

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

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“THE FERRET OF PORT OF SPAIN”

Werner Hartenstein’s *U-156* was the first boat to return from the Caribbean on March 17, 1942. He and his crew received a tumultuous welcome, with the band of 317th Infantry Regiment playing rousing marches and the naval female service, the *Blitzmädchen*, assembled near the *Isère*. Second Flotilla Commander Viktor Schütze was waiting as the sub tied up. “*U-156* back reporting from war patrol!” Hartenstein declared, throwing Schütze a snappy salute. “*Heil* to the crew of *U-156*!” The men roared out in unison: “*Heil* Herr Korvettenkapitän!”

At that moment, a black Mercedes rolled up to the pier. Out stepped Karl Dönitz – the “Great Lion” to the German submarine service. “Attention! Eyes Right!” The men, smartly turned out in their blue dress uniforms, snapped to attention. “At ease!” Dönitz and Schütze walked down the gangplank onto the deck of *U-156*. His eyes narrow slits and his thin lips pursed, Dönitz reviewed the assembled crew. He had a few words for each man. He stopped in front of Hartenstein and pinned the German Cross in Gold – mockingly dubbed “Hitler’s Fried Egg” because of its overly large round shape – onto the Kaleu’s coat. Then he had Hartenstein show him the deck gun with its temporary clamp still on. Well done! Only then did Hartenstein recognize the third narrow, gold “piston ring” above the broad gold bands on Dönitz’s jacket sleeves: he had been promoted to the rank of admiral three days earlier.

With two months’ wages tucked in their pockets, the men of *U-156* headed for some much-needed and well-deserved shore leave. A third would be assigned to new boats; another third would go on furlough; and the remainder would stay behind to supervise repairs on *U-156* for the next war patrol. Midshipman Max Fischer, who was about to turn 20, had



A crowd welcomes the return of *U-67* from a patrol. Source: Ken Macpherson Photographic Archives, Library and Archives at The Military Museums, Libraries and Cultural Resources, University of Calgary.

already been selected as a replacement for Lieutenant Dietrich von dem Borne. For rest and relaxation, the U-Boat Service had requisitioned two houses each in Carnac and Larmor-Plage for officers, and three large hotels in Carnac for the ratings.

Then it was off for the post-patrol banquet at Staff Headquarters – and mail call. Next came lunch, glorious lunch! Hot sausages, white bread, fresh vegetables, French desserts – and, of course, real Beck’s and Falstaff beer. The dining room soon became a blue-gray haze as the men lit up pipes and their favorite *Atikah*, *Memphis*, and *Gold Dollar* cigarettes. Later that night, it was off to the “Street of Movement,” where the action was. “Decadent” American jazz, French *chansons*, scents of perfume, and glorious *mesdemoiselles*. “Come in, sailor! Good music, *beaucoup* dance, good drink, *amour*.”¹ The Kriegsmarine had established special “houses” with “ladies of pleasure” in Lorient’s Rue de Sully for its U-boat crews; civilians

were not allowed. The “houses” were routinely inspected by medical personnel. After sex, each “lady of pleasure” had to hand her customer a special card that noted her name, date, and time of tryst for later “inspection” of the “client” by the medical authorities.²

That “inspection” was undertaken before the next war patrol during a mandatory one-week health cure at the Institute of U-Boat Diseases at Carnac, where medics meticulously searched the men for the “Luftwaffe antelopes” that they might have picked up from the *mesdemoiselles*.³ Syphilis and gonorrhea – which the Germans called “the French disease” – initially were treated with Albuclid tablets. If these brought no relief, then the doctors reverted to the older method of injecting permanganate of potash through a urethral syringe. And when all else failed, they applied the “Kollmann treatment,” using a metallic expandable instrument to dilate urethral strictures.⁴

Hartenstein, meanwhile, settled into the officers’ billet at the Hotel Majestik – and then checked in at the officers’ mess at the Hotel Beau Sejour. Wide French beds with clean white sheets were a welcome relief after two months in a 52-inch-long bunk with an artificial leather mattress. There was steaming hot food and rivers of vintage red wine – at a paltry 20 francs (or one Reichsmark) per bottle. He walked the beach at Carnac and reveled in the thunder of the surf. And there was a small château nearby for special encounters: “Officers Only!”

