

“‘FOOLING’ AROUND THE FRENCH COAST”: RCN TRIBAL-CLASS DESTROYERS IN ACTION — APRIL 1944



by Michael J. Whitby

The operations of the RCN's Tribal-class destroyers in the English Channel during 1944 are among the most glorious chapters in Canadian naval history. While “‘fooling’ around the French coast”, as sailors put it in polite company, the Canadians sank or forced aground three German destroyers and a number of light craft. These successes, however, were not as easily won as published accounts have suggested. This study of the first Canadian actions shows that the margin between victory and defeat was in fact very slim.

In describing the situation that existed in the waters off Guadalcanal in 1942, US naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that “a curious tactical situation had developed at Guadalcanal; a virtual exchange of sea mastery every twelve hours.”² A similar situation prevailed in the English Channel during early 1944. Air superiority allowed the Allies a measure of control over the narrow seas during daylight, but at night the Channel was far from secure. The Germans were able to run convoys along the coast of north Brittany, E-boats continued to be active, and their destroyers had proved to be remarkably adept at countering the Royal Navy's offensive sweeps. Small as they were, the German naval forces posed a considerable threat to the impending invasion of North-West Europe: the lumbering troop transports and supply ships would be extremely vulnerable as they made their night crossing to the French coast. The formation of the first permanent strike force at Plymouth, consisting of five Tribal-class destroyers, three of them Canadian, was part of an effort by the Allies to extend their mastery of the Channel beyond the daylight hours.

“Tunnels”

The principal British tactic — termed “Tunnels” — consisted of offensive anti-shiping sweeps along the Brittany coast. These had been carried out by Plymouth Command since September 1943, but early results had been dismal. The most disastrous “Tunnel” had taken place on the night of 22-23 October 1943 when a force composed of the A/A cruiser *Charybdis*, two Fleet destroyers and four less powerful Hunt-class destroyers was attacked by four German torpedo boats. In what one of the British participants called “the classic balzup of the war”,³ the ‘torpedo boats’ — actually small, heavily armed destroyers — sank the cruiser and a Hunt class destroyer with torpedoes, and made their escape without even being sighted.⁴

The Admiralty and Plymouth command learned important lessons from this setback. First, warships taking part in such operations had to be compatible in performance and armament. Because the capa-

bilities of the ships engaged on 22-23 October varied widely, it was difficult for them to operate as a cohesive unit. There was also a need for better tactics: now that radar was universally employed by the Allies to control ship movements and gunnery, the traditional line-ahead formation was far too flexible, and it proved especially cumbersome when destroyers were tied to the movements of a cruiser as had been the case on 22-23 October when *Charybdis* led the formation. Finally, the action demonstrated that the ships involved in “Tunnels” should have comprehensive collective training. The ships that sailed from Plymouth had never been to sea as a unit, and the Senior Officer, Captain G.A.W. Voelcker, RN, had no previous experience on “Tunnels”.⁵ Given such a lack of unit integrity and command experience it is hardly surprising that the operation ended in disaster.

Although valuable lessons had been learned, the severe shortage of destroyers



Haida at speed in the Channel, June 1944.

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prevented their systematic implementation. On 19 January 1944, within days and in some cases hours of arrival at Plymouth, the RCN Tribals *Athabaskan*, *Haida*, and *Iroquois*, along with their RN sister *Ashanti*, were sent on a "Tunnel" with three Hunt-class destroyers. This force had undergone no collective training, the Hunts and Tribals had vastly different capabilities, and the personnel in the Tribals were unfamiliar with both the type and theatre of operations. Predictably, problems with communications and leadership arose, and in his subsequent report, the CO of *Haida*, Commander H.G. DeWolf, RCN, "strongly recommended that the Plymouth forces exercise night encounters."⁶ Despite the need for such exercises, few were actually carried out, and the Tribals did most of their learning on the job.

10th Destroyer Flotilla

On 9 February 1944 the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, consisting of the Tribals *Ashanti*, *Athabaskan*, *Haida*, *Huron* and *Tartar* officially came into being. *Tartar's* CO, Commander St. John Tyrwhitt, RN, an officer with considerable destroyer experience, commanded the flotilla, but his tenure was brief. During a "Tunnel" on 25 February confusion arose when inexperienced radar operators mistook the approach of friendly aircraft for an attack by E-boats. Then, while off the French coast, the flotilla opened fire on what were thought to be German destroyers, but which turned out to be a group of small islands.⁷

There were still more serious problems on a sweep four nights later. The five Tribals twice gained contact with German naval forces but failed to engage them. First, Commander Tyrwhitt avoided a confrontation with E-boats in mid-Channel. More significantly, while off the Brittany coast, he twice ordered his force to turn away from a suspected torpedo attack. The destroyers returned to Plymouth after

making only a token search for the enemy: a more sustained search would likely have turned up the five torpedo boats that had not only stalked the Tribals, but had indeed carried out a torpedo attack which, fortunately for the Tribals, was unsuccessful.⁸ The failures of this operation may have contributed to a change in command of the 10th Flotilla.

