

## Nemesis: Admiral Sir Max Horton and the Defeat of the U-Bootwaffe

By Charles McCain

Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz lost the most critical battle of World War Two: the Battle of the Atlantic. As an admiral he was second-rate at best, incompetent at worst. As a strategist and a tactician he was uninformed and tunnel minded. Morally, he was a weak man of the lowest character. Why? As one of the top leaders of Nazi Germany, he was well aware of the foul deeds being committed by the Third Reich including the cold blooded murder of European Jewry. At Nuremberg, he perjured himself almost every time he spoke.



Royal Navy Admiral Sir Max Horton

Today Dönitz continues to be well known, even admired by some, while the man who bested him, his nemesis in the Battle of the Atlantic, is hardly known at all. That man was an English admiral, Sir Max Horton, perhaps the greatest fighting admiral produced by Great Britain in the 20th Century and one of the most important Allied commanders in the entire Second World War.

He wasn't the nicest man in the world, Sir Max. Ruthless, indifferent to anyone's feelings, "as hard as nails and close as a clam." A man so self absorbed he barely knew the names of his staff officers. A know it all. A driver. Aloof. Vain. Blunt to the point of rudeness. "...a staff officer reported that a certain cruiser had been lost, and that his son was on board. Horton instinctively replied, 'Yes, but what happened to the ship?'" If he had any friends, inside of the Royal Navy or out, no one knew who they were. Yet as a fighting admiral he was one of the best — bold and daring, inspiring those who served under him with his confidence, his knowledge, and his unshakeable belief in victory.

In his outstanding memoir, *Escort*, Commander D.A. Rayner, RNVR, a very successful escort captain in Western Approaches Command and one of Horton's favorites, writes:

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...Max Horton's own staff regarded him as something less than God but more than Man. If they had not done so they would have found themselves relieved. He had more personal charm than any man I ever met, but he could be unbelievably cruel to those who fell by the wayside.

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From 17 November 1942 to 15 August 1945, Admiral Sir Max Horton was known by the innocent sounding acronym: CINCWA (sinkwa), Commander in Chief, Western Approaches — the largest operational command in the entire Royal Navy — over 121,000 men and women with over 300 escort ships. So why had Prime Minister Winston Churchill himself put Sir Max at the head of the most important command in the Royal Navy? Because CINCWA commanded all British forces contesting German U-Boats for control of the North Atlantic — the most critical battle of the war.



Western Approaches Plaque in Liverpool

And the British were losing. Ship after ship being sunk by U-Boats — an average of four merchant ships each and every day by the winter of 1942/1943. By March, the United Kingdom had only a three week supply of food. Unless they could receive the goods being sent over the seas from America, Great Britain would be forced to surrender.

In a gray month, in a gray time, Sir Max came to Derby House in Liverpool, to a top secret command bunker built several years before on Churchill's orders. It is now a museum. In the beginning, few liked the man — and that was the high point of his popularity. Not that Max cared. Desperate times call for ruthless men. You had served with him in the past? Perhaps as a young officer in the Great War? That mattered for nothing. If you weren't up to snuff, Sir Max sent you packing. He rid Western Approaches Command of "incompetents – of whom there were plenty..." said one of his best seagoing escort captains, Commander Peter Gretton.



Wrens in Training

Just a few days after he walked through the guarded steel door of the bunker, everyone throughout the command began to feel the dragon's breath. Sir Max inspected, asked questions. Lots of questions. If you didn't know the answer, you were out. Dockyard superintendents slow getting work done; supply officers who could not get organized; escort captains not aggressive enough; training officers who didn't know enough? They were dismissed. All of them. Immediately. On the spot. This did not happen gradually. It happened in the first few months and kept on happening if anyone slacked off.

No matter what one's assignment, Sir Max impressed on each and every man and woman in his command that they had but one goal: bring the convoys safely through the wolf-packs in the North Atlantic by sinking U-Boats. Sir Max focused everyone on this goal. Nothing else mattered. And one of the best ways to sink U-Boats was by ceaselessly training the men and the women who comprised Western Approaches Command. No matter what task you performed, you could perform it better. Escort captains went to a special school. Anti-aircraft gunners trained in realistic simulation booths created by the British motion picture industry. Individuals

were sent to one course after another. Entire escort groups were pulled out of the battle and trained and trained till they could not only execute every command, but correctly anticipate every command. Training, training, and more training. Realistic training. Everyone one cursed him for it.

