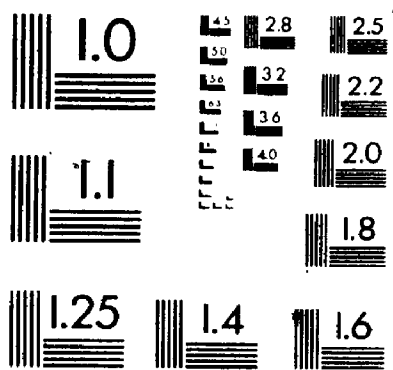


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THE "OTHER" NAVY AT WAR:
THE RCN'S TRIBAL CLASS
DESTROYERS 1939-1944.

by

Michael J. Whitby, B.A., B.Ed.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
August 1988

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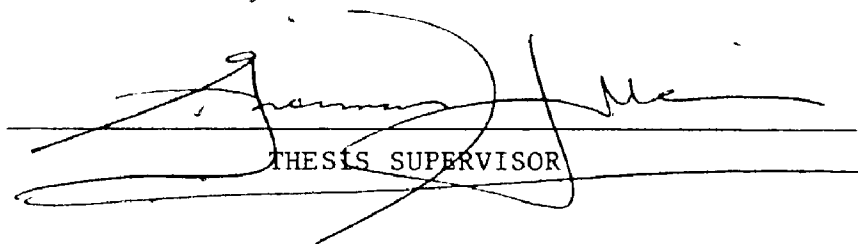
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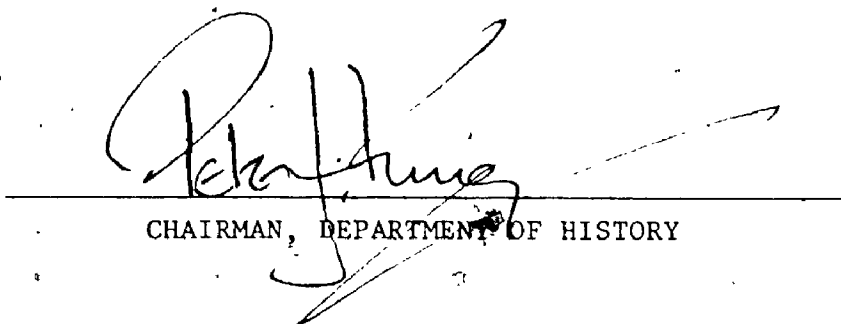
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THE "OTHER" NAVY AT WAR: THE RCN'S TRIBAL CLASS DESTROYERS 1939-1944

submitted by Michael J. Whitby, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts



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September 1988

ABSTRACT

A study of the R.C.N.'s Tribal class destroyers during the Second World War demonstrates that the Canadian navy was more than an anti-submarine navy. The naval staff envisioned these classic warships as the foundation upon which a secure navy could be built. The campaigns to acquire and deploy the Tribals therefore reveal what kind of service the R.C.N. wanted to be and what kind of war it wanted to fight. Furthermore, the analysis of Tribal operations in the Channel demonstrates that when Canadian sailors fought in modern warships under good leadership they were second to none. By widening the focus of R.C.N. history beyond the anti-submarine war this thesis adds an essential dimension to the understanding of the Canadian navy.

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PREFACE

The following is a study of the acquisition, deployment and operations of the Royal Canadian Navy's Tribal class destroyers in the Second World War. The study is primarily based upon R.C.N. and R.N. records held at the National Archives of Canada, the Department of National Defence Directorate of History, and the Public Record Office at Kew. Private papers, interviews, memoirs, and a wide range of secondary literature were also consulted.

I was privileged to work under the supervision of two outstanding historians. Dr. W.A.B. Douglas shared his unrivalled knowledge of the Canadian navy; his patient advice not only led to the avoidance of dangerous waters, but steered the author into promising areas of research. Our chats about the 'old' navy will be missed. Dr. Roger Sarty's contribution was equally significant, helping to define the topic and providing useful criticisms and encouragement throughout. He convinced one that style is as important in the writing of history as research.

Others also contributed. Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf was an invaluable source of information who always gave freely of his time. Peter Jones allowed access to his father's papers and provided wonderful hospitality. Although Haida was closed for the season her C.O., Commander R.A. Willson, allowed access to the ship and his records. My "snotties' nurse", Don Graves, was always encouraging and kept an eye out for useful information. The ex-navy types of the Whitby family all pitched in: Robert Fenn took time out to produce countless copies of the document, J.P. Whitby made useful suggestions, and along with my mother, the R.N. representative, provided encouragement.

Finally, two people provided invaluable support. Dr. Norman Hillmer genuinely cared about the welfare of the students in his 1986/87 grad class, and was always willing to listen to problems and provide confidence when it was most needed. Marina supplied patience and understanding on the home front without which this work would not have been possible..

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------------|--|
| A's and A's | Additions and Alterations |
| A.B.U. | Auto-Barrage Unit |
| A.C.M. | Air Chief Marshall |
| A.C.N.S. (W) | Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Warfare) |
| A.I.C. | Action Information Centre |
| A.M.C. | Armed Merchant Cruiser |
| A/S | Anti-Submarine |
| C.N.M.O. (L) | Canadian Naval Mission Overseas (London) |
| Capt. | Captain |
| C.N.S. | Chief of Naval Staff |
| Cdr. | Commander |
| C-in-C | Commander-in-Chief |
| C.O. | Commanding Officer |
| Comdr. | Commodore |
| C.W.C. | Cabinet War Committee |
| D.F. | Destroyer Flotilla |
| D/F | Direction Finding |
| DHIST | Directorate of History |
| D.G.A.A.W. | Director of Gunnery and Anti-Aircraft Warfare |
| D.O.D. | Director of Operations Division |
| D. of P. | Director of Plans |
| D.T.S.D. | Director of Tactical and Staff Duties Division |
| E-in-C | Engineer-in-Chief |
| H.E. | High Explosive |
| H.M.C.S. | His Majesty's Canadian Ship |
| H.M.S. | His Majesty's Ship |
| Lt. | Lieutenant |
| LtCdr. | Lieutenant Commander |
| M.T.B. | Motor Torpedo Boat |
| N.S.H.Q. | Naval Service Headquarters |
| O.I.C. | Operational Intelligence Centre |
| P.A.C. | Public Archives of Canada |
| P.R.O. | Public Records Office |
| R.A.F. | Royal Air Force |
| R.C.A.F. | Royal Canadian Air Force |
| R.C.N. | Royal Canadian Navy |
| R.N. | Royal Navy |
| R/T | Radio-telephony |
| S.A.P. | Semi-Armour Piercing |
| S.C.N.O. (L) | Senior Canadian Naval Officer (London) |
| S.O. | Senior Officer |
| SubLt. | Sub-Lieutenant |
| T.C.O. | Torpedo Control Officer |
| T.S. | Transmitting Station |
| VAdm. | Vice Admiral |
| V.C.N.S. | Vice Chief of Naval Staff |
| W/T | Wireless-Telegraphy |

Introduction

The last two decades have seen a growth of interest among both scholarly and popular writers in the history of the Royal Canadian Navy during the Second World War. The best of the recent titles, however, focus on the defence of shipping on the North Atlantic convoy routes almost to the exclusion of the service's other contributions. Most significantly, no analytical work has yet appeared on the R.C.N.'s Tribal class destroyers.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of these classic, powerful destroyers to the service. From the moment the Royal Navy commissioned its first Tribal shortly before the war, senior Canadian naval officers saw the type as the key to the future. Not only were the warships well-suited to Canadian defence needs, they would also place the navy on firm footing. Governments had often played political football with the tiny R.C.N. during the early 1920's and early 1930's, so much so that the service's very existence had been threatened. In promoting acquisition of the Tribals, the Canadian naval staff believed they had found a major defence program which would ensure sustained government support and therefore provide the navy with a more secure future. The particular appeal of the Tribals to naval leaders lay in the fact that although they were classified as destroyers - a warship type the politicians would accept, their size and gun-power made them virtually equivalent to cruisers, a class of major warship political leaders viewed with profound suspicion.

The Tribals continued to dominate R.C.N. policy and planning throughout the war. Indeed, acquisition of these big ships often had a greater priority than other, more urgent requirements. In the first months of the war the naval staff rejected Britain's offer of smaller, modern destroyers that could have been delivered quite quickly, preferring instead to wait many extra months until Tribals could be specially built in the United

Kingdom. Similarly, when Canada's inexperienced shipbuilding industry embarked on destroyer construction in 1940-41, the R.C.N. insisted on Tribals to the exclusion of smaller, simpler types that could have been completed more quickly at a time when Allied navies desperately needed destroyers of any description. It was only after the R.C.N. had eight Tribals completed or building that the naval staff seriously considered acquiring any other type of modern destroyer.

Such thinking also carried over into decisions concerning the operational use of these ships. When the first of them, Iroquois, was about to commission in late 1942 Canadian naval leaders sought to ensure that she and the three Tribals to follow saw duty that befitted their stature as Canada's premier warships. They were ultimately assigned to the Home Fleet where the chances of taking part in the type of action for which they were designed were greatest. In January 1944 the opportunity for seeing such action increased when they formed part of an offensive strike force based at Plymouth.

The Tribals' operational history is also important to an understanding of the Canadian navy. Surface operations with destroyers were what the pre-war R.C.N. had trained for more than anything else. The ability to master anti-submarine warfare had given R.C.N. professionals great scope for satisfaction, but, Tribal operations provided a stage where they could really show off their skills and the actors selected were proven performers as the commands were given to only the best officers. The C.O.'s of Athabaskan, Haida, Huron and Iroquois had previous command experience and outstanding war records. Their professional skill was to be an important factor in Channel operations. It follows that an analysis of operations provides an important measure of the calibre of experienced personnel. More than this, it reveals much about the nature of destroyer operations, and the contribution of the Canadian naval force to the surface battle.

The defence of shipping on the north Atlantic that came to dominate the R.C.N.'s war was an unexpected, and in some respects

completely new, form of sea warfare. Not surprisingly there were serious shortcomings in the Canadian performance in the convoy battles, and recent studies have rightly been critical. For a balanced assessment of the Canadian navy at war, however, an examination of other undertakings should also be made. The Tribals' war was the war the professional R.C.N. wanted to fight and had, since the 1920's, prepared to fight. How well the professionals justified the efforts to acquire, and deploy overseas, the Tribal destroyers is the question this thesis tries to answer.

Historiography on the Canadian Tribals is at the same stage as that on the subject of the R.C.N.'s escort role was in the early 1970's. Work has been done on the subject but in general it has been inadequate. Accounts of Tribal policy hardly scratch the surface, while that on operations is not only incomplete, but also distorted and uncritical.

Of the work done by Canadian historians on the Tribals that on policy is the best. In Volume II of The Naval Service of Canada Gilbert Norman Tucker gives a good account of the decisions concerning the acquisition and building of the Tribals, and while doing so conveys some of the importance of these warships to the R.C.N. However, Tucker does not carry this further into a consideration of the decisions behind the deployment of these warships, nor does he analyze the motivations of those making the Tribal decisions both inside and outside the navy. The latter is accomplished to an extent by W.A.B. Douglas in "Conflict and Innovation in the Royal Canadian Navy, 1939-1945." Even though the Tribals receive little mention the author presents a thorough analysis of the factors and motivations affecting R.C.N. planning. C.P. Stacey, although making no mention of the Tribals, places R.C.N. planning in context with Canada's complete war effort in his Arms, Men and Government, while J.W. Pickersgill and D. Forster's The Mackenzie King Record does the same, although to a more limited extent, for the

R.C.N.'s relationship with the King government. ¹

The history of Canadian Tribal operations has been left to popular historians who come across more as boosters than objective commentators. The first book of this genre ² is the one that will probably best stand the test of time. William Sclater, an R.C.N. publicity officer posted to Haida during the spring of 1944, wrote a romantic account of her first commission. Sclater's book, which helped establish Haida as the most famous warship in Canadian naval history, does not provide much factual information but is important because it presents a colourful, realistic portrayal of life aboard a Canadian Tribal.

An objective critical history of Canadian naval operations during the Second World War would have served as a good shelfmate to Sclater's book, but unfortunately such a volume did not appear after the war. Joseph Schull's official History provided a chronicle of R.C.N. operations but did not tell the reader much more than what Canadian warships fought where. ³ Schull's account of Tribal operations presents little beyond a description of their successful actions, therefore it is left to the reader to decide what factors contributed to this success and no mention is made of any shortcomings. As a Canadian naval historian has observed "history could not possibly been more badly served..." ⁴

Len Burrow and Emile Beaudoin provide a poignant memoir of the only Tribal lost on operations in a well illustrated account ⁵

¹ G.N. Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada Vol. I and II (Ottawa, 1952). W.A.B. Douglas, "Conflict and Innovation in the Royal Canadian Navy" in G. Jordan (ed.), Naval Strategy in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1977). C.P. Stacey, Arms, Men and Government (Ottawa, 1970). J.W. Pickersgill and D. Forster, The Mackenzie King Record (Toronto, 1960).

² William Sclater, Haida (Toronto, 1980). Originally published in 1945.

³ Joseph Schull, The Far Distant Ships (Ottawa, 1950).

⁴ Marc Milner, "Canada's Naval War" Acadiensis Vol. XII, No. 2. Spring 1983.

of Athabaskan's short career that relies heavily on a lower deck perspective.⁵ The book's major failing comes when the authors attempt to analyze Athabaskan's last patrol. Following an old Canadian custom, the authors blame everything on the British. The book would have been better if such analysis, unsubstantiated by fact, had been left out.⁶

British and German commentators have also contributed to the historiography of Tribal operations in the Channel and in general their work is superior to that done by Canadians. One deficiency on the Canadian side has been the lack of memoirs, however two have emerged from British participants. As both Captain (D) of the Flotilla in which the Tribals operated and an outstanding destroyer officer, Basil Jones' memoirs are a particularly important contribution.⁷ Expanding upon a series of articles that appeared in the Naval Review, Jones explains the background of the innovative tactical thinking that was used to great advantage in the Tribal operations. Another strength of And So to Battle is the use of German documents which allows Jones to present a balanced appraisal of some of the actions. Tartar Memoirs, based upon the experiences of a sailor who served in the Tribal Jones commanded, is another useful memoir.⁸ Meiklem provides an accurate description of some of the Tribal actions and gives a good portrayal of life in a R.N. Tribal.

Retired German naval officer Reinhart Ostertag provides a

⁵ L. Burrow and E. Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady (Stittsville, 1982).

⁶ The result would have been similar to two more general popular histories that include chapters on Channel operations: H. Lawrence, Tales of the North Atlantic (Toronto, 1985) and A. Butcher, I Remember Haida (Hantsport, 1985).

⁷ B. Jones, And So to Battle (Battle, 1976).

⁸ A. Meiklem, Tartar Memoirs (Glasgow, 1948).

good analysis of two of the actions. ⁹ Although weak in terms of the Tribals' side of things, Ostertag presents excellent insights into the German perspective that also reveals much about the complexities of night fighting in the Channel. M.J. Whitley's Destroyer! includes some useful analysis of the Channel actions, but more importantly places these actions in context with German destroyer operations throughout the entire war. ¹⁰

Several other works have been important to this study. Officers of the Royal Navy have been prolific in terms of writing memoirs, and while all of these are of some use, two written by ex-destroyer C.O.'s stand out in particular. Reginald Whinney provides a good critical study that reveals much about the attitudes at work in the navy before and during the war, while Roger Hill presents a sometimes scathing account of his service in the Channel, Arctic and Mediterranean. ¹¹ Two technical studies were very useful. E.J. March's British Destroyers is a tour de force, and Peter Hodges includes a good section on the Canadian Tribals. ¹² Stephen Roskill's The War at Sea and F.H. Hinsley's British Intelligence in the Second World War have been the source of important information and have helped to place the study in context with other events. Finally, Marc Milner's superb North Atlantic Run is crucial to any study of the R.C.N. during the Second World War. ¹³

⁹ R. Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers", translation of "Torpedoboote im Gefecht mit Zerstörern" Truppenpraxis. No. 12, 1980. DHIST, SGR/II/239.

¹⁰ M.J. Whitley, Destroyer! (London, 1985).

¹¹ R. Whinney, The U-Boat Peril (New York, 1986). R. Hill, Destroyer Captain (London, 1975).

¹² E.J. March, British Destroyers 1892-1953 (London, 1966). P. Hodges, Tribal Class Destroyers (London, 1971).

¹³ Roskill, The War at Sea, 3 vols. (London, 1957-1966). Hinsley, British Intelligence in the Second World War, 3 vols. (New York, 1979-1988). Milner, North Atlantic Run, (Toronto, 1985).

Chapter I

"To some extent the Naval problem is unique, in that its major vessels take years to build: therefore a Navy should possess in peacetime all the larger vessels which it is likely to require in the first two or three years of any possible war... A peacetime Navy should only be a nucleus, but one which can meet immediate requirements on the outbreak of war."

Captain H.S. Rayner
Director of Plans
1945

Tribal class destroyers had a special status within the Royal Canadian Navy. This was largely due to the fact that they were the key element in a campaign by R.C.N. planners to build a big ship, seagoing service that would be secure against the vagaries of domestic politics which had plagued previous naval development in Canada. The naval staff was determined not only to acquire the most powerful vessels they possibly could, but to ensure that they saw service that befitted their stature as Canada's premier warships.

Analysis of warship acquisition should include consideration of the basic fundamentals that guide naval planners and their political masters. Simply naval planners must consider the strategic objectives of their own nation and those of potential opponents. The time required to design and build a warship must be considered, most particularly in light of political, technological, tactical and strategic changes that may occur during that period.¹ Political leaders, of course, have their own set of concerns regarding defence planning. The climate of public and political opinion, economic considerations, industrial potential and budgetary constraints are among the most important of these. In order for any naval program to have any chance of success the ideas of naval planners and government leaders must be in step.² As will be seen in the case of the decisions regarding the acquisition of the Tribals the goals of the navy and the government, although sometimes based upon different needs and considerations, meshed quite well.

¹ Excellent examples of how these principals guide naval planners may be found throughout E.J. March, British Destroyers 1892-1953 (London, 1966) as the author describes the evolution of each class.

² R.H. Connery's The Navy and the Industrial Mobilization in World War II (New York, 1972) provides a good account of how such factors affected U.S. naval planning. A work on such planning in Canada does not exist.

The Tribals have been described as "the most famous of all British destroyers." ³ Assessments such as this, which are quite common, are not solely derived from the Tribals' operational record in the Second World War. From the moment of the design's conception in the mid-1930's the Tribals were seen as a special class of warship.

A British naval historian has noted that, compared to preceding Royal Navy destroyer classes, "the Tribals were a little short of revolutionary, and must have created much the same impact as had Dreadnought years previously." ⁴ However, while the impact of the Tribals on the fleet may have been similar to that of the revolutionary battleship the genesis of the design was not. Unlike Dreadnought the Tribals were not a radically new design, but rather were a response to new trends in destroyer design set by other naval powers. Thus, although the Tribals may have been seen as revolutionary within the British and Commonwealth navies, they were not judged as such throughout the rest of the naval world.

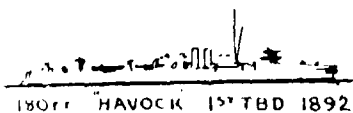
Post First World War Royal Navy staff requirements "had called for small handy ships with a good torpedo armament." ⁵ The subsequent Admiralty policy "was for a class of eight to be laid down annually, each succeeding class incorporating some small improvement over the previous one." ⁶ The result was the "A" to "I" class destroyers that commissioned between 1927 and 1938. The "C" or Crusader class destroyers acquired by the R.C.N. in the late 1930's were typical of this generation of British destroyers. Displacing 1375 tons with a length of 329 feet, the "C's" were armed with four 4.7-inch guns and two

³ Lt. David Lyons R.N.R., Warship Profile No. 2 "HMS Cossack" (London, date of publication unknown) p. 44.

⁴ Peter Hodges, Tribal Class Destroyers (London, 1971) p. 6.

⁵ E.J. March, British Destroyers 1892-1953 p. 323.

⁶ Peter Smith, Destroyer Leader (London, 1968) p. 17.



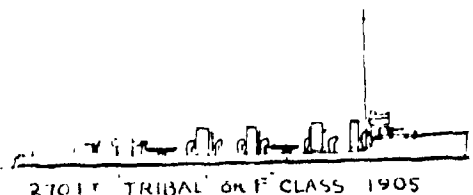
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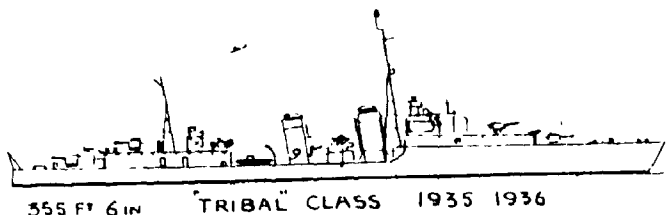
225 FT "RIVER" O^R L CLASS 1901



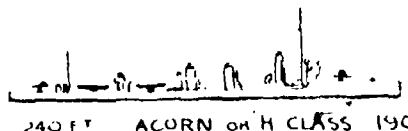
312 FT "A TO I" CLASSES 1927-1935



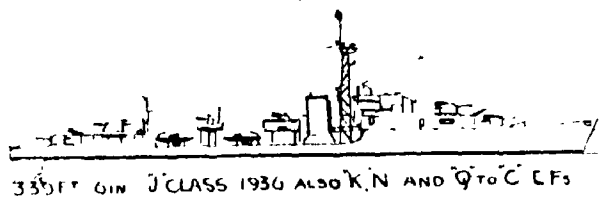
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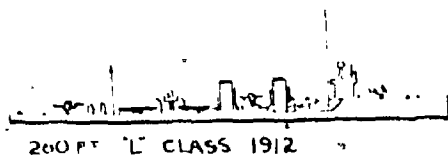
355 FT 6 IN "TRIBAL" CLASS 1935 1936



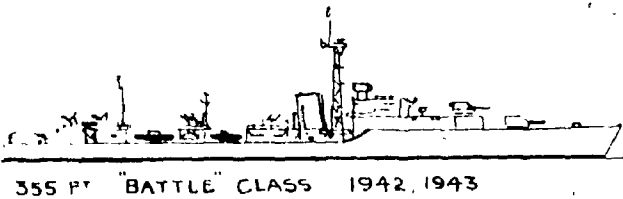
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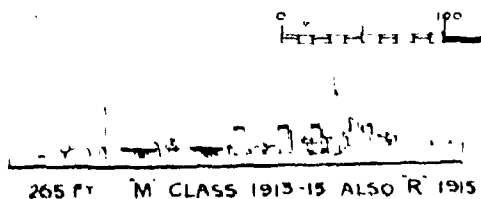
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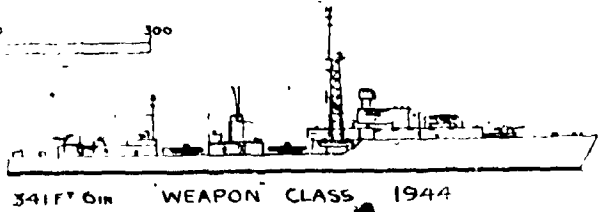
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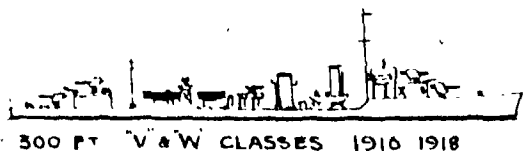
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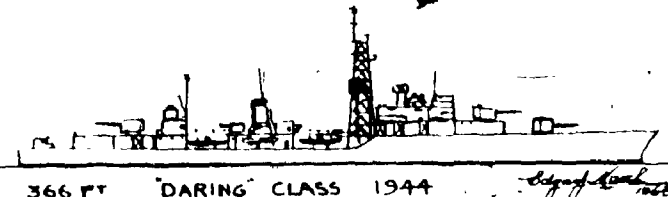
265 FT "M" CLASS 1913-15 ALSO "R" 1915



341 FT 6 IN "WEAPON" CLASS 1944

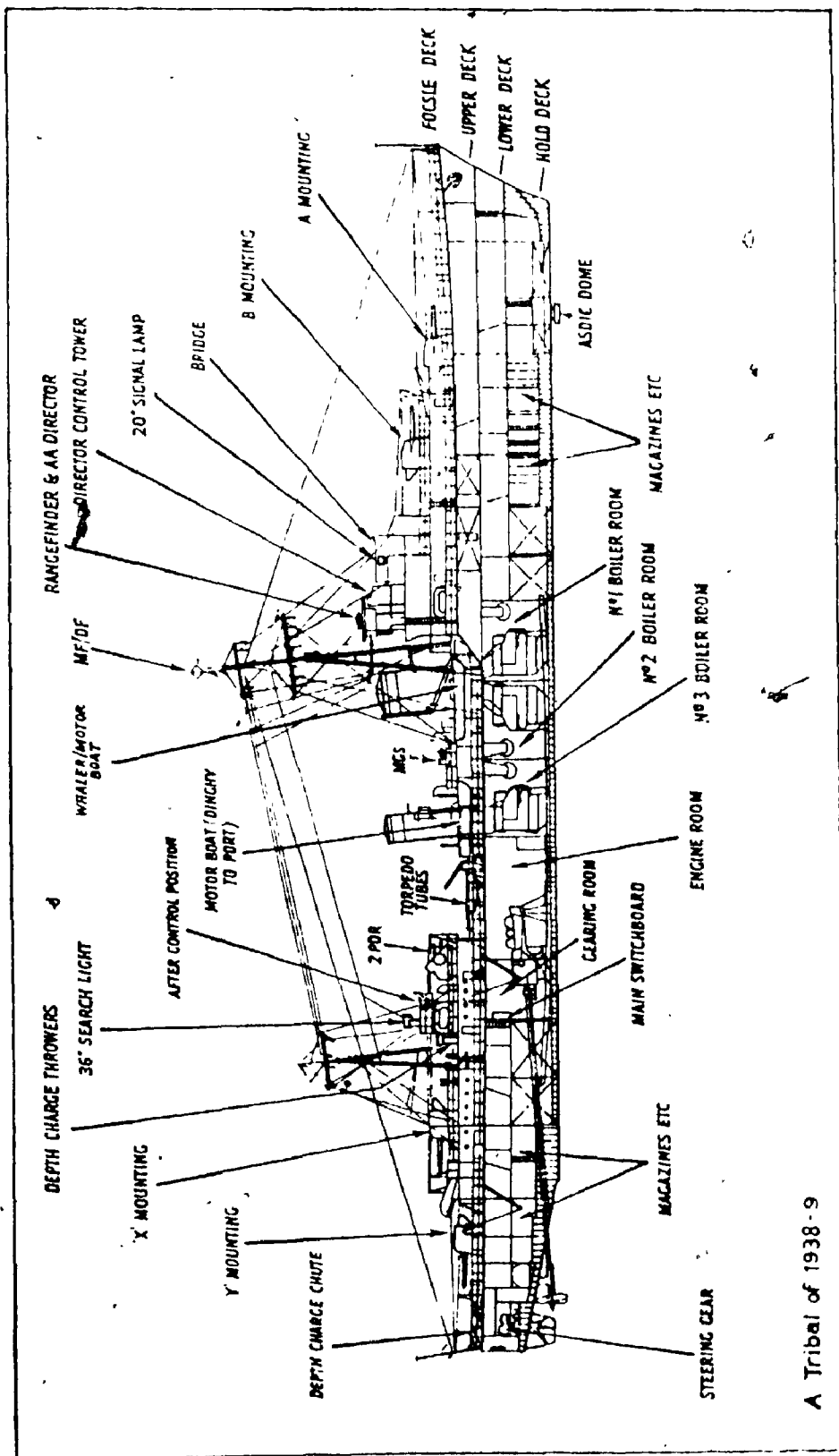


300 FT "V & W" CLASSES 1910 1918



366 FT "DARING" CLASS 1944

The development of the British destroyer 1892-1944. E. J. March, British Destroyers. (London, 1966).



A Tribal of 1938-9

quadruple 21-inch torpedo tube mounts, and could make thirty-six knots. ⁷ However, these "classical British destroyers"⁸ increasingly fell behind the newest foreign designs.

During the 1920's and early 1930's the Japanese, French, Italian, and United States navies had all started building new generations of destroyers that were larger and featured a substantially more powerful gun armament than traditional designs. Of these, the twenty-four Japanese destroyers of the Fubuki class commissioned between 1928 and 1932 posed the greatest potential threat to the British. With a displacement of 1750 tons and an armament of six 5-inch guns and nine 24-inch torpedo tubes, ⁹ the Fubukis would be formidable opponents. Furthermore, in 1933 the Admiralty learned that the Germans were designing a similar class of destroyers. ¹⁰ Faced with the prospect of meeting superior destroyers in two of their most important theatres of operations, Admiralty planners realized that "with 72 destroyers built or building whose principal armament was the torpedo there was a need for more heavily armed ships." ¹¹ The result was the Tribal design.

Although it is debatable if the new design can be considered revolutionary, there is no doubt that at the very least it represented a milestone in British destroyer design. Many features of what were first called the "V" leaders were significantly different from previous destroyers and became standard on subsequent British designs. The "V" leaders did not carry the traditional balanced armament that had been characteristic of Royal Navy destroyers. In order to match the

⁷ March, British Destroyers p. 269.

⁸ Hodges, Tribal Class Destroyers p. 5.

⁹ Antony Preston (ed.), Super Destroyers (London, 1978) p. 10.

¹⁰ March, British Destroyers p. 323.

¹¹ Ibid.

fire power of the latest foreign designs, they mounted eight 4.7-inch guns, while the torpedo armament was halved to one set of quadruple 21-inch tubes. The gun thus replaced the torpedo as the primary weapon. Controversy over this change continued throughout the life of the class.

The increase in gun armament had repercussions on the design as a whole. New twin turrets had to be prepared in order to accommodate the additional guns. The heavier turrets increased the destroyer's top weight. That meant that the size of the whole vessel had to be increased for stability and to provide a steady gun platform. The result was a length of 377 feet and a displacement of 1854 tons. There were also important changes in the bridge superstructure. Because the large turret would obstruct the helmsman, his position was moved to the front of the bridge superstructure.¹² This both improved and lowered the silhouette of the destroyer. Much to the relief of bridge personnel who were used to drafty, wet conditions, the superstructure was designed in such a way that air was deflected away from the open bridge, thus making watch-keeping more bearable.¹³ Changes such as these resulted in a much more attractive warship. Many of these features became standard on subsequent British destroyer classes with the result that British destroyers took on a distinctive Tribal appearance for the next two decades.

At the time the "V" leaders were being built there was some confusion and disagreement among Royal Navy officers over the classification and tactical function of the new generation of destroyers. The Director of the Tactical Division at the Admiralty suggested a wide ranging list of possible designations for the new class - "scout, destroyer, scout destroyer, destroyer scout, patrol destroyer, support destroyer, cruiser destroyer,

¹² Ibid. p. 309.

¹³ Martin Brice, The Tribals: Biography of a Destroyer Class (London, 1971) p. 15.

heavy large super-destroyer, Tribal destroyer...chaser, corvette, gun vessel" ¹⁴ which reflected confusion over the tactical functions of the new warships. Were they to perform the traditional tasks of screening the battle fleet and launching torpedo attacks on the opposing battle fleet, or would they be assigned new roles?

The basic issue was whether the Tribals should carry out the tactical functions of destroyers or cruisers. The difference between the two roles was quite significant. Cruisers had a wide-ranging offensive mission - advancing well ahead of the main fleet to search out the enemy, or operating independently in search of commerce raiders. Destroyers, by contrast, played a relatively restricted defensive role essentially providing a close screen for the main fleet. It is clear that Royal Navy officers thought that the new warships deserved more glamorous employment than that of the typical destroyer. The idea of attaching the Tribals to cruiser squadrons was soon quashed, however. In a memo dated March 8, 1937, the Director of Plans, Captain T.S.V. Phillips, pointed out the

disadvantage in giving the impression that we do not regard the TRIBALS as destroyers. Their tonnage was purposely limited in order to keep them within the recognized 'destroyer category', and Parliament voted the money to build them as 'destroyers'. It might be embarrassing if our own nomenclature were to be quoted against us (either by a foreign power or a political opponent) as evidence that we really regard them as something bigger than destroyers. ¹⁵

As an alternative Phillips suggested the Tribals be organized into the "1st TRIBAL Destroyer Flotilla which preserves the term 'destroyer' whilst maintaining a distinction from the normal Destroyer Flotilla." ¹⁶ Phillips' ideas were accepted by the

¹⁴ March, British Destroyers p. 327.

¹⁵ Capt. T.S.V., Phillips, Memo of March 8, 1937. p. 2. PRO, ADM 116/3734.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Admiralty, and when the Tribals commissioned they were assigned to either the 1st or 2nd Tribal Flotilla.

The distinction between Tribals and normal destroyers was important. Like standard destroyer flotillas the Tribal flotillas were intended primarily for fleet work, but as the Director of the Operations Division made clear their tasks were different:

- (A) By Day. Reconnaissance and counter action against enemy flotillas.
- (B) By night. Shadowing and/or Screening.
- (C) In General. As a counter to the large Leader type of other countries.

D.O.D. concluded that "their duties are thus more in the nature of those of cruisers than of destroyers." ¹⁷ It was this quality that made the Tribals attractive to the Royal Canadian Navy.

For the most part the 1920's and 1930's had been a difficult period for the R.C.N. Considered by some politicians and military men to be unnecessary, the navy had been forced to struggle for survival in the face of severe budget constraints and threats to its very existence. Despite these difficulties the R.C.N. survived. The situation began to change in the late 1930's. The increase in international tensions presented the R.C.N. with an opportunity to expand, and those in charge of the navy were determined to take advantage of the situation by creating a strong force that could withstand any political or budgetary threats to its existence. The Tribals became the key to this goal of security.

Leading this campaign was Rear Admiral Percy Nelles R.C.N. who had become Chief of Naval Staff in late 1934. Despite the budgetary constraints Nelles had managed to increase the R.C.N.'s destroyer strength to six through the acquisition of four "C" class destroyers. It is clear, however, that Nelles only considered these to be stepping stones. After revealing his

¹⁷ D.O.D. Memo. Feb. 21, 1936. p. 1. PRO, ADM 116/3734.

disappointment that the "C's" - an early 1930's design - were only a slight improvement upon the R.C.N.'s 1920's vintage River class, Nelles admitted in a personal letter that they "are a very good stop gap until we can work our blessed country up to the price of and/or building in Canada, plus having sufficient time to construct to our requirements." ¹⁸ This opportunity arose when international tensions continued to increase.

In January 1939, as the first Tribals were being commissioned into the R.N., Admiral Nelles strongly recommended the type to the Minister of National Defence. In a skillfully argued memo Nelles maintained that since either, or both, Great Britain and the United States would be allies in any future conflict "we can conclude the main forces of the enemy will be neutralized" by the strong capital forces of either allied navy. Therefore, Nelles concluded "our problem is protection of our harbours and of trade in Canadian waters." ¹⁹ Since the major threat would most likely be cruisers or Armed Merchant Cruisers, the R.C.N. found itself in a similar position to the R.N. when it first considered the need for Tribals. As there was little chance of the R.N.'s "A" to "I" class destroyers standing up to Japanese Fubuki's, the R.C.N.'s River class could not be expected to successfully challenge cruisers or A.M.C.'s. It was clear to Nelles that the R.C.N. needed more powerful warships to meet this threat.

Nelles admitted that capital ships were "beyond our financial, manning and maintenance facilities", and although "cruiser attack is best met by Cruisers" the C.N.S. acknowledged that acquiring that type of warship was out of the question: "cruisers are not alone sufficient for our needs and while the need of them must never be lost sight of, owing to their cost

¹⁸ Nelles to Capt. V.G. Brodeur R.C.N., March 22, 1937. NAC, MG 30, E312, Vol. 4, File 33.

¹⁹ C.N.S. Memo "Objectives of the Canadian Naval Service." Jan. 17, 1939. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 3844, 1017-10-34.

and large personnel, it is not considered that cruisers can be contemplated at the present time." However, Nelles noted, there was a good alternative:

The modern destroyer (Tribal Class with powerful gun armament and moderate torpedo armament) is capable of fulfilling many of the cruisers functions and with the number proposed should provide a real defence to cruiser attack. They are also an efficient counter to attack by Armed Merchant Vessels, Submarines or Minelayers.

The C.N.S. proposed that a flotilla of six Tribals on each coast would provide "reasonable Naval defence." ²⁰

The decision to acquire these destroyers was not an illogical one for the Tribals had several characteristics, that made them quite suitable for the R.C.N. In a memo to the Naval Advisory Committee, the D.C.N.S., Captain L.W. Murray R.C.N., pointed out that Canadian conditions and naval strength dictated that R.C.N. destroyers would "be working in small numbers over a large area and not in operating in flotillas." Murray maintained that the Tribals' powerful gun armament and adequate torpedo outfit made them extremely suitable for these tactical circumstances. Tribals "should be capable of standing up against the usual type of Armed Merchant Cruiser, and with torpedoes, two of them should stand a very good chance, if necessary, to attack any type of enemy cruiser." ¹⁸

The ability of its warships to stand up to cruisers and A.M.C.'s was a very important consideration to R.C.N. planners, and one that has not been fully recognized by historians. The fear of surface raiders can be traced to the First World War when German commerce raiders operated successfully in both the Atlantic and Pacific. As a result of this experience raiders were considered to be the major threat to Canadian shipping

²⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸ V.C.N.S. Memo "Proposed Building Programme for R.C.N.". Augth 9, 1939. p. 2. DHIST, Construction-Ships 8200 Vol. I.

during the 1920's and 1930's. ¹⁹ It is not surprising that Canadian naval officers were attracted to Tribals whose formidable gun-power would enable the R.C.N. to counter the surface raiders.

Good endurance was another factor in the Tribals' favour. Canada's coasts are vast, and the distance between the Atlantic and Pacific enormous. The first Tribals could steam 5700 nautical miles at a speed of fifteen knots. ²⁰ This would allow them to travel from Halifax or Esquimalt to British bases in the West Indies comfortably without refueling, thus allowing relatively easy transit between the two coasts. This was something that Canada's oldest destroyers could not do and the newest could barely do.

The R.C.N. also considered the Tribals to be flexible warships. Not only would they be able to counter surface raiders, but as Nelles pointed out in his January 1939 memo, it was also thought that they would be an "efficient counter" against submarines. ²¹ Although this expectation proved to be optimistic, naval planners could not have known that at the time, and even if they had, given the secondary role assigned to ASW in the years before the war, it is doubtful if it would have made any difference. It was also thought that the Tribals had a powerful enough anti-aircraft armament to stave off most air attacks. Unfortunately, as experience off Norway and in the

¹⁹ See G.N. Tucker: The Naval Service of Canada Vol. I (Ottawa, 1952) p. 332.

²⁰ The later Tribals did not have the same endurance. Various 'A.'s and A's' had greatly increased the top weight and the fuel level had to be kept high for stability.

²¹ C.N.S. Memo, "Objectives of the Canadian Naval Service" p.. 2.

