions to attack the combined convoy, which now consisted of 18 columns of ships spread out over 30 square miles of ocean. Time and time again, they beat off the enemy but the only escort to score a kill was the destroyer HMS *Keppel*, which ran down a HF/DF fix during the early hours of 22 September and surprised *Oberleutnant zur See* Robert Schetelig’s *U-229* running on the surface – *Keppel* promptly rammed and sank it. Despite hazardous flying conditions, the *Empire MacAlpine* launched one of her rickety Swordfish biplanes and VLR aircraft patrols were kept constantly overhead.



The Pleasures of Dining at Sea

In a time when Canadian warships had only rudimentary refrigeration facilities, fresh food, particularly bread, quickly became stale. Here, Able Seaman C.G. Walker of HMCS *Georgian* demonstrates how to cut rock-hard bread with a saw. Note the crowded quarters and the off-duty sailor sleeping in his “mick” or hammock behind Walker. (Photograph by W.H. Pugsley, courtesy National Archives of Canada, PA 1343511)

THE ROLE OF OPERATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

On both sides, the forces employed in the Battle of the Atlantic were subject to highly centralized command from shore-based headquarters. The Allied convoy system depended on rigid control of sailing schedules and routes, while Dönitz's employment of wolfpack tactics depended on frequent radio communication between his headquarters and U-boats at sea. The result was that both combatants generated a tremendous amount of radio communications that provided an important source of intelligence for their opponent.

Ultra intelligence

The Allied code breakers' success in unravelling the mysteries of cyphers generated by the Enigma machine was a war-winning asset. Information derived in this manner, termed "special intelligence" or Ultra, was not the most important weapon possessed by Allied naval intelligence, and perhaps too much emphasis can be put on the effect of Ultra in the Battle of the Atlantic as it did have weaknesses. It was subject to a delay and might not reach the relevant command in time, and there was always great concern about security – if the Germans learned that their Enigma-generated cyphers had been broken by the Allies, they would switch to a completely different system and this valuable asset, which affected land and air as well as naval operations, would be lost. For this reason, circulation of Ultra was restricted to a very few senior officers.

Ultra was also sensitive to procedural changes on the part of the *Kriegsmarine*. Most simply put, Allied code breakers were able to read the German *Heimisch* or "Dolphin" traffic, the code used for *Kriegsmarine* surface vessels and U-boats in home waters, without delay from the summer of 1941 to early 1942. At that point, changes made to U-boat coding systems and the introduction of the M4 Enigma machine led to the creation of a new cypher, called *Triton* by the Germans and "Shark" by the Allies, which baffled code breakers until late 1942 when they were able to read it intermittently but with considerable delay. *Triton* was completely broken in March 1943, just in time for the high point of the battle, but it was still subject to delays. From September 1943 to the end of the war, however, -advances in code breaking technology led to *Shark* being read within 24 hours.

It should be remembered that both sides were involved in code breaking. The German signals intelligence organization, the *B-dienst*, had broken the major British naval cypher before the war and were able to read it until the late summer of 1940 when Naval Cypher No. 3 was introduced. The Germans broke Cypher No. 3, used for the routing of convoys and escorts, in the first part of 1942, and from July 1942 to June 1943 were able to read almost all communications in this cypher with little delay, which offset the Allies' possession of Ultra. *B-dienst* lost this powerful asset in June 1943 when Cypher No. 5 was introduced and never regained it during the war.

Other intelligence

As discussed above, HF/DF, "Huff Duff," or High Frequency Direction Finding, was another crucial weapon for Allied intelligence. Land-based HF/DF stations that picked up a U-boat's signal could provide an approximate location although with some degree or error. Those signals would then become the subject of traffic analysis, the rigorous appraisal of the characteristics, frequency and form of the transmission that might give some clue as to its contents. Traffic analysis was made simpler by the fact that many U-boat transmissions were highly stylized. Weather, position, and sighting reports were often prefixed with a "Beta-Beta" code, giving them priority over other communications on the same radio frequency. Termed "B-bar" signals by Allied intelligence organizations, such transmissions hinted at their contents and a B-bar signal from a U-boat in the known vicinity of a convoy, for example, was an indication that it had been sighted and might be attacked.

Information provided by Ultra, HF/DF and traffic analysis was combined with other intelligence, such as U-boat siting reports made by vessels and

aircraft or information provided by agents (the many French civilian staff employed at U-boat bases in France proved very useful in this regard). No matter what its source, all information relating to the U-boats ultimately arrived at the Operational Intelligence Centre at the Admiralty in London.

Collection, analysis and dissemination of operational intelligence

The OIC and its component, the Submarine Tracking Room, correlated and analyzed all this information and then disseminated it to the relevant naval and air commands. Up to 1943, the major use of operational intelligence was to re-route convoys around the known or estimated positions of U-boat packs, and, if at all possible, an attempt was made to provide accurate information about possible U-boat locations before a convoy sailed. From 1943 onward, it was also used offensively in providing Allied “hunter-killer” groups with locations for U-boats that would then be attacked. The OIC in London most often dealt with the headquarters of Western Approaches Command in Liverpool, which assumed responsibility for operations in much of the North Atlantic and the RAF’s Coastal Command but, if relevant, it would also share information with the OICs in Ottawa and Washington (known as Op-20-G to the USN), which would then warn any threatened naval or air force commands in their areas of responsibility.

