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Barry M. Gough  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

James A. Woods  
*University of New Brunswick*

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# **“One More for Luck”**

## **The Destruction of *U971* by HMCS *Haida* and HMS *Eskimo*, 24 June 1944**

**Barry M. Gough and James A. Wood**

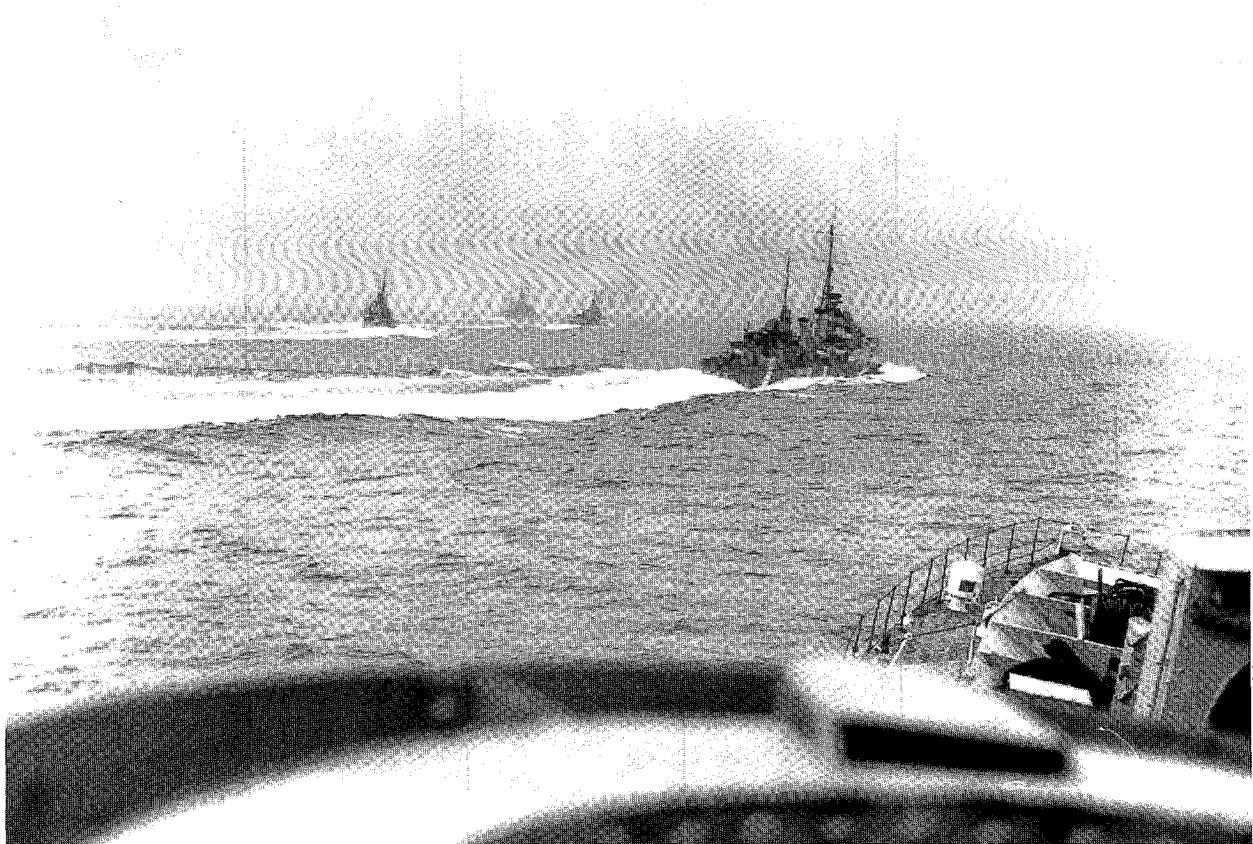
On the evening of 23 June 1944, HMCS *Haida* and HMS *Eskimo* set out from Plymouth, operational base of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla (10th DF), to conduct a sweep of the Western Approaches to the English Channel. Their role was to assist in securing these waters for the ongoing delivery of supplies and reinforcements to the Normandy bridgehead. Across the Channel to the southeast, American, British and Canadian forces were now in their third week of fighting across the fields and hedgerows of Normandy. Operation OVERLORD had been the largest amphibious invasion in history and, dependent as it was on the unimpeded use of the sea, required an intensive concentration of air and naval forces to protect Allied supply convoys. This naval counterpart of OVERLORD was Operation NEPTUNE, and it was as part of this massive undertaking that *Haida* and *Eskimo* now steamed out of Plymouth.

Next morning found the two Tribal-class destroyers patrolling calm waters north of Ushant. Commander Harry DeWolf, RCN, onboard *Haida*, a decorated veteran of several hard-fought actions in the English Channel, was Senior Officer of the force, while HMS *Eskimo* sailed under the capable direction of Lieutenant-Commander E.N. Sinclair, RN. Since February, the 10th DF had been engaged in a running battle with German destroyers and torpedo boats, fighting for control of the narrow sea dividing Britain from Europe. Now, faced with the vastly superior forces of Operation NEPTUNE, Germany had turned to its U-boat fleet, and more specifically those boats recently

fitted with schnorkel equipment, in a desperate, last-ditch effort to disrupt invasion convoys. *U971* was such a boat, and earlier in June this VII-C class submarine, under the command of *Oberleutnant zur See* Walter Zeplien, had received orders to proceed from Norway to the English Channel. It was to be *U971*'s first and last operational mission. Plagued for the entire journey by Allied aircraft and equipment failures, by 24 June the beleaguered U-boat was fast approaching a fatal encounter with *Haida* and *Eskimo*. That evening, the survivors of *U971* would find themselves being taken aboard the Allied destroyers as prisoners of war after a somewhat exceptional encounter: "It was rare for Tribals to kill U-boats. Usually it was the other way around."<sup>1</sup>

### **The 10th Destroyer Flotilla**

HMCS *Haida* and HMS *Eskimo* were Tribal-class destroyers: technologically some of the most advanced naval architecture, marine propulsion systems and weaponry of their time. They were fast and heavily-gunned, veritable pocket cruisers designed to participate in major fleet engagements. Commissioned on 30 August 1943, *Haida* joined the Home Fleet destroyers based at Scapa Flow in September to prepare for her first operational assignment: protecting the Arctic convoys carrying urgently-needed supplies to the Soviet Union. Convoy operations in these far northern dark, cold, stormy waters were major fleet exercises, under constant threat of attack from German air and naval units based in Norway. This was work *Haida* was designed



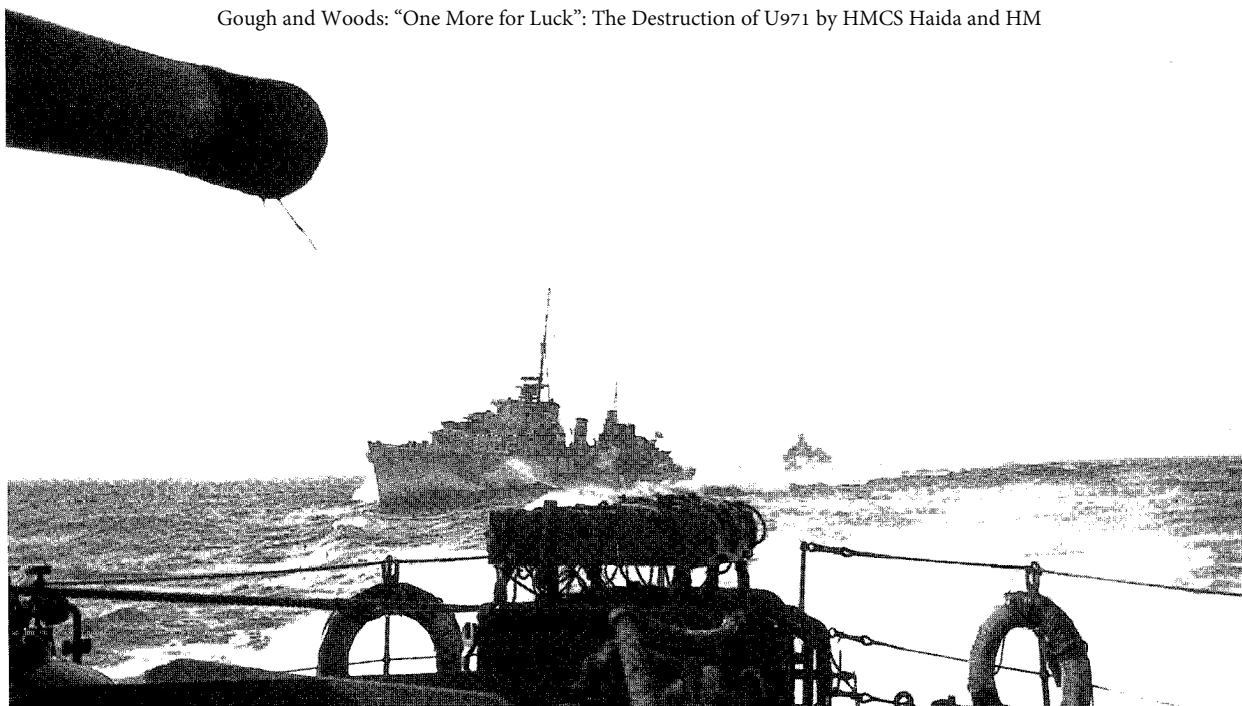
Three Tribals (*Haida* at right) and HMS *Black Prince* (second from left) manoeuvre at high speed March 1944. Together, Tribals of the 10th DF and the cruiser *Black Prince* formed Force 26.

for, and she won a battle honour for her part in the operations which witnessed the sinking of the German battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* at the end of December 1943. *Haida* was then reassigned to Plymouth Command in January 1944 to prowl the English Channel.

