

The Diesel Stoker

By Dan Gillcrist

“Permission to come up Sir.” The First Watch Officer who had been in the middle of a conversation with the Captain, leaned across the bridge to look down the tower hatch. Looking up expectantly, with his hands on the ladder, was Dieter Winter, U-136’s new diesel stoker.

“Granted”, was all Guenther Offerman said before turning his attention back to Herr Kaleun. He once saw an American movie and everyone called the captain of that movies’ ship, ‘Skipper’. He much preferred Herr Kaleun (the abbreviation of Herr Kapitaenleutnant). ‘Skipper’ was much too familiar and, he thought, even a bit feminine. The captain of a ship, even an American ship, should not be skipping around for God’s sake. The thought did occur to him that maybe he had, after all, lost something in the translation. That thought brought a smile to his very young face.

“As I was saying Guenther, our orders are to return to the North Carolina coast, but to choose a route where we are likely to encounter some shipping. The problem is that we need to head northwest, but I want to stay well clear of Ireland. So when you go below, plot such a course and show it to me. I’ll tell you something Guenther, the fucking Englanders have an awful lot of planes patrolling, and I don’t want to be inside their range if I can help it. We were nearly sunk on our way back from the last patrol, did you know that?”

“Yes, of course Herr Kaleun. The starboard bridge guard,” - and he said this loud enough to be heard by both of the men on lookout watch, - “must have been asleep on his feet, or playing with himself. And the watch officer...he must have been a little embarrassed as well.”

“Well, everyone on board was very tired from the patrol and we were only a couple days out from St.Nazaire and everything was far too lax...my fault really when you think about it. However, ‘embarrassed’ is not exactly the word I’d have chosen Guenther. That attack scared the living shit out of us actually. The patrol plane came out of nowhere, so low that when he dropped the depth charge,” at this, he pointed close off the starboard bow, “it actually hit about there and instead of sinking, the goddamn thing skipped way over to port. Had it hit conventionally we’d all be dead.”

They had only been underway out of the submarine base at St. Nazaire, near the mouth of the Loire, for 24 hours. The weather had been accommodating so far and the crew was happy about it. The weather in The Bay (Bay of Biscay) was normally bad.

Kapitaenleutnant Werner Hardegen turned to their bridge visitor, the new diesel stoker. “So, how do you like our little U-boat Dieter? Have you ever gone to sea on a Type VII boat before?” The captain used the first names of the crew when he could. He knew that in the rest of the German military such familiarity was frowned upon. He did

not want the distance most officers had between themselves and their sailors or soldiers, and he figured that since he could very well die along side this great bunch of men, he was, by God, going to treat them with respect. It was no secret aboard U-136 that Werner Hardegen thought there were far too many (in his words) pompous ass holes among his fellow German officers.

“No, Herr Kapitaen, I just got out of sub school, so this is my first patrol.”

“Aahh, that’s right, that’s right. I read that in your record. And where are you from again Dieter?”

“Abtenau, Herr Kaleun. It’s in the mountains south of Salzburg. It’s pretty small really. Very few people have ever heard of it. My mother runs a small Gasthaus.” This was said in obvious modesty. Dieter now wished he had not come up to the bridge for a smoke after all.

The captain wryly thought, ‘The kid has got that right - I never heard of the place. How does a kid from the Alps end up on U-boat? I’ll bet he never saw the ocean until he got to sub school. He probably never lived lower than 1500 meters altitude! I have a feeling it’s those romantic horse shit stories that fucking cripple Goebbels spins out.’ He felt the beginnings of a beard with his hand and thought, ‘I’d like to bring one of those fairies from the Propaganda Ministry out on a war patrol for a month or two - see what kind of story he’d write then...if he even got back.’

He knew that this profession he had chosen was very hard and unforgiving, yet he knew that nearly all the officers and men he had served with loved it. He figured that it was probably the same way with the fighter pilots or the panzer men. ‘To each his own.’ he thought.

“Guenther, I’ll take the conn. I want you to plot that course right now, if you would. I don’t like steaming around the North Atlantic by the seat of my Lederhosen.” The First Watch Officer was laughing as he asked permission to go below and dropped down the tower hatch, followed by Dieter Winter who all of a sudden felt uncomfortable up there with only the bridge guards and the captain.