One final item of business: the after-action report. It was well known in the U-Boat Service that the “Great Lion” read every war diary after a patrol, so the Old Man had to be precise, yet careful, for much had gone wrong during Operation Neuland. Hartenstein began his report with the first-ever observation of conditions in the Caribbean. These waters were so translucent, he wrote, that even at full speed with a strong bow wave, one could clearly see the bow hydroplanes; and at periscope depth, the boat’s fore- and afterdeck appeared as a “gray shadow” through the periscope. Suggestions: deck and bridge had to be painted black; the light pine decking had to be replaced with dark, impregnated wood; and the conning tower had to be painted to resemble teak. And space had to be made available on deck to store more torpedoes, for all Neuland boats had returned due to lack of “eels,” not shortage of fuel.

Finally, Hartenstein turned to “lessons learned.” First, the next wave of boats desperately needed precise sailing schedules for individual ports and roads in the Caribbean. Second, they needed civilian airlines’ schedules to avoid accidental sightings in congested areas such as the waters around Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad. Third, they needed a manual on international maritime law, as every encounter raised new issues of legality. The boats also “desperately needed” some form of air conditioning. Aircraft had sometimes forced them to stay underwater for as long as 13 hours off steaming-hot Caribbean ports with temperatures in the boats rising to 40° Celsius and with unbearable humidity. Thirteen hours under water in the tropics resulted in “severe diminution of the crews’ efficiency.”⁵

As always, Dönitz carefully read *U-156*’s war diary and Hartenstein’s after-action report. After all, here was a senior group commander just returned from a first, potentially war-winning, operation. Initially, Dönitz had censured Hartenstein’s action off San Nicolas as too timid and evanescent; the skipper should have kept his eye on the prize, the tankers and not the refinery. But how could he argue with sheer tenacity and eventual success? He penned his evaluation:

Very well executed first operation of a commander with a new boat. Dash, aggressive spirit and calculated actions on the part of the commander brought the boat a very nice initial success, unfortunately impaired by inexplicable [torpedo] misses. It is regrettable that the artillery deployment against the oil refinery at Curaçao [*sic*] was thwarted by a misfire (firing with tampion in place). Later measures for renewed deployment were recognized.⁶

He summoned Hartenstein to the Villa Kerillon, and congratulated the Kaleu on the tankers and freighters torpedoed, on the repair of the deck gun, and on his attempt to shell the “Esso” refinery. Later that night, at his favorite restaurant, Le Moulin de Rosmadic à Pont-Aven, Dönitz mused about “Crazy Dog” Hartenstein. He liked the wiry, eagle-beaked commander and thought him “an excellent officer, tough in battle and humane when it was over.”⁷ He would need Hartenstein to head a second wave of assault boats in the Caribbean.

* * *

Hartenstein was not the only one of the five Neuland captains to chalk up an impressive list of kills. While Hartenstein in *U-156*, Rosenstiel in *U-502*, and Müller-Stöckheim in *U-67* had focused mainly on the waters around the Netherlands Antilles, Kapitänleutnant Albrecht Achilles in *U-161* had tackled the difficult job of attacking shipping in the Gulf of Paria. Achilles arrived on station off Trinidad at 6 p.m.⁸ on February 16, 1942. “Trinidad in sight.”⁹ For much of the next day he circumnavigated the island. Both Achilles and Executive Officer Werner Bender took careful notes of its many bays and peninsulas, its sand banks and mud flats, and its air and surface defenses. It brought back memories of when both men had sailed these waters for the Hamburg-Amerika Line.

* * *

Trinidad’s northern and southern peninsulas reach out like “arms” due west toward Venezuela, almost in the shape of a “reverse C.” Between the two “arms” and the coast of Venezuela lies the Gulf of Paria, a shallow body of water no deeper than 275 meters (900 feet) with an overall area of 7,800 square kilometers. The Gulf has two entrances. The southern is the Boca de la Serpiente (the serpent’s mouth) separating the southern tip of Trinidad from the northern coast of Venezuela. The strait is less than 20 kilometers wide at its narrowest point. The northern is the Bocas del Dragon (the dragon’s mouth), about 25 kilometers wide. Vessels entering the Bocas del Dragon had to transit one of four channels interspersed with small islands; most used the largest, the Boca Grande – the main shipping channel to the northwest coast of Trinidad and its major harbor and capital, Port of Spain. The Boca Grande and the other channels were rock strewn and noted for their strong currents. Most ships transiting the Dragon’s Mouth did so slowly and carefully. By February 1942, most of the islands in the Bocas had been fortified with British or American coastal guns, some of them newly arrived US-built 155-mm “Long Toms.” About halfway down the west coast of Trinidad was the largest oil refinery in the British Empire – Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd. at Pointe-à-Pierre,

outputting 21 million barrels in 1941.¹⁰ It was protected by a mere brace of 6-inch coastal guns. Port of Spain was the home of a British naval station, HMS Benbow, with a single unit of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve commanding a few yachts and minesweepers.

