Challenge, Planning, Execution: The Seaward Defence of the Assault Area off Normandy, 6-14 June 1944[1]

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This study focusses on the nighttime defence of the American and British assault anchorages off Normandy from enemy surface attack in the period 6-14 June 1944. The subject is typically glossed over. Yet, the defence of the assault areas, like every other aspect of Operation NEPTUNE, was taken seriously by planners. Although German surface forces were not powerful enough to defeat the assault or make the anchorage untenable, if they were able to penetrate the assault area to sink vulnerable transports and landing craft with any regularity, they could disrupt the critical build-up of men and materiel into Normandy and impede the progress of the ground war. Further, rather than being a "one-off" defensive scheme for a massive assault unlikely to be repeated, elements of NEPTUNE's defensive challenges may have been considered had the Allies been forced to invade Japan in late 1945. Its lessons, therefore, carried some weight.

La présente étude porte sur la défense nocturne des mouillages d'assaut américains et britanniques au large de la Normandie

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contre les attaques de surface ennemies entre le 6 et le 14 juin 1944. Le sujet est généralement passé sous silence. Pourtant, la défense des zones d'assaut, comme tous les autres aspects de l'opération Neptune, a été prise au sérieux par les planificateurs. Bien que les forces de surface allemandes n'aient pas été assez puissantes pour résister à l'attaque ou rendre les mouillages insoutenables, si elles avaient réussi à pénétrer la zone d'assaut pour régulièrement faire couler les navires de transport et de débarquement vulnérables, elles auraient pu perturber la mise en place critique des hommes et du matériel en Normandie et entraver la progression de la guerre au sol. De plus, au lieu de constituer un schéma défensif « unique » pour une attaque massive peu susceptible de se répéter, certains éléments des défis défensifs de l'opération Neptune auraient pu être envisagés si les Alliés avaient été forcés d'envahir le Japon à la fin de 1945. Ses leçons avaient donc un certain poids.

In the early hours of 6 June 1944, *Korvettenkapitän* Heinrich Hoffman, leader of the *Kriegsmarine*'s 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*,[2] led three of his small destroyers from Le Havre to attack warships ominously crowding the Baie de la Seine. Soon, Hoffman and his cohorts sighted "large shadows" but before they could attack, the vessels, obviously those of the enemy, disappeared behind a veil of smoke. When they reemerged, Hoffman fired torpedoes. Uncertain if they scored any hits—the torpedoes passed between the British battleships *Warspite* and *Ramillies* to sink the Norwegian destroyer *Svenner* —Hoffman's ships spent a harrowing half hour dodging shell fire from battleships and other warships before escaping safely into Le Havre. That afternoon, after grabbing some likely fitful sleep, Hoffman surveyed the Baie from atop the towering chalk cliffs at Cap de la Hève. The spectacle gave him pause. Filling the horizon just 15 miles away were "80-100 warship units." Awed by the prodigious display of sea power, Hoffman turned to plan that night's sortie. Meanwhile, equally determined sailors in the Allied warships that crowded the Baie de la Seine readied their defences.[3]

One of those sailors was Rear Admiral Alan Kirk, USN in his flagship USS

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[2] German naval terminology has been retained, except when the English variation appears in original sources. The *Kriegsmarine*'s *torpedoboot* were small destroyers of about 1,000 tons.

[3] *Führer die Zerstörer*, Informational Report No. 5, Extract of *Kriegstabuch* (KTB) of the 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille* (Hereafter KTB 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*), 25 July 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), SGR II 340; and Stephen Roskill, *HMS Warspite: The Story of a Famous Battleship* (London: Collins, 1957), 278.

Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey, RN (left center), and Rear Admiral Alan Kirk, USN (right) tour a USN warship on 8 March 1944. Since this was prior to their later contretemps over the *S-boote* threat, one can assume relations between the two were still amicable.(Navy History and Heritage Command 80-G-219976)

Augusta. When Operation NEPTUNE was in its early planning stages, Kirk, the Naval Commander Western Task Force (NCWTF), assessed the enemy threat to the assault area in straightforward language:

(a) It is considered that attack by surface craft by daylight is unlikely, except in low visibility, due to our preponderant naval force and our general air superiority. It is possible, however, that the enemy may make a sortie with either E-boats or torpedo boats.
(b) At night, attack by E-boats is probable and to a lesser degree attack by destroyers, torpedo boats and surfaced U-boats must be expected.
(c) It is not considered that submerged attack other than by special craft such as midget submarines or one man torpedoes is likely due to the shallow water, proximity of minefields and presence of large numbers of friendly aircraft. However, it is possible, particularly in the early stages some submarines may attack anchorages.
(d) Air attack is most probable and may include bombs, torpedoes, mines,

circling torpedoes, and glider bombs.[4]

This study focusses on the threat Rear Admiral Kirk listed under (b) above: the nighttime defence of the American and British assault anchorages off Normandy from enemy surface attack. Focus is on the period 6-14 June 1944; after that, as one Royal Navy (RN) summary insisted, German efforts were "effectively scotched."[5] The seaward defence of the assault area is typically glossed over or taken for granted, and, quite understandably, focus has been on the planning of the invasion or the momentous events of the assault itself. Yet, the defence of the assault areas, like every other aspect of Operation NEPTUNE, was taken seriously by planners wanting to leave little to chance. Although German surface forces were not powerful enough to defeat the assault or make the anchorage untenable, if they were able to penetrate the assault area to sink vulnerable transports and landing craft with any regularity they could disrupt the critical build-up of men and materiel into Normandy and impede the progress of the ground war – tragic warning of the horrendous cost of such calamities occurred in late April 1944, when German motor torpedo boats, or *Schnellboot*, patrolling off Lyme Bay on England's south coast sank two landing ships engaged in Exercise TIGER, killing some 700 American GIs. The measures taken to prevent such losses, and the efforts of the sailors who saw them through, warrant attention, as do those of German sailors like Hoffman who attempted to thwart NEPTUNE. Further, rather than being a "one-off" defensive scheme for a massive assault unlikely to be repeated, elements of NEPTUNE's defensive challenges may have been considered had the Allies been forced to invade Japan in late 1945. Its lessons, therefore, carried some weight.

The Plan

During the initial planning for NEPTUNE, senior Allied naval leaders disagreed on the threat posed by enemy surface forces. *Kriegsmarine* light forces operating in the Channel had suffered steady attrition throughout the war, which left them with little chance against the massive forces allayed against them. *Admiral* Theodor Krancke, commanding *Marine Gruppe West* from his headquarters in Paris, could muster just four small *Torpedoboot*, 29 *Schnellboot*, and a number of auxiliary vessels in direct response to an

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4 Naval Commander Western Task Force, "Operation Plan No 2-44, Annex "C," 'Area Screening Plan,'" National Archives and Record Administration (NARA). The NARA records cited in this study are copies of original documents accessed through the www.Fold3.com digital archive.

5 Admiralty, *Coastal Forces Periodic Review* (July-August 1944), p. 5, DHH 84/7.

Just day before the invasion, Admiral Theodor Krancke (left) joins Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in inspecting defences in Normandy. (Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-300-1863-35)

invasion. When reviewing projections of the defensive forces required for NEPTUNE in a January 1944 meeting, British First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham challenged planners' assessments, scoffing "we had little threat to meet & E-boats represent it." Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, the naval commander for NEPTUNE, disagreed, asserting to his diary: "I maintain that I will have to fight for surface supremacy & must insure against destroyers, E- and R-boats and U-boats."[6] The key word in Ramsay's statement is "insure," emphasizing nothing could be left to chance.

Responsibility for the assault areas off Normandy was divided between the Naval Commander, Eastern Task Force (NCETF), who commanded the forces covering the British-Canadian beaches GOLD, JUNO and SWORD, and his opposite number commanding the Western Task Force (WTF), encompassing the American OMAHA and UTAH beaches. The ETF was under Rear Admiral Sir Phillip Vian. Beside gaining an almost legendary reputation as a fighting sailor through episodes like the *Altmark* boarding, the hunt for the *Bismarck* and the Second Battle of Sirte, Vian had accrued valuable combined operations experience leading an assault group in the invasion of Sicily and commanding

6 Robert W. Love and John Major, eds., *The Year of D-Day: The 1944 Diary of Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1994), 16. Hereafter Ramsay Diary.

the carrier covering forces in the Salerno landing. His American counterpart, Rear Admiral Alan Kirk, had also garnered significant combined operations experience leading amphibious task forces at Sicily and Anzio, after which he advised senior USN officers on upcoming amphibious operations in the Pacific. Importantly, when Kirk served as naval attaché in London from 1939-1941 and later in the Mediterranean, he had developed close working relationships with key British officers, including Andrew Cunningham, Bertram Ramsay and Vian, and the mutual respect they developed initially eased the planning process for NEPTUNE. Regrettably, the smooth relations between Kirk and Ramsay did not endure.[7]

Vian's defence plan had to account for the close proximity of Le Havre, a major *Kriegsmarine* base situated on the eastern flank of the assault area just 15 miles from SWORD Beach.[8] In an attempt to neutralize the forces operating from Le Havre, in May British aircraft and Coastal Force vessels began sewing a dense minefield off the port, but they were well-aware the *Kriegsmarine* would be able to clear channels through the mines, as indeed they did.[9] The onus therefore would fall on air and sea patrols to parry German sorties. Although Allied airpower kept German forces bottled-up during daylight, naval forces would bear the brunt of the defensive responsibility during darkness.

Vian's defence scheme was also colored by real concern over potential friendly fire incidents. With dozens of vessels packed into the Normandy assault area and shipping continually pouring into the beachhead from across the Channel, there would be a real danger of blue-on-blue engagements during darkness. Most Allied warships were fitted with Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) gear, but it had proved unreliable. In earlier landings, close-in protection of seaward flanks was undertaken by "endless chain" patrols where warships

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7 For Vian, see his autobiography *Action This Day: A War Memoir* (London: Frederick Muller, 1960) and Martin Stephen, *Fighting Admirals: British Admirals in the Second World War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 150-157. For Kirk, see David Kohnen, "Persistent: Alan Goodrich Kirk, 1888-1963" in *Nineteen-Gun Salute: Case Studies of Operational, Strategic and Diplomatic Naval Leadership in the 20th and Early 21st Centuries*, eds. John Hattendorf and Bruce Elleman (Newport: US Naval War College, 2010), 77-92.

8 *Schnellboot*, *Räumboot* and other light craft could also attack from secondary bases up the Channel like Boulogne or Fécamp, but these were outside Vian's area of responsibility and would be dealt with by forces under the Vice Admiral Dover and 16 Group RAF Coastal Command. See Air Historical Branch, "The RAF in Maritime War," vol. V, p. 13, DHH, 79/599.

9 Beginning in May 1944, under Operations MAPLE and KN, coastal forces from Portsmouth Command and aircraft from Bomber Command and the Fleet Air Arm laid dense minefields off Le Havre and Cherbourg, including Mark XXV mines specifically designed to counter shallow-drafted *Schnellboot and Räumboot*. See, Admiralty, *British Mining Operations 1939-1945* vol I, pp. 346-47 and 361-62, UK National Archives (UKNA), ADM 234/560.

steamed back-and-forth on predetermined courses, but in the notoriously difficult navigation associated with the English Channel Vian thought this "a very chancy business." Instead, he adopted a static defence scheme "to avoid risk of self-imposed casualties from collision or chance encounter among a large number of ships under way at night in an area of strong tidal streams."[10] As envisioned, each night smaller vessels, typically minesweepers, would anchor stem-to-stern 1000 yards apart six miles offshore along the entire 25-mile length of the three beaches comprising the British Assault Area. From the eastern terminus of this Defence Line to the shore along the flank of SWORD Beach, heavily armed landing craft (LCG and LCF) would be anchored 2000 yards apart on the so-called TROUT Line. The task of the two defence lines was to prevent enemy forces from penetrating into the assault area and to illuminate the outer patrol areas when required.