*Haida's* sister Tribal HMS *Eskimo* had a more storied wartime career. Built in 1937, she saw action from the earliest days of the war, scoring her first kill on 17 October 1939 by shooting down a German aircraft. She went on to spend the first winter of the war on convoy escort duties, and she later played a role in the highly successful Second Battle of Narvik on 13 April 1940. Here, *Eskimo* took part in the complete destruction of an eight-ship German destroyer flotilla, though in exchange she sustained severe torpedo damage to her bow. After repairs were completed, the veteran Tribal was redeployed to escort duties with the Home Fleet and later went on to help screen the Allied landings in North Africa and Sicily. Struck by fire from a German dive-bomber in this last operation, *Eskimo* returned to England for repairs and subsequently joined the 10th DF on 26 May 1944.

The naval forces gathered under Plymouth Command served as guardians of the Western Approaches to the English Channel. In the first half of 1944, these hotly contested waters were the scene of countless nocturnal skirmishes between Allied naval forces, including the 10th DF, and surface vessels of the German *Kriegsmarine* operating out of French ports. At the same time, the great invasion to open a front in northwest Europe was scheduled for the spring of 1944. "When planning the Normandy invasion," remarks Michael Whitby, a noted authority on the 10th DF, "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."<sup>2</sup> To meet this danger, Plymouth Command gathered the toughest destroyers they could find, among them all the Tribals in Canadian service.

During the spring of 1944 the 10th DF prowled the night waters of the Channel, harrying German shipping and seeking battle with enemy surface forces in offensive sweeps,



*Haida* and *Athabaskan* conducting high speed tactical exercises in the English Channel. The 10th DF sank 35 surface ships, a submarine, and damaged 14 ships at the cost of losing *Athabaskan* on 29 April 1944

and covering Allied minelaying operations along the French coast.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, explains Whitby, "the 'main objective' was to search out and destroy the enemy. The captains of the flotilla took [this] to heart, and this certainly contributed to the aggressiveness, at times verging on recklessness, that characterized the flotilla's subsequent operations."<sup>4</sup> This was Tribal warfare at its best, and *Haida* excelled at it. In her first direct encounter with the enemy on the night of 25-26 April 1944 *Haida* and HMCS *Athabaskan* shared in the destruction of the small destroyer *T-29*: the first enemy surface vessel sunk by the Royal Canadian Navy.<sup>5</sup>

The Germans got revenge a few nights later when, in pursuit of two other Elbing class destroyers, *Athabaskan* was rocked by "two definite explosions, one light, one heavy - almost simultaneously"<sup>6</sup> and sunk. Losing sight of one Elbing, *Haida* turned her guns against the second. With rounds impacting along the length of *T-27*, a fire broke out behind the forward gun, blinding the bridge. Ablaze, and with few options remaining, *T-27* was run hard aground to avoid sinking: *Haida*'s second victory. Harry DeWolf was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for gallantry in action and in recognition of the fact that in two consecutive actions, *Haida* had destroyed an enemy destroyer. This feat was unequaled in Plymouth Command, and spoke to the power of Tribals in surface actions when driven hard by gifted captains.

### The First Patrol of U971

Though commissioned over a year earlier on 1 April 1943, at the time of the Allied landings in Normandy *U971* was still considered a new boat, having yet to set out on its first operational patrol. Built in Hamburg by Blohm & Voss, *U971* was a VII-C class U-boat, an exceptionally seaworthy, maneuverable, and reliable craft. Like all VII-C U-boats, *U971* was built to be a workhorse, with a range of 8,500 miles at 10 knots on the surface. Originally designed to accommodate a crew of 44, *U971* was considerably more crowded in June 1944, having brought additional men onboard to service new anti-aircraft (AA) guns that were installed on all VII-C boats in the later stages of the war. The average age of the crewmen was approximately 21, and most of the men were inexperienced submariners.<sup>7</sup> The captain of *U971*, *Oberleutnant zur See* Walter Zeplien, was 25 years old. Under different circumstances, his first set of orders would likely have sent him off to join the wolfpacks in the North Atlantic. As it happened, in the spring of 1944 *U971* sailed from Kiel to Kristiansand, at the southern tip of Norway, there to be held in readiness against the possibility of an Allied invasion of that country. The deception of Operation FORTITUDE had been a success: as late as June 1944, the Germans remained uncertain as to whether the upcoming invasion would take place in the Pas de Calais, Normandy, or Norway.<sup>8</sup>

	<b>Tribal Class Destroyer</b>	<b>Type VII-C U-Boat</b>
<b>Manufacturer</b>	<i>Haida</i> -Vickers Armstrong, Newcastle <i>Eskimo</i> -V. A. Parsons, Tyne	U971 - Blohm & Voss, Hamburg
<b>Displacement</b>	1960 tons standard 2745 tons full load	769 tons surfaced 871 tons submerged
<b>Length</b> <b>Beam</b> <b>Draft</b>	355.5 ft ( <i>Eskimo</i> ) ; 377 ft ( <i>Haida</i> ) 37.5 feet 13 feet full load	220.5 feet 20.3 feet 15.4 feet
<b>Performance</b>	36 knots (32.5 full load)	surface: max. 17 knots, avg. 10 knots, submerged: 7.6 knots for 1 hour, twin AEG 750 hp electric motors
<b>Crew</b>	238 – 259	44 (+ additional crew brought onboard to service new AA guns)
<b>Armament</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 twin mounting 4.7-inch guns</li> <li>• 1 twin 4-inch gun – high angle</li> <li>• 1 2-pdr quad Pom-Pom</li> <li>• 6 20 mm twin Oerlikons</li> <li>• 4 21-inch torpedoes</li> <li>• 2 Depth Charge throwers-10 Mk VII DC in position, 22 on deck, 24 between decks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 AA gun - 3.5-inch (later - 37 mm)</li> <li>• 2 AA guns – 20 mm</li> <li>• 14 torpedoes - 21-inch. 4 tubes forward, 1 aft</li> <li>• 1 deck gun – 88 mm</li> </ul>
<b>Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 Canadian Tribals - 4 built in Halifax &amp; 4 built in UK</li> <li>• 16 British &amp; 3 Australian Tribals</li> <li>• “magnificent in appearance, majestic in movement, menacing in disposition.”</li> <li>• Tribals were technologically advanced ships in weaponry, propulsion, and structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 568 commissioned 1940 – 1945, capable of diving to periscope depth in 30 seconds and a maximum dive depth to 722 feet.</li> <li>• Range of 8500 miles at 10 knots on surface, medium sized, very manoeuvrable, reliable and exceptionally seaworthy</li> <li>• most famous VII-C was U96 featured in the movie “Das Boot”</li> </ul>

