



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

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GUNDOWN: *U-615* AND *U-161*

Ralph Kapitzky was an unlikely hero. He commanded only one boat, did not execute a single bravado war patrol, and did not come close to winning a Knight's Cross. Yet his war patrol to the Caribbean in the summer of 1943 was the stuff of legends, of modern-day buccaneers on the Spanish Main.¹ A member of the Crew of 1935, Kapitzky did brief tours of duty on the old battleship *Schlesien* and the light cruiser *Karlsruhe* before being seconded to the Luftwaffe. He flew a Heinkel-111 during the invasion of Poland and survived being shot down; posted to Caen, France, he flew 100 missions in Stuka and Ju 88 bombers during the Battle of Britain.²

The Kriegsmarine recalled Kapitzky in December 1940. After U-boat training, he was posted Executive Officer on *U-93*. On June 1, 1942, just before his 26th birthday, Kapitzky was promoted Kapitänleutnant and given a brand new Type VIIC boat, *U-615*. His first war patrol in September off Newfoundland was a litany of ice as well as hostile destroyers and airplanes.³ Then, on October 11, he torpedoed the 4,221-ton Panamanian freighter *El Lago*, in ballast from Reykjavik, Iceland, to New York. Twelve days later, en route to La Pallice, he dispatched the 12,656-ton British passenger/cargo ship MV *Empire Star*.⁴ It was a good first patrol. U-Boat Command agreed. "The operations against convoys were severely impaired by poor weather and visibility. The sinking of the two lone freighters, including the refrigerator-ship 'Empire Star,' is gratifying."⁵

Kapitzky took *U-615* out of La Pallice on November 25 and again shaped a course for the North Atlantic. It was a miserable war patrol.⁶ Violent gales whipped the gray waters into mountains of foam and spray; heavy escorts protected the few convoys that Kapitzky sighted; and enemy aircraft repeatedly drove the boat under. Returning to base on January 9,



Ralph Kapitzky. Kapitaenleutnant Kapitzky undertook only four patrols in *U-615*, sinking but four ships of 27,231 tons. His fame rests on an epic battle that he fought for days in August 1943 in the Caribbean against a crushing Allied superiority of aircraft and warships. He was last seen clinging to the bridge with legs shot off, but still directing fire against the enemy. Source: Deutsches U-Boot-Museum, Cuxhaven-Altenbruch, Germany.

1943, without a “kill,” Kapitzky knew that the formal evaluation would not be kind. He was right. “Hardly a satisfying operation.”⁷ Captain Eberhard Godt, Dönitz’s chief of operations, charged Kapitzky with “overestimating the escorts,” with “prematurely diving” after sighting the destroyers, and with “having remained submerged for far too long.” The lesson was clear: “The commander must not allow himself to be distracted too much from his primary goal – namely, to get close to the ships – by way of sustained dives and turning away [from hostile escorts].”

Kapitzky returned to Newfoundland for his third war patrol in March 1943. Again, it was sheer misery: Force 6 to 7 gales. One violent storm after another. The ocean became a mad fury of towering waves and cascades of seawater. Then heavy snow showers. Sheets of ice clung to men and boat alike. Periscopes froze. Guns became inoperable. For four days, Kapitzky was swept up in the biggest convoy action of the war. But *U-615* had no success. Time and again, Kapitzky broke off his attack run at the approach of destroyers. Time and again, he permitted B-24s to drive him under the sea. Humiliated, he informed Dönitz: “All eels [still on board].” Finally, on April 11, he torpedoed the 7,177-ton American Liberty ship *Edward B. Dudley*, bound from New York to Liverpool via Halifax with a cargo of 4,000 tons of munitions, food, and cotton. Shrapnel from the explosion showered the bridge of *U-615* and struck the skipper in the right arm, shoulder, and ear.

Captain Godt raked Kapitzky over the coals in his evaluation of the war patrol. The commander still had not learned how to drive home an attack. He still was too ready to evade attacks by enemy air and surface escorts. “Do not attempt to dive when aircraft is already too close. Repel 1st attack surfaced.” While in the biggest convoy battle of the war, Kapitzky again had been too content to take on a reconnaissance role. “The chances offered to attack were not exploited. Never postpone an attack without cogent cause.” Godt ended his evaluation on an ominous note: “The commander must take advantage of his experiences to date. A healthy portion of self-confidence and optimism is not only justified but also necessary.”⁸ It was a clear warning.

* * *

U-615 spent nearly two months in the repair bunkers at La Pallice. As part of "Bridge Conversion II," it received two twin-barreled 2-cm guns on the upper platform abaft the conning tower as well as a four-barreled 2-cm *Vierling* anti-aircraft system on a new lower platform, the so-called "winter garden." The 8.8-cm gun on the foredeck was removed and replaced with a semiautomatic 3.7-cm cannon.