This would be the second patrol to the Eastern Sea Frontier (ESF) for U-136. The first one was fairly productive with four freighters sunk. The U-boats in the North Atlantic convoy sea-lanes usually did better than that, but for the Mid-Atlantic coast four good sized freighters sunk wasn’t bad. They had gotten additionally lucky because in March 1942, while they were on their previous patrol, there was a big American bomber raid on their sub base at St.Nazaire. Dieter Winter had been there, awaiting the return of his new boat when the raid occurred. He concluded, incorrectly, that being ashore was just as dangerous as being on patrol. Adding to this misconception was the sense he had of safety aboard U-136, surrounded by a crew of highly competent, friendly U-boat men, and of course, a 35 millimeter thick, Bremen steel pressure hull.

By their fourth day out U-136 had skirted the Irish coast by a comfortable margin. The Second Watch Officer Hans Ostermann was on the bridge and happened to be looking straight over the bow at the horizon when he picked up a glint in the just rising sun. He notified the captain, who arrived on the bridge almost instantly.

There were many similarities among American and German submariners. The most obvious was the fact that, at sea, they seldom undressed, rarely changed clothes and almost never bathed. A sub captain of either navy, when summoned from a deep sleep would be on the bridge in well under a minute. Little of their precious space was taken up

with storing clothing and none of their time was wasted changing. They all slept in their different uniforms.

“What have you got for me Hans?”

“We have a contact dead ahead on the horizon, Herr Kaleun. So far it is just masts up.”

“He won’t see us for awhile so lets track him and see what his course is before we dive.” Kapitaen Hardegen put both elbows on the bridge splinter shield to steady the Zeiss binoculars his wife had given him as, of all things, a wedding present. He never took his eyes off of the target. After 20 minutes the bearing had not changed noticeably, indicating that the U-boat and the target seemed to be on reciprocal courses.

“Let’s dive the boat Hans, he seems to be coming our way.” Hardegen said as he dropped down the tower hatch.

“Prepare to dive.”

“ALARM, ALARM” Hans waited to shout this until the second bridge guard was in the tower hatch.

Since Dieter Winter was an extra diesel stoker - and the torpedo men were short a hand, his battle station was in the Bow Compartment. With the entire complement of crew at only 50 men, there was a lot of filling in and overlapping of functions. Dieter didn’t mind since he really liked the torpedomen, particularly Heinrich Schultz, the senior man. He bunked up there and they had even included him into their poker games.

The crew had been at battle stations for 40 minutes and had become their usual restless selves. In the Conning Tower Werner Hardegen raised the periscope again, turned his ever-present crushed ‘white’ bridge cap around so the bill wouldn’t interfere with looking through the periscope eyepiece. Since nothing aboard a U-boat was white for very long, the color of his hat was more on the order of battleship gray. He was thinking of the odds that two ships encountering one another at sea would be on reciprocal courses, ‘Were the odds 360 to 1 or two times 360 to 1?’ He was always working out numbers in his head. Guenther Offerman was up in the Conning Tower to help on the approach.

“Guenther, we are still on a collision course with this fellow. I don’t like these shots but we don’t have any choice. Flood tubes #1 and #2.” Guenther repeated the order to the torpedomen.

“Open torpedo doors on #1 and #2.”

“Range. Mark.” Guenther read the back of the scope.

“Eleven hundred meters.”

“Bearing. Mark.”

“Zero one one.”

Guenther announced, “Tubes one and two ready to fire.” He had barely gotten the words out of his mouth when the Captain turned the firing lever and hit his stopwatch.

As the Captain watched through the scope, he saw the eruption of one torpedo hit. One second later the entire crew heard the sound and they all cheered except Werner Hardegen who, at that instant, saw through the billowing smoke falling away to the freighter’s port side, the bow of a British destroyer. From the looks of the smoke and the bow wave from the destroyer, it appeared to be making top speed.

The Captain shouted down the control room hatch,

“Take her down to 35 meters! Right full rudder. All ahead full! Rig for depth

charge! We've got a frigate - Englanders I think. It must have been trailing and exactly behind the target the whole time." He thought to himself that had he known about the destroyer, he would not have risked this attack. His orders were to get to the ESF and take opportunities along the way, should they present themselves. This was not what he would define as 'an opportunity'. This was very dangerous stuff. These Brits were good.

The British destroyer had heard the torpedo hit the freighter, and more importantly, had also seen where the second of the electric torpedos broached twice as it passed closely down its port side. The destroyer began to backtrack the torpedo as fast as it could go. The British captain decided to head down the left side of the torpedo's track, knowing the U-boat would move away either to the left or to the right. He thought of playing goalie on the local soccer club during a penalty kick. He always had to choose to cover one side of the goal or the other - sometimes he got lucky. Regrettably, Hardegen chose to move to the left as well.