Officers and ratings began to call him "Der Fuhrer." And they came up with a slogan, parroted by all, "Max knows everything. Max knows everything." And he did — or most of it anyway. He was the most competent, most informed, most knowledgeable, and most experienced officer in the Royal Navy. He knew it and so did everyone else.

If you commanded an escort ship, don't tell Sir Max that a U-Boat got away from you because of some surprise maneuver. Sir Max knew everything about submarines — more than anyone in the Royal Navy and more than most in the German Navy. Max had begun his career in the Royal Navy in submarines, at a time when they were just curiosities. In 1914, the beginning of World War One, a young Max Horton had sunk the first capital ship ever sent to the bottom by a submarine.

Don't tell Sir Max that when your engine broke down in the North Atlantic it took eight hours to fix. Max knew how long it took to repair a ship's engine. Unlike any other deck officer in the Royal Navy, Max knew all about engines. Mechanical things fascinated him. He could take an engine apart himself. He inspected engine rooms on ships and gave lessons to Royal Navy engineers.

Seamanship? Don't tell Sir Max anything about that. He had been at sea since he was thirteen, served on vessels of every sort, and commanded vessels of every size in numbers ranging from one ship to a squadron. Max was one of the few men in the Royal Navy to command the battleship squadron of the British Home Fleet — ships he routinely trained to perform the most complex maneuvers — at full speed. At night. Radar had not yet been invented.



Admiral Sir Max Horton (left) while serving in Baltic

Torpedoes? When commanding the British submarine fleet before his tenure at Western Approaches, one of his submarine captains described a torpedo attack on a German ship. The attack had failed, the man said, because the torpedo had a faulty detonator and did not explode. Wrong. Max knew everything about torpedoes. Admit that what you said was rubbish he told the captain who brought him this story and the captain admitted it was rubbish. Sir Max had the torpedo blueprints brought to him. With the young captain, he worked through them to establish why the torpedo had failed to explode. And there was a fault, but not in the detonator. Orders went to the submarine fleet the next morning instructing them on what changes to make.

Radar? Gunnery? Aircraft? Unlike most officers of his generation, Max had realized their importance long before the war. He invited 15 Group of RAF Coastal Command — responsible for patrolling Western Approaches — to share his headquarters — and they did. Wanting to learn their job, Max spent many long and boring hours flying in Coastal Command aircraft to best understand how to deploy them. Attention like this from a senior officer was unusual. Coastal Command was the red-headed step-child of the RAF — the ‘Cinderella Service’ those within called it. While a part of the Royal Air Force, they were under the tactical command of the Royal Navy. It could have been a bureaucratic nightmare. It wasn’t because men like Max Horton made it work.

For many hours of the day and night, Sir Max stared at a plotting map which took up an entire wall of the very large operations room in his bunker and the map told him with up to the minute accuracy the location of every ship, every plane, and every convoy in his vast part of the ocean. All of this was kept up to date by several dozen Wrens (women in the Royal Navy) who climbed long ladders and moved the magnetic markers to their new positions. The ladders were so tall that one Wren slipped and fell to her death.



Operations Room at Derby House

Alongside those markers were placed the presumed location of every U-Boat, this last information clattering in unceasingly from the U-Boat tracking room in London which kept the plot of their best estimate of the location of every German U-Boat and information from the “Trade Plot” in London where a handful of retired Merchant Navy captains using index cards kept the plot with the position of every merchant ship in the world. Dönitz hadn’t anything remotely close to this type of organization. Could never even have dreamed the British and later the Americans would have this. But we did. It required immense effort, money, and a huge number of people. But it was done.

Convoy battles usually took place at night. After dinner, Sir Max would come into the plotting room and watch the action develop. Wrote one of his officers:

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His words were always direct. ‘Where is...?’ ‘What is...?’ ‘Why is...?’ ‘Why the hell not?’ Then having grasped the situation, his decision would come in a flash...He seemed to have an uncanny prevision of what the enemy would do next, which came of course from his long experience in submarines.

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If you were competent, if you knew your business, if you did it to your utmost, and if you would admit your mistakes and learn from them, then you could do no wrong with Sir Max. He would back you to the hilt. He brought men to the fore who had an instinctive feel for how to kill a U-Boat and they became famous for their exploits.

