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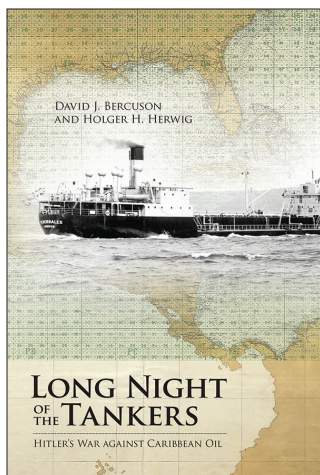
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## LONG NIGHT OF THE TANKERS: HITLER'S WAR AGAINST CARIBBEAN OIL

David J. Bercuson and Holger H. Herwig

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## WAR COMES TO ST. LUCIA

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The mango-shaped island of St. Lucia, once thought to have been visited by Christopher Columbus on his fourth voyage in December 1502, is a lush, green jewel set in a turquoise and blue sea. Its interior is rough and precipitous. Its mountains climb steeply from the sea, their summits often shrouded in mist. Two in particular, the Gros Piton (798 meters) and the Petit Piton (750 meters), rise from their base at a sharp 60-degree angle, thus resembling immense, lush, volcanic pyramids. Since the days of Columbus, mariners have used them as reference points. For more than a century, the British and French clashed no fewer than 14 times for possession of the island before it finally passed into British hands in 1814.

The United States presence on St. Lucia began with the “destroyers-for-bases” deal in September 1940. Washington considered St. Lucia vital for the defense of the Panama Canal, a sort of fixed aircraft carrier. Planes based there would be able to watch over the eastern entrances to the Caribbean – especially the St. Vincent, St. Lucia, and Martinique Passages – and defend the Leeward and Windward Islands. Short-range craft flying between Puerto Rico and Trinidad could stop at St. Lucia to refuel. The United States chose four locations for army bases and airfields. The largest was at Vieux Fort on the southern tip of St. Lucia, where Minder Construction Corporation of Chicago, using molasses as a surfacing agent, was just putting the finishing touches to two 5,000-foot runways at Beane Field (today Hewanorra International Airport) in March 1942. Vieux Fort was already well guarded – by the 120-meter-high Mule à Chique headland and by Beane Field’s fleet of warplanes, well-camouflaged behind horseshoe-shaped earthen mounds that served as hangars. It was some ten miles (as the crow flies) away from the main port and capital of Castries, the only viable entry point for all US men and

equipment sent to St. Lucia. A small naval air station, home to 18 PBV flying boats, was established on Gros Islet just north of Castries. Another, much smaller airfield was built on the outskirts of Castries (today George F. L. Charles Airport). Before the Americans arrived, Castries had been connected to the rest of the island by a network of poorly surfaced, narrow roads unsuitable for any sort of heavy equipment. The roads had been improved, but in March 1942 the best way to get from one coast to the other was still by sea.

Originally called Carenage (“safe anchorage”), Castries had been renamed in 1785 to honor a German in the service of France, Charles Eugène Gabriel, Marquis de Castries. Much like Willemstad on Curaçao, it was virtually impregnable.<sup>1</sup> The small Ville Bay harbor is strewn with menacing rock formations and sand bars. Its entrance is only 200 meters wide, and it is almost land-locked by two headlands: D’Estrées Point to the north and the equally treacherous La Toc Point and Tapion Rock to the south. Its waters are but 10 to 15 meters deep. In 1942 the twisted inner navigable channel was guarded by massive Fort Charlotte on Morne Fortune, a fortress with a commanding sweep of the bay. It would be suicide for a 76-meter-long U-boat to enter Castries harbor. This, of course, was just the sort of challenge that Albrecht Achilles and his Executive Officer, Werner Bender, loved. When apprised of the Old Man’s intentions to penetrate the harbor and attack ships at anchor therein, the men nicknamed Castries Harbor “Devil’s Bay.”

By 1 a.m.<sup>2</sup> on March 8, *U-161* was approaching St. Lucia. Achilles spied a freighter heading for Castries and shadowed it for hours.<sup>3</sup> At 2:15 p.m., he found another unescorted freighter, but it was too close to land to pursue. Four hours later, *U-161* stood two miles off the harbor entrance. Nightfall was imminent. Achilles ordered the boat to surface. The hatch was cracked. The bridge watch joyfully took in the intoxicating smell of anthurium, bougainvillea, hibiscus, frangipani, and beach morning glory. Achilles drove *U-161* ever so slowly up to the gap between D’Estrées and La Toc points, taking Atlas-echo soundings. Second Watch Officer Götz Roth, who in 1939 had entered Castries with the training ship *Gorch Fock*, was on the bridge to assist with navigation.<sup>4</sup> There were no coastal artillery batteries visible, Achilles correctly surmised, “perhaps merely a machine gun on either headland.” At one point, *U-161* softly scraped along a sand

