

# *U-Boats off Natal*

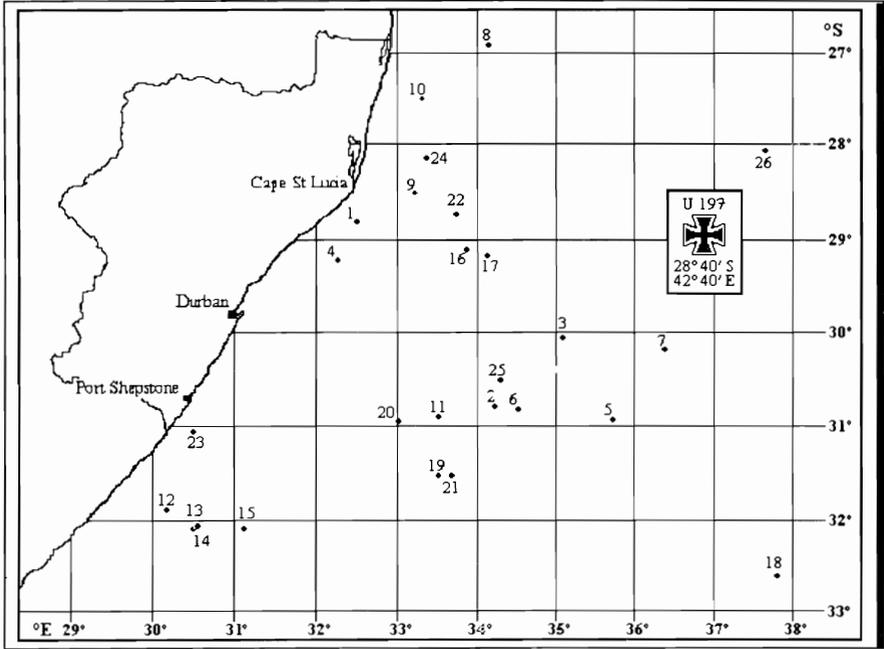
## *The Local Ocean War, 1942–1944*

Fifty years after the event, a good deal of reminiscence is evident as participants, historians, and a fascinated public carefully re-follow the chronology of World War II. Amazingly missing from this recollection here in Natal is the War as it came to our own front door (if one may use that expression for a broad reach of the Indian Ocean.) How extensive was the submarine warfare off Natal? Why was it not more publicly reported? How many Allied ships were sunk? Was an enemy submarine ever 'killed' off our coast? Were U-boats ever seen from the Natal mainland by amateur spotters? Did the Durban 'black-out' have any effect on this local naval war? Was the *Nova Scotia* (whose sinking off St Lucia led to the largest loss of life in our maritime history) ambushed as a result of 'fifth column' information?

I don't claim that the following article has all the answers to these questions. With our attention drawn to theatres of war in North Africa and Italy, it came as a great surprise to me to learn that the ship losses off the South African coast between 1939 and 1945 were not the half-dozen or so as I had casually believed, but (as C.J. Harris tables it in *War at Sea*) no less than 155.<sup>1</sup> Of that, 103 were lost in the 13 months of the present study, the period during which there were 'U-boats off Natal', and which accounted for some 26 ships off the Natal and Pondoland coasts alone. The sea, it seems, was the major local theatre of South Africa's participation in the war. But the concealment of this warfare was so effective at the time (for reasons good and bad, as will be discussed) that its size and its military implication have never really figured in the cultural aftermath.

Of course, where the war at sea is concerned, to claim a 'theatre' in any provincial or national sense must be tenuous. By far the greatest number of sinkings were (despite the 'constant stream of false alarms' from spotters on the coast<sup>2</sup>) far off territorial limits. Indeed, Natal's one accredited 'kill', RAF Catalina C/259 versus U-197, happened some five to six hundred miles east of Natal and south of Madagascar. Nevertheless, it was a St Lucia-based aeroplane that was involved, it was coastal radio intelligence that located the U-boat, and it was Durban-bound shipping that it was busy attacking. I will claim, then (with perhaps a whiff of authorial licence) that such incidents legitimately tell the story of the naval action off Natal.

The story has four major phases. We start with Phase 1: May to July 1942, when the Japanese attempt to hinder the Allied occupation of Madagascar. They make sorties down to Natal, sink one ship, and bring about the notorious



**Table 1 Ships sunk off the Natal and Pondoland coasts, 1942–1943**  
 (Chronological order follows the numbers given on the map)

(1) <i>Mundra</i>	( 6. 7.42)	(14) <i>Empire Mahseer</i>	( 4. 3.43)
(2) <i>Empire Guidon</i>	(31.10.42)	(15) <i>Marietta E</i>	( 4. 3.43)
(3) <i>Reynolds</i>	(31.10.42)	(16) <i>James B Stephens</i>	( 8. 3.43)
(4) <i>Mendoza</i>	( 1.11.42)	(17) <i>Aelbryn</i>	(11. 3.43)
(5) <i>Louise Moller</i>	(13.11.42)	(18) <i>Aloe</i>	(14. 3.43)
(6) <i>Scottish Chief</i>	(20.11.42)	(19) <i>Sembilan</i>	(17. 4.43)
(7) <i>Pierce Butler</i>	(20.11.42)	(20) <i>Manaar</i>	(18. 4.43)
(8) <i>Mount Helmos</i>	(24.11.42)	(21) <i>John Drayton</i>	(21. 4.43)
(9) <i>Nova Scotia</i>	(28.11.42)	(22) <i>Northmoor</i>	(17. 5.42)
(10) <i>Llandaff Castle</i>	(30.11.42)	(23) <i>Salabangka</i>	( 1. 6.43)
(11) <i>Sawhloento</i>	(14.12.42)	(24) <i>Dumra</i>	( 5. 6.43)
(12) <i>Harvey W. Scott</i>	( 3. 3.43)	(25) <i>William King</i>	( 7. 6.43)
(13) <i>Nirpura</i>	( 3. 3.43)	(26) <i>Pegasus</i>	(23. 7.43)

Sunk by RAF Catalina: U–197 (20.8.43)

'black-outs', the most tangible evidence to the population at large that something is going on.

Phase 2 sees the entry of Germany into the South African war at sea. (I am thinking here of a geographically-specific expedition. In 1940, the German raider *Pinguin* has already done damage south of Madagascar.) In October 1942, *Gruppe Eisbär* (Polar Bear), comprising four U-boats and a fuelling vessel, commence their formidable operation off the Cape, and don't return to occupied France until Christmas of that year. During their campaign, U-504 hives off from the pack and moves north, where it is joined by three U-cruisers. This derivative of *Eisbär* plagues both the Natal coast and the Mozambique channel from 31 October to 4 December. Off Natal itself they sink ten vessels and most notably the converted freighter *Nova Scotia*, whose demise results in the largest loss of life ever recorded in South African waters.

Then, in late February 1943, comes phase 3, when Natal has the unwelcome attentions of *Gruppe Seehund*, U-160, U-506, U-509 and U-516, plus fuel-carrying U-459 which is stationed south of St Helena. *Seehund* only ceases its mauling of coastal shipping — including some seven victims off Natal — when it is recalled on 14 March. A strange tail-end to this phase is the solo exercise in April by the Italian submarine *Leonardo da Vinci* which sinks, amongst others, three vessels south-east of Durban.

Phase 4 sees the final U-boat *gruppe* from Lorient arriving off Natal on 17 May 1943, not to return to Europe until August. For all their long stay, the tables have now turned against submarines. They maraud the coasts for three months, but only account for five ships off Natal, and lose one of their members in the attempt. Thereafter, U-boat Command decides against further sorties along the South African coast.

### *Phase One*

How lonely, how exposed did the port city of Durban feel after February 1942 and the fall of Singapore? Not greatly, if the social pages, the John Orr's and Greenacre's adverts, and the reminiscences of servicemen are to be believed. The Mediterranean being now closed to Allied shipping, Durban was the best-equipped port on the route to the East, and the last 'swinging' haven — for thousands of soldiers and sailors — before they got down to the business of war, whether in the East or in North Africa. Those more perceptive as to the sheer emptiness of the Indian Ocean once Singapore had fallen might have cheered themselves up with the knowledge of the boom at the harbour mouth, or the depth-charge throwers which guarded this, the only Union port whose dry-dock could accommodate a battleship. Did the social whirl engendered by the wartime traffic blot out the military facts? To quote *War in the Southern Oceans*: 'As the Japanese spread . . . over Malaya and the Indonesian Archipelago, the Union had to face the possibility of serious invasion, with the disconcerting premise that the coast batteries and Seaward Defence Force were quite incapable of resisting it.'<sup>3</sup> The fragility of Durban's wartime glamour was evidenced in the tempting array of moored ships out in the roadstead, averaging 20 a day in 1941 and 50 a day in 1942. The Japanese, who had bombed eight merchant ships in Port Darwin on 19 February, would not even have to penetrate the harbour!

