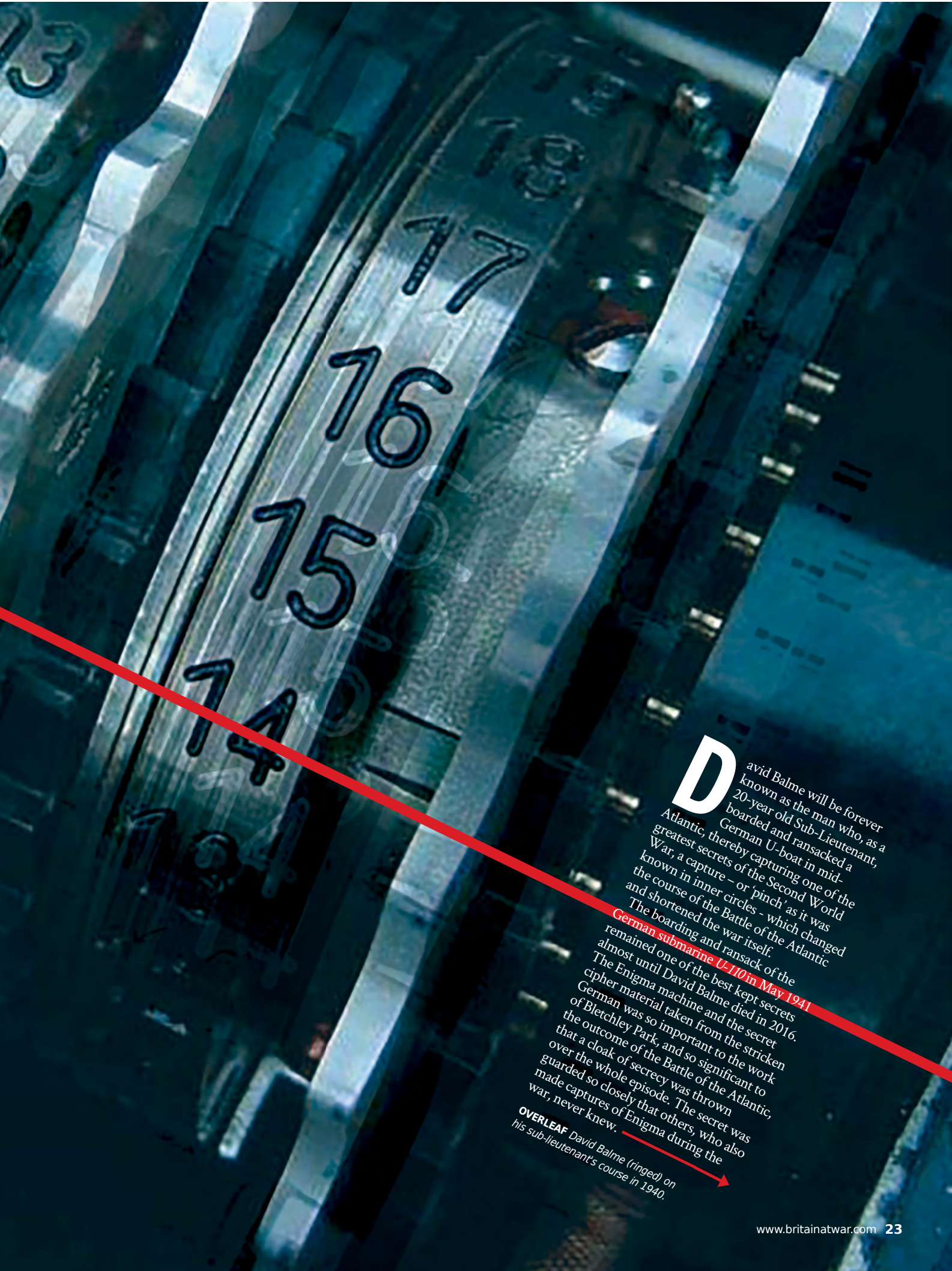




In the Spring of 1941 one of the most significant British intelligence coups took place as a group of Royal Navy sailors seized Germany's most vital secret – an Enigma cipher machine. **Captain Peter Hore** tells the remarkable story of its capture.

