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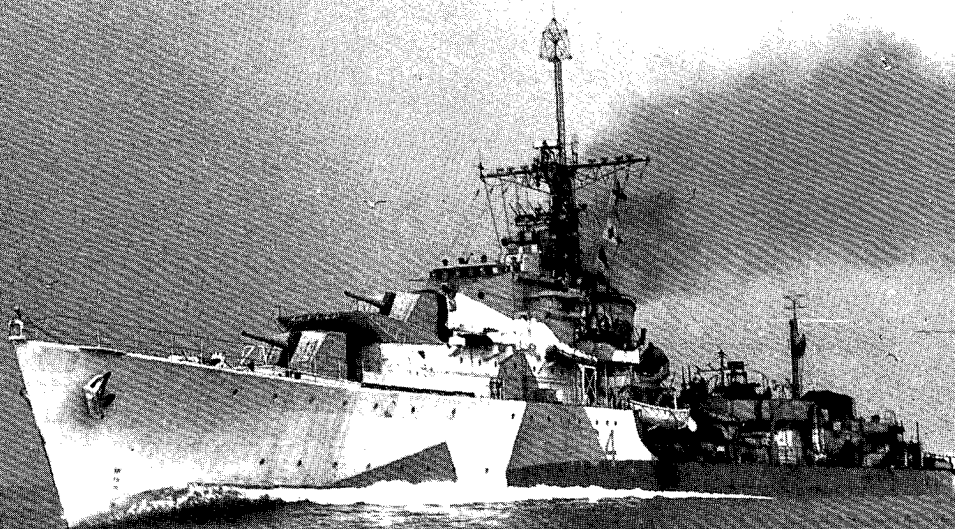
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HMCS Sioux in British waters, April 1944

(Photo by G.A. Milne, NAC PA 115559)

Masters of the Channel Night: The 10th Destroyer Flotilla's Victory off Ile De Batz, 9 June 1944

Michael Whitby

It was a dark and somewhat stormy night. In the western English Channel, off the Ile de Batz, twelve destroyers, eight Allied (including two Canadian) and four German, hurtled towards each other at a combined speed of 47 knots. Radar, penetrating the black murk ahead of the Allied ships, detected hostile contacts at ten miles range and the force deployed for action. Minutes later they opened devastating fire upon a startled enemy.

The battle that ensued on the night of 9 June 1944 was the *raison d'être* of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, a destroyer strike force based on Plymouth. When planning the Normandy invasion Allied naval commanders recognized that although *Kriegsmarine* surface forces represented only a limited threat to the beachhead, powerful destroyers based in Bay of Biscay ports could wreak havoc on vulnerable build-up convoys crossing the Channel.¹ But, because of the dominance of Allied air power, enemy destroyers came out only in the hours of darkness. Therefore, to win control of the western Channel, the 10th DF had to master the difficult art of night fighting.

I

Sailors have never been comfortable fighting at night. Quite simply, too much can go wrong. Command and control is confused, the risk of engaging friendly forces high, navigation imprecise, collision a constant worry and the chance of surprise from an unexpected quarter an ever-present danger. The famous fighting admiral, Andrew Cunningham, victor of a night

battle at Matapan in 1941, summed up these hazards well for the Second World War era when he concluded that "in no other circumstances than in a night action at sea does the fog of war so completely descend to blind one of the true realization of what is happening."²

In the Channel, quite apart from the "normal" hazards, Allied naval leaders also had to face the fact that German destroyers had consistently bettered them at night fighting. A devastating example of this superiority occurred on 22/23 October 1943. While conducting an offensive sweep off Brittany, a British force consisting of the cruiser *Charybdis*, two Fleet class destroyers and four less-powerful Hunt class destroyers, was attacked by five German fleet torpedo boats—small destroyers that packed a powerful punch. In what one British participant called "the classic balzup of the war,"³ *Charybdis* and a Hunt class destroyer were sunk by torpedoes while the Germans escaped unseen and unscathed. This defeat was painful proof that the Allies were a long way from the supremacy of the narrow seas required for the invasion.⁴

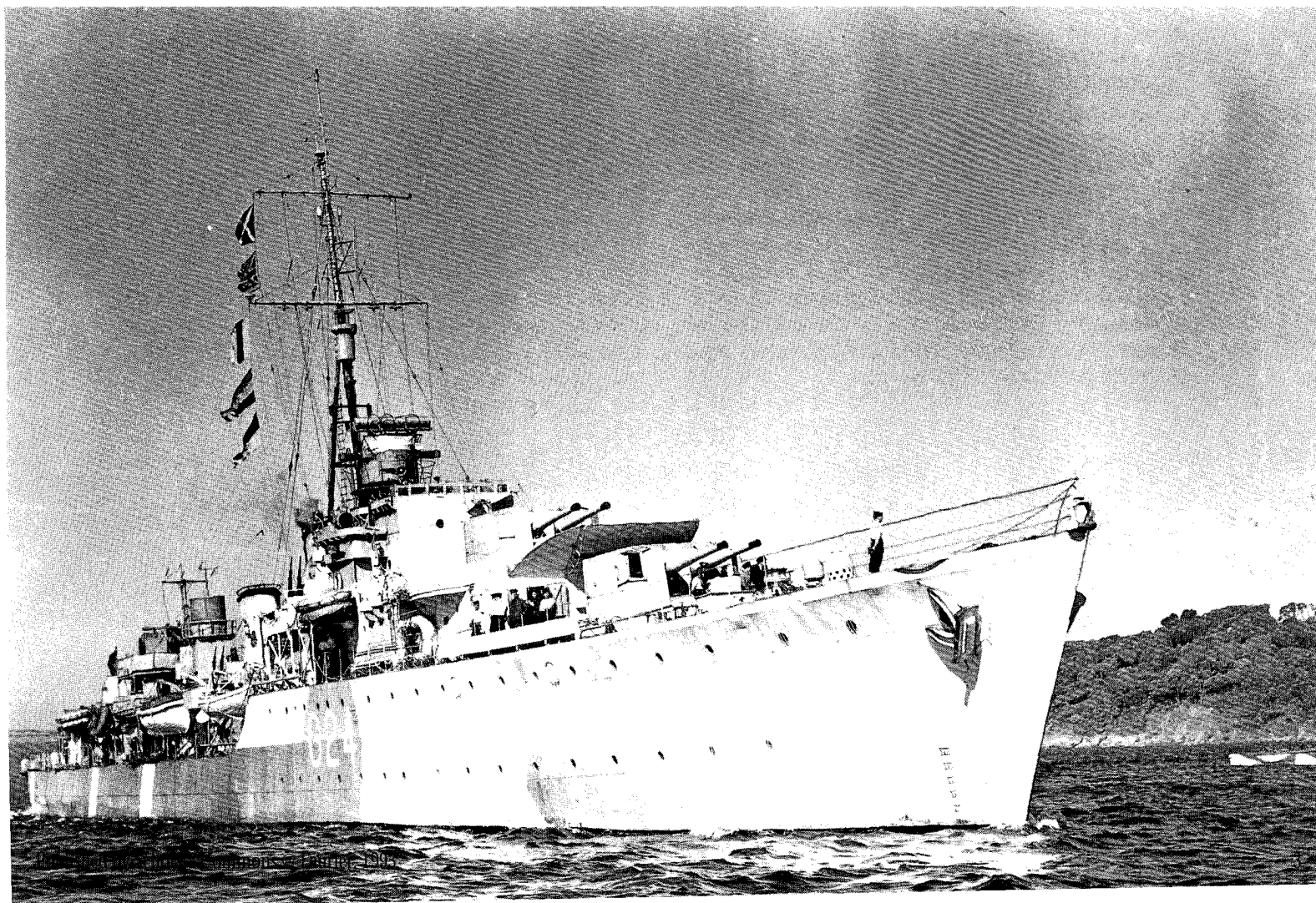
The officer responsible for winning control of the western Channel was the C-in-C Plymouth Command, Vice-Admiral Sir Ralph Leatham, who had previously served as C-in-C East Indies and Vice-Admiral, Malta. The latter appointment had been particularly valuable as he had directed offensive strike forces in night operations against enemy shipping.⁵ Since taking over Plymouth in August 1943, Leatham had pressed the Admiralty for ships to form a homogeneous

strike force to battle German destroyers but had been continually rebuffed. The *Charybdis* "balzup" changed everything. Admiralty staff officers agreed that the reasons for the defeat were that their ships had vastly different capabilities, had never been to sea together and had no night fighting experience. Their solution was to give Leatham the force he had pushed for.⁶

Specifically, the C-in-C Plymouth wanted Tribal class destroyers.⁷ The beautiful, powerful Tribals were the British answer to the "super" destroyers built by several navies during the 1930s. Boasting six 4.7-inch guns, two 4-inch High Angle guns and four 21-inch torpedo tubes, the big 1850-ton destroyers had twice the firepower of conventional British designs. Sixteen were built for the Royal Navy (RN) and they attracted the attention of the Canadian naval staff, who convinced their government to order eight for the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). The RN Tribals saw much hard fighting during the war and, by the time Leatham requested them, twelve had been lost, most to air attack.

