

The Case of the Phantom MTB and the Loss of HMCS *Athabaskan*

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In the early dawn hours of 29 April 1944, the destroyer HMCS *Athabaskan* plunged to the depths of the English Channel, her hull wracked by two powerful explosions. One hundred and twenty-eight young Canadians died with her. Fifty-two years later, in the article "I Will Never Forget the Sound of Those Engines Going Away: A Re-examination into the Sinking of HMCS *Athabaskan*" that appeared in this journal, Peter Dixon advanced the theory - which was presented as fact - that the second explosion, the one that sealed the destroyer's fate, was caused by a torpedo fired by a British motor torpedo boat (MTB).² The most significant warship loss in Canadian naval history, the theory goes, was caused by friendly fire.³ That is not so. When primary evidence overlooked by Dixon is considered and the recollections of witnesses recorded decades after the event are scrutinized, it becomes abundantly clear that *Athabaskan* could not have been the victim of a British torpedo.

Before getting into the specifics of the issue, it is important to set out the events of that night. Throughout the spring of 1944 Allied naval forces carried out anti-shipping sweeps to erode German naval strength in preparation for the invasion of northwest Europe. They also laid offensive minefields at strategic locations to impede *Kriegsmarine* sorties once the invasion was launched. Plymouth Command was responsible for mounting a good portion of these operations, and Canadian Tribal class destroyers, which had joined the command in January 1944, were heavily involved in both.⁴

It was not unusual, therefore, for HMCS *Haida* and *Athabaskan* to learn during the forenoon of 28 April that they had been ordered to screen HOSTILE 26, a minelaying mission off the French coast about a 100 miles south of Plymouth.⁵ The Tribals' role was to act as distant covering force for eight Motor Launches (MLs) of the 10th ML Flotilla that were to lay mines about nine miles north of the eastern point of the He de Bas.⁶ Two MTBs were to provide close escort to the minelayers, with Lieutenant-Commander T.N. Cartwright, RNVR, senior officer of the 52nd MTB Flotilla riding in *MTB-677*, in command of both the minelaying group as well as the two covering MTBs. Cartwright led his force out through the Plymouth boom at 1946 hours. *Haida* and *Athabaskan*, with Commander H.G. DeWolf, RCN as senior officer, followed at 2300 hours with orders to patrol a 12-mile, east-west 'race track' at 49° N, 4° 10' W, about 12 miles north-northwest from where the minefield would be laid. Conditions were good, with a gentle Force 3 wind blowing out of the north, a calm sea state 2, and good visibility.⁷

As the Canadian destroyers headed towards their patrol position, abnormal atmospheric conditions enabled the coastal radar at Plymouth Command to detect two enemy vessels off the French coast.⁸ From 0010 hours to 0130 hours the Area Combined Headquarters, Plymouth plotted the progress "of enemy vessels proceeding to the westward at 20 knots." At 0258 hours contact was regained, and at 0307 hours, the C-in-C Plymouth, Admiral Sir Ralph Leatham, ordered *Haida* and *Athabaskan* to



The Unlucky Lady. HMCS *Athabaskan* at anchor at Plymouth in the spring of 1944.

DND, R-1039

proceed southwest at full speed to intercept. From here, Commander DeWolfs after action report can be used to outline the events that followed:

.. .Commander-in-Chief Plymouth's 290307 was received in the plot at 0322. Course was altered to 225° and speed increased to maximum. At 0332 course was altered to 205° and at 0343 to 180°. It was estimated from information contained in C-in-C's 290313 and 0331 that the enemy could be intercepted East of Isle de Vierge

6. Radar contact was gained by Athabaskan at 0359° bearing 133°, 14 miles and confirmed by Haida at 0402 when an enemy report was made. Course was altered to 160° at 0400 and back to 170° at 0408, the bearing of the enemy remaining steady at about 125°. At 0402 plot estimated enemy course and speed 280°, 24 knots and this was confirmed by Athabaskan (278°, 23 knots).

7. At 0407 the enemy bore 127°, 13000 yards, course 260°, 24 knots and plot recorded that we were two miles clear of [minefield] QZX 1287. At 0411 Athabaskan reported 3 echoes and this was confirmed by Type 271 who reported the third echo as smaller.

