

## The Battle for Convoy HG-75, 22-29 October 1941

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In the autumn of 1941 Nazi Germany was victorious. All of continental Europe, from the Iberian Peninsula to the gates of Moscow, with the exception of Sweden and Switzerland, was under German control. The United States was neutral and Russia, reeling under the impact of German invasion, appeared on the verge of defeat while Britain, aided by its Empire and Commonwealth, fought a desperate battle for existence. Key to the continued survival of Britain was the ability, in the face of attack by German U-boats, to sail convoys of merchant ships to and from the island kingdom. The German navy in the autumn of 1941 had every reason to believe that Britain could be defeated by attacking the island's seaborne supply lines with U-boats. In September of 1941, with about eighty operational U-boats, the Germans sank fifty-three British and Allied merchant ships amounting to 202,820 tons, while in the period from 1 January to 31 September 1941 the British had managed to sink only thirty-one Axis U-boats.' The battle with the U-boats was a conflict the British had to win, for without a constant flow of supplies, transported by merchant ships, Britain would have been forced to surrender, for the civilian population would have starved and all industry would have ground to a halt. Britain's continued survival thus depended on the Royal Navy's ability to escort merchant ships to and from British ports.'

To combat U-boat attacks on merchant shipping the British had adopted a strategy of convoys.' These had been employed by the British in the great naval wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as in World War I. A convoy is a group of ships sailing under armed escort. The concept is relatively simple. For example, if there are fifty merchant ships sailing independently, scattered at random across the sea, the enemy is given fifty undefended points to attack. But if the fifty merchant ships are grouped together into a convoy under armed escort, the enemy has only one defended point to attack. That is, to attack and sink the ships within a convoy the attacker must first locate the group in the vastness of the sea and then either avoid or overcome the armed escort.' In the autumn of 1941 the validity of the British strategy of convoys was tested when the RN fought a series of convoy battles against German U-boats in defence of merchant shipping. One of these was fought over Convoy HG-75.

HG-75, comprising eighteen merchant ships and an escort of RN warships sailed for Britain from Gibraltar on 22 October 1941. The Germans, most likely from agents in Algeciras and Ceuta, had foreknowledge of its impending departure and had stationed a

group of six U-boats, code named *Breslau*, in the westward approaches of the Straits of Gibraltar. Three U-boats (*U-206*, *U-563* and *U-564*) were off of Cape Trafalgar and the remainder (*U-71*, *U-83* and *U-204*) were stationed off Cape Spartal.<sup>5</sup> The Germans intended to attack the British convoy just after it had passed Tarifa in order to "take full advantage of the carelessness in the convoy during the first hours and the fact that it would not be properly organized."<sup>6</sup> The British knew of the deployment of the U-boats in the western approaches to the Straits, for since 1 August 1941 they had been systematically decoding and reading the radio messages between the BdU (*Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote*) and the U-boats at sea.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the British intercepted and then on 16 and 19 October decoded and read orders from the BdU for the deployment of the six *Breslau* U-boats.<sup>8</sup> It was probably also appreciated by the British that the Italian submarines *Archimede*, *Galileo Ferraris*, and *Marconi* were further out in the Atlantic to the west of the German U-boats.<sup>9</sup> But a lack of sea room in the western approaches precluded evasive routing and it was clear to the British that they would have to fight to get FIG-75 into the Atlantic.

In the days before HG-75's departure from Gibraltar, two U-boats from the *Breslau* group carried out attacks on British vessels west of Gibraltar, sinking the tanker *Inverlee* and the freighter *Baron Kelvin*. The sailing of HG-75 was then postponed while the British conducted anti-U-boat sweeps to try to clear the U-boats from the western approaches. At 1100 on 17 October, the destroyers *Cossack*, *Legion* and *Vidette* sailed from Gibraltar to conduct anti-U-boat sweeps along the Spanish coast as far west as Cape St. Vincent.<sup>10</sup> Just before midnight on 17 October eight warships of the 37th Escort Group also departed from Gibraltar to search for U-boats.<sup>11</sup> In the early hours of 18 October, HMS *Carnation* sighted and attacked a U-boat; the next day, HMS *Mallow*, HMS *Rochester* and HMS *Carnation* discovered, attacked, and sank *U-204* off Cape Spartal. Anti-U-boat sweeps in the western approaches continued until 1800 on 20 October, when the British warships returned to Gibraltar. At 0710 on 20 October *U-83* had informed the BdU that it had withdrawn to the westward after being "located by A/S Vessel;" at 2218 the BdU directed the *Breslau* U-boats "In Case of A/S Hunt [to] Move Away Westwards As Far As Necessary."<sup>12</sup>

