

## CONVOY O.N. 127 & THE LOSS OF HMCS OTTAWA, 13 SEPTEMBER, 1942: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

**T.C. Pullen**

*[The following account is the last thing Captain Pullen wrote before his untimely death in August, 1990. He was concerned above all to ensure that the true facts about the sinking of this ship—a dreadful episode permanently etched into his memory—should be placed on record. To supplement his memory he referred to books and documents relating to Convoy O.N. 127, and the recollections of some shipmates.*

*He agreed to have the story published in The Northern Mariner, but was unable to put the final touches on the article before entering hospital for the last time. I have therefore reproduced his version with explanatory notes that are designed to place the events in context with both the convoy battle, and with certain measures taken as a result of the Board of Inquiry. Principal among these seem to have been the request of 16 September 1942, from Newfoundland to Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa, to accelerate the fitting of type 271 radar in Canadian escorts; what Captain Pullen described in his papers as "An appallingly badly written (1943) document by TCP entitled 'Hints to First Lieutenants';" and what he modestly called a professional rescue of this document, a publication-BRCN [Book of Reference for the Canadian Navy] 2401—entitled ABANDON SHIP.*

*There are some minor discrepancies in the account which Captain Pullen would undoubtedly have cleared up if he had been given the opportunity. I have, however, left these in, leaving any corrections to the endnotes, so as not to take away from the essential flavour of his writing. Anyone who knew him will recognise in his prose style the cheerfulness that marked his personality, together with the professionalism with which he approached his calling.*

*The illustrations include photographs taken in 1942 and some line drawings and diagrams by Commander L.B. "Yogi" Ienson, RCN (Ret'd), who as a Sub-Lieutenant survived this sinking himself. Commander Ienson is well known for his illustrating skill. As his navigating officer in 1962 when he commanded HMCS Fort Erie, I first saw his depiction of Ottawa's death throes and talked with him about the experience, and it is very satisfying to have persuaded him, at last, to give others the benefit of his skillful portrayal of the event.*

*Captain Pullen wrote the "Afterword," based on Admiralty Intelligence reports, describing the fate of the U-boat which torpedoed Ottawa. I have reproduced, in addition, some comments on Convoy O.N. 127 that emanated from U-boat headquarters in 1942.*

*-Alec Douglas]*

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From 3 September 1939, British and Allied destroyers (excluding USN) were in the thick of the fighting at sea. Before it was finished no fewer than 154 were lost in a wide variety of violent circumstances—torpedoes, mines, shellfire, bombing and, in some instances, collision.<sup>1</sup> The loss of one destroyer out of so many may not seem particularly significant, except to those involved and fortunate to survive. I refer, of course, to HMCS *Ottawa*.<sup>2</sup> To those who might fairly be described as "surviving survivors" now so many years after the event, there may be some who just might like to know how it was they found themselves abruptly catapulted into the North Atlantic in the middle of the night and struggling for their lives.

Victories are for celebration. Defeats, when they involve the loss of one's own ship without any retribution from the enemy, attract scant notice from the chroniclers of war. Properly so. It has bothered the writer of this recollection that whenever there is any reference in naval literature to Convoy O.N. 127, and the loss of HMCS *Ottawa* in particular, the facts are wrong and, with two notable exceptions, no explanations are given as to why what happened did happen and how it could have been otherwise.<sup>3</sup> This is scant comfort to those who paid with their lives or to their next of kin.

Marc Milner writes, in his excellent analysis of Mid Ocean Escort Force operations at the height of the Battle of the Atlantic:

1942 was a very anxious period in the battle against the U-boats in the Atlantic. By the summer of that year the products of Germany's first wartime building program were pouring forth at a rate of nearly twenty U-boats a month ... the number at sea on any given day was increasing, from an average of twenty-two in January to eighty-six in August, reducing the potential for successful evasive routing of convoys .... The prospect of the mid-ocean filling up with U-boats among which convoys could only be safely routed by very precise intelligence, was worrisome to say the least.... As early as August it was clear ... that the confrontation in the mid-Atlantic air gap would soon escalate rapidly.... Unfortunately for the Allies, a substantially higher casualty rate in the U-boat fleet was not in the offing in late 1942, and the exchange rate between Allied shipping losses and U-boats destroyed continued to favour the Germans heavily. Through the last months of 1942, U-boats exacted a punishing toll from North Atlantic Shipping.

Convoy O.N. 127 and its escorts bore witness to these facts.<sup>4</sup>

*Ottawa* belonged to the Canadian convoy escort group C4, and since this recollection is written from the viewpoint of a sailor in one of the escorting destroyers, it will be useful to know what was the composition of C4. The Senior Officer (SOE) was Lieutenant Commander A. H. Dobson, DSC, RCNR, in command of the destroyer HMCS *St Croix*. This American four-stacker was one of the fifty overage destroyers exchanged for British bases in 1940. Canada had accepted eight of them. The next senior ship was *Ottawa*, commanded by Acting Lieutenant Commander C. A. Rutherford, RCN. Built in 1932 as HMS *Crusader*, she had been purchased for the RCN and commissioned as HMCS *Ottawa* in 1938. The corvettes HMCS *Amherst* (Lieutenant H. G. Denyer, RCNR), *Sherbrooke* (Lieutenant J. A. M. Levesque, RCNR), *Arvida*

(Lieutenant A. I. MacKay RCNR) and HMS *Celandine*, (Lieutenant P. V. Collings RNR) made up the balance of the group.

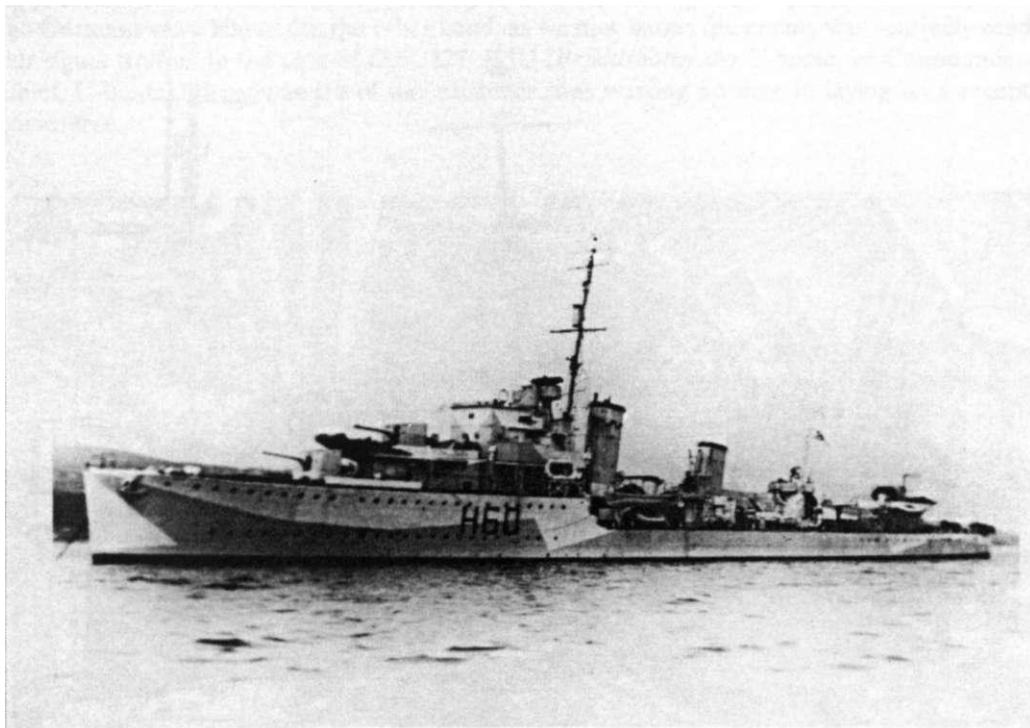


Figure 1: Photograph of HMCS *Ottawa* at anchor in Lough Foyle off Moville Northern Ireland on 5 September 1942, just before sailing. Picture taken from the skimmer by T.C. Pullen with a borrowed camera.

*Source: T.C. Pullen Papers.*

*Saturday, 5 September, 1942*

*Ottawa*, glistening in a fresh coat of paint, departed early from Londonderry, dropping down river to anchor off Moville with the rest of her Group, to await sailing orders. During our brief Derry lay-over the troops had worked long hours applying a novel Western Approaches camouflage scheme of white and pale shades of blue and green. Shore-based artistic experts were convinced it would render us invisible in the dark—well, almost. We were certainly going to put that theory to the test. After anchoring, I went away in the skimmer with the Sub (Sub-Lieutenant L.B. Jenson, RCN) and the Buffer (Petty Officer Smith) to admire the ship's company's handiwork from afar.<sup>5</sup> With a borrowed camera we took photographs, the last ever taken of our ship and treasured for that reason.

Late that same forenoon, C4 got underway for the 40 mile run to our rendezvous in the North Channel off Rathlin Island. There we joined 31 ships sorting themselves into nine

columns under the direction of the Commodore, the whole to become Convoy O.N. 127~of unhappy memory—squaring away on a westerly heading bound for America.

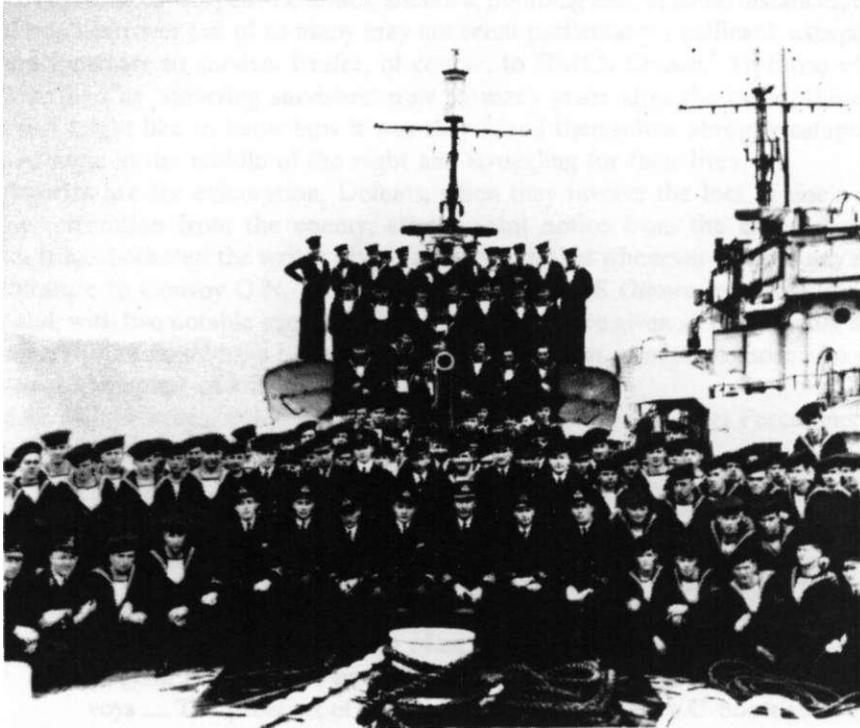


Figure 2: Ship's company, HMCS *Ottawa*. AB Bucheski standing beside and to the right of ship's doctor, G A . Hendry, who was to carry out a successful appendectomy on him at sea. Kneeling front row, left, the buffer, P.O. Smith, and beside him Chief Petty Officer Chaney, the Coxswain. Behind the buffer stands Leading Seaman Hood with two good conduct badges visible. Immediately under the barrel of "A" gun is Shipwright Billard. Between and behind Lieutenant McLeod and the Chief Engineer is PO Milburn, Ordnance Artificer.