Dönitz sent 12 Type VIIC and one Type IXC boat to the Caribbean in June 1943. Two U-tankers, *U-487* and *U-488*, were to refuel them west of the Azores. *U-615* was to act as a scout south of the Windward Passage and to engage Allied vessels only if "circumstances were entirely favorable."⁹

During the first week of June, the crew of *U-615* reassembled at La Pallice for the boat's fourth war patrol.¹⁰ After the mandatory examination for venereal disease – captain exempted – there was a raucous sendoff party. Then the men packed their private belongings into trunks, placed their last will and testament on top of them, and offered both up to Flotilla Command for safe-keeping. On June 12, the new Second Watch Officer, Klaus von Egan-Krieger, joined the boat. As Executive Officer Herbert Schlipper backed *U-615* out of the U-boat pen, a mysterious box was handed over.¹¹ The men would later learn that Dönitz had chosen their boat to test out a new "ship finder" called *Nachtferrohr*.¹² It was to be operated by one of the lookouts on the bridge, from where a cable would be run down the conning-tower hatch to the control room and the radio shack. Both "pings" via the headphones and "pips" on a screen would warn of approaching hostiles. Kapitzky alone had the keys to the box.

As *U-615* steamed out into the Rade de la Pallice, the captain broke out the boat's store of shorts, light shirts, canvas slippers, and pith helmets. The men were delighted: this would not be another patrol in the cold, gray wastes of the North Atlantic. To test the effectiveness of the new quadruple anti-aircraft guns, U-Boat Command had bundled five boats together for mutual protection against Allied "bees." It was a wise decision. For ten hours throughout June 14, the flotilla was savagely attacked and depth charged in the Bay of Biscay by Sunderland flying boats as well as Whitley and Wellington bombers. Gunner Helmut Langer managed to shoot down a "four-engine bomber," which could only have been a B-24 Liberator. But in the process, that aircraft's machine guns

shot Gunner Heinz Wilke through the stomach; he bled to death on the upper deck and was buried at sea three days later. The boat sustained only minor damage.

After taking on 20 cbm of fuel oil from *U-535*, U-Boat Command ordered Kapitzy to shape a course for Curaçao. *U-615* no longer was to act as scout for the other boats but to operate off the Dutch island during the “next favorable moon” as convoys were expected to assemble there. The orders were open-ended: “Further cruising according to your own judgment.”¹³ It was a nice birthday (June 28) present for the 27-year-old Kaleu.

On July 13, *U-615* entered the Caribbean via the dangerous coral-reef Anegada Passage in the British Virgin Islands and then headed south. As he approached Curaçao, Kapitzy must have remembered Werner Hartenstein and *U-156*’s surprise attack on the lake tankers off San Nicolas in February 1942. Could Kapitzy repeat that “happy time”?

He could not. Allied ASW had been beefed up and fully integrated since those days. For two weeks, *U-615* was repeatedly forced to execute emergency dives due to constant surface and aerial observation. Kapitzy remained submerged by day, coming up at night to ventilate the boat and to recharge the batteries. He could detect only small coastal vessels. Radar tracked his every move. His hydrophones were useless close in to shore.

On July 28, Kapitzy got lucky. The lookouts sighted the unescorted 3,177-ton Dutch lake tanker *Rosalie* ten miles south of Willemstad. Kapitzy fired two bow torpedoes into the hapless victim; it burst into flames and sank. Then his luck ran out: an Enigma message to U-Boat Headquarters – “Sank a 6,000 ton tanker” – was picked up by the Allies. There ensued, in the words of U-boat historian Clay Blair, “one of the most relentless U-boat hunts of the war.”¹⁴

It began one day after the destruction of the *Rosalie* when an American B-18 out of Aruba found and attacked *U-615*. It continued on July 31 when a Mariner flying boat out of Trinidad made contact and dropped depth charges as well as bombs in the direction of *U-615*. And it continued on August 1 when a B-24 Liberator out of Curaçao found and attacked the boat. None of the pilots spotted “visible evidence of damage.”¹⁵

On August 2, Kapitzy came across Convoy GAT-77 east of the Dutch islands and set out to attack it. At a range of 1,100 yards, the American patrol craft PC-1196 sighted the U-boat’s periscope. It launched five



U-615. One of 568 commissioned Type VIIC 870-ton boats, *U-615* was commissioned in March 1942 and commanded by Kapitänleutnant Ralph Kapitzyk; on her fourth patrol *U-615* fought the longest ongoing battle with aircraft southeast of Curacao, before being depth charged by US *Mariner* and *Ventura* aircraft. Source: Deutsches U-Boot-Museum, Cuxhaven-Altenbruch, Germany.

depth charges and made four “mousetrap” runs over the swirl of *U-615* as it executed an emergency dive. The patrol craft detected diesel oil on the surface but could make no certain damage assessment. But “damage” had been done: *U-615* was now in the crosshairs of every American warship and aircraft in the Caribbean. Perhaps acting on Dönitz’s recall order, Kapitzyk headed due east for Galleon’s Passage between Trinidad Tobago and the open ocean.

For four days, *U-615* eluded its pursuers, mainly by running submerged. The inside of the boat became a veritable hell of heat and humidity, sweat and stench. Kapitzyk took *U-615* up for short spells under the cover of darkness, but he could not escape the prying eyes of enemy radar: on the afternoon of August 5, the destroyer USS *Biddle* obtained an ASDIC contact and depth-charged the raider. Kapitzyk released a *Bold*

sonar decoy to slip away. Yet again, the enemy had a specific “fix” on his position, northwest of Trinidad.