Officially Tyrwhitt was relieved for a well-deserved rest following three extremely stressful years of destroyer command in the Mediterranean. However, the tone of the C-in-C Plymouth's report on the 1-2 March "Tunnel", together with the timing of the command change, suggest that the flotilla's performance may have been a factor in his replacement.

No matter what its cause, there is no doubt that the command change sent a strong message to the other CO's of the flotilla. In his report, the C-in-C, Admiral Leatham, had written: "depending on the circumstances, which only a commanding officer can gauge, evasive action may have to be taken, but this does not mean that the main objective is to be missed as a result."⁹ The "main objective" was to search out and destroy the enemy. The captains of the flotilla took these comments to heart, and this certainly contributed to the aggressiveness, at times verging on recklessness, that characterized the flotilla's subsequent operations. 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."¹⁰

During March and April of 1944 the Tribals were at sea twenty-five times and carried out a total of eighty-four individual sorties. Despite this activity, German forces were not encountered. The situation changed quickly and dramatically at the end of April: within a span of a few days Tribals twice engaged German torpedo

boats and put a significant dent in the enemy's naval strength in the theatre.

Air reconnaissance and signal intelligence during the last week of April suggested that the Germans were about to send a convoy from St. Malo to Brest.¹¹ Plymouth Command ordered a series of "Tunnels", the first of which was carried out on the night of 24-25 April. Although no direct contact was gained with German shipping, an interception was almost achieved. During a sweep down the Brittany coast, the cruiser *Black Prince* and three Tribals obtained radar contacts. However, the operators could only watch their screens in dismay as the convoy, warned of the presence of the raiding force by coastal radar, quickly slipped into one of the many harbours along the coast. The next night, despite a similar warning, the Germans were not to be as fortunate.¹²

25-26 April 1944

On the "Tunnel" of 25-26 April, Plymouth Command had no fewer than three forces working in concert. "Tunnels" were no longer strictly hit or miss jabs by a single group of warships, but sought to cover a broad area through the carefully coordinated deployment of a variety of forces. The main component was the strike force. *Black Prince* (SO), *Ashanti*, *Athabaskan*, *Haida* and *Huron*, designated Force 26, were ordered to head due south from Plymouth until they were ten miles off the French coast, then to sweep eastward. At 0330 they were to retire towards Plymouth so that they would be well within the range of Allied air cover at daybreak.

While Force 26 was carrying out its sweep, three MTB's — Force 114 — were to lie beyond the eastern end of the patrol line in order "to detect and report enemy surface forces on passage." To ensure that Force 114 did not frighten contacts away from the main strike force, the MTB's were under orders not to attack any shipping



Haida, *Tartar* and an improved Dido-class cruiser (likely *Black Prince*) practising high-speed manoeuvres, Spring 1944.

until after 0330, by which time Force 26 would be heading home. This would also reduce the risk of the two forces clashing by mistake. The third element of the operation was a *Halifax* aircraft from Coastal Command which carried out a radar sweep along the patrol line from 2330 to 0010: if contact was gained with German shipping the aircraft was to vector-in Force 26.¹³

Even with this support, Force 26 was fortunate to achieve an interception. When eighteen miles off the French coast, *Black Prince's* monitoring systems indicated that the warships were being tracked by German coastal radar.¹⁴ The Allied force had indeed been detected, but a failure of co-operation among the German services and a tactical miscalculation by the German commander at sea rendered the warning useless.

Three torpedo boats from the 4th Flotilla, under the command of Korvettenkapitan Franz Kohlauf, architect of the October victory over *Charybdis*, were providing cover for a convoy proceeding to Brest. When Kohlauf was informed of the presence of Force 26 at 0130, he assumed that they would continue southward in order to intercept the convoy that lay to the west of his torpedo boats; he therefore ignored the warning from coastal radar and held his westward course. At this very moment, Force 26 turned eastward to begin its sweep down the French coast. Coastal radar did not inform Kohlauf of this alteration in course until 0201, but by then it was too late: Force 26 was on a collision course only eleven miles ahead of the torpedo

boats and had picked them up on radar.¹⁵

Once informed of the immediate presence of Force 26, Kohlauf quickly turned away to a reciprocal course. His superior command later criticized this decision in the strongest terms, maintaining that "a headlong attack launched without changing the westward course might have brought a hard-fought-for success. In situations which appear hopeless, the boldest decision leads in most cases to success."¹⁶ This judgement was ill-founded: such a "headlong attack" would not only have been contrary to the Kriegsmarine's established tactical doctrine of avoiding action against matching or superior forces, but would also have been extremely foolhardy.

The German turnaway initiated a chase that provided the first test of new tactics adopted by Force 26. Rather than proceeding in the traditional line-ahead, the force was spread out in a variation of echelon formation, with *Black Prince* in the centre and a sub-division of two Tribals deployed one and a half miles, forty degrees off each bow. Based on lessons learned from the *Charybdis* fiasco, and practical because of Plan Position Indicators now fitted in the warships, the formation was designed to limit the exposure of the cruiser to torpedo fire while allowing it to illuminate any targets with starshell. This would give the Tribals freedom of movement and enable them to take full advantage of their strong forward armament of four 4.7-inch guns.

