



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

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## HUNTING OFF THE ORINOCO

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The struggle in the Caribbean between Dönitz's submarines and the Allies was not confined to the Caribbean basin alone. Tankers, bauxite carriers, and other Allied merchantmen were just as easily torpedoed outside the island chain as they were within. And when the Allies really turned the heat on in the basin itself, Dönitz merely sent his U-boats to the east and south, along the coast of Venezuela and Brazil. *Tonnagekrieg*, after all, knew no boundaries. Cargoes that would aid the Allies were sunk off the coastal bulge of Brazil, or even off the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, as they were near Trinidad or Cape Race. It did not take long before the Americans realized that the defense of the Caribbean was closely tied in with the defense of mid- and South Atlantic waters. Even before the summer of 1942, the war began to spread beyond the Caribbean to the waters of the Torrid Zone and into the South Atlantic.

Virtually all the men who commanded Karl Dönitz's "gray sharks" during Operation Neuland began their careers in the surface navy; Fregatenskapitän<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Wattenberg, skipper of the Type IXC *U-162*, was one of them. He had entered the navy in 1921, and at the outbreak of World War II served as navigation officer on the "pocket" battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*. After Captain Hans Langsdorff, trapped by British Hunting Group G, scuttled his ship in the Rio de la Plata off Montevideo in December 1939, Wattenberg escaped from the temporary internment camp at the Naval Arsenal in Montevideo. Friends provided civilian clothes, and the adventurous Wattenberg walked into Argentina, hiked across the Andes to Santiago, Chile, and coolly boarded a commercial flight to Germany in May 1940.<sup>2</sup> He at once volunteered for the U-Boat Service. *U-162* was his first command. He thirsted for revenge.

Wattenberg's first war patrol was disappointingly unsuccessful. In 40 days at sea he sank only one ship, the British 4,300-ton freighter *White Crest*, out of homebound North Atlantic convoy ONS-67. Wattenberg returned to Lorient in March 1942 to a sharp rebuke from Dönitz. He had not kept in constant touch with Kernével because he feared that the Allies were intercepting those signals. He had misjudged the course of a convoy near the Azores and had lost contact. He had been hesitant in attacking an escort destroyer and a lone freighter because he believed that the escort was part of a larger convoy, for which he had searched in vain. As far as U-Boat Command was concerned, he had "balked" at the chance for a "kill." Dönitz had been unsparing in his critique: "A commander never knows how a situation will develop, therefore always attack at first opportunity and never undertake experiments."<sup>3</sup>

Wattenberg's war patrol to the Caribbean began on April 7, 1942. He headed for the waters off Venezuela, the Guianas, and Trinidad and spent a good part of the last week of April scouting enemy traffic. He did not see much, but each day dutifully sent back long reports on what he did see. On April 25, he received orders to proceed to Grid Quadrant EE, the suspected shipping lane for West Indies–Gibraltar sailings. En route, he put the artillery crew under Second Watch Officer Berndt von Walther und Cronex through their paces, firing at jettisoned wooden egg crates by day and by night.

At 5 p.m. on April 29, the bridge watch spied the mastheads of a tanker. Wattenberg drove his boat hard for two hours to get in position to attack. Just before 9 p.m., he fired a bow shot at a range of 600 meters. "Surface runner!" He well remembered Dönitz's reprimand, and ordered "*Second bow shot at once.*" Somehow, both torpedoes sliced into the shadow. It stopped and began to list. Its crew took to the lifeboats. The survivors informed Wattenberg that he had torpedoed the British 8,941-ton tanker *Athelempress*, in ballast out of Liverpool. Since the wreck refused to sink, Wattenberg had it riddled with shells from the 10.5-cm deck gun, whereupon it quickly slid beneath the waves. It was the Old Man's first major success.

Shortly after 1 p.m. on May 1, standing off the mouth of the Orinoco River, the watch reported first a smoke smudge and then masts on the horizon. The diesels roared to full power. For two hours, *U-162* pursued.

