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The Great Naval Battle of North Point Myth or Reality?

Richard O. Mayne

Hollywood itself could hardly have scripted a better battle. According to eyewitnesses, a German U-boat lurking off the shores of North Point, Prince Edward Island, laid a trap for an unsuspecting convoy transiting the Northumberland Strait. On 7 May 1943, the trap was sprung. Canadian naval escorts and aircraft did their best to defend the beleaguered convoy from a brazen and unorthodox attack that was unlike any other. There could be only one conclusion: the German commander was half-mad. Just like the fictional Captain Ahab, he was willing to take unwarranted risks with his boat and men to destroy his white whale that came in the form of a troop ship at the centre of the convoy. His obsession led to a stunning three hour engagement that was brought to a dramatic end as the Canadians scored a direct hit forcing the U-boat's bow to rise sharply out of the water before sinking.¹ The problem is that there is no evidence that this battle ever took place.

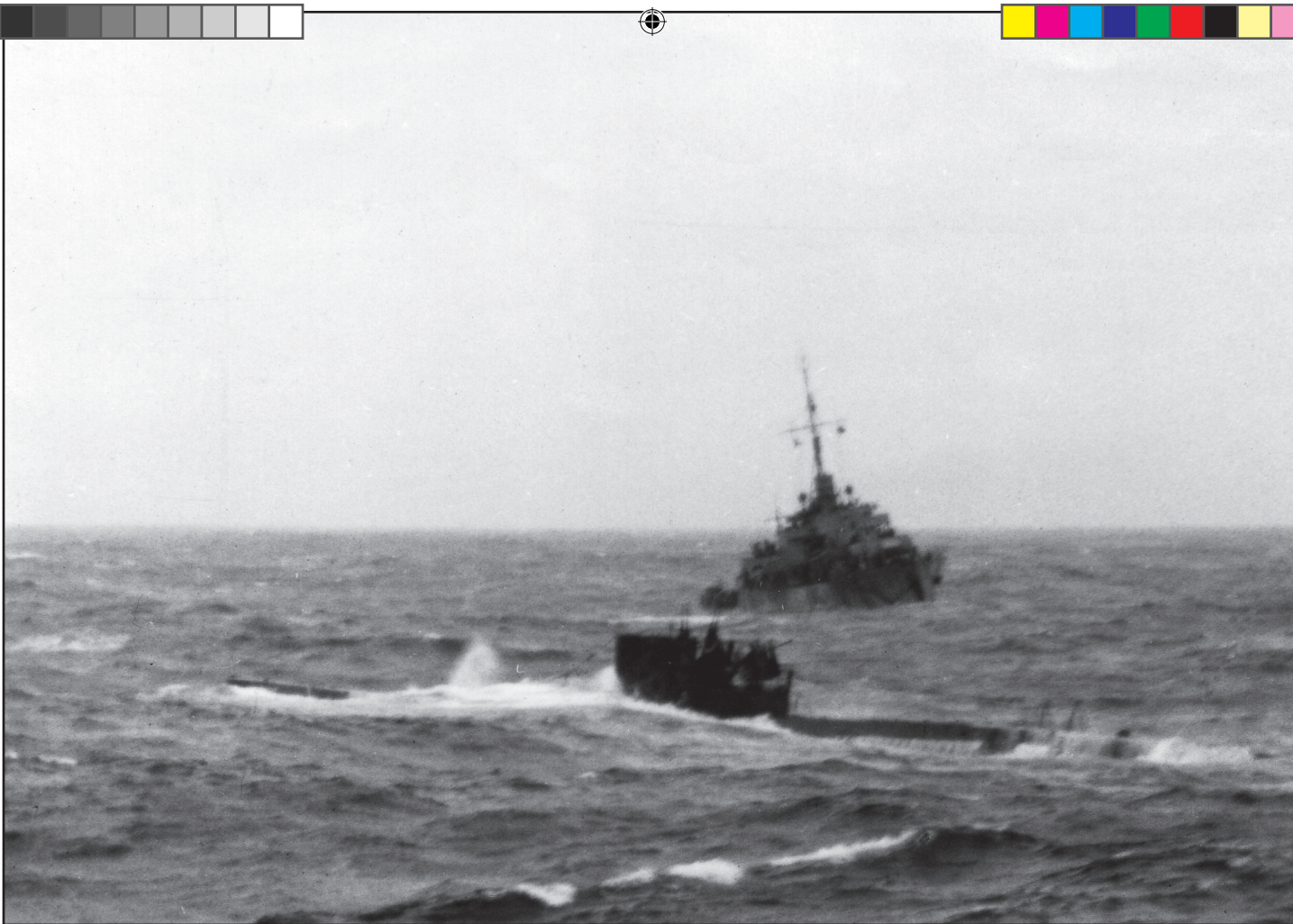
Islanders have retold this story – or versions of it – for over 60 years and it likely would have remained nothing more than a local legend except for one thing: in 1989 a New Brunswick diver found a submarine wreck in the precise spot where the witnesses claimed the battle took place. Despite directions in two separate diving guides, no one has managed to relocate this wreck which is said to lie 1.25 miles from shore in approximately 95 feet of water. The inability positively to identify what some call the “anomaly” has only fuelled interest. So much so, that major Canadian broadcasting networks have aired stories on the legend, while a prominent naval historian, Marc Milner, used the myth as the

basis for a novel entitled *Incident at North Point*. Scores of divers, naval scholars and enthusiasts have sought a resolution to a mystery that Mary Mackay, a Charlottetown journalist, argues is “as controversial as the Shroud of Turin and the monster at Loch Ness.”² After years of research the shroud over this legend can finally be lifted. And the answer not only explains what people saw on that May day in 1943, but it also reveals important insights about larger historical issues involving the power of folklore and its impact on local history.