bank. Around 9:45 p.m., the watch made out the broad contours of Castries. The city was blacked out, but by the light of several lamps burning on the piers the watch detected a shadow. Must be the freighter they had spotted earlier that day. Luck: the Americans, anxious to unload the freighter, had left the pier lights of Northern Wharf on. More luck: there was not just one ship at the wharf, but two others anchored in Ville Bay. A small flotilla of lighters with lanterns lit was transporting cargo from ship to shore. An hour before first light, Achilles spied what he called “Consolidated” and “Marlin” flying boats out of the US Naval Air Station at Gros Islet circling overhead. With little darkness left, he decided against risking a cavalry charge and took *U-161* back out to sea. He would return either at last light or under cover of darkness to deliver his attack.

\* \* \*

St. Lucia’s residents were happily unaware of the danger lurking off their coast. The war in Europe was an ocean away. That weekend, Clarke’s Theatre in Castries had run a twin bill: Boris Karloff in *Before I Hang* and George O’Brien in *Racketeers of the Range*. Bob’s Liquor Store had placed advertisements in *The West Indian Crusader* announcing a special cache of “Spirit of Love ... it’s a rum that can’t be duplicated.” The Department of Agriculture had let it be known that truckloads of cabbage, carrots, lima beans, potatoes, turnips, and Kentucky Wonder Pole Beans had just arrived at the local markets.<sup>5</sup> Not to be outdone, *The Voice of Saint Lucia* ran ads for Canadian Healing Oil and Eno’s Fruit Salts, as well as others promising “Keating’s Kills bugs, fleas, moths, beetles” and “Vic-Tabs Restores Manhood & Vitality.”<sup>6</sup> While Achilles planned his attack, the BBC entertained St. Lucians with music from the “International Staff Band Salvation Army” and with news from “Britain Speaks” and “Political Commentary.”

No one gave much thought to the harbor. It was safe. About a mile off its entrance, the launch *Welcome* maintained a vigilant sea patrol. On the heights of D’Estrées Point, an equally vigilant crew manned the Vigie Lighthouse, while Meadows Battery guarded the north side of the harbor entrance with a Nordenfelt Maxim 303 machine gun. Across the narrow harbor entrance on the southern shore, another battery stood guard at

Tapion Rock with a Lewis Light machine gun. Both posts were manned with local police constabulary. Blackout operations were in effect for the town of Castries.

\* \* \*

Undaunted, Achilles approached Castries in the late afternoon of March 9. He decided against penetrating the harbor semi-submerged at dusk due to its shallow waters. At 8:03 p.m., he surfaced. Ever so slowly and running on the surface, *U-161* approached Castries' outer channel. There was no moon, Achilles noted, but the sky was "moderately clear." Bender and Roth once again assisted in navigation. By 10 p.m., *U-161* was between the two headlands. "Visibility is good, bright, starry night." So far, so good. The machine gunners on La Toc Point had to be asleep – or drinking, or playing cards – not to spot the intruder. The sub must have been easily visible, but no alarm was raised. Achilles decided to hug the northern headland off Vigie (ironically, French for a nautical "look-out"), from where he expected a more favorable "shooting position." He took a chance that neither the sentries at the Castries landing strip nor the encamped soldiers at Vigie was expecting a visitor.

Soon, *U-161* was in the anchorage, a mere 200 meters off Vigie. "Great tension in the boat, since all is happening so close to land," Achilles tartly noted. Bender maneuvered the boat just north of the shipping channel, so that Achilles would be able to avoid Tapion Rock on the race out of Castries. It was 10:49 p.m. Achilles fired two bow torpedoes. The boat shuddered slightly as the "eels" shot out of their tubes. "Ajax" had selected the two closest targets. There would be no time to reposition the boat for a shot at the third vessel.

"Both engines full ahead! Hard a-starboard!" Achilles screamed. *U-161* heeled over hard, blue-gray smoke spitting from its exhaust, heading straight for the harbor entrance – and the open sea beyond. All the while, the watch waited for the explosions from the torpedo hits. They came quickly.

After 96 seconds (1490 meters), hit on passenger-freighter on the left, 8000 tons, high gray-white detonation column; can no

longer see the stern, only bow and superstructure still above water. Fore-ship begins to flame.

