

## The Battle for Convoy HX 133, 23-29 June 1941

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*A partir de juin 1941, l'Allemagne semblait triomphante et la seule lueur d'espoir des alliés était l'Atlantique nord. Le Bismark avait été coulé le 27 mai et la capacité de décoder les énigmes allemandes permit aux convois d'effectuer des manœuvres d'autoprotection pour éviter les emplacements connus de sous-marins ennemis. Le convoi HX 133, formé de 49 navires marchands qui avaient quitté Halifax le 16 juin, n'eut pas cette chance. Au cours d'une féroce bataille qui dura six jours, six navires furent coulés contre seulement deux sous-marins détruits. Ce combat fut le précurseur des grandes batailles de convoi de 1943 au cours desquelles les alliés déployèrent un grand nombre d'aéronefs et d'escortes et défirent les « U-boot ».*

At the beginning of June 1941 Germany was triumphant controlling the entire continent of Europe from the North Cape of Norway southward to Cape Matapan in Greece and westward from the Pyrenees to the western boarder of the Soviet Union. On 22 June Germany would invade Russia, but before that event only Great Britain, along with her Empire and Commonwealth, challenged the German conquest of Europe. For Great Britain and her Commonwealth allies - Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa - the first days of June 1941 were a time of defeat. British and Commonwealth armies and expeditionary forces had been expelled from Norway, France, and Greece and the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* had swept the forces of the British Empire and Commonwealth from Cyrenacia and had invaded Egypt. The only bright spot in this otherwise gloomy strategic situation for Britain the war at sea in the North Atlantic. The British on 27 May 1941 sunk the German battleships *Bismarck* and the Royal Navy, assisted by the Royal Canadian Navy, for the first time appeared to be on the verge of gaining the upper hand in the war against the U-boats in the North Atlantic.

The British success in the North Atlantic in 1941 owed much to superior intelligence. In the spring of 1941 the British had broke the German naval codes and by June of that year they were able to read the coded radio messages passing between the *Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote* (BdU) and the U-boats at sea.<sup>1</sup> The information obtained from reading the coded radio messages to and from the U-boats at sea permitted the British to adopt a strategy in the North Atlantic of routing convoys evasively so as to avoid the enemy vessels. According to one German authority this Allied use of information obtained from communications intelligence during the last half of 1941 prevented the Germans from sinking between 1.5 and 2 million tons of merchant ships. Additionally, the location of the transatlantic convoys by U-

<sup>1</sup> Public Record Office (PRO), HW 11/38, ff. 7-8.

boats became almost purely fortuitous.<sup>2</sup> One of the few convoys which did encounter U-boats in June 1941 was east bound Convoy HX 133.

Convoy HX 133, consisting of 49 merchant ships, sailed on 16 June from Halifax, N.S. bound for Great Britain. The escorts of the convoy were the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Wolfe* and four warships of the Royal Canadian Navy: the destroyer HMCS *Ottawa* and the corvettes HMC Ships *Chambly*, *Orillia*, and *Collingwood*. The merchant ships of the convoy were formed in nine short columns with HMS *Wolfe* between the fourth and fifth columns. The four Canadian warships, which joined off St. John's Newfoundland, were stationed around the perimeter of the convoy. As HX 133 steamed northeast out into the North Atlantic the convoy encountered a dense fog which lasted for several days and in conditions of extremely poor visibility. Some of the merchant ships were forced to return to port after sustaining damage from collisions with other ships of the convoy.<sup>3</sup>

When HX 133 departed from Halifax on 16 June the Germans had almost no knowledge of the movements of Allied ships in the North Atlantic. There had been no encounters between U-boats and convoys since 22 May. From the beginning of June the Germans had stationed a number of U-boats southeast of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Never before had U-boats been positioned so far to the westward in the North Atlantic, but they still failed to locate convoys that should have been readily found as they funnelled south of Newfoundland. The location of the German vessels "seem[ed] to be known" to the British." Therefore the BdU on 20 June ordered the German vessels to move to the northeast into an area to the south of Greenland.<sup>4</sup> For reasons which are wholly not clear British naval intelligence did not appreciate the movement of the U-boats to the northeast into an area south of Greenland and on 23 June U-203, at a point approximately 430 miles south of Cape Farewell, sighted HX 133.