Mediterranean proved, this thinking was also unrealistic. ²²

The final two factors that influenced the R.C.N.'s decision to pursue the Tribals had little to do with their fighting qualities. When Admiral Nelles initially proposed their acquisition in January 1939, the first Tribals were being commissioned into the Royal Navy. There can be no question that the new destroyers created as much a stir in the R.C.N. as they did in the R.N. Certainly Canadian planners wanted what they perceived to be the most modern destroyer in the world for their navy. ²³

Finally, it is obvious that Admiral Nelles saw the large destroyers as a guarantor of the R.C.N.'s future. This attitude was certainly evident to Commodore Sir Frederick Dreyer R.N. who, after a visit to N.S.H.Q. in 1940, noted:

It seems to me Rear Admiral Nelles is working to achieve two objects:-

Object I. To win the war.

Object II. Before the finish of the war to have a number of Tribal Destroyers in the Royal Canadian Navy, fully manned by Canadians. These he feels could not be wiped off the slate by whatever Canadian Government is then in power, as might be the case if only worn out Canadian Destroyers existed. ²⁴

The Tribals were seen as the key to the future of the post-war navy, thus when considering any decisions regarding them during

²² Of the twelve original Tribals lost in the war, six were sunk as a result of air attack. March, British Destroyers p. 339-40.

²³ R.C.N. scuttlebutt reports that, after seeing a photograph of the first Tribals, Nelles proclaimed "I want those for my navy"!

²⁴ Comdr. F. Dreyer to Secretary of the Admiralty, Jan. 31, 1940. DHIST, ADM 1/10608. See also W.A.B. Douglas, "Conflict and Innovation in the Royal Canadian Navy." p. 215.

the war, the post-war hopes of the R.C.N. must also be taken into account.

It is important to realize that the R.C.N.'s bid for the Tribals fit into the Mackenzie King government's defence policy. King had traditionally been reluctant to spend money on the military, but the deteriorating international situation forced him to change this policy. Beginning in 1936 defence spending was increased, but in line with King's apprehension about the political consequences that arose if one became involved in someone else's problems, he made it clear that the increase was to be devoted solely to the defence of Canadian shores.²⁵ This policy well suited the navy as its principal mission was the protection of waters adjacent to Canada against enemy raiders.

By 1939 the government's commitment to defence had deepened even further. When introducing the 1939-1940 Defence estimates in the House of Commons, the Minister of National Defence, Ian Mackenzie, noted that "the ultimate objective which the navy has set for Canada is to build up a force of eighteen destroyers."²⁶ These included the Tribals that Nelles had first asked for in January 1939, and although Mackenzie did not say if the R.C.N. was going to get its Tribals, the fact that he raised the matter in the House of Commons did indicate that the navy's plans were not incompatible with government policy.

It was originally intended that the Canadian Tribals would be built in Canadian shipyards. This was not the first time that Canada had considered building its own destroyers. In 1928 the Canadian government had flirted with the idea of building two destroyers in Canada, but the project was considered too costly and complex for Canadian shipbuilding firms, therefore the

²⁵ Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada Vol. I, p. 359.

²⁶ Quoted in Ibid. p. 367.

contract was given to a British shipyard.²⁷ Up to the outbreak of the war the only recent experience that Canadian shipyards had in building any warships at all were four Basset class minesweepers that were built in 1938.²⁸ However, this lack of experience did not deter R.C.N. planners. In an August 1939 memo to the Naval Advisory Committee, the D.C.N.S. explained the navy's rationale:

...as most of the building slips in England are already working to the capacity of the skilled labour available, and, as very satisfactory results were obtained in our recent enterprise of building ships in Canada, we are advising that a start be made with building more powerful ships in Canada.²⁹

Reading between the lines, it appears that the R.C.N. was trying to cover every eventuality to ensure that it got its Tribals. However, the ambitious plan suggested by Capt. Murray was not to come to fruition for some time, as the outbreak of war changed everything.

With war now a reality rather than a possibility, the Naval Staff realized that it would need additional destroyers quickly and it was "obvious that the building of destroyers in Canada would cause a delay in delivery which could not be accepted."³⁰ Therefore, in a telegram to the British First Sea Lord, Admiral Dudley Pound R.N., on September 16, 1939, Admiral Nelles enquired "as to practicability of Canada placing orders now in United

²⁷ Ibid. p. 334.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 363.

²⁹ V.C.N.S. Memo, "Proposed Building Programme for R.C.N." Aug. 9, 1939. p. 1. DHIST, N.H.S. 8200, Construction Ships Vol. I.

³⁰ V.C.N.S. Memo, "History of the Barter Arrangements with Admiralty." Mar. 4, 1940. p. 1. DHIST, N.H.S. 8200, Construction-Ships Vol. I.

Kingdom for construction of two Tribal destroyers." ³¹ This request initiated negotiations that resulted in the R.C.N. bartering corvettes built in Canada for British built Tribals. These negotiations are important because they indicate the R.C.N.'s steadfast determination to acquire Tribals and only Tribals.

On November 6 1939 the Admiralty accepted the barter proposal "in principle." However, the Admiralty "suggested substitution of Intermediate Type destroyers for Tribals." ³² The Intermediates referred to were the "O" and "P" class destroyers of the 1st and 2nd Emergency Flotillas ordered in the first two months of the war. The "O's" and "P's" were "reduced and cheaper" versions of the new generations of Fleet destroyers then commissioning into the R.N., and were quite similar in size and performance to the older "A" to "I" classes. ³³ After comparing the various destroyer classes at its meeting on January 22, 1940 meeting, the Naval Staff rejected the Admiralty's proposal on the grounds that the Intermediates were "not considered as suitable as 'Tribals' would be for Canadian conditions." It is clear that the two deciding factors were the Tribals heavier gun armament and better endurance. ³⁴

When reading Captain Murray's summary of the negotiations one sees that the British tried continually to persuade the R.C.N. to accept the Intermediates but the Canadians would not compromise. The Intermediates would be completed much sooner which meant the R.C.N. would get its much needed destroyers that much more quickly, but the Naval Staff was unwilling to settle

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. p. 3.

³³ March, British Destroyers p. 377-386. R.A. Burt, British Destroyers in World War II (London, 1985) p. 38-9.

³⁴ Naval Staff Minutes, Jan. 22, 1940. It is interesting to note that the Tribal's range was reported as 7000 miles. Presumably this extreme exaggeration was unintentional.

for destroyers that it considered inferior to the Tribal design. Decisions regarding the R.C.N.'s future were being made at the same time as war plans, and on this occasion at least it appears that naval planners were giving equal priority to concerns about the future.

Finally, in March 1940, the two sides reached agreement. The Admiralty would lay down two Tribals for the R.C.N. as part of their new construction program for 1940 in exchange for ten Canadian built corvettes. Later the Admiralty agreed to build two more Tribals for Canada as part of their 1941 program. The efforts of Admiral Nelles and the Naval Staff to acquire Tribals for the R.C.N. had finally met with success.

The original idea to build Tribals in Canada had been dropped by the R.C.N. in September 1939, but the following year the navy received another boost from the government when the idea of building major warships in Canada was resurrected by Canadian politicians. The background behind this decision reveals much about the direction the Canadian government wanted Canada's war policies to take.

Haunted by the specter of another conscription crisis, Mackenzie King wanted to avoid the huge manpower commitments needed to support a large expeditionary force. Instead he proposed that the bulk of Canada's contribution be made by the air and naval services. This strategy would also help further King's plan to use the war to expand Canadian industrial potential. By allocating more money to the air and naval services, aircraft and warships could be built in Canada thus benefitting industry.³⁵ This policy was also attractive politically and it won the support of King's cabinet. Angus L. Macdonald, Minister of Defence for the Naval Service, was determined to take full advantage of it to the benefit of both

³⁵ J.W. Pickersgill, The Mackenzie King Record Vol. I (Toronto, 1960) p. 76. Milner, North Atlantic Run, p. 14.

his home province and the service for which he was responsible.

Macdonald, like his Prime Minister, also thought that Canadian industry should benefit from the war. Furthermore, he saw naval shipbuilding as a way to help encourage re-industrialization in his home province of Nova Scotia. The government's strategy presented an opportunity to accomplish both these goals, and Macdonald was able to convince Mackenzie King and powerful cabinet colleagues such as J.L. Ralston and C.D. Howe that Canada should investigate the possibility of building destroyers for the R.C.N. in Halifax shipyards.³⁶ Needless to say, this program also won the support of the R.C.N., and once again demonstrated their commitment to Tribals.

If this project was to be undertaken, both the government and the R.C.N. realized that they would need the assistance of British naval and civilian shipbuilding experts.³⁷ When the senior Canadian defence minister, Colonel J.L. Ralston, raised the possibility of such personnel being loaned to Canada with government, naval, and shipbuilding representatives in Britain in early December 1940, he found them less than willing to co-operate.³⁸ Finally, in response to a direct query from Mackenzie King, Winston Churchill answered that their own destroyer building commitments "have used up all our key men and constructors, and although we are trying to obtain more from every possible source we are still short of the requisite numbers. We have regretfully concluded, therefore, that it is

³⁶ Ibid. p. 14-15, 19-21.

³⁷ A.L. Macdonald to Col. J.L. Ralston, Nov. 18, 1940.
Mackenzie King to Winston Churchill, Nov. 19, 1940.
Ralston Papers, NAC, MG 27, III B11, Vol. 54.

³⁸ Col. J.L. Ralston to A.L. Macdonald, Dec. 19, 1940.
Ralston Papers.

impracticable to carry out your proposal as you suggest." ³⁹

As an alternative to building a British design in Canada, the British prime minister suggested that Canadians consider building an American destroyer design as it would probably be easier to acquire the necessary expertise and manpower from that source. ⁴⁰ This suggestion proved to be unpalatable to both Canadian politicians and naval officers. Colonel Ralston immediately doubted the merit of Churchill's suggestion. He contended that "since in this war our destroyers will have to co-operate so closely with United Kingdom units in European waters, a common building design would be highly desirable." ⁴¹ The R.C.N. agreed, but found further reasons for rejecting Churchill's proposal. After an inspection tour of American shipyards the R.C.N.'s Engineer-in-Chief, Captain G.L. Stephens R.C.N., concluded that:

- (a) British destroyers are of better design.
- (b) As it would be required to generally operate in close association with British Destroyers similar design simplifies repairs, replacement of parts and stores.
- (c) R.C.N. personnel better acquainted with the construction and operation of British design. ⁴²

Although Stevens, like Ralston, cited practical reasons for rejecting Churchill's suggestion, it also seems unlikely that at that stage of its history the R.C.N. was ready to permit its strong ties with the R.N. to be weakened through the building American destroyers.

After the idea of building American destroyers was rejected not all agreed that the Tribals were the most appropriate type of

³⁹ Churchill to Mackenzie King, Dec. 18, 1940. Ralston Papers.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ralston to Macdonald, Dec. 29, 1940. Ralston Papers.

⁴² E-in-C Memo. "Question of Building British or American Destroyers in Canada." Feb. 14, 1941. DHIST, Destroyers 'Tribal' Class (General) 8000.

British destroyer to build. After discussing the subject with the Admiralty Technical Mission, the Director of Shipbuilding, Commander (E) A.C.M. Davy R.C.N., recommended that Intermediate destroyers be built:

I understand that the Intermediate Type ships are smaller, can be built more rapidly and more cheaply, if the Admiralty have decided as a result of war experience that the Intermediate type vessel is a more satisfactory product, then I feel we should be most ill-advised in proceeding with the construction of Tribal class destroyers. ⁴³

Besides pushing the Intermediates once more, it appears that the Admiralty also pressed the R.C.N. to consider building "Hunt" class destroyers. ⁴⁴ These suggestions were rejected by the Naval Staff at their meeting on April 27, 1941. Presumably as far as the Naval Staff was concerned the pre-war reasons for building Tribals still existed, and no matter what the Admiralty thought that was what they were going to build. This decision won political approval in June 1941 when the Cabinet approved the decision to build two Tribals at Halifax Shipyards Ltd. In early 1942 approval was given to the construction of two more. ⁴⁵

The decision to build Tribals in Canada was controversial at the time and, in the view of some naval historians, has remained so. ⁴⁶ Critics argue that the Tribal construction program absorbed facilities and manpower that should have been used to repair and maintain warships already in existence. There is no doubt that this was indeed a problem, and it was recognized as

⁴³ Naval Historian's File "Destroyers, 'Tribal' Class" DHIST Destroyers 'Tribal' Class (A-Z) 8000.

⁴⁴ Hunt class destroyers were essentially destroyer escorts. With an armament of only four 4" guns, a top speed of only twenty-five knots and limited endurance they were unsuitable for Canadian purposes.

⁴⁵ For more detail on this decision see Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada Vol. II, p. 54-60.

⁴⁶ See Ibid. p. 58, and Milner, North Atlantic Run p. 20.

such by the R.C.N. at the time.⁴⁷ Even so, the decision to build the Tribals is understandable from a naval point of view even though it was known it would have this effect.

Rightly or wrongly, Admiral Nelles and the Naval Staff were not only concerned with the war effort, but also with the condition of the post-war navy. In a 1944 memo⁴⁸ to the V.C.N.S. the Director of Plans, Captain G.R. Miles R.C.N., noted that "an active healthy shipbuilding industry is a prerequisite for any country which is to hold its place upon the sea."⁴⁹ Surely the same can be said of naval shipbuilding. What better way to ensure the survival of a significant permanent naval force than to have an active naval shipbuilding industry building the very warships that were wanted to form the foundation of a more secure R.C.N. The political and financial commitments to such a program would simply be too considerable to be dismantled easily. Therefore, while the resurrection of the idea to build Tribals was initiated by politicians, one should not blame the navy for taking advantage of such an opportunity. As Marc Milner concludes "since the government was determined to build something, the navy was happy to support the construction of Tribals."⁵⁰

Once the leaders of the R.C.N. had succeeded in their campaign to acquire the Tribals, it was left to ensure that they were used in a way that befitted their stature as Canada's most powerful warships. Such decisions were complicated by the fact that the war at sea, and the R.C.N.'s role in that war, had changed considerably between the time the first Tribals were ordered in the first winter of the war and when the first was

⁴⁷ Cdr. (E) A.C.M. Davy to Capt. G.L. Stephens, June 24, 1941. PAC, RG 24, Vol. 5613, 45-1.

⁴⁸ Capt. G.R. Miles, "Royal Cdn. Navy- Modernization" Aug. 14, 1944. PAC, RG 24, Vol. 8186, 1818 Vol. I.

⁴⁹ Milner, North Atlantic Run p. 20.

ready to commission in November 1942. In 1939 it was thought that German surface raiders would be the most dangerous threat to shipping off Canada's eastern coast. However, by late 1942, the Kriegsmarine had concentrated the bulk of their available surface forces in Norway in an attempt to disrupt Allied convoys to the Soviet Union. R.C.N. planners could therefore be fairly certain that no surface threat endangered the North Atlantic convoy routes. The submarine had become the greatest threat, and the R.C.N. had become so committed to containing the U-Boats that in October 1942 the Naval Board minutes stated without any equivocation that "the main effort of the R.C.N. is and will remain convoy escort work." ⁵⁰ This presented the R.C.N. with a problem of sorts as the navy was desperately short of modern escort vessels. However, despite the fact that trade protection had become the priority of the R.C.N., and there was a shortage of escorts, the Tribals were not to be used for that duty.

In January 1939 Admiral Nelles had listed A.S.W. potential among the Tribals' strengths, however by 1942 it was clear that although Tribals could be used for that type of duty, they were not that well suited to it. This stemmed from the fact that "they were over-large and had too wide a turning circle to be ideal for anti-submarine work, a task requiring considerable agility on the part of the attacker." ⁵¹ Thus, while the Tribals could certainly carry out the screening requirements they would not be that effective at killing U-Boats. It seems unlikely however, that this unsuitability was the only reason why the Tribals were not used for convoy escort duty.

On October 12, 1942, the Naval Board decided that upon completion the Tribals would "constitute the R.C.N.'s contribution to offence." ⁵² As such they would be stationed in

⁵⁰ Naval Board Minutes, Oct. 12, 1942. DHIST, 1000-100/2.

⁵¹ Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada Vol. II p. 79.

⁵² Naval Board Minutes. Oct. 12, 1942.

European waters. This is exactly what the R.C.N. wanted. In the months that followed it is obvious that the R.C.N. was willing to go to great lengths to ensure that this decision was adhered to, in order that the Tribals would be used in a way that would make the most advantage of their considerable offensive strengths. It is apparent that the R.C.N. thought that this would benefit the service in the long term.

The R.C.N.'s attitude is best summed up in a memorandum written by the Director of Plans, Acting Captain H.G. DeWolf R.C.N. DeWolf's memorandum, "Employment of Tribal Destroyers" explains the difference between the two types of destroyers, escort and fleet, and then goes on to explain why the Tribals should be committed to overseas service. One of the ideas DeWolf was obviously trying to promote was that fleet destroyers were more valuable than escort destroyers. Escort destroyers "have been modified to carry an increased number of depth charges at the expense of gunnery and torpedo equipment. In other words, the Escort Destroyer has sacrificed some of its striking power in order to carry out extended anti-submarine operations, such as are necessary in ocean escort work." Thus, destroyer escorts are portrayed as warships that have been denuded of much of their power. On the other hand, Fleet destroyers "are employed in protection of the more valuable units of the Fleet." Furthermore, fleet destroyers were used to escort the more dangerous convoys to Malta and the Soviet Union which were subject to attack by submarines, aircraft, and E-Boats. DeWolf concluded that "only Fleet-type Destroyers can attempt to protect these convoys." ⁵³

If DeWolf portrayed the fleet destroyers as being more valuable than destroyer escorts, he elevated the Tribals to another plane entirely:

The Tribal is essentially a fighting destroyer. It is the largest and most heavily armed of all Fleet

⁵³ Capt. H.G. DeWolf, "Employment of Tribal Destroyers" Dec. 7, 1942. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6797, NSS-8375-355.

Destroyers. It is especially powerful in surface and anti-aircraft gunnery. There are few such ships to meet the heavy demands in the fighting theatres of war, and every unit must be employed to best advantage. It would be most uneconomical to use a Tribal in North Atlantic convoy escort when its guns are so urgently required elsewhere. ⁵⁴

DeWolf betrayed the special commitment that the R.C.N. had to Tribals. It is clear that DeWolf considered the 'powerful', 'fighting destroyer' to be the R.C.N.'s most valuable warship. He and others were determined to see that they were assigned duties worthy of its capabilities.

In the opinion of the Director of Plans, this meant that the Tribals should be turned over to the British: "where the need is greatest can best be decided by the Admiralty and it is strongly recommended that the Canadian Tribals be placed at their disposal without restriction. Only in this way can they contribute to the general cause." ⁵⁵ Although it seems strange that the R.C.N. would be so willing to allow its most powerful warships to be placed at the disposal of the R.N., it must be realized that if this was not done it was possible that the Tribals would not have been used in an offensive role. Instead, as the shortage of escorts became acute the Tribals may have been used for convoy escort even though they were considered to be unsuited for that role.

There was also a chance that the Tribals would be used for coastal defence. When their deployment was discussed at a meeting of the Cabinet War Committee on September 16th 1942, Mackenzie King asserted that the R.C.N.'s "primary responsibility" was to defend the Canadian coast, and the Tribals should therefore be deployed in Canadian waters. ⁵⁶ King was

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, Sept. 16th, 1942. NAC, RG 2, 7c, Vol. 11.

obviously worried that the deployment of the Tribals in British waters would leave both coasts undefended and his government open to criticism. His concern was justified for on September 15th and 16th U-517 and U-165 were attacking shipping in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.⁵⁷ Despite the prime minister's anxieties, the Naval Staff was against the deployment of the Tribals in Canadian waters or their use as escorts, and it appears that DeWolf's memorandum may have been part of a campaign to ensure that this did not occur.⁵⁸

There are two striking features of the DeWolf memorandum. In the first place why were DeWolf and, one can assume, the Naval Staff concerned about the Tribals not being stationed overseas when the Naval Board had approved that policy in October 1942? Secondly, the memorandum is written in very simple language, and the descriptions of destroyers and their various roles are expressed in very elementary terms. Therefore it seems probable that the memorandum was intended for someone who was unfamiliar with warships and their functions. Although it was addressed to the C.N.S., there is a notation at the end of the document that indicates it was seen by the Minister of Defence for the Naval Service, and it is possible that it may have gone to the Prime Minister's office. An indication of this is that the memorandum was dated December 7, 1942. The timing seems crucial for the Canadian government had just opened negotiations with the British over the possible acquisition of more destroyers.

In a December 5, 1942 cable to Winston Churchill, Mackenzie King explained that the "Canadian escort groups employed in the protection of trade convoys in the North Atlantic are seriously

⁵⁷ Douglas, The Creation of a National Air Force (Toronto, 1986) p. 502-3.

⁵⁸ In his memo DeWolf refers to suggestions that the Tribals be stationed on the west coast. This is perhaps in reference to the prime minister's statement.

handicapped by a shortage of destroyers." The Canadian Prime Minister then inquired whether the British "would consider the release of 14 destroyers from new production in the United Kingdom to be purchased by the Canadian Government and manned by the Royal Canadian Navy." ³⁹ It is important to note two things about this request: the destroyers were to be from new production, and they were to be purchased from the British.

Four days later, on December 9th, Admiral Nelles sent a similar cable to the First Sea Lord, but it had one important difference. Nelles suggested that rather than purchasing the destroyers, possibly the "Canadian Government might agree to allocation of the 4 Canadian Tribals at present completing or building to fleet work in U.K. provided these would assist you to release the escort destroyers requested by us." ⁴⁰ It would seem, given the timing of events, that DeWolf's memo was part of the C.N.S.'s attempt to obtain the Government's agreement to exchange the Tribals for escorts, rather than a straight purchase.

There are several reasons why Admiral Nelles may have wanted to propose an exchange of destroyers rather than a straight purchase, and they all have one characteristic in common - the Tribals would be assured of having the best opportunity for offensive duty. It may be that Nelles wanted to use the Tribals for barter because the Admiralty would be more likely to agree to give up destroyers, which they were short of themselves, if they received use of the four Tribals. It was in Admiral Nelles' interests to sweeten the pot. If the R.N. agreed with the exchange the Tribals would then join the Home Fleet upon completion where they would have the best chance of being used offensively. If the deal fell through then there would be a good chance that the R.C.N. would be forced to use the Tribals for

³⁹ King to Churchill. Dec. 5, 1942. PRO, ADM 1/12564.

⁴⁰ C.N.S. to First Sea Lord. Dec. 9, 1942. PRO, ADM 1/12564.

escort duty which appears to be the last thing Nelles wanted. It is also interesting to note that the R.C.N. first requested new construction destroyers, but, much to the Admiralty's surprise, quickly settled for old 'declassified Fleets'.⁶¹ Nelles acceptance of these vessels not only ensured that the R.C.N. would get its escorts more quickly, but also that the Tribals would be released to the Home Fleet as soon as they were completed. Although it may be argued that Nelles was just using the Tribals as a bargaining tool to gain much needed escorts, this seems unlikely. If that was the case, why would the C.N.S. have offered to barter the Tribals at all, when Mackenzie King had expressed his willingness to buy the escorts outright?

Sovereignty may also have been an issue. It seems unlikely that Mackenzie King and other members of the Cabinet War Committee would support a decision that would see Canada's most powerful warships come under British control as DeWolf so strongly recommended. King had opposed the loan of corvettes to the R.N. for operation 'Torch', but the C.W.C. minutes reveal that beyond his initial statement about stationing the Tribals in Canadian waters, he gave little serious resistance to the idea of transferring them to R.N. control. Because the Tribals were bartered for much needed destroyer escorts and therefore helped solve the escort shortage, and because they saved the Government the money it would cost to purchase new escorts, the C.W.C. may have been more agreeable to the loss of operational control over the Tribals.

It is of interest to briefly follow these negotiations through to completion for it reveals much about the R.N.'s attitudes towards both the R.C.N. and Tribal class destroyers. Admiral Nelles' offer of December 9th was followed by a more detailed proposal from Captain W.B. Creery R.C.N. who was in

⁶¹ D.of P. (R.N.) Minute Sheet Feb. 3, 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12564. Declassed Fleet's were old "A" to "I" class destroyers converted for A/S warfare.

England at the time:

The actual proposal is that the 4 Tribals now completed or completing in England be manned by Canada but turned over to the Admiralty for operational purposes, and that 4 new Escort Destroyers be made available for Canada as soon as possible...Failing acceptance of this proposal it is possible that the Tribals would have to be withdrawn and used as destroyer escorts. ⁶²

British reaction to Creery's proposal is quite interesting. The assistant to the Director of Plans noted that "as much the offer is not an attractive one, however valuable the Tribals might be, even if British manned...It is obvious, however, that we must meet the Canadians halfway or we may lose their 4 Tribals to trade escort instead." ⁶³ Clearly the British, who were also desperately short of destroyers, held the Tribals in high regard. The appreciation goes on to indicate a lack of faith in the ability of Canadian sailors, as well as a poor understanding of R.C.N. concerns.

D. of P. would dearly like to see the Canadian Tribals British manned and thus a very valuable addition to our Fleet destroyer forces. He has a feeling that the Canadians would now prefer this too, so that the RCN can play a full part in the Battle of the Atlantic nearer home rather than a subsidiary one with the Home Fleet in foreign waters. ⁶⁴

Fortunately, for Canadian naval planners, some officers at the Admiralty had a better understanding of the R.C.N. The Director of the Operations Division (Home) disagreed with the D. of P.'s assessment: "the Canadians are proud of these Tribals and will, it is thought, be against a transfer of these, their

⁶² Creery to V.C.N.S. (R.N.) "Employment of Canadian Tribal Class Destroyers." Jan. 8, 1943, p. 1. PRO, ADM 1/12564. Creery was Chief of Staff to C.O.A.C. It is not known what he was doing in London at this time, or if he had been given any previous instructions by Nelles regarding the destroyer negotiations.

⁶³ D. of P. (R.N.) Appreciation. Jan. 10, 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12564.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

largest fighting ships, to R.N. manning." He proposed that the Canadians "be sounded on the question of the transfer of the Tribals to R.N. manning" but that "the Tribals however manned should be attached to H.F." ⁶⁵ D.O.D.(H) was correct in his assessment. The Canadians were proud of their new warships and they insisted on manning them with Canadian sailors. As it turned out, D.O.D.(H)'s viewpoint was the one that prevailed within the Admiralty.

There is one final note of some amusement regarding these negotiations. While Admiralty officials were considering the Canadian offer, Admiral Nelles was growing impatient. Finally on January 16, 1943, it appears he could wait no longer:

Some indication of the reply which may be expected re. destroyers would be greatly appreciated...If one or more R.N. destroyers will be available shortly for transfer to the R.C.N. IROQUOIS (on tour to east coast) will be returned to the U.K. If, however, no R.N. destroyers are available IROQUOIS must be based in Canada and will be employed in ocean escort duty. ⁶⁶

It seems that the strong tone of Nelles' cypher was not appreciated by Admiral Pound, and in his reply he called Nelles' bluff. Pound graciously accepted the offer of attaching the Tribals to the Home Fleet where "they will be a most welcome reinforcement and I am sure they will get a good chance to show their mettle." ⁶⁷ However, Pound did not give any details about what Nelles was going to get in exchange, except mentioning that the matter was still under consideration. It seems that Pound was giving Nelles a typical example of a British lesson in manners, and the C.N.S. was left to cool his heels until

⁶⁵ D.O.D.(H) Appreciation. Jan. 11, 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12564.

⁶⁶ C.N.S. to First Sea Lord. Jan. 16, 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12564.

⁶⁷ First Sea Lord to C.N.S. Jan. 19, 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12564.

Mackenzie King received an official response from Winston Churchill on February 23, 1943. In this message the British Prime Minister accepted the Canadian offer and agreed to transfer destroyer escorts to the R.C.N. in exchange for the Tribals being assigned to the Home Fleet. **

Although Nelles may have caused some bad feeling at the Admiralty, he had achieved his goals. The escort destroyers needed by the RCN to meet the immediate crisis on the north Atlantic sealanes had been obtained, and so too had assurances that the Tribals would be used as "fighting destroyers" in a "fighting" theatre of war thereby securing the reputation and future of the Canadian service. This would not only help the war effort, but would also probably vindicate his decision to acquire Tribals. Furthermore, a good performance by the Tribals would not do the post-war navy any harm either.

In November 1943, after the four British built R.C.N. Tribals had joined the Home Fleet and construction of the other four Tribals was underway at Halifax, the R.N. offered the R.C.N. two additional Tribals. On this occasion the R.C.N. did not jump at the opportunity but instead chose to accept two new "V" class Intermediate destroyers. The R.C.N. rejected the offer of the two Tribals because they were both of pre-war vintage and had suffered much wear and tear. Also by this time, the R.C.N.'s post-war prospects were encouraging, for at the Allied conference at Quebec in September 1943 arrangements had been made for the service to take over two cruisers and possibly two escort carriers. ** However, the acquisition of these major warships was not the key to the R.C.N.'s future. That battle had been won

** Churchill to King. Feb. 23, 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12564.

** See W.A.B. Douglas "Conflict and Innovation in the Royal Canadian Navy" in G. Jordan (ed.), Naval Strategy in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1977)

in the first years of the war when the R.C.N. had achieved its goal of acquiring Tribal class destroyers. Because of this victory the R.C.N. had no need for additional Tribals.

Throughout his campaign for Tribals Admiral Nelles had put decisions regarding the R.C.N.'s post-war goals alongside those concerning the war effort. Although this may be seen by some as an irresponsible way to conduct a war, it is understandable from an R.C.N. point of view. After two decades of fighting for survival, the outbreak of war presented an opportunity for security. Nelles, in a difficult juggling act, sought to ensure that the navy would not have to again fight for its very existence. Fortunately for the C.N.S. and the R.C.N. the Tribals performed very effectively in the English Channel in 1944, and thus, to some extent, vindicated his actions.

Chapter II

"I was finally in the ~~real~~ navy."

Hal Lawrence recalling his reaction upon joining the Fleet Destroyer Sioux for service with the Home Fleet in 1944.

When Lieutenant P.D. Budge R.C.N., First Lieutenant of the Canadian Tribal Huron, learned that the R.C.N. Tribals were being transferred from Scapa Flow to Plymouth Command in January 1944, he recalled being delighted that the destroyers would no longer be used as escorts but would be used "in the role of gunships, the duty for which they were designed."¹ It is likely that Budge was delighted not only because the Tribals would be used in what many considered their most appropriate role, but also because he and the other permanent force officers and men on the Tribals would get an opportunity to experience the type of duty they had prepared for before the war.

However, once they embarked upon offensive operations from Plymouth the men on the Canadian Tribals soon learned that enthusiasm and individual training were not enough to guarantee proficiency. Offensive sweeps of the type carried out by the 10th Destroyer Flotilla were professionally demanding and the English Channel was a difficult area in which to operate. After the first patrols it became clear that the flotilla would have to gain much-needed experience before it could expect to carry out offensive sweeps with any degree of success. They were fortunate that they were given this opportunity.

Canadian naval historian Marc Milner has recently described the pre-war R.C.N. as a "traditional, gun-oriented navy."² According to this definition the R.C.N. was traditional in the sense that it was guided by the same tactical principles and concepts that influenced most of the other navies in the world during the inter-war years. These navies were preparing to fight surface actions similar to those fought in The Great War under the dictates of what British naval historian Stephen Roskill

¹ Capt. V. Howland interview with Budge, p. 54. DHIST, BIOG B, Rear Admiral P.D. Budge.

² Milner, North Atlantic Run, (Toronto, 1985) p. 8.

referred to as the battle fleet concept. More specifically, like the Royal Navy, the United States Navy, the Imperial Japanese Navy, and even to some extent the Soviet navy, the Canadian navy was preparing to fight in another large scale set piece fleet action like Jutland.³

Before going further it is important to briefly comment upon the relationship between the R.C.N. and the R.N. in the pre-war years. All Canadian naval officers of this period received much of their training in R.N. ships and establishments and most of them served in R.N. warships at one time or another. These officers adopted the attitudes and traditions of the British navy and, as one Canadian naval historian has commented, saw the R.C.N. as a "sub-system"⁴ of that service. Rear Admiral F.L. Houghton R.C.N. provides an example of this in his unpublished memoirs: "I spent almost thirty-nine years in the R.C.N., through two world wars and the doldrums in between. We flew the White Ensign and did our best to uphold the glorious traditions of the Royal Navy."⁵ The influence of the R.N. went beyond the adoption of attitudes and traditions. Canadian officers also accepted R.N. tactical doctrine, and therefore when the battle fleet concept dominated British naval thinking it was also 'gospel' within the R.C.N.

The adherence of the R.C.N. to the traditional battle fleet concept can be discovered in two areas. In the first place it was deeply embedded in the officer corps of both the R.N. and

³ See Stephen Roskill, Naval Policy Between the Wars Vol. I (London, 1968) p. 533. Ronald Spector, Professors of War (Newport, 1977) p. 147. Jurgen Rohwer, "Admiral Gorshkov and the Influence of History Upon Sea Power" United States Naval Institute Naval Review 1981 p. 160-4.

⁴ W.A.B. Douglas, "Conflict and Innovation in the Royal Canadian Navy" in G. Jordan (ed.), Naval Strategy in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1977) p. 210.

⁵ Rear Admiral F.L. Houghton, "A Sailor's Life For Me" p. ii. NAC, Houghton Papers, MG 30, E444.

R.C.N. A pecking order that went beyond the rank structure existed in both navies. Officers were divided into three branches; executive, engineering and paymaster, and of these the executive branch was seen to be the most prestigious. Only executive officers could command warships and the majority of the most important posts went to officers from that branch. However, the pecking order did not stop there. The executive branch had its own specialist branches of which the gunnery officer, followed closely by the torpedo officer, were the elite. Other specialist categories, navigation, signals, submarine, air branch and anti-submarine, were viewed as less important within both navies. Reginald Whinney, a retired R.N. officer recalls that during the 1930's gunnery and torpedo exercises "were, by custom, accorded more priority" than other types of exercises. ⁶

The exercises carried out by the R.C.N. during the 1930's also make it clear that the service was preparing for surface action between battle fleets. In the first few months of each year during the 1930's Canadian destroyers embarked on a southern cruise "chiefly in order to take part in fleet exercises with the Americas and West Indies Squadron of the Royal Navy." ⁷ Thus, Canadian destroyers practiced the traditional flotilla role of screening their own battle fleet or launching massed torpedo attacks on an 'enemy' battle fleet. A typical example of this type of exercise is provided by the "General Idea" of an exercise that the R.C.N. destroyers Saguenay and Champlain participated in off Bermuda during April 1933:

On the opposing battle fleets having become engaged, the senior officer of destroyers in the van decides to carry out an attack upon the enemy's battle fleet, represented by a line of three cruisers. During the attack, the destroyers become engaged with a hostile

⁶ Reginald Whinney, The U-Boat Peril, (New York, 1986) p. 48-9. A.S.W. specialists like Whinney were near the bottom of the pecking order.

⁷ Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada Vol. I, (Ottawa, 1952) p. 351.

flotilla, stationed on the engaged bow of its own battle fleet to prevent such an attack being carried out. ⁹

In the evaluation of this exercise forwarded to N.S.H.Q. the C-in-C of the A. & W.I. Squadron, Vice Admiral R.A.R. Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax R.N., noted that "this test should have given valuable experience to all concerned and some realization of what might be expected under action conditions." ⁹ The same tactical philosophy continued to guide R.C.N. exercises until the outbreak of the war.

The exercises carried out by R.C.N. destroyers in home waters made one concession to Canada's particular strategic position. In their pre-war appreciations R.C.N. strategists concluded that cruisers or A.M.C.'s would form the main threat to shipping in Canadian waters, ¹⁰ and thus the destroyers often carried out evolutions to meet this danger. For example, in July 1939 four Canadian destroyers engaged in a series of exercises off the West Coast that included a "single destroyer attacking a single cruiser, unobserved in moderate visibility", a subdivision of destroyers "attacking two cruisers which are being shadowed and reported", and a divisional attack on "a cruiser whose speed has been reduced by torpedo bombers." ¹¹ Despite the concession to Canadian considerations the destroyers were still guided by the R.N.'s tactics concerning fleet actions.

It is clear from both types of exercises that the R.C.N. was

⁹ Cdr. L.W. Murray R.C.N., "Combined Torpedo and Gunnery Practice" April 22, 1933. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4014 N.S.C. 1057-62-11TE.

⁹ Vice Adm. Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax to C.N.S., May 25, 1933. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4014, N.S.C. 1057-62-11TE.

¹⁰ See Chapter I, p. 7.

¹¹ Capt. G.C. Jones R.C.N., "Torpedo Exercises" July 13, 17, and 19, 1939. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4012, NSC 1057-61-11TE Vol I.

preparing to fight a traditional war against surface warships. Destroyers engaged other destroyers in mock gun battles or launched torpedo attacks on crippled battleships. Cruisers were shadowed and then attacked in a variety of circumstances. Little in the way of anti-submarine or anti-aircraft training were undertaken. For example in a series of exercises carried out in August 1937, the destroyers Skeena and Saguenay spent the majority of time either preparing for or practicing gunnery and torpedo attacks. Only one short "Depth Charge Attack" and one "A.A. Practice" were undertaken in five days.¹² Furthermore, beyond the screening of capital ships, little in the way of manoeuvres for trade protection were undertaken by Canadian destroyers. Therefore, as historian Marc Milner points out, the majority of the R.C.N.'s pre-war training "bore virtually no resemblance" to the anti-submarine war in which the Canadian navy eventually found itself involved in.¹³ The exercises were, however, relevant to the type of warfare experienced by the Tribals in the Channel.

Due to the small size of the R.C.N., destroyers were often forced to play the part of cruisers in these exercises, therefore the manoeuvres evolved into a series of encounter operations in which one force searched for another and then sought to gain an advantageous position from which to attack. Even though many of the manoeuvres were restricted by rigid set-piece battle fleet tactics they were useful because they were carried out on a smaller scale than the R.N. fleet exercises.¹⁴ R.C.N. officers learned to carry out high speed attacks in close formation on individual ships under a variety of conditions. Such manoeuvres

¹² Cdr. W.J.R. Beech R.C.N., "Gunnery and Torpedo Practices" August 21, 1937. NAC RG 24, Vol. 4014, NSC 1057-62-11GE.

¹³ Milner, North Atlantic Run, p. 11.

¹⁴ The rigid tactics included use of the line ahead with all ships turning together to fire torpedoes in zones.

were much more like those used on offensive sweeps during the Second World War than were massed flotilla attacks on lines of capital ships. Thus, in some ways it was a distinct advantage that the R.C.N. was a small destroyer navy.

Another beneficial element of these exercises was the fact that many were carried out at night. It would appear that the small size of the R.C.N., as well as the relative weakness of destroyers in comparison with cruisers, caused Canadian naval officers to put more emphasis on night operations than their British counterparts.¹⁵ R.C.N. strategists thought that if they were to have much of a chance against the more powerful warships they would likely face they should engage them at night. As one senior officer explained in March 1939: "It would seem probable that H.M.C. Destroyers in the event of war must rely upon their night fighting efficiency to obtain decisive results."¹⁶ Although these exercises revealed severe deficiencies, especially in the area of searchlight control, at least Canadian officers became aware of their weaknesses.

Even though Canadian exercises bore some resemblance to the type of action the Tribals would see in the Channel it is difficult to assess the direct specific influence the pre-war training had in preparing the Tribal crews for the Channel operations. Certainly the influence was limited by the fact that the Channel operations took place nearly five years after the war had broken out. During that period the small pre-war permanent force had become outnumbered by the large influx of "hostilities

¹⁵ R. Whinney, a former R.N. destroyer captain, criticises both the amount and standard of R.N. pre-war night exercises. Whinney, The U-Boat Peril p. 52.