There was Sir Peter Gretton, one of the best escort commanders of the war, likewise ruthless, intolerant of the smallest error, and dismissive of most officers in the Royal Navy. But Sir Max knew his man. Gretton won the Battle of Convoy ONS 5 in May 1943, inflicting such damage on the U-Bootwaffe that Dönitz was forced to recall all U-Boats from the North Atlantic. True, Gretton lost ten merchant ships out of Convoy ONS 5, but his escorts sank five U-Boats, an unacceptable loss ratio for the Germans. (ONS 5: Outward Bound North Slow. The 5th convoy using this routing.)



Sir Peter Gretton RN

There was Donald Macintyre, who captured Otto Kretschmer, and the greatest of all — Captain Frederick John “Johnnie” Walker — who had been passed over for promotion to captain in 1938, effectively ending his career. He was thought to be a little too keen, Walker was. Talked shop a bit much. And specialized of all things in anti-submarine tactics, hardly something which would be needed when war came — until war did come and it was desperately needed. “Johnnie” Walker sank more U-Boats, 14, than anyone and developed many of the successful anti-U-Boat tactics used by the Royal Navy. He died of a stroke on 9 July 1944 brought on by the intense stress of combat.



Donald Macintyre RN

It says something of Admiral Horton that for his greatest captain, he arranged a funeral equivalent to the man's deeds. Sailors drew the coffin, affixed to a gun carriage, through the crowded streets of Liverpool to the Cathedral. The coffin was escorted on foot by six Royal Navy captains, an unprecedented tribute and in another astonishing tribute, Sir Max himself delivered the eulogy.

When the war ended, Sir Max, who already had a long list of decorations, received even more. The one he valued the most? “Chief Commander of the Legion of Merit of the United States of America.” This was the highest decoration the United States could give to non-Americans and few received it.

Yet with all of his honors and awards and victories, dispatches and orders, even a cover story in *Life* Magazine, Admiral Sir Max Horton remains a mystery. This is a great frustration to those of us who study World War Two, particularly the Battle of the Atlantic. Sir Max never wrote his memoirs or, to my knowledge, wrote anything about himself.



Frederick John Walker RN

The strain of his immense responsibilities robbed Sir Max of his health and in 1951, just six years after the end of the war, he died. He was sixty-seven. His ill-health precluded his life-long dream of living in the warm climate of Southern France. The only biography of him, from which many of the above quotes are drawn, is *Max Horton and the Western Approaches: A Biography of Admiral Sir Max Kennedy Horton* by Rear Admiral W.S. Chalmers, RN, a family friend. This is very much an “authorized biography.” Max Horton did have a brother who was married and that family inherited all of his personal papers which, to my knowledge, they have never released. Chalmers only saw what he was shown and was under some very strict ground rules about attribution.

While Sir Max was reputed to not have a friend in the world, he did have friends. We just don't know who they were. Chalmers quotes from numerous letters Horton wrote to friends but never tells us who the letters were written to. Presumably he was not allowed to disclose that information. I can say this is the only biography I have ever read which never discloses who any of the subject's personal correspondence was addressed to.

Admiral Horton had an extensive acquaintanceship throughout the British Empire. A man in his position would certainly have known a great many people. He entertained to the degree his rank and social position required it. On several occasions during the war the King and Queen came to luncheon at his formal living quarters in Derby House. A letter he wrote afterwards to a friend clearly indicates he knew them already.

But his background? Parents? His childhood? The source of his inner strength? His heroes? His inner life? Of Sir Max as a man? We have no idea. We do know this: the men and women under his command in *Western Approaches* never came to love him. They never came to like him. But they came quickly to respect him and even more, have the greatest confidence in him — for Sir Max radiated confidence.

The war ended at last. Slowly people went back to their civilian lives. The hundreds of RN ships that had defeated the U-Boats were broken up and sold for scrap. The HQ bunker in Liverpool sealed up and practically forgotten. Sir Max passed on. And the veterans of Western Approaches Command? To the end of their lives they were proud to have served under Sir Max. Why? They knew something which has only become clear in the last years: in the moment of supreme peril, Admiral Sir Max Horton was one of the handful of extraordinary men who led the Allies to victory over a deadly and determined foe serving a régime of unimaginable depravity.

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