*Source: T.C. Pullen Papers.*

### ***Sunday, 6 September***

An indication this voyage was going to be anything but routine occurred during the forenoon when Surgeon Lieutenant George Hendry reported that Able Seaman Bucheski had acute appendicitis and would have to be operated on within 48 hours. With this disturbing news we hastened to the Captain who wasted no time determining whether the operation could be carried out onboard. If not, it meant weakening the escort by returning to Lough Foyle to land the man. Doc confirmed it could be done on board but he would need considerable help. So it was decided. Arrangements were put in hand to convert the only suitable space, the Captain's day cabin aft, into what we were pleased to call our operating theatre.

It was a quiet day at sea, plodding westward into the Atlantic at eight knots with ships' companies settling into the three watch system. At that stage in the Atlantic battle, Western Approaches command was not benefitting from Ultra intelligence to provide warning of what the Germans were about. On the other hand, as we now know, the enemy was routinely reading our signal traffic.<sup>6</sup> In the case of O.N. 127, BdU (*Befehlshaber der U-boote*, or Commander-in-Chief, U-boats), already aware of our existence, was wasting no time in laying on a reception committee.

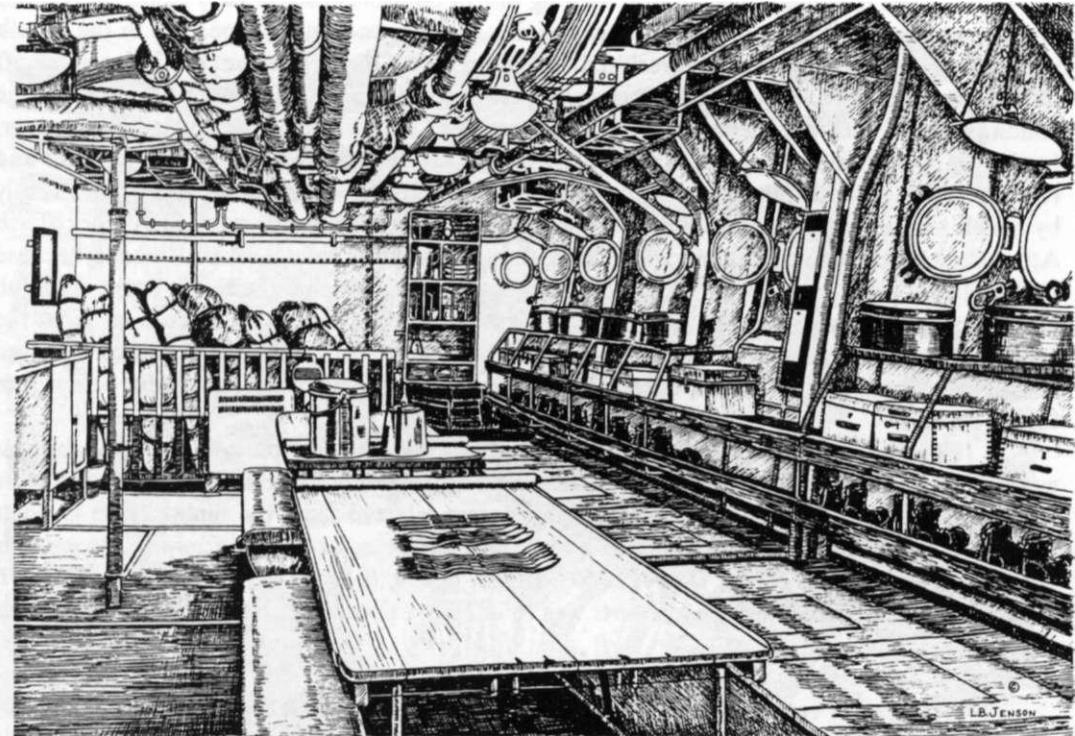


Figure 3: "A Sunny Saturday Morning Long Ago: Messdeck Ready for Captain's Rounds", HMCS *Ottawa*, 1941.

Source: Pen and ink sketch, L.B. Jensen.

*Ottawa* looked splendid in her new guise, but what really mattered was our ability, or want of it, to cope effectively with U-boats. Our Type 286M radar with its antenna at the foretruck was of marginal utility. It could usually be relied on to detect surface targets but against a submarine, trimmed down on the surface at night, its performance was lamentable. *Celandine* was the only ship in the group with the latest and most effective radar for such work, the 10 cm Type 271 (but then she was RN. They—the RN—always got to the head of the queue, understandably in the circumstances, to be fitted with the latest and best being produced in Britain).<sup>7</sup> Also, none of our group had HF/DF (High Frequency Direction Finding), another

piece of modern technology, for detecting and homing onto radio transmissions emanating from U-boats congregating for an attack. Like other fleet destroyers at that time we were ill-equipped for the task. High speed, our chief attribute, had to be tempered somewhat by limited endurance. Our torpedo armament was superfluous for the purpose and we were certainly over-gunned.

*Monday, 7 September*

"Pooch" Bucheski, our patient, a popular member of the ship's company, will always be remembered for a particular reason. During one of our boisterous hockey games in Halifax, Seamen *versus* the Wardroom, he unintentionally, so I like to think, clipped me in the mouth with his stick. The dead tooth that resulted has lasted to this day, a constant reminder of far-off days of yore and gore. The appendectomy was performed during the afternoon in moderate sea conditions and with considerable motion on the ship. I attended as an intrigued observer, hoping to provide moral support, and to ensure from the seamanship side all was in order and remained that way. Bucheski had to be lashed securely to the dining table and braced firmly by his shipmates against the rolling and pitching. Assisting the Doctor were SBA (Sick Berth Attendant) MacMillan and Shipwright Billard, though why him I cannot recall. Perhaps, because he was handy with tools (albeit of a cruder sort), we thought somehow he might come in useful. Once Doc got down to the bloody business of cut and thrust there were defections from the ranks of amateur helpers. No longer an observer, I became instead a fetcher and carrier until the job was done. Three hours it lasted. Then we were able to report its successful completion to the captain.

For our collective peace of mind, as these proceedings took place, it was probably just as well that we were in total ignorance of the preparations being made at U-boat headquarters to waylay us.<sup>8</sup> BdU had gathered a formidable force, selected from the ninety or so U-boats then on the prowl in the North Atlantic, a wolf pack known as *Vorwärts* (*Forwards*), consisting of thirteen submarines (*U-96, U-594, U-608, U-308, U-404, U-584, U-211, U-218, U-407, U-91, U-411, U-92* and *U-659*). Group *Vorwärts* was to intercept the next O.N. convoy, which was us.

*Tuesday, 8 September*

The Doctor reported Bucheski to be doing well, although George Hendry and his SBA continued to keep a close eye on the patient. Otherwise the day seemed uneventful, though in retrospect all those submarines assembling not very far to the west would have changed our minds. They were in what the Germans called with relish the happy hunting ground. To us in the Newfoundland Force it was the black pit, being that perilous part of the North Atlantic beyond the reach of all land-based air cover. That was where the fighting and the killing was the heaviest.<sup>9</sup>

*Wednesday, 9 September*

During the evening we were spotted again and reported, this time by *U-584*, with the result that BdU ordered Group *Vorwärts* to deploy southwards to ensure interception.<sup>10</sup> Bucheski continued his convalescence with no complications, a tribute to our two man medical team's consummate professionalism.

*Thursday, 10 September*

Convoy tedium was about to become a memory, for *Vorwärts* had us firmly in its grasp. Early in the afternoon *Oberleutnant zur See* Hans-Jürgen Hellriegel in *U-96* opened the grim saga of O.N. 127 when he attacked in position 51 deg. 30 min. North, 28 deg. 25 min. West." Until that moment we had no inkling we had been sighted and shadowed, and were about to be bushwhacked, by a baker's dozen of submarines. The sea at that time was smooth, there was little wind and unlimited visibility. Altogether it was a fine, sunny day. It seems incredible that in such ideal conditions a submarine could launch an attack without being observed by a single soul.

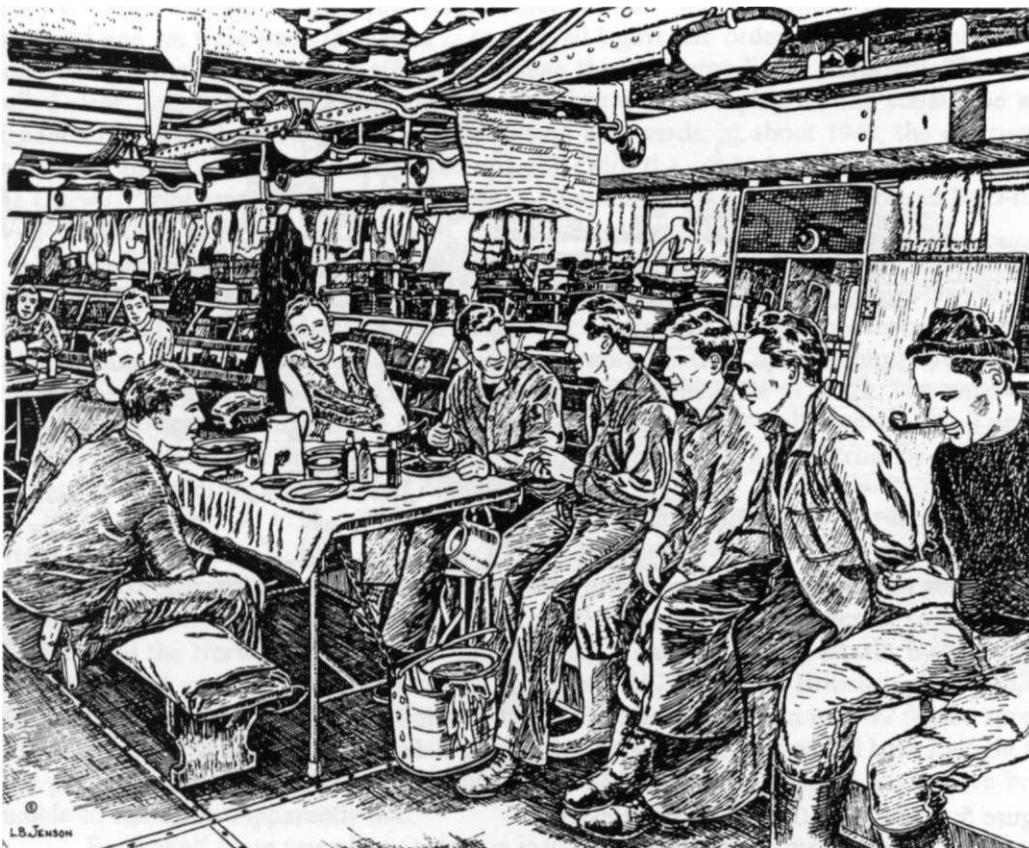


Figure 4: Torpedomen's mess, HMCS *Ottawa*, starboard after lower messdeck, 1941.

*Source:* Pen and ink sketch, based on a photograph, L. B. Jenson.

