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THE FATE OF THE U-869: PART II REEXAMINED CROW / KOINER INCIDENT

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Issue 18
A Quarterly Publication

the Fate of U-869 REEXAMINED

Part II of a 3-Part Article
The U-Boat War



The official commissioning photo of U-869 and her 59 crew. It took nearly six years to positively identify their grave site. (National Archives)



The petty officers of U-869 in an informal portrait; the Olympic rings on the conning tower signify that Captain Neuerburg entered officers training in 1936.

The Crow/Koiner Incident

By Richie Kohler, John Chatterton and John Yurga

World War II was extraordinarily complex and dynamic. The Atlantic and Pacific Theaters were radically different from one another, and as the war progressed, the way the war was fought and the tools used to fight the war continuously evolved.

Early on, Winston Churchill secured from President Roosevelt an agreement that the Allies would put their main effort into defeating Germany first, and then they would together turn their attention to the Pacific. This "Europe First" policy was not an easy one for Roosevelt to sell to the military, considering it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor which had forced America into the war.

It was especially difficult for the United States Navy to deal with this policy. The US Navy considered the Pacific to be their war and, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, this is easy to understand. The Pacific war was going to be a "big ship war" fought with naval groups comprised of large battleships, cruisers, aircraft carriers, and a variety of other vessels, in naval engagements like the world had never seen. These epic encounters would make history, naval careers, and even produce two American presidents. For Navy men, the Pacific was the place to be.

In the Battle of the Atlantic, the Navy had responsibilities that were significantly different, but nonetheless important. The key to victory in Europe was maintaining the flow of men and materials to Britain, and then onto the continent. The role of the Navy was to protect the convoys delivering those essential supplies, and to hunt down the U-boats trying to prevent those ships from reaching Europe.

Protecting the convoys required as many escort vessels as possible in order to keep enemy submarines suppressed below the surface and the convoys covered. This necessitated the efficient use of available resources, which meant smaller vessels that were more mission specific. We could build and man one destroyer, or in the same time and with the same raw materials, build numerous smaller ships that could better serve our escort and ASW (anti submarine warfare) goals. The destroyers were formidable ships, and very effective against submarines, but it was also necessary to use a variety of smaller vessels such as destroyer escorts, patrol craft, and the like.

For the US Navy, this was not considered glamorous duty, and small ships were not the way to build a career in the Navy. Convoy duty in the North Atlantic was difficult, dangerous, tedious work. The enemies were both the German U-boats and the North Atlantic itself. It was, literally, years of tedium, punctuated regularly by minutes and hours of terror and very real danger. The men and material that were delivered to Europe would eventually win the war. The convoy escorts did their job well.

Incident 7715

On February 11, 1945, the Coast Guard-manned Destroyer Escort *Howard D. Crow* (DE 252) was on convoy duty with the USN protecting convoy CU58 from New York to the United Kingdom when she picked up a sound contact at 1639 hours. Fourteen minutes later, they fired a single array of 24



Depth charges in position on the *Howard D. Crow*.
(National Archives)



1835 CTG 61.6 (Escort Commander CU-58) reported KOINER (DE 331) and HOWARD D. CROW (DE 252) had contact on probable sub 43 miles bearing 143°T from Point Zebra (approximately 39-30N 72-58W in 31 fathoms. Attacks on sonar contacts resulted in 1 hedgehog explosion and smear and sighting of diesel. At 2105 CTG 61.6 reported contact evaluated non-sub, KOINER and CROW to rejoin CU-58.

- Mark 10 depth charges (Hedgehogs), and noted explosions beneath the surface. Eighteen minutes later they fired four depth charges (type not specifically mentioned, possibly Mk 6 or Mk 9), and noted air bubbles with an oil slick. Twenty-seven minutes later, they made a second depth charge attack with three depth charges, with results as in the first attack. One hour and 21 minutes after the *Howard D. Crow* first noticed the suspicious contact, they were joined by the USN Destroyer Escort *Koiner* (DE 331), which was also part of CU58's escort.

