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This photo depicts the conning tower of *Rubis*. The interior of *La Perle* would have looked the same.

"SINK THE BASTARD!" FRIENDLY FIRE IN THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC¹

by Dr. W.A.B. Douglas

Late on the pleasant forenoon of 8 July 1944, 800 kilometres or so south-east of Greenland, the air gunner in a Swordfish aircraft from the Merchant Aircraft Carrier (MAC) *Empire MacCallum*, on a routine patrol ahead of the westbound convoy ONM-243, (originally 94 ships, of which four had been unable to sail, and three more had been detached — two for repairs and one for inadequate speed)² sighted the French submarine *La Perle*.³ The pilot, Lieutenant Francoix Otterveanger of the Royal Netherlands Navy, assumed that the submarine, surfaced and on a northeasterly course, was a U-boat, as did the senior officer of the Canadian Escort Group C5 in HMCS *Dunver*. That officer, Acting Commander George Stephen, the colourful and widely respected Senior Officer Escorts (SOE), is reputed to have exclaimed "Sink the bastard!", as he ordered the two MAC ships in company to get all available aircraft up.

The 'stringbag', a slow old biplane, had to give a wide berth to U-boat flak. Lieutenant Otterveanger put his Swordfish into a position upwind between the sun and the target. He waited for the other aircraft from *Empire MacCallum* and *Empire MacColl* to join him, and then held off for another ten minutes or so while the six Swordfish (four from *Empire MacCallum* and two from *Empire MacColl*) formed up, flying clockwise

around the submarine, to carry out a series of attacking runs. It was just about then, at 1358Z, an hour and five minutes after receiving the sighting report at 1253Z, that Commander Stephen suddenly passed a voice message to the MAC ships: "Have aircraft been informed that submarine 'La Perle' might be in our vicinity?" The bewildered air staff officer in *Empire MacCallum* knew nothing about *La Perle*, nor exactly what to do about the message, but tried to alert the aircraft with a belated warning: "Look out for recognition signals in case the sub is friendly. If not, attack." Only one aircraft heard him over the RT (radiotelephone) traffic that filled the air, and asked in vain for a repetition, just as Lieutenant Otterveanger was beginning his attacking run between 1404 and 1408Z, about an hour and fifteen minutes after the first sighting. When Otterveanger saw a series of "L's", the correct identification for the day, flashing from the conning tower of *La Perle*, and not having heard the last minute caution, he concluded it was simply a *ruse de guerre* and fired four pairs of rockets at the target. All the other aircraft followed up with rocket attacks and (now running into light machine gun fire from the submarine), in the last instance, with two depth charges on the order of Lieutenant Otterveanger, "who had conducted operations in a most proper manner

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from the start". So effective was the operation that the air staff officer in *Empire MacCallum* was moved to comment, in a more triumphal tone than probably was intended: "The attack was extremely well co-ordinated and was over in the space of a minute. At least eight

In March 1943, in command of the old four-stacker destroyer *Columbia*, he salvaged the 6000-ton merchant ship *Matthew Luckenbach* and brought her into harbour with a valuable cargo after she had been twice abandoned. For this, he had been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. And in March 1944, in command of the destroyer *St Laurent*, after his ship's company extinguished a severe fire that had broken out on board SS *San Francisco*, he joined HMS *Forester* to sink *U-845*, for which he received the bar to his DSC. With this record, he seems to have been a logical, perhaps inevitable, choice to take over command in April 1944 from Commander Hugh Pullen of Escort Group C5. His actions on 8 July 1944 left an unfortunate blot upon a truly remarkable record.⁷

Stephen was well aware of the passage of *La Perle* from refit in the United States to Holy Loch in the United Kingdom. As early as 4 July, after sailing from Moville on the 3rd, detailed messages from Flag Officer Newfoundland, Commander-in-Chief (C in C) Western Approaches in Liverpool, the Admiralty, and the United States Navy's (USN's) C in C Atlantic, had reported the departure of *La Perle* from St. John's Newfoundland, the positions

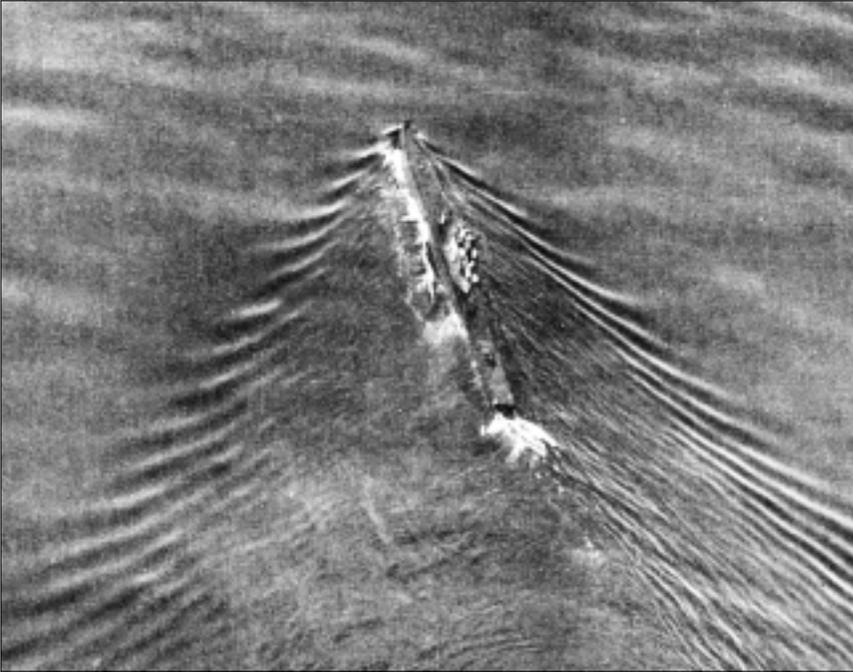
through which the submarine would pass, and the stringent bombing restrictions in force fifty miles ahead and astern, and twenty miles on either beam.⁸ Daily situation reports informed all naval ships of the position, course and speed of the submarine, and there is no doubt that enough of these signals had been received in *Dunver* to keep the SOE informed of *La Perle's* whereabouts, although Stephen would give evidence before the Board of Inquiry that he had not seen the sailing signal from St. John's and that he was unaware of the bombing restrictions until after the attack.⁹ Whether or not he was aware of such restrictions, he acknowledged that the most recent signal from Western Approaches placed *La Perle* in the approximate vicinity of the Swordfish sighting, and this should automatically have made him careful not to attack the French submarine. But he was also concerned about a U-boat, which the Admiralty's situation reports had placed to the north of the convoy, and steaming in a southwesterly direction, over the previous three days.

