

The Biscay Blockade: Canadian Tribal Class Destroyers in Operation KINETIC¹

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En août 1944, deux destroyers canadiens de classe Tribal, le NCSMHaida et le NCSMIroquois, ont pris part à l'opération KINETIC, une offensive alliée combinée visant à rompre les communications entre les ports du Golfe de Gascogne, occupés par les Allemands. L'objectif de cette opération était d'appuyer l'avancée de la US Third Army en Bretagne en anéantissant le commerce côtier allemand entre les ports français de l'Atlantique. Opérant en étroite collaboration avec les croiseurs et les destroyers de la Marine royale, et appuyés de renseignements électromagnétiques fournis par des déchiffrages ULTRA, les Canadian Tribals ont joué un rôle clé dans l'engloutissement de vingt-deux navires allemands, au cours de trois combats livrés dans le Golfe de Gascogne. Ce faisant, l'opération KINETIC a contribué au succès du barrage allié et à la destruction du Groupe ouest de la Marine allemande.

In August 1944, HMC Ships *Haida* and *Iroquois* conducted a series of offensive patrols into the Bay of Biscay with the intent of closing the area to German coastal shipping and preventing the delivery of supplies to surrounded German garrisons in the French Atlantic ports. Operation KINETIC was the codename for the Canadian role in a larger air and sea offensive of the Second World War combining the resources of the Royal Navy's Plymouth Command with those of RAF Coastal Command. Conducted in support of the US Third Army advance into Brittany, within three weeks the Biscay offensive resulted in tremendous losses for the German Marine Group West: twelve U-boats, eleven large ships totalling nearly 60,000 tons, two destroyers, one torpedo boat, and fifty-three smaller vessels, many of them minesweepers.² In this successful effort to dominate the waters of the Bay of Biscay, Allied air and naval forces destroyed the remnants of the German surface fleet in the area and forced the evacuation of the Atlantic U-boat fleet to Norway. Further, by eliminating enemy shipping in the area, Operation KINETIC also made a valuable contribution to operations on land by preventing the delivery of supplies to surrounded German garrisons in Brittany and along the

An earlier version of this paper was presented in May 2002 at the 13th Military History Colloquium of the Laurier Centre for Military and Strategic Disarmament Studies. Thanks to Dr. Serge Durflinger for his guidance and encouragement.

² Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea* (London, 1961), HI, pt. 2, 131; V.E. Tarrant, *The Last Year of the Kriegsmarine. May 1944-May 1945* (London, 1994), 109.

The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord, XIII, No. 3, (July 2003), 33-47.

Bay of Biscay.

Iroquois and *Haida* joined Operation KINETIC as experienced R C N veterans of the war at sea, the two Tribals having served together on the Arctic convoys to Murmansk in 1943. Tribal-class destroyers were powerful, versatile, heavily-gunned warships. As primary fighting gunnery, they carried three twin mountings of 4.7-inch guns, with an effective surface range of 16,900 yards, along with a twin 4-inch anti-aircraft mount, a quad pom-pom cluster firing high explosive 2-pounder shells, and six twin power-operated mountings of 20-mm Oerlikons. Powerful surface and anti-aircraft gunnery made these ships especially well suited to fighting surface engagements, yet they also carried limited depth charge armament to counter the threat of enemy submarines along with four torpedoes in a power-operated pivot mounting with a range of 14,000 yards.³

The pride of Canada's wartime fleet, the four Tribals operated out of British ports in 1944 as part of the Royal Navy's 10th Destroyer Flotilla (10th DF). Prior to D-Day these ships had demonstrated their efficiency during several hard-fought actions in the English Channel.⁴ In these engagements, three of the four Canadian Tribals, HMC Ships *Haida*, *Huron*, and *Athabaskan*, took part in the sinking of German Elbing and Narvik-class destroyers as well as an enemy submarine. It was during these successful operations in the English Channel that *Haida's* commanding officer, Captain Harry DeWolf, won the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Service Cross for his exemplary leadership.⁵

Commander Jimmy Hibbard of HMC S *Iroquois* was also a recognized and extremely capable leader, who had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his command of an Allied escort group during the almost continuous three-day U-boat attack against convoy SC42 off Greenland. In August 1944, however, *Iroquois* joined Operation KINETIC as a relative newcomer to the business at hand; she had sailed to Halifax in February for a refit. Although *Iroquois* had missed-out on earlier actions in the English Channel, as a trade-off, the destroyer now returned to Plymouth Command in August 1944 equipped with the most modern radar and combat control facilities of any destroyer in the theatre, an advantage that would prove decisive in all three KINETIC actions.

Since the fall of France in June 1940, the Germans had enjoyed the great strategic advantage of occupying French ports along the Bay of Biscay. Grand-Admiral Karl Dönitz, Commander-in-Chief of the *Kriegsmarine*, later pointed out that in comparison to their former North Sea route, possession of naval bases along the Bay of Biscay saved the U-boats some four hundred and fifty miles on their voyage to the Atlantic. This, in turn, allowed each patrol to spend an additional week in the mid-Atlantic, creating more operational time, raising the total number of U-boats at sea by about 25 per cent per month, and making it possible to sustain a prolonged mid-ocean campaign against Allied shipping. Nearly-impenetrable

³ For further specifications on Tribal armament, see Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa, (DHH), 8000, "Tribal" Class Destroyers, Signals Volume 1, 14 July 1944; Barry Gough, *HMC S HAIDA: Battle Ensign Flying* (St. Catharines ON, 2001), 18-28, 205-11.

Michael Whitby, "Instruments of Security: The Royal Canadian Navy's Procurement of the Tribal-Class Destroyers, 1938-1943," *Northern Mariner*, U, No.3 (1992), 10.

⁴ "Recommendations for Honours and Awards," National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 24, Vol. 11525, File 14373-102/266, Enclosure #1, Plymouth Letter, 18 August 1944.

Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy. The First Century* (Toronto, 1999), 94-95.