If a situation developed where recent intelligence revealed a shift in German dispositions, an attempt was made to actually divert convoys at sea. On many occasions, however, this information did not arrive in time to prevent a convoy being attacked and in other cases Dönitz received timely information from the *B-dienst* to counter such a move.

Convoy SC 42, September 1941

The map opposite provides an illustration of how operational intelligence was used in September 1941 to frustrate German attacks on a number of convoys, but unfortunately not the luckless Convoy SC 42, which suffered heavy losses.

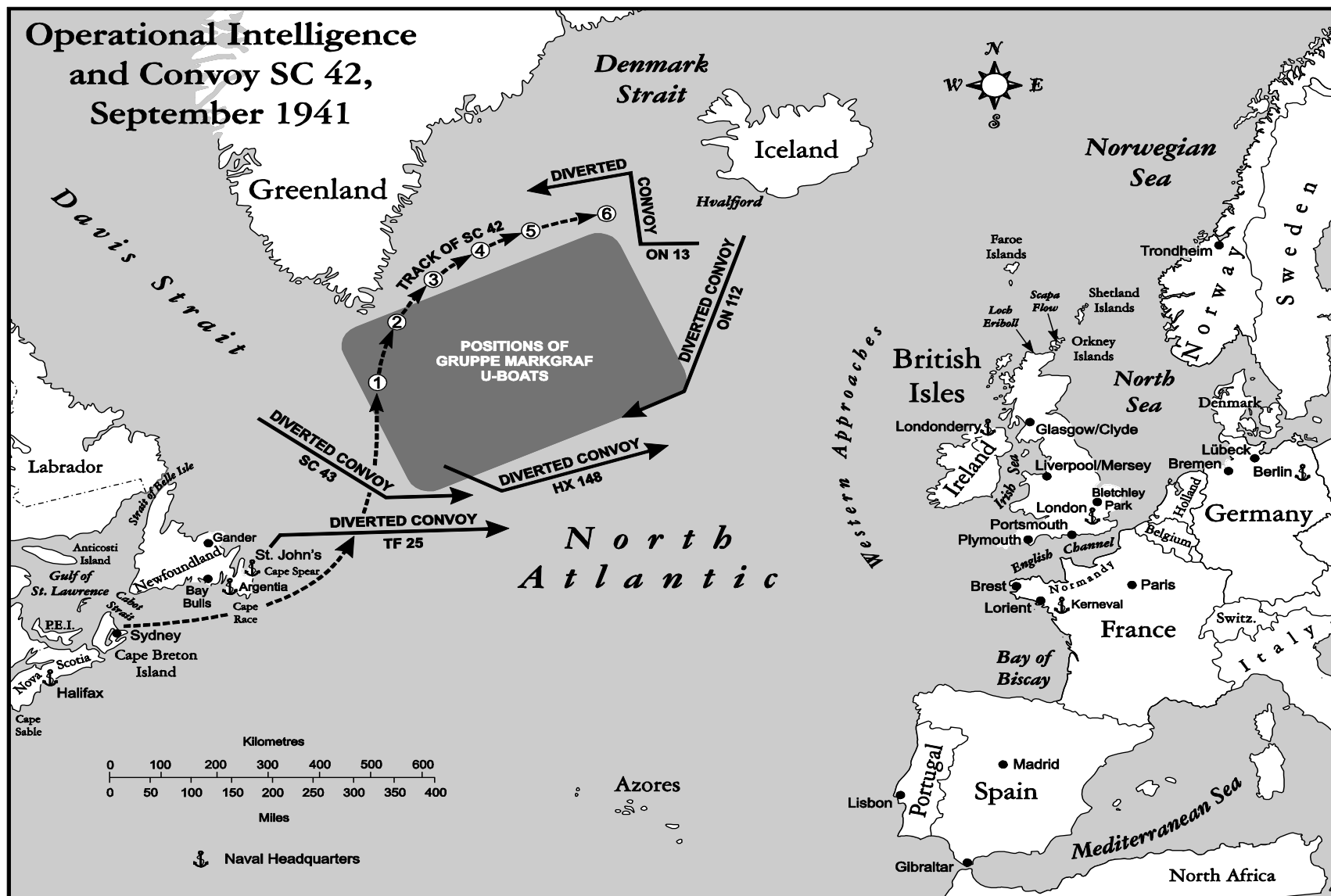
On 4 September 1941 Dönitz, having failed to intercept a number of convoys which had been routed around his patrol lines because of timely information, ordered 14 U-boats to form *Gruppe Markgraf* to patrol a large area off the southeast coast of Greenland (shaded area on map). This order was decoded by Bletchley Park on 6 September, and although the area to be patrolled by *Markgraf* was not exactly clear to the Allied intelligence, four convoys were routed north or south of the suspected German locations (lines on map). Convoy SC 42, 64 merchant ships escorted by a Canadian destroyer and three corvettes, had been battling headwinds, rough weather and heavy seas since it had left Sydney, Nova Scotia, on 4 September. The escort vessels were too short on fuel for SC 42 to be re-routed to the south so it was diverted north up the coast of Greenland in an attempt to make an end run around the location of *Markgraf*.