Certain south Atlantic movements of a Vichy French naval squadron gave the first hints that the Axis might use the chief port of Madagascar, Diego Suarez (a 'Vichy' possession) to complete their grip on the Indian Ocean.

Prime Minister Smuts decided he must occupy the island, and a mostly South African force took Diego Suarez on 6 May 1942. But, following their Singaporean triumphs, the Japanese did not leave this uncontested. Natal's coastal command must have felt distinctly anxious when it became known that a Japanese submarine strike force (under Admiral Ishizaki, operating south of Aden) had sneaked a midget submarine into Diego Suarez, and on 29 May inflicted some humiliating damage, mauling the battleship HMS *Ramillies* so badly that it had to be towed to Durban for repair. The Japanese action delayed the complete occupation of Madagascar until 4 November.

Was it Admiral Ishizaki, sitting in submarine I-10 in the Mozambique channel, who instructed a reconnaissance aircraft to fly over Durban on the night of 5 June? This small incident provoked the 'black-out' procedures that were to become the main evidence of a local war for the average Natalian. On this night the nervous captain of the Durban-based battleship *Valiant* complained to C-in-C Durban that though *he* had observed black-out procedures in his corner of the port the brilliantly-lit city abated not a jot in its hospitable mood. (The captain had every right to feel jittery. *Valiant* was under repair in Durban as a direct consequence of Italian 'human torpedoes' off Alexandria in December 1941!<sup>4</sup>) So, reluctantly and with not much conviction, Durban had to submit to a black-out of 20 miles' radius. On 4 July, another unidentified aircraft was observed, but as it turned out the black-out damaged the home side rather more than the enemy. Naval patrols couldn't find port, Anson aircraft couldn't find their landing-strips, and in another (somewhat suppressed) incident, the Bluff gunnery brought down one of the Durban-based planes. However, the sinking of the 7 341 ton *Mundra* off St Lucia on 6 July meant that the Japanese threat couldn't be discounted, and the black-out remained in force. (I shall speculate later, however, that the Durban black-out did not affect the course of the war at all. Perhaps it strengthened moral fibre on the home front!)

### ***Spying and the Ocean War***

In July of 1942 another little-publicised discovery must have raised stress levels at Command HQ. A camouflaged cache of gelignite and detonators was found in the basement of a house in Oriel Road, Wentworth. As G.C. Visser records in *OB: Traitors or Patriots?*:

Among documents seized was one from which it appeared that a plan was afoot to blow up the graving dock in Durban harbour. Later enquiries satisfied us that these two men (i.e. lodgers of the house) ran a very efficient spy system in Durban and had gathered information about ships and shipping from contacts in the dock area. It is more than likely that this cell was responsible for collecting the information relating to the South African Expeditionary Force that sailed for Madagascar in April 1942.<sup>5</sup>

We can hardly avoid considering, then, the effect of espionage on the local naval war. The geographic base for such activity was neutral Mozambique and of course the 'spy capital' of southern Africa, Lourenço Marques. What better story for television transcription than the psychological saga that was played out there between the 'handsome, pink-cheeked, fair-haired' Dr Luitpold Werz, sometime Consul for Germany in Pretoria and now in Lourenço Marques, and his opposite number for Britain, none other than Malcolm

Muggeridge. Visser observed at first hand the 'black comedy' at the Polana Hotel:

It always struck me as ironical to see them sharing the grillroom or bowing faintly to each other in the corridors, or stiffly ignoring each other when they found themselves simultaneously engaged in the gentlemen's cloakroom . . .<sup>6</sup>

After the war Visser was a member of the Barrett Commission, instituted by Smuts to search military records in Germany and get some evidence of the extent of espionage activity in wartime South Africa. In this capacity, Visser compiled eleven volumes of translated, decoded transcriptions of the 'Werz telegrams' (or *Leo Reports*) which had been somewhat casually dispatched through the Lourenço Marques post office.

Suffice it to say that the post-war Smuts government was not eager to pursue the Barrett report and stir up pre-election enmities. So when the change of government came in 1948, it is hardly surprising that the report went strategically missing. However, according to Visser, the United Party MP for Salt River, Harry Lawrence, was able to supply the missing volumes of the transcribed telegrams. Strangely enough, it seems that they were eventually scrutinised by none other than the first Nationalist Prime Minister, Dr D.F. Malan, whose 1957 memoirs sum up 'the German Documents' as 'extraordinarily comprehensive. No message from there or back, is apparently omitted. The picture is complete.'<sup>7</sup> With that, he (Malan) handed them to the State Archivist. Extensive enquiries today in 1994 suggest that they are not to be found. Surely it does not twist any ideological arm to say, fifty years later, that if they were found, they would put an end to much conjecture.

I tend to doubt that the spying was as influential as Visser claims. He says of the documents: 'They were revealing and indicated to me exactly how much had been given away by careless talk . . .'<sup>8</sup> Writing in 1976, Visser could surely have afforded some detail. He could have told us whether the attacks on convoy DN.21 out of Durban or CD.20 into Durban in 1943, were consequent on messages from Werz. After all, he is very circumstantial in the case of the Madagascar campaign. Werz became possessed (fortunately too late to be of effect) of very precise information as to the task force that had assembled in Durban. The details were given on micro-films:

Full information about the convoy must have been gathered and dispatched to Pretoria before the ships left Durban. Information at my disposal later showed that a messenger had arrived at the house of a professor of the University of Pretoria with the details of the expeditionary force that had assembled at Durban. This learned gentleman was not only a prominent member of the OB (*Ossewabrandwag*) but also a very good photographer.<sup>9</sup>

Why, then, no other instance so specific? The lack seems to bear out the somewhat notorious footnote to p.159 of *War in the Southern Oceans*, recording the German complaint of their inefficient South African agents, whose chief 'called himself Hannibal' and whose 'identity is known'! Well: what was known in 1961 seems not to be known today. It might be mentioned that *War in the Southern Oceans* was prepared by 'The Union War Histories Section of the Office of the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa', and there is a possibility that in 1961 it was not politic to declare the identity.

I must be as careful, of course, not to underplay the effect of spying as I am to deny its ultimate influence. There is no question that German Radio was able to reveal to its (largely unconfessed!) South African audience some remarkable home truths. Rev. Arthur Atwell of Cape Town recalls how, in 1944, he was — as a commissioned officer in the Royal Navy — assigned to a convoy assembling in Durban. The convoy was under such secret orders that next of kin did not know where one was, and the men on the ships had no idea of their destination. Yet the night before they sailed, Zeesen wished them *bon voyage* for their trip to Alexandria, and regretted that many of them would not make the journey. The identification of the convoy, its departure date and destination, was completely accurate, and indeed it was to find itself harrassed by submarines north of Mombasa.

Nevertheless, I must note that no U-boat log, as researched from those vessels operating off our coast, appears to record a predetermined ambush as by instruction. If Janie Malherbe is correct to recall how the *Nova Scotia* was sunk in November 1942 as ‘the result of information from a South African German spy’ who later ‘unblushingly revealed his horrible deeds in a South African Afrikaans periodical under a prudent pseudonym . . .’,<sup>10</sup> the fact remains that the U-boat captain (Gysae) misjudged the *Nova Scotia* and its mainly Axis complement of internees (he thought it was an ‘auxiliary cruiser’) in a way that hardly suggests prior knowledge. For me, a clinching argument lies in the fact that that succulent bait, the congested roadstead outside Durban, was simply never touched. A dozen years after the war, a U-boat captain was interviewed about this and he apparently answered with surprise, ‘They never told us about that . . .’<sup>11</sup> So, even if ‘they’ were the Werz network, they failed to put U-boat Command in touch with such a prime naval location.

Nevertheless, only the Werz telegrams could ever really resolve the issue.

