

U-163 OPERATIONS AND LOSS AFTER ATTACK ON THE ERIE

On November 13, 1942, the U-163 was ordered to move eastward in the vicinity of the Lesser Antilles Islands. Near the island of Martinique, on 18 November, the U-163 was attacked by a British Hudson-type bomber that dropped four bombs on her. The U-163 managed to escape unscathed. The next day, she did not fare quite as well, when another Hudson attacked just east of the Lesser Antilles. The Hudson's four depth charges caused minor damage that was quickly repaired.

The sub continued her search for merchant vessels east of Barbados. Two days later, she sighted smoke pouring from the stacks of two freighters. She began pursuing one, but broke off the hunt after a half hour. With the smoke of the second vessel still visible, the U-163 began pursuing her. She was the 6,060-ton British steamer, the EMPIRE STARLING, transporting frozen and canned meats, mail and other goods to Trinidad. After stalking the vessel for seven hours, the U-163 finally launched a fan shot of three torpedoes. Two hit the EMPIRE STARLING, causing her to list slightly. Minutes later the finishing shot was loosed, and she sank to the floor of the Caribbean Sea.

The 55-man crew all survived the sinking and the sailors were left to fend for themselves in four lifeboats. The Master of the ship, Eric Monckton, was taken aboard the U-163 and ultimately transported to a Prisoner-of-War camp for allied mariners, Milag Nord.

The next evening, the U-163 encountered convoy BNN-3 about three hundred miles east of Barbados. After trailing the convoy for about three hours, the U-163 fired torpedoes from both of her stern tubes, one of which struck and sank the 3,766-ton Brazilian steamer, the APALOIDE, captained by J. S. Silva. The torpedo explosion and sinking resulted in the loss of five of the ship's 57-man crew.

Patrolling in the same marine quadrant over the next ten days resulted in no sightings of suitable targets. On December 2, the U-163 was ordered to return to her homeport as soon as its diesel fuel stocks reached the 40-meter³ mark. Since its supply was then 46 meters³, her commander, Kurt Eduard Engelmann decided to pursue reports from the U-505 that the hunt for merchant vessels might be more successful to the south.

Two days later, she encountered two U.S. Navy vessels, the cruiser USS OMAHA and the destroyer USS JEWETT steaming about 400 miles east of Trinidad. After a short pursuit, the U-163 launched a 3-torpedo fan shot at the OMAHA, but all three were misses. The JEWETT quickly responded by laying down three heavy depth charge patterns, none of which damaged the U-163.

With her fuel stores now at a minimum, the U-163 headed home. Along the return route, she met up with three other U-boats (the 154, 129 and 505) that had been part of operational group "Southwards." All four were re-provisioned and re-fueled by a supply boat, the U-463. On January 6, 1943, the U-163 docked in her sub pen at Lorient, ending an 81-day, 12,409 nautical mile war patrol.

During the months of January and February 1943, the U-163 was reconditioned and modernized, in preparation for her third war patrol. Fully provisioned and with a complement of 57 men on board, she left Lorient on 10 March 1943. Her immediate objective was to rendezvous with the German blockade breaker, the REGENSBURG, in order to hand over special orders and certain material.

On her third day at sea, the U-163 encountered the allied convoy MKS-9 in the western reaches of the Bay of Biscay, enroute from Gibraltar to the U.K. Shortly after the U-163 began her

attack on the convoy, the U-boat was located by a newly installed radar unit on one of the escorts, the Canadian corvette, HMCS PRESCOTT (K-161), which is pictured below.



Multiple depth charge patterns laid down by the PRESCOTT drove the U-163 down, and a final barrage of nine depth charges set to 350 and 550 feet sank her. Although no visual confirmation was made, all contact with the sub was lost around 2330 on the 13th of March. All 57 men aboard the U-boat went to a watery grave that night.

In the course of researching the fate of the U-163, the webmaster was privileged to make the acquaintance of Collin R. Mullens, a former Royal Navy Wireless Mechanic who served aboard the HMCS PRESCOTT. In June 2000 (a little more than a year before his death on August 15, 2001), Mr. Mullens graciously provided detailed information concerning the PRESCOTT'S sinking of the U-163 .

As a salute to one of the brave and selfless "juicers" (wireless operators) who helped procure our freedoms in the Western Approaches during World War II, the following information regarding Collin R. Mullens and the PRESCOTT'S sinking of the U-163 is provided.



Collin Mullens (pictured to left, after attaining the rank of Petty Officer in 1944) served in the Royal Navy for 6 years, in the North Atlantic.

He was trained as a Wireless Mechanic, which rating qualified him to operate and repair radio and radar equipment. He received special training in the use and maintenance of the new (in 1942) British anti-submarine radar, the X-band WS [Warning of Surface] RDF [radar], Type 271-P.

The acquisition of this specialized training was the reason Mullens, a Royal Navy Wireless Mechanic, was aboard the Canadian corvette PRESCOTT when she sank the U-163 (and continued to serve on her until October 1944).