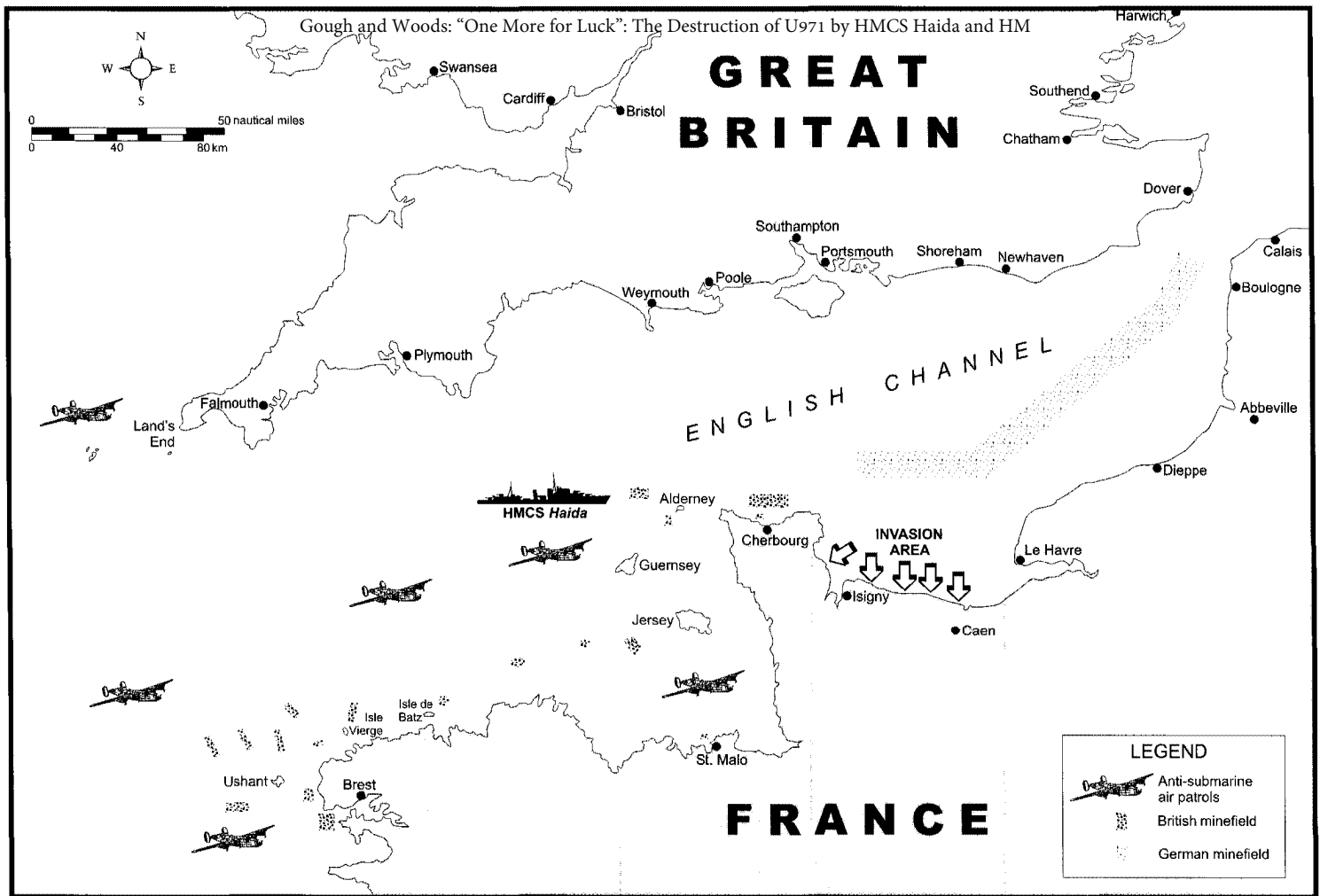
## Operation Neptune

As of 6 June 1944, both Plymouth Command and the German U-boat arm found themselves under new orders in response to the invasion. Both sides understood that the success of Overlord depended upon the ability of the Allies to transport vast quantities of men and materiel across the Channel. D-Day was the greatest seaborne assault of all time and required an armada of vessels, all gathered together under the auspices of Operation NEPTUNE. In the first forty-eight hours of the invasion, slow-moving transport vessels were scheduled to land 150,000 men and 1,500 tanks over a 50-mile stretch of the Norman coast, with a million men and several million tons of materiel to follow in the weeks ahead.<sup>11</sup>

To counter the long-anticipated invasion, the Germans relied on their land forces and coastal fortifications, supplemented, with any luck, by the 230 *Kriegsmarine* surface vessels stationed in France and some 130 U-boats stationed along the Bay of Biscay and in Norway.<sup>12</sup> While U-boats could be deployed only with great difficulty amid the shallow depths and unpredictable cross-tides of the Channel, they posed a significant threat

should the Germans decide to mount a determined offensive.

NEPTUNE's planners did not underestimate the enemy. To counter the threat of a German naval offensive in the Channel, both flanks of the sea-lanes to Normandy required a screen of warships and patrol aircraft. In the western Channel, this task fell to Plymouth Command, and to the destroyers of the 10th DF. It was expected that the Germans would use their sixteen destroyers at Brest, Cherbourg and along the Bay of Biscay to disrupt the invasion convoys as they crossed the English Channel. However, a more serious threat was posed by the U-boats, with one worst-case scenario put forward by the Admiralty's Anti-U-boat Division speculating that a loss of 240 ships per week was not outside the realm of possibility.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Escort Groups composed of escort destroyers, frigates and other smaller vessels – the anti-submarine specialists of the North Atlantic war with the latest in A/S sensors and weaponry – were established to protect convoys from U-boat attacks and to hunt them down as they approached. The heavier-armed Tribals of the 10th DF stood ready to counter German surface vessels should they attempt to interfere with the anti-submarine specialists.



## Operation NEPTUNE – 6 June 1944

Commander DeWolf, in his Report of Proceedings for June 1944, described *Haida's* work at the time of the invasion:

The Flotilla's invasion role was that of Covering Force in the Western Channel to protect the invasion convoy routes from attack by enemy surface vessels. The Flotilla continued to operate directly under the orders of Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth and in effect little change of routine resulted directly from the invasion. With the arrival in the Channel of the numerous A/S Escort Groups, to counter the U-boat threat, the scope of the Flotilla's patrol was extended to provide cover for those groups operating near the enemy coast.<sup>14</sup>

It was while screening the western approaches to the Channel that *Haida* and HMCS *Huron* shared in *Haida's* third surface kill when, on the night of 9 June, they became engaged in the largest purely naval action of Operation NEPTUNE. During the battle between the 10th DF and a flotilla of three large German destroyers, *Haida* and *Huron* engaged the powerful Narvik class Z-32, scoring a hit that

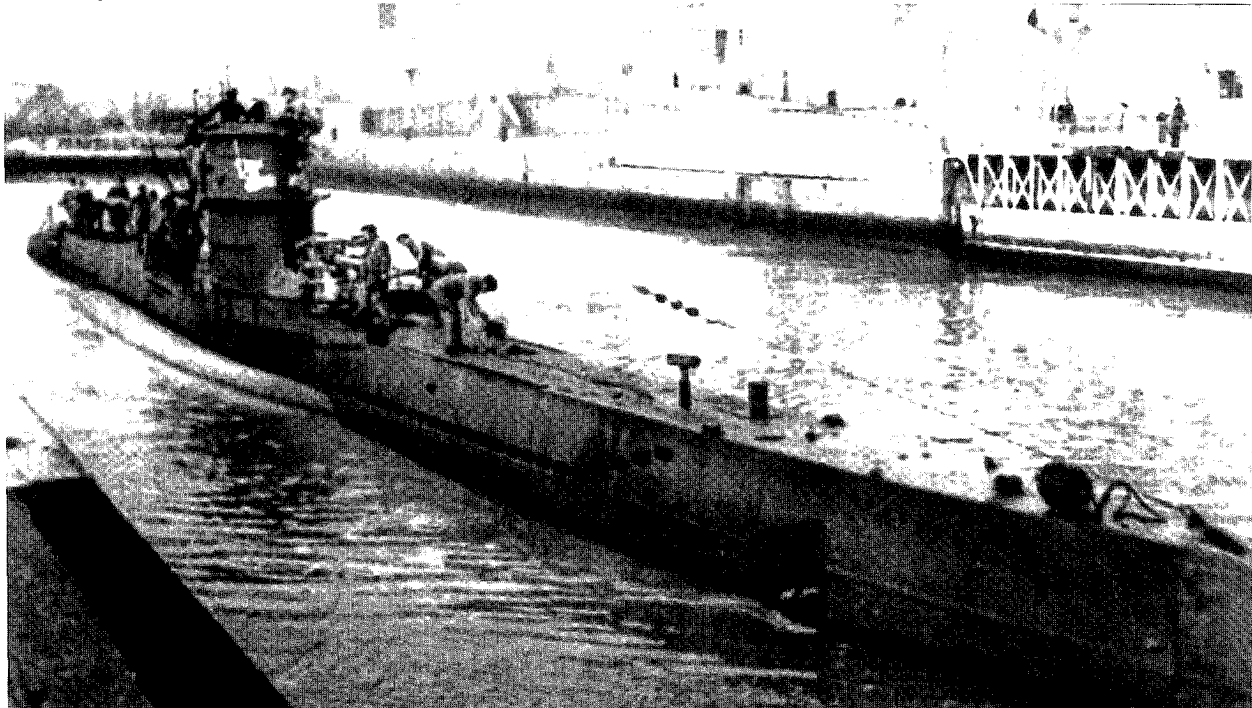
put the port engine out of commission. Another three hits destroyed one of the ship's forward gun mountings. For three hours they chased Z-32, scoring repeated hits until finally a shot from one of the Canadian Tribals shut down the Narvik's starboard engine. With escape now impossible, the burning Z-32 was run aground on the rocks of Ile de Batz. DeWolf was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for the night's action. The Tribals had destroyed two German warships and extensively damaged two others: losses the enemy could not afford with an invasion bridgehead now established on the mainland of northwest Europe. Moreover, *Haida* established herself the pre-eminent destroyer in the Channel, and DeWolf as a master of night surface actions.