### *Second Phase*

Admiral Ishikazi did not make his presence felt after July, and we come now to the second phase, the entry of Germany into South African waters in October 1942. The date is easily explained: by July of that year American coastal defences and radar-assisted convoys had contained, if not quite defeated, the submarine menace in the Atlantic. Admiral Doenitz, meditating in his Paris office on unemployed U-boats — when he wasn’t listening to organ recitals at *Nôtre Dame* — decided to send a pack of the 750-ton vessels withdrawn from the American coast down south of the equator, and so he set up the operational *Gruppe Eisbär*. Cape Town was rather more distant than New York, and there is not much room in a 750 ton vessel. One sailor recalled:

Whichever way you looked . . . torpedoes were lying about, big hams and fitches of bacon hung all over the place, long fat pieces of polony dangled here, there and everywhere. You knocked your legs against piles of tinned stuff, and stumbled over bags of sugar . . .<sup>12</sup>

The October campaign started with the biggest single punch that unprepared South Africa ever received by sea. The country’s comparative innocence is suggested by a night photograph — reproduced in *War in the Southern Oceans* — taken through one of the *Eisbär* periscopes. It shows a brilliantly-lit Sea Point and the outline of Lion’s Head. It was not surprising, then, that between 7 and 11 October 1942, within a range of thirty to ninety miles off

Cape Point, no fewer than fourteen ships (100 902 tons) were sunk in four days.

But *Eisbär* did not have it all its own way: it lost U-179 to aircraft off Dassen Island, and it provoked such a vigorous coastal response as to make the submarine captains abandon the plan to attack the Union's harbour approaches.

After this first round, a splinter from *Eisbär* (U-504) was joined by three newly-arrived U-cruisers to take the operation up the east coast. At 1 616 tons apiece, and with a range of 23 700 nautical miles, the U-cruisers seemed suited to the job. The literature, however, finds them to have lacked manoeuvrability and to have been less successful than their smaller counterparts. Seeing 'the other side' on these matters is rather like trying to get a sympathetic notion of the Great White Shark. One learns that a lot had to come together before a U-boat could get a strike, especially if it must not reveal itself by the fluctuation of the swell. (See U-178's log for 28 October off Agulhas: two torpedoes fired uselessly in the swell at a 10 000 ton freighter, and a whole day spent following a tanker without getting a chance.) Moreover, unlike the Great White Shark, a submerged U-boat was no great swimmer, moving at only 7.3 knots maximum. The hunter could become the hunted in a moment: off Tenerife one was destroyed by an armed trawler.

Nevertheless, Natal might well have had a tremor of apprehension if it had known that on 31 October 1942 its balmy land was first sighted by a U-boat. If our 'local war' had a more vivid memory or literature, one might well say that 'the hour had come'. A certain complacency was understandable, perhaps: Natal was basking in the reports of 'Alamein' where, between 23 and 25 October, the tide of war seemed conclusively to have turned. So, even if they had been publicly disclosed, the lonely sinkings 200 miles off Durban of *Empire Guidon* (7 401 tons) and *Reynolds* (5 113 tons), both falling to U-504 on 31 October, would not, perhaps, have stirred local consciousness.

But when the 8 233 ton *Mendoza* (now under British colours<sup>13</sup>) was sunk on 1 November only 70 miles east-north-east of the Bluff, the Port Natal defence mechanism sprang into action. Ten ships were brought in from the roadstead, the black-out was tightened up, and cars were banned from the beachfront. (Several authorities cite the *Mendoza* as the nearest-ever sinking to Durban, but, as I shall suggest later, this seems disputable.)

There now began something of a psychological warfare between the South African Naval Command and the popular press. How much should be made known about the U-boat war? The question hinged on the distinction between information on submarine strikes and information on shipping movements. Surely one might have the former without necessarily having the latter. Readers of *The Natal Mercury* saw every day a welter of Reuter reports on U-boat actions in the Atlantic and the North Sea. Such briefings would persuade the public of the very real danger that prevailed and of the vulnerability of the merchant fleet. But the South African naval authorities seem not to have made such a distinction, and (insofar as one can reconstruct their policy) would have preferred that there be no reporting of U-boat strikes at all. Even bearing in mind South Africa's fifth column activity, this was surely counter-productive. A *Mercury* columnist writing on 3 November – nearly a month after *Eisbär*'s big strike off Cape Town – is obviously a victim of this attitude. He scoffs at German Radio's claim that 'U-Boats are operating successfully against Allied shipping east of the Cape of Good Hope', and accounts for it as 'an indication of Axis nervousness . . .' But then, as if



Wolfgang Lüth, whose career as the second most successful U-boat ace of World War II was nearly cut short off Port Shepstone.

*(Provincial Museum Services)*

uneasily aware that it might not be the Axis who are laundering the news, he says: 'It would be unwise to dismiss altogether the claims made by the enemy'. That the claims of the enemy were unfortunately true was borne out that week by the arrival of survivors from the *Mendoza*. This led to a strongly-worded editorial in the *Mercury* for 7 November, entitled 'Naval Secrecy':

It would be difficult to imagine a more evasive or misleading statement of policy than the one issued by the Naval Authorities to explain their secrecy over recent shipping losses in South African waters. There can be few people in the Union who do not know of these losses. Hundreds of letters from survivors have passed through the post; survivors are walking — and talking — in the streets, and the news has been freely broadcast from Zeesen . . . If enemy submarines are operating in South African waters it is right and proper that the people of this country should be told of the fact . . . The people do not need to be comforted with soothing communiques. This is not a private war for the Army and Navy. It is a people's war . . . The present secrecy . . . drives people to listen to German propaganda.

A thesis is possible, I believe, that the policy of secrecy made the populace *more* casual, not less, as to the movements of shipping. The signs that went up around Durban, 'Don't Talk About Ships', merely increased a rumouring

environment. But of course, for the historian, the chief casualty is the events themselves. Because of this policy some of the most formidable duels ever fought in Natal warfare, and which might well rank with Shaka's victory over Zwide or the defence of Rorke's Drift, have simply passed into oblivion.

Such a duel was that between the Durban-based destroyer HMS *Inconstant* (fallacious name!) and U-181, off Port Shepstone on 15 November 1942. It seems amazing that our only documentation for this comes from the U-boat commander's log. Kapitänleutnant Lüth — notorious amongst crews for insisting that their pop music be interspersed with classical records, and that there should be no pin-ups in crew's quarters — had enjoyed a propitious 14 November. The day before group-leader U-178 had sunk the British *Louise Moller*, 240 miles south-east of Durban, and the campaign was going well. Now, lying off Port Shepstone (which Lüth observed as 'brilliantly lit up'<sup>14</sup>) came a radio message: he had been awarded Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross by a grateful Führer.

So — for the record — on 14 November, 1942, within sight of Port Shepstone, an officer of the Reich received Hitler's congratulations and the decoration of Oak Leaves.

But Lüth was not to enjoy these pleasures for long. At dawn next morning came an aircraft warning, and at 9.36 a.m. U-181 and HMS *Inconstant*, five miles apart, spotted each other. The tension of the sequel comes out in Lüth's report. First, he dives to 390 feet to avoid the initial depth charge from *Inconstant*. Then 6 depth-charges are counted much closer, and he must dive further to 460 feet. Then come ten so close that he must take his submarine below safety level to a dangerous 525 feet below surface. By 11.29 *Inconstant* is very much master of the situation. After another salvo Lüth records: 'when the starboard motor does more than 70 revs the boat clatters badly.' Those men who are off duty must breathe through potash filters, to keep down the carbon dioxide. After a while, a venting valve fails, and the smell of foul gas from the bilges pervades the submarine. At 1.00 p.m. *Inconstant* is back on track with another six charges, and Lüth, now down to 573 feet, reports a 'disquieting creaking and cracking all over the boat'. But when an exit hatch starts to leak 200–300 litres of seawater per hour, there is nothing for it but to rise and take some of the pressure off the stressed vessel. Fortunately, at 2.30 p.m. *Inconstant* loses contact, and by 6.30 p.m. U-181 can rise to 250 feet. But back comes the most constant *Inconstant*: the submarine's hydrophones pick up the beat of her propellers. So the war of nerves goes on. At 7.04 p.m. come four more depth charges, the 'closest of all'. But *Inconstant* has now run out of charges, and turns the battle over to her sisters *Jasmine* and *Nigella*. They don't seem to be as convinced of the 'contact', and at 11.59 p.m., C-in-C Durban calls off the search.

It is of course one of the frustrations of submarine war that an attacker like *Inconstant* would never know how close she had come to destroying the Führer's latest hero, Wolfgang Lüth, the second most successful U-boat captain of World War II.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps there was some recognition of the encounter in the award to *Inconstant*'s captain, Lieutenant-Commander W.F. Clauston, of the Distinguished Service Cross the following year.<sup>16</sup> With immense relief Lüth surfaced at 1.30 a.m. on the 16th, and moved south to carry out repairs. His log is graphic: every nut on the boat seemed loose enough to come off by hand, as in fact one did. Fifteen tons of water had to be pumped out to get the boat on even keel. The repairs must have been well executed: back off Natal, on 20 November, Lüth takes the 7 000 ton tanker *Scottish Chief*, carrying

10 000 tons of crude oil. And, in another nasty twist of submarine warfare, the nearby American ship *Pierce Butler* (7 191 tons) puts up such a graphic radio report on the explosion of the tanker that she gives away her own position, and is shot up by U-177. Fortunately all 93 of her crew are saved.