Twin-engine Mariner flying boats scoured the area, ignoring the steady rain and approaching darkness. At midnight¹⁶ on August 5, Lieutenant J. M. Erskine in P-6 of Patrol Squadron VP-204 obtained a radar contact 40 miles northwest of Blanquilla Island, Venezuela. It was *U-615*, running on the surface on an easterly course at a leisurely six knots, likely to conserve fuel and to reduce its wake. Erskine fired off two flares to illuminate the target and then swooped down for the “kill.” At an altitude of 1,600 feet, he dropped two bombs. They exploded with a bright red flash – but *U-615* continued to run on the surface. Apparently, its captain figured that the attack was over.

He was wrong. Erskine banked the Mariner and came back at the submarine. As he flew over its conning tower, he pulled the manual release switches – only to discover to his horror that three of the four depth charges hung up in the bomb bays. The fourth fell harmlessly 150 feet off target. Kapitzky ordered “Emergency Dive!” By the time Erskine could bring the Mariner back for a third attack, the raider was gone.

Another Mariner out of Chaguaramas, P-6, had also arrived on the scene. At 2 a.m. on August 6, it obtained a radar contact. Both Mariners depth-charged the area of the contact – and were aghast to discover that they had bombed not a submarine but a small inter-island schooner. Kapitzky had used it as a radar shadow, and he now resumed his easterly course on the surface.

Kapitzky’s clever escape infuriated Allied shore commands. “Huff-Duff” stations on Trinidad, Antigua, and Dutch Guiana triangulated his position. A Harpoon ASW bomber from VB-130 and two B-18 bombers from Edinburgh Field joined the Mariners in the hunt. The Americans knew precisely where *U-615* was and had established its general course – directly toward the largest US antisubmarine base in the world! They also knew through Enigma decrypts that most of the other Caribbean U-boats were racing for home. Only *U-615* and *U-634* remained in the once “Golden West.” It was just a matter of time.

And time it would take. Instead of immediately concentrating on Kapitzky, the Americans pulled many of their best submarine hunters (including the five tracking Kapitzky) out of the search for *U-615* and

assigned them to guard four large convoys then in Trinidadian waters. It was a major tactical blunder as it left only a single Mariner, Lieutenant A. R. Matuski's P-4 of VP-205, to take care of *U-615*. For much of the morning of Friday, August 6, Matuski flew a barrier search over the U-boat's last reported position. Kapitzky tracked the Mariner through his sky telescope and timed the American's approaches. A former Luftwaffe flyer, he made a rough calculation that he would have ten minutes between Matuski's "loops" to surface and charge his batteries for the run past Trinidad. He brought *U-615* to the surface. "Both Engines! Full Ahead!" *U-615* knifed through the water at 17 knots. The batteries were coming back to life and fresh ocean air was sucked into the boat. Around 1:30 p.m., Kapitzky ordered a routine "Dive!" as his stopwatch told him that Matuski was due back soon. A last 360-degree sweep by the bridge watch showed nothing in the sky.

Kapitzky never knew what hit him. Four depth charges exploded all around the boat at roughly 50 meters depth. *U-615* began to violently whip up and down – now by the bow, then by the stern. All the while, it continued its rapid descent. The terrified crew in the control room saw the depth indicator needle dip past 240 meters, twice the builder's maximum limit. The pressure hull groaned and creaked. Chief Engineer Skora was finally able to trim the boat by blowing the ballast tanks. Machinist Mate Reinhold Abel later recalled: "Damages: water break-in in the engine room – lights out and loss of the depth regulator – pressure hull bulkheads bent in 1.5 m[eters] near the air intake manifold."¹⁷ In layman's language, *U-615* with its cracked pressure hull and flooded engine room could now operate, if at all, only on the surface. Further investigation showed that both electric motors and the port diesel engine were out of commission, that numerous high-pressure air lines had blown, and that the lubricating oil tank had ruptured and its contents spilled into the bilge. Kapitzky decided to surface.

Lieutenant Matuski could not believe his good fortune: almost directly below him, a heavily damaged German U-boat had shot up out of the sea bow first in a gigantic swirl of foam and air. He immediately notified Chaguaramas and then, like any good pilot, powered up his two 1,700-hp Wright engines and swooped in for what could only be a certain quick "kill."

Kapitzky ordered the gun crews up on deck to man all ten anti-aircraft guns as well as the 3.7-cm semiautomatic cannon. The boat spewed out a deadly fire of more than 5,000 rounds per minute at the incoming *Mariner*. They struck home with lethal force. “P-4 damaged – damaged – Fire” was the last message Matuski sent off just before the *Mariner* and its crew of 11 crashed into the sea and exploded. A broken wingtip float, an uninflated dinghy, and a waterlogged cardboard box were all that was left of Matuski and P-4.¹⁸

Kapitzky took stock of his situation. The bilge pumps in the engine room could not keep water from rising in the stern. Both diesels and both electric motors were down. Hostile air forces undoubtedly were already on their way for a final attack. Nightfall was still six or seven hours off. The closest land was 250 kilometers away. He had to make the most critical decision of his life – and fast. Undoubtedly, Captain Godt’s scathing after-action reports raced through his mind. After the second patrol, Godt had chastised Kapitzky for “prematurely diving” at the approach of hostile ASW forces; after the third, for diving “when an aircraft is already too close” and for not repelling “1st attack surfaced.” Finally, Godt had challenged the *Kaleu* to develop “a healthy portion of self-confidence and optimism.”