After 105 seconds (1500 meters), hit on the freighter off to the right, 5000 tons, bright, high fire-flash, very loud detonation with three subsequent explosions. A huge black smoke cloud looms over the freighter. Stern below water.<sup>7</sup>

By now, *U-161* had raced to a point midway between Vigie and Tapion Rock. It was the moment of greatest danger. Machine gun fire and tracer bullets from both shore batteries cracked through the moist, tropical air. A few bullets pinged harmlessly on the hull. Achilles ordered the bridge cleared. Surely, no one could fail to spot *U-161*: white bow waves in front, bright phosphorescent wake behind, blue-gray smoke blowing from the exhaust, its silhouette lit by the flaming ships. The tension in the boat could be cut with a knife. The radio room picked up distress signals from shore: “sss sss sss de vñq submarine Castries harbour attacked shipping 0240 gmt/lo.” Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the machine gun fire ended. Why? Had someone called it off for fear of hitting one of the lighters? Or had they lost the submarine in the dark? It was immaterial to Achilles: *U-161* was clear of both headlands and heading out into the Caribbean. A great shout went through the boat when the Old Man announced the stunning victory over the intercom.

Achilles' first victim was the 7,970-ton Canadian passenger-freighter *Lady Nelson*, bringing 110 passengers and general cargo to St. Lucia. Twenty of its crew died in the blast. The second victim was the 8,141-ton British freighter *Umtata*, en route from Durban, South Africa, to New York with a full load of chrome ore, asbestos, and meat – the latter for the island's American garrison. Four of its crew, all from Calcutta, died that morning. Nineteen passengers and sailors injured in the attacks were taken to Victoria Hospital. US Marines rushed down from Gros Islet to render assistance at the Northern Wharf.

Achilles' audacious attack inside Castries harbor was the stuff of legends. He was the acknowledged “ace” of Operation New Land. German propaganda celebrated him also as “the ferret of Castries,” the *Frettchen* that had gone into the enemy's den and devoured its inhabitants.

Joseph Goebbels' minions could hardly wait for Achilles' return to exploit the triumphs.

\* \* \*

For St. Lucia, the attack meant the end of innocence. The war was brought home to it by *U-161*, just as it had been to Aruba by *U-156*. Neither island would ever again be the same. But what had happened to Castries' defenses? By approaching the entrance to the harbor submerged, Achilles had avoided the launch *Welcome*. Still, around 9:50 p.m., the guards at Vigie Lighthouse had seen "something rise from under the water." It was approaching the inner harbor hard against the Vigie (or northern) side of the shipping channel. Police Constable B. Rachel recognized the intruder as a submarine. "I loaded my rifle." Next, he alerted the lighthouse keeper, who confirmed the sighting. "It's a submarine."<sup>8</sup> Rachel's immediate superior, Police Constable T. Phillips, ordered Rachel to telephone the information to police headquarters – only to find that the officer on duty, Assistant Superintendent Conway, "was sleeping in his Office." Frantic calls to the Northern Wharf, to the Tapion Gun Post, and to the harbor master's office went unanswered. Police headquarters finally managed to contact the electric power station to get the lights on the wharf switched off. It was too late: two explosions rang out at that very moment.

Chaos reigned inside the harbor. At Meadows Battery, Police Constable Spooner wildly fired off 208 rounds from the Nordenfelt Maxim Gun. At Tapion Rock, Lance Corporal Harris, one of only a handful of military men on guard duty that night, still refused to believe that a U-boat had penetrated the harbor. He rang up the Harbor Office "to enquire what Launch it was he saw"! He never managed to get off a single round at the intruder. The *Welcome* raced back to port to render assistance. Just as it approached the narrow harbor entrance, its signal lamp suddenly went dead. Unable to give the agreed recognition signal ("BP" for boat patrol), it withdrew to nearby Cul-de-Sac Bay – amidst a hail of machine gun fire, not from *U-161* but "undoubtedly coming from 'Meadows Battery'." As the final act in this *opéra bouffe*, Constable Rachel reported that he "saw the submarine going out stern first" under a hail of machine-gun fire from Meadows Battery.



British censors at once placed a tight lid on news of Achilles' brazen attack. Ironically, the very morning of the German raid, the island's major newspaper, *The Voice of Saint Lucia*, in a front-page leader had warned residents, "Enemy Subs Believed Operating Near Panama Canal."<sup>9</sup> On March 17, the paper's editors called on government authorities to abandon their studied "disinterestedness" in home defense and to create "bodies of Coast Watchers, Home Guard, Special Constables, Communication Service Red Cross Workers" – without ever mentioning the sinking of the two ships.<sup>10</sup> St. Lucia's other paper, *The West Indian Crusader*, only obliquely referred to what it called the "incident" of March 9 in Castries harbor.