Rear Admral Sir Phillip Vian, RN (National Portrait Gallery)

Vian's scheme included destroyer and Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) patrols working to seaward of the defence lines. To facilitate their operations, the British Assault Area was divided into sections. Area PIKE extended north from GOLD and JUNO sectors to the northern boundary of the assault area, a line extending across the Baie de la Seine from Cap Barfleur to Cap d'Antifer. Areas TUNNY NORTH and SOUTH wrapped around the SWORD sector with their eastern border at SCALLOPS, the Allied mined area off Le Havre—obviously someone on Vian's staff had a keen appetite for seafood. (See Plan 10) Patrol dispositions would vary in each area and were laid out in Vian's British Assault Area Defence Orders (BAADO) promulgated in early April. Each night two destroyers designated Guard Destroyers would patrol GOLD and JUNO sectors and Area PIKE. To the east, four destroyers designated

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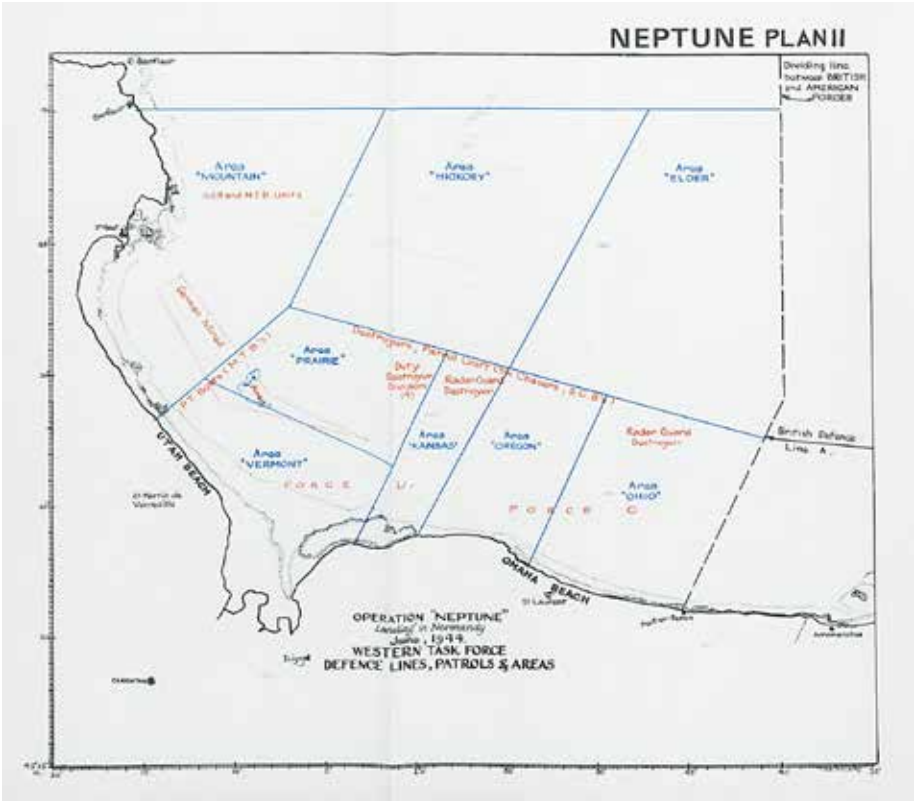
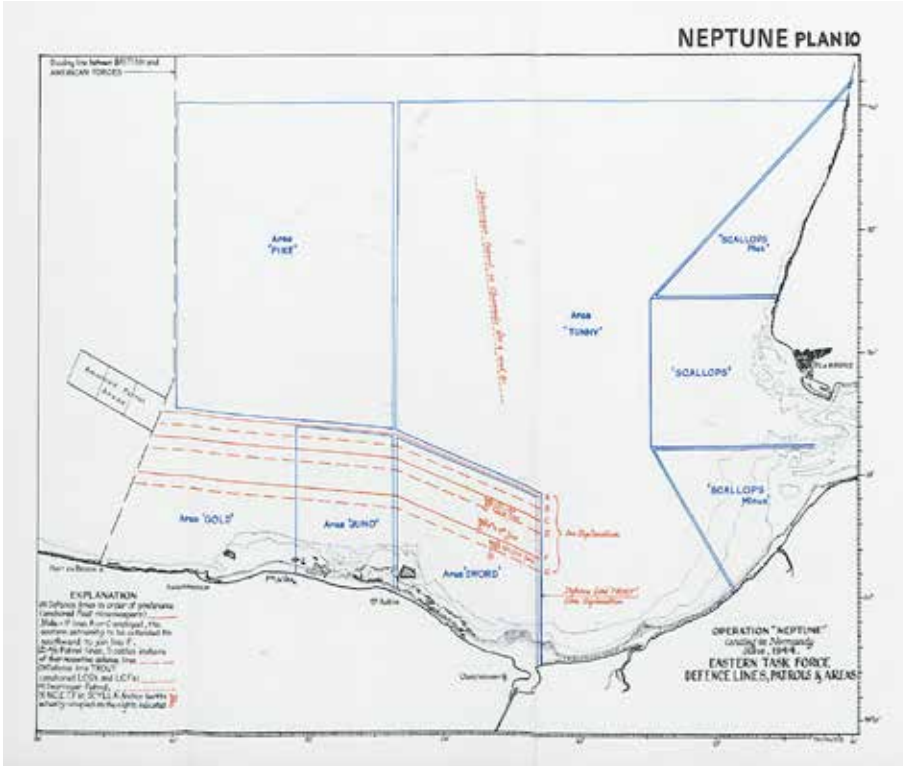
[10] Vian, *Action This Day,* 130-31; and NCETF Report: enclosure II Planning. During the actual assault the Allies also jammed German shore-based radar and communications systems, including those serving coastal artillery units.



Admiralty, Tactical and Staff Duties Division (History Section), *Operation "Neptune": Landings in Normandy, June 1944*, Battle Summary No. 39 Vol. 1, (June 1947), Plans 10 and 11

the Duty Division would perform similar duties in the SWORD sector, alert for intrusions into TUNNY. Finally, two divisions of four MTBs would be positioned at the eastern edge of SWORD sector or underway near fixed positions in TUNNY. To avoid friendly fire incidents, all forces were to remain within their assigned areas unless in hot pursuit of the enemy, and to avoid the powerful shore batteries around Le Havre as well as blue-on-blue encounters, the duty destroyer division was prohibited from entering TUNNY.[11] Similarly, both destroyers and MTBs were barred from entering SCALLOPS. In the unlikely event the enemy eluded the layered defences, the big guns of the battleships and cruisers of the bombardment groups that anchored in the assault area each night formed a formidable backstop to the offshore patrols.

[11] NCETF, "British Assault Area Defence Orders" (BAADO), 30 April 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com; and "Report by the Naval Commander Eastern Task Force" (hereafter NCETF Report), 21 August 1944, pt II, pp. 16-17, DHH, 83/105, pt. 2; Nick Hewitt, *Normandy: The Sailors' Story* (London: Yale University Press, 2024), 254-55.



Curiously, despite these heavy responsibilities, Vian did not have a full slate of dedicated forces to fulfill these requirements. He had dedicated MTBs, with the 29th and 85th MTB flotillas, the former a Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) unit, attached permanently to him for the nightly patrols in SWORD and TUNNY. Destroyers were another matter and apart from a single headquarters frigate, he was not formally allocated any for his patrol requirements. Instead, the ETF's thirty-six Fleet and *Hunt*-class destroyers were under the charge of the Force "G," "J" or "S" assault force commanders, who would only allocate ships to fulfill Vian's patrol requirements on a nightly basis. As will be seen, this system proved unreliable.

Control of Vian's patrols presented a specific challenge. Shore-based radar direction had proved advantageous at night in Channel operations but the distance from England and climate variations precluded reliable radar coverage into the Baie de la Seine. Plans were in place to establish three mobile radar stations (MONRADS) ashore in Normandy, however, until they were operational, Vian's patrols would be directed by two specialized control ships. The activities of the Guard Destroyers and the vessels in the defence lines would be coordinated by the Captain (Patrols), Captain Anthony Pugsley, RN

in the Captain-class frigate HMS *Lawford*, while the Duty Destroyer Division and MTBs in SWORD and TUNNY would be directed by Vian in his flagship, the light cruiser HMS *Scylla*.[12] As it was, seagoing control proved so effective that it remained the primary method throughout Neptune.

The concept of shipborne radar control of surface forces was not new. The RN had sporadically utilized control ships to direct MTB sorties against *Schnellboot* attacking Britain's east coast convoy routes, but the experiments met with mixed results, reliable communications and accurate plotting being key shortfalls. But by 1944, improved sensors, plotting and communications systems made the concept more feasible—the development of the Plan Position Indicator or PPI, which presented a continuous "bird's eye" of the radar coverage proved especially critical.[13] To act as control ships *Lawford* and *Scylla* went through significant modification. The frigate's superstructure was

Besides mines, German *Schnellboot* or *S-boote* were considered the main threat to the assault area. This is S 204 of the 4th Schnellboot-Flotilla. (Imperial War Museum A-28558)

[12] NCETF, "British Assault Area Defence Orders," 30 April 1944.

[13] Portsmouth Command, "Report on Operation OVERLORD (Coastal Forces), 12 September 1944, app. I, section 41, UKNA, ADM 179/509; Derek Howse, *Radar at Sea: The Royal Navy in World War 2* (Annapolis; Naval Institute Press, 1993), 87-88; and F.A. Kingsley, ed., *The Applications of Radar and Other Electronic Systems in the Royal Navy in World War 2* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1995), 167.

expanded to accommodate about two-dozen supplemental staff, two additional deck houses made room for additional radio equipment and a new main mast mounted the required communications antenna. Unfortunately, rather than the superior USN SL radar fitted in other British Captain-class frigates converted to control MTBs, for some reason *Lawford* retained obsolescent Type 271 and 291 warning surface sets.[14] Vian's *Scylla* had been converted to an "Escort Carrier Squadron Flagship," but during Neptune would control ships rather than aircraft. Her modifications included the fitting of enhanced communications systems, modern Type 276 Warning Surface search radar, a new Action Information Organization (AIO) featuring an enlarged operations room, a Flag Bridge and increased accommodation spaces for the 177 additional personnel that would be crammed into *Scylla*, including senior army and air force liaison staff.[15]

Rear Admiral Kirk's defensive challenge was more straightforward than Vian's. Unlike having Le Havre sitting on right on his doorstep, the closest *Kriegsmarine* base was at Cherbourg, home to light forces including *Schnellboot*, but it lay outside Kirk's area and was covered by forces of the Royal Navy's Portsmouth Command. The WTF area was also slightly smaller than the ETF's. Nonetheless, the Americans shared concerns for accurate navigation and potential friendly fire incidents. Kirk's initial defence plan, based on his Mediterranean experience, relied solely on mobile destroyer and coastal force patrols but Vian persuaded him to adopt his static patrol scheme supported by destroyer patrols.[16] The resultant plan was devised by the Commander, Area Screen (CTG 122.4) and COMDESRON 18, Captain Harry Sanders, USN who rode in the *Gleaves*-class destroyer USS *Frankford*. His plan mirrored Vian's in many respects, though rather than following a fisheries theme, Sanders' codenames reflected American geopolitics. The static defence line extending around the OMAHA and UTAH sectors of the American Assault Area was designated the MASON-DIXIE line; MASON ran northward along the western flank while DIXIE formed an east-west line seaward of the beaches—there is no explanation as to why Kirk or Sanders dubbed it MASON-DIXIE instead of the correct MASON-DIXON. Areas

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[14] Donald Collingwood, *The Captain Class Frigates in the Second World War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999); and Captain A.F. Pugsley, "Report of Proceedings of Captain of Patrols from 1800 Tuesday 6th to 0500 Thursday 8th June," 16 June 1944, UKNA, ADM 179/502.

[15] Alan Raven and John Roberts, *British Cruisers of World War Two* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 433.

[16] "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Naval Commander Western Task Force (CTF 122)," 2 September 1944, p. 4, DHH, 83/105 pt 2 (hereafter NCWTF Report); and Vian, *Action This Day*, 130-131.