Wattenberg took careful measure of the target. "Freighter has stern deck gun, also a gray-green camouflage stripe and no flag, thus hostile." At 2:46 p.m., he fired a single bow torpedo at 600 meters. It struck the freighter abaft the funnel. It stopped at once, down by the stern, and swung out four lifeboats. Wattenberg surfaced and had Walther-Cronex fire several heavy shells into its superstructure. No reply from the ship's gun. Wattenberg circled his victim. On both bow and stern, he could make out a name in small letters: "Pernahyba" out of "Rio." He still believed it to be a "hostile." Since it refused to sink, he pumped 56 rounds from the deck gun into the hulk. As it went down, he made out barrels of lubricating oil and intestine skins on the deck. He had destroyed the German-built 6,692-ton *Parnahyba*, bound for New York with a cargo of coffee, cotton, and cocoa.

Like Werner Hartenstein in *U-156*, Wattenberg had sunk a neutral vessel. He at once radioed the news to Paris. This undoubtedly would not sit well with Dönitz. Among the floating jetsam of oil and wood and guts, the watch spied a fat turkey perched on a barrel, chickens fluttering on the waves, and two black pigs swimming furiously among the wooden staves. They were all brought on board as "welcome booty" – then promptly butchered to feast the crew.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, Wattenberg shaped a course for the estuary of the Demerara River at Georgetown, British Guiana, to hunt bauxite carriers.

The sinking of the *Parnahyba* was another blow to Brazilian neutrality. When the war began, Brazil was closer to the Axis than the Allies. There were a significant number of German expatriates in Brazil, and Lufthansa, the German airline, had pioneered air routes connecting several South American countries. Brazil was a potential buyer of German military equipment, especially anti-aircraft artillery from Krupp. But Brazil was also a potentially important partner for the Allies because of the raw materials, especially rubber, produced there, and also because of its geography. The country's eastern bulge – U-boat skippers referred to it as the "mid-Atlantic" in their war diaries – was a key refueling point for aircraft flying from the United States to Africa and the Middle East, and Brazil's proximity to the sources of bauxite in the Guianas made it an excellent place to put antisubmarine aircraft.

At the end of 1942 Brazil was swayed to break diplomatic relations with the Axis after receiving promises of US military aid and American

airlines (especially Pan American World Airways) to fly Brazilian routes. But it was still officially neutral when Wattenberg and other U-boat commanders began to sink Brazilian ships. As the U-boats penetrated further into the South Atlantic, Brazil's shift to the Allied cause became the key to antisubmarine defenses in the area – especially given the pro-German “neutrality” of Argentina. Each sinking brought that day closer.

Wattenberg's decision to head for the waters off the mouth of the Demerara River was a good one. At 10 p.m. on May 3, the watch spied two shadows at two miles. Wattenberg approached them submerged, but decided that they were too small to risk losing the element of surprise. At 1:27 a.m., the next day the watch again reported a shadow, dead ahead in the moonlight at 10 degrees. An hour later, *U-162* loosed a bow shot at 2,800 meters. The boatswain counted off the seconds to 120. Nothing! The steam-driven torpedo apparently had not been fully charged and sank below the target.

Wattenberg renewed the attack. Range: 3,800 meters. “Hit! The freighter's stern sinks down to the base of the funnel.” He surfaced and circled his prey. “No name discernible.” It was 6 a.m. The first light of day was beginning to break over the horizon. He assumed that the stricken freighter would sink and left the area before hostile aircraft appeared. His victim was the American 3,785-ton bauxite carrier *Eastern Sword*, en route from New York to Georgetown. Eleven of its crew of 29 went down with the ship.

Around noon on May 4, *U-162* came across a three-masted schooner. It was the *Florence M. Douglas* out of Demerara, “thus hostile.” After ordering its crew into lifeboats, Wattenberg sank the schooner with 18 rounds from the deck gun. He saw something floating in the debris. “Yet again, a small black piglet comes on board. It is too small to be butchered and so it will eat our scraps and leftovers. It is quickly named: ‘Douglas.’” No sooner had it been stowed in the diesel room than an aircraft appeared out of the sun. “Alarm! Aircraft dead ahead! Emergency Dive!” Somehow, the enemy pilot failed to spot *U-162*. “Douglas” survived the steep dive unharmed and came squealing into the control room. Wattenberg decreed it to be the boat's “lucky pig.”