Unfortunately for SC 42, a straggler from the convoy was sighted and sunk by *U-81* on 8 September (1 on the map) and the following day the convoy was sighted (2 on map) by *U-85*, which sent a sighting report and began to track it. Dönitz’s response was to order all boats in *Markgraf* to concentrate and attack. At this point, the situation favoured the Germans because SC 42 was beyond air cover from either Newfoundland or Iceland and the U-boats could therefore proceed on the surface using their superior speed to catch the convoy. The German transmissions were decoded by Bletchley Park but there was little that the OIC in London could do to prevent what was about to happen.

During the night of 9-10 September, at least five U-boats came into contact with SC 42 (at 3), sinking five merchantmen despite the best efforts of the escort. The score was evened somewhat when two Canadian corvettes, HMC Ships *Chambly* and *Moose Jaw*, under the command of Lieutenant Commander J.D. Prentice, arrived from Newfoundland. Prentice, who had been watching the situation develop around SC 42 on the naval plot at St. John’s, had asked for and received permission to put to sea to reinforce the escort and had fortuitously appeared just in time to sink *U-501* ahead of the convoy.

The U-boats reported their victories to Dönitz by radio during the day of 10 September, and since it was clear that they were in good contact with a slow convoy, he ordered them to attack without mercy. The escort, however, was assisted on that day by a Catalina aircraft flying from Iceland at extreme range (4 on map), which patrolled briefly over the convoy and made it difficult for the attackers to manoeuvre into the best positions. Over the next two days, 10-11 September, SC 42 would enjoy intermittent air cover (5 on map) but not in strength enough to prevent the U-boats mounting further attacks which resulted in the loss of 11 more merchantmen. In all, 11 U-boats made 25 separate recorded attacks on SC 42 before the arrival of escort reinforcements and continuous daylight air cover forced Dönitz to call off the attack at this position (6 on map).

As the experience of SC 42 demonstrates, although operational intelligence could prevent or reduce losses, it was not always successful in doing so when other factors such as weather, seas, availability of air cover, strength of escort and fuel states affected convoys. Operational Intelligence was a means to an end – and an important means – but the outcome of the tactical battle was often resolved by the skill and determination of the escorts and their German opponents.





Kriegsmarine Schlüssel M4 Enigma Machine, 1942.

The Enigma machine was an electronic coding machine that was adopted by the German armed forces in the 1930s. The **Kriegsmarine** introduced an upgraded model, the **Schlüssel M4** in late 1941. Up to that time, thanks to the efforts of the codebreaking organization at Bletchley Park in England, the Allies had been able to read much of Dönitz's signal traffic but **Schlüssel M4**, which possessed a more complicated enciphering mechanism produced a sophisticated code called "Triton" that baffled Allied codebreakers from early 1942 to March 1943. "Triton" was broken just in time to have a major effect on the highpoint of the Battle of the Atlantic. (Courtesy, Steve Fahie)

The fog finally lifted during the afternoon of 22 September and Commander Evans, who had assumed command of all the escorts recorded that, after "living under a blanket for so long it was very nice to come into the open air and find it filled with Liberators."⁹ Those aircraft were from 10 Squadron RCAF based in Newfoundland and over the next few hours they made three separate attacks on surfaced submarines prowling around the convoy. Liberator L/10 flown by Warrant Officer J. Billings attacked Otto's *U-270* with depth charges in the face of anti-aircraft fire so accurate that it knocked out one of his engines and hit the cockpit of the aircraft. Having expended his depth charges, Billings requested assistance from Liberator X/10, another 10 Squadron aircraft, only to receive the reply: "I have a U-boat of my own on my hands."¹⁰ Billings was forced to break off the attack after he expended his ammunition but Otto's submarine was so badly damaged he had to return to base. Meanwhile, Liberator X/10, having dropped all its depth charges, severely raked *U-377* with its machine guns, seriously wounding its captain, *Oberleutnant zur See* Gerhard Kluth. His second-in-command submerged and withdrew from the battle to seek medical assistance. A few minutes later, Liberator X/10 attacked another surfaced submarine only to lose it in a fog bank. Elsewhere, two Swordfish from *Empire MacAlpine* sighted another surfaced submarine but, being no match for its heavy AA armament, contented themselves with circling out of range and calling in the escorts to deal with it. The U-boat dived deep before surface vessels came up and escaped. Finally, at dusk Liberator N/10 from 10 Squadron RCAF arrived and mounted a patrol around the convoy until darkness fell.

But there were still 10 boats from *Gruppe Leuthen* in contact and they were not yet finished. At 2130 hours, *Itchen* got a good radar contact ahead of the convoy and steamed to investigate, beginning a confusing but very lively night as the U-boats tried to penetrate the escort screen only to be foiled by the warships. The enemy responded with acoustic torpedoes which, fortunately, either missed their targets or exploded prematurely. Tragically, at one minute before midnight, *Itchen* was hit by a T5 fired by *Kapitänleutnant* Herbert

Engel in *U-666* and sank so fast that only three men were rescued: a sailor from her own crew, a survivor from *St. Croix* and the sole survivor from *Polyanthus*. At about 0200, the intrepid *Kapitän-leutnant* Hepp of *U-238* managed to slip on the surface through a gap in the escort screen and sink three merchantmen. At 0615, while it was still dark, *Kapitänleutnant* Oskar Curio, commanding *U-952*, recorded “At last, shadows to starboard,” as he sighted the convoy and fired a spread of standard torpedoes that hit and sank a sixth merchant ship.¹¹ That was the last casualty because, when dawn came on 23 September, the Liberators of 10 Squadron from Newfoundland returned in strength to drive the U-boats under and Dönitz ended the attack.