¹⁶ Capt. G.C. Jones, "Full Calibre Firings - 27 March 1939" April 23, 1939, p. 2. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4012, NSS 1057-61-11GE. For example in five days of exercises carried out by Saguenay in 1937 two nights of night exercises were conducted, and in July 1939 two torpedo exercises out of four took place at night.

only" personnel. Furthermore, during the intervening years technology such as radar had caused major changes in the way naval warfare was conducted.

Still, the pre-war training probably benefitted permanent force officers who later served in the Tribals. Simply put it gave them the opportunity to hone their skills and to learn how to react to situations that might confront them in war. This would be especially true for watch-keepers. According to Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham R.N., perhaps the most distinguished British "fighting" admiral of 1939-1945, destroyer exercises such as those carried out by the R.N. and R.C.N. before the war:

were unsurpassed for the training of the Captains (D), and the divisional and sub-divisional leaders, in handling their units at high speed in confined areas in tight corners. Large numbers of destroyers steaming at full speed in confined areas provided just that element of risk which is essential in the training of good destroyer officers. Quick thinking and initiative were essential. Laggards in either respect soon showed up. ¹⁷

No matter what long term practical results the R.C.N.'s pre-war training and exercises had, it is obvious that they encouraged a certain spirit within the service. The Canadian navy was preparing for and wanted to fight a battle-fleet style surface war. As the comment by Lieutenant Budge suggests, this spirit carried over to 1944. The Tribals were going to engage in what amounted to a traditional form of naval warfare; that was what the pre-war R.C.N. was all about.

In describing the situation that existed off Guadalcanal after the highly contested American invasion of that island in August 1942, the American naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison, wrote: "a curious tactical situation had developed at Guadalcanal; a virtual exchange of sea mastery every twelve

¹⁷ Adm. Andrew Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey, (London, 1951) p. 158.

hours." ¹⁰ In the English Channel, in late 1943 and early 1944, there was a similar situation. Air superiority allowed the Allies to control the area during daylight, but at night the Channel was far from secure. The Germans were able to run convoys along the northern coast of Brittany and their destroyers were proving effective in countering offensive sweeps carried out by the Royal Navy. Furthermore, E-boats continued to be a threat to both convoys and warships along England's south coast. The Germans did not actually command the sea at night, but rather the Allies lacked a clear advantage. Such a situation could not be allowed to exist with the invasion impending. The formation of a strike force of destroyers based at Plymouth was part of the Allies' effort to extend their mastery of the Channel beyond the daylight hours in order to ensure that the success of the invasion was not endangered by German naval units.

Such an object was related to the traditional naval concepts of sea power and command of the sea. Sea power "enables its possessor to send his armies and commerce across those stretches of sea and ocean which lie between his country or the countries of his allies, and those territories to which he needs access in war." ¹¹ According to this definition, in order to carry out the invasion of France in 1944 the Allies needed both the means to convey the invasion force across the Channel and the necessary degree of control to make the routes of conveyance secure. The Allies undoubtedly had the former, but they did not think they had the necessary command of the sea to ensure the latter.

Naval historian Sir Julian Corbett has defined command of the sea as "nothing but the control of maritime

¹⁰ Morison, History of United States Naval operations in World War II, Vol. V The Struggle for Guadalcanal, (Boston, 1955) p. 113-4.

¹¹ Richmond, Statesmen and Seapower (Oxford, 1946) p. ix.

communications." ²⁰ Accordingly, if the security of the invasion routes was to be ensured, the Allies would have to remove or at least contain any German threats to shipping in the waters that lay between England and France. Such command of the sea did not have to be permanent nor did it have to include all the sea routes to and around Great Britain. ²¹ All that was required was the ability to use the sea routes to the Normandy beachhead safely during the invasion period.

The role of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla in this strategy was twofold. In the months before the invasion they were to carry out a series of offensive patrols off the Brittany coast in the hopes of engaging and weakening German destroyer forces. During the invasion itself the flotilla was to act as a covering force in the western Channel in order to block any attempted intervention by German surface units based in the Bay of Biscay ports. Their eventual success in both these tasks helped the Allies gain the necessary mastery of the sea that was missing at Guadalcanal.

When the 10th Destroyer Flotilla was formed in early 1944 it was to act as a strike force conducting offensive sweeps against German shipping in the western English Channel. Surprisingly this was the first permanent strike force of destroyers to be based in British waters. ²² Certainly other destroyer flotillas had carried out offensive operations in this theatre but these operations were few and far between as the Allies were on the defensive. When the opportunity to go over to the offensive in the Channel presented itself, Allied destroyer forces, including

²⁰ J.S. Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy (London, 1911) p. 90.

²¹ Ibid. p. 100-102.

²² Admiralty Historical Section, Battle Summary No. 31. "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions English Channel and Western Approaches 1943-1944, p. 1.

the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, were not that well prepared to carry out the role.

The only examples of offensive strike forces within the Allied naval experience in the European theatre to that point of the war were those based at Malta in 1941. These strike forces were quite successful and provided good examples of how to conduct offensive sweeps. Unfortunately, it appears that many of the lessons learned at Malta were ignored by Plymouth Command when they embarked upon their first offensive sorties.

The situation in the Central Mediterranean during 1941 had been critical from an Allied point of view. The Afrika Korps, pushing General Wavell's forces out of Libya, was relying on convoys from Italy to supply their operations. British submarines and aircraft were "taking a steady toll of the Libyan convoys; but it was by no means enough."²³ It was clear to the War Cabinet and the C-in-C of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, that "unless drastic action was taken to stop that flow, the strength of the Afrika Korps would soon imperil our whole position in North Africa."²⁴ As a result a series of naval strike forces were based at Malta in an attempt to disrupt the Italian convoys.

Through a combination of boldness and superior skills these forces met with great success. On the night of April 15/16th, 1941 four British destroyers under the command of Commander R.J. Mack R.N. attacked an Italian convoy consisting of five merchant ships escorted by three destroyers. The British force, attacking with gunnery and torpedoes, "annihilated" the convoy and escorts while only suffering the loss of one destroyer.²⁵ On December 13, 1941, another force of four destroyers attacked an Italian force of two cruisers and two destroyers, and in a "brilliant

²³ Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey p. 341.

²⁴ Roskill, The War at Sea Vol. I, (London, 1954) p. 431.

²⁵ Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey, p. 345-6.

action" sank both cruisers and one of the destroyers with no loss to themselves. ²⁶ As successful as these actions were, they have not attracted as much attention as the operations of Force 'K'.

Force 'K' had a relatively short career as a strike force, but nonetheless provided good practical examples of how to carry out attacks on enemy shipping. Under the command of Captain W.G. Agnew R.N., Force 'K' was made up of the cruisers Aurora and Penelope and the destroyers Lively and Lance. On the night of Nov. 8/9 1941 these ships attacked an Italian convoy and sank seven of eight merchant ships and one of the accompanying destroyers despite the fact that the convoy had a strong escort of cruisers and destroyers. This success was largely due to the fact that the British strike force had engaged in repeated exercises and the ships were therefore used to operating with each other. Furthermore, "the commanders of Force 'K' had given much thought to the methods to be adopted in an attack on a heavily escorted convoy." ²⁷ The commanders had decided that before any attack on the convoy could be carried out the escort must be neutralized. Force 'K' would approach the escorts in line ahead and "the leading ship should keep each escort fine on the bow until that escort had been put out of action" so the danger from torpedoes could be reduced. ²⁸ Operations in the Channel later in the war proved that planning such as this was an important ingredient in any naval operation and could mean the difference between success and failure.

Although the Malta strike forces provided some good lessons on how to conduct successful sweeps against enemy shipping, there were some important differences between their situation and that which existed in the Channel later in the war. In the first place the quality of opposition in the Channel was superior. The

²⁶ Ibid. p. 430.

²⁷ Smith and Walker, The Battles of the Malta Striking Forces, (London, 1974) p. 46.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 46-7.

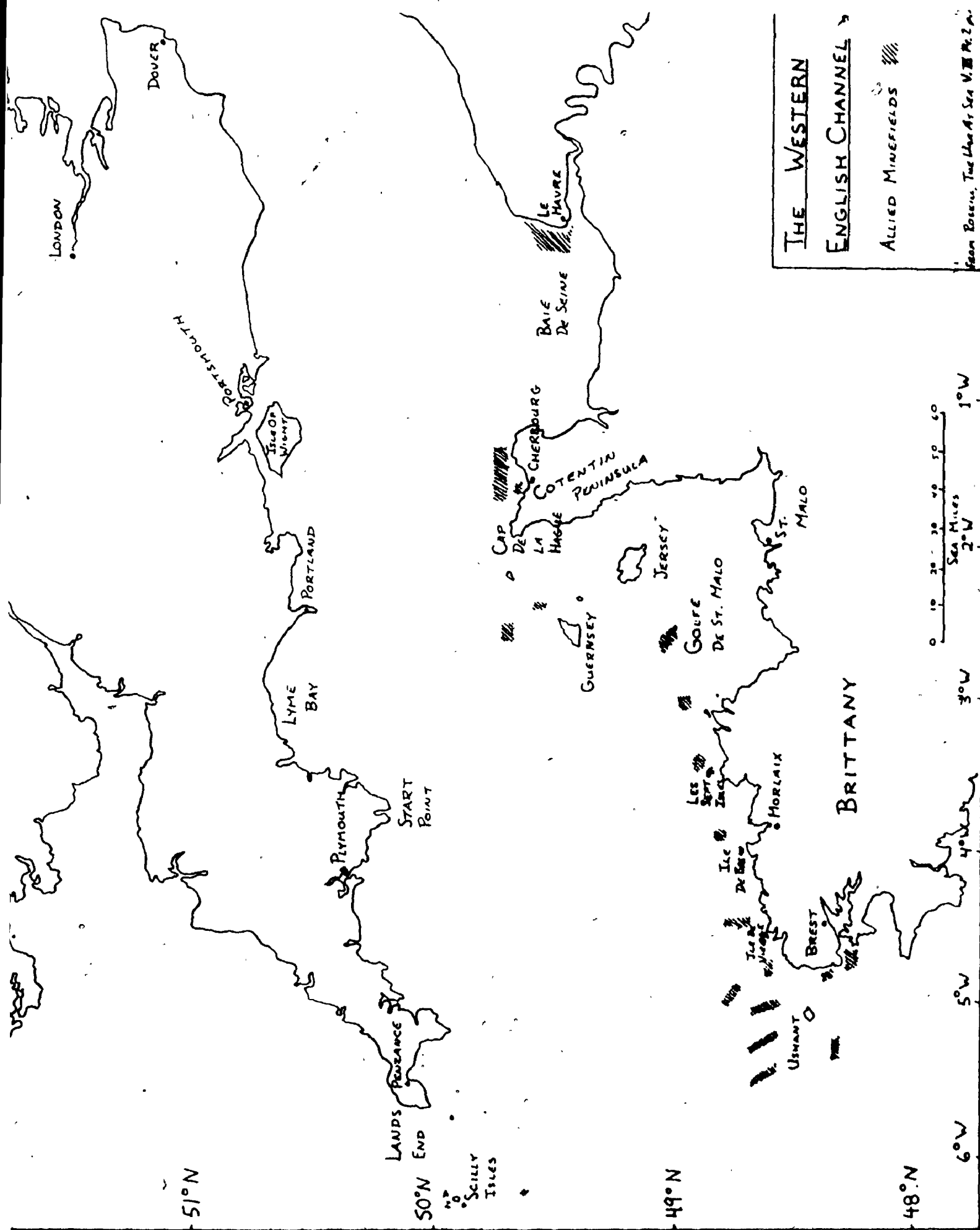
Malta forces were opposed by the Italian navy which as the war progressed, at least according to British sources, proved to be both unwilling and unable to stand up to the Royal Navy. For example, on the night of Force 'K's' successful operation, two Italian eight-inch cruisers were providing close support to the convoy, but even though they realized that the convoy was being attacked they took no action against Force 'K'. Furthermore, the merchant vessels took no avoiding action throughout the attack, therefore the engagement became "a matter of target practice for Force 'K'". ²⁹ Such docility could not be expected from German naval units. Also, while the Italians have been described as being as wary and unprepared for night fighting as the R.N. had been in the first world war, the German navy had devoted considerable attention to night fighting in their pre-war exercises and were quite proficient in that art. ³⁰

The second important difference between Mediterranean operations in 1941 and those in the Channel later in the war concerned the development of radar. The tactical advantage of surprise was often decisive in night actions and in the three examples referred to above the British forces were able to achieve this and capitalize on it. This advantage would prove to be more difficult to obtain in the Channel as the German coastal radar system was quite advanced, and almost all German warships were themselves equipped with radar. Thus German forces could expect some warning of the approach of any attacking force. This fact alone would have considerable impact on offensive operations in the Channel.

The first offensive sweeps carried out by Plymouth Command before the establishment of the permanent strike force demonstrated that a lot had to be learned about the conduct of such operations. In the summer of 1943, R.N. planners "expected

²⁹ Ibid. p. 54.

³⁰ Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey p. 336-7. Admiral Karl Doenitz, Memoirs (London, 1958) p. 6.



THE WESTERN
ENGLISH CHANNEL
ALLIED MINEFIELDS

From Brest, The Atlantic Sea N. 20°

that the Germans would try to transfer merchant ships from the west of France to the North Sea ports, to ease the shortage of tonnage in the Baltic and Scandinavian trades." ³¹ In order to impede this movement Plymouth Command started to carry out offensive sweeps called 'Tunnel' operations along the northern coast of Brittany. At first these sweeps were unsuccessful, but in October two engagements were fought against German forces. On the night of October 4/5th a force of two fleet destroyers and three Hunt class destroyers engaged four German torpedo boats, however the British force became separated and the German torpedo boats were able to make good their escape unharmed. Later in the month signal intelligence revealed that the Germans were going to attempt to send the blockade runner Munsterland up Channel, therefore Plymouth Command ordered a 'Tunnel' to be carried out in the hopes of bringing about an interception. ³² When planning this operation Plymouth Command either ignored or forgot the lessons learned from the successful Malta sweeps with the result that the operation of October 22/23rd 1943 proved to be a good example of how not to carry out offensive sweeps. ³³

The force carrying out the 'Tunnel' was designated Force 28 and consisted of the light cruiser Charybdis (S.O. Captain G.A. Voelcker R.N.), two fleet destroyers Grenville and Rocket, and four Hunt class destroyers Limbourne, Talybont, Wensleydale, and Stevenstone. Force 28 was proceeding on its designated westward course seven miles off the Brittany coast when Limbourne and Talybont monitored German R/T transmissions that indicated that a

³¹ Roskill, The War at Sea Vol. III Pt. 1, p. 93.

³² F.H. Hinsley, British Intelligence in the Second World War Vol. III Pt. 1 (London, 1984) p. 281. Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions: English Channel and Western Approaches 1943-1944," p. 2.

³³ It is extremely likely that the C-in-C Plymouth Admiral Ralph Leatham R.N., was aware of the Malta successes as he had been C-in-C Malta during 1942.

force of approximately five or six German destroyers was in the immediate area. Unfortunately, the German transmissions were not picked up on Charybdis and the Hunts did not communicate their findings so Captain Voelker was unaware of the German activity. However, at 0130 Charybdis obtained a radar contact dead ahead at the range of 14,000 yards. Unfortunately, as Force 28 was sailing in line ahead the rest of the force's radars were masked and they did not pick up the contact while Voelker did not communicate his information to them until it was too late. Thus,

the situation in the British Force was that the Charybdis knew that there was an enemy force 7 miles ahead and closing, but did not know its composition, while the Limbourne and Talybont knew that there was a force of five ships, probably destroyers, somewhere in the vicinity, but did not know where. ³⁴

The German force had a much better grasp of the situation than Force 28. Five torpedo boats ³⁵ under Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf had been warned of the presence of the raiding force, presumably by coastal radar and their own hydrophones, ³⁶ and they manoeuvred into position to launch a torpedo attack on Force 28. At 0145, just after Charybdis had fired starshell to illuminate the German destroyers, the cruiser was struck by a torpedo. Seconds later while the British force reacted in confusion Limbourne was also struck by a torpedo. Both these warships eventually sank and the Germans escaped without having any shots fired at them.

Three clear lessons emerged from this fiasco. In the first place, warships as incompatible as those that made up Force 28 should not have been sent on an offensive sweep together. The four Hunt class destroyers were capable of achieving only twenty-

³⁴ Ibid. p. 4.

³⁵ These torpedo boats, called Elbings by the Allies, were in fact destroyers. (1318 tons, 33 knots, four 4.1-inch guns, 6 21-inch torpedo tubes)

³⁶ Ibid. p. 5 n 3.

six knots ³⁷ while the fleet destroyers and Charybdis could achieve at least thirty-one knots. Therefore, if a high speed chase developed, which was often the case in night actions, the Hunts would either have to be left behind ³⁸ or the cruiser and fleet destroyers held back. Furthermore, there was a great variance of armament among the British warships. Charybdis, included because of her heavy armament, was an A.A. cruiser and therefore was equipped only with 4.5-inch guns although she carried eight of them. ³⁹ The fleet destroyers outgunned Charybdis in terms of calibre with their six 4.7-inch, but the Hunts each only mounted four 4-inch guns. In night actions it was important for a force to operate as a cohesive unit, however the incompatibility in speed and armament among no fewer than three classed ships made it difficult for Force 28 to do this.

The second lesson learned from this operation concerned the absence of any collective training carried out by the warships that comprised Force 28. The warships were thrown together for this operation from Plymouth and Portsmouth Commands and most of the C.O.'s had never worked with each other before. Furthermore, only one C.O., Lieutenant Commander R. Hill R.N. of Grenville, had previous experience on 'Tunnel' operations. ⁴⁰ Hill's conclusion in his report on the action that "ships should practice night encounters together before working off the enemy

³⁷ The Admiralty Historical Section credited them with 29 knots but the highest speed attained by any on their trials was 26. See March, British Destroyers, (London, 1966) p. 473.

³⁸ Which is what happened in the action on Oct. 5 1943.

³⁹ These cruisers were referred to as "Toothless Terrors" throughout the Royal Navy. Smith and Dominy, Cruisers in Action, illustration facing p. 160.

⁴⁰ Roger Hill, Destroyer Captain, (London, 1975) p. 139. In his very embittered memoirs Hill is extremely critical of 'Tunnel' operations.

coast" could not have been bettered as a guideline for future operations. ⁴¹

The final lesson that emerged from the 'Tunnel' on October 22/23rd was that a definite plan had to be established for such operations. In this case the plans were laid out in a standard operation order by Admiral Leatham with minor variations implemented at a conference of the various C.O.'s at Plymouth on the afternoon of the operation. ⁴² However, it is clear from the reports and recollections of some of the participants that they were unhappy with both the plan and the conference. ⁴³ Commander W.J. Phipps R.N., C.O. of the destroyer Limbourne and second Senior Officer of Force 28, described the conference as a "very hurried show run by Voelcker...I hadn't the least idea of his intentions and could not get anything out of him." ⁴⁴ This is an extraordinary statement for the second in command of the force to make, and it is therefore easy to understand why the British force reacted with confusion when Charybdis fell out of the action.

It is clear from the summaries of the action by Admiral Leatham and the Director of the Tactical and Staff Duties Division of the Admiralty that the appropriate lessons were learned from this defeat. ⁴⁵ The official historian could

⁴¹ LtCdr. R. Hill, "Report of Action," Oct. 24, 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12488.

⁴² See App. A and B of "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions" for copies of both Admiral Leatham's general operation order and Capt. Voelcker's orders for Oct. 22/23rd operation.

⁴³ See Hill, Destroyer Captain, p. 139-40; and Lt. E.F. Baines (C.O. of Talybont), "Report of Action", Oct. 24 1943, PRO, ADM 1/12488.

⁴⁴ Diary of Cdr. W.J. Phipps, quoted in Smith, Hold The Narrow Sea, (London, 1984) p. 190.

⁴⁵ See Smith, Hold the Narrow Sea, pgs. 191 and 198; Roskill, The War at Sea Vol. III Pt. 1, p. 100; and Adm.Hist.Sect., "Cruiser and Dest. Actions" p. 7-8.

conclude that:

the lessons of the encounter were, however, at once digested; and we took steps to build up a more suitable force for such operations, composed of light cruisers and fleet destroyers, and to give it such training as would enable the command of the western Channel to be effectively disputed. ⁴⁶

This was no easy task, however. In the first place if such a 'suitable' force was to be assembled, those involved in this task would have to decide what warships were indeed 'suitable'.

In describing a conflict that existed within the Royal Navy during the First World War, British historian E.J. March wrote that "there were two schools of thought in the Navy, bitterly opposed in their diametrically opposite views as to which was the primary weapon, the gun or the torpedo." ⁴⁷ This conflict was not resolved during the Great War and it continued to plague decision-making within the Royal Navy regarding the allocation and design of British destroyers throughout the Second World War. An example of this is provided by the differences of opinion among senior naval officers as to what type of destroyer should make up the permanent strike force at Plymouth.

In his report on the Charybdis action Admiral Leatham made it clear that he favoured destroyers with a strong gun armament for the Plymouth strike force. Historian Peter Smith writes that Leatham "recommended that future operations should be carried out against enemy surface convoys by a trained and adequately homogenous force, and that this force should be composed of 'Tribal' class destroyers with powerful gun armaments." ⁴⁸ Leatham's choice was opposed by the Tactical and Staff Duties

⁴⁶ Roskill, The War at Sea Vol. III Pt. 1, p. 100.

⁴⁷ March, British Destroyers p. x.

⁴⁸ Smith, Hold the Narrow Sea, p. 198.

✓ Division at the Admiralty. D.T.S.D. disputed "that the 'Tribal' class would be ideal - partly because of their large silhouette and partly because of their weak torpedo armament; 'J' and 'K' Class destroyers which carry the greatest combined offensive armament of guns and tubes, would seem to be the most suitable."⁴⁹ This opinion was based on the fact that the 'J's' and 'K's' were originally outfitted with ten torpedo tubes. By this stage of the war, however half of the tubes had been removed on most of these destroyers in favour of increased A/A armament, therefore their torpedo armament was virtually the same as that on the Tribals. As it turned out the Plymouth force was made up of Tribals, and the conflict over the relative merits of gunnery versus torpedoes was fueled by 10th Destroyer Flotilla actions throughout its stay at Plymouth.⁵⁰

9 The other problem that faced planners at the Admiralty and Plymouth Command was where to get the required destroyers. The shortage of destroyers had been a "chronic difficulty" throughout the war and the situation had not improved by late 1943.⁵¹ Captain Roskill notes that "the Commanders-in-Chief of the naval commands in the south all insisted that to achieve the desired mastery more destroyers were essential; but in the face of the demands coming from the Mediterranean the Admiralty could not make any more available."⁵² Three successful naval operations in the fall and early winter of 1943 were to change this situation.

Many destroyers, including the four Canadian Tribals, were

⁴⁹ D.T.S.D. (Most likely Capt. St.J. Cronyn) quoted in Ibid. p. 198.

⁵⁰ Tribals may have been chosen because the four modern R.C.N. Tribals were with the Home Fleet, and there were only 3 'J' class and 1 'K' class left afloat by that stage of the war. Admiralty, British Vessels Lost at Sea 1939-45 (London, 1946).

✓ ⁵¹ Roskill, The War at Sea Vol. III Pt.1, p. 59.

⁵² Ibid. p. 101.

committed to the Russian convoys. Because of the threat from German surface raiders the convoys to Murmansk were screened by heavy units of the Home Fleet which in turn had to be screened by destroyers. However, in September 1943 a force of British midget submarines had severely damaged the battleship Tirpitz, and in late December the battlecruiser Scharnhorst had been caught and sunk by units of the Home Fleet off North Cape. As a result of these two actions "the strategic situation in the north altered greatly in the Allies favour; for the enemy now possessed no force of surface ships capable of threatening our Arctic convoys, and we were therefore able to reduce the strength needed to cover their passages."⁵³ As a result warships became available for other commands including Plymouth.

Once the strategic situation allowed destroyers to be released to Plymouth the question of how many destroyers should make up the strike force remained. Originally Admiralty planners thought that eight destroyers were needed, but an action in the Bay of Biscay allowed a reduction in this estimate. On December 27, 1943 the Germans sent almost their entire destroyer strength in this theatre, five Narviks⁵⁴ and six torpedo boats, into the Bay of Biscay to escort the blockade runner Alsterufer to Brest. It was to no avail: the blockade runner was sunk by the R.A.F., and on December 28th the R.N. cruisers Glasgow and Enterprise⁵⁵ managed to cut the German destroyers off from their bases, sinking one Narvik and two torpedo boats in a running action in

⁵³ Ibid. p. 267.

⁵⁴ Narviks were the German version of the various "super destroyers" built in the 1930's. (2600-3000 tons, 38 knots, 4 or 5 5.9-inch guns, 8 21-inch torpedo tubes)

⁵⁵ Enterprise was commanded by Capt. H.T.W. Grant R.C.N. who later served as C.N.S. from 1947-1951.

heavy seas. ⁵⁶

On January 3, 1944 the Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser R.N., signalled the Admiralty that "as situation in the Bay has improved since your 281410 (the signal sent at 1410 on Dec. 28, 1943) was made it is for consideration that the requirements of 8 destroyers should now be reduced to five." ⁵⁷ Admiral Fraser suggested that the four R.C.N. Tribals, Athabaskan, Haida, Huron, and Iroquois, as well as the R.N. Tribal Ashanti, be sent to Plymouth as they became available. ⁵⁸ Accordingly all of the above Tribals, except Huron, transferred to Plymouth during the first two weeks of January. Huron was to remain at Scapa Flow to escort two more convoys to the Soviet Union and her place at Plymouth was taken by the R.N. Tribal Tartar.

Given the Canadian Naval Staff's desire to have the Tribals serve as "fighting ships in a fighting theatre of war" ⁵⁹ there can be little doubt that they would have approved of their transfer to Plymouth. However, it appears that they were not party to this decision. On December 13, 1943, in a letter to the S.C.N.O. (L), Admiral Nelles had asked Captain Houghton to raise the "vexatious question of Canada being kept informed where her ships, and her men, are at any given time" with the Admiralty. ⁶⁰ Such information was not immediately forthcoming for there is no reference to the C.N.S. or the Naval Staff being

⁵⁶ See Whitley, Destroyer!, p. 192-204, Smith and Dominy, Cruisers in Action, 172-4, and Schull, Far Distant Ships, (Ottawa, 1950) p. 201.

⁵⁷ Fraser to Admiralty, Jan. 3, 1944, NAC RG 24, Vol. 11751, 151-1-1. It is unlikely action in the Bay had an effect on signal referred to as it commenced at 1335.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ A/Capt. H.G. DeWolf, "Employment of Tribal Destroyers" Dec. 7, 1942, NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6797, NSS-8375-355.

⁶⁰ Nelles to Houghton, Dec. 13, 1943. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6796, NSS 1057-5-20.

consulted about the Tribals move to Plymouth in either Canadian or British records. This is not too surprising as the R.C.N. had placed the Tribals under R.N. operational control. The British were justified in making the decision by themselves, and they probably realized that the Canadians would approve of the decision to include their Tribals in the first permanent strike force based at Plymouth.

In his report on the the October 22/23rd 1943 'Tunnel' operation Admiral Leatham observed "that the art of night fighting with the added new technique of radar has, up to date in this war, had very little opportunity of practical test, and in Plymouth Command at all events, little opportunity of exercise." ⁶¹ If one was to think that such remarks were to lead to a new policy within Plymouth Command of providing opportunities for warships assigned to offensive sweeps to sharpen their night fighting tactics and skills through a comprehensive series of exercises one would be sadly mistaken. It is clear that while Plymouth Command may have been aware of the problems that contributed to the Charybdis fiasco, operational demands kept them from implementing the solutions.

The first four Tribals of the offensive strike force gathered at Plymouth in mid January 1944. Haida and Iroquois arrived from Scapa Flow on January 12th while Athabaskan and Ashanti joined them six days later after escorting the battleship King George V, with Winston Churchill aboard, back from the Azores. ⁶² On January 19th, Admiral Leatham, seemingly ignoring the lessons of the Charybdis action, sent the four newly arrived Tribals along with three Hunt class destroyers on a 'Tunnel'

⁶¹ Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions In the English Channel and Western Approaches" p. 11.

⁶² Iroquois Deck Log, Jan. 12 & 18, 1944. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 7418. Burrow and Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady, (Toronto, 1987) p. 69.

offensive sweep. It is perhaps fortunate that no contact with German units was made on this particular operation as there was much confusion. Problems arose over communications and direction of the force, and at one point the two separate divisions lost contact with each other while close to the French coast. It is evident that the Tribals in particular were thoroughly confused and after the operation Commander DeWolf suggested in his action report "it is strongly recommended that the Plymouth forces exercise night encounters." ⁶³

Despite the fact that both the C-in-C Plymouth and at least one of the destroyer captains realized the need for exercises this was difficult to accomplish. The problem with organizing any kind of training schedule was getting the destroyers concerned the time to carry out the exercises. There were so many operational demands on destroyers that it was extremely difficult to allocate any time for group exercises. A good example of the operational demands placed upon these warships at this point in the war is provided by activities of Haida during the first two months of 1944.

The first day of January found Haida escorting the Murmansk convoy RA 55B back to Great Britain. On January 7th, the destroyer was detached from the escort and arrived at Scapa Flow later that day. Three days later Haida, accompanied by Iroquois, left for Plymouth where they arrived on January 12th. On January 17th Haida joined the screen accompanying the King George V back to Plymouth, and then participated in the 'Tunnel' on January 19th. During the last week of January Haida had a new radar system installed, and then on the night of February 2nd/3rd took part in another 'Tunnel'. On February 4th the Tribals sailed for Scapa Flow to form part of the screen for battleships and aircraft carriers of the Home Fleet carrying out an offensive sweep against German shipping off Norway. Haida returned to

⁶³ Cdr. H.G. DeWolf to Admiral R. Leatham, Jan. 20, 1944.
NAC, Vol. 11730, CS151-11-9.

Scapa Flow on February 12th and then sailed for Plymouth with Athabaskan and Iroquois the next day. Upon arrival at Plymouth on the fifteenth Haida engaged in exercises before participating in more 'Tunnels' on the nights of February 19/20th and 25/26th.⁶⁴ While perhaps the scope of this activity was unusual, the amount of it was not. Throughout the war destroyers were busy ships and the heavy demands placed upon them made collective exercising difficult.

Even though Athabaskan, Haida, Iroquois, and Ashanti had been attached to Plymouth Command since mid-January 1944, the 10th Destroyer Flotilla was not officially formed until February 9th. The flotilla consisted of the three Canadian Tribals⁶⁵ and the R.N. Tribals Ashanti and Tartar, with the latter's C.O., Commander St. John Tyrwhitt R.N., becoming Captain (D)10. Tyrwhitt, son of the famous Admiral of the Fleet Sir Reginald Tyrwhitt R.N. of First World War fame, was an experienced destroyer man who had a good reputation within the R.N. He had commanded destroyers in the Mediterranean since 1940 and had seen some duty with Malta strike forces.⁶⁶ A description of Tyrwhitt by one of his crew paints an almost stereotypical portrait of a stern, distant Royal Navy commanding officer who was respected yet probably not admired by his men:

This austere gentleman was one whom nobody could ever really get to know, or shall we say to understand. Familiarity does not come into the question at all, but it stands that our Captain appeared more as a somewhat shady mythical being .

⁶⁴ Deck Log H.M.C.S. Iroquois Jan. 1-Feb. 18, 1944. Plymouth Command War Diary Jan. and Feb. 1944. "HMCS Haida" DHIST (Brief History. DHIST, Haida 8000.

⁶⁵ Iroquois left for refit in Canada on Feb. 18 and was replaced by Huron.

⁶⁶ Admiral A. Cunningham thought highly of him, see A Sailor's Odyssey, p. 275. For strike force experience see Smith and Walker, The Battles of the Malta Striking Forces p. 29-30.

than as a real person...It is agreed that after twenty-five years or so in a service which one has a wholehearted interest in, and living in extremely congenial surroundings, a man will undoubtedly (sic) determine to uphold the tradition of that Service to the last nail, even to the great discomfort of the lowliest ordinary seaman. So it was with Commander Tyrwhitt. ⁶⁷

The 10th Destroyer Flotilla probably conducted its most valuable training during the first weeks after its organization. In the absence of the ships logs for the period, it is difficult to determine exactly how extensive these exercises were, however Huron's C.O., Lieutenant Commander H.S. Rayner⁶⁸ R.C.N., wrote in his Report of Proceedings that between February 18th and 29th Huron "carried out numerous sea and harbour exercises with the Tenth Destroyer Flotilla." ⁶⁹ Both Lieutenant William Sclater R.C.N.V.R., an information officer who joined Haida for some of her sorties, and A. Meiklem, the Navigator's Yeoman aboard Tartar, recall that a great variety of exercises including torpedo shoots, gunnery exercises, anti-aircraft practise and towing evolutions were carried out. ⁶⁹ Even though such exercises were undoubtedly useful they would not be that effective in preparing the flotilla for night offensive sweeps. This could be accomplished through night encounter exercises, and both Sclater and Meiklem report that several of these were undertaken in late February.

Night encounter exercises were the basic night exercise practiced by both the R.N. and R.C.N. They simply involved splitting a force in two with each force then seeking to locate and identify the other force before it did the same. There were

⁶⁷ A. Meiklem, Tartar Memoirs, (Glasgow) p. 32.

⁶⁸ LtCdr. H.S. Rayner, "Report of Proceedings -Feb. 1944." Mar. 1, 1944. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11426, HU-013.

⁶⁹ Meiklem, Tartar Memoirs, p. 79. Sclater, Haida, (Toronto, 1946) p. 81-2. See also Brice, The Tribals: Biography of a Destroyer Class (London, 1971) p. 60.

several advantages to this type of exercise for the 10th Destroyer Flotilla. First the Tribals would get used to working in sub-divisions. Night actions often became very confused and large formations often broke down into sub-divisions once fighting broke out.⁷⁰ If sub-divisions were to operate effectively it helped if the ships concerned were familiar with each other. Secondly, night encounters provided the Tribals with the best conditions for practicing the relatively new art of radar interception. As will be seen it would take much practice and experience before this new type of warfare was carried out effectively. Finally, night encounters provided an opportunity for the Tribals to practice the type of close range, high speed manoeuvring that was characteristic of night actions between destroyers. Generally night encounters were intended to mold flotillas into a tightly knit team, and thus the 10th Destroyer Flotilla was carrying out the right type of exercise. Events during their training schedule revealed the need for these exercises.

As mentioned previously, the demands of war often made it difficult for warships to carry out a comprehensive program of exercises. Such was the case on February 25, 1944 as four of the 10th Flotilla's Tribals were ordered to participate in a 'Tunnel' offensive sweep being carried out that night. The results of this operation were to prove disappointing, and not only because enemy forces were not encountered.

The 'Tunnel' on February 25/26 was carried out by Force 28 consisting of Tartar, Athabaskan, Haida, Huron, and the cruiser Bellona.⁷¹ The latter's commanding officer, Captain Walter Norris R.N., was Senior Officer in the force. At 0140 on February 26th, when the force was about to start its eastward run

⁷⁰ The actions of April 25/26th and June 8/9th provide excellent examples of this.

⁷¹ When destroyers of the 10th Flotilla were accompanied by a cruiser they referred to as Force 26 or 28.

down the French coast, Bellona's radar picked up a contact "fine on the starboard bow, distance six miles." Almost immediately more contacts began to appear, causing Captain Norris to suspect they were E-boats and accordingly he took evasive action to port. As this manoeuvre was carried out "fresh and separate contacts, close in, appeared about every 40 degrees during the turn." Norris then prepared to order starshell to illuminate the continuously appearing contacts until he concluded "the 'enemy' plan of attack was 'too perfect' and that we were in the presence of some other freak of nature, rather than E-boats." At this point "a more experienced" radar operator took over and reported the the contacts were actually "low flying aircraft" which proved to be friendly. Norris then ordered Force 28 to resume its sweep eastwards along the French coast. ⁷²

At 0322 it appeared that the sweep may have been successful as Tartar's radar picked up a contact bearing 141 degrees at eight miles range. This contact was confirmed by Bellona and at 0325 Tartar's plot indicated that the contact's course was 180 degrees at nine knots. The contact was assumed to be an enemy vessel therefore "at 0327, in accordance with a pre-arranged plan, Bellona opened fire with starshell and the Destroyers were ordered to engage." Bellona's starshells "disclosed what appeared to be an enemy Destroyer", consequently Bellona and Tartar opened fire with their main armament. However, as Force 28 closed the target "these 'ships' quickly changed their form into small islets, lands, etc. Fire was ceased accordingly." Force 28 reformed and returned to Plymouth. ⁷³

This 'action' is illuminating as it reveals several problems that the 10th Destroyer Flotilla had to contend with. Regarding

⁷² Capt. W. Norris to Vice Admiral R. Leatham, February 27, 1944, p. 1. PRO, ADM 199/532. Capt. Norris sent in the only report on this operation.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 2. Cdr. DeWolf recalls firing on a target that turned out to be a buoy with starshell setting fire to haystacks inland. It was probably the same operation.

the first incident at 0140, Captain Norris noted that "an experienced Radar operator would undoubtedly have been able to interpret these contacts as a low flying aircraft, but, unfortunately, the few more highly trained men cannot be on watch all the time." ⁷⁴ Although this situation occurred aboard a British cruiser it is likely that the same problem existed on the Canadian Tribals. The problem was not necessarily lack of training, but rather lack of experience. Until the operators became used to the conditions in that particular theatre of operations such problems would continue to occur.