Four RCN Tribals were also in commission but they, and the one RN ship not in refit or serving in another theatre, were needed on the Murmansk run. It was not until the surface threat to the Russian convoys diminished, with the destruction of the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* on Boxing Day 1943, that five Tribals—three Canadian and two British—became available for the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, Leatham's strike force.⁸

Equipment fitted in the Tribals, either before or after their arrival at Plymouth, was vital to their success at night. Foremost was radar. British and Canadian Fleet destroyers of the period received three types of radar: Gunnery (GA), Warning Combined (WC) and Warning Surface (WS).⁹ For gunnery, all ships in the flotilla had Type 285P. Designed early in the war as a high angle set for use against aircraft, Type 285 had evolved into the standard fire-control set for destroyers. It provided excellent ranges, and was accurate enough to detect "overs" and "unders" and (to the mortification of operators) incoming rounds. The Type 285's



“yagi” dipole aerials were located atop the power-mounted director tower and echoes were displayed on an A-scope where they caused vertical deflections upon a horizontal trace.¹⁰ For Warning Combined, each of the five destroyers had Type 291, another well-trying unit that could detect surface contacts at nine miles. The Type 291 aerial was power-rotated and used an A-scope display. The set’s great disadvantage was that it could be easily monitored by the enemy and for this reason was seldom used until action was joined.

The most effective search radars were the Warning Surface sets. Unlike Types 285 and 291 which operated on decimetric and metric wavelengths respectively, the WS sets were centimetric which gave far superior performance, particularly for surface search. HMCS *Athabaskan* and the two RN Tribals, *Tartar* and *Ashanti*, were fitted with the recently developed Type 276 which could detect targets of destroyer-size out to about 12 miles. Power-rotation allowed consistent scanning and the antenna was mounted on a lattice foremast which ensured optimum range. Echoes were displayed on a Plan Position Indicator (PPI) which enabled operators to continuously monitor the positions of various contacts. This made it a far better search instrument than A-scopes which only displayed targets along any one bearing. *Haida* and *Huron* were fitted with the older and less effective Type 271Q. Performance was not too bad (a destroyer could be detected at approximately nine miles) but its antenna was manually rotated and, even though Type 271Q could utilize a PPI, *Haida* and *Huron* had A-scopes. Another drawback was that the aerial had to be mounted close to its power source,



Commander DeWolf and Admiral Leatham in April 1944 upon *Haida*’s return from the operation that resulted in the loss of *Athabaskan*. DeWolf is in his sea rig; layers of sweaters and a scarf around the neck to keep out the cool Channel air. He did not wear a “tin hat” in action.

(NAC PA 180348)

which in the Tribals’ case, meant that it was located in the searchlight position forward of the after canopy, only about forty-five feet above the waterline. This not only reduced range but the forward superstructure “wooded” the beam when it swept directly ahead.¹¹ It was not until stronger lattice foremasts were fitted in the autumn of 1944 that the two Tribals could be equipped with the latest search radars.

No matter what their relative merits, these systems removed much of the risk from operating at night. It is important to remember, however, that radar was still a relatively new, vacuum tube, technology. Breakdowns were common, especially under the pounding from hard steaming or shock from main armament blast, and performance was often impaired by

Opposite: Shown entering Plymouth in July 1944, *Huron* displays her forward armament of two twin 4.7-inch turrets. Type 285P GA radar is mounted on the Director Control Tower at the back of the bridge (facing rearwards). The X-shaped aerial at the top of the tripod foremast is the Type 291 WC, while the perspex shield of her Type 271Q WS is visible behind the second funnel. (Note how it is “wooded” by the forward superstructure.)

(DND)

climatic conditions. There was not much that could be done about the latter, but excellent maintenance facilities at Plymouth and well-trained radar technicians aboard ship reduced breakdowns.

Other new equipment contributed to the flotilla's mastery of the night. Navigation, notoriously difficult in the Channel, was simplified by the radio navigation aid GEE, which according to *Ashanti's* "pilot," enabled navigators "to pinpoint their position virtually at the touch of a button."¹² Flashless cordite helped conceal a ship's position during gunnery exchanges and preserved night vision. Tracer for the main armament helped gunners judge the fall of shot.¹³ Each destroyer also carried a monitoring device known as HEADACHE which allowed them to listen in on enemy R/T transmissions. HEADACHE was extremely useful but it had to be treated with care. *Haida's* CO, Commander H.G. DeWolf, recalls one occasion when intercepts thought to be from destroyers about to launch a torpedo attack turned out to be conversation among minesweepers forming up to enter harbour some miles away.¹⁴ Finally, the ships were fitted with the latest IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) gear which helped ascertain the identity of various forces.

It was not enough to have good equipment; it had to be utilized effectively. In his report on the *Charybdis* action, Leatham had noted "that the art of night fighting with the added new technique of radar has, up to date in this war, had very little opportunity of practical test, and in the Plymouth Command, at all events, little opportunity of exercise."¹⁵ Once his strike force came together at the end of January 1944, however, Leatham put them through a concentrated training period that lasted into March.

Because each ship already had a high state of individual training, the focus was mainly on group training which was accomplished through night exercises. These consisted of high-speed formation steaming in which ships manoeuvred at close quarters, and night encounters, where they launched attacks on one another. Both evolutions helped the various departments in a ship become accustomed to



A tired-looking Commander Basil Jones on Tartar's bridge after an operation.

the demands of night action and enabled the destroyers to get used to working with one another. It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of such exercises the 10th DF carried out during February and March because most of the log books of Canadian and British destroyers were destroyed after the war. However, the cruiser *HMS Bellona* participated in the training and her deck log shows that she conducted eight night exercises with the flotilla. The destroyers likely did a few more by themselves.¹⁶ This is quite a high number given other operational, maintenance and training requirements. Interspersed with this valuable training were several offensive sweeps off the French coast. The enemy was not met on these early operations but they provided important experience and a focus for training.¹⁷

It was not until April that the 19th DF faced trial by fire. On the night of the 25/26, *Ashanti*, *Athabaskan*, *Haida* and *Huron*, supported by the cruiser *Black Prince*, engaged three German fleet torpedo boats in a long

chase down the Brittany coast. The action was conducted at long range and, although all German ships suffered damage, it was not until *Haida* and *Athabaskan* caught *T-29* attempting to break back along the coast that one was sunk. Three nights later *Haida* and *Athabaskan* intercepted the two surviving torpedo boats heading to Brest for repairs. As before, the Germans reacted by turning away and firing torpedoes. Although the two Tribals turned towards the enemy, one of the torpedoes found *Athabaskan* and she later blew up in a massive explosion. *Haida* gained a measure of revenge by forcing *T-27* aground but *T-24* escaped.¹⁸

The lessons from these actions influenced the tactics employed in the June battle. The most important lesson concerned weaponry. In both encounters the Tribals had achieved good accuracy with radar-controlled gunnery

