

**The Royal Canadian Navy and the Narvik U-Boats - May 1945**

by

Air Commodore Derek Waller RAF (Rtd)

*“Ninth [Canadian] Escort Group consisting of Matane, Loch Alvie, St Pierre, Monnow and Nene slipped from Lisahally and proceeded to sea” (10 May, 2100). (1)*

*“Ninth Escort Group ordered by D.17 to detach and proceed with all dispatch to intercept German Convoy reported proceeding from Narvik to Trondheim”. (16 May, 1415). (1)*

On 17 May 1945 the 9<sup>th</sup> (Canadian) Escort Group (9 EG), commanded by Commander A F C (Frank) Layard, RN, who was on loan to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), intercepted 15 U-Boats in Vestfiord off northern Norway nine days after the war had ended, and thus played a major part in a long-disputed story about exactly where and when these U-Boats surrendered to the Allies. Was it in Narvik on 9 May, was it at sea in Vestfiord to 9 EG on 17 May, or was it in Loch Eriboll in northern Scotland after they arrived there on 19 May escorted by 9 EG?

In early May 1945 there were about 85,000 German Naval personnel stationed in Norway, as well as many Kriegsmarine surface ships and 87 U-Boats, and Admiral Donitz instructed General Franz Bohme, the German Commander-in-Chief Norway, that he was to follow to the letter the Allied capitulation plans as set out in ‘The Act of Military Surrender’, viz:

*We the undersigned, acting by authority of the German High Command, hereby surrender unconditionally to the Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Forces and simultaneously to the Soviet High Command all forces on land, sea and in the air who are at this date under German control.*

*The German High Command will at once issue orders to all German military, naval and air authorities and to all forces under German control to cease active operations at 2301 hours Central European time on 8 May and to remain in the positions occupied at that time. No ship, vessel, or aircraft is to be scuttled, or any damage done to their hull, machinery or equipment. (2)*

As a result General Bohme made a radio broadcast on 7 May from his Headquarters at Lillehammer, north of Oslo, saying that all the German forces in Norway were to obey Allied orders without dispute.

The Allies, particularly the British, had well established plans in place for the re-occupation of Norway in the event of a German capitulation. However, as there were no Allied forces on the ground in Norway on 7 May, one of the first British actions was to dispatch a small Disarmament Party from the UK to Norway, which arrived in Oslo on the afternoon of 8 May.

This joint-service party included a number of 'Disarmament Unit Commanders', as well as three Norwegian Army District Commanders, and they proceeded to pre-planned geographic zones in Norway on the morning of 9 May. Thereafter, responsibility for the successful execution of the surrender orders in each zone was initiated by these Unit Commanders in co-operation with the Norwegian District Commanders. The detailed work was carried out by a number of 'Disarmament Heralds', whose job was to work with the German authorities throughout Norway in order to implement the first stages of the surrender process.

The Allied surrender instructions included the '*Special Orders by the Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force to the German High Command relating to Naval Forces*'. These reinforced the words in the '*Act of Military Surrender*' and, with some duplication, stated that:

*The German High Command will forthwith issue categorical directions that no ship [or] vessel ... of any description is to be scuttled, or any damage done to their hull, machinery or equipment.*

*All warships ... in harbours are to remain in harbour pending further directions from the Allied Representatives.*

*All warships ... in port ... will immediately train all weapons fore and aft. All torpedo tubes will be unloaded and breech blocks will be removed from all guns.*

*All warships ... in German or German-controlled harbours will immediately land and store in safety all ammunition, warheads and other explosives. (2)*

Also, on the morning of 8 May the German Naval War Staff in Flensburg, Germany, made it clear to the Head of the Kriegsmarine in Norway, Admiral Theodor Krancke, that he was responsible for the notification of the conditions of surrender to all relevant naval organisations in Norway, including the Admiral Commanding U-Boats. Thus Admiral Krancke and his staff were very well aware of the need to cooperate fully with the Disarmament Heralds, as well as with the Allied Naval representatives when they arrived.

The naval surrender process itself began on 9 May but, in view of the large number of U-Boats and other German naval vessels in Norwegian waters and ports, the planned naval organisation was inadequate to deal with the task. As a result, the local German Navy authorities in Norway were ordered to follow the surrender and disarmament instructions issued by the Allies, which would be passed on by the Kriegsmarine HQ in Oslo. This facilitated the prompt and successful surrender of all the U-Boats in Norwegian ports on 9 May.