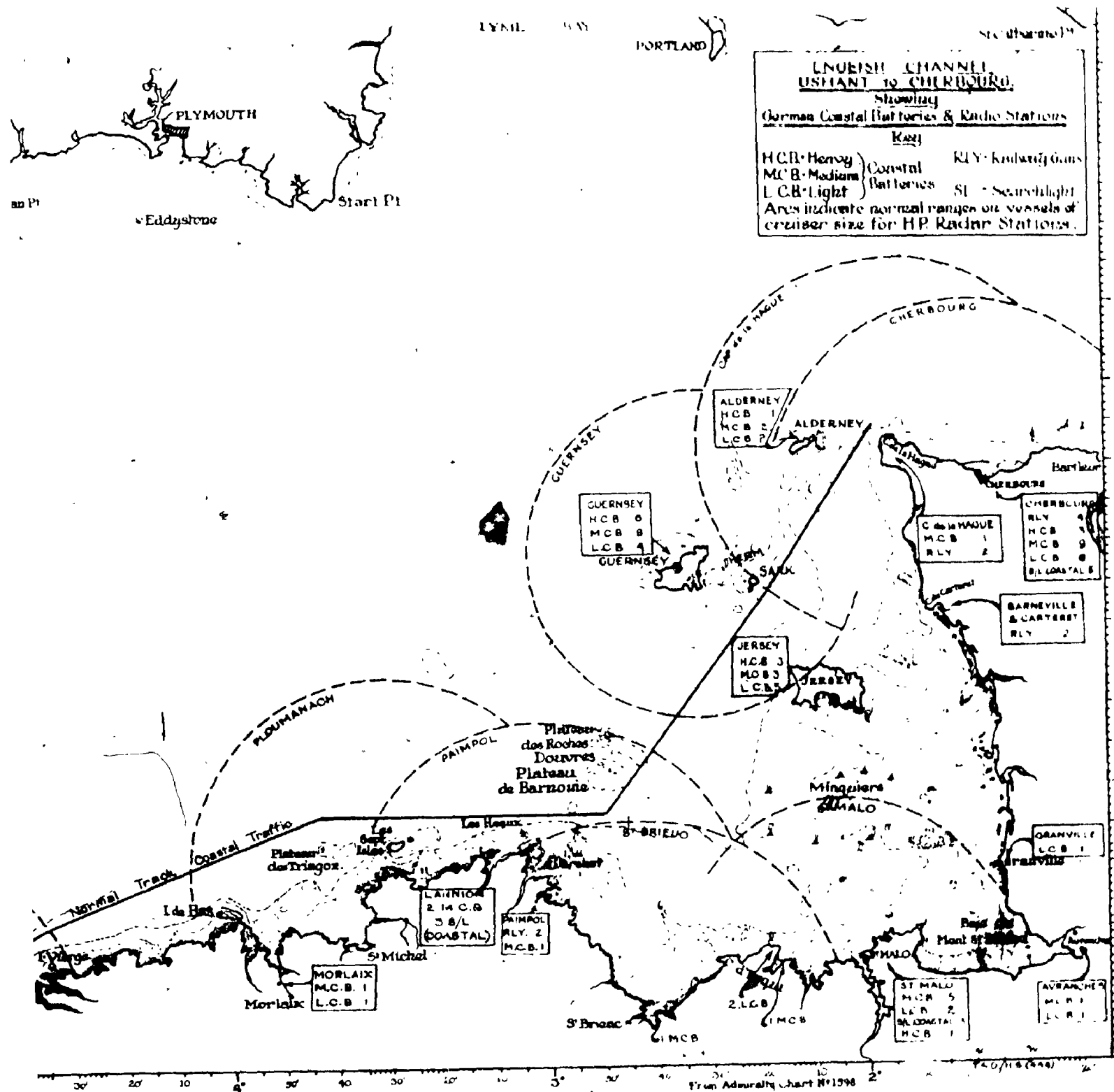
The incident involving the small islets reveals another problem. One cannot attach too much blame to the radar operators or look outs who identified the target as a destroyer for the problem was essentially one of navigation. In his report Captain Norris noted that "subsequent analysis has proved that my position was a good 3 miles to the southward of that estimated. Several days of northerly winds, providing an unusually southerly set, and possibly inaccuracy in reckoning due to excessive alteration in course and speed during the 0140 incident, probably combined to cause the result." ⁷⁵ Although experience with the strong tidal conditions would help the navigators on subsequent operations navigation along the Brittany coast would remain a difficult task throughout 1944. Commander DeWolf, a navigation specialist, recalls that he was often worried about being too close to the rocky Brittany coast and running aground. ⁷⁶

Although the problems with radar identification and navigation could be solved through experience, the officers and men of Force 28 also learnt of another potential difficulty that they could do little about on February 25/26th. As Force 28 was

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 1.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

⁷⁶ DeWolf interview with author. Aug. 20, 1987. Often the Germans assisted the Tribals by turning coastal lights on presumably to assist their own shipping.



Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions
Battle Summary No. 39.

steaming south towards the French coast Bellona's D/F receiver indicated that the force had been detected by a German coastal radar station. ⁷⁷ The radar signal was first detected when Force 28 was twenty-five miles from the coast and the German radar was "assumed to pick out the Force at a range of 22 miles from coast as at this position the beam, which was sweeping through our bearing once every three minutes, became steady for a period with maximum signal in the 'D/F receiver.'" ⁷⁸ The fact that German radar could detect Allied forces carrying out offensive sweeps and give any coastal convoys or warships considerable warning of their presence would have considerable bearing on future operations by the 10th Destroyer Flotilla. Indeed Kriegsmarine War Diaries reveal that the only successful interceptions by Plymouth forces before D-Day occurred as a result of either breakdowns in the German warning network or miscalculations by German commanders at sea when warned of the approach of a raiding force. ⁷⁹ Thus radar proved to be an advantage enjoyed by both sides during the Channel operations in 1944.

While the February 25/26th 'Tunnel' did not result in contact with German forces another sweep carried out by Tribals within the next week did. However, despite the fact that contact was gained the outcome was even more disappointing than that of the previous operation, and the effects proved to be much more far reaching as far as the personnel of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla were concerned.

On the night of March 1/2nd 1944, Bellona and the five

⁷⁷ Judging from the tone of Bellona's report the existence this radar station was previously unknown to Plymouth Command.

⁷⁸ Capt. W. Norris to Vice Adm. R. Leatham, Feb. 27, 1944, App. I, "Enemy Radar Station" p. 1. PRO, ADM 199/532.

⁷⁹ The miscalculation led to the action on April 26/27 while the apparent breakdown led to the engagement on April 29. See Chapters III and IV.

Tribals of the 10th Flotilla were ordered to carry out another 'Tunnel' operation. Shortly before leaving Plymouth it was discovered that Bellona had a radar malfunction and could not take part in the operation, therefore the force was reduced to the Tribals and Commander Tyrwhitt became Senior Officer. At 2343, when the Tribals were in mid-Channel, Tartar's radar gained contact with eight echoes "steering a South Easterly course at 17/21 knots." Unlike the previous operation Tyrwhitt was assured of the accuracy of this contact as the Radar Officer from Captain (D)'s staff at Plymouth was on board Tartar. In his report on the operation Tyrwhitt wrote that he "judged this to be a flotilla of large 'E' boats." Without investigating further Tyrwhitt altered course to evade the contacts and, after giving them a wide berth, resumed his regular course. ⁸⁰

After initiating an eastward sweep along the Brittany coast, the Tribals' radar detected a number of small contacts to the southeast. Along with radar the 10th Destroyer Flotilla used a monitoring system referred to as "Headache" to detect and plot the movements and intentions of German warships. On board each of the Tribals a German speaking "Headache" operator ⁸¹ was able to monitor close range R/T transmissions between German warships. On this 'Tunnel' this system proved effective as at 0226 and 0227 Haida intercepted transmissions that indicated torpedoes were being fired by German warships close by. As a result at 0227 Tyrwhitt ordered "a ninety degree turn to seaward (345)" and speed was "increased to 28 knots." After this manoeuvre "the

⁸⁰ Cdr. St.J. Tyrwhitt to Vice Adm. R. Leatham, March 3rd, 1944, p. 1. PRO, ADM 199/532. Tyrwhitt's report is the only narrative of this operation.

⁸¹ The "Headache" operators on the Canadian Tribals were Austrians. The British had started to monitor German plain language R/T signals in 1940. By 1944 it appears that many Allied warships operating against German surface units had their own "Headache" operators aboard. See Hinsley, British Intelligence Vol. II. p. 194-5.

sweep to the Eastward was resumed on course 075 , 20 knots, at 0237." ⁸²

At 0242 Haida's radar indicated a contact bearing 095 at a range of three miles. This contact was unconfirmed by the other Tribals, however at 0244 Tyrwhitt recorded that Tartar's "Headache" "reported indication of torpedoes being fired from or on a bearing of 070 ." Again Tyrwhitt ordered evasive action to be taken by a ninety degree turn away from the suspected source, but this time he ordered the bearing to be illuminated with starshell. The starshell revealed no German warships, and Tyrwhitt, concluding "it was obvious that our presence was well known to the enemy and it was suspected that 'E' boats were attempting to attack", immediately set course for Plymouth at twenty-eight knots. ⁸³

Commander Tyrwhitt concluded in his report that "considerable experience of conditions prevailing was gained as a result of this operation though it is regretted that no enemy was brought to action." ⁸⁴ It appears that Tyrwhitt would soon have more reason to regret this action. The evidence suggests, that as a result of this operation, he was relieved of his command as Captain (D)10.

In the first line of his report to the Admiralty on the March 1/2 'Tunnel', Leatham noted that "the result of this sweep is disappointing." While Leatham supported Tyrwhitt's decision to avoid the possible action with E-boats at 2343 he maintained that "it must be admitted that the evidence of the presence of E-boats is slender and unconvincing." Leatham was much more critical of the decisions taken later in the action, especially those between 0217 and 0240 when "there were definite indications, both by radar and Headache, of the presence of an

⁸² Tyrwhitt to Leatham, Mar. 3, 1943, p. 1.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 2.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

enemy force to the south and east of Force 26." ⁸⁵

Leatham was clearly not impressed with Tyrwhitt's reaction to the knowledge that there was a German force in the immediate area:

Senior Officer, 10th Destroyer Flotilla at the same time turned his force 90 to avoid torpedoes which he presumably thought must be coming from E-boats, but took no action to try to locate the enemy. This omission was unfortunate, as it seems certain that a star shell sweep to the south-east at 0227 would have revealed them. From the call signs used, it seems likely that these would have proved to be Elbings. ⁸⁶

Leatham based his opinion that the contacts would have proved to be destroyers and not E-boats on the fact that the call signs and torpedo firing orders picked up by 'Headache' were the same that were used by the German torpedo boats in the actions in October 1943. ⁸⁷ Tyrwhitt obviously disagreed with this assessment as in his report he twice mentions "that no radar contact was made which could have been a ship of destroyer size or greater." ⁸⁸ It is interesting to note that the flotilla library kept copies of the reports on both the actions in October 1943, and it is likely that intelligence officers also would have made the various C.O.'s aware of the call signs, therefore it is likely that Tyrwhitt was aware of them. In Tyrwhitt's defence he may have had reason to put more stock in radar than 'Headache' reports.

Leatham concluded that:

⁸⁵ Vice Admiral Ralph Leatham, "10th Destroyer Flotilla Report On Tunnel Night 1st/2nd March." March 25 1944. p. 1. PRO, ADM 199/532.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Capt. R.A. Morice, "'Headache' Intercepts by H.M.S. Tartar and H.M.S. (sic) Haida on 2nd March, 1944." March 4, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/532. Capt. Morice was Capt. (D) Plymouth.

⁸⁸ Tyrwhitt to Leatham, March 3, 1944. p. 2.

Sufficient steps were not taken to verify the very uncertain information received in spite of the enemy's sting having apparently being drawn at 0226, or thereabouts. The Senior Officer's experience in these waters was meagre and his decision to withdraw was evidently influenced by the size of his force. He might perhaps have split them with advantage but this requires a pre-arranged and well understood plan. °°

"Disappointing, ...slender and unconvincing, ...took no action, ...omission": Leatham's appraisal of the March 1/2nd 'Tunnel' was full of terms that no responsible naval officer would want said of an operation that he had led. While Leatham's report was issued ten days after Commander Tyrwhitt was replaced by Commander Basil Jones R.N., he certainly leaves the impression that Tyrwhitt was removed because he had handled this operation badly.

This conclusion is supported by two other pieces of evidence. At the time of the change in command Commander DeWolf recalls he and other Canadian officers thinking that Tyrwhitt was replaced as a result of poor performance on the 'Tunnel':

We were out one night and got some radar echoes and I think Tyrwhitt thought they were probably E-boats and he avoided, whereas they might well have been German destroyers...Anyway, we didn't investigate and I think he got very severely criticized for that. Then he was relieved and Jones was appointed in his place. All we ever heard was that Tyrwhitt had been overworked in the Mediterranean and was being given a rest ashore. °°

While the forty year old memory of a naval officer is not the most concrete evidence, the timing of the change of command also indicates that Tyrwhitt was replaced as a result of the March 1/2nd 'Tunnel'. Commander Jones took over as Captain (D)10 on March 15, only one month after Tartar had emerged from a three

°° Leatham, "10th Destroyer Flotilla Report On Tunnel." p. 2.

°° Interview with DeWolf, Aug. 20, 1987. DeWolf to author Sept. 5, 1987.

month long refit. ⁹¹ If Jones replacement of Tyrwhitt was routine then it would most likely have taken place earlier while Tartar was in refit. Jones was in Britain between assignments at this time so he was certainly available. Furthermore, Jones did not expect to be given such a command. He was taking courses at the Anti-submarine Tactical School and expected to be assigned to the "Atlantic run." ⁹² From this it can also be concluded that Tyrwhitt was relieved because Leatham did not think he was right for the job. Such an action might also have been kept quiet because of the status of Tyrwhitt's father. ⁹³

This incident is important because it was at least partially responsible for the aggressive tactics that became characteristic of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla. On the March 1/2nd 'Tunnel' Tyrwhitt had twice turned away from suspected torpedo attacks and then had returned to Plymouth without having conducted a thorough search for the opposition. In his report on the action Admiral Leatham wrote that "depending on the circumstances, which only the commanding officer can gauge, evasive action (e.g. to avoid a position of tactical disadvantage) may have to be taken, but it does not mean that the main objective is to be missed as a result of it." ⁹⁴ The 'main objective' as stated in Admiral Leatham's general operation order for 'Tunnel' operations was "to intercept and destroy enemy forces and shipping on passage up or down Channel." ⁹⁵ The major result of the March 1/2nd 'Tunnel', and the subsequent relief of Commander Tyrwhitt, was that the C.O.'s

⁹¹ Meiklem, Tartar Memoirs, p. 79.

⁹² Basil Jones, And So to Battle, (Battle, 1976) p. 74-5.

⁹³ Tyrwhitt was appointed to the Admiralty, and was later promoted to Rear Admiral.

⁹⁴ Leatham, "10th Destroyer Flotilla Report on Tunnel" p. 1.

⁹⁵ Leatham, "Orders For Operation 'Tunnel'. Interception of Enemy Shipping" Oct. 21, 1943. In Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions" App. "A" p. 16.

of the flotilla, particularly the Canadians, became extremely aggressive and never lost sight of the "main objective". In the future when under torpedo attack the Tribals took evasive action towards rather than away from the source, and they became very determined in their efforts to find and destroy German shipping. Commander DeWolf recalls "my feeling at the time was that we had failed to go after some ships...some echoes, so from then on in the back of my mind was if we ever get an echo, we're going after it. So if we found one we did. That was just natural fear of criticism." **

The Tribals were, perhaps fortunate that on the three 'Tunnels' they carried out between January 19th, and March 2nd 1944 they were not forced to engage German forces. Given the problems encountered on each of these operations it is likely that action with German warships would have resulted in outcomes similar to the two 'Tunnels' carried out by Plymouth Command during October 1943. The situation was to improve in the following two months. Throughout March and April the 10th Destroyer Flotilla took part in a number of operations that again did not result in contact with German forces. As a result of these operations however, the Tribal crews, particularly the officers, gained much experience in the type of conditions they would encounter on offensive sweeps. Therefore, when German destroyers were finally engaged in late April, the Tribals performed reasonably well.

** Interview with DeWolf, Aug. 20, 1987.

Chapter III

The captain of a destroyer in World War II was a think box into which radar, radio, and sight reports were fed, and out of which were triggered response orders some of which were considered reactions and some wild guesses.

Roger Hill
Destroyer Captain

The months of March and April 1944 were a period of intense activity for the 10th Destroyer Flotilla. During that time the Tribals were at sea on twenty-five occasions and carried out a total of eighty-four individual sorties.¹ Despite these efforts contact with German forces had not been made, therefore the flotilla had not come any closer to achieving its objective of weakening the German surface forces that posed a potential threat to the invasion. However, all this was to change on April 26, 1944. Off Les Sept Iles on the north coast of Brittany, the Canadian Tribals were to be involved in their first significant action, and the 10th Destroyer Flotilla was to take its first step in meeting its objective.

Although the Canadians serving on the Tribals had seen some action while with the Home Fleet during 1943 and 1944, and others had experienced combat earlier in the war in other destroyers, they had not yet participated in the type of intense, quick hitting, night action that typified destroyer battles in the English Channel. Certainly they had gained some experience during the first months of 1944, but it had yet to be put to the test of battle.

This relative lack of experience placed the onus of success squarely on the shoulders of the commanding officers of the three destroyers. Unlike most of their crew members, Commander DeWolf, Lieutenant Commander Rayner, and Lieutenant Commander Stubbs were familiar with this type of warfare. As officers in the pre-war R.C.N. their training and experience had concentrated on surface actions and fleet work. Therefore, the action of April 26th 1944 provides an opportunity to examine how well these officers performed while fighting the type of warfare for which they had been prepared by their naval service in the 1920's and 1930's.

If one is to study the performance of commanding officers in battle one must have some criteria on which to base such

¹ Plymouth Command War Diary, PRO, ADM 199/1393.

analysis. In this case the criteria can be broken down into three general categories; ship handling, tactical decision-making, and the overall performance of the ships crews. Ship handling raises two broad questions: how well did the C.O. manoeuvre his destroyer throughout the action and how successfully did he take advantage of the weapons and technology he had at his disposal? Coming to terms with tactical decision-making is more difficult. How well did the captain anticipate enemy movements and how effectively did he respond to them in such away that the safety of their ship or the whole force was not imperiled? Finally, a captain is responsible for the performance of his crew. How well did the Tribal crews perform in areas such as gunnery and torpedo firing?

The officers concerned were among the best of what can be termed second generation R.C.N. officers. They had joined the navy either at the end of the First World War or during the inter-war years, and had learned their trade in both R.C.N. destroyers and warships of the R.N. Each had received his first destroyer command early in the war,² and performed superbly. They were given Tribal commands as part of an R.C.N. policy to award these posts to its most promising officers.

Of the officers commanding the Tribals in the spring of 1944, Commander H.G. DeWolf was the "star". He had joined the Royal Naval College of Canada in 1918, and his inter-war record revealed that he was highly thought of in Canadian naval circles. A navigation specialist, he had served as Navigating Officer and First Lieutenant on R.C.N. destroyers, but the best indication of his promise is that he was selected to attend the Royal Navy Staff College in 1937, and then served on the staff of the Flag Officer commanding the First Cruiser Squadron in the prestigious

² DeWolf had commanded a minesweeper in the early 1930's.

Mediterranean Fleet. ³

Once war broke out the promise that DeWolf had shown earlier was realized on both operations and staff duties. DeWolf became C.O. of the destroyer St. Laurent in October 1939, and after spending seven months escorting convoys in and out of Halifax, St. Laurent joined the other R.C.N. destroyers serving in British waters when the threat of invasion was at its highest. DeWolf and St. Laurent took part in a wide range of inshore operations during the evacuation of France that were undoubtedly of some benefit during his later operations in the Channel. In July 1940 DeWolf relinquished his command to become Chief of Staff to the Commanding Officer Atlantic Coast, Commodore G.C. Jones, and then in June 1942 when Jones became V.C.N.S., DeWolf followed him to N.S.H.Q. to become Director of Plans. In these posts DeWolf earned a reputation of being "one of the ablest of RCN staff officers", but he wanted to get back to sea. In the summer of 1943, Rear Admiral Jones followed through on a old promise and DeWolf was given command of Haida. ⁴

Throughout the R.C.N. Harry DeWolf had a reputation as being a stern and taciturn officer, and this carried over in the way he ran his ship. Lieutenant S.M. Tovell R.C.N.V.R. who was attached to C.N.M.O.(L) in 1944 as a historical officer, recalls that, in terms of discipline and countenance, the Tribals were far more formal than other R.C.N. warships he came into contact with, and that Haida was by far the most "pusser" of the Tribals. DeWolf's style of leadership was obviously successful. Haida's crew

³ Biographical File on Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf, DHIST, BIOG D. "Top Command to Change" Crowsnest, Vol. 12, No. 6. April 1960. p. 5.

⁴ Ibid. Author Interview With DeWolf, Aug. 20, 1987. Quotation from Milner, North Atlantic Run, caption on illustration of DeWolf. DeWolf describes G.C. Jones as "a great friend", and Jones obviously had great admiration for DeWolf's abilities for he continuously employed him on his staff, and after DeWolf left Haida Jones appointed him A.C.N.S.

considered him to be strict but fair, and it is clear that they responded by holding him in a great amount of respect. As a result of this, and DeWolf's considerable abilities as a ship handler, Haida was an extremely happy and efficient ship during the spring and summer of 1944. ⁵

The C.O. of Huron was also an outstanding officer with a reserved personality. Lieutenant Commander H.S. "Herbie" Rayner had joined the R.C.N. in 1928 and like many other R.C.N. officers his pre-war sea time alternated between Canadian destroyers and R.N. battleships. Rayner became a torpedo specialist, and was First Lieutenant of Skeena when war broke out. In July 1940 he succeeded DeWolf as C.O. of St. Laurent, and spent the next seventeen months under the heavy pressures that faced C.O.'s on the North Atlantic run. In February 1942 Rayner was appointed Staff Officer Operations of C.A.C. where he remained until appointed C.O. of Huron in July 1943. ⁶

Huron's First Lieutenant during Rayner's period as C.O. later described him as "a reserved Christian gentleman with a high sense of duty. He had a calm, quiet manner, seldom showed or expressed exasperation, a rare quality in any commanding officer." Lieutenant Budge also recalled that "no matter what task the ship was given, we all had the greatest confidence in him." ⁷ Only a good leader and highly competent officer could inspire such confidence from those under his command.

Like DeWolf and Rayner, Lieutenant Commander J.H. Stubbs already had an outstanding war record when he became C.O. of

⁵ DHIST interview with S.M. Tovell, May 12 1988. Sclater, Haida, (Toronto, 1946) p. 25. Lawrence, Tales of the North Atlantic, (Toronto, 1985) p. 12, 220-221.

⁶ Biographical File on Vice Admiral H.S. Rayner. DHIST Biog R. "C.N.S. Retires", Crowsnest Vol. 16, No. 8, Aug. 1964.

⁷ Rear Admiral P.D. Budge, Address to Huron Reunion, Sept. 19, 1981. DHIST, 82/92.

Athabaskan in November 1943. In June 1942, while captain of the destroyer Assiniboine, Stubbs helped save a potentially bad situation when as Senior Officer of a weak and poorly equipped escort group he used innovative tactics that helped frustrate U-boat attacks on the convoy ONS 100. ⁹ Stubb's reputation continued to grow when on August 6th 1942, Assiniboine caught U 210 on the surface. Demonstrating "cool determination" while under fire from the U-boat, Stubbs kept Assiniboine close to the submarine while it attempted to escape until he eventually succeeded in ramming the U-boat. ⁹ For this action Stubbs was awarded a D.S.O.

Of the three Tribal C.O.'s, Stubbs was the only one who could be referred to as a 'sailor's captain'. Leading Seaman George Lauder recalls that "Stubbs seemed to want to know his ship's company, the men, better. (than previous C.O. Commander G.R. "Gus" Miles R.C.N.) A younger man than Gus, but he was brilliant. He knew what was going on. He was very good and everybody respected Stubbs." ¹⁰ According to lower deck gossip outlined in the book Unlucky Lady, Stubbs would go to great lengths to defend his men from overbearing officers, and it is clear that he was extremely popular because of this. According to the authors Len Burrow and Emile Beaudoin he transformed Athabaskan into a happy ship which also contributed to her being a better fighting ship. ¹¹

Towards the end of April, R.A.F. reconnaissance aircraft had revealed that several German destroyers were gathering in the

⁹ Milner, North Atlantic Run p. 117-20.

⁹ Schull, The Far Distant Ships (Ottawa, 1950) p. 135-7.

¹⁰ DHIST interview with C.P.O. G. Lauder, Oct. 21, 1985. DHIST, BIOG L.

¹¹ Burrow and Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady (Toronto, 1987) p. 58-9.

harbours of north Brittany.¹² The presence of these warships and the decryption of German signals indicated that the Germans were about to send a convoy down the coast towards Brest, consequently Plymouth Command ordered a series of 'Tunnel' operations. On the night of April 24/25, three Tribals of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla led by the cruiser Black Prince carried out the first of these. Although no direct contact was made with German shipping an interception had almost been achieved. During the run down the Brittany coast the raiding force picked up a group of ships on radar but could only monitor the contacts in frustration as they disappeared into the safety of one of the many harbours along the coast.¹³ On the next night the German force was not to be as fortunate.

The operation order for the 'Tunnel' on April 25/26th reveals that these sweeps were not strictly hit or miss offensive jabs, but carefully planned combined operations. If the Germans had the same amount of co-ordination among the various elements of their forces during this period, Allied naval operations off the French coast would have been much more hazardous and probably not as successful.

On the night of April 25/26th Plymouth Command had three distinct forces working together. The most important of these was the strike force which was designated Force 26. Consisting of the cruiser Black Prince (S.O.) and the Tribals, Haida, Athabaskan, Ashanti and Huron, Force 26 was ordered to proceed due south from Plymouth until it was ten miles off the French coast. It was to then sweep eastward until it entered the Gulf of St. Malo at which point it was to return to Plymouth. It was estimated that Force 26 would reach the eastern end of its sweep by 0330 which would allow it to be within twenty miles of the

¹² "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," App. II, p. 1, R.C.N. Narrative, DHIST, 84/224. F.H. Hinsley, British Intelligence in WWII Vol. III Pt.1 (London, 1984) p.287

¹³ "Notes on Channel Patrols," Naval Historian's File, DHIST. This report was likely written by Lt. S.M. Tovell

English coast, and relatively safe from air attack, by daybreak. ¹⁴

While Force 26 was carrying out its sweep a force of three M.T.B.'s from Plymouth Command - Force 114 - were to lie beyond the eastern end of Force 26's patrol line in order "to detect and report enemy surface forces on passage." To ensure that Force 114 did not frighten any contacts away from the main strike force, the M.T.B.'s were ordered not to attack any German shipping until after 0330 when Force 26 would be on its way back to Plymouth. This would also prevent the two Allied forces from clashing with each other by mistake. ¹⁵

The third element involved in the operation was a Halifax aircraft from Coastal Command which was to reconnoitre Force 26's patrol line from 2330 until 0010. If any contact was made with German surface units the Halifax was to home in Force 26. Also, in order to avoid confusion an effort was made to clear all Allied aircraft from Force 26's patrol area throughout the rest of the night. ¹⁶ As a result of this co-operation the area of suspected German activity would be covered from 2330 on April 25th until at least 0330 the next morning.

Despite such sustained coverage, Force 26 was fortunate to achieve an interception that night. At 0106, while eighteen and a half miles off the French coast, Black Prince's radar monitor indicated that Force 26 "was being held by an enemy shore Radar station." ¹⁷ German records also indicate that Force 26 was picked up by German coastal radar, but lack of co-operation among

¹⁴ C.N.M.O. (L) Narrative, "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," App. II, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Despite such precautions Allied aircraft often wandered into these zones causing a great amount of nervousness aboard the destroyers.

¹⁷ Admiralty Historical Section, Battle Summary No. 31, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions in the English Channel and Western Approaches 1943-44" p. 9.

German forces and, as will be seen, a tactical miscalculation by the German commander caused this warning to be rendered ineffective.

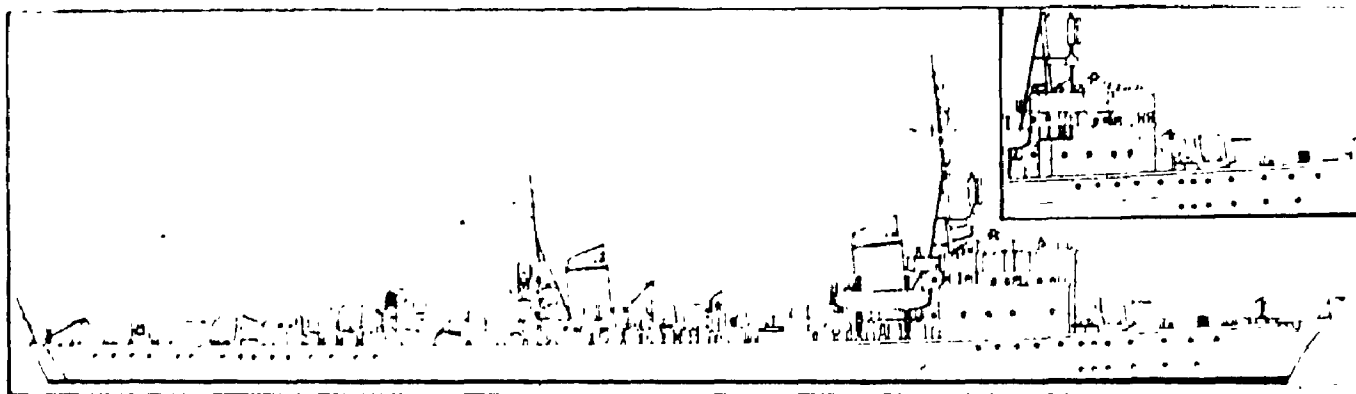
The destroyers that the R.A.F. had initially reported were part of the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla led by Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf. Kohlauf's flotilla had been operating in the western Channel since the summer of 1943, and was a very effective fighting force. It was the 4th Flotilla that had fought the two successful actions against British warships in the Channel in October 1943 that had resulted in the loss of the R.N. cruiser Charybdis and the destroyer Limbourne, and which had led to the establishment of a permanent strike force at Plymouth.¹⁸ On April 26 that force, the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, was to take the first step in realizing its major purpose.

On the night of April 25/26 1944, three of Kohlauf's torpedo boats were ordered to lay mines off Morlaix and provide long range support to a convoy that was proceeding westward along the Brittany coast towards Brest. At 0130, while off Les Sept Iles, Kohlauf was informed of the presence of Force 26 by coastal radar but he assumed that the force would continue heading southwards in order to intercept the convoy which was to the west of his torpedo boats. Kohlauf therefore paid little attention to the warning and continued on his westward course. However, at almost the same time Kohlauf was warned of their presence, Force 26 turned eastward to begin its run down the French coast. The coastal radar station did not inform Kohlauf of that change of course until 0201, but by then Force 26 was only eleven miles directly ahead of the torpedo boats, and had already picked up the German force with radar.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Chapter II for more detail.

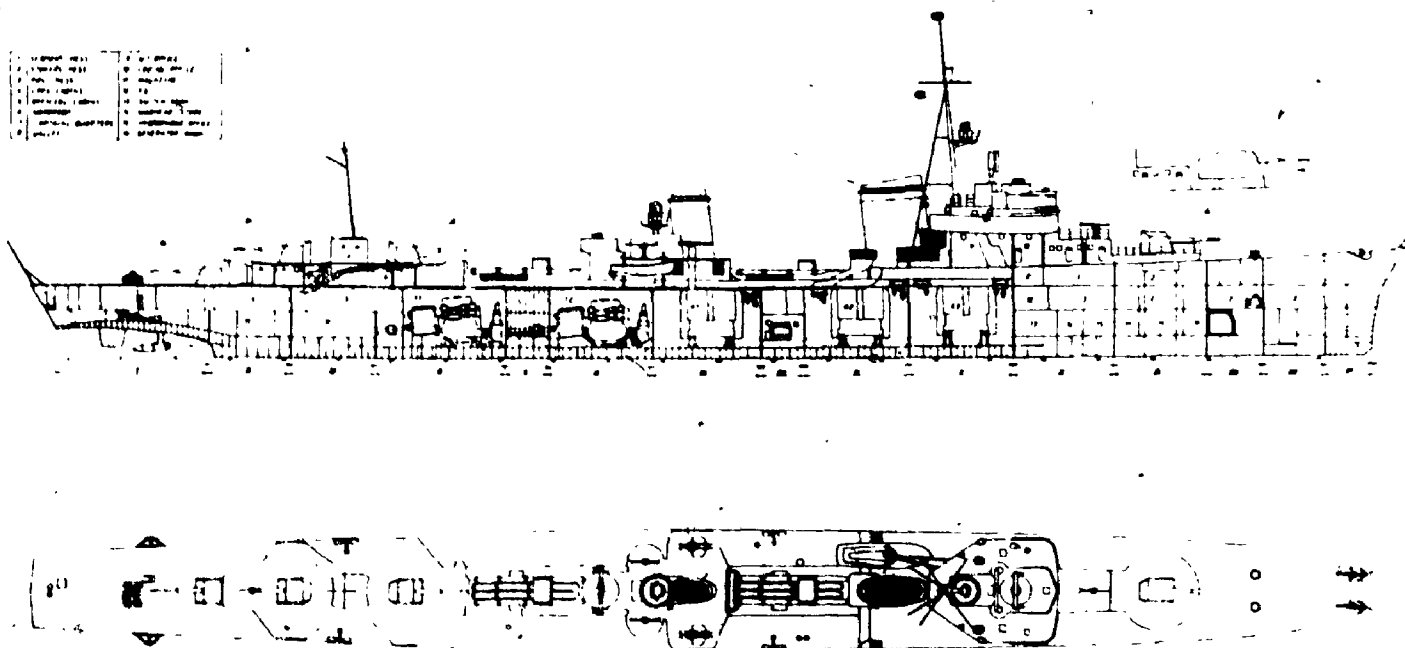
¹⁹ Reinhart Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers," Truppenpraxis Vol. 12, p. 3-6. DHIST, SGR/II/239. War Diary, 4th T.B. Flotilla, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by 4th T.B. Flotilla," p.1. DHIST, Athabaskan (I)(1944) 8000.

The Tribals' Opposition.



Side Elevation of Fleet Torpedo Boats T22 - 24
and, above right, the Changed Bridge of Boats T25 - 36

Type 36A, inboard profile and plan
NARVIK CLASS DESTROYER



Once informed of Force 26's immediate presence Kohlauf's reaction was quick. He correctly assumed "that he had already been spotted by the enemy radar and that a surprise attack was not possible anymore" therefore, "due to the threat arising to the safety of the convoy, the C.O. decides (sic) to divert the enemy from the former." ²⁰ Kohlauf accomplished this by increasing speed to thirty knots while turning away to a reciprocal course. Kohlauf was later criticised for this tactical decision in the 4th Flotilla's War Diary which concluded that "a headlong attack launched without changing the westward course might have brought a hard-fought for success. In situations which appear to be hopeless, the boldest decision leads in most cases to success." ²¹ This judgement seems somewhat strange, especially as it was an official criticism. Such a "headlong attack" would have been contrary to the Kriegsmarine's established tactical doctrine of avoiding action against evenly matched or superior forces. Although such an attack would have been courageous, it probably would have caused heavy losses, for Force 26 would likely have made short work of the smaller, slower, more lightly armed torpedo boats in a close range action. Few experienced naval commanders would be willing to risk their force in a close range encounter with an enemy of unknown strength. Kohlauf's decision was undoubtedly the correct one.

The German turnaway initiated a chase that was to extend forty-five miles down the coast and last over two hours. This chase was the first test of new tactics adopted by Force 26. Rather than proceeding in the traditional line-ahead formation, the force was deployed in three sub-divisions that were spread out in a variation of echelon formation. Black Prince was in the center of the formation with a sub-division of two Tribals off

²⁰ "Evaluations of Actions Fought by the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla," p. 1.

²¹ Ibid. p. 3.

each bow. The 2nd Sub-Division (Haida and Athabaskan) was deployed at a distance of one and a half miles and an angle of forty degrees off Black Prince's starboard bow, while the 3rd Sub-Division (Ashanti and Huron) were in a similar position off the cruiser's port bow. This formation, based on lessons learned from the Charybdis fiasco, was designed to limit the exposure of the cruiser while making best advantage of the Tribals' high speed and heavy gun armament. If German warships were encountered:

The force would be manoeuvred into contact by the cruiser, who would then illuminate the enemy with her more powerful and long range starshells and release the destroyers to attack from either bow or quarter of the enemy. Continued illumination by the cruiser allowed all destroyers guns to be used offensively, while the cruisers own offensive and longer range guns would tend to slow down, if not destroy, the enemy until the destroyers were in close action. ²²

The great advantage of this formation was the amount of flexibility it afforded the destroyers. They no longer had to be concerned about keeping tight formation, and they were thus allowed the freedom of manoeuvre necessary to exploit various tactical situations. These tactics represented an important advance in the art of night fighting and undoubtedly contributed to the success of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla throughout 1944. ²³ It is to the credit of the commanding officers of the Canadian Tribals that they were able to master such tactics without the benefit of much practice.

The action opened at 0219 when Black Prince, at a range of 13,800 yards, began illuminating the fleeing torpedo boats. Such

²² Capt. Basil Jones, "A Matter of Length and Breadth," p. 138, The Naval Review, Vol. XXXVIII No. 2, May 1950.

²³ In And So to Battle (Battle, 1976) Basil Jones notes that the Tactics were considered important enough to be studied at the R.N.'s Tactical School after the war.

illumination was vital, for although the Tribal's Type 285 gunnery radar gave the range of a target, it did not provide the bearing. ²⁴ At 0227 the targets were illuminated well enough for the Tribals to open fire but even with the benefit of starshell, gun control was extremely difficult. The night was moonless and a smokescreen laid by the Germans further obscured visibility. However, according to a contemporary Canadian account:

the enemy's gunfire greatly assisted our own ships in establishing his exact location. Periodically, however, the flashes of the enemy fire would be absorbed by the smoke, the Tribal's fire would have to be checked, and a starshell search renewed. It became impossible to observe fall of shot and even night tracer 4.7 shell would become obscured because of the smoke. ²⁵

There is no doubt that in terms of gunnery Force 26 had a clear advantage. The German gunnery radar had a blind spot astern, ²⁶ and as the Tribals were using flashless cordite they did not give away their positions as the Germans did. As a result the torpedo boats scored no hits with their main armament throughout the action.

On the other hand the Tribals' shooting was accurate, and at 0231 and 0236 Haida observed probable hits on one of the torpedo boats. German records indicate that the rearmost torpedo boat, T27, was "straddled by several salvos, receives (sic) 2 hits in her after canopy, 1 hit on the port 3.7 cm. gun position and 1 hit in the forward engine room." ²⁷ The damage was severe enough that Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf ordered T27 to break away from the action. She did so shortly before 0300, and due to a potentially critical oversight by the 2nd Sub-division, T27 was presented

²⁴ E.J. March, British Destroyers (London, 1966).

²⁵ C.N.M.O. (L), "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," p. 4.

²⁶ 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla War Diary, "Evaluations of Actions Fought by the 4th T.B.F." p. 3.

Ibid., p. 2.

with "the opportunity to create a dramatic change in the battle." ²⁰

Throughout the action the 2nd Sub-Division of Haida and Athabaskan had been closest to the torpedo boats, and at 0257 radar operators on both Tribals observed that one of the torpedo boats had broken away to the south. ²⁰ However, neither Commander DeWolf nor Lieutenant Commander Stubbs reacted, with the result that T27 was able to escape with little difficulty from under the noses of the two Canadian Tribals. This nearly had disastrous consequences as T27 was able to launch torpedoes at Force 26 as it swept by. Fortunately for the Allied force they missed their target but they did force Black Prince to take avoiding action with the result that the cruiser played no further part in the encounter. T27 was able to escape into Morlaix. ³⁰

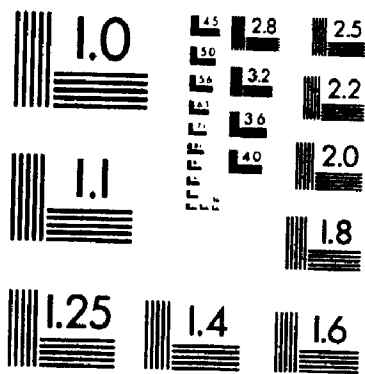
After T27 withdrew from the running battle most of the Tribals' concentrated on T29. The Tribals superior speed was allowing them steadily to overhual the torpedo boats and as the range closed to about three miles Force 26 found itself north east of the German formation. Haida was thus able to bring her after turrets into action. At around 0320 T29 was hit by a salvo of shells which started a fire and damaged her rudder, causing her to veer out of formation towards Force 26. At 0325 Haida made visual contact with the burning torpedo boat and along with Athabaskan, closed the target and pounded it at close range. T29 immediately received "hits in the after funnel, both boiler rooms

²⁰ Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers," p. 8.

