In late July 1943, a small number of Australians participated in one of the most remarkable actions in RAAF history—an episode that has become famous as the sinking of U-461 by the crew of aircraft ‘U’ of No 461 (Australian) Squadron. Less well known is the level of cooperation achieved between Allied aircraft and naval vessels that opposed the German U-boat menace in the Bay of Biscay at the time.

RAF Coastal Command carried out an offensive against the U-boats while they transited from bases in southern France, through the Bay of Biscay, to their operational areas in the Atlantic. On 30 July 1943, a RAF Liberator aircraft sighted three U-boats running on the surface across the Bay of Biscay trying to break out into the Atlantic. The German submarines applied a new tactic of remaining on the surface and using their anti-aircraft guns to produce a fury of fire against the attacking Allied aircraft. Soon six more aircraft joined the fight. The submarine U-462 was damaged in the air attacks and left dead in the water. After a short time, U-504 decided it was safer to dive than to fight on the surface. While the third submarine, U-461, was under simultaneous attack by two Liberators (one British and one American), a No 461 Squadron Sunderland flying boat, with nine crew who were mostly Australians under Flight Lieutenant Dudley Marrows, approached unnoticed to drop a stick of seven depth charges from a height of 50 feet. U-461 was hit several times and appeared to break in two, sinking almost immediately, although some of its crew managed to escape. Meanwhile, five Royal Navy anti-submarine warfare (ASW) vessels were summoned to the area by the aircraft. They sank U-462 on the surface with gunfire. The ships then used ASDIC (sonar) to locate the submerged U-504 and sank it with depth charges. Approximately 70 German submariners were picked up from the scene by the ships and taken back to England as POWs.

The tactical advantage in this fight in the Bay swung between German submarines and Allied aircraft as each side gained temporary advantages in technology, intelligence and operational research. Submarines initially had an advantage as the Allies had limited number of operational maritime reconnaissance aircraft to patrol the area. Even when they did find a submarine, experienced submariners would normally see the aircraft first and crash-dive before an air attack could be executed.

During 1942, Wellington aircraft fitted with an early form of radar (ASV II) gained an advantage in daylight; however, within a few months, the Germans countered with a rudimentary radar detector (Metox). In March 1943, Coastal Command aircraft were fitted with new 10-centimetre radar (ASV III), which could not be detected by the German Metox, and air attacks once again became lethal against the U-boats during the day. The aircraft fitted with ASV III radars were also lethal at night when used in combination with the Leigh light, which could illuminate U-boats during the final phase of an attack. As a result, Admiral Karl Dönitz, Commander of German Navy, ordered submarines in the Bay of Biscay to submerge at night, surface in daylight to recharge
batteries, and if attacked, fight back on the surface. This was a disastrous over-reaction to the Allied tactics.

By mid-1943, the Allies had built up an effective, coordinated ASW system, with well trained and experienced personnel operating relatively large numbers of aircraft and ships, equipped with the latest ASW technology. Area Combined Headquarters at Chatham, Gosport, Plymouth and Rosyth coordinated the Allied ASW effort, with joint operations rooms staffed by air force and naval personnel. Coastal Command headquarters was situated at Northwood, near London, close to the Admiralty. Signals intelligence (Ultra), high-frequency detection finding (HFDF), technical intelligence and other forms of Allied intelligence were disseminated through these headquarters providing critical support to ASW operations.

The Allies’ ASW system, which included air force and naval personnel, also relied upon a dedicated group of civilians within Defence, industry and the scientific community contributing to the overall ASW capability. In contrast, there was none of the productive interaction and coordination between the Kriegsmarine, Luftwaffe and comparable science, industrial and technology organisations that was so evident within the Allies’ system. For the Germans, this meant that effective countermeasures were slow to be developed in response to the new Allied ASW capability that was increasingly being employed on operations.

It was the remarkable level of cooperation achieved between Allied air and naval forces that was instrumental in the success of the Atlantic campaign. Coastal Command—which included British (RAF and Fleet Air Arm), Canadian, Australian, Czechoslovakian, Norwegian, Dutch and American squadrons under its control—contributed to the Atlantic battles throughout the six years of war. Three Australian squadrons served with Coastal Command during this time: Nos 10, 455 and 461. In addition, approximately 43 per cent of the RAAF personnel in Coastal Command served with RAF or empire squadrons. Overall, more than 1600 RAAF personnel served with Coastal Command during the war and, of these, 408 lost their lives.

After the war, a small core of RAAF professionals retained the strategic lessons from the air war against the U-boats and formed a dedicated maritime air component within the RAAF, initially equipped with Catalina flying boats followed by the MR 31 Lincoln. When the Australian Neptunes entered service with No 11 Squadron in November 1951, it was the start of a new long-range ASW capability; one which has been upgraded, most significantly with the introduction of the P-3C Orion aircraft. As we now look forward to a combination of P-8A Poseidon aircraft and long-range unmanned aerial vehicles to maintain this ASW capability, it is worth remembering the ASW system that underpinned the Allied victory in the Battle of the Atlantic.

Key Points

- RAAF personnel serving with Coastal Command played a critical role in the victory gained over the German U-boats during World War II.
- The Allies developed an effective, coordinated ASW system of experienced and well-trained personnel operating relatively large numbers of aircraft and ships, each equipped with the latest practical ASW technology.
- The Allied ASW system was a team effort including Air Force and Navy personnel supported by dedicated civilians within Defence, industry and the scientific community.