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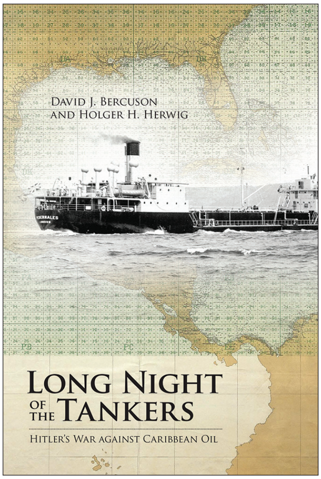
David J. Bercuson and Holger H. Herwig
Long Night of the Tankers
Hitler's War Against Caribbean Oil

LONG NIGHT OF THE TANKERS: HITLER'S WAR AGAINST CARIBBEAN OIL

David J. Bercuson and Holger H. Herwig

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MARTINIQUE

Shortly before 8 p.m.[1] on February 20, 1942, Kapitänleutnant Werner Hartenstein brought *U-156* up to the surface. The sea was relatively calm.[2] A welcome breeze was blowing and large wavelets rippled off the boat's gray steel hull. He could smell tropical blossoms and wood fires. Off the right bow, he spied the lights of Martinique. He had drafted his own chart of the west coast of the island from the commercial map that the Kriegsmarine had given him at Lorient. A cautious man, he ordered battle stations. He was not "fully certain," he noted in the war diary, whether he could "trust the loyalty" of the French colonial authorities on the island, "far away from Vichy." For "security reasons" he ordered the boat's emblem to be covered and the new experimental FuMO 29 radar detector to be stowed below decks.

U-156 approached the coast at half speed. Bright moonlight illuminated the broad sweep of the bay of Fort-de-France. The lights in the harbor had been extinguished and all shipping buoys removed. Hartenstein ordered running lights and set lanterns to light up the battle flag raised on the extended periscopes. It was 9 p.m. He signaled French shore authorities in his best high-school French. "German vessel. Please dispatch a boat for a wounded man." After a while, a small lighter appeared. Its captain spoke no German. The Kaleu tried his high-school English. No response from the lighter. The Frenchman disappeared into the darkness.

At 10:35 p.m., a patrol boat approached *U-156*. On its deck, Hartenstein could make out three officers and six black sailors, all smartly turned out in crisp white uniforms and caps. The officers, the skipper happily noted, were "very cordial." One of them, an Alsatian, spoke some German. The boat also had a medical doctor on board. The French officers asked Hartenstein to douse his lanterns. Under the cover of darkness, Lieutenant Dietrich von dem Borne, his bleeding staunched but his fever out of control, was brought up on deck and handed over to French sailors. Fortunately, Vichy had alerted Martinique to Hartenstein's arrival. A few last farewells and best wishes for a speedy recovery for Borne,[3] and *U-156* headed westward back out to sea at flank speed.[4] The entire undertaking had taken less than three hours.

* * *

The lush tropical island of Martinique lies between St. Lucia and Dominica, both British possessions in 1942. It prides itself on being "the queen of the Caribbean islands." Its Indian name, "Madinia," translates into "the island of flowers." Distinguished manor houses and old rum distilleries evoke the splendors of the past. Nestled in the turquoise and blue sea, fantastic white beaches graced by king palms dot its shores. One of Martinique's major claims to fame is that it was the home of Napoleon Bonaparte's first empress, Joséphine. In February 1942, it was the most feared western bastion of Vichy France.

The island's capital, Fort-de-France, in the words of a US Navy officer, was "a potential Gibraltar of the Caribbean."[5] A protective semicircle of high mountains rings the capital and its port. The bay that fronts Fort-de-France is a massive 13 square miles in area; the entire 1942 US Navy could have anchored in its calm, yet deep waters. The entrance to the bay was well guarded: Fort Tartenson to the west had four 16-cm guns and two 8-cm mortars as well as anti-aircraft guns; a second installation farther east and right near the coast was Fort Desaix. It was "sturdy, easily defended, well armed and well supplied." Its 17th-century walls were "solid rock hewn out of the mountain surrounded by a dry moat 150 feet deep and 50 feet wide." One easily defended road accessed the fort, which counted two 9.5-cm guns and five 8-cm mortars as well as a battery of eight anti-aircraft weapons. It was well camouflaged by vegetation and trees and was difficult to spot from the sea. Below the fort were a military hospital and the artillery headquarters and barracks for the French West Indies and French Guiana.[6] Roughly 5,500 Vichy French troops with artillery, ten warships, and 106 fighter and bomber aircraft were based on Martinique.

