Christmas Eve is supposed to be a time of joy, happiness, and goodwill toward all, but in the chilled waters off wartime Halifax a German U-Boat commander ignored the coming day of peace and focused his periscope on the mid-ships of a hapless minesweeper. For the survivors, 24 December 1944 was to be a day of horror they would never forget.

"No One Dies on Christmas Eve!"

By Tony Keene

Just under the surface of the North Atlantic, a few nautical miles outside Canada’s Halifax Harbor, the U-Boat lurked in the half-light of the chill water, her periscope just breaking the waves. Above her, six-foot swells washed over the prismatic lens as the captain scanned the horizon for the tell-tale embers of smoke that would indicate the presence of a convoy — outward bound with vital supplies for the Allied armies fighting in Europe against the increasingly desperate forces of the Third Reich. The commander was wary, because this winter, five-years after the start of the war, was not the “Happy Time” for German submarines that the first glorious months had been.

There were reasons for this, of course. Almost total Allied air superiority by now had virtually eliminated the surface attack, which was what the U-Boat was actually designed for, being meant to use her submersibility as a means of approach and escape. And aircraft could even spot submerged U-Boats, if the water was clear and not too rough.

There was slight chance U-806 would be spotted from the air this time, though. The sea was far too agitated, its surface rolled and heaving. No, the real threat was not human eyes, but ears, aided by a device first developed and named more than 20-years before, tagged with the acronym of the group which oversaw its development, the Allied Submarine Detection Investigation Committee — ASDIC. Now, refined and more powerful, its eerie underwater ping had sounded the death-knell for many a brave Kriegsmarine U-Boat crew.

But there were ways to beat the ASDIC, and still make a successful attack and escape. And the commander of U-806 believed he had found one.

To the west, Convoy XB-3 was forming up outside Halifax Harbor, its escorts taking station. Among them were two small vessels peculiar to the Royal Canadian Navy’s role in this war. Aboard the Bangor-class minesweeper Clayquot the crew was relaxed, enjoying the calms of the day before Christmas, and looking forward to the handing out of the special holiday “ditty bags” which the Navy League distributed to crews at this time of year. Ship’s writer Arthur Katz was 26 at the time, and in his birth month. He says no one believed the Germans would be so ungracious as to do anything warlike on Christmas Eve.

“I mean that’s the one day you figure it’s going to be quiet,” he later recalled. “As a matter of fact, we had a cabbage contest in progress between the officers and men. At that point, I believe I was still playing against the captain.”

The “old man” on this run was LCdr. Craig Campbell of Vancouver and, like all seven of the “Clayquot’s” commanding officers, he was a reservist. Reserve officers were easily distinguished by the waved stripes of rank on their sleeves, and the reserve service, Royal Canadian Navy Reserve (RCNR) and the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR), was known colloquially as the “Wavy Navy.”

The Bangor minesweeper class carried one twelve-pounder gun, one twin and two single Oerlikon 20mm anti-aircraft cannon, and 40 depth charges. The Clayquot, like most of her sisters, had been ordered to leave her sweeping gear ashore and devote her duties, on what came Triangle Run — St. Boston, and New in length, displacing Her top speed was That last figure smile to the face of was interviewed “The ship would

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