²⁰ C.N.M.O.(L), "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," p. 4, LtCdr. J. Stubbs, "Report on Action with Enemy Destroyers," in Burrow and Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady, App. I p. 174.

³⁰ Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers," p. 8. Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions," p. 10.

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and the engine room, Nos. 3 and 4 guns, and several direct hits on the bridge and rangefinder. A hit on the forward tubes detonates (sic) one of the torpedoes that has not been fired. By 0335 hrs the boat is stopped in the water and burning from stem to stern." ³¹

While Haida and Athabaskan engaged T29, the 3rd Sub-Division continued to pursue T24 eastwards. Contact was soon lost however, and Lieutenant Commander J.R. Barnes, captain of Ashanti and leader of the sub-division, ordered the two Tribals to join the unequal fight against T29. This was certainly a curious decision as Barnes made no serious effort to regain contact with the fleeing T24 nor did he inform Haida or Athabaskan of his approach. As DeWolf recalled years later, the first indication he had of the close proximity of the two Tribals was when they loomed out of the darkness off Haida's bow forcing him to break off a torpedo attack on T29. ³²

In both World Wars German warships had demonstrated the capacity to absorb a tremendous amount of punishment; on April 26 T29 proved to be no exception. For over forty-five minutes the four Tribals circled the critically damaged torpedo boat pounding it at close range, while the Germans gamely returned the fire. As Lieutenant Commander Stubbs recorded in his action report the scene was one of considerable confusion:

Although by this time burning fiercely, the Elbing maintained a constant fire of close range weapons as we were circling her. HURON and ASHANTI joined and there was a certain amount of dangerous cross fire although this was unavoidable. Fighting lights had to be switched on on several occasions to avoid collision. ³³

There can be no doubt that this cross fire was indeed quite

³¹ Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers," p. 9.

³² Author's interview with DeWolf, Aug. 20, 1987.

³³ Stubbs, "Report of Action" p. 2.

dangerous for after the action Commander DeWolf found shell fragments with British markings on them embedded in his golf clubs and personal effects. ³⁴ When their close range gunfire failed to sink T29, the four Tribals attempted to finish off the torpedo boat with torpedoes, but incredibly all four Tribals missed the immobile target. Finally, at 0422, after more concentrated close range gunfire, Commander DeWolf was able to signal Plymouth "enemy has sunk." ³⁵ However, the excitement was not yet over for as the Tribals were reforming Ashanti and Huron collided. Although both destroyers were damaged by the collision they were able to make twenty-five knots ³⁶ and return to Plymouth safely, but the incident was to have important consequences in the immediate future.

At 0720, just before entering Plymouth, Captain D.M. Lees in Black Prince signalled to the four Tribal captains that "Force 26 will wear battle ensigns on entering harbour." ³⁷ Although this was a naval tradition it also reflected the satisfaction that Force 26 had towards its night's work. This feeling was shared by the C-in-C Plymouth, Admiral Leatham who wrote a glowing report that expressed close to complete approval of the action. This enthusiastic response is understandable. After three frustrating months contact had finally been made with German forces and the outcome, except for the collision between Huron and Ashanti, looked to be a complete success. However, cooler and more detached staff officers at the Admiralty did not come to the same conclusions. Their comments, and the reaction of other

³⁴ DeWolf to author Sept. 30, 1987. Halifax Herald, Oct. 3, 1944, p. 2. Butcher, I Remember Haida (Hantsport, 1985) p. 53.

³⁵ C.N.M.O.(L), "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions" App. II 'Signals Relative to Action of April 25/26' p. 6.

³⁶ Huron Deck Log, April 26th 1944.

³⁷ Ibid.

commentators allow a more complete and balanced appraisal of the performance of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla and the Canadian Tribals.

One area of staff criticism arose from the fact that all four Tribals of Force 26 devoted their attention to T29 when there were indications that other German warships may have been in the area:

DTSD observes that from 0325 until 0420 four Tribals combined to sink a stopped and burning Elbing, knowing that at the same time that another enemy was to the southwards. This does not seem entirely satisfactory. As was to be expected Radar could not distinguish a unit against the rocks and land but there was undoubtedly another enemy ship in the vicinity. (BLACK PRINCE'S Report of Action) and whilst making full allowance for the tricky and hazardous coast off which they were operating DTSD feels that some effort might have been made to search for an enemy known to be present and very possibly damaged. ³⁰

This was a sound assessment. As mentioned previously, when Ashanti and Huron lost contact with T24 they made no sustained effort to locate the torpedo boat but instead joined Haida and Athabaskan in the uneven battle against T29. Furthermore Lieutenant Commander Barnes did not inform anybody except Lieutenant Commander Rayner of his decision. There can be little doubt that the command structure of Force 26, and the peculiarity of this action contributed to this situation. Captain Lees of Black Prince was Senior Officer of Force 26 but when the cruiser had been forced to stand off from the action, leadership of Force 26 transferred to Cdr. DeWolf as senior officer at the scene. It may be that Barnes was unsure of the command situation, but he still should have informed DeWolf or Lees of his plans. The Naval War Manual left no doubt that it was essential for each unit to "keep the commander (and other units) constantly informed of any change in circumstances as viewed by them, and of their

³⁰ Capt. St. J. Cronyn, Minutes on Action of April 25/26, 1944, PRO, ADM 199/263.

own actions." ³⁹ This was not ~~done~~ on April 26th.

The confusion that resulted from Barnes' action created other difficulties. Four large destroyers were milling around off an unfamiliar coast at night in a constricted area at fairly high speed, and it was fortunate that the resulting cross fire and the collision between Ashanti and Huron did not have more serious consequences. ⁴⁰ Had any of the ships sustained serious damage, it is doubtful that they could have been recovered from a position so close to the enemy coast when daylight was not far off.

The Director of Gunnery and Anti-Aircraft Warfare at the Admiralty pointed out a second unhappy result of the failure in command control: "it is disappointing that all four Tribals concentrated to finish off the one enemy ship stopped by HAIDA while at least two, if not three others (some possibly damaged) were making good their escape." ⁴¹ Although German records show that none of their warships were in the immediate vicinity it was an error that no attempt was made to search the area even after Ashanti and Huron had joined the other Tribals. It appears that the major reason for this stemmed from DeWolf's grim determination to sink the torpedo boat.

An article based on interviews with members of Haida's crew that appeared in the Plymouth Daily Sketch on April 29th 1944, noted DeWolf's resolve that T29 "should be sunk before he left." According to Haida's Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant Richard Heslan R.C.N., DeWolf brought Haida close to the burning torpedo boat

³⁹ Tactical and Staff Duties Division, Naval War Manual (London, 1947) p. 30.

⁴⁰ The collision was caused because the sub-division organization had broken down. Rayner and Barnes were unsure of the others' location; no inquiry followed.

⁴¹ D.G.A.A.W., Minutes on Action on April 26th, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.

and said "there you are. Give him the works."⁴² DeWolf, looking back on the action more than forty years later, recalled that other officers in Plymouth Command had been criticized by Admiral Leatham for leaving similar actions unfinished and he was determined not to repeat the same mistake.⁴³

Assessments of tactical decisions made in the heat of an intense engagement are necessarily subjective, but other staff criticisms pointed to lapses in fundamental naval skills. For example, while attempting to finish off T29 all four Tribals had fired their full complement of torpedoes at close range at the motionless target. Captain St. John Cronyn of DTSD summarized these attacks in chart form:

| SHIP | NO. OF TORPEDOES | RANGE | HITS | TARGET |
|------------|------------------|--------------|------------|-------------|
| HAIDA | 4 | 500yds. | NIL | 1 ELBING |
| HURON(1) | 2 | 2000 | NIL | CLASS |
| HURON(2) | 2 | 2000 | NIL | DESTROYER |
| ATHABASKAN | 4 | 3000 | NIL | STOPPED |
| ASHANTI | 4 | 800 | NIL | OR DRIFTING |
| | <u>16</u> | <u>TOTAL</u> | <u>NIL</u> | |

"These results," Cronyn concluded, "speak for themselves."⁴⁴

Captain Cronyn broke down the causes of this failure on a ship-by-ship basis. The calculations made on Haida's bridge meant that her torpedoes were "bound to miss ahead of a stopped target. HAIDA's setting of 5 knots deflection is considered inexcusable since she apparently considered the target to be

⁴² The Daily Sketch, April 29th, 1944. p. 3. The article is in the DeWolf Papers, PAC, MG 30, E509, Vol. 2.

⁴³ Author's interview with DeWolf, Aug. 20 and Sept. 5, 1987. See Chapter II for details of these earlier incidents.

⁴⁴ Capt. St. J. Cronyn, Minutes on Action of April 26th, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.

stopped." ⁴⁵ Although Commander DeWolf claimed he saw Haida's torpedoes pass under the target, DTSD concluded "it is not considered that any reliance can be placed on this statement." Cronyn thought that instead of relying on the less accurate bridge sight, Haida's torpedo officer should have used local control at the torpedo tubes themselves. ⁴⁶

Huron was forced to make three runs at the target. On the first run two torpedoes were fired at a spread of seven degrees. DTSD noted that this calculation was clearly flawed: "if the enemy was stopped the torpedoes should have straddled; if the enemy was underway her speed would have had to be eight knots for the van torpedo to hit." In the second attack "HURON did not succeed in firing any torpedoes at all due to a serious error in control and firing drill." On the third attack the remaining two torpedoes were fired but these also missed the target. In summing up Huron's performance Captain Cronyn observed that "HURON's action in firing less than a full outfit of torpedoes is also inexcusable, and two failures in drill show that the state of training of the Torpedo Control parties is of a very low order." ⁴⁷ While firing half salvos of torpedoes was against accepted practice, Lieutenant Commander Rayner can probably be excused for doing so on this occasion. He most likely ordered a half salvo because the target was heavily damaged and he thought, probably correctly, that one torpedo would have been enough to sink T29 at that point.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Capt. Cronyn's based his remarks on the firing control settings given the torpedoes and the amount of deflection used on the tubes.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Cdr. DeWolf insists that the torpedoes used did not have a shallow enough setting for a Torpedo Boat, however the Mark IX 21" torpedo had a minimum setting of 6', while T29 had a draught of 10'6". It is possible that because Haida fired at close range her torpedoes had not yet recovered to their depth setting.

⁴⁷ Cronyn, Minutes on Action of April 26th 1944.

Captain Cronyn had little to say about the performance of Ashanti or Athabaskan. Ashanti is noted to have missed with all torpedoes at close range probably because bridge rather than local control was used. No comments were made about Athabaskan's performance, probably because she was sunk before the staff evaluations were written. In summing up the whole torpedo performance DTSD concluded that:

The errors in torpedo attack may perhaps be ascribed to the fact that there was no Torpedo Officer on the Flotilla Staff, an unfortunate state of affairs which has since been rectified... It is considered that the Commanding Officers of the destroyers, and to some extent the Senior Officers of the force, must be held responsible for the bad torpedo training which resulted in a complete failure in this action of the most effective weapon we possess. ⁴⁰

Captain Cronyn's strong statements concerning the use of torpedoes indicate that he was likely a torpedo specialist, therefore his comments have to be treated with a certain amount of caution. As a member of that branch he would obviously have a certain bias concerning the use of that weapon, and could be expected to be quite critical when torpedoes were used ineffectively. In this case, however, Cronyn's strong language can be excused; the Tribal's torpedo performance on April 26th was so abysmal that even the most fervent Whale Island gunnery type would have criticized it with equal vigour.

As far as can be ascertained the practical effects of Captain Cronyn's criticisms appear to have been minimal at best. Commander DeWolf does not recall ever hearing of them although he admits that they may have been justified. ⁴⁰ The staff appreciations were written weeks after the actions themselves so even if they had reached operational officers it would have been doubtful if they would have had much practical effect. As there was no torpedo officer attached to the flotilla or Plymouth

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Author's interview with DeWolf, Aug. 20, 1987.

Command, the destroyer officers were themselves responsible for torpedo training. Once again experience would be the only real teacher. As a result the flotilla's torpedo performance continued to be poor, and Captain Cronyn continued to criticise this situation in future appreciations.⁵⁰

The first instinct is to attribute the poor performance of the Canadian torpedo crews to a general incompetency among the officers and men. The professional qualifications and experience of the personnel, however, suggests otherwise. Huron provides the best evidence, for although her torpedo performance was perhaps the worst of all the Tribals, the officers and men concerned had a strong background in torpedo control. Lieutenant Commander Rayner was a torpedo specialist, while the First Lieutenant had been commissioned from the ranks where he had been trained as a torpedo gunner. At one time Lieutenant Budge had trained R.C.N. midshipmen in the use of torpedoes, and in 1940 he had been the Flotilla Torpedo Officer at Halifax.⁵¹ Huron's T.C.O., Sub Lt. W.H. Howe, was relatively new to the job, but the other men in the department had considerable experience. The Gunner (T), C.S. Smedley had been in the R.C.N. fifteen years and had considerable destroyer experience, while the Torpedo Coxswain, C.P. Burch was a veteran of the First World War.⁵² Given the considerable background and experience of these men it is unlikely that they were incompetent. A more plausible explanation is, that their skills had deteriorated through lack of use.

As far as can be ascertained the April 26, 1944 action

⁵⁰ The 10th Destroyer Flotilla was not the only target of DTSD's scathing remarks concerning torpedoes. For example see Roskill, The War at Sea Vol. III, Pt. 2, p. 316.

⁵¹ DHIST Interview with Rear Adm. P. Budge, DHIST Bio B. Hal Lawrence, Tales of the North Atlantic p. 78.

⁵² Commissioning Roster H.M.C.S. Huron. DHIST, H.M.C.S. Huron 8000.

was the first where Canadian destroyers had fired torpedoes in anger. Most of the wartime torpedo experience was gained by Canadians serving in M.T.B.'s in the English Channel and the Mediterranean, and it seems that none of these personnel had been transferred to the Tribals. Therefore the Tribal crews were dependent upon training exercises, and both the quality and quantity of such exercises left much to be desired.

For years practical torpedo training at sea in both the R.C.N. and R.N. had consisted of two types of unit exercises. The first was the large fleet exercises conducted before the war. In his memoirs Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, who served as Rear Admiral (D) of the Mediterranean Fleet in the mid-1930's, recalls that "the massed and simultaneous attack upon an enemy's battle-fleet by three, four or more flotillas during a fleet action in daylight still held pride of place as the most important function of destroyers." In these exercises destroyer flotillas practiced torpedo attacks similar to the ones that had taken place at the Battle of Jutland. The destroyers acted as a collective force and there was little room for independent action. Cunningham notes that although he and other officers doubted if such tactics would ever be used in the future "massed attacks were unsurpassed for the training of the Captains (D), and the divisional and sub-division leaders." ³³ This type of exercise was also carried out by the America and West Indies Squadron although on a smaller scale. Regular R.C.N. officers, the majority of whom served with either these fleets at one time or another, underwent this type of training. Such training proved to be of limited value in the war as there were few massed torpedo attacks.

The second and more useful type of torpedo training was carried out by smaller groups of warships. In these exercises individual destroyers carried out attacks on each other using

³³ Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey (London, 1951) p. 157-8.

torpedoes with dummy warheads. When one destroyer had finished its attack and the practice torpedo had been recovered, the destroyers reversed roles and repeated the exercise.⁵⁴ The evidence suggests, however, that these exercises were carried out only infrequently after the outbreak of war. Lieutenant Commander T.J. Cain R.N., an ex-torpedo officer points out in his memoirs, that upon mobilization in 1939 torpedo officers were ordered to return their practice torpedo heads to common pools, and they could only draw them from these pools when the destroyer was specifically detailed for torpedo practice.⁵⁵ Given the fact that both the R.N. and R.C.N. suffered from a serious shortage of destroyers throughout the war, with the result that the ships were committed to gruelling operational schedules, it is unlikely that many of these exercises took place.⁵⁶

Another consideration limited the usefulness of the exercises that did take place. Practice torpedoes were considered such valuable items that as much importance was attached to recovering them as to hitting the target. Home Fleet standing orders made it clear that a blizzard of paperwork would await the poor captain who managed to lose one of these precious objects. Furthermore, the Senior Officer Home Fleet Destroyers was instructed to use all ships available to find lost torpedoes.⁵⁷

The unfortunate result of this catchpenny attitude was that torpedo exercises were conducted with something less than full vigour and most of them were conducted during daylight hours

⁵⁴ For an example of such an exercise see Capt. B. Jones, "Procedures for Torpedo Practice Runs," July 28, 1945. Jones Papers, Battle, Great Britain.

⁵⁵ LtCdr. T.J. Cain, H.M.S. Electra, (London, 1959) p. 149.

⁵⁶ Huron's Deck Log reveals that she carried out two torpedo exercises in April, one in harbour and one at sea with Haide.

⁵⁷ "Home Fleet Destroyer Tactical and Technical Orders." Aug. 25, 1939. PRO, ADM 1/10076. Although issued before the war, these orders were not superceded.

under controlled circumstances. ⁵⁸

Another factor that undoubtedly contributed to the poor torpedo performance was the officers' view of the Tribals' capabilities. They were considered to be gunships with the result that guns became the weapon of choice. Captain Jones' memoirs are instructive: "the Tribals had only one torpedo mounting; but had four 4.7 inch guns on their forecastles. In the main it was planned to bring the enemy to action with the gun." ⁵⁹ The Canadian officers all showed a clear preference for the gun. However, it is important to point out that although Commander DeWolf downgraded torpedoes in future actions, Lieutenant Commander Rayner endeavoured to use them, although with no success.

It is probable that the reliance the 10th Destroyer Flotilla placed on the gun went beyond considerations of the Tribals' strengths. During the war gunnery technology had advanced considerably. For example all of the Tribals at Plymouth were equipped with Type 285 range finders. Although Type 285 only provided the range and not the bearing of the target, it nonetheless contributed greatly to the accuracy of the Tribals' gunnery. ⁶⁰ In comparison, although there were some improvements made in torpedo control during the war they certainly did not match those made in gunnery technology. ⁶¹ The torpedo attack;

⁵⁸ R. Whinney, The U-Boat Peril (New York, 1986) p. 37. The author attributes poor R.N. torpedo performances in the war to poor training methods in the pre-war years.

⁵⁹ Basil Jones, And So To Battle, (Battle, 1980) p. 77.

⁶⁰ Hodges, p. 42-3. Haida and Huron were fitted with Type 271 surface warning radar which could sometimes be used to fix the direction of the target.

⁶¹ It should be pointed out that the Mark IX 21" torpedo used by the Tribals was considered to be a reliable weapon. In his memoirs Admiral Gretton described them as "elderly, but well tried and reliable"; and in his book

once the primary function of destroyers, became a lost art, and the torpedo a secondary weapon.

Another factor that mitigated against the use of torpedoes was the fact that the Tribals were involved in quick-hitting, high speed, close range actions. Experience to that point in the war had proved guns were much more effective in this type of warfare than torpedoes which required a more methodical controlled approach. For example at the Battle of Sirte in March 1941 British destroyers, despite having a good opportunity, were most unsuccessful in the use of torpedoes against Italian warships. According to naval historian S.W.C. Pack, they found "the accuracy of setting was markedly affected by the necessity for spontaneity and the intermittent sighting provided by gaps in the drifting smoke." As a result the 1st Destroyer Division suffered breakdowns in torpedo drill similar to those on the Tribals on April 26th, and launched twenty-five torpedoes without success.⁶² On the operations when torpedoes had been successful the attacking force usually had more opportunity to make the correct calculations, or lack of opposition allowed them to be more methodical.⁶³ Situations such as these were few and far between in the Channel.

Given these factors one can understand the preference among the Tribal officers for guns, and it is clear that they would not agree with Captain Cronyn's assessment that torpedoes were "the

on the battles of Narvik, Peter Dickens noted that the submarine version continued to be used into the 1970's.

⁶² S.W.C. Pack, The Battle of Sirte (Annapolis, 1975) p. 116-118.

⁶³ Examples of this are the unseen attack by four British destroyers that resulted in the torpedoing of two Italian cruisers on Dec. 13, 1941 and Force 'K's' annihilation of an Italian convoy on Nov. 9th 1941.

most effective weapon we possess." ⁶⁴ This does not in any way excuse the poor torpedo performance on April 26, however. If a warship is to perform with peak efficiency in battle it must make effective use of all its weapons. Furthermore, poor torpedo performance continued to plague the Tribals throughout 1944, and while the 10th Destroyer Flotilla was undoubtedly successful during this period, even greater results could have been achieved if the flotilla's torpedo performance had been better.

Since the gun was the weapon of choice of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla one would expect that they would perform more effectively with this weapon than they did with torpedoes, and on April 26th this was indeed the case. A stern chase was not the ideal situation for effective gunnery, but it did play into one of the Tribals' strengths. While the torpedo boats were attempting to escape eastwards the Tribals were able to take advantage of their powerful forward armament of four 4.7-inch guns, and they did so with consummate skill. After the action a German survivor commented that "the British (sic) ships in complete comfort were hacking us to bits," while another recalled that "no matter how we twisted and turned the salvos (sic) always straddled us." ⁶⁵ Hits were scored on all three torpedo boats, and those on T27 and T29 were severe enough to force them to abandon their escape to the east.

Of the "British" warships credited by one of the German survivors with success, it was most likely the 2nd Sub-division that caused most of the damage. Throughout the action Haida and Athabaskan were on the starboard flank of Force 26 and were thus substantially closer to the torpedo boats than the other warships in the formation. This allowed them better visibility, which

⁶⁴ Capt. St. J. Cronyn, Minute on Action of April 26, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/563.

⁶⁵ Jones, And So To Battle, p. 79.

probably resulted in more effective fire. ⁶⁶ Fire from Haida seems to have damaged T27 first. At 0231 Haida reported that a possible hit had been scored on a target, and then that a definite hit was observed at 0236, ⁶⁷ and in his analysis of the action Reinhart Ostertag notes that T27 was hit at 0229 and 0235. ⁶⁸ Later in the action it was definitely fire from Haida which crippled T29 and led to her destruction under the guns of the four Tribals. During their service with the 10th Destroyer Flotilla the Canadian Tribals, especially Haida, earned a reputation for accurate and effective gunnery. This reputation certainly started on April 26th when Haida and Athabaskan hit the torpedo boats quickly and often. That is the mark of good gunnery.

Reinhart Ostertag is critical of the Tribals' gunnery. He maintains that given the advantages they had with radar controlled range finding and the torpedo boats giving their position away with their gunfire, the Tribals should have managed more hits. This is perhaps expecting too much. Despite Ostertag's assertion that they were "well practised crews experienced in night combat", the Tribals were in fact, except for Ashanti, engaged in their first night action. ⁶⁹ Furthermore, the action opened at long range in poor visibility and the destroyers were shooting at narrow targets. The first hits at around 0230 were achieved at a range of "slightly over five miles". ⁷⁰ Under such poor conditions this was good

⁶⁶ Athabaskan's "A" turret managed to fire an amazing 350 rounds in an hour and a half. Stubbs "Report on Action with Enemy Destroyers," p. 3.

⁶⁷ "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," Op Cit. p. 4.

⁶⁸ Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle With Destroyers" p. 7.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 26.

⁷⁰ C.N.M.O. (L), "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," p. 4.

shooting, and these results were the decisive factor in the outcome of the action.

In terms of losses inflicted, the action off Les Sept Iles was undoubtedly an Allied victory. On the German side one torpedo boat was sunk; while two others were damaged, one quite extensively. The fact that warships were damaged represented a significant problem for the Kriegsmarine at this time:

German shipyards were by this time no longer able to send out teams of specialists and craftsmen to occupied dockyards to supervise repairs, spares and replacements for major items were almost unobtainable, and the French workmen were not inclined to rush into repairing a Nazi destroyer at this stage of the war.⁷¹

Furthermore, because the repair facilities at St. Malo where the torpedo boats were stationed were not sufficient, the torpedo boats had to proceed to Brest for further work. The fact that they had to go to Brest in a weakened state was to have repercussions in the immediate future. As far as casualties were concerned the action was a disaster for the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla. On T29, Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf, all his officers, and about one hundred and twenty of the crew were killed, while another three men were killed on T24 and a further eleven on T27.⁷² These were heavy losses and the death of one of the Kriegsmarine's best destroyer officers was to prove especially significant.

The 'numbers game' was kinder to Force 26, which suffered no losses in ships. Haida and Athabaskan sustained minor damage, and Huron and Ashanti were damaged more heavily as a result of their collision. In his report to the Admiralty, Admiral Leatham reported that he expected Huron to be out of action for ten days and Ashanti for three weeks, but in fact both Tribals were not

⁷¹ M.J. Whitley, Destroyer! (London, 1985) p. 204.

⁷² Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers" p. 11-12.

operational until the third week in May.⁷³ Like the damage to the German torpedo boats, the temporary loss of these two Tribals was to have repercussions. In regard to casualties Force 26's were much lighter than their German counterparts. Only one man died in the action, and five officers and men were slightly wounded.⁷⁴

Strategically the battle changed little. Although Force 26 had weakened German destroyer strength in the western Channel these forces still posed a threat to the invasion. However, the loss of one destroyer was something the Germans, unlike the Allies, could not afford. Besides the two survivors of the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, the Kriegsmarine only had the three destroyers of the 8th Destroyer Flotilla based at La Pallice to defend the western approaches of the English Channel and the Bay of Biscay.⁷⁵ This problem was compounded by the fact that the Germans were unable to reinforce their flotillas. On the other hand, although the Allies were still suffering from a chronic shortage of destroyers, they could at least manage to deploy enough to counter the limited German threat in this theatre. Therefore, while the loss of T29 did not affect the Kriegsmarine's Channel strategy, it meant that they were that much closer to a potentially serious situation.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this action was the effect that it had on the morale or esprit de corps of the forces concerned. An analysis of psychological factors is difficult, but it is clear that they had an influence on the engagements that followed this action. Growing confidence among Allied commanders and increasing caution among their German counterparts had a definite effect upon their tactical decision-making. In

⁷³ Admiral R. Leatham to Admiralty, May 2, 1944, in C.N.M.O.(L), "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," App. II p. 7.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Whitely, Destroyer! p. 206.

quick hitting actions the difference in aggressiveness caused by these attitudes was extremely critical to the outcome of the actions that followed. Thus, psychological factors contributed both to the success of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla and the Canadian Tribals, and the failure of the German forces.

As far as the Kriegsmarine's 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla was concerned the action on April 26 was a disaster. Not only had they lost T29, and suffered many casualties, but they lost their flotilla commander Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf. When analyzing the tactical decisions of German officers in the action fought three nights later the 4th Flotilla's War Diary alluded to the poor state of morale:

The ship comds (sic) were under the impression of the action fought on April 25/26 as well as of the oppressive general situation existing at the coast of Northern Brittany, a situation which had never failed to make them clearly aware of their inferiority. In addition, the loss of their excellent flotilla comd (sic) has had a strong impact on their morale. ⁷⁶

A victory of any kind on April 26th would have done a great deal to offset the feelings of inferiority that existed among the German officers. Instead, the defeat on April 26 caused this attitude to become more deeply embedded with the result that German officers were unable to exploit a very favourable tactical situation that arose three nights later.

Predictably, the reaction of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla to the action was quite different. In his action report Captain Lees wrote "there is little doubt that this minor engagement has done much to enhance the already high morale of the ships and men of the ships companies engaged." ⁷⁷ An officer attached to Haida described the reaction to the battle in somewhat romantic terms:

⁷⁶ "Evaluations of Actions Fought by the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla," p. 4-5.

⁷⁷ Capt. D.M. Lees, "Report on Action of April 26, 1944,"

Sailing up harbour they were the subject of interested scrutiny. The buzz had got around, in the mysterious way it does in naval ports, and ship after ship saluted them. They had done something and they felt their ship had gained prestige in this action. They were very proud of Haida. She had acquitted herself well... numerous visitors, from the Commander-in-Chief down, were waiting to come aboard. They had made a good showing and everyone was pleased. 76

Was the Canadians' pride and satisfaction justified? There are two ways to make an assessment. The first is to look at the 'bottom line'. Despite the fact that her escape was overlooked by Commander DeWolf and Lieutenant Commander Stubbs, T27's resultant torpedo attack did not sink nor damage Black Prince. Furthermore, despite the Canadian's deplorable torpedo performance, T29 finally sunk. This was undoubtedly the means the Canadians used to evaluate the action, and it indicated a good performance. This method is artificial, however, because it overlooks mistakes. A more effective method of evaluating the Canadians performance is therefore to compare it with the performance of the other Tribal that participated in the action.

The association between the Canadian Tribals and H.M.S. Ashanti can be traced to October 1943, when Ashanti had joined the Canadians in the Home Fleet escorting convoys to the Soviet Union and screening the fleet on its operations against the Tirpitz. Before that Ashanti had seen considerable action during the war in both Norway and the Mediterranean, and as Lieutenant Commander Barnes had been C.O. since December 1942, he and his crew were at least as experienced as the Canadians. Furthermore, Ashanti had gone through a major refit in the summer of 1943, and had been modernized to the same state as the R.C.N. Tribals. Given the fact that the R.C.N. Tribals and Ashanti had been operating together for seven months, shared the same technological advantages, and their officers and men had the same

76 William Sclater, Haida (Markham, 1980) p. 115.

amount of experience, a comparison of their performance seems valid.⁷⁹

It appears that the gunnery of the Canadian Tribals was superior, although Haida and Athabaskan had a definite advantage in that they were deployed much closer to the torpedo boats. Ashanti claimed to have scored two hits early in the action at extremely long range, but these do not seem to have been followed up by other hits.⁸⁰ As far as torpedo fire was concerned the performance of Ashanti was no better than the Canadians. Ashanti's four torpedoes also failed to hit the target, and DTSD noted that the reasons for this failure were the same as for Haida's misses.

Comparing tactics, Lieutenant Commander Barnes and Commander DeWolf both led sub-divisions and had to make tactical decisions throughout the course of the battle. Once again there is little to choose between the two. When faced with torpedo boats attempting to escape, both officers made the same decision, and in both cases it seems to have been the wrong one. DeWolf knew that T27 had broken off to the south and had done nothing about it, while Barnes had lost contact with T24, but instead of searching further for the torpedo boat had joined the other Tribals against T29. Both these reactions allowed torpedo boats to get away, but gained little for Force 26.

There was little to choose between the performance of the various Tribals on April 26. Depending upon one's perspective, the Canadian Tribals performed as well, or as poorly, as the British ship. The positive assessment would certainly have been gratifying to the R.C.N. At different points in the war the R.N. had complained about the efficiency of Canadian escort groups on the North Atlantic convoy routes, and in December 1942 had gone

⁷⁹ Martin Brice, The Tribals: Biography of a Destroyer Class (London, 1971) p. 58-9. Ashanti had also been "chummy" ship to both Haida and Athabaskan.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 62.

so far as to mount a campaign that resulted in the transfer of Canadian escort groups from the critical mid-ocean war to retraining at British bases. ⁸¹ This was certainly a grave embarrassment and any news of Canadian successes or favourable comparisons with the R.N. would have been the cause of elation at N.S.H.Q.

The fact that they had performed as well as their British counterparts would also have been important to the Canadian Tribal sailors at Plymouth. In a force of mixed nationalities it was obviously important that the men from each country had confidence in each others abilities. On April 26th, in their first action, the Canadians had proved that they were the equal of the R.N. in this type of warfare. However, this was only the starting point. The Canadians' performance was to improve as they gained experience throughout the summer of 1944, and by the time they left Plymouth Command in the fall, the Canadian Tribals had risen to the point where they were arguably superior to their British colleagues.

In describing what it was like to be on a warship during a night action Admiral Andrew Cunningham wrote: "instant and momentous decisions have to be made in a matter of seconds. With fast-moving ships at close quarters and the roar of heavy gunfire, clear thinking is not easy. In no other circumstances than in a night action at sea does the fog of war so completely descend to blind one to a true realization of what is happening." ⁸² Any Canadian success on April 26, 1944 occurred because the C.O.'s were able to overcome the fog of war. The destroyers were handled well, and with the exception of the torpedo control departments, there had been little in the way of breakdowns in drill or efficiency. The mistakes in tactical

⁸¹ See Milner, North Atlantic Run p. 185-214.

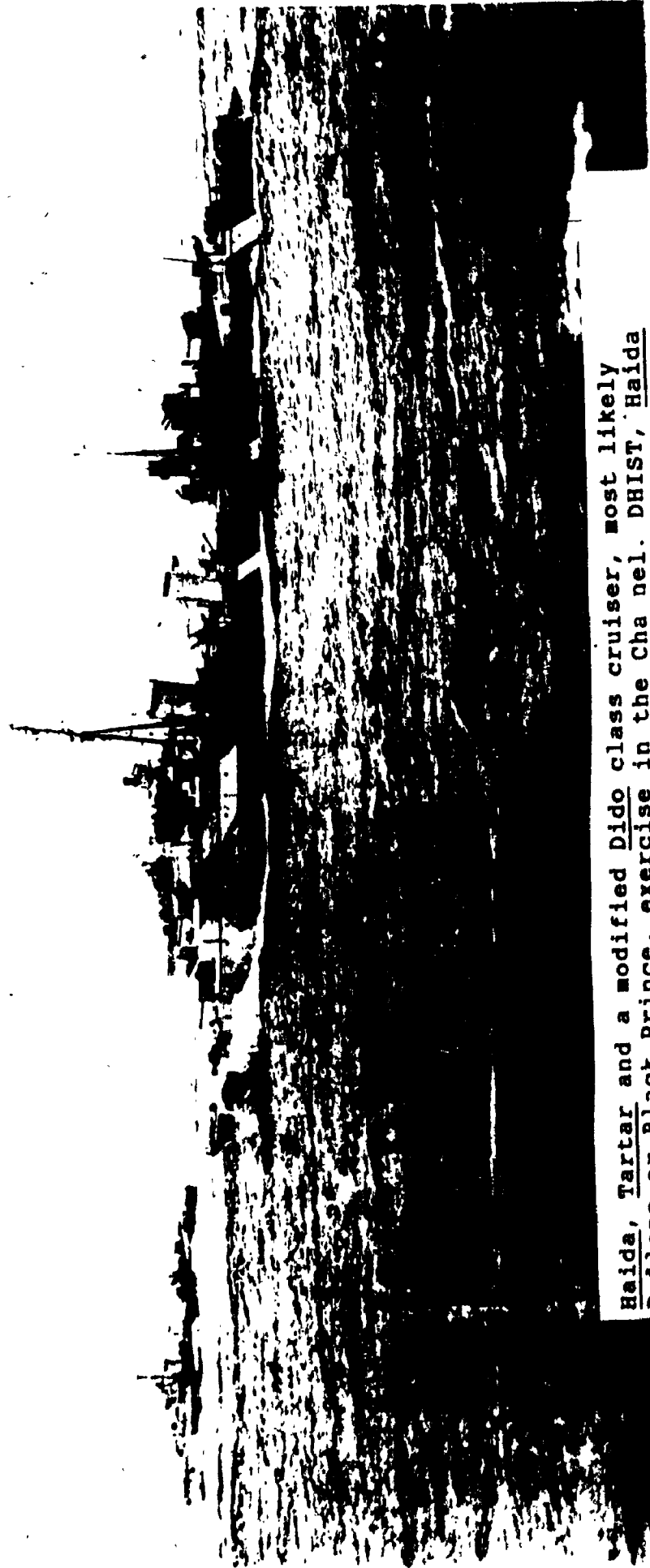
⁸² Viscount Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey, p. 335-336.

judgement were the most serious in that they could have been critical to the outcome of the battle, but they can largely be explained by lack of experience. Most importantly those responsible for the mistakes learned from them.

That they achieved some measure of success should not be surprising. The three C.O.'s had not only received a thorough grounding in surface warfare before the war, but that training also enabled them to cope with any new trends that had arisen since that time. Furthermore, as officers in a destroyer navy they had become accustomed to handling positions of some responsibility throughout their careers and this undoubtedly helped them cope with the pressures of action. As a result of these factors they had helped demonstrate that when Canadian sailors were put in good warships, were given the advantages of modern technology, and provided with good leadership they could perform with effectiveness and proficiency. Throughout the summer of 1944 the Canadian Tribals would continue to build on this success and establish considerable reputations for themselves and the R.C.N.



The launching of Iroquois Sept. 23rd, 1941. DHIST, HMCS Iroquois



Haida, Tartar and a modified Dido class cruiser, most likely
Beilona or Black Prince, exercise in the Cha nel. DHIST, Haida
1943-45.



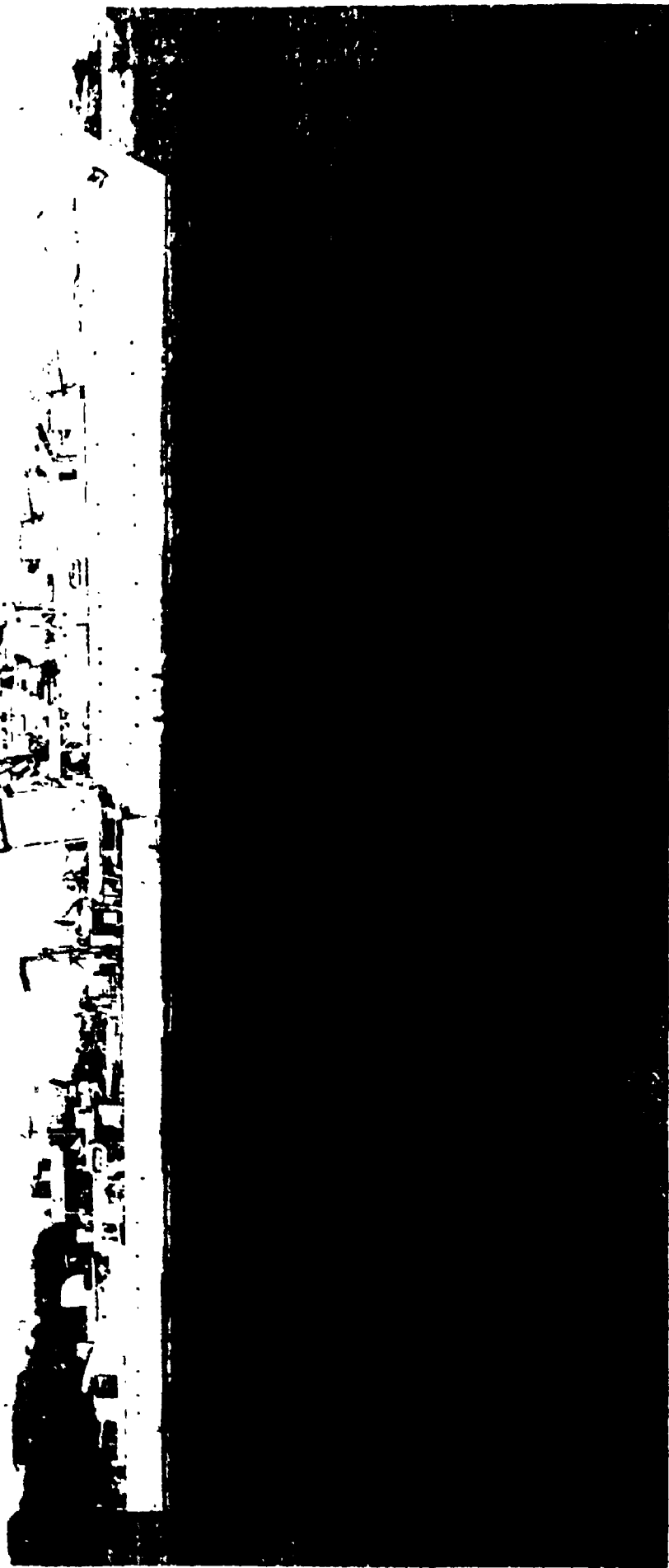
This view of Haida at speed in the Channel shows well the deck layout of the Tribals. Censors have blotted out her R.D.F array.