The US War Department's BUNGALOW Plan for a possible war with Vichy France estimated that it would take a reinforced infantry or Marine division of 21,100 men – augmented by 75 fighter aircraft, 30 medium and ten light bombers, four cruisers, and 16 destroyers – to take Martinique. It wildly anticipated casualties at anywhere between 250 and 18,000 men.[7]

Presiding over this large garrison was Admiral Georges Achille Marie Joseph Robert, High Commissioner for the French Antilles, serving at the pleasure of the Vichy government of Field Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain. Robert, a crotchety bachelor, had retired in the grade of vice admiral in 1937 but had been recalled to service in September 1939 and promoted admiral as the Republic's commander in the western hemisphere. He had made the transition to the Nazi puppet state based at Vichy seamlessly. He saw Pétain as the very "incarnation of Eternal France." He viewed both the "Anglo-Saxons" and "Gaullism"[8] as France's primary enemies. He seemed to share the visceral dislike that his boss, Admiral Jean-François Darlan, Commander in Chief French Fleet, had for British "dishonesty" and "untrustworthiness and treachery" in general, and for the "drunkard," Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill, in particular.[9]

At various times, Admiral Robert commanded a formidable fleet of warships totaling 70,000 tons, based on Martinique and Guadeloupe.[10] Shortly after the collapse of France in June 1940, its only aircraft carrier, the rebuilt 28,000-ton *Béarn*, had put into Fort-de-France. On board were 106 American Brewster Buffalo and Curtiss fighter aircraft. They had been sold by the US government to the Anglo-French Purchasing Commission, then moved to Halifax, Canada, and in June 1940 loaded onto the *Béarn*. Robert also had command of two 6-inch light cruisers, *Jeanne d'Arc* and *Émile Bertin*, both displacing about 6,000 tons. As well, Robert could call on the service of the 5-inch destroyer *Le Terrible* and the armed merchant cruisers *Esterel*, *Barfleur*, and *Quercy*. Six tankers and nine freighters of 80,000 tons rounded off his flotilla.

Of special interest to the Allies was the *Émile Bertin*, then the pride of the French navy. It had arrived at Martinique on June 24, 1940 – with a precious cargo estimated as high as $300 million in gold. On June 16, the French government had ordered all gold reserves held by the Bank of France, including those of occupied Belgium and Poland, to be evacuated. When Premier Paul Reynaud's request for an American cruiser to be sent to Bordeaux to pick up the gold fell through, it was decided to put the bullion on the French cruiser and dispatch it to Canada. But the French armistice was signed, and the allegedly neutral – but in fact collaborationist – Vichy government under Marshall Pétain was installed after the *Émile Bertin* reached Halifax on June 18.

The Canadian government of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King was challenged by the cruiser's presence. Canada was at war with Germany, but not with France, or what remained of it, rump or not. Mackenzie King tried to persuade the French Ambassador to Canada, René Ristelhueber, to let the *Émile Bertin* stay in Halifax and transfer the gold to the Bank of Canada,[11] but the Vichy government insisted that the ship be allowed to leave. The Canadian Minister of National Defence, Colonel J. L. Ralston, and the deputy head of the Bank of Canada, Donald Gordon, urged Mackenzie King to restrain the ship by force. But the prime minister was afraid that armed action against the ship ("folly and injury") would cause "no end of trouble throughout Canada" because "the British Admiralty had expressed the view we should not let the ship go."[12] King and his government cogitated for three days, then decided to allow the ship to depart. The captain of the *Émile Bertin* seized the initiative and left under his own steam on June 21.[13] He then sailed straight for Martinique, trailed all the way by the heavy cruiser HMS *Devonshire*, which did not interfere with its passage.[14]