Assailed by such blows, the Durban port authority closed the harbour for a week. The U-boat pack, noticing the quiet, headed north for Lourenço Marques. Survivors of one of Lüth's sinkings in the Mozambique Channel report him speaking from surfaced U-181 in 'Oxford English with an accent that was German in character'. His destruction of the 6 481 ton Greek ship *Mount Helmos* off Oro Point on 24 November might be included in the Natal story, since the 37 survivors came ashore at St Lucia. Lüth himself survived almost to the end of the war, when he was shot, in Germany itself it seems, by a jittery sentry.

Attention now turns to Kapitänleutnant Gysae in U-177, who performed the two most familiar sinkings off Natal, and the two disasters which brought the U-boat war to palpable reality for most Natalians. At 6.12 a.m. on 28 November, Gysae sighted smoke east of Cape St Lucia, and later identified 'a medium-sized passenger ship' zigzagging at 14 knots. This was the ill-fated *Nova Scotia*, a hired transport of 6 796 tons, whose demise now was to cause the greatest loss of life of any maritime casualty in South African history. Not that the major portion of victims were South African: she was carrying 765 Italians, mostly civil internees from Eritrea, and only 134 South African servicemen in addition to her crew. The fact that Gysae, at 400 metres range, hit a ship peopled mostly with Axis personnel again suggests that there was no espionage behind this daylight attack. (Incidentally, 14 knots is not quite fast enough to escape a U-boat. Gysae would have struck the 17 000 ton liner *California* on 15 November, east of Durban, if, after a five hour chase, the passenger ship had not eventually outpaced the submarine's 18 knots.)

For the South Africans on board *Nova Scotia* — in sight of a long-deserved home welcome after the 'Alamein' action — the destruction of the ship was a bitter tragedy. I was first struck by this when I came upon the *Nova Scotia* saga in a completely removed context — the autobiography of the Natal mountaineer, Brian Godbold.<sup>17</sup> Godbold had got early release from his corps at Helwan, but found that he did not have all his papers, and so had to sacrifice his chance of an early sailing. Later 'the hand of Providence' seemed to show itself when he learned that the ship he missed at Port Tewfik was none other than *Nova Scotia*. So he escaped being one of several Natalians who went down with the ship — the *Mercury* later gave notices for, amongst others, F. W. Brokensha (of 302 Prince Alfred Street, Pietermaritzburg), and Sergeant (Jock) Payne, educated at Maritzburg College.

When Gysae, 30 miles off Cape St Lucia, hit *Nova Scotia* with three torpedoes at 400 metres range, there began the best-documented sinking saga in the local war literature. One need only recommend the latest amalgamation of accounts by Ian Uys in *Survivors of Africa's Oceans*. What a story! — a man rushes from his cabin to escape the listing ship only to find a pillar of oil-fire coming the other way, straight along the corridor. Squeezing through the porthole, he so injures his back as to keep the scars for the rest of his life. He is winded when he hits the sea, yet not long after notices sharks beginning to mill around the boats and rafts.<sup>18</sup> Down in the water, prisoners and their late captors are suddenly equalised.

Corporal Andrew Biccard, of the Cape Town Highlanders, tried to board a tiny raft which barely had room for the two Italians already there. They tried to push him away. Then one noticed he had a rosary around his neck. They were fellow Catholics! Biccard was pulled to safety.<sup>19</sup>

A major historic interest of this saga lies in the subsequent actions of the U-boat captain. (At this point I must interpolate a completely non-specialist note when I say that, gazing at the photograph of *Nova Scotia* in Ian Uys's book,<sup>20</sup> I believe I can see why Gysae might have identified this 7 000 ton transport ship as an 'auxiliary cruiser.' The *Nova Scotia* has streamlined passenger-type fairings around her bridge and foredecks, and looks considerably more impressive than her actual size or her humble designation.) There is no question but that the rescue operation, mounted from Lourenço Marques, and which saw the Portuguese sloop *Alfonso de Albuquerque* pick up 192 survivors, would never have happened if the U-boat captain had not radioed for help. I say this because there is the breath of an implication in some of Uys's interviews that he only did this because he 'received a tremendous shock when he found that he had torpedoed a prisoner-of-war ship carrying his allies' and so was heard shouting repeatedly in English: 'I am sorry . . . I am terribly sorry . . . I will radio Berlin . . . Help will be sent . . . Be brave . . .'.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, for the men struggling in the water, the eerie presence of one's late 'killer', especially of the size of a U-cruiser, circling the disaster-scene of its own creation, its guns manned in case of any retaliation, are factors not likely to endear one to the voice behind the megaphone, even if it does speak perfect English. But in fact Gysae's actions are consistent with a number of reported instances, even when the survivors were all under an Allied flag. Whereas it was commonplace, apparently, for Japanese submarines to machine-gun survivors, there is only one recorded instance of this in all the 130 or so U-boat sinkings off South Africa, off Ascension Island in 1944. (In fact the Nuremberg Trials showed it to be the only case in World War II.<sup>22</sup>) After the war not a few survivors sought out U-boat captains to thank them for aid received. Kapitänleutnant Witte, on U-159 of *Eisbär*, heading home from the Cape in December, was so helpful to his victims on *Star of Scotland*, supplying and towing their lifeboat, that the American captain went to great lengths to meet him again in 1948.<sup>23</sup> Off Natal, note the case of *Louise Moller*: 'Survivors describe how the U-boat (U-178) surfaced and they were questioned by an officer with a long black beard who, before making off, indicated various men swimming in the water who should be rescued.'<sup>24</sup> As aerial counter-attack became more efficient, however, such incidents could only diminish. Once aircraft could come up from the horizon in less time than it took a U-boat to submerge, one could no longer afford to have the crew preoccupied up on deck.<sup>25</sup>

In fact the German captains off South Africa had come under restraint not to give more help, and that as a consequence of a 'red-letter' incident which, fifty years later, should be given prominence. This occurred some two and a half months before the *Nova Scotia* affair, when *Eisbär* first moved south of the equator. On 12 September 1942, U-156, under Captain Hartenstein, en route to the Cape, saw and torpedoed the passenger liner *Laconia*. It turned out that there were 2 372 passengers and troops on board, many of them women. Hartenstein immediately mounted a major rescue operation, and took on board many (including an English nurse) who were later to testify to their good treatment at his hands. In heavy seas he rounded up *Laconia*'s lifeboats and

marshalled them ready for towing — all the time showing a large Red Cross banner. Suddenly out of the skies appeared an American ‘Liberator’ which started to bomb U-156. The U-boat was damaged, and Hartensein had no option but to disembark his new passengers, cut the tow-rope, and submerge before the ‘Liberator’ could come back and finish him off.

Headquarters policy changed in a moment. Admiral Doenitz issued a communique that sounds strange to anyone too fixed on World War II stereotypes. ‘The incident is proof’, he said, ‘of how disastrous it could be to display humane feelings toward such an opponent.’<sup>26</sup> Rescues must cease: one might round up the chief officer of the sunken ship (to put his expertise out of commission for the duration of the war) but thereafter the survivors must look to themselves. ‘In spite of the most scathing enquiries’, says Uys, ‘no-one has ever discovered where that bomber was based or whether or not it asked for and received orders.’<sup>27</sup> At any rate, because of it, the *Laconia* casualty list greatly increased, and less than half its complement reached Liberia.

So when — as C.J. Harris reports the *Nova Scotia* in *War at Sea* — Gysae radioed Command that he had sunk a ship with (as he estimated) ‘over a thousand Italian civil internees ex Massawa’ on board, the predictable reply came back: ‘Continue operating. Waging war comes first. No rescue attempts.’<sup>28</sup> But obviously, as we have seen, the German HQ did inform the Portuguese at Lourenço Marques.

This being a Natal story, I must only hint at the sequel in Mozambique. The Allied soldiers and sailors picked up by the neutral Portuguese had to be interned under international law for the duration of hostilities. But that was to reckon without Malcolm Muggerridge. By dint of arranging a semi-official parole for them one Sunday afternoon, and organising some 10 taxis to swoop down and pick them up, he was able to have them delivered over the Swaziland border. Despite Consul Werz’s shrill protests they arrived home rather sooner than international law required!<sup>29</sup>

So far as our local social history goes, the sinking of the *Nova Scotia* demonstrated graphically the strange policy of muffling the U-boat war. The papers positively glowed with virtuous silence. Two days before the sinking, there had appeared this in the *Mercury*:

Father Christmas calling all children! Sssh!!!! don’t talk about ships . . . Everyone knows that all the big Boats have been away taking Soldiers, Airmen and War supplies ‘up North’ and everyone knows that the shops are short of Toys this Christmas. When the war is over Father Christmas will return to Toyland at Greenacres . . .

