

## *More About the U-Boats*

*W. H. Bizley's article 'U-boats off Natal' in Natalia 23/24 prompted several interesting responses from readers able to provide further information. It is appropriate to publish the following supplement to the original article.*

### ***Secrecy of the U-boat war confirmed***

Being able to present my article as a paper on several occasions, the response has amply confirmed its thesis that the secrecy enjoined during the maritime war meant that it never really emerged in local retrospect. The ignorance includes more than the ordinary public. Dr Frank Hewitt, one of the top-ranking officers of the Special Signals Service, recalls how, after he had done special training in the UK, he returned to South Africa on the liner *Orcades*. Soon after this, he met, at a party in Somerset West, officers of the *Orcades* that he had befriended on the voyage, and who he thought must be well on their way back to England. The reason? — the *Orcades* had been torpedoed, not far off Cape Town. So even an officer of considerable eminence in coastal surveillance knew no details of the 'Seehund' attack of October 1942.

Similarly, Maj.-Gen. Graham Moodie, now retired in Swellendam, who was in charge of gunnery on the Cape Peninsula, tells me that he had no idea of the extent of the U-boat strikes until after the war.

### ***Who spotted U-197?***

Even as my article 'U-boats off Natal' went to press, I realised that the question of coastal intelligence, insofar as that had led to the demise of U-197 on 20th August 1943, would open up complexities of surveillance organisation that have not emerged in the subsequent history. It was not radar, but high frequency radio that — unknown to the public, and indeed, to most people in Special Signals Service — extended surveillance of the enemy beyond territorial limits. Who, then, were 'Direction Finding', mentioned on p.95 of my article, and so briefly referred to in *War in the Southern Oceans*? A note from Professor Eric Axelson (author of the official history of the SAAF in World War II) expressed the unexpected hunch that they tied up with that homely and familiar organisation, the South African General Post Office!

This was indeed the case, but a case that needs considerable qualification. By the good offices of Commander Bisset of the Naval Museum, Simonstown, I was put in touch with ex-Lt.-Comdr. Tony Stott RN, who had seen the founding of 'V' group in 1939, and for which group he had trained special telegraphists at Admiral's Office, Simonstown. In response to 'U-boats off Natal', Tony has written a memoir on the subject, which will be filed at the Naval Museum. It tells us that, already in 1939, a Lt. Bennett of the Royal

Navy arrived in South Africa to set up a unit for High Frequency Direction Finding (Huff Duff), thereafter to be known as 'Y' group. Tony Stott, a radio ham and a Petty Officer Telegraphist in the RNVR, found himself transferred to a 'hot seat'. 'The Postmaster', he says, 'provided a group of highly skilled telegraphists . . . they had to be prepared to spend lonely nights and days at remote D/F stations.' At such isolated places they would, throughout the war, have the frustration of never knowing the value or significance of all the morse signals they transcribed. (That would be done by Naval Intelligence, often — after the 'Ultra' breakthrough on German codes — at Bletchley Park in England.) But even if they couldn't decode the morse messages, local 'Y' group *could* at least locate enemy positions. U-boats surfaced at night for fresh air and to recharge batteries, and that was their moment for transmitting and receiving signals to and from Europe.

High frequency waves bounce off the ionosphere, so one station on its own cannot pin-point a transmission. Triangulation is required to get a set of bearings, and even then (given the instability of the ionosphere) they won't have much more than a fifty mile prediction accuracy. So three stations were set up — one at Smith's Farm near Cape Point, one in Natal at Overport, Durban, and the third probably in Bulawayo. The GPO's job was to assist the three points of the triangle to communicate with each other. U-boat transmissions did not last very long, and — in those days of manual telephone exchanges — it was imperative to contact the other stations immediately to tell them the frequency of the transmission. The triple bearings would then be drawn on specially prepared charts.

Tony Stott was seconded to the West African station in 1942, so he never witnessed the founding of the 'Price Milne Organisation' in South Africa. Dr Frank Hewitt suggests that, as the Royal Navy came to depend more and more on locally-made equipment, this ultra-secret South African group was brought into the surveillance project. A photograph has come into my hands that suggests that this group, based on Eskom in Johannesburg, operated from 1941 to 1945. So it could well have been one of their personnel who 'spotted' U-197 in 1943.