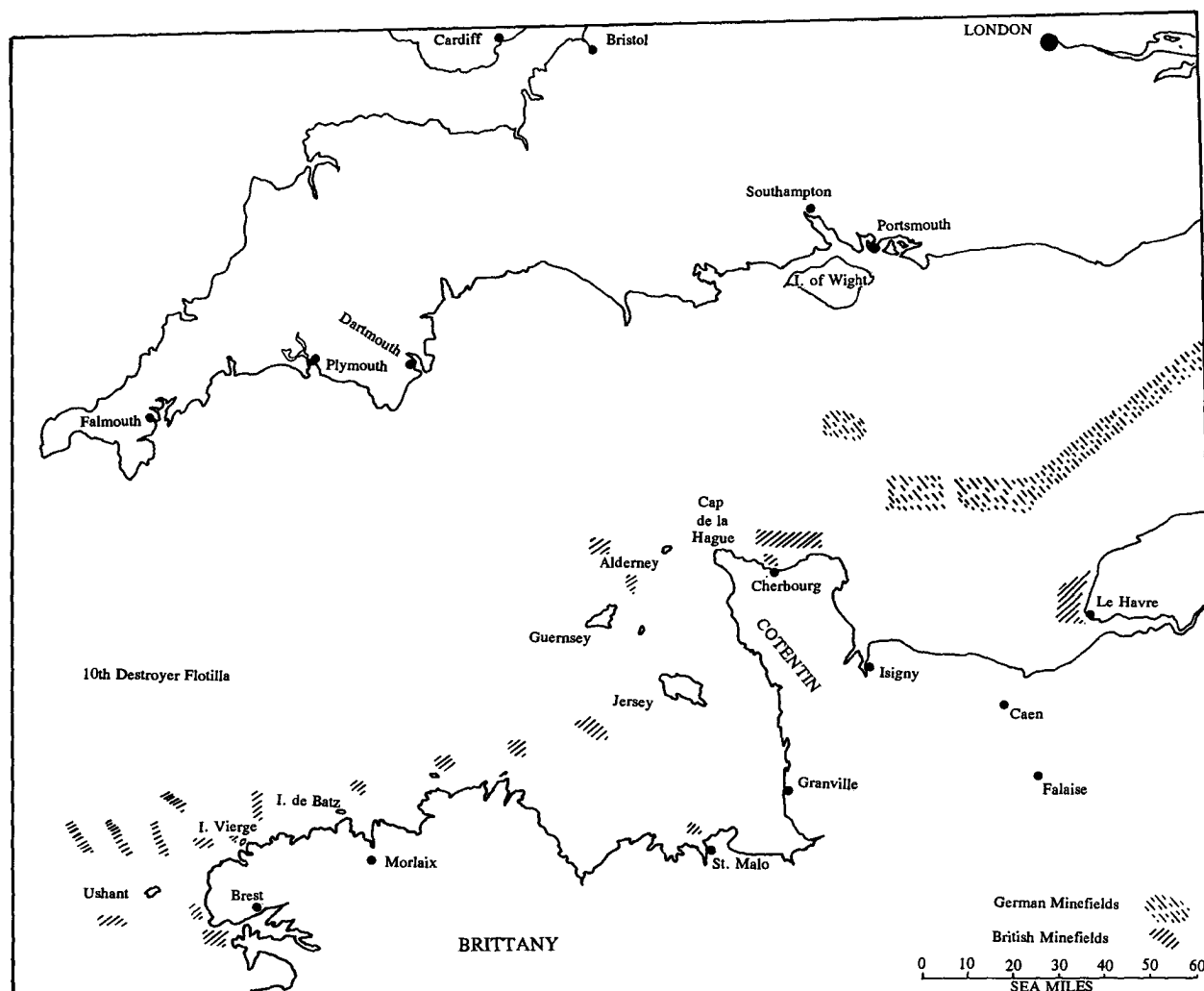
but results with torpedoes were much less impressive—in the first action all four destroyers had fired torpedoes at the motionless *T-29* but, incredibly, all had missed. Not surprisingly, guns, which were thought to be much better suited to the fast pace of night actions, became the weapon of choice. Torpedoes, however, remained the enemy's most effective weapon. In both engagements the reaction of German destroyers had been to turn away, fire torpedoes, and race for the safety of one of the many harbours along the Brittany coast.¹⁹ The challenge facing the flotilla was to develop tactics that would enable them to evade torpedoes yet get amongst the enemy before they could escape.

The officer who solved this tactical problem was Commander Basil Jones. An experienced destroyer man, the popular Jones had taken command of *Tartar* and the flotilla in March.

Canadian Tribals conducting high speed tactical manoeuvres in the Channel. Such exercises were a vital component of the 10th DF's training.

(NAC PA 151742)





The English Channel, June 1944

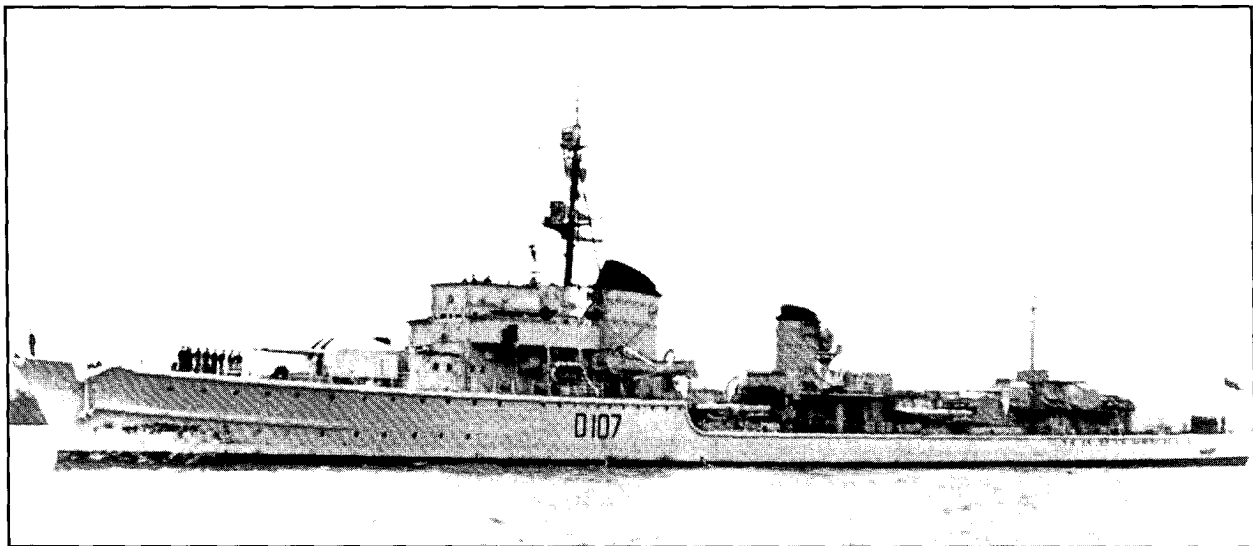
Although he had not participated in the April actions (*Tartar* was in refit), he was well aware of their lessons.²⁰ Jones thought that the flotilla had “to press on into the enemy during his turn away,” but for that to be accomplished a different formation had to be utilized. The traditional night fighting formation was line-ahead where ships proceeded in column one behind the other. Its strength was that it allowed ships to maintain contact but Jones thought it was unsuitable for the head-on encounters prevalent in the Channel because ships were prevented from entering action

together and the destroyers at the head of the formation screened the radar of those behind. For Jones the solution was simple:

It was desirable that all destroyers should have their forecandle guns bearing, their Radar unimpeded ahead, and ships capable of individual action to comb enemy torpedoes. Only a reasonably broad and shaken-out line of bearing formation [in this case, line abreast] could satisfy these conditions. It was realised that cruising at night for lengthy periods in such a formation was a strain as regards station keeping, although the P.P.I. removed much of the strain [for those who had it]. Accordingly Line Ahead for comfort, and Line of Bearing for action, was the order of the day.²¹

It took a bold individual to tamper with the RNs hallowed line-ahead but Jones' unorthodox tactics, which were supported by Leatham, were designed to achieve the treasured naval maxim to hit first, hit hard and keep on hitting. The loss of *Athabaskan* at the end of April reduced the flotilla's strength to four Tribals but reinforcements arrived in May in the form of two British and two Polish destroyers. Of these new ships, HMS *Eskimo* was the only Tribal but the slightly larger Polish *Blyskawica* and the sister ships HMS *Javelin* and ORP *Piorun* had similar qualities. Each had two twin turrets on their fo'c'sles (probably not a coincidence given the gun mentality at Plymouth), HEADACHE and GEE. The Polish destroyers had the same radar suit as *Haida* and *Huron* while the British ships

This heaped much of the onus for success squarely upon the shoulders of the 19th Division's commanding officers. It was well placed. Jones himself, Commander DeWolf, and *Huron's* Lieutenant Commander H.S. Rayner had all established good reputations in previous wartime commands, and although *Ashanti* was Lieutenant Commander J.R. Barnes' first command, he had proved his ability on the Murmansk run and in the Channel. Though all were talented officers, DeWolf stood a head above the others, a fact recognized by his fellow COs. In his memoirs Jones described the quiet, determined Canadian from Bedford, Nova Scotia "as an outstanding officer, not only in skill but aggressive spirit. Furthermore he had that priceless gift of fortune, . . . of there always



Although this post-war shot shows a sister ship of Z-32 in British markings, it nonetheless provides a good view of a Type 36A Narvik. Note the twin 5.9-inch turret forward and three single mounts astern; her two quadruple banks of torpedo tubes are fore and aft of the second funnel.

