

# Claim Confirmed

In 2017, a Polish exploration team chanced upon an initially unidentified wreck in the North Sea which unlocked the mystery of a Royal Navy submarine's disappearance in 1940. It also confirmed a claim made by a Luftwaffe bomber crew. **Chris Goss** sets out the story.

In April 1940, German intelligence had apparently managed to decipher some Royal Navy signals to submarines, including what they thought were messages to HMS Porpoise. In fact, they were to another submarine, HMS *Narwhal*. Quite possibly, because of these intercepts, *Narwhal* was doomed once she set sail from Blyth on 22 July 1940. It is said, but not confirmed, that her probable route was known, and that aircraft were sent to find and sink her.

Flying from Stavanger, and commanded by Major Joachim Hahn, Küstenfliegergruppe 606 had already seen action over the North Sea. For example, on 18 July 1940, a Dornier 17-Z of the unit, commanded by Leutnant zur See Klaus-Dietrich Siems of 3./606, was intercepted and damaged by three Spitfires of 603 Squadron off Aberdeen. Later that afternoon, Oberleutnant zur See Helmut Waldecker of 2./606 had an inconclusive combat with an Avro Anson of 612 Squadron, flown by Pilot Officer D Isted, off Kinnairds Head. Four days



■ Major Joachim Hahn, the commanding officer of Küstenfliegergruppe 606. Hahn was killed near Le Treport, France, on 3 June 1942, when serving with KG6. The Messerschmitt 108 in which he was flying was caught by two Spitfires which chanced upon the defenceless communications aircraft.

later, off Skegness, Leutnant zur See Horst Felber of 1./606 was intercepted by three Hurricanes of 46 Squadron and returned with a wounded crew member. As this was taking place, HMS *Narwhal* was heading out from Blyth into a North Sea which would imminently see much activity by Küstenfliegergruppe 606.

First blood on 23 July 1940 went to the RAF, when three Spitfires of 603 Squadron intercepted Leutnant zur See Otto-Hermann Geschke of 1./606, shooting him down 15 miles east of Peterhead at 1315hrs with the loss of all crew. Two Spitfires were damaged by return fire.

Meanwhile, seven aircraft of 2./606, one of them commanded by Leutnant zur See Bernhard Müller, had taken off between 1200 and 1234 hrs for a line reconnaissance of the North Sea. It was a typical operation for the unit, but no mention was made of any hunting for a submarine, although that was perhaps a purpose – if not the specific one on this particular sortie.



■ One of the Dornier 17 Z-5 aircraft of Küstenfliegergruppe 606 showing the distinctive and unusual bulges either side of the aircraft's nose which contained floatation equipment.



■ Aircrew of Küstenfliegergruppe 606 prepare for another sortie. This photograph shows the mix of Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe crews.

Leutnant zur See Hinrich Würdemann, also reported a submarine at 1525hrs, although by this time HMS *Narwhal* had sunk, taking with her all 58 crew. The submarine was soon reported overdue, and on 5 August 1940 was officially declared lost with all hands. The cause of her loss remained unknown to the Royal Navy, as did her exact position.

## EARLY PATROLS

When she was sent on her final dive, *Narwhal* had already run up a reasonable war record. At the outbreak of war, she was commanded by Lieutenant Commander Eric Oddie and under refit at Devonport. In November 1939, she was instructed to proceed to Rosyth, only to be recalled to Portsmouth from where, on 15 November, she set sail on her first war patrol escorting convoy OA36 to Halifax, Nova Scotia. She set sail on her second war patrol on 2 December, together with her sister submarine *Seal*, arriving back in Portsmouth on 14 December.

After Christmas, she set sail for Rosyth, arriving on 10 January and departed for her third war patrol on the 15th (another convoy escort) returning to Rosyth a week later. So far, her patrols had been uneventful - as was the next

## SUBMARINE SANK VERTICALLY

Five of the seven crews later returned without seeing anything, although the Dornier 17-Z (7T+EH) commanded by Leutnant zur See Bernhard Müller with Unteroffizier Wolfgang Hillmann (pilot), Obergefreiter Kurt Siedentopf (flight engineer) and Unteroffizier Karl Kubitzki (flight engineer) got airborne at 1225hrs, seeing nothing until 1454hrs when Müller (ironically a sub-mariner on flying duties) reported the following:

*“At 1454 hrs in Quadrant 4856, at a distance of 2,000m, I spotted an English submarine breaking the water. In a glide flight I attacked the submarine*

*in position 80 with machine gun and released three bombs at a height of about 80m. After the ‘plane had levelled off, I was able to observe the impacts. The first was 5m short, the second was a hit and the third 3 to 5m wide. The bomb fell about 3m behind the tower. The submarine stood vertically, and the bow protruded 3 to 4m above the water. After about 2 to 3 minutes, the submarine sank vertically. On the return flight, after having completed the reconnaissance, I saw the place of the attack was recognisable by a very large oil stain, the wreckage of a lifeboat and other debris”*

A second crew, commanded by



■ The distinctive unit emblem of 2/ Küstenfliegergruppe 606, one of the elements of the Gruppe. It was an aircraft of this staffel which sunk HMS *Narwhal*.