⁵ Type 293 radar was an S-band target indicator capable of detecting aircraft at an altitude of 10,000 feet from a distance of 15 to 18 nautical miles. Variants of Type 293 radar installed on *Iroquois* in 1944 remained in service until the late 1950s. See Gough, *HMC S HAIDA*, 214; William McAndrew, Donald E. Graves, and Michael Whitby, *Normandy 1944, The Canadian Summer* (Montreal, 1994), 105.

concrete pens built in the French harbours along the Bay of Biscay provided the Atlantic Wolfpacks with shelter from Allied bombing raids and access to vital repair facilities. The repair dockyard at Lorient, in particular, was noted for being even more efficient than Germany's own overworked shipyards in servicing and repairing the U-boats.⁸ By allowing the U-boats to remain at sea for longer periods of time, while also offering a safe-haven for rest and refitting, German occupation of the Biscay ports made a substantial contribution to the losses inflicted upon Allied shipping during the Battle of the Atlantic.

In August 1944, as the Allied forces broke into the French countryside from Normandy, German Marine Group West had some fifty-three U-boats and four destroyers at its disposal in the Biscay area, along with a large number of patrol vessels and minesweepers.⁹ Operating from secure bases at Brest, Lorient, St-Nazaire, La Pallice, and Bordeaux, the German Navy in the Bay of Biscay enjoyed the natural protection of rocky shoals and inlets, supplemented by minefields, shore-based radar, coastal artillery, and *Luftwaffe* patrols. German coastal artillery was particularly dangerous on this portion of the Atlantic Wall. In addition to a large number of light and medium batteries, German coastal artillery along the Bay of Biscay included sixty-four heavy guns of 100- to 150-mm calibre and twenty super-heavy guns of 170-mm or greater. In comparison, the Atlantic Wall in the Normandy sector included only two-thirds as many heavy guns and half as many super-heavy guns.¹⁰ In August 1944, German shore batteries represented an imposing threat to Allied naval operations on the inshore waters of the Bay of Biscay. By remaining close to shore and within artillery range, the German Navy could operate in relative security, despite its comparative weakness in relation to Allied naval forces at this stage of the war.

In addition to conducting harassing patrols against the Allied navies, the Germans were able to take advantage of the cover provided by the coastal guns to move supply convoys between the Biscay ports. By sailing only at night and, whenever possible, within range of the coastal guns, these convoys were able to move between the ports carrying vital supplies. Prior to the Allied invasion of Normandy and the disruption of French rail networks, coastal convoys had been of only limited importance to the Germans garrisons along the Bay of Biscay. Beginning in the spring of 1944 and continuing throughout the summer, Allied bombing and the activities of the French resistance succeeded in throwing overland communications into chaos. Faced with an ever more difficult situation on land, coastal convoys became increasingly important to the Germans garrisons in Brittany and along the Bay of Biscay.

To make matters worse, the success of Operation COBRA in the last week of July 1944 allowed the US Third Army to begin a rapid advance that threatened to isolate the entire Breton peninsula. While the Germans might have taken this opportunity to abandon the French Atlantic ports and withdraw their forces to the east, Hitler and his generals instead opted to hold the coastal fortresses for as long as possible. Brest, Lorient, St-Nazaire, La Pallice and Bordeaux were still defended by large garrisons, but with the Allies moving west and south, these garrisons were in danger of being surrounded and trapped. Once these ports fell behind Allied lines, coastal convoys operating at night would offer the only means of maintaining the

Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely* (New York, 1991), 90, 194.

The 2nd and 10th Combat Flotillas of German Marine Group West had their base at Lorient, while the 1st and 9th Combat Flotillas operated out of Brest, the 6th and 7th from St-Nazaire, the 3rd at La Pallice, and the 12th Combat Flotilla at Bordeaux. Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War: The Hunted 1942-1945* (New York, 1998), 580 and 611; Roskill, 130.

J.E. Kaufmann and R.M. Jurga, *Fortress Europe: European Fortifications of World War II* (Conshohocken PA, 1999), 394.

surrounded garrisons. Operation KINETIC was intended to support the American drive into western France by intercepting German coastal convoys and forestalling any attempt by the Germans to evacuate essential personnel by sea." "Fortresses that were fed by sea, could be starved by sea. Operation KINETIC was designed to break the German coastal supply links once and for all."

By disrupting German sea communications and supporting Third Army's effort to capture the Breton ports, Operation KINETIC would contribute to a campaign that was expected to play a major role in the build-up and maintenance of the Allied armies in Europe. From the earliest stages of planning, the success of the Normandy invasion had hinged upon the delivery of sufficient supplies, ammunition, armaments, fuel, and reinforcements to keep the Allied armies moving. During the planning phases of OVERLORD, the second major objective, after the primary goal of establishing a bridgehead in Normandy, had been to gain control of the Breton Peninsula in order to seize and develop its port facilities. At the beginning of August, Allied planners still considered a foothold in Brittany to be prerequisite to the larger objective of destroying German forces in the West.¹³

So long as the German garrisons of the Breton and Biscay ports held out, the Allies had to depend upon beaches and artificial harbours, called Mulberries, to supply their armies in Normandy. The Great Storm of 19 June, however, had destroyed the American Mulberry at St-Laurent and badly damaged the British one at Arromanches. Throughout July, the commander of the Twelfth Army Group, General Omar Bradley, along with his logistical staff, had continued to look upon the capture of the Breton ports as a means of supplying the growing number of American divisions in France.¹⁴

As Operation KINETIC got under way at the beginning of August, the discharge of essential cargo at existing facilities in Normandy could supply only 75 per cent of projected requirements.¹⁵ "Planned capacity" of the beaches and ports was calculated according to the approximate daily requirement of an American division, which stood at 800 tons per day, reserves at 400 tons per day, plus equipment, vehicles, and fuel.¹⁶ In June and July, the beaches and Mulberry harbours were able to meet the immediate needs of the invasion forces. Further, it was hoped that the capture of Cherbourg might eventually provide additional port capacity once repairs were completed. Allied planners assumed, however, that deep-water ports in Brittany would ultimately assume a progressively larger portion of the logistical burden - once they were captured.

Taking the Breton ports, therefore, would not only neutralize the threat of German surface and submarine raiders but meet Allied logistical goals as well. When Operation KINETIC began, the Allies believed these ports would provide a means of supplying the invasion forces prior to the breakout from Normandy and the advance toward the Seine River. To the north and south respectively, Brest and Bordeaux were the largest of the French Atlantic ports, while Lorient, St-Nazaire, and La Pallice provided smaller harbours that would also be useful for discharging cargo. OVERLORD planners anticipated that the capture of Brittany would achieve one of the basic requirements for the success of the Allied invasion:

"Brief History of HMCS *Iroquois*," DHH, 8000, "Tribal" Class Destroyers, HMCS *Iroquois*, History and general, I, 4 August 1959.