Admiral Robert was delighted. As soon as the cruiser arrived at Fort-de-France, he ordered the gold unloaded. Fearing what he slyly called "the eventuality of ulterior transport … (if the need arose)," he ordered the colony, "under duress" as he maliciously noted in his memoirs, to build 8,000 crates to store the "precious cargo" in uniform weights of 35 kilograms (77 pounds) each. Thereupon, it disappeared into the rock caverns of Fort Desaix.[15] Robert's gold reserve is generally estimated at 12 billion francs – which translates into $3.85 billion in 2012 US dollars[16] Robert, with his fleet of ten warships, 106 airplanes, and 12 billion francs in gold, was a man to be reckoned with in the western hemisphere. Solidly in the hands of Vichy, Martinique was perceived as a major threat to Allied interests in the entire Caribbean. In the words of the official history of the Trinidad sector, "it was in the position of being able to inflict considerable damage on American bases as well as to supply a headquarters for enemy intelligence, operations or supply in the Western Hemisphere."[17]

Well before Hartenstein showed up, stories circulated around the Caribbean basin about German activity on the island. In late April 1941, US Army Intelligence in the Panama Canal Department received a report that German pilots flying for commercial airlines in South America were stationed in Martinique and preparing to carry out bombing missions against the Panama Canal. Apparently, this story followed the unloading of "airplane equipment" at Martinique.[18] Other tales indicated that all the customs inspectors were German and that the roads on the island were being mined.

After the United States entered the war, surveillance of Martinique was increased. Intelligence was gathered from Pan American clipper pilots flying the Martinique-Trinidad route. People who escaped from the island were closely questioned, but their information was often contradictory. Not long after the Pearl Harbor attack, many officers and men began leaving Martinique to join Free French forces. On December 21, two men from Martinique landed at St. Lucia in a canoe. One was a French artillery officer, the other a student. Their hands were raw after paddling for 24 hours.

On February 21, the US consul in Martinique reported Hartenstein's arrival in Fort-de-France and the transfer of "a wounded man" ashore to US Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Two hours later, the State Department instructed Ambassador William D. Leahy, a recently retired US Navy admiral and personal friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to inform the Vichy regime that the United States "cannot permit any of the French possessions in the Western Hemisphere to be used as a base for Axis operations." Apparently, the landing of a wounded sailor had already escalated into a German assault on the Caribbean. Leahy poured fuel on the fire on February 26 by informing Hull that the wounded sailor in question was "the son of an officer high in the German Admiralty."[19] And Anthony Eden, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, lectured Hull "that in his opinion the United States Government should immediately have proceeded to occupy Martinique as a result of this incident."[20]

Given the state of developments on Martinique, it is no wonder that Hartenstein's landing of his wounded officer on February 20 set off a flurry of diplomatic activity. Secretary of State Hull was still fuming over what he termed the "so-called Free French" seizure of the Vichy-controlled islands of St. Pierre and Michelon off Newfoundland on Christmas Eve 1941, and especially the storm of protest his comments had aroused in the American press.[21] He was in no mood for further French transgressions in the western hemisphere, be they Vichy French or Free French. To make matters worse, Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief US Fleet, warned the Secretary that the aircraft on the *Béarn* were still "useable and might be used very effectively against us."[22]

Hartenstein's arrival in Fort-de-France harbor further set off a new and more frightening cycle of rumors and stories about German submarines and Vichy collaboration. A Pan American crew reported to the US Army on Trinidad that people on Martinique were very irritated because the Vichy authorities were permitting U-boats to refuel there. Two stowaways who landed at St. Lucia in mid-March asserted that there was a large number of Germans on the island. They also reported flying over a submarine lying in harbor at Portsmouth on the eastern side of Dominica, 100 kilometers northwest of Martinique. One of the more fantastic stories alleged that bauxite carriers coming to Martinique, which were owned by the American aluminum company ALCOA, were actually bringing food and provisions to the island in violation of a British embargo on the French West Indian islands proclaimed after the establishment of the Vichy state. It was alleged that, although ALCOA owned one of the largest fleets in the Caribbean, it had suffered relatively small losses. Was ALCOA somehow in cahoots with the Germans? One captain of a torpedoed ship claimed that a U-boat had slipped alongside his life raft and had provided provisions to the survivors, including two cans of milk "bearing the name of a Martinique distributor."[23]

