

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

David J. Bercuson and Holger H. Herwig

ISBN 978-1-55238-760-3

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

TORPEDO JUNCTION

Admiral Karl Dönitz launched the second wave of the Caribbean offensive five days before the first boat returned from the opening attack. The first three Type IXC submarines to sortie from Lorient at the end of March were *U-154*, to patrol the Mona and Windward passages; *U-66*, bound for Trinidad; and *U-130*, headed to Curaçao. *U-108* followed in short order, directed to Puerto Rico. These boats, together with *U-123*, eventually destroyed 29 ships, 13 tankers among them, for a total of 164,000 tons.¹ *U-130*, commanded by Ernst Kals, surfaced to shell the Curaçao refinery in the early morning hours of April 19, but the island's defenders were not caught napping. The 155-mm "Long Toms" of 252nd Garrison Artillery were emplaced and ready to fire, and fire they did. Kals was forced to retreat to deeper water.

Dönitz used radio reports from the Neuland captains to paint a picture of Allied defenses in the Caribbean and the prospects for future operations.² While Allied air cover over Aruba was sufficient numerically, Dönitz concluded, it was "inexperienced and bad compared to English air surveillance." Above all, the skippers had experienced no "crisp, well-thought out" antisubmarine operations; at best, only "spur-of-the-moment panic reactions" to the sinking of the tankers. Commander U-Boats was "surprised" that so much tanker traffic continued to operate in the Caribbean, which to him only revealed how desperate the United States was for the oil, especially given that much of it had to be shared with Britain. As far as surface antisubmarine warfare was concerned, Dönitz surmised that due to lack of available escorts, there would be no "long-term real, effective protection" against the U-boats in the Caribbean.

Yet again, a heated war of memoranda had raged behind the scenes between Dönitz and Grand Admiral Erich Raeder concerning Neuland. From Berlin, Commander in Chief Navy on March 26 telegraphed Kernével that he wanted the U-boats to mount a “continuous occupation” of the Caribbean, with boats constantly spelling each other in the area in rotating “waves.”³ Dönitz replied two days later with what amounted to a lecture on submarine operations.⁴ First, U-boats simply could not “occupy” any area of sea. Second, it took three to four weeks to reach the operations area. Third, to stagger departures from the Bay of Biscay, when boats were provisioned and ready to sail, would have “a very negative psychological effect on crews ready for war patrol,” as well as an “unwanted congestion of the [Biscay] bases and docks.” Fourth, there were only five boats available at any time for Caribbean operations. When they departed, there naturally had to be a “hole” in further sailings. To sweeten the message, Dönitz promised greater activity in the Caribbean once U-tankers were available to resupply the boats on station.

Raeder took a week to respond. On April 2, he had his staff send Kernével an acid one-sentence telegram: “Commander-in-Chief wishes that his dispatched order [of March 26] will be carried out through deployment of all suitable units.”⁵ Dönitz chose not to respond. But, ever the consummate bureaucrat, he knew that his actions needed to be documented. Thus, on April 14, he penned a lengthy justification of his “tonnage war.”⁶ It was simple mathematics:

1. The shipping of the enemy powers forms one great whole. Thus, in this context it is immaterial where a ship is sunk; in the final analysis, it has to be replaced by a new construction.
2. The decisive question in the long run is the race between sinking and new construction.

The real enemy in this area was the United States, not Britain. “Thus I will strike the evil at its root by tackling the supply, especially oil, at this center of gravity.” Every ship sunk translated not just into a lost bottom, but into a further diminution of the American shipbuilding and armaments

industries. Every ship sunk translated into delaying a possible British attack on Nazi Germany. Therefore, the U-boats had to attack enemy shipping where it was “most rational” and “cheapest” in terms of potential U-boat losses.

Dönitz once more reassessed American ASW. While it was improving in quantity, its quality (“its attentiveness, its will to attack and to destroy”) left much to be desired. “Soldiers do not fight [for America],” he philosophized, “but rather people who are paid for their presence in areas endangered by the U-boats.”⁷ The will to win would decide the war’s outcome. And that “will” was with Germany.

The “Great Lion” had also come up with a technological innovation: the so-called “milk cows” (*Milchkühe*).⁸ These deep, broad-beamed 1,700-ton Type XIV craft were basic Type VIIC boats converted to oil tankers; each held 432 tons of diesel. By resupplying the subs in the Caribbean, the “milk cows” could extend the war patrols of twelve Type VIIC boats for an additional four weeks, or five Type IXC boats for an extra eight weeks.

Kapitänleutnant Georg von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf’s *U-459* was the first operational *Milchkuh* and was immediately assigned to the Caribbean boats. Known throughout the service as “wild Moritz” for his antics both on shore and at sea, Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, a veteran of the Great War, was the right man for the job. Calm under the most violent of actions, he could be relied upon by Dönitz to undertake the arduous trip to the Caribbean. *U-459* could refuel Type IXC boats at the rate of 35 tons per hour; it also carried 34 tons of lubricating oil, 10.5 tons of fresh- and three tons of distilled water, spare parts, four torpedoes, extra rations, a modest medical service, and a bakery that could produce 80 loaves of bread per hour. Supplies and spare parts would be transferred in calm seas on a six-meter rubber dinghy; and in heavy seas on a “dead-man’s cradle.” Diesel transfers would be undertaken by way of a main fuel hose with several manila lines wrapped tightly around it for strength and to protect against chafing (and sparks) on the steel hulls.

