

## **SOME REVISIONIST HISTORY IN THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

**Fraser M. McKee**

Most historians decry historical revision undertaken solely for political aims. The past Soviet tendency to do this has caused much derision, even domestically; under a new regime, this provides considerable scope even to their historians. In addition, many scholars respond negatively to the all too-common practice of second-guessing the commanders of the day. Yet some cases remain controversial, as shown by a recent reassessment of Admiral Lord Mountbatten's personal responsibility for the disastrous raid on Dieppe in 1942.<sup>1</sup> But because of the availability of huge quantities of former enemy documents, some naval history is rightly being rewritten to revise erroneous wartime judgements. This is certainly the case in assessing credits for the destruction in World War II of German U-Boats and Italian *sommergibili*.

The British Ministry of Defence's (MOD) Historical Section has been re-examining all the supposed submarine kills during the Second World War in the Atlantic and Mediterranean theatres, matching Allied records to the German and Italian. In the modern age, this process has been facilitated substantially by using computers to search for discrepancies in the recorded details from both sides. Special attention can then be directed to those kills in which there was no concrete proof of which submarine was sunk, or even whether a sinking occurred. In many cases prisoners were taken, or sufficient debris collected, to identify U-boats with precision, even given the possibility that a struggling submerged boat might eject debris to mislead its attackers. These cases are not in question.

Due to a the careful search being undertaken by R. M. Coppock of MOD's Foreign Documents Section,<sup>2</sup> there have thus far been sixty changes in assessments of U-boat and *sommergibili* kills, or about nine percent of the total sunk during the Atlantic battle. Four of these have brought new credit to RCN ships, bringing the Canadian total to a very respectable thirty-three submarines destroyed. In this revision, it is significant that three of the additional successes occurred between late 1940 and early 1943, a period in which it was being accused of inefficiency and even incompetence. Although these criticisms were partially justified, since the RCN had been stretched by expansion beyond its ability to train officers and crews to

***The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*, I, No. 4 (October 1991), 27-32.**

acceptable levels of efficiency as well as by severe shortages of modern anti-submarine equipment, this interpretation must now be modified in the light of these new-found successes.

These reassessments have been made possible by a careful study of U-Boat logbooks and Headquarters (BdU) message traffic, including at times even non-replies from subs. While the Admiralty may have known of a successful attack, and interceptions of enemy ULTRA radio traffic may have indicated that a U-Boat had gone missing in the general area,<sup>3</sup> and although the Admiralty Assessment Committee sometimes gave credit to the attackers, the two events were not necessarily related. A specific boat, in fact, may have gone missing several days earlier, or been heard from after the attack, yet this related message traffic may not have been picked up or decrypted at the time. Thus, not until the actual dates and times of attacks and communications with individual boats, derived from the detailed examination of BdU message registers, U-Boat logs and C.O.'s reports, were matched were many discrepancies found. Often this comparison simply led to one of two observations: either that it could not have been a certain U-boat sunk by a particular vessel, for the sub had been heard from at a later time, or in cases where a sinking was confirmed, uncertainty over which U-boat had been destroyed.

During most of the Battle of the Atlantic, the U-Boat groups and individual subs, including their Italian cohorts until 1943, were controlled very tightly by U-Boat Headquarters (BdU) in France. The operations section required commanders to report to Headquarters when they had successfully crossed the dangerous Bay of Biscay, when they reached their patrol area, and when they contacted a convoy or a ship. In turn they were told when and even in some cases how to attack. Once the attack had been made, the boat was to report results and was assigned its next task. In addition, rendezvous were ordered - and acknowledged - with other boats, homecoming surface raiders and supply U-Boats, the "milch cows." This system explains the wealth of signal traffic available.<sup>4</sup> An analysis of this information often enables the researcher to revise the kill assessments, although in some cases it poses even more conundrums.

A case which demonstrates the utility of this type of study concerns the loss of *U-69* on 17 February 1943, originally credited to HMS *Viscount*. Cross-checking revealed she had indeed probably sunk a U-Boat that day, but by studying probable boat locations and reports, it develops that she must have sunk *U-201*. Other evidence suggests that *U-69* was probably sunk by another destroyer, HMS *Fame*, which was originally credited with *U-201*'s kill. In this instance the credits were simply exchanged between the two destroyers.