This contention, as the findings of the Board of Inquiry would imply, had the tone of special pleading. The U-boat situation report, it is true, placed an enemy submarine within ninety miles of a position to the northeast of the convoy, steering south west,¹⁰ and until receipt of the situation report for the next day, it could have been regarded as a legitimate threat to the convoy.¹¹ Stephen could always argue that case, and it is conceivable that as an experienced escort commander he truly believed, despite the warnings about *La Perle*, that any submarine close to his convoy was fair game. His subsequent evidence, nevertheless, suggested that the wish was father to the thought:

hits were scored on the submarine which sank within four minutes of the attack."⁴ By the time escorts from Convoy ONM-243 reached the scene, only one man out of a crew of sixty men, a Chief Petty Officer machinist, was still alive.⁵

Terrible mistakes like this are the currency of war, but they trouble the conscience long after the event. Knowing the tension between De Gaulle and the Allies, and the suspicion of Vichy influences in the French Navy, was there malice aforethought?⁶ Why did it take so long for the SOE to issue his warning, and why was it given in such ambivalent terms?

George Stephen was a master mariner with nearly twenty years at sea before the war. He was one of that rare breed, an old Arctic hand, and had been serving as Chief Officer and Master of Vessels trading in the eastern Arctic since 1934, before putting on naval uniform in 1939. He had been escorting convoys almost continuously since the winter of 1941, and had earned the reputation of a first-rate leader of men, as well as being a fine and courageous seaman. In March 1942, while commanding the corvette *Mayflower*, he salvaged the 16,000-ton tanker *Imperial Transport* after she had been abandoned by her crew, and had her towed into Newfoundland. This feat, and his "great devotion to duty and ... invaluable service in connection with the escort of vessels during exceptionally severe winter months" had brought him a Distinguished Service Cross. Later that year, he received a Mention in Despatches for his display of "outstanding seamanship in taking one of HM ships in tow under the most difficult circumstances, bringing her safely into harbour."



The French submarine *Rubis*, sister boat to *La Perle*.

I was also in possession of a signal from C-in-C US Fleet, Time of Origin 080038Z, which would put the LA PERLE in a position a considerable distance to the westward. This appeared to me to be a rather obvious diversion for the submarine to avoid making contact with the convoy, but as it was not supported by any statement from C IN C WA it left me in doubt as to the true position of LA PERLE.

At 1327, he had asked the aircraft to report the course and speed of the target at first sighting, and "after consulting the plot further", he decided that this might after all be the French submarine.¹² Stephen enlarged upon this in his evidence at the Board of Inquiry on 14 July:

Two days, or three days before the incident...the submarine reports from C. in C. W.A. gave the usual weather reports, and there was one submarine which seemed to be north of ... the convoy and travelling in a south-westerly direction. In the evening of the 7th we had a report which included the "La Perle" giving her position, course and speed. A signal regarding that was sent off to the Commodore, Vice-Commodore and M.A.C. Ships ... We had no sooner sent that one off when we had an amendment from C in C. W.A. So then we gave the amended position to the Commodore, Vice-Commodore and M.A.C. Ships ... Early next morning, the 8th, there was a signal brought down to me from the W/T Department from C in C U.S. Fleet ... which gave a different position and route for the submarine, but I didn't pass that signal to anyone.... At 1252 there was a report saying there was a U-boat in sight ... [another] signal at 1255 [said] the submarine was at periscope depth. At 1259 there was a signal "U-boat intends to fight on the surface". So ... I really did think it was a German submarine...[but] when they gave me [a course of] 045, and a speed of 16 knots, I thought it may be the "La Perle", seeing it was going in that direction....¹³

As will be seen from other evidence in the Board of Inquiry, the transmissions from *Dunver* on the evening of 7 July were not even logged, and there was no acknowledgement from any of the addressees.

On the bridge of the frigate, so far as can be reconstructed from the evidence, Stephen's impulsive order had been met with stunned silence. The leading signalman in *Dunver*, John Seale, who had been plotting the daily situation reports, exclaimed "Sir, that may be the *La Perle*". Stephen's response, and this is a vivid recollection, was a non-committal grunt. None of the other

bridge personnel, according to Seale, said a word. The leading signalman was a witness of some credibility. He had joined the naval reserve in 1937, having previously been a bandsman in the Winnipeg sea cadet band, had taken his first qualifying courses as a signalman in 1939-40 at HMCS *Stadacona*, and served briefly in the corvettes *Chaleur* and *Collingwood* before being attached to Captain (D) [Destroyers] in Halifax as a trained operator. He had been leading signalman in *Dunver* since October 1943 (the ship had been commissioned in September), and in this capacity spent more time on the bridge than almost any other lower deck hand in the ship. Unfortunately, he came down with appendicitis before *Dunver* returned to harbour and, being hospitalized, did not give evidence before the Board of Inquiry or the subsequent investigation into the communications department.¹⁴

George Stephen, for his part, was a dominating presence, and the ships' officers stood in awe of him. His men, according to the reports of almost all the officers who had reported on him, would do anything for him, but throughout this voyage he had consistently