Positioning *U-459* in the Atlantic south of Bermuda gave U-Boat Command the opportunity to send the smaller Type VII boats into the Caribbean as well. Dönitz actually preferred the smaller subs because they were more nimble and maneuverable, though with decidedly shorter range. The first of the Type VIIs to venture into the Caribbean was

Dietrich Hoffmann's *U-594*, which had been patrolling the Atlantic sea lanes off the United States since March 1. Hoffmann replenished fuel and supplies from *U-459* and then headed into the Caribbean. It was followed by *U-69*, *U-558*, and *U-741*. Hoffmann's sortie was a complete flop, and he was relieved of command when he returned to France at the beginning of June; the other three sank more than 30,000 tons in total.⁹

* * *

In the first half of 1942, Royal Air Force raids on Brest, only 60 miles north of Lorient, and a daring British commando raid against the St. Nazaire dry dock prompted Hitler and Raeder to order Commander U-Boats to leave Kernével for a safer location. Dönitz resisted, but Hitler and Raeder insisted. The new headquarters were established on the Avenue Maréchal Maunoury in Paris, and, at 11:00 a.m. on March 29, 1942, control passed from Kernével to Paris. Orders to the U-boats emanated from the powerful transmitter at the former French Colonial Office in Saint Assise, southeast of the capital. And just to be safe, the Führer grounded Dönitz's private Junkers Ju 52 aircraft; he could not afford to lose his most dedicated naval commander.

The last two weeks of April were slim pickings for the German subs. The Americans, along with the British, the Dutch, and the Venezuelans, tried to halt tanker traffic temporarily in order to mount an interlinked convoy system over the major Caribbean and South Atlantic shipping lanes. Their main obstacle, as Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill had anticipated, was the lack of escort vessels. There were fewer than five destroyers in the entire Caribbean basin and all of these were World War I ships. Other vessels were on hand – sub-chasers, patrol craft, converted yachts, motor torpedo boats – but these did not have the range, armament, or submarine detection equipment needed to battle the U-boats. As a prominent historian of the campaign in the Caribbean put it: “In the first five months of the Caribbean offensive the U-Boats’ only worry in the area, was the threat of air attack by [US Army] Air Corps aircraft.”¹⁰

But lack of escort vessels was not the only obstacle. Although both the US Army Air Forces and the US Navy had a not-insignificant air presence along the island chains, the Americans had almost no experience in the

use of aircraft to escort convoys. The air crews were untrained in ASW, and a reliable system of relieving covering aircraft by other aircraft so as to provide air cover 24 hours and seven days a week had not been worked out. As well, some captains, answering primarily to their own ship owners and – if registered in neutral countries – outside the purview of the Royal or US navies, chose to continue steaming on their own. Advantage Dönitz.

* * *

On April 22, 1942, Hartenstein left Lorient shortly after dusk on his second war patrol to the Caribbean. To his distress, *U-156* encountered numerous French fishing boats in the Bay of Biscay the next day. “I do not like this gathering of fishing boats; it opens the door to collaboration with the enemy.”¹¹ Shortly before midnight on April 23, Dönitz sent a long, convoluted radio message. Hartenstein quickly guessed its essence: “Means: Panama Canal.” He decided to enter the Caribbean through the Mona Passage and to “graze” off the northern coast of Puerto Rico, where he expected to encounter traffic from the canal to San Juan and St. Thomas Island. Many of the crew entertained themselves with tales of Caribbean pirates, Spanish galleons, and gold.

Hartenstein and the other four boats of Operation Neuland had pioneered the Caribbean campaign, but by the end of April the waters in the Caribbean basin, the Gulf of Mexico, and immediately outside the island chains were swarming with submarines. At any given time that month, at least 13 boats, mostly Type IXs but with a handful of Type VIIs, were either in the area or en route to it. As Dönitz had told Raeder, in practical terms, the only way to keep the pressure up in the Caribbean was to mount continuous sorties. Thus, a conveyor belt process fed subs into the Caribbean as soon as they were ready from a previous war patrol, or as soon as they were commissioned and had had their first shake-out patrol. In the spring months of 1942, most of these boats concentrated on the waters of the Windward Passage between Cuba and Hispaniola, around the Dutch Islands, and in the waters surrounding Trinidad. Allied seamen came to call that area Torpedo Junction.¹²

On this second passage out, Hartenstein’s “garbage tour” was sheer misery. Day after day, unending rain showers and fog. In the Bay of

Biscay, British aircraft forced *U-156* to submerge for 16 hours. On April 30, *U-156* passed San Marina Island in the Azores – without ever sighting its soaring cliffs due to unabated rain showers. Morale plummeted. This time, there were no swims in the warm waters, no fishing off the deck. The sea continued to roil. Four more days of howling wind and rough seas. Below decks, the first cases of pubic lice and crabs demanded attention with a special “Kuprex”¹³ ointment before the affliction spread to the rest of the crew by way of the shared bunks and blankets. The only cheer came by news from Paris that Midshipman Max Fischer had just been promoted lieutenant. Schnaps for every man on board!