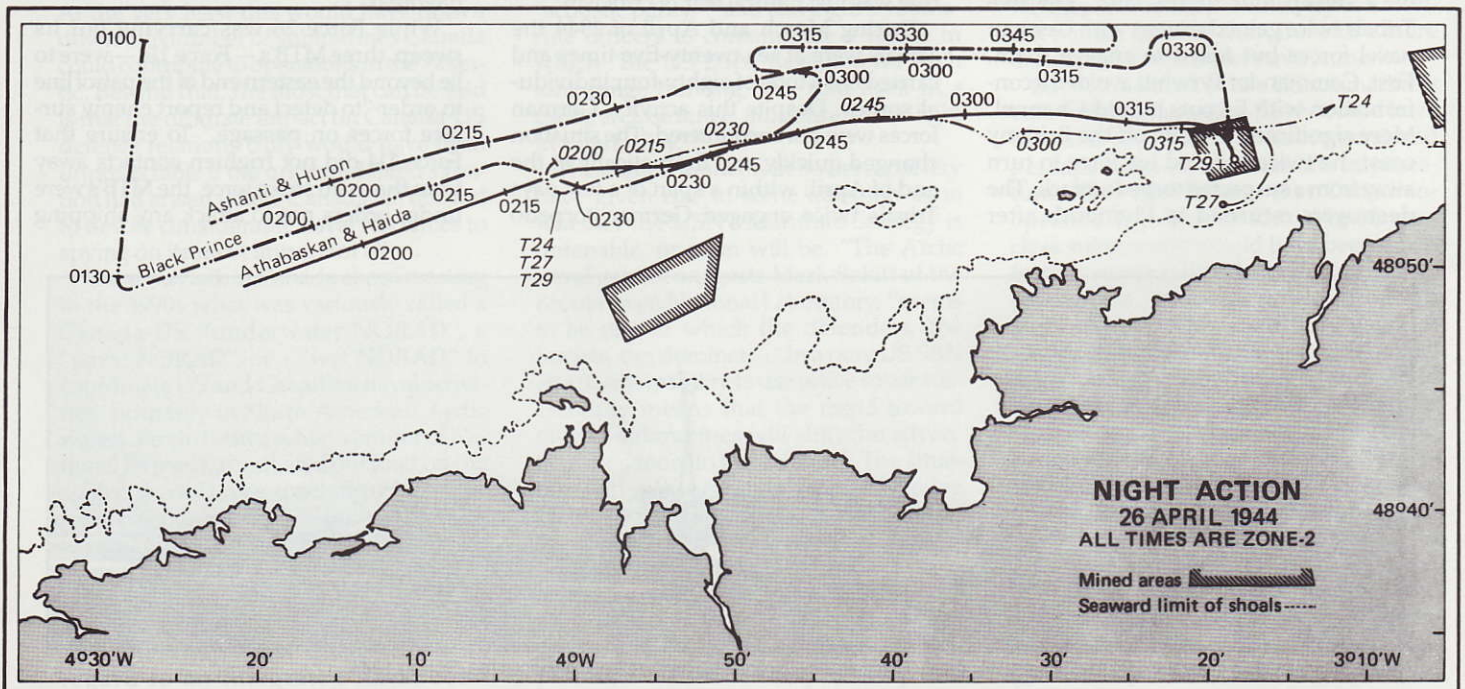
The 26 April action opened at 0220 when *Black Prince* began illuminating the fleeing boats at a range of 13,600 yards.¹⁷ The destroyers opened fire seven minutes later,

and although the range was long and visibility limited by German smokescreens, their fire was accurate. Type 285 gunnery radar provided accurate ranges, and because the German torpedo boats were not using flashless cordite they revealed their position whenever they fired their main armament. *T27*, the rearmost torpedo boat, was the first to suffer. Hit four times between 0213 and 0236, the damage was sufficiently severe that Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf ordered her to withdraw.¹⁸

T27's subsequent disengagement to the southeast, detected but ignored by *Haida* and *Athabaskan*, put her in a position "to create a dramatic change in the battle."¹⁹ As Force 26 swept by to the north, the German destroyer fired her full outfit of six torpedoes; none of them hit, but they did force *Black Prince* to turn away and the cruiser played no further role in the action. *T27* eventually escaped into Morlaix.