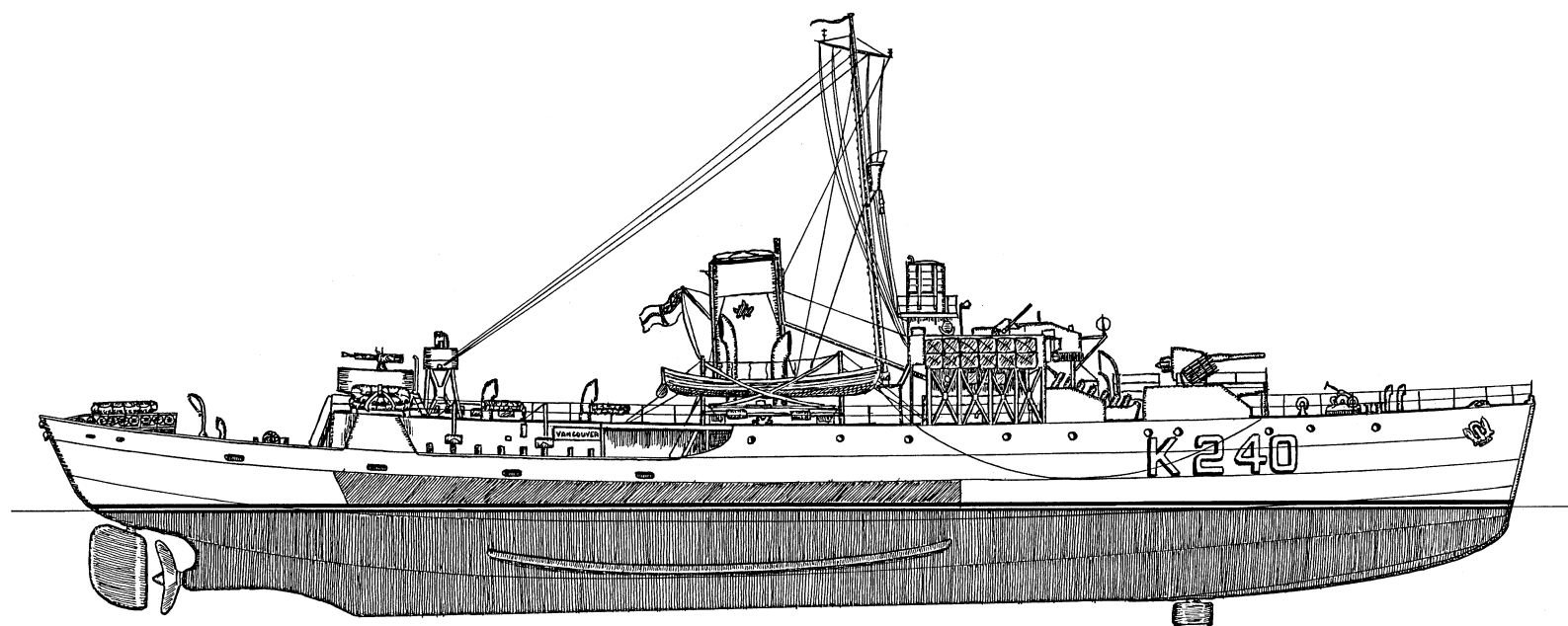


Four-Stacker – Ill-Fated HMCS St. Croix.

One of six ex-USN destroyers taken over by the RCN in late 1940 and one of the few that had the range to operate in the North Atlantic, **St. Croix** served with the Newfoundland Escort Force in 1941-1943. She was a relatively successful ship, sinking **U-90** in July 1942 and assisting in the destruction of **U-87** in April 1943. Her luck ran out in September 1943 when she was sunk by **U-305**. Eighty-one members of her crew were rescued by HMS **Itchen** but only one survived the subsequent loss of that vessel. (Courtesy, Directorate of History and Heritage, DND, PA 104474)

“We cannot stand these losses:” The U-boats leave the North Atlantic

Both sides claimed victory. Dönitz, working from the radio reports of the commanders of *Gruppe Leuthen* believed that, for the loss of 3 submarines, his crews had used the new torpedoes to sink no less than 12 destroyers and 7 merchant ships, and damage 3 more destroyers and 3 merchant ships. He also believed that the new radar search detectors mounted on many of the submarines in *Leuthen* had worked satisfactorily and would go some way to eliminating the threat of Allied aircraft. In actual fact, his commanders had sunk 3 escorts and 6 merchant ships while, as for the new German T5 torpedo, an effective Canadian countermeasure was introduced within a matter of days. Dubbed the CAT (Canadian Anti-Acoustical Torpedo) gear, it was basically a noisemaker, an arrangement of loosely connected pipes which, if towed behind a ship, produced a louder noise than her propellers, causing the torpedo to explode harmlessly against it. The battle for ONS 18 and ON 202, however, cost the lives of about 400 British and Canadian sailors from *Itchen*, *Polyanthus* and *St. Croix* and more or less eliminated Escort Group 9 in the process. It was formally disbanded a few weeks later.*