HICKORY and ELDER, north of the OMAHA sector, would be patrolled by a Guard Destroyer unit, while to the west, a Duty Destroyer Division would patrol Area PRAIRIE, which covered the UTAH Sector as well as a portion of OMAHA. The destroyer patrols would be supplemented by US Navy PT boats and British coastal forces positioned on the MASON-DIXIE Line and in Area MOUNTAIN flanking the UTAH sector.[17] (See Plan 11)

The ETF and WTF schemes differed in other respects; most due to the differing command philosophies of the RN and USN. For example, Sanders did not utilize control ships. Instead, he would oversee operations from *Frankford*, typically anchored at point "MD" at the junction of the MASON and DIXIE lines. Individual destroyers would maintain their own plot and engage contacts considered hostile on their own initiative. This less-centralized approach was made possible by the American destroyers' superior SG radar and well-developed Combat Information Centers—the standard of the RN's search radar varied between ships and they were only in the early stages of fitting their Action Information Organization (AIO) across their destroyer force.[18] It also reflected the less centralized approach practiced by the USN. Similarly, Sanders' patrol orders were just four pages long, in contrast to Vian's 29-page BAADOs.[19] Sanders' scheme also did not feature divided command as in the ETF; there was no equivalent to a Captain (Patrols), and Kirk and his staff in the cruiser *Augusta* had no role in guiding night-to-night operations. Sanders also deployed his light forces differently. Unlike the mobility accorded MTBs in the ETF plan, to avoid being mistaken for *Schnellboot* Sanders' PT Boats and MTBs would remain in static positions along MASON, and if they did

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17 Commander Task Group 122.4, "Operation Plan," 13 May 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com; Hewitt, *Normandy*, 255.

18 The RN only began fitting its AIO system in destroyers in late 1943. Initially, it wasn't as effective as the USN's more mature CIC and it took the RN longer to get it to the fleet due to operational demands and limited shipyard resources. As a result, RN destroyers operating in NEPTUNE had varying capabilities in terms of radar and plotting. For the development of the CIC and AIO see Trent Hone, *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the US Navy, 1898-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 208-249 and 212-215; Kingsley, *The Applications of Radar and Other Electronic Systems in the Royal Navy in World War 2*; W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby, *A Blue Water Navy: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy, 1943-1945* (St Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, 2006), 306-17.

19 When Sanders was on the staff of Admiral Ernest King when he was Commander, US Atlantic Fleet, in a conversation with the Chief of Staff of the RN's Western Approaches Command he contrasted the copious British Western Approaches Convoy Instructions (WACIs) with King's more succinct Convoy Escort Instructions. The British officer explained "Your Admiral King thinks everybody has as much brains as he has. But we write instructions for the boneheads." See Vice Admiral Harry Sanders, "King of the Oceans," US Naval Institute, *Proceedings* (August 1974), 52-59. in a conversation with the Chief of Staff of the RN's Western Approaches Command.

move, they were restricted to less than 10 knots unless in hot pursuit; thus, any radar contact exceeding that speed could probably be considered hostile, helping to ease recognition challenges. Finally, Sanders commanded more of a mixed force comprising British *Hunt*-class destroyers, MTBs and Steam Gun Boats (SGBs) besides his American units. Although this caused some challenges with naval terminology—one British officer admitted difficulty in understanding what a "Bewey" was—it appears to have had little impact on their operations.[20]

That cannot be said of relations between the senior-most commanders, with friction between Admiral Ramsay and Rear Admiral Kirk over larger issues related to defence of the assault area. One was what an historian has dubbed "The E-boat Letter Controversy," which was sparked by the stunning *Schnellboot* attack into Lyme Bay on the night of 28 April that sank two LSTs engaged in Exercise TIGER.[21] Concerned that similar catastrophes might occur during the initial stages of the invasion, Kirk wanted to curb the *Schnellboot* threat prior to the actual assault. In a letter to Ramsay on the heels of the TIGER disaster, Kirk argued it brought "the risk from this type of attack into sharp focus and requires examination of means to prevent reoccurrence during the actual Operation NEPTUNE." He was apprehensive about the overall weakness of his destroyer screen and thought his assault groups would be exposed to surface attack from Cherbourg. Since the majority of his destroyers would be escorting the leading echelons of the assault formations so as to be in position to fulfill their bombardment duties, he feared the more lightly defended rear elements would be vulnerable to *Schnellboot*. "Consequently, and in view of recent experiences," Kirk concluded, "very great concern is felt for the safety of the ships and troops in these convoys. There seems little reason to presume that escorts of the weak number and type, which for lack of ships are contemplated, will prevent losses—possibly losses of such magnitude as to jeopardize subsequent events." "It is my considered opinion", he emphasized, "that it is vital to the success of the initial phase of Operation NEPTUNE that the following steps be taken":

(a) Bring the port of Cherbourg under heavy bombardment, both by the heaviest naval guns and by the heaviest aerial bombs, at such time prior to D-1 as will destroy the port as an operational base for German E-boats and destroyers.

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[20] Lieutenant Commander P. Baker, RN, "1st SGB Flotilla in OVERLORD," *Coastal Forces Periodic Review* (May-June 1944), 9. Whereas Americans pronounce a buoy as "bewey," the British and others pronounce it "boy."

[21] Christopher D. Yung, *Gators of Neptune: Naval Amphibious Planning for the Normandy Invasion* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 118-119.

(b) Strengthen the covering forces of the Portsmouth and Plymouth Home Commands by naval types capable of dealing with the E-boat menace, to such degree as will destroy all E-boats which attempt to interfere with our initial cross-channel movement and subsequent deployment in the Bay of the Seine.

Kirk envisioned the bombardment operation taking place in the hours before the assault, and pledged the battleship USS *Nevada*, a destroyer screen and minesweeping force to the endeavor, as well as an American flag officer in command. Presumably, the RN would fill out the force.[22]

Ramsay was aghast, and he considered Kirk's letter "hysterical."[23] In a meeting on the matter a few days later with General Eisenhower and Kirk, he agreed *Schnellboot* posed "a serious menace" but cautioned "it would be a mistake to overestimate it." He thought a bombardment of Cherbourg would be risky and could reveal the location of landing. Moreover, Ramsay had confidence with the plans in place to thwart German surface operations, which included laying minefields off Le Havre and Cherbourg, a bombing campaign against coastal radar sites, and the fitting of jamming equipment in Allied warships; all backed up by the defensive schemes to be implemented after the assault. Ramsay's view carried, and in the event Kirk's concerns were unrealized.[24]

Kirk was also concerned about coordination along the northern boundary of his assault area. Portsmouth Command had responsibility for the defence of assault shipping in the Channel adjacent to the WTF area, including control of the Frigate/MTB groups designated for anti- *Schnellboot* patrols off Cherbourg. Kirk was worried that Portsmouth did not have enough resources to fulfill this responsibility—a situation partially alleviated by the reinforcements on the way from the US—and he also thought command and control issues would arise along the WTF/Portsmouth Command CHOP line. Reflecting traditional USN philosophy, rather than having to rely upon co-operation with the C-in-C

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22 Rear Admiral A.G. Kirk to Naval Commander Allied Expeditionary Force, "Aggressive Measures Against German E-Boats and Destroyers – Operation NEPTUNE," 4 May 1944, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force: Office of Secretary, General Staff: Records, 1943-45, box 9,file 045/93, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

23 Ramsay Diary, 6 May 1944.

24 Ramsay Diary, 8 and 11 May; Yung, *Gators of Neptune*, 118-119; and John Foster Tent, *E-Boat Alert: Defending the Normandy Invasion Fleet* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996). Despite its sub-title, Tent's valuable study focusses on *Schnellboot* operations in the Channel during NEPTUNE rather than the defence of the assault area. In regard to the E-boat letter controversy, Ramsay appeared more upset that Kirk went over his head to Eisenhower with the matter, after which the Supreme Commander treated Kirk as his equal, rather than as his subordinate.

Portsmouth, Kirk thought there should be a unified command covering the assault areas as well as the sectors of the English Channel covered by Portsmouth and other commands.[25] Ramsay refused to relent so Kirk decided to go over his head and raised it with Winston Churchill at the final OVERLORD combined briefing for the senior leadership at St Paul's School on 15 May, telling the British Prime Minister that the orders were unclear in respect to overall command responsibilities. Ramsay expressed rightful indignation in his diary, writing Kirk acted "stupid." In the end, Kirk again failed to persuade his allies and the command setup remained as it was but tension between the two senior officers never completed dissipated, and concerns over co-ordination with Portsmouth Command would continue to cause Kirk anxiety.[26]

Honing the Blade

Rigorous training was an essential element of the preparations for NEPTUNE, but its value proved uneven in terms of the ETF and WTF defence schemes. The main reason for this was that some destroyers assigned to NEPTUNE did not join the invasion fleet until almost the last minute, thus did not have the same opportunity as those assigned earlier on. In March 1944, for example, *Scylla*'s plotting team was the first to pass through the RN's newly established Action Information Training Center (AITC) at Greenwich, where they sharpened their radar direction skills.[27] In the first week of May, ETF and WTF units participated in various phases of the large-scale FABIUS exercise on England's south coast, which included practicing some aspects of the defensive system. Later, on 18 May, ETF units conducted a large-scale defence exercise dubbed CONTAB, which tested the communications and tactical components of the BAADOs, with *Scylla* controlling the MTB flotillas assigned to Rear Admiral Vian—in a realistic twist "genuine Teutonic E-boats" put in an appearance 20 miles to the south, but in a foreshadowing of events to come, they were driven off by covering flotillas.[28] In addition, destroyers undertook specialized anti-*Schnellboot* training. From 20-22 May, for example, Sanders' DESRON 18 carried out a series of night encounter

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25 NCWTF Report; and Kirk, "Aggressive Measures Against German E-Boats and Destroyers – Operation NEPTUNE," 4 May 1944.

26 Ramsay Diary, 15 May 1944; and Hewitt, *Normandy*, 111.

27 Kingsley, *The Applications of Radar and Other Electronic Systems in the Royal Navy in World War 2*, 61. It is unclear what other of the NEPTUNE ships benefitted from this training, but it seems certain that *Lawford* participated.

28 Report of the Naval Commander Allied Expeditionary Force (NCAEF), October 1944, p. 37, DHH, 83/105 pt. 2; C-in-C Portsmouth, "Report on Operation OVERLORD (Coastal Forces)," 12 September 1944, sections 22-30 and 48-49, UKNA, ADM 179/509; C-in-C Home Fleet, War Diary, May 1944, UKNA, ADM 199/1427.

serials in Scottish waters with RN motor launches posing as *Schnellboot*. British and Canadian destroyers received similar training at Scapa Flow, although, the focus there was directed more towards bombardment procedures.[29] In contrast, "new arrivals" such as the RN's 26th Destroyer Flotilla, which had been screening Home Fleet strikes along the Norwegian coast, or the five USN *Allen M. Sumner*-class destroyers of DESRON 60, assigned late to NEPTUNE, did not become as well acclimatized. The latter only arrived at Portsmouth on 27 May; in the short time available they had to exchange their American signal books for British ones and then absorb the contents of those as well as the comprehensive NEPTUNE orders, which left time for only two short bombardment exercises.[30]

The rigorous planning and preparation coupled with their preponderance of strength, left Allied commanders in a far superior position than their opponents across the English Channel. *Kriegsmarine* light forces defending the Baie de la Seine simply had little chance against the sheer might backing the invasion. The condition of the 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille* was typical of most German destroyer units at that stage of the war. Its ships, *Möwe*, *Jaguar*, *Falke* and *T-28*—fleet torpedo boats that were small destroyers ranging from 938 to 1297 tons standard displacement armed with six 21.7-inch torpedo tubes and three to four 4.1-inch guns—had different capabilities and were in varied states of maintenance. The first three, built in the 1920s, suffered from hard service during the war leaving *T-28*, commissioned in June 1943, as the only truly modern vessel. In the critical area of radar, the *Kriegsmarine*'s systems were substandard in comparison to their opponents; one historian asserted their sets "were to Allied sets as a pocket torch is to a car headlight."[31] The personnel situation was no better. Although they had experienced leaders—*Korvettenkapitän* Hoffman, had commanded five torpedo boats before taking over the 5th flotilla in November 1943—many junior officers, petty officers and key ratings had been transferred to the U-boat arm. Those who remained were inexperienced and because of operational demands, fuel shortages and Allied air attacks they had seen little opportunity to train up to the mark.[32]

Schnellboot remained a potent weapon. These small, fast, elusive craft had

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[29] USS *Thompson*, War Diary May 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com; and C-in-C Home Fleet, War Diary, May 1944, UKNA, ADM 199/1427.