If, as historian Marc Milner has asked, the object found off PEI was indeed a U-boat, why had the Canadian government not trumpeted its destruction back in 1943? It was a good question. Even more intriguing was the fact that neither Canadian nor German naval records contained any hint of a battle having been fought in this location. When confronted with a lack of documentation some have turned to conspiracy theories. One such hypothesis holds that Prime Minister Mackenzie King's cabinet covered up the sinking of a Vichy French submarine because of sensitivities in Quebec towards the pro-Nazi government in France. Yet another contends that the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was guilty of hiding some type of horrific friendly-fire accident.³

Under normal circumstances such conspiracies are difficult to refute because they are built on the premise that the lack of evidence proves the theory. But the diver's description of the object as “covered with debris, lots of nets... 220 by 25 feet with a large deck gun, a 20 mm

Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH) RU U-744



Unlike the mythical North Point battle, which described an unrealistic and suicidal in-shore surface attack by a U-boat, this photo captures the real-life results of a 30-hour "hunt to exhaustion." As with most commanders, the captain of the *U-744* did everything in his power to remain submerged and only surfaced when his battery power and oxygen ran short.

anti-aircraft gun, [and] periscopes" casts serious doubt on the possibility that it was an Allied submarine. French and Italian ones can also be ruled out. What is more compelling is that these dimensions are consistent with those of a Type VIIC U-boat.⁴ The theory that the object is a Type VIIC is particularly popular with U-boat enthusiasts. It also has its detractors.⁵ Critics are quick to point out that none of the U-boats lost during the war were anywhere near PEI at the time of their loss.⁶ That being said the *U-376* is particularly important to this investigation because it was actually ordered to North Point to rescue escaped German naval officers during the first week of May 1943.

Operation Elster (Magpie in English) was an intricate and elaborate plan. German prisoners at Camp 70 near Fredericton, New Brunswick, were to stage a breakout and make their way to North Point.⁷ This seemingly impossible gauntlet was never attempted. The escape fell through. As for the *U-376*, it was reported as destroyed in the Bay of Biscay off France by a British Wellington bomber from 172 Squadron. This

appeared to eliminate the *U-376* as a contender for the mysterious object off PEI. This changed when research in the 1990s conclusively proved that the original assessment was wrong. The Wellington had actually inflicted serious damage on another U-boat rather than *U-376*.⁸ And so, given that *U-376* was not sunk where previously presumed; that it was heading for North Point, PEI; and that numerous witnesses claim they saw a battle in the exact location where a modern-day diver says the wreck of a U-boat lies, it is understandable why some people are convinced that the anomaly is a German submarine. At the very least it gives the myth resilience against its critics. Skeptics would nevertheless reiterate that there is absolutely no evidence of any naval battle having been fought in this location. They are right to say so.

Canadian officials were aware that some type of special operation involving POWs and a U-boat was in the works. Coded letters between the prisoners at Camp 70 and their homes in Germany were used as a means to plan the details of Operation Elster.⁹ What the Germans did



not know was that this code had been cracked. “Intercepted letter to Prisoner of War in Canada,” read one British intelligence report, “indicates intention [that] the U/Boat shall wait...for several days during new moon period in May.” With the new moon occurring on 4 May, the RCN had a good idea of when the rendezvous was going to take place; instead it was their assumption that the prisoners would be heading south for the Gulf of Maine that was wrong.¹⁰ It was a fateful mistake.

Two days after the *U-376* was declared missing, U-boat Headquarters ordered the mission’s backup boat, *U-262*, to Canada. Arriving off North Point at 0631 hours on 2 May, the *U-262* took up station to the east of the Island waiting for some type of signal from the escapees. After four days without any sign of the POWs the U-boat’s commander finally gave up and returned to his base in France empty handed. Despite the fact that a U-boat was in the area, the *U-262*’s presence off the eastern shores of North Point does not explain what people witnessed on 7 May 1943. Both the accounts of the battle as well as the reported location of the wreck were to the west of North Point whereas the log of the *U-262* makes clear that it never once strayed into these waters. It also left a full day early.¹¹

It is within the details of the mysterious battle where the key to the riddle lies. Cracking the myth rests with two specific testimonials which positively identify the attacking surface units as corvettes.¹² Based on a distinctive whale catcher design, the Flower Class corvette was mass-produced for both the RCN and Royal Navy (RN) and was therefore one of the most recognizable anti-submarine platforms on the North Atlantic.¹³ This promising lead quickly hit a dead end. A study of all RCN and RN corvettes left little doubt that none were near PEI on the day of the battle. Once again, some enthusiasts turned to conspiracy theories involving doctored ship’s logs to explain this discrepancy, while yet another idea was that the eyewitnesses had simply mistaken the attacker’s identity. Fairmiles and minesweepers were other types of escorts that frequented the Gulf of St. Lawrence area, and confusing them for a corvette was a reasonable possibility. Of course, the RCN and RN were not the only navies to operate corvettes.