The Ultimate PINCH



David Balme will be forever known as the man who, as a 20-year-old Sub-Lieutenant, boarded and ransacked a German U-boat in mid-Atlantic, thereby capturing one of the greatest secrets of the Second World War, a capture – or ‘pinch’ as it was known in inner circles – which changed the course of the Battle of the Atlantic and shortened the war itself. The boarding and ransack of the German submarine **U-110 in May 1941** remained one of the best kept secrets almost until David Balme died in 2016. The Enigma machine and the secret cipher material taken from the stricken German was so important to the work of Bletchley Park, and so significant to the outcome of the Battle of the Atlantic, that a cloak of secrecy was thrown over the whole episode. The secret was guarded so closely that others, who also made captures of Enigma during the war, never knew.

OVERLEAF David Balme (ringed) on his sub-lieutenant's course in 1940.



WOLFPACK WEST

To understand the event, a little background knowledge is necessary. In early May 1941, in German U-boat headquarters in occupied France, Kontreadmiral Karl Dönitz had intelligence of a large convoy from Britain to North America and had ordered Wolfpack West consisting of 23 U-boats to gather across its predicted path. Dönitz controlled his U-boats by wireless: scouting aircraft and U-boats reported convoy sightings and made their weather reports by wireless, and Dönitz formed wolfpacks, his Rudeltaktik, and conned his U-boats into position by wireless. Everything was encrypted using Enigma machines whose rotor-settings were changed daily, with the Germans believing their wireless messages were indecipherable by the British. On the British part,

the war to read Enigma messages and to break the codes was conducted from Y-stations around the British Isles and from Bletchley Park, where Alan Turing's bombe machines were beginning to break German naval codes - albeit after long delays, and then only intermittently.

Also, at this stage of the Battle of the Atlantic - the longest continuous campaign of the war - there was an air gap in mid-ocean where there was no cover from long-range aircraft. Anti-submarine destroyers, frigates and corvettes also had insufficient range and had to break off from their escort duties to refuel in Iceland before the arrival of escorts from Canada.

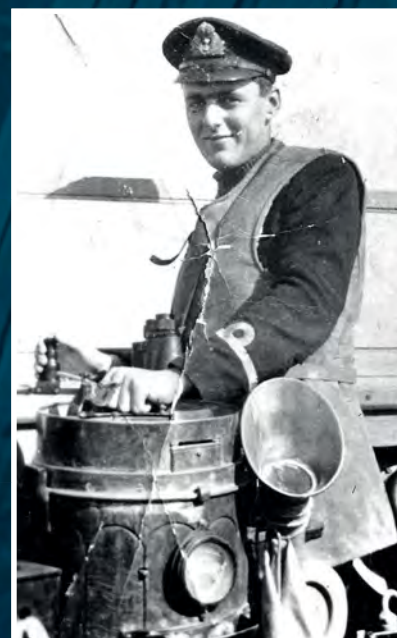
Wolfpack West's rendezvous for this operation was the furthest west that had been ordered so far in the war, and the first two U-boats to arrive were *U-201*

ABOVE

The destroyer HMS Bulldog.

RIGHT

David Balme on the bridge of HMS Bulldog.



LEFT

HMS Bulldog's mascot bulldog with two of the ship's officers.

commanded by the future U-boat ace Korvettenkapitän Adalbart Schnee and *U-110* commanded by Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp, who was already an ace and held the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross (Ritterkreuz). Lemp had commanded *U-30* when on the first evening of the war he had sunk the passenger ship *Athenia*. Now, he was towards the end of a three-week long patrol during which he had sunk only one, small, slow freighter.

Lemp and Schnee met in the early hours of 9 May 1941, ahead of the convoy's track, and over loudhailers they agreed their tactics. Lemp would attack first, by daylight and submerged, and from the starboard side or northern flank of the convoy, and, expecting that the convoy would make an emergency turn away to port, Schnee would position himself to the south and wait for the convoy to be driven towards him. Lemp's officers wanted to wait until evening when they thought the escort would have left for Iceland and the convoy would be unprotected, but Lemp was frustrated by his lack of sinking on

this patrol and wanted to attack at once.

He submerged and waited for the convoy to come towards him.

SALVO OF TORPEDOES

The convoy was OB318, a west-bound convoy of 38 ships either in ballast or carrying trade goods, and which had sailed from Liverpool on 2 May 1941 bound for ports in North America. The first escort had been the 7th Escort Group whose ships were beginning to turn back for lack of fuel. OB318 was joined in mid-ocean by the 3rd Escort Group, led by Commander Joe Baker-Cresswell in the destroyer HMS *Bulldog*, and consisting of the destroyer HMS *Broadway*, the corvette HMS *Aubretia* and five other warships.