Upon sighting HX 133 the BdU ordered U-203 not to attack, but rather to remain in contact with the convoy while other U-boats joined to attack the convoy in sternight.<sup>5</sup> At 2332<sup>7</sup> BdU ordered the U-boats "TO CONTINUE OPERATING ALONG THE GENERAL LINE OF ADVANCE [of the convoy] EVEN IF CONTACT SHOULD BE BROKEN OFF."<sup>8</sup> The U-203's sighting report had been intercepted in British Isles<sup>9</sup> and the Admiralty at 1757B informed FIX 133 that it had been sighted and ordered the convoy "to make a drastic alteration of course after dark." Several hours later, just before sunset which was at 2315, HMCS *Ottawa* conducted an offensive sweep ahead of HX 133 and then just after night fall the Canadian destroyer carried out another sweep astern of the convoy. At 0132 on 24 June HX 133 altered course 40 degrees to starboard.

As the ships of HX 133 were turning on to the new course the merchant ship

<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Rohwer, "The Operational Uses of 'Ultra' in the Battle of the Atlantic," in Christopher Andrew and Jeremy Noakes, (eds.), *Intelligence and International Relations* (Exeter, 1987), 283-284.

<sup>3</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, f. 166.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Defence (Navy), *German Naval History, The U-Boat War in the Atlantic, 1939-1945* (London, 1989), vol. I, 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Behfehlshaber der Unterseeboote War Diary of the German U-Boat Command, 1939-1945*. Microfilm edition of the English translation; original at the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C., 20 June 1941. Hereafter this will be cited as BdU War Diary.

<sup>6</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/20, intercepted 1338/23/6/41 decoded 1700/23/6/41.

<sup>7</sup> The time zone for all British decrypts (DEFE sources) is British local time, time zone B. British and Canadian ships at sea normally kept local time, and used that in their after action reports.(ed.)

<sup>8</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/20, intercepted 2332/23/6/41 decoded 0723/24/6/41.

<sup>9</sup> PRO, ADM 223/1, xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> PRO, ADM 199/1145, ff. 60-61.

*Glenpark* sighted a U-boat which immediately dived.<sup>11</sup> Several minutes later U-203 fired three torpedoes at the ships of the convoy. One of these torpedoes failed to explode, one missed, and the third hit the Norwegian merchant ship *Solôy*.<sup>12</sup> When the torpedo hit the *Solôy*, HMS *Wolfe* fired a green very light to "indicate that a ship had been torpedoed" and the merchant ship *Traveller*, which was astern of the *Solôy*, fired two white rockets and began to rescue survivors from the sinking Norwegian merchant ship. The response of the Canadian warships of HX 133's escort, owing mainly to a lack of experience and to the fact that none of the corvettes of the force were equipped with radio telephones, was uncoordinated and ineffective. HMCS *Ottawa* "swept" across the rear of the convoy firing star shells. HMCS *Collingwood* steamed down the port side of the convoy firing a star shell and dropping a single depth charge. HMCS *Chambly* seeing the white rocket moved closer to the mainbody of HX 133. And HMCS *Orillia*, apparently unaware of the attack, maintained her station on the starboard beam of the convoy. After searching unsuccessfully for the U-boat the escorts of HX 133 returned to their stations.<sup>13</sup> Later the British would conclude that the U-boat, which had been sighted by the *Glenpark*, had dived under the convoy and probably fired the torpedo from her stern tube which hit the *Solôy*.<sup>14</sup>

Several hours after the sinking of the *Solôy* and well astern of HX 133, U-371 torpedoed and sank the merchant ship *Vigrid* at 0740. This ship belonged to HX 133 and had fallen astern of the convoy during 23 June owing to engine problems. When U-731's torpedo hit the *Vigrid* the ship's crew took to the life boats and subsequently 23 merchant seamen, who had survived for three weeks in two of the boats, were picked up.<sup>15</sup>