The true story of what happened at North Point actually began in Quebec. It was in that province where three corvettes being built for the RN were transferred to the United States Coast Guard. Renamed *USS Alacrity*, *USS Haste* and *USS Intensity*, these corvettes made their way down the St. Lawrence River en route to Boston. This offered local authorities with an opportunity. The merchant ship *Essex Lance*, required an escort to take it from Quebec City through the Northumberland Strait and the Gulf of Canso to Halifax. As a matter of convenience it would get three corvettes; and such a disproportionate escort presence for a lone merchantman gave an impression of importance that the *Essex Lance*’s cargo of grain and flour did not warrant.¹⁴ When the *Essex Lance* and its escorts neared the North coast of PEI on the morning of 7 May, local observers began an interpretive process that turned the real cargo of flour and grain into a mythical one of troops. And with that a legend started to take shape.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the eyewitness accounts was that they got so much right. The logbooks from these American warships confirm a good portion of the legend. For instance, according to one observer the battle began around 0900 hours. Another, who was ten years old at the time, “vividly recalls that fateful day” when he heard explosions while playing at Skinner’s Pond which “rattled cupboards” and shocked the local populace “from their sleepy morning routine.” The *Alacrity*’s log states that the convoy was indeed approaching North Point and that this ship went to general quarters – an American naval term for a heightened state of combat readiness – for 15 minutes starting at 0815 hours. It is also interesting that no one claimed to have seen the morning portion of the battle. Reports suggest that the sound of detonations were heard and felt, but that there was a general sense of confusion as “every time there was an explosion, people were running up to the woods and hiding. They didn’t know what was going on.” The reason no one knew what was happening was provided by an air force weather report from Summerside. Thick fog blanketed the waters off PEI at 0900 hours and visibility was “near zero.”¹⁵

By mid-morning the fog began to lift, and as a result the testimonials from observers include