The revisions made thus far do not lead to any major shifts in success among the various forces or weapons involved. But some systems have turned out to be more successful in destroying U-Boats than was thought at the time. Nine more destructions are now credited to British and Axis mines; of these, six fewer are now ascribed to RN ships and submarines, two fewer to the RAF, and one, *U-22*, has been removed from the "unknown" category. The "unknowns" have been altered almost as much, with six U-Boats removed to more definite kill assessments, and three added. One of the latter is an interesting case. While the sinking of *U-325* was originally classed as an unknown loss,<sup>5</sup> and then later credited to HMS *Havelock* and *Hesperus*,<sup>6</sup> it has now been determined that those ships sank *U-242*, while *U-325* is now just shown as "missing," with no clues as to her loss. Of the other two new "unknowns," HMS *Wild Goose* and *Ruthven Castle* are now known to have depth-charged the wreck of *U-247* and sunk *U-683*, while HMS *Vimy* attacked the Italian *Torelli*, which though damaged reached port

safely, and not the *Alessandro Malaspina*, which disappeared without a trace at about the same time.

Another very unique case is the loss of *U-132* on 3 November 1942. Originally credited to RAF aircraft from 120 Squadron south of Greenland on 5 November, in fact by that time she was already missing. On 3 November *U-132* torpedoed the ammunition ship SS *Hatimura*, which was then in convoy. The torpedo detonated the ship's cargo with an explosion so violent that the attacker herself was destroyed.

Submarine sinkings of other submarines, a not uncommon hazard, were quite often unprovable, since a torpedo hit usually sank the target with no chance for survivors, while the attacker was loathe to surface and expose itself to unknown hazards, either to prove its case or to attempt rescues. But the new analysis causes RN submarines to lose credit for three and the USN for one kill, at least in the north Atlantic theatre. One is now credited to mines; one, *Michèle Bianchi*, to the destroyer HMS *Tigris*; one to the RAF; and the final one, previously given to the USN, now goes to the RCN corvette *Prescott*. Many of these revisions simply involve exchanging one U-Boat number for another, as described above for *Viscount* and *Fame*. The attacks were in fact successful, but the wartime assessment mis-matched U-Boats, several of which may have gone missing about the same time as far as listeners at Bletchley Park<sup>7</sup> could determine. Thus RN vessels lose sixteen specific credits, but gain nineteen: two from the "unknown" category, five from the RAF/RCAF/RAAF; six involving simple exchanges of boat numbers; four between ships or groups; and two within the RAF. Not too surprisingly, the Air Forces operating in Coastal Command lose twelve credits to various sources, but in exchange acquire nine credits. Of the nine, one is simply an added credit for *U-242*, sunk by HMS *Hesperus* and *Havelock* in the Irish Sea in April 1945 with the assistance of 201 Squadron. The other eight are all gains from surface forces or submarines, although two are again exchanges of U-Boat numbers. The loss of only three net credits is surprising given the difficulty of confirming loss details in an aircraft attack, even if debris or survivors surfaced, if the latter were not rescued by conveniently present surface escorts. The USN loses three, one each to naval aircraft, a submarine, and a Coast Guard cutter. In return the escort destroyer USS *Nields* gains a credit from the RN corvette HMS *Vetch* which attacked but did not sink a submarine. Several of the sixty changes are very minor modifications to records only. *U-463* remains a credit to RAF 58 Squadron, but on 16 rather than 15 May 1943. *U-579* is credited to RAF 224 Squadron rather than "unknown RAF aircraft." *U-1008* is now to be shown as scuttled on 6 May as a result of an attack by aircraft of the RAF's 86 Squadron, rather than sunk directly by them. The credit, however, remains the same.

The added Canadian successes deserve, for our records, a bit more attention and detail. But their cases are typical of the revisions which have been made. Our first anti-submarine success, as it turns out, was the sinking in the open Atlantic west of Ireland of the Italian *Commandante Faa'Di Bruno* on 6 November 1940 by HMCS *Ottawa* (CDR E. Rollo Mainguy) and HMS *Harvester*. The Italian Navy at first ascribed her loss as "unknown,"<sup>8</sup> but in immediate postwar reassessments, Roskill credited her loss to HMS *Havelock* on 8 November. But for that to be correct, the boat would have to have been one hundred miles off track, and at any rate she had been missing for quite some time prior to that date. On 6 November the merchantman *Melrose Abbey* was attacked on the surface by a submarine's gunfire, called for help, and *Ottawa* and *Harvester* arrived shortly thereafter. They fired on the still surfaced U-Boat, *Ottawa* getting away five salvos before the target dived. After a short hunt, a target was located, and *Ottawa*

made four attacks with twenty-one depth charges and *Harvester* five attacks using sixty-two depth charges. Underwater explosions were heard, and some oil came to the surface, but no identifiable debris. And in those days of too few escorts, the attacking destroyers could not afford to wait for more certain material to surface. Their attack, it turns out, was almost exactly on the dead reckoning course to the *Faa' Di Bruno's* patrol area. But the hard-nosed Admiralty Assessment Committee at that time had felt that there was "insufficient evidence to credit a destruction." *Havelock's* later attacks, they judged, were the more likely, and at first she got the credit. But a search of postwar Italian records soon showed that *Havelock* had attacked the Italian *Marconi*, which although somewhat damaged reached home and recorded the exact time and date of that attack.