Of course one must agree that, with men of the First Division *en route* home from North Africa, the disclosure of convoy details and shipping movements would invite danger. But that is a different thing from refusing to admit that tragedies of some scale are happening off one’s own coast. On 30 November and 1 December the *Mercury* reports some seven sinkings off Lourenço Marques. But, closer to home, the *Nova Scotia* only gets a brief mention on 2 December in a small item at the bottom of a page: ‘About 100 survivors from a torpedoed vessel have been picked up by the gunboat *Alfonso de Albuquerque* which left Lourenço Marques on Sunday morning.’ On 4 December this is corrected to 192 survivors, and the admission is made that ‘acting as escort for prisoners of war were some British soldiers.’ Otherwise, the *Mercury* can only hint at this concealed disaster with a few military

funeral notices and a photograph of ‘Captain Herder and Purser Muller of the *Nova Scotia*’, sub-titled, with due vagueness, ‘Drowned at sea through enemy activity.’

Much less possible to be kept secret was the sinking — two days after *Nova Scotia* — of the Union Castle liner *Llandaff Castle*, of 10 799 tons, which was torpedoed just south of Oro point at the boundary between Mozambique and Natal. This was another ‘bag’ for Gysae in U-177. In fact, on 2 December, he almost opened fire on yet a third passenger ship to complete a gruesome hat-trick, but fortunately identified her just in time as the hospital ship *Dorsetshire*. (Lüth, too, saw her that night, illuminated, says his log, ‘as in regulations’.) The abandoning of the *Llandaff Castle* went according to drill, there being no oil fire as on *Nova Scotia*, and 270 survived of a complement of 280.

Now it was quite impossible for the Durban press to conceal this event, because by 5 December the bulk of the survivors were walking the streets! More than that, they were not slow to compliment the city on its reception of them: ‘Charity can be cold, but Durban’s charity and kindness is as kind as its sunshine.’ This comment raises the interesting question what the weather was like in Durban on 3 December. Perla Gibson, Durban’s ‘lady in white’, recalls the weather in which the *Inconstant* (constant yet again!) brought the *Llandaff Castle* survivors to port.

All through the night of 3 December 1942 — it was pouring with rain — we waited until in the grey, moist dawn, we saw the silhouette of HMS *Inconstant* coming into dock, her decks crowded with bedraggled survivors wearing all sorts of odd scraps of clothing. Anything but downcast . . . they shouted, the moment they saw me, ‘Give us a song’, and I responded with ‘There’ll Always Be an England.’ Lustily they joined in . . .<sup>30</sup>

Later that day the visitors could be seen, says the *Mercury*, ‘touring the shopping centre in order to obtain clothing. A three-month-old baby was fitted with a complete layette free of charge.’ (Was this the baby who, according to one interview, was handed from boat to boat of the five lifeboats until it reached its mother?) One survivor told how the officers had seen the torpedo coming along the surface of the sea, and had tried to swing the ship to port helm, but too late. There was notably no panic: one child was heard to say, as it was lowered from the sinking ship, ‘Naughty boat, naughty boat to break.’

And, once again, as the lifeboats gathered off the sinking ship, came the eerie arrival of the victor.

Suddenly, quite close, the submarine surfaced — and what a whopper she was! I heard a voice call out in perfect English: ‘Come alongside’ . . . The submarine’s searchlight then flashed over each boat in turn. I thought that this was the end, and that the next thing we would hear would be machine-guns; but nothing like that happened. We heard her motors start up and she slipped quite silently beneath the surface . . .

The *Llandaff Castle* saga had one interesting complication, when two of the lifeboats broke from the tow in heavy seas. Their story is reported in the *Mercury* for 7 December. They landed on an uninhabited part of the northern Zululand coast, from where the members of the crew carried a child for nearly twenty miles ‘in a blanket slung between ropes.’ ‘But’, says the *Mercury*

cheerily, these survivors 'will be brought down by train from Zululand this morning.' A compass from one of *Llandaff Castle*'s lifeboats graces the Provincial Assembly building in Pietermaritzburg to this day. Apparently a Zulu headman, Mpahleni Zikali, gave considerable help to a splinter-group of survivors, and later found a ship's compass in their deserted lifeboat. The neat plaque donated along with the compass by the Union Castle Company does not mention that, when the Administrator of Natal visited Zikali in 1946, the compass was handed to him with the words: 'I no longer want this watch which doesn't keep time . . .'<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, the far greater disaster of the *Nova Scotia* got no direct mention — except, that is, for one grisly indirect mention that could no longer be suppressed. Thus on 7 December: 'A huge number of bodies — not from the *Llandaff Castle* — have been washed up along the North and South Coast within the last few days. They include 10 SA soldiers. (Notice how the *Nova Scotia* is alluded to as 'not the *Llandaff Castle*'!) For all the official concealment, then, such graphic evidence meant that *Nova Scotia* entered Natal's folk consciousness. Janie Malherbe says, in *Port Natal*: 'The people of Durban were shaken into horrified awareness of the closeness of danger when no less than 120 corpses were washed up on their city's hitherto gay holiday beaches . . .'<sup>32</sup>

One speaks, no doubt, with the advantage of hindsight when one judges that if official policy had been more open on such incidents, there would have been no need for the *Mercury* leader of 9 December. Ships bringing the First Division back home were now approaching port, and the story of what had actually happened on 28 November would surely have made people *more*, not less, tight-lipped. Instead we get this, under the heading 'Telling the Enemy'. 'No one', says the editorial, 'has complained more than we have about the suppression of news.' On the other hand the paper has never questioned that 'there are occasions for absolute secrecy'. All the more reason to complain, then, that

forty-eight hours before these ships (i.e. the troopships) reached Durban on Monday half the population of Durban appeared to know not only the approximate time of their arrival but also the ships in which they (the returning soldiers) were coming. The reason for the leakage was the desire to give the men a civic reception.

For indeed, in early December, the U-boat *gruppe* was still around. Returning from the Mozambique channel, U-177 sank on 14 December the Dutch vessel *Sawhloento* of 3 085 tons, almost exactly abreast of Durban. This was the tenth ship sunk by Lüth's group off Natal, and their last victim of 1942. The U-cruiser remnant of the original *Eisbär* expedition was now recalled, and the three U-cruisers were all back in Bordeaux by early January. (Lüth celebrated Christmas, says his log, 'in tropical heat 30 metres under water, with a concertina going and a home-made tree.'<sup>33</sup>)

Whether or not this was a happy home-coming for the German crews it is impossible to say. The colossal struggles around Stalingrad were now in progress, and one wonders whether local editors in occupied France were as much muffled from real events as their counterparts in Durban. Meanwhile poor Durban, unaware that its maritime enemies were well on their way back to Europe, had to endure a 'blacked-out' New Year. The *Mercury* for 1 January — with its main headline 'Germans liquidated at Stalingrad' — evoked the atmosphere. 'Present on the darkened streets' were the 'coon' bands,

their zest being undiminished by the fact that they could be heard but not seen. Mr Edward Dunn, Director of Entertainments, last night toured the principal Durban cinemas to announce the arrival of the First Division and outlined today's arrangements. The arrangements were greeted by loud cheering and applause, to which a number of the First Division men present contributed in no small measure.