Wattenberg headed out to sea. Shortly before midnight on May 6, the watch reported “Shadow with heavy smoke cloud 165 degrees!” Since

there was a bright moon, he opted for a submerged attack with a stern torpedo. "After running for 10.4 sec. bright, yellow fire-flash against hull." Then, a metallic, hollow "clank." He had miscalculated, coming too close to the target – 180 meters – and thus the "eel" had not had ample time to arm the trigger mechanism. *U-162* came round for a bow shot. "Miss! Miscalculated target's speed!" It was now 2:33 a.m. The Old Man expended a third torpedo on the target. "Hit amidships! High detonation column. Freighter breaks in half and sinks in 7 min." The men cheered the hit and "Douglas" ran through the boat squealing with delight.<sup>5</sup> The vessel's master stated that his ship was the 7,000-ton bauxite carrier *Run-ciman*. But Wattenberg could not find it in any of his shipping registers. In fact, the wily skipper, Ingvald Hegerbeg, had given Wattenberg a false name. The victim was the Norwegian 4,271-ton freighter *Frank Seamans*, bound for Trinidad with a load of bauxite. The crew of 27 all took to the lifeboats; Wattenberg offered provisions and directions.

Just before 10 a.m. on May 8, *U-162*'s watch sighted a new target. Wattenberg plotted a submerged attack with the stern tubes. But after the destruction of the neutral *Parnabyba*, he had grown cautious. "Cannot absolutely discern origin of the vessel. No zigzagging, no deck gun, no camouflage stripe, but also nowhere anything indicating marker as a neutral." He could not make out the flag fluttering from its stern. On the bow, he saw what he thought was the name "Louis" preceded by the letter "M." Was it a Vichy French carrier? He tracked the target for nine hours. It never set evening lights and so he guessed it to be "hostile," possibly a Canadian bauxite carrier. At 10:12 p.m., he fired a bow torpedo at it. "Hit in the after-ship. Mighty explosion with resulting dark-black smoke, which immediately envelops the entire ship." The vessel disappeared so quickly that he thought it loaded with explosives. His hunch had been right. It was the Canadian 1,905-ton freighter *Mont Louis*, en route from Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana, to Trinidad.

Thereafter, the sea was empty. The radio room picked up urgent long-wave calls from "Navy Commander Bermuda" to Georgetown and Paramaribo warning ships to avoid "area seven." The Old Man remembered from his days on the *Graf Spee* that British merchantmen used numbered codes for specific areas of the ocean. He decided to head for the more

promising coast of Guiana, where he would hook up with Hartenstein in *U-156*.

Once again, his decision proved to be right. Just before sunrise on May 12, still well off Barbados, the watch reported “Mast tops at 253 degrees.” He pursued. Time for another submerged attack using the stern tubes. At 1:49 p.m., he fired two torpedoes; both missed the target. Wattenberg refused to give up. At 8 p.m., he was again in position to fire. But the target veered wildly off course, apparently hoping to ram *U-162*. Wattenberg coolly dived under the hostile at full power and came up on its other side. “Stern shot hits amidships, immediately causes oil bunkers to explode, so that a column of fire lights the entire ship for one minute.” The victim stopped and put its lifeboats in the water. Its captain reported it to be the 7,699-ton Standard Oil tanker *Esso Houston*, with a full load of crude from Aruba to Montevideo – scene of the *Graf Spee* disaster in 1939. Wattenberg delivered the *coup de grâce* with another “eel.”

*U-162* stayed in the target-rich environment of Grid Quadrant EE 73. At 4 p.m. on May 13, it came across another tanker. After a three-hour chase, Wattenberg ran a nighttime surface attack: a single torpedo struck the target and caused a single column of flame to rise, but no further detonation. It blew alarm whistles. Its crew manned the stern gun and began to fire at *U-162*. “Immediately set out to renew attack from the East.” Another bow shot: the tanker saw the telltale bubbles of the “Ato,” heeled hard to starboard and avoided a hit. It continued to fire. Furious, Wattenberg plotted a new approach. At 1:39 a.m. on May 14, he fired a double spread. “Hit astern. High detonation columns combined with bright red fire flames, caused by a fuel bunker explosion on the target.” The crew took to the lifeboats.