But Achilles' action could not be covered up. On March 19, the editors of *The Voice of Saint Lucia* decided to ignore official censorship. The paper carried the front-page headline, "St. Lucia Can Take It!" In the story that followed, it gleefully announced that the sinking of the two ships had served finally to plaster over "petty" domestic disputes among the islanders. The death and destruction in the port occasioned by the German raider "will have seared across the screens of their minds the indelible impressions of mingled dread and sleepy surprise as heavy explosions rocked them from sleep to the first grim realities of this war."<sup>11</sup> Most islanders had surmised, "An earthquake," when they heard the initial blast – only to realize with the second explosion that the war had come home to them. The shock wave of the explosions had "wrenched off" many office doors and windows, had "upset" countless desks and shelves, and had scattered glass over three square blocks. Countless residents fled the capital for the safety of the rainforests in the interior of the island. Those who remained wondered whether more German submarines lurked off their shores. In utter defiance of official secrecy, the paper reported that 16 people had died and that 13 had been injured on the *Lady Nelson*, with another four dead and six wounded on the *Umtata*. Incredibly, it gave the names of the casualties that could be identified.

The immediate first task at Castries was to douse the fires on the two freighters and to begin salvage operations at once since Castries was the sole point of entry for the Americans and their supplies. Just as quickly, an official inquiry into the disaster was launched by St. Lucia's administrator, Alban Wright. It was a sobering report.<sup>12</sup> Castries' defenses had lacked both a "harbor boom" and adequate "artillery protection." There

had not even been “a searchlight to light up the targets at night.” The blackout had been “by no means wholly effective.” And the “more or less untrained police” that manned the defense posts at Vigie Lighthouse, Tampion Rock, and Meadows Battery had not been up to the task. In short order, an antisubmarine harbor boom was installed at the entrance to the harbor, and a battery of coastal 155-mm artillery was rushed in to guard D’Estrées and La Toc points. Another battery of the “Long Toms” was hastily dispatched from the United States to Beane Field at Vieux Fort, lest another “ferret” steal in and shell the complex. Training was stepped up for the machine-gun companies scattered about St. Lucia, which, after Achilles’ attack, had fired at anything that moved – much to the distress of the island’s residents. By May 28, Wright reported to Governor Charles Talbot at Grenada that all “main deficiencies” of March 9 had “already been made good.”<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

While chaos reigned on St. Lucia, Achilles pointed *U-161* west to throw off the expected aerial searches. He then shaped a course north for the Mona Passage and home. He radioed his recent success to Kernével, informing Admiral Karl Dönitz that he planned to set out for Lorient on March 14. “Still one stern eel, 100 cbm, strong Trade Winds.”

On March 10, Achilles spied lone freighters but had to let them go since they were too fast. In the early morning hours of March 13, he made out a tanker and raced after it for most of the day. While maneuvering for a shot, another tanker hove into sight. It was on course to run between *U-161* and the first tanker. Achilles simply waited for it to come into range. At 8:30 p.m., it was a mere 580 meters away. “Ajax” fired the single stern torpedo. After 29 seconds, it slammed into the tanker slightly ahead of the funnel. “High water column with minimal fire-flame, apparently boiler-room explosion.” The target went down by the stern. It did not have time to put its lifeboats into the water. “Nothing more to be seen other than a large fuel-oil streak.” He later learned that he had torpedoed the 1,940-ton Canadian freighter *Sarniadoc*. It was carrying a cargo of bauxite out of Demerara, British Guiana, for St. Thomas. All hands on board were lost. Achilles radioed news of the sinking to Kernével and informed

U-Boat Command about the target-rich environment that he had found west of Guadeloupe.

Just before daybreak on March 15, south of Hispaniola, the bridge watch spotted a blacked-out shadow at 256 degrees.<sup>14</sup> Neither Bender nor Roth could find its silhouette in any of the commercial shipping books on board. It was slow – eight knots – it was small – about 1,000 tons – and it altered course every few minutes. Achilles' first thought was: "U-boat trap." But he decided to observe it for an hour. Satisfied that it was not some sort of new "Q-ship" (an antisubmarine vessel disguised as a merchantman), he moved to attack it head on at 0 degrees, "the dog's curve" in German parlance. This would offer the hostile the smallest possible silhouette. It was 5:37 a.m.

Achilles brought *U-161* on a parallel course. "Free to fire artillery!" Lieutenant Roth opened up with the deck gun as well as with the smaller anti-aircraft guns. The victim at once signaled for help. "'Acacia' (Call-signal NRWP), position, artillery attack, abandoning ship." By now, Roth had unleashed a deadly hail of 68 10.5-cm, 92 3.7-cm, and 70 2-cm shells. Achilles watched the tracer shells from the bridge and concluded that half of the large shells had found the target. "Superb shooting!" But the 3.7-cm explosive shells were largely ineffective, and he made a mental note to suggest to Dönitz that he issue incendiary shells in future.