8. At 04121 gave the order "engage the enemy" and opened fire with star shell, the range then being 7300 yards. At 0414 two destroyers were in sight, bearing 115° and were recognized as Elbings.⁹

9. The enemy laid smoke and turned away to the Southward. At 0417 course was altered 30° to port, still keeping "A" arcs open and at this moment Athabaskan was hit aft and a large fire started. She was observed to slow down and turned to port. The first hit on the enemy was obtained at 0418.

10. At 0419 Haida altered course 90° to port and lay a smoke screen for Athabaskan who appeared to be stopped and badly on fire. "A" arcs were opened to starboard. At 0420 another hit was observed on the enemy.

11. At 0422 plot reported enemy steaming 160° in line abreast. At about this moment the enemy not being engaged was sighted broad on the starboard bow steering from left to right and target was shifted. The first destroyer was disappearing in smoke to the Eastward. Course was altered to the starboard placing the engaged enemy on the bow and the other ahead. At 0427 "X" gun reported star shell expended and a moment later Athabaskan appeared to blow up. Fortunately at this black moment the engaged enemy was on fire and though hidden by smoke, the glow of the fire was bright enough to provide a point of aim.¹⁰

Haida battered this target, which proved to be the German destroyer *T-27*, for five more minutes before DeWolf realized it was hard aground on He de Vierge. *Haida* then headed northwest to search for the other destroyer, but as contact had been lost DeWolf broke off the

search and returned to where *Athabaskan* had last been seen. All that was found was "a large group of survivors."¹¹ Shattered by the two explosions observed from *Haida*, *Athabaskan* was gone.

The cause of the first explosion that crippled *Athabaskan* at 0417 hours is not in doubt. It came from a torpedo fired by the German destroyer *T-24* as it turned away eastward.¹² It is the cause of the second explosion, the one that finished her off (although she probably would have sunk anyway) that has been questioned. According to official investigations at the time, and subsequent examination by historians, the large fire that burned out of control after the first explosion led to a chain of events that caused the second, and by virtually all accounts, more powerful internal explosion at 0427 hours.

Peter Dixon disagrees. He believes that at 0307 hours, *MTB-677* copied Plymouth's signal ordering *Haida* and *Athabaskan* to intercept the enemy radar contact. After a 55-minute run at 30 knots, *MTB-677* arrived at the scene in time to be picked up as the third radar contact detected by the Tribals at 0411 hours. The flash from *T-24*'s torpedo hitting *Athabaskan* at 0417 hours acted as a beacon that led the MTB to the Canadian destroyer. Then, confused by *Athabaskan*'s camouflage pattern, *MTB-677* mistook the Tribal for a German destroyer and attacked, killing a sailor on the fo'c'sle with machine gun fire and mortally wounding her with a torpedo.

For the above to be true, a document lying in the Public Record Office in Kew, England has to be false. Indeed, it and all its parts must be complete fabrications. This is the "Report by the Senior Officer, 52nd MTB Flotilla, of proceedings of Operation 'Hostile Twenty Six.'" Dated 30 April 1944, this report was submitted by Lieutenant-Commander T.N. Cartwright, RNVR, senior officer of the 52nd MTB Flotilla, who as already noted, was riding in *MTB-677* that night.¹³ As senior officer of the minelaying force and the two MTBs providing close protection, Cartwright's duty was to ensure that the minefield was laid effectively and accurately, to screen the MLs doing the work, and then to escort the MLs safely home. This is his account of *MTB-677*'s movements at the time Peter Dixon says he was torpedoing *Athabaskan*:

Commander-in-Chiefs 290307 and 290313 were received at 0315 and 0323 respectively and it was realized that enemy plot was probably destroyers but Radar sweep to the southward produced no contact nor was anything sighted. At 0338 C.in C's 290331 was received just as [minelaying] Divisions rejoined and altered course to N.6°E. for return passage at 14 knots. At 0405 *Haida*'s 290402 was received and 0410 continuous star shell was sighted bearing approximately S.45°W; *Haida*'s 290414 was received and at 0416 an explosion was sighted followed by a burst of flame bearing S.55°W. This was followed at 0427 by a very large explosion with a large white mushroom of white smoke on approximately the same bearing; it was feared that at the time that this explosion emanated from one of the destroyer support force. At 0505 C.in C's 290448 was received ordering MTBs to detach and proceed to rescue of survivors of *Athabaskan*; MTBs proceeded to the S.W. at 20 knots until C. in C's 290537 ordering them to return to Plymouth. Contact was re-established with M.L.s at 0838 and force entered harbour at 0955.¹⁴