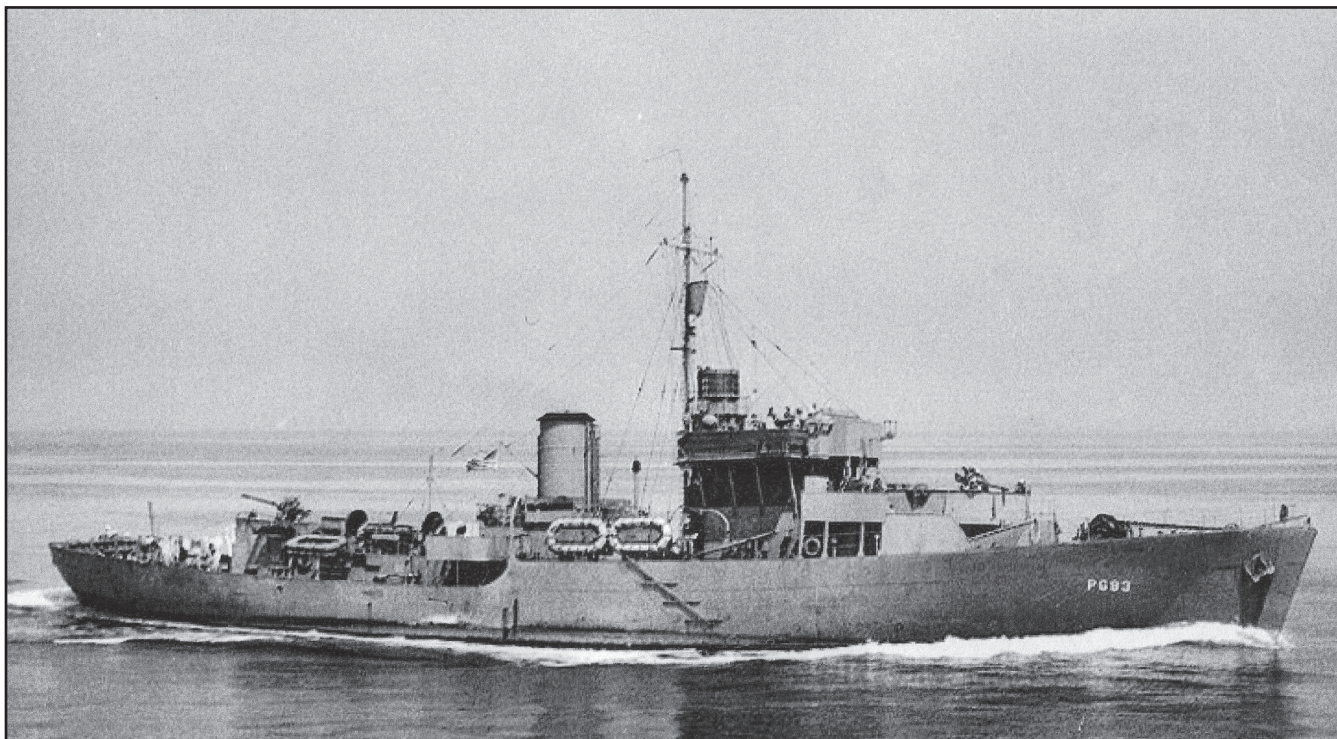




DHH 81/520/1000 Box 142 File 3



Naval Historical Center Photo # NH 97406

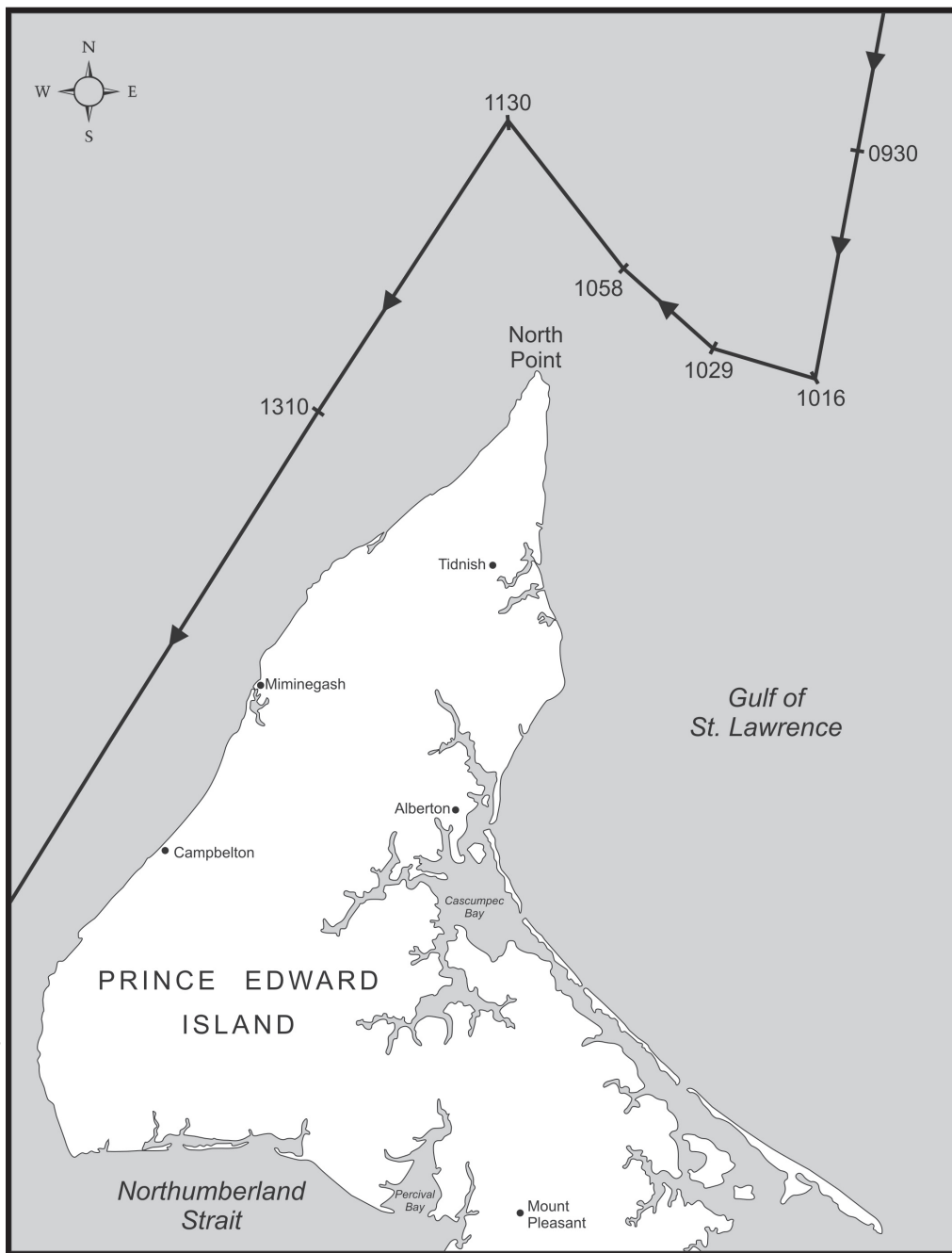
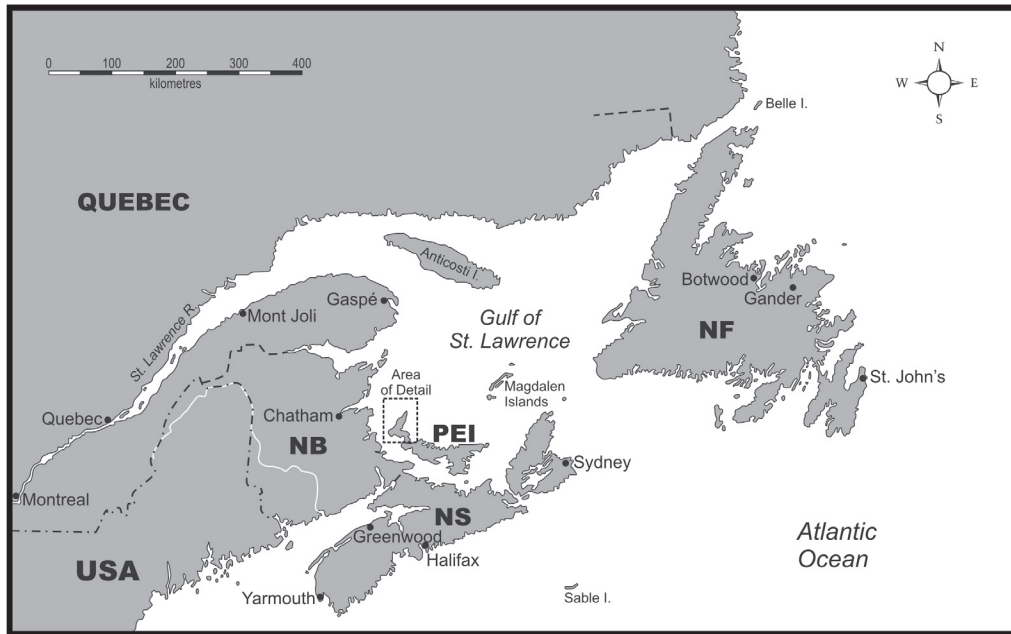