At 6:11 a.m., Achilles ordered "Cease Fire!" The wreck was listing badly and burning profusely in at least three places. It sank within 20 minutes. Its crew had taken to two lifeboats. As the ship went down, Achilles spied a "USA flag" in its fore-mast. "Departed at high speed since airplanes are to be expected on the basis of the freighter's signaling." *U-161* shaped a course for the Guadeloupe Passage, sailing past the British island of Montserrat on its way out into the Atlantic.

The "mystery" ship later turned out to have been the 1,130-ton American lighthouse tender USS *Acacia*. Originally constructed as the mine-layer *General Joseph P. Story* for the US Army, it had been acquired by the Coast Guard in 1927 and rebuilt and renamed. All 31 of its crew survived. *Acacia* was the first Allied warship lost in the Caribbean theater.

\* \* \*

The fifth submarine in the first wave of Operation Neuland was *U-129*, commanded by Kapitänleutnant Asmus Nicolai Clausen. “Niko,” as he was known to his friends, had joined the navy as an ordinary seaman in 1929 and thus was the second oldest among the five commanders. He joined the U-Boat Service in September 1935 and learned his trade under Werner Hartmann, who was destined to become one of the great U-boat aces of World War II. When war broke out, Hartmann requested Clausen as his Executive Officer on *U-37*, where “Niko” completed three war patrols. After a brief interlude commissioning *U-142*, Clausen was given command of *U-37*. He sank 12 ships on three war patrols and was awarded the Iron Cross, First Class. In May 1941, he received the brand new Type IXC *U-129*, which he led on three fruitless war patrols, mostly in the Atlantic. Operation Neuland, he vowed, would be very different.

Unlike the other four boats, *U-129*, with “Westward Ho” painted on the front of its conning tower, was sent to hunt and destroy the bauxite traffic steaming up from Georgetown and Paramaribo in the Guianas. Clausen informed Dönitz that the “peculiarities of the inshore water” – read, the 100-mile-wide shallow continental shelf – made for “unfavorable operations,” and thus positioned *U-129* about 50 miles east of Galera Point, on the northeastern tip of Trinidad. Just after 2 a.m. on February 20, the unescorted 2,400-ton Norwegian steamer *Nordvangen* hove into sight. It was carrying a cargo of bauxite from Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana (Suriname), to New Orleans by way of Trinidad. Clausen fired a single bow torpedo. The “eel” blew off the *Nordvangen*’s stern. It plunged to the bottom within a minute, taking all 24 of its crew with it.<sup>15</sup> There had been no time for its radio operator to get off a distress call. On March 6, a lifeboat and some debris from the *Nordvangen* washed ashore at Trinidad, a sure sign of the ship’s fate.

After sinking the *Nordvangen*, Clausen cruised to a point about 120 miles southeast of Trinidad, right in the middle of the main bauxite shipping lane. Around 10 a.m. on February 22, just north of the Orinoco River estuary, all hell broke loose. A steamer suddenly appeared; neither the hydrophone operators nor the skipper had detected its approach. Clausen fired twice. “Missed!” He steamed away from the scene. Then another freighter suddenly hove into view. The radio operator reported an emergency signal from 35 kilometers away: “SSS SSS SSS ... Submarine seen.”

Clausen suspected this pertained to three Italian subs north of him. *U-129* headed away from the site. At 4 p.m., a third steamer appeared. “Alarm! Aircraft at 45°, course SE, range 7,000 m[eters].” No time to lose: a single “eel” leaped out from Tube V, “Missed!” Then another shot, this time from Tube IV. The torpedo broke the back of the small ship instantly.<sup>16</sup> The victim was the 1,754-ton Canadian bauxite carrier *George L. Torian* out of Paramaribo. Four of its crew managed to clamber into lifeboats and were eventually rescued.

*U-129* remained in the target-rich waters between the Guianas and Trinidad – which the Allies soon dubbed “Torpedo Junction.” Within an hour of dispatching the *George L. Torian*, the lookouts spotted another heavily loaded freighter. A single “eel” struck the hostile amidships. It lowered two rafts, and sent out an SSS signal: “Torpedoed [*sic*], torpedoed [*sic*].” A *coup de grâce* torpedo at 600 meters broke the ship in half.<sup>17</sup> It was the 5,658-ton American ore carrier *West Zeda*, bound from Mombasa, Kenya, to Trinidad.