Ralph Kapitzky decided to show U-Boat Command his mettle. While Skora and the technical crew labored to restart one of the diesels and to work the bilge pumps in the stern, Kapitzky, Schlipper, Egan-Krieger, and Chief Petty Officer Hans-Peter Dittmer supervised the transfer of the remaining stocks of 2-cm and 3.7-cm ammunition up on deck. Just in time: at 3:30 p.m., the watch reported an aircraft approaching at 11,000 meters.

“Battle Stations!” The attacker was another *Mariner*, P-11 of Patrol Squadron VP-205 out of Chaguaramas. At the controls sat Lieutenant (jg) L. D. Crockett, an experienced pilot and one thirsting for revenge ever since his copilot had been killed by gunners from *U-406* just three weeks earlier.¹⁹ Crockett circled the crippled U-boat below him, radioed his position back to base, and then began his attack run. The P-11’s anxious gunners opened fire with the twin Browning .50-caliber machine guns in the nose turret a mile from target. Kapitzky held his fire until the *Mariner* was 300 meters away. Gunners Langner and Dittmer were

sharp as ever: their first bursts holed the aircraft and one 2-cm shell ripped through the starboard wing root, starting a gasoline-fed fire. Crockett released two MK-17 aerial bombs. They landed harmlessly off the U-boat's port quarter.

With the Mariner pouring out a steady plume of smoke and fire and in danger of exploding at any moment, Crockett pressed home a second attack. Navy Machinist A. S. Creider climbed into the Mariner's wing root and with a spare shirt tried to smother the flames. For a second time, the two antagonists blazed away at each other. As he passed over the submarine's conning tower, Crockett released four MK-44 depth charges. He then banked away from the deadly wall of anti-aircraft fire and saw four gigantic columns of water arise all around the U-boat. He had landed a deadly punch. Numerous new cracks opened in the boat's hull and the sea began to rush in. The men inside the boat were working in water up to their knees. *U-615*'s stern settled ever deeper into the sea, while its bow rose concomitantly. The boat was in danger of sliding into the depths by the stern. Kapitzky and Skora urged on the men at the pumps and ordered others to join them. The boat was turning in circles as the last attack had jammed one of the rudders hard-a-starboard. *U-615* was a sitting duck.

Less than an hour after Crockett's second attack, a Ventura PV-2 Harpoon bomber, B-5 of VB-130, arrived on the scene and joined the Mariner in a combined attack. They approached the stricken submarine flying just 50 feet over the water. Kapitzky instructed his gunners to ignore the shattered Mariner and to concentrate on the Harpoon and its five machine guns. Roaring in at 280 knots, Lieutenant T. M. Holmes' B-5 flew through not only Kapitzky's tracer bullets, but also Crockett's .50-caliber shells. It then bracketed *U-615* with four 325-lb. bombs. It should have been the end – but instead of ripping the U-boat apart, the simultaneous explosions of the depth charges drove *U-615* under the sea, taking its tethered bridge personnel and those inside the craft with it and washing its gunners into the sea. After what must have been a terrifying 15 seconds, *U-615* came back up. Some of the gunners swam back to the boat and manned their weapons. As Crockett came in for a third attack, which he took to be a certain “kill,” he was met instead by yet another withering hail of machine-gun fire and had to veer off sharply.

How long could this go on? Despite the best efforts of the men at the pumps, *U-615* was sinking by the stern. A single electric motor had been made operable. Most gauges and instruments had long been smashed. Damage control as such was non-existent. Incapable of diving or of steaming, *U-615* had been reduced to a beleaguered (and sinking) gun platform.

At 6 p.m., Mariner P-8 of VP-204, Lieutenant (jg) John W. Dresbach at the controls, arrived at the scene and joined P-11 and B-5 in a concerted effort finally to sink *U-615*. Dresbach came in low from the stern at 190 knots. A burst of fire from Kapitzky's quadruple anti-aircraft guns smashed through the Mariner's nose, killing its pilot instantly and knocking out the plane's radar and automatic pilot. The four depth charges that Dresbach had released just before dying exploded harmlessly in the water. Inside the cockpit of P-8, copilot Oran Christian grabbed the control yoke with one hand and Dresbach with the other, until the crew could claw the dead pilot out of his seat. In anger, Christian wiped the blood off the cockpit windshield and barreled in for a second attack. He released two depth charges at 1,500 feet; they exploded some 300 feet off the submarine's port side. The wind fairly whistled through the gaping holes that Kapitzky's gunners had made in P-8. The two attacks lifted *U-615*'s stern out of the water, smashed its recently jerry-rigged rudder, and shredded its aft diving planes. More holes in the pressure hull. More water in the boat. *U-615*'s stern sank below the sea again. Shore installations by now had all tuned in to the reports coming from Crockett for none could believe that the German submarine was still afloat. US Navy Command ordered three warships out of Grenada and the brand-new destroyer USS *Walker* out of the Gulf of Paria to rid the Caribbean of Kapitzky and *U-615*.