Supplementing Cartwright's report is a two-page extract from *MTB-677*'s deck log for 28/29 April 1944. This document, which details the position, course and speed of *MTB-677* over the course of the operation as well as the position of the mine lay, was completed as the mission unfolded and thus can be taken as the most reliable account of the MTB's movements. The original log would have remained with the MTB and an extract submitted so that Plymouth Command would know the precise location of the new minefield.¹⁵ The deck log demonstrates conclusively that Cartwright never deviated from his orders for HOSTILE 26. He stayed with the MLs over the course of the entire operation, and did not head for the location of the destroyer action until 0505 when C-in-C Plymouth ordered MTBs 677 and 717 to rescue *Athabaskan*'s survivors.¹⁶

Conspiracy theorists will argue that both the log and the report could have been altered or falsified to cover up what 'really' happened that night.¹⁷ For that to be true, and for that cover-up to have remained air tight to this day, Cartwright, Clayton, the 20-odd crew members of *MTB-677*, and the crews of *MTB-717* and the ten MLs - something approaching 200 sailors - would have had to lie about the MTB's absence from the flotilla and then kept silent all these years. Staff at HMS *Black Bat*, the MTB base at Plymouth who were responsible for signing off



A Fairmile D MTB - or 'Dogboat' - similar to *MTB-677*.

deck logs would also have recognized that the log had been altered and therefore been part of the conspiracy, as would the staff of the torpedo office at Plymouth who would have to explain away a missing - and rather expensive - torpedo. Experienced senior staff officers at the Admiralty who wrote detailed appreciations of the action based on reports from all participants would have had to have been fooled by the cover-up or been part of it. And, of course, the crew of the *MTB-677*, who would have had the loss of an Allied warship and the deaths of 128 Canadians on their conscience, would have had an even greater tragedy to hide. To suggest that it could all have been kept quiet in the first place - let alone have remained a secret all these years - seems ludicrous. By accepted standards of historical scholarship, the information in Cartwright's report and the MTB's log proves that *MTB-677* remained with the MLs and did not go anywhere near *Athabaskan*.

Dixon's case loses further veracity when one scrutinizes the eye-witness testimony he brings forward from two survivors. One sailor from 'A' gun on *Athabaskan's* fo'c'sle deck claims to have witnessed the actual attack by *MTB-677*: "I saw the son of a bitch go across the bow like a banshee. I saw the white track go into the port side."¹⁸ Another describes 'B' gun being "raked

by small arms fire, killing Able Seaman Hubert J. Peart."¹⁹ According to the citations in Dixon's article, both claims were made in statements or correspondence during the mid-1980s, or 40 years after the action. A more reliable source would obviously be accounts taken immediately after the events, and for that we can turn to the Board of Inquiry into the loss of *Athabaskan*.

During the war the RN and the RCN held formal inquiries into the destruction of most warships in order to investigate the circumstances of the loss. Because *Athabaskan* was under RN operational control, the inquiry was held under British auspices. Four RN officers²⁰ made up the board and on 3 May 1944 - four days after the action - they interviewed 29 witnesses, 21 of whom were from *Athabaskan*. Their testimony is on record at the Public Record Office but was not consulted by Peter Dixon.²¹ What he would have found would likely have given him pause. The inquiry heard testimony from survivors of *Athabaskan's* forward gun crews, from officers and men on the bridge, from lookouts, and from radar operators - among others. But not one made any reference to seeing an MTB or any other small craft attack *Athabaskan* at any point in the action. What is most interesting is that the sailor who 40 years later claimed to have seen

"the son of a bitch go across the bow like a banshee" appeared as a witness but mentioned nothing of that incident:

(Q) What was your action station in the Athabaskan?

(A) 'A' gun, sir.

(Q) Were you Captain of the gun?

(A) Yes, sir.

(Q) What happened after the first explosion?

(A) I reported the 'A' gun out of action and immediately on checking up reported it back in action again.

(Q) What made you think it was out of action?

(A) It gave such a jar, I reported it was out of action and then I saw it was alright.

(Q) Did you carry on firing?

(A) Yes, sir.

(Q) When did you cease firing?

(A) I got a check fire after eight rounds.

(Q) When did the second explosion occur?

