



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

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A HARD WAR: HARTENSTEIN AND *U-156*

The loss of Otto Ites in *U-94* and Jürgen Wattenberg in *U-162* made clear to Admiral Karl Dönitz that Allied antisubmarine warfare in the Caribbean basin had improved dramatically. The enemy was now able routinely to detect the “gray sharks” and then to direct airplanes and flying boats with new “direction finders” (radar) to destroy them. The seven Type IXC boats that sailed to the Americas in July 1942 had torpedoed 23 ships of 130,000 tons – about three ships of 18,500 tons per boat. The five Type IXC boats that sortied in the Caribbean in August 1942 did even better, sinking 30 ships of 143,000 tons – six ships of 28,600 tons each. But the overall balance sheet was negative: in 1942, American, British, and Canadian shipyards produced 7.1 million tons of new merchant shipping (including 92 large tankers), about one million tons more than the U-boats destroyed.¹ Obviously, the “gray sharks” were not making a major dent in the Allies’ merchant-ship pool of 30 million tons. The constantly updated charts at U-Boat Headquarters made clear to Dönitz that the Allies were beginning to win his “tonnage war.”

There were other setbacks. On October 21, 15 of 90 B-17 and B-24 bombers from General Ira Eaker’s American Eighth Air Force Bomber Command in Britain dropped 60,000 lbs. of bombs on Lorient, killing 160 Germans and 180 conscripted Belgian or Dutch laborers. They did little damage to the massive steel-reinforced concrete U-boat pens at Kéroman. In nine follow-up raids to January 3, 1943, 357 of 870 bombers reached Lorient and dropped their loads.² The raids drove home the point that the Allies had seized the initiative. After several follow-up bombing runs by the Royal Air Force in January and February 1943, most of the

civilians not employed in the German war effort fled Lorient. The port became part devastated ghost town and part German war base, a purely military target.

Also critically, and of course unknown to Dönitz, Bletchley Park's code-breakers (ULTRA), using the Short Weather Keys recently taken off *U-559* after it had been attacked by three Royal Navy destroyers in the Mediterranean, managed by December 13, 1942, to get enough "cribs" finally to break the German four-rotor "Triton" Enigma keys.³ By the end of the month, they were able to achieve solutions in about 12 hours.

But there was much bleaker news from the larger war front. In November, the Allies dramatically altered the strategic situation in North Africa. By November 4, General Bernard Montgomery's Eighth Army had stopped Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps dead in its tracks at El Alamein, ending forever German hopes of taking the Suez Canal and gaining access to the vast oil reserves of the Middle East. Four days later, Anglo-American ground forces landed at Morocco and Algeria (Operation TORCH), meeting opposition only from some Vichy French forces stationed in Algeria. The Afrika Korps was now sandwiched between two Allied armies. Benito Mussolini's cherished "Italian lake," the Mediterranean, was again firmly in Allied hands.

The greater disaster, of course, came in the East. On January 31, 1943, the newly promoted Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus surrendered the Sixth Army at Stalingrad: a Soviet counteroffensive by Aleksandr Vasilevsky and Georgi Zhukov resulted in the death of 147,000 and the capture of 91,000 German and Romanian soldiers. It was a strategic defeat of the first magnitude. Operation Blue's initial successes of the summer in the South had turned to disaster. Visions of German control of the Eurasian heartland as far eastward as the Caspian Sea receded from view, as did those of control of the Transcaucasian oilfields. Germany had lost the initiative in the war in the East as well.

For Dönitz, these setbacks seemed to demand a drastic reassessment of the Battle of the Atlantic. Instead, his war diary (KTB) revealed a strange composite of operations manual and pep-rally script. On August 11, 1942, he yet again insisted that the U-boat war was purely an operational art form, and not a strategic design. It was all a simple matter of "sinkings, regardless where and whether [the ships were] loaded or in

ballast.”⁴ One of Grand Admiral Erich Raeder’s staff officers could not help but sarcastically note “truly remarkable” in the margin of the document where Dönitz had juxtaposed “strategic pressure” and tactical “sinkings”; he wondered whether “Commander U-Boats has been misled in these matters or simply does not want to understand them”!⁵

One month later Dönitz acknowledged that Operation Neuland had run its course.⁶ “After the disappearance of single-ship traffic, the area [Caribbean] no longer bears fruit. Strong aerial surveillance makes an attack approach against a convoy difficult, if not impossible.” The few successes that his skippers recently had scored were due “mainly to chance.” Moreover, “these successes have been paid for by relatively high losses ... presumably due to air attacks.” German radar detectors such as the FuMB-1 produced by the French firms Metox and Grandin had proven ineffective against Allied “direction finders,” and the tropical heat hardly made “lengthy sorties promising.” From now on, Commander U-Boats would dispatch boats to the Caribbean only in small groups of two or three.

