



U-BOAT STORIES

Narratives of German U-Boat Sailors – Edited by Karl Neureuther and Claus Bergen



We break surface.

(Frontispiece.)

U-BOAT STORIES

NARRATIVES OF GERMAN U-BOAT SAILORS

EDITED BY

KARL NEUREUTHER AND CLAUS BERGEN

AND WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR,
AND THIRTY-FOUR IN BLACK-AND-WHITE AFTER DRAWINGS BY

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U-BOAT CO-OPERATION.

BY COMMANDER KARL NEUREUTHER,
COMMANDER OF UB 73 .

A LIGHT haze hung over the North Channel, the northern entrance to the Irish Sea. The sun shone gratefully through the white air on to the conning-tower, where five sturdy U-Boat sailors were enjoying the warmth.

There was enough visibility to allow us to stay on the surface, but we had to keep pretty wideawake, for we could not see further than three to four miles. At that distance the sea melted into a white haze, though the sky above us was a deep and shining blue.

Both Diesel engines were going at half-speed, and we altered course every three minutes to protect ourselves against attack by enemy U-Boats.

The enemy was not as yet much in evidence. In the early morning a large convoy had passed us, but unfortunately at so great a distance as to give us no chance of attacking them. Our U-Boat was now moving eastwards towards the narrower entrance to the Channel in the hopes of finding richer prey and better opportunities of attack.

A note was handed up to the Commander from below. ' Wireless from U 53. Enemy convoy on square x-y steering E.N.E.,' with a comment from the operator, ' U 53 must be quite near.'

Shortly afterwards, indeed, the German U-Boat U 53 came into sight, making north-east : a few minutes later the boats were within hail, and exchanged news. While our boat, UB 73, was outward bound and intending that day to make the Irish Sea through the North Channel, U 53 - Captain-Lieutenant Rose - was on her way home ; she had fired every torpedo but one, and could look back on a mass of tonnage sunk. He could, in general, only report that there was ' plenty doing ' in the Irish Sea. We were very ready to believe this, and, keen as we all were, the boats felt a touch of silent envy - they of our prospects and we of their success. U 53 told us that they had seen the convoy in question very shortly before, but then lost sight of it, and had not been able to attack it, mainly because, owing to the thick weather, they could not get close enough ; added to which, owing to defective air-leads, they could not blow two of their tanks, and hence could not dive quickly.

Meanwhile the two boats were moving in a westerly direction side by side. But they gradually drew apart, and the conversation had to be continued, no longer by megaphone, but by semaphore ' Commander to Commander.'

Suddenly our talk was broken into by a signal from U 53, which was leading : 'Enemy in sight on starboard bow.' Followed by : 'Commander to Commander. Suggest combined artillery attack' ; our reply to which was, naturally : 'Agreed' ; and the gun's crew appeared forthwith on deck. We seemed in for an eventful day, for behind the enemy ship, a steam trawler, there were signs of something very promising. Soon after came a signal from U 53 : ' Port bow, cruiser and convoy in sight.'

There she was ! A large old cruiser at the head of a convoy, as yet very faintly defined, but clearly recognisable as such.

Soon after a further signal from U 53 : 'Commander to Commander; am attacking' ; the alarm-bells rang, the conning-tower hatch slammed behind the Commander, and in a few minutes our boat was diving at full speed to the proper depth for attack, while U 53, remaining on the surface, altered course and was soon out of sight.

Slowly the convoy came nearer - about twenty fine well-laden steamers. It was escorted by several destroyers in addition to the cruiser. The Commander issued his orders calmly and confidently : everyone was conscious of the gravity of the moment.

While we were manoeuvring into position to attack two large steamers which had dropped slightly out of the centre of the line towards the left wing, we observed with joy that an enemy destroyer which had been darting about in most unpleasant proximity to us had turned at full speed towards the south. And it really looked as if another were on the point of following her.

Ah, wasn't that a depth charge ? And another ! And a third ! The noise of the explosion was quite audible, but far away. Three cheers for our valiant comrades and friends of U 53. With equal astuteness and audacity they had stayed so long on the surface that all the destroyers had gone in pursuit of her.

We, therefore, were able to proceed with our task at leisure and undisturbed. The great steamers were bearing directly down upon us : we turned slowly to prepare to fire two bow torpedoes simultaneously at the two largest ships within



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within range. One was about 400 metres away, and the other 800 metres. Unfortunately, it was very calm, so that the enemy would probably see the track of the torpedoes, which would be very soon and clearly visible, so we drew a little closer and fired at about 300 and 700 metres respectively.

A large burst of smoke shot up into the sunshine under the first steamer's bridge, while the second torpedo sped on its way to the second and more distant victim. But, alas, the track of the torpedo was too clearly visible. It was observed by the second steamer, which turned, and we waited in vain for the crash of the second explosion. It was fate, with which the U-Boat Commander must reckon for a long while until, by the favour of Heaven, a torpedo is invented that is not driven by compressed air, and leaves no track of discharged air behind it.

But our chief gratitude was due to our comrades of U 53, who did not allow their boat's defective diving capacity to prevent them diverting the escort's attention, and thus enabling us to attack, as far as possible, safe and undisturbed.

Unfortunately, such opportunities for generous co-operation towards a common success were rare : our U-Boats were so few in number that it was seldom possible to arrange it. But an unexpected meeting was always a happy chance; and it was a still happier chance when - as in this instance - at the exact moment of meeting a convoy appeared on the scene and offered both boats the opportunity of such victorious common action.