A radio call was made requesting a "hunter-killer" group to come to the scene and continue the attack. *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner* had a primary duty to escort CU58, while hunter-killer groups were specifically meant to be used for tracking down and eliminating enemy submarines using aircraft, sonar and specialized tactics. If there was a sub in the area, the hunter-killers would find it, pursue it, and stay with it until it had been sunk, leaving the escorts free to return to their primary function.

Koiner sounded general quarters at 1823 hours, and dropped an unknown number and type of depth charges in three attacks at 1831 hours, 1841 hours, and 1854 hours. Eighteen minutes later, *Koiner* came to a complete stop over the site and launched a motor whale boat to investigate the surface of the water over the site where they had dropped their depth charges. Fourteen minutes later, they raised the whale boat, got underway, and classified the contact as "non-sub." Both vessels left the area to rejoin the convoy. At that time, they notified ASW that a hunter-killer group was not needed.

Documentation

What we currently know of the details of this incident comes from the ships' logs of *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner* that we have augmented with recent interviews we conducted with then-Lt. Commander Judson, skipper of the *Koiner* and

PROCESSED BY THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES		REF. CLASSIFIED
SECRET		By 61-1000-933
1835	<p>WINE had made 2 depth charge attacks. At 2308 K-77 reported contact lost. At 0428/12 NIGHT reported all patrol vessels at assigned positions. At 0511/12 on 05 12/12.</p> <p>CTG 61.6 (Escort Commander CU-58) reported KOINER (DE 331) and HOWARD D. CROW (DE 252) had contact on probable sub 43 miles bearing 143°T from Point Zebra (approximately 39-30N 72-58W in 31 fathoms. Attacks on sonar contacts resulted in 1 hedgehog explosion and smear and sighting of diesel. At 2105 CTG 61.6 reported contact evaluated non-sub, KOINER and CROW to rejoin CU-58.</p>	
1904	<p>(Re: EAD 1130/10) PRUDENT reported results negative. Five attacks made. PC 1546 made 2 mousetrap and 1 depth charge attack. TRITON made 2 depth charge attacks. Large water slug observed after one of these attacks. PRUDENT'S evaluation: Possible sub. TRITON and PC 1546's evaluation: sure sub. Last contact and attack was at 1831/10. At 2257 PRUDENT and HASTE ordered to return to New York. CALYPSO, designated CTC, will continue search with TOS 02.16 and 02.17. RANDORA (CG) and PC 1187 depart New York 0800/12 to relieve CALYPSO and ICARUS and TOS 02.17.</p>	
1920	<p>K-11 out of Weeksville on patrol reported MID contact in area of oil slick in position 36-45N 78-35W in 11 fathoms. EST Sub Track Evaluation: Non Sub.</p>	
1120	<p><u>ACTIVITY OUTSIDE-EASTERN SEA FRONTIER</u></p> <p>NSHQ reported HMCS STRATFORD had hydrophone offset in position 46-30N 83-21W bearing 290°T 7.5 miles from Shubin Island in 33 fathoms. STRATFORD presumed torpedoes had been fired. Also had asdic contact at 1147. NSHQ Evaluation: Possible. CINCPAC directed CTC 22.10 to investigate. At 1410 STRATFORD reported no further contacts, returning to base. At 1843 CTC 22.10 reported results negative.</p>	
0030/12	<p>(Re: EAD 1830/10) WILLETT and SC 1001 arrived at scene. Salvage operations to commence at dawn.</p>	

An excerpt from the Enemy Action And Distress Diary reveals that *Koiner* and *Crow* considered the contact to be a "non-sub" during Incident 7715.

the sinking of a submarine. This required that physical evidence be collected from the site, which might include prisoners (survivors) from the submarine, wreckage, fuel oil, or human remains. Without any physical evidence, the Navy might award a “B - probably sunk” classification to an event where perhaps a visual sighting of the sinking was obtained, but there was no physical evidence. As the letter classifications go on, it is less and less likely to be a successful submarine attack. The “J” classification was “insufficient evidence to assess,” while a Class I was “target attacked is non-sub.”