As the chase continued down the coast, the Tribals closed the range with their superior speed. At 0320, *T29* was hit by a salvo from either *Haida* or *Athabaskan* that damaged her steering. Veering out of control, the destroyer emerged from the smoke 4000 yards off *Haida's* starboard bow and was quickly smothered with hits: "by 0335 hours the boat is stopped in the water and burning from stem to stern."²⁰

While *Haida* and *Athabaskan* engaged the doomed *T29*, *Ashanti* and *Huron* continued to pursue *T24* eastwards. Contact was soon lost, however, and *Ashanti's* CO, Lieutenant Commander Barnes RN, decided to join the unequal fight against *T29*. Unfortunately, *Haida* was not in-



formed and when the two Tribals loomed out of the darkness off *Haida's* bow, Commander DeWolf was forced to break off a torpedo attack.²¹

In the past German warships had consistently demonstrated a capacity to withstand a tremendous amount of punishment: *T29* was no exception. For over forty-five minutes the four Tribals circled the crippled vessel, pounding it with close-range fire, while the German sailors gamely fought back. *Athabaskan's* CO, Lieutenant Commander J.H. Stubbs, described a scene of 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.* Commander DeWolf later found evidence of the crossfire when he discovered a shell fragment with British marking embedded in his golf clubs in his day cabin.²²

When close-range fire failed to sink *T29* the four Tribals attempted to finish her off with torpedoes. Incredibly, as a result of either failures in drill or calculation, all sixteen torpedoes missed the immobile target. Finally, at 0422, after more concentrated close-range fire, Commander DeWolf was able to signal "enemy has sunk." As the Tribals reformed, *Huron* and *Ashanti* collided. Both destroyers were able to return safely to Plymouth at twenty-five knots, but the incident was to have important consequences in the immediate future.

The damage suffered by *Ashanti* and *Huron* seemed a trivial price for signal success gained after three frustrating months of fruitless searches for the enemy. Admiral Leatham and his staff shared the flotilla's sense of richly deserved victory, but staff officers at the Admiralty, whose job it was to be coldly objective, found reasons to fault the performance of Force 26.

These criticisms centered mainly on the final forty minutes of the action. All four destroyers concentrated on the obviously crippled *T29*, "while at least two, if not three others (some probably damaged) were making good their escape."²³ The most scathing remarks, however, concerned the deplorable torpedo performance. After outlining the mistakes that led to the debacle, Captain St. John Cronyn of the Tactical and Staff Duties division laid the blame squarely upon the shoulders of the senior officer of Force 26 and the commanding officers of the destroyers, who "must be held responsible for the bad torpedo training which resulted in a com-

plete failure in this action of the most effective weapon we possess."²⁴

Bad as the torpedo performance was, there were reasons for this. Flotilla officers in fact disagreed with the Admiralty about the utility of torpedoes. The ship commanders found the sustained and high volume fire of their heavy guns much better suited to the surprise, close-range, fast paced encounters in the Channel. The little time available for training was therefore spent on gunnery exercises and on the development of tactics that would make best use of the guns. The reliance upon gunnery may not have been popular among certain staff officers at the Admiralty, but it did prove to be a crucial factor in the flotilla's success throughout the spring and summer of 1944.

The action on the night of 25/26 April had important results. The Germans had suffered not only the destruction of a valuable destroyer, but, because Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf had died in the carnage aboard *T29*, the loss of one of their most capable destroyer officers. According to the 4th Flotilla's war diary, their morale was badly affected and there can be no doubt that this reduced combat effectiveness in future operations.

The reverse was certainly true in the 10th Flotilla. The enemy had finally been met and, despite some problems, had been dealt a heavy blow. The boost to morale was likely greatest in the Canadian destroyers. *Haida* and *Athabaskan*, despite their lack of combat experience, had played the leading role in the action, and had been responsible for the hits which had crippled *T29* and forced *T27* out of the action. Furthermore, the realization that they had performed at least as well as their RN sister ships was undoubtedly a source of pride to the men of a navy that had often stood up poorly in comparison with their British mentors.

Chance had unquestionably played a role in Force 26's triumph. Had Korvettenkapitan Kohlauf reacted differently to

the warning provided by coastal radar the action likely would not have taken place at all. Had *T27* been more accurate with her torpedo salvo the cost of victory may have been extremely high. Chance, however, is part of war, and as the men of *Haida* and *Athabaskan* could soon attest, it smiles upon both sides.

When the damage to *Ashanti* and *Huron* was assessed after the action, it was realized that the ships would not be operational until mid-May. With *Tartar* in the midst of an extensive refit, the flotilla's strength was reduced to two Tribals at the very time when demands were peaking because of the upcoming invasion. It fell to the men of *Haida* and *Athabaskan* to fill the breach. They had been scheduled for a rest after their arduous duty during March and April, but now had to take on the workload of the entire flotilla. Some survivors of *Athabaskan* suggest that this was another example of Plymouth Command's willingness to assign the Canadian Tribals more than their fair share of operations, but these claims are not supported by the evidence.²⁵

The five Tribals of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla carried out a total of ninety-one sorties between January and the end of April. Of these, sixty (68.1 percent) included the three Canadian Tribals attached to the flotilla at any one time. During the busiest months, March and April, when eighty of the ninety-one sorties were carried out, the three RCN Tribals had participated in fifty-two (60.5 percent) of the operations.²⁶ Given the fact that they comprised sixty per cent of the flotilla, the Canadian destroyers obviously carried out no more than their fair share of operations.

