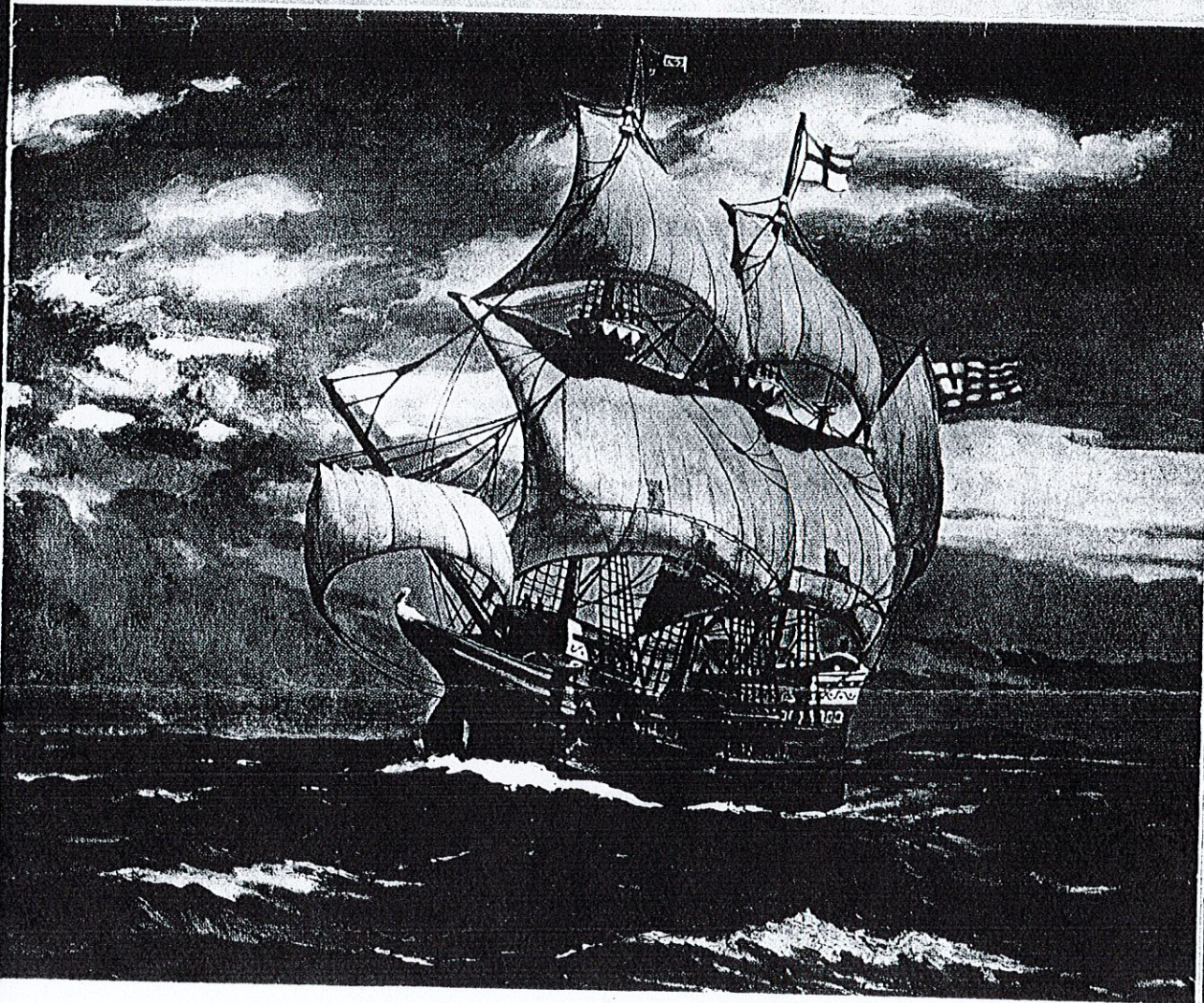


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Last Chapter for U-853

By

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A sunken Nazi U-boat in 20 fathoms of water a few miles south of Newport has aroused keen interest in skin-diving circles in Rhode Island. During the past year, newspapers headlined the exploits of various teams of skin-divers who removed the hatch in the conning tower and made their way into the submarine, identified as *U-853*. The divers brought up six life rafts, clipped off the upper eight inches of the periscope for a souvenir, and removed a number of human bones, including one complete skeleton, from the World War II submarine. Plans have been announced for the return of the human remains to Germany, and many questions have arisen concerning the sinking of the U-boat fifteen years ago within sight of Point Judith. The story of that kill is the subject of this article.