Joseph Schull, *Far Distant Ships: An Official Account of Canadian Naval Operations in World War II* (Toronto, [1950] 1987), 348.

Roland G. Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support of the Armies* (Washington, 1953), I, 188.

Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* (Bloomington IL, 1981), 175.

Adapted from: Ruppenthal, 297; Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Osmanski, "The Logistical Planning of Operation Overlord," *Military Review*, LXIX, No. 10 (1959), 59.

" Ruppenthal, 307.

a continental port capacity sufficient to support the forces deemed necessary to defeat the Germans.¹⁷

While the original planning for OVERLORD had placed a great deal importance upon securing existing ports in Brittany, even greater attention had been devoted to proposals for the construction of entirely new harbour facilities at Quiberon Bay, on the south coast of the Breton peninsula between Lorient and St-Nazaire. According to Plan CHASTITY, the US Army intended to develop Quiberon Bay as the site of a major deep-water anchorage with a projected daily discharge rate of 10,000 tons. The scale of this construction becomes apparent when compared with Cherbourg's daily estimated capacity by the end of August of 8,000 tons, with Brest at 5,300 tons and Lorient at 2,550 tons.¹⁸ Once captured, these ports, along with the newly constructed facilities at Quiberon, would allow the build-up of reinforcements and supplies in preparation for the advance toward Paris and beyond. Together the four ports were to provide over half the expected shipping requirements of 45,950 long tons per day needed for the advance. Thus, in August 1944, the intent of the Allied drive into Brittany and the effort to destroy German coastal shipping in the area was to secure a hold over existing German-occupied ports and prepare the way for constructing new harbour facilities at Quiberon Bay. At the beginning of August 1944, Allied planners viewed this operation as being vital to the logistic needs of the armies fighting in Normandy.

On 1 August, the American Third Army under General George S. Patton, "turned the corner" at Avranches and began the task of capturing the Breton ports. In a special order of 2 August, Hitler outlined arrangements for the defence of these "coastal fortresses," assigning specific units to hold each of the remaining ports to the "last man's last round of ammunition." Hitler's fortress policy further emphasized that "these forces were not to be regarded as rear guards which were to follow in due time, but were to carry out their defensive mission to the last."¹⁹ German forces in Brittany and along the Biscay coast were to be utilized in the defence of fortress positions at Brest, St-Nazaire, Lorient, La Rochelle and its adjacent port of La Pallice, and the north and south banks of the Gironde estuary, which guarded the entrance to Bordeaux. The French Atlantic ports, however, were equally important to the Allies - without them, and particularly those in Brittany, logistics planners believed it would be difficult to sustain Allied forces on the continent and continue the build-up for coming offensives, especially in the American sector. At sea, the combined air and naval blockade of Operation KINETIC was to act as the anvil when the hammer of the US Third Army swung westward to crush the German defenders of the Breton ports.

Operation KINETIC began on 31 July as Force 26 departed Plymouth for the Bay of Biscay. With its objective of closing down the sea lanes to the Biscay ports, Force 26 was comprised of two cruisers, HM Ships *Diadem* and *Bellona*, along with the escort carrier HMS *Striker*, four Tribal destroyers of the 10th DF, HM Ships *Tartar* and *Ashanti*, HMC Ships *Haida* and *Huron*, the Polish destroyers *Poirun* and *Blyskawika*, and an anti-submarine screen of three Canadian River-class destroyers of HMC Ships *St. Laurent*, *Chaudière*, and *Kootenay*. Despite the impressive gathering of Allied ships, this first KINETIC patrol encountered no enemy ships and, on 3 August, returned to Plymouth empty-handed: no sightings, no targets, no action. Another uneventful patrol took place the following day off Belle Isle with no enemies sighted. Despite these inauspicious beginnings, however, events on the land front were about to set the German coastal convoys in motion.

Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, 1961), 346.

" Ruppenthal, 294,296-7,467.

Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) War Diary, US National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland, MSB-034, 330-31.

Responding to Third Army's move into Brittany, German naval traffic in the Bay of Biscay began to increase dramatically as the evacuation of non-essential personnel and equipment from the fortresses began. Hitler's instructions of 2 August warned that all but absolutely essential officers and technicians would man the fortresses, with the remainder returning to Germany by way of the Channel Islands.²⁰ On the night of 5/6 August, Force 26 conducted its third KINETIC patrol in the waters off St-Nazaire. Led by the cruiser HMS *Bellona*, accompanied by the Tribal HM Ships *Tartar* and *Ashanti*, and HMCS *Haida*, Force 26 now included HMCS *Iroquois*, which had recently returned from refit in Halifax to replace *Huron*. While passing St-Nazaire, Force 26 detected a southbound enemy convoy moving north of Ie d'Yeu. As it would throughout Operation KINETIC, the new Type 293 radar aboard *Iroquois* immediately proved its worth: "First contact was obtained at 2043 at the fantastic range, for Radar, of 44,000 yards, but it was not until the Force had closed the enemy convoy to about 27,000 yards by midnight, that an accurate appreciation of the enemy's movements could be made."²¹

From the cruiser *Bellona*, Captain Charles F. W. Norris, Senior Officer of Force 26, noted the enemy's course and speed. Initially, Norris gave the order to hold off, waiting for the Germans to pull away from the coast and the protective cover of the shore batteries. Then, at 0034, Norris ordered the destroyers to slip between the enemy vessels and the coastline. Anticipating the usual German tactic of mining for shore when attacked, Norris planned to have his cruiser play an indirect role, firing starshell illumination from two miles away while the destroyers engaged the enemy in the shallow inshore waters.