(A) The second explosion came just after this and someone came up and said stand by to abandon ship was given. They all started to their abandon ship stations and so we went back to the gun and opened fire again.

(Q) Did you see the second explosion?

(A) No, sir.

(Q) Did you fire after the second explosion?

(A) I was firing at the time. I believe I had got away three rounds but I am not sure if three were away after the explosion.

Witness withdrew.²²

Nary a "son of a bitch," nary a "banshee," nary an MTB. Furthermore, although three sailors who were working 'A' or 'B' turrets during the action testified at the inquiry, not one made any reference to being raked by small arms fire or to seeing Able Seaman Peart cut down.²³

If survivors witnessed a direct attack on their ship and the death of one of their

Vice Admiral Percy Nelles speaks to the Ship's Company of the *Athabaskan*, Plymouth, England, 14 April 1944.

shipmates by small arms fire, as claimed in Dixon's article, why did they not report it at the inquiry? This seems especially illogical when one considers that they would have assumed that such an attack would have been made by an enemy vessel. Surely, they would have reported what they saw. That was, after all, the purpose of the inquiry. It makes no sense whatsoever, leaving one to conclude that they did not see what they later said they saw, leaving - again - no valid reason to think that a British MTB participated in the action or was responsible for the second explosion.²⁴

Besides the evidence in *MTB-677's* log and Cartwright's report, as well as the obvious problems associated with his eye-witness testimony, Dixon's theory falls apart in other areas. Although he had not seen the contents of ADM 199/531, he was aware of a summary of *MTB-677's* movements that night that Admiral Leatham referred to in his covering letter to the report of the Board of Inquiry:

Since the Board of Inquiry sat, a report has been received from the Commanding Officer of M.T.B. 677 [sic],²⁵ who was in command of Force "Hostile XXVI", and who was returning to England from the vicinity of the He de Bas on the early morning of 29th April, that he saw two explosions.

As he was at the time a matter of some 30 miles to the north eastward of Haida and Athabaskan, he was not called as a witness at the Board of Inquiry.

Photo by Gilbert A. Milne, NAC PA 166532





A grim, weary Commander Harry Dewolf discusses the loss of *Athabaskan* with Admiral Sir Ralph Leatham and his staff after returning to Plymouth on 29 April 1944.

His description of the explosions, however, is illuminating. He states in his report (forwarded with Plymouth letter No. 1931 / Ply. 1618 of 25th May, 1944, Report on "Hostile" Operation XXIII, XXIV, XXV and XXVI) that at 0416 "an explosion was sighted followed by a burst of flame on a bearing S. 55° W. This was followed at 0427 by a very large explosion with a large mushroom of white smoke on approximately the same bearing."²⁶

This summary is clearly based upon Cartwright's report of proceedings. In a strange twist of logic, Dixon concludes that Cartwright's description of the nature and the timing of the explosion indicate he was at the actual site, even though he reported he was 30 miles away. Dixon reaches this assumption on the rationale that such a detailed description of the second explosion - a "large mushroom of white smoke" - proved that the MTB had witnessed the explosion from close quarters after it had torpedoed the hapless *Athabaskan*. He also questions whether Cartwright could give times for both explosions that matched those given by *Haida* if he was not near to their source: "Had he been with 'Hostile XXVT (which was exactly 30 miles away)," Dixon wrote, "the time of the sighting would be later and not as precise as he claims." Based on this, and some bending of the basic laws of physics, Dixon concludes that Cartwright's accurate description of the explosion and the time he accords it "is the proof that *MTB 677* was at the scene of the engagement."²⁷

In fact, the reports of several German vessels operating about the same distance from the action as *MTB-677* provided similar details of the explosion. Six minesweepers of the 24th *Minensuchflotille* were about 25-30 miles to eastward at the time of the engagement, and they not only observed gun flashes from the engagement but recorded a massive explosion and cloud of smoke at the time of the second explosion. Even more telling is the account of three minesweepers of the 6th *Minensuchflotille*. They had been tasked to rendezvous with *T-24* and *T-27* but had been held up, and at 0400 hours were laying a minefield northeast of He d'Ouessant (or Ushant), about 25 miles south west from where *Athabaskan* blew up. Their war diary notes gun flashes from the destroyer action and at 0416 hours describes "a detonation with flames and clouds of smoke," followed at 0427 hours by "a detonation with huge clouds of flame visible."²⁸ These reports - and the times accorded the explosions - effectively refute Dixon's contention that *MTB-677* had to be near by *Athabaskan* to describe the explosion in such detail.