*U-129* stood off the Orinoco for another 24 hours. Just before noon on February 23, Clausen spied yet another unescorted freighter. At periscope depth, he fired two torpedoes. “Two hits.” But the target steered straight at *U-129*. Clausen ordered a hard turn to starboard – just as the freighter began to break apart, its screws hopelessly turning out of the water. He had torpedoed the 1,904-ton Canadian ore carrier *Lennox*. Once more, the blue-green waters of the Caribbean were covered with gray bauxite dust. He steered toward the lifeboats, “full of whites and niggers,”<sup>18</sup> and asked the fearful, weary sailors the name of their ship, its cargo, and its destination. Then he told them that Trinidad was 120 miles to the northwest and handed over some food and water. Unbeknown to Clausen, just before going under, the ship’s master, Daniel Percy Nolan, managed to get off an SSS. Trinidad Naval Station was alerted anew to the presence of “gray sharks” off its waters.

Clausen decided to leave the area and move closer to the Guianas to attack the bauxite carriers at their source. Yet again, the shallow waters of the continental shelf gave him little leeway to dive, and shipping seemed to have all but disappeared. After four days of frustration, his luck returned. Just after supper on February 28, he torpedoed the 2,605-ton Panamanian ore carrier *Bayou*. Then, another week of empty seas.

At dawn on March 3, a return to good fortune: Clausen destroyed the unescorted 5,105-ton American freighter *Mary*, carrying war stores from New York to Suez. And at dusk on March 6, a final strike: the unescorted 6,188-ton American ore carrier *Steel Age*, caught off Vichy French Guiana (Guyane).<sup>19</sup> In all, Clausen chalked up seven ships at 25,600 tons.<sup>20</sup> On March 13, Admiral Dönitz awarded Clausen the coveted Knight's Cross. Clausen was more methodical, perhaps, than the daring Hartenstein or Achilles, but with no less dramatic results as the Allies suddenly discovered that their major source for bauxite was also endangered by this new U-boat offensive.

\* \* \*

Albrecht Achilles was still not done. At dawn on March 21, he came across a tanker in Quadrant DE 9772, mid-Atlantic. He plotted a surface artillery attack. At a range of 3,500 meters, Lieutenant Roth and his gun crew opened fire with all three cannons. Then all three guns jammed. As well, the distance to target had been too great. Too bad, for it was a fat prize: the 6,000-ton tanker *Empire Gold*. It ran off at high speed, showing *U-161* only its slender stern. Then it opened fire with a deck gun – shells with timed fuses splashed 150 meters off *U-161*. Next came three smoke bombs. All the while, the tanker was signaling its position.

Within half an hour, Roth fired 30 shells from the 10.5-cm deck gun at the hostile. Achilles made out two hits, one amidships and one on the stern. Then the shells from the tanker's gun ranged in on *U-161* and so he took it down to avoid being hit. But the thought that the shell Roth had fired had landed on the tanker's stern and might have damaged its rudder gear nagged Achilles. At 9:11 a.m., he was back up on top. It was hazy and rain began to fall. The target seemed to be turning circles – and then disappeared into the rain. Achilles passed its position on to U-Boat Command in the hope that another sub might be in the area.

*U-161* tied up in Lorient at 9:30 a.m. on April 2. From its extended periscope tube flew eight pennants – for five ships of 27,997 tons sunk and three ships damaged – including two black pennants for tankers and a red one for the warship. A vast crowd was at dockside to celebrate the “ferret.” Goebbels' camera crews were on hand to record the glorious scene for

that week's propaganda newsreel, *Die Wochenschau*. Second Flotilla Chief Viktor Schütze, proudly wearing his Knight's Cross, welcomed Achilles home. A young girl handed "Ajax" a huge bouquet of fresh flowers. Three shouts of "Hurrah!" thundered across the harbor.<sup>21</sup> *U-161* headed straight for the cavernous Kéroman bunkers for repairs. Achilles and his crew left the boat for the usual round of banquets and much needed shore leave.

Admiral Dönitz was delighted with the war patrol. Not content with the nickname "ferret" for Achilles, he devised one of his own: *Lochkriecher*, or "borer." His official evaluation gushed with praise:

Superbly executed first operation by a young commander with a new boat.

Especially to be praised are the penetrations of the Gulf of Paria and the harbor of Port Castries on Santa Lucia, executed with daring and cunning.<sup>22</sup>

On April 5, the "Great Lion" awarded Achilles the Iron Cross, First Class. There was a man to be closely watched for future awards – and future war patrols.

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The first wave of Operation Neuland created panic and chaos in the Caribbean and in Allied capitals. In just 28 days, the five Type IX U-boats sank 41 ships, 18 of which were tankers, for a total of 222,657 tons; they damaged a further 11 ships. "Diplomats Blame Hull For New Sub Activities; Expect Cabinet Ouster" the *Miami Herald* declared in a front-page story on February 24. The newspaper's Washington correspondent claimed that British and Russian diplomats were "indignant" that Secretary of State Cordell Hull had allowed a situation to develop wherein the Caribbean was "swarming with Nazi submarines based on the French islands."<sup>23</sup> This was an allusion to Hull's careful approach to Vichy France and its colonies in the Americas. None of that was true, of course, which made the real implications of the disaster even more serious. The U-boats were steaming 3,000 miles across the Atlantic, gliding easily through the gaps in the island chains, and striking at will from the Florida Strait to the waters east



of Trinidad. The Allies were unready, divided, disorganized, untrained, under equipped, and terrified.