The plan worked perfectly. Surprised and confused by the direction of incoming fire, the German convoy began sending up green and red recognition flares. The Germans, it was later found, were under the impression that they were being mistakenly engaged by their own shore batteries and the flares were intended to signal them to stop.²² In the event, the flares added to the illumination shells fired from *Bellona* and the Tribals continued firing until the convoy was in total disarray. The intensity of action can be measured not only by the number of targets destroyed, but by the speed of the engagement:

The destroyers swept in amongst the enemy on 'fishing off sorties, leaving a large number of burning targets. As soon as one target was stopped and put out of action, fire was shifted to the next. Smoke soon obscured the enemy and blind fire was continued on them. On one run in, *Iroquois* passed between two ships, one stopped and one burning, and engaged them with armament and close range weapons on both sides. *Iroquois* then altered to the eastward to investigate radar contacts and two ships were sighted which appeared to be stopped. While closing and engaging, a further two ships were sighted to the northeastward ... *Iroquois* gave chase and engaged a small merchant ship which was seen to sink and a trawler which was set on fire. Course was altered to the southward to engage an unknown type and an 'M' class minesweeper.²³

f" F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London, 1988), HI, pt. 2, 464.

"The RCN's Part in Destroying Enemy Shipping From the Breton Ports - Early August 1944," DHH, 8000, ^Tribal" Class Destroyers, HMCS *Haida*, 11 August 1944.

^Captain Charles F. W. Norris, "HMS *Bellona* Report of an Operation by Force 26 on 5th and 6th August 1944," NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11730, File CS 151-1-2, 30 August 1944.

"Three Accounts of Anti-Shipping Strikes in the Bay of Biscay," DHH, 8000, HMCS *Iroquois*: General 1944-1945, 14 October 1944.

By 0222 seven enemy vessels were destroyed: two minesweepers, two armed escorts, a large cable layer, and two merchant ships. Two of the ships were sunk by *Haida*, two by *Iroquois*, and the other three by *Tartar* and *Ashanti*. Another German ship escaped to the westward but all ships of Force 26 were busily engaging the enemy and unable to pursue. From prisoners, it was later learned that the destroyed convoy had been carrying eight to nine hundred special troops who were being evacuated from Brittany. As specialists and technicians, these soldiers were desperately needed in Germany for submarine construction and repair. Most of them went down with their ships.²⁴

The German convoy had little chance against the well-armed ships of Force 26. Superior radar had allowed the Allied warships to detect the enemy with more than enough time to manoeuvre for a surprise attack. On the night of 5-6 August, *Haida* expended over 1,000 rounds of 4.7-inch ammunition from its main armament alone. *Iroquois*, close behind, fired some 865 shells during the engagement.²⁵ Such a volume of fire was only possible due to the advanced gunnery radar carried in both Tribals, which enabled them to determine the distance to enemy ships and automatically direct fire with great accuracy.²⁶

With several burning ships in sight, *Bellona* ordered the destroyers to re-form astern. As the destroyers fell into line, a cordite charge in *Haida*'s 'Y' gun turret exploded just as the breech was closing, killing two gunners and wounding eight others. Shortly afterwards, a second convoy was detected between Belle Isle and Quiberon Bay. Four or five enemy vessels, possibly minesweepers, were engaged at 0337, but by this time the Tribals' luck had turned for the worse. On the first salvo, *Haida* suffered a second misfire when the 'A' gun became jammed and a shell exploded in the barrel. The second German convoy also proved much faster than the first, having no merchant coasters to slow it down. Some hits were scored, but Force 26 was almost out of starshell and the present line of attack silhouetted the Allied ships against the moon - a dangerous position to be in should they approach within range of German coastal artillery.

As Senior Officer, Norris was concerned by the proximity of a mine barrier and other navigational difficulties in a shoal area. From the cruiser, the strong moonlight prevented him from seeing the flashless charges being fired by the destroyers and he was unaware that they were actually engaging the enemy. Acting on the information available to him, Norris ordered a withdrawal. In his Report of Action for HMS *Bellona*, Norris attributed his decision to "problems in communication that interfered with the passage of orders between the cruiser and [the] S.O. of the 10th DF."²⁷ Although i/o/Jo's Report of Proceedings graciously stated that "... some damage was inflicted before navigational limitations caused the action to be broken off,"²⁸ *Bellona*'s captain accepted entire responsibility for bringing the action to a premature end that night.

With daylight rapidly approaching - signalling further danger from the coastal batteries and the possibility of an air attack - Force 26 received orders from Plymouth Command to return to port. They were told not to risk the Force so close to the enemy's airfields in daylight. At this point, FIMCS *Iroquois* detached to reinforce the 2nd and 11th Escort Groups,

"Brief History of HMCS *Iroquois*," DHH; "The RCN's Part in Destroying Enemy Shipping from the Breton ports," DHH.

²⁵ "The RCN's Part in Destroying Enemy Shipping from the Breton Ports," DHH.

Type 285P was a secondary-battery gunnery radar capable of directing the main 4.7-inch armament on *Haida* and *Iroquois* to within 100 yards on a 15,000 yard scale. See Gough, *HMCS Haida*, 53, 214.

Norris, "HMS *Bellona* Report of an Operation 5th and 6th August 1944."

Captain E G . DeWolf, "HMCS *Haida* Report of Proceedings, August 1944" NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11730, File g3 151-11-7, 5 September 1944.

"The RCN's Part in Destroying Enemy Shipping from the Breton Ports," DHH.

two "hunter-killer" formations that were presently engaged in tracking down U-boats in the English Channel. HMCS *Haida* returned to Plymouth to bury the men killed in action: Leading Seaman Roy H. Betts and Able Seaman Gordon J. Rowe. For his bravery that night, Able Seaman Michael Kerwin was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, a decoration second only to the Victoria Cross, presented to naval non-commissioned officers or servicemen who distinguish themselves by acts of pre-eminent bravery in action with the enemy. Kerwin had entered the burning turret to rescue a shipmate, even though he was badly wounded himself.³⁰

As the first major action of Operation KINETIC drew to a close, the Allied advance into Brittany continued severing the land lines between German fortresses on the Atlantic coast and their headquarters in Paris, forcing them to rely on wireless communication that the Allies, in turn, were able to intercept and decrypt. The result was a spectacular increase in the volume of German wireless traffic in August, which was intercepted, decrypted, and distributed to key Allied commanders on a daily basis. The flood of ULTRA decrypts detailed the movement of supplies, equipment, and personnel between the Biscay ports, betraying the locations of German transports, armed escorts, and minesweepers. This movement at sea became even more significant as overland routes were cut off by American forces, resulting in a corresponding increase in signals traffic.

