

An Historical Vignette – Sinking of HMCS Ottawa (H60) – 13 September 1942

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The Royal Navy *C-class* destroyer **HMS Crusader** was built in the Portsmouth Dockyard. The work had started in September 1930 and she was commissioned into the Royal Navy on 2 May 1932. She served in the *2nd Destroyer Flotilla* until April 1938, when she entered the Sheerness Dockyard for a refit to address some technical and operational needs of the Royal Canadian Navy. On 5 June 1938, at Chatham, UK, she was commissioned into the RCN as **HMCS Ottawa** (H60), a *River-class* destroyer. Her first commanding officer was Captain Victor Gabriel Brodeur. On 7 November 1938, the *Ottawa* arrived in Esquimalt for service in the Pacific. However, on 3 September 1939, the United Kingdom (followed by Canada on 10 September) declared war on Germany ... and the destroyer *Ottawa* was required in the Atlantic. Her first war-time operations were as a local escort for the first two Canadian troop convoys of the war **TC-1** (10-12 Dec 1939 - 5 ships, 7,415 troops) and **TC-2** (22-24 Dec 1939 - 7 ships, 8,168 troops) through the Halifax approaches to their mid-ocean escorts.

Until August 1940 she remained based in Halifax as a local escort for some 17 eastbound HX convoys destined for Liverpool. Her final local escort tasking was escorting troop convoy **TC-7** (27 Aug – 4 Sep 1940, 6 ships, 10,359 troops) through the Halifax approaches. *Ottawa* stayed with the convoy for the Atlantic crossing.

10th Escort Group – Convoy WS-4

HMCS Ottawa (Commander Edmund Rollo Mainguy) and the destroyers **HMC Ships Assiniboine, Restigouche, St Laurent, and Saguenay**, which had been serving in UK waters, were assigned to **10th Escort Group**, Greenock (on the river Clyde Estuary) for anti-submarine operations in the *Western Approaches*. Over the next 10 months, *Ottawa* served primarily as a local escort through the Western Approaches for:

- Outbound convoys (WS-3B, WS-4, WS-4B, WS-5A, WS-8A, WS-8B, & WS-9A) destined for Freetown, Sierra Leone, and OB-217 destined for Halifax and NYC; and
- Inbound convoys (SC-3, SC-11 & SC-25) from Sydney NS; and the troop convoy **TC-9** (5 ships, 6,007 troops) and *HX-127* from Halifax.

The outbound convoy WS-4 is of a particular interest. On 6 Nov 1940, a freighter the **SS Melrose Abbey II**, a straggler from convoy *OG-45* (Liverpool to Gibraltar), sent a distress signal that she was being pursued by a surfaced submarine. (A day earlier, in the convoy, she had collided with and rescued survivors from the freighter **SS Gartbrattan**.)

Ottawa and **HMS Harvester** (an H-class destroyer) were immediately detached from convoy WS-4 to assist the freighter and they arrived in time to engage a surfaced Italian submarine, the **Comandante Faà di Bruno** (Aldo Enrici) which was firing her deck gun at the freighter. Both destroyers commenced firing with their forward guns. The boat crash dived. Over five hours the two destroyers completed nine attacks on the enemy boat and launched a long series of depth charges. Underwater explosions were eventually heard, contact with the submarine was lost, and an oil slick appeared on the surface (50°45'N, 10°49'W) about 56 nm SW of Mizen Head, Ireland. However, the RN *U-boat Assessment Committee* agreed that a submarine was engaged, but there was insufficient evidence of its destruction and was considered “*probably damaged*”. In 1982, the RN *Naval Historical Branch* reassessed the evidence and credited the sinking of the Italian submarine to the actions of **HMCS Ottawa** and **HMS Harvester**.

Newfoundland Escort Force – Convoy HX-133

In the spring of 1941, complete end-to-end protection was introduced for Atlantic convoys. The RCN would be responsible for the western Atlantic. The newly formed *Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF)* of primarily RCN and some RN ships would be under RCN command (Commodore Leonard Murray) and be based in St. John's Newfoundland. **HMCS Ottawa** and other RCN ships serving in UK waters were reassigned to the *NEF*.

