

U-BOAT HUNTERS IN THE BAY OF BISCAY

The dramatic air-sea engagement on July 30, 1943, was the first single action of its kind in which three German submarines were sunk.

BY NORMAN FRANKS

As the Battle of the Atlantic turned against the submarine arm of Adolf Hitler's *Kriegsmarine* in mid-1943, Britain's Royal Air Force Coastal Command began stepping up its efforts to seek and destroy U-boats, as they departed from or returned to their ports on the western coast of France. Consequently, the Bay of Biscay became a battleground between British and German aircraft and the submarines that ran the gantlet through it. Improvements in RAF Coastal Command's detection methods made it necessary for German Admiral Karl Dönitz to give orders to his submarine captains that if they were unable to crash-dive safely, they should remain on the surface and fight back against attacking airplanes. To make that possible, the thin-skinned U-boats mounted a formidable array of anti-aircraft weaponry, ranging from a rapid-fire quartet—or *Vierling*—of 20mm cannons on the “winter garden” aft of the conning tower, to 37mm and even 88mm cannons forward.

At that time U-boats were staying out longer on patrol, supplied at sea by specially designed submarines capable of taking fuel, torpedoes and supplies to the boats already out in the Atlantic. It was also a time of heavily armed U-boats heading out in small numbers to ward off lone attacking planes. To counter them, the RAF ordered any of its aircrews who spotted submarines to radio for other aircraft

to join them, and then attack together.

Late on July 27, 1943, two supply submarines, or “Milch Cows,” as the Germans called them, *U-461* and *U-462*, headed out to sea with a third vessel, *U-504*. Making a rendezvous soon after dawn on the 30th, Captain Wolf Stiebler, *U-461*'s commander, discovered that *U-462* had remained submerged all night, so its batteries needed recharging. Although he knew it was dangerous to remain surfaced, Stiebler decided to continue, but at about 0930 that morning a Consolidated B-24 Liberator of No. 53 Squadron, RAF, spotted the boats and circled out of gun range while radioing for assistance.





Short Sunderland W6077
"U" of No. 461 Squadron,
Royal Australian Air Force,
depth-charges German
submarine *U-461*, in
Caught on the Surface, by
Robert Taylor (The
Military Gallery, Ojai, Calif.).

Senior engineering officer Hans Krüger aboard Bruno Vöwe's *U-462* survived to explain what followed: "After three days [sailing] through the Bay we were positioned about 90 miles northwest of Cape Ortegal when we were located by an aircraft. All the boats were still recharging after a long voyage underwater. A Liberator remained just outside the range of our flak and called for reinforcements."

"After we met up with the other two boats, our passage continued above water and the guns were manned," said Leading Seaman Alois Momper of *U-461*. "The first [additional] aircraft was soon sighted. After an hour the number of aircraft increased to, in my memory, six. They

circled us at a height of 3-4,000 meters. This lasted for two or 2½ hours, while we were attacked simultaneously by three different machines."

Next to arrive was a Short Sunderland flying boat of No. 228 Squadron, then a Consolidated Catalina of No. 210 Squadron, the latter cooperating with sloops of Captain Frederick J. "Johnny" Walker's 2nd Escort Group in the outer bay area. Very soon those ships were heading for the scene as well. Near the submarines an American B-24 Liberator of the 19th Antisubmarine Squadron had arrived, then a Handley Page Halifax from No. 502 Heavy Squadron. The latter's crew decided to attack, but was met



The large "Milch Cow" submarine *U-461* heads out to sea, its primary mission to bring fuel and supplies to U-boat wolf packs at secret rendezvous points in the Atlantic, which by mid-1943 required it to run a gantlet of British warships and aircraft in the Bay of Biscay (Norman Franks).

that scored a near miss on *U-462*, while Marrows straddled *U-461* with depth charges.

"I had been relieved at 0600 and went into the interior of the boat to freshen up," recalled Acting Supply Officer Alfred Weidemann of *U-461*. "Later an air-raid warning was given from the bridge. In trousers and deck

by fierce anti-aircraft fire that struck the *Halifax* and caused its three 600-pound bombs to miss the target.