At 1430 on 22 October the warships of the 37th Escort Group sailed ahead of HG-75 to hunt for U-boats. At 1600 the merchant ships, screened by the destroyers *Cossack*, *Legion* and *Vidette*, departed from Gibraltar. Before the convoy even sailed, German intelligence reported the time it would leave and that it could be expected to pass Traifa about 1945 and be off Cape Spartal about 2025. As a result of this information the BdU informed the *Breslau* U-boats at 1624 that HG-75 was sailing. A little over an hour and one-half later the BdU directed that when a U-boat first sighted the convoy it was to report the contact "In Order To Bring The Other Boats Up" before attacking. At 2348 *U-71* reported sighting HG-75.<sup>13</sup>

As HG-75 preceded westward at 2250, HMS *Vidette*, stationed about four miles off the convoy's port bow, obtained a radar contact at a range of 7000 yards. The destroyer increased speed to twenty-four knots. At a range of 3000 yards a U-boat was sighted and subsequently fired at. The U-boat submerged and *Vidette* attacked with depth charges. But owing to confusion over the sounding of action stations, only four depth charges, instead of a full pattern of fourteen, were dropped at a point slightly ahead of where the enemy craft had disappeared under the surface. The British destroyer then undertook an unsuccessful

twenty-minute sonar search before returning to its station. At 2315 HG-75 altered course from 254 degrees to 262 degrees. At 0400 on 23 October HMS *Rochester* intercepted a radio transmission on its HF/DF (high-frequency direction finder). While no clear bearing could be obtained, it probably came from *U-564*. The British thought that the radio transmission was from a U-boat making a sighting report and that it probably was the one which HMS *Vidette* had attacked. Just before dawn on 23 October, HMS *Cossack* and HMS *Lamberton* swept some six miles astern of HG-75, but nothing was found and they returned to their stations.<sup>14</sup>

Besides U-boats, the Germans intended that HG-75 would also be shadowed by aircraft. On 23 October the U-boats were informed by the BdU that German aircraft would locate and shadow the convoy from 1200 on 23 October. Standard operating procedure called for the aircraft to transmit radio beacons to permit the U-boats to locate the convoy with a direction finder. In theory the scheme had merit, but coordination between the German navy and air force was almost non-existent and for reasons which are not wholly clear, no German aircraft appeared over HG-75 on 23 October. While the aircraft did not assist the U-boats that day, a number of British aircraft based in Gibraltar had been escorting the convoy during daylight hours. They were having an effect. For example, at 0726 *U-206* reported that it had been "Kept Under Water By Aircraft." Nevertheless, the *Breslau* U-boats were able to maintain contact with the convoy. At 1358 *U-71* reported sighting a British vessel and at 2010 *U-564* reported that the convoy was steering a "Southwesterly Course." At 2148 the BdU radioed the U-boats that if there was no contact, it should be assumed that HG-75 was proceeding at a speed of up to eight knots and that searches should be undertaken on an arc of between 260 and 320 degrees from its last estimated position.<sup>15</sup>

At 2306 HMS *Carnation*, while on station off the starboard bow of HG-75, sighted a U-boat on the surface at a range of 1000 yards. The British corvette turned towards the enemy vessel and increased speed to ram it. At 2308 the U-boat submerged and *Carnation* attacked unsuccessfully with five depth charges set to explode at fifty feet. The warship then dropped a calcium flare to mark the position and a sonar hunt for the U-boat was begun. HMS *Bluebell*, which joined the hunt, unsuccessfully attacked the suspected position of the U-boat with five depth charges. But the search for the submarine was soon abandoned and both corvettes returned to their positions in the screen. At 2337 *U-563* torpedoed HMS *Cossack*, a destroyer that was astern of the port wing of the convoy. When HMS *Legion* closed with *Cossack* about fifteen minutes after the attack, "all before her bridge had been apparently blown off, and her bridge was burning fiercely. Short range ammunition was exploding. She was lying head to the wind on and even keel. Several Carley floats were sighted with the occupants singing." *Carnation* picked up forty-nine survivors while other warships mounted a hasty hunt for the U-boat. *Bluebell* attacked "a doubtful contact" and *Legion* obtained a radar contact, which at first was believed to be a U-boat but turned out to be FFS *Commandant Dragou*. *U-563* escaped and HG-75 soon left the scene. It was decided to attempt to salvage *Cossack* and *Carnation* and *Lamberton* were left to guard the damaged destroyer. Yet even though *Cossack* was taken under tow by a tug from Gibraltar, efforts to save the vessel failed and it eventually sank at 1043 on 27 October.<sup>16</sup>