Shortly after establishing the *NEF*, convoy **HX-133** (58 merchants) departed Halifax on 16 June 1941 and was eastbound for Liverpool. The *NEF mid-ocean escorts* (20-27 June) were the destroyer *Ottawa* (Captain Rollo Mainguy, senior officer) and three corvettes **HMC Ships Chambly, Collingwood** and **Orillia**. Also included was the armed merchant cruiser **HMS Wolfe** (A/Capt. William Shuttleworth, RN retired).

Some operational context: On 23 June 1941 at 15:00 (GMT+3), **U-203** (in grid position AJ9253 – about 325 nm SSE of Greenland) sighted the eastbound convoy and reported details to the *Admiral Commanding U-boats* (Karl Doenitz). The Admiral's *War Log* entries indicate that he had a special interest in **HX-133** and had overall operational control of the U-boats assigned to attack convoy HX-133. On 24 June, from 06:41 to 16:32, either **U-79** or **U-203** provided Doenitz with convoy location updates. “*The boats were ordered to go into operation against the most favorable one. All the boats, therefore, even those to the south which cannot operate with any prospect of success against the N.E. bound convoy, have good prospects for attack. U 203, however, gave only one further report of contact at 1632 in AK 4460 (55°03'N, 38°45'W), 2200, speed 9 knots, but subsequently reported at 2020 that she was returning owing to broken muffler valve. 4 ships were sunk, 24,000 tons.*”

The loss of four merchants in the attacks on convoy **HX-133** occurred primarily at night ... and *Ottawa* was the only escort with radar (*RDF Type 286*) and she had challenges coordinating anti-submarine actions of the three corvettes which only had convoy escort experiences in the relatively safe *Halifax Approaches*. The corvettes also lacked radio telephones,

their wireless equipment was unreliable and their visual signalling at night by blue flashing light was no better. At 17:00 GMT on 27 June, convoy *HX-133* was handed over to the **8th Escort Group** (60°22'N 26°50'W) about 240 nm SW of Iceland for escorting through the *Western Approaches*. Two more merchants were lost in attacks on the convoy ... and two U-boats were sunk.

Canadian 4th Escort Group (EG-C4) - Convoy ON-127

Over the next 14 months, *HMCS Ottawa* was busy escorting a dozen Atlantic convoys. On 11 August 1942, convoy **SC-96** (29 merchants) had departed Halifax and safely arrived in Liverpool on the 27th. The five escorts (*HMCS St Croix*, *HMCS Ottawa*, *HMCS Amherst*, *HMCS Arvida* and *HMS Celandine* of the **Canadian 4th Escort Group EG-C4**) had left the convoy west of the entrance to the *North Channel* and they arrived in Londonderry, Northern Ireland on the 26th. The crews would get some needed rest and shore leave while their ships would be readied (i.e. engineering and combat systems maintenance, ammunitioning, fuelling and storing ship, etc.) before escorting their next convoy through the UK *Western Approaches* and across the Atlantic.

The radar system in *Ottawa*, was the primitive *RDF Type 286* which did not have a rotating antenna. This system, was originally designed for aircraft and small ships. The target area was scanned by maneuvering the ship or by operator control of the antenna. In *Ottawa*, an operator trained the RDF antenna direction by hand and it was often difficult to determine if an echo came from one direction or the 180 degree reciprocal. Sub Lieutenant Latham Jensen, the gunnery officer, was responsible for the operation and maintenance of the *RDF Type 286* radar. While alongside in the Londonderry dockyard, he had arranged with the dockyard to replace the *RDF Type 286* radar with a more capable and reliable *RDF Type 271* system. Jensen's memoir published in 2000 states:

*"In Londonderry just before our last trip (escorting convoy ON-127) a lovely new 271 radar set appeared on the jetty next to Ottawa. The captain (A/LCdr Clark Anderson Rutherford) had not been informed of this major change to his ship, and when I told him what was planned, he was furious. He had been given no authority to accept this and I was to tell them not to install it." **

On 5 September 1942, escorts from the **Canadian 4th Escort Group (EG-C4)** joined westbound convoy **ON-127** (36 Merchants) which had departed Liverpool a day earlier. The escorts from Londonderry, were two destroyers *HMCS Ottawa* (A/LCdr Clark Anderson Rutherford, RCN) and *HMCS St. Croix* (Senior Officer, LCdr Andrew Hedley Dobson, RCNR) and four corvettes *HMCS Amherst* (Lt H.G. Denyer, RCNR), *HMCS Arvida* (Lt Alastair Ian MacKay, RCNR), *HMCS Sherbrooke* (Lt Joseph Ange Maurice Levesque, RCNR), and *HMS Celandine* (Lt. Patrick Varwell Collings, RNR). None of the *EG-C4* escorts had HF/DF and the only escort with *RDF Type 271* radar installed (but not reliably operational) was the *Celandine*.