L to R
Huron's Lt Cdr H S Rayner
Haida's Cdr H G DeWolff
Athabaskan's Lt Cdr J H Stubbs
 early in 1944.

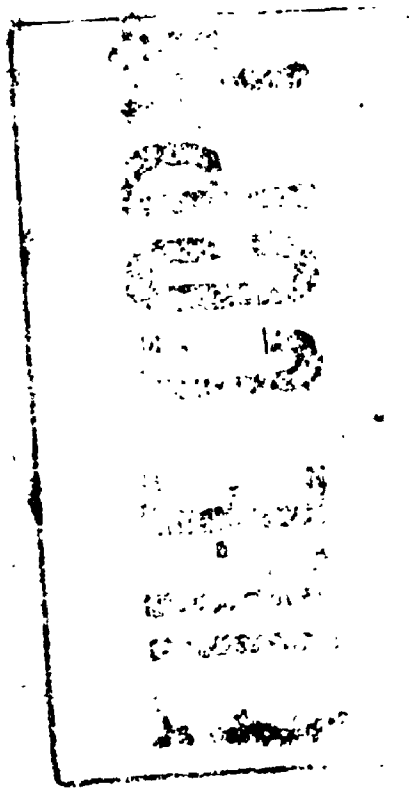


RECAP
 Cdr. De Wolf and Admiral Leatham meet
 upon the return of *Haida* to Plymouth
 on the morning of *Athabaskan's* loss.





At the end of the road, the building is a large, multi-story structure with a flat roof. The building is surrounded by a low wall and a paved area. The image is oriented vertically on the page.



Triumphant Return: Iroquois, Huron and Haida / steam into Halifax
at the end of the war. DHIST, HMCS Iroquois.

Chapter IV

The continuous struggle in the western coastal waters was bitter and unrelenting. These encounters had a grim significance for the men involved, yet were barely noticed by a world preoccupied with the fullness of greater events.

Friedrich Ruge
Sea Warfare 1939-45:
A German Viewpoint

The action that took place off Ile de Vierge during the early hours of April 29th 1944, although relatively minor in comparison to other destroyer actions, deserves attention. In common with the other Tribal actions in the Channel the engagement provides a useful vehicle for the analysis of destroyer operations at that point in the war. Also, some of the events surrounding the sinking of Athabaskan during this action have given rise to misconceptions that must be cleared up so that an accurate assessment of Canadian Tribal operations can be made. Most importantly, this engagement contributed to the establishment of a Canadian naval tradition. Before the Second World War the R.C.N. shared the traditions and heritage of the Royal Navy. Although the R.C.N. was proud of this connection, it somewhat stifled the development of a distinctly 'Canadian' navy. The actions of crew members from Haida and Athabaskan on April 29th, along with those of other Canadian sailors during the war, helped change this.

The action on April 29th can be seen as the second and concluding part of the battle that took place on April 26th off Les Sept Iles. All four destroyers that took part in the latter action had been involved in the earlier one, and the damage suffered by both German and Allied ships on April 26th were important factors in the action fought three nights later. At the end of the action on April 26, the destroyers Ashanti and Huron had collided with each other as Force 26 was reforming to make its way back to Plymouth. Although they returned safely both Tribals were damaged quite heavily and were not able to return to operations until the third week of May. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the fifth Tribal of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, H.M.S. Tartar, was involved in an extensive refit and would not be ready to return until the middle of May. Therefore, at a time when demands were at a peak due to activity involving the coming invasion, the flotilla's strength was reduced to two destroyers.

This could not have happened at a worse time as far as the men of Haida and Athabaskan were concerned for they had seen much duty during March and April, particularly in the last weeks of April, and were scheduled for a brief rest. Instead they were forced to take on the workload of the whole flotilla. Survivors of Athabaskan suggest that this was an example of British overuse of the Canadian Tribals, and that this was a source of resentment among the Canadians. This view finds expression in the recent history of Athabaskan written by Len Burrow and Emile Beaudoin:

The men on the Canadian Tribals had already become accustomed to being treated as chattels by the R.N. Indeed it is said that Lieutenant-Commander Stubbs, when at one time he considered that the Canadian Tribals were doing more than their share of night patrols, signalled Captain (D), 'Has Britain signed a separate peace treaty with Germany?' This could hardly have endeared the intrepid Stubbs to his superiors, but it certainly reflected Canadian feelings.¹

These claims, while providing a good example of the tendency of some Canadian military writers to rail against the British, do not stand up to examination.

The Plymouth Command War Diary reveals that between their arrival in January 1944 and the end of April, the Tribals had carried out a total of ninety-one individual sorties. Of these, sixty or 68.1 percent, were carried out by the four Canadian Tribals that had served with the flotilla at various times. When one considers that at any one time the Canadian Tribals made up no less than sixty percent of the force it is possible to see that they carried out no more than their fair share of operations. Furthermore in the busiest months, March and April, when the flotilla carried out eighty of its ninety-one total sorties, the three Canadian Tribals participated in fifty-two, or 60.5 percent of the operations. Obviously, statements that imply

¹ Burrows and Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady (Toronto, 1987) p. 167.

overuse are inaccurate. ²

On the night after the action off Les Sept Iles Haida and Athabaskan took part in the invasion exercise 'Tiger' in Lyme Bay on the south coast of England. This was the fourth time in five nights that these two Tribals had been involved in operations and there can be little doubt that the crews of both destroyers were very tired. Besides the stress and fatigue of operations both crews had to prepare their ships for sea before they could proceed on their next operation. This was a strenuous task in itself. First the damage and debris from the action had to be cleared away. On Haida:

The fore'd messdecks, under A and B gun mountings, looked like a shambles. Steam radiators had shaken off their bulkhead fixings and fallen over. Chunks of asbestos had dropped from overhead pipes and many of these were sagging low. Crockery, breaking loose from lashed cupboards, lay broken on the decks and seagear was scattered everywhere. It was quite a mess to clean up, though only minor damage. ³

After the clean-up, there was the long tiring job of reammunitioning ship:

Replenishing magazines was a heavy chore. Approximately two thousand one hundred rounds of all types of ammunition had been expended, more than half from the main gun mountings. All this had to be replaced and stored in the proper magazines.

It was a job that could only be done by hand. A covered ammunition lighter came alongside with the ammunition packed in special watertight cases. A long line of men was then formed from the barge to the magazine two decks below and each shell was passed from hand to hand. They were heavy and had to be handled with care, high explosive being what it is, and the job took time. ⁴

² Plymouth Command War Diary. PRO, ADM 199/1393. These totals do not include the Tribals participation in the Home Fleet operations against Tirpitz during February.

³ Sclater, Haida, p. 115-6.

⁴ Ibid. p. 116.

These tasks were not completed until four o'clock in the afternoon, which meant that the men would have only three hours to rest and eat before they left Plymouth at seven for exercise 'Tiger'. No doubt they hoped for a quiet night.

In the spring of 1944 E-boat raids on the south coast convoys were still common, and they posed a dangerous threat to both the ships involved in the invasion exercise and the destroyers screening them.⁵ On the night Haida and Athabaskan were screening the exercise E-boat activity was suspected and the ship's crews went to action stations three times. No E-boats materialized but the interruptions made sleep hard to come by.⁶

It is difficult to analyse the effect that strain and fatigue from the constant night patrols had on the Canadian sailors, but it is likely that it was of some influence. An indication of this is provided by Athabaskan's Leading Writer Stuart Kettles who recalled that the fatigue factor at the end of April "was no joke, for about in a weeks time, we were able to get a total of about seven hours sleep, and at about this stage of the game, it was beginning to tell on the dispositions of the various lads."⁷ Whatever the effects of strain and fatigue at least the sailors at Plymouth had a distinct advantage over their colleagues on the North Atlantic convoy runs. During their off time, and in this case they were to have a day and night in Plymouth, they could go ashore and blow off some steam rather than being stuck on board

⁵ See Roskill, The War at Sea Vol. III Pt.1. (London, 1960) p. 284-5.

⁶ On the following night E-boats did attack, and sank two L.S.T.'s, and damaged a third with a heavy loss of life.

⁷ Stuart Kettles "A Wartime Log: A Personal Account Of Life In H.M.C.S. Athabaskan And As A Prisoner Of War." (Ottawa, 1945), DHIST, 74/458. The subject of the effects of strain and fatigue on Canadian sailors certainly warrants further investigation.

ship. ° Perhaps this is what many of them did on the night of April 27/28, and it probably had some effect in relieving some of the affects of the many night operations.

No matter what Athabaskan's men had done on their night off, Leading Writer Kettles recalled that they were enthusiastic about operations on the afternoon of April 28: .

At that time it was not known what we were liable to have to do for another night's fun, but the whole crew were all for going and grabbing off another Jerry destroyer just for the fun of it. Finally, we were no longer in doubt, for the shrill blast of the Quartermaster's pipe told us all too plainly that our nights of relaxation were over. 'Fo'c'sle Party To Muster On The Fo'c'sle'. Yes, once again we were going to F.A.F.C. What under the sun does F.A.F.C. mean? Well, in sailors' language it wouldn't be polite to say but to give you a general idea, F.A.F.C. means 'fooling around the French Coast', and that is what we had been doing for about six weeks. °

Unfortunately, this "F.A.F.C." would have tragic results for some of Kettles' shipmates.

Besides the 'Tunnel' anti-shipping sweeps they had carried out since their arrival at Plymouth, the 10th Destroyer Flotilla also played an important role in Operation 'Maple', a minelaying operation "designed to assist in the protection of the Allied forces in the Channel." ¹⁰ Minelayers from Portsmouth Command and Plymouth Command laid a series of minefields west of the assault zone that were intended to limit the flow of German naval forces to the invasion beachhead once the landing had taken place. Plymouth Command referred to these as 'Hostile'

° The Canadians propensity to do this was frowned upon by senior officers at Plymouth Command. See Cdr. C.H. Bonneycastle RCNVR to Capt. F. Houghton RCN, July 2nd, 1944. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11716, CS 14-1-1.

° Ibid.

¹⁰ Admiralty Historical Section, Battle Summary No. 39, "Operation Neptune" p. 47. See Chart I for the position of the minefields in the Western Channel.

operations, and employed either fast minelayers such as H.M.S. Apollo, or smaller motor launches to carry out these missions off the coast of north Brittany. ¹¹ The 10th Destroyer Flotilla provided distant support to the minelayers in case of German intervention. The 'Hostile' operations had started in mid-March, and the Tribals had screened five of these operations by the end of April without incident. ¹²

On April 28 the C-in-C Plymouth, Admiral Leatham, ordered Haida and Athabaskan to screen Hostile XXVI. ¹³ Eight motor launches were to lay mines in an area east of Ile de Bas off Morlaix. Close support was to be provided by two M.T.B.'s while the two Tribals were to provide distant support by patrolling about twenty miles off the Brittany coast. The minelaying operation was to be completed by 0215 and the two destroyers were to leave their patrol area and return to Plymouth at 0245. ¹⁴

Some survivors of Athabaskan have maintained that the support force of two Tribals for Hostile XXVI was not strong enough. Burrow and Beaudoin maintain that "with Devonport Harbour crowded with warships at that particular time, it seems incongruous that the two Canadian Tribals were left to operate in enemy waters on their own." ¹⁵ Also, in a recent television documentary on the loss of Athabaskan, Dunn Lantier, who was the

¹¹ The fast minelayers were actually small light cruisers of the Abdiel class that could make 40 knots. See Smith and Dominy, Cruisers in Action (London, 1981) p. 69.

¹² Plymouth Command War Diary.

¹³ Unlike 'Tunnel' operations, Plymouth Command numbered its 'Hostile' operations presumably in order to keep track of what areas had been mined.

¹⁴ C.N.M.O.(L) Narrative, "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions," App. II 'Signals Relative to Action of 28/29th April, 1944', p. 8. DHIST, 84/224.

¹⁵ Burrow and Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady, p. 166.

radar officer aboard the Tribal, recalled that the support force used on the night of April 28th/29th was smaller than usual.¹⁶ Analysis of both past 'Hostile' operations and the situation that existed that night reveal that both of these implied criticisms are unwarranted.

Hostile XXVI was the sixth mining operation for which the 10th Destroyer Flotilla had provided support. On four of those 'Hostiles' two Tribals covered the minelaying force, and on the other two operations three Tribals screened the minelayers.¹⁷ Therefore, the support force for Hostile XXVI can be considered of normal strength for that type of operation.¹⁸ The assertion that Plymouth was crowded with warships is also misleading. Certainly the impending invasion meant that there were many warships at Plymouth at that time but few of them were suitable for such an operation. Furthermore, Exercise 'Tiger' was still underway and "every seaworthy destroyer that could be spared from Plymouth Command was required to patrol to seaward of the landing craft."¹⁹ Even if other destroyers had been available it is unlikely that they would have accompanied the two Tribals. Plymouth Command had learned its lesson about sending mixed forces on night operations,²⁰ and the confusion that probably would have resulted would likely have outweighed the advantage of more strength. The only known German strength in the area were two torpedo boats in St. Malo and the two Tribals should have been strong enough to handle them if they interfered with the

¹⁶ "The Unlucky Lady: The H.M.C.S. Athabaskan, 1940-1944." CHCH Public Affairs Production. (Hamilton, 1984).

¹⁷ Plymouth Command War Diary.

¹⁸ According to the Operation Order for Hostile XXVI three destroyers from Portsmouth Command who were supplying distant support for Exercise 'Tiger' were also available to reinforce the two Tribals.

¹⁹ "H.M.C.S. Haida" DHIST 'Short' History, p. 13.

²⁰ See Chapter II, p. 15-16.

operation. Therefore, it was neither unusual nor negligent that only the two Canadian Tribals left from Plymouth at 2215 on April 28, 1944 to support Hostile XXVI.

Like the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, the German 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla was suffering some lingering effects from the battle on April 26. After that action the two surviving torpedo boats, T24 and T27, had made their way to St. Malo where limited repairs to their battle damage had been carried out.²¹ In order that these repairs could be completed T24 and T27 were ordered to move to Brest on the night of April 28/29. Such a journey was risky because the torpedo boats' fighting ability was still impaired. T27 could make only twenty-four knots and some of her main armament was still damaged while T24's radio could receive not transmit. Therefore, the Senior Officer, Korvettenkapitan Gotzmann of T27, ordered that if Allied warships were encountered the torpedo boats were to "head for the coast and avoid combat."²² This conservative, yet understandable, tactical decision was to cause the Germans to miss a good opportunity that night.

On a few occasions during 1944 the radar at Combined Headquarters Plymouth was able to plot shipping movements along the Brittany coast.²³ Unfortunately for T24 and T27 April 29th was one of the nights when such abnormal radar plotting conditions prevailed and Combined Headquarters was able to track the torpedo boats intermittently as they made their way west

²¹ Reinhart Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Combat with Destroyers" p. 12. DHIST, SGR/II/239.

²² "Evaluation of Actions Fought by the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla on 25/26 and on 28/29 April 1944" 4th TBF War Diary, p. 3-4. DHIST, Athabaskan I (1944) p. 12.

²³ On one occasion Plymouth Command had warned Haida that she was too close to the coast and was in danger of running aground. Haida's radar did not detect this. Such an increase in radar range was caused by a greater downward bending of the radar beam brought about by abnormal atmospheric conditions.

NIGHT ACTION

29th April, 1944.

All times are Zone-2

KEY

British Forces ———

Enemy Forces - - - - -

Haide
Arhabaskan
0400

0412
open fire

0415

Arhabaskan
torpedoed

0420

0420

0442

Plateau
du Guern

Plateau du
Lizen Vert

I Orger

Gouven

35°

30°

25° From Admiralty 20° Chart N° 2644.

15° TSD/MS (+52) 4° 11' W

50'

45'

40° 40'

towards Brest. As the two Canadian Tribals on station in the Channel were the only warships in the vicinity capable of handling the torpedo boats the interception became their responsibility. At 0307, when both forces were in the right position, Admiral Leatham ordered Haida and Athabaskan to proceed south west at full speed to intercept the contacts. ²⁴

At some point in his long naval career Commander DeWolf had acquired the colourful name 'Hard Over Harry'. No matter where or when it originated this name certainly fit on this occasion. When Admiral Leatham's order was received at 0322 DeWolf increased to full speed and quickly altered to the appropriate course. A telegraphist aboard Haida recalls:

When I heard the order to change course I was in the W/T shack, plugged in with the earphones on, but before I realized what they were talking about she went hard over, and honest to Pete I nearly stangled on the earphones. I went straight out from the W/T shack, right into the passageway. Almost ended up in the showers... ²⁵

The manoeuvre had the same effect below the waterline: "I was down in the boiler room when the order came to change course, and I found myself slidin' from one side of the boiler room to the other, singin' that old refrain, 'There goes Hard Over Harry again!'" ²⁶ Clearly Commander DeWolf was not going to waste any time in closing the contacts.

At 0359, after steaming southwards at full speed for forty minutes and being vectored to the correct location by Plymouth, the Tribals established radar contact with the two torpedo boats

²⁴ Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions" p. 12. C.N.M.O.(L), "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions" App. II, p. 9.

²⁵ Butcher, I Remember Haida p. 57.

²⁶ Ibid.

bearing 133 at a range of fourteen miles.²⁷ The first naval action against German destroyers involving Canadian warships under Canadian command was about to open.

When Haida and Athabaskan initially made radar contact with the torpedo boats at 0400, the tactical situation was perfect for torpedo attack. The two Tribals were heading south south east in echelon formation in an attempt to cut the two torpedo boats off, while T24 and T27 were in the same formation heading almost due west.²⁸ Therefore, "the two forces were closing at a 90 track angle on an approximately steady bearing. The ideal position for torpedo attack was developing automatically."²⁹ However, despite this tactical situation, Commander DeWolf did not choose the torpedo option, but instead decided to close the torpedo boats and rely on gunnery. This decision became the subject of criticism in some quarters.

Most of the the criticism of DeWolf's tactical decision came from the Admiralty. In his evaluation of the action Captain St. John Cronyn, the assistant director of the Tactical and Staff Duties division at the Admiralty, wrote that "our force...was so wrapped up in the picture of a gun action that it seems never to have contemplated the use of torpedoes" even though it was rapidly approaching the "ideal position for torpedo attack."³⁰ The A.C.N.S.(H) Rear Admiral E.J.P. Brind R.N., concurred with Captain Cronyn: "I am normally unwilling to criticize what might

²⁷ Different ranges are quoted in various accounts of the action. Fourteen miles comes from DeWolf, "Report of Action" April 29th, 1944, p. 1. DHIST, HMCS Haida 8000.

²⁸ Ibid. See Chart III.

²⁹ Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions." p. 12.

³⁰ Capt. St. J. Cronyn, Minutes on Action of April 29, 1944. July 15, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.

have been done ...in this case however it is apparent that we forgot all about torpedoes." ³¹ These views were shared by the Admiralty Historical Section. In their post-war analysis of the action they commented that "in their anxiety to close to gun range the Canadian destroyers seem to have overlooked the possibility of the use of torpedoes either by themselves or the enemy." ³² The basis for these criticisms is that DeWolf did not only not use torpedoes, but also did not even contemplate using them. However, it appears that this was not the case.

Commander DeWolf, looking back at the action forty years later, recalls that he did consider the torpedo option:

We headed for the corner, Brest, to cut them off and then we got a contact in lots of time. I thought what we should do now is fire our torpedoes at maximum range and then follow them in. Arrange to open fire with starshell at the moment, as near as possible, that our torpedoes would be arriving, and then the enemy would turn and be broadside on to our torpedo tracks. ³³

Unfortunately, the above account is not substantiated by DeWolf's report on the action therefore we are forced to trust his memory. However, the exact tactical situation that DeWolf encountered was practised by Canadian destroyers in exercises during the 1930's, so it is likely that he was familiar enough with the situation that he did consider the torpedo option. Furthermore, DeWolf was an outstanding operational officer, therefore he is likely to have considered all options. At any rate, when confronted with a textbook tactical situation, DeWolf contemplated carrying out what can be termed the classic torpedo response but rejected it. His reasons for doing so appear to be sound.

In a comment written in the margin of the official narrative

³¹ Rear Admiral E.J.P. Brind, Minutes on Action of April 29, 1944. Oct., 5, 1944, PRO, ADM 199/263.

³² Admiralty Historical Section, "Cruiser and Destroyer Actions" p. 12.

³³ DeWolf to author, Aug. 20, 1987.

of the action DeWolf noted that "my first object was to prevent the enemy getting past to westward."³⁴ At the time of interception the torpedo boats were north east of Ile de Vierge which meant that they were almost at the 'corner' at Ushant. As Ushant was just over ten miles north west of the approaches to the heavily defended port of Brest and well within the range of that port's strong local defences, the Tribals would have little chance of preventing their escape into Brest if the torpedo boats made it to the 'corner'. DeWolf recalls that "I wasn't quite sure that we were going to get to the corner before they did so I kept on that course. We would have had to turn to fire torpedoes."³⁵ Such a turn would have increased the chances of the torpedo boats reaching safety, therefore DeWolf continued on the course that would cut the German warships off from their harbour.

There can be little doubt that DeWolf's preference for the gun was also a factor in his decision to reject the torpedo solution and engage the torpedo boats in a gun action. DeWolf has since admitted that he "was never very torpedo minded",³⁶ and with the deplorable torpedo performance of April 26th undoubtedly fresh in his mind, it is not surprising that he rejected the torpedo option. DeWolf considered the Tribals to be essentially gun ships, and in this action, as in the others he took part in throughout 1944, he relied on guns as his primary weapon.

Commander DeWolf's tactical decision on April 29th, although criticized by Admiralty staff officers, was actually in accordance with Home Fleet standing orders for that type of

³⁴ C.N.M.O. (L) Narrative, "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions" p. 10. DHIST, 84/224. While the exact date cannot be ascertained, DeWolf wrote his margin comments on the narrative while he was stationed at Plymouth.

³⁵ DeWolf to author. Aug. 20, 1987.

³⁶ Ibid.

engagement. The Home Fleet Tactical and Technical Orders stated that when German light forces such as destroyers were met at night experience had proved that their first reaction would be "to fire torpedoes and turn away under smoke." In light of this "it will be essential to hit the enemy hard and stop him before he can get away." If the enemy forces were seen to fire torpedoes, or were in a position to do so "a course to comb the tracks should be steered while this danger exists." However, if this situation did not exist "the best course is the closing course which will give the gun armament the best chance of early success." Regarding the use of torpedoes by Home Fleet destroyers in such engagements, while "ships must always be ready to take any opportunity of torpedo fire which presents itself...it is considered to be definitely unsound to delay the approach by a turn away, however small with the sole object of firing torpedoes."³⁷ Clearly DeWolf followed these guidelines to the letter on April 29th.

● Commander DeWolf's decision bears comparison with another by Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten R.N., during an action in the Channel on November 29th, 1940. In this action five British destroyers under Mountbatten encountered four German destroyers off Plymouth. Faced with a similar tactical situation as DeWolf but at closer range, Mountbatten, aboard the lead destroyer H.M.S. Javelin, elected to turn parallel to the German destroyers in order to launch torpedoes instead of closing them and relying on gunnery. The results were disastrous. Javelin was hit by two German torpedoes soon after turning to the parallel course and had her bow and stern blown off. This caused much confusion in the British ranks and the German destroyers escaped unscathed.³⁸

³⁷ "Engagement at Night Between Light Forces" Sept. 27, 1940, in Home Fleet Tactical and Technical Orders PRO, ADM 1/10076.

³⁸ See Rear Adm. A. Pugsley R.N. with Capt. D. MacIntyre R.N., Destroyer Captain (London, 1957) p. 59. Smith, Hold the Narrow Sea (Annapolis, 1984) p. 131-133.

Admiralty staff officers and some of the officers within Mountbatten's flotilla concluded that he had displayed poor tactical judgement in this action. Javelin's C.O., Commander Anthony Pugsley, recalled urging Mountbatten to close the Germans and attack with gunnery as "the first few salvos could be decisive." ³⁹ At the Admiralty the V.C.N.S. concluded that "it is elementary that one should open fire first at night.", while the D.O.D.(H) observed that "the British destroyers should have gone straight for the enemy and engaged them with all weapons." ⁴⁰ Given these comments it would seem likely that these officers would have supported DeWolf's tactical decision on April 29. Although he did not employ all his weapons, he did close the enemy in order to cut them off from their base. Such aggressive action, so emblematic of that of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, was in complete accordance with Admiralty instructions for such situations.

The chances of T24 and T27 reaching Brest uncontested on April 29 were in jeopardy from the outset. Ultra decrypts passed on by the O.I.C. gave Plymouth Command warning of their passage and shortly after the two torpedo boats left St.Malo their radar monitors revealed that they had been detected by Allied radar and flares were dropped in their vicinity by Allied aircraft at 0100. ⁴¹ However, after these early contacts, the two destroyers proceeded towards Brest without any further indications that their adversaries were aware of their presence and there can be

³⁹ Pugsley, Destroyer Captain p. 59.

⁴⁰ Philip Ziegler, Mountbatten (New York, 1985) p. 138-9. It should be noted that Lord Mountbatten had a poor reputation as a destroyer captain within the R.N.

⁴¹ F.H. Hinsley, British Intelligence in the Second World War Vol. III, Pt. 1. (London, 1984) p. 287. Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Combat with Destroyers" p. 12.

little doubt that as the night went on the German sailors thought they would reach Brest safely. Wilhelm Zerber, a gunner aboard T27, recalls that by 0400 the crews of the torpedo boats were quite relaxed. They knew through past experience that the Allies usually carried out their offensive sweeps much earlier in the night, therefore they thought they were safe at that late hour.⁴² Unfortunately for these sailors, not only were the Tribals at sea but their immediate presence was unknown to the Germans.

On past operations coastal radar had usually given the torpedo boats warning of the presence of Allied warships, but for some reason on April 29 the two destroyers received no warning of the approach of the Tribals.⁴³ The torpedo boats, were as a result, "taken completely by surprise when, at 0412 hrs, starshells light up the sky above them and shells fall right alongside."⁴⁴ The two Canadian Tribals had achieved the advantage of full tactical surprise.

When faced with similar situations in two world wars German warships had traditionally reacted by turning away and launching torpedoes. This is precisely the manoeuvre T24 and T27 executed on April 29th, as they fired torpedoes from approximately 6500 yards. Unfortunately, the evolutions were marred by the fact that the performance of the torpedo control parties was as deplorable as Force 26's had been on April 26th. On T24 the salvo from the front tubes was launched correctly but "the crew at the after tubes is (sic) unprepared for the quick firing

⁴² "The Unlucky Lady: The H.M.C.S. Athabaskan 1940-44" CHCH Public Affairs Production, 1984.

⁴³ 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla War Diary, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla." p. 5.

⁴⁴ Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Combat with Destroyers" p. 13-14. DHIST, SGR/II/239.

clearance and fires to port, on the wrong side." ⁴⁵ T27's performance was even worse as all six torpedoes were launched to the wrong side and in fact endangered T24 which had to take avoiding action. However, despite the "incompetance among the operating crews" ⁴⁶ three torpedoes were running true and as it turned out that was enough to be decisive.

When Commander DeWolf saw the torpedo boats initiate their predictable turnaway, he reacted appropriately: "I altered towards to avoid torpedoes but limited the turn to 30 to keep A arcs open." ⁴⁷ This manoeuvre was intended to enable the two Tribals to comb the torpedo tracks and yet still keep the rear turrets bearing on the target. The latter was an important consideration as it allowed "X" turret, the rear 4" turret, to fire starshell which meant that the more powerful forward guns ~~could both~~ be used to fire H.E. and S.A.P. Unfortunately, this manoeuvre came too late to avoid all the torpedoes. As the turn was being completed at 0417 "ATHABASKAN was hit aft and a large fire started. She was observed to slow down and turned to port." ⁴⁸ The fact that half of his force was damaged and out of action did not alter Commander DeWolf's approach to the action. At 0419 Haida turned and laid a smokescreen to cover Athabaskan, and then continued after the fleeing torpedo boats. While Haida was pursuing T24 and T27 eastwards Athabaskan blew up.

In the brief action that ensued Haida's gunnery team overcame difficult conditions and once again proved their

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 29. Kohlauf attributes the poor showing to an incompetant gunner's mate on T24 and a new torpedo officer on T27 who had not exercised with the crew.

⁴⁷ DeWolf minute, "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions" p. 10. See also DeWolf, "Report of Action," April 29, 1944, p. 1. DHIST, H.M.C.S. Haida 8000.

⁴⁸ DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 1.

proficiency. In his action report Commander DeWolf noted that "spotting was extremely difficult from the start as, frequently, neither splashes nor tracer could be seen because of the enemy's efficient use of smoke." ⁴⁹ These conditions were compounded by the fact that the Germans, learning a lesson from the action on April 26, were using flashless cordite so that they did not give their position away every time they fired their main armament. Despite the poor visibility Haida's radar systems allowed her to maintain steady and accurate fire:

For a greater part of the time that the enemy was being engaged it was necessary to fire blind as he was hidden behind a smoke screen. The main armament was kept on the enemy by using the Remote Tube in the Director. Hits were obtained by spotting from the reports of the fall of shot received from the 285 office and from the A.B.U. in the T.S. ⁵⁰

Although radar controlled gunnery systems were quite common at this stage of the war, their effective use was still very much a matter of trial and error. In his action report DeWolf concluded that "as in the action on the 26th of April, it is considered that what success was obtained in hitting the enemy was due to a large extent to the accurate ranges obtained from type 285 and to the excellent performance of the equipment." ⁵¹ Credit should also have been given to Haida's gunnery control team for their ability to use the available technology to full advantage.

T27 bore the brunt of Haida's accurate fire. At 0418 while turning away to port the torpedo boat suffered two hits along the waterline, and then minutes later T27's fighting power was "severely reduced by hits in quick succession striking the port and starboard quadruple gun mountings as well as the gun plotting

⁴⁹ DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 3. The 285 office was in the R/F Director at the rear of the bridge while the Transmitting Station was in the bridge superstructure at the main deck level.

⁵¹ Ibid.

station." ⁵² This damage forced T27 to sheer away southwards. As she headed towards the coast she was sighted by Haida at 0422. At this point the torpedo boat took more hits in the forward boiler room and on the forecastle, and "a strong conflagration breaks out in the forward gun position." ⁵³ This fire made it difficult for Korvettenkapitan Gotzmann to con his ship and as a result T27 ran aground. Haida continued to fire on the beached destroyer until 0422 when DeWolf decided to retire. ⁵⁴

After leaving T27 to burn on the rocks DeWolf was faced with the decision of whether to pursue T24 or return to Plymouth. DeWolf's choice was in large part dictated by the tactical situation. Contact with T24 had been lost at 0433 at a range of 14,000 yards therefore it would probably take some time to find the torpedo boat. The proximity of both daybreak and the French coast left DeWolf little choice but to head home. However, rather than returning directly to Plymouth, DeWolf ordered course to be set "to pass through position where ATHABASKAN had blown up and preparations made to pick up survivors." ⁵⁵ This decision initiated a series of events that would contribute greatly to the tradition and heritage of Canada's navy.

The torpedo that hit Athabaskan at 0417 caused such destruction on board the Tribal that, despite their efforts, it was impossible for the crew to save their ship. It appears from the initial damage that the torpedo struck the gearing room located in the hull under the pompom platform. Immediately after

⁵² Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Combat with Destroyers" p. 16.

⁵³ "Evaluations of Actions Fought by 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla" p. 4.

⁵⁴ The Germans tried to salvage T27 but were disrupted by Allied air attacks. T27 was finally destroyed by a force of MTB's. See Peter Scott, p. 182-3 for details.

⁵⁵ DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 2.

the hit Athabaskan lost both the ability to steer and get under way which would indicate damage in the gearing room. Furthermore, both the navigator, Lieutenant R.B. Hayward R.C.N., and Leading Writer Stuart Kettles recalled in 1945 that the pompom had been demolished by the explosion and that the propellor shafts appear to have snapped.⁵⁶ Also, the Court of Inquiry into the sinking concluded that the explosion had occurred "just abaft the sickbay" which was located above the gearing room.⁵⁷ Although the damage caused by the explosion was severe it was the resultant fire that probably contributed most to the sinking of the Tribal and the terrible casualties suffered by her crew.

On Tribals the main fuel tanks were located aft between the gearing room and the 4-inch magazine; in Athabaskan this arrangement was to prove fatal. The torpedo ignited the diesel oil with the result that a large fire broke out and soon enveloped most of the Tribal's stern. Stuart Kettles recalled that a "diesel oil fire breaks out at the tubes, enveloping entire after canopy and stern. Flames forty to fifty feet high. Pompom ammunition explodes in all directions."⁵⁸ Athabaskan's crew was unable to control this fire as the aft pump had been destroyed and it took time to move the forward seventy ton pump aft so that it could be used to fight the fire. As the fire spread out of control Lieutenant Commander Stubbs in response to a query from Halda signalled that "It looks quite serious. Am settling aft", and consequently ordered the crew to stand by

⁵⁶ Lt. R.B. Hayward, "Account of Loss of Athabaskan" May 3, 1945, NAC, RG24, Vol. 6890, NSS 8870-355/3. Kettles, "A Wartime Log" p. 14.

⁵⁷ Report of Board of Inquiry into the Loss of H.M.C.S. Athabaskan. May 3, 1944. p. 1. DHIST, H.M.C.S. Athabaskan (I) (1944) 8000.

⁵⁸ Kettles, "A Wartime Log" p. 14-15.

abandon ship stations.⁵⁹ Finally at 0427, when her deck was crowded with men, a second explosion rocked Athabaskan. The 4-inch magazine had exploded and the Tribal began to settle quickly by the stern.

The explosion caused great devastation and many casualties on Athabaskan. Lieutenant Hayward recalled that "high casualties were due to the Ship's Company being at abandon ship stations. Almost all those on the port side were instantly killed, while those on the starboard side were badly burnt or blown over the side."⁶⁰ The casualties were not limited to the stern as burning oil rained upon the whole upper deck inflicting serious burns to crew members situated on the bridge and fo'c'sle. Those who could went over the side but even then the situation was perilous as most of Athabaskan's boats and Carley floats had been destroyed and the sea was covered with oil. Finally:

the blazing wreckage of what had been one of the happiest ships in the Canadian navy upended slowly in the water and slid under amid clouds of steam and the doleful roar of escaping air. On the oily heaving blackness of the sea there remained only a few bobbing lights attached to the life jackets of Athabaskan's survivors, who were floating - many of them barely conscious - within five miles of the German held coast.⁶¹

When Haida first came upon Athabaskan's survivors at 0457 Commander DeWolf had only intended to stay long enough to drop Haida's boats and Carley floats.⁶² Stopping to rescue survivors in a war zone was risky at best and naval officers were continually warned about the possible consequences of such

⁵⁹ C.N.M.O.(L), "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions" App. II, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Hayward, "Account of the Loss of Athabaskan."

⁶¹ Joseph Schull, The Far Distant Ships, (Ottawa, 1950) p. 255.

⁶² DeWolf interview with H. Lawrence, DHIST, BIOG D, Vice Adm. H.G. DeWolf. p. 60.

actions. Despite the fact that DeWolf later admitted that "I felt that I was wrong stopping there at all," Haida lay stopped for eighteen minutes while her crew rescued survivors. ⁶³ They were probably the longest eighteen minutes of Commander DeWolf's life. As his men attempted to bring as many survivors aboard Haida as possible her C.O. remembers thinking "Here we are, drifting broadside downwind, gently, slowly; sooner or later we're going to hit a bloody mine!" ⁶⁴ Finally at 0515, after rescuing thirty eight survivors and leaving all her boats and several of her crew at the scene, Haida started back to Plymouth.

The acts of two individuals on April 29 help to relieve some of the gloom resulting from the loss of a warship, and also established two lasting Canadian naval legends. The first involves the C.O. of Athabaskan. From all accounts Lieutenant Commander Stubbs was a well respected naval officer, and his actions during the time that Athabaskan's survivors struggled in the water give an indication as to why this was so. For example, as Athabaskan's survivors awaited rescue it is said that Stubbs, a permanent force officer, "cheered his men by leading them in the singing of 'Wavy Navy' - the 'theme song' of the naval volunteers of the Second World War." ⁶⁵ More importantly as far as Canadian naval lore is concerned, as Haida lingered at the rescue scene Stubbs, urging the Tribal to leave, is alleged to have yelled "Get away Haida. Get Clear." ⁶⁶ Although Stubbs was not heard by DeWolf himself enough testimony exists from a variety of sources to indicate that it is quite likely that

⁶³ "The Unlucky Lady" CHCH Public Affairs Production.

⁶⁴ DeWolf to author, Aug. 20, 1987.

⁶⁵ "Birth of a Legend" Crowsnest, Vol. 11, No. 6, April 1959. p. 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid., For a summary of the evidence regarding Stubb's action see E.C. Russell, "Loss of HMCS Athabaskan" Feb. 2, 1960. DHIST, Athabaskan (I) (1944).

Stubbs did in fact yell this warning and thus put Haida's safety above that of himself and the other survivors.

When Commander DeWolf ordered Haida's boats to be dropped for Athabaskan's survivors he meant them to be unattended by Haida personnel, however Leading Seaman W. McClure insisted on manning the motor cutter. As a result he and two shipmates who followed him, were left behind when Haida departed at 0515. However, McClure, after rescuing two other sailors from Haida and three from Athabaskan, evaded a German minesweeper that was picking up other survivors and started the long journey back to Plymouth. After suffering engine trouble and being badly frightened by Luftwaffe fighters, McClure and his shipmates finally returned safely to England after a thirty hour journey. ⁶⁷ McClure's gallantry was recognized specifically in the report by the officers conducting the inquiry into the sinking of Athabaskan and by Vice Admiral Leatham who recommended him for an award. ⁶⁸ Although the actions of McClure and Stubbs cannot relieve all the effects of the tragedy on April 29th, they have provided lasting examples of the high calibre of the men serving on Canadian warships.

Two Canadian authors have recently charged that Plymouth Command's efforts to rescue Athabaskan's survivors were half-hearted at best. In his action report Commander DeWolf noted that before Haida left the scene of the rescue "word was passed to men in the water that M.T.B.'s were being sent to pick them

⁶⁷ See Schull, The Far Distant Ships p. 257-8, Lawrence, Tales of the North Atlantic, p. 116-8, and Sclater, Haida, p. 149-161.