Dixon also claims that for *MTB-677* to have seen the second explosion from 30 miles distance, it would have to have been "over 525 feet high," which he seems to think doubtful. But in her war diary, *T-24*, which was eight miles east of *Athabaskan* at the time, noted "Columns of fire approximately 200 metres high

(Bb) with a big mushroom of heavy smoke. Apparently from burning oil." Not only did the Germans describe an explosion that was even greater than Dixon estimated, but they also conclude that it came from an internal source. (They also took a measure of satisfaction at the result as they then exclaimed, "In any case 'One wicked foe blown in the air.'")²⁹

There are technical inaccuracies that also mar Dixon's version of events. For example, even if *MTB-677* had wanted to close the action, it is unlikely that it would have got there in time to fit into his time frame. Time of origin and time of receipt of signals differ, and although Plymouth Command signalled the Tribals to intercept at 0307 hours, the signal was not monitored in the MTB until 0315 hours, eight minutes later than Dixon states.³⁰ Also, due to additional top weight from increased armament, radar and other equipment fitted as the war progressed, the actual continuous maximum speed of Fairmile D-type MTBs like *MTB-677* was about 26-27 knots, not the 30 that Dixon ascribes to them.³¹ More importantly, because of threats to the reliability of their powerful Packard engines as well as the physical toll on personnel caused from sustained pounding at high speed, MTB crews - like the fighter pilots - did not push their power plants at high revolutions for any longer than absolutely necessary, and certainly not for the 55 minutes that Dixon allotted *MTB-677*.³² Consequently, even if he had closed the action, an experienced Coastal Forces officer like Cartwright would probably only have done so at the 20 knots he later put on when Leatham ordered him to head to the scene to rescue survivors. If one takes these discrepancies of time and speed into account, *MTB-677* could only have reached the scene well after *Athabaskan's* demise. But, of course, that is all speculation as her log already proves she was not there at all.

What about the third radar echo that *Haida* and *Athabaskan* detected at 0411 hours? Peter Dixon maintains that it was proof of *MTB-677's* presence.³³ It must be understood, however, that radar was still in its relative infancy in 1944, and it was not unusual for 'ghost' or 'side' echoes to appear on A-scans and PPI displays, or for other anomalies to occur. Two examples from among many in the records of surface engagements in the English Channel during this

period provide evidence of this. On the night of 25/26 February 1944 a group of ships from Plymouth, including *Haida*, *Huron* and *Athabaskan*, picked up a radar contact that was plotted at eight miles range heading south at nine knots. When illuminated by star shell, the contact was revealed to be a group of very stationary islands, not enemy warships!³⁴ On another sweep that led to an engagement with three German destroyers on the night of 25/26 April - two nights before *Athabaskan* was sunk - the cruiser *HMS Black Prince* and the destroyers *Haida* and *HMS Ashanti* all initially detected four radar contacts, although only three German ships were present.³⁵ The fourth was a 'ghost' or 'side' echo. This is also the most likely explanation for *Haida* and *Athabaskan's* third contact at 0411 hours on 29 April. After that action, three of *Haida's* radar operators subsequently reported that they only ever saw two echoes, while a fourth who acknowledged a third echo identified it as a "side echo."³⁶ This is further reinforced by the fact that neither *Haida* nor *Athabaskan* seems to have tracked the third echo, whereas if it had of been a firm contact, it would have been plotted by at least one of them.³⁷ Instead, it simply vanished, which suggests that an actual contact never existed in the first place.

Unfortunately, perhaps because he believes so strongly in his theory, Dixon also misrepresented evidence from the report of the Board of Inquiry. When referring to confusion over which ship should get credit for sinking *Athabaskan*, he wrote, "Yet this confusion is compounded by the statement in the inquiry's report that the members of the board 'did not consider [whether] any other ships were present.'" Dixon's insertion of the word 'whether' into the quote fundamentally changed its meaning. He has the board reporting that they did not investigate *if* any vessels besides the two German destroyers were at the scene of the engagement, when, in fact, they were saying that they did not think any other vessels *were* present. This is proved by the witnesses they called and the questions they posed at the inquiry. The board asked Commander DeWolf about the third radar contact and whether he thought any other ships were present. They then questioned four radar operators from *Haida* and another from *Athabaskan* about the third contact.³⁸ (The sailors from *Haida* maintained there never was a third contact,