The last attack had again been costly for *U-615*.²⁰ Chief Petty Officer Dittmer, a veteran of 13 previous war patrols, had been shot through the head by one of the Harpoon's shells and blown clean overboard. Gunner Langner, who had brought down the four-engine bomber in the Bay of Biscay and had just helped destroy Matuski's Mariner, had taken a heavy-caliber bullet to the knee; he would later bleed to death. Some of the Mariner's other shells had torn into Kapitzky's thigh. He lay slumped in a corner of the bridge, bleeding heavily, the shattered leg crazily drooped across his chest. He was given morphine and propped up

against the periscope standard. His last orders were to transfer command to Schlipper and to be remembered to his parents.

At about 6:30 p.m., yet another Mariner hove into sight: P-2 from VP-205, piloted by Lieutenant-Commander R. S. Hull. Yet again, Crockett directed an attack on the U-boat by all four aircraft. It was another bitter disappointment: the Mariner's bomb doors opened prematurely ("failure of the release mechanism") and its stick of depth charges exploded harmlessly 600 feet astern *U-615*. Furious, Hull took his machine up to 1,500 feet and then roared in for a visual bombing run – both bombs splashed harmlessly into the water some 500 feet from the sub. *U-615*'s gunners were as deadly as ever, and Hull was forced to take his battered Mariner back to base. At 6:40 p.m., the Harpoon also informed Crockett that it had to return to base because it was running low on fuel. Darkness finally fell on hell.

But all was not calm. At the last twilight, yet another tormentor arrived: Lieutenant Milton Wiederhold's B-18 bomber out of Edinburgh Field. The indefatigable Crockett set up yet another attack run on *U-615* – but, to his dismay, it was gone. Darkness and a tropical rain storm had swallowed up the boat. Navy Airship K68 had also arrived on the scene. At 9:15 p.m., its pilot, Lieutenant (jg) Wallace Wydean, spotted *U-615* on the surface between two rain squalls and guided Wiederhold's B-18 in on its attack run. For the last time, *U-615*'s gunners put up a blistering hail of anti-aircraft fire. The depth charges from the B-18 rocked the U-boat, but they were not close enough to sink it. By the time the American bomber returned on a second run, rain squalls again had enveloped *U-615*. Wydean had been so engrossed in the action that he forgot to check his fuel situation; when ordered home, he was too far away and had to crash-land K68 on Blanquilla Island. Heavy winds tore the beached blimp to shreds the next day. It was *U-615*'s last victim.

U-615 had been depth-charged 14 times by seven different aircraft. It barely remained afloat. Its ammunition had been shot off. Its engines were down. Its rudders and aft dive planes were shattered. Some of its bulkheads had been caved in and its pressure hull compromised. Up above, a dozen Mariners were still searching for it. Schlipper assembled the crew on the foredeck in order to press down the bow and thereby raise the stern. He asked Machinist Mate Abel to go below to take charge of damage

control. Miraculously, Abel kept the bilge pumps going through the night and even occasionally blew high-pressure air into the diving tanks to prevent the boat from sinking.

* * *

The story of the last night on *U-615* became (and remains) the subject of wild speculation and myth-making, increasing in drama with every telling. In his original (1988) account, historian Gaylord T. M. Kelshall had Kapitzy quietly bleeding to death propped up against the periscope standard.²¹ Ten years later, after an interview with Executive Officer Schlipper – who allegedly gave Kelshall a “Kapitzy Diary” (improbably saved off the sinking *U-615*!) – the story of Kapitzy’s last hours took a much more dramatic turn.²² The skipper, mortally wounded and profusely bleeding, managed to greet and to shake hands with every member of the crew as they came up on deck. He even joked with some of them. As the seas grew rougher during the night, Schlipper had Kapitzy and Langner placed in a rubber dinghy. An exceptionally high wave swept the small craft off the deck. Seaman First Class Richard Sura dived into the dark waters to retrieve it, but as he brought the dinghy alongside the U-boat, his body slipped beneath the sea. Others took up the cause and eventually brought the dinghy, as well as Kapitzy and Langner, back safely. The Old Man was still in a joking mood, telling his Executive Officer that he now qualified for the “Silver Wounded Badge.”