On March 12, Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill wrote President Franklin D. Roosevelt's close advisor Harry Hopkins: "I am most deeply concerned at the immense sinkings of tankers west of the 40<sup>th</sup> meridian and in the Caribbean Sea.... The situation is so serious that drastic action of some kind is necessary." Churchill urged the Americans to pull some of their destroyers out of the Pacific and to put them to work escorting convoys off the US coast, in the Caribbean Sea, and in the Gulf of Mexico. Britain had promised to give the US Navy ten Flower-class corvettes to bolster the defense of shipping off the east coast, where the U-boats had just completed another great slaughter in Operation Drumbeat, and Churchill hoped that these escorts, bolstered by American destroyers, would hold off the U-boat offensive in the Caribbean. He pointed out that, unless an effective form of convoy protection was worked out, the Allies faced two stark alternatives – temporarily stop the sailings of tankers, which would "gravely jeopardize our operational supplies," or diminish the number of convoys crossing the North Atlantic in order to release sufficient escorts to cover the Caribbean.<sup>24</sup> Either move was fraught with danger. But with the Imperial Japanese Navy romping over the Pacific, and US destroyer production just two years into a long-term expansion program, Churchill's suggestion was ignored.

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By late April 1942, tensions between some 50 Chinese stokers and the Curaçaoese Shipping Firm Maatschappij (CSM), caused by the sudden loss of dozens of tankers since mid-February, exploded into what the Curaçao historian Junnes Sint Jago has called "one of the greatest mysteries of our nation's history." In a tragic series of events "fifteen Chinese sailors [were] killed and dozens more wounded" by police bullets at a camp just outside Willemstad.<sup>25</sup> The so-called *bloedbad*, or "blood bath," was brought about by the shipping company's failure to address the growing fear of the Chinese stokers.

Although CSM had immediately halted further transports of oil from Venezuela after *U-67* had torpedoed the tanker *Rafaela* on February 16,



news slowly seeped into Willemstad via United Press bulletins of *U-156*'s sinking of *Oranjestad* and *Pedernales* at San Nicolas as well as of *U-502*'s dramatic destruction of *Tia Juana*, *Monagas*, and *San Nicolas* off the coast of Venezuela. Three days later, word filtered through that another raider, *U-161*, had torpedoed *British Consul* and *Mokihana* off Port of Spain, Trinidad. Not surprisingly, these additional sinkings greatly alarmed the Chinese engine crews of the lake tankers.

Some 500 Chinese indentured sailors lived in squalor in four large "lodgments" in Punda, the old part of Willemstad. They were non-union and without full citizenship rights. Most were men in their early to mid-forties. Many had come from Guangdong province to work for Dutch shipping firms before the war – hence, their common nickname "Rotterdam-Chinese." Many had accepted long-term contracts with the Dutch fleet of small tankers that in endless rhythm hauled crude oil from Lake Maracaibo to the Royal Dutch Shell Santa Anna refinery in Curaçao for processing. None had bargained for war, or for U-boats.

The Chinese stokers pleaded with their nearest consul, Hing King in Trinidad, and through him with the Chinese ambassador in London, Dr. Wellington Koo, to put pressure on the Dutch government-in-exile to mediate the dispute with CSM on Curaçao. The stokers demanded a rise in wages from their current 50 florins (\$450 in 2012 US dollars)<sup>26</sup> per month; a 10 per cent cost of living allowance; a war bonus for dangerous work; repatriation to China after the expiration of their contracts with CSM; and, above all, the convoying and screening of the tanker fleet between Willemstad and Maracaibo by Allied warships.

To no avail. Neither CSM nor the Dutch authorities on Curaçao or in London would budge. Exasperated, on March 14, the stokers mounted a peaceful demonstration near the Governor's Palace in Punda. The Dutch General Military Commissioner, Baron Carel van Asbeck, was not amused by what he and his staff termed a "mass strike" of an "aggressive" nature. They rolled out military trucks and instructed the Chinese: "We go camp!" The police took them "over the hills" to Camp Suffisant, which had served as British barracks from June 1940 to February 1942. As numerous other Chinese stokers returned from Maracaibo on board lake tankers, they voluntarily interned themselves, in an act of solidarity, at what was now called "concentration camp" Suffisant. The inmate population

quickly swelled to 420. News of additional sinking of tankers by U-boats, coupled with tight official censorship, further fanned the flames of unrest.