There can be little doubt, however, that the crews of *Athabaskan* and *Haida* were feeling some strain. *Athabaskan's* Leading Writer Stuart Kettles recalled that, at the end of April, fatigue "was no joke, for about in a week's time, we were able to get a total of about seven hours sleep, and at about this stage of the game, it was begin-



Athabaskan at anchor in Plymouth harbour.

ning to tell on the dispositions of the various lads.”²⁷ Fortunately, after screening an invasion exercise on the night of 26-27 April, the Canadian sailors received the next night off, and Kettles recalls that on the afternoon of April 28th, *Athabaskan's* crew had recovered some of their enthusiasm: *At the 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 sailor's 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.*²⁸

28-29 April 1944

That night, 28/29 April, *Haida* and *Athabaskan* patrolled at mid-Channel, providing distant support for eight motor launches laying mines off Morlaix.

Like their counterparts in the 10th DF, the German 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla also suffered some lingering effects from the battle on 26 April. The two surviving warships, *T24* and *T27*, had taken refuge in St. Malo after the action, but the repair facilities there proved inadequate, and the destroyers were ordered to Brest on the night of 28/29 April. Because the torpedo boats' fighting capacity was impaired, the senior officer Korvettenkapitan Gotzmann of *T27*, ordered the torpedo boats to "head for the coast and avoid combat" if Allied warships were encountered.²⁹

On some occasions, atmospheric conditions enabled the radar at Combined Headquarters Plymouth to track shipping movements along the Brittany coast. Unfortunately for *T24* and *T27*, 29 April was one of those nights, and from a distance of eighty miles, Plymouth tracked them intermittently as they made their way towards Brest.³⁰ At 0307, *Haida* and *Athabaskan*, the only warships in a position to make the interception and powerful enough to handle the torpedo boats, were ordered to proceed southwest at full speed. Much like night fighters being vectored onto a distant contact, the Tribals were guided to the target by Plymouth, and at 0359 *Athabaskan* gained radar contact with the two torpedo boats at fourteen miles distance.³¹

When contact was obtained *Haida* and *Athabaskan* were heading almost due south, while the enemy was steering

almost due west: "the ideal position for torpedo attack was developing automatically."³² However, Commander DeWolf rejected the torpedo option, and decided instead to close the enemy and rely on gunnery. Admiralty officers later criticized this decision. Captain St. John Cronyn RN, assistant director of the Tactical and Staff Duties Division, concluded 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." The Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, Rear Admiral E.J.P. Brind RN, concurred: "I am normally unwilling to criticize what might have been done . . . in this case however it is apparent that we forgot all about torpedoes."³⁴ This was not the case.

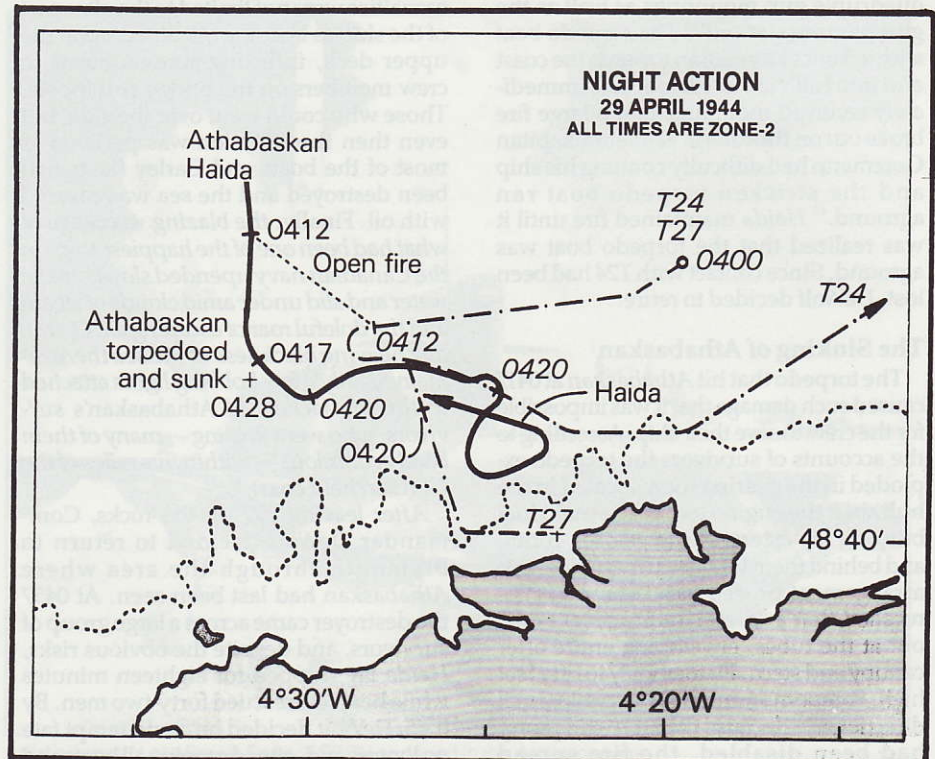
In a recent interview DeWolf recalled that he did consider the classic torpedo response to this tactical situation: *We headed for the corner, Brest, to cut them off and then we got a contact in lots of time. I thought what we should do now is fire our torpedoes at maximum range and then follow them 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 be broadside on to our torpedo tracks.*³⁵ The Canadian officer, however, rejected the textbook response. *His reasons for doing so were not only sound, but reflected the aggressiveness of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla.*