Although the United States Coast Guard identified their corvettes as patrol boats, these photographs of HMCS *Beauharnois* (top) and USS *Intensity* (bottom) show how shore observers could easily mistake an American for a Canadian ship.

visual details such as one account that recorded how the convoy approached the Island from the East.¹⁶ At first glance this does not make sense: after rounding the Gaspé Peninsula ships heading for the Northumberland Strait came from the North. Another, more detailed report told a similar tale. Jim Morrissey had a great view of the developing battle from the top of the North Point lighthouse: "...the big ship was coming in... She'd have the troops on her...there were quite a few smaller boats...the submarine was following.

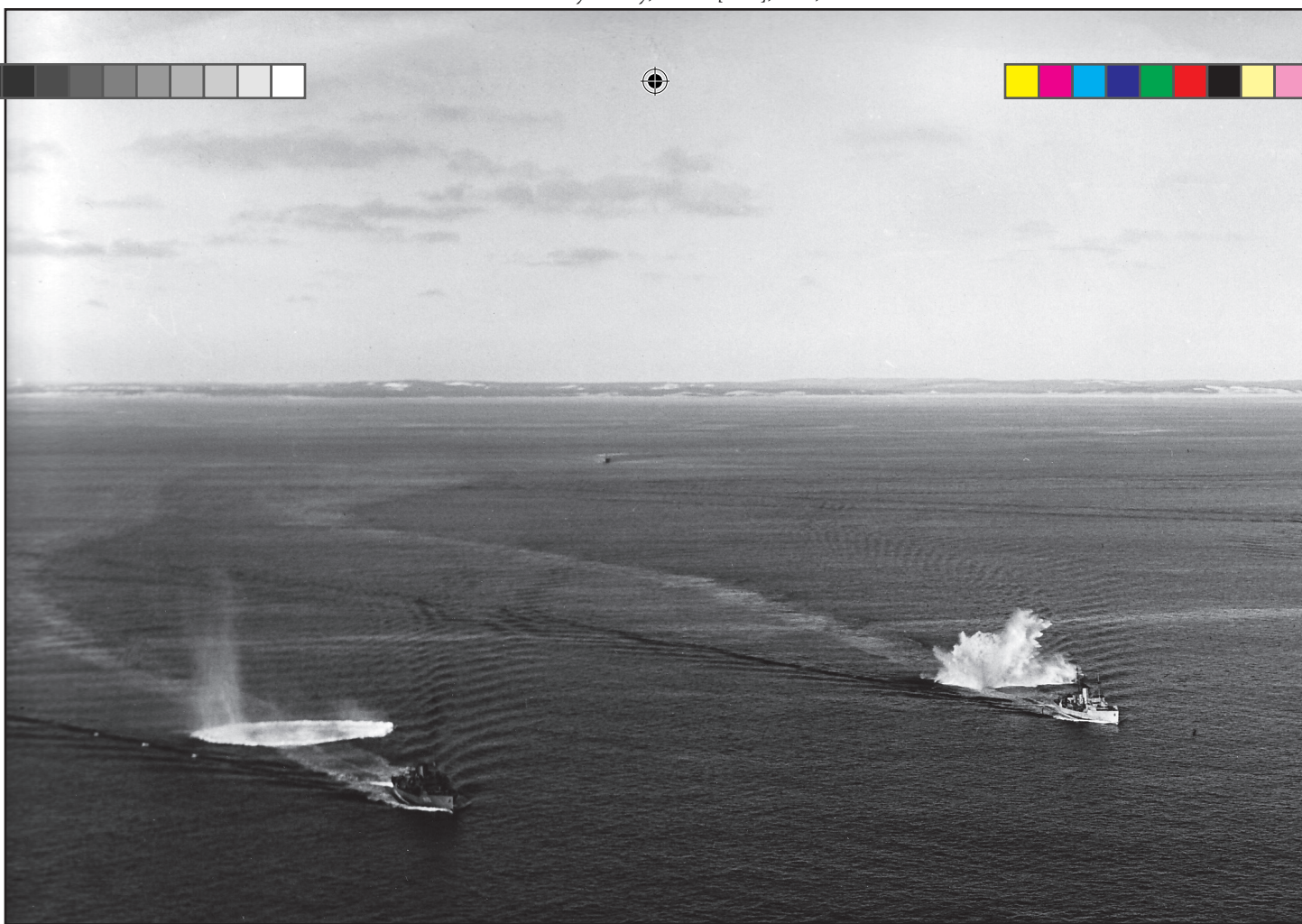
The large ship was moving to shallower waters so the submarine couldn't go underneath her."¹⁷ The *Essex Lance* was indeed heading into shallower water but not for the reason Morrissey gave. Thanks to the poor visibility as well as flooding tides and heavy currents, the convoy had been pushed well out to sea during its transit through the Gulf. When the escorts' radars finally made landfall it was quickly determined that the convoy had overshot the mouth of the Northumberland Strait. Correcting this error gave the appearance





A reconstruction of the log from USS *Alacrity* shows how the convoy had to round North Point because tidal and weather conditions caused it to miss the mouth of the Northumberland Strait. The log also shows that the *Alacrity* went to action stations at 1310 exactly when and where eyewitnesses said a battle took place.