A second No. 502 Squadron *Halifax* now arrived, joined by a *Sunderland* from No. 461 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). The latter was short on fuel, as it had already been out on patrol for some time and had received wrong information about the location of the subs.

"Having set course for home we received a message from Group giving the position of three surfaced U-boats," navigator Jock Rolland explained. "On arriving at or near the position given, there was nothing to be seen but an empty Bay of Biscay. So, off on a square search for over an hour. We were just on the umpteenth and last possible leg when another message arrived apologizing for having made an error of one degree latitude on the first position. By then, our reserves were practically nil, so the only thing to do was lay a track through the new position. If contact was established it allowed no more than ten minutes for action. If no contact, it was a case of 'Home James,' and be very sparing with the horses."

BY THE TIME THE AUSTRALIAN flying boat arrived just before noon, the action was beginning to heat up. Walker's sloops were racing toward the area, and the aircraft captains were preparing to attack, hoping to divide the Germans' anti-aircraft fire.

"When the lookout reported a single aircraft, our CO looked on this machine—which was on its own, and because of our considerable armament—as of negligible importance," remembered Able Seaman Gerhard Korbjuhn, the signalman on *U-461*'s bridge. "So we continued on our way undisturbed. Then heavy radio activity was reported in the area by the radio room. It was already too late to dive because by now we were being circled by 6-8 aircraft, all just out of range of our weapons. When [ship] smoke eventually appeared on the horizon, the aircraft decided to attack, apparently to stop us from diving."

Flight Lieutenant Dudley S. Marrows, captain of No. 461 Squadron's *Sunderland*, headed in, while the *Halifax* also began an approach. The B-24 also edged in, taking some of the flak. The *Halifax* pilot dropped a 600-pound bomb

shoes, and still with a piece of sea water soap in my hand, I made my way up, hand over hand, to take up my lookout position. As our fire was reliant on a 2cm gun, I jumped into the bandstand. I was no expert gunner but having already had four years of warfare under battle conditions behind me I knew a bit about which way the wind blows. The aircraft grew ever more in number and audacity. We shot all that the gun held and joyfully turned it round again hoping that the aircraft would enjoy a taste of our juice, but it didn't happen that way. We played cat-and-mouse until 1100. But then it came to the kill because 'Johnny' Walker was out with his destroyers on the warpath. The aircraft were closer on the ball and had the advantage."

"They attacked simultaneously from all sides, firing with all guns and flying at such low altitude that they were barely a few meters above the water," said Korbjuhn. "Our *Vierling* gun received a hit on its mounting and would no longer swivel. I lined up the cockpit of the *Halifax* as the order came to open fire, then let loose with both barrels. Then everything happened very quickly."

"At around 1015 a *Sunderland* and a *Catalina* arrived," said Krüger of *U-462*. "*U-461* was the first boat to be attacked by three aircraft. In the meantime five other aircraft arrived and attacked both us and *U-504*. The boats all fired everything they had."

"From the wireless traffic it started to become more interesting and positive," Dudley Marrows recalled. "Obviously other aircraft had already arrived and were reporting sightings of three submarines! Pilot Officer Jimmy Leigh sighted the first through binoculars whilst some distance

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away—there were indeed three in a tight ‘V’ formation. I decided to go in as low as I could, hoping that there would be some trouble when the subs were broadside onto the swell, for them to adequately depress their guns at all times. Whilst they rolled with the swell, some fire [was] blanketed by the sub being attacked—the outer sub.

“I jinked violently as I lost height to sea level. As expected all the enemy guns and cannons were firing—very impressive indeed. [Sergeant F.] ‘Pierre’ Bamber in the front gun turret and [Sergeant A.M.] ‘Bubbles’ Pearce came into their own, and they did a marvelous job, otherwise we would not be here. They concentrated their fire on the gunners and this they obviously did well.