In a comment written shortly after the action, Commander DeWolf noted that

*"my first object was to prevent the enemy getting past to westward."*³⁶ At the initial contact the torpedo boats were approximately twenty miles east of the "corner" at Ushant. Because this was within range of the strong defences of Brest, and daylight was approaching, the Canadian destroyers would have little chance of preventing the escape of the German warships if they made it to the "corner". The Tribals would have to turn westwards to fire torpedoes and, because the Allied ships could expect to be detected at any moment, the torpedo boats would be given the opening they needed to escape. In order to prevent this, DeWolf chose to close with the enemy and engage with gunfire.

There can be little doubt that DeWolf's preference for the gun was also a factor in his decision. Like the other COs in the flotilla, he considered the Tribals' heavy armament of six 4.7-inch and two 4-inch guns to be their major strength. He has since admitted that he "was never very torpedo minded",³⁷ and with the deplorable torpedo performance of the previous action undoubtedly fresh in his mind, the choice of weapons is not surprising.

Having received no warning from coastal radar, and not expecting an attack at such a late hour, the men aboard *T27* and *T24* were taken completely by surprise when starshell burst over their heads at 0412.³⁸ The German destroyers reacted predictably by turning away and firing torpedoes at their attackers. This



manoeuvre was marred by poor drill. T24's salvo from the front tubes was launched without difficulty but "the crew at the after tubes is (sic) unprepared for the quick firing clearance and fires to port, on the wrong side." The performance in T27 was even worse, as all six torpedoes were fired to the wrong side and forced T24 to take avoiding action. Despite the "incompetence among the operating crews",³⁹ three torpedoes were running true, and with lethal accuracy.

When the torpedo boats were seen to turn away, *Haida* and *Athabaskan* "altered towards to avoid torpedoes but limited the turn to thirty degrees to keep A arcs open."⁴⁰ Such a manoeuvre was intended to enable the Tribals to comb torpedo tracks while still keeping the rear turrets bearing, thus allowing the rear 4-inch turret to illuminate the targets while the forward 4.7's fired high explosive and semi-armoured piercing shells. At 0417, before the turn was completed, "*Athabaskan* was hit aft and a large fire started. She was observed to slow down and turned to port." *Haida* laid a smokescreen to cover her stricken sister and continued after the fleeing torpedo boats.⁴¹

In the brief action that ensued, *Haida's* gunnery team demonstrated the same proficiency they had shown three nights earlier. T27 quickly suffered two hits along the water line, and then her fighting power was "severely reduced by hits in quick succession striking the port and starboard quadruple gun mountings as well as the gun plotting station."⁴² The torpedo boat sheered out of formation towards the coast and into full view of *Haida*. She immediately received more hits, and a large fire broke out on the foc'sle. Korvettenkapitan Gotzmann had difficulty conning his ship and the stricken torpedo boat ran aground.⁴³ *Haida* maintained fire until it was realized that the torpedo boat was aground. Since contact with T24 had been lost, DeWolf decided to retire.

The Sinking of Athabaskan

The torpedo that hit *Athabaskan* at 0417 caused such damage that it was impossible for the crew to save their ship. According to the accounts of survivors the torpedo exploded in the gearing room located in the hull abaft the engine room. The main fuel bunkers lay astern of the gearing room, and behind them the 4-inch magazine: this arrangement proved fatal. Stuart Kettles recalled that a "diesel oil fire breaks (sic) out at the tubes, enveloping entire after canopy and stern. Flames forty to fifty feet high. Pompom ammunition explodes in all directions."⁴⁴ Because the aft 70-ton pump had been disabled, the fire spread



Commander H.G. DeWolf on *Haida's* bridge.

out of control and Lieutenant Commander Stubbs ordered his crew to stand by to abandon ship stations. At 0427, with her deck crowded with men, *Athabaskan's* 4-inch magazine erupted in a massive explosion and she began to settle quickly by the stern.⁴⁵

The second explosion was devastating. *Athabaskan's* navigator, Lieutenant R.B. Hayward, RCN, 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."⁴⁶ The casualties were not limited to the after part of the ship as burning oil rained upon the upper deck, inflicting serious burns to crew members on the bridge and foc'sle. Those who could went over the side, but even then the situation was perilous as most of the 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.*⁴⁷

After leaving T27 on the rocks, Commander DeWolf decided to return to Plymouth through the area where *Athabaskan* had last been seen. At 0457 the destroyer came across a large group of survivors, and despite the obvious risks, *Haida* lay stopped for eighteen minutes while her crew rescued forty-two men. By 0515, DeWolf decided he could tempt fate no longer, and, after dropping all boats and

floats, shaped course for Plymouth. Admiral Leatham had ordered two MTB's to the scene, but the proximity of daylight and the closeness of the enemy held coast led him to subsequently cancel rescue operations because of the risk of air attack. Of *Athabaskan's* company left behind, six returned to England after a heroic journey across the Channel in a motor cutter manned by three of *Haida's* crew, while eighty-five were rescued by German warships and made prisoners of war. One hundred and twenty-eight men perished.