But, in that photograph, there is no 'Mr Thomas'! Now 'Mr Thomas' is the name of the person to whom a 'Most Secret' letter is addressed, a copy of which has been passed on to me by Comdr. Bissett at Simonstown. It is dated October 14th 1943 and signed by Lt-Comdr. J. S. Bennett (the man who set up 'Y' group. It is in fact headed with the reference 'Y/122'.) The letter congratulates Mr Thomas on 'the efficiency of your station' which has resulted in 'the destruction' of 'enemy units operating here'. U-197 was sunk on August 20th, so one might presume that this letter addresses the station that spotted the enemy vessel. It must have been nice for 'Mr Thomas' — who, without rank, was presumably one of the Price Milne Organisation or the GPO — to have had confirmed that after days and months and even years at the headphones his station had scored a triumph.

If we knew who 'Mr Thomas' was, and which organisation he belonged to, we would have a better grasp of the way local 'Intelligence' worked during the war.

### ***Kapitänleutnant Lüth***

Two subsequent references have made me pleased that I included the photograph of the German U-boat ace. The first comes from the book *The U-boats* in the Time-Life 'Seafarers' series. Apparently in 1943 — i.e. *after* the

Port Shepstone incident, which nearly saw the end of Lüth and U-181 – he addressed a convention of naval officers in Weimar, on the theme ‘How to maintain morale’. When we consider that the Indian Ocean beat was then the longest stint for U-boats, we can believe that he was well-experienced in what he describes.

He let his men have a look through the periscope or come up on to the bridge in turns to watch a steamer sinking or a whale blowing . . . He ran a ship’s paper. He staged a chess competition, a tall-story championship, a funny-verse contest and a singing competition; first prize was to be allowed off a watch duty, second prize for a seaman was to start the diesel engine, and for a machinist a spell on the bridge running the ship in place of the captain. Lüth encouraged self-improvement on board and arranged lectures on such subjects as the Atlantic and its climate and fauna, the Gulf Stream, flying fishes and trade winds . . .<sup>1</sup>

My second reference comes from ‘oral tradition’, and concerns U-181’s sinking of the Greek freighter *Mt. Helmos* on 24th November 1942, off Oro Point. That incident, reported in my article, resulted in a most interesting phone call from Mr Roger Gaisford, of Eshowe Environmental Centre. It concerned his father-in-law, Mr Geoff Selley, whose wartime job was Coast Watch, patrolling the coast north of St Lucia.

One night, in November 1942, Selley saw a flash far out to sea (it must have been sixty miles off the coast), and he was sure that a torpedo had struck. So he expected that survivors might, if lucky, touch the Natal coast within 24 hours. And sure enough, next morning, two lifeboats with a Greek crew beached themselves on the Zululand coast at First Rock, six miles north of St Lucia mouth. Along with his father Nick, the Selleys were the first landsmen to contact them. Nick being able to speak Greek, the crew got a friendlier welcome than they ever expected. In fact, after their weekend at the St Lucia hotel, the captain gave a farewell embrace to Nick Selley on Mtubatuba station with the words ‘Nick, you’re a helluva bastard . . .’

But the point of the story is that when the Selleys first saw the survivors on the beach they noticed how many of them had suffered badly from steam burns. Yet they were well bandaged, and a large tube of salve for burns was carried by the crew.

It is pleasant to record — at this distance in space and time — that that medication was supplied by the U-boat. Apparently the helpless crew had appealed to the captain (who, of course, as we can reconstruct today, was Lüth) when the submarine surfaced. When he saw the desperate situation of the Greek crew, he called up his medical officer and instructed him to hand over medical supplies.

The tangible proof of the incident was the large tube of ointment, with its Third Reich labelling, which did service on a Natal sugar farm for another forty years!

#### REFERENCE

1. Douglas Botting, *The U-boats*, (Time-Life Books, Amsterdam, 1979), p. 156–7.