Something had to be done to defuse a tense situation. Hull turned to Admiral John W. Greenslade, who had been on Martinique since August 1940, to deal with Robert about the US-built aircraft. The American admiral had found Robert extremely arrogant, even by French standards. Robert acted as virtual head of state and sovereign in Martinique. But Greenslade understood power. He ordered two US Navy destroyers operating out of the American base still under construction at St. Lucia to patrol off Fort-de-France, at all times within sight of its inhabitants. Robert had relented, to a degree, and agreed that his warships would not leave the West Indies and that he would give Washington 48 hours notice before he moved the larger units. But out of a sense of "honor," he refused to return the 106 aircraft on the *Béarn* to the United States.

Greenslade then stepped up the pressure. The US destroyers now patrolled routinely off Fort-de-France by night, and PBY Catalina flying boats, also based on St. Lucia, by day. Robert relented some more. He agreed to remove the Brewster Buffalo and Curtiss airplanes from the carrier and to put them ashore, where, presumably, the "elements" would "take their toll" on the craft. When the State Department sent a special delegate, Sam Reber, as well as Admiral John H. Hoover, Commander Caribbean Sea Frontier, to Martinique to press the American case, Robert collapsed completely. He agreed to immobilize his warships, and American crews removed engine parts as well as reduction gear pinions from the *Béarn* and shipped them to San Juan, Puerto Rico. And when it seemed that American forces might actually land on Martinique in the face of the grave U-boat threat, French flyers, under orders to "destroy the planes" in such an eventuality, chopped off the tail assemblies of numerous aircraft and set countless others on fire.[24] It was an inglorious end to Admiral Robert's once-proud fleet and air arm.

It was not until early March 1943 that the Americans finally received some reliable information about the state of affairs on the French island. On March 6, three young men from prominent island families made their way to Trinidad to join Free French forces. They reported that they were certain that the army forces on Martinique would fight if the island was invaded and the French naval ships scuttled. There was an acute food shortage on the island, which was having a profound effect on its politics by undermining remaining support for the Vichy government. In fact, they claimed, nearly all inhabitants had rejoiced at the news that the British and Americans had taken North Africa. When asked if there had been any contact between German submarines and Martinique with the exception of Hartenstein's entry into Fort-de-France harbor, all three were "very positive" that none had occurred. In light of the serious shortages of both food and fuel on the island, the notion that the Germans were using it as a supply base was "extremely foolish."[25]

The news should have come as no surprise. The embargo on food and fuel shipments to the French islands, proclaimed in November 1942, had caused massive unrest. French Guiana deserted the Vichy cause under American pressure in March 1943, and there were anti-Vichy riots on Guadeloupe in late April. That month, the Americans finally cut diplomatic relations with the island. Robert's position was becoming increasingly unstable. The US Army and Navy had already initiated plans for an invasion of the island using American troops from Guantánamo, Trinidad, and San Juan. The Trinidad Mobile Force, as it was called, would consist of the 33rd Infantry Regiment, accompanied by a regiment of engineers. In May 1943, these troops were concentrated in Trinidad and began to practice amphibious landings.[26] But the landing never happened. What the unpublished official history of US Army operations in the Caribbean in World War II termed "probably the most inflammable situation of the war in the West Indies" was resolved peacefully and the invasion "at the last moment became unnecessary."[27] Local resistance forced Robert to resign at the end of June; he was replaced by a representative of the Free French. The gold was recovered and the *Émile Bertin*, ironically, was refitted in New York and later put to sea as part of the revived Free French fleet.[28]

* * *

After leaving Martinique, Hartenstein resumed the hunt for ships. He headed west to search the waters between Trinidad and the Anegada Passage just east of the British Virgin Islands; and thereafter the Trinidad–Mona routes. He was champing at the bit. By now, Kernével would have had time to assess the disaster with the deck gun's tampion, and thus his failure to destroy the Lago refinery. As well, they would have heard from enemy reports that he had not spotted the *Henry Gibbons* inside San Nicolas harbor and that he had missed the *Hooiberg* just arriving from Maracaibo with a full load of crude. A reprimand was sure to result.