In November 1942, Dönitz again consigned his purely operational thoughts about the Battle of the Atlantic to the war diary: “The tonnage war is the primary task of the U-boats, perhaps the decisive contribution by the U-boats to the outcome of the war,” he wrote. “It must be conducted where the greatest successes can be gained at the least cost.” All available boats needed “to be concentrated for this primary task,” even “at the cost of thereby creating gaps and weaknesses in other areas.”⁷ The frequency of such entries into his official war diary allows the comment that they seem almost to be mental reminders as well as operational justifications for the simple “tonnage war” that he was waging against the Allies.

By spring 1943, the pep-rally rhetoric totally dominated Dönitz’s war diary. Early in May 1943, he “demanded” of his captains that they “continue resolutely to take up the struggle with the enemy,” that they counter “his cunning and technical innovations” with their own “ingenuity, ability and iron will.”⁸ Later that month, he called on them to sink and sink, fight and fight, and “force the enemy to undergo a permanent bloodletting, one by which even the strongest body must slowly and inevitably bleed to death.”⁹ Dönitz had chosen his words carefully: the term “bleed white” had been used by General Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the General

Staff, in his Christmas Memorandum of 1915 to justify the war of attrition planned at Verdun the following spring.

Dönitz's professional life soon was radically changed by events over which he had no control. Adolf Hitler had increasingly become disenchanted with the role of the surface fleet in the war – beginning with the scuttling of the “pocket” battleship *Graf Spee* in Montevideo in December 1939, through the sinking of the brand-new battleship *Bismarck* in the Atlantic in May 1941, to the interminable delays in working up its sister ship *Tirpitz*. The last straw in that seemingly endless list of failures and disappointments had come on December 31, 1942, when the heavy cruisers *Hipper* and *Lützow* failed to dispatch Convoy JW.51B in the Arctic, with *Hipper* limping back to port heavily damaged.

Over lunch on December 30, the Führer had bitingly informed Vice Admiral Theodor Krancke, Raeder's representative at Military Headquarters, that the German Navy was but a carbon copy of the British Royal Navy, “only more miserable, the U-boats excepted.” The fleet “lacked the willingness to engage; [the] ships lay around in fjords like so much scrap metal; are totally useless.” By New Year's Day, Hitler had worked himself up into a full lather. Furiously pacing up and down in his bunker at the Wolf's Lair near Rastenburg, East Prussia, he spat out the full measure of his venom at Krancke. “Ships totally worthless; because of the lying about inactive and the lack of willingness to engage, are only a hearth of revolution; this means the death of the High Sea Fleet.” The reference to the mutiny in the fleet that had precipitated the revolution of 1918 was intended to cut to the quick. More, German surface ships fired only on unarmed freighters; unlike the Royal Navy, they did not “fight to the bitter end.”¹⁰ To rub salt into the wound, Hitler ordered his comments to be taken down in writing, with Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht (OKW), as witness.

Still, Hitler was not done. On January 6, 1943, he subjected the Commander in Chief Kriegsmarine to a 90-minute tirade about the ineffectiveness first of the Prussian and later of the German surface fleet. It had remained “without effect” during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71); it had remained “without effect” during World War I; and its role in the revolution of 1918 and the scuttling at Scapa Flow in 1919 constituted “no page of honor” in its history. Now, as then, the light forces, and especially

the U-boats, were carrying the main burden of the war. The Führer demanded that the “big ships” be mothballed and their guns deployed as land-based artillery.¹¹

Raeder was crushed. He immediately requested that he be allowed to retire, effective January 30, 1943 – the tenth anniversary of his service to the Führer. As a possible successor, he suggested two men, Rolf Carls and Karl Dönitz. Given Hitler’s rant against the surface fleet (with which Carls had served both as its Chief and as Naval Commander North), the choice was simple: on January 31, Dönitz was promoted to the rank of grand admiral and appointed Commander in Chief Navy. As well, he continued in his role as Commander U-Boats, elevating Generaladmiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg to chief of staff, with the formal title of Commanding Admiral, U-Boats.