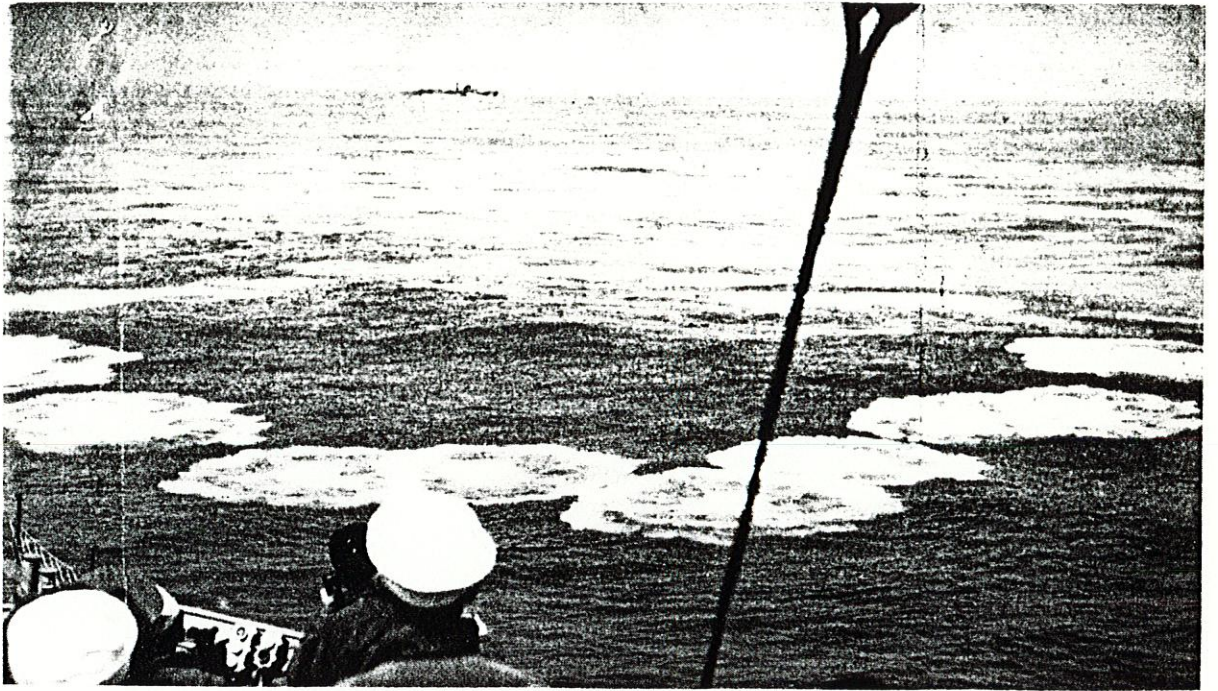
During the closing months of World War II, Grand Admiral Doenitz sent many of his U-boats to operate off the coasts of the United States and Canada. These boats kept up their attacks on enemy shipping until the final hours before Germany's surrender. *U-853*, which was a type-IX-C, 740-ton snorkel boat, reached her operating area off southern New England late in the month of April. She remained undetected in her patrol area off Block Island until the afternoon of 5 May, at which time she torpedoed and sank *SS Black Point*, a small collier with a load of soft coal bound for Boston.

Black Point was taking a well-travelled route from New York City to Boston via the coastal waterway of Long Island Sound, Rhode Island Sound, and the Cape Cod Ship Canal. The collier was without escort and was not zigzagging, for those waters were considered free of enemy submarines. As she was about to enter the western end of Rhode Island Sound, some four miles southeast of Point Judith, an explosion tore away about 40

feet of her stern section. Twelve men lost their lives when the ship sank, several of them dying immediately in the after section when the torpedo hit. A total of 34 men, including three injured, were rescued by ships which soon converged on the scene. *Black Point* settled rapidly by the stern, rolled over to port, and capsized at 1755, about 25 minutes after the explosion of the torpedo. One of the merchantmen which was in the area to pick up survivors, *SS Kamen*, sent out an SOS report of torpedoing and information regarding the location of *Black Point*.