Aboard HMCS *Dunver*. Commander George Stephen is on the right.

refused to make a formal acknowledgement of the daily reports shown to him by the signalman. By contrast, the Captain (Lieutenant Wilfred Davenport) and First Lieutenant (Lieutenant W.G. Mylett) had signed to say they had seen the report on each occasion that it was brought to the bridge. Stephen, recalls Seale, had not only refused to sign, but had shown disinterest to the point of rudeness.¹⁵ Stephen, according to his own account, began to have his own doubts about forty minutes after the first sighting. Possibly he was puzzled that the submarine had not engaged in any evasive manoeuvring or thrown up any anti-aircraft fire. Nevertheless, he delayed another twenty minutes while he was "working on the chart ... going over my figures and positions just to make absolutely sure",¹⁶ before asking the MAC ships whether the pilots knew about the possible presence of *La Perle*. That, of course, proved to be too little too late.¹⁷

Had the air staff in the MAC ships known of *La Perle's* position, course and speed they would certainly have had similar doubts. That they did not know resulted from the failure of *Dunver* to ensure that they received the situation reports. It was the SOE's responsibility to pass all relevant naval signal traffic to the Commodore and Vice-Commodore of the convoy, as well as the MAC ships, since merchant ships did not themselves have the capability of reading such traffic. Although MAC ships carried aircraft and the personnel needed to operate the aircraft, they were still merchant

sition with the ships in the escort. Sometimes we ask the merchant ships to pass the message and we try to be reasonably sure the message does go through. At night when there is a possible chance we check up with a stern sweep — "have you received certain messages" — and we are generally up to date on that.¹⁹

When asked to explain why there was no check to ensure that signals were received by addressees, the Group Signals Officer responded "Because the MAC

ships will not use Naval procedure ... And no one can make them".²⁰ It was not the answer the Board was looking for: the communications organization in *Dunver* clearly left a great deal to be desired. As Rear Admiral L.W. Murray, C in C Canadian Northwest Atlantic, observed in his report to the Naval Secretary, "from the evidence of laxity in handling communications on board H.M.C.S. DUNVER, it is reasonable to believe that any errors or omissions occurred in that ship."²¹

Rear Admiral Murray, although he was fond of Stephen and always ready to defend the escort commanders who served under him to the limit, lost no time in getting to

the bottom of this tragedy. Murray was in good odour with the Free French because of his hospitality to Vice-Admiral Muselier in 1941, prior to Muselier's capture of St. Pierre and Miquelon, and it was in his nature to extend special courtesy to the representatives of allied navies.²² A senior French naval officer, *Capitaine de Vaisseau* R.E. Blanchard, flew up from Washington to join Commander R.M. Aubrey, RN, the training commander at Halifax and Commander L.D. Goldsmith, RNVR, of the Fleet Air Arm,²³ as members of the Board headed by Captain David K. Laidlaw. Captain Laidlaw recollected the occasion clearly:

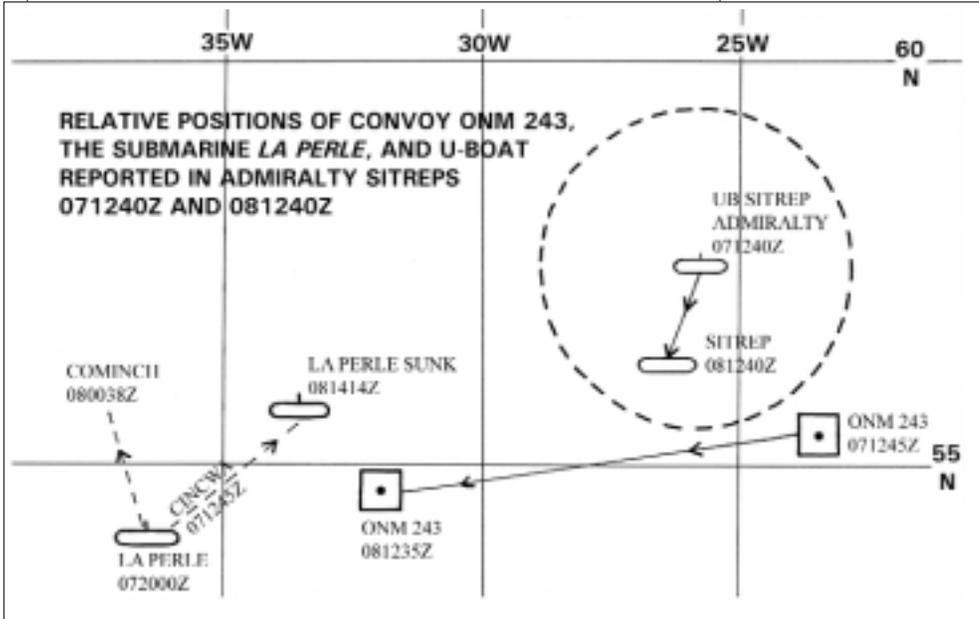
As Chief of Staff to Admiral Murray I headed the inquiry and he told me that he wanted, as a result of the evidence, proposals for new procedures to be put into force for the handling of allied submarines on independent passage that would obviate a recurrence of this nature. He also said that he wanted my proposals by midnight of the day of this inquiry. The start of the inquiry was delayed due to the late arrival of the French admiral's [sic] plane and it lasted into the evening. By the time the Board had drafted a signal to the Admiralty, Flag Officer Submarines and other interested authorities proposing new procedures and got to Admiral Murray's office it was 1:30 AM. He was waiting for me, approved the proposals, the signal went out and was approved by the Admiralty on that day....²⁴

ships, and carried neither the communications staff nor naval cyphers to be found in naval vessels. In the Board of Inquiry held on the arrival of *Dunver* in Halifax, both Stephen and the ship's communications staff said they had been passing naval traffic to the merchant ships, including the situation reports from Western Approaches. As already noted, however, they had not received any acknowledgement, nor had they logged the transmissions.¹⁸ In this regard, the evidence of the yeoman of signals, Petty Officer 2nd Class Frank Benson, is of interest. Asked whether routing instructions had been passed "in a proper service manner", he replied:

No sir, it is impossible to do this owing to the fact that different procedures are used, and most of the convoys are instructed in the new procedure, and I have all kinds of procedures put to me and it makes it practically impossible to use the Regulations for passing instructions.