(DND PMR 92-707; courtesy of K. Macpherson)

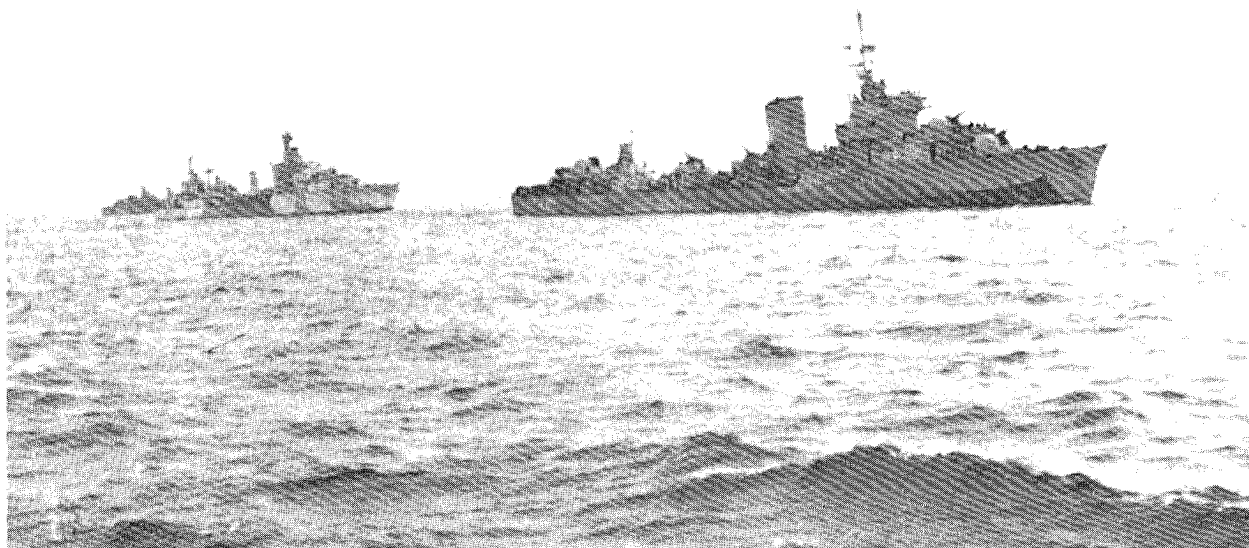
had PPI and the latest search radar. What separated the newcomers from the core of the flotilla was their lack of training and experience. The last of them arrived as late as the third week of May, so there was no opportunity for a comprehensive night training programme. To compensate for this, Commander Jones concentrated his experienced ships in the 19th Division and placed the green destroyers in the 20th Division.²²

being a target in whatever area he was told to operate."²³ These talents were all to be key factors in the June battle.

II

The enemy the 10th DF was preparing to meet were the four destroyers of the *Kriegsmarine's* 8th *Zerstörerflotille*.²⁴ Although this German flotilla had good ships, it had fallen behind its opponents in training and technology, and had thus lost the night fighting superiority it once held.

Typical of German-built warships, Z-32, Z-24 and T-24 could withstand a lot of punishment, and all four destroyers possessed superb torpedo control gear which made the torpedo their most dangerous weapon. The Narviks' gun armament was powerful but the rate of fire was quite low as the large 45 kg shells were unwieldy on the pitching deck of a destroyer. The greatest collective weakness of



Blyskawica and other ships of the 10th DF in the Channel. The pretty Polish ship was the fastest Allied destroyer in the theatre but her withdrawal from the June action prevented her speed from being a factor.

(NAC PA 180512)

The 8th *Zerstörerflotille* was very much a mixed bag. Z-32 and Z-24 were Type 36A destroyers, popularly known as "Narviks." Displacing approximately 3000 tons, capable of 38 knots, and armed with five 5.9-inch guns and eight 21.7-inch torpedo tubes, they were larger, faster and packed a heavier punch than Tribals. The smaller, slower ZH-1 was a captured Dutch destroyer armed with five 4.7-inch guns and eight 21.7-inch torpedo tubes. The Type 39 fleet torpedo boat T-24 was the weakest member of the flotilla. Displacing only 1300 tons and capable of 28 knots, she was considerably smaller and slower than her mates. Armament was four 4.1-inch guns and six 21.7-inch torpedo tubes.²⁵

the ships was their wide range of capabilities. If they were to operate as a unit they would have to conform to T-24's performance which deprived the two Narviks of one of their greatest assets—speed.

Although the Germans had pioneered the development of naval radar, they had fallen well behind the Allies by 1944. The main reason for this was that the *Luftwaffe* had been given priority over equipment and research, and the navy mainly received obsolete hand-me-downs ill-suited for naval warfare. The ships of the 8th *Zerstörerflotille* were fitted with 1940-vintage FuMO25 or FuMO28, which were

metric sets limited in range and accuracy.²⁶ A-scopes were used for display and had a 30-degree blind spot astern, a fact well known to the Allies.²⁷ Performance data is scarce but action reports from the 9 June battle reveal that their radar indicated a contact on a rough bearing, but they had little idea of its range and were therefore unable to establish an accurate plot. All in all the inadequacy of German naval radar at this stage of the war was summed up by historian Arthur Hezlet, who concluded they “were to the Allied sets as a pocket torch is to a car headlight.”²⁸

Training was another deficiency. Since 1941, there had been a steady turn-over in destroyer personnel as experienced officers and ratings were transferred to the U-Boat arm. This caused a constant need for sea training that by 1944 was becoming increasingly difficult to accomplish as fuel was in short supply and Allied airpower made ships vulnerable to attack whenever they left harbour.²⁹ As a result, the four warships that engaged the 10th DF had never been to sea together before.

The Germans were better off in terms of battle experience. Since April 1944 the flotilla had been commanded by *Kapitän zur See* Baron Theodor von Bechtolsheim, a veteran destroyer officer who had been CO of the *Karl Galster* in many night operations during the first three years of the war. Later, he served as chief of staff to the *Führer die Zerstörer* (FdZ; the officer in charge of German destroyers) and was thus abreast of the latest developments in destroyer warfare. Of the four COs,³⁰ only *ZH-1*'s *Korvettenkapitän* Barkow had not commanded his ship in action. *Kapitän-Leutnant* Meentzen in *T-24* had a unique edge: he had twice survived battles with the 10th DF and his ship had sunk *Athabaskan*.

III

The 8th *Zerstörerflotille* was pressed into action as soon as the German naval high command learned of the invasion. Early on 6 June, Admiral Kranke, the commander of Group West, ordered *Z-32*, *Z-24* and *ZH-1* from the

Gironde to join *T-24* at Brest and then head into the western Channel. The Allies learned of these plans almost as soon as they were sent because, since 1941, British cryptographers had been able to decypher the *Kriegsmarine*'s “Home Waters” Enigma that controlled surface ship movements. Fully aware of their intentions Admiral Leatham ordered air strikes against *Z-32*, *Z-24* and *ZH-1* on their way to Brest. Beaufighter aircraft (including some from 404 Squadron RCAF) caused light damage, which delayed the destroyers' departure from Brest until the evening of 8 June. Further decrypts revealed their intended course and speed. As the four destroyers rounded Ushant and headed into the Channel, Leatham directed the 10th DF into a perfect intercept position, much like an air controller vectoring fighters on to a bomber. At 0114 hours on 9 June, *Tartar*'s Type 276 radar detected a contact bearing 241 degrees at 10 miles range. After allowing the plot to develop for eight minutes, Jones gave the order to deploy into line of bearing. Meanwhile, coastal and shipborne radar had provided von Bechtolsheim with some warning of the approach of the Allied force, but it was only when moonlight exposed the sides of the Tribals in the 19th Division that he knew they were upon him.³¹

True to form, the Germans turned away to port and launched torpedoes. *Z-32*, *Z-24* and *ZH-1* were able to pick out clear targets and each launched four deadly fish at the charging 19th Division—the 20th Division, positioned two miles to the north was still undetected. HEADACHE now paid dividends. Von Bechtolsheim's order was monitored in all four Tribals and the combination of this warning, along with the flexibility of the line-of-bearing formation, allowed the torpedoes to be avoided with relative ease.³²

Jones wanted to engage the enemy in a close-range “pell-mell battle,” which resulted after the 19th Division, followed closely by the 20th (two miles to the north), opened fire. The German destroyers were in the midst of their initial turn to port and lay across the bows of the 19th Division at a range of approximately 3500 yards in the order, from north to south, *Z-32*, *ZH-1*, *Z-24*, and *T-24*. As the northernmost ship in the 19th Division, *Tartar* initially

engaged *Z-32*, hitting her four times, but when she sped off northwards Commander Jones left her for the 20th Division and joined *Ashanti* in firing upon *ZH-1* and then *Z-24*. *Haida* first engaged *Z-24* but DeWolf, much to the chagrin of his gunnery officer who had to lay on a new target, joined *Huron* against *T-24*.³³ From this point the battle devolved into confusion—the best way to untangle events is to follow each German destroyer after the initial clash.