The defenses of Chaguaramas, near the western tip of the northern arm of Trinidad, were more formidable. The port had been included in the September 1940 Anglo-American “destroyers-for-bases” deal, and by May 1941 was home to US 11th Infantry Regiment as well as several units of 252nd Coastal Artillery Regiment. Six PBY5 Catalina flying boats were scheduled to be based at Chaguaramas, once its silt-laden harbor had been dredged. For the time being, the US Navy berthed two 1,000-ton World War I “flush-deck” destroyers, the USS *Barnley* and the USS *Blakeley*, at Chaguaramas. Built in 1918, they mounted four 4-inch guns but had terrible “sea legs” owing to their slender beam, great length, and high superstructure.¹¹

Further inland, the US Army Air Forces had stationed squadrons of twin-engine Douglas B-18 “Bolo” bombers of 1st Bombardment Group at Waller Field in the Fort Reid complex near San Rafael on the Caroni plains. It had also selected Trinidad’s civilian Piarco Field, 20 kilometers south-southeast of Port of Spain, as the training site for these units. While the effort was impressive on paper, American “disorganization was so complete” that it would take seven months before the patrol planes and bombers were fully operational.¹² Moreover, there was a confused command structure: President Franklin D. Roosevelt had designated the Navy as the service with overall responsibility for the defense of the central and eastern Caribbean but had also chosen the Army to defend the Panama Canal Zone and its approaches. But most of the fighting forces in Puerto Rico, the Lesser Antilles, the Leeward Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, the Netherlands Antilles, and Jamaica were army personnel (with Dutch, British and Canadian troops also present) while the great majority of the aircraft were Army Air Forces. General Henry C. Pratt, US Army, commanded the overall Trinidad Sector; Captain S. P. Oineder the US Naval Air Station; and Lieutenant Colonel Waddington of the Army Air Forces Waller Field. Admiral Sir Michael Hodges, Royal Navy, outranked all three Americans; and above him towered the difficult British Governor, Sir Hubert Young, who despised anything “American.”

Achilles and Bender were eager to exploit the situation. On February 16, Kernével informed *U-161*: “Achilles Free to Attack!” Hartenstein had already assaulted Aruba, and so there was no reason to hold off. Achilles monitored the sea and air traffic while he planned his approach through the Dragon’s Mouth. Running on the surface, he guided *U-161* safely through the Boca Grande at 3 a.m. on February 18, in good part thanks to well-lit navigation buoys and shore lights. A British-laid “antisubmarine loop” under the sea detected the intruder, and soon the bridge watch heard the drone of aircraft overhead – B-18 bombers out of Waller Field sent to investigate the contact – along with a few patrol boats. Incredibly, few of Trinidad’s defenders had heard anything at all about the attacks around Aruba and north of Lake Maracaibo. They were far from alert.

At 10:34 a.m., Achilles set *U-161* down on the bottom at 60 meters off Chaguaramas under the very noses of the patrol craft and bombers. He did not know it at the time, but the two American destroyers *Blakeley* and *Barney* had left their moorings to charge westward toward Curaçao. The antisubmarine alert was called off in mid-afternoon, but Achilles chose to stay on the bottom until dark, and then surface to charge the batteries. Then, and only then, would he attack the freighters riding at anchor in Port of Spain. He made a mental note not to approach the shore at depths less than 15 meters for fear the torpedoes would not run true, since they first dove upon leaving the tubes, then rose to their preset depth. “Intention: Before operating in the entire area, will drive into the harbor [Port of Spain] since unnoticed until now and defenses hardly anticipating this.”¹³