Shortly after midnight on February 21, Hartenstein fired off a terse after-action report to Vice Admiral Karl Dönitz at Kernével:

> Transfer [Borne] without incident. Day before yesterday in CM 55 empty freighter 2 misses Eto. Secure targeting data. Depth 3

> and 2 meters. Yesterday JK 65 2 hits. 3 misses against 4,000-ton stopped freighter. Could not observe sinking due to flying boat. 140 cbm.[29]

He could only hope that better times lay ahead.

In the evening of February 21, Hartenstein, on a course for the Trinidad–Mona sea lanes, stopped to reload the torpedo tubes. It was damned hard work. Not even the cool of the evening eased the torpedo gang's sweaty labors. Each of the seven-meter-long and 1.5-ton-heavy "eels" with their 300-kilogram warheads had to be hoisted out of its watertight compartment under the Prussian Scotch pine planks that covered the upper deck and ever so gently hoisted by block and tackle down into the bow of the boat, where it had to be placed on tracks and moved forward into the tubes. The torpedo gang then worked hours to load and arm the "eels." In the always terse words of the war diary: "Transferred 4 Atos from the upper deck into the boat. Duration: 2 hours, 40 minutes from the start of the operation until 4 Atos under deck."[30]

But this was just the start of heavy-duty operations that night. As the last of the torpedoes disappeared into the forward torpedo compartment, Hartenstein called the remaining technical staff up top to deal with the deck gun, whose muzzle had exploded at San Nicolas. Yet again, the boat's sparse war diary gives no sense of the ardor of the task. "Sawed off destroyed 10.5-cm gun muzzle's 53cm length with hacksaw. Duration: 7 hours 20 minutes." In fact, what Hartenstein and his crew accomplished quickly became legendary even in the daredevil "Volunteer Corps Dönitz."

The Old Man was an artillery expert. Ever since his cadet days at the Navy School in 1931, he had rotated through a series of peacetime artillery assignments and at the start of the war had been assigned artillery officer to destroyers. It was now time to put that training to work. Hartenstein had a good sense of humor. The deck gun was cumbersome and unwieldy, so he dubbed it the "lazy Susan."[31] Moreover, he liked to poke fun at convoluted German naval terminology, referring to the gun as "number-so-and-so-many-centimeter rapid fire cannon in submarine-mounting C 36."

More seriously, how to remove the splayed muzzle? "By acetylene burner or with the hacksaw?" he mused aloud. Puzzled faces. Was the Old Man suffering from heat stroke, Executive Officer Paul Just wondered? It had to be a joke. Surely, no one could seriously consider cutting through Krupp-hardened steel in the middle of the Caribbean – and expect the mutilated gun to fire with any degree of accuracy! Hartenstein merely shrugged his shoulders. “But if we get close enough to a steamer, we can hit it even with the shortened barrel.” Given that the burner would give off an intense bright light, he opted for the hacksaw. “How many on board?” the Old Man asked. The reply was 14. ”Well then, we will use the better half of those.” With tape and chalk, Hartenstein measured off the length of barrel to saw off. Two men began the job. After half an hour the blade was dull. Hartenstein measured: 4-mm into the barrel. Hour after hour, the men worked in shifts. Blade after blade gave out. Shortly after 5 a.m., the deformed muzzle fell onto the deck. Mission accomplished.

It was time to get out of sight of possible prowling aircraft. First Watch Officer Just, a former navy flyer, agreed. The next day brought home to Hartenstein the fact that enemy air assets were being daily enhanced. Twice he had to crash dive to avoid wheeled aircraft. When he finally spotted a lone tanker at 5:30 p.m. on February 23, it had air cover. Twice more, *U-156* had to seek safety by emergency dives. It was maddening work. The Kaleu turned the boat into the trade winds on “Slow” in order to preserve precious fuel. *U-156* was now 34 days out of Lorient.