“I was just skimming the swell, submarine sitting low in the water and then I had to pull up as I dropped the depth charges in order to clear the boat. All the time I was worrying about what was going to happen when I passed over the outer sub we were attacking, and came upon the other two. I am sure the other two couldn’t fire as *U-461* was in the way. At any rate, there is a big factor of luck—very big—one inch either way can make a vital difference.”

“The 53 Squadron Liberator and the American Liberator led a charge towards the pack,” said Sergeant G.M. “Paddy” Watson, the flight engineer and one of the non-Australians on the *Sunderland*’s crew. “Dudley realized this was his best chance to get at the sub, while their fire was on them. With throttles flat open, we dived down, weaving from side to side as if he was flying a Tiger Moth! I heard the nose gunner [Pearce] open up. Dudley shouted: ‘Bloody good shooting Bubbles,’ as he cleared the *U-boat*’s decks of gunners. Seven depth charges were dropped as Dudley cleared the conning tower of *U-461* at 50 feet. I heard the tail gunner open up with his four Browning machine guns as we passed over, then he shouted over the intercom: ‘We have split him in half, skipper.’ Dudley was too busy climbing and weaving away from the flak from the other boats to listen.”

U-461 BEGAN TO CIRCLE, ITS RUDDER damaged, and smoke could be seen coming from the conning tower. Wolf Stiebler later said that at the moment of attack he had tried to turn the boat to the left, since he was unable to turn right due to *U-462*’s close proximity. He also saw the near miss on the other submarine and watched its crew start to abandon ship just as the depth charges crashed about him. The charges broke *U-461*’s back, and just then Stiebler’s clothing caught on something. The submarine’s skipper was dragged beneath the water to some depth before he was able to struggle free and swim back to the surface.

“By this time the *Halifax* had bombed another *U-boat* from 4,000 feet—out of range of their 20mm guns,” Pilot Officer Pete Jensen said, “and this boat was then going round in circles with smoke blowing out and the crew jumping into the water, one-man dinghies inflating all around. It looked like a mass of flowers bursting into bloom. Once we were about 600 yards from the boat, all guns turned on us. Bubbles Pearce held his fire to about 400 yards then opened up and swept the decks. We just cleared the conning tower and straddled it with seven



Top: Sunderland DV960 “H” of No. 461 Squadron on patrol.

Above: W6077’s crew on July 30, 1943. From left, back row: P.E. Tablin, J. Tainer, J.S. Rolland, Dudley Marrows, P.C. Leigh, D.C. Sidney, P.T. Jensen. Front row: R.L. Webster, G.M. Watson, F. Bamber (with dog), A.M. Pearce and H.H. Morgan.

depth charges. They must have blown it apart. Then there were about 20 men in the water so we circled and dropped them one of our dinghies and took photos.”

“At around 1100 the radio room reported surface ships moving toward us at great speed,” recalled Krüger. “The aircraft attacked without pause. *U-461* shot at an aircraft, then a *Sunderland* flew in low, attacked the boat and destroyed it with depth charges. The commander and 14 of the bridge personnel were saved; the other crew members went down with the boat.”

“I think we still had five or seven machines around us,” recalled Able Seaman Alex Franz, “but when, after 2½ hours of battle the anti-submarine vessels came into view, they grew braver and began to attack us from all sides. At the end we were being attacked by four machines at once. The machines forward and to starboard turned. The *Sunderland* astern finished us off. Meantime, the pedal firing system of the *Vierling* was broken. I was just going to fetch the hand firing system when I noticed that my jacket was covered in blood. I said to the ‘old man’ that I thought I’d been hit and he told me to go straight under and get myself bandaged up, but before I went I took one last look round and saw that the bows were already under water.