Several other U-boats in the early hours of 24 June gained contact with HX 133. At 0433 U-71 radioed that she had sighted the convoy<sup>17</sup> and several hours later U-79 reported being in contact with HX 133.<sup>18</sup> At 1533 the U-79 was ordered "TO SEND CONTACT REPORTS HOURLY."<sup>19</sup> Then after a radio silence of some twenty hours U-203 reported at 1610 that she had sighted a convoy proceeding on a "SOUTHWESTERLY COURSE."<sup>20</sup> The course reported for this convoy by U-203 was directly opposite from the one being steered by HX 133. At first the BdU concluded that there must be some mistake in the report made by U-203 and requested verification of the convoys reported course.<sup>21</sup> At 1737 U-203 again reported by radio "ENEMY IN SIGHT SQUARE AK 4460. COURSE 220 DEGREES."<sup>22</sup> Upon receipt of this radio message from U-203 the BdU concluded that "2 convoys were, therefore meeting in a very narrow area."<sup>23</sup> At 1956 the BdU ordered the U-boats "TO OPERATE AGAINST THE CONVOY MOST FAVORABLY SITUATED IN THE REGION IN RELATION TO THEMSELVES."<sup>24</sup> The assumption that there were two

<sup>11</sup> PRO, ADM 199/723, f. 166.

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes of World War Two: German, Italian and Japanese Submarine Successes, 1939-1945* (Annapolis, Md., 1999), 57.

<sup>13</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, ff. 166-167.

<sup>14</sup> PRO, ADM 199/2002, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, f. 167.

<sup>17</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/20, intercepted 0433/24/6/41 decoded 0735/24/6/41.

<sup>18</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/20 intercepted 0908/24/6/41 decoded 1259/24/6/41.

<sup>19</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1533/24/6/41 decoded 2146/24/6/41.

<sup>20</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1610/24/6/41 decoded 1945/24/6/41.

<sup>21</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1640/24/6/41. decoded 2051/24/6/41.

<sup>22</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/32, intercepted 1737/24/6/41 decoded 2009/24/6/41.

<sup>23</sup> BdU War Diary, 24 June 1941.

<sup>24</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1956/24/6/41 decoded 2355/24/6/41.

convoys was correct for owing to misadventure Convoy OB 336, a west bound convoy, had blundered into the area where the U-boats were attacking Convoy FIX 133.

Convoy OB 336 had been ordered by Western Approaches Command to alter course away from the area in which the U-boats were attacking Convoy HX 133. Unfortunately the telegraphist rating serving on the commodore's ship was inexperienced. When the radio message calling for OB 336 to alter course away from the danger area arrived the telegraphist was not able to decode it. Not asking for assistance the message remained unread for 27 hours and by then it was too late for the Convoy OB 336 had already arrived in the vicinity of the U-boats operating against Convoy HX 133. At 0901 on 24 June the commodore of OB 336 sighted the funnel tops of the ships of HX 133 some miles to the north.<sup>25</sup> At 0913 a U-boat was sighted on the surface by one of the ships of OB 336 and then several minutes later U-203 torpedoed the merchant ship *Kinross*.<sup>26</sup> Two other torpedoes were at the same time sighted by the ships of OB 336 passing from starboard to port. Immediately OB 336 executed two 45 degree turns to port, smoke floats were dropped, and the convoy steamed away from the region at full speed. During the next few hours two other U-boats would be sighted by the ships of OB 336, but the convoy made good its escape from the area of danger for no further attacks occurred on the ships belonging to Convoy OB 336.<sup>27</sup>

After sinking the *Kinross* out of Convoy OB 336 U-203 reported that her "EXHAUST CUT-OUT OF THE PORT DIESEL [was] BROKEN. SQUARE AK 4813. AM RETURNING."<sup>28</sup> Upon receipt of this message the BdU ordered U-203, if she was able to dive, to remain in contact with OB 336 in order to "LEAD THE OTHERS ON."<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, U-203 was determined to return to France and radioed that she was not in contact with the enemy, could not dive, and had "BEGUN RETURN PASSAGE."<sup>30</sup> This exchange of radio messages with U-203 infuriated the BdU who doubted the claim that the U-boat could not dive and believed that U-203 should have made a much greater effort to remain in contact with OB 336 in order to be able to guide by radio other U-boats to the convoy. The BdU concluded that these oversights were owing to inexperience of the commanding officer of U-203.<sup>31</sup>