One of those who arrived in port on New Year's Day itself was Brian Godbold, quoted above. The lesson of *Nova Scotia* had considerably delayed his homecoming. 'For three days we had been steaming westward, so our top-secret course must have taken us a long way towards India to elude the submarine menace. We did not know then that the *Nova Scotia* . . . had been torpedoed.'<sup>34</sup>

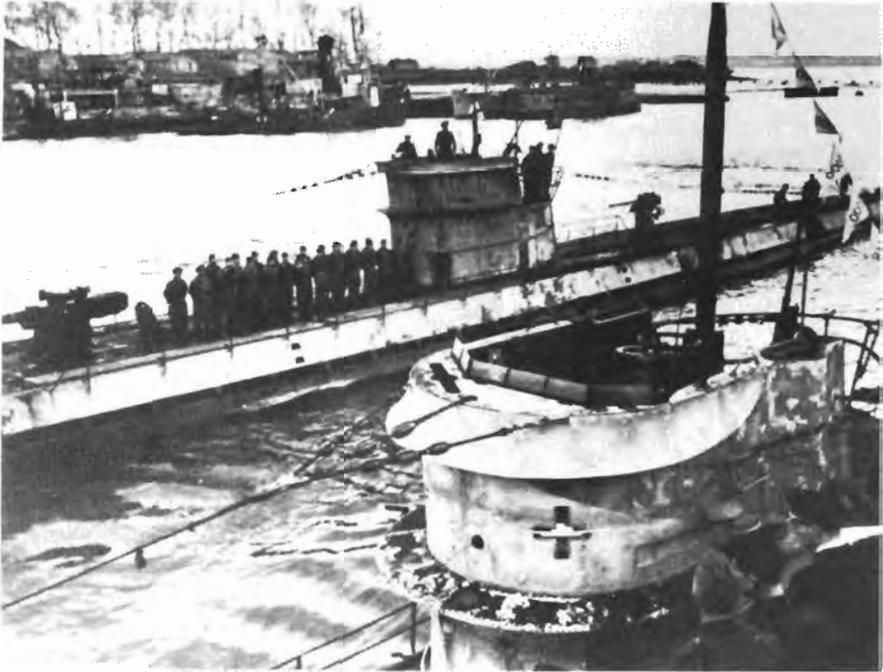
### Phase Three

Phase Three of Natal's U-boat war opens with the arrival of *Gruppe Seehund* off South Africa in February 1943. U-506, U-509, U-516 and U-160 fuelled up at the 'milch-cow', as the sailors named U-459, south of St Helena. *Seehund* arrived off Natal on 31 February. This group met with a less amenable war situation: the palpable shocks of *Nova Scotia* and *Llandaff Castle* had galvanised the Coastal Command. Ships moved in and out of Durban, now, within a convoy system that was enforced all around South Africa. Catalina squadrons, based at Durban and St Lucia, had a much greater range than the valiant old Ansons. The *Seehund* logs admit for the first time the demoralising sensation of being under radar beams, as detected by their own 'Metox' equipment. Nevertheless, along with the later-arrived U-182, the five boats did a great deal of damage off Natal, sinking seven vessels in a fifteen-day sortie, before *Seehund* was recalled on 14 March. The expedition does not rank so vividly in the literature, however, because no passenger ships were involved, and there was no loss of life on the scale of *Nova Scotia*.

Nevertheless, *Seehund* accounted for what might well be an undesirable record in South Africa's military/naval history. One of its members dealt what was probably the most expensive single salvo that has ever been fired from the enemy in any South African naval action, and perhaps in any South African action whatsoever. The story turns to Kapitänleutnant Lassen in U-160, who patrolled off Port Shepstone on 1 March 1943.

Incidentally, Lassen's coastal patrol, on 1, 2 and 3 March from Port Shepstone almost to the Bluff and back, is the only documented coastline journey you will find in *War in the Southern Oceans*, whose maps are compiled from the U-boat logs themselves. So . . .! of all the countless spottings of conning towers, disappearing periscopes, cylindrical shadows, emerging swastikas, megaphones shouting through the surf, that were so amply and ardently reported by Natalians through 1942 and 1943, we can say that those who saw a lonesome periscope off-shore between 1 and 3 March 1943 *did* perhaps see the real thing! (We have to deglamourise a considerable local mythology. After *Eisbär*'s Cape peninsula strike of October 1942, some 95 per cent of the U-boat operation took place far off territorial limits.)

Having completed his patrol, Lassen lay at ease off Port Shepstone on 3 March. The *Mercury* for that day ran a nice editorial on the *nagana* controversy — the main local debate of these months. It seems that a large agricultural lobby wanted disease-bearing game shot out of Zululand. In the



Back in Lorient, France, U-160 (foreground), which did the greatest damage of any enemy unit operating off Natal. Her barnacled and patchy condition witnesses to her long stint at sea. Notice the victory pennons, with ships' tonnages.

(Herzog: *U-boats in Action*)

typical metaphor of the day the *Mercury* called the Provincial 'action committee' a 'committee of little Hitlers', and stated that 'public opinion is overwhelmingly against the slaughter of game.' Meanwhile, unknown to the *Mercury's* genial readership, a life-and-death struggle between hunter and hunted was going on right on its (maritime) doorstep!

At 2.00 p.m. on that day there occurred off Port Shepstone the fatal meeting between U-160 and the eleven ship convoy 'DN.21', attended by the corvette *Nigella*, and three Royal Navy armed trawlers. The long debate as to whether convoys attract or dissuade attack would have given the argument on this occasion to the more cynical school. In U-160, 'Kanonier' Lassen (as he was known to the U-boat men — he had worked his way up from gunner to captain in fifteen months<sup>35</sup>) found it easy to follow the convoy through the afternoon and into the night; it was pin-pointed by the navigation lights of escorting aircraft. He followed DN.21 to a position off the Pondoland coast (but, as his ambush started off Natal, I will still lay claim to this as a Natal story!) There he did a very daring thing. He took advantage of the cloudy night, and surfaced in the middle of the convoy. So there was U-160, up in the open, penetrating the two lines of slow-moving ships and avoiding (on the surface) the asdic search of the escorts. At 11.22 p.m. by his log he opened fire, and sent off what might well have been the most destructive single salvo (three torpedoes) ever fired in a South African engagement. He sank at once the American *Harvey W Scott* of 7 176 tons, the British *Nirpura* of 5 961 tons, and severely damaged the Dutch

tanker *Tibia* of 10 356 tons (which eventually limped into Durban under its own steam.)

An awful lack of prior drill or convoy discipline immediately became apparent. *Harvey W Scott* switched on her upper deck lights on impact, making her own fatality all the more dangerous to her consorts. *Viviana* switched on a searchlight to pick up survivors, and thus gave illuminated information to any silent watcher. *Nigella* sent up star shells, the American *Carolinian* fired indiscriminate tracer. While chaos developed, U-160 bided her time, and then, at 1.10 a.m. (4 March) fired another two torpedoes. The log claims two sinkings, but in fact only the British *Empire Mahseer* of 5 087 tons was hit, and she went down in less than two minutes. The convoy was now in complete disarray, and Lassen could wait for another prime sighting, which he eventually got at 3.46 a.m. Two torpedoes each found their target, sinking the British *Marietta E*, of 7 628 tons, and severely damaging *Sheaf Crown*. At last, after 14 hours of chase, the convoy escort got the measure of Lassen's game. U-160 discovered a destroyer coming straight for her, and so quietly slipped away from the rout she had caused, and headed north for St Lucia.

It was the Durban base's biggest single disaster. Reaction was clumsy: the rescue boat didn't get through the harbour boom until 4.45 a.m. At 7.31 a.m. *Nigella* reported that DN.21 was reduced to five ships and one escort. Later that day C-in-C Atlantic took over affairs and ordered the convoy to be disbanded and all sailings out of Durban to be cancelled. The dismal tidings had more effect far way in the British Prime Minister's office than in the local press. Churchill commented to the Admiralty: 'We simply cannot afford losses of this kind on this route'. Their response was that, since convoys were introduced, only seven ships had been lost. Churchill was pacified, being sure that they were, 'as ever, doing their best.'<sup>36</sup>

The nearest that Natalians might have got to guessing a new intensity in the submarine war was the appearance of a communique, published, ironically, on 4 March, just as Lassen scored his final hits. This was from the naval C-in-C South Africa:

The enemy has struck at our lines of communication . . . the tide of land war has receded in Africa, but the sea war has come closer to our shores . . . Never by word or deed give the enemy the slightest information about the movement of ships at sea. To win the war at sea he must have that information and he spends a fortune in an attempt to get it.

By that sleight of hand, which put the blame more on the fifth column than on the convoy system or coastal defence, no factual information ever reached the public. The story of DN.21 was never told, and the urgency of the HQ warning was never enforced by honest facts. (The virtuous *Mercury* supported the call to secrecy, though, with a rather nasty little regular slot which recorded the names of those who were fined five pounds for not observing the black-out!)

Meanwhile, off the Natal coast, just south of St Lucia mouth and in sight of land, 'Kanonier' Lassen could, on 9 March, take his leisure in the knowledge that he had received the congratulations of his Führer and the award of Oak leaves — the second U-boat commander to be so decorated within sight of Natal.

By 10 March many of DN.21's survivors were in hospitals in Durban, with amazing stories to tell. (At least, one *presumes* they were the convoy survivors,

for the calamity itself was never publicised. But there were no other Natal sinkings at the time.) One man interviewed by the *Mercury* recalled how his lifeboat had tried to make way with 30 men on board: 'Before they had time to push off, the ship capsized on top of the boat, which overturned . . . the suction was so terrific that our clothes were ripped off . . .' Then, after six days battling with the ocean, another incident burns itself on the memory. One of the exhausted rowers 'suddenly rose, and in a matter-of-fact voice told the others to carry on for a while, saying: 'I'm just strolling home for a cup of coffee, fellows,' and walked over the side. They drew him back with difficulty, and shortly after that he died.' Another survivor described how his ship had 'suddenly folded in two, stern meeting bow.'