This photograph, which captured two corvettes involved in anti-submarine warfare exercises off Halifax in December 1941, shows how easy it would be to mistake surface forces involved in a practice attack with the real thing.

of an eastern approach. Rather than being a source of protection, the shoals represented a grounding hazard that had to be avoided through further course alterations.¹⁸ The comparison between what actually happened on the ships and the perceptions of those ashore makes an important point: the facts as reported by the eyewitnesses were often correct even if their interpretation was not.

The same was true for the so-called battle. Hours had passed since the first explosion had been heard and further detonations – along with the arrival of an RCAF aircraft – helped to build a growing sense of excitement among the spectators on shore. The climax soon followed with an “unsuccessful attempt by [the] U-boat to sink [the] cargo ship at about 1:00 pm.”¹⁹ But while the *Alacrity* did go to general quarters at 1310 hours for a short three-minute period in the exact spot where the witnesses said the battle took place, none of the American logbooks even hint at the presence of a U-boat. Signals from the corvettes to Halifax were equally devoid of any reference to sighting the enemy, explaining why an action report – a mandatory procedure anytime American warships were involved in combat – was not filed by these ships for the month of

May.²⁰ Only one conclusion can be drawn from such overwhelming evidence – there was no battle.

Rather, an eagerness to test the mettle of the crews and the fighting strength of their newly commissioned ships led the commanding officers of the *Haste*, *Intensity* and *Alacrity* to conduct a series of weapons’ drills and live firing exercises during the passage to Halifax. What the islanders had likely first heard, and then later saw, was a series of three exercises conducted at 0815 hours and 1130 hours followed by the one that was interpreted as the battle’s climax at 1310 hours. While it appears that it was the *Intensity* and *Haste* that were actually doing the shooting, their logs offer only sketchy details. Fortunately the *Alacrity*’s log was extremely well maintained, and thanks to their efforts it is possible to get a sense of what the eyewitness probably saw.²¹

Although it occurred two days earlier, the details of the *Alacrity*’s weapons’ test provide a good sense of what *Haste* and *Intensity* did off the coast of PEI: “Stopped. Lying to making preparations to hold test firing of 4” gun, 4 rounds expended. No casualties. Held test firing of hedgehog [an ahead-firing anti-submarine



projectile]. 26 charges expended, No casualties. Held test firing of depth charges 2 charges expended. No casualties. Test completed.”²² The depth charges and hedgehog would have been particularly impressive. The shallow water around North Point ensured that the contact-fused hedgehogs exploded while the depth charges would have produced towering water geysers filled with dark silt. Those on shore would have had no idea that it was just a drill, and as a result the combination of gunfire and underwater pyrotechnics produced a spectacular show that was easily confused for a battle.

The aircraft that at least one witness claimed dealt the final deathblow to the U-boat can also be explained. Despite the poor visibility that day, a 119 Squadron Lockheed Hudson from Chatham, New Brunswick, managed to take off at 1230 hours. Half an hour later it was circling over North Point – just as the witnesses reported. Its mission was to carry out routine “creeping

line” searches ahead of the convoy, which it did without incident.²³ Dipping in and out of a thick ceiling of cloud cover, this aircraft did not even spot the convoy let alone a U-boat.

The documentary evidence strongly suggests that the myth was based on a series of misinterpretations and coincidences, but the question surrounding the modern day discovery of the wreck off PEI remains. Upon closer scrutiny the spark that triggered so much interest in the legend loses much of its luster. During an interview with a journalist, the diver who located the wreck started to express doubts about his find, observing that he “cannot say for certain that what he saw was a German U-boat.” The object he saw was covered in sand, and attempts to take photographs during two subsequent dives did not succeed because of poor lighting and turbulent waters.²⁴ An attempt by the Canadian navy to find the wreck in the mid-1990s further casts doubts on the original claim. Using its side scan