At 0544 on 24 October HMS *Lamberton*, astern of HG-75, heard a "strong hydrophone effect" moving from starboard to port. At first it thought this was a U-boat and

the warship gave chase, before realizing it was pursuing a torpedo when a nearby ship was hit. Beginning at 0548 *U-564* torpedoed three merchantmen in rapid succession. *Carsbreck* sank within a minute, *Ariosto* went down in five minutes, while *Alhama* remained afloat for several minutes longer before sinking. With the explosion of the first torpedo *Lamberton*, along with the other escorts, began firing starshells and snowflakes (extremely bright white flares) and dropped "depth charges independently at intervals." By the time that *Lamberton* expended all its starshells, the glow could be seen for fifty miles. After this incident the merchant ship *Pacific*, later joined by HMS *Heliotrope* and HMS *Campion*, arrived at the scene and picked up a number of survivors. *U-564* escaped and reported to the BdU that it had expended all its torpedoes while hitting five ships."

After *U-564's* attack the U-boats apparently lost contact with the convoy. But at 0915 on 24 October two German FW-200 aircraft appeared over HG-75. Several hours later British aircraft also arrived to supply air cover. At 1218 *U-83* reported that both British and German aircraft were in the vicinity. At 1300 *U-564* concluded from bearings taken from radio transmissions and from its "Own Observations" that HG-75 was "In Square 8416, Course 325 Degrees [Speed] 7 Knots." Nevertheless, the BdU judged that "the D/F bearings which were reported were hardly any use." While the German aircraft were supposed to guide U-boats to the convoy, the British planes were to drive the submarines away. At 1540 a British Catalina aircraft sighted a U-boat, probably *U-83*, about twelve miles north of HG-75. The U-boat was attacked twice by the aircraft and HMS *Lamberton* was detached from the screen to hunt for the enemy vessel. Arriving at the scene of the aircraft attack at 1745, *Lamberton* had by 1808 obtained a sonar contact. Several depth-charge attacks were carried out without result, and at 2000 the British destroyer departed to rejoin HG-75.<sup>18</sup>

During the afternoon of 24 October the U-boats again lost contact with the convoy. The BdU at 2242 informed the U-boats that several Italian submarines were also in the vicinity and would also operate against the HG-75. At the same time, the U-boats were informed that German aircraft would locate and shadow the convoy on 25 October and that the subs should search for it on an arc of 325 degrees to 295 degrees from the position of the convoy as calculated by *U-564* at 1300.<sup>19</sup>

There were no contacts between FIG-75 and the U-boats during the night of 24 October. At 0820 on 25 October, HMS *Duncan* joined the escort. Before joining the convoy, this destroyer had sailed from Gibraltar with a surgeon and medical supplies for the survivors of HMS *Cossack*. During the night of 24 October it was concluded that because HMS *Lamberton* did not have enough fuel to reach Britain, it would be better to detach it to Ponta Delgada in the Azores to refuel and at a later date to rejoin the convoy. The next morning at 0817 *Lamberton* departed for the Azores. At 1041, when the ship was south of HG-75, a Catalina aircraft from Gibraltar sighted a U-boat on the surface to the northwest of the convoy.<sup>20</sup>

The British aircraft attacked the U-boat with two depth charges and machine gunfire. Unfortunately the depth charges, which landed within thirty and ten yards of the vessel, failed to explode. The U-boat, taken by surprise, did not submerge but rather engaged the aircraft with gunfire. The Catalina circled and radioed HG-75's escort about the U-boat. But the U-boat's position relative to the convoy was omitted, and as a result HMS *Duncan* was sent in the wrong direction. At 1107 HMS *Lamberton*, thirty miles ahead

of the convoy and south of the surfaced U-boat, sighted to the north a second British Catalina aircraft as well as two German FW-200s. *Lamberton* turned north towards the three aircraft. One of the British aircraft (it is not clear which one) radioed that it was over a surfaced U-boat. At 1135 *Lamberton* sighted the Catalina circling over the U-boat. At 1140 this aircraft signalled the destroyer "Full speed" and five minutes later signalled that it was circling a surfaced U-boat steering at 330 degrees. At about this time the destroyer sighted smoke on the horizon and realized that a U-boat was attempting to escape on surface. *Lamberton* came to full speed and soon sighted the U-boat. At 1200, at a range of 900 yards, the destroyer opened fire with "A" gun. The U-boat then turned ninety degrees to starboard and engaged the destroyer with a deck gun. Even though the U-boat obtained a single hit on *Lamberton*'s forecastle, the contest was unequal; at 1223 the U-boat disappeared under the surface 6300 yards from the destroyer.<sup>21</sup>