At noon on May 5, the Enigma lit up: “Hartenstein area of 300 nautical miles in Grid Quadrant ED 99.... Previous order rescinded ... proceed ... to north corner of Barbados.” Richard Zapp in *U-66* had reported “moderate traffic” just outside the chain of the Lesser Antilles. At midnight, Chief Engineer Wilhelm Polchau reported that two steering racks and a fairlead bushing in the diesel compressor had broken down. A return to Lorient would mean four weeks of lost time. Hartenstein remembered that Zapp and *U-66* were on their way home, and hence he radioed U-Boat Headquarters to ascertain whether Zapp could spare the parts. On May 7, Zapp replied that *U-66* was desperately low on fuel and requested the transfer of five tons of oil.

Three days later, the two boats met in Grid Quadrant DQ 7937. “Cloudy, misty, occasional rain.” Hartenstein steered a course parallel to *U-66* until he was abreast of it at a distance of 25 meters. The two steering racks were floated across with the aid of a buoy, and then *U-156*’s rubber dinghy paddled the oil hose over to *U-66*. As always, the war diary was terse: “5 cbm in 26 min.” Zapp reported stray freighters in Quadrants EE 36 and 39 as well as in EF 1190. Hartenstein was thrilled. “That seems to be the golden vein New York – Cape Roque [Brazil]. Am heading for it.” The northeasterly trade winds kicked in and *U-156* made good time. The sun finally appeared.

Zapp had been right on the money. At 2:05 p.m.¹⁴ on May 12, the bridge watch called out, “Steam freighter! 17 Degrees!” Quadrant EE 39. For hours, Hartenstein worked *U-156* ahead of the target. It was a clear, star-filled evening. No moon to give the U-boat away. Strangely, no smoke from the target’s funnel.¹⁵ At 7:20 p.m., Hartenstein was ready for the kill:

he fired two bow torpedoes. Anxiously, the boatswain counted down the seconds. Nothing. "Both misses!" Hartenstein approached the shadow in its wake – and discovered that it had drastically reduced speed at the moment of attack. "That explains the miss. Reloaded." A little before 10 p.m., he fired again. The electric torpedo was a surface runner! It veered off target, but then steered toward it. "Hit machine. Steamer is putting lifeboats over the side. Steamer sinks by the stern." The Old Man approached the lifeboats to ascertain nationality and displacement of the victim, but could not make out a mumble that sounded like "Ouney." He could not find the name in any of his shipping registers. He would later discover that he had torpedoed the Dutch 4,551-ton motor freighter *Koenjit*, in transit from Halifax to Egypt with 8,000 tons of general cargo. The crew of 37 was rescued.

At 9:31 a.m. on May 13, the watch spotted a smoke smudge on the horizon off Barbados. The target was running on an erratic zigzag course, but in the general direction of the U-boat. Given that it was daylight, Hartenstein opted for a submerged shot. At 4 p.m., the hydrophone operator warned, "He is turning to run at us!" Calmly, Hartenstein counted down the range: 1,500 – 1,000 – 700 – 450 meters. He fired a stern shot from Tube V. The G7e headed straight for the target. "Hit just in front of the bridge. Stops. Swings lifeboats out. List of 2 degrees." Still submerged, Hartenstein circled his victim. On the stern he could make out "*City of Melbourne*. Liverpool." *Lloyds Register* listed it as a British 6,630-ton general cargo steam freighter.

But the victim refused to go under. "Surface! Ready the Artillery!" It was time to test the newly installed 10.5-cm deck gun. Second Watch Officer Fischer and his gun crew pumped 24 shells into the fore-ship. It broke off and the stern lifted up out of the sea. "Steamer still refuses to sink!" Fischer fired another five shells into the wreck. "Slowly sinks!" Hartenstein was beside himself. Many of the shells' nose fuses failed to detonate on impact and the missiles harmlessly passed out the other side of the ship. "Behavior of the 10.5cm ammunition unsatisfactory," he laconically noted in the war diary. The *City of Melbourne* lost only one of its crew of 78 that day.

To preserve precious fuel, Hartenstein let the current take *U-156*. The men took turns coming up on deck to shower, to swim, and to wash their

sweaty shorts and neck rags. Shortly after noon on May 14, the watch spotted yet another “smokeless” steamer. It seemed to be in ballast, and it mounted a heavy gun on the stern. A few minutes before 3 p.m., *U-156* attacked. No detonation. “Inexplicable Miss! Probably ran under the ship!”

For four hours, the two MAN diesels roared on full speed to get *U-156* ahead of the target again. No moon. A star-studded clear night. Just before 8 p.m., Hartenstein fired from Tube II. Another terse entry in the war diary: “Inexplicable Miss!” And another hour to plot yet another attack. This time Hartenstein let loose from Tube III. The “Eto” broke the surface, but this time there was no mistake. “Hit amidships. 20 m[eter] high dark explosive cloud. Swings lifeboats out, begins to list. Steamer sinks!” The crew in the lifeboats revealed it to be the Norwegian 4,301-ton motor freighter *Siljestad* out of Oslo. It was carrying general cargo and war material from New York to Alexandria, Egypt. Two of the crew of 33 died.

