

THE PHANTOM FLEET

WITH THE FORMATION OF THE TENTH FLEET,
THE WAR ON HITLER'S U-BOATS TOOK A GIANT LEAP FORWARD
BY KEN J. HOBIN

With U-Boats causing death and destruction in the North Atlantic, the Allies knew something had to be done to slow the success rate of the U-Boats and the answer was the Tenth Fleet.



Admiral Ernest J. King was the brainchild of the Chief of Naval Operations. He is depicted in an oil painting by famed artist McClelland Barclay.



Fregattenkapitan Paul Buchel didn't know what hit the *U-860*. One moment, Buchel's surfaced U-Boat was steadily riding into a golden sunset; the next it shuddered like an iron bell — hammered by the impact of a brace of 5-in High Velocity Aerial Rockets (HVAR) seemingly launched out of nowhere.

Crewmen on the deck of the half-awash 1200-ton U-Boat toppled and fell as machine gun bullets stitched into the conning tower, starting a fiery blaze in the ready ammunition lockers. In seconds, the dazed *Kapitan* realized his attackers were a trio of American Grumman Avengers that came in low across the gentle Atlantic swells; the

brilliant August fireball at their back. The aerial surprise was complete and utterly devastating. Despite the best defensive efforts of Buchel's well-trained gunners, the planes stubbornly pressed their attack with withering gunfire, rockets, and depth charges. Mortally damaged, leaking oil, *U-860* took her last dive as a swooping Avenger dropped a depth charge that broke the near-new boat's back.

Clinging to bits of debris in the oily water, Buchel, one other officer, and 18 crewmen swam for their lives as the *U-860* upended and went down with 42 of her crew. What none of the survivors knew was that the swift, deadly attack, which abruptly ended

U-860's career, was in fact entirely orchestrated by an obscure group of naval tacticians who anticipated their every move even though they were half a world away from the scene of the submarine's demise.

Located in a tranquil Virginian countryside setting not far from Washington, DC, a dedicated team of naval intelligence experts toiled around the clock in their prodigious effort to track, plot, analyze, and anticipate the movement of Adolf Hitler's marauding U-Boats. These astute top-secret sleuths were the officers and men of the US Navy's virtually unknown "Tenth Fleet" — a powerful force all the more remarkable because it could not boast

of owning so much as a single motor-whaleboat, much less fleets of U-Boat stalking hunter-killer groups.

In essence, the "Tenth Fleet" was a massive intelligence collective organized as a super-coordinating Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) force, solely dedicated to eradicating the menace of Nazi Germany's most effective naval weapon — the U-Boat. While ASW forces afloat operated under the jurisdiction of the respective Fleet Commands, it was the phantom Tenth Fleet that came to direct their operations by pin-pointing U-Boat locations on the vast Atlantic Ocean via a complex network of electronics, cryptography, intelligence gathering,

plotters, and high-frequency communications. No small part of the Tenth Fleet's remarkable success was due to the uncanny skill and educated guesswork on the part of its astute personnel, many of whom were civilians recruited because of their special cunning in being able to out-guess the Nazi admirals.

Brainchild of the Chief of Naval Operations, Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, the creation of the unique Tenth Fleet was mandated by the staggering losses of Allied merchant shipping to German undersea marauders throughout 1942. Unless these losses could be stopped, and stopped quickly, the entire Allied war effort in Europe

was in jeopardy. Adding to the severe shortage of warships able to cope with the Nazi's ocean menace was the complete lack of uniform agreement by Allied leaders at every level on how best to utilize ASW vessels on hand.

A virtual war within a war went on between the Royal Navy and the US Navy's top echelons. Even factions within each navy had differing opinions and strategies on how to stem merchant ship losses. Haphazard, often incoherent and generally ineffectual, early detection of prowling U-Boats was at best sheer luck, not the result of coordinated action by the Allied naval forces. In too many cases, penetrating layers of over-lapping authority