[30] The five *Allen B. Sumner*-class destroyers of DESRON 60 only arrived in Portsmouth on 27 May. USS *Walke*, War Diary, May and June 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com.

[31] Vice Admiral Sir Arthur Hezlet, *The Electron and Seapower* (London: P. Davies, 1975), 264. Hezlet had a distinguished career in RN submarines before becoming a respected historian.

[32] See M.J. Whitley, *German Destroyers of World War Two* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991).

proved effective in both minelaying and anti-shipping operations throughout the war and, manned by capable, experienced sailors, were a match for Allied coastal forces.[33] Despite this, *Schnellboot* commanders were not sanguine about their chances against the expected invasion.[34] *Kommodore* Rudolph Petersen, the *Führer der Schnellboot* (*FdS*), cautioned *Admiral* Krancke to temper expectations citing "the difficulties for our E-boats caused by the enemy's superiority in radar detection capabilities." Petersen thought increased co-operation from the *Luftwaffe*, better radar detection equipment and additional boats would increase their chances, but all went unfulfilled.[35]

Given all this, Krancke had limited confidence in his command's ability to defend against the invasion. Besides the weaknesses with destroyers and *Schnellboot*, in a situation report dated 4 June, he complained that his mining campaign, upon which much depended, continued to be plagued by equipment shortages and maintenance problems. Moreover, "our own naval forces were regularly—and practically invariably—intercepted directly after leaving harbor." To Krancke, the only saving grace was that he did not think the invasion was imminent. Since Germany had not transferred significant numbers of their forces in Western Europe to the Eastern Front or Italy, he assumed the Allies felt:

> Neither strategical pressure for an invasion at the present stage of the war, nor the prospect of success which would correspond to his striving to avoid risks. His measures are therefore a well-calculated combination of bluff and preparation for an invasion which is intended to occur later.

Nonetheless, Krancke thought because such a judgement was "naturally fraught with uncertainties … we are obliged to prepare for surprises and to continue to carry out the necessary measures with the greatest urgency."[36] Within 48-hours, the so-called bluff was played with brute force.

Opening Moves

Late in the afternoon of 6 June, as Allied assault forces poured relentlessly into the Baie de la Seine, Rear Admiral Vian put that night's defence measures

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[33] See Lawrence Paterson, *Schnellboot: A Complete Operational History* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2015).

[34] At the beginning of June just over half the 29 *Schnellboot* in Channel ports were in position to attack the assault area and return to base under the cover of darkness. Admiralty, Training and Staff Duties Division, "German E-Boat Operations and Policy, 1939-1945," May 1946, UKNA, ADM 223/28.

[35] *KTB*, *Marine Gruppe West*, 29 April 1944, DHH, SGR II 340.

[36] *KTB*, *Marine Gruppe West*, "Retrospective Survey for May 1944: Assessment of Invasion Preparations," 4 June 1944, DHH, SGR II 340.

into effect. Friction raised its hand almost immediately, and despite the careful planning and training, problems arose, most notably with communications. When the four MTBs of the RCN 29th MTB Flotilla arrived off Normandy, they had trouble locating Vian's flagship *Scylla* in the crowded anchorage. When they finally located the cruiser, high swells prevented the 29th's senior officer, Lieutenant Commander Anthony Law, RCNVR, from boarding the cruiser for instructions, so the night orders had to shouted to the bobbing MTBs against a cacophony of wind, sea, engines and the incessant boom of the shore bombardment.[37] Other problems were more serious. The Captain (Patrols), Captain Pugsley, failed to receive the night policy signal delineating that night's patrol assignments from *Scylla* because the heavy communications traffic swamped the available channels, so he was forced to undergo the tedious process of receiving it visually and then passing it by the same method to his destroyers and vessels along the 25-mile long defence line.[38] Not all got the message. When Pugsley took *Lawford* to inspect the defence line, he discovered the nine vessels of the British 40th Minesweeping Flotilla (MSF) had failed to turn up, leaving a dangerous four-mile gap. He anchored *Lawford* to plug the hole in the vacant sector, but two nights would pass before the errant flotilla showed up.[39]

The static lines saw no action the first night—indeed, they were not really challenged until July when they rebuffed minor attacks by small battle units[40]—however, the forward defences were tested. Although unsure of the exact situation, Krancke ordered all available units into the Baie de la Seine. Since there were as yet no *Schnellboot* based at Le Havre, only Hoffmann's destroyers and a flotilla of *Räumboot*—motor minesweepers called *R-boot* by the *Kriegsmarine* and R-boats by the Allies—were available. This was precisely the type of threat *Scylla* had prepared for, and the control ship's procedures proved effective. As on most nights to follow, the cruiser anchored inside the defence lines near the northeast corner of the SWORD area, "so as to give maximum Radar coverage to North Eastward whilst being outside easy torpedo range of craft firing outside the defence line." Depending on environmental conditions, radar coverage with her Type 276 varied from about

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37 C. Anthony Law, *White Plumes Astern: The Short, Daring Life of Canada's MTB Flotilla* (Halifax: Nimbus Books, 1969), 73-74.

38 Despite the fact that NEPTUNE planners took measures to prevent communications channels becoming overloaded, it remained a problem; by relying primarily on designated R/T and TBS waves, Vian's and Sanders' defensive screens largely avoided the problem.

39 Pugsley, "Report of Proceedings of Captain of Patrols from 1800 Tuesday 6th to 0500 Thursday 8th June," 16 June 1944.

40 See V.E. Tarrant, *The Last Year of the Kriegsmarine: May 1944-May 1945* (London: Arms and Armour, 1994), 96-100.

8 to 15 miles for vessels the size of *Schnellboot* and *Räumboot*, but the key to her effectiveness as a control ship lay as much in the plotting arrangements honed at the Action Information training centre and tested in exercises like late-May's CONTAB. Three plots were set-up in her operations room: a "general chart" displaying the entire Channel, a "local plot" of the assault area on an ARL table on scale one inch to a mile, and the PPI working off the Type 276 centered between the other two plots.[41] On the bridge one deck above, two magnified "view trunks" enabled watch keepers to peer down at the plots below; this was particularly beneficial to *Scylla*'s Flag Captain Thomas Brownrigg, who conducted most night operations while Vian rested from his demanding daytime chores.[42]

The plots were overseen by *Scylla*'s Navigation Officer, Lieutenant William Robertson, RN, who was in charge of the operations room, as well as by the Surface Forces Direction Officer (SFDO) who worked off the local plot, and another officer who stood by the PPI—the SFDO was Lieutenant Patrick Edge, RNVR, a respected member of the MTB fraternity. In his report on NEPTUNE, Brownrigg described their procedure:

> The officer on the PPI 'told' directly off the scan to the local plot operator who kept a continuous plot of all movements of own and enemy forces. SFDO could therefore quickly establish an enemy plot and pass out information by R/T with the minimum of delay…The general plot operator, on information received from outside sources,[43] kept a plot of own and enemy forces operating beyond the area covered by the local operational plot. Tracks of any forces entering the area were transferred to the Local Operations Plot for action plotting and the PPI operator endeavored to pick up the contact. Filtered enemy reports were also passed out by W/T so that all forces in the area were informed of the situation. When enemy forces were plotted approaching the defence area, ships and craft anchored on the defence lines were informed by R/T on Patrol Wave. Those ships and craft in the sector particularly concerned were often ordered to illuminate to

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41 The ARL [Admiralty Research Laboratory] Table, was an automatic course-plotting device where a carriage driven by the ship's log and gyro compass projected a spot of light on a chart or plotting ship. See Kingsley, *The Applications of Radar and Other Electronic Systems in the Royal Navy in World War 2*, 169.

42 Commanding Officer, HMS *Scylla*, "Report of Proceedings of HMS *Scylla* during Operation NEPTUNE – 3rd to 26th June 1944," 6 July 1944, UKNA, ADM 179/502. Vian was ill on the eve of NEPTUNE and the symptoms returned after the operation was under way, which increased his Flag Captain's role.

43 "Outside sources" included the Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth, the Vice Admiral Dover, the MONRAD radar station ashore and other ships in the ETF. See, NCETF Report, 17.

seaward.[44]

Timely, accurate plotting being essential, *Scylla*'s operations staff marked routine echoes every five minutes and suspicious ones every thirty seconds. "It was thus possible," Rear Admiral Vian reported, "to pass out information and orders with the least delay and to vector divisions of MTBs or destroyers to intercept the enemy in the same manner as fighter interception is worked."[45] Efficiency increased as operations progressed and "the time interval between an echo being originally detected on the PPI and the plotted positions passed out to forces by R/T rarely exceeded 15 seconds." Brownrigg thought this was "the first occasion that surface interception using a control ship has been employed in this manner," making *Scylla*'s achievement quite impressive.[46] Similar arrangements were established in HMS *Lawford*, although, as will be seen, the frigate did not accumulate the same level of experience.

To return to the German sortie on the night of 6/7 June, Hoffmann claimed to have sunk two Allied destroyers but since none reported being engaged, this reflected the shroud of confusion that typically reigns over night actions.[47] The events of the *Räumboot* mission were more tangible. At 0336, the four Fairmile Type D "Dogboats" of the 55th RN MTB Flotilla in TUNNY SOUTH received a contact report from *Scylla* and were vectored to an interception position by Lieutenant Edge. Led by the seasoned Lieutenant Commander Donald Bradford, RNR they closed to within 800 yards before opening fire. To the north, the four Scott-Paine 70-foot "Short" MTBs of Lieutenant Commander Law's 29th flotilla saw the gun flashes and immediately headed to support Bradford. A typical fast-paced coastal forces action ensued as Bradford's and Law's craft sped down and around the enemy line. Colorful tracer stitched the darkness as the MTBs opened up with their 6-pdr, 2-pdr and 20mm automatic weapons, while the *Räumboot*, turned away for Le Havre, responded with their 20- and 37mm. Gunners had a tendency to fire high in such fast-paced actions but on this occasion both sides scored hits. Bradford remembered,

Our guns were hitting them, and we could see the flashes as the

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44 Commanding Officer, HMS *Scylla*, "Report of Proceedings of HMS *Scylla* during Operation NEPTUNE – 3rd to 26th June 1944," 6 July 1944. In line with the procedure commonly adopted in RN ships, *Scylla*'s Type 276 would have conducted a continual all-round search while her two Type 285 gunnery radars fixed on various contacts. For the evolution of RN night-fighting doctrine see Michael Whitby, "Controlling the Chops: Destroyer Night Action and the Battle of Ile de Batz" in *Fighting in the Dark: Naval Combat at Night, 1904-1944*, eds. Vincent O'Hara and Trent Hone (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2023), 217-250.

45 NCETF Report, 17.

46 Commanding Officer, HMS *Scylla*, "Report of Proceedings of HMS *Scylla* during Operation NEPTUNE – 3rd to 26th June 1944," 6 July 1944.

47 *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*, 7 June 1944.

> Oerlikon shells, tore in. One R-boat got a direct hit with a 6-pounder shell and started to fall back crippled. They commenced making smoke to cover themselves, but we were on their windward quarter so it only served to silhouette them. They were jettisoning their mines as fast as possible – we could see the splashes as they went over the stern.[48]

The MTBs broke off the engagement when the *Räumboot* entered SCALLOPS. One *R-boot* was destroyed, two of the 55th's MTBs suffered slight damage, and all four Canadian boats were shot up with four ratings injured.[49]

This first night featured several elements that would continue throughout NEPTUNE. The control ship system worked well and the dispositions of the MTB groups in TUNNY proved self-supporting with Law's group providing timely support to Bradford. On the German side, minelaying from surface vessels proved challenging as the slow *Räumboot* could not penetrate the defensive screen; this task was gradually assumed by the *Luftwaffe* who fulfilled it effectively. Also, German forces showed themselves unwilling to push too hard against the stout defences. Although Hoffmann was not subjected to return fire from the destroyers he claimed to have attacked, he nonetheless headed back to base, unwilling to exploit the confusion he thought he caused.

