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# AXIS U-BOATS: In Far-Eastern Waters

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Sea Classics, Jul 2006 by Riviere, P

Seeking to establish a sense of continuity with their wartime ally Japan, Germany and Italy sent submarines on almost futile missions to the Pacific and Indian Oceans

A few months after Pearl Harbor, the German underwater war rose to its height. Admiral Donitz's wolf pack was registering record victories against Allied shipping. All seven seas were soon to become death rings for Allied ships with the entry of the Japanese in the war arena. The increase of Allied ship traffic in the Indian Ocean was followed by a U-boat infiltration round the Cape of Good Hope

A wolf pack would operate in the Indian in 1943 to reinforce the isolated U-boats and surface raiders plying these waters. There were no organized convoys in the Indian Ocean as in the Atlantic, because of a shortage of warships as escorts. Thirteen squadrons of British land planes or flying boats were all that were available to cover the vast expanses from Africa to Australia, from India to the southern latitudes. As an example, twelve freighters were sunken in June and 17 in July 1942. A German U-boat base had been set up at Penang in Japanese-occupied Malaya, where crews and boats could recuperate and repair from their long sea voyages.

An armada of eleven submarines (including two supply boats) left Kiel, Germany, during 1943 for the Indian Ocean. Five succeeded in rounding the Cape in August. On the 20th of that month, a British plane from Madagascar would sink U-197. After resupply from the German supply ship Brake, hunting in the Indian Ocean since 1941, the four U-boats hastily left the waters south of Madagascar for the sea lanes to the north, where Japanese subs were already on patrol. These would sink six freighters during September.

One of the four, U-533, would be sunk on 17 September off the coast of Somaliland. The other three, after a few successes, would wearily rejoin Penang. Of three new subs

despatched as reinforcements in November, one would reach its destination. Other boats would arrive in the Indian in the spring of 1944, to take part in the sinking of 30 Allied ships (195,000-tons in six months). The resupply ship Brake would be destroyed in March 1944.

Example of a cruise: Boat U-188, captained by L/Commander Luedden, left Lorient, France, on 30 June 1943, together with U-155, captained by L/Commander Pfenning. The first supply ship in the Atlantic having been destroyed, U-188 rejoined the second one to tank up with fuel oil on 22 July. The boat bypassed the Cape well to the south and was replenished by the reliable Brake 600-mi (1000km) south of Reunion Island on 8 September (at the same time as four other boats). Heading northward, U-188 was on station off Somaliland by the 21st, where it sank a solitary ship. Mechanical difficulties thereafter robbed the boat of opportune occasions to fire at the numerous tankers steaming within range. The captain was ordered to Penang on the 30th, after 122 days at sea and 19,000-nautical miles travelled, without too much success. After repairs, U-188 arrived at Singapore to collect 100-tons of tin, eleven of raw rubber, 18 of wolfram, quinine and opium.

It left Malaya on 1 January 1944, sank six ships at the end of that month in the entrance to the Gulf of Aden, and rejoined supply ship Brake on 2 March 800-mi (1288km) south of Reunion. Commander Luedden was caught while awaiting replenishment by a British Naval force - the same force which had disposed of another supply ship the previous month. The sub crash-dived to escape before it had begun to refuel, while Brake was being sunk by the guns of HMS Roebuck.

Low on fuel and munitions, U-188 crossed to the Atlantic where it met with Z7-1062 on the 22nd, then with U-181. Enough fuel was obtained from these two boats. Luedden obtained munitions from U-129. When all appeared to be going satisfactorily, the boat's radio equipment broke down. Making use of the South Atlantic currents, U-188, slowly (to conserve fuel and engines) and carefully (to avoid detection) made its way to Prance where it arrived on 9 June. After six weeks of radio silence, the boat and crew had been given up as lost at sea. The unlucky U-188 would be scuttled in August when the Germans retreated from western Prance.

Other submarines would know unending and dangerous cruises. These were the boats detailed to transport back and forth, between Germany and Japan, equipment and raw material essential to the war effort of the two countries. Japan was short of specialized technicians, of precision tools, of special alloy steels; Germany was short of rubber, of rare metals, of quinine. Exchange by surface ships was out of the question since the Allies controlled the seas. Beside a few blockade running ships, submarines were drafted to run commercial missions despite the long distances to cover.

Three Naval forces were to take a part in these escapades in the Indian Ocean: German Kriegsmarine, Italian Regia Marina, and Imperial Japanese Navy.

The Kriegsmarine was poorly equipped for these long-ranging commercial missions. The U-boats were war machines of small displacement (750- to 1200-tons after 1941). Only two ocean-going boats would be sent and under the pretext of a very urgent special delivery to their Japanese ally.

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The first of these, U-511, captained by LCmdr. Schneewind, left Lorient on 9 May 1943, with Japanese Adm. Nomura on board, recalled to Tokyo from Berlin. The boat entered the Indian Ocean on 10 June, far south of the Cape, where it was shaken by a murderous swell. Two weeks later, U-511 was off the eastern coast of Madagascar, haliway to Reunion Island. It sank an American liner on 9 July shortly before entering the Japanese-patrolled waters off Malaya. Commander Schneewind docked at Penang after 69 days at sea. The optical instruments, special steels, etc., on board were given to the Japanese Admiralty as was the sub to become a Japanese training submarine.