LB JENSON

FLOWER CLASS CORVETTE
MODIFIED
HMCS VANCOUVER
March 1945

205 feet

HMCS Vancouver, Flower Class Corvette, as Modified

Commissioned in early 1942, **Vancouver** served in the Aleutian campaign before undergoing modification which resulted in her appearing as shown in this drawing. Her bridge has been rebuilt and enlarged, new bridge wings have been installed to bear the weight of heavier AA armament and her focsle has been extended. **Vancouver** now carries Type 271 radar in the dome at the base of her foremast. **Vancouver** served in the Western Escort Force and was broken up in 1946. (Drawing by Yogi Jenson, courtesy of Directorate of History and Heritage, DND)

Believing wrongly that the new weapons had turned the balance in his favour, Dönitz continued group operations in the North Atlantic with disastrous results. In early October, 15 U-boats attacked Convoy SC 143 and sank one escort and one merchant ship for the loss of three of their number. Operations in late October and early November were even worse – one merchant ship sunk against four submarines lost. By this time, there were even more aircraft above the Atlantic as Portugal had finally permitted the Allies to fly from the Azores Islands, thus closing the southern part of the Atlantic air gap. On 1 November, the daily log of the U-boat Headquarters complained: “We cannot stand these losses particularly with no successes to counterbalance them” and a week later Dönitz redeployed his remaining submarines from the mid-ocean to the eastern Atlantic.¹² His plan was to continue offensive operations as long as possible until the new and more effective Type XXI and XXIII submarines appeared the following year.

The magnitude of the German defeat in this last attempt to operate in strength in the North Atlantic is revealed in the statistics – between June and December 1943, the Allies lost 87 merchant ships, although 47 of these vessels were either sailing independently or stragglers from convoys. Of the 41,000 ships convoyed across the Atlantic during the same period, 40 were sunk, a loss rate of just under 1 in a 1000. Balanced against this was the loss during the same period of about 150 U-boats. Dönitz’s bid to return to the Atlantic had utterly failed.

“War is not won by valour alone:” Crisis in Ottawa, December 1943

Unfortunately, very few of the German submarine kills in the last half of 1943 were made by the RCN – HMC Ships *Snowberry* and *Calgary* joined a British vessel in sinking *Kapitänleutnant* Rolph Schauenburg’s Type IX boat, *U-536*, on 20 November – and that was the sole success. This did not



Angus L. Macdonald (1890-1954)

Angus L. Macdonald, shown here with Admiral G.C. Jones and (on the right) Admiral E.R. Mainguy, was the Minister of Defence for Naval Service from 1940-1945. Macdonald presided over the wartime expansion of the RCN but he did not take much interest in the navy until 1943 when its poor record of submarine victories caused the Liberal government political embarrassment. The result was an investigation into the backwardness of the escort fleet that ultimately led to the replacement of Admiral P.W. Nelles. (Courtesy Directorate of History and Heritage, DND, DHH-H115)

please Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s Liberal cabinet which had been under considerable criticism throughout 1943 for its ham-fisted management of the Canadian war effort. The Minister of the Navy, Angus L. Macdonald, who was not noted for having any real knowledge of naval warfare, was

embarrassed in front of his cabinet colleagues and wanted to know why the RCN, which was absorbing a considerable portion of that war -effort, was not more successful, and he began to suspect a cover-up by Nelles and his senior staff of the RCN's technical backwardness. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1943, Macdonald had collected information from various British and Canadian sources, some of it accurate and some not, about the state of the Canadian navy and its equipment. Since, in Macdonald's eyes, German submarines killed translated into Liberal votes gained, he began to look for a scapegoat and his sights became firmly fixed on Rear Admiral Percy Nelles, the Chief of the Naval Staff.

In October 1943, Macdonald sent his executive assistant, John Connolly, on a fact-finding mission to Britain. Connolly crossed the Atlantic in the corvette *Orillia* to meet with Horton and other British officers concerned with Canadian operations in the Atlantic and gained valuable information, particularly about the slow rate of modernization of the Flower Class corvettes. After his return to Ottawa, he submitted a long memorandum to Macdonald detailing the deficiencies in the RCN, which was prefaced with the remark that

My personal views cannot count in this business. I must admit they are prejudiced – because I know what men in Corvettes at sea have to face from the elements – because I have been told what they must face at the hands of a desperate, scientifically armed enemy – because I doubt the ability of some of our ships to deal with submarines.

A war is not won by valour alone, or by the keenness of the individual fighter.¹³

Macdonald used information provided by Connolly and from other sources to begin an exchange of increasingly acrimonious correspondence with Nelles that ultimately led to the admiral's dismissal as Chief of the Naval Staff in late December 1943. The firing was sweetened by the appointment of Nelles as Senior Canadian Flag Officer Overseas, the pretext being that the build-up of Canadian naval forces for the forthcoming invasion of the European mainland required such an appointment, but it was essentially an empty position as all Canadian warships operating in British waters were under the operational control of the Admiralty. Nelles had served as CNS for ten years, and although it was clear that he found it difficult to assimilate the highly technological nature of ASW, he had done an honest if rather plodding job of overseeing the expansion of the RCN since 1939.