These ULTRA decrypts showed that considerable numbers of German U-boats were arriving and departing from the Biscay ports on a daily basis, while coastal convoys continued to deliver vital equipment and stores between German naval bases. The decrypts also revealed the deteriorating conditions within the garrisons as a result of the blockade at sea, as demonstrated by the ongoing stream of requests issuing from the fortresses as garrison commanders pleaded for more oil, ammunition, carbide, medical stores, and oxygen for welding.³¹

Aware that the evacuation of equipment and personnel by sea was accelerating, the Allies were also able to predict departure times and intercept the convoys with some degree of accuracy. Operation KINETIC's Force 26 formed part of Cruiser Squadron 10, sailing under the command of Vice-Admiral F.H.G. Dalrymple-Hamilton in HMS *Diadem*. Appointed by the Home Fleet Dalrymple-Hamilton was an "indoctrinated" commander with access to ULTRA decrypts. In addition to enemy convoy schedules, ULTRA revealed Dönitz's orders stressing the importance of installing schnorkels onboard the U-boats stationed at Lorient, with work continuing even as the Americans approached the outskirts of the city.³² The airwaves also carried constant updates regarding German losses and casualties, noting in particular the heavy damage to shipping and dockyard equipment resulting from

³⁰ "Recommendation for Awards," NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11525, File 14373-112/266, 22 September 1944; see also Lieutenant Commander William Sclater, "HMCS *Haida* at Sea," Royal Canadian Navy Press Release, NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11730, File CS 151-11-7, 17 August 1944. Only two Conspicuous Gallantry Medals were awarded in the RCN in the Second World War; none were awarded to Canadians in the First World War or the Korean War.

³¹ Public Records Office. Ministry of Defence (DEF 3), "War of 1939-1945 Intelligence from Enemy Radio Communications: Signals to Allied Commands Conveying Special Intelligence," Teleprinted Translations of Decrypted German and Italian Naval Radio Messages, DEF 3/113, XL 4875 of 5 August 1944; DEF 3/115, XLs 5423, 5427 of 5 August; XL 5485 of 10 August; DEF 3/116, XL 5612 of 11 August, XL 5740 of 12 August; DEF 3/117, XL 5810 of 12 August; DEF 3/118, XLs 6203, 6213, 6214 of 14 August; DEF 3/119, XL 6404 of 15 August, XL 6462 of 16 August; DEF 3/120, XL 6611 of 17 August.

~ Hinsley, 246, 464.

³² *Ibid.*, 464 and DEF 3/115, XL 5349 of 9 August.

RAF and US Eighth Air Force bombing raids on the Biscay ports.³⁴

Following the D-Day landings, all German armoured divisions and several infantry divisions in Brittany had been withdrawn to reinforce the Normandy front. By August, only five German divisions remained in the peninsula. As ordered, these troops had retreated into Hitler's designated fortresses. The Germans hoped this fortress policy would retain the U-boats bases until the new type XXI and XXIII submarines could be made ready for service. Hitler placed great faith in the advanced speed and submerged endurance of these vessels, hoping they might help restore the *Kriegsmarine* to its former glory. ULTRA decrypts revealed the Fuhrer's instructions of 8 August for defending the fortresses to the last man and weapon in order "to prevent the Allies from seizing the harbours and using them for large scale landings" as well as "to gain time for counter measures" - the secret weapons upon which the Germans were beginning to rest their hopes of victory. These messages stressed that "heroic fighters [were] essential." Hitler believed that holding the ports, and thereby denying the Allies access to them, was the only means of providing the *Wehrmacht* with the six to ten weeks deemed necessary to establish a new line of defence further east along the Somme and Marne Rivers.³⁵ German forces would then strike back at the Allies and drive them into the sea, or so the theory went.

The failure of Hitler's counter-offensive at Mortain, however, brought an end to these plans of stopping the Allied breakthrough. By attempting to isolate the US Third Army in Brittany and drive the Allies back into the sea at Mortain, Hitler's counterattack had instead exposed the German Fifth Panzer and Seventh Armies to encirclement by Allied forces. By 11 August, the Mortain counter-offensive had ground to a halt. To the east, US forces took Argentan on 13 August while Canadian and British forces closed in toward Falaise from the north, thus initiating the drive to encircle and destroy two German armies inside the Falaise Pocket. No one could have predicted this sudden turn of events, and although the siege of the Breton ports continued, the focus of the war was quickly shifting further east. Meanwhile, in the waters of the Bay of Biscay, Operation KINETIC was about to enter its second phase, an exceptionally successful operation that went largely unnoticed as all eyes turned eastward towards the German retreat to the Seine.

Force 27, consisting of the cruiser HMS *Mauritius* and the destroyers HMS *Ursa* and HMCS *Iroquois*, departed Plymouth on 13 August to carry out a new patrol along the central section of the Biscay coast. Shortly after 0200 on 15 August, between Les Sables D'Olonne and La Pallice, *Iroquois* picked up a radar contact at 27,000 yards. Force 27 began its pursuit and an hour later spotted an Elbing-class destroyer escorting a convoy of four vessels. Moments later, the Elbing turned away, but not before firing two torpedoes that passed just off the bow of *Iroquois*. Following the usual German tactic of firing torpedoes and then ranning for shore, the Elbing was *T-24*, a survivor of three previous encounters with Canadian Tribals of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla. In retaliation, *Iroquois* returned fire with four torpedoes of her own, all of which missed, but she did manage to land one hit with gunfire before the Elbing made off at high speed toward La Pallice.

³⁴ The most intense of the bombing raids had wrought destruction against port facilities in Brest on 5 August (DEFE 3/113, XL 4907 of 6 August); Lorient on 8 August (DEFE 3/115, XL 5447 of 10 August); and La Pallice, Brest, and Bordeaux on the 11-12th (DEFE 3/118, XL 6214 of 14 August). See also Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries. An Operational Reference Book, 1939 - 1945* (Harmondsworth UK, 1985), 562-577.

³⁵ DEFE 3/114, XL 5206 of 8 August and DEFE 3/115, XL 5272 of 8 August.