⁶⁸ Summary of Board of Inquiry into the Loss of HMCS Athabaskan. May 3, 1944. p. 1. PRO, ADM 199/263. Vice Adm. R. Leatham, "Report of Action of 28th/29th April." June 1, 1944. p. 3. DHIST, Athabaskan (I) (1944). It is not known if McClure received any official recognition beyond mention in the two reports.

up." ⁶⁹ At 0448 Leatham had ordered two M.T.B.'s of the flotilla providing close cover to the minesweepers to proceed to where Athabaskan had gone down to rescue survivors. However, at 0537 Leatham cancelled this order and ordered the M.T.B.'s to return to Plymouth. In his report to the Admiralty Leatham explained why he recalled the M.T.B.'s:

their distance from the scene of action was too great to permit them to arrive before first light, and as adequate fighter protection could not be supplied owing to other heavy commitments of aircraft, these orders were subsequently cancelled, as these craft could not be left unsupported off the enemy coast in daylight. ⁷⁰

Clearly Leatham was unwilling to endanger any more of his forces in a rescue attempt in the face of possible intervention by the Luftwaffe.

This decision was "unjustifiable" according to Len Burrows and Emile Beaudoin:

The Admiral's excuse implying the threat of an enemy air attack is completely unacceptable, because every senior officer in Britain at this critical time knew that the Luftwaffe was extremely weak. Any likelihood of it making an appearance at the scene was exceedingly remote, for the Germans would probably not hazard precious aircraft for such an insignificant affair. ⁷¹

Perhaps the resentment demonstrated by Burrows and Beaudoin towards the apparent abandonment of Athabaskan's survivors is understandable given the fact that their book was to serve as a memorial to those died on Athabaskan. However their argument that the Luftwaffe was "a non-existent threat" ⁷² that could have been ignored by Leatham does not hold up to scrutiny.

⁶⁹ DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 2.

⁷⁰ Admiral R. Leatham, "Report of Action of 28/29th April." June 1, 1944. p. 2.

⁷¹ Burrow and Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady p. 167.

⁷² Ibid. p. 168.

Although there is no doubt that the Luftwaffe was in a weakened state at this point in the war Luftwaffe activity in the Plymouth area during April proved that they were still a potential danger. German aircraft carried out mining operations off Plymouth on April 10th and thirty-five Luftwaffe bombers carried out a major raid on Plymouth the night after Athabaskan was sunk.⁷³ Burrows and Beaudoin claim that two Messerschmitts that buzzed McClure's cutter on the afternoon of April 29th were "all that the Luftwaffe could muster"⁷⁴ but this was obviously not the case. Allied commanders had to treat the Luftwaffe as a force in being which meant that they could not risk valuable ships and men in rescue attempts off the French coast in daylight.

Commander DeWolf also shared Admiral Leatham's belief that the Luftwaffe was a threat and that a prolonged rescue attempt was hazardous. DeWolf recalls that from the time they started operating from Plymouth the "one thing we had drummed into us was if you're caught on the French coast at daylight you'll be sunk by dive bombers...so we were very conscious of our need to be on our way home before daylight."⁷⁵ An indication of the extent to which DeWolf thought that Luftwaffe attack was a threat that night is provided by the fact that at 0430 he ordered Haida's Type 291 Air Warning radar turned on.⁷⁶ While this seems an obvious precaution, the Tribals rarely used their 291 sets because they could be easily monitored by the Germans and thus reveal a ship's position.⁷⁷ The fact that DeWolf used 291 to

⁷³ Plymouth Command War Diary. April 1-30 1944.

⁷⁴ Burrow and Beaudoin, Unlucky Lady p. 168.

⁷⁵ DeWolf to author, Aug. 20, 1987.

⁷⁶ Dewolf, "Report of Action" p. 3.

⁷⁷ A study of 10th D.F. operations reveals that they used Type 291 more often to jam German radar than for air warning.

warn of the approach of aircraft indicates how serious he thought the threat of German air attack actually was. Thirteen Tribals had been sunk by that point of the war, six as a result of air attack; clearly DeWolf did not want Haida to be the seventh.

The loss of a warship usually initiates a flurry of official activity as headquarters personnel and staff officers seek to learn the lessons of the action and distribute blame if needed. The loss of Athabaskan was no exception to this. At Plymouth Command Admiral Leatham immediately ordered that an inquiry investigate the cause of the loss, and he then followed this up with his own report on the action. After this had been done the various departments at the Admiralty studied the reports from Plymouth and then wrote their own appreciations of the action. ⁷⁰ The official reaction at Plymouth following the action of April 29th, like that following the one on April 26th, was considerably different from that of the Admiralty.

The three R.N. officers that made up the board of inquiry into the loss of Athabaskan reached two conclusions. ⁷⁰ The first concerned the cause of the sinking. After interviewing Commander DeWolf ⁸⁰ and some of the survivors that returned on Haida, the board decided that Athabaskan sank as the result of two explosions. The first at 0417 was caused by a torpedo, while the second was caused by either a torpedo or the explosion of the 4" magazine. It was clear to them that the torpedo or torpedoes were fired by the two torpedo boats as they "did not consider

⁷⁰ Due to the fact that Athabaskan was attached to the Home Fleet there was no R.C.N. inquiry.

⁷⁰ The officers were Cdr. Basil Jones, Cdr.(E) V.A. Vincent R.N., and LtCdr. J. Rusher R.N.

⁸⁰ The authors of Unlucky Lady criticize the board for not interviewing DeWolf but he did in fact appear and his testimony is on record. PRO, ADM 199/263.

that any other enemy ships were present." ⁸¹ The second conclusion of the board was that the officer in charge of the confidential books was negligent because he did not land some of the books as instructed before Athabaskan sailed. ⁸² Some of these books were recovered by the Germans and, according to the German intelligence report, provided them with "information of great importance" concerning Allied cryptographic procedures. ⁸³ Apart from this incident the board concluded "that no blame is attributable to officers and men for the loss of H.M.C.S. ATHABASKAN and that their conduct was in accordance with the best traditions of the service." ⁸⁴

It is of interest to note that to this day some survivors of Athabaskan dispute the board's major finding. They insist that their ship was not sunk by the torpedo boats but by a German E-boat. When Haida and Athabaskan first made radar contact with the torpedo boats three contacts had appeared upon both destroyers radar screens, one of them smaller than the others, and it was assumed that T24 and T27 were accompanied by an E-boat. ⁸⁵ Athabaskan's radar officer Dunn Lantier among others thinks that this E-boat launched a torpedo which caused the second explosion on Athabaskan. Lieutenant William Clark R.C.N., Athabaskan's torpedo control officer, when interviewed by a

⁸¹ Summary of Board of Inquiry into the Loss of H.M.C.S. Athabaskan. May 3, 1944. p. 1. PRO, ADM 199/263.

⁸² The authors of Unlucky Lady chastise the board for criticizing the officer for not destroying the books, however he was actually censured for not landing them.

⁸³ According to the German report the information concerning cryptographic procedures found in the books was confirmed during the interrogation of one of Athabaskan's Leading Telegraphists. "German War Diary Concerning Documents Captured from H.M.C.S. Athabaskan" DHIST, SGR/II/259.

⁸⁴ Summary of Board of Inquiry. p. 2.

⁸⁵ Dewolf, "Report of Action" p. 3. Lantier and others in "The Unlucky Lady." CHCH Public Affairs Prod.

R.C.N. Historic Records Officer maintained that the first torpedo hit came from an E-boat. Furthermore, after he was rescued by the Germans he claims he saw the commanding officer of T24 talking to an officer who was thought to be a commander of an E-boat and "there seemed to be a friendly argument going on as to which of them was responsible for the destruction of Athabaskan." ⁶⁶ Despite these claims, German records indicate that the two torpedo boats were the only warships in that area that could have sunk Athabaskan. They also reveal that the second explosion must have been an internal explosion as the torpedo boats did not fire any more torpedoes after their first salvos.

It was beyond the terms of the board of inquiry to comment on the general handling of the action but Admiral Leatham's report to the Admiralty reveals Plymouth Command's view on this matter. Leatham concluded that Commander DeWolf:

handled well a tactical situation which, after the loss of Athabaskan, became somewhat difficult. As events turned out, it would perhaps have been better if he had followed the Elbing making to the eastward but at that time it could not have been known that the enemy he was engaging was sufficiently hard hit to force her to run ashore. ⁶⁷

Leatham also supported DeWolf's decision to rescue survivors, and concluded that his decision to return to Plymouth when he did "hard as it must have been to make and leave so many of his country men in the water, was correct." ⁶⁸ A good commanding officer will always support his men when possible and it is clear that Leatham was doing this in his report. However, staff officers at the Admiralty did not have to concern themselves with this type of leadership, and their comments were much more

⁶⁶ Lt. W. Clark, May 18, 1945. NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6890
NSS 8870-355/3.

⁶⁷ Leatham "Report of Action" p. 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

critical.

The theme of the Admiralty comments concerning the action was one of disappointment. Besides their criticisms of the tactical handling of the battle already noted they were also critical of the final outcome. Captain Cronyn, summing up the staff reaction, concluded that "it was an unfortunate action in which, quite unnecessarily, we swapped a Tribal for an Elbing." "While it is true that such a swap was unequal, the inclusion of the word 'unnecessarily' clearly implies that the loss of Athabaskan was avoidable. This was not the case. Commander DeWolf's tactical thinking was sound and nothing short of avoiding action altogether could have prevented the loss. Athabaskan was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. When a force operates so close to an enemy coast losses are bound to occur. What transpired off Ile de Vierge on April 29th was indeed 'unfortunate' but nothing could have been done to prevent it.

When Haida returned to Plymouth on the morning of April 29 its crew, tired after the night's action and undoubtedly saddened by the loss of their 'chummy' ship, once again faced the long task of re-ammunitioning. Haida's sister ship Huron was tied up in Plymouth that morning and her First Lieutenant recalled "the 'Huron's', having had a night's rest, and knowing the amount of work involved in re-ammunitioning, volunteered as a body, and led by the gunnery officers, marched over to 'Haida' to do the job - a gesture much appreciated by the 'Haida's'." "

This incident, along with others that occurred on April 29th, have become important elements of the Canadian navy's traditions and folklore. When the R.C.N. first considered

" Capt. StJ. Cronyn, Minutes on Action of Apr. 29, 1944,

" Rear Adm. P.D. Budge, Address to Huron Reunion, Sept. 19, 1981. DHIST 82/92.

acquiring the Tribals it was hoped that they would form the backbone of an expanded and more secure navy. Even though the navy lost one of these valuable warships on April 29th 1944 it nonetheless gained some of the lasting contribution that it had hoped the Tribals would provide the R.C.N.

Chapter V

Invasion is not merely a matter of putting troops ashore on hostile beaches...

Kenneth Edwards,
Operation Neptune

The invasion of France was the 10th Destroyer Flotilla's raison d'être. Since their initial arrival at Plymouth in January 1944 almost all of the activity of the Canadian Tribals was related to this event. 'Tunnels', 'Hostiles', and invasion exercises were all conducted as preparation for the invasion, and all contributed to its success. After D-Day the 10th Destroyer Flotilla's contribution to the great enterprise was more direct.

On June 8th/9th, in the largest destroyer action fought in European waters since the first and second battles of Narvik in April 1940, the 10th Destroyer Flotilla effectively removed any chance the Kriegsmarine had of attacking the western flank of the invasion with large surface units. This victory was followed up by successful attacks on German coastal shipping in the Channel that disrupted German attempts to first reinforce and then evacuate its positions on the Channel Islands and the coast of northern Brittany. The contribution of the Canadian Tribals to these operations was significant, and in the final analysis justified the decision to transfer them to the European theatre.

The mission of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla during the invasion of France was relatively straightforward. Their job was to ensure that German destroyers based in the Biscay ports did not attack either Allied convoys proceeding to the beachhead or the beachhead itself. In order to accomplish this the destroyers of the flotilla carried out two alternate patrols from June 1st through June 10th. The first and most important was the Hurd Deep patrol which ran southwest and northeast for thirty-eight miles at mid-Channel between the Channel Islands and Lyme Bay. The second patrol line lay in the western approaches to the Channel halfway between Ushant and Penzance. Both patrol lines were well placed to block German warships heading to the invasion area from the Bay of Biscay and destroyers on station on the Hurd

Deep patrol could also bottle up German warships in Cherbourg.¹ It was hoped that both these patrols would be sufficient to protect the western flank of the invasion, but it is important to realize that even if the 10th DF failed, Allied naval strength in the immediate beachhead area was more than strong enough to counter any German excursion in that area.²

German destroyer forces were successfully intercepted by the 10th DF on the night of June 8/9th because the Allied destroyers were deployed in the correct strategic position and because Allied intelligence was able to track the German force as it made its way to the invasion area. At 0621 on June 6th the three German destroyers of the 8th DF that lay in the Gironde, Z32, Z24 and ZH1, were ordered by Group West to prepare to transfer to Brest. This signal was decrypted by the Allied intelligence with the result that the three destroyers were attacked by R.A.F. Beaufighters while southwest of St. Nazaire. Enough damage was inflicted that the destroyers proposed transfer to Cherbourg was postponed for twenty-four hours. Further decrypts received on June 8th revealed that the three destroyers accompanied by the torpedo boat T24 would leave for Cherbourg that night and provided information as to "their detailed route and intended speed, and disclosed that they would make an offensive sweep against south-bound shipping north of Cherbourg before entering the port."³ On the basis of this information the 10th DF was placed in full strength and in perfect position to intercept the German ships.

¹ C.N.M.O.(L), Narrative "B", "The R.C.N.'s Part in the Invasion of France" p. 160.

² This was demonstrated by the plight of the 5th Torpedo Boat Flotilla at L'Havre during the first days of the invasion.

³ F.H. Hinsley, British Intelligence in the Second World War Vol. III Pt. 2. (London, 1988) p. 162. German Naval Staff, Operations Division War Diary, June 6-8th, 1944. DHIST, SGR/II/261.

3

The force that was at sea to engage the German destroyers was at that time the most powerful flotilla in the European theatre. Besides the four original Tribals, the flotilla had been strengthened in May by the addition of a fifth Tribal H.M.S. Eskimo, a "J" class destroyer, H.M.S. Javelin, the Polish "N" class destroyer Piorun, and the large pre-war Polish destroyer Blyskawica.^{*} Opposing this force on June 8/9th were the two powerful Narviks with their 5.9" guns and heavy torpedo armament, and the smaller, slower, and more lightly armed ZH1 and T24.[°] The main advantage that the Germans had over the Allied force was speed but this was obviously countered in part by the numerical superiority held by the 10th DF. Another important factor was the weather. The intermittent rain squalls and low cloud cover made visibility poor and caused confused radar conditions on the Allied ships.[°] As the action progressed these conditions were to favour the German destroyers.

At 1637 on June 8th Commander Jones was ordered to concentrate his force as Force 26 and carry out an east west patrol approximately fifteen miles off the Brittany coastline between Ile de Bas and Ile de Vierge. According to pre-arranged instructions D10 deployed his destroyers in two divisions in staggered line ahead. Commander Jones himself led the experienced 19th Division of Tartar, Ashanti, Haida and Huron. The 20th Division, made up of the newly arrived, relatively inexperienced destroyers, was led by the Polish officer Commander Namiesniowski in Blyskawica, and was deployed two miles to seaward of the 19th Division. At 2236 while on the first patrol leg Commander Jones was ordered by Plymouth Command to adjust his patrol line five

* The common characteristic of the destroyers was that they all had a strong forward armament of four 4.7" guns.

° ZH1 was the ex-Dutch destroyer Gerard Callenburgh.

° Deck Log, H.M.C.S. Huron, June 8th, 1944. NA, RG 24, Vol. 7402.

miles to the north. This final alteration in course, presumably ordered as a result of the decrypt that had provided the course of the German force, put Force 26 in perfect tactical position relative to the German force.

Force 26 made contact with the German force while carrying out their second westward run. Tartar's radar first picked up a contact at 0114 while Force 26 was heading 255 at twenty knots. At 0117 this was confirmed by both Haida and Huron whose radars indicated that the contacts were bearing approximately 249 at 20,000 yards. ⁷ Convinced that the contacts were German destroyers, Jones ordered speed to be increased to twenty-seven knots and initiated the new tactics that he had formulated for such a situation.

Knowing that any contact with German forces would likely result in a head on confrontation, and given the Germans' propensity for turning away and firing torpedoes when contact was met, Jones had sought to formulate new tactics that would both counter the German manoeuvre and take advantage of radar. Jones recalls in his memoirs that he first considered "taking a leaf out of the enemy's book, and turning to fire torpedoes as he approached, and then turning back to colliding course." However, Jones concluded that because

the Tribals had only four torpedoes to the enemies (sic) eight, and with their lesser speed, the turn away to fire might well mitigate against eventual close action. I came to the conclusion that it was quite necessary to press on into the enemy during his own turn away, to bring about a decisive result, using the comparatively few torpedoes rather as a weapon of opportunity for later use.

The forward gun armament of the Tribals was powerful and ammunition for blind fire was plentiful with a home port under their lee.

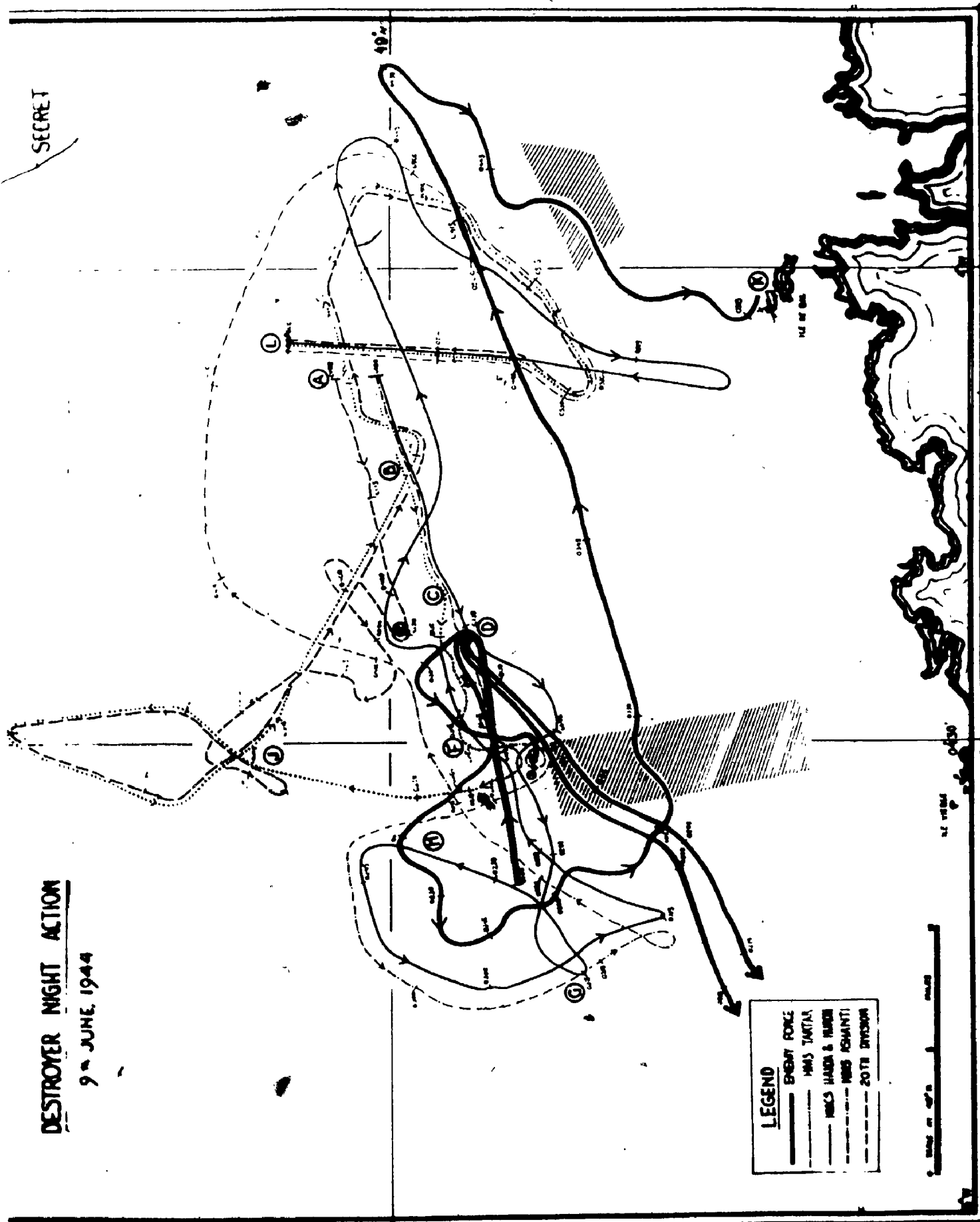
With the above considerations in mind it appeared

⁷ Deck Log HMCS Huron. June 9th, 1944. PAC RG 24, Vol. 7402. LtCdr. Rayner, "Extracts of Radar Log" in "Report of Action" June 9 1944, DHIST Huron 8000, and Cdr. DeWolf "Report of Action" June 9, 1944. DHIST Haida 8000

SECRET

DESTROYER NIGHT ACTION

9th JUNE 1944



✓
that immediately prior to going into action on the enemy route it was desirable that all destroyers should have their forecastle guns bearing, their radar unimpeded ahead, and ships capable of individual action to comb enemy torpedoes. Only a reasonably broad and shaken-out line of bearing formation could satisfy these conditions. *

Thus on June 9th, as Jones considered that the German destroyers would not fire torpedoes until the range was ten thousand yards or less, Force 26 closed the enemy in staggered line ahead formation until 0122 "when both divisions were altered by White Pendant 35 to Starboard, followed by a turn of 50 to Port together, rear ships steering straight for their line of bearing positions. This manoeuvre spread the Flotilla across the bearing of the enemy and enabled all ships (sic) front guns to bear and torpedo tracks to be combable." * In effect, Commander Jones had achieved the prized naval objective of crossing his enemy's "T".

9 While the above manoeuvre placed the eight destroyers of the 10th Flotilla squarely in the path of the enemy it also revealed their presence to the German force. At 0123 while the German destroyers were proceeding on an easterly course in line abreast "shadows were sighted off their port bow at a range of 4,000-5,000m."¹⁰ In his report on the action Capt.(D) Plymouth, Captain R.A. Morice, concluded that until 0123:

the 19th Division, steering 255, were presenting a shadowed starboard side to the enemy. They then altered to 290, thereby exposing their Port sides, fully illuminated by the moon. Within a minute of this turn the enemy reported 'enemy in sight', firing their torpedoes immediately after. The Tribals, having a light camouflage and producing considerable bow wave, would show up clearly after.

* Jones, "A Matter of Length and Breadth." The Naval Review. Vol. XXXVIII No. 2, May 1950, p. 139. See also Jones, And So to Battle, p. 82-83.

* Ibid. p. 83.

¹⁰ Whitley, Destroyer! p. 208.

being virtually invisible. ¹¹

As Commander Jones had predicted the reaction of the leader of the 8th DF, Kapitan zur See Baron von Bechtolsheim, was to order his force to turn away northwards and fire torpedoes. ¹² These orders were monitored by Headache operators on the various Tribals with the result that officers on board the Tribals were able to time the approach of the torpedoes. ¹³ Therefore, when they passed through the 19th Division at 0129 the combination of this warning and the flexibility of the formation allowed them to be avoided with relative ease. ¹⁴

Commander Jones had wanted to engage the German destroyers in a close range "pell-mell battle" and this is what resulted after the 19th Division, followed shortly after by the 20th Division, opened fire on the enemy destroyers at 0127-0128 at a range of approximately 4,000 yards. At this point the German destroyers were in the midst of their initial 180 degree turn to port and therefore lay across the bows of the 19th Division. Z32 was the northernmost destroyer in the formation followed by ZH1, Z24, and T24. As the starboard ship in the 19th Division Tartar initially engaged Z32, but as that destroyer made off to the north Tartar left her for the 20th Division and joined Ashanti in firing on ZH1 and then Z24. Haida first opened fire on Z24, but

¹¹ Capt. R.A. Morice, "Action Fought With Four Enemy Destroyers By The 10th Destroyer Flotilla Off The Ile De Bas On The 9th June, 1944" p. 1. PRO, ADM 1/15784.

¹² Whitley, p. 208. According to Whitley Z32, ZH1, and Z24 each fired four torpedoes at Force 26. T24 could not see the targets.

¹³ LtCdr. R.S. Rayner "Report of Action" p. 1. Also Enclosure III "Facsimile of Messages Received", in above report, and Huron Deck Log.

¹⁴ Ibid. See transcript of address by Rear Admiral P.D. Budge to Huron reunion on Sept. 19, 1981, for detailed description of this part of the action. DHIST, 82/92.

then joined Huron firing on T24. ¹⁵ At this point the engagement became thoroughly confusing, and perhaps the best way to untangle the events is to follow the German destroyers as they went their separate ways after the initial exchange of gunfire.

What transpired immediately after Z32 escaped the guns of Tartar and came under those of the 20th Division has since been termed "a .Polish variation." ¹⁶ The 20th Division's problems started when they did not follow Commander Jones' order to change to line of bearing formation once contact was gained with the German force. Therefore, even though they were in "ideal position" to destroy Z32 when it crossed their front, the fact that they were in staggered line ahead meant that they could not take full advantage of the opportunity. ¹⁷

When Z32 was taken under fire by the 20th Division von Bechtolsheim signalled "I have three cruisers and one destroyer before me - Glasgow class." ¹⁸ The German destroyer was hit several times but straddled Blyskawica with her return fire. As a result of this fire, and because his Headache operator reported that Z32 was about to fire torpedoes, Commander Namiesniowski ordered smoke and turned his destroyer away to starboard. This peculiar reaction resulted in "ESKIMO and JAVELIN, assuming the Division were turning to fire torpedoes, following round and firing 3 and 4 torpedoes respectively, eventually forming up astern of BLYSKAWICA and losing contact due

¹⁵ Rayner, "Report of Action" pgs. 1 and 6. DeWolf "Report of Action" pgs. 1 and 3. Morice, "Action Fought With Four Enemy destroyers. p. 1. Schull, Far Distant Ships, p.290

¹⁶ Jones, And So to Battle. p. 84.

¹⁷ According to Capt. Morice's report Javelin improved the formation by moving out onto Eskimo's port quarter but Piorun remained abaft Blyskawica's starboard quarter.

¹⁸ Quoted in Whitley, Destroyer! The German officer was possibly misled by Blyskawica's large, unusual profile. See illustration in Schull, Far Distant Ships p. 249.

to the smoke screen put up by BLYSKAWICA and the enemy destroyer." ¹⁹ "Thoroughly confused by the situation" Blyskawica, followed by Eskimo and Javelin, headed eastward away from the action for fifteen minutes before realizing what was happening. ²⁰ Eventually the 20th Division was rejoined by Piorun and returned to the scene of the action but played no decisive role in the rest of the battle.

Von Bechtolsheim and Z32's C.O., Korvettenkapitan von Berger, must have been relieved to see the 20th Division vanish eastwards into the smoke. The Narvik had been heavily damaged in her two brief encounters with Allied destroyers and the German force had scattered in confusion. Von Bechtolsheim then headed west presumably in an attempt to reform his force, but before this could be accomplished Z32 once again found herself in contact with Tartar and Ashanti. At 0138 Z32 opened fire from Tartar's disengaged starboard beam and quickly scored four hits on her bridge superstructure. The Narvik was herself hit three times by return fire and was forced to break off to the east. At this point fortune once again aided Z32, for as Ashanti turned to follow the Narvik "ZH1 appeared out of the smoke, wallowing and helpless." ²¹ The two Tribals turned their attention to this target enabling Z32 to escape. ²²

ZH1 had been severely damaged by Tartar and Ashanti when fire had first been exchanged at 0128. She absorbed hits on the

¹⁹ Capt. R.A. Morice, "Action Fought With Four German Destroyers." p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid. In Blyskawica's defence her radar was not operating efficiently, however the turnaway was nonetheless a poor decision. One can only imagine the comments on the bridges of Eskimo and Javelin as they followed Blyskawica away from the battle.

²¹ Whitley, Destroyer! p. 209.

²² Ibid. Morice, "Battle with Four Enemy Destroyers" p. 2. C.N.M.O.(L), Narrative B "The R.C.N.'s Part in the Invasion of France." p. 165. Jones, And So to Battle p. 84.

bow, side and boat deck:

but the decisive shell penetrated the turbine room, destroying the main stream line and filling the room with scalding steam. The destroyer then received a further underwater hit in No. 1 boiler room, causing flooding, and as the steam pressure dropped the rudder motor failed, the engines refused to obey telegraphs, and the turbogenerators ran down. Hand-steering was ordered, but despite both diesel generators being started all power was lost and the destroyer came to a stop wreathed in smoke and steam which masked her from her assailants. ²³

When Tartar and Ashanti came upon ZH1 a second time at approximately 0140, Tartar, heavily damaged herself, raked her with fire from the point blank range of five hundred yards and then Ashanti blew her bow off with a torpedo. Realizing ZH1 was past salvage Korvettenkapitan Barkow ordered the crew to abandon ship and scuttling charges were laid. As a result the destroyer blew up in a heavy explosion one hour later at 0240. ²⁴

In the action on June 9th the two Canadian Tribals found themselves involved in an action similar to the one in which they had participated on the night of April 25/26th 1944. By contrast with the close range fighting that had opened the June action, Haida and Huron found themselves involved in two long stern chases. These chases were decisive in the 10th Destroyer Flotilla's victory. First the Canadian Tribals succeeded in driving two German destroyers back to Brest thereby preventing them from reforming with Z32, and then they sank that destroyer as it sought to escape to the same port later in the battle.

When Commander Jones manoeuvred the 19th Division into line

²³ Whitley, Destroyer! p. 208.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 209. Morice, "Action Fought With Four Enemy Destroyers" p. 2. At 0143 Huron's Headache operator reported "Many excited voices heard all at the same time. Sounded like a general panic." This was likely the reaction on board ZH1 to the second attack by Tartar and Ashanti.

of bearing Haida and Huron were in position, to engage the third and fourth destroyers in the German line. At 0127 Haida fired starshell from "B" turret at a range of approximately 4000 yards and then "A" turret opened fire in rapid salvos at a target at an inclination of forty-five degrees to starboard. According to Commander DeWolf's report on the action the target, which later proved to be Z24, "just then turning away, very quickly started to make smoke and zig zag at fine inclinations. Spotting was extremely difficult, particularly for line. Some ten or fifteen salvos were fired at this target and several possible hits were scored before another target was observed to the left." ²⁵ Z24 was certainly damaged at this point in the action, particularly by a hit that destroyed the wheelhouse and charthouse, and killed and wounded several bridge personnel. ²⁶ From the documents examined it is difficult to ascertain if this damage was caused by Haida, or by Tartar and Ashanti who fired on Z24 immediately after Haida. However, given the close range and the volume of fire delivered by Haida, it is likely that some of the hits can be attributed to the Canadian Tribal.

When the action opened Huron engaged T24 which was the farthest left in the German line. At 0132, shortly after observing a hit on the torpedo boat, Huron:

found the torpedo range clear, and turned to port to fire torpedoes at 0134.

At that moment the enemy was steering in a southerly direction i.e. to the left at a broad inclination. The point of aim selected was the bow of the leading ship (left hand) of the enemy line, and a considered deflection of seven knots left was used in order to allow for a delayed turn away. Just before firing, the enemy ships were, in fact, observed to be commencing a turn together away.

"Huron" fired three torpedoes to starboard. The enemy at that moment bore 240, at a range of about 3,800 yards. The ship's head on firing the first

²⁵ DeWolf "Report of Action" June 9th, 1944. p. 4. DHIST, Haida 8000.

²⁶ Whitley, Destroyer! p. 208.

torpedo was roughly 133 and on the last 124. After firing the second torpedo the enemy was lost from view in his smoke screen. The Torpedo Control Officer fired his third torpedo by time, but withheld his last as the enemy was completely hidden. The ship appeared to be swinging correctly at the time of firing.

The enemy was completely invisible until long after the torpedoes were due to have reached the target line. No hits were observed. ²⁷

Lieutenant Commander Rayner's last assessment was correct. As he noted that the target was turning away from Huron when the torpedoes were fired, it is likely that T24 presented a narrow end on profile when they reached her. In his report on the action Captain (D) Plymouth commented that "it is a pity that this ship did not fire a complete salvo, since the enemy took the very avoiding action that had been expected." ²⁸ Given the relative positions of the ships it seems likely that a fourth torpedo would have had a good chance of a hit. As it was, T24's turnaway initiated a long chase in which the two Canadian Tribals pursued Z24 and T24 to the southwest.

Gunnery conditions were poor as Halda and Huron mounted this pursuit. In his report on the action Commander DeWolf observed that the targets

were engaged with the wind dead ahead and rain squalls were frequent. Cloud base was never more than 1,000 feet and often as low as 500 feet. Consequently illumination was poor and starshell were generally more than half burned before they effected any illumination whatsoever. The enemy made excellent use of smoke throughout and continuously took violent avoiding action thus making spotting at times well nigh impossible. ²⁹

These difficult circumstances were exacerbated by the detrimental effects the poor weather and atmospheric conditions had on the

²⁷ Rayner, "Report of Action" p. 7.

²⁸ Capt. R.A. Morice, "Action Fought with Four Enemy Destroyers" p. 4.

²⁹ Cdr. H.G. DeWolf "Report of Action." p. 4.

performance of Haida's Type 285 gunnery radar and Huron's Type 271Q search radar.³⁰ Nevertheless the two Tribals maintained a steady fire on the targets until 0146, but no hits were observed.

At this point events turned in favour of Z24 and T24. At 0150 the plots on the two Tribals indicated that the German destroyers, at this point steering 210, were entering an Allied minefield (QZX 1330) which they eventually crossed with impunity. However, Haida and Huron were forced to make several alterations in course towards the north in order to avoid the minefield and by the time they were clear of it at 0210 and back on course 210, the German destroyers had widened the range to approximately 19,000 yards.³¹ Shortly after this radar contact with Z24 and T24 was lost and, as the position of Haida and Huron "with regard to own forces and remainder of the enemy was obscure", Commander DeWolf decided to rejoin the rest of Force 26. Therefore, at 0214 the two Tribals abandoned the chase and altered course to 055.³²

During the Tribals' run to the southwest one Canadian sailor performed an important act that has been ignored in the published literature. During her brief skirmish with Z32 at 0140, four 5.9-inch shells hit Tartar in the bridge superstructure. One of these shells toppled the mast, "while the main W/T office and A.I.C. under the bridge became dense with fumes, making their

³⁰ Ibid. p. 6. Rayner "Report of Action" p. 7.

³¹ Ibid. In The Far Distant Ships Joseph Schull maintains that Z24 and T24 turned south and then east before entering the minefield. However, all available evidence indicates that they maintained a steady southwesterly course.

³² DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 2. Although DeWolf recorded that they altered to 065 Rayner's report indicates 055 and this is the course given in Haida's executive signal.

efficient operation relatively difficult." ³³ Tartar's ability to communicate by W/T was thus temporarily impaired. At this point Haida and Huron passed close by the damaged flagship, and the latter's Chief Telegraphist, C.P.O. L.M. Stone, observed the damage. On his own initiative Stone relayed Tartar's situation reports to Plymouth until Tartar restored her communications. For this action C.P.O. Stone received the Distinguished Service Medal. ³⁴

When Haida and Huron abandoned their pursuit of Z24 and T24 the situation off the Brittany coast was quite confused. Huron's communications log reveals that the Allied destroyers were unsure of each others' location, and her Headache log seems to indicate that the same confusion existed among the German force. At 0225, in order to clear up some of the confusion among his command, Commander Jones ordered the various destroyers to concentrate on Tartar. ³⁵ Unfortunately, this did not clarify the situation in Haida and Huron.

At 0228, eight minutes after altering course to rejoin the rest of Force 26, the radars of both Canadian Tribals attained a firm contact bearing 032 at a range of six miles. As their plots indicated that Tartar should bear 040, both Commander DeWolf and Lieutenant Commander Rayner thought that the contact was their flagship. According to DeWolf's report:

At 0230 sighted ship ahead steering a northerly direction at slow speed, assumed to be TARTAR.

³³ A. Meiklem, Tartar Memoirs, p. 84. Meiklem was on duty in the A.I.C. during this action. See also Jones, And So to Battle, p. 84.

³⁴ L.M. Stone interview with W.A.B. Douglas. Rayner, "Report of Action" Enclosure III, p. 1. It appears from Huron's communications log that Tartar was able to communicate with the rest of Force 26 on R/T despite the damage.

³⁵ Rayner, "Report of Action" Enclosure III, p. 1. DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 2.

Made identification by light and ordered Plot to carry out Radar search for other ships which might be concentrating. Ship in sight replied to our signal by light, but his signals were unintelligible. Main armament was brought to the ready and the challenge made, but the reply was again unintelligible. During this procedure HAIDA and HURON passed astern of the unknown ship at a distance of about one mile. I still considered it might be TARTAR with damaged signalling facilities and personnel. The ship made smoke and turned away to the west and south but was not being plotted by Radar and range was opened to 9,000 yards before this move was fully appreciated. ³⁶

The warship encountered by the two Tribals was not Tartar but Z32, which had withdrawn westwards after the brief engagement with Tartar and Ashanti at 0140.

When Z32 initially accelerated away from Haida and Huron at 0233 it was heading 348 but over the next eighteen minutes the Narvik slowly swung around in a southwesterly direction. Finally at 0252 the German destroyer turned eastwards and settled on course 110 at a speed of twenty eight knots. ³⁷ According to von Bechtolsheim's report he was "intending to break through towards St. Malo." ³⁸ One has to admire this decision for had von Bechtolsheim initially remained on his southerly course he probably could have used his superior speed to outdistance the Tribals and make Brest safely. His decision to head for St. Malo underlines his determination to complete his original mission.

It appears, despite Z32's reaction of dropping a smoke pot and accelerating away to the north, that there was still some doubt in Commander DeWolf's mind as to the identity of this warship. At 0254 both Tribals fired starshell at the target, then bearing 135 at 6500 yards, and although "careful watch was still kept for identification signals", DeWolf was finally

³⁶ DeWolf "Report of Action" p. 2.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 3.

³⁸ War Diary, Operations Division, German Naval Staff, June 9th, 1944. DHIST, SGR II/261.

convinced that the destroyer he saw illuminated by the starshell was a Narvik. Both Tribals accordingly opened fire at 0256. ³⁹

Once again firing conditions for the Tribals were not good. Lieutenant Commander Rayner reported that

observation of the enemy was difficult due to his frequent and skillful use of dense white smoke screens. In addition our starshell burst above the clouds and appeared to make much longer to fall, often burning out before properly illuminating the enemy. Because of this fire was spasmodic. Line keeping was easy because of the night tracer fitted but spotting overs and shorts was more difficult. ⁴⁰

All the while Z32 maintained a steady and accurate fire on Huron and Haida with its 5.9-inch guns.

At this point Allied minefield QZX 1330 once again played a significant role in the action. At approximately 0311, Z32 entered the minefield while heading eastward and at 0315 Haida and Huron were once again forced to alter course to the northeast. As DeWolf recorded in his report "for the second time it looked as if an enemy would escape through the intervention of this minefield. Fire was checked at about 0320 when the range reached 10,000 yards." When they were finally clear of the minefield at 0342 they altered to 090 and Z32 was bearing 126 but the range had opened to ten miles. Shortly after this radar contact with the German destroyer was lost. ⁴¹

Although von Bechtolsheim had not had any success in concentrating his forces after the initial action earlier in the night, Commander Jones had. Tartar had made contact with the 20th Division at 0243 and as Haida and Huron pursued Z32 eastwards, Jones' force "set out to follow the action at 25 knots

³⁹ DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 2. Deck Log, HMCS Huron June 9th, 1944. Morice, "Action Fought with Four Enemy Destroyers" p. 3.