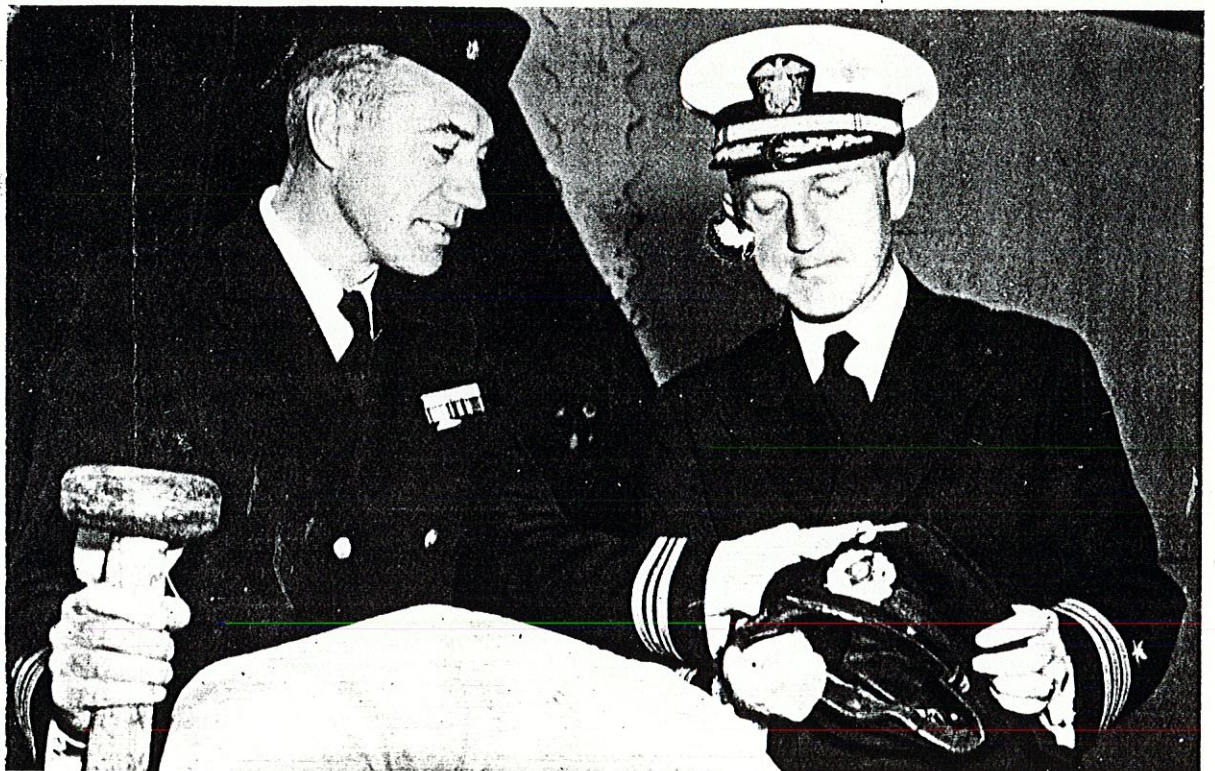
This signal was picked up at 1742 by the radio operator of *Moberly*, a Coast Guard frigate, travelling in company with two Navy destroyer escorts. These ships, which were about 30 miles south of the sinking, were remnants of Task Group 60.7, an escort group which had just delivered the merchant ships of convoy GUS-84 to Norfolk, Philadelphia, and New York City. A fourth warship, the destroyer *Ericsson*, was far ahead en route to Boston, having already entered the Cape Cod Ship Canal. Embarked in *Ericsson* was CTG 60.7, Commander F. C. B. McCune, USN. All the ships were headed for the Boston Naval Shipyard for much needed repairs and provisions. Lieutenant Commander L. B. Tollaksen, USCG, commanding officer of the Coast Guard frigate, was the Senior Officer Present of the three vessels, *Amick*, *Atherton*,

GRADUATED from the U. S. Naval Academy in the Class of 1960. Ensign Tollaksen is currently First Lieutenant in USS *Lester* (DE-1022). Last year in preparing his term paper for the English, History, and Government Department, USNA, he selected the story of the kill of *U-853* in which engagement his father had been commanding officer of the U. S. Coast Guard frigate *Moberly*. Later he submitted his revised paper to the U. S. Naval Institute.