³⁶ Blumenson, 340.

Commander J. Hibbard, "HMCS *Iroquois* Report of Action, 14th / 15th August 1944," NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11731, File CS 151-13-17, 17 August 1944.

As Force 27 approached the coast in pursuit, German shore batteries opened up with effective illumination that silhouetted the three Allied ships. Within moments the 5.9-inch battery at Les Sables D'Olonne opened fire, and was soon joined by a previously undetected battery of 240- to 260-mm guns on the Ile de Ré - providing what was later described as "a hot reception for Force 27 at medium and close ranges."³⁸ This first engagement ended when the enemy reached the northern entrance to La Pallice, though not before Force 27 obtained repeated hits on the fleeing vessels. One supply vessel was driven ashore "burning fiercely," a second supply ship was also set on fire, while two merchant ships escaped at high speed.

Resuming the patrol, *Iroquois* was ordered to take the lead so as to take advantage of her superior radar, which quickly demonstrated its worth.³⁹ A small tanker was later detected in the same area and at 0445 was driven ashore in a badly damaged condition. Shortly afterwards, *Iroquois* gained another radar contact, leading to the discovery of an additional convoy consisting of two medium-sized vessels proceeding under an escort of two M-class minesweepers. Opening fire at 0620, Force 27 obtained repeated hits driving all four ships ashore, all of them burning fiercely. By dawn, Force 27 had added another seven ships to Operation KTNETIC's total: two minesweepers, a flak ship, three merchant vessels, and one tanker, which ran aground in flames. HMCS *Iroquois* had fired even more rounds on this night than during the furious action of 5/6 August. On the night of 14/15 August, the Canadian Tribal used all four torpedoes - 997 rounds of 4.7-inch shell, 146 rounds of 4-inch starshell, and 350 rounds of pom-pom.

In his Report of Proceedings for HMS *Mauritius*, Captain W. W. Davis praised the radar equipment and Action Information Centre (AIC) onboard HMCS *Iroquois*, stating, "In these engagements, the movements of the force were in large measure ordered from the excellent information provided by *Iroquois*. The situation at times was far less clear to me than the track chart might appear to indicate."⁴¹ Hibbard also praised his crew: "In this second action in less than a fortnight, the ship's company showed marked steadiness during [a] considerable period of heavy enemy fire."⁴² Once again, a Canadian Tribal-class destroyer had made a significant contribution to Allied coastal operations.

Later that day, on 15 August, German forces in the Biscay area learned of an Allied landing in Southern France. The success of Operation DRAGON, the codename for this second amphibious landing in France, meant that German forces along the Bay of Biscay area were now hemmed in on two sides. The following day, on 16 August, German high command issued a general order for the withdrawal of forces from the Biscay coast and areas south of the Loire River. Approximately 100,000 men were involved in this evacuation, including port service labourers and troops of the German First Army. Only those intended for the defence of the fortresses were to stay behind.⁴³ OKW Chief of Staff, Field-Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, ordered large amounts of defensive matériel moved into the fortresses in preparation for extended siege operations. Echoing Hitler, Keitel insisted that "The fortresses and fortified areas at the western and southern coast of France were to be held to the last man."⁴⁴ Submarines were still being assembled at Bordeaux and Keitel went on to order that the city

³⁸

Captain W. W. Davis, "HMS *Mauritius* Report of Proceedings and Engagements with Enemy Forces in the Approaches to La Rochelle on 15 August 1944," DHH, 8000, Destroyers Tribal Class (A - Z), 3 September

An "".

⁴⁰ Hibbard, "HMCS *Iroquois* Report of Action, U/15th August 1944."

Davis, "HMS *Mauritius* Report of Proceedings, 15 August 1944."

⁴² Hibbard, "HMCS *Iroquois* Report of Action, 14th/15th August 1944."

⁴³ DEFE 3/121, XL 6753 of 17 August.

OKW War Diary, 110, 352.

be held until the new boats were completed. In order to guard the entrance to Bordeaux, the garrison withdrew to the ports of Royan and Le Verdon, designated by the Germans as the fortresses of Gironde North and South.

The two recent successes of Operation KINETIC, alongside an intensifying Allied air campaign, were beginning to have a serious impact upon German shipping in the Bay of Biscay, as well as hampering the German Navy's ability to escort U-boats to and from the safety of their concrete pens. An urgent flow of ULTRA messages showed that the Allies had succeeded in cutting the flow of supplies between the ports. With the US Army on the outskirts of Brest, Lorient, and St-Nazaire, the Germans realized they would have to move their U-boats quickly if they were to escape. On 16 August, the U-boat fleet received orders for evacuation from the French Atlantic coast, directing them to make their way to Norway, taking with them key personnel, valuable gear, torpedoes and as much fuel as possible. Only those U-boats whose fuel did not permit the 2,000-mile journey were to stay behind, ordered to make their way to Bordeaux.⁴⁵ Two days later, on 18 August, Hitler directed further evacuations from all of southwestern France, excepting, of course, the fortress garrisons of La Pallice, La Rochelle, Gironde North and South, and Bordeaux.⁴⁶

In addition to KINETIC patrols conducted by the Tribals of the 10th DF, River-class destroyers of Canadian Escort Groups 11 and 12 also formed powerful anti-submarine hunting groups, while Escort Groups 6 and 9 operated lighter hunting groups comprised of frigates and sloops. Patrolling alongside the British escort groups of Coastal Command, this latest foray into the Bay of Biscay quickly developed into an Allied drive to destroy what remained of the *Kriegsmarine* in France. On both 18 and 20 August, Escort Group 11 successfully hunted down German U-boats, sinking *U-621* and *U-984*,⁴⁷ two of the sixteen U-boats leaving the bases of Brest and Lorient in accordance with the evacuation orders of 16 August. The remnants of the German surface fleet also fell under threat. On 24 August, Beaufighters of RCAF 404 Squadron and RAF 236 Squadron caught and sank the destroyers *Z-24* and *T-24* off Gironde South at Le Verdon. The latter ship, *T-24*, was the same Elbing that had escaped the action of 15 August.⁴⁸ Alongside these successes at sea, the RAF flew nearly fifteen hundred sorties against the Biscay ports, laying mines in harbour entrances, attacking the concrete U-boat pens, and bombing port facilities.⁴⁹ By the afternoon of 20 August, ULTRA decrypts showed the Germans yielding to Allied pressure when the Captain of U-boats West reported that no further transport of supplies to the Biscay fortresses would take place. Supplying Bordeaux, he reported, was now impossible and the port would have to be evacuated.⁵⁰ On 21 August, the last U-boats left Bordeaux, with the garrison left behind receiving orders to abandon the port by the end of the month.⁵¹