The destroyer made a classic depth charge run, mortaring its charges in big arcs, off to port and starboard and rolling them off the fantail depth charge racks. While those depth charges fired to starboard landed well aft of the submerged U-boat, those fired to port began going off all around the submarine. The fourth depth charge off the port side appeared to the British destroyer captain to have been a dud and he pounded his chart table in anger. In fact, the reason the depth charge didn't explode was that it landed on the U-boat's bridge, between its two periscopes, where it became trapped.

Depth charges are exploded by hydrostatic switches. A setting is made aboard ship so that the depth charge goes off at a particular depth - the depth they think the sub is. The switch measures water pressure as the charge sinks, exploding it at the pre-determined depth. The British had set this one for 50 meters and the sub was only at 35 meters.

With depth charges going off all around them, Kapitanleutnant Hardegen made a fateful decision,

"TAKE US DOWN TO 100 METERS."

As they passed 50 meters the depth charge trapped on the bridge exploded killing everyone in the conning tower - Werner Hardegen, Guenther Offerman, the helmsman and the seaman on the sound powered phones. The explosion crushed the Main Induction and flooded the Motor Room. The diving officer, Leutnant Hans Ostermann quickly secured the badly damaged hatch between the Control Room and the Conning Tower, but not before several tons of seawater had dropped into the compartment. He then only managed to slow the flooding through the damaged hatch and the compartment began to fill with seawater. Hans Ostermann, bleeding badly from his head, ordered an up angle on the Bow Hydroplanes and a blow on all ballast tanks. He was not yet aware that the Motor Room had flooded as he also ordered "all ahead full" on the screws. When no one answered the Motor Room sound powered phone, and the boat took a large up angle, they all realized it must have flooded, and they could not power the boat toward the surface.

The Chief Navigation Bosun and Control Room Assistant, holding on to the gyro table, quickly realized that it was hopeless, with both the Conning Tower and the Motor Room flooded and water up to his waist and rising fast. In spite of his overwhelming fear, he noticed how bitterly cold the water was. The Control Room party; Leutnant Ostermann, the bosun, the hydroplane operators and the manifold operator all just looked at one another. The planesmen seemed frozen to their wheels. The young one on the bow

planes began, "Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be..." The salty old bosun said, "You're all good men and I'm proud to serve with you." They started to tread water as their heads began hitting the overhead. In the few short minutes they had been breathing the compartment's remaining air, compressed by the incoming seawater, they had become intoxicated with nitrogen narcosis. It was a Godsend. Each took one deep breath - his last. There was no place to go - no salvation. In the dim light of a battle lantern, each of them finally exhaled and stopped thinking of home. Only the opened, terrified eyes of dead men in the Control Room could have seen the boat's main depth gauge pass 150 meters, its official "test depth".

Dieter Winter was at his battle station in the Bow Compartment. The boat now had an up angle of 25 degrees due to the flooding aft. With depth charges still going off, he was unspeakably terrified, but said nothing. Those in the room had lost contact with the rest of the boat. The lighting was very dim, supplied by battle lanterns - one on the after bulkhead and one up between the tubes. No one screamed, there was no flooding in their compartment, and they each expected and had faith that the now dead diving party aft in the Control Room would somehow turn the situation around. They waited in silence holding on to whatever they could to keep from sliding aft. The old chief torpedoman, Heinrich Schultz was the only one to notice the depth gauge between the torpedo tubes passing 200 meters. He too knew it was hopeless, but chose not to say anything to the others.

The soundman was wedged in his little space directly across from the head when it happened. The seawater-flushing valve in the head blew across the room with such force and noise that everyone in the room gazed in horror as the two kilo brass valve hit him in the chest, killing him and pinning him against the pressure hull. A torpedoman leaned across to see the source of the ear splitting sound and was struck full in the face with a stream of seawater with a force no one had ever seen before. His eyeballs were blown out and the water broke the bone behind his right eye and entered his brain cavity.