Upon reaching the position where the U-boat had disappeared, HMS *Lamberton* conducted a sonar search, believing it was possible that the U-boat had submerged. But a number of survivors in the water soon convinced *Lamberton*'s commander that in fact the sub had sunk. The British destroyer fished forty-four Italians out of the water. The U-boat was not German, but rather the Italian submarine *Galileo Ferraris*, whose commander later told the British that knowing that German aircraft would be in the vicinity, he had been surprised by the British Catalina, which he mistook for a German FW-200. The Italian did not realize his mistake until the British plane attacked with depth charges and machine gunfire. While no damage was done by the former, which failed to explode, machine gun bullets pierced the submarine's saddle tanks, causing an oil leak. When the Italians saw *Lamberton* approaching, they decided to attempt to escape on the surface, believing that if they submerged the oil leak would give away their position. Moreover, the Italian also thought that the approaching British warship was not a destroyer but a corvette, which he could outrun on the surface. When he realized his mistake, the commander of *Galileo Ferraris* opened fire with his deck gun, but upon finding that he was confronted with superior firepower, he gave the order to scuttle the submarine.<sup>22</sup>

The German U-boats throughout most of 25 October were not in contact with HG-75. From bearings transmitted by FW-200 aircraft, the BdU concluded that the convoy was steering a more southerly course than had been estimated and that the U-boats were to the north of the British. At 1458 the *Breslau* U-boats were informed that "According To Air Report and Bearings The Convoy at 1500 Was in Square 7150. Course West To Northwest." At 2028 the BdU directed the U-boats to search in an arc, from the position signalled to them at 1458, of 280 to 330 degrees, assuming that the convoy was steaming at a speed of between five and 7.5 knots. At 2322 *U-83* sighted HG-75 and twenty-one minutes later the U-boat began to transmit radio beacons to attract other U-boats on to the convoy. At 2359 the U-boats were ordered by the BdU "To Operate on Report From *U-83*."<sup>23</sup>

At 0300 on 26 October *U-83* torpedoed the freighter *Ariguani*.<sup>24</sup> Two torpedoes hit the ship aft and it stopped dead in the water, quickly falling astern of HG-75. *Ariguani* did not sink, but was considered unmanageable and abandoned. Its crew was picked up by HMS *Campion* and FFS *Commandant Dragou*. Later the master of *Ariguani* and a small party returned to the damaged vessel, and after many vicissitudes it was towed into Gibraltar on 2 November.<sup>25</sup>

After *Ariguani* was torpedoed, HMS *Heliotrope* conducted a search astern of HG-75 for the U-boat that had carried out the attack. At 0512, when steaming to rejoin the convoy, *Heliotrope* sighted a U-boat, probably *U-83*, at a range of 1000 yards. As the British corvette turned towards the U-boat, it submerged. Sonar contact was obtained at a range of 400 yards and at 0515, as *Heliotrope* passed over the position where the U-boat had disappeared, the order was given to drop five depth charges. This attack, however, miscarried due to a failure to set the fuses on the depth charges. *Heliotrope* quickly regained sonar contact and attacked a second time at 0519, dropping nine depth charges. The port depth-charge trap jammed during the attack and a tenth depth charge was not dropped. One minute after the nine depth charges exploded, "another explosion was heard, quite different from the noise made by the depth charges." *Heliotrope* then conducted another sonar search, and shortly after 0553 a contact was obtained, which was attacked with seven more depth charges. But at 0604 the operation was halted when the corvette's engine developed a defect. After laying dead in the water until 0630, *Heliotrope* was ordered to close with *Ariguani*, which was done at a speed of only five knots."

After the torpedoing of *Ariguani*, HG-75's escort was reorganized. HMS *Vidette*, *Campion* and *Heliotrope*, as well as FFS *Commandant Dragou*, were detached and sent to Gibraltar, while HMS *Legion* went to Ponta Delgada to refuel. The escort was now reduced to HMS *Rochester*, *Bluebell*, *Duncan*, *Mallow*, and FFS *La Malouine*. At 1630 on 26 October, two German FW-200s appeared over the convoy and remained in the vicinity until 1710. Though there were no attacks during the afternoon, it was apparent to the British that a number of U-boats were nearby because *Rochester's* HF/DF intercepted five radio transmissions, probably from *U-564*. The British, however, could not obtain bearings on these transmissions and believed that they were coming from points to the northeast and southwest of the convoy. In an attempt to evade the U-boats, HG-75 made several course alterations during the evening of 26 October.'