The morning of 9 May dawned sunny over a calm sea, a long Atlantic swell and good visibility - although as the day wore on a mist thickened over the cold water. Baker-Cresswell's ships were also running low on fuel and he would soon have to start sending his ships off to Iceland to refuel. But Joe's palms were itching and with a few of the longer-range ships left from 7EG he was able



to place an escort on each flank of the convoy, including *Aubretia* out to starboard. Sensing something was going to happen, he decided to stay with the convoy for few more hours. At noon, when his officers usually met on the bridge, he would make a decision as to what to do

next.

As the convoy steamed westwards, so Lemp slipped through the screen of

ABOVE


Attempting to tow U-110, a photograph taken from HMS Bulldog.

LEFT

HMS Bulldog's ship's badge.

BELOW

U-110 lies under the guns of HMS Bulldog as she lowers a boat for boarding.

escorts ahead of the convoy and into a perfect firing position. With his first salvo of torpedoes he hit two ships, and raised his periscope to look for his next targets. He was shocked to see, filling his lens, the menacing bow wave of a corvette only 800 yards away and heading directly at him. Within the next few minutes *Aubretia* delivered two accurate depthcharge salvos which bracketed *U-110*. The crew were quick to obey Lemp's order to abandon ship, and as *Aubretia* stopped to pick up the men in the water, Baker-Cresswell in *Bulldog* arrived. Though now abandoned, *U-110* was still 

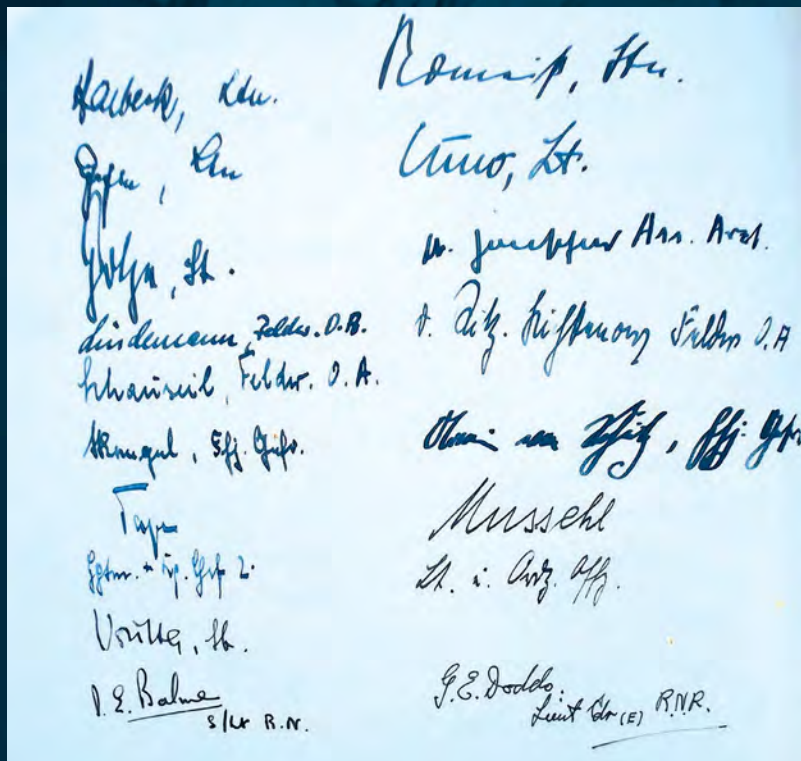


RIGHT
The armed boarding party rows over to the U-110.

moving slowly ahead and while *Aubretia* hastened her prisoners down between decks, the gap between her and the other ships gathered around the German U-boat, widened. But Baker-Cresswell's next order would change the course of the war.

THE PINCH

Turning to his 20-year old navigator, Sub-Lieutenant David Balme, he said: 'Right, sub, you take the seaboard! Get onboard as quickly as you can. Get hold of the signal books first and then anything else useful you can take away.'



RIGHT
A page from U-110s visitor's book, seized by the HMS Bulldog crew. Cheekily, the last two signatures are those of Sub Lt Balme and Lt Cdr Dodds!

BELOW
The oil-covered survivors of U-110 await rescue by HMS *Aubretia*.