With regard to the Battle of the Atlantic, Dönitz’s immediate mission was to destroy as much of the American supply line to the fighting fronts in North Africa as possible. In March 1943, the greatest convoy battles of World War II took place in the turbulent waters of the North Atlantic: while the U-boats were able to destroy 84 merchant ships of 505,000 tons, they lost 14 boats and 650 men of their own. For the first time in the war, aircraft sank more “gray sharks” than did surface craft in a given month.

Dönitz apprised Hitler of the seriousness of the situation.¹² “Losses are high. The U-boats’ struggle is hard.” Still, there was no alternative other than to continue the fight, to destroy 100,000 to 200,000 tons more shipping per month than the Allies could build. To “bleed the enemy white” – a term that he used again – the Reich would have to escalate U-boat production from 27 boats per month in the first half of 1944 to 30 by the end of 1945. Losses among the roughly 425 to 438 boats on patrol continued at a relatively steady rate: 19 in February, 15 in March, and 14 in April 1943. But in May, when Dönitz learned that the Allies had destroyed 38 U-boats – which he termed “a frightful total” – he came to the “logical conclusion” of withdrawing the boats from the North Atlantic. From now on, they would be deployed in the “area south-west of the Azores.”¹³ This made sense because the Allies, highly concerned about the loss of tankers in the Caribbean basin, had directed them to take their oil to Cape Town, South Africa, where naval units operating in the Indian Ocean could draw fuel.

Dönitz was fully aware that he was losing the “tonnage war.” On January 6, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt personally had delivered his annual Budget Message to the Congress. It was a blockbuster. He demanded that the Republic raise its production of aircraft from 45,000 in 1942 to 75,000 in 1943, and of tanks from 45,000 to 75,000 during that same period. His figures for new merchant-ship construction were still more staggering: from 1.1 million tons in 1941 to six million in 1942 and to ten million by 1943. The American press calculated that this would translate into “a plane every four minutes in 1943; a tank every seven minutes; two seagoing ships a day.”¹⁴

While Hitler and his propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, decried Roosevelt’s demands as constituting “hysterically inflated figures,” “absolute nonsense,” and Jewish-inspired “truly criminal politics,”¹⁵ Dönitz appreciated that the United States was becoming the major player in the Battle of the Atlantic. In 1942, the Republic built more than 15,000 aircraft and, in 1943, almost 25,000, as well as 108 warships in 1942 and 369 in 1943. With regard to merchant shipbuilding, US yards produced 5.5 million tons in 1942 and a staggering 11.4 million in 1943.¹⁶ By war’s end, the United States had launched 5,800 vessels (including 600 tankers), while the U-boats had destroyed 733 American merchantmen. To stem this flood of American-produced shipping, Dönitz rushed his boats out into the South Atlantic at a frenetic pace.

* * *

Werner Hartenstein in *U-156* and Albrecht Achilles in *U-161* belonged to a group of eight boats that Dönitz had dispatched to the South Atlantic in the fall of 1942. Dönitz could rely on Hartenstein and Achilles, both veterans of the first wave of New Land boats, to find fresh opportunities south of the Azores. In August, *U-156* joined three other Type IXC boats as Group *Eisbär* (Polar Bear), supported by the “milk cow” *U-459* and tasked with carrying out a surprise attack on Cape Town. In September, *U-161* became part of Group *Streitaxt* (Battle-Axe) and was redirected to Grid Quadrant ER 50, where it was to be resupplied from the tanker *U-461* before heading for the waters off Brazil.