Sometime around 1 a.m., Kelshall relates, the commander who “had fought the greatest battle of the war against aircraft” died. There then ensued a Wagnerian funeral befitting the opera stage at Bayreuth. Amid the “background sound of snarling hunter’s [*sic*] engines overhead, complimented [*sic*] by lightning and rolls of thunder, with the lashing rain soaking everyone,” the sailors sewed Kapitzy’s corpse into a hammock and weighted down his feet. Then they lustily sang “the traditional naval hymn, the words of which were heard in the fierce wind and rain.” As “the body of their much beloved commander slid over the side,” the boat’s “gunners stood to their weapons.” Chief Engineer Skora recalls a more simple order of events. “The commander was committed overboard to the Caribbean Sea during the night 6/7,” August 1943.²³

There is no doubt that the final night on board the barely floating hulk that once was *U-615* must have been frightening. The men had suffered two days of aerial depth charges and strafing runs. Their captain and their best gunner lay dead on the deck. Their much-loved petty officer, Dittmer, had been shot to death and hurled overboard by the machine-gun blast. Nineteen sailors were wounded, some bleeding profusely. The casings were awash with seawater. It was pitch black, with rain, thunder, and lightning flashing all about. They were in shark-infested waters about 250 kilometers from the nearest land. Their prospects were not good.

The first rays of light brought a “smoke smudge” on the horizon. Rescue? Or death? The sailors grabbed life vests and floats, took to the water, and grouped around the rubber dinghy. Schlipper and Skora joined Abel inside the boat and blew the last remaining high-pressure air out of Diving Tank No. 3, allowing seawater to rush in. By the time they returned on deck, they were standing in deep water. *U-615* slipped beneath the sea around 5 a.m. on August 7, 1943. No one bothered to take along the “top-secret” *Nachtferrohr*, for it had detected not a single attacker. The last thing the survivors of *U-615* saw was its conning tower emblem: a torpedo across which a winged aerial bomb had been superimposed. Fitting!

The “smoke smudge” on the horizon was the USS *Walker* under Commander O. F. Gregor. At 5:25 a.m., *Walker* sighted red flares off the port bow, and 22 minutes later the conning tower of a “submarine apparently submerging” at 16,000 yards. Leery of possible U-boats in the area, *Walker* approached the source “zig zagging radically at high speeds.” At 6:07 a.m., Gregor spied survivors in a raft. He began rescue operations at once, and after a brief interruption at 6:55 a.m. caused by a false “contact” report, hauled “3 officers, 40 enlisted men and 1 dead enlisted man” out of the water. He ordered medical attention to three survivors for gunshot wounds, one for shrapnel wounds, and 15 for “superficial lacerations, contusions and abrasions.”²⁴

Pilots Crockett, Christian, and Dresbach (posthumously) were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for their valor in destroying *U-615*. Both *The New York Times* and the *Reader's Digest* eulogized their actions in feature articles in November 1943.

For Karl Dönitz, the destruction of *U-615* was but the most dramatic episode in the “killing” of eight of the 13 boats that he had dispatched

to the Caribbean in June 1943, in return for a mere three ships of 17,000 tons sunk. After several futile attempts to reach Kapitzky on August 11, 14, and 18, Captain Godt declared *U-615* “potentially lost” on August 30, 1943, and “formally lost” on May 18, 1944.²⁵ On August 18, 1943, U-Boat Command had fired off an ominous last Enigma message: “No refueling possible for Kapitzky (615).”²⁶ It was a fitting epitaph.

* * *

In January 1943, Admiral Karl Dönitz had awarded Albrecht Achilles the Knight’s Cross for his spectacular attacks on Port of Spain and Castries. It brought the young “ace” no luck. A harrowing fourth war patrol to Newfoundland and Rhode Island in Force 6 to 7 seas battered the slender craft, and its only “kill” was the 250-ton brig *Angelus* of Montreal, loaded with molasses. A despondent Achilles did not even submit an after-action report for the wretched patrol. U-Boat Command laconically commented, “Patrol by a single craft which, despite long duration, brought no special success. Only minimal traffic encountered, but strong sea and air patrols. The sinking of a brig by artillery is the only consolation. Nothing else to be noted.”²⁷

As always, Dönitz had technological innovations on hand. The entire conning tower was reinforced with protective shielding. As well, *U-161* became the first boat to receive the new “W. Anz g 1” direction-finder receiver of the Hagenuk Company. Formally introduced into the U-Boat Service as FuMB-9, it became *Wanze*, or “bedbug,” in crew parlance. Dönitz was certain that he had found the “cure” for Allied “direction-finding.” Due to the frequency of enemy air attacks, he added a medical doctor to the crew of each boat. In the case of *U-161*, this was Oberleutnant Dr. Thilo Weiss. U-Boat Command obviously had taken the Kaleus’ after-action reports concerning Allied air attacks seriously.

Achilles took *U-161* out of Lorient on August 8. His orders were to rendezvous with Shinji Uchino’s submarine *I-8* west of the Azores. Thereafter, *U-161* was to proceed to the coast of Brazil. After crossing the Bay of Biscay, *U-161* steamed down the coast of Iberia and headed for the prearranged rendezvous with *I-8*.²⁸ Codenamed *Flieger* (Lilac), the Japanese blockade runner carried an extra crew of 48 sailors; Uchino



The Crew of *U-161* musters topside for the loading/unloading of torpedoes. Source: Ken Macpherson Photographic Archives, Library and Archives at The Military Museums, Libraries and Cultural Resources, University of Calgary.

was to take possession of the new *U-1224*, a gift from Hitler to Emperor Hirohito. After firing the recognition signal, *Achilles* sent one officer and four radio operators as well as a brand-new *Wanze* over to *I-8* by rubber dinghy. Uchino then made for Brittany to load aircraft engines, torpedoes, and anti-aircraft guns as well as German advisors for the return leg of the journey. But Hirohito would be denied the Führer's present, grandiosely misnamed "Marco Polo II": bound for Japan, the renamed *RO-501* was sunk by depth charges from the destroyer USS *Francis M. Robinson* northwest of the Cape Verde Islands on May 13, 1944.