The U-boats remained in contact with HG-75 throughout the evening. At 1744, for example, *U-564* signalled that the position of the convoy was "Square CF 6419. Speed 6 Knots. Course 290 Degrees." While the BdU intended to reinforce the *Breslau* group with *U-432*, because of a lack of fuel *U-71* and *U-83* were forced to return to base. At 2237 *U-564* reported to the BdU that the convoy was in "Square 6171. Enemy Steering Northerly Course. 5 Knots."Zs

HMS *Bluebell*, on the starboard beam of HG-75, at 0218 on 27 October obtained a sonar contact. The corvette turned towards the target and at 0222 began a depth-charge attack. The range had to be estimated because the sonar's recorder was discovered to be inoperable and then the starboard throwers did not fire "owing to a failure of the buzzer." At the conclusion of the attack, *Bluebell* conducted a sonar search, but the contact could not be regained, and at 0240 the corvette returned to station. Several hours later, off the convoy's port side, HMS *Duncan* at 0458 sighted a U-boat at a range of 1000 yards. Not being fitted with a very high frequency radio telephone, the contact was reported by short wave radio and the firing of two rockets, after which *Duncan* turned and attempted to ram the U-boat. Because of this manoeuvre the order was given to set the destroyer's depth charges on safe. But before *Duncan* could ram the U-boat, the enemy vessel submerged at a range of 100 yards. Just as *Duncan* was about to pass over the estimated position of the

U-boat, the depth charges were ordered to be brought to ready. As *Duncan* passed over the estimated position, the order to fire was given. This attack miscarried because the throwers were not ready to operate and the trap failed to function. Although *Duncan* had run out and turned in order to obtain sonar contact, and then had run in to attack a second time, the contact turned out to be *Rochester*. Avoiding *Rochester* and nearly colliding with a merchant ship, *Duncan* passed through the main body of the convoy to the rear of the formation, before sweeping up its port side. Contact with the U-boat was not regained. At 0813, after returning to its station, *Duncan* sighted another U-boat at a range of 3500 yards. The destroyer turned towards the enemy vessel, causing it to submerge immediately. Nevertheless, at a range of 1500 yards a sonar contact was obtained and at 0820 an attack was carried out, but the port thrower failed to fire. Sonar contact was regained and at 0830 another attack was mounted with a full pattern of depth charges. At 0838 *Duncan* conducted a third attack, but with only three depth charges as a "full pattern was not ready." A fourth attack was undertaken at 0911. After this attack, however, sonar contact was lost and *Duncan*, in company with HMS *Mallow*, began a sonar search for the U-boat. At 0938 *Mallow* obtained one more sonar contact and attacked. This was followed by a depth-charge attack by *Duncan* at 0941. Unfortunately, after this attack contact was again lost. At 1000 *Mallow* was ordered to rejoin the convoy leaving *Duncan* to continue to search for the U-boat without result until 1200, when it set course to rejoin HG-75.<sup>29</sup>

Although no attacks were mounted against the convoy on 27 October, several U-boats remained in contact throughout the day. For instance, *U-564* reported at 1616 that the convoy was in "Square 2884...Course 320 Degrees. 6.5 Knots." During the afternoon HMS *Rochester* obtained several HF/DF fixes on U-boat radio transmissions. A Catalina aircraft, which was providing air cover, was dispatched at the request of the senior officer of the escort but apparently without result. But unknown to the British, the aircraft was sighted by *U-563*, which was forced to submerge.<sup>30</sup>

At 0410 on 28 October, *U-432*, which had just joined the *Breslau* group, torpedoed the freighter *Ulea*, which was the rear vessel in the port-wing column. The freighter had just sighted a U-boat, which it was attempting to ram when hit by the torpedo. *Ulea* sank in three minutes. The nearest escort, FFS *La Malouine*, saw the explosion and attempted a sonar search, but its "Asdic Sound-Receiver Key broke down" and the hunt had to be abandoned. Closing with the wreckage of *Ulea*, *La Malouine* picked up four survivors. Another five men were rescued by HMS *Bluebell*, which also conducted an unsuccessful hunt for the U-boat.<sup>31</sup>