THEY CAUGHT *U-853* IN COASTAL WATERS AT THE VERY END OF THE WAR

Crewmen of USCG *Moberly* (*above*) watch the surface boil with a pattern of detonating hedgehogs where the submarine was bottomed in about a hundred feet of water. The task unit's commander and *Moberly's* captain (*below*) later examine some of the debris, including an officer's cap which rose from the mortally wounded U-boat. Skin-divers have recently descended to the sunken Nazi craft.



and *Moberly*.¹ He immediately notified the two destroyer escorts of the situation. As *Atherton* was in the lead, she was directed to proceed to the scene of the sinking and then to sweep south from that position. *Amick*, being next in column, was to examine the Block Island Sound area on the westward approaches to the sinking, while *Moberly* would examine the eastern approaches to this area, and thus box in the enemy submarine. All three ships were to maintain extreme sonar alert and evaluate possible contacts as they went to their assigned areas.

At this time an attempt to communicate with Commander McCune in *Ericsson* was made, but to no avail. When contact was established shortly before 1900, information was exchanged between CTG 60.7 and *Moberly*, and the commanding officer of *Moberly* was designated Officer in Tactical Command until *Ericsson* would reach the scene. *Ericsson* had turned around in the Cape Cod Canal on orders of CTG 02.1 at 1840 and was heading back to join in the search. Meanwhile, the other three ships reached the area of the sinking about 1930 and began to work themselves into a scouting line to sweep to the south from the northern tip of Block Island. They took station about 3,000 yards apart on a line abreast. *Atherton*, because of her excellent sonar team and equipment, was assigned to what the OTC determined was the most likely escape route of the enemy submarine. *Moberly* took the eastern position as guide, and *Amick* was assigned the central position. (See chart.)

The search was planned on the assumption that the submarine would try to run out of the area at high speed until her skipper felt he could safely lie on the bottom for the night. It was believed that she would not get very far as she would want to keep a reserve charge in her batteries. About nine miles to the south of the sinking of *Black Point* was an area which might be chosen by the submarine as an excellent place to hide. In this area,

known as East Ground, there is a steeply rising shoal alongside of which a submarine might be able to lie and escape detection of any searching destroyer. In addition there was the possibility of a wreck in the area which would further confuse the search. Such tactics were the latest in use by German U-boats. Once the above course of action was deemed most likely for, the German submarine skipper to follow; the search plan was set up to sweep across this area and back.

Shortly before the three ships were in position to begin their sweep, at 2014, *Atherton* picked up a sonar contact right along the track laid out by the OTC as the most likely escape route for *U-853*. The returning echo was unusual and unfamiliar, but *Atherton* became more and more confident that this contact was the submarine on or near the bottom. In order to prevent interference to *Atherton*, the two other ships ceased pinging and listened to *Atherton's* echo ranging, while the sonar operators of the three ships discussed the characteristics of the signal over the TBS voice radio. When all the operators were satisfied that they could recognize this unfamiliar type of echo, *Atherton* began attacking. The submarine's screws were heard by the sonar operator. It was also determined that contact was moving slowly along a course of 090 degrees true and the returning echo revealed a slight down doppler.

At approximately 2029, *Atherton* dropped 13 magnetic depth charges, one of which exploded, but it could not be determined at the time whether the explosion was a result of attacking the submarine, or a wreck which possibly was in the area. It was at this point that *Amick* received word to leave the scene and join *Booth*, another destroyer escort from Task Group 60.7, which had been detailed earlier to escort a merchantman from New York City to Boston via Cape Cod. This left *Atherton* and *Moberly* alone, with *Ericsson* not due to arrive for nearly an hour. *Atherton* made a second run with hedgehogs this time which resulted in a large explosion two or three seconds after the last of the hedgehogs was fired and about one hundred feet to starboard of the pattern. This explosion was considered the result of countermining by the hedgehogs of one or more of the depth charges dropped in the first run. A second

¹ USS *Amick* (DE-168) LCDR E. L. Barauman, USNR
 USS *Atherton* (DE-169) LCDR L. Iselin, USNR
 USS *Ericsson* (DD-440) LCDR C. A. Baldwin, USN
 USS *Moberly* (PF-63) LCDR L. B. Tollaksen, USCG

hedgehog attack followed immediately, but it was not certain whether these charges hit the submarine or simply exploded on the bottom. *Atherton* lost contact on her run in and could not regain it, due to the extremely disturbed condition of the water in the area. Since doubt existed as to whether *Atherton* had actually been attacking a submarine or one of the wrecks nearby, it was decided to continue the search for the submarine in case she had slipped by the group. *Atherton* dropped a lighted marker buoy in the general area where her three attacks had taken place, for future reference, and then the two ships began their night search.