From start to finish, the two destroyer escorts, *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner*, spent 2 hours and 47 minutes over the site. Although an oil slick was noted in the *Howard D. Crow* log, there are no references to the taking of a sample. *Koiner* came to a complete stop and put their whale boat in the water to investigate the surface of the water over the site, but no mention is made of the results of that investigation, so it is fair to assume that the results were completely, absolutely negative. Lt. Cmdr. Judson was the senior officer and recalls that the target acted like a wreck, no debris was sighted, and only a “smear” of oil. When asked how much oil, he said it was so little it wasn’t worth sampling. There was no movement and no reason to suspect it was anything other than an old wreck, not a “fresh kill.” Based on this information, the Navy classified the attack as “I - target attacked not a submarine.”

Known Sunk

With the success of the bestselling book, *Shadow Divers*, by Robert Kurson, the story of the German U-boat *U-869* became known to well over a million readers in the US and in 21 foreign countries. Now-retired USCG Captain Harold Muth was one of those who enjoyed the book, but thought the rough location given for the wreck might match an event he recalled from WWII. As a young Junior Officer, Muth had served aboard the Destroyer Escort *Howard D. Crow* and recalled a particular incident that occurred on February 11, 1945. Muth contacted Robert Kurson, as well as several other divers and historians. Muth came to believe that *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner* were indeed responsible for the sinking of the *U-869*. A case was presented to the USCG Historian’s Center, and the USN Historical Center, where it was reviewed by both entities, and statements were taken from surviving crew members almost 60 years after the event.

Clockwise: The Action Report from USS *Atherton* clearly identified debris from *U-853*. This method was typical of a sub “kill”.

As seawater continues to deteriorate the steel of *U-869*, entire sections of the plating fall off of the streamlined outer hull. (Photograph by Richie Kohler)

The direction and type of fractures in the upper section of the pressure hull above the diesel motor room or *U-869* indicate stresses from an internal explosion, not depth charge damage. (Photograph by Richie Kohler)

EVIDENCE OF DAMAGE.

(a) Large quantities of oil, wood, articles of uniform, inflatable life rafts, and miscellaneous debris from both interior and exterior of the submarine following **ATHERTON's** fourth attack. (Each subsequent attack brought additional oil and debris to the surface.) Diving operations were carried out and the target determined to be a German submarine, which had been "killed" but a short time before.

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REF ID: A68133
DATE: 08 MAR 2010
BY: 68 NARA DMR/08-28-05

UNITED STATES FLEET
COMMANDED BY CHIEF
COMBATANT
REPORT NO. 22, 22

(a) German submarine.

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ANALYSIS OF ATTACK.

ATHERTON Attack No. 1

Time.....0000
Range at which contact was gained.....200 yards
R.E.Propeller noises
Range at which contact was lost.....200 yards (approximate)
Doppler.....Slight down
Target movement.....Slight slowly
Number of charges.....13
Depth setting.....Magnetic

This was a carrier attack with the U-boat at slow speed. Traces were over-baked, too faded for accurate analysis. Only one charge exploded.

ATHERTON Attack No. 2

Time.....0047
Range at which contact was gained.....1300 yards
Range at which contact was lost.....775 yards
R.E.Propeller noises
Doppler.....Slight down
Target movement.....Slight slowly
Number of charges.....24
Depth setting.....Hedgehog

Traces baked and faded. One explosion occurred immediately after hedgehog detonations. This was probably caused by the countermining of a Mark 8 depth charge from the previous attack.