His replacement was Rear Admiral George C. Jones, an intelligent and ambitious officer,

Rear Admiral G.C. Jones, RCN, (1895-1946), Second Wartime Commander of the RCN

A prewar regular, Jones served as COAC (Commanding Officer, Atlantic Coast) from 1940 to 1942 while his longtime rival, Commodore L.W. Murray, was commanding the Newfoundland Escort Force. He later moved to NSHQ and replaced Rear Admiral Percy Nelles as senior officer of the RCN in January 1944. An ambitious man, Jones excelled at staff work but did not have a good reputation as a shiphandler -- his nickname, "Jetty Jones," derived from the amount of time ships under his command spent in dock for repairs following minor collisions. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 200116)



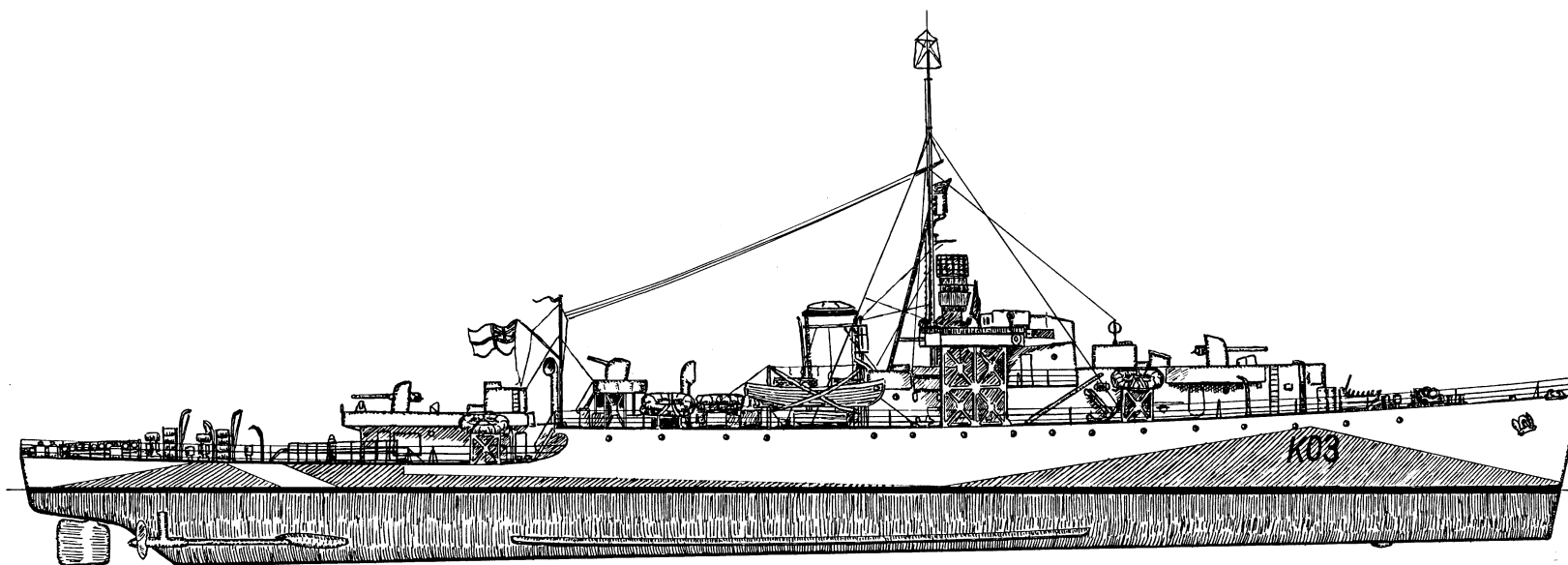
but not a man liked or respected by his peers – his service nickname was “Jetty Jones” because his record of minor collisions had kept the vessels he commanded in dockyards for long periods. In 1941-1942, Jones held the appointment of Commanding Officer, Atlantic Coast, at Halifax while Murray was commanding the Newfoundland Escort Force – the two officers had never particularly liked each other and Murray -suspected, with some reason, that Jones had not fully backed up the NEF during its very difficult first year of operations. This was the closest Jones ever came to the Battle of the Atlantic – essentially a desk officer and a political animal, he had transferred to NSHQ in 1942 and had adroitly manoeuvred himself into a position of being the best candidate to replace Nelles.

Jones was fortunate to take over command of the RCN just as that service, having suffered through awful growing pains brought on by unbridled expansion, was about to reach maturity. The autumn 1943 successes in the North Atlantic had convinced Allied naval staffs that the sea lanes were nearly secure and all three English-speaking navies cut back plans to build more ASW escorts. At the same time, the construction of merchant shipping reached unprecedented levels – in the previous 12 months, the United States alone had produced 1,949 merchantmen totalling 13 million tons of gross weight, which compared very well to the 420,000 tons that had been lost that year in Atlantic. By the end of 1943, 16 of the new frigates had joined the RCN and at long last Canadian corvettes were being taken in hand for modernization. The state of equipment on warships, particularly radar, ASDIC and “ahead throwing” weapons such as Hedgehog and Squid, still lagged -behind the RN and USN but it was beginning to catch up and there were plans to send a technical liaison team to Britain to keep abreast of the latest developments.