Hartenstein ordered four of the old “Ato” torpedoes to be moved from below the upper deck plates to the bow tubes. *U-156* once more drifted with the current. At 8:26 a.m. on May 15, the watch screamed “Steam Freighter in sight!” Hartenstein began his approach. At that moment, the target blew off steam and stopped – to pick up survivors from the *Siljestad*. “They have a surprise in store for them!” the Old Man chuckled. The freighter resumed its course, zigzagging wildly. At 3 p.m., Hartenstein was in position. Range: 1,200 meters. He fired a single bow torpedo. “Hit just in front of bridge and cargo room 2. Lists 2 degrees to port. Swings lifeboats out.” On its deck, Hartenstein could make out large wooden crates. The victim turned aimlessly in circles for 15 minutes, then the sea swallowed it. Hartenstein surfaced. A dozen lifeboats bobbed up and down on the gentle sea. They carried the survivors of both ships. The water was littered with wooden boxes revealing airplane and automobile parts. Hartenstein had the men fish 14 automobile tires and about 100 inner tubes as well as packs of Chesterfield cigarettes out of the water. The survivors (39 out of a complement of 41) informed him that he had sunk the Yugoslavian 4,382-ton freighter *Kupa*, bound from New York to Egypt.

For two days, *U-156* encountered no new targets. Again, halcyon days for showers and swims up on deck as Hartenstein let the boat drift with

the trade winds. Then, just before noon on May 17, the welcome shout, "Steam Freighter in sight!" The target mounted two guns on the stern and was laden down with wooden crates on deck: "Probably automobiles or airplanes." For more than three hours, the Jumbos drove *U-156* ahead of the target. At 3:04 p.m., Hartenstein fired a stern shot. The torpedo ran true. After 25 seconds, "Hit front of funnel. 40 m[eter] high black-brown column of fire. Steamer sinks."

"Surface!" *U-156* broke the sea in an immense field of crated airplane parts. The watch spotted a figure floating amidst the smashed wooden crates. It was a young American sailor. He informed Hartenstein that he had sunk the British 5,072-ton freighter *Barrdale*, en route from New York to the Persian Gulf with "airplanes, tanks, automobile tires, and general cargo." A good loss for Joseph Stalin and the Red Army, Hartenstein must have noted. He fished several of the large airplane tires out of the water as a "trophy." Then he drove the American over to the lifeboats.

There was no time to rest. At 3:39 a.m. on May 18, the watch was at it again: "Dark shadow to starboard!" Hartenstein was up on the bridge in a flash. He decided to position *U-156* west of the target to silhouette it against the first light of dawn. It would still be sufficiently dark to risk a surface shot. At 4:18 a.m., he fired. After one minute and 22 seconds, "Hit stern superstructure. 40 m[eter] high black column of fire and smoke. Steamer sinks." The blast killed 11 of its crew of 41. Once again, Hartenstein approached the lifeboats. He was informed that he had torpedoed the American 4,961-ton freighter *Quaker City*, en route from Bombay to Norfolk with a full load of manganese ore. Junior Third Mate Charles Stevens recalled Hartenstein as being "very courteous" and giving the survivors the coordinates for the nearest landfall, Barbados.¹⁶ The men in the lifeboats declined the skipper's offer of water and food but requested playing cards to while away the time. These boys have a sense of humor, Hartenstein thought, and passed them three decks.

Still, the crew of *U-156* got no rest. At 8:07 a.m., the by now familiar cry "Steamer in sight!" rang down from the bridge. For five hours, Hartenstein drove *U-156* hard to get ahead of what he took to be a tanker in ballast. Just before 1 p.m., he decided on a double bow shot. The two electric "eels" ran for just over one minute. "Hit under the bridge. 2nd hit amidships." The tanker began to list to port, but its wily skipper quickly

ran his bilge pumps and managed to right the vessel. He continued on course at 11 knots and fired his deck guns at *U-156*. Hartenstein was furious. He pursued under water, hoping that the adversary would “stop or show a sign of weakness. Nothing of the sort.” Was it a U-boat trap? Was the “tanker” a decoy, a Q-ship?

“Surface!” Hartenstein was determined to hunt this one down. At that moment, 5:18 p.m., the Enigma lit up:

To Hartenstein. Proceed at once to Grid Quadrant ED 66.
Task: 1. attack American warships suspected operating off the harbor. 2. Scout harbor and anchorages, if this can be done without being seen. 3. Destroy departing French warships and merchant ships so that they will not fall into American hands.
[Aircraft carrier] “Béarn” especially important.

Vichy France had cautioned the Germans that the Allies were patrolling Fort-de-France with one cruiser and four destroyers.

What was taking place at Martinique was, in fact, a classic game of tit-for-tat. The Allies worried lest Admiral Georges Robert’s tidy fleet of 70,000 tons of warships and treasury of 12 billion francs in gold would join the U-boats in their assault on the vital Caribbean oil supply. In the near-panic atmosphere of 1942, J. Edgar Hoover at the Federal Bureau of Investigation warned the Administration that “1400 airplanes and 50 submarines are near readiness at Martinique for an attack on the Panama Canal, Puerto Rico, Florida or the Florida Keys and Cuba.”¹⁷ The Germans, for their part, were equally panicked that Robert, far away from Vichy, might have had a change of heart and joined the Allies. Whatever the case, both stepped up their surveillance of Martinique.