“The ‘old man’ gave the order to abandon ship,” he con-



U-461 crewmen who survived to describe the action from the receiving end included (top, from left) Alois Momper, Gerhardt Korbjuhn and Alfred Weidemann, as well as (far left) Franz Alex (with Richard Wulff at left, who had been killed in a bathing accident on July 11, 1943) and Wilhelm Höffken (Photos: Norman Franks).

tinued. "I wanted to dive headfirst from the 'winter garden' because I was already up to my neck in water; but we were washed overboard. The boat set itself on its head, the propellers turning high in the air. I'll never forget that scene. Those who didn't get free in time or who hung around were taken down with her. Like Hermann Moesender, who must have hung onto the *Vierling*, because he came up full of panic. He hadn't inflated his life jacket and so clung to my neck and held it tight. I told him that wouldn't do and that we'd both drown; we were not going to swim to shore in any event! He quickly calmed down and let go of me. I didn't have an aviator's life jacket, just the old six-cell type—probably the only one on board. It was more comfortable to wear, because we also had to sleep in them, but now I had problems because I had tied it so loosely that it came up when inflated. Since I was also handicapped by my wound it was very difficult for me."

"I fired at the machine attacking us from starboard,"

Momper recalled. "It returned fire, firing with all its guns. They must have hit one of the loaders because all of the ammunition had run out. I looked for him; he was lying close to the gun, bleeding from a dreadful chest wound. He must have been killed on the spot. At the same moment the bombs began to fall. We were engulfed by a jet of water, and I found myself eventually in the water again. I saw another man close to me. We swam toward each other and tried to stay together. We thought we were the only survivors when an aircraft, not too far away from us, dropped something down. Later we heard a whistle from this direction and swam towards it. Soon we saw the other survivors in the dinghy."

"I believe that *U-462* was the first to cop some of the damage but then the airmen had designs on us," said Weidemann. "Their on-board weapons spat out everything they had and pressed us hard. Our *Vierling* gun left its mounting and our crew were the worst for it. One had his

knee shot to pieces. Another was shot in the head or in the mouth and stumbled through the conning tower hatch into the boat. I dived for cover behind the bridge quarter-deck, and as I saw the machines flying towards us, I could only count the bombs as they fell; there might have been six or seven. There followed a violent explosion and I felt a burning pain as if someone had pulled a wide piece of wood from above my left buttock.

"I didn't hear the order from the 'old man,' 'everybody out,' because the boat had already gone under and taken me with it," Weidemann continued. "I had an aviator's life jacket on with a bottle of compressed air. The going under and the tearing open of the air bottle were as one. As I saw the sun again I began to feel better. The Sunderland dropped a dinghy, and when we gathered together there were 15 of us left."