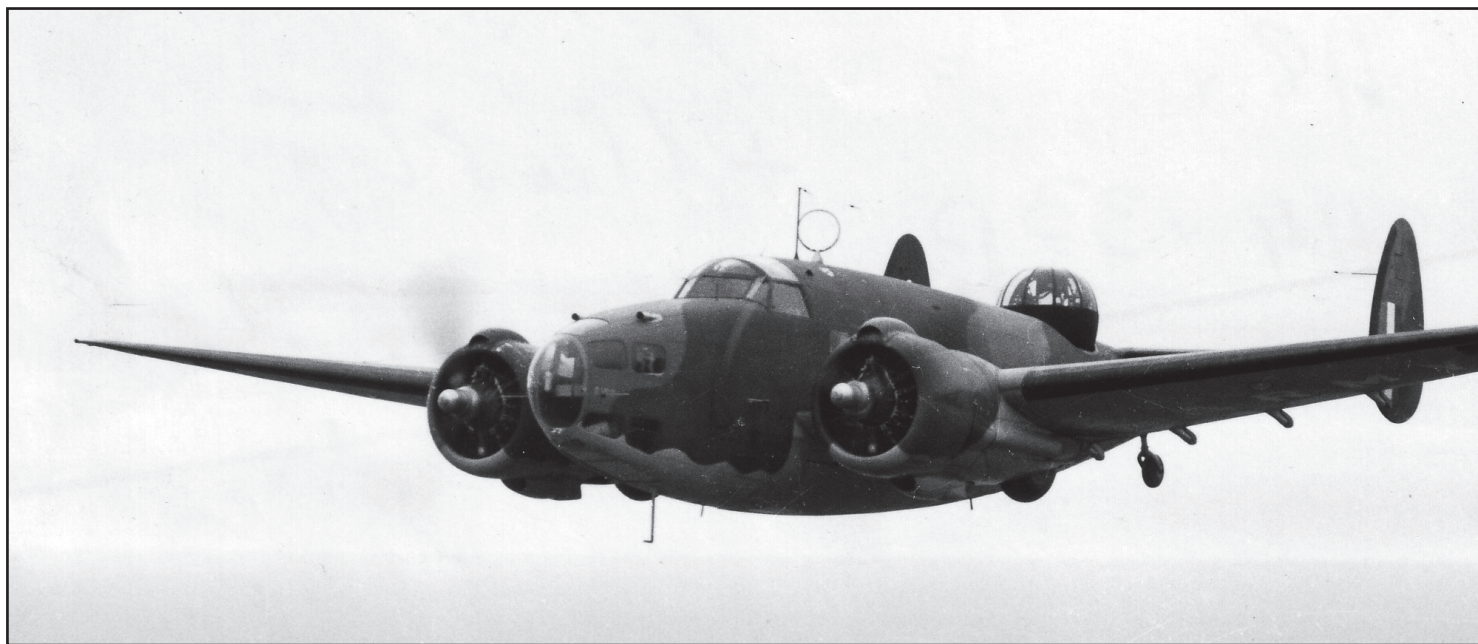


DHH 81/520/1000 Box 141 File 23

Shallow depth charge attacks like those produced in the 100 feet of water around North Point, PEI would have resulted in large and silt-filled explosions. This dramatic effect would only add to the confusion of observers on shore.



DHH R A/C L Lockheed Hudson



According to eyewitnesses, the “death blow” struck to the North Point U-boat was delivered by an aircraft. Air force records show that the only aircraft in the area was a 119 Squadron Lockheed Hudson (like the one pictured here) which did carry out a “creeping line” search in the area but without incident.

sonar, the minesweeper HMCS *Morseby* searched the area without result, while on the same day another diver found “two large boulders the size of a severed submarine.”²⁵ This suggests that the original sighting was the product of local stories having so influenced a professional diver that he interpreted menacing boulders in the murky waters around PEI as a U-boat.

There is also the question of what became of the *U-376*. Although improbable, there is circumstantial evidence that this U-boat continued on with its mission, and was operating in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in May. Having spotted what they believed was a slowly submerging U-boat some 55 miles east of PEI on 16 May, the crew of an Avro Anson aircraft from Charlottetown dropped two depth charges and claimed that they had narrowly missed the periscope. Thirty minutes later an oil slick developed in the spot where the attack took place, a fact that was confirmed by another aircraft. This was not enough to convince the U-boat assessment committee – the Allied authority responsible for awarding such victories – which concluded that there was “insufficient evidence of the presence of a U-boat.”²⁶ A second attack, reported five days later, was also inconclusive. Located some 65 miles to the north of the first, this encounter began when a Consolidated Catalina from 117 Squadron dropped a cluster of depth charges on what the crew felt was a periscope trailing convoy SQ 48.

However, the captain of the corvette, HMCS *Ville de Quebec*, had his doubts, telling his superiors that the “contact could have been anything.” The assessment committee agreed, observing that there was “insufficient evidence of damage.”²⁷ As a result, the likelihood of finding the *U-376* in these particular locations is remote, but they do represent a more realistic option than North Point.

Skeptics have consistently argued that the North Point legend was the result of an innocent event being contorted beyond recognition. In the end they were right. But it would appear that the eyewitnesses had not twisted reality as badly as suspected, and that is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the North Point legend. Most of what they saw actually happened. It was only their interpretation of those events that was misleading. Individuals have a natural tendency to fill gaps in their understanding of dramatic events with conjecture. And it was this type of speculative guesswork that allowed the myth to grow to the point where it developed a life of its own. The legend becomes part of the community’s common history and nothing short of dragging the waters around PEI will discourage true believers. So while the American logbooks leave no doubt that the shots off North Point were not fired in anger, the power of the legend nevertheless forces the overly cautious scholar to leave wiggle room for the remote possibility that



a German submarine rests somewhere off the coast of North Point, PEI. The American records nevertheless make one thing clear: if there is a U-boat wreck there it was the product of the most improbable fluke shot of the Second World War.