A few of us off watch were resting in the wardroom when the great underwater clanging sound of a distant torpedo explosion brought us to our feet and on deck in a rush. Five miles away, on the far side of the convoy, *Elizabeth van Belgie*, no. 12 (the second ship in the first column), was unmistakably the victim, for she was noticeably deeper in the water and dropping back. Badly damaged, she had eventually to be sunk by *Sherbrooke*. While we were

absorbing this startling turn of events there was another explosion and a ship in the adjacent column to *van Belgie*, the tanker *FJ. Wolfe*, was struck on her port side by a single torpedo. Immediately there followed a third eruption. This time the target was *Svene*, no. 32. The Senior Officer had by then ordered *Ottawa* and *Celandine* to sweep with him through the convoy hoping to catch our unseen attacker in the convoy's wake. Success eluded us. *Svene*, unable to continue, also had to be sent to the bottom by *Sherbrooke*. *FJ. Wolfe*, though damaged, managed to continue.

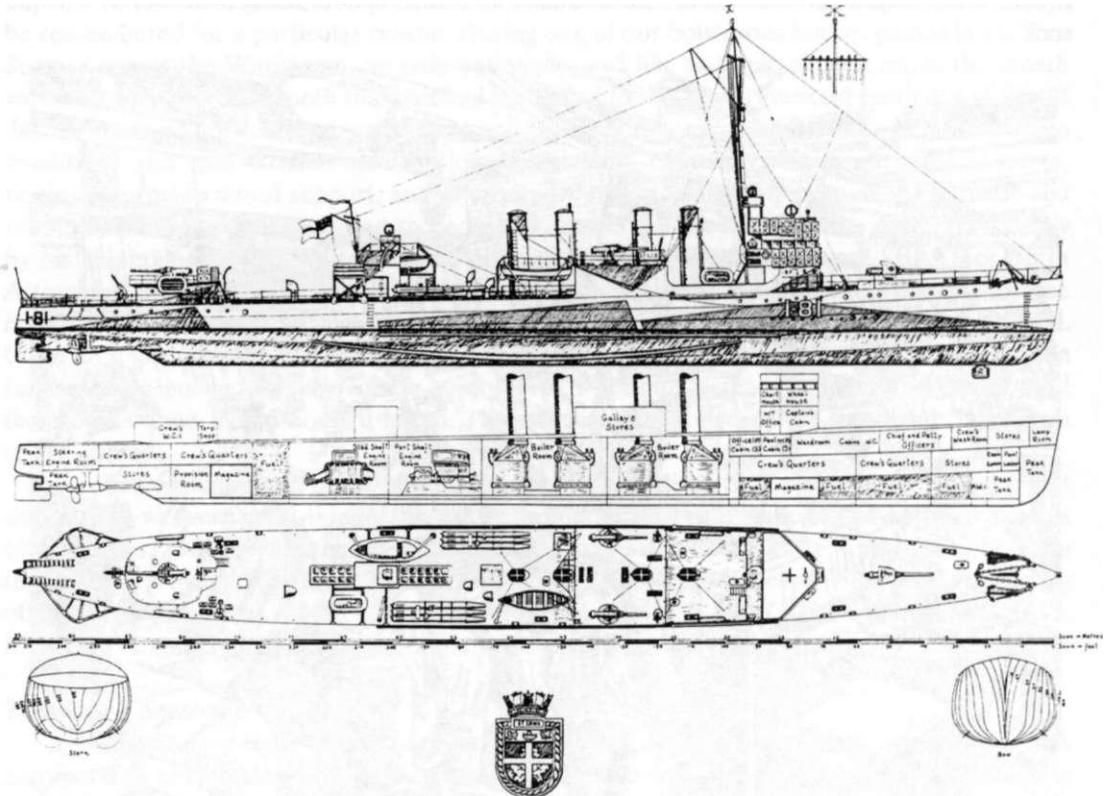


Figure 5: HMCS *St Croix* plan and elevation.

Source: L.B. Jenson.

During the remainder of the afternoon we continued our patrol astern of the convoy to prevent our attacker from surfacing and overtaking. At about 1700 *St Croix*, stationed just ahead of the convoy, obtained an asdic contact, but before she could investigate it the convoy arrived. At 1715 *Empire Oil*, no. 43, a tanker of 8,000 tons sailing in ballast, was torpedoed by *U-659* on her starboard side, in the way of the engine room. There was a dull thud, debris, smoke and steam rose high in the air, but there was no flash and no water thrown up. She stopped, settling by the stern and falling off two points (23 degrees) to starboard. Her master

reported: "Nothing was seen of the track of the torpedo, nor of the submarine, although we had seven lookouts and all the gunners were closed up at action stations".<sup>12</sup> For the ships of C4 it was maddening to see ships torpedoed one after another yet be unable to grapple with the villains responsible. To man her armament of a 4-inch gun, 12-pounder and an Oerlikon, *Empire Oil* carried five naval and six army gunners. One of the latter group, a gunlayer named Jones (not to be confused with our Gunner (T[orpedo]) Lloyd Irwin Jones), had been severely wounded by the explosion when a rivet was driven deep into his abdomen causing excruciating pain. Four minutes after the first explosion she was hit again, this time on the port side, leaving a huge hole, following which the badly injured Jones was carried to one of the boats swung out ready for lowering. The ship, in the words of her Master, "was completely disabled, engines shattered and we were badly damaged ... so at 1740 I gave the order to abandon ship, three boats being lowered quickly and efficiently despite the 25 degree list to starboard. The boats pulled clear ... then two destroyers came along. They were sweeping for the submarine and signalled they would return later. Some two hours afterwards, at about 1940, the destroyers returned, I and 26 of the crew were picked up by *St Croix*, the remaining 24 being taken aboard the *Ottawa*."<sup>13</sup> Not long after, *U-584* finished the demolition job of *Empire Oil* begun by *U-659*. With three ships sunk and one damaged, the situation was all in the enemy's favour.

The task of getting those twenty-four survivors up the port side and onto the iron deck went off smoothly except for poor Jones, for whom any movement was agony. Despite the encouragement of his shipmates and the patient but determined effort of our troops struggling in the lifeboat and on the scrambling net, it was slow work. To the Captain it must have seemed forever because, of course, we had to remain stopped and vulnerable to attack. Not once were we hectored from the bridge at the delay. I admired him for that. Finally, when able to report all clear, the water under our counter was quickly transformed into a maelstrom by our screws. To everyone's relief we were off and running.

#### *Friday, 11 September*

According to German records, *U-96* sank a Portuguese fishing schooner by gunfire near the convoy, but of that we knew nothing. Overnight they also claimed a dozen or so attacks. *U-584* damaged the Norwegian tanker *Hindanger*, *U-380* missed his target, attacks by *U-404* and *U-608* damaged another Norwegian tanker, the *Marit*, *U-211* hit the British tankers *Empire Moonbeam* and *Hektor* and *U-608* finished them off, while unknown to us *U-92* fired a spread of four torpedoes at *Ottawa* and, *mirabile dictu*, missed the target. One would have thought the high pitched whine created by not one but four torpedoes tearing close by might have been audible to our asdic. Apparently not.<sup>14</sup>

For myself there was plenty going on inside the ship to keep me hopping. The bigger picture around our beleaguered convoy was not my responsibility except during the standing morning watch (0400-0800). We had our tanker survivors to cope with and the Doctor and additional patient requiring constant attention. Bucheski continued to progress but for Jones surgery was essential, and it would have to be soon if there was to be any chance of saving his life. Again the owner's quarters were rigged for surgery. On this occasion my services as helper were requested as volunteers were in short supply, except of course for SBA MacMillan. It promised to be a much messier business than the appendectomy.

In the event it was a surgical *tour de force* as Doc hauled out segment after segment of intestine, making the necessary repairs then restowing the lot in an exhausting performance

lasting four hours. It was rather like overhauling a boat's falls. Cut and stitch, cut and stitch. It was grisly and it did not seem possible that one stomach could accommodate so much running rigging. I emerged from what was an ordeal for all concerned with increased respect for George Hendry. What we would have done without him is difficult to imagine. Once again his outstanding efforts were reported to the Captain.

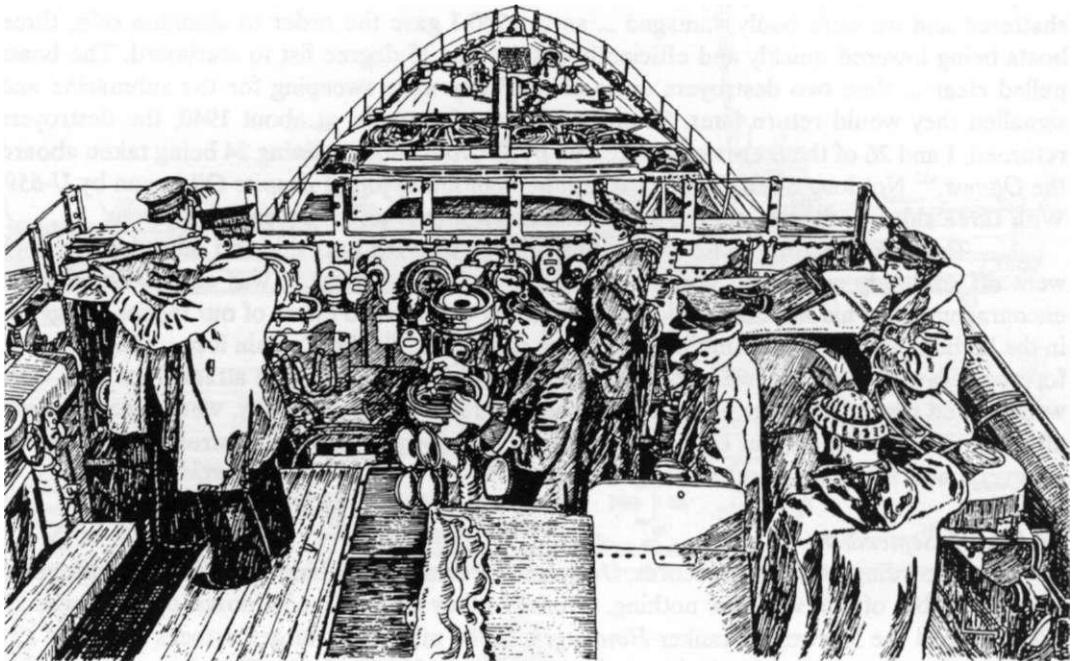


Figure 6: The Bridge of HMCS *Ottawa*, 1941. (Those identified include Commander H.F. Pullen, commanding officer in late 1941, who had left the ship before his younger brother, T.C. Pullen, arrived as First Lieutenant)

*Source:* Pen and ink, based on a photograph, L.B. Jenson.

*Saturday, 12 September*

During the day the escort successfully held the pack at bay and in the process one of our ships damaged *U-659*.<sup>13</sup> Among other duties it was my business to keep the bridge informed as to the state of our patients. For the first time I sensed that with the Captain, as with the Doctor, exhaustion was a matter for concern. For their sakes I hoped for an early lull in the proceedings so they might get desperately needed rest. For our Captain this was not to be. During the night there were more attacks by *U-594* and *U-407* which came to nought but kept all C.O.'s on their feet and on their respective bridges.

*Sunday, 13 September*

An American straggler with engine problems, *Stone Street*, fell victim to *U-594*, losing thirteen men. Then, at last, air support appeared on the scene from Newfoundland to drive off our attackers.<sup>16</sup> The so-called black pit was nearly behind us.<sup>17</sup> Thus far six ships sunk, two damaged, was what Group *Vorwärts* had to show for the cost of one U-boat damaged by depth charge attack.