The loss of *Athabaskan* prompted the usual official investigations. A court of inquiry called by C-in-C Plymouth determined that she sank as the result of two explosions. The first at 0417 was caused by a torpedo, the second by either a torpedo or the explosion of the 4-inch magazine. It was clear to the court — a panel of four RN officers — that the torpedoes were fired by the two torpedo boats as they "did not consider that any other ships were present."⁴⁸ This judgement, disputed to this day by survivors who insist that their ship was sunk by torpedoes from an E-boat, proved accurate. German sources indicate that T24 and T27 were the only German warships in the area that night. Furthermore, because the torpedo boats did not fire any more torpedoes after their initial salvo, the second explosion must have been internal. *Athabaskan* was clearly a victim of one of the three torpedoes launched from T24.

The inquiry also found that the officer in charge of the confidential books was negligent in that he did not follow standing orders to land certain books in his charge before sailing. Some of these were in fact recovered by the Germans and, according to a Kriegsmarine intelligence report, provided them with "information of great importance concerning Allied cryptographic procedures."⁵⁰ Apart from this oversight, the court concluded "that no blame is attributable to officers and men for the loss of HMCS *Athabaskan* and that their conduct was in accordance with the best traditions of the service."

It was beyond the terms of the inquiry for the court to comment on the tactical direction of the action; however, in his after action report Admiral 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 have perhaps been better if he had followed the Elbing making to the eastward T24 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.* 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 countrymen in the water, was correct."⁵¹ As with the action on 25-26 April, the view of Admiralty staff officers diverged sharply from Plymouth Command's. 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."⁵² The swap was indeed unequal, but the word "unnecessarily" implies that the loss of *Athabaskan* was avoidable. This was not the case. DeWolf's tactics had been sound, and nothing short of avoiding the action altogether could have prevented the loss. *Athabaskan* was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time — in the words of her biographers, an "Unlucky Lady". What had transpired off Ile de Vierge was indeed "unfortunate", but losses must be expected when warships operate so close to an enemy coast. Most importantly, the Allies could afford the loss of a destroyer: the *Kriegsmarine*, already in a weakened position in the west, could not.

An Envable Record

Canadian Tribals continued to operate from Plymouth in the strike role until October 1944. They compiled an enviable record by playing a major part in the destruction of the surface warships that threatened the invasion, and by wreaking havoc upon coastal craft attempting to supply or evacuate *Wermacht* forces along the Channel and Biscay coasts. The major difference between these successes and those in April was that the same fine line between victory and defeat did not exist. The Canadians put their early experience to good use, and that is the surest mark of military professionalism. □