Convoy HX 133 during 24 June continued steaming in a general northeasterly direction. At 1358 HMS *Wolfe* reported to HMCS *Ottawa* that one of the ships of the convoy had sighted a U-boat. HMCS *Ottawa*, assisted by HMCS *Collingwood*, conducted a search for this U-boat without result, returning to their stations in the convoy's screen at 1431.<sup>32</sup> Then at 1906 the U-651 torpedoed the merchant ship *Brockley Hill*.<sup>33</sup> The torpedo hit the merchant ship on the port side sinking the vessel. The crew of the *Brockley Hill* was picked up by the merchant ship *Sauger*. The convoy executed an emergency turn to starboard. And HMCS *Ottawa* and HMCS *Collingwood* conducted a search without success for the U-boat. HX 133 at 1936 resumed a course of northeast and the two Canadian warships returned to their stations in the screen of the convoy at 1940.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>25</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, f. 167.

<sup>26</sup> Rowhwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, f. 168.

<sup>28</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1910/24/6/41 decoded 2326/24/6/41.

<sup>29</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 2045/24/6/41 decoded 0126/25/6/41.

<sup>30</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 2045/24/6/41 decoded 0350/25/6/41.

<sup>31</sup> BdU War Diary, 24 June 1941.

<sup>32</sup> PRO, ADM 199/1145, f. 65.

<sup>33</sup> Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 57.

<sup>34</sup> PRO, ADM 199/1145, f. 65; ADM 199/2002, 11.

On 24 June because of the obvious weakness of the escort of HX 133 and the number of U-boats<sup>35</sup> known to be operating against the convoy the Admiralty decided to reinforce the escort of the convoy. The corvette HMS *Gladius*, originally intended to be part of the escort of convoy OB 336, was ordered to join HX 133<sup>36</sup> and four warships - HM Ships *Ripley*, *Fleetwood*, *Nasturtium*, and *Celandine* - all escorts of convoy OB 335 were directed to also reinforce HX 133.<sup>37</sup> All these ships joined HX 133 at 2030 on 24 June.<sup>38</sup> OB 335 was a west bound convoy which had already passed to the westward of HX 133. The Admiralty from communications intelligence knew that there were no U-boats operating to the west of the group of U-boats attacking Convoy HX 133 and therefore had concluded that there would be little or no risk to the ships of OB 335 by employing the ships of its escort to reinforce Convoy HX 133.

Shortly after joining HX 133 HMS *Ripley* at 2200 obtained a direction finder bearing on a U-boat making a radio transmission and a quarter of an hour later the convoy made an emergency turn to port. Nevertheless, at 0100 on 25 June HMS *Gladius*, stationed on the port quarter of HX 133, sighted a U-boat off her port bow at a range of VA cable. The British warship attempted to ram the U-boat which promptly submerged. Sonar contact was gained and HMS *Gladius* attacked dropping a pattern of depth charges. Sonar contact was immediately regained and three more depth charge attacks were carried out. After this last series of attacks HMS *Nasturtium* joined the hunt and several more depth charge attacks were conducted apparently without effect. The contact was lost. Both warships then searched the area for the U-boat. At 0300 while conducting this search HMS *Gladius* sighted a stationary U-boat at a range of 300 yards. The captain of HMS *Gladius* later reported that he did not attempt to ram the U-boat because he did not wish to damage his ship at a distance of 600 miles from land. Later the failure to attempt to ram the U-boat was considered to be a "error of judgement" and it was also noted that HMS *Gladius* had attempted to ram the U-boat when the enemy vessel had been first sighted. Instead of ramming HMS *Gladius* took the enemy vessel under gunfire. The second round from the corvette's 4 inch gun appeared to hit the u-boat aft of the conning tower. There was a blinding flash and an explosion as the U-boat was seen to disappear into the sea sinking stern first. Sonar contact was not obtained and the two corvettes searched the region until daylight finding a large patch of oil, but no wreckage.<sup>39</sup> Later HMS *Gladius* reported sinking a U-boat by gunfire. In truth no U-boat had been sunk and no U-boat at this time reported being attacked on the surface in the vicinity of HX 133.