After escaping from *Tartar*, *Z-32* benefitted from the 20th Division's lack of experience. Led by Commander C.F. Namiesniowski in *Blyskawica*, the division had not deployed into line-of-bearing but had remained in line-ahead. Despite this, the encounter began well. All four destroyers quickly scored hits on *Z-32* but before they could press home their advantage, *Blyskawica*'s HEADACHE operator reported that the enemy was about to launch torpedoes. Rather than turning towards *Z-32*, Namiesniowski laid smoke and hauled around to starboard. The rest of the division, thinking they were wheeling for a torpedo attack, followed suit with *Eskimo* and *Javelin* firing torpedoes as they turned. Then, instead of re-engaging *Z-32*, Namiesniowski compounded his original error by leading the division away from the action for fifteen minutes. All contact with the enemy was lost and the division played no further role in the battle. It was now four against four.³⁴

Commander Jones refers to this episode as "a Polish variation."³⁵ If nothing else it emphasizes the value of experience and training. The flotilla had learned that it was crucial to turn towards the enemy in order to maintain contact. Namiesniowski had been briefed on this tactic but he had obviously found it difficult to carry out. Battle experience would have demonstrated the necessity of this manoeuvre and training would have made it easier to accomplish.

Namiesniowski was not the only officer in the 20th Division to go wrong that night. Certain confidential publications were supposed to be destroyed before sorties off

an enemy coast but, remarkably, *Javelin*'s Signals Officer also destroyed his signal books prior to leaving harbour. According to his CO, this blunder (or "British variation," as Poles may want to call it), rendered *Javelin* "completely deaf and dumb as no signals could be sent out or decoded."³⁶ Again, inexperience had taken its toll.

Having survived two tussles with the enemy, von Bechtolsheim headed west in an attempt to reform his force.³⁷ Instead, he found himself in yet another fight. At 0138 hours, *Z-32* sighted *Tartar* at close range and quickly scored three hits on her bridge superstructure. *Tartar*'s navigator's yeoman described the devastation wrought by the 5.9-inch shells:

When the actual crashes came upon us the A.I.C. was plunged in darkness and a brilliant flash pronounced the end of the Type 293 (sic) Radar set. Shrapnel rattled around in all directions and soon the small compartment filled with choking smoke. Pandemonium reigned for a few minutes on the bridge immediately above us, and from the wheelhouse adjoining our action station came the voice of the Coxswain shouting loudly, "Someone's been hit". . . . Curling smoke swirled everywhere, and the stench of blood was sickening.³⁸

One officer and two ratings were killed and several others were wounded. Fire raged around the forward superstructure and the loss of all radar and W.T. gear temporarily prevented Commander Jones, who was slightly wounded, from exercising control of his force.³⁹ Happily for the 10th DF, the battle-wise COs of *Ashanti*, *Haida* and *Huron* knew their stuff.

At this point fortune again smiled upon *Z-32*. *Tartar* had hit her three times in their brief exchange and von Bechtolsheim tried to break off to assess damage. As he attempted his escape, *Ashanti*, who had been attracted by gun flashes and a HEADACHE report that an enemy destroyer was heading towards the burning *Tartar*, brought *Z-32* under fire. However, before any decisive damage was incurred, the thick pall of smoke from *Tartar*'s fires shielded *Z-32*. Before *Ashanti* could locate her in the murk, *ZH-1* emerged, "wallowing and helpless."⁴⁰

ZH-1 had been badly mauled by *Ashanti* and *Tartar* at the outset of the battle. Among a deluge of hits, several shells had penetrated her machinery spaces, cut all power and brought her to a stop. When the vast quantities of steam and smoke that surrounded her lifted, she lay unveiled before her original assailants, who quickly finished her off. Despite her own damage, *Tartar* raked *ZH-1* with fire from point-blank range while *Ashanti* put two torpedoes into her. Realizing his ship was doomed, *Korvettenkapitän* Barkow ordered her abandoned and laid scuttling charges. At 0235 hours, *ZH-1* blew up in a massive blast that was heard all over the western Channel.

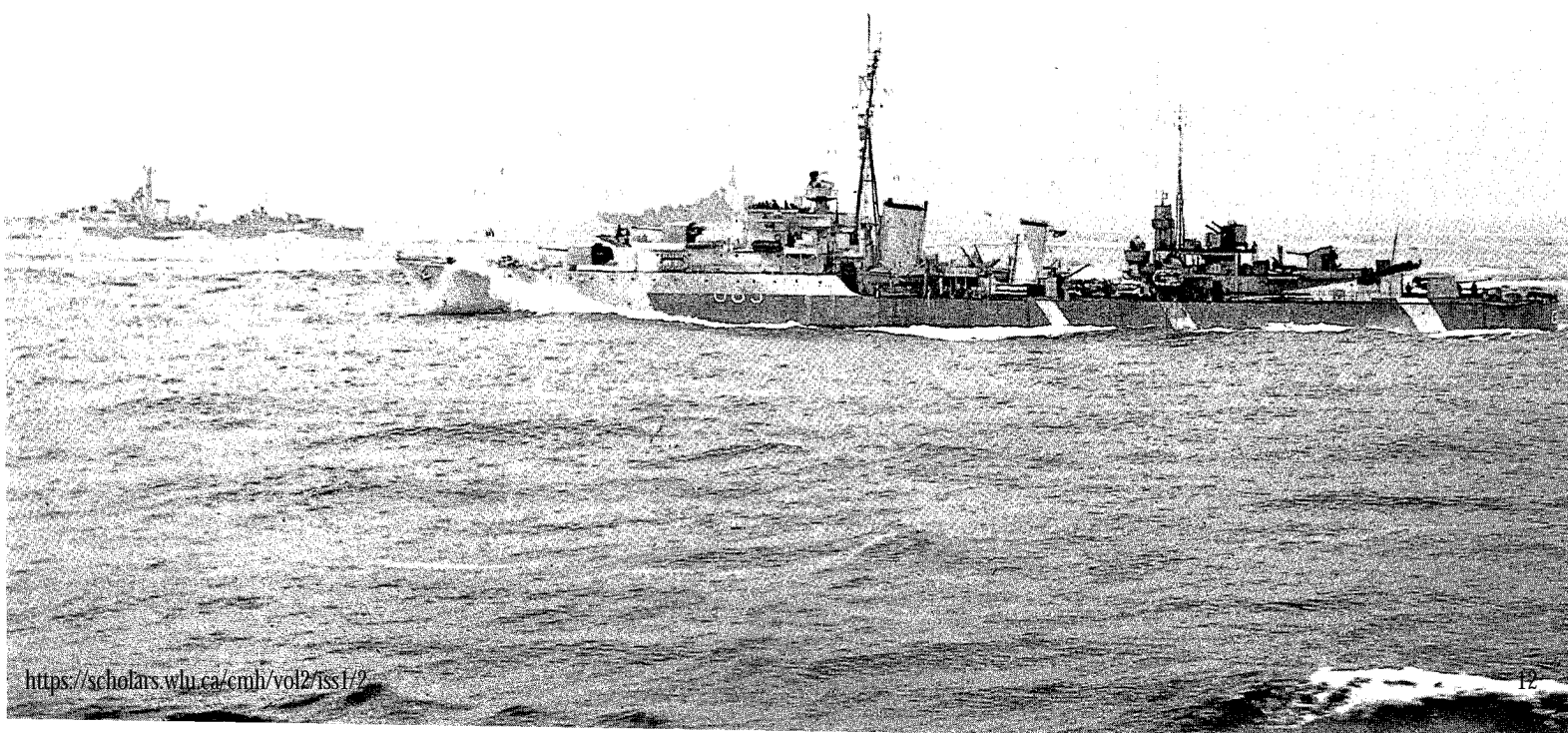
To the southwest, *Haida* and *Huron* were pursuing *Z-24* and *T-24*. When the battle was joined, they had engaged the two ships which were third and fourth in the German formation. At 0127 hours *Haida* opened fire with rapid salvos from "A" mounting ("B"

was firing starshell) at a target to starboard at a range of 4000 yards. According to DeWolf's after-action report, the target, which proved to be *Z-24*, "just then turning away, very quickly started to make smoke and zig zag at fine inclinations. Some ten or fifteen salvos were fired at this target and several possible hits were scored before another target was observed to the left."⁴¹ *Z-24*, which was also briefly engaged by *Tartar* and *Ashanti*, suffered severe damage and casualties from hits to the bridge, engine room and forward gun mount. The chaos caused by these hits forced her to turn away to southwestward.⁴²

The situation was equally confused on *T-24*. She had been totally surprised when starshell burst overhead and 4.7-inch tracer rocketed by. *ZH-1* was being pounded close-by, and the torpedo boat narrowly avoided colliding with the burning destroyer as the latter veered out of control. When a Narvik was

This shot of Haida, Tartar and the cruiser Bellona exercising in the Channel shows the nice lines of a Tribal. Haida wears the greys and green of the Special Home Fleet Destroyers Pattern camouflage.