Hartenstein did not have to consult the navy’s grid chart to know that Martinique was in Quadrant ED 66 – precisely where he had dropped off his Second Watch Officer during the last war patrol. But he was less than pleased. This was just the sort of micromanaging by the “Great Lion” that the U-boat skippers hated. “First the tanker must be disposed of. Half-finished work should not be allowed to languish. Course for Martinique will have to be shaped without me.” This bordered on insubordination. It had better result in a major success.

An hour before noon on May 18, Hartenstein fired another torpedo at the tanker. It struck the hostile abaft the bridge after 37 seconds, causing a 20-meter-high column of dark smoke to rise. Incredibly, the tanker continued on course at seven knots as if the torpedo had missed! Hartenstein pursued. Three hours later he fired yet another torpedo. After one minute and 16 seconds, it hit near the engine room. Still, the damned thing continued on course at seven knots. In a towering rage, Hartenstein leaped ahead of the target yet again. Since it had taken four torpedoes in the starboard side, he decided to “break it in half” with a shot in the port side. And since the torpedo gang had not had enough time to reload the bow tubes, he was forced to make a stern shot. At 3:17 a.m., the electric torpedo sped on its way – and missed! What did he have to do to sink this character? Doggedly, Hartenstein ordered “Pursue!” But the tanker outran him on an erratic zigzag course, swinging wildly from 120 to 330 degrees south and west.

Finally, “Crazy Dog” gave in. He let it go. He had spent 20 hours pursuing the target, had plotted five attacks, and had torpedoed it four times. And nothing to show for it. Then, reality set in like a cold shower via the Enigma machine: “Shape course for Martinique at once.”

Some time later, Hartenstein would learn that the tanker he had chased through the night was the 8,042-ton *San Eliseo*, in ballast out of Liverpool. Ironically, it belonged to the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company of San Nicolas, Aruba, the scene of his first Neuland war patrol triumphs. The *San Eliseo* had been severely damaged but managed to make it to Aruba.

At 9:25 a.m. on May 19, the watch screamed, “Alarm! Aircraft! 270 degrees! Course 0!” Executive Officer Paul Just had the watch. “Emergency Dive!” The lookouts tumbled down the hatch. The crew heard the air blowing out of the dive tanks. The diesels cut out; the electric motors began to whirl. Thirty seconds and *U-156* was below the surface, on a downward angle of 20 degrees. Within two minutes, two depth charges exploded near the boat. Glass broke. The lights went out. Dim emergency bulbs came on in the *Zentrale*.

“Damage Control, report!” It was the Old Man. Chief Engineer Polchau was ready. “Damage to both hydroplane motors, vertical rudder motor, gyro indicator, lights, starboard electrical motor. Major damage:

leak in ballast tank I, 2 batteries torn and slowly draining, echo sounder.” Emergency teams began their repair work. At 110 meters, just beyond recommended maximum depth, two more depth charges rocked the boat. Polchau ordered “Both hydroplanes up!” and finally leveled the boat.

“Periscope depth!” Hartenstein surveyed the scene through the sky periscope. “Alarm! Airplane at 240 degrees!” *U-156* dove again. This time there were no depth charges. The boat remained submerged until dusk. At 5 p.m., it resurfaced. Course: Martinique. For hours, the torpedo gang muscled four “Ato” torpedoes from under the upper deck boards into the bow torpedo room. At 9:40 p.m., Martinique came in sight. Lieutenant Just noted the strain on the crew. “30th day. 16 hours submerged with 45-degree [Celsius] heat and 90 percent humidity in the boat.”¹⁸ Mildew had spread everywhere. The men were covered with heat sores.

Cautiously, *U-156* circumnavigated the island. Officers and men were on edge. Headlands appeared menacingly in the distance; the watch mistook “La Perle” cliff for a hostile craft. Hartenstein submerged off Fort-de-France to reconnoiter the harbor. It revealed five tankers as well as the aircraft carrier *Béarn*. Off to the side in Flammand Roads, he spotted a modern passenger liner, *Agittaire*. Dead ahead was a warship: perhaps the cruiser *Émile Bertin*? Two American flying boats buzzed around Fort-de-France. *U-156* remained on station. Suddenly, at 12:06 p.m. on May 21, a dark shadow with two masts appeared. A signboard on the bridge revealed its name: *President Trujillo*. It flew a Dominican flag, “thus enemy.” Hartenstein wasted no time, firing an “eel” from Tube II. After 29 seconds the “Ato” ripped into the ship’s stern, sending up a 30-meter-high column of fire and smoke. The 40-year-old Dominican 1,668-ton freighter sank within a minute, taking 27 of the crew of 39 as well as beer-making machinery and forage down with it.