Still, the tanker remained afloat. Another torpedo failed to send it down. Wattenberg fired yet another torpedo at the target. “Huge fire flames combined with pervading black smoke clouds.” The tanker burned furiously and finally slid beneath the waves. Its captain informed Wattenberg that he had destroyed the 6,917-ton tanker *British Colony*, en route from Trinidad to Gibraltar. The kill had cost ten hours and six torpedoes. Later that night, Wattenberg had the last four “eels” brought below decks. Kernével radioed that a Wehrmacht communiqué reported 21 ships of 113,000 tons sunk in the Caribbean and singled out *U-162* and *U-156* for

praise. “Jubilation and pride” throughout the boat, the Old Man wrote in the war diary. “Douglas” squealed joyfully as ever.

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The initial Allied reaction to the spring U-boat offensive in the Caribbean was to put temporary halts to shipping, especially of tankers and bauxite carriers. Tanker traffic under Allied control was stopped in mid-February and mid-April; bauxite traffic was stopped after Nicolai Clausen’s first predations east of Trinidad with *U-129*. But clearly, this was no long-term answer to the Caribbean attacks. At a sequence of meetings of the US, Royal, and Royal Canadian Navies in Washington and Ottawa in late spring 1942, several key decisions were made regarding the Caribbean. British escort group B5, consisting of the Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Havelock* and four Flower-class corvettes, were to be taken off the North Atlantic run and sent to the Caribbean. The Royal Navy escort group was to receive air cover from No. 63 Squadron Royal Air Force (Coastal Command), consisting of 20 Lockheed Hudson twin-engine bombers based at Trinidad.

A Canadian escort group of four corvettes and an occasional destroyer would escort tankers from the Caribbean to the east coast of Canada. Admiral Ernest J. King also redoubled his efforts to convince President Roosevelt to support the building of destroyer escorts, which eventually began to appear in the Caribbean – but not for another year at least. The withdrawal of the British and Canadian escorts from North Atlantic convoy duty forced Britain to “open out” the convoy cycle – stretching the time of departure between convoys – while shortening the North Atlantic voyage by sending convoys on a more northerly route.<sup>6</sup> Both moves resulted in a decrease of tonnage reaching Britain. To this extent at least, Dönitz’s tonnage war in the Caribbean directly affected the Battle of the Atlantic.

The first convoys to sail in the Caribbean appeared in the first half of May; within the next two months, a complicated network of convoys was put in place that locked into the new coastal convoys off the US coast. Some convoys proceeded directly to Britain from the Caribbean via Bermuda or Gibraltar, while others – mostly bauxite carriers – traveled



between the waters off eastern Trinidad along the east coast of South America as far as the bulge on the Brazilian coast. Some of the prime routes were Halifax-Aruba-Halifax, Trinidad-Aruba/Curaçao-Trinidad, Aruba-Guantánamo-Aruba, Aruba-Colón-Aruba, Guantánamo-New York-Guantánamo, Key West-New York-Key West, and Key West-Texas-Key West.<sup>7</sup>

On May 20, *U-155* Kapitänleutnant Adolf Piening in *U-155* spotted the first large convoy sailing from New York to Trinidad. The 31-year-old Piening had taken command of the brand new Type IXC boat in August 1941; this was only its second war patrol, but Piening had already sunk six ships of 33,500 tons. The *Kaleu* approached the convoy off Venezuela's Testigos Islands, 110 miles northwest of Port of Spain. He was spotted by the US Navy four-stack destroyer *Upshur* and dove to trail the convoy as it sailed toward the Dragon's Mouth entrance to the Gulf of Paria. At dawn, about 40 miles out, Piening sank the Panamanian-registry 7,800-ton *Sylvan Arrow*. At Curaçao the tanker had taken on 125,000 tons of bunker oil, which quickly blew all over the ship and burst into flames. *U-155* received the usual plastering by depth-charges from *Upshur* and a patrol craft but escaped without damage.<sup>8</sup>