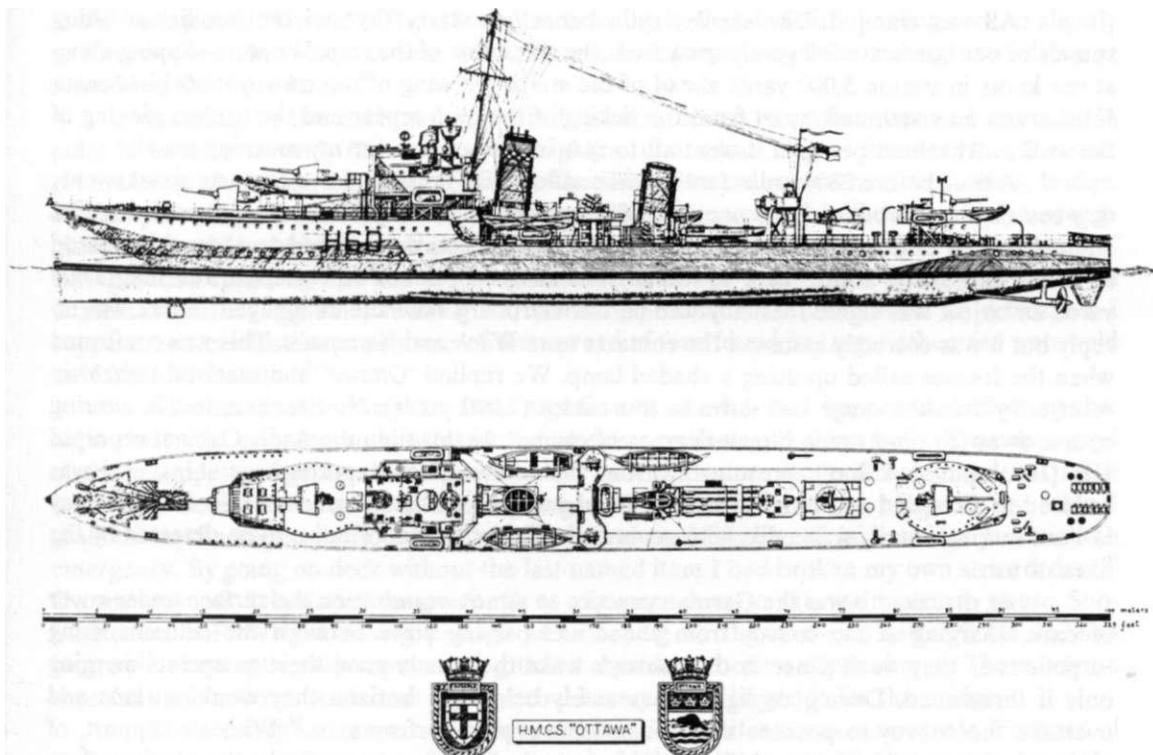


Figure 7: HMCS *Ottawa*, (ex HMS *Crusader*), 1 May 1929.

*Source:* Plan and elevation drawings based on Admiralty sketch design, with later Canadian modifications, L.B. Jenson.

Not unexpectedly, according to a disappointed and weary George Hendry, our patient died during the forenoon as a consequence of peritonitis. At sunset all officers and hands that could be spared, including his *Empire Oil* shipmates, gathered on the quarterdeck. There, to the best of my ability, I conducted a solemn burial service from the Book of Common Prayer and Gunner Jones was committed to the deep. What it may have lacked in ceremonial was more than made good by our collective sincerity. Within a few hours most of those attending, bareheaded and bowed and including every one of his shipmates, would themselves be committed to the deep, in unimaginably violent circumstances.

After dark I spent a few quiet moments on the bridge with the Captain reviewing events. In both destroyers, shortage of fuel was causing concern and *St Croix* had already asked Captain (D) in St John's to be relieved because he was very short.<sup>18</sup> Captain (D)'s reply, drafted by some unknown staff officer, was that both of us should refuel from tankers in the convoy. As not one of them was fitted for refuelling at sea it was a singularly unhelpful response. However, reinforcements were on the way. Two destroyers, one RN (*HMS Witch*) and one RCN (*HMCS Annapolis*), were due to join during the night.

All was tranquil. The sea lay calm beneath a starry sky and the familiar swishing sounds of our bow wave fell gently away from the shoulders of the ship. We were slipping along at ten knots in station 5,000 yards ahead of the starboard wing of the convoy. Sub-Lieutenant Jenson was on watch and, apart from the ticking of the gyro repeat and the tireless pinging of the asdic, all seemed peaceful. I went aft to rest in preparation for my morning watch.

A little before 2300 radar (at that time called RDF) reported two contacts about twenty degrees on the starboard bow, one at 8,000 and one at 6,000 yards. As a precaution a five charge pattern of depth charges, set to explode at fifty feet, was readied and speed increased to twelve knots and a little later to fifteen. The range continued to close. On reaching 2,000 yards an object was sighted visually fine on our starboard bow and challenged. There was no reply but it was correctly assumed the contacts were *Witch* and *Annapolis*. This was confirmed when the former called up using a shaded lamp. We replied "*Ottawa*" and received "*Witch*" in return. By then the range was down to five cables (1,000 yards). No time was lost in altering course away (to port) using fifteen degrees of rudder. At this time the Asdic Cabinet reported HE (Hydrophone Effect), presumably from the screws of the approaching ships, and was ordered to disregard and to carry out all round sweeps for other sources of HE. However any U-boat lurking nearby was unlikely to generate sufficient propellor noise to be detected by the likes of us.

At that time it was the German practice to attack *en masse* on the surface under cover of dark, charging at the convoy from ahead and passing down between the columns firing torpedoes as they went. Once in the convoy's wake they made good their escape submerging only if threatened. During daylight, when safely below the horizon they would surface and overtake the convoy to position themselves for a repeat performance.<sup>19</sup> With air support, of course, it was possible during daylight to frustrate such tactics. Accordingly, the likeliest place to encounter U-boats after dark was five or ten miles in the grain of a convoy, lying in wait to renew the nightly fireworks.<sup>20</sup> This was the danger zone into which *Ottawa* was heading and where it is possible she became fatally distracted by the approaching destroyers. Had we been fitted with radar Type 271, as we should have been but were not because there was not time or some such excuse, the lurking enemy would most likely have been detected and the tables turned.<sup>21</sup> It is also possible that on our bridge, during those final minutes, lookouts were concentrating on the radar targets. It is equally possible that because the night was so dark nothing could have been seen of a skulking submarine trimmed down and probably end-on, no matter how vigilant our lookouts.

So it was that three minutes after 2300, concealed by darkness a mile or more to port, *Oberleutnant zur See* Heinz Walkerling, in command of the Type VIIC boat *U-91*, was surprised to find himself in the near vicinity of three escorts and ideally placed to attack undetected.<sup>22</sup> And at just about the same moment, while resting on my bunk, I sensed our two increases in speed. My cabin, located above the port shaft, enabled me to tell instantly whenever propellor

revolutions were changed. In the circumstances a sudden increase could mean a submarine contact, action stations and a general hubbub. When the revolutions went from twelve to fifteen knots my curiosity was fully aroused and, sliding into my seaboots, I went up into the after canopy and onto the quarterdeck to investigate. All was serene: dark, no moon, no breeze, an oily-looking sea, smooth with a barely perceptible swell. I spotted a signal lamp winking off to starboard and read the word "*Witch*". By then we were slipping along at fifteen knots. An attempt to contact the bridge by a sound-powered telephone went unanswered though I heard in the background "Port 15". The ship began to swing in that direction heeling ever so slightly to starboard as she went. At that very moment four torpedoes were rushing towards us at something like forty knots.<sup>23</sup>

Standing by the starboard guard-rails peering ahead, everything seemed normal. No point in hanging around. Then, out of the night, a tremendous clap of thunder from forward, the stunning blast of an exploding warhead. The ship's forward superstructure, funnels, bridge, all that part visible from where I stood agape, became momentarily silhouetted by an orange glow, followed by darkness and an ominous silence. Seconds later came the pitter-patter of falling debris splashing into the sea and clattering onto the upper deck. I distinctly recall an unpleasant rotten egg smell wafting aft, some by-product of the explosive. In retrospect I suppose we were fortunate only one of that spread of four found its target otherwise we would have been obliterated.<sup>24</sup>

I hesitated, absorbing the awful significance of what had happened. Following that night-shattering eruption nothing broke the silence, no shouts, no alarm bells. Even the sound of the sea rippling against the ship's side died as with engines stopped we slowed. In fact it must have been only seconds before training asserted itself. Tumbling below to my cabin I grabbed my flashlight, knife, morphine, pistol, flask and lifebelt, all laid out for just such an emergency. By going on deck without the last named item I had broken my own strict orders.<sup>25</sup> On my way out I hesitated long enough to nip next door to the wardroom to rouse Sub-Lieutenant K.F. Wright, taking passage and sleeping on the port-side settee.<sup>26</sup> He seemed incapable of accepting my news, arguing that it must have been a depth charge. There was no time for explanations. As fast as my legs could carry me, I legged it for the bridge.

The scene greeting me on reaching the compass platform was memorable. Forward of B Gun there was nothing but water. The bow, including A Gun and all, had vanished and the blast screen between A and B Guns was folded back on itself. *Ottawa* still had slight headway rising and falling sluggishly in the swell and continuing to turn slowly to port. The explosion had flung two kishies (lifebuoys) over the side and somewhere forward, port and starboard. There they were bobbing along, their unquenchable calcium flares burning brightly, beacons for an unseen enemy to administer what the Germans called the *fangschuss* or finishing shot. Hesitating just long enough to report to the Captain I headed below to assess the situation, promising to get back as soon as possible.

Getting to the scene of damage would have been impossible without my flashlight. The narrow passage leading to the messdecks was jammed with survivors in shock stumbling out to the upper deck, and cluttered with debris, mostly notice-boards and broken glass blown off the bulkheads. The smell I had noticed earlier was by then more noticeable and equally unpleasant. Clattering down the ladder into the stoker's mess, or what remained of it, revealed the extent of the destruction. Fortunately the torpedo just missed the forward 4.7-inch magazine or half the ship or more, not just the bow, would have gone galley west. All was chaos and carnage.

The adjacent messdeck forward, what had been the fore-lower messdeck for Signalmen and Telegraphists, had disappeared completely, being replaced by a view of the Atlantic. Nothing remained. The space that had been the stoker's living quarters had been transformed into a waist high jumble of damaged lockers, mess tables, hammocks, clothing, all framed by torn and twisted steel. Underneath the wreckage could be heard groans from a few victims who had survived the blast and were in great distress. Above me were the bloody remains of lifeless men smashed upwards from their hammocks and impaled on overhead fittings by the tremendous force of the explosion. In the light of my torch the battered face, or what remained of it, of one familiar stoker was barely recognizable.

As I stood trying to avoid becoming engulfed by the encircling shambles, the ship seemed reluctant to lift to the swell impeded from below by a tangle of wreckage still clinging to the hull. The sealed asdic cabinet, located in the port aftercorner of the mess, was inaccessible and almost invisible behind the rubble which was jammed against it, thus blocking its heavy door designed, alas, to open outward and effectively trapping its terrified occupants. The Doctor and the Chief (D.L. McGillivray) appeared and together we tried to assess this scene of death and devastation.<sup>27</sup> *Ottawa* had been heavily damaged but she was still on an even keel with her propulsion system intact.