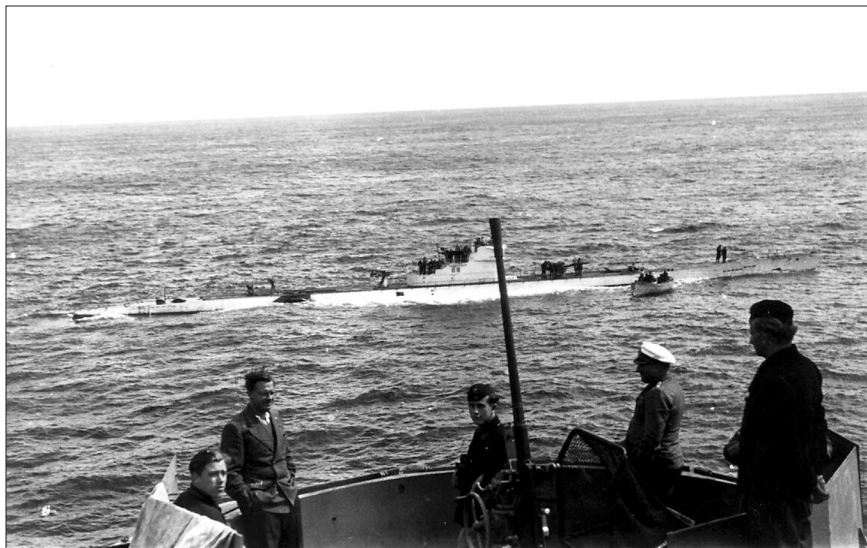
Achilles brought *U-161* to the surface at 7:32 p.m. The hatch was cracked and cool evening air rushed into the conning tower. Achilles sprang up through the narrow opening, followed by the rest of the bridge watch. Bender stayed below. The sea was calm. Search lights from Chacachacare Island played on the waters. A few clouds danced overhead. An aircraft flew by. The U-boat went completely unnoticed. There were targets in the roadstead off Port of Spain. “Freighters are well defined before the well-lit town,” Achilles noted in the KTB.¹⁴ All were brightly lit, oblivious to the lurking danger. “Ajax” could clearly make out vintage



Albrecht Achilles. "Ajax" Achilles first served on the German battleship *Gneisenau* and joined the submarine forces in April 1940. On six patrols with *U-161* he destroyed 14 Allied ships of 104,664 tons, and damaged the British light cruiser *Phoebe*. His actions off St. Lucia earned him the nickname "ferret" for his ability to destroy enemy vessels in their ports. He died on 27 September 1943 when *U-161* was sunk with all hands off Bahia, Brazil. Source: Deutsches U-Boot-Museum, Cuxhaven-Altenbruch, Germany.

American cars moving slowly along the shore as well as fishing boats bobbing up and down in port. The piers were littered with tarred fishing crates and nets. The watch took in the bewildering tropical scents: the sweet smells of damp earth and tree bark, of warehoused sugar and nutmeg; the fragrant scent of orchid and cocoa trees as well as oleander; but also the sulfurous stench of mangrove swamps, tar pits, and cesspits.

Achilles was ready. To guard against an unexpected attack, he positioned the boat with its bow facing out into the Gulf of Paria for a quick escape. Range: 3,700 meters. Sea: calm. Time: 11:32 p.m., February 18. Bender fired both stern tubes. After four minutes, "Hit freighter amidships. 20 m[eter]-high water column, thereafter thick, dark cloud of smoke." The 7,460-ton *Mokihana*, en route from Baltimore to Suez with general cargo, heeled over and began to settle almost immediately. Twenty-eight seconds



U-161. Another large Type IXC boat, *U-161* under Kapitänleutnant Albrecht Achilles operated most dramatically off St. Lucia, Caribbean; it was destroyed by depth charges from a US *Mariner* aircraft near Bahia, Brazil, in September 1943. Source: Deutsches U-Boot-Museum, Cuxhaven-Altenbruch, Germany.

later, a second detonation. “Hit freighter amidships, very high fire column, parts of the superstructure fly into the air.” The bow rose above the sea, the target “broken apart amidships.”¹⁵ It was the 6,900-ton tanker *British Consul*, bound for the United Kingdom with a load of fuel oil. The burning vessels lit up Port of Spain – as well as *U-161*.

“Both engines full ahead!” *U-161* sliced into the Gulf of Paria. Achilles ordered a test dive. The bow almost immediately sank into the soft mud of the harbor floor. With engines in full reverse, the sub was freed and raced toward the Bocas on the surface. “High-speed escape in the direction of Chacachacare Island!” Achilles noted for the KTB. Flare bombs lit up the Boca de Navios. “Emergency Dive!” But the strong current prevented progress with the electric motors. “Prepare to surface!” Achilles opted to drive *U-161* west toward neutral Venezuela “to seek protection from searchlights.” Then, in the midst of the confusion caused by his attack, he would attempt a daring escape northward, through the Bocas, on the surface.