One hundred and twenty-eight young Canadian volunteers died with *Athabaskan*. This is an early grave marker erected in Plouescat, France.

while the one from *Athabaskan* said that his set broke down after the first explosion.) Why else would they call radar operators from *Haida* unless they were interested in finding out what ships were present? The evidence they heard led them to conclude - or, to use another word, consider - that no ships beyond the two Canadian and two German destroyers were involved in the action.³⁹

In discussing the inquiry, Dixon also writes "Eyewitness accounts have *Athabaskan* being torpedoed twice on the port side. This explanation seems to have been discounted by the Board." Dixon is correct in that conclusion, but it is important to recognize that the board did examine the possibility of two torpedoes hitting *Athabaskan*. In doing so they were following up a preliminary investigation by Captain D Plymouth, Commander R.A. Morice, RN based on his informal conversations with 25 survivors. "Shortly after the first damage," he wrote, "a heavier and more violent explosion was felt amidships. This is believed to have been either the blast of a torpedo or heavy calibre shell fire."⁴⁰ The board pursued this matter at the inquiry. Nine of *Athabaskan's* survivors, all of whom had previously talked with Morice and who all appear to have been on the upper

deck at the time, were queried about the second explosion. The board in particular wanted to know if any sea water was thrown up with the blast, evidence that it may have been caused by a torpedo. No witness recalled any sea water, they mostly refer to large amounts of flame. Only one witness, Lieutenant J.W. Scott, RCNVR, thought a torpedo hit caused the second explosion:

Q: The second explosion, do you remember seeing it?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Do you know which side?

A: On the starboard side. That was a definite torpedo because the whole ship just seemed to fall apart.⁴¹

The other witnesses corroborate only Scott's observation that the second explosion was devastating but descriptions of its precise origin vary.

Taking this evidence into account, the board reached the following conclusion:

The fact that this hit stopped the ship and caused a heavy jar all over the ship seems to show that it must have been caused by something more than hits from 4.1 projectiles and would.

therefore, appear to have been caused by a torpedo fired by the enemy when they turned at about 0414. This agrees approximately with the running time of a 40 knot torpedo so fired.

This shot stopped the ship, which had just altered course 30° to port, and ten minutes later she sustained a second and much heavier explosion, i.e. at 0427.

This may have been caused by :-

- a) a torpedo, or
- b) the explosion of the after 4" magazine.

In support of (a) the radar plot shows an apparent jink to the southwards between 0420 and 0422 of the Elbing destroyer who was not engaged by Haida. A torpedo fired on this jink at the stationary and burning Athabaskan would have arrived at about 0427. The Elbing engaged by HMCS Haida was also in a position from which she might have fired torpedoes, although this would entail a long shot fired well abaft her beam.

In support of (b) the after 4" magazine had been close to a very serious fire for a period of ten minutes. The explosion of this magazine would have thrown burning oil up and far enough forward, to have caused the flames which were experienced by the ship's company amidship and near the bridge.

In view of the evidence of men who were in No.2 boiler room, which they left intact, the second explosion must have occurred in or abaft the engine room.

We do not consider that any other enemy ships were present, besides the two Elbing destroyers mentioned the Haida's report, and that the torpedo or torpedoes which hit the Athabaskan were fired by them.⁴²

There is no question that events on the night of 28/29 April 1944 were confused. But we know now through the examination of German records that T-24 and T-27 did not fire any additional torpedoes after their initial salvo, and we also know that no other German vessels were in the immediate vicinity of the action. That eliminates a second German torpedo as the cause of the massive explosion at 0427 hours. Searching further for the source of a second torpedo, Peter Dixon chose to blame MTB-677, but when his case is examined closely, it is clear that the evidence against it is overwhelming, leading one to conclude that the theory is flat out wrong. That leaves an internal explosion as the cause of the second explosion, and no one can deny that with heavy structural damage, a massive fire burning out of control, and volatile materials close by, the elements for the

catastrophic explosion that devastated Athabaskan that April night were there.