With the Germans on the move to evacuate by sea, Operation KINETIC scored a third and final success for the naval offensive in the Bay of Biscay. On the night of 22/23 August, the cruiser HMS *Mauritius* and the destroyers HMCS *Iroquois* and HMS *Ursa* were patrolling Audierne Bay between Brest and Lorient. As with their previous encounters, effective radar onboard *Iroquois* played a decisive role, providing Force 27 with prompt and accurate accounts of enemy movements. Aboard *Iroquois*, Hibbard placed so much

⁴⁵ DEFE 3/120, XL 6591 of 16 August.

⁴⁶ DEFE 3/122, XL 7009 of 19 August.

Marc Milner, *U-Boat Hunters: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Offensive Against Germany's Submarines* (Toronto, 1994), 280.

⁴⁸ McAndrew, Graves, and Whitby, 106.

Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, 562-577.

⁴⁹ DEFE 3/122, XL 7009 of 19 August and DEFE 3/124, XL 7427 of 22 August.

⁵¹ DEFE 3/125, XL 7940 of 26 August.

confidence in the new, up-to-date Type 293 radar that he decided to direct the opening moves of the battle from the Action Information Centre rather than the bridge, at least until giving the order to illuminate with starshell. This may well have been the first time a captain chose to fight his ship from the AIC,⁵² an approach that would later become common practice.

With *Iroquois* once again in the lead owing to her superior radar, Force 27 was able to close undetected and launched a surprise attack on the enemy convoy. At 0213 *Iroquois* scored the first hit on an armed merchant ship, which was subsequently set on fire. A second medium-sized merchant ship was quickly destroyed by gunfire from *Mauritius*, while two others were set on fire and driven onto the shoals. Only nineteen minutes after opening fire, all four German ships had been put out of action, with one sunk and the remaining three aground and burning.⁵³

In a second action two hours later, *Iroquois* detected another convoy of four ships departing from the harbour of Brest: an M-class minesweeper, two armed trawlers and a converted mine-destroyer ship, or "*sperrbrecker*". Using the radar on *Iroquois*, the destroyers stalked the convoy at long range until 0408, when the enemy ships were illuminated with starshell. Upon opening fire, Force 27 quickly overwhelmed the enemy, sinking two vessels and causing two others to collide in the confusion and burst into flames as they raced for shore, with surviving crew members jumping over the side as they went. One of these vessels capsized and sank while the other drove onto the rocks at full speed and exploded.

At dawn, Force 27 continued with another sweep around Audierne Bay in order to confirm the destruction of the enemy. When two further minesweepers came into view, both were pounded with gunfire and driven onto a reef near Port Audierne. *Iroquois* finished off one minesweeper with a torpedo, while HMS *Ursa* sent a boarding party onto the other to grab eleven prisoners. Those captured by *Ursa* turned out to be the lucky ones - the other one hundred and fifty survivors who were able to swim to shore were subsequently taken prisoner by the French Resistance.⁵⁴

With 1,197 rounds of 4.7-inch shell fired, along with 231 rounds of starshell, *Iroquois* expended even more ammunition in this action than during either of the first two KINETIC encounters.⁵⁵ The final tally for the night was eight ships destroyed: one minesweeper driven ashore and heavily damaged, a flak ship, five armed trawlers, and the *sperrbrecker*. In his Report of Proceedings for HMS *Mauritius*, Davis attributed the success of the night's action to two principal causes: "some lucky guesses, and the excellence of *Iroquois*' radar and plotting teams."⁵⁶ He could not have known that ULTRA intelligence also bore some responsibility for the luck of those guesses.

Operation KINETIC came to a close with this final success in Audierne Bay. Of the thirty-five German ships sunk or destroyed by the 10th DF between April and September 1944, twenty-two went down in August during the blockade of the Biscay ports.⁵⁷ In the last week

⁵² Commander J. Hibbard, "HMCS *Iroquois* Report of Action 23 August 1944 off the Biscay Coast, with Reference to Good Performance of Action Information Centre," NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11731, File CS 151-13-7, 28 August 1944.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Captain W.W. Davis, "HMS *Mauritius* Report of Proceedings and Engagements with Enemy Forces in Audierne Bay on 23 August 1944," NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11730, File CS 151-1-2, 11 September 1944.

⁵⁵ Hibbard, "HMCS *Iroquois* Report of Action 23 August 1944."

⁵⁶ Davis, "HMS *Mauritius* Report of Proceedings, 23 August 1944," NAC. "*Sperrbrecker*" was the German name given to merchant vessels that had been converted to naval use for the dual purpose of minesweeping and escort duties.

⁵⁷ Captain Basil Jones, "Record of Tenth Destroyer Flotilla, April to September, 1944," NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11730, File CS 151-1-2, 15 September 1944.

of August, HMCS *Haida* resumed patrolling the area under Operation ASSAULT, sailing in company with the cruiser HMS *Bellona* along the Biscay coast from Belle Isle near Lorient to Arcachon Point, south-west of Bordeaux. Continuing these sweeps through the remainder of the month, *Iroquois* patrolled off the coast and sent landing parties ashore on the French mainland and outlying islands. In his Report of Proceedings for the month, Hibbard described August 1944 as the best to date for *Iroquois*, the ship's company having spent twenty-eight days at sea, with most nights closed up at Action Stations.⁵⁸

Operations at sea had achieved their tactical goals but as the land campaign in Brittany wore on, the Allies turned eastward in the effort to crush the German armies falling back toward the Seine. For the Americans in Brittany, supply problems, communication difficulties and a lack of sufficient forces hindered the campaign. Those ports surrendered by the Germans were utterly demolished, while others remained occupied until the end of the war. In hindsight, the US Third Army's drive for the ports of Brittany was a questionable objective, and it became even more so as the main battlefront moved further east. On 7 September, three days after the capture of Antwerp, General Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, cancelled the plan to develop port facilities at Quiberon Bay, deciding that Brittany was simply too far removed from the front lines to be of any immediate use to the Allied war effort. Two days later, the Supreme Commander told Bradley of his decision, informing him that it was no longer necessary to capture the ports of Lorient, St-Nazaire and La Pallice. These fortress cities remained in German hands until the end of the war - the garrisons trapped within and likewise tying down the Allied forces sent to contain them.