U-161 had scored a complete surprise and plunged Port of Spain into chaos.

Coastal defense gunners fired their weapons off without ever spotting a target. Patrol boats raced out of Chaguaramas, without any idea of what they were looking for. The island's overburdened telephone system broke down. Air raid sirens wailed. Someone cut off the city's power supply, cutting radio communications and throwing military installations into utter darkness. Antisubmarine personnel at HMS Benbow had to work by flashlight.¹⁶

How to make good the escape through the treacherous Dragon's Mouth? Achilles decided that audacity was his best chance.¹⁷ He kept *U-161* on the surface, reduced his speed, trimmed the boat to where the decks were just awash, set only a few running lights, and mixed in with a small flotilla of fishing boats and US Navy and Royal Navy launches. No one would suspect such cheek. He passed the guns of the Royal Artillery sited 300 feet up on Caspar Grande Island, so close to shore that they could not be depressed sufficiently to fire at him – even if its gunners had spotted the U-boat. There remained a last hurdle: eight US 155-mm coastal defense guns on Chacachacare Island. Beyond lay open sea. Achilles stuck to his daring plan and coolly ran for three miles under the gunners' noses. Not a shot was fired at *U-161*. Its crew took full notice of their skipper. At home, the German propaganda machine celebrated Achilles as “the ferret of Port of Spain.”

Achilles' bold penetration of the Gulf of Paria has been likened to the earlier feat of Günther Prien, who on October 14, 1939, had slipped his *U-47* into the closely guarded British fleet anchorage Scapa Flow and had sunk the 29,150-ton battleship HMS *Royal Oak*. Achilles' audacity was a key factor in his success, but so were the unpreparedness and the lack of training of the defenders.¹⁸ In effect, his and Hartenstein's successes symbolized the battle for the Caribbean at this stage of the war – U-boats with daring commanders and a highly flexible command structure challenging the poorly organized, untrained and under-equipped Allies and creating great slaughter as a result.

Following their foray into the Gulf of Paria, Achilles and Bender hatched yet another daring scheme: why not return to Trinidad and

resume the hunt off its northwest peninsula? Surely, no one would expect the intruder to return so soon after its miraculous escape.

They were quickly rewarded.¹⁹ At 7:20 a.m. on February 21, the sounding room reported: "Screw noises at 350 degrees. Tanker, 3000 tons." Achilles closed range. He decided to repeat his first attack and fire from the stern tubes. Tube V: "Miss!" He had overestimated the tanker's speed and underestimated the distance to target. Tube VI. "Miss!" The target had suddenly veered off to port. Had its captain seen the U-boat? Or the track of the "eel"? "Torpedo probably passed in front of it," Achilles dryly recorded in the war diary. He ordered a new plot for a bow shot. But then the target veered off course again. By this time, hostile aircraft circled above the prey and two surface escorts approached at high speed. There was nothing to do but to head away from the scene of this misadventure submerged.

Just after 3 p.m., the hydrophone operator reported a contact at 345 degrees, northwest of the Boca Grande. "Ajax" brought *U-161* to periscope depth. "Tanker, 5000 tons. No neutrality marking. Flag extremely small, hard to make out, probably American." The unsuspecting target was approaching *U-161* at high speed. Achilles submerged and for an hour awaited its arrival. Range: 910 meters. Achilles fired a double spread. After 59 seconds, "Hit amidships. High column of water, as high as the masts." After 69 seconds, "Hit just ahead of the funnel. Likewise, high column of water." The first torpedo blew out the plates on the starboard side of the target, ripped through the inner bulkheads, and sliced open the plates on the port side. The second blew the stern off, taking rudder and propeller away with it. The tanker began to list heavily to starboard and to go down by the stern. But it did not sink. Its savvy skipper used his ballast pumps to shift water to the port holding tanks and thus managed to right his ship. Achilles maneuvered to deliver the *coup de grâce*.