### U-971 Sets Out for the Channel

Even as the 10th Destroyer Flotilla celebrated the removal of one threat from the Channel, a second set out from Norway to take its place. On 6 June, a wireless signal arrived at

Kristiansand announcing the Anglo-American landings in France, followed two days later by *U971*'s new orders: proceed on the surface into the North Sea. Zeplien received a second signal on 10 June directing him to set course for the Atlantic via the *Rosengarten* off the Shetlands. These were dangerous waters for a U-boat, particularly given the low clouds and bad visibility – conditions favouring Allied patrol aircraft.<sup>15</sup> Initially steering as directed, Zeplien decided his present course was too dangerous after sighting Allied aircraft and ordered *U971*

The next signal Zeplien received ordered *U971* and four other U-boats to proceed to an area of operations in the English Channel between Plymouth and Ushant. It was to be a passage beset by difficulties. On 13 June one of his acoustic T5 torpedoes developed a malfunction and had to be jettisoned. The next morning the U-boat was forced to submerge after being pursued by a ship that Zeplien suspected was summoning attack aircraft. Passing near the Faeroes on 15 June, *U971* was sighted while fully surfaced and attacked by a British Sunderland,



NAC/CN 3817 courtesy Ken Macpherson

A Type VII-C U-Boat entering a French Biscay harbour. *U971* was a type VII-C, known as the workhorse of the *Unterseebootwaffe*. Shown here is *U96*, featured in the movie *Das Boot*.

onto a new heading that would pass only a few miles north of the Faeroes.

Just as the orders given to *Haida* and *Eskimo* were now dictated by the requirements of the D-Day invasion, so too were those of *U-971*. Admiral Dönitz's unequivocal order of June 11 to his U-boat commanders reflected the urgency of the situation in the Channel:

The invasion fleet is to be attacked with complete recklessness....When it is necessary to get to grips with the enemy landing fleet, there is no question of any regard to danger through shallow water or possible minefields or reservations of any kind....A U-boat which inflicts losses on the enemy during landing has discharged its highest duty and justified its existence, even if it does not survive.<sup>16</sup>

but was able to return fire with flak armament and force the aircraft to turn away.

Zeplien's second encounter with patrol aircraft did not turn out so well. On 20 June, Coastal Command aircraft attacked the surfaced U-boat, this time while it was passing south of Ireland. On this occasion, a Leigh Light-equipped Wellington bomber of 407 (RCAF) Squadron, piloted by Flying Officer Frederick H. Foster, attacked with depth charges and inflicted damage to three of the four bow torpedo tubes. Flying over the stricken *U971*, the Wellington's rear-gunner also reported further damage to the target after seeing some of the 400 rounds from his gun ricocheting off the hull.<sup>17</sup> The following day, on 21 June, a Sunderland of 228 (RAF) Squadron and a Halifax bomber of 502 (RAF)





Squadron, machine gunned *U971*, with the Halifax also managing to drop a pattern of four depth charges that fell wide of the target by only 63 feet.<sup>18</sup> Zeplien's green crew was quickly learning why Allied aircraft were both feared and despised by the U-boats.

Following the attack, the captain of *U971* decided that aircraft cover was too strong and again shifted his course. On 22 June he tested his torpedo tubes, not knowing the full extent of the damage. He discovered that only two tubes remained serviceable. That same day he received a signal stating that the most important area of operations for *U971* and the other four U-boats was off the coast near Cherbourg. Noting the urgency of this signal, Zeplien set course for that area using his schnorkel.<sup>19</sup> This device, essentially an intake and exhaust valve, allowed U-boats to continue operating diesel engines while travelling at periscope depth, thereby avoiding detection by Allied aircraft and radar, though at a cost of reduced visibility and speed.

In the early morning hours of 24 June, while schnorkelling, *U971* sighted two destroyers, one dead ahead and the other off the port bow, both at a range of about 2,000 yards. Seizing upon this opportunity, Zeplien manoeuvred to fire a torpedo from the stern tube, only to discover that it could not be released. Instead, the torpedo "ran 'hot' – its propeller started running but the torpedo did not eject from the tube, a situation terrifying to submariners."<sup>20</sup> Coming about for a second attempt, Zeplien attempted to fire an acoustic T-5 torpedo from Tube II, his only working bow tube, but this too failed to fire. Both destroyers then disappeared into the mist as the crew of *U971* undoubtedly cursed their boat, loaded as it was with equipment that never seemed to work. Three of the torpedo tubes were damaged beyond use and an attempt at firing the remaining two had resulted in two misfires. One of the officers later reported that even the head was broken, recalling that "at 0600 the boat surfaced to dump fecal matter overboard as the toilets were defective."<sup>21</sup>

*Oberleutnant zur See* Walter Zeplien, on his first operational mission in command of *U971*, at this point made the decision that it was hopeless to continue operating in this area without repairs. While *U971* was surfaced to clear the defective toilets, Zeplien signaled that

he was putting into Brest, approximately 30 miles to the west. *U971* was running on the surface. At 0615 hours an aircraft was sighted but, perhaps not surprisingly, neither the 37 mm nor the 20 mm would fire and *U971* dived. At 0730 hours, the U-boat was again brought to the surface to proceed at full speed towards Brest, but within twenty minutes another aircraft was sighted. Again *U971* was forced to crash dive, this time to a depth of about 400 feet. Since daybreak, Zeplien had brought his vessel to the surface on two occasions and both times been spotted by enemy aircraft within 15 to 20 minutes. Given the intensity of Allied air cover, running below the surface using schnorkel seemed out of the question – even if the enemy missed the wake of the schnorkel itself, the diesel engines still produced black clouds of exhaust – and continuing along the surface without anti-aircraft armament would be suicidal.

*U971*'s best option at this point was to remain submerged and use batteries, but then, "after proceeding for about one mile toward Brest, the batteries failed. Zeplien realized that his only hope of escape was to proceed surfaced under cover of darkness into Brest. He ordered the men into their bunks and all hands were issued with potash cartridges."<sup>22</sup> Intending to rest on the ocean floor until after sundown before making a break on the surface for Brest, there was to be no sleep for the crew of *U971*. Within less than an hour, at 0830 hours, an Asdic signature was noted by a passing Allied vessel and a series of depth charge attacks commenced. *Leutnant zur See* Helmut Buchholz, Second Watch Officer of *U971*, later reported that these attacks continued all day, every 20 minutes, always with 12 bombs.<sup>23</sup>

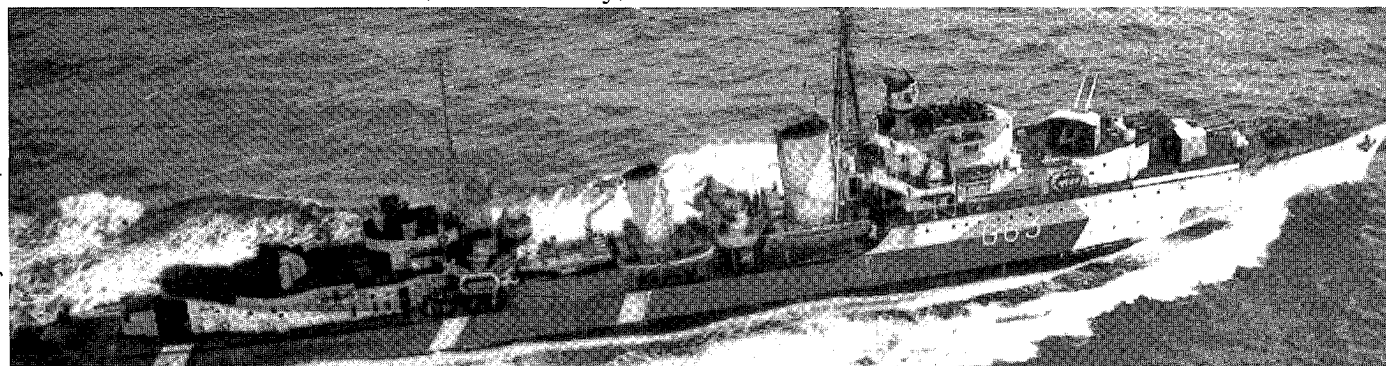
### **The Attack: *Haida* and *Eskimo* "Roar off to the Spot"**