As part of the initial surrender arrangements, and before the full extent of German co-operation was generally known, Admiral Krancke sent a German Naval delegation to Rosyth in Scotland, arriving there on 11 May. The delegation was led by Captain Krueger, and whilst he was unable to provide details about all the U-Boats and their specific locations, he was able to confirm that:

*The U-Boats have orders to surface and surrender. (3)*

He was also able to confirm that the Kriegsmarine in Norway was willing to assist in carrying out the surrender terms that had been laid down by the Allies.

As well as the 87 U-Boats which surrendered in Norwegian ports on 9 May, a further nine surrendered from sea - five on 9 May, one on 10 May, one on 12 May, one on 14 May and one on 15 May - making a total of 96:

In port:	Bergen	28
	Kristiansand (S)	17
	Trondheim	13
	Narvik	12
	Holmestrand (Horten)	10
	Stavanger	7
From sea:	Bergen	4
	Narvik	3
	Stavanger	2

There is little doubt that the surrender of the U-Boats in Norway was accomplished astonishingly smoothly. Germany had capitulated on 7 May, the German High Command had issued the appropriate surrender orders on 8 May and, although there were few Allied forces to whom to surrender, the U-Boat COs and their crews laid down their arms on 9 May with virtually no arguments whatsoever. No U-Boats were scuttled, no COs tried to escape, and there was no serious trouble. Of the nine U-Boats that surrendered from sea on or after 9 May, some were routinely returning to base after their last operational patrols, some were obeying Donitz' *'cease operations and return to Norway'* instruction of 4 May, whilst others arrived in ignorance of the capitulation, having failed to receive any of the surrender messages.

Whilst action was underway to establish the exact number of U-Boats in each of the Norwegian ports, there was considerable surprise and concern when the Royal Norwegian Navy destroyer HNoMS *Stord*, which was transporting the Norwegian Navy's Rear Admiral E C Danielsen to Tromso in north Norway, sighted a convoy of German naval vessels at sea in Vestfjord early in the morning on 16 May. The convoy included 15 U-Boats, which were being moved to Trondheim from Narvik where they had surrendered either in port or from sea on 9 May.

The 12 U-Boats already in port at Narvik on 9 May were U-294, U-295, U-312, U-313, U-363, U-427, U-481, U-668, U-716, U-968, U-997 and U-1165, and the three that had arrived from sea during the morning were U-278, U-318 and U-992. However, there were no Allied forces in Narvik at that time, and the surrender arrangements for all the German naval vessels there were therefore implemented by the German Navy commander in Narvik, Captain Reinhard (Teddy) Suhren, who was Captain (U/B) Northern Waters, acting under the orders of the Kriegsmarine's 'Naval Chief Command Norway' (NCCN), which was itself acting under Allied orders.

Some of the U-Boat COs in the Northern Waters area (including Zoller in U-315, Will in U-318 and Falke in U-992) had initially been inclined to continue the war alone or to escape rather than to obey the surrender instructions. However Captain Suhren would tolerate no

such thoughts or actions by anyone under his command, and his staff quickly made it very clear to all the U-Boat COs in Narvik that it was their duty to co-operate with the Allies without demure. (4)

Nevertheless, after completing the surrender instructions, Suhren became worried about the security situation in Narvik, with his description of the local situation being that:

*The German fleet was widely scattered at the time, and as part of the surrender process the Allies gave orders for [the vessels] to meet at fixed collection points and to be handed over there. We in Narvik felt that we were situated a bit too close to Murmansk, and that the Soviets might decide to occupy Narvik and take us over too. As a precaution I appealed to [the] Allied Command and suggested that as regards getting all the submarines together, we could bring them and all their attendant ships to Trondheim. (5)*

Thus, on 11 May, with Allied permission, the NCCN staff approved Suhren's proposal to transfer the U-Boats and their supporting vessels from Narvik southwards to Trondheim. In the meantime, the 15 U-boats were moved to an anchorage in Skjomenfjord (30 miles south of Narvik) on 12 May, partly to avoid conflicts with Norwegian and other forces, including ex-POWs.