Meantime U-160's trail of destruction continued. The American *James B Stephens* (7 176 tons) was dispatched on 8 March, and the night of 11 March saw the end of the British *Aelbryn*, of 4 986 tons, off the North Coast. In the tradition of Lüth before him, Lassen surfaced and spoke to the survivors in what they later described as 'perfect English'. All but eight of them were rescued by the Portuguese liner *Lourenço Marques*. What with such an array of successes, and with Hitler's radio message to Lassen, it seemed that a hostile providence was agreeing with Robey Leibbrandt, who on 12 March gave his pro-Hitler speech when he received the death sentence for treason from Justice Schreiner. U-160's activity off Natal in March 1943 must constitute an undesirable record for damage done by a single operating unit of the enemy.

But, back in occupied France, U-boat Command was not awed into false optimism by Lassen's successes. In fact it was not satisfied by *Seehund*'s overall performance. It had been an almost one-man affair (though U-182 finished off the South African *Aloe* (5 047 tons) far south-east of Durban as the group headed south.) On 14 March *Seehund* was recalled, and all had reached the 'pens' at Lorient by 11 May — all, that is, except U-182 just mentioned. And in her fate lay a bitter irony. We recall that the U-boats were instructed to pick up the chief officers of victim vessels. Let us hope that the captain of *Aloe* was hosted well before U-187 was itself wiped out by a US destroyer as it neared home in France. Regarding the *Seehund* mission, U-boat Command 'passed the buck' rather as did their counterpart in Cape Town, blaming the group's unsuccess not on themselves but on enemy Intelligence! South African coastal defence was they said 'brilliantly supported by a system of spotters along the coast.' The authors of *War in the Southern Oceans* take a very wry view of this claim. The 'prolific reports' that saturated Naval HQ were 'almost invariably false and distracting.' C.J. Harris recalls putting his crew at action stations and steaming at full speed down the coast 'to ram a periscope sighted off Durban'. It turned out to be 'a broomstick floating upright in the water . . .'<sup>37</sup>

Before *Seehund* got home, however, the third phase of submarine activity off Natal turned out not to be over. It was completed by the strange lone voyage of the Italian submarine *Leonardo da Vinci* under Captain Gazzana-Priaroggia. Of the 26 ships (as I calculate) that were sunk by submarines off Natal and Pondoland in World War II, only four were not felled by the Germans. One was lost to the Japanese, and the other three to this Italian loner, whose April expedition had begun with the notorious destruction of the *Empress of Canada* off Las Palmas. By mid-April *Leonardo da Vinci* was off Natal, where it sank the Dutch *Sembilan* (6 566 tons), the British *Manaar* (8 007 tons), and the American *John Drayton* (7 177 tons), all some 160 miles south-east of Durban.

The tenacious Durban tug *Prudent* went out to save some 25 survivors in weather so ferocious that even the Ventura squadrons did not leave ground. Meantime, the luckless captain of the *Manaar* suffered the same fate as his confrère mentioned above: his host vessel was itself sunk, going down with all hands on its return journey on 23 May.

#### *Phase Four*

Phase Four began in May 1943. Perhaps it was because of demoralisation in the U-boat campaign that this last group to operate off South Africa did not even bear a code-name. As it was, the successes of *Eisbär* and *Seehund* contrasted remarkably with what was happening in the Atlantic, when, between August 1942 and May 1943, 122 U-boats were lost, 55 managed to damage but not sink an Allied vessel, and 42 achieved no result at all.<sup>38</sup> Off Natal the greater effectiveness of coastal defence and surveillance was illustrated at the new *gruppe*'s very first strike, when, at 2.12 p.m. on 17 May off St Lucia, U-198 hit the British *Northmoor* (4 392 tons). Within two hours the submarine found itself circled by aircraft and patrol boats. They pursued her right through till 8.45 p.m. on the 18th, when U-198 was engaged by an RAF Catalina of 262 (St Lucia) squadron. The plane illuminated the sea, says the U-boat's log, with a 'dazzling red light'. On this occasion, the U-boat's deck guns had the better of it, and the Catalina had to limp back to St Lucia on one engine.

A few more successes accrued to this small contingent: U-198 got the British *Dumra* off Zululand on 5 June, and on 7 June, east of Durban, the 7 176 ton American vessel *William King*. (Says the U-boat log menacingly: 'The captain did not come on board until my invitation was emphasized with a burst from an automatic pistol.') A more dramatic success had fallen to U-178 on 1 June as it waited within sight of shore some 60 miles from the Durban Bluff for the approach of convoy CD.20, which had already lost two ships to the *gruppe* off Cape Agulhas. At last the convoy arrived, and, in the morning light, U-178 picked off the Dutch *Salabangka* (6 586 tons). But CD.20 did not fall into disarray as DN.21 had done three months earlier, and the convoy limped into Durban that evening. A tug attempted to tow in the crippled Dutch freighter, but it foundered in the seas. (Incidentally, if *Salabangka* was torpedoed where it was sighted, 60 miles off Durban Bluff, this would surely be closer to Durban than *Mendoza* — 1 November 1942 — which was 70 miles off the Bluff.)

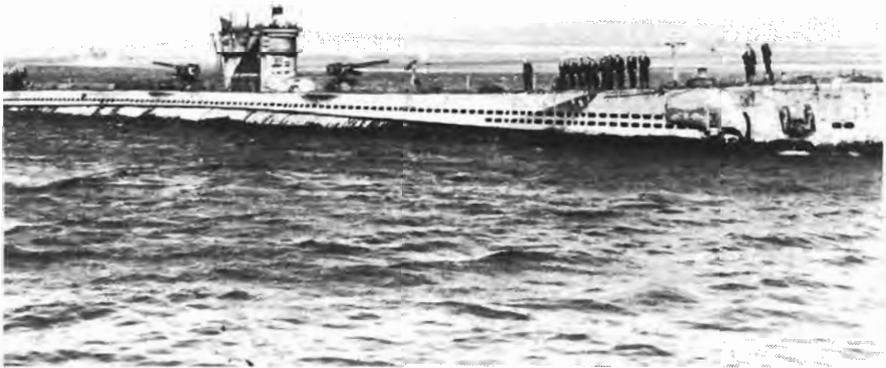
The strikes of early June 1943 were the last U-boat strikes close to Natal. The *gruppe* scored more successes off Mozambique, and potted on looking for victims through June and July into August, but it seems incontrovertible that Natal now 'commanded the sea'. South African coastal reconnaissance, by radar and by air, had greatly improved since July 1942. Dr F.J. Hewitt, a sometime senior officer of the SSS, the South African Radar detection unit, admits in a recent essay<sup>39</sup> the problem of poor identification when radar was first deployed. The locally-made receiver, the 'JB', was 'certainly not able to distinguish quickly, if at all, between a fishing boat and a surfaced submarine', so that 'Air Force crews soon tired of fruitless flights to find yet another fishing boat . . .'<sup>40</sup> One can imagine the scepticism aroused by the fledgling radar unit (a corps of 'mad scientists and beautiful women') in seasoned airmen whose activity was itself dubbed 'a rest-cure for those who had had a long spell in the Desert . . .', especially when one reads of some of the earlier

gaffes. Thus the Anson from No.42 Air School, which in December 1942 sighted over 30 ships 60 miles off Port Elizabeth, and, knowing of no home convoy of that size, signalled an all-time emergency. A bomber squadron was immediately despatched to take on what looked to be a full-scale Japanese fleet, only to find wafting over the sea the rather beautiful effect of shadows of cirro-cumulus clouds cast upon the water.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, by August 1943, coastal radar — or shall we say coastal radiographic surveillance — was giving the U-boats a hard time. And as for the cynical airmen, it was their patrolling technique that had apparently given the enemy some complacency. *War in the Southern Oceans* mentions an interview in 1958 with ex-Korvettenkapitän Kentrat, of U-196. Apparently the U-boat personnel traded on the belief that the coastal pilots ‘habitually flew too high and were observed by the look-out on the U-boat which had plenty of time to submerge and frequently evade notice altogether.’<sup>42</sup> But by mid-1943 this was no longer happening. See for instance U-196’s log for 25 May: the captain is scrutinising the Natal South Coast when he is forced to submerge by aircraft. Later, when he returns to Natal from the Mozambique channel, he cannot surface for fear of being spotted by the Mtubatuba Squadron (SAAF No.22 TBR). Squadron patrols keep him down for two days: only after midnight on 16 August can he surface and let his boat catch breath.