At 1330 HMS *Duncan* undertook a sweep back along the track of the convoy searching for a U-boat. HF/DF bearings obtained by HMS *Rochester* indicated that a U-boat for some time had been shadowing the convoy. At 1332 *Duncan* sighted a U-boat at a range of about five miles. The destroyer increased speed to twenty-six knots and steamed towards the vessel, which promptly submerged. On reaching the position where the U-boat had disappeared, *Duncan* began to conduct a sonar search. A contact was quickly obtained and a depth-charge attack was carried out. As a second attack was being mounted, *Duncan's* sonar broke down and the depth charges were dropped by "eye and assumption." After its sonar was repaired *Duncan* was joined by HMS *Lamberton*, which had just returned to HG-75 after refuelling in the Azores, and the two conducted another sonar search, but when

neither obtained a contact, the hunt was abandoned at 1800. As the two destroyers were steaming to rejoin the convoy, HMS *Rochester* obtained a HF/DF bearing on a U-boat radio transmission coming from off the port beam. *Duncan* and *Lamberton* were directed by radio to hunt for the suspected U-boat, but the search did not result in a contact and the two warships rejoined HG-75 shortly before midnight on 28 October.<sup>32</sup>

The battle for convoy HG-75 ended in the early hours of 29 October. On that day two FW-200s appeared over the convoy and a number of HF/DF bearings on U-boat radio transmissions were obtained by HMS *Rochester*.<sup>36</sup> But the U-boats had shot their bolts. Only two – *U-432* and *U-563* – remained in contact with the convoy and both had expended all their torpedoes. At 0034 on 29 October the BdU ended the operation and directed the two remaining subs to return to base.<sup>33</sup>

In the final analysis communications intelligence in the form of decoded enemy radio messages did not greatly effect the outcome of the battle. The decoding of enemy radio messages for the most part assisted the Germans in intercepting convoys and enabled British convoys to avoid groups of U-boats. The Germans learned of the sailing of HG-75 from agents in and around Gibraltar, while the British gained knowledge of the deployment of the *Breslau* group from both communications intelligence and reports of sinking and attacks by U-boats. But foreknowledge had little effect for the British because lack of sea room in the western approaches to Gibraltar precluded the evasive routing of the convoy and made contact between HG-75 and the U-boats all but inevitable. On the one hand, when contact had been established, intelligence played no part in the conduct of the battle. On the other hand, tactical communications intelligence in the form of bearings on U-boat radio transmissions in the vicinity of HG-75, obtained by HMS *Rochester's* HF/DF set, might have played a decisive role in the British defence of the convoy.<sup>34</sup> But, shipboard HF/DF was a device the Allies had just introduced and which had not yet achieved its later tactical importance in convoy battles.

The Germans believed that the battle was an important victory. The BdU noted in that the U-boats had "shadowed the convoy tenaciously in dogged pursuit." What the Germans missed was that while the U-boats were capable of shadowing HG-75 with the assistance of reconnaissance aircraft, they had difficulty in closing with it or in mounting successful attacks. On the basis of radio reports, the BdU concluded that the U-boats had sunk six merchantmen and a destroyer, while damaging a further eight ships. In fact, the U-boats had sunk five merchant ships and a destroyer (*Carsbreck*, *Ariosto*, *Alhama*, *Ariguani*, *Ulea*, and HMS *Cossack*). The overestimation was a result of U-boats reporting as successful unobserved detonations of torpedoes at the ends of their runs.<sup>35</sup> In the course of operations against HG-75, the Germans lost *U-204* while the Italian submarine *Galileo Ferraris* was also destroyed, although the latter was not mentioned in the BdU war diary. In fact the BdU ignored the Italians, except to warn the *Breslau* group of their presence.

The British in this battle were less than successful in defending the convoy. The escort was very powerful and for 1941 extremely well equipped. Indeed, the British employed most of the devices and equipment – aircraft, radar, sonar, HF/DF – which would later be used with devastating effect against U-boats in the great convoy battles of 1943.<sup>36</sup> But in this battle they were hampered by minor equipment failures and a tactical inability to coordinate ships and aircraft to prevent U-boats from approaching and attacking the



convoy. Further, the British forces were singly incapable of mounting attacks on U-boats which were not marred by equipment failures or human error. The sources of these problems were clearly seen by a number of British officers, including the Vice Admiral Commanding North Atlantic who after studying the after action reports of the escorts, noted that "the number of U-boats which should have been 'gifts' and yet escaped is most disconcerting: in the main this is probably due to a lack of A/S practice and inexperienced personnel."<sup>37</sup>

The loss of *U-204* and *Galileo Ferraris*, in exchange for sinking five merchant ships and a destroyer, does not in hindsight appear to constitute a great German victory. But more important, what was not seen at the time by most of the British and nearly all the Germans was that the strategy of convoys, given escorts with proper weapons and training, could not be defeated by the Germans with their existing weapons and tactics. By 1941 the U-boat – not a true underwater craft – was a limited weapon system with limited effectiveness in convoy battles and which, with proper doctrine and training, could be defeated by the escorts. In the event, the British, with their allies, would in the coming months institute intensive training programmes and thus develop the doctrine required to defeat the U-boats decisively in convoy battles. This, however, was yet to come.