The action by the “Rotterdam-Chinese” alarmed Dutch authorities. What if other, non-Chinese sailors joined their protest? Would the vital flow of oil out of Maracaibo be curtailed? And how would Curaçao, which produced virtually no food and had no major artesian wells, survive if general cargo shippers also were crippled by strikes? An example had to be made. On April 18, Dutch civilian and military police as well as CSM company guards, under the command of Willem van der Kroef, ordered 58 putative “ringleaders” to muster in the barracks square for a peremptory roll call – and to receive instructions on how they were to be removed to another camp. Several Chinese sailors stepped forward and shouted some incomprehensible commands, most likely in Chinese. Thereupon, armed with pipes, rocks, and sticks, they stormed the entrance gate. Panicked by this act of defiance, Van der Kroef ordered the police, carrying carbines with bayonets fixed, to draw up in a line. Shots rang out. Thirteen stokers were dead and 40 wounded; two died later of wounds inflicted that day.

The Dutch police seized the rocks, sticks, and pipes and ordered the Chinese to return to their barracks, and eventually to work. Most did – once they received promises that the lake tankers would, indeed, be convoyed across the Caribbean Sea – but 52 hard-core “strikers” refused to return to work for CSM under any circumstances. They were sentenced to isolation arrest in police barracks at Camp Suffisant. Subsequent attempts to dispatch what Dutch authorities now called “unwilling Chinese” to the United States or to send them to serve with the Chinese Expeditionary Army in India failed. No record of their eventual fate has ever been found. Twelve of the 15 stokers killed at Camp Suffisant are buried in a neglected cemetery at Kolebra Bèrdè (Papiamento dialect for “green moray”) at Kas Chikitu on Bonaire Island.

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On the morning of April 20, 1942, Adolf Hitler exited his bunker at the Wolf’s Lair near Rastenburg, East Prussia. His paladins stood at attention in two parallel lines: Field Marshals Wilhelm Keitel and Erhard Milch, General Alfred Jodl, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, Reichsführer-SS

Heinrich Himmler, Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, Armaments Minister Albert Speer, and Chief of the Party Chancery Martin Bormann, among others.<sup>27</sup> A selected group of local children bounced up to the Führer and handed him bouquets of fresh flowers. It was Hitler's 53rd birthday.

The day's festivities had started shortly after midnight. For the first time since the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Hitler's entourage had broken out champagne and heartily toasted their (albeit at the time absent) Führer. Lunch – cutlets, red cabbage, potatoes, and fruit salad – was served with Rhine wine on white table linens, as was supper – ham with home fries and asparagus salad. Hitler, as usual, touched neither meat nor wine. He entertained the birthday well-wishers with tales of how Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess, who had mysteriously piloted a Bf-110D fighter-bomber<sup>28</sup> to Scotland in May 1941, would immediately be locked up in an insane asylum or summarily executed if he ever returned to Germany. That night Hitler watched the first newsreels featuring the new steel-reinforced concrete U-boat bunkers built by the Organisation Todt along Bay of Biscay ports in France. He had good reason to celebrate the opening of these behemoth bunkers. The submarine war was going well. Surely, the Allies could not withstand this onslaught much longer.

For the Allies, in fact, things might have been far worse. Admiral Dönitz apparently never realized that the shallow-draft lake tankers bringing Venezuelan crude from Lake Maracaibo to the refineries on Curaçao and Aruba were purpose-built and limited in number. A few of these ships had been sunk at the very beginning of the operation, but they were never specifically targeted. If they had been, the flow of oil from Venezuela could have been stopped altogether, at least until sufficient escorts were available and new tankers built.<sup>29</sup> It remains a mystery why this vital weak link was not cut. It may well be that Dönitz's almost religious belief that every Allied ship sunk constituted a loss to the Allied war effort, and thus that all ships were to be attacked whenever and wherever they might be found, is at the heart of the mystery. This was *Tonnagekrieg* (tonnage war), a struggle that did not distinguish between a lake tanker and an ocean tanker, or even a dry cargo ship. In other words, a ship was a ship, and any effort to target particular classes of ships would result in opportunities lost to sink other types of ships. But whatever the

reason for this strategic mistake, Dönitz certainly realized that the Caribbean was a very important weak point in the Allied war effort. He quickly dispatched the next wave of U-boats to the Caribbean as Werner Hartenstein, Albrecht Achilles, “Niko” Clausen, Jürgen von Rosenstiel, Günther Müller-Stöckheim, and others, began to arrive back at Lorient. In the months that followed, the Germans would add significantly to the toll they had already taken.