Some historical context: Admiral Karl Doenitz was well aware of the 4 September departure of convoy ON-127. The Admiral's 9 September entry in his War Log includes:

"U 584, belonging to Group "Vorwärts", sighted a convoy of 11-15 steamers in AL 7463 at 2029. It was ON 127, which was expected at this time by dead reckoning. Group "Vorwärts" was ordered to operate against it. At 2146 U 584 confirmed that course and speed were as suspected, i.e. W 2200, 5-7 knots. ... "

Grid position AL 7463 is roughly equivalent to 52°27'N, 25°05'W, about 550 nm West of Ireland.

(For possible sources of Doenitz' intelligence related to ON-127 convoy's ships and departure timing from Liverpool or the escorts from Londonderry ... his log and memoirs offer no clues. However, one is reminded of WW2 posters "*Loose lips sink ships*" and "*ZIPP IT Careless talk costs lives*" ... and it is noted that *IRA chief of staff* (Sean Russell), spent the summer of 1940 in Berlin.)

On the afternoon of Thursday 10 September (a sunny cloudless day over a calm blue ocean, with visibility up to 10 miles) the convoy was nearing the mid-ocean point, when first attacked by the *Vorwärts* wolf pack. **U-96** (Hans-Jügen Hellriegel) fired four torpedoes into the convoy and sank the *SS Elisabeth van Belgie* and the *SS Sveve*, while damaging the *SS F.J. Wolfe*. Later at dinner time in the convoy, the tanker *SS Empire Oil* was damaged when torpedoed by **U-659** (Hans Stock).

Over the next three nights, the wolf pack attacked the convoy. With escorts not having the *RDF Type 271* radar systems, U-boats at periscope depth were difficult to detect. In the darkness, a flash and explosion would be the first indication of a merchant ship being torpedoed ... but from where? The action taken was to fire illuminating star-shells and the escorts would start standard search patterns as ordered by the senior officer in *St Croix*. (These illuminations were also useful to the U-boat commanders, in identifying targets.)

At night, on Friday 11 September, **U-404** (Otto von Bulow) torpedoed and damaged the *SS Maritt*; and **U-218** (Richard Becker) torpedoed and damaged the *SS Fordass*. Later on Friday, **U-584** (Joachim Deeke) torpedoed and sank the already damaged *SS Empire Oil* and torpedoed and damaged the *SS Hindanger*. *HMCS Ottawa* rescued a couple dozen survivors from the sinking *Empire Oil* ... and *HMCS Amherst* rescued 40 survivors from the *Hindanger* and sinks her with gunfire and depth charges.

At night on Saturday 12 September, **U-211** (Karl Hause) torpedoed and damaged two freighters *SS Empire Moonbeam* and the *SS Hektor*. Later on the 12th, **U-608** (Rolf Struckmaker) torpedoed and delivered the *coup de grace* to both freighters ... and **U-404** (Otto von Bülow) torpedoed and damaged the *SS Dagbild*.

On Sunday 13 September, at daylight, **U-594** (Friedrich Mumm) torpedoes and sinks the *SS Stone Street* which was a straggler from the convoy. Air escort cover had been deployed from Newfoundland causing **U-96** to submerge while **U-380** and **U-584** were driven off from the convoy. *HMS Witch* (a *W* class destroyer) and *HMCS Annapolis* (a former *USN Town class destroyer*) were also dispatched from St John's.

Author's note – During the attack on convoy ON-127, the allies used GMT and the U-boats used GMT+3. In this vignette, times are expressed in GMT.

Later on the 13th, on a very dark night (with no moon), *HMCS Ottawa* was patrolling ahead of the convoy. At 19:00 GMT, **U-91** (Heinz Walkerling), at periscope depth, established contact with the approaching convoy. The U-boat and convoy were on converging courses on this very dark night, and contact was lost when the convoy zigzagged. At 22:50, the *U-91* regained contact with the approaching convoy and was in the direct path of a slow two-funnelled lead destroyer (the *Ottawa*).