This decision to allow the U-Boats in Narvik to move to Trondheim was not surprising, as the Royal Navy's Commander-in-Chief Rosyth had already recommended to the Admiralty on 9 May that:

*All the U-Boats [in Norway] should be ordered to concentrate in ports for which NOICs [Naval Officers in Charge] are planned, i.e. Oslo, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø. (6)*

Captain Suhren then signaled NCCN on 13 May saying:

*In accordance with Naval Chief Command Norway's message of 11 May intend to transfer on 13 May eight U-Boats of the 13<sup>th</sup> U/B Flotilla and seven U-Boats of the 14<sup>th</sup> U/B Flotilla to Trondheim. Accommodation in Narvik has so far been almost exclusively afloat, which can no longer be reckoned with. Accommodation ashore in the Narvik area is impossible owing to the general lack of space, whereas in Trondheim the 13<sup>th</sup> Flotilla's Depot can accommodate Captain (U/B) Northern Waters' entire unit. (7)*

As a result, all the U-Boats at Narvik/Skjomenfjord were directed to transfer to Trondheim, with Suhren advising at 1155 on 15 May:

*With the consent of the Allied Commission in Oslo, [and] in accordance with Naval Chief Command Norway's [instructions], Captain (U/B) Northern Waters' unit will leave Narvik at 2000 hours on 15 May 1945 with the 14<sup>th</sup> Flotilla (15 U-Boats) [in an] open water passage at 10 knots to Trondheim. All vessels will fly a black flag at the starboard yard. (7)*

And, at 2103 a further message was sent which advised NCCN:

© CNRS/SCRN and all original copyright holders

*Captain U/B's unit with 'Grille', 'Huascarán', 'Kamerun', 'Stella Polaris', 'Kaernten' [and the U-Boats] U-278, U-294, U-295, U-312, U-313, U-318, U-363, U-427, U-481, U-668, U-716, U-968, U-992, U-997 and U-1165 left Narvik at 2000 hours for transfer passage to Trondheim by outer route. (8)*

'Grille' was Hitler's former yacht, 'Huascarán' was a submarine depot ship, 'Kamerun' was a minelayer, 'Stella Polaris' was an accommodation vessel, and 'Kaernten' was a naval tanker. The group, under the overall command of Captain Suhren in 'Grille', sailed south, with the 15 U-Boats on the surface in accordance with the agreed surrender arrangements. But before doing so, and in accordance with the Allied surrender terms, all ammunition and mines had been landed, and all torpedoes had been rendered harmless.

However, on 16 May, the circumstances for the convoy changed dramatically when HNoMS *Stord* had been surprised to sight the German convoy in Vestfjord en route from Narvik to Trondheim. At that stage, the UK naval authorities in London knew nothing whatsoever about the surrender arrangements for these 15 U-Boats and, as recorded in the Admiralty War Diary for May 1945, a flurry of signal messages followed:

160819 - Stord to Flag Officer Norway: *Have met German convoy ... in Vestfjord ...they say they are sailing from Narvik to Trondheim. Is this in order?*

161130 - Assistant Chief of Naval Staff to Flag Officer Norway: *Admiralty is taking action on Stord's [message].*

161200 - Assistant Chief of Naval Staff to Stord: *U-Boats are to be escorted ... to Loch Eriboll.*

161340 - Flag Officer Norway to Stord: *[Your 160819] Yes, German submarines have been in touch with Trondheim.*

170211 - Assistant Chief of Naval Staff to Flag Officer Norway: *Request report whether convoy referred to in Stord's [message] was ordered by you to sail from Narvik to Trondheim or whether it sailed under German orders. This is not clear from your 161340.*

191306 - Flag Officer Norway to Admiralty: *Permission for German Naval Command to sail convoy from Narvik to Trondheim was granted by Disarmament Heralds who preceded Joint Force Commanders to Norway. Reason for request was shortage of stores and of accommodation for personnel landed after disarmament at Narvik. (9)*

At the same time, the last Arctic convoy, JW 67, which was on passage to Murmansk was in the area, and so Commander Frank Layard's 9<sup>th</sup> (Canadian) Escort Group, comprising HMCS *Matane*, HMCS *Loch Alvie*, HMCS *Nene*, HMCS *Monnow* and HMCS *St Pierre*, was detached from the convoy in order to intercept the U-Boats. Also, as discussions were underway with the US Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington about a British proposal to transfer all the seaworthy U-Boats in Norway to the United Kingdom, the Admiralty took an immediate unilateral decision that the U-Boats should be moved to Loch Eriboll in north-

west Scotland which was the main designated reception anchorage for U-Boats surrendering from sea in the vicinity of the UK.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Escort Group sighted the German convoy off the Norwegian coast at 0445 on the morning on 17 May, and a 3-man boarding party from HMCS *Matane* was put aboard 'Grille' an hour later. The first action of the Boarding Officer, Lt John J Coates, RCNVR, was to ask Captain Suhren if he had read and understood the terms of surrender and if his U-Boat commanders also understood these terms. In response Suhren confirmed that all ammunition had been landed, no mines were carried, the pistols had been removed from all torpedoes and that the COs of the U-Boats understood and would comply with the terms of the surrender.