Asked whether he had received a normal procedure letter to say the Commodore had passed the signal on to the MAC ships, he replied:

No sir, I have been sailing across the Atlantic now since 1939 and it is only on very rare occasions I get an "R" — it used to be "Z", and now it is "L" — but it is only on very rare occasions we get that back. We are always getting L's back from our escorts but it is a different propo-



Historians sometimes find themselves acting like forensic pathologists, probing under the skin to uncover more than appears on the surface, trying to avoid presuppositions and drawing their conclusions with objectivity. The *La Perle* Board of Inquiry, a subsequent investigation into the Communications Department on board *Dunver*, and the general outcome of the *La Perle* tragedy, offer an opportunity to engage in this process. They illuminate not only the possible reasons for Commander George Stephen's actions, but also partially uncover the anatomy of a young and burgeoning navy in its heyday.

The RCN, in July 1944, had grown to a strength of 97,500 men and women, and was playing a far larger part in the naval war than could have been imagined when it first began to expand in 1940. Supporting the D-Day Landings and subsequent *Overlord* operations were fourteen Canadian destroyers, eleven frigates, twenty corvettes, sixteen minesweepers, two Landing Ships Infantry (Medium) and 44 landing craft. Involving 9780 of the Navy's approximately 30,000 seagoing personnel, this was greater than the combined strength, amounting to twenty-five comparable vessels, from all the other smaller allied navies.²⁵ The other two-thirds of Canadian seagoing personnel were, for the most part, to be found in the escort groups of the Western Escort Force (24 corvettes and five Algerine minesweepers), and the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (five 'C' groups with eight frigates and 26 corvettes) which were now predominantly Canadian. For local duties, C in C Canadian Northwest Atlantic had at his disposal three corvettes, 21 minesweepers, six miscellaneous small vessels and four Fairmile flotillas with a depot ship.²⁶

Since May 1943, Rear Admiral L.W. Murray, Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic, situated in Halifax, had been one of three theatre commanders in the Atlantic region, along with Commander-in-Chief Western Approaches and Commander-in-Chief US 10th Fleet. In St. John's, Newfoundland, the Flag Officer Newfoundland, Commodore Cuthbert Taylor, reporting to Murray, had his own self-contained operations staff. Area Combined Headquarters, modelled on the British organization in Liverpool, had, after much discussion, been established and had reached a satisfactory standard of performance in both St. John's and Halifax.²⁷ At both bases, a combination of experienced British and Canadian officers — throughout the war, the Royal Navy lent some of their most experienced officers, both to command Canadian escort groups at sea and to occupy key staff positions ashore, until the RCN had been able to bring enough of their own up to speed — formed the operational staff. Their comments on Reports of Proceedings and, in this case, the various

reports about the sinking of the *La Perle*, reflect the accumulated wisdom as well as, perhaps, the prejudices of men who had been faced with similar requirements for command decision at sea.

The immediate findings of the Board of Inquiry,²⁸ copies of which went to the Secretary of the Admiralty and the French naval mission in Washington, focused on the communications department of *Dunver*, which "appears to be run in a most irregular manner", and gave Commander Stephen the benefit of the doubt, if in a less than persuasive fashion: "The fact that the latest Admiralty U-boat situation report had indicated that a U-boat might be in the vicinity of the convoy", the Board found, "possibly explains the failure of the Senior Officer Escort to realize the true situation." They also cast some of the blame on C in C Western Approaches:

The original routes combined with the sailing times of LA PERLE and ONM 243 indicated that a diversion might be necessary. The diversion of LA PERLE, when made, was not sufficiently drastic to increase her separation from the convoy to a sufficient extent.²⁹

For routeing authorities, however, it cannot have been that simple. The presence of U-boats, most of them pinpointed with ULTRA intelligence, made it necessary to keep *La Perle*'s course within fairly narrow limits. By the same token, it was clear that none of the witnesses who came before this Board knew much, if anything, about dealing with unescorted friendly submarines in the middle of the ocean. They normally expected to find them in coastal waters, professed ignorance about the procedures for recognition, and did not expect to find a friendly unescorted submarine sighted close to a convoy. The members of the Board exoner-



HMCS *Dunver*.