On 23 June, *Haida*, in company with *Eskimo*, swept inside the Channel Isles in support of the Light Coastal Forces operating off St-Malo, returning to the area off Land's End the next morning. At 0848 hours Plymouth ordered the two Tribals to proceed south across the Channel. With DeWolf acting as Senior Officer, their new task was to act in support of the Captain F.J. Walker's famous U-boat killers the 2nd Escort Group by ensuring that German destroyers did not attempt to interfere with their

anti-submarine sweep. It took the Tribals nearly four hours to make the crossing, and upon their arrival *Haida* received a signal from Captain Walker that a U-boat had recently been sighted by aircraft northwest of Ushant.<sup>24</sup>

While the 2nd Escort Group was conducting its search, the two Tribals established their patrol line to the north, zig-zagging in line abreast at 25 knots. It was a calm, cloudless day, with

minutes later. With the celebrated U-boat killer, Captain Johnny Walker, only a few miles off, DeWolf signalled the 2nd Escort Group: "We have a submarine here, would you like to take over?" "No," came the reply, "go ahead and get on with it."<sup>28</sup> DeWolf also notified other Escort Groups in the area of the situation, expecting the A/S specialists to take over as soon as possible. DeWolf was keenly aware that Tribals were not



RAF Photograph of *Haida* making good speed off the coast of England, 1944. *Haida* and *Eskimo* were Tribal-class destroyers, noted as fast, versatile, heavily-gunned ships that inspired their officers and men with pride.

excellent visibility, and at 1545 hours both ships reported sighting a Liberator some 5 miles astern dropping depth charges or bombs. Moments earlier, Flying Officer Jan Vella of 311 (Czech) Squadron RAF had sighted the periscope of a U-boat on the surface at 49 00' N, 05 40' W – approximately half-way across the Channel between Ushant and Land's End. Vella engaged the enemy with rockets and depth charges and dropped a smoke float to mark the U-boat's last position.<sup>25</sup> The Liberator then turned away to attack a second periscope that had appeared nearby, again using rockets and depth charges.<sup>26</sup>

According to DeWolf, a report of a U-boat on the surface was welcome news, "so we roared off to that spot." He continued, "We couldn't talk to the Czech, we couldn't understand him and he couldn't understand us, but we did get the messages he was sending to the Admiralty."<sup>27</sup> By the time *Haida* and *Eskimo* had arrived on the scene, the Liberator had lost contact with the target – U971.

### "One More for Luck"

Both *Haida* and *Eskimo* reduced speed to 7 knots in order to facilitate their asdic search. *Eskimo* was the first ship to detect the submarine, with *Haida* obtaining contact a few

properly equipped for and had no real experience with hunting U-boats. At this point, it even seemed likely that the target had managed to escape and that *Haida* and *Eskimo* were now pursuing a false contact. Nevertheless, the two Tribals continued "the hunt, pending the arrival of EG 15. When the latter heard that two fleet class destroyers [Tribals] were attacking an immobile target that seemed to be on the bottom, they left *Haida* and *Eskimo* to pursue their own folly."<sup>29</sup> This is the view of Marc Milner. Signalman George Mannix later recalled:

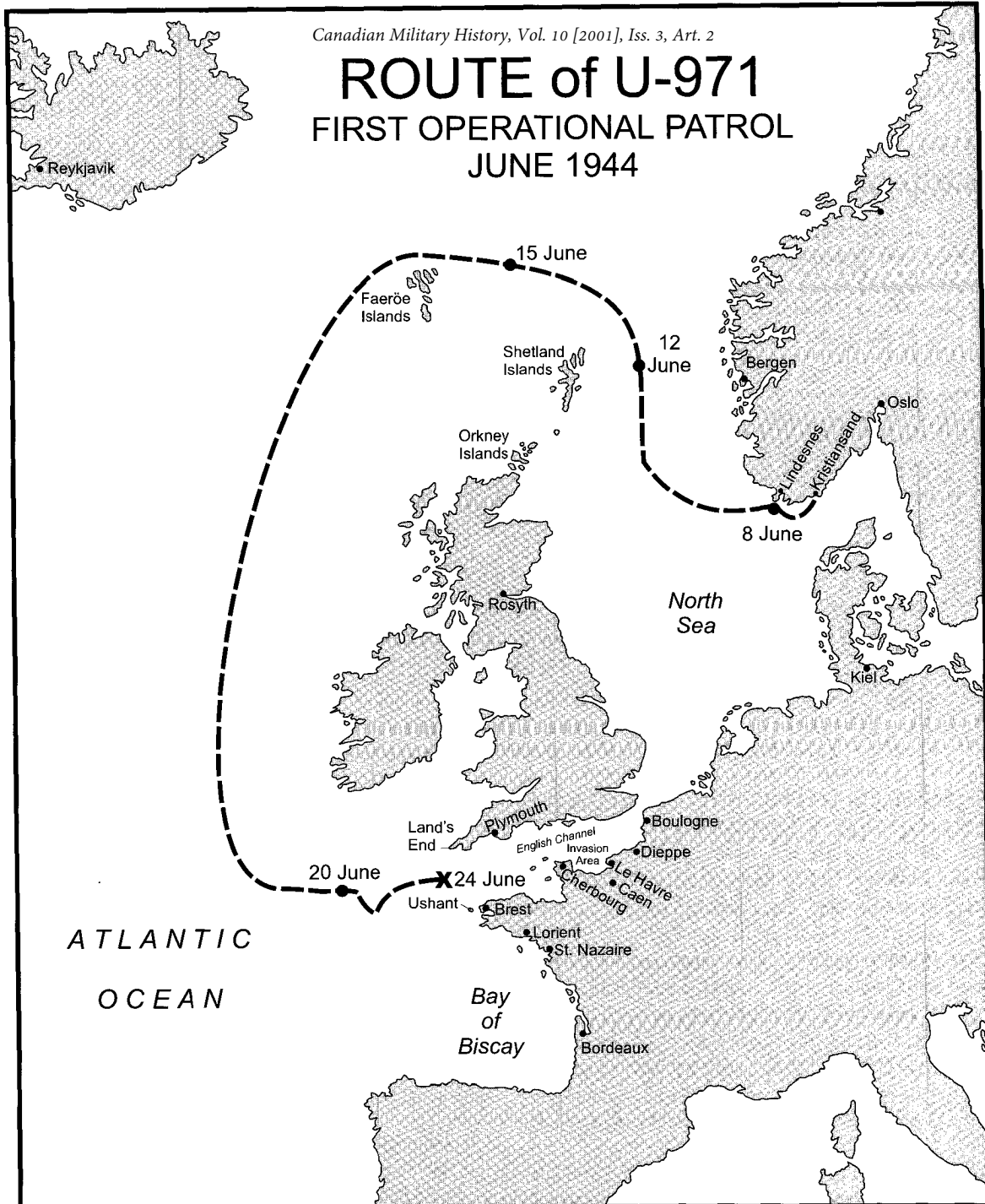
Cdr DeWolf decided to abandon this questionable pursuit and carry on with his ordered Tunnel Operation. At this, the normally mild mannered and controlled A/S team, ...Lieutenant John Coates and...Chief Petty Officer John Lipton, rushed to the bridge in high excitement and insisted on further prosecution of the echo, convinced they had a sub. So DeWolf revised his decision and soon the team gained contact with the sub at about 1600, drifting with the current just clear of the bottom.<sup>30</sup>

From 1626 hours to 1825 hours the two ships carried out nine complete depth charge attacks, seven of them by *Eskimo*. By 1749 hours, eight of these patterns had been dropped. Although no visible results from the attacks could be discerned at first, it was believed that the submarine could still be lurking somewhere in

# ROUTE of U-971

## FIRST OPERATIONAL PATROL

### JUNE 1944



the immediate area. At 1803 hours, after almost two hours of attacking, DeWolf signalled to *Eskimo*: "Will drop one more pattern for luck."<sup>31</sup> This final barrage came at 1825 hours.