At 7:30 p.m., Hartenstein resurfaced just west of the Dominica Channel.[32]

“Steamer in sight!” The moon sparkled on the waves. The target was making 12 knots and steering a zigzag course. After four hours, the moon dipped below the horizon. It was pitch black. Every time the Old Man made a run at the vessel, it veered off. “I suspect detecting [*U-156*] with sound locator.”[33] Finally, Hartenstein maneuvered *U-156* to a position 900 meters behind the target. It presented a sliver of a shadow. He fired a surface “Ato” torpedo, hoping against hope that it would hit the propellers. “Miss! Attack broken off.” Was it another defective firing pin, or had the depth mechanism failed again? It was like shooting with blanks. The radio room took it to have been the 5,127-ton British freighter “*Del Plata*.” It had cost *U-156* 14 hours.

Just after noon on February 24, the bridge watch spied two tankers in line-ahead on a southerly course. One was a small Aruban lake tanker, the other an ocean-going tanker. They were moving along smartly at 13 knots. “Both engines full ahead!” The chase was on. Hartenstein pursued the targets for the rest of the day and well into the night.[34] He was proud of the Jumbos. “Performance of the diesels most delightful: both engines at three-quarter speed 17 knots against Force 3 [seas] and, despite tropical cooling water, can maintain this for hours.”

Since the full moon was out early, around 7 p.m., he positioned *U-156* four kilometers ahead of the large tanker and submerged. At 8:18 p.m., an “Ato” torpedo leaped out of Bow Tube III. While the boatswain’s mate counted down the seconds, Hartenstein struck again, this time with another “Ato” from Tube IV. He ordered Chief Engineer Wilhelm Polchau to maintain *U-156* at periscope depth. No guessing what else might be up there. Then the first welcome news: “Heard detonation! 1 min. 43 sec.” More anxious seconds. Then, more welcome news: “Hit stern of ship between mast and engine! Thus first hit must have been amidships. Running time 1 min. 43 sec.” Through the periscope, he saw the tanker stop, flood the decks with lights, blow off steam, and settle into the sea.

Just then the Enigma machine lit up. A press report out of Lisbon confirmed the sinking of the 5,127-ton American freighter *Delplata*, en route from Buenos Aires to New Orleans with a general cargo, last Friday in the eastern Caribbean. An American airplane had spotted the wreck, called in a US Navy warship, and as a result 52 survivors had been safely landed in an unnamed port in the Antilles. Hartenstein was delighted. “That one goes to our credit from 20 [February].” Apparently, two of the five torpedoes he had fired at the pesky freighter that day had, in fact, found their target.

No time to gloat. After a ten-minute chase, he spied the small lake tanker, course 350 degrees, speed nine knots. It was in ballast. Hartenstein decided to cross its wake to the starboard side, forge ahead four kilometers, submerge, and repeat the attack. Just before midnight he was ready to press the kill. There were still two “Ato” torpedoes in the stern tubes. Again, the agonizing countdown. Again, silence. “Both Misses!” Then, after 40 seconds, a bright flame on the tanker’s stern. Perhaps one of the “Atos” had hit? “Joy premature,” the Old Man ruefully noted in the war diary. The tanker was firing at the head of the bubble trail of the G7a “eel.” All the while, it was turning away hard. One torpedo was left in the bow tubes; no need to save it for another day.

By now, the moon had dipped over the horizon. Hartenstein raced ahead of the tanker for a third time and submerged. He fired at the incredible distance of 1,800 meters. Time: 0:21 a.m. He immediately ordered a hard turn to starboard to avoid ramming the tanker, which was coming straight on. Again, the seconds ticked away. Silence. Then:

> Hit in the fore-ship! Running time: 1 min. 33 sec. Tanker sinks quickly. Stern out of the water. Lifeboats swung out. Fore-ship slips under. Tanker rises into the air and then falls away. 2 min. after hit! All torpedoes fired off!

God bless the last "eel," Hartenstein thought. Its victim was the 5,127-ton British steam tanker *La Carriere*, in ballast from New York to Trinidad. Fifteen of its crew of 41 died that night.