Some still had hope in spite of the soundman and the torpedoman. Suddenly there was an enormous explosion aft, knocking them all to the deck, only to slide forward as the boat suddenly went from a 25 degree up angle to a 45 degree down angle in a matter of seconds. The bulkhead between the now flooded Control Room and the Battery Compartment had failed profoundly causing the boat to flood yet another compartment and assume a steep down angle and speed up its decent. The only crew now left alive, were in the Bow Compartment. Dieter was now wedged between the tubes as all the bunks and everything else loose in the compartment along with a loose torpedo, crashed forward with the steep down angle, crushing two men. He fought to pull himself up and aft to support himself just in front of the #2 tube door. The #1 tube door was the support for Heinrich Schultz the older torpedoman who had always been so nice to him. He smiled at Dieter attempting to reassure him when Dieter heard a sound, which seemed as loud as a 20-millimeter shell going off and saw that his friend had only half his head. The sight glass with its brass housing from the #1 tube door had blown off under the now enormous sea pressure and struck him on his smiling face. In all the confusion, someone had failed to close the tube outer doors after the attack on the freighter. The stream of seawater from the hole where the sight glass had been now struck Schultz, propelling his body aft into the debris. The boat was passing 270 meters, nearly twice its test depth.

Numbingly cold 7-degree water was now quickly filling the compartment and Dieter, in the dimness and horror realized he was the last one left alive in the compartment. He thought of his mother and how sad she will be not to have a son anymore. He then heard a very loud boom, but a little distant and muffled. It was the implosion of the main Motor Room whose forward bulkhead collapsed aft with such force and energy that the compartment detached itself from the rest of the boat, and it began to fall separately through the ocean depths.

Dieter Winter screamed out, "MOOOOOTTTHHHEERRR!" and at that instant, passing 310 meters, the enormous sea pressure behind #2 tube door, caused the brass locking ring to shear off. The door exploded into the room, filling it in less than a second.

Nine hundred miles east in a little town in the Alps, just south of Salzburg, a pretty 38 year old woman sat bolt upright in her bed - she knew not why. Clutching the sheets to her breasts she cried out, "Oh, God in Heaven!"

The horror was now over for the crew of U-136... finally. The two parts of the boat now fell separately into the depths of the North Atlantic. They still had 1000 meters to fall before they reached the bottom of the Rockall Trough. They crashed violently at 55 knots, 400 meters apart - two tombs of honor on that sunless desert bottom.

Author's Note (March 2000)

To be sure, there were submarines - German and American - which were attacked on the surface. They were rammed, attacked from the air or taken under gunfire. In these cases there were often survivors who escaped by leaving the submarine before it sank. The vast majority of sinkings, however, occurred at depth when the submarine was attempting to evade its pursuers on the surface. In all of these cases the submarine was mortally wounded, usually from flooding, and then it sank with its unaffected compartments still intact only to implode under enormous forces at crush depths. Each of these compartments were filled with men who knew what was about to happen to them and who were utterly powerless to change the outcome. In all these cases there were no survivors - no eyewitnesses to tell the story.

I have discovered that the public generally has the notion that submariners who died at sea died from drowning, and that since drowning seems to be some dreamy loss of consciousness, death on a submarine is believed to be quick and painless. This of course is simply not true. The point of this story is to correct this misconception and to call attention to the notion that the German and American submariners of W.W.II showed exceptional courage. They all volunteered for submarine duty, and then going back on patrol over and over, knowing that it was extremely dangerous.

The second purpose of this story is to try to provide some level of advocacy for all those submariners who died. All other military units have living survivors who, thankfully, remind us of their fallen comrades. Each year for the last 55 years there are thousands of reunions. Survivors from Stalingrad and Tobruck to Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima meet to commemorate what was done and remember their friends who were killed. Thousands of books and newspaper stories serve as reminders for us. This is a wonderful thing and it transcends all political borders. There are even reunions involving both adversaries at a particular battle!

“To find the life of battle good,
And dear the land that gave you birth,
And dearer still the brotherhood,
That binds the brave of all the Earth.”

However, since there are no submarine survivors to attend such reunions, there is very little public awareness of the price they paid.

It is a little known fact, therefore, that the submarine services of Germany and the United States experienced the highest death rate of ANY of their other military branches. While the estimates vary slightly, they are overwhelming when examined. Of the 39,000 German submarine sailors and officers, who put to sea, it is estimated that an astounding 32,000 never returned. Of the 16,000 American submariners who made war patrols, 3,500 died - almost one out of four!

With respect to the American submariners, they represented less than two percent of the Navy, and yet accounted for the sinkings of 55% of Japan's naval and merchant fleets! Less than two percent of one branch of the United States Armed Forces accomplished this incredible feat.

The year 2000 is the 100th anniversary of the submarine. It is also a time, long overdue, when we commemorate the sacrifices of the World War II submariners - German and American - who gave their lives to the sea.

Sailors, Rest Your Oars