The introduction of a convoy system into the Caribbean certainly did the "gray sharks" no service, but it did not hinder them much either. Sinkings for the balance of May and June continued at a rate of from one to two ships per day. The convoy system in the Caribbean could never be as effective in fighting off, or avoiding, submarine attack as it was in the North Atlantic. There, the space was so vast that a convoy could shift course and avoid a U-boat concentration if intelligence indicated that subs were gathering on its track. Once a convoy left the east coast, whether Halifax or Sydney in the early days of the war or New York later, it was in the open sea, and even the largest convoys could be difficult for the U-boats to find. Aside from the Strait of Belle Isle, which was only infrequently used, there were no narrow seas, nor "chokepoints" where subs could lie in wait for traffic. But the Caribbean was much smaller, meaning that convoys that attempted to take alternate routings to avoid U-boats were usually easily found; and the Caribbean was ringed with chokepoints. From the Florida Straits east and south along the arc of the island chain, the Windward Passage, the Mona Passage, and the rest of

the narrow waters between the islands offered excellent ambush points. After all, at some point in time all the ships moving in the Caribbean Sea, except for inter-island traffic, had to enter or exit the Caribbean basin. And when they did, the “gray sharks” were often waiting for them.

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With Hartenstein’s *U-156* moving into Barbados waters, Wattenberg took *U-162* into Bridgetown Roads. The harbor was devoid of targets, but the shore was lit up as in peacetime. He could clearly make out brightly lit fishing boats, houses, and cars. He returned to the open sea. At 3:22 a.m. on May 17, the watch spied a tanker, but given that dawn was not far away and that he was well within range of land-based aircraft, Wattenberg decided to track it until he was in optimum position to attack. At 9 p.m., he fired two “eels” at the tanker. One hit. “The 1st torpedo exploded with a high black-gray detonation column. The fo’c’sle broke in half.” The tanker sent its crew off in lifeboats and Wattenberg fired the *coup de grâce* at the flaming hulk. “Hit amidships and caused the ship to sink in 10 minutes after showing a gigantic fireball and heavy smoke.” Its captain revealed it to be the British 6,852-ton tanker *Beth*, bound from Trinidad to Freetown. A single crew member lost his life.

On May 18, Wattenberg dispatched a lengthy radiogram to Kernével, summarizing his experiences off Venezuela and Barbados. Enemy antisubmarine activity from the air was “minimal,” that from surface vessels “absent.” He deemed Quadrant EE 71 to be the “chokepoint” for all West Indies traffic bound for Gibraltar, Freetown, and South America. His experience with *Athelempress* convinced him that single “eels” could not sink crude-oil tankers and that the deck gun was inadequate to do the job. Bauxite carriers, on the other hand, were easy game. His bag to date: nine ships of 47,162 tons.<sup>9</sup>

Wattenberg had only a single old “Ato” torpedo left in the tubes and 67 rounds for the 10.5-cm deck gun. He decided to head for Quadrants EE 30 to 60 in hopes of sinking a “capital South American” target as a “Whitsuntide roast.”<sup>10</sup> But the sea remained empty for the next five days. The radio room intercepted a news flash from the Transocean Press Service stating that the United States had ordered a halt to all shipping in

the area to save bottoms for the vital supply line to Britain. Wattenberg decided to return to the coast of Guiana, to fire his last torpedo at a tanker and perhaps to destroy some sailboats with the deck gun.

“Whitsuntide roast at 183 degrees!” came the call from the bridge at 6 p.m. on May 23. “Another tanker. Jubilation throughout the boat.” Wattenberg decided to “dine” on the target under the cover of darkness. At 1:28 a.m., he fired his last torpedo. It harmlessly raced by the bow of the tanker, which for some reason had suddenly reduced speed. Had it spied the boat, or the torpedo’s bubbles? The sea churned up to Force 5. No weather for an artillery attack.

Wattenberg shaped a course for Lorient. Ahead lay 12 days of the return “garbage tour.” *U-162* tied up to the hulk *Isère* in Lorient at 7:10 a.m. on June 8, 1942. It proudly flew ten sinking pennants, including three black ones for tankers, from its periscope tubes. There was the customary military band, the welcoming *Blitzmädchen*, the post-patrol feast at Flotilla Headquarters, and crew rotations. “Total distance covered 9657.3 nautical miles” was the last clinical entry in the war diary. “Douglas” was ceremoniously handed over to Commander Viktor Schütze of 2<sup>nd</sup> U-Boat Flotilla for “safekeeping.”