"*Fliebo!*"²⁰ The bastard had signaled his position and predicament by "code SSS" to Port of Spain. A Royal Navy Fairey Albacore bomber flying out of Piarco Field had delivered two near-lethal hundred-pound bombs. "Emergency Dive!" Achilles took *U-161* down to 50 meters. Not a sound in the boat. The men took off their shoes; those off duty climbed into the bunks. At 4:23 p.m., Achilles brought *U-161* up to periscope depth. He spotted the wreck. In the fading sun he noticed three hostile aircraft

directly overhead: two American B-18s from Waller Field had joined the hunt. All three had clearly made out the U-boat's dark shadow in the translucent waters.

"*Fliebos!*" Now all three enemy flyers were depth-charging him. Again, the Old Man took the boat down to 50 meters. Chief Engineer Heinrich Klaassens calmly reported, "No damage." *U-161* came up to periscope depth. For the crew, this was insanity. "Tanker must be brought under water, in any event," Achilles barked out. If not, it could probably be towed into Port of Spain. Given the pervasive air cover, Achilles decided to submerge and to await nightfall. At 6:49 p.m., he deemed the moment right and returned to periscope depth. For the next hour, he maneuvered into position. Range: a mere 370 meters. "Hit, funnel. Tanker sinks very quickly by the stern!" The crew managed to get the lifeboats out of the davits, and Achilles could clearly make them out in a long, white line. "Emergency Stations!" The flaming hulk seemed to be coming right at *U-161*, even though its stern had been blasted away. "Bow towers high out of the water in front of the periscope." Was it drifting with the current? There was not a moment to lose. "Dive! Dive! 15 meters. Hard turn!"

It had been a close call. Too close, in fact. Upon surfacing, Achilles found himself in a sea of fuel oil. He ordered a course in the general direction of the Mona Passage, southeast of Dominica. It was high time to leave the Trinidad sector – and to recharge the almost depleted batteries, to ventilate the boat, and to reload the bow tubes. His third victim had been the 8,207-ton British tanker *Circle Shell*, in ballast from the River Clyde to Curaçao, but diverted to Trinidad. It lost a single sailor in the action.

Shortly before midnight on February 23, *U-161*, standing about 250 miles west of the Martinique Passage, came across a fourth target. Since it was dark, Achilles ordered a surface attack. Range: 2,600 meters. He fired. After two minutes and six seconds, the torpedo slammed into the shadow's fore-ship. It ground to a halt and began to go down by the bow. It was furiously signaling "Freighter 'Lihue' sends U-boat warning," followed by "SOS I am hit sinking." Achilles was irate. He was not about to expend another "eel" on the cripple – he had only eight left – and yet it was going down much too slowly for his liking.

“Clear the decks! Prepare to fire artillery!” *U-161* broke the surface at 0:59 a.m. A human chain conveyed the heavy shells up on deck. Second Watch Officer Götz Roth opened fire with the 10.5-cm deck gun. The prey immediately replied with its 3-inch cannon and several machine guns. A few shells splashed into the water near *U-161*. Too close for comfort. “Alarm! Dive!” Achilles tracked the wreck, which had gotten up steam again, over the hydrophone set. At 1:24 a.m., he resurfaced. Roth’s artillery crew blazed away at it again with the deck gun, setting its entire length on fire. Still, it refused to sink. Livid by now, Achilles maneuvered to deliver the *coup de grâce*. But the freighter’s wily skipper continued to zigzag, and then put his wheel over hard to ram *U-161*. “Angle 0, distance 1500 meters.”

The angle of the shot was more than 90 degrees – too risky – and so Achilles took the boat down, just to be safe. At 5:10 a.m., he resurfaced. “No sight of the freighter.” He shaped a course for where he estimated it might have gone. “6:28 a.m. Freighter again in sight.” By now, the sun was breaking over the horizon. Surely, hostile airplanes would shortly appear. He broke off his third plot.

“Dive!” Doggedly, he followed the target, hoping to deliver a final submerged attack. He was like a terrier seeking to hunt its prey to ground. He resurfaced. For four hours, the freighter continued to zigzag at 8 knots. All the while, it radioed its position and situation as well as appeals for help. Achilles plowed ahead. It was now noon, February 23. He took *U-161* down for a submerged attack. Range: 5,000 meters. The target’s bow was down three meters. Achilles fired from Tube VI.

“Miss.” He closed the range to deploy the deck gun. “Freighter looks abandoned, but I do not trust it.” He broke off the surface plot.