## NOTES

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1. S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945* (8 vols., London, 1954-1961), 1, 599-601 and 616.

2. The most recent surveys of the Battle of the Atlantic are Dan van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign: World War II's Great Struggle at Sea* (New York, 1988), John Terraine, *The U-Boat Wars, 1916-1945* (New York, 1989), and Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War: The Hunters, 1939-1942* (New York, 1996).

3. Great Britain, Admiralty, Historical Section, *The Defeat of the Enemy Attack on Shipping, 1939-1945* (London, 1957).

4. The world's leading authority on convoys is W.D. Waters. The bulk of his writings on the subject are in the Waters Papers in the National Maritime Museum.

5. Great Britain, Public Record Office, Admiralty (ADM) 199/2099, f. 364A; and F.H. Hinsley, et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations* (4 vols., London, 1979-1990), II, 719-721.

6. United States, Naval Historical Center (NHC),

"BdU War Diary," 17 October 1941. This is a microfilm edition of the English translation.

7. Hinsley, et al., *British Intelligence*, II, 663-664. The best account of the breaking of the German naval codes is David Kahn, *Seizing the Enigma: The Race to Break the German U-Boat Codes, 1939-1943* (Boston, 1991). For an overview of the role of intelligence in the Battle of the Atlantic, see Hinsley, et al., *British Intelligence*. Histories of the Battle of the Atlantic from the perspective of communications intelligence can be divided into several groups. There are those, such as the American and British official histories by S.E. Morison and S.W. Roskill, respectively, which were written with a knowledge of Allied code breaking. This is also the case with Gunter Hessler, *The U-Boat War in the Atlantic, 1939-1945* (London, 1989), which was written for the British Ministry of Defence and is the most authoritative German account in English. Another group consists of studies such as van der Vat, *Atlantic Campaign*; Terraine, *U-Boat Wars*; and Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely: The Royal Navy in the Second World War* (London, 1991), which are surveys dealing only with communications intelligence in very general terms. A third category includes books, such as Ralph Francis Bennett, *Behind the Battle: Intelligence in the War with Germany, 1939-45* (London, 1994), 168-201, which attempt to assess the general

impact of communications intelligence.

8. PRO, DEFE 3/32, intercepted 1445/14/10/41, decoded 1028/16/10/41; intercepted 1129/17/10/41, decoded 1026/19/10/41; and intercepted 1521/17/10/41, decoded 1058/19/10/41.

9. The British were reading the Italian naval codes; see, for example, PRO, DEFE 3/832-870. Yet the transcripts of radio traffic between the Italian naval command and its submarines apparently have not been placed in the PRO.

10. PRO, DEFE 3/32, intercepted 1620/17/10/41, decoded 1134/19/10/41; and ADM 199/1197, f. 350.

11. The destroyer HMS *Lamberton*; sloop HMS *Rochester*; corvettes HMS *Carnation*, HMS *Bluebell*, HMS *Campion*, HMS *Heliotrope*, FFS *La Malouine*, HMS *Mallow* and FFS *Commandant Dragou*. PRO, ADM 199/1197, f. 351.

12. PRO, ADM 199/1994, 1. I wish to thank Mr. R.M. Coppock and LCDR W.J.R. Gardner, RN of the Naval Historical Branch of the Ministry of Defence for information on the sinking of *U-204*. See also PRO, DEFE 3/32, intercepted 0710/20/10/41, decoded 0238/22/10/41; and DEFE 3/32, intercepted 2218/20/10/41, decoded 1356/22/10/41.

13. PRO, ADM 199/1197, f. 351; ADM 199/1994, 2; NHC, 'BdU War Diary,' 22 October 1941; PRO, DEFE 3/33, intercepted 1624/22/10/41, decoded 0432/24/10/41; DEFE 3/33, intercepted 1742/22/10/41, decoded 0335/24/10/41; and DEFE 3/33, intercepted 2348/22/10/41, decoded 0517/24/10/41.