## Küstenfliegergruppe 606

Küstenfliegergruppe 606 was formed in Kiel-Holtenau in November 1939. Commanded by Oberstleutnant Hermann Edert, its task was coastal armed reconnaissance and attack. However, 2 Staffel/606 was already operating Dornier 18D-3s seaplanes, its first and last combat loss with the Dornier 18 occurring on 17 October 1939 when Gloster Gladiators of 607 Squadron flown by Flight Lieutenant John Sample, Flying Officer George Craig and Pilot Officer Bill Whitty intercepted the Dornier 18 commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Siegfried Saloga and shot it down into the North Sea off Acklington, Northumbria. Despite an attempt by Hauptmann Rudolf Wodarg in another Dornier 18 to land and pick them up, Saloga and two of his crew were captured by HMS *Juno* although his gunner was killed.

After the formation of the Gruppe, it converted to the Dornier 17-Z, after which the unit became active

in the Baltic and over the North Sea. Its first loss was an accident on 28 March 1940.

During the Norway Campaign, it carried out coastal armed reconnaissance between Germany, Denmark and Norway. Because of its maritime nature, Küstenfliegergruppe 606 uniquely operated the Dornier 17 Z-5, an aircraft equipped with additional floatation and survival equipment. Notably, these were two floatation devices fitted either side of the nose, giving the Z-5 a distinctive appearance. Also, due to the unit's operations over the sea, most of the observers were naval personnel.

The unit would suffer its first operational loss with a Dornier 17 on 9 April 1940 when an aircraft of 3./606, crewed by Leutnant Walter Priebe (observer), Unteroffizier Wilhelm Pohl (pilot), Unteroffizier Walter Schweitzer (radio operator) and Unteroffizier Wilhelm Tölle (flight engineer), failed to return from an armed reconnaissance.



■ A Küstenfliegergruppe 606 which came to grief after a landing mishap in 1940.



■ This aircraft of Küstenfliegergruppe 606 has had its undersides painted black for night operations. Again, the floatation bulges are clearly evident.

- but her fifth patrol, escorting convoy HN14, would be different.

On 25 February, *Narwhal* spotted the Type IIC U-boat U-63, commanded by Leutnant zur See Günther Lorentz, as he was positioning to attack HN14. Lorentz departed for his first war patrol on 1 February, U-63 having only been commissioned just over a month before. The previous day, 24 February, he sunk the unescorted 3,840 ton Swedish ship *Santos* on its way from Buenos Aires to Stockholm, 32 miles south-east of Fair

Isle. Of the crew and passengers, 31 died but 12 were rescued by HMS *Gallant*.

Eric Oddie radioed an alert to the convoy escort, after which destroyers HMS *Escapade*, *Escort*, *Imogen* and *Inglefield* broke off to investigate, but U-63 crash dived and was hunted for two hours. Damaged by depth charges, she surfaced and was abandoned by her crew. Of these, 24 men, including her captain, were captured "...after making a whole lot of noise in the water".

The next day, 26 February, Lieutenant

Commander Oddie handed over command to Lieutenant Commander Ronald Burch. For the 33-year-old Burch, it would be his first and last command.

### A SUCCESSFUL RUN

The next patrol was uneventful, but on the seventh patrol, starting 13 March and described as 'assistance to Finland', she was recalled following the signing of Finland's armistice on 16 March. While on the way back, on the morning of 17

HMS *Narwhal* was built by Vickers Armstrong at Barrow-in-Furness, was launched on 29 August 1935 and commissioned on 28 February 1936.

*Narwhal*, assigned the code N45, was one of six *Grampus* Class mine-laying submarines: the sister ships being *Porpoise* (N14), *Grampus* (N56), *Rorqual* (N74), *Cachalot* (N83) and *Seal* (N37). They had a crew of 59, six 21" bow torpedo tubes each firing two torpedoes, a 4" deck gun and carried 50 mines.

*Grampus* and *Cachalot* were sunk by Italian torpedo boats, *Porpoise* by a Japanese aircraft and two were sunk by German aircraft. Of those sunk by the Germans, the first was *Seal* on 4 May 1940. When mine laying in the Kattegat, she was damaged by a mine, forced to surface and tried to make it to Sweden.

The following day, she was spotted and attacked by two Arado 196s of 5 Staffel/Bordfliegergruppe 196, commanded by Leutnant zur See Günther Mehrens and Letnant zur See Karl-Ernst Schmidt, and a Heinkel 115 of 1 Staffel./Küstenfliegergruppe

## The Grampus Class



906 commanded by Leutnant zur See Nikolaus Broll.

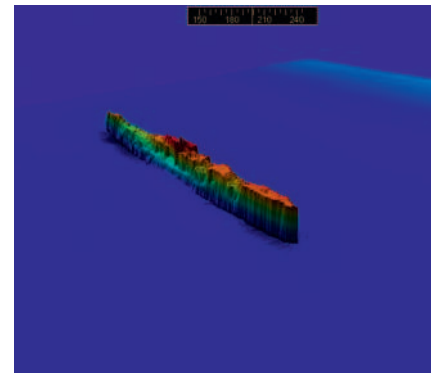
With no effective means of defending herself, dead and wounded crew on board and unable to submerge, the *Seal's* commander, Lieutenant Commander Rupert Lonsdale had no option but surrender. *Seal* was repaired to become a German U-boat but keeping her going was problematic and she was paid-off

before being damaged in an air raid. She was scuttled in Heikendorf Bay on 3 May 1945.