U-156 sailed out of Lorient on August 20. Its passage of the Bay of Biscay was a litany of having to dive to evade enemy aircraft. Running submerged depleted the batteries, and Hartenstein was forced repeatedly to bring *U-156* up on the surface to recharge them and to ventilate the boat.¹⁷ After torpedoing the 5,941-ton British ore freighter *Clan Macwhirter* about 600 nautical miles west of Casablanca late on August 26, Hartenstein crossed the equator and on September 12 stood 550 nautical miles south of Cape Palmas, Liberia. At 7:07 p.m., he fired two bow torpedoes at what he took to be “an old passenger freighter.” He had torpedoed the 19,695-ton Cunard White Star Line troop transport *Laconia*. In what U-boat historian Michael Hadley has called “a scenario unique in nautical lore,”¹⁸ Hartenstein asked Dönitz to arrange a “diplomatic neutralization of the scene of the sinking,” that is, a sort of unofficial cease-fire, and under a Red-Cross flag to rescue as many of the survivors as he could. All the while, an American B-24 Liberator piloted by Lieutenant James D. Harden for two days made numerous bombing runs at the U-boat, incredibly failing to destroy it. Dönitz was livid. On September 17, he issued his Triton-Null Order (soon to be known as the *Laconia* Order):

All attempts to rescue the crews of sunken ships will cease forthwith. This prohibition applies equally to the picking up of men in the water and putting them aboard a lifeboat, to the righting of capsized lifeboats and to the supply of food and water. Such activities are a contradiction of the primary object of war, namely, the destruction of enemy ships and their crews.¹⁹

Just for good measure, he added (but omitted from his *Memoirs*): “Be harsh, having in mind that the enemy takes no regard of women and children in his attacks on German cities.” And he awarded Hartenstein the Knight’s Cross.

Out in the South Atlantic, *U-156* continued its war patrol. On September 19, Hartenstein torpedoed the 4,745-ton British steam freighter *Quebec City*, out of Cape Town and bound for Freetown with a cargo of 6,600 tons of cotton and wool. But the rest of the patrol proved to be uneventful. On November 16, Hartenstein returned to Lorient. *U-156* in 88 days at sea had covered 11,887 nautical miles, 373 of them submerged.

* * *

From the start of the U-boat war in the Caribbean, the Allies knew that airpower was going to be crucial to stop the slaughter of tankers and other merchant ships, and that the United States would be called on to supply most of the aircraft for the fight. At the beginning of the air campaign against the U-boats, both aircraft and effective antisubmarine weapons were scarce. American aircrews, both Army Air Forces (AAF) and Navy, were inexperienced. But even as these problems were slowly resolved in the summer and fall of 1942, one major headache remained – there was still no unity of command between the navy and the army. One side in this war – the Germans – fought under one commander pursuing a single overall objective and organized by a single headquarters, with one view of what was necessary to pursue victory in this campaign. The other side – primarily the United States – did not move to a single purpose, nor even to two single purposes, but to several different commands at different times.

As early as May 1942, General H. A. “Hap” Arnold, Chief of Staff of the United States Army Air Forces, proposed to Admiral Ernest J. King that the two services establish an American version of the Royal Air Force’s Coastal Command. The latter was one of several commands operating under Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, Commander in Chief RAF (other commands being, for example, Bomber Command and Fighter Command). But Coastal Command worked very closely with the Royal Navy and was effectively under its operational control. Though sometimes difficult, the culture of inter-service cooperation had developed in the early years of the war to the point where air force and navy were able to operate effectively in the escort of convoys and attacks against U-boats in the Bay of Biscay and the North Atlantic.²⁰

Such was not the case in the United States, where airpower culture was still strongly influenced by the airpower theorists of the 1920s and 1930s, who believed that the overall objective of an air force was offensive – primarily to bomb the enemy’s productive capabilities. Thus, as much as the AAF was, in effect, dragged into the Caribbean campaign (and that off the US east coast as well) in early 1942, it was still uncomfortable in the role and unhappy at operating under naval control. To complicate

matters, elements of three air forces – First, Third, and Sixth – were called into the antisubmarine campaign on an emergency basis between February and October 1942. It was a chaotic situation, made even more complex in July 1942 when the AAF set up the Antilles Air Task Force at Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico, under command of Sixth Air Force.

Arnold's suggested US "Coastal Command" never materialized; instead, the AAF established the Antisubmarine Command in mid-October 1942, using resources of I Bomber Command, First Air Force, operating out of several air fields on the US east coast and Florida. It assigned I Bomber Command's 26th Wing to Miami to cover the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, while 25th Wing was headquartered at New York to provide air cover for the east coast. As a history of the Antisubmarine Command put it: "The most serious [operational] problem [encountered by the 26th Wing] came ... not from the climate or the native population, but from the command situation into which the AAF Antisubmarine Command squadrons were plunged."²¹ Antisubmarine Command squadrons operating in the Caribbean were under the control of the Caribbean Sea Frontier, a naval command, and the Caribbean Defense Command, but "many lesser headquarters existed between the highest echelon and the single AAF Antisubmarine Command squadron serving at Trinidad."²² There was no end of command, control, and logistics problems afflicting these and the other AAF squadrons operating in the area. The most substantial benefit of these mostly ad hoc arrangements was that several dozen B-24s finally began to flow into the Caribbean air campaign.