The RCN’s “Happy Time:” January to April 1944

On 1 January 1944, Dönitz had 436 U-boats in commission but only about 160 were available for deployment and a significant proportion of these were usually in transit to and from their area of operations. The remainder were new boats working up, or boats being refitted or repaired. Most were Type VII and Type IX craft but Dönitz still hoped that, by the spring of 1944, the first of the new submarines would be ready to thwart a possible invasion of Europe. In the meantime, he was forced to change his tactics. On Hitler’s orders, Dönitz reinforced the submarine flotillas in Norway operating against the Allied convoys to the Soviet Union and those in the Mediterranean, leaving him 121 boats available for the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. He sent most of the Atlantic boats to operate in two large groups in the eastern part of that ocean, but such was the strength of Allied airpower that they were forced to remain submerged during much of their time at sea and were unable to concentrate against convoys. Dönitz simply placed them in the best intercept positions on the major shipping lanes where they waited for the targets to come to them.

Their locations, of course, were known to the Allies through Ultra and the change in German tactics played right into the hands of their opponents, who were shifting emphasis from the defensive protection of shipping to the offensive task of killing German submarines. This was to be the main role of the hunter-killer groups formed in the three -Allied navies.



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River Class Frigate
HMCS DUNVER
November 1943

301 feet

HMCS Dunver, River Class Frigate

The frigate, or "twin-screw corvette," was an improved ASW vessel intended for mid-ocean escort that entered Canadian service in 1943. A total of 67 River Class frigates were commissioned by the RCN during the war. A vessel of this class displaced 1,445 tons, were 301 feet long, carried a complement of 141, had a top speed of 19 knots, twice the range of a Flower Class corvette, and was armed with two 4-inch guns, four 20 mm AA guns and the Hedgehog ASW weapon (mounted on the main deck ahead of the forward gun) as well as depth charges. **Dunver** is shown here with HF/DF antenna and Type 272 radar. The main armament of the first 15 Canadian River Class frigates was one 4-inch gun and one 12-pdr. gun. **Dunver** was commissioned in September 1943, assisted in the destruction of **U-484** in September 1944, was sold in 1946 and expended as part of a breakwater in British Columbia in 1948. (Drawing by L.B. Jenson, courtesy Directorate of History and Heritage. DND)

Although the RCN had enjoyed indifferent success in 1943, things changed in the first part of 1944 as, with increased experience, new ships and better equipment, the Canadian ASW forces enjoyed a very successful period. The first kill was registered by Escort Group 6, consisting of two British frigates and three Canadian corvettes, *Camrose*, *Edmundston* and *Snowberry*, which reinforced the escort of Convoys KMS 38 and OS 64 off Ireland in early 1944. On 8 January, the group obtained a surface radar contact which turned out to be *U-757*, a Type VII craft commanded by *Korvettenkapitän* Friedrich Deetz, and after the warships drove it under, they attacked it continuously for 12 hours until a depth charge launched by *Camrose* resulted in "a pool of oil, some bits of wreckage and a uniform cap" floating on the surface.¹⁴

The next success was gained by the frigates HMS *Nene* and HMCS *Waskesiu*, which picked up an ASDIC contact on 24 February while serving as part of the escort for an eastward-bound convoy. They commenced an attack which drove the contact deep and kept attacking until *Nene*, becoming impatient, broke off the hunt and returned to the convoy. *Waskesiu* remained and, soon after the British vessel left, obtained a firm contact which she blew to the surface with a depth charge attack. When the crew of Kapitänleutnant Heinz Rahe's Type VII boat, *U-257*, attempted to man their guns, they were cut down by a hail of fire from the Canadian ship and abandoned their sinking boat. *Waskesiu* recovered 19 survivors but Rahe was not among them as he had thrown his lifejacket to one of his crew and chose to go down with his command. *Waskesiu* became the first Canadian frigate to score a kill.



The Capture of U-744, March 1944

On the morning of 5 March 1944, British and Canadian escort vessels obtained an ASDIC contact that initiated the second-longest U-boat hunt of the war. After 32 hours and constant attacks, **U-744** surfaced directly ahead of HMCS **Chilliwack** which promptly brought it under heavy fire, hitting its conning tower repeatedly as is evident from this photograph. Boarding parties were sent to capture **U-744** but it was heavily damaged and sank. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 112996)

One of the most notable victories in this period was gained by C-2 Group while escorting Convoy HX 280. Late in the evening of 5 March 1944 HMCS *Gatineau* picked up a contact which was attacked by five British and Canadian warships. The submarine, *U-744*, a Type VII commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Heinz Blischke, dived deep and executed a series of turning manoeuvres which frustrated the attackers for nearly 15 hours. In mid-afternoon, new submarine contacts caused the larger warships to depart, leaving HMC Ships *St. Catharines*, *Chilliwack* and *Fennel* in place. They were later joined by HMS *Kenilworth Castle*, equipped with the new Squid mortar, which made a series of attacks on *U-744* until darkness fell on 6 March. At dawn the next day, two British destroyers arrived to carry out a further series of attacks that lasted for nearly three hours but,

frustrated with the lack of results, the British left the three Canadian vessels to simply wait out Blischke, who had not been able to surface to recharge his batteries.