These mounting successes came to a head in what was surely Natal’s greatest local victory, and the memorable climax of its U-boat war. I refer to the hunting and sinking of U-197, commanded by Kapitänleutnant Bartels. U-197’s terminal voyage takes our story far off the Natal coast indeed. In fact her last success, when, on 23 July, she torpedoed the 9 583 ton Swedish tanker *Pegasus*, occurred 450 miles east of St Lucia. Remarkably, at that distance, the entire crew was saved. (U-boat captains were instructed, one gathers, not to respect neutrality in the case of Swedish ships ‘not listed in the Göteborg traffic’.) The hulk of *Pegasus* was still blazing when, days later, it was spotted 600 miles east of Durban. Having despatched the Swede, U-197 headed even further east, little realising that, at such a distance, she was still not safe from scrutiny by South African coastal Intelligence. The unsung heroes on this occasion are referred to in the literature as D/F — Direction Finding, but otherwise not identified in the logistical data. D/F now became engaged in the most exciting maritime hunt of our local war. They managed to ‘bust’ the radio communication between the four U-boats of the *gruppe* (ironically, a conversation as to the best meeting-place to pass on to each other ‘Bellatrix’, a newly-issued cypher code!) Radio signals on their own do not identify position, but it seems that, on 17 August, a careless reference by U-197 (Bartels), in its operational report to U-181 (Lüth), enabled D/F to plot a voyage-path. So, at 7.10 p.m. on 19 August, R/F was able to offer combined HQ a grid reference for the route of the enemy vessel. And on 20 August, Flight-Lieutenant O. Barnett, in an RAF Catalina of 259th St Lucia Squadron, was directed to a point in the ocean far from base, some five to six hundred miles due east of St Lucia, and 100 miles south of Madagascar. When one thinks of the years of patrolling, of all the dubious alarms and the close shaves, it seems nothing short of miraculous that Barnett should emerge at 1.10 p.m. out of cloud over the vast anonymous ocean, and see ‘a large white-cap at the limit of visibility’. The sea was rough, but ‘with the aid of binoculars he could make out U-197 on an easterly course, doing about 10 knots on the surface.’<sup>43</sup>

Immediately Barnett executed a port-side diving turn in order to approach



With Durban Bluff and Salisbury Island in the background, the surrendered Italian submarine *Ammiraglio Cagni*. Revd Arthur Attwell, who was on the veteran HMS *Caradoc* when it sailed out of Durban to effect the capture, remembers both the shock and the delight at the size of the U-cruiser as she surfaced.

*(Local History Museum, Durban)*

U-197 in an opposite course but at the correct angle for straddling. At the last moment U-197 turned in the direction of the plane, and the six depth charges, dropped from 50 feet, missed target. Only the Catalina's front and port blister guns scored hits on the submarine's deck and conning tower (Barnett could see 'the brown overalls and flat blue caps of her gun crews' as he veered overhead). In fact, it was these gun-strikes from the aircraft that eventually proved decisive. It became obvious as the duel went on (the U-boat manoeuvring not to be caught 'straddled') that, with her listing appearance and tell-tale oil streaks, she was hardly fit to submerge. This she attempted at 1.45 p.m., but at 2.23. she had to come up again, and at 3.46 radioed her sister vessels (120 miles south) that she was no longer able to dive. This was her last message. Meanwhile Barnett, who had expended his depth-charges, could only circle and leave a trail of flares, in the hope that other Catalinas might spot the position. At last, at 5.05 p.m., he was joined by N/265, manned by Flight Officer C.E. Robin. Desperately Bartels tried to angle U-197 to the aircraft's dive. Robin's first two runs were unsuccessful, but then, at 5.30 p.m., Bartels misjudged the aircraft's third attack, and was straddled by six depth-charges, dropped from 75 feet. 'Debris flew into the air, and the U-boat disappeared leaving a large patch of oil on the surface.' For half an hour the Catalinas — the only local aircraft with the range for this operation — circled the area, but there was nothing more to be seen, and they flew on to Madagascar for re-fuelling.

So ended the U-boat war off Natal — and, indeed, in any operational sense,

off South Africa. (There were some lone hits far south in the Atlantic while Germany and Japan exchanged *matériel* and personnel in late 1944 and 1945.) No doubt the vantage of hindsight is a privileged one, but it does seem remarkable that this epic duel, with its great capacity to boost local morale, went unremarked in the local or national press. In fact, even when — in a final whiff of maritime excitement — the submarine *Ammiraglio Cagni* gave itself up after the Italian Armistice, and was escorted into Durban on 20 September 1943, there was no publicity. After that, Allied shipping started to move through the Mediterranean again, and the 'strategic significance of the Cape route was diminished to a level unknown since Italy entered the war in June 1940.'<sup>44</sup>

So it is only in retrospect that we can piece together a story that had many epic moments, the story of 'U-boats off Natal'.

### Author's Note

One's debt to *War in the Southern Oceans* is so large as to render one's narrative really a re-arrangement and a 'perspective' on its authors' original research — itself having the incomparable advantage of access to the U-boat logs. So although I only cite my verbatim references to this work, the bulk of detail does derive, nevertheless, from its pages.

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3. WSO, p. 109.
4. Viscount Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, London, Hutchinson 1951, p. 433.
5. G.C. Visser, *OB: Traitors or Patriots?*, London, Macmillan 1976, p. 116 (hereafter Visser).
6. Visser, p. 50.
7. Visser, p. 199 (trans. Visser).
8. Visser, p. 81.
9. Visser, p. 86 ff.
10. Janie Malherbe, *Port Natal*, Howard Timmins 1965, p. 210 (hereafter Malherbe).
11. WSO, p. 96.
12. WSO, p. 161.
13. *Mendoza* had been a Vichy French ship, captured more by argument than force outside Montevideo by HMS *Asturias*. She was sufficiently damaged to warrant some repair, and this was effected in Montivideo using steel plating from the scuttled *Graf Spee*! In fact, those who believe that Justice moves in circles will note that *Asturias* was later put out of commission by the *Ammiraglio Cagni*, the enemy submarine that was eventually to surrender outside Durban. Harris, p. 77 ff.
14. WSO, p. 194.
15. Bodo Herzog, *U-boote im Einsatz*, Dorheim, Podzun Verlag 1970, p. 49 (hereafter Herzog). Lüth was credited with 46 sinkings.

16. Naval Lists, 1943. Why was 'Inconstant' not given a worthier name, like others in the 1 370 ton 'I' Class Destroyers, such as 'Imperial' or 'Impulsive'? Perhaps because she deserted her baptismal name soon after her birth! Built for the Turkish Navy as 'Gayret', she was requisitioned, on completion at Barrow, by the Royal Navy in January 1942, and re-named for the 'I' class. A smaller vessel than U-181, she would nevertheless easily have out-gunned and out-paced a surfaced submarine, having a speed of 36 knots. After the war she continued her career for Turkey, with her original name 'Gayret'! (My thanks to Eddie Oxley of Durban for the reference: *Jane's Fighting Ships, 1944-5*.)
17. Brian Godbold, *Mountains, Bullets and Blessings*, Kloof 1989, privately published, p. 317 (hereafter Godbold).
18. Ian Uys, *Survivors of Africa's Oceans*, Germiston, Fortress Publishers 1993, p.84 (hereafter UYS).
19. Uys, p. 91.
20. Uys, p. 75.
21. Uys, p. 93.
22. Herzog, p. 51; WSO, p. 248.
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24. WSO, p. 194.
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27. Uys, p. 58; but see Herzog, p. 181.
28. Harris, p. 334.
29. Uys, p. 115.
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31. Uys, p. 131.
32. Malherbe, p. 21.
33. WSO, p. 201.
34. Godbold, p. 321.
35. Herzog, p. 186.
36. WSO, p. 210.
37. WSO, p. 215.
38. Herzog, .204.
39. Peter Brain, *South African Radar in World War II*, Cape Town and Johannesburg, The SSS Radar Book Group, 1993, p. 139 ff. (hereafter Brain).
40. Brain, pp. 152-3.
41. WSO, p. 205.
42. WSO, p. 223.
43. This detail from Martin/Orpen, p. 278/9, but the reconstruction on the whole is taken from WSO p. 243 ff. Martin and Orpen (1979) seem to have found a source since WSO (1961), but don't disclose it. They are surely wrong to suggest that the attack started at 12.10 p.m.
44. Martin and Orpen, p. 279.

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