At this time, measured in seconds, I was acutely aware that our ship was motionless, dangerously exposed to another attack, and puzzled why the engines were not used to gather sternway. A moving target, even a slow one, might be more difficult to hit than a stationary one. In fact, had my wish been granted, the second torpedo would have struck much nearer—indeed right at us. I had a premonition we were for it but staggered when it came with a mind-numbing roar, exploding not far off.<sup>28</sup> The forward part where we were immediately started to submerge and commenced listing to starboard. From the grinding, tearing sounds all about, the ship was breaking up. There was nothing to be done but clear out in what few seconds remained. I followed Chief and Doc up the ladder to the Seamen's Mess. In the renewed confusion, the ship heeling amid the roar of escaping steam, it was a monumental struggle getting up the inside ladder to the bridge, parting on the way from George Hendry on the flagdeck. I never saw him again.<sup>29</sup> The thought of those we could not see, let alone reach, in that shambles when she went to her death throes is with me still.

Everything happened so swiftly. I left my cabin at 2300 to investigate that second speed increase. At 2305 came the first torpedo, followed at 2320 by the second. The latter exploded in Number Two boiler room, located between the funnels, starboard side, wreaking havoc and breaking her back. By the time I got back to the bridge after my fruitless investigation, whatever there was to report had been overwhelmed by events. What remained of the fore part of the ship was already halfway over. Following the second hit, one of two dan buoys stowed by the after funnel hurtled through the air, landing on the bridge.<sup>30</sup> Between us the Captain and I pushed it over the side.

By this time he and I were alone. The order had already been passed to abandon ship. During my absence below, and in all the confusion, it had been impossible to supervise preparations for this last rite. My only hope was that others had seen to it, and they had. Altogether we carried nine carley floats for a ship's company of 180 and every officer and rating had been allocated a berth, twenty to a float. This meant overcrowding but it had to be assumed that in the unhappy eventuality this would be offset by casualties. How many floats were released I do not know, but certainly not all. Two were inextricably jammed or destroyed

under the whalers. Three next-to-useless cork floatnets, two 27-foot whalers, and the 25-foot motorboat, were excluded from the abandon ship organisation, correctly so as it turned out. Destroyers are so lightly built, and torpedoes wreak such damage, there is rarely time to get undamaged boats away in time. Despite the loss of seventy or so men there was still overcrowding, so much so that some over-burdened floats capsized, throwing their occupants into the water and adding to the death toll.

During those final moments some grim dramas were being played out. The pitiable entreaties emanating from the voice pipe to the bridge from the two young hands trapped in the asdic hut far below became unbearable to those on the bridge, who were totally helpless to do anything for them. What could, what should, one do other than offer words of encouragement that help was coming when such was manifestly out of the question? What happened at the end is hard to contemplate for the imprisoned pair, as that pitch black, watertight, sound-proofed box rolled first 90 degrees to starboard and then 90 degrees onto its back before sliding into the depths and oblivion. It is an ineradicable memory.

Then there was Bucheski on whose behalf our gallant Doctor, SBA MacMillan and Pooch's friends, dedicated themselves to the task of saving him. Tragically they opted for the starboard whaler which was directly in the line of fire when the second torpedo arrived, annihilating everyone and everything in the vicinity. For all those struggling to lower the boat death must have been instantaneous. Mr. Jones, our redoubtable Gunner (T), slightly removed from that scene, was blown overboard but, unhurt, somehow managed to climb back on board by a scrambling net.

The order to abandon ship never reached Number One boiler room, the foremost of three. With the second hit, when the forward section started to disintegrate, the situation there became perilous without lights, and escaping high pressure steam engulfing the whole place. All but one of the watchkeepers, Leading Stoker Skillen, I believe, rushed for the ladder to the upper deck, getting severely scalded in the process. Skillen remained because no order to leave had been received. When conditions became intolerable he lifted the floor plates and sought shelter in the bilges where cool water provided a measure of protection. As the space filled he floated up until he could grasp the ladder and emerge unhurt. Such presence of mind and devotion to his duty mark him as very special indeed.

To us on the bridge it was obvious the end was coming, and rapidly. Only a few seconds remained to put a few hurried puffs into what passed for lifejackets in those days.<sup>31</sup> Together the Captain and I scrambled out of the bridge, into the port sponson, and from there onto the ship's side. While engaged in these acrobatics my cap was knocked off on the forestay and tumbled back inboard. Old habits die hard. Maybe it was the cost involved. Whatever, without hesitating I turned back and went in pursuit very nearly paying heavily for such rashness. By then the bow section was on its beam ends calling for a mighty effort on my part to extricate myself vertically. The Captain was waiting, and side by side we picked our way, carefully pausing when we reached the bilge keel. I am thankful to have been with him as that grim business moved to its climax. I could not bear to think of him alone at such a time. The mental shock of losing his ship in such sudden and disastrous circumstances must have weighed fearfully on him when he was already physically played out.

As we stood side by side, hesitating, his quiet last words to me were: "She was a fine ship, Number One." He jumped and I followed. For some perverse reason it seemed presumptuous to go first, even though the custom in such matters is that captains go last. When

I plunged, clutching my flashlight and burdened by that heavy pistol, away went that cap again while water-filled seaboots dragged me straight down. Struggling to get rid of them took some seconds, all the while being pulled deeper. Finally kicking them clear I surfaced, but by then Larry Rutherford was nowhere to be seen. It was dark, the sea blanketed with oil, making it impossible to identify individuals. I never encountered him again. After four days and nights of unremitting stress he was really beyond coping with the physical demands involved in continuing the struggle. Also, he was wearing a lammy coat, heavier and more water-absorbent than duffel, a deadly encumbrance had he not shucked it.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 8: HMCS *Ottawa* torpedoed and sinking, 2330, 13 Sept. 1942.

*Source:* Pen and ink, drawn from memory, L. B. Jenson.

It was urgent to distance oneself from the wreck, but progress through a thick layer of Bunker C was difficult. For a ship critically low in fuel there seemed to be a great deal of it about. I managed thirty yards or so before turning to witness the sad finale. By then the forward section was almost vertical, stem—or where the stem used to be—skyward. It hung motionless for a moment or two and without a sound slid straight down and was gone. Earlier, all hatches abaft the after bulkhead in the Engine Room had been shut tight and, for a moment, it seemed the stern section might break free and remain afloat. It appeared buoyant. However, this was not to be. The stern tilted higher and higher. As it too approached the vertical there came a mighty clatter, clouds of dust, and the entire after superstructure, X Gun

included, as well as nearly seventy depth charges, broke loose and plummeted into the sea. What remained of the hull, dripping propellers and all, soon followed, leaving nothing in its wake but a bewildered collection of oil-covered swimmers and crowded carley floats. So much for pastels, so much for protective camouflage. By my waterproof watch it was 2330.

When those depth charges, twelve tons or so of high explosive, tumbled into the water, all who witnessed it tensed in preparation for the rupturing pressure wave that was sure to follow. The detonation of one would counter-mine the remainder. Being so close to such a watery Krakatoa no swimmer could possibly survive. Fortunately for all of us our indefatigable Gunner (T), assisted by his torpedomen, had rendered them harmless, every single one. It was another reason to be thankful.<sup>33</sup>

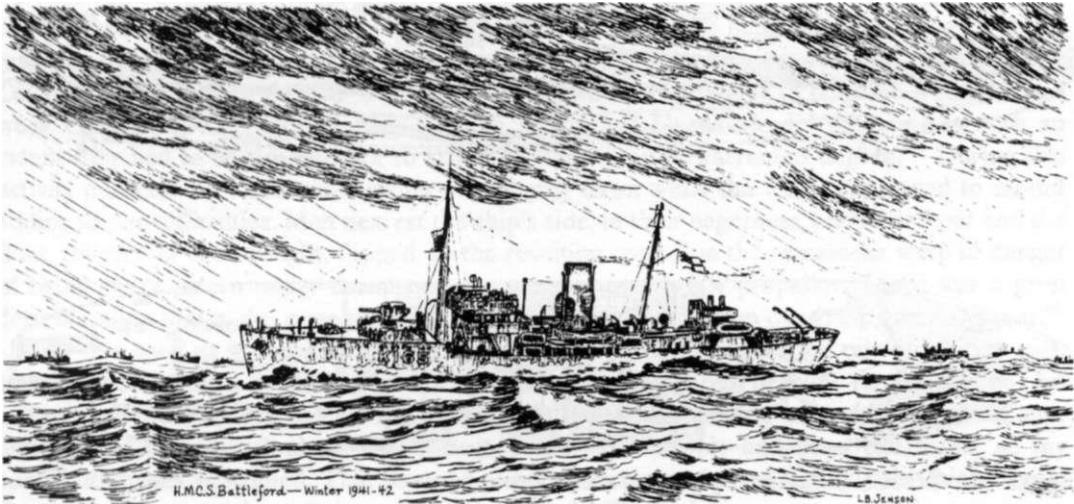


Figure 9: HMCS *Battleford*, Winter 1941-42, similar to HMC Ships *Arvida*, *Sherbrooke* and *Amherst*.

Source: L.B. Jenson.

Striking out for the nearest float, already fully occupied, I grasped one of its rope becketts when out of the darkness bobbed the dan buoy tossed overboard earlier. Promptly collaring it with one hand, and the becket with the other, I was set for the remainder of our ordeal. The buoy floated horizontally, providing support for a number of men, but as time passed, one by one they gave up and drifted wordlessly into the night. Throughout that long middle watch there was no talk. For the swimmers, mouths and eyes had to be shut tight against the ceaseless sluicing of oily waves.<sup>34</sup>

It must have been around midnight when the convoy appeared silently out of the darkness steaming majestically through our area and just as quietly was gone. A tanker in ballast passed so close we could see a cavernous hole in her port side. As she glided by a huddled shape in our carley float wondered aloud why she did not stop to pick us up.<sup>35</sup> Assuming the tanker people were aware of our predicament and on the lookout, it was futile

trying to explain wartime priorities to men in our circumstances. I did not know whether word had been received by the Senior Officer, or anyone else for that matter, that we had "bought it," and I had no intention of revealing the depressing possibility that they had not. We had quite enough on our hands as it was.