Three airplanes appeared at once and dropped depth charges randomly. *U-156* submerged. Every half hour, Hartenstein brought it to the surface to reconnoiter Fort-de-France. It was sheer hell for the crew. Sixteen hours submerged. Then 20 hours. Then 14 hours. Heat and humidity were almost unbearable. Finally, on May 25, *U-156* surfaced in an isolated bay to recharge the batteries. Rain, glorious rain! It came down in sheets. The watch could hardly see beyond one meter. Hartenstein called the men up in shifts to take in the tropical air and the sweet-cold sea spray. And then

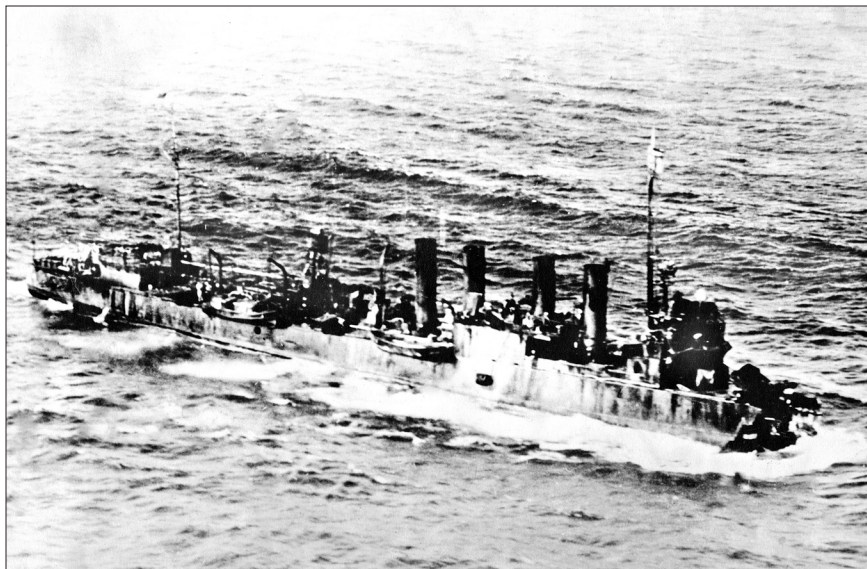
the rain stopped and the sun broke through. Steam rose from bay and boat. It was a sauna.

Shortly after 1 a.m. on May 25, Dönitz was back on the airwaves. "Danger exists that ships in the main harbor will be turned over to the USA. Thus main task is attack on USA warships and other ships leaving port. Attack incoming ships only if identified as hostile." *U-156* was off Cape Salomon. The watch reported "Shadow ahead!" It was a fellow traveler, *U-69*. Paris had ordered it to join *U-156* in patrolling Fort-de-France. Hartenstein returned to Fort-de-France. At 7:43 a.m. on May 25, the hydrophone operator reported, "Screw noises at 235 degrees." Hartenstein ordered periscope depth. He could hardly believe his eyes. "American 4 stack destroyer." Would he finally get a crack at one of the "destroyers-for-bases" craft that Dönitz had lectured the *Kaleus* about at Lorient?

The destroyer was the 1,154-ton USS *Blakeley*. It had seven survivors from the *Quaker City* on board. Launched in Philadelphia in 1918, the "flush-decker" had seen no action in World War I and then had been decommissioned at Philadelphia from 1922 to 1939. It escorted troop convoys to Curaçao in February 1942. On May 25, *Blakeley* was assigned to patrol a base course roughly north to south off the west coast of Martinique. It was steaming at 15 knots and zigzagging with the galley deck guns and the .30- and .50-caliber machine guns manned.

But it was too far off to attack. "Perhaps he will return," Hartenstein wrote in the war diary. As per his wish, the destroyer reappeared two hours later off Precheur Light, zigzagging and making 15 knots. "He is coming! Battle stations!" Clear sky, calm sea. Range: 800 – 700 – 600 – 500 meters. On board the destroyer, a fatal mistake: the sonar had been turned off at 1:45 p.m. while a maintenance man went to the tracking room to lubricate the equipment. But the Officer of the Deck wasn't notified. When the maintenance work was completed, the sound-detector gear was turned back on; it started to sweep off the starboard beam, but too late to deter Hartenstein.

Time: 10:52 a.m. Hartenstein fired two bow shots. After 25 seconds, he gleefully recorded: "Hit in fore-ship. High column of fire. Fo'c'sle torn off. Hit must have been 2nd torpedo." It was a strange sight: bow and fo'c'sle shot off and listing 15 degrees to starboard, the destroyer's rump continued to move ahead. The oil from the forward tanks shot 1,000 feet



USS *Blakeley* after a direct torpedo hit to the fo'c'sle from *U-156*. Source: Ken Macpherson Photographic Archives, Library and Archives at The Military Museums, Libraries and Cultural Resources, University of Calgary.

into the air and then showered the ship with “torrents of oil, water and debris.” The bow was lifted clear out of the water and the fantail was “set to whipping” by the explosion. Several sailors had seen the torpedo’s telltale “bubbles” at the last moment, but it had been too late to alert the bridge. The explosion was so powerful that radio tubes and resistors as well as the gyro compass on the U-boat were heavily damaged. But there was no time to deliver the *coup de grâce* as enemy aircraft were already overflying the Bay de Fort-de-France and dropping depth charges all about. *U-156* headed back out to the open sea.