Throughout NEPTUNE, the Allies benefitted from a bounty of intelligence, some of which profited their defensive operations. According to F.H. Hinsley's study on British operational intelligence, decrypted communications intercepts usually "gave advance notice of E-boat and torpedo-boat intentions for the coming night, stating which flotilla would be operating from which port and how many boats, whether they were undertaking torpedo or mining operations or both, and to which port and at what time they would return." The intercepts also detailed enemy strength on a day-to-day basis thus forming a valuable check on Allied action claims as well as insights into the flow of reinforcements from other areas.[50] At the tactical level, select Allied destroyers and MTBs carried HEADACHE teams of German linguists who eavesdropped on *Kriegsmarine* tactical broadcasts. This proved of mixed utility since locations were often hard to pin down but occasionally they provided useful information such as when destroyers or *Schnellboot* were laying mines, launching attacks or firing torpedoes or discerned the call signs being used by the enemy destroyers on

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48 Quoted in Peter Scott, *The Battle of the Narrow Seas: A History of the Light Coastal Forces in the Channel and North Sea, 1939-1945* (London: Country Life Ltd, 1945), 194.

49 Lieutenant Commanders D.G. Bradford and C.A. Law, "MTB Action Reports 6th/7th June 1944," UKNA, ADM 179/502.

50 F.H. Hinsley et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vol. III, pt. 2 (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1988), 163.

a mission-by-mission basis.[51] Despite the obvious value of the intelligence material provided by signals intelligence, HEADACHE and other sources, there was, of course, no guarantee that an interception would take place, and the defence of the assault area ultimately depended upon the control ships and vessels on patrol who had to bring the enemy to battle.

Yet, intelligence could deceive. In April, signals intelligence and prisoners-of-war warned of the "W-Boat," an innovative German submarine described as "a submersible E-boat" that was supposedly capable of speeds of thirty knots surfaced or submerged. Alarmed at such a revolutionary weapon—the Allies had no anti-submarine vessels that could keep pace—the Admiralty stripped three MTB flotillas of their torpedo tubes, replacing them with 48 small Mark XII depth charges. In tactics developed on the fly, it was decided the MTBs, who had no active sonar, would plaster a suspected W-boat contact with the depth charges, hopefully not damaging their fragile hulls in the process. The 29th was one of the flotillas selected, and a dejected Lieutenant Commander Law recalled "mere words cannot explain the effect on the Flotilla's morale—the bottom had dropped out of everything, and our faces were long and sad as we watched our main armament and striking power being taken away." Despite fresh evidence that allowed the Admiralty to dismiss the W-boat threat on the eve of NEPTUNE, the 29th retained its depth charges.[52]

The loss of their striking power became a source of great frustration on the night of 7/8 June when Law, in TUNNY SOUTH with four MTBs, encountered three enemy destroyers. Thinking they might be friendly even though Allied destroyers were not supposed to be in the area, Law fired recognition flares, only to be answered by the guns of *Jaguar*, *Möwe* and *T-28*. After an initial exchange of fire, the toothless Canadians kept their distance cursing the loss of such a splendid opportunity and shadowed the enemy until three MTBs from Bradford's 55th flotilla, who had torpedoes, attacked. "We fired," Bradford recalled, "and away went six torpedoes, a tricky shot as the destroyers were turning away and firing at us." Although he claimed a hit, all six torpedoes missed and the enemy retreated safely into Le Havre, suffering only light damage and casualties.[53] The next night, the 29th achieved success despite

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[51] HEADACHE was often impaired by interference from a vessel's own radio traffic and usually gave no information as to the enemy's location. See, HMS *Stevenstone*, "Operation NEPTUNE," 14 June 1944, UKNA, ADM 179/502.

[52] Most of the pre-NEPTUNE plans, both British and American, allude to W-Boats. Admiralty, Directorate of Naval Operation Studies, "E-Boat Attacks on Coastal Convoys: Comparison with Actual Threat from Walther Boat," 19 April 1944, UKNA, ADM 219/121; and Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, 163 and 245; *Coastal Forces Periodic Review* (March-April 1944), 24; and Law, *White Plumes Astern*, 37.

[53] Scott, *The Battle of the Narrow Seas*, 195; Lieutenant Commanders D.G. Bradford and C.A.

their lack of torpedoes. Early on 9 June, two of Hoffman's destroyers, their decks laden with mines, encountered three MTBs led by Lieutenant Cornelius Burk, RCNVR. Under accurate fire, Burk saw no option but to turn away under the cover of smoke. Bluff and angst had a role to play. Unaware the MTBs had no torpedoes, when German sailors saw the MTBs turn away, they assumed they had launched torpedoes so took evasive action. With Hoffmann's radar revealing his operational area "full of enemy formations," and an engagement "an extremely unpleasant prospect because of my load of mines," he abandoned his mission.[54]

Massaging Destroyer Operations

Although the control of MTBs functioned smoothly during the first nights, the destroyer patrols lacked cohesion. This was partly because their patrol organization could not be executed as efficiently, since many of the destroyers had been scattered around several commands prior to NEPTUNE and in some cases had only joined NEPTUNE days before the event. Familiarity with the defence scheme was, thus, far from uniform, but another factor also had an impact. The myriad demands heaped upon destroyers in the first days of the invasion—bombardment, escort, anti-submarine patrols and anchorage defence as well as seeing to their own replenishment needs—not only placed an immense burden upon the ships themselves, but also on the staff officers allocating them to various tasks. As a result, some plans went awry. Moreover, the method by which destroyers were assigned to Pugsley and Vian on a nightly basis was unreliable. Under the NEPTUNE orders, destroyers' duties were delineated "as required" by the commanders of Assault Forces S, J and G who "owned" the destroyers. Consequently, Vian and Pugsley's staffs were left in the dark as to which ships would be assigned to them, which became a source of confusion.[55] But, more critical to the organization of the destroyer patrols, on the night of 7/8 June, the team of *Lawford* and *Scylla*, who had begun to establish a smooth working relationship, suffered a key loss.

That night, Pugsley was forced to repeat the cumbersome process of distributing the night policy orders visually, and due to the 40th MSF's continued absenteeism, he had to assign two destroyers to fill the gap in the defence line. At 0200, reports that *Schnellboot* were active began coming in

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Law, "MTB Action Reports 7th/8th June 1944," UKNA, ADM 179/502; *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*, 8 June 1944; and Law, *White Plumes Astern*, 81.

54 *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*, 8 June 1944; Lieutenant Commander C.A. Law, "MTB Action Reports 8th/9th June 1944," undated, UKNA, ADM 179/502.

55 Admiralty, Battle Summary no. 39 vol. II *Operation NEPTUNE: Landings in Normandy, June 1944*, UKNA, ADM 234/366.

"fairly frequently," and within a half-hour *Lawford*'s plotting team resolved them into two groups, "one of which was well to the Eastward of the TROUT Line, the other one of which appeared to be about 8 miles North of the Defence Line, steering West." At 0245, Pugsley broadcast "Influenza East" indicating possible *Schnellboot* activity to the east and ordered the Force G Guard Destroyers to concentrate at the eastern end of their patrol line. Fifteen minutes later, *Scylla* directed Pugsley to intercept enemy surface craft to the north of the assault area in Area PIKE:

> *Lawford* weighed and proceeded. Rendezvous was made with the four Guard Destroyers and two were ordered to patrol 7 and 8 Channels, while Captain (P) took the other two and patrolled 5 and 6 Channels. At about 0345 a doubtful radar contact was obtained which was closed and illuminated but appeared to be a false alarm. About 0415 'Negative Influenza East' was received and it was decided to leave the destroyers patrolling the Channels, while *Lawford* returned to the Defence Line to patrol the gap left by the 40th MSF.[56]

The 40th MSF's delinquency now came home to roost. Fifteen minutes after *Lawford* anchored in the gap in the defence line, ships were alerted that friendly aircraft would be approaching from northward, so when *Lawford* heard engines approaching "it was assumed it was one of them." This was dispelled by tracer sweeping the ship followed by a bomb exploding on the port side abreast the funnel. Victimized by a *Luftwaffe* JU-88, the frigate went down quickly with 26 members of the ship's company. Ironically, Pugsley and many of *Lawford*'s survivors were rescued by HMS *Pique*, a minesweeper from the 40th Flotilla that had finally showed up. One can only imagine the icy exchange between Pugsley and *Pique*'s commanding officer.[57]

Pugsley and his surviving staff were sent on survivors leave and Vian immediately named Captain Peter Cazalet, commander of the 23rd Destroyer Flotilla [D23] as the new Captain (Patrols). However, he replaced him only a few hours later with Captain Manley Power, D26 and the CO of HMS *Kempenfelt*.[58] This is perplexing, most importantly since it appears that Vian had built no redundancy into his patrol organization; one would have thought an officer would have been identified to replace Pugsley if he or *Lawford* became casualties—in the WTF Captain Sanders had a designated deputy in another destroyer who was fully read in on the defence scheme. Also, although

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[56] Pugsley, "Report of Proceedings of Captain of Patrols from 1800 Tuesday 6th to 0500 Thursday 8th June," 16 June 1944.

[57] For the loss of *Lawford* see Collingwood, *The Captain Class Frigates in the Second World War*, 152–153.

[58] One account mistakenly has Pugsley resuming the position of Captain (Patrols), Hewitt, *Normandy*, 266.

Cazalet received no turn-over from Pugsley, he had at least participated in the pre-invasion FABIUS exercise and would have been familiar with the defence plan. Power, on the other hand, whose flotilla had only arrived in Portsmouth on 27 May, did not have the benefit of FABIUS nor any other pre-invasion exercise. Moreover, unlike Pugsley who had a large, dedicated staff and specialized facilities, and did not have the additional responsibility of commanding *Lawford*, both Power and Cazalet had only a small flotilla staff and were double hatted as commanding officer of their respective destroyers and leaders of their flotillas. Nonetheless, senior commanders have the prerogative to select their own people, and Vian probably thought Power's shortcomings related to the position of Captain (Patrols) were overshadowed by his extensive experience in combined operations in the Mediterranean, where he had been a key planner in the assaults from TORCH through ANVIL. Perhaps more important, Vian and Power had both been respected members of Andrew Cunningham's close-knit command team in the challenging days of the Mediterranean war, so Vian selected an officer he knew and trusted. No matter the *rationale*, the incoming Captain (Patrols) had only limited familiarity with the ETF defensive scheme.[59]

The waters were further muddied when the leadership change coincided with a change to the patrol policy. The original BAADOs prohibited destroyers from entering Area TUNNY to avoid possible friendly fire incidents with MTBs, however, concerned by Hoffman's destroyer sorties, and perhaps recognizing that German shore batteries around Le Havre posed only a limited threat, Vian decided to reinforce the MTBs with forward destroyer patrols. This had an impact on Power's first operation, which occurred just hours after he assumed the duties of Captain (Patrols). Rather than lying in readiness inside the defence line, on the night of 8/9 June *Kempenfelt* led a sub-division of destroyers into TUNNY. Receiving the code-word "Cowpuncher" signifying possible enemy destroyer activity: Power reported "I moved out to engage the enemy, and finding an unexpected destroyer *with two funnels*, *Kempenfelt* was on the verge of engaging her when she was identified as HMS *Faulknor*."[60] *Faulknor* was not supposed to be in the area—the Commander Force S had allocated her to Vian at the last moment without informing him—and with two funnels she could be easily mistaken for a German destroyer. Stewing over *Faulknor*'s "unorthodox and tiresome" actions, Power ordered her to follow

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[59] Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944, ADM 179/502; UK, Admiralty, *The Navy List for April 1944*. Power's sparse memoir at Churchill College Archives sheds no light on the change in command.