A few minutes before 23:00, *Ottawa* was steaming about 5000 yards ahead of the convoy between columns 1 and 2, when her *RDF Type 286* radar operator reported an unknown object at *Green 30* (degrees to starboard). With *RDF Type 286* radar performance issues, the object could have been on a reciprocal bearing of *Red 150* (degrees to port). Aimed at the bearing to starboard, *Ottawa* exchanged "AA" flashing light (*What ship?*) signals and a weak blue light signal "*Witch*" was received. (Destroyers *HMS Witch* and *HMCS Annapolis* from St. John's were joining the convoy for the final leg to Halifax and NYC ... and were taking initial positions ahead of the convoy). *Ottawa's* port and starboard lookouts were constantly searching their sectors with binoculars. No potential U-boat contacts were reported by *Type 124 Asdic* (sonar) operators in either *Ottawa*, *Witch*, or *Annapolis*.

At 23:05, a spread of two torpedoes from tubes I and III were fired by *U-91* at the *Ottawa* (Target speed 11 knots, range 1000 meters). *U-91* then crash dived and a minute and 50 seconds later, two explosions were heard.

On board *Ottawa*, the radar operator had reported a small echo on the port bow but wasn't sure about it. The Officer of the Watch, Sub Lieutenant Latham Jensen, with the Captain's concurrence, ordered "*port 15*" and the ship started turning to port when the two torpedoes exploded into the destroyer. After chunks of wreckage and water stopped falling, the engines were stopped. Some interior lights were illuminating the ocean in front of the bridge, where the forecastle along with anchors, cables and A-Gun used to be.

When *U-91* returned to periscope depth, the commander observed what he incorrectly thought was a second destroyer closing in to assist the stricken *Ottawa*. At 23:15, he fired a single torpedo from tube II at the destroyer. One minute and 45 seconds later, the torpedo hit the destroyer amidships starboard side and into the Number 2 boiler room, followed by a series of explosions ... and the sinking of *HMCS Ottawa H60*. The 131 casualties included: the commanding officer (LCdr C. A. Rutherford); 102 (RCN, RCNR or RCNVR) and 6 RN crew members; and 22 merchant seamen rescued from earlier sinkings. There were about 65 survivors.

Post Scriptum

It was a bad week for the RCN, with the armed yacht *HMCS Racoon* (no survivors) and the corvette *HMCS Charlottetown* (10 casualties) torpedoed and sunk in the *Gulf of St Lawrence* on 7 and 11 September, respectively.

On 17 September 1942, *Captain D, Newfoundland* (Captain H.T.W. Grant, RCN), convened a *Board of Inquiry* "*into the loss of HMCS Ottawa*". In the Evidence provided by Lt T.C. Pullen, (*HMCS Ottawa's* First Lieutenant), he was asked if he had any "*suggestions for lessons learnt, etc.*" His *Q.26* response included:

"... *I consider that if we had been fitted with H.F. D/F (high frequency direction finder) and R.D.F. type 271 (radar) in all probability the ship would still be afloat.*"

Lieutenant Pullen was asked "Why?" His clarification included:

"*It is my opinion that from the beginning of the convoy attack three or four day's previously, that we would have had considerably greater results in locating the shadowing submarines and fixing them at night with the Type 271. If the submarine had been on the surface or awash 286P certainly won't pick them up. To bear that out, exercising at Moville before the convoy, we endeavoured to try out our Type 286P on the submarine on the surface without any satisfaction at all. In other words, 286P picked up WITCH and probably ANNAPOLIS but an object the size of a submarine would not appear on the screen.*"

In the *Board of Inquiry's* 23 September 1942 report, to *Flag Officer, Newfoundland Force* (Captain E.R. Mainguy, RCN), the first suggestion reads:

1. "*That the fitting of type 271 R.D.F. (radar) to all convoy escorts and H.F.D/F F.H.3 (high frequency direction finders) to destroyers be pressed on to the maximum.*"

* *Tin Hats, Oilskins & Seaboats, A Naval Journey, 1938–1945*, Latham B. Jenson, 2000, Jaguar Book Group