In 1942, HMCS PRESCOTT and other Canadian corvettes were the primary escort vehicles for many Atlantic convoys. When originally constructed, they lacked gyrocompasses, used very obsolete sonar and had no radar (or had minimally useful SW1C or SW2C radars). In the fall of 1942, the Admiralty decided to equip the PRESCOTT and a number of other Canadian corvettes with the new British Type 271-P anti-submarine radar units. While the upgrade was a critical one, it was problematic, as the Canadian Navy lacked sailors proficient in the use of the Type 271-P system. To resolve the problem, the Royal Navy agreed to assign teams (consisting of one Wireless Mechanic and three operators) from its forces, to operate and maintain the new units. The Royal Navy personnel assigned to each Canadian corvette were selected from a pool of individuals who volunteered for this service. Among the volunteers was Wireless Mechanic Collin Mullens.

Thus, on 27 November 1942, Collin Mullens came aboard the PRESCOTT in Londonderry and, nearly four months later, was in her 271 Radar Office (and also on the bridge behind Captain W. McIsaac) when she made contact with the U-163 during the evening of 13 March 1943.

The following is Mullens' transcription of Captain McIsaac's 15 March 1943 report, detailing actions taken against the U-163. (Note: this report mistakenly assumed that there were two U-boat attackers; per Collin Mullens, this was subsequently established to be just one U-boat.)

"At 2149 R.D.F. picked up an echo at 3400 yards, bearing 066 degrees. Convoy course was 006 degrees. Course was at once altered towards and the echo closed rapidly to 2100 yards. At 1400 yards a U-boat could be seen diving and very strong hydrophone effect was reported.

At 2155 a submarine was sighted off the port bow going away from us. The first submarine, according to doppler and change of range and bearing, was coming towards us and moving right. This movement right appeared to be only slight and was noted only in the earlier stages of the attack. When we were some distance from our target, the second submarine, which may have been zigzagging, began to loom very large on the port bow. Course was altered to port towards it.

At 2158 the A/S C.O. fired a five-charge pattern, in spite of this unexpected alteration of course. We then opened fire on the second submarine, firing two H.E. and one star shell. No hits were observed but the submarine was already going away from us at high speed and was almost immediately seen to dive, Asdic contact was immediate at 600 yards.

Nine charges were fired at 2204, time to fire being obtained from the recorder. One charge was not fired, because the firing buzzer did not function in this attack, the order to fire being passed by telephone. Bearing was reported drawing right shortly before contact was lost.

After running out and back over the spot, we began to carry out observations along with H.M.C.S. Napanee which came up at this time. Napanee was ordered to do the southern half of the square, while we searched the northern half.

At 2319 we picked up an asdic echo about 1500 yards north of where the second submarine had dived. It was classified as doubtful, and contact was lost at about 400 yards.

We ran in on it a second time and regained contact at 1500 yards. This was at 2326. Extent of target was about eight degrees, but it showed no movement either on the set or the plot. However, the echo was sharp and believing that it might be the second submarine lying deep, we decided to attack. Contact was again held to 400 yards, and nine charges set to 350 and 550 feet were dropped, time to fire being obtained by stopwatch.

According to the plot, some of these charges were on the target. We continued to search the area but did not regain contact. We then carried on with our search of the larger area, dropping single charges at our three points of attack, time to fire being obtained from the plot. No evidence of destruction or of anything else out of the ordinary could be found, though many non-sub echoes were encountered.

At 0210/14 we left to rejoin the convoy, having previously been ordered to search until 0200. The trace of the first attack dried out in the recorder. The trace of the second attack is reasonably well preserved; the echo in the third attack left only a very faint trace, which also faded out before it could be dried.

When first detected the U-boats appeared to be in quarter line ahead about a mile apart and coming in to attack the convoy. The second one, which was seen well on the surface, was painted light grey. This, in the prevailing visibility, made it look deceptively like an escort vessel. No further attacks were made on the convoy."

[End of Narrative found in PRO ADM199/975 (part of), Enclosure 6 to Commodore, Londonderry's No. LY.40/250 OP, dated 4 April 1943, to Commander in Chief, Western Approaches, *et al.*]

The German U-boat Command inserted the following remarks regarding her loss in the war diary of the U-163:

"No action reports are coming in. Ordered to report her position on the 15th and 16th [of March], the boat fails to respond.

Loss by aerial bombardment or mines is possible.

On April 24, the U-163 was declared as Missing, effective 15 March 1943, and assigned a star. [A star was assigned to U-boats on German official loss assessment lists, when they were deemed probable losses.]"

During her three war patrols, the U-163 sank three merchant vessels (the two described above, and the LA CORDILLERA, a 5,185 ton British freighter which she sank on November 5, 1942, while making her way towards the Dutch West Indies as part of the U-boat operational group "Südwärts." She also badly damaged the USS ERIE, which sank 23 days after the U-163 torpedoed her (in part, because those in charge of salvage operations badly miscalculated negative buoyancy factors).

The final assessment of the U-163 on behalf of the U-boat Commander (Admiral Doenitz) seemingly speaks to a less than stellar performance of her commanding officer and crew:

"The commander strove to take advantage of every opportunity and sought for good results.

Torpedo engagements were unsatisfactory and can be tied to definite deficiencies in attack experience, thus, the three-torpedo fan shot on 21 November at a single steamer 500 meters distant was excessive, as well, the spread shot on December 4 at the Marblehead-type cruiser must be deemed wrong, considering the hopeless distance and position.

Nothing else is noteworthy."¹

¹ The remarks and final assessment are excerpted from the "Kriegstagebuch" (War Diary) of the U-163 and translated into English by the webmaster.