Although abandoning the effort to capture the ports lying further south, the Americans continued their attack on Brest. The result was a bitter forty-day siege, which continued until 19 September when Major-General Hermann Ramcke finally surrendered the fortress. In the original OVERLORD planning, high hopes had been placed upon Brest as a port of supply, but prior to surrendering, German demolition parties made certain to dash any such hopes. Upon entering the city, the Americans found that sunken blockships and oyster pressure mines had closed the port so effectively that no attempt was made to clear the harbour until 1945.⁶⁰

In response to the rapidly changing focus of the land campaign, which moved in turn from the Falaise Gap to the Seine River, the Channel ports, and Antwerp, the basic logistical objectives that once had lain behind the original plan for OVERLORD were never achieved, at least in Brittany. The Breton ports were not used to deliver supplies in preparation for a breakout from Normandy and the new harbour facilities at Quiberon Bay never went beyond the planning stage. At sea, however, the tactical objectives of the supporting naval offensive, which included Operation KINETIC, had been met. Germany lost its capacity to support the French Atlantic garrisons by sea and was denied further use of the U-boat pens along the Biscay shore.

Vice-Admiral Sir Ralph Leatham, Commander-in-Chief Plymouth Command, complimented the actions of the Canadian Tribals in August 1944 as being extremely well-fought, adding that Operation KINETIC "may be regarded as a model of its type."⁶¹ Leatham also paid special tribute to the efficiency of the plot room of HMCS *Iroquois* and, on the occasion of *Haida*'s departure for refit in Halifax in September, C-in-C Plymouth made the following address to the Canadian officers and ratings of the 10th DF:

J "Brief History of HMCS *Iroquois*" DHH.

A. Harding Ganz, "Questionable Objective: The Brittany Ports, 1944," *Journal of Military History*, LIX, [o. 1 (January 1995), 94-5.

¹ Barnett, 846.

"Three Accounts of Anti-Shipping Strikes in the Bay of Biscay," DHH.

You have engagea! in many fierce and spirited actions in enemy waters, actions [from] which you have emerged the victors on every occasion. You have bottled up enemy shipping and made the movements of his fighting ships an extremely hazardous operation, even in his own waters. In these encounters you have piled up an enviable score. Your Flotilla figures at the moment stand at thirty-four enemy surface ships. Of this you have the lion's share.... You have displayed a great fighting spirit, coupled with a determination and a persistence which have brought you to victory on every occasion on which you have met and engaged the enemy.⁶²

By patrolling the inshore waters and destroying enemy shipping in Operation KINETIC, Canadian Tribal-class destroyers played a significant part in the defeat of German naval forces in the Bay of Biscay. For the Allied naval forces involved, this was a significant victory, but one that garnered little attention as the front advanced eastward, progressing further and further away from Brittany. Tasked with supporting the American drive into Brittany, Operation KINETIC reflected the changing focus of the land campaign. Following the failure of Hitler's Mortain counteroffensive and the withdrawal of the Fifth Panzer and Seventh Armies from Normandy, Brittany and the French Atlantic ports were quickly eliminated as a potential base of logistical supply. The blockade of these Biscay ports, however, achieved impressive results independent of the campaign on land. By the close of the Operation KINETIC, the combined Allied naval and air offensive resulted in the collapse of Marine Group West, which ceased to exist as an organized formation of the German Navy.

Appendix

Operation KINETIC:

Enemy Ships Sunk in the Blockade of Biscay Ports, 5-23 August, 1944

| Action | Location | Results |
|--|---|---|
| 5/6 AUGUST | First Action: île d'Yeu | SUNK or DESTROYED: Minesweeper (<i>M486</i>) Minesweeper (<i>M263</i>) Armed Trawler (<i>V414</i>) Armed Escort (<i>SG3C</i>) Cable Layer (<i>Hoher Weg</i>) Merchant Ship (<i>Otto</i>) Merchant Ship |
| Force 26 HMS <i>Bellona</i> (Cruiser) HMS <i>Tartar</i> HMCS <i>Haida</i> HMCS <i>Iroquois</i> HMS <i>Ashanti</i> | SSW of St. Nazaire | DAMAGED: Minesweeper (<i>M304</i>) Flak Ship (<i>Richthofen</i>) |
| 14/15 AUGUST | Off La Rochelle | SUNK or DESTROYED: Minesweeper (<i>M385</i>) Minesweeper Flak Ship (<i>Richthofen</i>) Armed Merchant Ship Armed Merchant Ship Merchant Ship Tanker DAMAGED: Elbing (<i>T-24</i>) |
| Force 27 HMS <i>Mauritius</i> (Cruiser) HMCS <i>Iroquois</i> HMS <i>Ursa</i> | Between Les Sables D'Olonne & La Pallice | |
| 22/23 AUGUST | Audierne Bay | SUNK or DESTROYED: Armed Trawler (<i>V717</i>) Armed Trawler (<i>V730</i>) Armed Trawler (<i>V702</i>) Armed Trawler (<i>V729</i>) Armed Trawler (<i>V720</i>) Sperrbrecker Minesweeper Flak Ship (<i>Tellus</i>) |
| Force 27 HMS <i>Mauritius</i> HMCS <i>Iroquois</i> HMS <i>Ursa</i> | N of Belle Isle between Brest and Lorient | |

Adapted from: Jones, "Record of Tenth Destroyer Flotilla:" Norris, "HMS *Bellona* Report of Operation 5th and 6th August 1944;" Davis, "HMS *Mauritius* Report of Proceedings 15th August 1944;" Davis, "HMS *Mauritius* Report of Proceedings 23rd August 1944;" Hibbard, "HMCS *Iroquois* Report of Action, 14th / 15th August 1944," and "HMCS *Iroquois* Report of Action, 23 August 1944."