Blakeley’s skipper, Lieutenant-Commander M. D. Matthews, at first did not know how badly damaged his ship was. As soon as the debris cleared, it became obvious that the *Blakeley*’s bow had been blown off and that it had developed a 15-degree list to starboard. He gave the order to prepare to abandon ship. But the damage-control party sprang into action. It pumped oil from the starboard tanks into the port tanks, righting the

ship. Matthews concluded that *Blakeley* would stay afloat. He canceled the order to prepare to abandon ship and lowered a whaler to pick up several men who were in the water. He tried to back the ship into Fort-de-France harbor, seven miles away. The distance was too great. Matthews then ordered the *Blakeley* turned about and, with 20 meters off its bow, steamed ahead into the harbor. The destroyer docked alongside the *Béarn* some three hours after the torpedo hit. French surgeons treated the 21 wounded sailors. After the legal stay of two days, *Blakeley* was escorted to Castries, St. Lucia. Muster revealed that six sailors had died or were still missing.¹⁹ The loss of the *Blakeley* came as a severe shock to Washington. The Navy Department hastily dispatched the destroyers *Breckenridge*, *Greer*, and *Tarbell* as well as two Catalina flying boats to the Caribbean to deal with the marauding “gray sharks.”

* * *

For Hartenstein and *U-156*, the coming days brought only a succession of emergency dives to avoid attacks by land aircraft and flying boats. It was hell for the crew. Every time the boat surfaced to recharge the batteries and to take in fresh air, hostile aircraft forced it to dive. Day after day, aerial depth charges rained down all about the craft. Executive Officer Just again expressed concern about the state of the crew:

We look like cellar wood lice. The skin is a greenish white; shriveled and wrinkled due to the constant sweating. Some of us are tortured by rashes and abscesses. Others have ear infections from the temperature changes [caused by the] dives. When we surface at night, the rush of air into the compartments is ice cold. The seawater shower in the diesel room brings no refreshment, but still stimulates a bit.²⁰

Around midnight on May 26, Hartenstein surfaced off Pointe des Nègres. “Alarm! Flying boat at 250 degrees!” The Catalina was flying 30 to 50 meters above the water and coming straight out of a bright moon. “Engine full speed ahead! Hard-a-starboard!” As the boat heeled over to the right, three depth charges exploded in its wake. Close call. After surfacing, the

routine set in anew. And then a chilling report from the radio room: "Destroyer noises at 60 degrees!" The men could hear the sickening "pings" of the destroyer's ASDIC bounce off the hull. Hartenstein ordered "Silent Running!" and took the boat down to 120 meters. Six depth charges burst around *U-156*. Glass broke, lights shattered, two of the heavy batteries shorted out, and both hydrophones broke down. Total darkness. For hours, *U-156* crept along in the deep, listening to the occasional rumble of depth charges off in the distance. The heavy, humid air burned the men's lungs.

By 3 a.m. on May 27, Hartenstein had no choice but to surface, for both the men and the electric batteries were drained. Forty minutes later came the dreaded cry, "Alarm! Flying Boat 160 degrees." Down again. Then up again. After 20 minutes, "Alarm! Airplane!" To hell with this harbor patrol! Dönitz may have claimed that American air reconnaissance was "inexperienced and *bad*" and that there existed no "crisp, well thought-out antisubmarine operations," but that was the picture back at Lorient and not here in the Caribbean. The Old Man ordered a course for the open sea with the last juice left in the electric batteries. At 7:24 p.m., he brought *U-156* to the surface. Coast clear. "Both engines full ahead!" The Jumbos roared up to power and Hartenstein shaped a course for St. Lucia.

At 11 a.m. on May 28, the watch reported, "Smoke cloud at 280 degrees!" Hartenstein at once gave chase, but in the excitement of the moment he brought *U-156* too close to the target. A torpedo detonation would have damaged both vessels.

He followed the hostile, which was heading back to Martinique. Precious hours wasted. By 7 p.m., *U-156* had caught up to the shadow. Hartenstein fired a single "eel" from Tube IV. The old "Ato" ran true. After 30 seconds, "Hit amidships, down by the stern. Lists to starboard, but does not sink." Afraid that he might already have drawn enemy aircraft, Hartenstein delivered the *coup de grâce* from Tube II. After 45 seconds, "Hit forward hatch." Then he discovered that the target's stern deck gun was manned. Too late! The ship slipped beneath the waves with a last tremendous rattle of detonations. He had torpedoed the British 1,913-ton freighter *Norman Prince*, in ballast en route from Liverpool to St. Lucia. *U-156* was down to its last three torpedoes.

Shortly after 3 a.m. on May 30, Hartenstein fired off a unique radiogram to U-Boat Command in Paris. After reporting on enemy traffic off Fort-de-France and his latest “kills,” he pressed on Dönitz the toll that the war patrol was taking on the crew. “In 7 days in the tropics, 121 hours submerged. Limit of capacity reached.” The Old Man had taken careful measure of his young crew. They needed relief. He shaped a course for the Atlantic, planning to pass Vincent Channel in the Lesser Antilles between Barbados and St. Lucia.

The first of June brought a fat target in Grid Quadrant ED 5329. The Old Man noted in the war diary: “Flies an indiscernible flag. Name painted over.” No time for niceties. He fired from Tube V. “Hit abaft mast. Sinks down by the stern.” He circled the victim. From its stern flew a small Brazilian flag. The smudged plate revealed the name *Alegrete*. The boatswain snatched up *Lloyds Register*. “Has 5,970-tons, Herr Kaleu!” Owner: Lloyd Brasileiro. Home port: Rio de Janeiro. Damn, it was a neutral! Hartenstein decided that he could not just leave the freighter to sink by itself. He surfaced and ordered Lieutenant Fischer to pump 20 10.5-cm rounds into the wreck. It sank by the stern, bow high out of the water. This would take some explaining back in Lorient.