It was time to shape a course for Lorient, still a very long 3,000 miles away. In the distance, Hartenstein could see the lights of Puerto Rico. Mona Passage and the open Atlantic lay just beyond. Still, there was one piece of unfinished business: the sawed-off deck gun.[35] What if some easy target came into sight? The Old Man called the repair crew back up on deck at 1 a.m., February 25. Years of ballistics training now paid off. Hartenstein quickly calculated that the barrel had lost 40 kilograms (88 pounds) weight, and hence the breech tilted down toward the deck. He ordered two cast iron ballast weights each of 25 kilograms (55 pounds) to be removed from under the floor plates and brought up on deck. After arduously drilling two holes through each, the crew mounted them onto the barrel with long connecting rods and nuts to counterbalance the heavy breech. Still, it was jerry-rigged. Hartenstein had the ballasts and connecting rods welded onto the barrel.

Sailors held blankets to form a protective screen around the electric welder. Then it was time to submerge. The first rays of light were just breaking over the eastern horizon.

In the morning light of February 26, the Old Man decided to test the gun.

What would the new muzzle velocity and windage be? Would the gun's recoil mechanism still function? Would the two ballasts attached to the barrel hold under the jolt of firing? Hartenstein ordered the repair crew below deck. He then hooked up a line to the gun's trigger and from the bridge gave it a sharp pull. The 10.5-cm shell flew out of the barrel. A water column rose some 500 to 600 meters downrange. "Fired gun. Gun seems to be combat worthy. Windage unaltered. Recoil mechanism sufficient." He would later recall, "One just has to want it badly!"

The killer instinct in "Crazy Dog" refused to let go. He decided to scout the roadways of Aquadilla on the west coast of Puerto Rico, and then to slide past Arecibo on the northern shore as far as San Juan in the hope of encountering strays. After all, he still had the deck gun and more than 200 shells. And German naval intelligence had intercepted an Allied radio signal instructing merchantmen to hug the coasts of the islands as U-boats were operating in the central Caribbean. En route, the Enigma again lit up: the neutral press had reported the sinking of SS *La Carriere* off Puerto Rico the previous Wednesday. Hartenstein registered his "disappointment" over its tonnage (reported as 5,685) in the war diary.

At 4:35 a.m. on February 27, *U-156* stood off Silver Bank, north of Haiti. Just barely visible in the falling moon, Hartenstein spied the dark shadow that he had been pursuing for the better part of ten hours. He had the 10.5-cm ammunition brought up on deck by a human chain. Then he ordered "Hard-a-port" and brought the boat on a parallel course with the shadow. Range: 1,000 – 800 – 700 – 600 meters. Calm Sea. Moderate wind.

"Clear the decks. Prepare to fire artillery! Open fire with all guns!" Now the acting artillery officer, Hartenstein was in his element. The incendiary shells landed amidships, ripping apart side hull plates, while the smaller guns sprayed the hostile's bridge. It returned fire with its stern deck gun and then tried to send out an SSS signal, which *U-156*'s radio crew managed to jam. Soon, the bridge watch heard a loud explosion and saw bright flames shoot up into the darkness. The burning vessel began to list to port. All the while, Hartenstein pumped more shells into the wreck: 92 10.5-cm and 111 3.7-cm shells, of which 25 to 30 per cent found their target.

Suddenly, a brightly lit ship off on the horizon began to open fire on *U-156*. "Crazy Dog" was no fool. It would be suicide to engage what obviously was a hostile warship in an artillery duel with a sawed-off, jerry-rigged deck gun in the approaching daylight. Since the burning ship was swinging its lifeboats out, Hartenstein ordered "Cease Fire!" He gave the crew, gathered in four lifeboats, sailing instructions to the nearest land. As the ship slipped beneath the waves with a loud hissing noise, he ordered Lieutenant Just to shape a northeasterly course at full speed.

Hartenstein would later learn that the "Lazy Susan" had dispatched the 2,498-ton British steam freighter *Macgregor*, loaded with 2,621 tons of coal and bound from Tyne to Tampa. It was a nice birthday present for the 34-year-old Hartenstein. True to form, the Old Man allowed no reference to his birthday in the war diary on February 27.