The situation was discussed with CTG 60.7 on board *Ericsson* via voice radio, and it was decided that if the contact were a submarine it was damaged enough to hold for awhile. Shortly thereafter, Commander McCune arrived on the scene and took over as OTC, but *Ericsson* did not join in the attacks. Several vessels had been dispatched to the area to assist wherever possible in preventing the submarine's escape and reported to the OTC for orders. He assigned *Ericsson* and the other assisting ships² to barrier patrols.

When contact had not been regained by 2200, *Moberly* suggested that *Atherton* search an area several miles to the north of her last contact while *Moberly* would search an area the same distance to the south. *Atherton* headed north and soon picked up a radar contact which she felt could be the snorkel of the German submarine. Arriving in the vicinity about 2235, she turned on her searchlights and discovered that instead of a submarine it was only a small unlighted buoy.

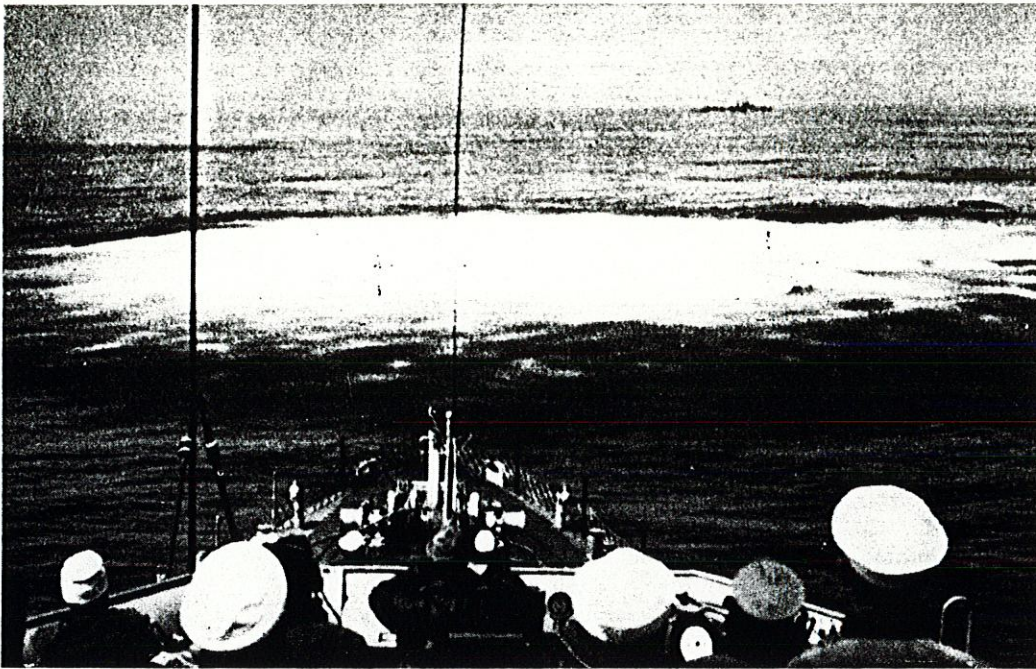
Atherton resumed her search, and on her final leg, picked up a sonar contact presumed to be the submarine, which was estimated to be lying dead in the water at a depth of one hundred feet with her propellers silent. This position was about 4,000 yards to the east of the first group of attacks. *Atherton* fired a pattern of hedgehogs at 2343 and, soon after this attack, bubbles of air, oil, and pieces of broken wood rose to the surface indicating the submarine might have been hit. *Atherton* picked up the contact again after this attack

² USS *Action*; USS *Barney* (DD-149); USS *Breckinridge* (DD-148), Flagship of DesDiv 54; USS *Blakeley* (DD-150); USS *Newport*; USS *Restless*; USS *Semmes* (AG-24).