“New approach submerged.” Achilles decided on a double bow shot to kill this pesky adversary. Both “eels” missed the target. “Freighter must have been listening for the torpedoes.” Achilles lost all composure. He plotted and ran four more underwater approaches. To no avail. “Freighter always lies at dead stop, then shortly before I reach firing position turns away hard toward the boat.” He vowed not to expend another torpedo unless guaranteed success. “Freighter must be sounding the approach of the boat, even though I undertook the last two runs at great distance and at slow speed.”

“Alarm! Aircraft approaching boat!” Achilles ordered “Emergency Dive! A-20.” *U-161* crept along submerged and silent at 60 meters until 4:20 p.m., when the starboard hydrophone operator reported “great noise” dead ahead. “Ajax” brought the boat up to periscope depth. Behind and off the port side, he could make out the target – and two airplanes circling above it. There was also a small tanker some five kilometers behind the cripple.

Achilles ordered the boat to level off at 30 meters. The starboard hydrophone continued to pick up “noises.” At 4:40 p.m., the men in *U-161* heard “a weak detonation and following echo.” Achilles guessed that some “metal object” must have struck the outer fuel bunker and “clanked” along the length of the U-boat. He took *U-161* down to 50 meters. A second detonation. He ordered Klaassens to take the craft deep, 110 meters. “Third detonation, weaker and higher up.” Was the enemy dropping depth charges? “Suspect that the freighter is a U-boat trap. Wants to maintain contact with the boat until escorts arrive.”

There was no sense in further pursuit. “I let the freighter go since I cannot catch him submerged and since [*U-161*] can be seen on the surface due to the bright moon.” And there was another reason: “Absolutely must recharge batteries.” The plucky freighter, the Matson Navigation Line 7,000-ton *Lihue*, bound from New York to Suez with a load of general cargo, would sink two days later. Its crew of 37 was rescued by the tanker *British Governor*. Its master, W. G. Leithead, brazenly reported that he had sunk a German sub.

U-161 returned to its original northwest course on February 25 and headed for the waters between Trinidad and the Mona Passage. The bridge watch finally broke the seal of the hatch and glorious fresh, cool air rushed into the boat. The men were delighted. They had undergone 22 hours of harrowing plotting, attacking, firing, diving, surfacing, and then repeating the cycle over and over – no fewer than nine times in all – since first spotting the *Lihue* after midnight on February 23. The boat was a cesspool, the diesel buckets set out for the men overflowing with urine and excrement. The temperature inside the boat had reached 40° Celsius; the humidity almost 100 per cent. The men were white as sheets, their skins blotted and lacerated with sweat, diesel oil, and acid that had leaked from the batteries. In small groups, the Old Man allowed them up on deck to

suck much needed air into their scorched lungs. Many had reached the limits of their physical and psychological capacities.

But they were immediately reminded that this was a war patrol. Through a dark haze the bridge watch spied a lone freighter at 230 degrees; then “suddenly a second freighter coming out of the mist.” The two hostiles converged, then one shot off at a sharp angle. Achilles followed the remaining freighter. At 8:42 a.m., he took *U-161* down for a submerged attack. After an hour of blind pursuit, he was ready to pounce. Time: 9:58 a.m. Range: 900 meters. He fired a double bow shot. After 58 seconds the hydrophone operator reported that the sounds of the torpedo and the target had “merged.” Another “Miss!” Achilles had set the “eels” to run at three meters, “too deep” for the half-laden freighter.

Achilles pursued the target for nearly two hours, hoping for a night surface attack. When he came back up, “Ajax” spied not only the hostile, but also a periscope at 800 meters. “Alarm! Dive!” He could not risk a torpedo shot with another U-boat in the vicinity. “Perhaps it is Hartenstein in *U-156*.” But Achilles could not catch up to his prey.

Shortly before 9 a.m. on February 26, the bridge watch cried out, “Alarm! Aircraft at 37 degrees! Range 7000 meters!” It was a B-18 out of Waller Field, coming straight for *U-161*. The bomber was undoubtedly equipped with one of the new Anti-Surface Vessel (ASV) radars. In general, at that early stage of the Caribbean campaigns, B-18s and other American medium bombers such as the A-20s were armed with only machine guns and small 300-lb depth bombs; few American pilots had any idea at all as to how to attack a submarine. Achilles immediately ordered “Emergency Dive!” to 50 meters. “3 detonations (probably Wabo).” The last depth bomb severely rocked the boat amidships. The hull groaned and creaked. Glass and china shattered. Buckets rolled around the floor. The men were frozen in their tracks. “Chief! Damage Report!” Achilles screamed. Klaassens’ report was a litany of woe. “Depth pressure gauge out of service, including back-up pressure gauge and Papenberg.²¹ All glass water-leveling gauges sprung. Lights out in many compartments. Glass fuel-level gauges for the engine-oil reservoir burst. Hence, diesel oil in the lubricating oil collecting tank.”