The U-651 throughout 25 June maintained contact with HX 133 making several sighting reports to the BdU.<sup>41</sup> And on the morning of 26 June the U-556 gained contact with HX 133.<sup>42</sup> During the morning of 26 June the balance of power in the vicinity of the HX 133 shifted in favor of the British when an RAF Coastal Command Sunderland flying boat appeared over the convoy. This aircraft was one of three Sunderland flying boats which operated over HX 133 during the daylight hours of 26 June<sup>43</sup> and when a U-boat was sighted

<sup>35</sup> Cf. PRO, ADM 223/1, xxii.

<sup>36</sup> PRO, ADM 199/2099, f. 840.

<sup>37</sup> PRO, ADM 237/543, Admiralty to OB 335, 24 June 1941.

<sup>38</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, f. 160.

<sup>39</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, f. 169.

<sup>40</sup> PRO, ADM 199/1145, f. 45.

<sup>41</sup> PRO, ADM 223/1, xxiv.

<sup>42</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1049/26/6/41 decoded 1357/26/6/41.

<sup>43</sup> PRO, AIR 27/1209, 26 June 1941.

at 1310 by one of these aircraft the course of the convoy was altered away from the position of the enemy vessel.<sup>44</sup> Not only could aircraft attack U-boats with gunfire and depth charges, but the mere presence of an anti U-boat aircraft would usually force a U-boat to dive and in many cases lose contact with a convoy.<sup>45</sup> For instance, on 26 June U-551 reported "HAVE SO FAR BEEN SIGHTED ONCE BY SUNDERLAND AND THEN KEPT DOWN BY GUN BOAT."<sup>46</sup> The BdU fully understood the possibility that anti U-boat aircraft might force the U-boats to lose contact with HX 133 and at 2023 radioed the U-boats directing that "IF CONTACT WITH THE U-556'S CONVOY IS BROKEN CONTINUE TO OPERATE ALONG THE GENERAL DIRECTION OF THE ADVANCE."<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately for the British the only aircraft available in 1941, with the range to operate in the mid Atlantic, were a handful of Sunderland flying boats of RAF 204 Squadron.

At 2258, long after the departure of the last Sunderland flying boat, the U-79 torpedoed and damaged the merchant ship *Tibia*.<sup>49</sup> The escort of HX 133 immediately after the attack by U-79 on the *Tibia* conducted a search, without result, for the U-boat.<sup>50</sup> The just before midnight the U-569, in rapid succession, torpedoed three merchant ships.<sup>51</sup> The *Maasdam* was sunk. The *Malaya II*, which was loaded with 1,500 tons of liquid TNT, exploded. And the *Kongsgaard* was damaged. The survivors of *Has Maasdam* were picked up by the merchant ships *Harprins* and *Randa*. And the escorts of HX 133 again, without success, conducted a search for the U-boat.<sup>52</sup>

At 0735 HMS *Nasturtium*, off the port bow of HX 133, obtained a sonar contact. At first this contact was "considered doubtful." Nevertheless, two depth charges were dropped. Sonar contact was immediately regained and at 0820 a "deliberate" attack was made dropping six depth charges set to explode at 250, 150, and 100 feet respectively. HMS *Nasturtium* then attacked for a third time dropping her last six depth charges. Again sonar contact was regained by HMS *Nasturtium*. At this point HMS *Celandine* and HMS *Gladiolus* arrived in the region, but failed to gain sonar contact. Nevertheless, at the insistence of the captain of HMS *Nasturtium* the attack was continued. Beginning at 1027 HMS *Nasturtium* vectored HMS *Celandine* on to the target. Twenty four depth charges were dropped. At 1107 traces of oil were seen on the surface of the sea by the British corvettes. At 1217 HMS *Gladiolus* obtained a sonar contact and attacked dropping 10 depth charges. Contact was regained, and as HMS *Gladiolus* was running in to attack again with depth charges, U-556 surfaced off the British warship's starboard bow. Only three depth charges were fired and one of them bounced off the U-boat's hull before exploding. All three British warships opened fire with their guns on the surfaced U-boat forcing the crew of U-556 to abandon ship before the German vessel sunk.<sup>53</sup> Whilst U-556 was being hunted and then sunk during the forenoon

<sup>44</sup> PRO, A D M 199/732, f. 169.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Alfred Price, *Aircraft versus Submarine: The Evolution of the Anti-Submarine Aircraft* (Annapolis, Md., 1973).