[60] Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944. The emphasis on *Faulknor*'s two funnels is Power's. RN destroyers built pre-war up to the Tribal-class had two funnels, while their war-built classes had one.

him and continued to search for the enemy. His mood did not improve when the radar contact pursued by *Kempenfelt* turned out to be three barrage balloons that had been laid to assist Allied bombardment ships with their navigation. With Power thus distracted the actual enemy destroyers escaped into Le Havre. After a frustrating night, Power complained to Vian about the chaotic communications and tactical control that marred the patrol: "The situation was not clear owing to the confused enemy reports and congestion on the patrol wave. It was plain at the time and from subsequent reports, that many ships were missing many signals, and that orders issued by me were in contradiction to your own, originated simultaneously."

Power, who was known to be an ambitious, talented staff officer—though a tad irascible—set out to make things right. After his experience on 8/9 June, he thought Vian's BAADOs were flawed since they did not contain instructions for destroyer patrols in TUNNY, and thus did not "meet the circumstances of both offensive and defensive defence"—one does wonder why the possibility of forward destroyer patrols had not been considered beforehand. Power assigned his small flotilla staff the job of drawing up a completely new set of orders to replace the BAADOs; not an easy task, he admitted "during active operations when rest and sleep were scarce." The new orders were not promulgated until 17 June, after the destroyer threat they addressed had dissipated, suggesting the BAADOs did not require a complete re-write but perhaps just an addendum dealing with the new forward destroyer patrols.[61]

Captain Sanders also modified the WTF defence scheme. During the first nights of the invasion, his forces remained untested since *Schnellboot* were unable to break through the tight blockade Portsmouth Command's Frigate/MTB groups clamped down on Cherbourg. The biggest threat came from the air, with glider bomb attacks a particular menace.[62] The first engagement with *Schnellboot* came on the night of 8/9 June, when *Frankford*'s radar detected three contacts heading south at 20 knots through Area MOUNTAIN under the lee of the Cherbourg Peninsula. After confirming the contact as three *Schnellboot*, *Frankford* engaged with her 5-inch main battery, quickly joined by other destroyers. Two *Schnellboot* withdrew northward under smoke while a third slowed apparently damaged before it, too, disappeared from radar screens. Later that night, *Schnellboot* – perhaps the same ones – torpedoed two LSTs just miles north of the WTF sector in the area defended by Portsmouth

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61 Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944. The revised orders, "Operation NEPTUNE: Patrol Orders for British Assault Area (Short Title VP)," 17 June 1944, form an appendix to Power's NEPTUNE report.

62 Commander Destroyer Squadron 18, War Diary, June 1944, NARA\www.Fold3.com.

Command.[63]

A number of observations arise from this action. *Frankford*'s SG radar detected the *Schnellboot* at 13,600 yards, and her CIC plotted their advance until they fired starshell at 8000 yards, followed quickly by main armament. That performance could not be duplicated by British destroyers who typically had radar of less capability. Also, the fact that Sanders' forces held static positions aided in the quick identification of the enemy, who were the only contacts exceeding Sanders' 10-knot cap, helped to prevent a possible friendly fire incident. Moreover, the USN destroyers fired 5-inch air bursts against the *Schnellboot*: although it would probably not destroy the target, its harassing and dispersing effect was thought to be more persuasive.[64] In the estimation of *Frankford*'s executive officer:

> The employment by protective screens of air bursts against E-boats is felt to be very sound. The purpose of the screen was to "drive off" and destroying (sic) if possible. Since E-boats captains are seldom aggressive in the face of illumination and gunfire, an air burst would have a much more discouraging effect on morale than shells splashed in the water. E-boats are very lightly armored and 5" shrapnel would no doubt cause a great deal of damage while a 5" shell might just go through the boat and do relatively minor damage.[65]

The commanding officer of USS *Baldwin*, who had joined in the action, echoed that thinking, noting "It is considered unlikely that a group of E-boats, unless attacking in overwhelming numbers, and upon a an extremely disorganized convoy or task force, could press home their attacks with any success in view of the present equipment and doctrine used by our forces."[66] Against those strengths, Sanders' forces were unable to communicate directly with Portsmouth Command units, so could not inform them of contacts heading into their area of operations. Instead, Sanders had to transmit sitreps to the Coastal Forces plot at Portsmouth, who then relayed the information to its forces, a time-consuming process unsuited to fast-paced operations. Thus, there would always be level of friction on the WTF/Portsmouth CHOP Line, an issue Rear Admiral Kirk had predicted.

Although the static positioning of Sanders' forces simplified the recognition

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[63] Commanding Officer USS *Frankford*, "Action Against E-Boats – Report of," 29 June 1944; USS *Frankford*, War Diary June 1944; and Commander Destroyer Squadron Eighteen, War Diary, June 1944, all NARA/www.Fold3.com.

[64] Trent Hone believes the use of air bursts can be traced to USN experience in the Pacific. Hone to author, 22 September 2019. *Frankford* used Mark 18 Common AA Mechanical Time Fuses. See, Commanding Officer USS *Frankford*, "Action Against E-Boats – Report of."

[65] XO USS *Frankford*, "Executive Officer's Report," 29 June 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com.

[66] USS *Baldwin*, War Diary June 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com.

challenge, it opened up escape routes for *Schnellboot*. Lieutenant Commander P. Baker, RN, senior officer of the British 1st Steam Gunboat (SGB) Flotilla under Sanders, observed "The American destroyers had twice driven them off with starshell and main armament at ranges between 7,000 and 10,000 yards. They had not, however, destroyed any; so it was at last decided to use SGBs and PT Boats in their proper role."[67] Chaffing at their restricted mobility, Baker and Commander John Bulkeley, USN, the PT Boat leader, persuaded Sanders to position them seaward of MASON-DIXIE where they could cut-off escaping *Schnellboot*, and he deployed two SGBs four miles outside the DIXIE line with three PT Boats three miles further north. The new tactics were tested on the night of 10/11 June. After destroyers forced the *Schnellboot* to turn away from the assault area, *Frankford*, duplicating *Scylla*'s role, vectored them into an attack position. Baker's SGBs caused slight damage to the *Schnellboot* but the PT Boats were unable to close the trap. Again, problems arose near the CHOP line when MTBs from Portsmouth Command mistakenly engaged the SGBs and PTs but, fortunately inflicted no damage. Despite the friendly fire incident, Kirk applauded Sanders' adjustment with the SGBs and PT Boats: "Although these units made no known kills of E-Boats, their presence and aggressive attitude are considered partly responsible for the fact that no serious threat was made against the screen."[68]

In the eastern Baie de la Seine, the situation regarding the control of ETF destroyers gradually improved as Vian and Power continued to sort out their problems. While Power's staff beavered away on the new defence orders, he, Vian and Brownrigg decided that *Scylla*, whose Type 276 produced far better results than *Kempenfelt*'s "obsolescent" Type 272, would share information with Power who would use it to direct his destroyers. Emphasizing *Kempenfelt*'s poor suitability as a control ship, they had to tailor her R/T to communicate directly with MTBs and bolster her HEADACHE detachment of German linguists—*Lawford* had been fully equipped in both aspects—the lack of redundancy is, again, surprising. Nonetheless, events on the night of 9/10 June demonstrated that although control of the MTBs remained effective, there was still work to do with destroyers.

The night began with yet another muddle. Late in the evening, the Commander of Force S sent the destroyer HMS *Isis* to relieve another in Power's duty division without informing him. Her radar out of action, *Isis*—

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[67] Lieutenant Commander P. Baker, RN, "1st SGB Flotilla in OVERLORD," 10. Steam Gunboats were larger, sturdier and more heavily armed than MTBs or MGBs, but lacked their performance. See, George L. Moore, "The Steam Gunboats," *Warship 1999-2000*, 125-139.

[68] NCWTF Report.

another two funneled ship that could be mistaken for an enemy torpedo boat—trespassed into TUNNY SOUTH; a situation Power noted, with evident sarcasm that was "naturally liable to cause confusion." He ordered the wayward *Isis* to follow *Kempenfelt* but this left the duty division with only two destroyers, as the third was unexpectedly called away on a fire support assignment. Adding to the friction, *Kempenfelt* then encountered the destroyer HMS *Swift*, who had also been deployed by Force S without informing Power. As they grappled with this confusion, hostile contacts popped up on *Scylla*'s plots.[69]

Admiral Krancke had planned coordinated attacks for the night. While *Schnellboot* from Cherbourg probed the flanks of the western assault area, six boats from Le Havre were to lay mines in the eastern part of the Baie de la Seine; then, after hopefully distracting the defensive patrols, they were to join three of Hoffman's destroyers in an attack against the anchorage. Despite Power's early travails, the defensive scheme proved flexible enough to defeat this plan. Early warning came when *Scylla* reported probable *Schnellboot* contact northeast of the assault area. Fifteen minutes later, *Kempenfelt*'s HEADACHE section monitored E-boat chatter, which was followed in short order by hydrophone and radar contacts. After illuminating several bearings with starshell, four enemy craft were finally sighted at 5000 yards retiring north-east at high speed. *Kempenfelt* engaged with her 4.7-inch but soon lost visual contact and was forced to rely upon radar-controlled fire, which held little promise against such small elusive contacts—*Isis*, who Power thought interpreted his orders to follow him "too literally," played little role in the engagement. After about an hour of cat-and-mouse, during which the *Schnellboot* used their superior speed to evade their pursuers, Power was told MTBs would continue the action so he led *Isis* back to the northeast corner of the defence line. Although the *Schnellboot* managed to lay 24 mines they were unable to link up with Hoffmann's torpedo boats.[70]

Relying on their own radar, Hoffmann's destroyers avoided MTBs, but when they saw the *Schnellboot* being engaged by Power, they moved around to the north hoping to profit from the distraction. After an hour searching for targets, Hoffmann sighted shadows running due east on a reciprocal course at about 6000 yards, which he identified as "four large destroyers," and immediately ordered a torpedo attack. These were actually HMS *Verulam* and ORP *Slazak* from Power's duty division patrolling TUNNY SOUTH,

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[69] Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944.

[70] Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944; NCETF Report: enclosure A, "Operation of Coastal Forces and Destroyers in Eastern Assault Area 6th to 30th June"; *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*, 10 June 1944.

who were unaware they had been targeted. *Verulam* reported sighting two destroyers, but aware that friendly units were in the vicinity, they ascertained their identity with starshell: "as soon as the starshell burst the enemy made smoke and retired at high speed in the direction of Le Havre." The Allied ships gave chase firing a few radar-controlled salvos but were soon outdistanced. Hoffmann's destroyers beat off an attack by Bradford's MTBs before entering Le Havre.[71]

The night's sortie confirmed that the situation confronting the 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille* and other *Kriegsmarine* forces was becoming increasingly desperate. Upon leaving port their radar monitors immediately detected various types of air and seaborne radar probing for them through the darkness, and although Hoffman received sporadic tactical information from shore-based radar and radio intercepts, he marveled at the effectiveness of the Allied control system that consistently placed defensive forces in his path. Moreover, his own radar was often jammed by Allied warships.[72] The expected support from shore artillery was similarly frustrated by radar jamming, so although batteries threatened Allied naval forces that came within range in daylight, they had only limited impact at night. Other problems were of the *Kriegsmarine*'s own making. Their lack of experience and training became apparent at critical moments as routine evolutions or maneuvers went awry. Co-ordination also lacked cohesion: destroyers and *Schnellboot* often operated in the same sectors without knowing the other would be there, and cooperation with the *Luftwaffe* was virtually non-existent. There was also an "acute" shortage of torpedoes. To hedge their bets on the site of the invasion *Marine Gruppe West* had located their torpedo reserves in a suburb of Paris, roughly equidistant between Normandy and Pas de Calais; a decision that backfired. Once the invasion took place as Allied air interdiction made it almost impossible to transport torpedoes to the Channel ports.[73] When these problems reached a head with the 9/10 June sortie, Hoffmann painted a dismal picture, informing *Marine Gruppe West*: "Given the superiority of the enemy armed forces, where all the advantages lie on the opposing side, conducting any operations outside the range of our own coastal batteries had little prospects of success, it can only lead to defeat in greater or lesser degree." *Gruppe West*'s reply did not inspire confidence as they instructed forces to go easy on torpedoes. To Hoffmann, this restriction ran

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[71] NCETF Report: enclosure A, "Operation of Coastal Forces and Destroyers in Eastern Assault Area 6th to 30th June"; HMS *Verulam*, Report of Proceedings, 21 June 1944, UKNA, ADM 179/502; *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*, 10 June 1944.