⁴⁰ Rayner, "Report of Action" p. 6.

⁴¹ DeWolf, "Report of Action" p. 3.

at a distance of some 6 miles to the north." ⁴² Ashanti had attempted to join the Canadians in their pursuit of Z32 but was unable to catch them and remained about four miles astern. ⁴³ The disposition of the various destroyers of Force 26 meant that Z32 would be cut off if von Bechtolsheim made any attempt to break back towards Brest, however it appears that the German commander had no knowledge of this. As he continued to race eastwards he must have realized that he little chance of making Cherbourg or even St. Malo before daybreak which meant he would have to run the gauntlet of Allied air attacks as he had on June 6th. Given the condition of his destroyer such a prospect was doubtlessly unpalatable, therefore at 0432 von Bechtolsheim "decided to break through to Brest" and altered course to the south. ⁴⁴

Doubtlessly Haida's bridge personnel were surprised when radar indicated that Z32 had altered course to the southwest. It had appeared that the Narvik would be able to outrun the Canadian Tribals, but for the third time in as many actions a German destroyer pursued by Haida had altered course towards the guns of the Canadian Tribal. When Z32 turned southwest the two Canadian Tribals duplicated the manoeuvre with the result that they effectively blocked Z32's path to Brest. At 0444 Haida and Huron opened fire on a bearing of 215 at a range of seven thousand yards. Von Bechtolsheim, returned the fire of what he thought were two cruisers, ⁴⁵ made smoke and attempted to escape at thirty knots. However, the Tribals, making thirty two knots,

⁴² C.N.M.O.(L), Narrative "B", "The R.C.N.'s Part in the Invasion of France." p. 170.

⁴³ Rayner, "Report of Action" Enclosure III. p. 2. Ashanti reported she was four miles astern at 0330. After avoiding the minefield she joined Tartar.

⁴⁴ War Diary Operations Division, German Naval Staff. June 9th, 1944.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

were able maintain contact:

by 0500 the Canadian ships were firing continuously and Z32, clearly, could no longer escape. A hit in the after turbine room slowed her down, and her forward turret received three heavy blows, knocking it out; she could now make only a feeble reply with No. 3 gun, using ammunition brought aft from the turret. She launched her last two serviceable torpedoes, and since the torpedo davits had been destroyed and the reserve torpedoes could therefore not be loaded, she had now shot her bolt. At 0515 hours the starboard engine failed and, having fired the last of her ammunition, Z32 was finished. Von Bechtolsheim ordered her CO, Korvettenkapitan von Berger, to scuttle the ship and run her ashore on the Ile de Batz. At 0520 the destroyer struck and for ten minutes was shot up by the Canadian ships before they withdrew. ⁴⁶

Haida and Huron, leaving the Narvik aground and burning, turned to join the rest of the Force 26, which "with no enemy ships in the vicinity, and daylight approaching...proceeded at 23 knots to Plymouth." ⁴⁷

In his report on the June 9th action Captain (D) Plymouth concluded that "the results of this action are likely to prove decisive from an operational point of view. The engagement resulted in a serious defeat of the only remaining surface force which was likely to interfere successfully with our landings in Normandy, and other connected operations in the Channel." ⁴⁸ This assessment proved to be accurate. Due to the loss of Z32 and ZH1, and the heavy damage to Z24, the only major surface unit that the Germans could deploy against the western flank of the invasion was T24. ⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Whitley, Destroyer! p. 211. The Germans considered the beached destroyer beyond salvage.

⁴⁷ Morice, "Action Fought With Four Enemy Destroyers" p. 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 6.

⁴⁹ Z24 was not ready for sea again until August. On August 24th, Z24 and T24 were sunk by aircraft of 404 Sq. RCAF and 236 Sq. RAF off the Gironde on the Bay of Biscay.

The destruction of two German destroyers and heavy damage to a third in return for heavy damage to only one of the Allied force meant that the action was a success in terms of the 'numbers game'. This, however, does not mean that the action was a complete success. Problems with tactics, communications, and the use of torpedoes arose during the action, and Force 26 was perhaps fortunate to achieve as much as it did.

Certainly the most significant tactical failure during the action was the decision by Captain Namiesniowski to turn away to avoid Z32's torpedo attack. As a result of this the 20th Division was effectively removed from the action and Force 26 lost its numerical superiority over the German force. It is possible that had Namiesniowski's ships reacted with the same vigour as the 19th Division the victory on June 9th may have been more complete. Had the 20th Division pressed on towards the German force it is likely that they would have at least immobilized Z32 thus saving Tartar from its damage. More importantly, the 20th Division would have been in a good position to pursue Z24 and T24 as they attempted to escape to the southwest. Since they would have been approaching from a more northerly direction they would not have had to make as severe an alteration in course as Haida and Huron to avoid minefield QZX 1330. This may have allowed them to at least catch the slower T24.

The consequences of Namiesniowski's actions are of course purely a matter of conjecture, but such conjecture is important to a complete analysis of the action. Commander Jones had decided to place all his inexperienced destroyers in one division and most accounts of the battle imply that this was the correct decision. However, it might have been wiser to distribute the experienced destroyer C.O.'s among the two divisions. Due to the rank structure of the flotilla the best way that this could have been accomplished would have been to make Commander DeWolf S.O. of the 20th Division with Blyskawica taking Haida's place in the

19th Division. ⁵⁰ With Huron joining Haída and Eskimo joining Blyskawica it seems that a good balance would have been attained. The 10th Destroyer Flotilla's early operations had demonstrated that experience was vital to success in Channel operations, and it may well be even more could have been achieved if both divisions had been led by officers experienced in Channel operations.

Poor communications among Force 26 was also a problem during the action. As mentioned previously Huron's signal logs reveal many queries from the various destroyers asking for others' locations, and in his report on the action Captain (D) Plymouth noted that "the lack of situation reports by the individual units, into which the Flotilla soon became split, hampered Commanding Officers in their appreciations of the situation." ⁵¹ Captain Morice criticized DeWolf for not reporting that Haída and Huron "had chased half the enemy force to the South-west." Furthermore, "HAIDA's report of engagement with enemy Destroyer at 0300 was not plotted or received in the 20th Division until 0315, thereby causing a delay of 30 minutes in the 20th Division joining HAIDA and HURON. This report contained no information as to the course of the enemy." ⁵² In a situation when visibility and radar conditions were poor, good communications become extremely important.

Once again Force 26 had problems with torpedoes. During the course of the action a total of fourteen were fired ⁵³ but only two of the four fired at ZH1 at close range by Ashanti hit. In

⁵⁰ Cdr. Namiesniowski was senior to DeWolf therefore he could not serve under the Canadian officer in the same division.

⁵¹ Morice, "Action Fought With Four Enemy Destroyers" p.4.

⁵² Ibid. Capt. Morice did compliment Haída and Huron on their ability to work well as a team, making communication other than by R/T "unnecessary."

⁵³ Four each by Ashanti and Javelin, and three each by Huron and Eskimo.

his report of July 10th 1944 Captain (D) Plymouth noted that:

All the attacks, except ASHANTI's, were marred by small errors which can be overcome if the Control Officers concerned study the particular circumstances in which the present actions are fought, and grasp the particular method required to cope with them. The torpedo is a single shot weapon, but a decisive one so far as light forces are concerned. Mistakes with it cannot be retrieved. Thorough training in its use is therefore essential, and must be directed so that unexpected and unusual situations are readily and correctly dealt with. ⁵⁴

The timing of Captain Morice's remarks is perhaps of some importance. It was at around this time that Captain Cronyn was writing his scathing criticisms of the flotilla's poor use of torpedoes in the two actions at the end of April. It is possible that Captain Morice was addressing some of the criticisms levelled at the flotilla for, although his language is milder than Captain Cronyn's, the message is basically the same. Both officers blamed the poor results in the various actions on mistakes in drill caused by a lack of training. This assessment was certainly accurate for it is clear from minutes on an action on June 14th 1944 that the 10th Destroyer Flotilla continued to devote little time to torpedo training.

On June 14th Piorun (S.O.) and Ashanti engaged a force of minesweepers southwest of the Channel Islands. In his minute on the action Captain Cronyn once again savaged the poor torpedo performance of the flotilla and Plymouth Command's apparent lack of concern in that regard. ⁵⁵ Commander Jones response to Cronyn's criticism is illuminating:

The enemy approved policy of turning to run away gave him the position of opportunity of torpedo advantage. The four gun armament of the 10th DF gives us a gun advantage over the enemy when advancing against his retreat. The fact that the enemy ships were faster than

⁵⁴ Morice, "Action Fought With Four Enemy Destroyers" p. 5.

⁵⁵ Capt. St. J. Cronyn, Minute on June 14th, 1944 action. July 21st, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/532.

us made any delay in turning towards him generally unacceptable. The positively Elizabethan method of projecting torpedoes at right angles to our own ships' fore and aft line is a cause of delay. Our policy was not to turn away nor intend to waste any time at all in closing the enemy. With the above essentials in view, such opportunity for training as occurred was naturally devoted rather to gunnery than the torpedo. ⁵⁶

Although this statement concerned the June 14th action it could also be applied to the tactical decisions made in both the April 29th and June 9th actions. Simply put Captain (D)10 and the other Tribal C.O.'s did not consider the torpedo to be a suitable weapon for the type of warfare in which they were engaged. Therefore, little time was spent on torpedo exercises with the result that torpedo drill on the Tribals was deficient. This attitude certainly reflected a radical change in tactical thinking. The 10th Destroyer Flotilla was eschewing what was traditionally seen to be the destroyer's most powerful weapon, and, under the principles of the battle fleet school, its raison d'etre. It is to the credit of the officers involved that they recognized the inappropriateness of torpedo governed tactics, and, in the face of criticism moved to formulate tactics that were much more suitable for the close range high speed manoeuvring that typified Channel actions in 1944.

Although the victory on June 8th/9th marked the fulfillment of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla's main objective it was not until mid-July that its operations in the Channel were concluded. After June 9th the Tribals' operations were more directly in support of Allied ground forces. As the U.S. Army moved to capture Cherbourg and the Cotentin peninsula, secure the Brest promontory, and advance along the Biscay coast, naval forces from Plymouth Command attacked German coastal shipping in order to prevent the Germans from either evacuating their soldiers or

⁵⁶ Cdr. B. Jones quoted in Peter Smith, Hold the Narrow Sea, (Annapolis, 1984) p. 243.

landing reinforcements.

It appears that the 10th DF was over-confident in its sweeps against coastal craft. ⁵⁷ These engagements proved to be very difficult, however, and some officers were soon humbled. Once again experience proved to be the best teacher, for by the time the flotilla embarked upon offensive operations in the Bay of Biscay in mid-July they had become quite proficient at destroying German light craft.

Before the Canadian Tribals made any contact with German shipping on these offensive support sweeps they participated in two operations quite different from those they were used to. On the night of June 12/13th Haida and Huron took part in a diversionary sweep as part of an operation simulating an Allied landing on the Cotentin Peninsula. The two Tribals embarked British Army personnel who, as the two destroyers stood off the Channel Islands south of Guernsey, transmitted "a series of signals associated with the approach of a landing force." ⁵⁸ This mission was extremely difficult from a naval point of view as the Tribals were manoeuvring in restricted waters well within the range of several German shore batteries. Fortunately, "the enemy did not appear aware of the presence of the ships in their waters and the only sign of activity was pyrotechnics from shore in the vicinity of St. Malo and the west coast of the Cherbourg Peninsula." ⁵⁹

Two weeks later Haida took part in another operation that was somewhat different from those its officers and men were used to. Although the Tribal helped bring the action to a successful conclusion, the engagement underlined the Tribals' lack of

⁵⁷ Author's interview with Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf, Aug. 21st, 1987.

⁵⁸ C.N.M.O.(L), Principal Narrative 'B', "R.C.N. and Operation Neptune" p. 157. DHIST, 84/230.

⁵⁹ Ibid. For a more colourful description of this operation see Sclater, Haida, p. 217-226.

suitability for the type of warfare upon which the R.C.N. was expending most of its efforts.

An important component of the Kriegsmarine's anti-invasion strategy was the deployment of U-boats against the various invasion convoys. ⁶⁰ One of the U-boats involved in this operation was U971 commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Walter Zeplien. U971 was ordered to patrol in the Channel off Falmouth and Plymouth but, frustrated by the strong Allied defences, she never reached her patrol position. The C-in-C of Coastal Command, Air Chief Marshall Sir Sholto Douglas had ordered the western approaches to the Channel:

to be patrolled at such an intensity that every position in the whole area was to be under observation at least once in every half hour, by night as well as by day. The C-in-C's purpose was to destroy any U-boats caught on the surface, and to force the enemies to stay submerged for such long periods that their batteries would be exhausted before they reached the invasion routes. ⁶¹

U971's experience showed what dividends this strategy paid.

On June 20th the U-Boat was attacked by a Wellington A/S aircraft while approximately eighty miles west of the Scilly Isles. This attack damaged her forward torpedo tubes but Zeplien continued towards his patrol position despite continually being harassed by Allied aircraft. On June 24th while north west of Ushant, Zeplien attempted to fire torpedoes at two passing destroyers but discovered that his torpedo tubes were damaged. Considering "it hopeless to operate in this area", Zeplien set out for Brest on the surface, but at 0750 on June 24th U971 was forced to submerge after yet another air attack and then discovered that her batteries had failed. Finally at 1537 on June 24th U971 was attacked by a Liberator from 311 Squadron of

⁶⁰ Roskill, The War At Sea Vol. III Pt. 2, p. 15-16.
"Report on Interrogation of Survivors From U-971."
DHIST, H.M.C.S. Haida 8000.

⁶¹ Roskill, The War At Sea Vol. III Pt. 2. p. 20.

Coastal Command. Although the attack was unsuccessful it did succeed in attracting the attention of Haida and Eskimo who were patrolling in the vicinity. ⁶²

The two Tribals had left Plymouth as Force 26 on the night of June 23rd to conduct an anti-shipping sweep south of Guernsey. After the sweep proved uneventful they were ordered to support an M.T.B. operation off St. Malo, and then sent northwest of Ushant to support the famed Captain F.J. Walker's R.N. 2nd Escort Group. Once they reached this position Captain Walker ordered them to patrol further to the south. Shortly after reaching their new position thirty-seven miles northwest of Ushant a Liberator was seen to attack a submarine and mark its position with a smoke float. The Tribals immediately headed towards the marker and at 1615 Eskimo located U971 with asdic at a range of 700 yards. ⁶³

Over the next three hours the two Tribals were engaged in a type of warfare quite different from that which they were used to, and one, at least in the opinion of the C.O. of Eskimo, for which the Tribals were most unsuited. In his report on the action Lieutenant Commander Sinclair noted that the A/S equipment and outfit of depth charges on the Tribals was "obsolescent". For example the Tribals carried a small outfit of depth charges and Haida was equipped with less powerful amotol charges. ⁶⁴

The Tribals were also not fitted with towed "foxer" or "CAT" gear which guarded against acoustic torpedoes. Although this gear would not have been any help in sinking the submarine it

⁶² "Report on Interrogation of Survivors From U971" p. 3-4.
"Brief History H.M.C.S. Haida" p. 27. DHIST, H.M.C.S.
Haida 8000.

⁶³ LtCdr. E.N. Sinclair, "Report on Action" July 28, 1944, PRO, ADM 199/472. Cdr. H.G. DeWolf to VAdm. R. Leatham, July 6th 1944. C.N.M.O.(L), Narrative 'B', "R.C.N. and Operation Neptune" p. 174.

⁶⁴ The Tribals only carried 45 depth charges while A/S destroyers normally carried 120 to 150. N.S.H.Q., Particulars of Canadian War Vessels. Jan. 1944. p. 2-4.

probably would have made the crews feel more secure. As it was, due to the danger from acoustic torpedoes the two Tribals were forced to manoeuvre at the low speed of seven knots.

Despite the deficiencies the two Tribals made relatively short work of U971. Because she was equipped with minol depth charges seven of the nine attacks on the U-boat were carried out by Eskimo with Haida acting as the directing ship. According to the proceedings of the U-Boat Assessment Committee these "nine deliberate attacks were made in excellent asdic conditions. The U-boat moved very little, and did not appear to employ evading tactics." ⁶⁵ Indeed, throughout most of the attacks U971 remained motionless on the floor of the Channel with the result that, according to Sinclair "some doubt was beginning to creep into our minds", and DeWolf recalls never being entirely "convinced that we weren't wasting our afternoon attacking old wrecks at the bottom of the English Channel." ⁶⁶

On the floor of the Channel the situation was different. Surviving crewmen reported that the only depth charge attack to cause any damage was the last one carried out by Eskimo at 1825. As a result of this attack water started to enter the stern glands and one of the diving tanks. According to the interrogation with survivors of U971:

Zeplien decided that the position was hopeless. His starboard diesel was out of action, he could not proceed submerged owing to lack of current and he had only just enough air left to surface. He ordered the destruction of all secret gear and papers. He then issued a bottle of beer all round, which the men drank standing knee deep in water. He assembled his men in the control room telling them his intentions and thanking them for their loyalty. The tanks were then

⁶⁵ Proceedings of the U-Boat Assessment Committee, (Date Unknown) PRO, ADM 199/1786.

⁶⁶ Sinclair, "Report on Action." Author's interview with DeWolf, Aug. 20, 1987.

blown and U971 surfaced. ⁶⁷

Haida was just about to commence another depth charge attack when at 1921 the submarine surfaced fine on the starboard bow between her and Eskimo at a range of eight hundred yards. Eskimo immediately went full astern in order to clear the line of fire and both destroyers opened fire with main and close range armament. Haida's "B" gun scored hits on the conning tower with its second salvo and fire broke out. The crew of U971 immediately started to abandon ship therefore the Tribals ceased fire and launched boats in an attempt to salvage the submarine. However, Zeplien had opened the sea cocks and set scuttling charges and U971 sank before either Haida's or Eskimo's boats could reach her. Of the U-boat's crew of fifty-three all but one survived and were rescued by the two Tribals. ⁶⁸

Despite this particular success it is clear that there was a feeling among some naval officers that Tribals should not be used for anti-submarine work. Eskimo's C.O. was especially vehement in this regard. In his report on the action he concluded "though this success adds to the variety of the 10th Flotilla's bag, and is a feather in our cap, it should not be taken as too strong an encouragement to go after U-boats." Lieutenant Commander Sinclair was especially concerned about the necessity to manoeuvre at low speeds: "these large destroyers at 7 knots or less present a simple target, their turning circles large, their acceleration poor...had the U-boat been aggressively minded as well as resolute and skillful, the story might have been very different." ⁶⁹ Sinclair's concern about exposing the large, relatively unmanoeuvrable Tribals to torpedoes was shared by the

⁶⁷ "Report on Interrogation of Survivors From U-971." p. 3-4.

⁶⁸ Sinclair, "Report on Action." p. 2. DeWolf to Leatham, July 6th 1944. "Report on Interrogation of Survivors From U-971" p. 5. Schull, Far Distant Ships, p. 302-3.

⁶⁹ Sinclair, "Report on Action." p. 2.

Anti-U-boat Division of the Admiralty. Writing for the Director, Commander Farquhar concurred with Sinclair that "Tribal Destroyers are not good A/S hunting ships in these days of 'Gnats', and are too large, valuable and unmanoeuvrable to creep about at 7 knots." ⁷⁰ Sinclair proposed that in the future the Tribals "should not engage in prolonged A/S work. An Escort Group should take over at the first opportunity. I think it is reasonable to sit on a contact for a short period, but early relief by the proper A/S ships from Escort Groups is most desirable." ⁷¹

Commander DeWolf shared these reservations about the Tribals' A/S capabilities. In a 1982 interview he recalled that the "Tribals were not too good at anti-submarine work - we didn't have much practice at it." ⁷² Throughout the hunt for U971, DeWolf had attempted to have the 11th Escort Group relieve the Tribals. ⁷³

When Haida and Eskimo returned to Plymouth after bagging their U-boat, the cruiser Black Prince signalled to Haida "Narviks, Elbings and submarines all seem to come alike." ⁷⁴ This signal refers to Haida's remarkable record while attached to Plymouth Command. She had clearly been the most successful destroyer in the flotilla in terms of German warships sunk, and she had played a significant role in each of the actions in which

⁷⁰ Cdr. Farquhar, Minute concerning sinking of U971. Aug. 16, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/472.

⁷¹ Sinclair, "Report on Action." p. 2.

⁷² DHIST interview with DeWolf, Aug. 27th, 1982. p. 67.

⁷³ DeWolf to Leatham, July 6th, 1944.

⁷⁴ C.N.M.O.(L), Narrative "B", p. 178. Schull, The Far Distant Ships, p. 303.

she had been involved. ⁷⁵ Credit for Haida's exemplary record must be given to her C.O. In his memoirs Commander Jones described DeWolf as "an outstanding officer, not only in skill but aggressive spirit. Furthermore he had that priceless gift of fortune which in my experience, only H.M.S. Nubian in the Mediterranean had also possessed, of there always being a target in whatever area he was told to operate." ⁷⁶ DeWolf had one of the most outstanding operational records among R.C.N. officers, and his professional skill was undoubtedly one of the major reasons for the Canadian Tribals' success at Plymouth.

While Haida and Eskimo were hunting U-boats, the other destroyers of the 10th Flotilla continued to carry out anti-shiping sweeps in the vicinity of the Channel Islands and further south into the Gulf of St. Malo. One feature of these operations was that the combination of destroyers that worked together was constantly being changed. Before the action on June 9th the Tribals had consistently been assigned to the same sub-divisions. For example before Athabaskan was lost, she had most often worked with Haida, while Ashanti led Huron in another sub-division. After April 29th Huron replaced Athabaskan, and Ashanti and Tartar formed another sub-division. ⁷⁷ With the changes after June 9th, Huron was given an opportunity to lead a sweep with Eskimo on June 27/28th. Lieutenant Budge recalled years later, "for a change we were senior ship and therefore in

⁷⁵ It is apparent from Rear Admiral Budge's address to the Huron reunion in 1981, and DHIST interviews with former R.C.N. historical officer S.M. Tovell and ex-Huron Seaman J. Coleman that there was some resentment on Huron as to the amount of publicity that Haida received while at Plymouth.

⁷⁶ Jones, And So to Battle, p. 88. Nubian was one of the R.N. Tribals. She received more battle honours than any British warship except the battleship H.M.S. Warspite.

⁷⁷ Plymouth Command War Diary. PRO, ADM 199/1394.

command of the operation." 70

The offensive sweep carried out by Huron and Eskimo off St. Malo demonstrated that German light craft such as minesweepers could prove to be formidable opposition and could not be taken lightly, and it once again underscored the confusion that often resulted in night actions and the importance of experienced leadership in such circumstances. At this point the objective of offensive sweeps was to prevent the escape by sea of German personnel following the fall of Cherbourg and the Cotentin Peninsula. On the night of June 27/28th the two Tribals were carrying out an east-west patrol between Jersey and St. Malo with the intention of intercepting any German shipping attempting to escape to the Brittany ports. 70

Huron and Eskimo were heading due east at twenty-four knots in line abreast when at 0052 Eskimo obtained surface contacts bearing 110 at 11000 yards. As the range closed the contact was confirmed to be three ships and at 0059 the two Tribals turned towards the contacts and opened fire with starshell at a range of 8000 yards. The German force, made up of one minesweeper and two armed trawlers, obviously had some warning of the approach of the Tribals for when their starshell burst at 0100 only one ship was visible, the other two being obscured by a smoke screen. Both Huron and Eskimo engaged this target immediately and by 0105 the minesweeper M4620 was on fire. 80

During this initial attack Eskimo's bridge personnel observed "a number of bright flashes...from the direction of St.

70 Rear Admiral P.D. Budge address to Huron Reunion. Sept. 19, 1981. p. 11.

70 C.N.M.O. (L), Narrative "B", "The R.C.N.'s Part In The Invasion of France" p. 256. Smith, Hold the Narrow Sea, p. 244.

80 Huron Deck Log, June 28th, 1944. LtCdr. H.S. Rayner, "Report of Action" June 28th, 1944. p. 1. NA, RG 24, Vol. 11730, CS151-12-7. LtCdr. Sinclair, "Report of Action" June 28th 1944, p. 1. PRO, ADM 199/532.

Malo." Moments later "six to eight salvos fell in line with the Bridge, 40-50 yards short." ⁸¹ Under fire from shore batteries, the two Tribals turned away to port and then turned to 090 and increased speed to thirty knots in order to close the German force once more. Once again starshell was fired and revealed:

the initial burning ship (Target 'A') and a line of thick white smoke extending for about a mile, to the right of which an enemy ship was observed. She was the smoke layer (Target 'B').

HURON continued to engage the burning ship (Target 'A'); ESKIMO engaged the right hand ship (Target 'B'), but shortly HURON shifted her fire to ESKIMO'S target ('B'). HURON was unable to fire more than a few salvos before the range became foul. HURON was slightly abaft ESKIMO'S Port beam at this time, distant seven cables. She then, presumably, re-engaged her first target ('A'), while ESKIMO pressed on towards the right hand enemy, and passed through the smoke screen close to this ship (Target 'B').

This phase of the Action took place between 0110 and 0127. At about 0125 ESKIMO passed through the line of smoke. The Enemy was well hit during the approach, but she was not seen to burn, though smoke was caused by hits. ⁸²

By this point in the action the two Tribals had split up and when Eskimo emerged from the smoke screen she found herself alone with a third German warship that opened "a rapid and accurate fire on ESKIMO using one 3" gun, one Bofors and about four Oerlikons. She obtained hits with Oerlikon on the ship's side and after superstructure almost at once." ⁸³ Two of the twenty millimeter Oerlikon shells had devastating effect as they cut pipes and tubes in the boiler rooms which caused Eskimo's speed to be reduced to six knots. The trawler's "unpleasantly rapid and accurate fire" caused further damage by cutting the electric cables that provided power for the communications, radar and gunnery control systems. Furthermore, the Tribal could not

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

engage the trawler with her main armament, because Huron was known to be on the same bearing. Finally, the power to Eskimo's pom pom failed, and a twin Oerlikon jammed, thus, as Lieutenant Commander Sinclair noted in his report, "in effect we were almost outgunned by this determined and gallant trawler." *4

At 0136 the trawler responsible for damaging Eskimo escaped eastwards through the clouds of smoke and steam that hung over the area, therefore Eskimo concentrated on the other trawler (Eskimo's Target "B") which had been heavily damaged but refused to sink. Shortly after this Eskimo regained steam pressure and was able to make twenty knots. After "a considerable amount of gunfire had failed to achieve the desired result", Lieutenant Commander Sinclair attempted to sink the trawler through the use of M.T.B. tactics. He manoeuvred Eskimo to within forty yards of the trawler and a depth charge was launched at the target with the starboard thrower. This novel form of attack by a Tribal failed, and Eskimo was forced to try to sink the target with gunfire. *5

After the two Tribals had become separated, Huron had continued to engage M4620 to the northwest of Eskimo. At 0137 the minesweeper blew up and sank, and at 0140 upon receiving a damage report from Eskimo, Lieutenant Commander Rayner turned to close the damaged Tribal. Upon arrival Rayner ordered Eskimo to disengage to the west and at 0201 Huron opened fire on the damaged trawler and quickly set it on fire. Huron then searched for the other trawler to the east but when the search turned up nothing Huron returned and sank the burning trawler at 0250. At 0415 contact was regained with Eskimo and the two Tribals

*4 Ibid. p. 1-2. Capt. R.A. Morice to C-in-C Plymouth, July 2nd, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/532. The two 20mm. shells that caused so much damage were found intact.

*5 Sinclair, "Report of Action" p. 2.

returned to Plymouth. **

It is clear from the various reports filed on this action by the two C.O.'s, Plymouth Command and the Admiralty that it was disturbing to all concerned. Two powerful Tribals had engaged three light craft yet had only managed to sink two of them while a third had not only managed to escape but had severely damaged one of the destroyers. The mistakes were obvious and the result of inexperience. In the first place the two Tribals lost contact with each other. As Captain St. John Cronyn pointed out this caused the "cohesion" of the force to be lost. In the opinion of Cronyn and the other officers who commented on the action there was no reason why the Tribals "were not manoeuvred in line ahead which experience has shown to be the best formation in this type of action." Secondly, rather than decreasing speed after the first contact the Tribals "increased to 30 knots which was quite unnecessary and which must have complicated a true appreciation of the situation and interfered with gunnery." **

The blame for both these mistakes lay with the S.O. of the force, but to his credit Lieutenant Commander Rayner, in his report written after the action, admitted that he had made a tactical error. Rayner's explanation of his tactics is illuminating: "I treated the enemy initially as destroyers, that is high speed vessels, as from previous destroyer engagements I was obsessed with the idea of not letting the enemy get away." ** Thus the cause of Rayner's tactical errors was aggressiveness, and errors due to aggression are perhaps the most forgiveable in naval circles. It was clear that different tactics would have to be used by the Tribals against light craft such as minesweepers

** Huron Deck Log, June 28th, 1944. Rayner, "Report of Action" p. 2.

** Capt. St. J. Cronyn, Minutes on June 28th 1944 Action. Sept. 8th, 1944. PRO, ADM 199/532. Cronyn's observations were shared by Adm. Leatham in his report of July 29th.

** Rayner, "Report of Action" p. 4.

and trawlers, and in future actions in the Channel and the Bay of Biscay Allied destroyers approached such targets at low speed in line ahead.

During the first two weeks of July the 10th DF continued its offensive sweeps against German surface craft off the Channel Islands and the coast of north Brittany. On July 1/2, Huron, Eskimo and Javelin were operating off Ushant when the two British destroyers collided. While Javelin was only slightly damaged, Huron was forced to tow Eskimo stern first for ten hours until she was relieved by tugs from Plymouth. ** On the night of July 4/5th Tartar and Ashanti inflicted heavy damage to four German patrol vessels off Ile de Bas, and then on July 8/9th Tartar and Huron inflicted damage to five trawlers near the Channel Islands. These operations once again demonstrated the difficulty of engaging light craft so close to the German held coast. ** Nevertheless the operations were obviously a success for after the July 8/9th sweep the German C-in-C Group West, Admiral Kranke wrote that "continuous patrolling by powerful enemy forces was creating difficulties in getting supplies to the Islands." **

On the night of July 12/13th Tartar, Blyskawica, and Haida engaged in an offensive sweep "of a more ambitious nature than had heretofore been attempted" ** as they patrolled off Lorient about seventy miles south east of Brest. While this patrol was unsuccessful they returned to the same area on the night of July 14/15th and completely destroyed a convoy of three ships. That operation marked the beginning of a new campaign as the Tribals,

** Huron Deck Log, July 2nd 1944.

** Plymouth Command War Diary. C.N.M.O.(L), Narrative "B" "The R.C.N.'s Part in the Invasion of France" p. 258-9. Meiklem, Tartar Memoirs, p. 88-9.

** Vice Admiral Theodor Kranke, July 10th, 1944. In Capt. Basil Jones' Personal Papers.

** C.N.M.O.(L), Narrative "B", "The R.C.N.'s Part in the Invasion of France" p. 260.

for the most part, were engaged in operations along the Biscay coast until September. During this period the Canadian component in the flotilla changed. Huron was recalled to Halifax for a major refit on August 4th, with Haide following her on September 22nd. Their place in the flotilla was taken by Iroquois.

The extension of operations into the Bay of Biscay marked the end of operations in the English Channel for the Canadian Tribals. During their attachment to Plymouth Command they had played a significant role in the victory over German destroyer forces. Their most important contribution was their part in the victory on the night of June 8/9th. Participating in the type of large scale, high speed surface action that destroyer officers dream of, the two Canadian Tribals had succeeded in driving two German destroyers from the battle and had forced a third ashore on the rocky Brittany coast. This success surely justifies the decision to the R.C.N.'s most powerful destroyers to the European theatre.

C

Conclusion

On March 6th 1943, H.M.C.S. Iroquois slipped quietly into Halifax for the first time. Because of wartime secrecy her arrival was unheralded, but the word soon got out, and the first ship of Canada's newest most powerful warship class became the subject of interested scrutiny. Canada's naval minister was one of those who made a special effort to see the new destroyer. Angus L. Macdonald was clearly impressed: "although I knew the specifications, I was surprised at her size." Commenting on the importance of the Tribals to the R.C.N. Macdonald concluded that "her commissioning marks an important step in the development of our Navy. Heretofore we have been confined largely to convoy and escort work. The Iroquois is a major fighting ship and will operate as such." ¹ The Tribals were not disappointing in this role.

In the Channel operations the Tribals showed that Canadian sailors were good. Fighting in modern, well equipped destroyers, and led by experienced, well-trained officers, the Canadians compiled an enviable record. During the period considered in this study the Canadians engaged German naval forces on seven occasions. In all but one of these actions German warships were sunk or forced aground. ² The success of the Canadians, however, goes beyond the "numbers game". Problems were encountered, but, with the exception of torpedo firing, the lessons were learned and the problems did not recur. The Canadian Tribals also proved adept at employing new tactics developed for the Channel operations.

¹ Department of National Defence Press Release, April 2nd 1943. DHIST, H.M.C.S. Iroquois (1942-1943) 8000. Macdonald visited the ship on March 8th 1943.

² The exception was the July 8th/9th action when Tartar and Huron were forced to break off an engagement with five trawlers due to accurate fire from shore batteries.

The success of the R.C.N. Tribals demonstrated that Canadian sailors were at least the equals of their R.N. counterparts and German opponents. Not only did this compensate for some of the disappointment brought on by the Canadians' poor showing on the convoy routes earlier in the war, but it also attested to the quality of the pre-war permanent force. During the 1930's those officers most responsible for the achievements of the Tribals had received a thorough grounding in surface warfare. The fact that they were fighting the type of war they had prepared for and understood undoubtedly contributed to their success at Plymouth. Thus, a stronger correlation exists between the R.C.N. activities in the 1930's and its operations during the war than has previously been acknowledged by historians.

Was the priority given the acquisition and overseas deployment of the Tribals justified? Strong arguments can be made on both sides of this question. Those opposed would argue that the primary responsibility of the R.C.N. was the defence of north Atlantic shipping, and that all resources should have been used for that purpose. If additional escort destroyers had been procured instead of the Tribals, and such excellent officers such as DeWolf, Rayner and Stubbs been given escort group commands, that would have done much to bolster the beleaguered mid-ocean force.

The Canadian navy, however, was not a one dimensional force. Although the protection of shipping was indeed the primary concern of the navy it was not its exclusive concern. It was important to the R.C.N., as it was to any navy, to show that it had the capability of performing more than one role. The Tribals had been acquired for surface warfare and when the opportunity to take part in such warfare arose one cannot blame the service for grasping it. Furthermore, by the time the Tribals were being commissioned or taking part in their first operations during the summer and fall of 1943 the U-boat threat had diminished and the shortage of A/S warships had been overcome.

Success in war is its own justification. It is still more

satisfactory when it contributes to recognizable strategic advantages, and there is a good case for arguing that the 10th Destroyer Flotilla made such a contribution. By controlling the German surface threat the 10th Destroyer Flotilla helped secure the west flank of the invasion, the most significant operation of the war. This had political as well as military benefits. In 1944 Mackenzie King, desiring that Canada's war effort "should command international respect", called for the projection of the Canadian military effort into the major theatres.³ Canada's Tribals helped to bring about such a result.

There is, then, much to suggest that the R.C.N. was justified in its policy of acquiring and using Tribal class destroyers. Perhaps it is of more importance that the questions raised, in examining this process, show that detailed analysis of anti-submarine warfare does not necessarily provide a complete understanding of the Canadian naval experience. Other questions, about other aspects of Canadian naval operations need to be posed. When such Second World War activities as combined operations, the operations of coastal forces, mine sweeping and naval aviation are examined in detail, it may be necessary to reconsider some of the judgements made by historians of the R.C.N.

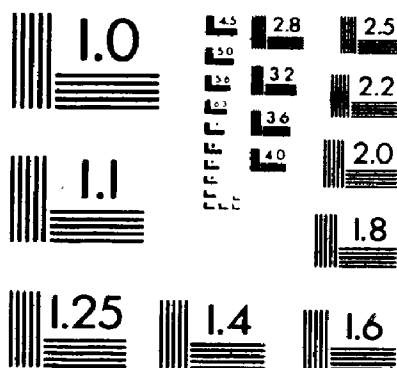
A narrow focus on the north Atlantic, moreover, depends heavily upon hindsight and fails to come to grips with the R.C.N. as it was. We are after all discussing a navy that barely existed in 1939, whose tiny corps of senior officers had spent much of their careers struggling against the decimation or extinction of their service. They were utterly dependent upon the R.N. for both technical and moral support, and the advice from Great Britain was unambiguous: the only true line of development was a big-ship, surface warfare fleet. If any confirmation was needed, it was readily available from the

³ W.A.B. Douglas, "Alliance Warfare 1939-1945: Canada's Maritime Forces." Revue Internationale D'Histoire Militaire No. 51, 1982. p. 177.

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R.C.N.'s own experience during the First World War. The service had built a small-ship, anti-submarine flotilla in 1917-18, and the government had not hesitated in rapidly dismantling it in 1919.

U-boat successes during the Second World War caught the Royal Navy and, later, the United States Navy by surprise and woefully unprepared. Despite the enormity of the crisis, both navies continued to limit anti-submarine commitments in the interest of more glamorous offensive roles. As in 1917-18, but on a far more vast scale, the R.C.N. found itself rushing small ships into commission to fill gaps in the major navies. Is it any wonder that the R.C.N. also took steps to ensure that it was not entirely consumed by the demands of a short-term crisis, as had happened twenty-five years before?

A navy draws strength from its past. The courage and professionalism of Canadian seamen in Tribals was second to none. In conceiving and seeing through the Tribal program the Canadian naval staff had given moral considerations at least as much weight as strategic and technical ones. The legacy of the Tribals turned out to be richer than they had dared to hope.

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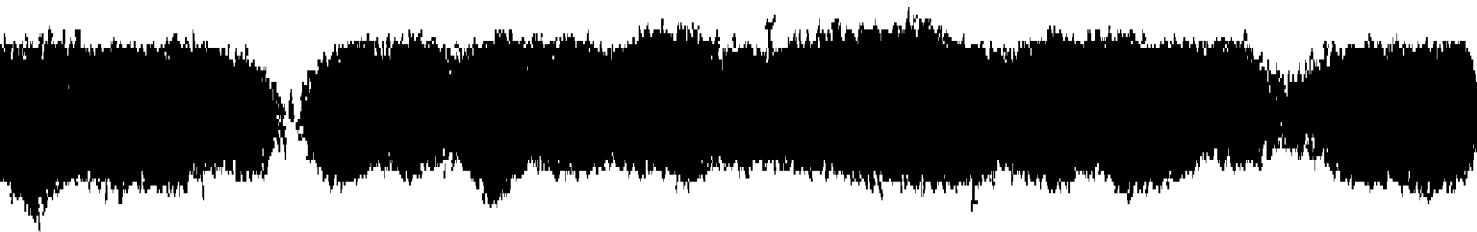
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