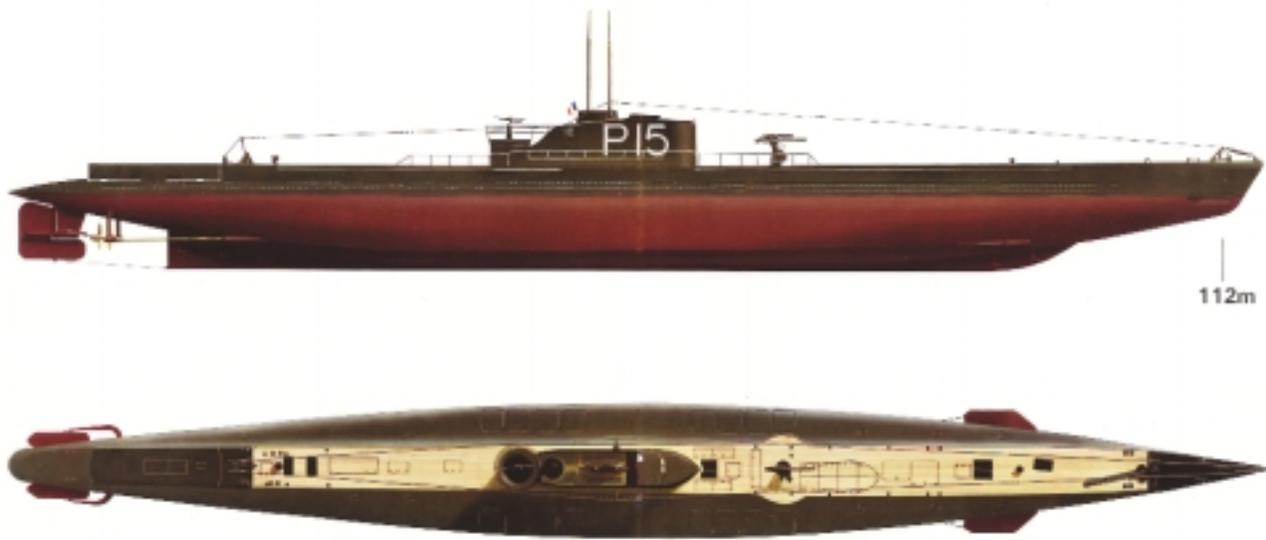
ated Lieutenant Otterveanger completely. "In extenuation of the pilot's judgement," recalled Captain Laidlaw, "it was stated that his family had been killed when their house was demolished by a German bomber. I think he felt that any submarine he sighted was bound

to be a U-boat.”³⁰ Admiral Murray conveyed the sense of this to the Naval Board in his covering letter, by noting that the pilot denied being aware of the letter of the day or of the colours used in identifying friendly submarines. “It is for consideration whether this may be accepted as being absolutely true, or as being the attitude of an officer of an occupied country who, having many scores to settle, could not believe that any submarine sighted could possibly be other than enemy.”³¹ There was no comment on the fact that *La Perle*, in spite of the appearance of first one, then four, and finally six aircraft circling the submarine, seems not to have

It would be like having a high-powered elderly relative living with you. I foresaw it as being confusing to the crew.³²

Easton had once proposed the idea at a post-convoy conference in Iceland, “where the British appeared to feel I had spoken out of turn”, and he had discovered that although this was normal practice in the United States Navy, USN officers did not like carrying the Senior Officer. Easton’s senior officer was Commander A.F.C. Layard (RN). Easton “respected his ability and admired his knowledge, yet ... admired more his reti-

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Drawing of the *Rubis*-class of submarine. *La Perle* was identical to *Rubis*.

flashed the proper recognition signals until the aircraft actually began their attacking runs.

As soon as the Board’s findings had been submitted, Murray ordered an investigation of *Dunver*’s communications department. This investigation, conducted by Lieutenant Commander (later Rear-Admiral) M.G. Stirling and two RCNVR signals specialists, revealed problems in organization that seem to have arisen from divided responsibility to the ship and the group, and the uncertainty of personnel about their terms of reference. This was one of the risks in the system of appointing an officer to command an escort group or support group rather than a ship. Lieutenant-Commander Alan Easton, commanding the frigate HMCS *Matane* when he joined the support group EG9 in February 1944, observed that “In the wardroom our appointment to such a group received less attention perhaps than the news that the senior officer was going to reside in the ship.”

The very thing I had favoured, that of the senior officer not being in direct command of the ship he was in, had at last come to fruition. But it had descended upon me. This meant that it would be difficult sometimes to draw the line of responsibility and could be the cause of muddled and perhaps conflicting orders on the bridge; in some cases possibly interference, and that could lead to strained relations between us.

ence in displaying it. He was a man of great sincerity with a fine sense of propriety.”³³ Layard was also an officer of very wide experience — he was 44 when appointed to HMCS *Matane* — and a distinguished war record (he had commanded the destroyer HMS *Broke* and earned the Distinguished Service Order during Operation *Torch*), and did not at first think much of his Canadian ships’ companies (“You can never trust a Canadian ship to do anything without being told three times”). However, when he had to move from *Matane* to *Swansea*, he wrote in his diary: “Quite overwhelmed how much officers and men seem to have liked me in this ship....”³⁴

George Stephen, despite his remarkable war record, was a rather different kettle of fish. He eventually built up an excellent group spirit in C5 (his signal “Follow George” hoisted on leaving harbour rather than the senior ship’s pendant numbers, became his trademark),³⁵ but he did not evidently employ Layard’s hands-on methods. The captain of *Dunver*, Wilfred Davenport, was a young and very junior commanding officer, and both he and Stephen, perhaps reflecting their merchant service background, seem to have left the ship’s organization entirely to the First Lieutenant. This, as Alan Easton had feared would happen in *Matane*, led to confusion in the ship’s company. A Group Signals Officer, who had completed a five-month specialist course at the signals school, was appointed as a ship’s officer,

but his staff duties conflicted with his ship duties to such an extent that a Signals Bos'n came aboard to assist him. Nobody in the department seemed to know exactly what the terms of reference were for these two officers: the Commanding Officer regarded the Signals Bos'n as Signal Officer, the Bos'n thought he was responsible for visual signalling only, and the First Lieutenant said the Bos'n was simply borne for training. When *Dunver* sent the messages about *La Perle* on the evening of 7 July, neither the Group Signals Officer nor the Signals Bos'n bothered to check whether they had been passed to the MAC ships, and there was no regular procedure on which they could rely to ensure that this was done. The investigating officers concluded "that no blame can be attached to the ratings of the Communications Staff ... since their supervision has been inadequate and unsatisfactory."³⁶