(NAC PA 163952)



seen withdrawing westward, *Kapitän-Leutnant* Meentzen followed, thinking it was the leader Z-32. All this time, his ship was engaged by *Huron* and then *Haida* but, although there were many near misses, no hits resulted.⁴³

The battle now took a familiar turn for the Canadians. In each previous action they had become involved in long chases; now they pursued Z-24 and T-24 as they fled southwestward. Conditions did not favour *Haida* and *Huron*. DeWolf later reported that the enemy ships:

were engaged with the wind dead ahead and rain squalls were frequent. Cloud base was never more than 1000 feet and often as low as 500 feet. Consequently illumination was poor and starshell were generally half burned before they effected any illumination whatsoever. The enemy made excellent use of smoke throughout and continuously took avoiding action thus making spotting at time well nigh impossible.⁴⁴

The performance of search and gunnery radars was also hampered by the poor conditions. Despite these difficulties, the two Tribals pounded southwestward at 32 knots and would likely have succeeded in overhauling the slower T-24 had fate not intervened.

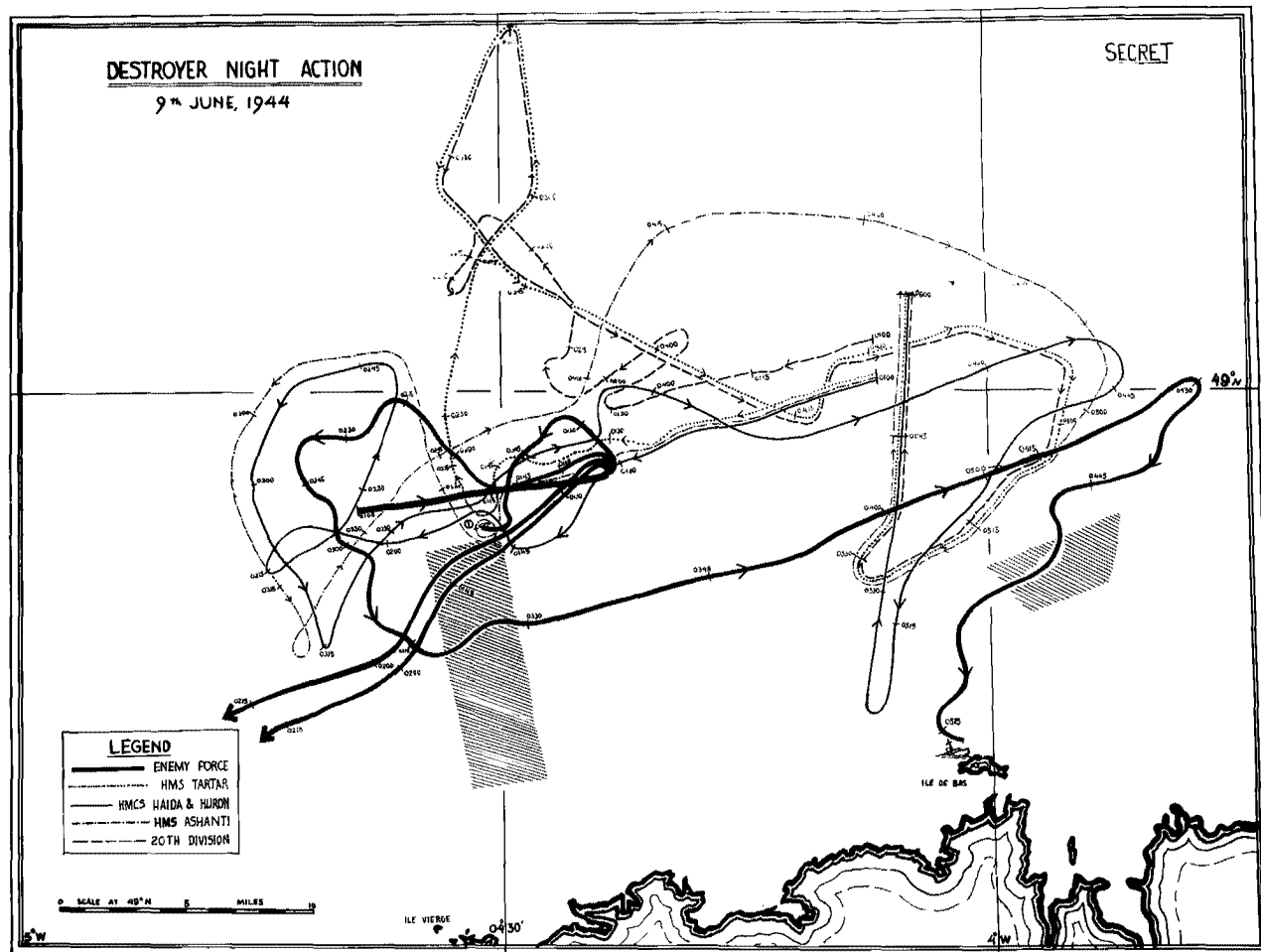
Under the codename Operation "Maple," the allies had laid a series of defensive minefields along the French coast to restrict the movements of U-boats and surface vessels against the invasion corridors.⁴⁵ On this night they had the opposite effect. At 0150 hours plots kept in the two Canadian warships indicated that the Germans were entering minefield QZX-1330. *Haida* and *Huron* were forced to alter course while Z-24 and T-24 steamed through the field of 150 mines with impunity.⁴⁶ When the Tribals resumed direct pursuit they had fallen nine miles behind the enemy and radar contact was lost shortly thereafter. At 0214 hours, because his position "with regard to own forces and remainder of the enemy was obscure,"⁴⁷ DeWolf abandoned the chase to reform on *Tartar*. Z-24 and T-24 later turned back towards the battle but played no further role and eventually made it to Brest.

By this time the situation throughout the battle zone was thoroughly confused with both commanders unsure of their own forces let alone that of the enemy. At 0237 hours, Commander Jones, his communications restored, attempted to gain a semblance of order by signalling his ships to concentrate on *Tartar*. To the west, von Bechtolsheim also continued his efforts to raise his ships and headed "on a southern course in order not to get too far away from the battle area."⁴⁸

Meanwhile, the Canadian destroyers were proceeding carefully towards *Tartar*. Visibility was obscured by rain squalls while climatic conditions and the shock from gun blasts and high speed running had made radar imprecise and unreliable. Despite this, at 0223 hours both ships obtained a firm contract bearing 032 degrees at six miles. Because their plots indicated that *Tartar* should bear 040, both DeWolf and Rayner thought this was their leader. IFF could provide no confirmation because they could not be certain that *Tartar's* gear was not damaged. According to DeWolf:

At 0230 sighted ship ahead steering a northerly direction at slow speed, assumed to be TARTAR. Made identification by light and ordered Plot to carry out radar search for other ships which might be concentrating. Ship in sight replied to our signal by light, but his signals were unintelligible. Main armament was brought to the ready and the challenge made, but the reply was again unintelligible. I still considered it might be TARTAR with damaged signalling gear and [wounded] personnel. The ship made smoke and turned away to the west and south but was not plotted by Radar and range was opened to 9000 yards before this move was appreciated.⁴⁹

Z-32, the ship encountered by the Canadians, was equally cautious. Von Bechtolsheim noted that "Individual shadows are sighted. Exchanges of recognition signals by blinker gun, and even by night identification signal, do not lead to any identification. The fact that, despite German recognition signal interrogation, these shadows do not fire, however causes me to make the decision not to use my weapons."⁵⁰



Z-32 initially accelerated away to the northwest but over the next 18 minutes gradually swung around to an easterly course. After the battle, von Bechtolsheim explained his thinking:

Standing here alone with Z-32 I can do nothing against the too powerful enemy, especially since my reserve torpedoes would first have to be reloaded and my artillery ammunition is no longer sufficient for a lengthy battle. My goal must continue to be to head east. Since I can no longer reach Cherbourg before daybreak, I decide to head for St. Malo. I am hoping that, on my way there and before reaching the Channel Islands area, I will have the remaining destroyers with me.⁵¹

Despite Z-32's reaction, DeWolf still had doubts about the identity of the contact. Finally, at 0254 hours, starshell revealed the distinctive silhouette of a Narvik. Both Tribals

immediately opened fire with "A" and "B", mounts with "X" providing starshell illumination. Again, shooting conditions were poor. Dense smoke laid by Z-32 made spotting difficult but tracer was followed for line and Type 285 provided precise ranging (von Bechtolsheim thought the accurate fire was due to flares dropped from aircraft!). Several hits were scored but before they had any telling effect minefield QZX-1330 again intervened on the enemy's behalf.