At 1520 hours, the two corvettes were about to commence a new attack when *U-744* rose to the surface directly ahead of *Chilliwack*. The corvette opened up with everything it had, scoring several hits on the conning tower, killing Blischke and blowing one of the U-boat's AA guns off its mount. The German crew, who were in no condition to fight, indicated that they wished to surrender, and as the heavily damaged *U-744* lay wallowing on the surface, a race began between the three Canadian ships to launch boats and get aboard the prize. The sea was so rough that some of the boats capsized but eventually all the Canadians and 39



The Frigate HMCS St. John, 1944

In the last half of 1943, the first frigates began to enter Canadian service. Commissioned in December 1943, *Saint John* joined Escort Group 9 in April 1944 and shared with HMCS *Swansea* the destruction of *U-247* in September 1944 and, in February 1945, destroyed *U-309*. *Saint John* was sold for scrap in 1947. Note the HF/DF antenna on her foremast and the Type 271 radar in its Perspex dome. (Photograph by E.W. Dinsmore, courtesy National Archives of Canada, PA 134503)

German survivors were safe, although the U-boat was too badly damaged to be taken in tow and had to be sunk. The hunt for *U-744*, which had lasted 36 hours, was the second longest U-boat hunt of the war and a signal success for the ships involved.

The RCN's good fortune continued in March 1944. Four days after the destruction of *U-744*, another submarine was sunk while shadowing Convoy SC 154, which was strongly protected by C-1 Group and the Canadian Escort Group 9. HMCS *St. Laurent* had dropped astern of the convoy to assist a merchantman put out a fire when she picked up radio transmission which, with HF/DF, she was able to locate as having originated between her position and the convoy. These signals were from *Korvetten-kapitän* Werner Weber's Type IX boat, *U-845*, which had been sent on a



Triumphant -- the Escort Carrier USS Guadalcanal, 1944

In the spring of 1943, the introduction of escort carriers which provided air cover for convoys turned the scales decisively against the U-boats. One of the first such vessels to enter battle in the spring of 1943, and certainly one of the most successful, was the USS *Bogue* which sank, or helped to sink, 9 U-boats and two Japanese submarines during the war. On 27 May 1944, an American "hunter-killer" group centred around the escort carrier, USS *Guadalcanal*, attacked and captured U-505 as shown in this photograph. (USN photograph, author's collection)

long patrol into Canadian waters the previous month. Weber was an -aggressive officer. On 1 February he had run aground while trying to tail a freighter entering the narrow harbour of St. John's but had got his badly damaged boat off and encountered SC 154 during his return voyage.

In mid-afternoon on 10 March, *St. Laurent* and the corvette *Owen Sound* came upon Weber when he was running on the surface to recharge *U-845*'s batteries and drove him under. Over the next several hours, the two Canadian ships and the British destroyer *Forester* made a series of depth charge and Hedgehog attacks but Weber went deep, about 700 feet, and escaped damage. By early evening the three ships were about give up when *U-845* suddenly surfaced about 400 yards away, manned her guns and moved at high speed on the surface. Weber had been forced to take this dangerous action because of the need to recharge his batteries, and when the escorts recovered from their surprise, they immediately closed and smothered *U-845* with gunfire blowing away half its bridge and killing Weber and his first officer. *St. Laurent* alone expended 119 rounds of 4.7-inch ammunition, 1,440 rounds of 20mm ammunition and 1,400 rounds of small arms ammunition in this action. The German scuttled their craft and jumped in the water – 45 were rescued by the victors.

On 13 March, the frigate *Prince Rupert* assisted aircraft from the escort carrier USS *Bogue*, and two American destroyers to sink *U-575*, a Type VII boat commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Wolfgang Boehmer, which had sunk the British corvette *Asphodel* four days earlier. A British aircraft had spotted Boehmer on the surface and transmitted homing signals that had brought up the American task group and *Prince Rupert*, which just happened to be passing by. Badly damaged and forced to surface, *U-575* was finished off by gunfire from the warships and rockets from aircraft. Boehmer and 37 of his crew were rescued.

April 1944 was also a good month. Escort Group 9, consisting of the frigates HMC Ships *Matane*, *Stormont* and *Swansea*, and

the corvette *Owen Sound* joined the British escort carrier HMS *Biter* and three RN sloops to attack *Oberleutnant zur See* Helmut Dauter's *U-448* on 14 April. Driven to the surface, the Type VII was riddled with gunfire and sank but the Canadian ships picked up Dauter and 41 of his crew. Two weeks later, *Matane* and *Swansea* co-operated to kill *U-311*,* a Type VII boat commanded by *Kapitänleutnant* Joachim Zander, who was one of the few U-boat commanders during this period to actually sink a merchant vessel.

This action concluded the Canadian navy's string of successes. During a six-month period, they had sunk 6 of the 31 U-boats destroyed in the North Atlantic as opposed to 19 for the RN and 6 for the USN. This Canadian "Happy Time" was an indication that at long last the RCN had come of age as a professional fighting force.