and held it for about 20 minutes while circling the area. There was no noticeable movement of the submarine, no doppler or noise from her screws. CTG 60.7 ordered *Atherton* to cross over the spot with her fathometer in order to determine the exact position of the submarine. This was done at 0020 and it was decided the submarine had not moved. Commander McCune ordered *Atherton* to make another attack in an attempt to split the submarine's pressure hull. She did so shortly thereafter, increasing her attack speed to 15 knots and dropping a pattern of depth charges which were set to explode at 75 feet. This shallow setting was used, for it was feared that if set for one hundred feet, the charges might come to rest on the bottom before exploding. The water in this area was 104 to 128 feet in depth. After the attack, it was noticed that air bubbles and oil were still welling to the surface.

The runs were now discontinued until shortly after 0100 while *Moberly* and *Atherton* searched the area for wreckage or debris that might have come to the surface. Turning on their searchlights, they discovered that the water was covered with oil, bits of wood or cork, dead fish, and other miscellaneous debris. At this time, *Atherton* recovered a pillow, a life jacket, and a small wooden flagstaff.

As *Atherton* was still in contact with the submarine, which had not moved since the midnight attacks, she made the first run when the order was given by the OTC to resume depth charging. This attack was identical to the last one, except that this time she was not able to clear the area of the exploding depth charges without damage. She was shaken up and her dead reckoning tracer was knocked out. *Moberly* then picked up the contact and moved into the area while *Atherton* made necessary repairs which were not completed for nearly an hour. *Moberly* expected to find the submarine in the same place where *Atherton* had been attacking. However, as she closed the submarine, she estimated that it was moving across her course at a speed of four to five knots. This unexpected movement threw off *Moberly's* solution of the attack, but she went ahead and fired her depth charges anyway. In order to reduce the probability of damage such as *Atherton* had just received from the shallow-exploding depth charges, *Moberly*



SHALLOW WATER COMPLICATED THE PROBLEM FOR THE U-BOAT KILLERS

further increased her attack speed over set doctrine to 18 knots. Even with this increase, she was damaged temporarily and had to stand off to make repairs. *Atherton* was still having trouble with her sonar gear and so, while *Moberly* labored to regain her steering control, the attacks were discontinued. *Moberly's* repairs were completed about 0200, and she began a deliberate hedgehog attack on the submarine. A slight up doppler was noted, and the target judged to be moving about two to three knots. This run was made using only hedgehogs in order to avoid the damage mentioned above. However, a casualty nullified the attack because the firing panel came off at the last moment, strong evidence of the pounding being experienced in the shallow water. The contact which had just been evaluated at 75 feet seemed to "bottom" at the end of this run. Doppler indications disappeared, and contact was lost in the reflections from the bottom and was not regained immediately.

Commander McCune in *Ericsson* now assigned various ships to search areas for the rest of the night. *Atherton* was assigned the area centered over the last contact with the submarine. No further attacks were made

until about 0530 that morning. It was felt that the submarine was badly damaged as she appeared to be bleeding oil and air bubbles heavily. *Atherton* circled the area every 20 to 30 minutes in order to keep track of the position of the contact and to hunt for more wreckage that might have come to the surface during the recent attacks. At 0241 she reported that there were three pools of oil coming from the submarine which were spaced about 30 feet apart. *Moberly* reported that an oil slick and much debris extended half a mile from the position of the last attacks. With the coming of daylight, *Moberly* and *Ericsson* discontinued search in their assigned areas, and with *Atherton*, began searching for evidence of the submarine's destruction. The ships found a large number of German escape lungs and life jackets, several life rafts, abandon ship kits, and an officer's cap which was later judged to belong to the submarine's skipper. Two ZNP type blimps, K-16 and K-58³ from Lakehurst, New Jersey, arrived on the scene between 0540 and 0605 and reported to the OTC. They were directed

³ K-16 LTJG J. T. Clark, USNR
K-58 LTJG M. "I" Zabst, USNR



FATAL HITS BROUGHT UP THE SUBMARINE'S DIESEL OIL IN LARGE BUBBLES

to assist in identifying the oil slicks in the area, to photograph the area, and to mark the position of the submarine with smoke and dye markers. In carrying out these orders, K-16 searched the area of the oil slick and soon came up with a strong contact with her MAD gear. She marked this position on several successive sweeps and reported that the target was stationary.