<sup>46</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1727/26/6/41 decoded 23/26/6/41.

<sup>47</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 2023/26/41/6 decoded 2326/26/6/41.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. C. G. Jefford, *RAF Squadrons: A Comprehensive Record of the Movement and Equipment of all RAF Squadrons and their Antecedents since 1912* (Shrewsbury, 1988).

<sup>49</sup> Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> PRO, A D M 199/732, f. 169.

<sup>51</sup> Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 58.

<sup>52</sup> PRO, A D M 199/732, f. 170; A D M 199/1145, f. 67.

<sup>53</sup> PRO, A D M 199/732, ff. 170-171.

of 27 June HX 133 continued to steam northeast towards Britain.<sup>54</sup> For several hours during 27 June the convoy was escorted by a Sunderland aircraft of R A F 204 Squadron.<sup>55</sup> During this period the escort of the convoy was further reinforced by the arrival of nine warships, three anti-U-boat trawlers,<sup>57</sup> and the rescue ship *Zaafaram* from Iceland. At the same time HMCS *Ottawa*, HMCS *Orillia*, and HMS *Wolfe* along with a tanker were detached from HX 133 and set course for Iceland.<sup>58</sup> The escort of HX 133 was strengthened for the eastern portion of the passage across the North Atlantic because it was believed by the British authorities to be the part of the voyage during which the convoy would be in the most danger of being attacked. Nevertheless, until the early hours of 29 June, there would be no further attacks mounted against HX 133 by the U-boats.

As HX 133 steamed towards the British Isles the BdU encountered difficulties marshalling the U-boats necessary to continue the battle. At 0415 on 27 June U-79 informed the BdU that because she had only 42 tons of fuel remaining she was returning to base.<sup>59</sup> The BdU thought that this was not a "sufficient justification" to break off the operation and believed that U-79 should "push on after the convoy" in order to make shadowing reports to enable other U-boats to gain contact.<sup>60</sup> The BdU was further disappointed at 1946 when U-562 gave up pursuing HX 133 owing to a "PORT COUPLING [being] OUT OF ORDER."<sup>61</sup> Then in the early hours of 28 June U-558, without once gaining contact with HX 133, radioed the BdU that she was now returning to base.<sup>62</sup> And at 1113 on 28 June U-553 reported that she was ending the operation against HX 133 because "WITHOUT SHADOWER THERE IS NOT PROSPECT OF SUCCESS."<sup>63</sup> By noon on 28 June it appeared that the U-boats had lost contact with HX 133 and the BdU ordered the U-boats to move off to the southwest if contact with the convoy was not soon reestablished.<sup>64</sup>

Then at 1331 on 28 June U-651 reported that she had gained contact with HX 133.<sup>65</sup> Upon receipt of U-651's radio message the BdU radioed the U-boats in the vicinity of HX 133 to, if possible, attack the convoy. If no attacks were possible the U-boats were to redeploy to the southwest. At the same time "U-651 IS FREE TO ATTACK."<sup>66</sup> Several hours later at 2108 U-651 reported "IN SQUARE AL 3178 ENEMY CONVOY SIGHTED."<sup>67</sup> And then at 0030 on 29 June U-651 torpedoed and sank the freighter *Grayburn*.<sup>68</sup> This ship was positioned on the starboard wing of HX 133 and was sunk four minutes after being torpedoed amidships being loaded with 10,500 tons of steel. The U-651 had penetrated within mainbody of HX 133 at periscope depth. After firing two torpedoes, one of which hit the *Grayburn*, and as she was withdrawing, U-651 collided with the merchant ship *Anadara*. U-651 was only

<sup>54</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, f. 171.