Now the cat and mouse waiting game had begun. The depth of water here was 250 feet, hardly enough for the U-boat to make a deep dive, and she could only lie quietly on the ocean floor. Earlier that afternoon, after more than seven hours of depth-charging, Zeplien had decided to ascend to periscope depth, probably looking for an opportunity to replenish *U971*'s air supply. Instead, he had been attacked by an

Allied aircraft, suffering further damage in the process, and forced to crash dive to the bottom. At this point, "the likely course of action for a U-boat being hunted was to bottom and lie 'with the tide' (bow resting on the bottom and stern pointing down the direction of the tide stream) no more than 2-4,000 yards from its would-be target. This trick is what *U971* played on *Haida* and *Eskimo*."<sup>32</sup> Lying on the bottom, particularly close inshore and affected by tides, Zeplien knew that *U971* would present a difficult target, as asdic echoes bounced in all directions, complicated by schools of fish, rock ledges, and differences in salinity from fresh-water run-off.

Under these circumstances, according to Harry DeWolf: "I thought – well, the Channel here is full of wrecks, so we're probably bombarding wrecks on the bottom and we'll go on doing that till we give up or we've already destroyed the submarine and it's on the bottom."<sup>33</sup> Thus, by 1825 hours, he was ready to call an end to the hunt and decided to carry out one last attack.

Unknown to *Haida* and *Eskimo*, their "one more pattern for luck" caused the situation aboard *U971* to deteriorate rapidly. "The first water entry occurred at 1830 hours through the stern glands, and shortly afterwards water came through the vents to diving tank No.3."<sup>34</sup> Repairs were quickly made, but it goes without saying that by this point the crew was getting very nervous. Now in their eleventh hour of intermittent depth charging since the first attack that morning, by 1830 hours the crew of *U971* had endured the last two hours under near-constant bombardment by the two destroyers above, who as yet were showing no sign of giving up until the job was done. It was to be a hunt to exhaustion, and the strain was beginning to take its toll on Zeplien and his crew.

For almost an hour after the last depth charge attack was completed, *Haida* lay still in the water, listening for any indication of the submerged U-boat. At the same time, *Eskimo*

had lost contact with the target, and was quietly conducting a slow-speed search. As they waited, *Haida's* crew undoubtedly thought back to a few weeks before when a torpedo that seemed to come out of nowhere had slammed into their sister-ship, *Athabaskan*. To make matters worse, by this time the Czech Liberator's report of a second periscope in the area had probably been translated by headquarters and retransmitted in English.

### Desperate Action and Lightning Response

*U971* was running out of options. The batteries were dead and it seemed decidedly unlikely that a working torpedo could be found anywhere on the boat. Air quality was poor, with just enough left to surface.<sup>35</sup> According to later testimony by the prisoners, at this point "the Captain made up his mind that escape was unlikely, further depth charging too awful to contemplate, and that the only thing to do was to surface and save his crew."<sup>36</sup> He explained the plan to the officers and men while standing knee-deep in the water of the control room and finishing off the last of *U971's* beer ration. After ordering all secret gear and papers destroyed, at 1900 hours Zeplien thanked the crew for their loyalty and ordered the ballast tanks blown. *U971* then began a rapid rise to the surface.

Depth charge explosion off stern of *Haida*. After *Eskimo* and *Haida* launched eight depth charge attacks against *U971*, Commander DeWolf decided upon "one more for luck" at 1825 hours. This final barrage was the only one causing real damage, forcing the U-boat to surface.



courtesy David Ernst



RCN photo R-1950 by Lieutenant-Cdr W. Sclater RCNVR

View from *Haida* 24 June 1944 after destruction of *U971*. *Eskimo* stands by as a motor boat from *Haida* goes to rescue the remaining six U-boat survivors, including the captain, Zeplien.

*Haida* and *Eskimo* were in the final stages of preparing another depth charge attack when the asdic officer reported to DeWolf that the submarine was blowing tanks and coming up rapidly. *U971* then broke the surface some eight hundred yards off *Haida*'s port bow. At this, *Haida*'s gunners burst into immediate action, bringing the forward "B" gun mounting onto the target and opening fire. Al Warner, a rating from *Haida*, recalled the scene:

The submarine was almost between us and the *Eskimo*, and she [*Eskimo*] went full astern to back up when the boys opened up with the 20 mm. "B" gun was fully manned at this time, and when the submarine surfaced they depressed the gun to fire at the submarine. We were cruising with the guns elevated at 45 degrees, anti-submarine positions, "A" gun off to starboard, "B" gun to port. The sub was so close [200 yards] they had to depress "A" gun so "B" wouldn't hit the barrels. That gave *Eskimo* time to back up before we opened fire. The first salvo

hit the sub; the second, too. That's all "B" gun fired. Two salvos, four hits.<sup>37</sup>

As DeWolf described it: "a hit was obtained on the conning tower, with the second salvo. High explosive was used and penetrated the conning tower, starting a fire, the flames being clearly visible through the hole made."<sup>38</sup> The enemy could offer no resistance. "B" mounting and small arms fire was quickly checked once it became apparent that the enemy did not intend to fight.

The U-boat lay awash. Men were coming up on deck and jumping over the side. As the crew began to abandon ship, both *Haida* and *Eskimo* closed for boarding and lowered their whalers in an attempt to reach the stricken submarine before it went down. Any chance of capturing the U-boat intact, however, or recovering secret documents or equipment quickly disappeared:

the damage inflicted by *Haida's* gunnery was lethal. The submarine capsized and quietly slipped beneath the waves of the Channel. Although small explosions were later heard, it seems likely that *U971* was destroyed by gunfire rather than by the scuttling charges set by the crew.<sup>39</sup> *U971* was lost at 1917 hours, at 49 01'N 05 35'W, northwest of Ushant. "Three hours of depth charging and three minutes of gunfire had ended her story, the first bringing her to the surface and the second sending her smashed to the bottom."<sup>40</sup>

The task of rescuing the German crewmen was then set upon, with fifty-two of the fifty-three officers and men being recovered, 46 taken onboard *Eskimo* while *Haida* screened, and the other six taken into *Haida*. Of the survivors, six were injured, three seriously, including one rating who had been shot through the hand a few days earlier during one of the air attacks. Another casualty, having suffered a wound to his leg, probably caused by a 20mm round from the *Oerlikons*, was given an emergency blood transfusion. While this was going on, there also seems to have been some tough-talk by the prisoners, as *Haida* rating Warner continued:

I understand, also, that when the survivors were picked up and taken aboard our ship, one of them asked if this was the *G-63*. We said yes. He says, "Well, you have the other ship [*Eskimo*] to thank for your lives." They'd pinpointed us and were goin' to let go their torpedoes, but when

they scanned the surface and saw the *Eskimo* they knew that if they torpedoed us, the *Eskimo* was right there; they'd be dead within an hour. They were lookin' out for themselves.<sup>41</sup>