In 2005 the USCGHC and USNHC historians credited the sinking of the submarine *U-869* to the *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner*. History had yet again been rewritten. The accounts can be found on the internet at:

Top left & right: Photographs of *U-853* portray the inward bending of the pressure hull's metal caused by depth charges or hedgehogs from the outside. (Photographs by James Lee)

http://www.uscg.mil/history/WEBCUTTERS/U869_Crow_Koiner.asp

http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/h8/howard_d_crow.htm

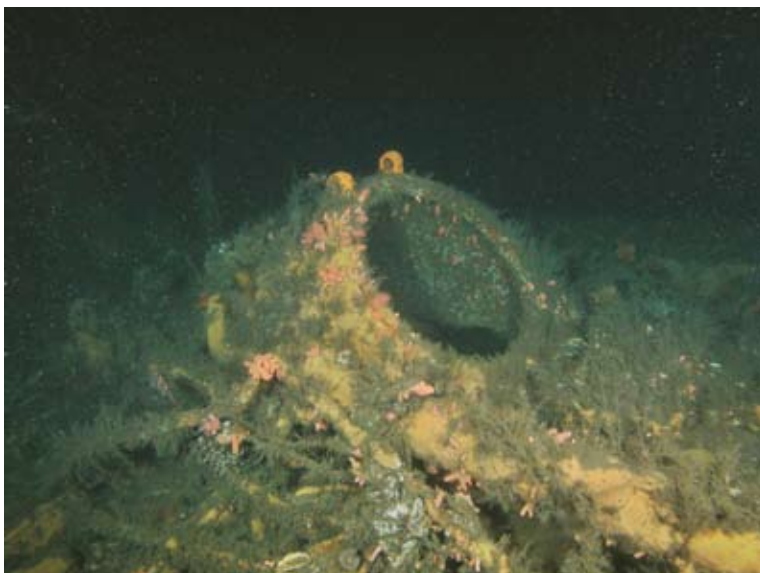
Bottom left: Peering down the hatch of *U-869*, a spare torpedo is seen on the starboard side deck, a protective shroud covering the propeller. (Photograph by Richie Kohler)

Bottom right: The unique angular hatch combing of *U-869* was our first clue the wreck was not a barge but a submarine! Note: this hatch (like all the others on the sub), has been blown off its hinges. (Photograph by Richie Kohler)

The Wreck of U-869

Shipwrecks age, just like people do. They don't stay the same, they change over time. If we are looking at a shipwreck and trying to learn something from the site, we need to separate the damage from the sinking from the effects of age, which can include a wide array of human impact from commercial fishing operators, dive boats, and even divers, as well as natural events like hurricanes. Unfortunately, you don't always see the wreck exactly as it sank.

In the case of submarines, the outer skin is made of relatively thin steel and is most susceptible to the effects of aging, while the pressure hull is constructed of substantially thicker steel, and therefore less susceptible. Even wrecked submarines from World War I still have their pressure hulls



relatively intact. Submarine wrecks from WWII are today over 60 years old. In general, their skins are deteriorated, their pressure hulls are intact, and they still show the signs of battle damage.

The wreck of *U-869* lies in 230 feet of water, approximately 60 miles east of Point Pleasant, New Jersey. It was discovered by a group of recreational wreck divers in September of 1991, and positively identified in 1997.

There are two distinctly different areas of damage to *U-869*: the control room and the aft torpedo room. The damage in the aft torpedo room appears similar to depth charge damage noted on other U-boats, such as *U-853*, which was built at the same shipyard as *U-869*. The attack on *U-853* is a well-documented sinking by surface vessels using depth charges. There is an area aft on *U-869* where the pressure hull is compromised and pushed inward, obviously from an explosive force from outside the vessel. This is significant damage and a major breach in the pressure hull directly at the aft torpedo room loading hatch, and slightly aft. This damage is similar in character to what can be seen on *U-853*.

In the area of the control room, the damage is different and far more severe. The pressure hull itself is completely destroyed on the port side, from the sand level all the way over, across the top, to the starboard side. This damage area runs more than 20 feet, from the forward control room bulkhead, to the aft control room bulkhead, and beyond. Cracks in the pressure hull extend both forward and aft. The conning tower, which was atop the control room, is adjacent to the port side of the wreck and only connected to the main body of wreckage by little more than a periscope. The starboard side pressure hull in the control room area has multiple fractures. This boat is virtually blown in two, amidships.