The next RCN success is credited to the corvette HMCS *Morden*, under the command of Lt. JJ. Hodgkinson, RCNR, on 1 September 1942. Originally U-756, which was assuredly lost, was credited to an unknown RAF aircraft; after the war this was changed to give credit to a USN Catalina aircraft of 73 Squadron. But records indicate that the Catalina attacked U-91, which reached base, although somewhat damaged. U-756 had left Kiel on 15 August 1942, and last signalled to BdU at 0015 on 1 September, when pursuing a convoy. She had already been counter-attacked, but with no damage. By the early morning of the third, BdU became concerned at her silence, but there was no response to their signals requesting a reply. At 0050 on the first *Morden*, following along astern of her convoy SC-97, picked up a submarine two miles away on her primitive radar, between the ship and the convoy. She at once altered course to ram, and the U-Boat dived. Hodgkinson made a skilful visual attack, followed by two deliberate and careful depth charge attacks on a target difficult to hold beneath the sea. When his target disappeared, satisfied that at least she was no longer a danger, he then had to leave and catch up to his convoy, drawing steadily away from the scene. He was convinced that it would have been difficult to imagine the U-Boat not being at least badly damaged. But the Committee again concluded that there was "insufficient evidence" to give credit for a kill. All other U-Boats operating against SC-97 got home safely and reported that U-91, U-92, and U-609 had been attacked by three Catalina aircraft, while HMS *Burnham* had attacked U-211 on 2 September. U-756 should have reported in after a successful attack early on the 1 September but did not. So *Morden* now collects the credit.

The next Canadian success was for HMCS *Prescott* (Lt-Commander Wilfred "Red" McIsaac, RCNR) against U-163. Her loss, learned from radio traffic, was at first credited to unknown causes. Then the USN claimed she was sunk by the submarine USS *Herring*. U-163 had been despatched to rendezvous with the incoming blockade-runner *Regensburg* on 20 March 1943, well west of Biscay. But by 15 March she had not transmitted the normal message that she had crossed the Bay of Biscay successfully and failed to respond to BdU signals. The USN based its claim on USS *Herring's* firing of two torpedoes at "a U-Boat" on the surface on 21 March. But this was one hundred miles back on U-163's intended track, and six days after she failed to respond to signals. Nor did she meet *Regensburg* on 20 March, which she would have reported. The Germans thought she might have been sunk by aircraft in the Bay, but had no basis for this except that it was not uncommon. It has subsequently been decided, in the face of no other evidence of U-Boats present, nor any reports by German or British submarines that they had been even fired upon, that *Herring* had fired at Spanish fishing trawlers working in the area, another fairly common error, given the restricted visibility from a submarine's low bridge. A search of attacks between 12 and 15 March revealed *Prescott* as the only unit likely to have

achieved a success. On 13 March, *Prescott* was screening five miles off the starboard bow of Convoy MKS-9 bound from Gibraltar to the U.K., the RCN's mid-ocean Groups having been withdrawn from that desperate struggle "for additional training." A few minutes before 10 p.m. she got a radar contact at 3400 yards, altered toward it, and the contact closed rapidly. At 1400 yards the U-Boat could be seen diving, her motors and diving sounds could be heard, and an attack was commenced. Then, as often happened, events got a bit hectic and confused. McIsaac saw what he thought was another U-Boat breaking the surface to starboard, broke off his attack on his first target and altered to attack this new menace, as it was closer to his convoy and thus a greater threat. But he had forgotten to cancel his first depth charge attack pattern, and five charges were dropped, likely well off the mark, but no doubt rattling the submarine's C.O. "Red" then fired two rounds of high explosive and one of starshell at this supposed second submarine, by now going away at speed on the surface. The U-Boat dived at seven hundred yards, contact was gained, and a nine-charge pattern fired. Then HMCS *Napanee* (Lt. S. Henderson, RCNR) joined the chase, a search was begun, and at 2319, an hour and thirty minutes after the first detection, the two got a dubious contact. *Prescott* made one nine-charge attack before all contact was lost. In fact research reveals there were no other U-Boats in the area and that the convoy track crossed the planned U-Boat route right at this location, and so *Prescott* and *Napanee* get the credit.