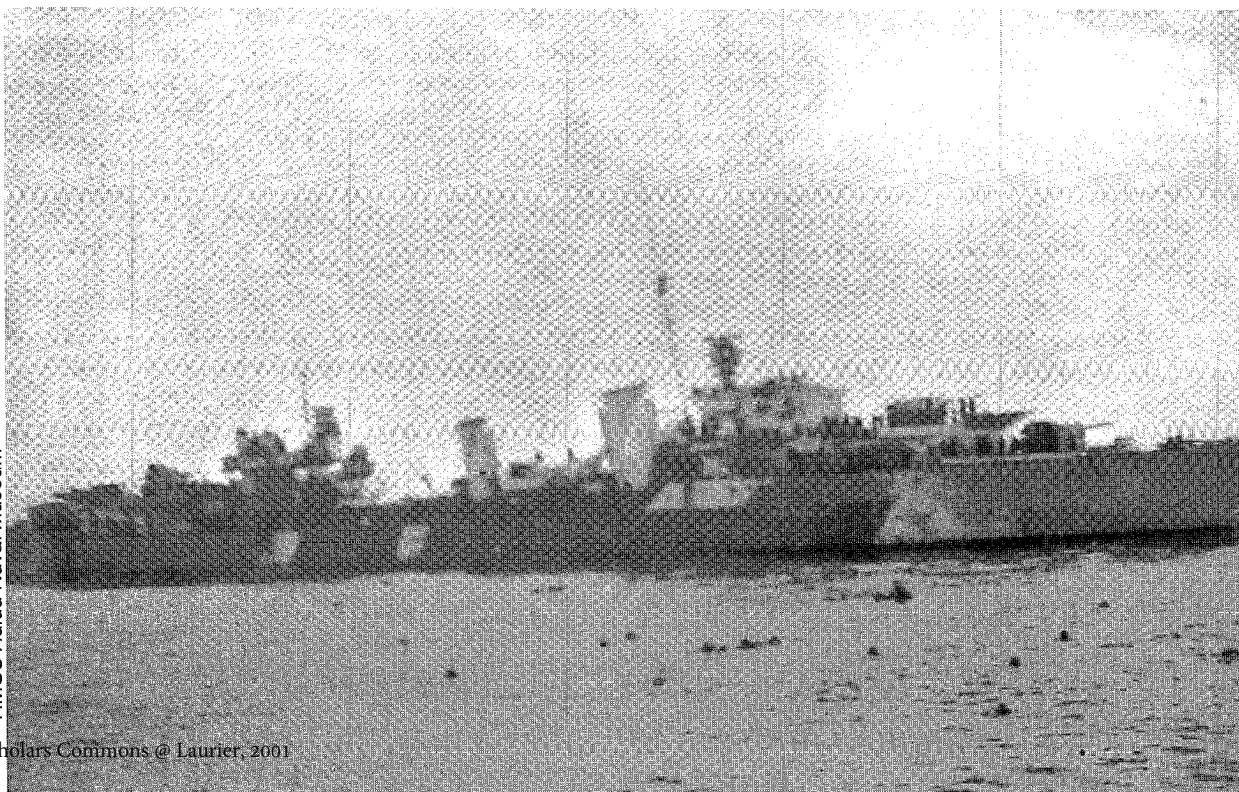
This is all assuming, of course, that a working torpedo could be located somewhere in *U971*.

The destruction of *U971* exemplified Harry DeWolf's actions in the English Channel. His determination to stay with the action, his aggressiveness and good fortune often paid off. A true leader, he had listened to his officers when they urged him to stay with the chase, even though it could not be certain that the target remained in the area. It was the last depth charge pattern, dropped "for luck" at 1825, that caused the final damage and forced *U971* to the surface.<sup>42</sup>

### Reflections on the Destruction of *U971*

Once the rescue was complete and the whalers recovered, *Haida* accompanied *Eskimo* to Falmouth, arriving at 0300 on 25 June 1944. Here, the prisoners from *U971* were sent ashore for internment before the two Tribals returned to Plymouth. Passing the harbour gate, *Haida* received a signal from *Black Prince*: "Elbings, Narviks, and submarines all seem to come alike to you." To this DeWolf replied that it was just Saturday recreation for the crew.<sup>43</sup>

Survivors of *U971* Awaiting Rescue, 24 June 1944. *Eskimo* took 46 prisoners onboard as *Haida* screened.





RCN photo courtesy Ken Macpherson

Captain of HMCS *Haida* Commander H. G. DeWolf. Awarded the Distinguished Service Cross three times as well as the Distinguished Service Order, DeWolf is Canada's most renowned fighting sailor. He had the Nelson touch: the desire 'to engage the enemy more closely'.

rather, designed for surface action. The versatility of Tribal destroyers, the two commanders and their crews, along with the repeated practice of 10th DF had all paid off in the destruction of *U971*.

In contrast, *U971* began running short on luck in the early stages of its command. Some of Zeplien's decisions have been questioned. In *Eskimo's* "Information Obtained from Prisoners," for example, it is stated that none of the crew interviewed could explain why the German submarine was running on the surface during daylight hours of 24 June. The report indicates that "the crew were quite mystified as to why it was necessary – they did not think it was, in fact, necessary at all." However, in an account of the sinking, Second Watch Officer Helmut Buchholz stated that *U971* had been obliged to surface to empty holding tanks and clear out foul air. Although the U-boat had been fitted with a schnorkel in April of 1944,<sup>45</sup> there were several reasons why Zeplien had chosen to run on the surface. Given the damage suffered in repeated attacks, he had decided to make speed on the surface to Brest. Using the schnorkel, he would have had to contend with reduced visibility and speed. Further, given the clear visibility on 24 June, the wake produced by a schnorkel on calm seas and the diesel exhaust would not likely have gone unnoticed by Allied patrol vessels and aircraft.

In *Eskimo's* report of the sinking, Sinclair called Zeplien's actions "stupid" for remaining stationary after being spotted by the *Liberator*. He stated that it would have been a much more difficult operation had Zeplien used different tactics.<sup>46</sup> Buchholz, on the other hand, stated, "Since a silent running was not possible due to damage to the rear shaft drive, the boat was set on the seabed." The extent of the damages suffered by *U971* over the course of her journey had left her without essential weapons, unable to proceed using battery power, and ultimately with a diminishing air supply. By 1900 hours on 24 June, Zeplien had to choose: either bring *U971* to the surface, or die.

Several RN and RCN decorations were granted as a result of this action. DeWolf and Sinclair were both recognized for their

Later assessments of the attack on the U-boat contained comments in regards to future anti-submarine work with Tribal-class destroyers. The commander of *Eskimo* stated:

In spite of this success I am strongly of the opinion that Tribals should not engage in prolonged A/S work. An Escort Group should take over at the first possible opportunity. I think it is reasonable to sit on a contact for a short period, but early relief by the proper A/S ships from Escort Groups is most desirable. Though this success adds to the variety of the 10th Flotilla's bag, and is a feather in our cap, it should not be taken as too strong an encouragement to go after U-boats when so many better equipped vessels are available.<sup>44</sup>

Commander Sinclair went on to capture the spirit of the moment by adding to his report on the sinking of *U971*: "though it does show that such good opportunities must be taken without hesitation when they occur." Herein lay a special strength of DeWolf as Senior Officer. He had seized control of an unanticipated situation, resulting in pragmatic and persistent teamwork alongside *Eskimo*. An expert in the use of *Haida's* main armament, he had on this occasion made effective use of anti-submarine equipment even though Tribals are not sub-hunters, but

leadership. Lipton was recommended for decoration and received the Distinguished Service Medal and Coates was Mentioned in Despatches "for outstanding devotion to duty...during a hunt which resulted in the destruction of an enemy submarine."<sup>47</sup> These were the two officers who convinced DeWolf to persist with the attack, even though, as DeWolf explained years later with classic understatement, "Frankly, I hadn't much confidence in our ability to sink the bloody thing. We weren't in that kind of game, we hadn't had any practice at it."<sup>48</sup> Able Seaman T.F. Cuthbert and Able Seaman R.H. MacLeod, operators in the Asdic Control Room, were Mentioned in Despatches. Commander Basil Jones, RN, Senior Officer of the 10th DF, congratulated DeWolf for the victory, calling it "another feather in *Haida's* Headdress"<sup>49</sup> – a fitting tribute for a Tribal. On Dominion Day of 1944, Commander DeWolf was promoted to the rank of Captain by the Government of Canada.

### Afterword

"Happy *Haida*," was noted for her success and luck. In his memoirs, Commander Jones paid tribute to DeWolf: "Hard-over Harry was an outstanding officer, not only in skill but in aggressive spirit. Furthermore, he had that priceless gift of fortune...of there always being a target in whatever area he was told to operate."<sup>50</sup> The continued good fortune of *Haida*, however, meant destruction for *U971*. It also led to an increased admiration for the versatility of the Tribals. While Allied Escort Groups, specifically trained in anti-submarine (A/S) warfare, had planned and practised repeatedly to keep the D-Day shipping lanes free from U-boat attack, they had been short on luck. "After nearly three weeks of tireless effort by the A/S specialists during which they had managed to sink only one U-boat, the A/S novices of the 10th Flotilla sank one on their first try."<sup>51</sup>

The risks had been great for the crews of *Haida*, *Eskimo* and *U971*, yet only one man died in the encounter. It had been a relatively bloodless battle, especially considering the fate of so many other U-boat crews. By 1944, the life expectancy of a new U-boat had plummeted to almost a single patrol. On the Allied side, the fate of *Athabaskan* had already shown how close to the line a ship's crew could be at any time.

The destruction of *U971* illustrated the high degree of co-operation in the Channel among the ships of the RCN and RN, as well as among the aircraft of the RAF and RCAF. Over the course of nine days, *U971* suffered attacks by RCAF 422 and 407 Squadrons and by 502, 228, and 311 (Czech) Squadrons of the RAF. HMS *Eskimo* and HMCS *Haida* together brought an end to the long pursuit. The victory had been one link within the massive accomplishments of Operation NEPTUNE.