Aside from being so severe, the damage around the control room is characteristically different from the damage in the aft torpedo room, as well as any damage observed on any submarine the writers of this article can recall. The damaged pressure hull around both control room bulkheads is actually deflected out, not in. The pressure hull around both of these control room bulkheads is significantly separated from the bulkhead itself in areas, and on the port side forward this separation is close to three feet.

When the wreck was discovered, all of the pressure hull hatches were found to be blown open or completely off, from the forward torpedo room to the aft torpedo room, including the conning tower.

Questions

As we look at the severe damage to *U-869*, there should have been an abundance of evidence coming to the surface at the time of the sinking. With possibly two massive breaches to the pressure hull from the same attack, a large amount of positively buoyant items would have floated to the surface and been easily noticeable.

The fuel was stored in external fuel cells running along both sides of the pressure hull adjacent to the control room, precisely where we see the most severe damage. The scent of the fuel would have been as noticeable as the sight of the slick. Where could this fuel have gone? In our last article (Issue 17 of *WDM* part 1), we mentioned the sinking of *U-521* where the oil slick was 100 to 900 feet across and 19.7 miles long only 12 hours after the sinking. There was a large amount of fuel oil in *U-869* that would have been released when it was sunk.

We also can assume that there were at least several members of *U-869*'s crew in the area of the control room. Bodies and human remains often floated to the surface and were collected as evidence in submarine kills, again as in the case of *U-521*. What happened to the remains of the *U-869* crew from the control room?

Interior paneling, tables, bedding, clothing, and an abundance of debris were regularly collected at sites where U-boats were lost. With the degree of damage to *U-869*, and specifically due to the large openings in the pressure hull, a significant amount of debris should have escaped from the interior, and floated to the surface.

The attacks by *Howard D. Crow* occurred in the late afternoon/early evening period. The relatively small amount of oil which came to the surface as a result of the attacks was visible to *Howard D. Crow*'s crew. Therefore, if debris had been released from the U-boat, it should also have been seen on the surface.

Koiner put their whale boat in the water specifically to look for evidence. The collection of evidence provided valuable military intelligence, and was the only way at the time to receive credit for sinking

a sub. This was their job, and they knew the importance of what they were doing. If there was any evidence of any sort, they certainly would have collected it.

The re-assessment by the USCGHC and the USNHC historians would seem to be based solely on eyewitness testimonies of an event 60 years earlier, and the fact that there is a wreck at the approximate location. They excluded the examination of any physical evidence, and appear to have drawn only simplistic and self-serving conclusions.

The bottom line is that other than the presence of the wreck itself, there was no physical evidence to indicate a submarine being sunk by USS *Howard D. Crow* and USS *Koiner* on February 11, 1945. To state unequivocally that this was the true fate of *U-869* is probably no more accurate than the original post-war assessment indicating that the sub was sunk off Gibraltar. While it is easy to understand that the Coast Guard wants the men involved to get their just due while they are still alive, this sort of rush to judgment is exactly what drove the post-war assessors to erroneously give credit to USS *Fowler* and the French vessel *L'Indiscret* for sinking *U-869* off Africa in the first place.

This revised assessment certainly does not hold up to the rigorous standards we should expect from our military historians entrusted with writing and re-writing naval history.

Location

The original sound contact, the detonation of one or more Hedgehogs (which explode only on contact with metal), the seepage of the small amount of oil and the small amount of bubbles noted by *Howard D. Crow* are all consistent with depth-charging a wreck. This is undoubtedly what the men in command of both the *Howard D. Crow* and the *Koiner* thought at the time.