It is to the credit of Murray and his staff that these problems were identified, and recommendations made to solve them, immediately they became evident. It seems certain that the involvement of the Free French made them react particularly strongly, and it may have been the same stimulus that also encouraged the Naval Board to respond without delay. On 15 August, the Naval Secretary in Ottawa informed the Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic that both the captain of *Dunver* and the Group Signals Officer had "incurred the severe displeasure of the department for not exercising closer supervision over the signals of the group." A week later Murray passed this to Commodore Taylor, Flag Officer Newfoundland, and required him to inform the officers concerned. Staff officers in St. John's, who were busy devising orders that would prevent any repetition of Stephen's mistake, were appalled at the decision. Captain E.A. Gibbs (RN), Captain (D) [Destroyers] in Newfoundland, knew the situation in *Dunver* from taking passage in her during the first part of ONM-243's voyage, and after inspecting *Dunver* on 24 August, wrote to Taylor on 31 August pointing out:

... it was clear before I transferred to FLORIZEL at Westomp that DUNVER's signal department required an overhaul. More detailed technical knowledge of this may, however, be available at Naval Service Headquarters since the Director of the Signal Division, N.S.H.Q., [Captain G.A. "Sam" Worth] took passage in DUNVER on the immediately preceding crossing. ...The signals containing the position of LA PERLE were originated by the Senior Officer C5 and handed for transmission to a communication department whose efficiency or inefficiency must be assumed to be known by the Senior Officer, and which was headed by a specialist officer on his staff.... Lieutenant Davenport had done a good job in improving the situation.

However, the higher organization was found to leave much to be desired. It was not evident that the Senior Officer, Acting Commander George H. Stephen, had for his part made a clear effort to straighten out his position as Senior Officer with respect to the communi-

cations department and, more particularly, the functions of the Senior Officer:

...[On the other hand] Lieutenant Davenport can be assumed to have only the very limited knowledge of technical signal matters and procedure to be expected of an officer of his training. It is felt, therefore, that he was justified in placing confidence in the organization set up by the Group Signal Officer.³⁷

"From my own personal knowledge of the Senior Officer and the Commanding Officer," added Gibbs, "I know it must have been difficult for the Commanding Officer to organize anything at all." In what was surely an extraordinary act for an officer of his rank and posi-



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The control room aboard *Rubis*.

tion, he concluded with the sentence, "In view of this, and the factors outlined in the preceding paragraphs, it is strongly recommended that Naval Service Headquarters be requested to revise their decision."³⁸

When Commodore Taylor forwarded the report on the inspection of *Dunver*, he took Gibbs' comments into account, without going so far as to repeat Gibbs' final request. "It is considered that the S.O. C5 cannot be held blameless for the continued existence of unsatis-

factory conditions in the 'higher organization' referred to in [the] remarks of Captain (D) Newfoundland." Stephen, he told the Naval Board, had "not yet grasped" that he was responsible for ensuring the efficient communications facilities of the ship in which he was borne.³⁹ Several weeks later, the Chief of Staff to Flag Officer Newfoundland, Acting Captain G.B. "Boomer" Hope, acting on instructions from Commodore Taylor, went even further. Forwarding Gibbs' memorandum of 31 August, the one that concluded with a request for NSHQ to revise their decision, he wrote:

Adoption of the practice whereby the Senior Officer of a group is borne additional in one of his ships has undoubtedly precipitated some uncertainty in the minds of certain Senior Officers as to the extent of their responsibilities, the result perhaps being that interference with purely ship matters has occurred in some instances, while failure to appreciate situations and exert influence where required has occurred in others. Such, it is clear, has been the case with C5. The Commanding Officer has been forced into the background by a colourful personality to the extent that he has yielded a great deal of responsibility and authority. The Senior Officer has then failed to follow up his authority in a sphere where he perhaps feels less at home than in others with the result that the [communications] department received no higher supervision from either Senior Officer or Commanding Officer.⁴⁰

Headquarters acted swiftly. Ten days later, on 28 September, they ordered C in C CNA to inform Stephen that he, too, had incurred the severe displeasure of the Department "for failure to exercise complete control over the escorts in his Command." They justified the decision in language reflecting the findings of the Board of Inquiry, and followed it up on 30 September with an instruction to C in C CNA, "that, in view of further information brought to light, the expression of the Department's severe displeasure conveyed to the Commanding Officer of H.M.C.S. 'Dunver', Lieutenant Wilfred Davenport, R.C.N.R., is cancelled and this Officer is to be informed accordingly." On 21 October, Captain Gibbs responded, as the order came down to him: "Lieutenant Davenport has not been informed in the sense of Naval headquarters NS. TS. 11150-381.12, Vol. 1, Secret (Staff) of 15th August, and no action appears to be necessary."⁴¹

One can almost hear the cheers in the Staff offices at St. John's. It was a remarkable, perhaps unique, reversal of a Naval Board disciplinary measure.

Further inspections of *Dunver* took place in the summer and fall of 1944, until the ship's and group organization finally satisfied the Newfoundland authorities.⁴² George Stephen remained as Senior Officer of C5, shifting from *Dunver* to HMCS *Runnymede* in February 1945, earning praise for his loyalty and co-operative attitude, and for the group spirit he was felt to have inspired in the C5. In April 1945, he took command for the second time of the

destroyer *St. Laurent*, until October of that year when he went to the auxiliary aircraft carrier HMS *Puncher* (manned by a Canadian ship's company) as the Executive Officer. He appears to have been a great success in that appointment. The *La Perle* tragedy, however, probably prejudiced his chances of further employment and promotion. With his outstanding record of service before that incident, and his reputation as a seaman, he might have expected to continue his naval career, transferring as a good many successful RCNR and RCNVR officers did to the RCN. Not until after he was demobilized in July 1946, however, was he confirmed in the rank of Commander, and he never held command again. Except for some brief periods of naval training, including his appointment to HMCS *Nootka* as ice navigator on a cruise to Hudson Bay in 1948, and acting as Convoy Commodore in a NATO exercise in 1956, he remained ashore as supervisor of yardcraft in HMC Dockyard at Halifax until his retirement in 1969. He lived to a ripe old age, and was until his death in 1994 a colourful and very well-liked figure in both the naval and civilian community of Halifax and Dartmouth.⁴³