The second *Grampus* Class submarine to be lost to German aircraft was HMS *Narwhal*. For 77 years, her loss remained a mystery and the Royal Navy only knew she had not returned.

The Luftwaffe crew were certain they had sunk a submarine, but had no idea which one.

■ Probably the most unusual Küstenfliegergruppe 606 loss of all was this aircraft which landed itself on the mudflats at Ness Point, Ewerton, when the crew had baled-out over 130 miles away over Wiltshire on 21 October 1940 after becoming lost in an electrical storm.



■ Sonar side-scans of the wreck identified as HMS Narwhal in the exact position identified by the Küstenfliegergruppe 606 crew. (Rafal Rapa, [www.santiodnalezcorla.pl](http://www.santiodnalezcorla.pl))

March, she was surprised by a Dornier Do 17 and crash-dived without incident. However, *Narwhal's* next encounter with a Dornier 17 would not end well.

On 1 April, *Narwhal* sailed for Immingham where she was loaded with 50 mines and set sail the next day for the Heligoland Bight. This was followed on 10 April, when she set out on her ninth war patrol to lay a minefield off Skagen. She successfully laid 50 mines, north of Laeso Island on 13 April, but the previous day had unsuccessfully tried to intercept the warships *Gneisenau*, *Scharnhorst* and *Hipper*.

Having laid her mines, she carried out an unsuccessful attack on a German convoy south of Skagen. However, having returned to Immingham on 17 April, it was on 20 April that the 5,042 GRT merchant ship *Togo* was damaged by one of *Narwhal's* recently laid mines. Three days later, auxiliary minesweeper M1302/*Schwaben* hit a mine and sank north of Laeso Island. A further 21 mines were detonated by other minesweepers. This was the start of a successful phase for Ronald Burch and *Narwhal*.

On 1 May, she laid another 50 mines, after which she attacked and sank the 8,580 GRT troop transport *Buenos Aires*, and damaged the 8,580 GRT troop transport *Bahia Castillo*, the latter being written off on return to port. Two days

later, auxiliary minesweeper M1102/*H.A.W. Müller* was damaged by one of *Narwhal's* mines, the next victim coming on 30 May when the armed trawler V1109/*Antares* hit a mine off Bud which had been laid by *Narwhal* on her 11th patrol. These were followed on 5 June, when the 2,863 GRT merchant ship *Palime* and minesweeper M11 hit mines laid by *Narwhal* on 3 June, on what had been her 12th patrol off Jaerens Point. The former was beached, but later declared a total loss, while the latter sank.

The final success came on 6 July, when auxiliary submarine chaser *Treff VIII* hit a mine which had been laid by *Narwhal* on the 4th while on its 14th patrol, after which she arrived back at Blyth on 7 July.

Fifteen days later she set out on her final patrol. Unfortunately, there were no survivors to tell the story of her demise.

### POSTSCRIPT TO THE ACTION

Damage to the submarine visible on the 2017 sonar scan taken by Santi Diving when searching for the Polish submarine *Orzeł* (lost in June 1940) matches exactly with reports submitted by the German crew, albeit the reported number 457 is a puzzle because British submarines did not usually carry such markings. However, the similarity to her assigned number of N45 cannot

be ignored. What is no doubt is that *Narwhal* was sunk by Müller and his crew, the position of the wreck corresponding to the attack. It lies 300ft down, 150 miles west of Edinburgh, and is 88m long and 7m wide - the dimensions of *Narwhal*.

As to the Küstenfliegergruppe 606 crew, none survived the war. Bernhard Müller would return to U-boats at the start of 1941, serving as First Watch Officer on U-584, and then commanding U-633 from 30 July 1942. He and his crew of 41 were all killed on 10 March 1943 when attacking convoy SC121. In this action, U-633 was rammed and sunk by the SS *Scorton*. Meanwhile, Hillmann and Seidentopf were killed on 29 August 1940 when their Dornier 17 failed to return from an armed reconnaissance, while Kubitzki was killed with 2./606 on 6 July 1942, his Junkers 88 being damaged over Malta by Squadron Leader Bill New of 185 Squadron and crashing in the sea south of Sicily.

A postscript to the story is that mines laid by *Narwhal* on her fateful last patrol accounted for four ships and damaged one other after she had been sunk.

The first was the patrol boat NB 15/*Biene* off Osterfjord on 16 August 1940, then the 1,600 GRT merchant ship *Clara L M Russ* was damaged off Jaerens Point on 28 September 1940.

Finally, the auxiliary minesweepers *Gnom 7*, *Kobold 1* and *Kobold 3* were both sunk by *Narwhal's* mines off Osterfjord on 13 October 1940. ✚