The location given for the attack by both *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner* is approximately 5.2 nautical miles from the location of the wreck of *U-869* today. This is relatively close, considering the navigational capabilities of the period. There are no other wrecks currently known to be in the immediate vicinity. If the USS *Howard D. Crow* and the USS *Koiner* attacked a wreck, and they were at or near the location of the wreck of *U-869*, is it not reasonable to conclude that they most likely depth-charged the wreck of *U-869*?

The Damage

As already stated, the damage in the area of the control room is catastrophic. According to explosive experts consulted by the authors, the steel of the pressure hull being bent outward, as opposed to being pushed inward, tells us a few things.

The first is that the damage occurred while the submarine pressure hull was filled with a compressible medium, which would have to be air, not water. This is also indicated by all the pressure hull hatches being blown open or off. The hatches are designed to take pressure from the outside/in with the only thing other than the water pressure holding the hatches down being several “dogs.” They were never meant to take a reverse pressure differential, with inside pressure greater than outside. This indicates that a tremendous concussive wave affected the submarine from the bow to the stern with enough pressure inside to cause the “dogs” to fail, and the hatches to blow open. Depth charges on *U-853* did not blow open any hatches.

This also helps us set a time line for the damage. With there being no closed hatches to isolate the aft torpedo room, we can conclude that the damage to the control room occurred first, while the submarine was still filled with air, and the damage to the aft torpedo room occurred some time later.

The second thing that experts tell us is that the pressure hull evidence indicates that the center of the explosive force was inside, not outside the pressure hull. This indicates again that the control room damage could not be from a depth charge. If the sinking occurred as a result of the damage to the control room, and this damage could not have been done by a depth charge, it reinforces our conclusions with regard to the documentation relating to the *Howard D. Crow/Koiner* attack in February 1945.

It seems most likely *U-869* was sunk from an event prior to the arrival of *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner* on February 11. That event caused the damage to the control room. The fuel oil, the debris, and likely even some human remains of the crew floated to the surface and were undoubtedly washed away, unnoticed, in sea lanes accustomed to such phenomena. When *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner* arrived, they detected the wreck, depth-charged the site, caused the damage to the wreck in the aft torpedo room, and saw no evidence of a fresh U-boat sinking.

The men aboard both *Howard D. Crow* and *Koiner* did exactly what they were supposed to do.

They never would have left what they believed to be an enemy submarine on the bottom, without proof that it had been completely destroyed.

From the existing documentation, and the lack of additional documents, it would certainly seem that at the time of the incident, the commanders of both vessels were confident that the contact they had depth-charged was “non-sub.” This explains why they did not complete an action report immediately after the incident, and why they cancelled the hunter-killer group.

Conclusion

There is some subjectivity to the interpretation of the limited documentation on Incident 7715. Eyewitness testimony on an event from 60 years earlier is certainly suspect, only because of our limited human capabilities with regard to memory and perception.

As of today, virtually all of the physical evidence, and a preponderance of the circumstantial evidence, takes us away from the possibility that Incident 7715 was responsible for the sinking of U-869. However, there is no conclusive proof to date as to exactly how the U-boat sank.

If the *Harold D. Crow* and the *Koiner* did not sink U-869, then what really did happen?

Read more in our next article which will appear in Issue 19 of *Wreck Diving Magazine*.

About the Authors: John Yurga, John Chatterton and Richie Kohler have known each other and dived with one another for more than 15 years. They developed as divers on wrecks local to New York and New Jersey waters, like the *Andrea Doria*. As a team, they worked on identifying the mystery submarine they located 60 miles off the New Jersey coast in 230 feet of water, in 1991. It took them six years to positively identify the WWII submarine as U-869. Together they all contributed to the Nova documentary, *Hitler's Lost Sub*, and worked with author Robert Kurson on his bestselling book, *Shadow Divers*.



Left: An emergency life raft canister of U-869 that once sat on the upper deck now lays adjacent to the hull on the port side, a tattered life raft hanging out. (Photograph by Richie Kohler)

Below: The Opinion section of USS *Atherton's* Action Report demonstrates how the documentation was completed when a “kill” occurred; in this case it was U-853.