What happened next can be told in Balme's words:

'We rowed over, the bowman got out onto the U-boat and I jumped out and was on the deck. With my revolver in my hand I walked down the deck to the conning tower, and then I had to holster my revolver to climb up three ladders to get from the hull to the top of the conning tower. The hatch down was closed tight, but sprung open as soon as a clip was released.' With his revolver still in its holster, Balme started climbing down: 'This was a very nasty moment, both my hands were occupied with the rungs of the ladder and I was a sitting target to anyone down below. I wondered how many Germans there were there. Hatches leading forward and aft were open and all lighting on. There was a slight escape of air in the control room but no sign of chlorine. The U-boat seemed to be in reasonable good order and I went right for'd and right aft with my revolver in my hand to see if there was anybody about. The lights





'There's a funny sort of instrument here, it looks like a typewriter but when you press the keys something else comes up on it.' Neither Balme nor Long knew anything about Enigma, but they were both intrigued by this strange looking typewriter: 'We both thought it looked very interesting, probably some sort of decoding machine, so I said: 'Can you unscrew it?'

A 'pinch' was the name given to captured German documents and equipment during the war and what Long had found, and now Balme ordered to be shipped over to *Bulldog*,

THE INVISIBILITY CLOAK

Schnee in *U-201* now made his attack on the convoy and the surrounding, friendly warships disappeared into the mist to drive off this new attacker. Balme, who had been joined by the engineer officer of *Bulldog*, Lieutenant-Commander George Dodds, to assess the damage, were deserted in mid-Atlantic: Balme recalled, 'This was a desolate and awful moment. There was I, with my boarding-party, aboard *U-110*, in the middle of the Atlantic, alone with no ships in sight with the wind and sea gradually increasing. There was complete silence in the U-boat except

BELOW

The Captain of HMS Bulldog was John Baker-Cresswell, seen here (centre) sporting a pair of Zeiss binoculars taken from the U-110.

were still on and everything was lying around just as if one had arrived at someone's house after breakfast, coats were thrown around, bunks half made, etc. There was nobody there at all. So I called down my boarding party, and we started ransacking all the treasures of the U-boat.'

Balme found that no attempt had been made to destroy any books or apparatus. In the hydrophone office, the set was still running and he found that the sensitivity could be increased or decreased by a control knob and the bearing on the gyro dial could be altered. There were charts, confidential books, signal logs, pay books, and general correspondence, and in the officers' quarters he found several slips of paper, wallets, binoculars, cameras, a sextant – all were sent up the conning tower and ferried by boat to *Bulldog*.

When Balme entered the wireless office he found Leading Telegraphist Alan Long taking note of the frequency settings and Long told him:



was a complete 'pinch' of an Enigma machine with the actual settings for 9 May 1941, a full set of rotors, the 'home' water settings for the months of April and June, the special settings used in the German navy for 'officer only' traffic, and the code book used in the U-boat fleet for making the short signal sighting reports, thus making it possible for the first time for the British to read these two important types of traffic – and to reconstruct later editions of them. All that was missing were the settings for the month of May which were either destroyed during the panic evacuation of *U-110* or, more likely, lost during the transfers of materiel to *Bulldog*.

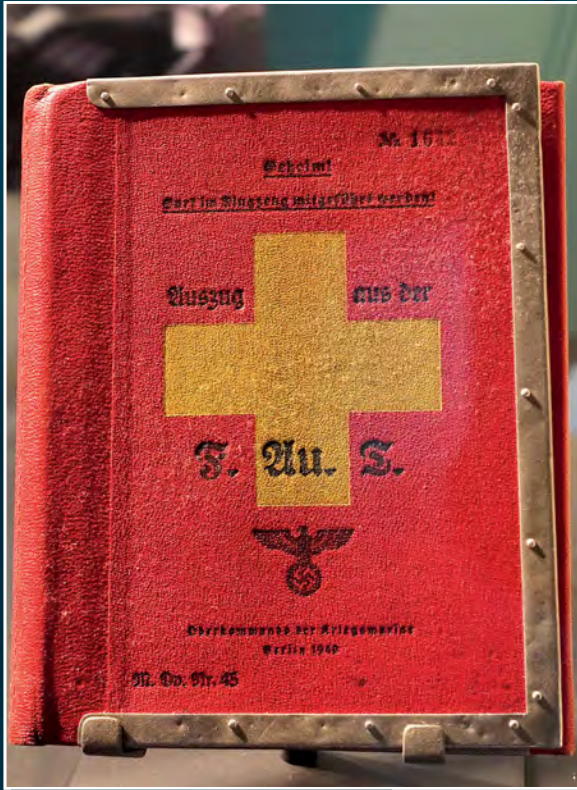
for the continual thud of our own depthcharges. A most unpleasant and frightening noise.' Biding their time, Balme and Dodds ate sandwiches in Lemp's cabin and amused themselves by signing the U-boat's visitor's book.