Achilles headed for Brazil. He met the homeward-bound *U-198* in the South Atlantic on September 5, handed over a *Wanze* receiver, and took on fuel oil. The next day U-Boat Command ordered *U-161* to proceed to Bahia to begin the war patrol. Around 5 p.m.,²⁹ on September 19, off Martin Vaz Rocks, *Achilles* found the unescorted 5,472-ton British

steam freighter *St. Usk*. It was armed and loaded with 6,500 tons of Brazilian rice, tinned meat, and cotton seed, bound from Rio de Janeiro to Freetown. Achilles fired a single torpedo, hitting the target aft but not sinking it. Master G. H. Moss immediately ordered a zigzag course. Darkness set in. Achilles pursued and just before midnight fired two torpedoes. Despite hearing "powerful muffled thuds," Moss's ship refused to go under. Again, Achilles pursued. At 6:50 a.m. the next morning, he loosed a single torpedo at the plucky vessel; it struck aft of the port side in the No. 5 Hold. The ship's main top-mast came down, the derricks were shattered, and the propeller was blown off. Moss ordered "Abandon Ship!" and the *St. Usk* sank by the stern an hour later.

Achilles made for the lifeboats. After apologizing for sinking the ship, he handed the survivors coffee and water, ordered Dr. Weiss to attend to the wounded, and then presented a small-scale chart on which he drew a course for Bahia, 500 miles away. Acting on Dönitz's standing order, he took its master prisoner but released the rest of the crew of 47 in the lifeboats. Chief Officer E. C. Martyn remembered the submarine's commander, dressed in khaki shorts, tropical jacket with battered epaulettes and "forage" cap, as "a young man, in his early thirties," with "hair of medium colouring, and face sunburned," with small but "well kept hands," and fluent in English, "with no trace of an accent." The crew he judged to be all very young, with the exception of the doctor, who was "grey-haired."³⁰

On September 26, off Maceió, Achilles came across another unescorted loner, the 4,998-ton Brazilian packet ship *Itapagé*, bound from Rio de Janeiro to Belém with 600 tons of general cargo.³¹ At 3:50 p.m., he fired two torpedoes into its starboard side. The vessel sank within four minutes. Eighteen of its crew and four passengers were killed; 85 survivors made it in lifeboats to São Miguel dos Campos. That same day, *U-161* possibly also found the 300-ton sailing ship *Cisne Branco*, carrying a load of salt, and sank it with a single torpedo. Six of its complement of ten were eventually rescued.³² Later that evening, Achilles took his boat to the mouth of the São Francisco River, north of Aracajú, in hopes of encountering other unescorted merchantmen.

By now, US Navy ASW forces stationed in Brazil were scouring the coast off Bahia in search of the raider. They had read "all pertinent [radio]

traffic” emanating from *U-161* through ULTRA intercepts and began to close the noose. During the night of September 26, “Huff-Duff” operators got a rough fix on the U-boat, and next morning several aircraft flew barrier sweeps over the suspected location. One of those was a Martin PBM-3C Mariner flying boat, P-2 of Patrol Squadron VP-74, piloted by Lieutenant (jg) Harry B. Patterson.³³ The blue-gray Mariner had lifted off the waters at Aratú at 9:29 a.m. It was a clear, cloudless day with unlimited visibility. Patterson climbed to 4,500 feet. At 10:50 a.m., Radioman D. A. Bealer made a contact at 38 miles. It was a submarine bearing eight degrees to port and making flank speed, 18 knots. Why, Patterson must have wondered, this extravagant use of fuel? Was it pursuing fresh prey?

The P-2 quickly closed range. Within five minutes Lieutenant (jg) Charles Ferguson, second pilot, made visual contact at 18 miles, attracted by the fully surfaced submarine’s wide white wake. Patterson sounded battle stations, brought the Mariner up to 180 knots, and executed a shallow turn to the left “to take advantage of the sun.” The flying boat’s oyster-white bottom was perfectly suited to the conditions. Patterson decided to attack the raider’s stern. At a range of seven to eight miles, the U-boat’s gunners suddenly sent up steady bursts of anti-aircraft fire, all of it short, leaving only “white puffs” in a line across P-2’s approach. Achilles had well remembered Dönitz’s admonition: “In case of doubt, stay up top and shoot!” But he had overestimated the range of his new guns. *U-161* turned to port to keep the flying boat off its stern. Patterson was confused: in the past, the boats had always presented a beam target.