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AUTHORITY: A6168133
By: 68 NARA DUC R-2265

DECLASSIFIED

OPINIONS

Floating Room.

Divers confirmed sinking of U-853 by this attack.

OTO 60.1.

While the **ATHERTON** made the initial contact and first drop, it is felt that the **MOBERLY** and **WRECKERS** very definitely were deciding factors in the actual sinking. The **ATHERTON**, although on the scene but for a short time, contributed to the success of the mission by being there in the early vital stages of the hunt. This undoubtedly led the German captain to a decision, namely, trying to hide on the bottom rather than head for open sea.

Tactical Analysis Officer.

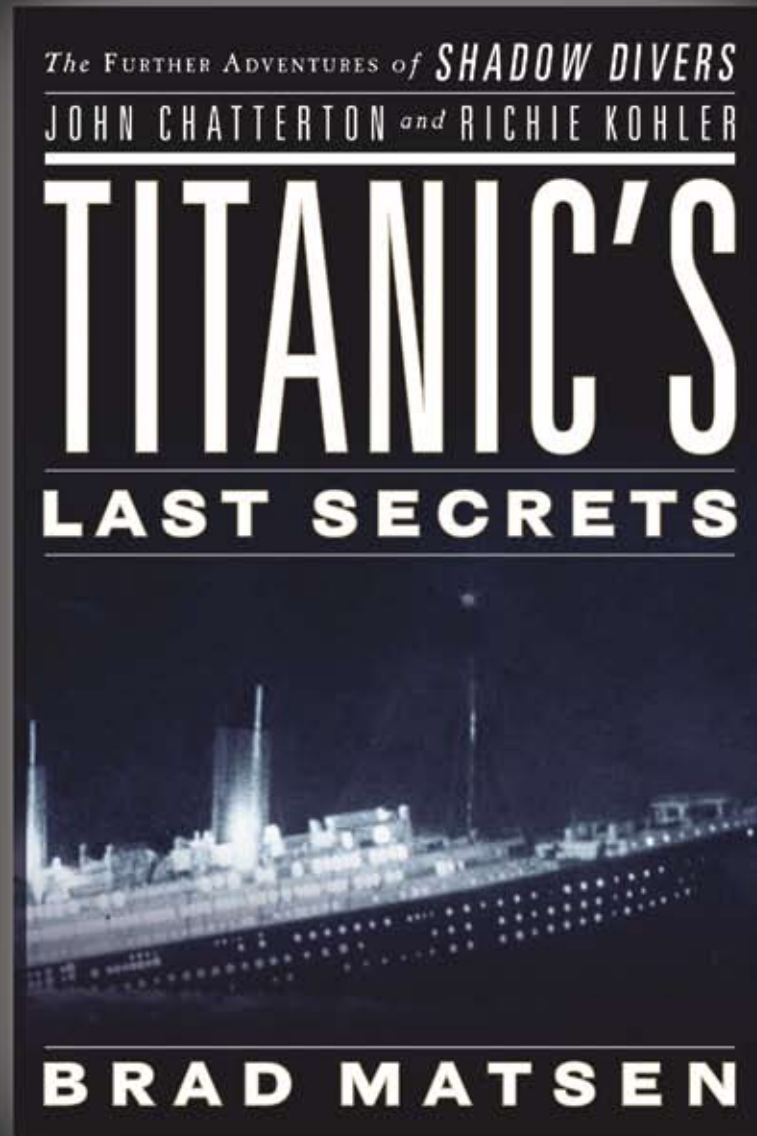
The evidence of damage, plus the location of the sunken submarine by divers, definitely indicates that this U-boat was sunk. It is, therefore, recommended that this incident be assessed "A", with principal credit to the **ATHERTON**. For her part in organizing the initial search it is recommended that **MOBERLY** receive contributory credit.

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Do not attach.

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