When *Bulldog* returned after some hours, strenuous efforts were made to tow *U-110* to Iceland which was about 400 miles away, but the weather worsened during the night of 9/10 May, and by dawn the wind was blowing hard. The U-boat had settled lower in the water and was yawing wildly. Balme recalled: 'At about 11 o'clock that morning, the seas got up a bit and suddenly the U-boat's bows came right out of the water and she slowly began to sink and we had to cut the towrope with an axe. We were all very disappointed, but it was the best thing that could have happened because there were so many spies in Iceland, if they'd seen →

LEFT

These Zeiss binoculars were taken from the U-110 as a trophy by David Balme and were used by him throughout the war and as a post-war recreational sailer.





to the Admiralty 'Primrose has sunk'. There was guarded language even within the encrypted messages, Baker-Cresswell adding: 'Consider petals of primrose of utmost importance.'

In London, the report of boarding *U-110* was read by the Vice Chief of Naval Staff who personally directed that the circulation of the file should be limited and it was marked 'Not to pass through any registry'. Nor did any other official document; not the war diary of the Commander-in-Chief Western Approaches, not the Monthly Anti-Submarine Report and not the report of the formal interrogation of the prisoners. None of them made any reference to the capture, and even many years later the history of secret captures by the official historian made no reference to any crypto material having been taken from *U-110*.

However, the effect of the 'pinch' from *U-110* was immediate. The 'pinch' reached Bletchley Park on 13 May, and at 21:37 that evening, after having been silent for some two days, the teleprinters in the basement of the Citadel in

London burst into life as Bletchley began a continuous stream of decrypts. After a briefing from naval intelligence at 23:10 that night the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, sent to Baker-Cresswell at sea a personal signal saying 'Hearty congratulations. The petals of your flower are of rare beauty.'

'CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY'

One controversy did arise. Fritz-Julius Lemp, the commander of *U-110*, died in the water with 14 of his crew shortly after he had abandoned his boat. Had he survived the war he would probably have been tried at a war crimes tribunal because, on the first day of the war, and when in command of another U-boat, *U-30*, he had sunk without warning the passenger liner *Athenia*. The sinking of *Athenia* was one of the charges of crimes against humanity which were brought against Lemp's chief, Karl Dönitz, and it was only at Nuremberg that the truth about *Athenia* emerged. Carrying nearly 1,500 passengers and crew, including many Jewish refugees, she had been

us towing in a U-boat they would have reported it immediately back to Germany. As it was, they just saw a routine destroyer coming in to refuel and didn't suspect that anything dramatic had happened.'

Even before the details of the 'pinch' from *U-110* were known in London, a heavy cloak of secrecy was thrown over the affair. On 10 May, the Admiralty had signalled that the capture was to be referred to as Operation Primrose and that as few people as possible were allowed to know. Nevertheless, Baker-Cresswell could scarcely conceal his disappointment when he signalled back

ABOVE

Although not from the U-110, this code book would have been similar to the 'pinch' from U-110. It is lead-weighted to allow for its destruction if thrown overboard.