The B-24 Liberator was a four-engine, long-range, strategic bomber developed in the 1930s to strike targets deep in enemy territory. It was heavily armed with .50-caliber machine guns for self-defense and carried a bomb load of 5,000 pounds, with a range of 2,200 miles. Stripped of most of its machine guns and with additional gas tanks installed in the bomb bay, it became the best antisubmarine aircraft of World War II. The problem was that the AAF wanted every Liberator it could get its hands on for strategic bombing in Europe and the Pacific. Both Coastal Command and the US Navy had to beg for any scraps they could get. The flow of B-24s to the RAF and the USN eased greatly after the Casablanca Conference between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill in December 1942 and January 1943. Most of the

B-24s obtained by the RAF were sent to Ireland and Iceland, while Army Air Forces' B-24s began operating near Trinidad, in the south Atlantic, and off the coast of Brazil, flying out of Natal and Ascension Island. It was one of these aircraft that had given Hartenstein such a difficult time.

The beginning of the final resolution of American command problems in the Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf of Mexico was the establishment by Admiral King of the new US Tenth Fleet on May 1, 1943. King made the decision following the Casablanca Conference – where the president and the prime minister emphasized the importance of defeating the U-boat threat preliminary to D-Day – and the Atlantic Convoy Conference held in Washington in March 1943. The latter was a gathering of US, British, and Canadian naval chiefs aimed at deciding how to best carry out the aims of the Casablanca Conference. On April 6, King had named Rear Admiral Francis S. Low chief of staff for antisubmarine warfare, who subsequently recommended that the whole US Navy ASW campaign be placed under the command of Admiral Royal E. Ingersoll, Commander in Chief Atlantic Fleet (CINCLANT in naval parlance).

While this did not solve the AAF/Navy impasse, or the AAF's own internal command problems, it did consolidate and rationalize USN antisubmarine activities. In fact, King went a step further and placed Tenth Fleet as a "fleet without ships" under his own command to coordinate ASW operations, using resources from existing formations such as CINCLANT. Low actually ran Tenth Fleet and exercised control over all US Atlantic Sea Frontiers. Tenth Fleet used centralized intelligence gathered from signals intelligence and other Allied sources and coordinated ship movements with the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Navy, while directing the US Navy's shore establishments, aircraft, and antisubmarine assets at sea – especially the new hunter-killer groups formed around escort carriers, or "baby flat tops," carrying Wildcat fighters and Avenger torpedo bombers.²³

The creation of Tenth Fleet – and the obvious implication that the USN would continue to control its own antisubmarine aircraft, including its B-24s – made the AAF Antisubmarine Command redundant. At first, a temporary solution was to place an Army Air Forces general in command of Tenth Fleet, but the AAF continued to insist that its aircraft hunt submarines. The USN, on the other hand, demanded convoy escort

– that is, aircraft over the convoy and not chasing submarines around the western Atlantic or Caribbean. In May 1943, King asked Arnold to send a squadron of B-24s to Newfoundland to close the North Atlantic air gap. The planes went north, but with instructions to hunt submarines, not escort convoys.

It was frustrating for all. Finally, Arnold offered to get out of the antisubmarine campaign entirely. The AAF would turn its B-24s, already configured for ASW operations, over to the Navy in return for an equal number of as-yet unmodified B-24s out of the Navy's allocation. The USN thus took over all airborne antisubmarine operations on September 1, 1943, and for the first time in the war, airborne ASW operations from Panama to the Outer Antilles (not to mention the Atlantic Ocean) bent to the will of a single commander – Admiral Francis S. Low of Tenth Fleet. This change of command, along with more and better long-range aircraft, improved ASW weapons, amended sub-hunting tactics, an increase in escort vessels, and the hunter-killer groups, would deal a further heavy blow to the “gray sharks” in the Caribbean.