The sinking of the *Macgregor* only whetted Hartenstein's appetite. Instead of continuing on to Lorient, he ordered the boat to make one more pass at the traffic coming out of the Mona Passage – or possibly even to scout the north coast of Puerto Rico. It was a wise choice. Just before 6 p.m., the bridge watch reported: "Tanker in sight!" It was fully loaded and running on a zigzag course. No deck guns visible. No escorts in sight. Hartenstein could not make out its grimy flag. Again, the arduous chase – nine hours this time. Again, a human chain brought the heavy shells up on deck. As far as the men were concerned, "Crazy Dog" was fully justifying their nickname for him.[36]

At 5:17 a.m., Hartenstein opened fire on the tanker. The first two shells slammed into the bridge. Range fell to 400 meters. The target's decks soon were enveloped with flames. But its captain threw the wheel hard-a-port. He was heading straight for *U-156*! In the excitement of the action, Hartenstein had not foreseen this clever move. Several thousand tons of flame and smoke were bearing down on the slender U-boat. The men on deck could feel the intense heat and smell the putrid black smoke of the tanker.

"Starboard engine full ahead! Port engine full reverse! Rudder hard-a-port!" But before hunter and prey could separate, the two collided in a screech of iron and a shower of smoke and fire. *U-156* heeled over to port, then righted itself again. The forward diving plane on the starboard side scraped against the burning hulk, sustaining considerable damage. It could not be repaired. Thankfully, there were no casualties among the gun crews up on deck.

As soon as the two antagonists ground past one another, Hartenstein ordered the guns to blaze away. The jerry-rigged ballast that he had attached to the deck gun flew off the barrel under the strain of rapid firing and collision. This notwithstanding, Hartenstein fired at the tanker at almost point-blank range. Later, he recorded the night's action in the war diary:

> Continued to fire. Expenditure: 58 rounds 10.5-cm, 304 rounds 3.7-cm, and 101 rounds 2-cm shells. Observed about 25–30 hits by the 10.5-cm and 200 hits by the 3.7-cm. Tanker brightly flaming amidships. 10.5-cm and 3.7-cm ammunition expended. Expect later sinking [of tanker].

The victim turned out to be a rich prize: the 7,017-ton American steam tanker *Oregon*, en route from Aruba to New York with a load of high-octane gasoline.

After setting a decoy course of northeast, Hartenstein at last shaped a course for Lorient. *U-156* was down to 101 cbm[37] fuel. Still, it had been a daredevil act: the B-18 bombers of No. 45 Squadron on Puerto Rico were within easy range of *U-156*, and he had risked all for another kill. But he still had on board 1,300 rounds of 2-cm anti-aircraft shells. To the disbelief of the crew, "Crazy Dog" was not yet content. Like a Weimaraner that has chased down and killed its first wounded deer, the scent of blood was in his nostrils.[38] He plotted anew:

> Plan: in case a freighter is encountered on the march home during the day, steam directly ahead of it, dive, observe if it is armed, surface at a distance of 500 meters at an angle of 100 degrees, suppress its stern gun with the 2-cm cannon, signal it with semaphore or radio: 'Stop and Surrender.' Sink with blasting charges.

The adrenaline slowly ebbed. Hartenstein returned to his professional, rational self. Late on March 2, he refused to attack a freighter with his 2-cm anti-aircraft guns. The next morning he chased another freighter but then saw that it had a heavy aft deck gun manned by four men in uniform. He broke off the chase. "No, this is not right. They will open fire before my antiaircraft crew is ready to fire. Abandon attack. Surface. Proceed on course 51 degrees."

Day after day, the "garbage tour" proceeded on its tedious course. The Old Man had a shower rigged in the engine room and ordered each man to wash off the sweat and grime of two months at sea – and to shave off his beard. As well, he had dress blues pressed. Shortly after 9 a.m. on March 17, *U-156*, flying six pennants from the extended periscope tubes, tied up alongside the hulk *Isére* in Lorient harbor. Precise as ever, Hartenstein made his final entry in the KTB: "58 days at sea, 10050 nautical miles. 3 tankers, 1 freighter sunk; 1 tanker, 1 freighter probable. 23632 tons."

It had been a highly successful first war patrol. Overall, the Neuland boats had destroyed 22 ships in ten days in the Caribbean; 17 had been tankers. In terms of surprise and impact, Operation New Land had outstripped the earlier Operation Paukenschlag assault on the US eastern seaboard.