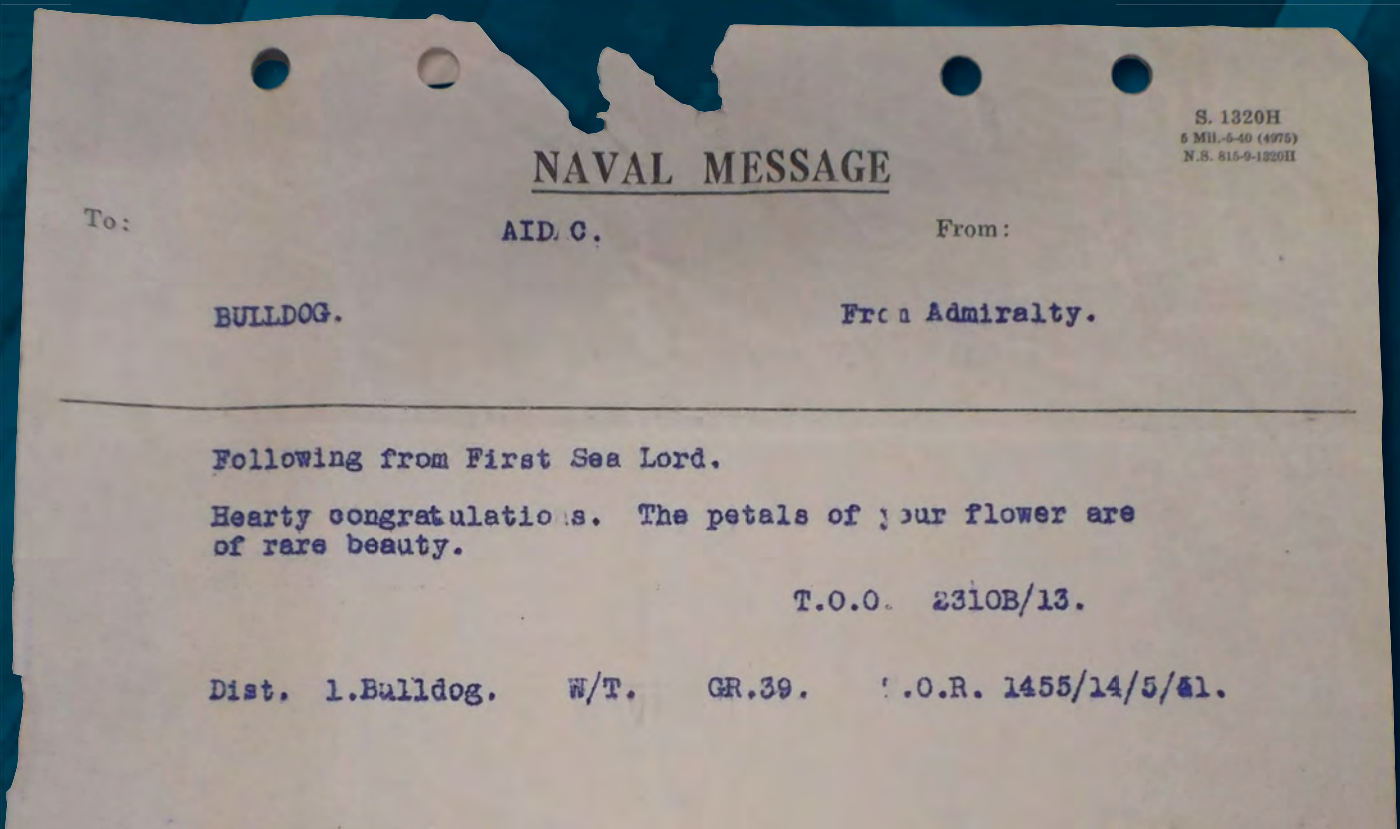
RIGHT

Although not the Kriegsmarine version from U-110, this Enigma machine would have been broadly similar to the mysterious 'typewriter' seized from the submarine.

LEFT

David Balme with Lemp's service cap which he souvenired from the U-110.





torpedoed south of Rockall and the Germans had covered this up - not least because 28 US citizens had been killed and Hitler feared that the news could help bring America into the war just as the sinking of the *Lusitania* had in 1915.

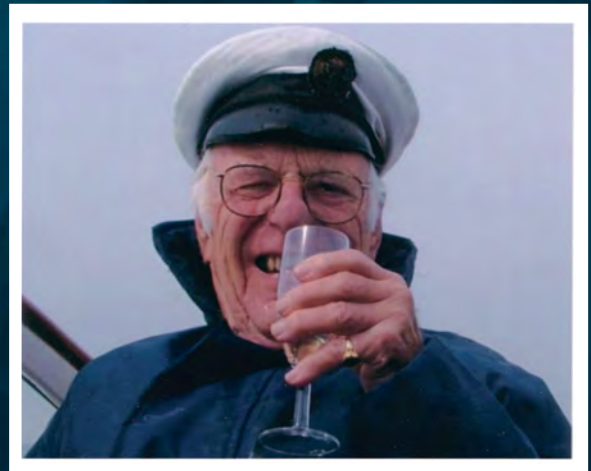
During the attack on Convoy OB318 in May 1941, Lemp had been tired after three weeks at sea, worried about the recent deaths of three of his fellow U-boats aces. He had also been wounded by a cut to his head when HMS *Aubretia* had delivered the second of two devastating depthcharge attacks. No one was killed, but the lights went out temporarily and a broken gauge seemed to show that the U-boat was sinking. Lemp ordered the vents to be blown to bring the boat to the surface only to be surprised when a sudden rocking movement told him she was already on the surface. When he reached the top of the conning he was shocked to find not one but three warships surrounding him and he ordered 'abandon ship'. Georg Högel, one of the experienced men who had followed Lemp from *U-30*, fled from the wireless office without destroying any code material, and the engineer officer, Hans Joachim Eichelborn, left the machine room without shutting down the engines.