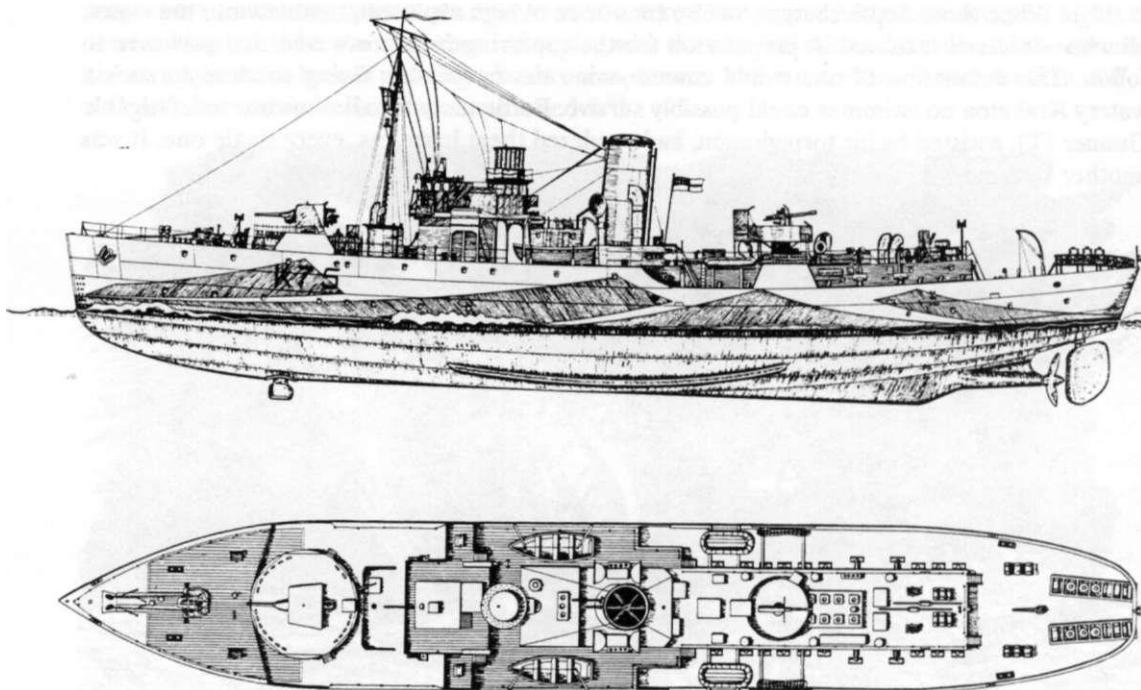


Figure 10: HMCS *Celandine*, plan and elevation.

Source: L.B. Jenson

In fact the tanker *Clausina* did stop, and tried unsuccessfully to pick up survivors, but they were not us. She certainly assisted *Celandine* in locating them at 0110 when that ship started picking up people. At 0200 *St Croix* ordered *Arvida* to help. So the news got through and ships were looking for us within an hour of the sinking. We knew nothing of this.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Monday, 14 September*

It was an exhausting night. I tried not to dwell on how long we could endure or our prospects for being picked up. As time passed they seemed to diminish. Under a canopy of stars looking down in icy unconcern the only sound to disturb the stillness was the slopping of oily waves against the float and those clinging to it. For each one of us there was ample time for serious reflection. I was uninjured, a good swimmer and set on sticking it out until dawn. Luckily the water was not cold for we were still in the Gulf Stream. Had we been forced to take to the water not many miles farther west we would have ended up in the frigid Labrador Current where survival time for swimmers is measured in minutes, not hours. Even those fortunate enough to be in carley floats would have suffered quickly in the cold air. As it was,

the sea teemed with jelly fish looking like lumps of fist-sized phosphorescence. I poked one and was stung for my temerity. One man had jumped in wearing only a shirt and was badly stung about the body and legs.<sup>37</sup> As that middle watch dragged on the wind strengthened, the waves grew higher, jerking me violently between dan buoy and the rough canvas of that unyielding float.

About 0530 one sensed rather than saw a presence nearby. Then a mass, blacker than our surroundings, materialized out of the gloom. It was the side of a ship looming over us. In Canada the corvette *Sackville* is properly revered as a symbol of the Atlantic battle. To us [survivors of *Ottawa*] then, and now, there is but one corvette that will always be special. Her name is *Celandine*. She was commanded by Lieutenant Collings, aged 24, one of the youngest captains in the Atlantic. According to him, "It was so dark that men on rafts were invisible until we were right on top of them. There was the continual danger of running them down."<sup>38</sup> By this time our numbers were further reduced, the strength needed to hang on had proved for many just too much. The corvette's people did yeoman work in helping everyone up her side. *Celandine's* Lieutenant Arnold "went again and again into the water to help the wounded and weak Canadians. Two ratings, Able Seaman Arden and Unsworth, did the same to such an extent they had to be ordered not to risk their lives to an unwarranted degree."<sup>39</sup> During this activity darkness was noticeably giving way to grey dawn while the waves continued to mount adding to our difficulties. Men nearest the ship's side, in their eagerness, scrambled out and the float, relieved of their weight, flipped. In the resulting confusion the remainder were in danger of being swept astern under the corvette's counter towards her propellor. There was a grim determination that at the moment of rescue nobody should slip from our grasp and disappear.<sup>40</sup>

As soon as it could be managed I explained to Collings who the oily apparition was, standing before him, and on behalf of the *Ottawas* offered our heartfelt thanks to him, his officers and men, for our rescue. He remained in the vicinity as long as he dared, making sure nobody had been overlooked. The corvette's morphine supply had been exhausted, so my contribution was welcomed. That damned pistol of mine was turned over to her Chief Engine Room Artificer to strip and clean. Once a gunnery officer, always a gunnery officer.

*Celandine* cleared the area before full daylight to proceed direct to St. John's, 450 miles away. During that period we all rested. I recall the kindness shown to us all, the bunks surrendered for our use, hours of blessed sleep, great apprehension whenever the alarm gongs went off, and the fervent hope for a safe arrival dryshod in St. John's. I still have a small snapshot taken by someone in the corvette's crew of our group mustered on the corvette's fo'c'sle. A motley gang it was, including Gunner (T) Jones, Lieutenant Dunn Lantier, the Buffer (P.O. Smith), prudently still wearing his lifebelt, also a seaman by name of Bell if I recall aright, and maybe Leading Torpedoman (Whoopee) Hood.<sup>41</sup> A. B. Archibald is at the back with me. I need help to identify the remainder.

### *Wednesday, 16 September*

We reached St. John's safely and to a caring reception by the Red Cross and many naval folk. Those members of the ship's company who were not hospitalized were housed at Buckmaster's Field barracks. We were a bedraggled lot, fortunate to be alive, saddened at the growing realization of what had happened and how many of our shipmates had gone.<sup>42</sup> Altogether we lost 137 souls, not 113 as the official casualty figures state. Not one of the *Empire Oil* people we had plucked from the sea survived. Altogether they had been hammered by four

torpedoes, and understandably a few reportedly became panicky when they had to abandon ship a second time, creating difficulties in floats already dangerously overcrowded. Let it not be forgotten that Merchant Seamen were as involved in the battle for the convoys as the navy—indeed more so—because it was their cargoes that meant the difference. We gave them sanctuary and safety—alas, short lived—but at the end, they were one with us and should be recorded as such.



Figure 11: 14 September 1942, *Ottawa* survivors gathered on the foc's'le of HMS *Celandine*. The Buffer, prudently still wearing his lifebelt, left foreground. Back row Able Seaman Archibald. Others include Mr. L. I. Jones and Lieutenant Dunn Lantier, front middle. T. C. Pullen right rear.

Source: *T. C. Pullen Papers*.

## APPENDIX I

### Afterword: *U-91*. Extracts From Admiralty Intelligence Report<sup>4</sup>

*U-91* was commissioned at the Flenderwerke, Lübeck, on 28 January, 1942. Officers at the time of commissioning were *Oberleutnant zur See* Heinz Walkerling of the 1935 term, Commanding Officer; *Oberleutnant zur See* Wilzer, First Lieutenant; *Leutnant zur See* KulL Second Watchkeeping Officer and *Leutnant (Ing)* Heinrich, Engineer Officer. The U.A.K. trials at Kiel and the working up exercises in the Baltic were described as normal. The U-boat returned to Königsberg for final adjustments.

*U-91* sailed from Kiel on 15 August, 1942 with several other U-boats. On 17 August she called at Kristiansand S. and then proceeded through the Rosengarten to her patrol area. This was said to have been in about 50 deg North 40 deg West. There she sank two destroyers from a west-bound convoy and was herself subjected to depth charge attacks. Walkerling was

disappointed at not receiving an award for this attack. Later *U-91* sank a 7,000 ton ship from another convoy.<sup>44</sup> On passage to base she was refuelled by a supply U-boat commanded by Wolf-bauer. *U-91* arrived at Brest on 6 October, 1942, where she joined the 9th Flotilla.

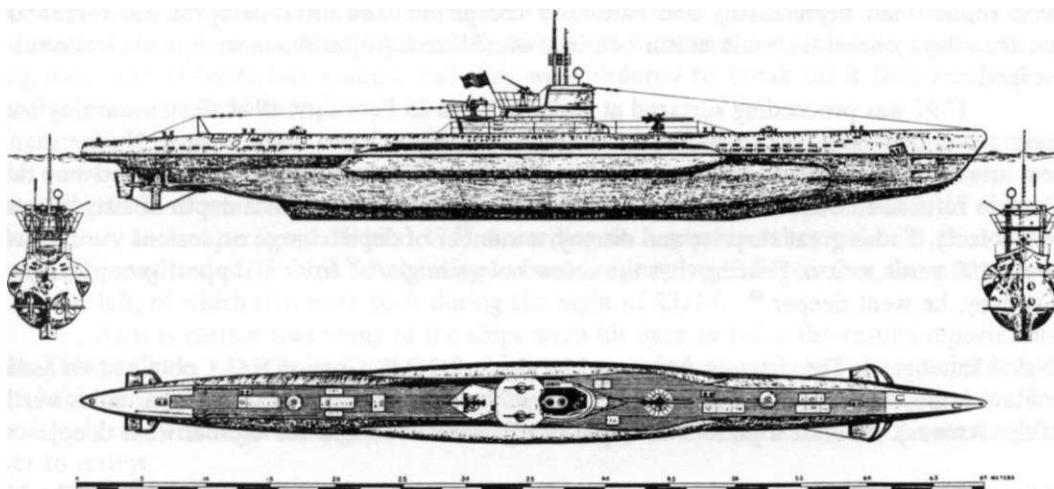


Figure 12: U-boat 91, plan and elevation with additional illustrative material.

Source: L. B. Jenson.

*U-91* sailed from Brest on 1 November, 1942 on her second patrol, proceeding to her operational area off the west coast of Africa in the latitude of Casablanca. One day while proceeding submerged, the U-boat was surprised by surfaced craft and was depth charged. Slight damage was sustained. She then headed north at slow speed without sighting anything.

Her third patrol saw her sailing from Brest on 11 February, 1943 and operating in the North Atlantic. There she sank four ships totalling 29,000 tons.<sup>45</sup> On passage to base through the Bay of Biscay she claimed to have shot down one enemy aircraft. She arrived at Lorient on 28 March where she was attached to the 10th Flotilla. This was Walkerling's last patrol.

#### **Sixth and last patrol of *U-91***

*U-91* [now under the command of an officer by the name of Hungershausen] was to have sailed from Brest on 19 January, 1944. However, owing to transportation difficulties, her new 37 mm gun failed to reach her on time and her sailing was postponed. When the gun finally appeared, the crew were dismayed to find that it was in a dismantled condition. No one in *U-91* had had any training in this type of weapon, and consequently they took two days to assemble it. When fired it promptly jammed, causing further delay.

At 1500 on 25 January, *U-91* sailed, accompanied by *U-256* commanded by Brauel and the U-boat commanded by Barleben.<sup>46</sup> *U-413* was also to have sailed with them, but failed to put in an appearance. The three boats were escorted to the thousand-fathom line by minesweepers.

