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). The most significant warship loss in Canadian naval history, the theory goes, was caused by friendly fire. 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. 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. 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 Ile de Bas. Two MTBs were to provide close escort to the minelayers, with Lieutenant-Commander T.N. Cartwright, RNVR, senior officer of the 52nd MTB Flotilla leading 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.

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

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 all and 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 ahead. At about this moment the enemy not being engaged was sighted broad on the starboard bow steaming 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 "A" 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 through 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-24, for five more minutes before DeWolf realized it was hard aground on Ile 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 theiso's 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 operations of Operation Hostile Twenty Six."

At 0422, this 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 minelayer 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-Chief's 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 southwest produced no contact nor was anything sighted. At 0338 C-in-C's 290311 was received just as [minelaying] Divisions rejoined and altered course to N.9°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 55°S.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. 0838 and force entered harbour at 0655.14

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 LE 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 0505.16

Conspiracy theorists will argue that both the MTB's 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 Buoy, the MTB base at Plymouth who were responsible for signing off
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 jerk. 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 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 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) who was in command of Force "Hostile XXVI", and who was returning to England from the vicinity of the île 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.
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 Minesweeper Flotille 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 Minesweeper Flotille. 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 Ile d'Ouessant (or Ushant), about 26 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 huge clouds of flame visible.”

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 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 300 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 blow in the air.’”)

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. 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. 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. 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. His Diary does not mention any other ships present. The fourth was a ‘ghost’ or ‘side’ echo. This is also the most likely explanation for a report of a “side echo” that Dixon’s version of events. For example, even if MTB-677 had wanted to close the action, it also seems 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. Dixon concludes that Cartwright’s description of the explosions, however, is illuminating. He states in his report (forwarded with Plymouth Letter No. 1601 (Phy) 16/18 of 30th May, 1944, Report on “Hostile” Operation XXIII, XXIV, XXV and XXVI) that at 0410 “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.”

This summary is clearly based upon Cartwright’s report of proceedings. In a strange twist of logic, Dixon concludes that Cartwright’s accurate description of the explosions, however, is illuminating. He states in his report (forwarded with Plymouth Letter No. 1601 (Phy) 16/18 of 30th May, 1944, Report on “Hostile” Operation XXIII, XXIV, XXV and XXVI) that at 0410 “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.”

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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.33

In discussing the inquiry, Dixon also writes "Eyewitness accounts have involved in the action.39

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 04.14. 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 0430 and 0442 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 destroyer 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 better room, which they left intact, the second explosion must have occurred in or abaft the same room. We do not consider that any other enemy ships were present, besides the two Elbing destroyers mentioned in the Haida’s report, and that the torpedo or torpedoes which hit the Athabaskan were fired by them.36

There is no question that events on the night of 28/29 April 1944 were confused. But we know now through these documents of German reports 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.
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.


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.F. 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 Ellings, April 1944," The Mariner’s Mirror, Vol 82, No 2 (May 1995), p.200

25. Actually from Cartwright.


27. Dixon, p.24

28. The evidence and analysis about the 6th and 24th Minensuchflotte 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. 1, 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 more for use by the inquiry.


42. Report of the Board of Inquiry, 3 May 1944. PRO ADM 199/263

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