### Notes

1. Barry M. Gough, *HMCS HAIDA: Battle Ensign Flying* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2001), p.104. Proceeds from the sale of the book will go to the Friends of HMCS *Haida* for the maintenance of the ship as a Canadian naval museum at Ontario Place, Toronto.
2. Michael Whitby, "Masters of the Channel Night: The 10th Destroyer Flotilla's Victory off Ile de Batz, 9 June 1944," *Canadian Military History* 2:1 (Spring, 1993), p.5.
3. Canadian Naval Mission Overseas (London) Narrative, "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," Directorate of History and Heritage, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa, Ontario (DHH), File 8000 (A-Z), p.1.
4. Michael Whitby, "'Foolin' Around the French Coast: RCN Tribal-Class Destroyers in Action – April 1944," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 19:3 (Winter, 1989), p.55.
5. E.C. Russell, *H.M.C.S. HAIDA: A Brief History*, (Ottawa: Naval Historical Section, Naval Headquarters, [1959] new ed. n.d.), p.11.
6. Lieutenant R.B. Hayward, "Account of the loss of *Athabaskan*," 3 May 1945, NSS 8870-355/3, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario (NAC), RG 24, Vol. 6890, p.1.
7. Lieutenant-Commander E.N. Sinclair, "HMS *Eskimo's* Letter No. 0114, Information Obtained From Prisoners," 25 June, 1944, DHH HMCS *Haida* (prior to 1950) 8000, Enclosure 6, p.1.
8. Bill McAndrew, Donald E. Graves and Michael Whitby, *Normandy 1944: The Canadian Summer* (Montreal: Art Global, 1994), p.92.
9. Gough, *HMCS HAIDA*, p.210.
10. Nathan Miller, *War at Sea: A Naval History of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.34.
11. Tony German, *The Sea Is At Our Gates: The History of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), p.168.
12. Joseph Schull, *Far Distant Ships. An Official Account of Canadian Naval Operations in World War II* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1987, First published Ottawa: King's Printer by authority of the Minister of National Defence, 1950), p.244.
13. Marc Milner, *The U-Boat Hunters: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Offensive Against Germany's Submarines* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p.137.
14. Commander H.G. DeWolf, "Report of Proceedings-HMCS *Haida*, June 1944," 6 August 1944, NAC RG 24, Vol. 11730, HA-41, p.1.
15. Commander H.G. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida*, Report on Interrogation of Survivors From *U971*," NAC RG 24, File NSS1487-49, DHH HMCS *Haida* 8000 - *U971*, p.2.



16. McAndrew *et al.*, *Normandy 1944*, p.101. Dönitz's message was intercepted by Allied cryptographers.
17. *Ibid.*, p.96.
18. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report on Interrogation of Survivors," p.3.
19. *Ibid.* The four other U-boats that received this order were *U480 (Foerster)*, *U715 (Roetge)*, *U-Hyronimus* and *U-Maertens*.
20. McAndrew *et al.*, *Normandy 1944*, p.96.
21. Helmut Buchholz, quoted in Rainer Busch and Hans-Joachim Röhl, *Der U-Boot Krieg, 1939-1945* (Hamburg: E.S. Rittler & Sohn), p.260.
22. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report on Interrogation of Survivors," p.4. Potash cartridges were used to extend the air supply in a submerged U-boat by absorbing exhaled CO<sub>2</sub> while allowing the user to draw air through a rubber hose attached to the filter.
23. Buchholz, quoted in Busch, *Der U-Boot Krieg*, p.260.
24. Commander H.G. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report of the Sinking of *U971*" 6 July 1944, DHH, HMCS *Haida* 8000, p.1. Captain F. "Johnny" Walker was responsible for the destruction of 20 U-boats during the course of the war, more than any other sub-hunter on any ocean. Walker died of a heart attack on 9 July, 1944 - about two weeks after the sinking of *U971*.
25. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report on Interrogation of Survivors," p.4.
26. Norman L. R. Franks, *Search, Find and Kill: Coastal Command's U-Boat Successes* (London: Grub Street, 1995), p.116.
27. "An Afternoon with Vice-Admiral H. G. DeWolf," *Maritime Warfare Bulletin*, Commemorative Edition (Halifax, 1985), p.20.
28. *Ibid.*, p.21.
29. Milner, *The U-Boat Hunters*, p.151.
30. Fraser McKee and Robert Darlington, *The Canadian Naval Chronicle, 1939-1945: The Successes and Losses of the Canadian Navy in World War II*, revised ed. (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 1998), p.159.
31. Lieutenant-Commander E.N. Sinclair, "HMS *Eskimo* Letter No. 0114, Signals Report," 25 June 1944, DHH, HMCS *Haida* 8000, Enclosure 5, p.2.
32. Milner, *The U-Boat Hunters*, p.154.
33. "An Afternoon with DeWolf," p.21.
34. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report on Interrogation of Survivors," p.4.
35. *Ibid.*, p.5.
36. Sinclair, "HMS *Eskimo* No. 0114, Information Obtained From Prisoners," Enclosure 6, p.1. By this time, *U971* had endured 12 hours of depth charge attacks on 24 June. A few months earlier, Admiral Dönitz had congratulated *U333* under Lieutenant Peter Erich Cremer for surviving nine hours of depth charging by a destroyer and sent messages to his captains showing "what a well-disciplined crew can do." See David Bercuson and Holger H. Herwig, *Deadly Seas, The Duel between the St Croix and the U305 in the Battle of the Atlantic* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998), p.297.
37. Alan D. Butcher, *I Remember Haida: A Brief History of Canada's Most Famous Warship* (Hantsport: Lancelot Press, 1985), p.71.
38. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report of the Sinking of *U971*," p.1.
39. Axel Niestlé, *German U-Boat Losses in World War II: Details of Destruction* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1998), p.94. Niestlé confirms that *U971* was sunk by *Haida* and *Eskimo*, as do the two ships' reports of the sinking. In Busch, *Der U-Boot Krieg*, p.260, Second Watch Officer Helmut Buchholz claims the boat was scuttled. Although the explosions heard after *U971* went down seem to confirm that scuttling charges were set, by this time *U971* was already on its way to the bottom.
40. William Sclater, *Haida* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.176. Lieutenant Sclater, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, was an Information Officer who joined *Haida* on some of her patrols.
41. Butcher, *I Remember Haida*, p.72.
42. DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report on Interrogation of Survivors," p.4.
43. "Signals.....Lt. Cdr. W. Sclater, R.C.N.V.R." as amended 1/9/44, DHH, HMCS *Haida* 8000, p.1. Saturday was race day in Plymouth. The crew had been disappointed to learn they were once again going out on patrol and would miss their much preferred Saturday recreation at the track; see also Sclater, *Haida*, pp.171, 179.
44. Sinclair, "HMS *Eskimo* Letter No. 0114, Narrative of Events," Enclosure 2, p.2.
45. U-boat.Net: <[http://www.uboat.net/technical/schnorchel\\_fitted.htm](http://www.uboat.net/technical/schnorchel_fitted.htm)> See also McAndrew *et al.* *Normandy 1944*, pp.92-94. All non-schnorkel U-boats were removed from the Channel after 10 June.
46. Sinclair, "HMS *Eskimo* Letter No. 0114, Narrative of Events," Enclosure 2, p.1.
47. Vice-Admiral Leatham, "HMCS *Haida* and HMS *Eskimo*, Recommendations for Awards," 18 August 1944, DHH, HMCS *Haida* 8000, p.1.
48. "An Afternoon with DeWolf," p.21.
49. Jones, *The 10th Destroyer Flotilla in the English Channel 1944*, p.15. DeWolf's promotion to Captain caused some discomfort for Commander Basil Jones, the Commanding Officer of the 10th DF, as one of his Canadian subordinates now outranked him. When Admiral Leatham kept Jones in command of the Flotilla after DeWolf's promotion, some of the Canadians felt insulted, but DeWolf never commented on the situation and the two officers continued to work well together. A few weeks later the situation was resolved when Jones was promoted to Acting Captain. See also Tony German, *The Sea Is At Our Gates*, p.164.
50. *Ibid.* Vice-Admiral DeWolf, affectionately known as "Hard-Over Harry" for his ship handling propensities, passed away on 18 December 2000. He was, and remains, Canada's most famous and respected fighting sailor.
51. Milner, *The U-Boat Hunters*, p.152.

Barry M. Gough is Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University and is author of several works in naval and imperial history, most recently *HMCS Haida: Battle Ensign Flying* (Vanwell, 2001). James A. Wood, a graduate of Wilfrid Laurier University, is a post-graduate student in History at the University of New Brunswick.