At 2:40 a.m. on June 3, Hartenstein spied a darkened schooner off Cape Moule à Chique, the southernmost tip of St. Lucia. He ordered it to strike sails. It refused. He sent a 3.7-cm shell across its bow. The schooner set 18 inter-island passengers off in a lighter and continued its course. From the abandoned passengers, Hartenstein learned that it was the Venezuelan sloop *Lilian*, loaded with rum out of Jamaica. He could read the thoughts on the crew’s collective face. But his temper broke at the cheek of its captain: Fischer fired 52 light rounds into the *Lilian*. A terrible waste of good Jamaican rum.

Paris ordered *U-156* to shape a course for Lorient – 12 days away. But “Crazy Dog” still had supplies for 41 days, more than a hundred 10.5-cm shells below decks, and one torpedo in the tubes. At 10 a.m. on June 23, the watch detected a smoke smudge on the horizon. Hartenstein pursued. He wanted this one badly. The freighter ran a wild zigzag course. Time and again, the Old Man approached for a shot, only to see the target dash off at high speed in another direction. He was finally in position at 2:20 a.m. on June 24. The “eel” fired from Tube I was a “hot runner”: it stuck

in the tube, its small compressed-air motor running wildly. The danger of a premature explosion of its warhead was high. Executive Officer Just ordered double air pressure for Tube I and the torpedo finally left the bore. It veered erratically off target and then sank.

"Clear the decks to engage with artillery!" Fischer fired 65 rounds from all three guns. The target's captain sent out a distress signal, from which Hartenstein learned that he was shelling the British 4,587-ton freighter *Willimantic*, in ballast from Cape Town to Charleston. Hartenstein took the ship's captain prisoner. He learned from Master Leon Everett that the crew consisted of elderly men ("well over 60") taken from an existing "pool" of sailors. The Allies could build ships at great speed, but experienced skippers were hard to come by. Another 20 rounds from the deck gun and the *Willimantic* sank.

U-156 glided through the Kernével Narrows and docked in Lorient at 2:06 a.m. on July 7, 1942. Ten pennants flew from its periscope tubes. The last entry in the war diary was terse, as ever: "Total distance 10,465.4 nautical miles, of this 546.9 underwater." For the first time, Hartenstein signed the KTB with his new rank: Korvettenkapitän (lieutenant-commander). He was especially pleased that he had offered water, food, and directions to every lifeboat from the ships that he had torpedoed. For July, the entire crew of *U-156* was invited to be feted by their "sponsor," the city of Plauen in Saxony, Hartenstein's birthplace. Paul Just received his own command, *U-6*, and Lieutenant Gert-Fritjof Mannesmann took his place as Executive Officer.

Chief Engineer Polchau used his final report on the war patrol to underscore the Old Man's radio signal to Dönitz that the crew had reached the "limits" of their "capacity" off Martinique. "The boat remained underwater for a long time in tropical waters, once seven days in a row and on average 18 hours per day. Water temperature 30 degrees [Celsius], air temperature in the boat on average 34 degrees." The capacity of the batteries had been reduced once the acid mix reached 42 to 44 degrees. And at 47 degrees, it had proved impossible to recharge the cells.²¹ It was a sobering report.

Dönitz was pleased with the war patrol. "The commander exploited well the numerous chances for success and thus scored a very nice success. Especially to be praised is the special assignment off Martinique,

conducted with tenacity.”²² The new technological innovation, the “milk cow,” had proved its mettle: *U-459* had resupplied two outbound boats, four returning boats, and five boats on station off the Caribbean Sea.

En route to Plauen, Hartenstein paid the customary call on Dönitz in the Avenue Maréchal Maunoury.²³ The “Great Lion” was in a particularly good mood and offered Hartenstein (as well as Karl Thurmman of *U-535*) his Mercedes limousine to do some sightseeing. Hour after hour passed. At 8 p.m., Dönitz had to borrow a smaller car to take him to a meeting with the city commandant. “It is always the same story,” he growled to an aide, “If you offer these types your little finger, they’ll grab the whole hand.” When he returned from the meeting, the Mercedes was still not back. He ordered his adjutant to have both skippers report to him immediately upon their return. Well after midnight, Hartenstein and Thurmman finally returned – after a night of barhopping and sampling what Paris had to offer. Seeing that both officers were three sheets to the wind, the adjutant suggested they wait until morning to report.

Not Hartenstein. He put on his dress uniform and insisted on being taken to Dönitz. A workaholic, the admiral was still at his desk. He let loose with a tirade concerning the ingratitude of the two skippers. Hartenstein took it all in, saluted, and recited from the arch-rascal Baron Karl von Münchhausen:²⁴ “On many a flag have I laid my hand swearing loyalty in this wicked war, many an admiral have I served.” As his voice trailed off, Hartenstein simply turned around and left the room. Dönitz recounted the story the next morning at breakfast in great mirth. Things were going very well for the “Great Lion.”