For the RCN, this unhappy episode pointed up some of the problems in adjusting doctrine to meet the changing requirements of anti-submarine warfare. Even after nearly five years of war it was not easy to find officers capable of conducting group operations. The cream of the crop were in European waters in the summer of 1944. However, there is no indication that the selection of George Stephen as Senior Officer of a group gave Canadian naval authorities any qualms — rather, the opposite — and he commanded the respect of his men as much as he ever had, but the evidence of Captain (D) Newfoundland suggests that his ability may have been in question by the time the group was sailing with ONM-243. For sailors who had been constantly at war with U-boats for so many years, moreover, the extreme dislike of submarines was endemic, and it must have been galling to know that Canadian groups and ships were achieving kills in European coastal waters, while convoy escorts in mid-ocean had so little chance of contact. Knowing the threat was still there — there were shocking losses to U-boats in the Canadian Northwest Atlantic in the last eighteen months of the war⁴⁴ — still kept escort commanders on the *qui vive*. Stephen had had a taste of victory with the sinking of *U-845* in March. "[With] his first submarine kill after four years of rugged rescue work," observed Arthur Bishop in his description of the incident, "Stephen was so jubilant he tore the peak clean off his sea-worn captain's cap when he raised it in salute to *Sally's* victory."⁴⁵ When *Empire MacCallum's* aircraft reported a submarine, exposed as Stephen had been to convoy disasters and constant danger, he seems to have been carried away with the thought of another success against the U-boats. In the excitement of the moment, he had evidently lost the capacity for prudent forethought, something that he must have possessed in abundance as an Arctic navigator. If there is any exculpation for his impulsiveness, it must be the unfamiliarity of his role, in addition to the hard life he had endured at sea for the previous four and a half years.

The sinking of *La Perle* was a terrible human tragedy. Because the full details have remained obscure until now, it has raised doubts in peoples' minds. Was there in fact a hidden motive? The mysterious loss of the French submarine *Surcouf*⁴⁶ could be fuel for suspicions that the Admiralty or the US Navy deliberately put *La*

Perle at risk, but the evidence leads to a much more mundane conclusion: in the final analysis, the sinking of *La Perle* was, sad to say, simply a matter of incompetence.