[72] As part of the electronic countermeasures (ECM) program for NEPTUNE, some 800 American-built jamming systems had been installed in Allied vessels. See Kingsley, *The Applications of Radar and Other Electronic Systems in the Royal Navy in World War 2*, 214.

[73] "The RAF in Maritime War," vol. V, 14; Paterson, *Schnellboot*, 286-287.

USS *Nelson* (DD-623) under tow following temporary repairs after her stern had been blown off by a torpedo from a German *S-boote* off Normandy on the night of 13 June 1944. (United States National Archives, 80-G-245431)

"counter to all previous experiences and operational doctrine not to be sparing of torpedoes…Now all that's left to me is the occasional torpedo success by accident. Pity!" But even the chances of "accidental" torpedo opportunities dissipated, when later that afternoon Krancke informed Hoffmann his flotilla was now to act as decoys to divert attention from minelaying operations.[74]

Despite the deteriorating situation, German forces still managed some successes. Throughout NEPTUNE, Captain Sander's destroyers maintained their static positions on the MASON-DIXIE Line turning their engines over enough to hold them against the tide so they could get underway quickly. On the night of 11/12 June, however, USS *Nelson* was forced to anchor in position because her starboard shaft and propeller had been removed in late May after she became ensnared with a buoy off Plymouth, and a single shaft could not hold her in place against the tide.[75] At 0105, *Nelson*'s CIC plotted a contact

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74 *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*, 10 June 1944.

75 On 24 May *Nelson* fouled her shaft with a buoy's anchor chain and went into dock for five days. Such was the shortage of American destroyers that she was deployed despite her handicap.

to the north at 6000 yards. She challenged the contact as per instructions, but when it went unanswered the immobile destroyer opened fire and got off ten rapid salvoes with her main armament before a torpedo exploded against her hull. *Nelson*'s damage control teams saved the ship, which was towed safely to Portsmouth, but 24 sailors died.[76]

In his action report, *Nelson*'s captain, Lieutenant Commander Thomas McGrath, USN posed some interesting dilemmas. Clearing his yardarm, he subtly explained that with his ship's ability to maneuver impaired, he had been uncomfortable anchoring on the DIXIE Line. He nonetheless expressed understanding "that the ship was sent into the assault area because every available gun was needed. The Commanding Officer believes his superiors accepted his lack of maneuverability in order to gain the increased fire power." In their endorsements, Captain Sanders and *Nelson*'s squadron commander suggested the fact the destroyer was anchored had little to do with her fate, and that she had fallen victim to the "enemy's good fortune."[77] More interesting in terms of the defence policy was McGrath's criticism of the policy of challenging contacts before engaging:

> It is felt that the ship was hit by an E-boat torpedo. This was fired at the signal light when the challenge was made. Where using a fixed screen around an area, vessels approaching should bear the burden of proving their friendly character. Challenging imposes too great a penalty on the screening vessels. If this ship could have opened fire as soon as control reported on target without challenge, she probably would not have been hit.[78]

Lieutenant Commander Baker of the 1st SGB Flotilla agreed, remarking *Nelson* "was rash enough to challenge an unidentified plot approaching her at 20 knots and got a torpedo in reply."[79] There is no question that having to signal the challenge, thus revealing their position, could be problematic, however, the planners who adopted the system had to weigh that against the decreased chances of friendly fire incidents. Evidence of that danger came the next night when the destroyer USS *Plunkett*, similarly positioned on the

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USS *Nelson*, War Diary May 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com.

[76] USS *Nelson*, "Enemy Surface Action – Report of," 23 June 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com; Paterson, *Schnellboot*, 288; and Tent, *E-Boat Alert*, 136. Paterson and Tent both attribute the torpedo hit to *S-138*.

[77] Commander Destroyer Squadron 17, "Enemy Surface Action – Report of," 6 July 1944; Commander Task Group 122.4, "Enemy Surface Action – Report of," 10 July 1944, both NARA/www.Fold3.com.

[78] USS *Nelson*, "Enemy Surface Action – Report of."

[79] Lieutenant Commander P. Baker, RN, "1st SGB Flotilla in OVERLORD," in *Coastal Forces Periodic Review* (May-June 1944), 11.

MASON-DIXIE Line, mistakenly engaged the British cable layer HMTS *Monarch* and its corvette escort, causing a number of casualties including the death of *Monarch*'s captain.[80] Given the heavy shipping traffic poring into the assault area, day and night, planners like Sanders made a prudent choice.[81]

Meanwhile, the situation in the eastern assault area kept improving. After the confusion of 9/10 June, with destroyers popping up unannounced, an angry Captain Power paid a visit to Force S's Chief of Staff to protest his practice of "sailing destroyers haphazard into the patrol areas." Apart from that issue, the ETF leadership was satisfied with the outcome of 9/10 June's operations, observing that radar information was "much better" than on the previous night. However, they still worked to improve the co-ordination of the defence forces. On 10 June, the Commander Coastal Forces (Channel), the officer in command of MTB operations out of Portsmouth, visited *Scylla* to clear up confusion regarding the nightly disposition of his forces outside the assault area. Unhappily, similar efforts to improve coordination by ETF and WTF leaders did not bear fruit. Concerned that *Schnellboot* might enter the British Assault Area from the northwest to lay mines, at a conference on 13 June Power asked his American counterpart if USN destroyers could mount a nightly mobile patrol to the west of PIKE. Powers reported Sanders "was agreeable to this proposal but it was disapproved by the Naval Commander, Western Task Force." The rationale for Rear Admiral Kirk's rejection remains unexplained but in light of his anxiety over CHOP lines, he likely wanted to avoid increasing the chance of friendly fire incidents. Power kept prodding Sanders for a decision but "after several more meetings on subsequent days the proposal was dropped."[82]

On the night of 12/13 June, the tightening up that Vian and Power implemented frustrated the most determined German effort into the eastern Baie de la Seine. Tipped off by signals intelligence, Vian deployed a more powerful patrol force than usual. The Fleet destroyers *Ursa*, *Ulysses* and

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[80] *Plunkett* twice attempted to illuminate the contact with starshell but the evolutions went awry and her challenge went unanswered. USS *Plunkett* War Diary, June 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com; Roger Litwiller, "HMCS *Trentonian*: A Victim of Friendly Fire," http://www.rogerlitwiller.com/tb-book/hmcs-trentonian-a-victim-of-friendly-fire/

[81] Admiral Ramsay noted that on an average day in the first week of NEPTUNE, 25 Liberty Ships, 38 coasters, 40 LST, 75 LCT, 9 personnel ships and 20 LCI(L) arrived off the assault area. Although they were scheduled to arrive at sequenced times, there were constant disruptions due to weather and operational friction, and identity challenges were bound to arise. See, Admiralty, Battle Summary no. 39, vol. II *Operation NEPTUNE: Landings in Normandy, June 1944*, 119.

[82] Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944.

Virago patrolled PIKE, while the *Hunt*-class *Stevenstone* and *Glaisdale* covered TUNNY SOUTH with *Isis*. Two other Fleet destroyers, *Serapis* and *Swift*, lay stopped with engines ticking over just inside the assault area, while Power's *Kempenfelt* waited in reserve. In addition to the nine destroyers, two groups of MTBs also patrolled TUNNY SOUTH. Additionally, Allied aircraft were active over SCALLOPS.[83]

First contact came in TUNNY NORTH. Shortly after midnight, *Stevenstone* detected two *Schnellboot* at close range. Minutes later, in a rare instance of *Luftwaffe* support to surface operations, the destroyer was illuminated by flares dropped by aircraft and shaken by bombs bursting alongside. *Isis* switched on her radio countermeasures, and although flares continued to illuminate the area, they grew increasingly inaccurate. An hour later, *Isis*, *Stevenstone* and *Glaisdale* fought a sharp engagement with four *Schnellboot*, damaging one before they withdrew northward. At about the same time to the west, *Ursa*, *Ulysses* and *Virago* patrolling PIKE drove off a second group of *Schnellboot*.[84]

HMCS *Sioux* was typical of the destroyers that defended the British Assault Area (Courtesy For Posterity's Sake)

Monitoring this activity from her position in the northeast corner of the assault area, at 0058 *Scylla*'s radar detected a new contact evaluated as enemy destroyers bearing 057º at nine miles. The SFDO, Lieutenant Edge, vectored three of the 29th Flotilla's MTBs towards the location and informed Power, who also held

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83 NCETF Report: enclosure A, "Operation of Coastal Forces and Destroyers in Eastern Assault Area 6th to 30th June"; Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944.

84 Captain D 26th Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944.

the contact. An interesting game of cat-and-mouse ensued. At 1406, the three MTBs came into contact with *T-28*, *Falke* and Möwe, but instead of sending them into attack—the Canadians had finally got their torpedoes back—Edge directed them to draw the enemy towards the approaching *Serapis* and *Swift*, then to clear the area so the destroyers could fight it out. Hoffmann, whose role was to act as a decoy, was a willing participant in this game. A *Luftwaffe* intercept station ashore had already alerted him to the approach of the Allied destroyers, but he continued down the bearing to ensure contact. After being warned the Allied ships were close by, Hoffmann turned away to the northeast to draw them away from German minelayers. Ten minutes later, starshell from *Serapis* and *Swift* burst overhead followed by shellfire. Despite British claims to have scored hits, there was no damage.[85] Hoffman's course took him into SCALLOPS, which *Serapis* and *Swift* had to avoid. At 0240 Hoffmann ordered a torpedo attack when he sighted the two destroyers silhouetted to westward, however, botched drill prevented uniform salvos from being fired, and none of the scarce weapons found their target. Hoffmann circled the area for another half hour before withdrawing into Le Havre.

If one accepts that, beyond numerical superiority, quick response and flexibility are the keys to a successful screen, that night's results demonstrated the maturation of Vian's scheme. In a little over an hour, three distinct and widely spaced forces rebuffed enemy probes. In the brushes with *Schnellboot*, the Allied destroyers were well-placed and reacted quickly to the threat. Against Hoffmann, *Scylla* directed MTBs onto the target to fix his position; then, deploying strength against strength, handed the contact over to destroyers better suited to handle the threat. Hoffmann may have been a decoy but, even if he had not been, it is doubtful he would have been any more successful than on previous sorties.

Hoffmann's confidence had clearly evaporated in the face of Allied superiority and that night he despaired about the hopelessness of the situation:

> All the advantages are on the other side, such as numbers, speed, armament, radars, favoring horizon, briefing on my movements, the presence of enemy fast patrol boats and jointly directed operations with destroyers, fast patrol boats and aircraft. In the west heavy gun bombardment against the coast by heavy units, all around the horizon bright flashes of gunfire, extended starshell illumination, practically uninterrupted defensive firing, mine detonations nearby and smoke

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[85] NCETF Report: enclosure A, "Operation of Coastal Forces and Destroyers in Eastern Assault Area 6th to 30th June"; Senior Canadian Liaison Officer (London), Narrative B, "The Royal Canadian Navy's Participation in the Invasion of France," pt. 2, p. 53, DHH, 84/235.

screens. All hell seems to have broken loose![86]

This was the naval equivalent of Armageddon, and no statement better describes Allied naval superiority and its impact upon the enemy.

End Game

On 14 June, this game of strengthened parry and waning thrust ended abruptly when the Allies dealt Le Havre a sledgehammer blow of the type Rear Admiral Kirk had wanted to inflict on Cherbourg. When intelligence and aerial reconnaissance revealed many of the Cherbourg-based *Schnellboot* had congregated with the forces already at Le Havre, Admiral Ramsay persuaded the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command to mount a raid on the port.[87] To ensure accuracy and limit collateral damage, the raid was launched in the evening, which also meant enemy warships would be caught in the harbor. In all 221 Lancasters and 13 Mosquitos flew the mission, some of the former armed with 12,000-pound "Tallboy" bombs to crack the thick concrete of Le Havre's

Quick, elusive and persistent, MTBs played a key role in defending the assault area. This is MTB 459 of the RCN's 29th flotilla. (Courtesy For Posterity's Sake)

86 *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille*, 13 June 1944.