Later, under interrogation as a POW, Dietrich Loewe, the first lieutenant and Lemp's cousin, was adamant he and Lemp were the last to leave the boat and when, he said, the water had risen one metre up the conning tower. However, photographs show *U-110* riding high out

of the water. The Germans' reaction and their mistakes were probably brought on by panic.

All contemporary German witnesses agree that Lemp was swimming in the water when he disappeared. In the 1950s Joe Baker-Cresswell corresponded with members of Lemp's family about the return of Lemp's Iron Cross, which had been taken from his cabin in *U-110*, and there were no recriminations about the manner of his death. All believed that Lemp had drowned.

There are no accounts of shots being fired, but 40 years later two journalists fabricated a story that Lemp had been shot while swimming in the sea. →

**TOP**

The seizure of the *U-110* was given the name 'Operation Primrose'. Thus, this signal refers obliquely to the 'rare beauty' of the flower!

ABOVE

David Balme, 1920-2016.

LEFT

David and Sue Balme on the film set of *U-571* with Bill Paxton, Jon Bonjovi and Matthew McConaughey.



ABOVE
David Balme's great-grandsons, Ned and Jack, with his medals, badges and decorations.

When, in the 1980s, this claim was repeated, Balme challenged the claim which had been published in the German weekly, *Bild am Sonntag*, that one of the sailors in the whaler 'had seized a machine pistol which hung round his neck' and shot Lemp.

The newspaper's editor interviewed Balme as well as survivors of *U-110* and a retraction was duly printed. The editor accepted that the British boarding were armed with First World War vintage Webley .45 revolvers, not rifles or submachine guns, and therefore could not have shot anyone with a 'machine pistol' (a German weapon) and that Balme never saw Lemp, still less would he have been able to single him out

BELOW
David Balme poses with the gun on the film set 'U-571'.

among the oil-soaked men in the sea. *Bild am Sonntag* accepted that Lemp had suffered a heart attack or drowned and no subsequent enquiry has ever found otherwise.

A ROYAL PROMISE

The nature of bravery varies. On the battlefield, a red mist of anger may fall over a man who charges an enemy machine gun position and turns the tide of battle, and in the air a man may accomplish a set number of sorties and be rewarded. At sea, there may be days and weeks of struggle, not just against the violence of the enemy but also the dangers of the sea. But the nature of David Balme's bravery was of another, greater magnitude.

No red mist of anger fell upon him driving him to impetuous action: rather, he had some time to confront his fears and to contemplate the many ways of dying when exposed on the ocean in *HMS Bulldog's* whaler or while boarding *U-110* and when conducting, alone, the first search of the U-boat. He risked being shot, blown-up or drowned, and when *Bulldog* disappeared into the Atlantic mist to hunt another U-boat, he risked being sunk. Yet where others tried and failed, or tried and tragically lost their lives, Balme and the boarding party succeeded magnificently in capturing

Enigma and associated cipher material. At his investiture on 17 February 1942, His Majesty King George VI told Balme: 'This should be a much higher award, but the Germans would wonder why. It will be put right at the end of the war.'

Balme was awarded the DSC, and although there were moves in the 1990s to have the award upgraded to a VC, Balme, who died on 3 January 2016 aged 95, never succeeded in calling in the Royal promise which had been made to him in 1942. Ⓞ

READER OFFER

Through Britain at War Magazine we can offer 'Enigma - The Untold Story Of The Secret Capture' to readers at a special price of £13.99 plus £2.50 p&p (UK). Contact Whittles Publishing for delivery overseas. To order, e-mail sue@whittlespublishing.com or telephone: 01593-731333