NOTES

- This article arises out of the recollections of Anthony Griffin, Staff Officer Operations to Flag Officer Newfoundland in August 1944, who drafted the sailing orders for *La Perle* from Newfoundland to Holy Loch, subsequent comments by the British naval historian Arnold Hague, and correspondence with John Seale, a retired cinematographer who had been serving as a signalman in HMCS *Dunver* when aircraft from the MAC ships *Empire MacCallum* and *Empire MacColl* attacked and sank the submarine. Anthony Griffin, *Footfalls in Memory* (Toronto, n.p., 1998), p. 129, (excerpts of this memoir appeared in several issues of *Starshell*, the newsletter of the Naval Officers Association of Canada, in the year 2000); Arnold Hague to Griffin, 5 Dec 2000; John Seale to Griffin, 15 Dec 2000, and subsequent correspondence, DHH Biog file A.G. Griffin; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11128, "Sinking of Submarine *La Perle*"; RG 24, Vol. 11927, 60-4-142, "Communications, HMCS *Dunver*". I am grateful to John Seale for giving me access to his personnel file.
- Report of Proceedings, HMCS *Dunver*, 13 July 1944, NDHQ Directorate of History and Heritage (henceforth DHH) 81/520/8280, Box 7, ONM 243.
- La Perle* was a 669-ton minelayer of the *Sapphire* class, built in 1935, listed as *Perle* in *Jane's Fighting Ships*, 1936, 1942, 1944-5. Although serving with the Free French forces, the lone survivor of this submarine made a point of saying he belonged to the French, not the Free French Navy.
- SOE C5 to Captain (D) [Destroyers] Newfoundland, 11 July 1944, enclosure, LCdr H.B. Dangerfield RN, "M.V. 'Empire MacCallum' in company with Convoy ONM 243: Report on Sinking of Submarine 'La Perle'", RG 24, Vol. 11128.
- ibid.* Dangerfield statement; "Statement of Hornbill I (T.1) Swordfish aircraft LS 241"; "Declaration du Premier-maitre mecanicien Cloarac Emile, MLE 3313-25-2, sous la perte du sousmarin franç 'La Perle'."
- James Rusbridger, *Who Sank Surcouf? The Truth about the Disappearance of the Pride of the French Navy*, (New York: Century, 1991), pp. 62, 184 ff.
- Biog file George Hay Stephen, DHH.
- "I remember very clearly," recalled Commander Tony Griffin RCNVR, Staff Officer Operations at St. John's at the time, "giving this submarine her sailing orders, going over carefully with the captain, navigating officer and my own navigating officer the route to be followed by *La Perle*, clear of all convoys and concentrations of U-boats. I also remember drafting the signal, with side distribution to all concerned at sea and ashore, specifying the route and the 'safe' corridor ... in which ships were not to attack, as they normally would, any surfaced submarine on sighting." Anthony Griffin, *Footfalls in Memory*, p. 29.
- Evidence, Board of Inquiry, 14 July 1944, questions 306 and 307, RG 24, Vol. 11128.
- Admiralty to AIG [Action Information Group] 331, Commodore US Fleet, 071440B, *ibid.*
- Admiralty 081444B, *ibid.*
- SOE C5 to Captain (D) Newfoundland, 11 July 1944, RG 24, Vol. 11128.
- Evidence, Board of Inquiry, *ibid.*
- Personnel file, John Seale. Captain (Destroyers) or Captain (D) was responsible for the efficiency and training of destroyers and smaller vessels.
- Seale to Griffin, 15 Dec 2000.
- Evidence, Board of Inquiry, NAC RG 24 Vol 11128. John Seale was not aware of these events, having left the bridge after Stephen's outburst.
- Stephen maintained he had never communicated directly with the aircraft, but Lieutenant Otterveanger's statement reports getting a "Roger" from the SOE at 1253, and "Interrogation skating" at 1330, which suggests Stephen did ask the pilot rather than the MAC ship. SOE C5 to Captain (D) Newfoundland 11 July 1944, enclosure: "Statement of Hornbill I, (T1) Swordfish Aircraft LS 241", *ibid.*
- "The signal log of the Commodore of Convoy O.N.M. 243 for the 6th, 7th and 8th July ... discloses no record of C. In C. W.A.'s situation report being passed to Commodore by Senior Officer Escorts during the three days concerned." Commander in Chief, Canadian Northwest Atlantic to Secretary, Naval Board, 28 July 1944, RG 24, Vol. 11128.
- Evidence, Board of Inquiry, 14 July, RG 24, Vol. 11128. The letter 'L' indicated that messages had been received and passed to other addressees.
- Evidence of Lieutenant J.H.C. Wilson RCNVR, Investigation of the Communications Department of H.M.C.S. "DUNVER", 20 July 1944, RG 24 Vol 11927.
- C in C CNA to Naval Secretary, 28 July 1944.
- Murray's part in the St. Pierre and Miquelon episode appears to have been exaggerated by Muselier. Muselier had asked him for permission to take the three Free French corvettes to sea with him on a trip to inspect them at sea. According to the French Admiral, "Murray hésitait un peu. Il me dit, en riant: 'Je ne sais pas s'il est prudent de vous laisser passer près de St Pierre avec ces trois corvettes?' Je lui répondis, en souriant: 'Je vous ai dit que je me rendrai directement à Halifax'. Il n'insista pas." Murray later objected to the insinuation that he had connived with Muselier without reference to the Admiralty or the higher US naval command in Newfoundland, but he had made a friend in Muselier. C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945*, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970) p. 373n.; Murray to S.F. Wise, 13 May 1971 and subsequent correspondence, DHH 80/632; Biog file L.W. Murray, DHH.
- Goldsmith appears in the January 1945 RN Navy List in command of HMS *Seaborne*, the RN establishment in Halifax that serviced aircraft from MAC and CAM (Catapult Aircraft Merchantmen) ships on the RCAF base at Dartmouth N.S., the future site of the Canadian naval air base, HMCS *Shearwater*.
- D.K. Laidlaw to W.A.B. Douglas, 6 February, 1986. The promptitude recalled by Captain Laidlaw cannot be verified from available documents, since the findings of the Board did not find their way onto paper until 19 July.
- Lieutenant James George (later a distinguished Canadian diplomat) makes the observation in his narrative "The Royal Canadian Navy's part in the invasion of Northern France", Narrative "B", Vol. 1, 1944, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa, Directorate of History and Heritage, 84/230, on which Joseph Schull based the very well-written official account. Schull, *Far Distant Ships*, p. xix.
- RCN Weekly State, 2 May 44, 30 May 44, 20 June 44, DHH, NHS 1650 DS.
- Commander P.B. Martineau, RN to C in C CNA and AOC-in-C CNA, 6 August 1943, RG 24, Vol 3896, 1034-3, Vol. 1.
- Findings of the Board of Inquiry, 19 July 1944, enclosed in C in C CNA to Naval Secretary, 28 July 1944, CNA 0032, RG 24, Vol. 11128.
- ibid.*
- Laidlaw to Douglas, 6 Feb 1986, D.K. Laidlaw biog file, DDH.
- C in C CNA to Naval Secretary, 28 July 1944.
- Alan Easton, *50 North: An Atlantic Battleground*, (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963, Paperjacks edition, 1980), p. 205.
- Alan Easton, *50 North*, p. 231, cited by Doug McLean in "The Last Cruel Winter: RCN Support Groups and the U-Boat Schnorkel Offensive", unpublished MA thesis, Royal Military College of Canada, 1992.
- War Diary, Commander Layard, typescript from original in Commander Layard's possession, DHH 5/130 to 126/130, DHH.
- Joseph Schull, *The Far Distant Ships* (Ottawa: Queens Printer, 1961) p. 224.
- Staff Signal Officer, Area Combined Headquarters, Halifax NS to C in C CNA, 28 July 1944.
- Memorandum, Gibbs to Taylor, 31 August 1944, No 34-18050, RG 24, Vol. 11927.
- ibid.*
- Taylor to Naval Secretary, 31 August 1944, *ibid.*
- A/Captain G.B. Hope, for Commodore, RCN, Flag Officer Newfoundland to Naval Secretary, 18 Sep 1944, based on a rough pencilled draft by Taylor, *ibid.*
- Naval Secretary to C in C CNA, 5 October 1944, Minute IV by Captain (D) Newfoundland dated 21 October 1944, *ibid.*
- RG 24, 11927, [NS] 60-4-112, *passim*.
- Biog file G.H. Stephen, DHH; Captain Norman Jackson RCN (ret'd) to W.A.B. Douglas, 9 April 2001.
- U-boats in the Canadian Northwest Atlantic sank the escorts *Valleyfield* (7 May, 1944), *Magog* (14 October 1944), *Clayoquot* (26 December, 1944), and *Esquimalt* (16 April 1945) and the merchant ships *Cornwallis* (3 December 1944) *British Freedom*, *Martin Van Buren* and *Athelviking* (14 January 1945), Michael Hadley, *U-Boats Against Canada: German Submarines in Canadian Waters* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens, 1985) pp. 193-301; Jürgen Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945*, (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1983), pp. 186-195.
- Arthur Bishop, *Courage at Sea. Canada's Military Heritage*, Volume III. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1995), p. 95.
- Rusbridger, *Who Sank Surcouf?*, pp. 184 ff.

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