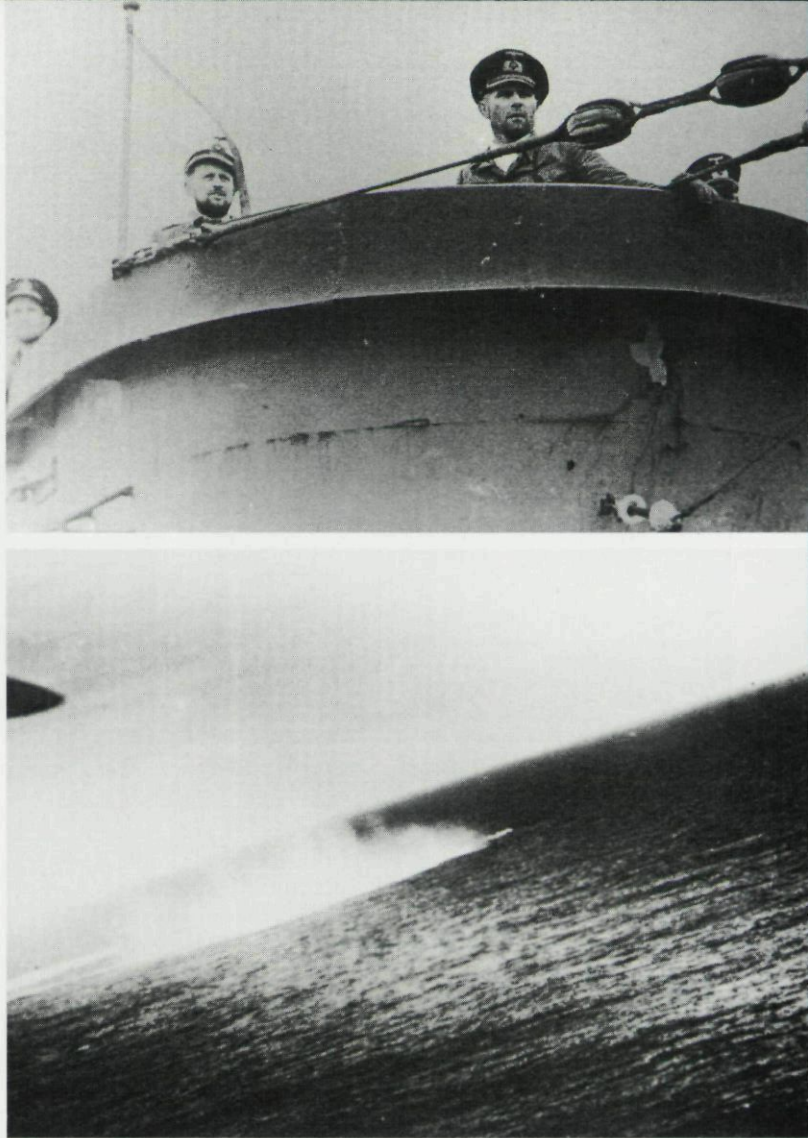
BEFORE THE ATTACK "OUR DOCTOR told me to get everything ready for an emergency, in case we have to operate," said medical orderly Wilhelm Höffken. "Then a message came from the control room: 'Sani to the tower!' I hurried up and saw one of our men had been hit. We carefully laid him down. He had been hit in the chest and throat and was bleeding heavily. Then he died. At the same moment there was an enormous crack, the boat lifted and shook itself a couple of times. The order came from the bridge—'everyone overboard!' I heaved myself upward, I was still looking at Helmut, then water began to come through the conning tower hatch. My last thought was to open the oxygen bottle, then everything went black. As I swam upwards I came to again, and found myself directly next to Alfred Weidemann. He said to me that he had caught something in his left side."

"I emptied my magazine, I think I hit targets too, then the low altitude fliers were only about 100 meters away," said Able Seaman Korbjuhn. "Bullets whistled past my ears with a terrible noise and I shouted over to my loader that he ought to clip on a new magazine. It was only then I noticed that he had been hit and lay senseless and bleeding on the deck. Who was he? I couldn't tell anymore.

"There were losses on the 'winter garden' too, but at that moment the boat was rocked by a series of enormous tremors and lifted vertically. As I now know, the pilot of the Sunderland had released his bombs and our boat had been hit more than once. The CO was asking the control room what damage had been caused, but the boat was already going under. He now ordered everybody off. I climbed onto the bench and was about to dive over the railing when the boat gave way beneath me. It was a remarkable feeling to be wrecked out in the middle of the Atlantic."

"Having surfaced at around 0600 we were still pumping out diesel when a lookout reported an aircraft at 1000," recalled Able Seaman Helmut Rochinski of *U-461*. "Within another half hour or so, five aircraft were in the area. My battle station was as helmsman in the tower, so I could not see what was going on on the bridge, but in one of the attacks the *Vierling* must have received a direct hit on its mounting and we lost it.

"We could only fire the 2cm gun and we had our first casualties, one of whom was fatally hit as he stood over



Top: Captain Wolf Stiebler and his first officer scan the sea ahead from the conning tower of *U-461*. **Above:** Caught in the Bay of Biscay, *U-461* comes under attack by Sunderland "U" of No. 461 Squadron on July 30, 1943 (Photos: Norman Franks).

the conning tower hatch. I caught him and he died in my arms. I laid my leather jacket under his head.

"Then came new orders for the helm, which I had to follow, and overhead the aircraft continued to attack. Our freedom of movement to starboard was limited as we were running in line abreast with the other submarines. *U-462* was hit and then *U-504* dived, leaving *U-461* alone. Then the CO ordered a call to base: 'Am battling five aircraft, request aerial support.' I had just passed this order on to the radio room when a machine flew over us and dropped bombs. A violent tremor ran through the boat.