Z-32 entered the minefield from the west at 0311 hours, and *Haida* and *Huron* were forced to alter around it to the northeast. By the time they had done so at 0342 hours, Z-32 was ten miles to the southeast. Minutes later radar contact was lost. On *Haida's* bridge the sense of frustration was deep as



Z-32 photographed hard aground on the Ile de Batz the day after the battle. The forward twin turret is pointed in the direction that Haida and Huron were firing in the final stage of the battle. Later that day she was destroyed by Allied strike aircraft, including Beaufighters from the RCAF's 404 Squadron.

(DND CN-6870)

“for the second time it looked as if the enemy would escape through the intervention of this minefield.” Although DeWolf thought it likely that the enemy would escape into the small port of Morlaix, he doggedly continued the chase with *Huron* matching his every move.⁵²

Like DeWolf, von Bechtolsheim remained optimistic. Although *Z-32* had endured “numerous heavy and light hits,” the damage was “not severe enough to force me to avoid another battle.” He expected this confrontation would occur in the area of the Channel Islands (presumably because that was on the invasion flank) but believed he would have a good chance of success as *Z-24* and *T-24*, thought to be only twelve miles astern, would have joined by then. This hope was shattered at 0420 hours when the two ships reported they were actually 25 miles to westward and requested permission to return

to Brest. Von Bechtolsheim’s reaction to this setback is testimony to his professionalism:

With a heavy heart I must therefore decide to break off the mission ordered. In this situation I cannot force a breakthrough to the east with “Z 32” alone. Will still have to wait and see whether the breakthrough to the west will be successful. I continue to suspect that there are more naval forces as contact keepers to the northwest of me.

If von Bechtolsheim had possessed good search radar he would not have had to guess what lay to the west; as it was his suspicions proved correct.⁵³

Since 0412 hours, *Haida* and *Huron*’s Type 271Q indicated they were slowly overhauling *Z-32* from the northwest but at 0432 hours the range began to drop rapidly. DeWolf first suspected that the enemy was heading south for the safety of the coast but

it soon became apparent that he was heading westward and the Canadians altered to the south to cut him off. Commander Jones had concentrated the other destroyers about six miles to the north where he could cut off any attempt by the enemy to escape eastward. Z-32 was trapped.

At 0444 hours *Haida* and *Huron* opened fire at 7000 yards range. Z-32, thinking she was under attack from two cruisers, altered to the south, returned fire and launched her remaining torpedoes. The underwater projectiles missed their mark and although several 5.9-inch shells burst close to the Tribals, they caused no damage. On the fo'c'sles of the Canadian destroyers, gun crews worked hard slamming 50-pound shells and 35-pound cartridges into the four 4.7-inch guns. DeWolf initially ordered rapid salvos but dismayed by the apparent results, changed to more accurate salvos at 0452 hours. Even with that reduction, five or six salvos of semi-armour piercing shells roared out towards the enemy every minute.

Although both DeWolf and Rayner were unsure if they were hitting, von Bechtolsheim attests to the accuracy of their shooting. He had altered southwards "to get out of the excellent straddle coverage of the enemy gun batteries. The ship is constantly caught by hits. The way things are going, my running won't last long." Except for one brief interruption *Haida* and *Huron* kept up their withering fire. (*Blyskawica* briefly joined in from the north but did not score any hits.) Sometime around 0500 hours, Z-32's port engine quit and three hits put "Anton" (the forward turret) out of action. Hoping that the "tremendous quantities" of shells fired by the Tribals would cause them to run out of ammunition, von Bechtolsheim attempted to escape along the coast but at 0513 hours, in the midst of continuous hits, the starboard engine lost power. Realizing the end was at hand, von Bechtolsheim ordered the ship, now engulfed by flames, run aground. *Haida* and *Huron* fired a few more salvos but checked fire when they realized Z-32 lay hard on the rocky shore of Ile de Batz.⁵⁴

IV

The defeat on 9 June 1944 dashed any German hopes of interceding against the western flank of the invasion. Not only had they lost Z-32 and ZH-1 but the damage to Z-24 took weeks to repair and there was little that T-24 could do alone. Neither survivor carried out any further offensive sorties and, on 25 August, were sunk by Allied fighter-bombers off Le Verdon.⁵⁵

The Germans attributed the defeat to their poor state of training, the withdrawal of Z-24 and T-24, and overwhelming odds. Von Bechtolsheim's performance was justifiably praised. The FdZ, Admiral Kreisch, lauded him as a "daring, experienced and resolute commander, with excellent tactical skills, exemplary offensive spirit and a clear perspective of the battle" who had "brought honour to the destroyer arm."⁵⁶

But for the 20th Division's "inexcusable" turnaway, Leatham and Admiralty commentators thought that the 10th DF would likely have completely destroyed the enemy. As it was they ascribed the success to the ability and experience of the 19th Division, the bold tactics devised by Commander Jones, and the persistence of the Canadian ships. The only real criticisms concerned Namiesniowski's error, the fragility of some equipment, particularly IFF, and the failure of ships to broadcast situation reports throughout the action.⁵⁷

From a strictly Canadian viewpoint, *Haida* and *Huron*'s role in the battle demonstrated the ability of Canadian sailors and, with newspapers filled with accounts of the victory, garnered much positive publicity for the navy. The attention was a welcome change for a service that had spent most of the war toiling in relative obscurity on the harsh North Atlantic. To this day *Haida* remains Canada's most famous warship and "Hard Over Harry" DeWolf, who later rose to become Chief of Naval Staff, her most renowned fighting sailor.