87 "The RAF and Maritime War", vol. V, 14; and Tent, *E-Boat Alert*, 156-157.

Schnellboot pens. The strike gained an immense assist when the *Luftwaffe* implemented a restriction on anti-aircraft fire so that its aircraft sortieing to mine the assault area would not be mistakenly fired upon.[88] Ninety minutes after this order went into effect, the first bomber wave struck, followed by a second an hour later. *Marine Gruppe West*'s war diary described "catastrophic" devastation: two destroyers, 15 *Schnellboot*, seven minelayers and a host of auxiliary craft were destroyed, and many more heavily damaged. The harbour facilities were ravaged, and more than 200 naval personnel killed, including many experienced officers. One Lancaster was lost.[89]

The raid, and another by 297 bombers on Boulogne the next day, shattered *Kriegsmarine* surface strength in the region. Little more than a dozen *Schnellboot* and a single destroyer remained operational, and the additional loss of mines and minelayers severely curtailed that form of warfare as well. Moreover, until Le Havre and Boulogne could be repaired, there were no other suitable bases to launch operations against the eastern assault area because distances were too long on the short summer nights. The situation was no better to the west where Cherbourg's facilities were also badly damaged and *Schnellboot* remained hemmed in by Allied patrols. Admiral Krancke pledged "the war against the enemy supplies will be continued as far as possible with the means at hand" but lamented "owing to the weakness of our forces successes will probably be smaller whilst the losses will increase."[90]

The battle continued, but on a much-reduced scale. For the remainder of June, Allied defensive patrols only had to fend off occasional incursions by *Schnellboot*. Nonetheless, the mine threat remained severe: *Scylla* was declared a total constructive loss after being mined on 23 June, and the destroyer *Swift* was sunk the next day. Towards the end of the month, the Allied minefields off Le Havre switched to safe, allowing naval forces to clamp down a close blockade on the port. Throughout July and August, MTBs and frigates fought pitched battles against the so-called "Night Train," small convoys attempting to supply, and later evacuate, Le Havre from up the Channel. The fighting in the eastern Baie de la Seine only ended in September when First Canadian Army liberated the port. To the west, Cherbourg fell to the Americans on 29 June. As the summer progressed, Allied naval forces harassed German shipping around the Channel Islands and along the coast of northern Brittany, and then moved into the Bay of Biscay coast after US forces broke out of the beachhead in late

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88 *KTB*, 5th *Torpedoboot Flotille* and *T-28*, 14 June 1944.

89 *KTB*, *Seekriegleitsung* (*SKL*), 14-16 June 1944, DHH, SGR II 261, pt. 58; Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everett, *The Bomber Command War Diaries* (London: Viking, 1985), 528; Tent, *E-Boat Alert*, 164-182.

90 *KTB*, *SKL*, 15 June 1944; Tent, *E-Boat Alert*, 199-200.

July. Apart from air attacks by the *Luftwaffe*, the battle for the assault area was won.

Much to learn

Commanders at all levels took important lessons from the operations. Rear Admiral Kirk reiterated his concerns about command relationships with the RN's Home commands. Although he offered no remedy, he observed "the success of a command based on cooperation does not change the old rule that naval operations are most effective when controlled through a simple and direct chain of command."[91] Despite Kirk's resolute feelings on the matter, it seems unlikely that British political or naval leadership would have been prepared to weaken the Home command system that had served them so well for so long. Kirk and Sanders also expressed concern that WTF units had been unable to communicate directly with those from Portsmouth operating on their doorstep, which slowed response and invited friendly fire incidents. That holds water, yet it is perplexing Kirk rebuffed Power's effort to increase coordination at the junction of the ETF and WTF areas. In terms of the overall effectiveness of the WTF's defensive scheme, Kirk accepted it met its objective "to furnish protection against surface and sub-surface attack from seaward, and it was so skillfully handled that at no time was there any penetration by enemy naval forces into waters off the U.S. beaches." He attributed this to the soundness of the defence plan, Sanders' leadership and the "excellent results" obtained by destroyers' SG radar. To Kirk, "It was a good screen well directed."[92]

Because the weight of the challenge came in their sector, the British absorbed more lessons. In all, the enemy attacked the ETF on four occasions with torpedo-boats and another eight times with *Schnellboot* and *Räumboot*, against just three *Schnellboot* sorties against the WTF sector.[93] Further, more lessons were accrued due to Vian's adoption of the more novel control ship scheme, which invited considerable professional scrutiny. Both the Admiralty and Admiral Ramsay also identified the importance of rigorous planning and training as well as effective orders, but the Admiralty emphasized "the main *desirata* are good radar cover and really good communications."

This theme dominated observations from *Scylla* and *Kempenfelt*. Like

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91 NCWTF Report.

92 NCWTF Report; and NCWTF, "Action Against E-boats; Report of," 21 July 1944, NARA/www.Fold3.com.

93 Commander U.S. Naval Forces, Europe, "Administrative History, United States Naval Forces in Europe 1940-1946, vol. V, The Invasion of Normandy: Operation NEPTUNE, Part IV: Assault Area: Screen and Escorts," 427, https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Admin-Hist/147.5-ComNavEu/index.html.

his USN counterparts, Captain Brownrigg lamented the fact that units under Vian's control were unable to interconnect directly with covering forces under the Vice Admiral Dover: instead, they had to communicate through the operations room in Dover, which slowed exchanges considerably. Brownrigg also recommended utilizing only one Control Ship, instead of *Scylla* having to co-ordinate with the Captain (Patrols) in *Lawford* and then *Kempenfelt*. He added that strict R/T discipline must be observed and that all contacts be immediately plotted and established as "enemy, friendly or false," and in a nod to the problems caused by Force S's wandering destroyers, "Own forces must keep accurately to their station on patrols which must be within Radar Cover of the Control Ship." Finally, Brownrigg thought destroyers and MTBs were a good match:

> Providing satisfactory R/T communication and Radar cover is maintained, destroyers and coastal forces can be operated and controlled in the same area at the same time without fear of engaging each other. The advantage is that destroyers can support coastal forces and can provide extended Radar cover. The disadvantage is that own and enemy forces are liable to get confused if R/T communication or Radar cover breaks down.[94]

The point was echoed by Captain Power, who observed that it became possible "to operate destroyers and coastal forces in adjacent and sometimes the same areas with confidence and without confusion." Power also thought anchored defence lines had proved superior to the traditional endless-chain patrols, that destroyers were more suitable platforms for a Captain (Patrols) than frigates due to their superior speed and armament, and he recommended the Captain (Patrols) not be burdened by command of his own ship since the duty "entailed all night every night on the alert except under exceptional circumstances, and continual movement about a crowded anchorage by day in addition to conferences and staff work."[95] Interestingly, he noted the scheme required "comprehensive patrol orders from the beginning to meet all circumstances," which seems thinly veiled criticism of Vian's failure to consider forward destroyer patrols in his initial BAADOs. There is no response on record from Vian, but Ramsay thought the BAADOs "worked well"; as mentioned before, one questions why Power did not just tweak Vian's original orders instead of wasting valuable staff time on a complete rewrite.[96]

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[94] CO HMS *Scylla*, "Report of Proceedings of HMS *Scylla* during Operation NEPTUNE – 3rd to 26th June 1944," 6 July 1944.

[95] Due to the heavy demands, Power left manoeuvring and fighting *Kempenfelt* largely in the hands of his First Lieutenant, Lieutenant James Ashforth, RN.

[96] Captain (D) Twenty Sixth Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of

Power observed that control and communication procedures "improved steadily and rapidly, until, towards the end a very effective teamwork was in being."[97] This understates the main attribute of both the ETF and WTF's handling of the defensive problem: their flexibility in adjusting their schemes to cope with changing circumstances. Vian, Brownrigg and Power instituted forward destroyer patrols when it became evident that Hoffman's torpedo boats formed a more persistent threat than predicted, and then overcame the challenges associated with controlling destroyers and MTBs in close proximity. Likewise, when it became clear that *Schnellboot* were escaping too easily once repulsed by WTF forces on the MASON-DIXIE lines, Sanders readily adopted the tactics recommended by his senior light force commanders to block the enemy's escape. And, of course, Power and Sanders tried to improve cooperation between their own forces at the juncture of the ETF/WTF zones, only to have their recommendation ignored by Kirk. The need for some of those adjustments perhaps should have been foreseen, nonetheless flexibility in the face of the enemy is a critical tactical attribute and it succeeds best when there exists a sound plan that serves as a foundation. American and British officers may have spoken different languages in a naval sense and adhered to differing philosophies, but the existence of an effective agreed-upon plan smoothed out some of the rough spots. As important, seasoning in the type of operations being undertaken – in this case, an element of amphibious or combined operations – gave leaders the confidence to embrace such flexibility. The successful defence of the NEPTUNE assault area may well have been inevitable given the combination of Allied strength and enemy weakness, but the adoption of a sound plan and the flexibility to adjust it to changing circumstances helped assure that outcome.

NEPTUNE's surface defence scheme proved to be a "one off" but it may have received consideration in another instance. If the Allies had been forced to launch an amphibious assault against Japan, many of the conditions encountered off Normandy would have applied to Operation OLYMPIC, the invasion of Kyushu, scheduled for November 1945. The Japanese anticipated an American assault on Kyushu, and the naval forces it intended to deploy against the beachheads were not dissimilar to those utilized by the *Kriegsmarine* off Normandy, albeit far more numerous. A US Army study based upon interviews with Japanese officials and the study of their planning documents observed, "Offshore the landing force would have been hit by large numbers

Proceedings," 13 July 1944.

97 Captain (D) Twenty Sixth Destroyer Flotilla, "Operation NEPTUNE – Report of Proceedings," 13 July 1944.

of small suicide craft and submarines, and the Japanese expected to destroy 60 transports by these means"—and those in combination with an even higher rate of *Kamikaze* attack than experienced off Okinawa. Although American leaders would have had no compunction about destroying enemy bases in pre-invasion air strikes, the study suggested the Japanese could still have deployed 12 destroyers, 40 submarines of various types and as many as 1,000 small attack craft against the assault area.[98] Thus, light forces, many of them small suicide craft manned by one or two individuals, formed the dominant threat and the Japanese planned to deploy them at night. Moreover, given the suicidal desperation that drove Japanese defensive strategy, these attacks would have been more tenacious than those mounted by the *Kriegsmarine*—there would have been no turning back in the face of opposition.[99] Finally, OLYMPIC was planned against sections of a built-up, heavily-defended coast, exposed to high tidal currents. The defence problem therefore closely resembled that presented by Normandy, and a static defence system backed-up by destroyer/PT Boat patrols may have been a logical consideration—at the least, it would probably have been tactically advantageous to have enemy light craft batter themselves against a powerful defence line, rather than having to hunt them down in darkness with radar that would only be marginally effective against a mass of small, elusive targets. Whether leaders in the Pacific theatre would have been prepared to learn from Normandy is debatable, but some senior officers who had been involved in NEPTUNE were slated to be part of OLYMPIC's command structure and could advise on the lessons they learned dealing with similar challenges.[100] Thus, at the very least, the defensive scheme implemented off Normandy, one of unknown successes of Operation NEPTUNE, would have been a valuable starting point for planning.

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98 Headquarters US Sixth Army, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, "The Japanese Plans for the Defence of Kyushu," 31 December 1945, pp. 1, 7 and 20, http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/Pearl%20Talk/The-Japanese-Plans-for-the-Defence-of-Kyushu.pdf.

99 For American and Japanese preparation for OLYMPIC see Waldo Heinrichs and Marc Gallicchio, *Implacable Foes: War in the Pacific, 1944-45* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 523-526, and 572-573; and Richard Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 182-185.

100 Appointments could have changed but Rear Admiral William Tennant, RN, who had led the PLUTO force and served on Ramsay's staff during NEPTUNE was designated to be the senior British naval commander for OLYMPIC, while Rear Admiral Kirk was angling for a command position in the assault.

Prize from the Society for Military History and three Keith Matthews Awards from the Canadian Nautical Research Society. He is the recipient of a Maritime Command Commendation for his contributions to Canadian naval history.