The final credit revised thus far goes to HMCS *Swansea* and *Matane* against *U-311* on 22 April 1944. This makes it *Swansea's* fourth credit, although her third in sequence. The loss of *U-311*, which left Brest on 9 March, was at first credited by the Allies to RCAF Sunderland 'A' of the 423 Squadron on 24 April. The U-Boat last contacted BdU on 2 April, but no more signals were expected unless she found a convoy to attack. By 10 May, however, when signals were not answered she was presumed lost, again due to air attack in the Bay. Sunderland 'A' had indeed executed a very good depth charge attack on the 24th on a surfaced U-Boat, raining several depth charges right across it before the boat disappeared. But recent checking reveals this was *U-672* which, although extensively damaged, reached home and reported the attack in her patrol report. Available records revealed only four other possible causes of loss in *U-311's* operating area. The first was Liberator 'M' of the RAF's 120 Squadron on the 24th, but as it transpired she also had attacked the luckless *U-672*. HMS *Flint Castle*, *Hesperus* and *Ruthven Castle* made two attacks on 27 April, but it was adjudged very doubtful that these were on *U-311* and at any rate were rather late after she disappeared. Then there was the attack on 22 April by the RCN frigates *Swansea* and *Matane*. On the 22nd, ninety-five miles to the west of the later Sunderland attack, CDR A.F.C. Layard, DSO, RN, commanding the Canadian EG-9 Group in *Matane* and acting as an additional convoy support group, had taken in a signal from a Leigh-light Wellington patrol aircraft<sup>9</sup> that she had a good surface radar contact early that morning. By 1900 CDR Layard had *Matane* and *Swansea* (A/CDR C.A. King, DSO, DSC, RCNR) in the middle of the area reported, and at 2000 the two got a firm submarine contact. Two other ships, *Stormont* and the corvette *Owen Sound*, were ordered to leave the convoy to its close escort and assist. A deliberate hedgehog attack<sup>10</sup> at seven knots was started by *Matane*, when the swirl of a periscope was seen only two hundred yards on her starboard bow. Too close for a good hedgehog attack, and due to the vulnerability of the oncoming other two ships, a five-charge depth charge pattern was dropped at once by *Matane*, too deep and not very accurate, as CDR Layard later wrote. *Swansea* then reduced speed, and carried out a deliberate full-pattern attack. Asdic conditions shortly became very bad, contact was lost, and although a

carefully coordinated search was carried out and the Group remained on the scene until dawn (one of the advantages of the plethora of escort warships available by the spring of 1944), no further contact was gained. But a submarine was definitely present, and to no other attack could *U-311's* loss be ascribed.

It may be that a few more changes in U-Boat kills will arise as a result of further research. But the results so far, carefully documented and reasoned, have already caused us to make several crucial revisions in our interpretation of the war against the U-boats during the Second World War.

\* Fraser M. McKee is a specialist in naval history living in Markdale, Ontario.

1. Brian Loring Villa, *Unauthorized Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid* (Toronto, 1989).

2. Much of the material for this article is derived from correspondence with R.M. Coppock of MOD's Foreign Documents Section, who provided information on the changes. RCN details were supplemented by records held by the Directorate of History at National Defence Headquarters, courtesy of Dr. W A B .Douglas.

3. ULTRA was the code name given to decrypted messages that arose from listening to German coded radio traffic, handled at a house near London called Bletchley Park, where it was decoded, translated into English, sometimes analyzed, and forwarded under very strict secrecy to Commands that required it for tactical use. See John Winton, *Ultra At Sea* (New York, 1988).

4. J.P.M. Showell, *U-Boat Command and The Battle of the Atlantic* (St. Catharines, Ontario, 1989). This is an excellent description of BdU's command operations and problems.

5. S.W. Roskill, *The War At Sea* (4 vols., London, 1954-1961). This is the source for all "original" acridations of U-Boat and *sommergibili* losses. Its tables and appendices are particularly useful for their time. His source was the original Admiralty Assessment Committee records.

6. H.T.Lenton, *German Submarines* (2 vols., London 1965). These volumes contain useful data on every U-Boat, some Italian *sommergibili*, and a few cases of updated loss assessments.

7. See Winton, *Ultra at Sea*.

8. M. Bertini and A. Donato, / *Sommergibili Italiani* (Rome, 1968). This is a very useful reference for all Italian submarine operations.

9. Leigh-light Wellingtons were Coastal Command bombers that carried under the leading edge of one wing a searchlight with a brilliant beam that looked forward and down in order to illuminate any radar-detected targets on the surface at night.

10. "Hedgehog" was a fore-castle-mounted anti-submarine weapon that fired twenty-four bomb-like projectiles, which only exploded on contact, two hundred yards ahead of the attacking ship while she was still in close proximity to her underwater target.