At the same time, the other RCN escort vessels were ordered to approach the two lines of U-Boats to ascertain whether or not they had complied with the surrender terms. As a result, and as described by Commander Layard in his subsequent Report of Proceedings (RoP):

*Boats were lowered and several U-Boats were boarded and the reports which I received satisfied me that the surrender terms had been complied with and that we were unlikely to experience any trouble or hostilities. (1)*

In the meantime on board 'Grille', Captain Suhren who was already operating under Allied orders to move the 15 U-Boats from Narvik to Trondheim, was having some difficulty in accepting the new instruction that the U-Boats were to be diverted to Loch Eriboll instead of continuing to Trondheim. As recorded in 9 EG's RoP:

*He explained that his reluctance was due to the fact that he was proceeding to Trondheim under German High Command orders in co-operation with the Allied High Command. [However] he was informed that he was to comply with all orders given by my Boarding Officer [and that] his High Command would be informed, if necessary, by the Allied High Command. At that, he surrendered his command of the U-Boats and ordered [the CO of] U-278 to assume command under Senior Officer 9EG, forming up and proceeding in accordance with instructions. (1)*

Thus, Commander Layard advised the Admiralty at 0720 on 17 May:

*Have ordered five merchant ships to proceed to Trondheim and have started for Loch Eriboll with the following German U-Boats: U-278, U-294, U-295, U-312, U-313, U-318, U-363, U-427, U-481, U-668, U-716, U-968, U-992, U-997 and U-1165. (1)*

Similarly, Captain Suhren, who was allowed to continue to Trondheim in 'Grille', sent a message to NCCN and BdU (Ops) saying:

*At 0700 hours on 17 May 15 U-Boats handed over to British corvette formation under the command of K.444 [HMCS *Matane*] for passage to Scotland. (8)*

Thereafter, the 15 U-Boats were ordered to form up and proceed in two columns towards the Shetlands, and thence to Loch Eriboll. U-278 had been nominated as the lead U-Boat, and one officer, Lt J Mallett, RCNVR, and two Canadian crewmen were transferred to it from HMCS *Loch Alvie* for the duration of the passage.

The passage to Loch Eriboll was relatively uneventful, though some bad weather was encountered. Also, two of the U-Boats (U-295 and U-312) needed to refuel in Lerwick in the Shetland Islands. However, escorted by HMCS *St Pierre*, they then caught up with the convoy, and all 15 of the U-Boats ex-Narvik arrived off Loch Eriboll at 1915 in the evening of 19 May where they were met by ships of the 21<sup>st</sup> Escort Group (21 EG) before moving into the anchorage for initial processing.

At 1400 on the same day, the Royal Navy's Commander-in-Chief Western Approaches ordered the 30th Escort Group (30 EG), comprising HMS *Pevensey Castle*, HMS *Caistor Castle*, HMS *Launceston Castle* and HMS *Kenilworth Castle*, to move from Lough Foyle in Northern Ireland to Loch Eriboll to assist 21 EG with the processing arrangements. 30 EG arrived in Loch Eriboll in the late morning of 20 May and immediately helped to provide armed guards on the U-Boats.

After that, all the ex-Narvik U-boats were quickly transferred to Loch Alsh, near Skye in western Scotland, sailing in three separate batches of five. The first batch comprised U-294, U-481, U-716, U-968 and U-997, and they were escorted by four of the ships from 9 EG (HMCS *Matane*, HMCS *Loch Alvie*, HMCS *Nene* and HMCS *Monnow*) on 20 May. In the meantime, the fifth ship in 9 EG, HMCS *St Pierre*, had been sent to Greenock in order to disembark the Norwegian passengers that 9 EG had originally been transporting to Russia before it was diverted to Vestfiord.

The second batch comprising U-278, U-427, U-668, U-992 and U-1165 left Loch Eriboll on 21 May escorted by two ships from 21 EG (HMS *Conn* and HMS *Fitzroy*) and one from 30 EG (HMS *Caistor Castle*), and the third batch comprising U-295, U-312, U-313, U-318 and U-363 escorted by three ships from 21 EG (HMS *Rupert*, HMS *Deane* and HMS *Byron*) also left Loch Eriboll on 21 May.

The first batch of five U-Boats escorted by 9 EG arrived at Loch Alsh on 21 May, and the second and third batches arrived on 22 May, where they were all processed by ships of the 5<sup>th</sup> Escort Group (5 EG), with their remaining torpedoes being unloaded and most of the German crews being taken into captivity. Thereafter, all 15 of the ex-Narvik U-Boats were transferred to Lisahally in Northern Ireland during the next few days for laying-up prior to decisions being made about their final disposal.