The second one, U-1224, left Brest, France, in April 1944 as the Japanese Ro-501, with a full Japanese crew brought to Europe on board 1-8, as we shall detail later on. Ro-501 would be sunk on 13 May by USS FM. Robinson north of the Cape Verde Islands.

The most numerous commercial runs were carried out by boats of the Italian Royal Navy at the request of Adm. Donitz. In March 1942, Supra Manna (Italian Admiralty) was contacted to send its deep-sea subs on missions to the Far East. The request was accepted in exchange for the delivery, by Germany, of nine Type VIIC combat boats. Serialized S1 to S9 by the Italians, they were never to see action.

The Italian base at Bordeaux, France, began the modification of seven large subs as cargo carriers, with the last one to be ready in July 1944.

The first one completed, Caupellini captained by Lt. Anconi, left Bordeaux on 11 May 1944, overloaded with precious equipment, German technicians, overfilled fuel tanks and unarmed. It entered the Indian Ocean on 12 June. Ravaged by eight days of stormy weather, damaged by waves, inundated by a punctured conning tower, the boat came out of the storm on the 20th. lieutenant Anconi docked at Singapore on 10 July after 59 days

at sea.

It would take a month of work to make the sub seaworthy again. It left for Europe in late August, loaded with rubber and wolfram. As Italy had laid down arms on 3 September, the boat was seized by the Japanese at Sabang.

Tazzoli and Giuliani left Bordeaux on 16 May, returned because of mechanical difficulties, left again on the 23rd to disappear somewhere in the Atlantic in August.

Torelli left Bordeaux on 25 May. Surprised by Allied planes near St. Helens Island, the boat was forced to make wide detours from its planned route. It ran out of fuel in July when south-east of Mauritius Island. Replenished by a passing U-boat, it docked at Sabang on 26 August. It would also be seized by the Japanese in September.

Gagni left Bordeaux on 15 June for South African waters where it had been on operations the previous winter. Empty of cargo, the sub was out on an offensive patrol, without too much success except for a large British liner of 22,000-tons sunk in the Atlantic. Resupplied by Brake south of Reunion, it learned of the Italian Armistice and, contrary to orders, surrendered to the Allies at Durban, South Africa, on 20 September.

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Barbarizo, another Atlantic veteran, left Bordeaux on 15 June to disappear without a trace somewhere in the Atlantic.

Bagnoli and Fonzi, ready at Bordeaux in August, would be seized by the Germans in September.

A sad ending truly to this silent epic. If 335-tons of highly valuable material, equipment and men were delivered to the Japanese, nothing was brought back to Europe. All the subs had had been lost, including the crew of three of them.

The Japanese would run four commercial missions:

On its way to Europe, I-30 attacked the British base of Diego Suarez at Madagascar, sending two midget submarine to sink a tanker and damage battleship HMS RaimUies. After refuelling in the Mozambique Channel, 7-30 crossed into the Atlantic south of the Cape, with some difficulties, to dock at Lorient on 5 July. After repairs and loading, it left Europe to safely dock at Singapore in October, a very successful mission.

The second mission was done by I-8, captained by L/Comdr. Uchino. Accompanied by resupply boat 1-10, it brought to Europe in July 1943, beside its own crew, that of Comdr. Norida which was to return to Japan with U-1224(Ro-501) handed over by the Germans as mentioned above. The crossing of the Indian Ocean would be particularly trying. It would take 1-8 ten days to get round the Cape, in a stormy sea. Replenished south of the Azores, it docked at Brest after 61 days at sea. Repaired and re-armed, it left France in mid-September carrying ultra-modern detection equipment and 17 Kriegsmarine specialists. It reached Singapore after 64 days, after having escaped from a South African Air Force air attack south of the Cape.

I-34 would be sunk the day after its departure from Singapore, on 12 November 1943, by HMS Taurus.

The handwriting was clearly on the wall when, on 13 June 1944, I-52 was sunk just west of the Cape Verde Islands by carrier-based bombers operating from the escort carrier USS Bogue. One of the most-successful Allied Hunter-Killer ASW groups, this hard-hitting assault force built around bantam-sized CVE-type aircraft carriers offered a dramatic preview of the coordinated ASW warfare which ultimately brought the surviving Axis U-boats to their knees.

The Axis' attempt to operate its marauders in the Indian Ocean was - by almost any measure - a dramatic failure doomed from the beginning by the impossible logistics of providing too little too late. Neither the Japanese, nor the Germans or the Italians fully comprehended the risks of such a chancey enterprise, especially considering the distances involved and unforeseen rapid build-up of the overall Allied anti-submarine effort. Damned from its inception, the pity was that so many lives were expended on an enterprise that yielded so little reward.

BY DR. R RIVIERE

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