Notes

1. Henry Keatts and George Farr, *Dive into History, Volume 3: U-Boats* (Houston, Pisces Books, 1994), pp.201-3.
2. David N. Barron, *The Combined Atlantic Diver Guide*, (North Maritime Research, Halifax, 1999), p.323; Keatts, *Dive into History*, 201-203; Mary MacKay, "Marine mystery," *Weekend Guardian-Patriot*, 13 May 1995; Julie Watson, *Shipwrecks and Seafaring Tales of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto, Hounslow Press, 1994), p.145.
3. Marc Milner, *Incident at North Point* (St. Catharines, Vanwell, 1998), pp.231-234; Mary MacKay, "Marine mystery," *Weekend Guardian-Patriot*, 13 May 1995. Others have suggested that the Islanders had witnessed some type of fleet exercise or even the filming of the movie *49th Parallel* which portrayed an attack on a U-boat in Canadian waters.
4. Keatts, *Dive into History*, pp.201-203. The Type VIIC was 218 feet, 1 inches long and 20 feet, 5 inches wide.
5. For a sample of the strength of the "U-boat theory," see the forum on <www.u-boat.net>.
6. See "Translations of BdU War Log," 1-31 May 1943, Directorate of History and Heritage [DHH] 79/456, Vol.7.
7. Michael Hadley, *U-boats against Canada* (McGill-Queen's Press, Kingston, 1985), pp.170-174.
8. Axel Niestle, *German U-boat losses during World War II* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1998), pp.59, 227.
9. Mary MacKay, "The Tale of Two Subs," *The Guardian* as reprinted on <www.powell-pressburger.org>.
10. Admiralty message, 29 April 1943, DHH 97/3, Series 3, SRH.
11. BdU War Log, 6 May 1943, DHH 79/456, vol. 7 and *U 262 Log*, 6 May 1943, DHH 83/665, Box 47.
12. Marc Milner, *Incident at North Point*, 231-234; Mary MacKay, "Marine mystery," *Weekend Guardian-Patriot*, 13 May 1995.
13. For more information on the corvettes see: Ken Macpherson and Marc Milner, *Corvettes of the Royal Canadian Navy, 1939-1945* (St. Catharines, Vanwell, 1993).
14. NCSO to CinC CNA, 05 0436 May 1943, DHH 81/520/8280, Box 264; Ship movement cards, USS *Alacrity*, DHH; Ship movement cards, USS *Intensity*, DHH.
15. Mary MacKay, "Marine mystery," *Weekend Guardian-Patriot*, 13 May 1995; USS *Alacrity* Ship's log, National Archives and Records Administration [NARA]; RCAF Operational diary, DHH Reel 219, 1GR School, (Summerside, PEI). The author would like to thank Mr. Patrick Osborn from the NARA for his extensive assistance with my research.
16. Barron, *The Combined Atlantic Diver Guide*, p.323.
17. Mary MacKay, "Marine mystery," *Weekend Guardian-Patriot*, 13 May 1995.
18. NCSO to CinC CNA, 050436 May 1943, DHH 81/520/8280, Box 264; Roger Jordan, *The World's Merchant Fleets*, (London, Chatham Publishing, 1999), p.161.
19. Henry Keatts, *Dive into History*, pp.201-203; Mary MacKay, "Marine mystery," *Weekend Guardian-Patriot*, 13 May 1995.
20. Movements – USS *Haste*, Library and Archives Canada [LAC] RG 24, Reel C-5892, NSS 8700-736/60; Movements – USS *Alacrity* RG 24, Reel C-5892, NSS 8700-736/408. According to these messages the only significant incident during this trip to Halifax was a report from *Alacrity* asking if it could proceed directly to Boston because of a leaky condenser. Patrick Osborn NARA to author, 7 December 2005. A search of the "After Action Reports" held at the Naval Historical Center in Washington, DC, revealed that there were none for *Alacrity*, three for *Haste* (one from July 1944 and two from February 1945), and only two for *Intensity* (both dating from early 1944).
21. Patrick Osborn (NARA) to author, 7 December 2005, USS *Intensity* and USS *Haste* Log, 7 May 1943, NARA. *Haste's* log simply noted that they were "underway" while *Intensity's* had a line marked across the page.
22. USS *Alacrity* Log, 5 May 1943, NARA.
23. Orders issued by Gulf Group Controller, May 1943, DHH 181.005 (D 1556); RCAF Operational diary, DHH Reel 219; 1GR School, (Summerside, PEI), and 119 Sqn Chatham Det., Reel 101.
24. Mary MacKay, "Marine mystery," *Weekend Guardian-Patriot*, 13 May 1995; Henry Keatts, *Dive into History*, pp.201-203.
25. Mary MacKay, "The Tale of Two Subs," *The Guardian* as reprinted on <www.powell-pressburger.org>.
26. Orders issued by Gulf Group Controller, 1943, DHH 181.005 (D 1556); Eastern Air Command Monthly Anti-submarine reports, May 1943, DHH. 321.009 (D6); EAC Operational Intelligence Summary No. 53, DHH, 321.009 (D84); Halifax Monthly Report of Proceeds (Hereafter ROPs) May 1943, DHH, 81/520-1000-5-13, vol. 18; RCAF a/c attack on U-Boats, Attack by Anson W 165 of 31 GRS RCAF 16 May 1943, DHH, 181.003 (D1345).
27. HMCS *Ville de Quebec* ship's log, 21 May 1943, LAC RG 24, Vol.7588; *Ville de Quebec* to NSHQ, 211858 May 1943, LAC Vol. 6903, file NSS 8910-331/119; HMCS *Ville de Quebec*, ROP for Convoy SQ 48, 24 May 1943, DHH 81/520/8280-SQ 48; RCAF Aircraft Attacks on U-boats re Attack by Catalina S of 117 Sqn 21 May 1943, DHH 181.003 (D1346).

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