Second Watch Officer Detlef Knackfuss’s gunners were superb, and a stream of fire from the twin and quadruple mounts of 2-cm guns whistled past the Mariner, buffeting it with air turbulence. At 3,000 yards, Bow Gunner L. V. Schocklin opened fire with the .50-caliber Browning machine guns. He squeezed off 1,000 rounds and was certain that he had wounded or killed several gunners on the U-boat’s deck. But the “twin fifties” were still out of range. By now, only 75 to 100 feet above the sea, Patterson approached *U-161* over the port stern. Copilot Ferguson dropped a string of six Mark 44 Torpex-filled bombs. Patterson then banked the Mariner into a sharp left turn to escape Knackfuss’s lethal fire.

Hell broke loose all around *U-161*. The Mariner’s tail and waist gunners saw one depth charge explode off the starboard side “abeam quarter,”

another off the starboard stern. The U-boat was engulfed in sea spray. The Americans assumed some damage to the submarine. VP-74 Squadron Commander G. C. Merrick later estimated that the six depth bombs “were slightly over to starboard, believed within damage range of submarine’s stern.”

Achilles opted to stay on the surface and fight it out. He used his 10.5-cm deck gun whenever P-2 was off in the distance and his 2-cm cannons whenever it closed range. After reaching 800 feet, Patterson renewed the attack. The fire from the U-boat was “heavier and more accurate,” the shells exploding just off P-2’s port side. Then one struck the flying boat forward of the galley door, the “shrapnel and aluminum” severely injuring Radioman Bealer and Ensign Oliver J. Brett, the bombardier. Patterson continued his run. Fergerson dropped the remaining two Mark 44 bombs as the Mariner passed over the target from stern to bow at 150 feet. Both bombs exploded near the submarine. *U-161* slewed almost to a halt and “maneuvered erratically and violently.” Patterson observed: “after deck awash,” “light grey smoke ... in addition to diesel fumes,” and “small fire believed begun near [conning tower] base on after deck.” The submarine’s stern “vibrated.” Still, the gun crews were putting out a “continuous fire.” Commander Merrick later recorded that the last two charges “were on the starboard quarter,” and again “within damage range of the submarine’s stern.”

Patterson brought the flying boat up to 2,500 feet. He then went back for a final look. At 11:22 p.m., he saw *U-161* “submerge.” He dropped a marker over the swirl and headed back to base to get medical treatment for his crew. A US Navy Lockheed Ventura bomber from VB-129 arrived a short time later but saw neither the U-boat nor its survivors.

U-161 disappeared beneath the waves 250 miles south of Recife, Brazil, in two miles of water. No sign of either the boat or its 52-man crew (and Master Moss of the *St. Usk*) was ever seen. Thus, one can only speculate on “Ajax” Achilles’ final moments. From all reports by the crew of the P-2 Mariner, the six Mark 44 aerial bombs had started a “small fire” near the conning tower, brought the craft to a virtual halt, forced the stern to “vibrate,” caused the craft to emit “light grey smoke,” and so damaged the aft that *U-161* “maneuvered erratically and violently.” Under these conditions, and knowing that the Mariner undoubtedly had reported his

position and called in reinforcements, “the ferret of Port of Spain” apparently had decided to seek safety by going deep. Historian Gaylord Kelshall speculates: “If this is the case then the occupants of U161 must have died under nightmare circumstances, diving deeper and deeper, with the boat out of control, until the sea finally claimed them.”³⁴

When Achilles failed to reply to urgent Enigma messages on October 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, and 19 – including a dire warning that he was thereby violating Paragraph 354 of the *Captain's Handbook* – U-Boat Command deemed *U-161* to have been “sunk by Brazilian air force.”³⁵ But how? Had the Hagenuk *Wanze* failed to detect enemy aircraft? Had the anti-aircraft guns malfunctioned? Or were even the quadruple cannons inadequate to bring Allied planes out of the skies? On April 5, 1945, Dönitz posthumously promoted Achilles to the rank of Korvettenkapitän.³⁶

Within one calendar year the “Great Lion” had lost his four Caribbean “aces”: Otto Ites of *U-94* in August and Jürgen Wattenberg of *U-162* in September 1942; Werner Hartenstein of *U-156* in March and Albrecht Achilles of *U-161* in September 1943. There no longer were sufficient boats and veteran skippers to mount attack waves against the font of Allied oil refining. Two-thirds of the U-boat tanker fleet (*U-487*, *U-459*, *U-461*, *U-462*, and *U-489*) needed to support operations in distant waters had been destroyed in less than four weeks, from July 13 to August 4, 1943. Allied air and surface ASW with its unfathomable new technologies – “Huff-Duff,” Leigh Lights, ASV radar – had gained the upper hand in the Battle of the Atlantic.

For the time being, there was nothing that Dönitz could offer his commanders, save more exhortations. “Take Advantage of any chance to attack.” “Bring honor to your name.” “Go after ’em at top speed.” “Something must be sunk out of this convoy tonight. At ’em.” “You have only tonight left, so put all you have into it.”³⁷ For the late fall of 1943, he placed his hopes in German engineers to come up with antidotes to the deadly Allied ASW technologies. But the days of the “Golden West,” when half a dozen U-boats could wreak havoc with Caribbean oil, were a thing of the past. Operation New Land had run its course.