Notes

1. The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Ms. Kate Tildsley of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) Naval Historical Branch in London, England, as well as Steve Harris and Bill Johnstone at the Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH). Although the author is an official historian with the Department of National Defence, the views expressed in this article are entirely his own.
2. Peter A. Dixon, "I Will Never Forget the Sound of Those Engines Going Away": A Re-examination into the Sinking of HMCS Athabaskan, 29 April 1944," *Canadian Military History*, Vol 5, No 1, Spring 1996, pp.16-25. The article is also available on the Canadian Tribal Association web site at www3.sympatlc.ca/hrc/haida/g71ost.htm
3. This version of events has subsequently appeared in the television documentary "Unlucky Lady: The Life and Death of HMCS Athabaskan" and was repeated in the 16 April 2001 issue of *Maclean's* magazine.
4. Between 16 and 29 April alone, Haida participated in four 'Hostiles' and two 'Tunnel' offensive sweeps. See, HMCS Haida, Report of Proceedings, 26 May, 1944. National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 24 (Ace 83-84/167), Box 694, 1926-DDE-215, vol 1
5. HMCS Haida, Report of Action, 29 April 1944. Public Record Office (PRO), ADM 199/263. Copies of this report are also held at the NAC.
6. Fourteen mines were laid by one ML at 48°51'39" N, 03°57'18" W on course 319°, and another 14 by the other division at 48°52'42" N, 03°53'24" W on course 010°. LCDR F. Cartwright, "Report by Senior Officer, 52nd MTB Flotilla, of proceedings of Operation 'Hostile Twenty Six', PRO ADM 199/531
7. Haida, Report of Action, 29 April 1944.
8. It was a condition of anomalous propagation known as super-refraction. There was also signal intelligence that the German destroyers would be at sea. See, *The Admiralty Manual of Navigation*, Vol I, (London, 1955), pp.229-234, and F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence In the Second World War*, Vol III pt 1, (London, 1984), p.287
9. Elbings was the name given by the Allies to small German destroyers. The *Kriegsmarine* referred to them as torpedo boats (which sometimes leads to confusion with the term Motor Torpedo Boats).
10. Haida, Report of Action, 29 April 1944.
11. *Ibid.*
12. T-24 War Diary, 29 April 1944, PG 70209, DHH, SGR II 340
13. Dixon apparently was unaware that Cartwright was riding in MTB-677 and attributes her actions to the CO, Lieutenant A. Clayton, RNVR. This is not completely his fault as Leatham's summary of the report that appears in his covering letter for the Board of Inquiry erroneously states that the report from the MTBs was written by the CO of MTB-677, Lieutenant Clayton, instead of the SO for the operation. Just to avoid any possible misinterpretation about different reports, the