While passing through the Bay of Biscay, several G.S.R. [search receiver for detecting enemy radar transmissions] warnings were received.<sup>47</sup> After each one, ten to twenty R.D.B's [Radar Decoy Balloons] were released and the U-boat dived. A telegraphist who was in charge of the balloons estimated that a total of about 120 were released. In spite of the delay in sailing, deck repairs had been hastily and carelessly completed, and after being at sea for about fourteen days, one of the main motor bearings overheated. Adjustments were made while submerged.

*U-91* was proceeding surfaced at about 2330 on 25 February, 1944 when a warning was received on the *Naxos* G.S.R. Believing that an enemy aircraft was in the vicinity, *Hungershausen* submerged. About thirty minutes later H.E. (hydrophone effect) was reported but the Captain refused to believe that danger was imminent and remained at a depth of sixty metres (196.8 feet). To his great surprise and dismay, a number of depth charge explosions were heard about 100 yards astern. Fearing that the screw noises might be from a support group and not a convoy, he went deeper.<sup>48</sup>

[Naval Intelligence Department note-on 25 February, HMS *Gore* of E.G.I obtained an asdic contact in position 49 deg 45 min North 26 deg 20 min West (about 500 nautical miles north of the Azores). At 2302 a pattern of depth charges was fired and the U-boat went deep].

More depth charges were dropped, the third pattern inflicting severe damage. The U-boat was driven to a depth well below 200 metres (656 feet). An external tank was ruptured, causing her to list. The W/T equipment was smashed and there was water entry in the diesel room causing her to be about 20 degrees heavy by the stern. Tanks were blown, but the U-boat failed to respond. On repeating to blow she rose slowly to a depth of about 170 metres (557 feet). More depth charges fell as the U-boat again lost trim and became heavy by the stern. Once more tanks were blown and she shot to the surface unexpectedly, before arrangements for scuttling and abandoning ship had been made. Upon reaching the surface, the diesels were started as the enemy opened fire. *Hungershausen* hastily fired a T.5 torpedo (*Gnat*), but it was wide of the mark. He then gave the order to abandon ship and the Engineer Officer opened the vents. The U-boat did not sink, however, and he was forced to go below and set scuttling charges. It was stated that these detonated satisfactorily but still the U-boat remained on the surface. She was finally sent to the bottom by British gunfire.

[N.I.D. note: Five patterns of depth charges were dropped on the U-boat between 2302 on 25 February and 0240 on 26 February. During the last attack, loud tank blowing noises were heard. The U-boat surfaced and was picked up by radar. HM Ships *Gore* and *Affleck* opened fire while the U-boat was under way. *Affleck* manoeuvred along the starboard side and was rammed, but little damage was done. The U-boat's crew then began to wave dirty linen and fire was ceased. The U-boat listed 20 degrees to port, her bows lifted in the air, and she hung in this position for 30 minutes. *Affleck* was about to fire (depth charge) throwers when the U-boat sank, stern first, disappearing from sight at 0325.]

APPENDIX II

*"Final Remarks on convoy No. 50 [O.N. 127J"\**

[Group *Vorwärts* was to continue the operation until boats had just enough fuel to allow them to reach the supply point, Grid Square BC, with a small reserve, but on 14 September heavy fog made the U-boats lose contact and they were ordered to break off if they received no further contact before dark.]<sup>50</sup>

Good weather and corresponding visibility conditions favoured the operation against the convoy. 13 boats took part, of which 8 were on their first patrol. With the exception of one boat, the C.O. of which was ill, all scored successes against the convoy, i.e. sunk: 15 ships, 2 destroyers, 1 corvette; torpedo hits: 17.<sup>51</sup> According to a captain taken prisoner the convoy originally consisted of 35 ships.<sup>52</sup> According to boats' reports on 13 September, there were only 18 ships left, of which two were sunk during the night of 13/14.

As it is certain that many of the ships were hit once or twice the results reported for the U-boats have been boiled down: 19 ships are regarded as sunk and 6 torpedoed. It is probable however that the losses of the convoy were higher. No attacking boats were lost. One boat only received slight damage, which could not be repaired at sea and made it necessary for her to return.

This is a very good result. It shows once more that convoy operations are still possible and can be successful outside the range of the enemy air force, provided a sufficient number of boats are used and the weather is fair. The work of C.O.'s on their first patrols is deserving of special recognition: 75% of the C.O.'s were on their first patrols in command. Apart from their efficiency, the tenacity with which they pursued the convoy for 5 days and attacked again and again should be mentioned. Only someone who has served in a U-boat himself can assess the demands made on C.O. and crew.<sup>53</sup>

It is regrettable that torpedoes with impact firing heads have such small effect.<sup>54</sup>

NOTES

1. Edgar J. March, *British Destroyers: A History of Development 1892-1953* (London, 1966), 492 *et seq.*

2. This account was originally prepared with the ship's company of HMCS *Ottawa* in mind.

3. The exceptions are Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* (Toronto, 1985), esp. 159-67, and Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates: The History of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto, 1990), 125-6.

4. Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, 158 *et seq.*

5. A *skimmer* was a high speed 14-foot planing boat, for up to four people including the coxswain. It was used as a despatch boat, for the postman, and special runs with the captain, weather permitting. The *buffer*

was the Chief Boatswain's Mate, after the Coxswain the next most senior rate in the upper deck department of the ship. He was the First Lieutenant's right hand man and link between him and the seamen, hence the name. As First Lieutenant, or Executive Officer (second in command) the author was responsible for all work done by hands in each part of ship. "My appointment ... as Executive Officer," he wrote in some last minute notes to this account, "was dated 16 March, 1942, and I joined her alongside undergoing repairs of various sorts in Belfast. My destroyer experience was based on service in *HMCS Assiniboine (cx-Kempenfelt)* as Gunnery Officer/Watchkeeper between October, 1939, and December, 1940; before that with the Mediterranean fleet in the new destroyers *Hotspur* and *Hostile*. The basic design of these ships was the same and I knew them inside out. I was never aware of the reason for the direct switch

which took place between me and Lieutenant Frank Caldwell. He left the ship to take over as X.O. of HMCS *Niobe* just outside Gourrock, and a fancy name for the ancient, north-facing poor house and asylum that had occupied the site since Victorian times. Whatever the reason, my place at that age and stage was not ashore in barracks or taking gunnery courses, but in the Atlantic where fighting was crucial to success."

6. F.H. Hinsley *et al*, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol 2 (London, 1980), 179; Hans Meckel, "Die Funkführung der deutschen U-Boote und die Rolle des xB-Dienstes (deutscher Marine-Funkentzifferungs dienst),\* Jürgen Rohwer und Eberhard Jacket (eds.), *Die Funkaufklärung und ihre Rolle im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 1979), 121-132.

7. L.B. Jenson, on reading this passage, placed on record the following startling recollection: "The final time we were alongside in Londonderry I, as the Gunnery officer, was informed by the dockyard authorities that we were to be fitted with a RDF 271 in lieu of the rangefinder. The 271 arrived alongside on the jetty and I casually so informed the Captain, whom I assumed had been informed about this. He became very upset and seemed to have the impression that I had authorised this on my own. I was to cancel it at once, which I did. I was very sorry as I was the RDF officer and very aware of the limitations of the 286 M RDF (Radar). It always was my personal experience in *Ottawa, Longbranch* and *Algonquin* that when we were working out of Royal Naval Bases, a Canadian was treated just like a Royal Naval ship—for better or for worse." L.B. Jenson to W.A.B. Douglas, 13 September, 1991, copy with the Pullen Papers.

8. BdU War Diary, 8 September, 1942: "Group *Vorwärts* was ordered to take up positions in patrol line from AK 6664 to AL 7854 .... The next convoy is expected about 9 September," DHist 79/446, Vol.6.

9. Captain Pullen's memory seems to be at fault here. The Germans had two expressions like this: "The Happy Time" (first in British Home Waters in 1940, then on the Eastern Atlantic Seaboard in the first half of 1942) and what they called "The Black Pit." In Allied terminology this region, beyond range of shore-based aircraft, was The Greenland Air Gap." However, it is possible that the German expression "Black Pit," so much more descriptive, was copied by Allied sailors. In fact, Admiral Doenitz worried that Allied air cover was becoming more widespread."... Unless suitable counter-measures can

be taken prospects of success of U-boats will be reduced to an unjustifiable extent." BdU War Diary, 3 September 1942, DHist, 79/446, Vol.6.

10. BdU War Diary, 9 September, 1942: "U-584 ... sighted convoy of 11-15 steamers in AL 7463 at 2029 [Central European Time]. It was ON 127, which was expected at this time by dead reckoning."

11. Times and positions of U-boat attacks are taken, unless otherwise indicated, from Jürgen Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945* (Annapolis, 1983), the updated English-language edition of *Die U-Boot Erfolge Der Achsenmächte 1939-1945* (Munich, 1968). An indispensable source, it still contains the occasional mistake.

12. Interview with Captain E. Marshall, master of S.S. *Empire Oil*, 22 October, 1942, Public Record Office (PRO) A D M 199/2142, copy in the T.C. Pullen papers.

13. *Ibid*.

14. This is not quite correct, although Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, states that such an attack did take place. In fact, at about 2210 local time *U-92* fired four individual shots in sequence against what *Oberleutnant zur See* Oelrich described as "4 Steamers range 8-1200 metres, enemy speed 8 knots, running from 085-110." He thought he had missed three and hit one. Rohwer's information will have been from a different source, and may have confused this attack with two other incidents. At about 0100 local time on 11 September "Convoy starboard beam in sight again reloaded. In trying to get a shot at the convoy was continuously forced away by 2 or 3 ships of the port security screen." Later, at about 0200, the U-boat log states: "A salvo of 4 ready to fire on the destroyer but not fired despite range 1000 as it is constantly tacking. After 3 min secure salvo and cancel battle stations. Moved off on account of dawn breaking.\* *Kriegstagebuch* (U-boat log), *U-92*. In other words, the escorts were doing their job well. The reference to dawn by Oelrich, even at this northern latitude, would seem to be stretching the facts. Nautical twilight, the end of total darkness, in the position shown would have begun at about 0615 GMT, about an hour later.

15. Actually, according to *V-659s* log, it was depth charge explosions after the first attack on 10 September that caused a crack in Diving Tank Two, and the boat began its homeward journey at about 2200 local time on 10 September.

16. The first Catalina flying boat of I Group RCAF, based on Botwood, Newfoundland, sighted *U-96* in the early afternoon (too far away to attack before the U-boat submerged), and shortly after joined O.N. 127 on the most easterly sighting yet made by any aircraft flying from North American bases, about 550 miles east of St John's. The RCAF at this time had to rely on Consolidated Canso Amphibians and Catalina flying boats for such efforts; it would not be until May of 1943 that the first Very Long Range Liberators were allocated to the Canadians, and USAAF B-1Ts based on Gander were not being tasked with convoy escort duties. The slow speed and limited range of flying boats and amphibians restricted their time on task at great ranges, and their effectiveness in putting down U-boats getting into position for attacks after dark was accordingly much less than that of Liberators at this distance from base. W.A.B. Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force: The Official History of the RCAF*, Vol. 2 (Toronto, 1986), 521-2, 537-541, 549-551.

17. From BdU War Diary, 13 September: "At 1825 [European Central Time] U 96 was forced to submerge in BC 6314 by an aircraft. This position is about 550 miles east of St. John's. U 380 and 584 also reported that they had been driven off by aircraft while shadowing. So far in previous operations aircraft have not appeared in this remote area. Long-range English aircraft must therefore recently have been stationed in Newfoundland." The deduction, as indicated in the previous endnote, was only partially correct. It does, however, show that RCAF air cover was hampering U-boat operations.