Once their work at Loch Alsh was finished 9 EG departed for Londonderry on 21 May after what was its final (and successful) war-related operation prior to being disbanded, but not without some unfortunate criticism from the resident NOIC, Captain Brian Gourley, RN who sent a message to Commodore (D), Western Approaches, Commodore G W G (Shrimp) Simpson, RN, in Londonderry on 21 May saying:

*Search of German prisoners has revealed following evidence of fraternization between U-Boat crews and armed guards of 9 EG on passage from Loch Eriboll. Canadian personnel badges, English money, and packets of Eire butter, English and Canadian cigarettes (1)*

There was no love lost between Commander Layard and Captain Gourley, as is reflected in a comment in the former's diary entry for 21 May, viz:

© CNRS/SCRN and all original copyright holders

*Re-published on For Posterity's Sake with permission of the Canadian Nautical Research Society and the author, Derek Waller.*

*Who should come on board just before we sailed but Mr. Bloody Brian Gourlay now Captain NOIC Loch Alsh. He was my Captain at the end of the last war in the Sea Bear. (10)*

They had both served in the destroyer HMS *Sea Bear* in late 1918 when, as a Lt Cdr, Brian Gourlay had been an extremely harsh and unpopular captain, and there were clearly still a few issues to settle between them. As it happened, Commander Layard could see both sides of the problem, as was reflected in the comments in his diary entry, also on 21 May, which recorded that:

*How the hell can you help fraternization if you berth U-Boats alongside ships for 24 hours. As a matter of fact it was very bad in this ship [HMCS *Matane*] and I had to get the Captain to do something about it. (10)*

Although, in the end he got no sympathy from Commodore Simpson, Commander Layard also highlighted the problem in his 9 EG RoP saying:

*With reference to NOIC Loch Alsh's signal, the evidence of fraternization is much regretted and shows clearly a great lack of supervision on the part of certain ships. It is submitted, however, that if boats are berthed alongside ships and if it is quite apparent that, by their attitude the German crews are accepting the terms of surrender willingly and without question, it is indeed difficult to prevent English or Canadian personnel from displaying those small acts of kindness and goodwill which is our National characteristic. (1)*

Typically, his final comment was;

*To the last we [the 9th (Canadian) EG] were true to form. Never out of trouble. (10)*

At the very start of his naval career Commander Layard had witnessed the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow in 1918 and, earlier in May 1945 when 9 EG had sighted one of the surrendering U-Boats on its way into Loch Eriboll, he had written in his diary that he could not help being sorry for the U-Boat crews, observing that defeat and surrender must be very bitter. So it was not surprising that he had some private sympathy with the actions of some of his Royal Canadian Navy crews, no matter that they were disobeying Royal Navy orders.

*Arundel, West Sussex, UK*

*January 2017*

### **Specific Sources:**

1. TNA Kew, ADM 199/139 - Report of Proceedings, 9<sup>th</sup> Escort Group

© CNRS/SCRN and all original copyright holders

*Re-published on For Posterity's Sake with permission of the Canadian Nautical Research Society and the author, Derek Waller.*



*This article was originally published in  
Argonauta, Volume XXXIV Number 2 Spring 2017*

2. The University of North Carolina's US Library and Digital Archive website:  
www.ibiblio.org - The Act of Military Surrender signed at Rheims on 7 May 1945
3. TNA Kew, ADM 1/18665 - Minutes of Meeting in Rosyth on 11 May 1945 with  
German Naval Officers
4. Cuxhaven U-Boat Museum and Archive, Germany - Note re U-318.
5. Teddy Suhren: "Ace of Aces - Memoirs of a U-Boat Rebel" (Chatham Publishing  
2005) – page 223
6. TNA Kew, ADM 199/2317, Admiralty War Diary - 1 to 15 May 1945
7. TNA Kew, HW 18/222 – German Naval Messages, 8 to 15 May 1945
8. TNA Kew, HW 18/223 – German Naval Messages, 15 to 20 May 1945
9. TNA Kew, ADM 199/2318, Admiralty War Diary - 16 to 31 May 1945
10. Michael Whitby: "Commanding Canadians: The Second World War Diaries of AFC  
Layard" (UBC Press 2005) – pages 531 and 532

© CNRS/SCRN and all original copyright holders

*Re-published on For Posterity's Sake with permission of the Canadian  
Nautical Research Society and the author, Derek Waller.*