NOTES

1. Stuart Kettles, "A Wartime Log: A Personal Account of Life in HMCS *Athabaskan* and as a Prisoner of War", 7, DHist, 74/458.
2. S.E. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in the Second World War, V: The Struggle for Guadalcanal* (Boston 1955), pp. 113-114.
3. Roger Hill, *Destroyer Captain* (London 1975), p. 135. Hill was CO of the destroyer HMS *Grenville*.
4. Great Britain, Admiralty Historical Section, *Battle Summary No. 31: Cruiser and Destroyer Actions English Channel and Western Approaches 1943-1944*, pp. 2-7. Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea*, III: Pt. 1, pp. 99-100.
5. *Ibid.* Lieutenant Commander R. Hill, RN, Report of Proceedings, 24 October 1943. Public Record Office (PRO), ADM 1/12488. Lieutenant E.F. Baines, RN, Report of Proceedings, 24 October 1943. PRO, ADM 1/12488. P. Smith, *Hold the Narrow Sea* (Annapolis 1984), pp. 184-200.
6. Commander H.G. DeWolf, Report of Proceedings, 20 January 1944. National Archives of Canada (NAC), CS 151-11-9, RG 24, Vol. 11730.
7. Captain W. Norris RN, Report of Proceedings, 27 February 1944. PRO, ADM 199/532.
8. Commander St.J. Tyrwhitt, Report of Proceedings, 2 March 1944. PRO, ADM 199/532. War Diary, Operations Division, German Naval Staff, 2 March 1944. DHist, SGR II/261.
9. Vice Admiral R. Leatham, "10th Destroyer Flotilla — Report on Tunnel Night 1st/2nd March", 25 March 1944. PRO, ADM 199/532.
10. Interview with Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf, August 20th, 1987.
11. C-in-C Plymouth to SO Force 26, 25 April 1944. DHist Operations; English Channel, I., 1650-239/13. F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London 1984), III: Pt. 1, p. 287.
12. Lieutenant F.M. Tovell RCNVR, "Notes on Channel Patrols", April 1944, DHist *Haida* (Prior 1950) 8000.
13. C-in-C Plymouth to SO Force 26, 25 April 1944. DHist, Operations; English Channel, I: 1650-239/13.
14. Captain D. M. Lees, RN, Report of Proceedings, 2 May 1944, ADM 199/263.
15. *Ibid.* War Diary, 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla", DHist, HMCS *Athabaskan* (I) (1944) 8000. Reinhart Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers", *Truppenpraxis*, 12, 1980, 3-6 DHist, SGR/II/239.
16. War Diary, 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, 2. DHist, HMCS *Athabaskan* (I) (1944) 8000.
17. Unless other sources are cited, all details for the action are taken from the action reports of the five allied warships involved. These are found in 1926-215 Vol. 1, NAC, RG 24 (Acc. 83-84/167) Box 695; and PRO, ADM 199/263.
18. War Diary, 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by 4 Torpedo Boat Flotilla", 2, DHist, HMCS *Athabaskan* (I) (1944) 8000.
19. Ostertag, "Torpedo boats in Battle with Destroyers", 8, DHist, SGR II/239.
20. *Ibid.* 9.
21. DeWolf to author, 30 September 1987.
22. *Ibid.* A.D. Butcher, *I Remember Haida* (Hantsport 1985), p. 53.
23. Director of Gunnery and Anti/Aircraft Warfare, Minute Sheet of 8 July 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.
24. Tactical and Staff Duties Division, Minute Sheet of 27 June 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.
25. See Len Burrows and Emile Beaudoin, *Unlucky Lady: The Life and Death of HMCS Athabaskan*, (Toronto 1987), p. 167.
26. Plymouth Command War Diary, PRO, ADM 199/1393.
27. Stuart Kettles, "A Wartime Log: A Personal Account of Life in HMCS *Athabaskan* and as a Prisoner of War." DHist, 74/458.
28. *Ibid.*
29. War Diary, 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla", 3-4 DHist, HMCS *Athabaskan* (I) (1944) 8000. Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Combat with Destroyers", p. 12. DHist SGR/II/239.
30. Admiralty Historical Section, *Battle Summary No. 31*, p. 12.
31. Commander H.G. DeWolf, "Report of Action", 29 April 1944. DHist, HMCS *Haida* (Prior 1950) 8000. Unless noted otherwise, details of the April 29th action are from this report.
32. Admiralty Historical Section, *Battle Summary No. 31*, p. 12.
33. Captain St. J. Cronyn, Minutes on Action of 29 April 1944. 15 July 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.
34. Rear Admiral E.J.P. Brind RN, Minutes on Action of 29 April 1944. 5 October 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.
35. Interview with Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf, 20 August 1987.
36. Canadian Naval Mission Overseas (London) Narrative, "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions", 10. DHist, 84/224.
37. Interview with Vice Admiral H.G. DeWolf, 20 August 1987.
38. War Diary, 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla", 5. Interview with Wilhelm Zerber in "The Unlucky Lady: HMCS *Athabaskan* 1940-44", CHCH Public Affairs Production, 1984. Zerber was a gunner aboard *T27*.
39. Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers", 13-14. DHist, SGR/II/239.
40. Commander H.G. DeWolf Minute, CNMO(L) Narrative, "Canadian Tribal Channel Actions", 10. DHist, 84/224.
41. Commander H.G. DeWolf, Report of Action, 29 April 1944. DHist, HMCS *Haida* (Prior 1950) 8000.
42. Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers", 16. DHist, SGR/II/239.
43. War Diary 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by the 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla", 4. DHist, HMCS *Athabaskan* (I) (1944) 8000.
44. Kettles, "A Wartime Log: Life Aboard HMCS *Athabaskan* and as a Prisoner of War", 14-15.
45. It is not known if the aft magazines were flooded, or if such a move was possible given the extent of the damage.
46. Lieutenant R.B. Hayward RCN, "Account of the loss of *Athabaskan*", 3 May 1945. NSS 8870-355/3, NAC, RG 24, V. 6890.
47. Joseph Schull, *The Far Distant Ships* (Ottawa 1950), p. 255.
48. Summary of Board of Inquiry into the Loss of HMCS *Athabaskan*. 3 May 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.
49. War Diary 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla, "Evaluation of Actions Fought by 4th Torpedo Boat Flotilla", DHist, HMCS *Athabaskan* (I)(1944) 8000. Ostertag, "Torpedo Boats in Battle with Destroyers" DHist, SGR/II/239. Oscar Sprenger quoted in "The Unlucky Lady", CHCH Public Affairs Production. Sprenger was a radio technician aboard *T24*.
50. "German War Diary Concerning Documents Captured From HMCS *Athabaskan*." DHist, SGR/II/259.
51. Admiral R. Leatham, "Report of Action on the Night of April 28th/29th", 1 June 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.
52. Captain St. J. Cronyn, Minutes on Action of 29 April 1944. PRO, ADM 199/263.