18. "Captain (D)": The senior officer ashore with direct responsibility for the operational requirements of destroyers and, where applicable, other escort vessels. In Newfoundland at this time Captain (D) was Captain E. Rollo Mainguy, RCN.

19. This is a good description of U-boat tactics, except that it was seldom possible to attack *en masse*. U-boat captains, to be successful, besides being intrepid to a marked degree had to be both individualists and opportunists.

20. "Grain": a seaman's term for the line of water ahead of a vessel along which she will pass, the opposite of "wake," Admiralty, *Manual of Seamanship*, Vol II (London, 1952), 746.

21. Canadian ships, as already suggested, had a lower priority than British ships; Canadian corvettes slated for service in the Mediterranean, and ships of the

MOEF, were fitted with Type 271 over the winter, but Naval Service Headquarters did not approve accelerated fitting of the type to Canadian escorts of the Mid Ocean Escort Force until after the loss of *Ottawa*. It was a request from Captain (D) to NSHQ, dated 16 September, that brought about such approval, something that would be recommended by the board of inquiry into the loss of *Ottawa* only a few days after. Quite probably, therefore, Captain Mainguy acted with knowledge of the proceedings of that inquiry. David Zimmerman, *The Great Naval Battle of Ottawa: How Admirals, Scientists and Politicians Impeded the Development of High Technology in Canada's Wartime Navy*, (Toronto, 1989), 83; "Findings of Board of Inquiry into the Circumstances Attending the Loss of H.M.C.S. OTTAWA on Sunday, 13 September 1942," copy in T.C. Pullen papers.

22. From the log of *U-91*: "[1800 local time, 13/9/42] Make contact with convoy, since it is gradually getting dark close in on staggered course. Convoy making a wide evening tack toward the north and I lose contact in the dusk .... I now steer a southerly course since I assume the convoy will be turning back onto its general course of 240 degrees during the night. [2300 ? 13/9/42]! have a number of shadows (ship silhouettes) in sight and must be positioned directly ahead of the convoy. Well ahead of it, at position 70, I can recognise a twin-funnel destroyer under slow speed

23. From the log of *U-91*: "A salvo of two torpedoes against the destroyer from tubes I and III. Target speed 11 knots, range 10 hundred metres ...."

24. From the log of *U-91*: "After 1 min 50 sees two detonations. Black-white detonation cloud and bright red flames. The destroyer lies dead in the water, burning fiercely ...." Thus not four, as Pullen had thought, but only two torpedoes had been fired and only one, not two as Walkerling thought, had hit the target.

25. From "Hints to First Lieutenants," H.M.C. Gunnery School, Halifax, 25 January 1943: "*Lifebelts*. My orders were simply, 'Anybody caught without a Lifebelt actually being worn would spend an appropriate number of hours in the Crow'snest' ... " T.C. Pullen papers.

26. From "Hints to First Lieutenants": "*Passengers*. It is quite possible for a man to be sleeping in the Wardroom when you get hit for'd and think it was just a depth charge being dropped, so if you have any

passengers see that they are informed of the latest developments."

27. "Chief": Chief engineer, usually, as in this case, a Lieutenant (E) in destroyers.

28. From the log of *U-91*: "[The destroyer] fires off a flare shell which separates into 5 green stars. Star shells are immediately fired off by other ships. I assume this is an S.O.S. signal as a second destroyer dashes up to the spot where the first one was hit. I turn hard rudder and make a full circle for a new attack run on the second destroyer which has now stopped. A single shot from tube II with firing angle 0 degrees. Running time 1 min 45 sees. A hit amidships. High column of water...." Evidently Walkerling mistook the stationary *Ottawa* for a second destroyer, and he later claimed to have sunk two destroyers.

29. From the Toronto *Evening Telegram*, 24 September, 1942: "Surgeon Lieutenant George Hendry, who captained the University of Toronto hockey team in 1934, is reported missing and believed killed .... Lieut. Hendry was the last of a noted Canadian medical family. His father, who died just a few years ago, served as a Colonel in the last Great War." Clipping in the T.C. Pullen papers.

30. "Dan buoy": "A cylindrical can with a metal lifting bracket, and a tube through the centre of the can to take the Dan stave [about twenty feet in length] ...." Admiralty, *Manual of Seamanship*, II, 451. Dan buoys are used principally to mark the swept channels in minefields.

31. From "Findings of Board of Inquiry into the Circumstances Attending the Loss of H.M.C.S. OTTAWA on Sunday, 13 September 1942": "That the merchant service type of lifesaving jacket fitted with watertight torch be supplied to H. M. ships and that these jackets are fitted with a becket and toggle with which an exhausted man can secure himself to the life saving lanyard of a float or raft." T.C. Pullen papers. "Beckets" were loops of rope around the perimeter of carley floats to serve as hand-holds for swimmers for whom there is no room inside.

32. From BRCN 2401, "**ABANDONSHIP**": *Some notes for the guidance of responsible officers in the event of an emergency*, Director of Training and Naval Assistant, Naval Service Headquarters (Ottawa, 1943). "The basic material was furnished by an officer who served afloat in H.M.C.S. *Ottawa* ...": "It is best to remove sea boots before taking to the water. And all concerned are advised not to wear lammy coats when

going into the sea. After a short period they tend to become waterlogged, and a dead weight ...."

33. From the log of *U-91*: "... many detonations in succession. Apparently detonating depth charges. Destroyer sank at once. Lots of fireworks, star shells, followed by the firing of the green five-starred rocket and sweeping the scene with searchlights. 3 or 4 of the guard ships simultaneously set out a green-red light on the mast-head and fire off red star shells. After about 2 minutes the lights are extinguished ...." The view from the submarine was evidently less than exact.

34. From BRCN 2401: "... (*d*) **Dan Buoys**: These make very good life rafts, and may provide help to a considerable number of men crowded off floats. Their only drawback is that they tend to revolve rapidly in the water, and are apt to become rather tiring. Definitely better than nothing. It is well not to have the sinkers attached. (They could be available nearby). The sinking of H.M.C.S. *Ottawa* proved that Dan Buoys have a considerable value as a life-saving device."

35. Hal Lawrence incorrectly attributes this remark to Pullen; see *Tales of the North Atlantic* (Toronto, 1985), 182.

36. Pullen's source for this information was Admiral Sir Peter Gretton, in a letter dated 14 April, 1981. Gretton's project for a book on minor naval actions of World War II (not to my knowledge completed) was to include O.N. 127 as "an example of the worst time when the ships had no air cover, no HFDF and no Ultra information though the Germans were reading our signals. No support groups either." This letter seems to have been responsible for Pullen's urge to record the story himself: "... You may regret asking me for you have opened the floodgates of memory. For years I have planned to set down what I could recall of those events and your letter has served as a catalyst ...." Correspondence with Sir Peter Gretton, 25 February, 1981 to 9 May, 1983, T.C. Pullen papers.

37. From BRCN 2401: "(10) **Clothing**. The importance of taking to the water adequately, but not excessively clothed cannot be too strongly stressed .... It may be of interest to recall that H.M.C.S. *Ottawa* went down on the edge of the Gulf Stream where the sea was teeming with jelly fish. One luckless seaman had taken to the water with nothing on but a shirt, and was very badly stung all over the legs. This would appear to underline the necessity of turning into

one's bunk or hammock fully dressed, and a standing order to this effect should be promulgated and constantly enforced in every ship."

38. Alan Randal, interview of Lieutenant Collings, 12 March, 1943, Canadian Press Report, in T.C. Pullen Papers, "HMCS *Ottawa*, press reports."

39. *Ibid.*

40. BRCN2401: "(7) *Being Rescued*. Tragic incidents are most likely to occur when rescue is actually at hand, and it is precisely in this connection that the officer in charge should exercise his authority to maintain proper discipline .... The best plan is to try to persuade men of the folly of any precipitate action before the side of the ship is actually reached .... Everything possible should be done to see that the hope of survival is not ruined by some precipitate action."

41. L.B. Jenson recalls "Leading Torpedoman 'Whoopie' Hood telling me that he was found by a merchant ship in daylight 14 September, floating by himself on some wreckage. He was quite fat and I thought that might have helped protect him from exposure ..." Jenson to Douglas, 13 September, 1991.

42. From the Findings of the Board of Inquiry: "*General Remarks* .... The Board wishes to draw special attention to the commendable devotion to duty (shown in evidence) of the following officers and men: The Commanding Officer, Acting Lieutenant Commander Clark A. Rutherford, RCN and the medical officer, Surgeon Lieutenant George A. Hendry, RCNVR These officers lost their lives largely through exhaustion caused by little or no rest for some days previous. Also to Sub-Lieutenant L.B. Jenson, RCN, who for a young officer displayed considerable initiative and power of command. Acting Gunner (T) L.T. Jones, Petty Officer Gridel, Leading Stoker McLeod, and Sub-Lieutenant Arnold of HMS CELANDINE."

43. Admiralty Interrogation of Survivors, *U-257, U-91, U-358, U-749*, DHist 80/582, item 61.

44. This must refer to the sinking of *Ottawa*, mistakenly claimed as two destroyers, and the attack on 26 September on an unidentified steamer of 5,000 tons in convoy RB 51 (passenger ships being transferred from the Great Lakes), apparently resulting only in damage to the target. Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*.

45. On 17 March, 1943, Walkerling sank two stragglers from HX 229, the American cargo ships *James Oglethorpe* and *William Eustis*, firing the *coup de grace* after they had previously been damaged by *U-758*, and later the same day did the same against the American *Irene Du Pont* and the British *Nariva* after they had been damaged by *U-600*, and after HMS *Mansfield* had failed to sink the vessels with gunfire. Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*.

46. This indicates that the boat had yet to be identified by British naval intelligence, although from Enigma messages the captain's name was now known.

47. Note added by T.C. Pullen.

48. Support groups (escorts sometimes accompanied by auxiliary aircraft carriers) could move to the defence of whichever convoy was most threatened. They became truly effective after the German naval Enigma had been penetrated for good, early in 1943, and could also be used, in conjunction with U L T R A to locate and destroy U-boats even when not in the vicinity of convoys.

49. BdU War Diary, 14 September 1942, DHist 79/446, Vol.6.

50. *Ibid.*, 13 September; log of U-91, 14 September.

51. The actual figures were: sunk, *Elizabeth van Belgie, Sveve, Empire Oil, Hektor, Empire Moonbeam, Hindanger, Stone Street*, and *Ottawa*, for a total of eight; damaged, *F.J. Wolfe, Marit, Fjordaas, Daghild*, for a total of four. *U-407, Oberleutnant zur See* Britler, seems to have been the boat that did not attack, according to Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, although the BdU War Diary states he fired four torpedoes and heard a detonation from one of them on 12 September.

52. The convoy originally consisted of thirty-four ships, but one had turned back early in the passage, and the convoy actually consisted of thirty-three ships at the time of attack. PRO, ADM 237/90. From available sources it has not been possible to identify the captured master who volunteered this information.

53. Even if the claims were inflated, this tribute to U-boat personnel was well deserved.

54. For discussion of the poor performance of torpedoes, see Eberhard Rossler, *The U-Boat* (Annapolis, 1981), 143.