The Old Man took stock of his men. “The crew’s composure good. Exceptions were quickly dealt with.” Obviously, some of the younger and

less experienced hands had cracked under the strain of staring death in the face. The enemy above was daily growing bolder.

Achilles thought about heading for Grenada to recharge the batteries and to reload the bow tubes, but the strong presence of enemy patrol planes convinced him instead to shape course due west, for Branquilla Island off neutral Venezuela. On the way, Klaassens and the technical crew repaired the gauges as best they could and drained the diesel from the lubricating oil collecting tank. It was hot, sweaty work. Later, Bender supervised the transfer of four torpedoes from under the upper deck plates into the bow torpedo room. More hot, sweaty work. *U-161* then retraced its steps due east, headed for St. Lucia in the Windward Islands. Achilles hoped to intercept oil tankers heading north from Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad. A week had gone by since the attack by the B-18.

“Ajax” did not have to wait long. At 9:13 a.m. on March 7, the watch spied a ship about 40 miles off St. Vincent Island. Achilles drove the *Jumbos* hard and positioned the boat for a submerged attack. Time: 11:59 p.m. Range: 1,500 meters. The first “eel” hit after 73 seconds. “Detonation. Boat is undercut.” The second followed 15 seconds later. “High detonation column with several smaller explosions.” Achilles could not resist a closer look through the periscope. “Freighter steams in circles, its engines still running. Boats have been lowered into the water but are only partly occupied.” The twin explosions had rocked *U-161*, even though it was more than a mile away. The thing was big, damned big. It required another shot. After 34 seconds, the torpedo slammed into the wreck’s side just abaft the funnel. Again, Achilles could not let go of the periscope. “High detonation column. Several successive strong explosions. Vessel sinks by the stern after 3 minutes.”²² It had flown no flag and shown no other identification markings. As it sank, it dragged three of the four lifeboats down with it. For several minutes, the men in *U-161* could hear underwater explosions. Some feared renewed depth-charge attacks. Achilles estimated the hostile at 6,000 tons. Given the tremendous after-hit explosions, it must have carried ammunition, perhaps dynamite.

He was wrong on both counts. He had torpedoed the 9,755-ton Canadian tanker *Uniwaleco*, carrying a full load of 8,800 tons of refined gasoline from Curaçao to Freetown. Thirteen of its crew of 51 lost their lives, mostly when the wreck sucked down the lifeboats. It would later turn

out that “Ajax” had torpedoed the second-largest tanker bagged during Operation Neuland. The men in *U-161* were relieved when the *Unirwaleco* finally slammed into the seabed and the explosions in its holds ceased.

Achilles took the boat down to assess his situation. Klaassens reported that they had just slightly more than 100 cbm of fuel oil, and most of that would be needed for the nearly 4,000 miles back to Lorient. There were three “eels” left on board. What a shame to take them back to France.

Achilles brought the boat back up to the surface. *U-161* was on a course due east. Achilles and Bender pondered their options. A turn south toward Aruba or Curaçao, much less Trinidad, was out of the question due to the critical fuel situation. For the same reason, so was a sortie north to Mona Passage. As they brainstormed, a dark shadow appeared in the distance: St. Lucia. Its shores seemed to be totally blacked out. Welcome warm rain showers pelted the skipper, his executive officer, and the four-man bridge watch.

Achilles and Bender went below and for hours continued to mull over their options. Soon, they were just off St. Lucia’s coast. Bender finally broke the impasse. He had sailed these waters before the war and thus knew the general layout of the island and its ports. Why not go out in a blaze of glory by repeating February 18’s cavalry charge into Port of Spain and Chaguaramas? Capital idea! Achilles and Bender raced down into the *Zentrale* to study the sea charts of St. Lucia. All they had for Castries, its major port, was a dated commercial sailing chart. “Intention,” Achilles quickly scribbled in the war diary, “lie off during the day; by night approach St. Lucia anew; and, if possible, force entry into Port Castries.” St. Lucia was about to go to war.