- file number on the report cited by Leatham (Plymouth letter No. 1931/Ply. 1618 of 25 May) matches the one submitted by Cartwright.
14. LCDR F. Cartwright, "Report by Senior Officer, 52nd MTB Flotilla, of proceedings of Operation 'Hostile Twenty Six', PRO ADM 199/531
 15. The original deck log has not survived but this is not the result of any conspiracy or cover-up. After the war, it was decided - in the interests of storage concerns - that only a 10% sampling of deck logs for ships of destroyer size and smaller would be preserved by the Public Records Office.
 16. LCDR F. Cartwright, "Report by Senior Officer, 52nd MTB Flotilla, of proceedings of Operation 'Hostile Twenty Six', Appendix I, "Extract of Deck Log of M.T.B. 677, 28/29 April, 1944," PRO ADM 199/531. A transcript of the above was provided to the author by Ms. Kate Tildsley of the Naval Historical Branch, MOD, London. Like the other ADM documents cited in this article, a copy of the original PRO document is held at DHH.
 17. Peter Dixon now seems aware of the log extract but rejects its authenticity. See "Maritime Mystery," *Maclean's*, 16 April 2001, p.34.
 18. Dixon, p.22. The source cited for this are comments made to Mr. E. Stewart in June 1985.
 19. Dixon, p.20. The source for this is a letter to Mr. E Stewart dated 13 October 1986. Although Peter Dixon does not say the small arms fire came from the MTB, that is certainly the impression gained from the article.
 20. They were Captain N.C. Moore, Chief of Staff to C-in-C Plymouth and President of the inquiry; Commander B. Jones, Captain D of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla (the unit to which the RCN Tribals were attached); Commander (E) E.H. Vincent from HMS *Alaunia*; and Lieutenant-Commander J. J.S. Rusher from the Gunnery School at Plymouth.
 21. ADM 199/263 has been open since at least 1987 when this historian looked at it during the course of doing research for his MA thesis.
 22. Inquiry Report, "Minutes of the Witnesses", pp.31-32. PRO ADM 199/263
 23. The other sailors from *Athabaskan's* forward turrets who testified were AB A. Audet, PO Backus and AB J.J. Carr. See Inquiry Report, "Minutes of the Witnesses", pp.8-9, 21-23, and 30-31. PRO ADM 199/263. Other survivors who were forward with bridge or damage control parties also made no mention of an MTB or small arms fire.
 24. One possible explanation for the mistaken eyewitness account may lie in the action that took place on 25/26 April. In his report Commander DeWolf mentions a vessel, which he thought may have been an E-boat, racing through the Allied formation close by *Haida*, John Watkins, HMS *Ashanti's* navigator at the time, later established that the craft was actually the British *MGB-502*. She was returning from a special operation off the coast of France only to find herself in the midst of a violent, fast-paced destroyer action. Although *Athabaskan's* report makes no mention of the incident, she was steaming in close proximity to *Haida* and some of her sailors may have seen the MTB or heard of it later. See, HMCS *Haida*, Report of Action, 26 April 1944. NAC, RG 24 (Acc83-84/167) Box 694, 1926-DDE-215, Vol 1; and John Watkins, "Actions Against Elbings, April 1944," *The Mariner's Mirror*, Vol 82, No 2 (May 1995), p.200
 25. Actually from Cartwright.
 26. Commander-in-Chief Plymouth, "Report of Action on Night of 28th/29th April, 1944 Between HMC Ships *Haida* and *Athabaskan* and Two Enemy Destroyers", 1 June 1944, 2. PRO ADM 199/263.
 27. Dixon, p.24
 28. The evidence and analysis about the 6th and 24th *Minensuchflotille* was kindly provided by Kate Tildsley. The war diaries can be found at PG 72054-PG 72057 and PG 72630-72633 of the NHB German Naval Microfilm collection, NHB file number FDSN57/2000. Their activities that night are confirmed by the war diary of the 3rd Security Division held at DHH.
 29. T-24 War Diary, 29 April 1944, PG 70209, DHH, SGR II 340. My thanks to Dr. Jean Martin for translating this document.
 30. Dixon, p.21
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. See, for example, J. Lambert and A. Ross, *Allied Coastal Forces of World War II: Vol. I, Fairmile Designs and US Submarine Chasers*, (London, 1990), pp.90-93, App VIII. There are many sources that discuss RN MTB tactics during the war, but among the most useful are the *Coastal Forces Monthly Review*, DHH, 84/7, Peter Dickens, *Night Action: MTB Flotilla at War*, (London, 1974), and Peter Scott, *The Battle for the Narrow Seas*, (London, 1945).
 33. Dixon, p.21
 34. Captain W. Norris to C-in-C Plymouth, 27 February 1944. PRO ADM 199/532
 35. HMS *Black Prince*, HMS *Ashanti*, HMCS *Haida*, Reports of Action, NAC, RG 24 (Acc 83-84/167) Box 694, 1926-DDE-215, Vol 1
 36. Inquiry Report, "Minutes of the Witnesses", p.26. In his testimony at the inquiry DeWolf confirmed the three echoes he mentioned in his after action report but also said he never saw anything other than the two destroyers.
 37. HMCS *Haida*, Report of Action, 29 April 1944. This is also borne out by charts of the action, which track no third German contact.
 38. These were AB F. Gorseworth, AB P.P. Wispinski, AB M. Williams and LS R.E. White from *Haida*, and AB J.F. Kane from *Athabaskan*. See Inquiry Report, "Minutes of the Witnesses," pp.16-17, 23-26. PRO ADM 199/263
 39. Report of the Board of Inquiry, 3 May 1944, 1. PRO ADM 199/263
 40. Captain D Plymouth, "Report on the Loss of The HMCS *Athabaskan*", 30 April 1944. PRO ADM 199/263. It is clear from Morice's opening paragraph that his report was intended for use by the inquiry.
 41. Inquiry Report, "Minutes of the Witnesses", pp.12-13. PRO ADM 199/263
 42. Report of the Board of Inquiry, 3 May 1944. PRO ADM 199/263

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