<sup>55</sup> PRO, AIR 27/1209, 27 June 1941.

<sup>56</sup> *Maplin, Malcolm, Watchman, Scimitar, Icarus, Speedwell, Niger, Arabis, Violet, Northern Gem, Northern Spey, Northern Waters.*

<sup>57</sup> PRO, ADM 199/732, ff. 171-172.

<sup>58</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 0415/27/641 decoded 0751/27/6/41.

<sup>59</sup> PRO, ADM 223/1, xxv.

<sup>60</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1946/27/6/41 decoded 0052/28/6/41.

<sup>61</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 0149/28/6/41 decoded 0624/28/6/41.

<sup>62</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1113/28/6/41 decoded 1435/28/6/41.

<sup>63</sup> PRO, ADM 223/1, xxv.

<sup>64</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1331/28/6/41 decoded 1617/28/6/41.

<sup>65</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 1331/28/6/41 decoded 1812/28/6/41.

<sup>66</sup> PRO, DEFE 3/21, intercepted 2108/28/6/41 decoded 2332/28/6/41.

<sup>67</sup> Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 58.

slightly damaged by the collision and escaped from the immediate vicinity of HX 133.

The British response to the sinking of the *Grayburn* was at first confused with escorts racing around attacking random sonar contacts with depth charges. Then at 0456 the commanding officer of HMS *Malcolm*, along with HM Ships *Speedwell*, *Scimitar*, *Arabis*, *Celandine*, and *Nasturtium* mounted a systematic hunt for the U-boat. For the next hour and fourteen minutes the British warships conducted a series of sixteen attacks on sonar contacts during the course of which numerous depth charges were dropped. Then at 0530 HMS *Malcolm* sighted at a range of some five miles the conning tower of a U-boat. As the British warships raced towards the U-boat the German vessel was taken under gunfire and upon closing with the U-boat the British saw that her crew had abandoned ship. U-651 sank at 0537 and 44 members of her crew were fished out of the water and captured.<sup>70</sup>

The sinking of U-651 was the last contact between HX 133 and the U-boats. The Battle for HX 133 must have been a disappointment for the BdU. The Germans had deployed against the HX 133 eight U-boats.<sup>71</sup> In six days of operations against the convoy, and at a cost of two U-boats,<sup>72</sup> the Germans had managed to sink only six ships<sup>73</sup> and damage two others.<sup>74</sup> At the beginning of the Battle for HX 133 the U-boats, mostly owing to the weakness of the Canadian escorts, which were hampered by a lack training and of equipment such as radio telephones, appeared to be gaining the upper hand. However, communications intelligence permitted British to turn the tables on the U-boats. Knowing the deployments of the U-boats throughout the Atlantic from communications intelligence the British were able to reduce with safety the escorts of two westward bound convoys, OB 335 and OB 336, and to amass the forces required to mount a successful defense of Convoy HX 133. With arrival, beginning in the evening of 24 June, of British reinforcements - anti U-boat aircraft and additional escort vessels - the defenders of HX 133 were able to mount a series of counter attacks which lead firstly to the sinking of U-556 and then U-651. By the last day of the battle, 29 June, the strength of the escort of HX 133 had become, with the arrival of additional reinforcements from Iceland, so numerous that five warships could be detached from the convoy to mount a prolonged hunt for the U-boat which sunk the merchant ship *Grayburn*. This hunt resulted in the sinking of U-651. In some respects the Battle for Convoy HX 133 was a precursor of the great convoy battles of 1943 in which the Allies deployed over powering numbers of aircraft and escorts to defeat the U-boats.

PRO, ADM 199.732, ff. 172, 174.

PRO, ADM 199/732, ff. 172-174.

<sup>71</sup> U-203, U-79, U-71, U-651, U-556, U-201, U-562, U-553.

<sup>72</sup> U-651, U-556.

<sup>73</sup> *Maasdam*, *Malaya II*, *Kinross*, *Brockley Hill*, *Soloy*, *Grayburn*.

<sup>74</sup> *Kongsgaard*, *Tibia*.