14. PRO, DEFE 3/33, intercepted 0144/23/10/41, decoded 0516/24/10/41; and ADM 199/1994, 2-3.

15. PRO, DEFE 3/33, intercepted 1949/23/10/41, decoded 0507/24/10/41; ADM 223/2, "Recent Information on Homing and Intercommunication Procedure – U-boats and Aircraft;" AIR 41/47, ff. 36-38; NHC, 'BdU War Diary,' 23 October 1941; PRO, DEFE 3/33, intercepted 0726/23/10/41, decoded 0711/24/10/41; DEFE 3/33, intercepted 1358/23/10/41, decoded 0642/24/10/41; DEFE 3/33, intercepted 2010/23/10/41, decoded 0642/24/10/41; and DEFE 3/33, intercepted 2148/23/10/41, decoded 0637/24/10/41.

16. PRO, ADM 199/1994, 3; ADM 199/1197, f. 393; Jurgen Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945* (Annapolis, Md., 1983), 70; ADM 199/1197, ff. 269, 389-390; ADM 199/1994, 4-5; and ADM 199/1197, ff. 271-272 and 389-390.

17. PRO, ADM 199/1994, 7; Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 70; ADM 199/1994, 6-7; and DEFE 3/33, intercepted 0613/24/10/41, decoded 1620/25/10/41.

18. NHC, "BdU War Diary," 24 October 1941; PRO, DEFE 3/33, intercepted 1218/24/10/41, decoded 1655/25/10/41; DEFE 3/33, intercepted 1441/24/10/41, decoded 1650/25/10/41; DEFE 3/33, intercepted 2032/24/10/41, decoded 1757/25/10/41; AIR 27/1182, 24 October 1941; and ADM 199/1994, 8.

19. PRO, DEFE 3/33, intercepted 2242/24/10/41, decoded 1700/25/10/41.

20. PRO, ADM 199/1197, f. 252; and ADM 199/1994, 9.

21. PRO, ADM 199/1994, 9-10, 23; and AIR 27/1182, 25 October 1941.

22. PRO, ADM 199/1994, 10; ADM 199/1197, f. 346; and ADM 199/1997, 19.

23. NHC, "BdU War Diary," 25 October 1941; PRO, DEFE 3/33, intercepted 1458/25/10/41, decoded 2303/25/10/41; DEFE 3/33, intercepted 2028/25/10/41, decoded 1835/29/10/41; DEFE 3/34, intercepted 2322/25/10/41, decoded 1835/29/10/41; DEFE 3/34, intercepted 2343/25/10/41, decoded 1837/29/10/41; and DEFE 3/34, intercepted 2359/25/10/41, decoded 1258/29/10/41.

24. Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 70. *Ariguani* was a merchantman chartered in 1940 by the Royal Navy, serving first as an ocean boarding vessel and later as a catapult ship.

25. PRO, ADM 199/1197, ff. 291-293.

26. PRO, DEFE 3/34, intercepted 0910/26/10/41, decoded 1249/29/10/41; and ADM 199/1197, ff. 315, 434-438.

27. PRO, DEFE 3/34, intercepted 1452/26/10/41, decoded 1844/29/10/41; and ADM 199/1994, 13.

28. PRO, DEFE 3/34, intercepted 1744/26/10/41 decoded 1845/29/10/41; DEFE 3/34, intercepted 1353/26/10/31, decoded 1335/29/10/41; DEFE 3/34, intercepted 1416/26/10/41, decoded 1518/29/10/41; intercepted 1429/26/10/41, decoded 1325/29/10/41; and DEFE 3/34, intercepted 2237/26/10/41, decoded 0930/29/10/41.
29. PRO, ADM 199/1994, 13; ADM 199/1197, ff. 309, 420; and ADM 199/1994, 14.
30. NHC, "BdU War Diary," 27 October 1941; PRO, DEFE 3/34, intercepted 1616/27/10/41, decoded 1035/29/10/41; ADM 199/1994, 15; and DEFE 3/34, intercepted 2023/27/10/41, decoded 1134/29/10/41.
31. Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 71; and PRO, ADM 199/1994, 16.
32. PRO, ADM 199/1197, ff. 421; and ADM 199/1994, 16-17.
33. PRO, ADM 199/1994, 17; NHC, "BdU War Diary," 29 October 1941; and PRO, DEFE 3/34, intercepted 0034/29/10/41, decoded 012031/10/41.
34. Cf. David Syrett, "Communications intelligence and the Battle of the Atlantic, 1943-1945," *Archives* (April, 1995), vol. XXII, 56-57; and Kathleen Broome Williams, *Secret Weapon: U.S. High-Frequency Direction Finding in the Battle of the Atlantic* (Annapolis, MD, 1996).
35. NHC, "BdU War Diary," 29 October 1941; and Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 70-71.
36. See David Syrett, *The Defeat of the U-boats: The Battle of the Atlantic* (Columbia, S.C., 1994).
37. PRO, ADM 199/1197, f. 356.