NOTES

1. Admiralty, Naval Intelligence Division (NID), "Naval Staff Appreciation of the German Naval Threat to Operation 'Overlord' as it affects Coastal Command," undated, pp.9-10. Public Records Office (PRO) ADM 223/287 Part I. Admiralty, NID, "Operation Neptune: The Part Played by NID," pp.89-94. PRO ADM 223/287 Part II.
2. Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, (London, 1951), p.336.
3. R. Hill, *Destroyer Captain*, (London, 1975), p.135. Hill was CO of the destroyer HMS Grenville.
4. For the Charybdis action see Admiralty Historical Section, *Battle Summary No. 31: Cruiser and Destroyer Actions, English Channel and Western Approaches, 1943-1944*, (London, 1945), pp.1-8; Roskill, *The War at Sea*, III pt. 2, (London, 1960), pp.99-100; and Smith, *Hold the Narrow Seas*, (Annapolis, 1984), pp.190-200.
5. Smith and Walker, *The Battles of the Malta Striking Forces*, (London, 1974). Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, pp.417 & 439.
6. Leatham, "Action with German Ships on the Night of 22nd/23rd October 1943," Part II, pp.1-5. Director of Operations Division (Home) Minute, 5 December 1943. Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Home) Minute, 26 January 1944. PRO ADM 199/1038. The C-in-C Portsmouth also sent a letter supporting Leatham's position.
7. Leatham, "Action with German Ships on the Night of 22nd/23rd October, 1943." 13 November 1943, Part II, p.5. PRO ADM 199/1308. When forming a strike force for the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Cunningham also specifically requested Tribals. See Smith and Walker, *Battles of the Malta Striking Forces*, p.12.
8. Brice, *The Tribals: Biography of a Destroyer Class*, (London, 1971). Hodges, *Tribal Class Destroyers*, (London, 1971). March, *British Destroyers 1892-1953* (London, 1966), pp.322-340. Whitby, "Instruments for Security: The R.C.N.'s Procurement of Tribal-Class Destroyers, 1939-1943," *The Northern Mariner*, July 1992.
9. The names and classification of British naval radars changed throughout the war. I have used those current at the time which are listed in Confidential Admiralty Fleet Order (CAFO) 477/1944.
10. Friedman, *Naval Radar*, (Annapolis, 1981), p.195.
11. Lieutenant Commander H.S. Rayner, "Report of Action," 9 June 1944. DHist, HMCS Huron (Prior 1950) 8000. Admiralty, Signals Division, "RDF Bulletin No. 6," 3 March 1944. PRO ADM 220/204. Alastair Mitchell, "The Development of Radar in the Royal Navy (1935-45)," Part II in *Warship*, April 1970 No. 14, pp.123 & 129-30.
12. John Watkins, "Destroyer Action, Ile de Batz, 9 June 1944," in *The Mariner's Mirror*, Vol. 78 No. 3 (August, 1992), p.308. To monitor GEE signals the ships used the receiver QH-3.
13. For development flashless cordite and tracer see Admiralty, Director of Gunnery Division, *Gunnery Review*, July 1945, pp.80-2. DHist, 89/235; and Admiralty, Tactical and Staff Duties Division, "Guide Book of Fighting Experience," December 1942, p.13. DHist, 91/79.
14. Author's interview with Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf, 20 August 1987. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, II, (London, 1981), pp.194-5.
15. Leatham, "Action with German Ships on the Night of 22nd/23rd October, 1943," 13 November 1943. Part I, 5. PRO ADM 199/1038.
16. HMS Bellona, Deck Log, February 1944 and March 1944. PRO ADM 53/118941 and ADM 53/118942.
17. For early operations see Whitby, "The 'Other' Navy at War: The RCN's Tribal Class Destroyers," MA thesis, (Carleton University, 1988), pp.43-68.
18. For the April actions see Whitby, "Foolin' Around the French Coast: RCN Tribal-Class Destroyers in Action-April 1944," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Vol.19 No. 3, Winter, 1989, pp.54-61. Schull, *The Far Distant Ships*, (Ottawa, 1950), pp.250-8.
19. Whitby, "Foolin' Around the French Coast: RCN Tribal-Class Destroyers in Action-April 1944," pp.54-61. Whitley, *German Destroyers of World War Two*, (Annapolis, 1991), pp.156-7.
20. Jones also may have profited from a tactical manual entitled "The Guide Book of Fighting Experience" which was distributed biannually by the Admiralty. It included narratives, commentaries and lessons from various actions fought by Allied ships, and sections on how best to use new equipment. Night actions, including those fought off Guadalcanal, received a good deal of attention. Plymouth Command was on the distribution list therefore it is probable that Jones and Leatham used it.
21. Jones, "A Matter of Length and Breadth," in *The Naval Review*, XXXVIII, May 1950, p.139.
22. Flotillas traditionally comprise eight destroyers, which were in turn divided into two divisions of four and sub-divisions of two.
23. Jones, *And So To Battle*, (Battle, 1976) p.88.
24. Two other destroyers on strength were under repair.
25. Whitley, *German Destroyers of World War Two*, pp.201-3. Whitley, *Destroyers of World War Two: An International Encyclopedia*, (Annapolis, 1988), pp.63-8 & 73-6.
26. Pritchard, *The Radar War: Germany's Pioneering Achievement, 1904-1945*, (Wellingborough, 1989), pp.190-203. Friedman, *Naval Radar*, pp.205-6. D.E. Graves MS, "German Naval Radar Detectors, Radar Foxing and IFF Equipment 1939-1945: An Overview and Descriptive Catalogue."
27. See Admiralty, Signals Division, "R.D.F. Bulletin," No. 3, 29 May 1943. PRO ADM 220/204.
28. Hezlet, *The Electron and Seapower*, (London, 1975), p.264.
29. Whitley, *German Destroyers of World War Two*, p.166.
30. Unlike Jones, von Bechtolsheim did not command his own destroyer but rode in someone else's ship.
31. Commander B. Jones, "Report of Night Action - 9th June 1944," 14 June 1944, p.1. PRO ADM 199/1644. F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, III pt 2, (London, 1988), pp.161-2. Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, (London, 1991), p.268. Seekriegsleitung, FdZ- Nachricht Nr. 4. Gefecht 8. Zerstörerflotille Am 9.6.44, DHist, SGR II 340, Vol. 51. Pg 74796. This last entry is the appreciation of the 9 June action written by von Bechtolsheim and commented on by the FdZ.
32. Lieutenant P.A. Hazelton, "Enemy R/T Intercepted on 9th June 1944," 12 June 1944, p.2. PRO ADM 199/1644. Hazelton was a Signals Officer on the staff at Plymouth.
33. Jones, *And So To Battle*, p.15. Leatham, "Destroyer Action - Night of 8th/9th June, 1944," 18 June 1944, p.2. Jones, "Report of Night Action - 9th June, 1944," 14 June 1944, pp.1-2. PRO ADM 199/1644.

34. Commander C.F. Namiesniowski, Report of Action, undated, pp.1-2. PRO ADM 199/1644. Leatham, "Destroyer Action - Night of 8th/9th June 1944," pp.1-2.
35. Jones, And So To Battle, p.84.
36. HMS Javelin, Report of Proceedings, 10 June 1944, p.2. PRO ADM 199/1644.
37. Von Bechtolsheim, "Gefecht 8. Zerstörerflotille am 9.6.1944," p.4.
38. Meiklem, Tartar Memoirs, (Glasgow, 1948), p.83.
39. Jones, "Report of Night Action - 9th June 1944," 2.
40. Whitley, German Destroyers of World War II, p.160. Watkins, "Destroyer Action, Ile de Batz, 9 June 1944," p.316. Lieutenant P.A. Hazelton, "Enemy R/T Intercepted on 9th June 1944," p.2. Lieutenant Commander J.R. Barnes, "Report of Action," 9 June 1944, PRO, ADM 199/1644.
41. Commander H.G. DeWolf, "Report of Action," 9 June 1944, p.1. DHist, HMCS Haida 8000.
42. Kriegstabuch (KTB) Z-24, 9 June 1944. "KTB Abschnitt Maschine Des Zerstörer Z-24," 9 June 1944. DHist, SGR II 340, Vol. 72, PG 74646. A KTB is the War Diary kept aboard the ship; the second cited above is the Engineer's.
43. KTB, T-24, 9 June 1944. Lieutenant Commander H.S. Rayner, "Report of Action," 9 June 1944, pp.1-2. DHist, HMCS Huron (Prior 195) 8000.
44. DeWolf, "Report of Action," p.4.
45. For Operation MAPLE see Admiralty Historical Section, Battle Summary No. 39: Operation Neptune, I, (London, 1947), pp.47-8.
46. Deputy Director of Operations Division (Mines) Minute, 28 September 1944. PRO ADM 199/1644. Roskill, The War at Sea, Vol. III, Pt.I, (London, 1972), p.289.
47. DeWolf, "Report of Action," p.2.
48. Von Bechtolsheim, "Gefecht 8. Zerstörerflotille am 9.6.1944." p.6. Jones, "Report of Night Action.," pp.2-3.
49. DeWolf, "Report of Action," p.2.
50. Von Bechtolsheim, "Gefecht 8. Zerstörerflotille am 9.6.1944." p.6. Kriegsmarine action reports are written in the historic present.
51. Von Bechtolsheim, "Gefecht 8. Zerstörerflotille am 9.6.1944," pp.6-7.
52. DeWolf, "Report on Action," p.3. Rear Admiral H.E. "Rastus" Reid, the RCN's future Chief of Naval Staff and an observer in Haida that night, urged DeWolf to abandon the chase and reform on Tartar. Interview with Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf, 2 November 1992.
53. Von Bechtolsheim, "Gefecht 8. Zerstörerflotille am 9.6.1944." p.7. KTB Z-32, 9 June 1944.
54. Von Bechtolsheim, "Gefecht 8. Zerstörerflotille am 9.6.1944," pp.7-8. DeWolf, "Report of Action," p.3. Rayner, "Report of Action," pp.2-3.
55. Whitley, German Destroyers of World War II, pp.162-3.
56. Admiral Kreisch, "Stellungnahme des FdZ," pp.10-11. DHist, SGR II 340, Vol. 51, PG 74796.
57. Leatham, "Destroyer Action - Night of 8th/9th June, 1944," 18 July 1944. PRO ADM 199/1644. The various Admiralty staff commentaries are at the end of Leatham's report.

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