Commander McCune then decided that further attacks were necessary to crack the hull of the submarine in order to bring up more debris to the surface. The attacks, therefore, continued with the three ships employing combined hedgehog and depth charge attacks. A methodical, but rather unusual, plan was used at this time. As one ship passed over the submarine, dropped her charges, and "drifted off" for repairs, a second ship in the circle would move in to attack. She would attack and stand off to be followed by the third ship. By the time this ship had finished her attack, the first ship was repaired and could begin the cycle again. From time to time the attacks would be discontinued and boats lowered to pick up more wreckage. *Ericsson* recovered a chart desk, a life raft, a rubber

hood for foul weather gear, and some bits of cork.

One of the blimps dropped a sonobuoy on an oil bubble which was still coming to the surface. The sonar operators in both blimps heard sound which they described as a "rhythmic hammering on a metal surface, which was interrupted periodically." About ten minutes later they heard a "long, shrill shriek and then the hammering noise was lost in the engine noise of the attacking surface ships." The blimps were very helpful in marking the exact position of the submarine and in conning the surface vessels over this position. They photographed the area, pointed out debris to the searching whaleboats, and made attacks on the submarine with their 7.2" rocket bombs. At 1045 CTG 60.7 declared that the "submarine was sunk and on the bottom." Both blimps left the area at this time following orders from their base.

An experimental vessel, *Semmes* (AG-24), was given permission to enter the area where the attacks had taken place in order to use her new XQHA sonar on this "bottomed submarine." Marker buoys were dropped into

the oil bubbles and practice hedgehog runs were made by the vessels under almost perfect conditions. At 1224 the position of the submarine was marked by *Ericsson* with a buoy line⁴ and attacks were discontinued. Commander McCune issued orders that his ships were to proceed to Boston and that the rest of the ships in the area were detached.

Later that afternoon, a diver from *Penquin* (ASR-12) followed this buoy line down to the battered U-boat and landed on the conning tower. He identified the submarine as *U-853* and reported that there were bodies strewn about inside. The side was split and the hull damaged from the hedgehogs and depth charges.

The main interest of this article lies in the fact that this was the last German submarine to be sunk by U. S. forces in World War II. Certainly this action shows the latest tactics in use by both sides. It was the first "bottomed submarine" destroyed by the forces of CinCLant.

Atherton was credited with the kill of *U-853* with *Moberly* assisting in the destruction. Lieutenant Commander Lewis Iselin, USNR, commanding officer of *Atherton*, was awarded

⁴ The final buoy was dropped into the air bubbles which were coming up through the center of *Moberly's* last hedgehog pattern.

the Legion of Merit for the sinking. Lieutenant Commander L. B. Tollaksen, USCG, commanding officer of *Moberly*, was awarded the Bronze Star with combat "V" for his original analysis of the situation and for setting up the search which located *U-853*.

The effect of dropping depth charges in shallow water was made painfully clear to the attacking ships. In order to avoid damage from these depth charges, attacks were made at speeds several knots higher than doctrine at the time. However, it was not until the depth settings on the charges were also increased that the damage to the destroyers decreased. Hedgehogs were particularly effective, although it was difficult to assess hits on the submarine, since many exploded on the hard bottom.

It is interesting to note that at no time during these attacks on the submarine did she attempt to surface or fire torpedoes at her attackers. It is possible that she was damaged by the first depth charge attack and could not surface. In any case, it seems that her skipper decided to try to inch away on the bottom, hoping the attacking ships would be convinced of a kill and leave. They were persistent, however, and would not give up until positive evidence of the submarine's destruction was found.



WHO WON THAT WAR?

Contributed by Lieutenant R. L. WESSMANN, USN

The period of time a ship is subjected to Underway Training is usually one of near chaos. Essentially a world of "let's pretend," it is filled with make-believe holes in the deck, assumed noises in the reduction gear, imaginary enemy aircraft, and visualized formations. Even the climax is an "on paper" war which the Training Group normally wins.

The skipper of a Coast Guard cutter, sensing the low spirits of his crew after one of those days, had the following word passed,

"Supper for the crew and Training Group Observers. Now supper for the Observers will be simulated."

(The Naval Institute will pay \$5.00 for each anecdote accepted for publication in the PROCEEDINGS.)