"The CO asked the L.I. about the condition of the boat, but in the same moment someone called out that the boat was going under and the CO ordered everyone out. That was the last order from the CO that I passed on, then I climbed the ladder, holding onto the handle of the tower as the water came over me. On the bridge I made out a couple of dead and wounded comrades, who went down with the boat. No one followed me out of the tower. I was



From left, former enemies Dudley Marrows, Wolf Stiebler and Peter Jensen have a 1980 reunion in Marrows' native Sydney (Peter Jensen via Norman Franks).

the last man out. I grabbed hold of the periscope but was swept away by the waves. *U-461* sank very fast and the aircraft circled over us, the *Sunderland* dropping a dinghy. We put some wounded men into it while the rest of us clung to ropes. After some hours the corvette *HMS Woodpecker* picked us up and after a few days we arrived in a British port. Then we were sent off to a POW camp."

"HAVING GAINED height and distance from the scene of action, we could see a bright orange pool of scum, oil and wreckage below us," said Paddy Watson. "About 30 men were down there. We decided to drop them one of our three dinghies. Meanwhile the *Halifax* had had another go, fighting his way through the flak and dropped more bombs, which fell close to *U-462* and crippled her. Soon they were to scuttle her and take to their life-rafts. Dudley then turned his attack to the one remaining U-boat—*U-504*—but flak was all around us and the midships gunner called: 'Five ships on starboard beam, they are firing.' We abandoned our

attack, with relief, to Captain Walker's ships which were firing their heavy guns at the lone U-boat, which soon dived."

"In the meantime we had reached mid-day; the surface ships arrived and entered the battle with their artillery," said Krüger of *U-462*. "The detonations were close to us. We ran out of ammunition because of the flak barrage and in the control room we were practically up to our knees in empty cartridges. Then we were hit starboard astern and the pressure resistant hatches through to the stern were destroyed and the rudder jammed. The aft com-

partment had to be closed off and without our rudder we turned in circles. With our last bullets we gave *U-504* covering fire for an emergency dive. She dived undamaged but was destroyed after eight hours of depth charging by the frigates.

"Then the order—everyone off the boat. The whole crew, including two seriously wounded men, got out of the boat before it sank and she went down flags waving. After eight hours in the water we were picked up by an English ship and went into four years of imprisonment."

"We were scattered [in the water] over about 50 meters and someone yelled for us to get together," Franz recalled. "When we had just about managed it a machine flew over us and fired. The shots hit about 10-15 meters away so none of us were hit. Later another machine came towards us and we thought that this was it. It turned out to be a *Sunderland*. Four men were actually standing there next to each other, with their elbows leaning on the open door. Suddenly they threw something down—a smoke bomb—followed immediately by a dinghy. I thought it was a depth charge and wanted to dive out of the way, but of course, I couldn't with the life jacket on.

"The dinghy hadn't inflated itself so we swam around until we discovered the bottle, hanging down deep in the water. The 'old man' took off his life jacket and dived, found the bottle straight away and finally the dinghy blew itself up. We got the seriously wounded into the boat and the others hung onto the ropes at the side and waited for rescue."

"Gradually I made out the heads that were swimming close to me," Korbjuhn said. "The CO urged us to stick close together because a single straggler would have little chance of rescue. It became painfully clear to me that all the rest of my comrades were dead, no one else got out from inside the boat. There was not much time to mourn them, for we were battling for our own lives. Fortunately the sea was calm and fairly warm.

"The *Sunderland* circled us once more," he continued. "In the open hatch several airmen were standing, waving and making Victory-V signs. Then it flew quite close to us and they threw something out. When it became clear that it was an inflatable dinghy and that these airmen wanted to help rescue us, we were both relieved and thankful.

"After about three hours an English warship arrived. A large scrambling net was hung over the side so that we could clamber aboard, and be greeted by heavily armed sailors. We were taken below and provided with warm, dry clothes, chocolate and cigarettes. I got to know the 'Tom-

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