Admiral Dönitz read *U-162*’s war diary with great interest. He was pleased: “Good and superbly conducted operation. The commander exploited well the numerous chances for success and achieved a very good success. Very good firing technique.” Wattenberg had atoned for his first war patrol.

The second wave of Neuland boats had enjoyed a “merry month of May,” sinking 78 per cent of the total bag of 109 Allied ships destroyed that month. The Caribbean boats alone destroyed more tonnage than was coming down US slipways. The simple mathematics of Dönitz’s “tonnage war” was proving to be on target and the admiral looked toward summer 1942 with high expectations. With a few notable exceptions, neither Allied surface patrols nor Allied aircraft had caused German commanders much concern. Despite the introduction of convoys, merchant ships – and especially tankers – continued to move as single units rather than in the convoys. The deployment of the U-boat tankers, the so-called “milk cows,” promised even greater operational time on station. Dönitz was determined to dispatch a third wave of New Land boats to the Caribbean at

the earliest possible moment. This time, he would send them out in groups of three or four to maintain steady pressure in that theater of the war.

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As the Lorient boats in staggered formations began to head out once more for the Golden West, Dönitz used the transit time to reassess Operation Neuland with Adolf Hitler and Grand Admiral Erich Raeder. He remained ever the optimist. On May 14, 1942, he reassured Hitler that the “race between enemy new construction and U-boat sinkings” was “in no way hopeless.”<sup>11</sup> The U-boat war was a simple matter of “combat against enemy merchant tonnage.” He regarded Britain and the United States “as *one!*” The trick was to deploy the U-boats where they could do the most damage with the lowest risk. They were sending some 700,000 tons of enemy shipping to the bottom of the seas every month – more than enough to stay ahead of US shipbuilding. Thanks to the U-boat tankers, the Type IXC boats could operate in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico for four to five weeks. Finally, Dönitz informed his Führer that US antisubmarine warfare remained woefully incompetent. “American flyers cannot see anything; destroyers and their air escorts operate at too high speeds ... and they are not sufficiently tough in pursuing depth charge attacks after detecting U-boats.” In short, there was every reason to expect summer 1942 to bring another rich harvest in the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup>

As soon as the third wave of New Land boats approached the Caribbean, Dönitz in a “secret assessment” reminded his commanders that Allied ASW efforts were largely ineffective. “Clumsy, questionable conduct. Overall impression: security forces lack training and toughness; U-boats superior. Little ASDIC.” While there was moderate air cover in the Windward Islands and the Mona Passage, and “somewhat stronger” air cover off Curaçao and Trinidad, Allied surface ASW forces remained “inconsequential.”<sup>13</sup>

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Albrecht Achilles’ *U-161* had barely spent three weeks at Lorient for repairs, refitting, and resupply before it, along with *U-126* and *U-128*, was

ordered out at the end of April 1942. Destination: Fernando de Noronha Island, off the eastern “bulge” of Brazil. Several old friends from the “first wave” (*U-156*, *U-162*, and *U-502*) would soon follow.

On May 11, off the Cape Verde Islands, Achilles ran across a large, well-protected convoy. The 12 ships of SL-109 were arranged in three columns and screened by what the Kaleu took to be a dozen escorts. He realized that the enemy had learned some hard lessons. For three days and three nights, *U-161* was repeatedly forced to crash dive by energetic depth-charge attacks by the escorts. Several times, the boat shook violently as the bombs exploded close by. China and glass gauges shattered. Fresh food rolled on the floor. Lights blew out. Nerves were on edge. At night, a barrage of star shell illuminated the ocean and betrayed the U-boat’s whereabouts; during daytime, the hostiles had an uncanny ability to pinpoint its position. Achilles informed U-Boat Command: “Enemy operates very effectively with listening device.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, it was the new ship-borne “High-Frequency Direction-Finding” (HF/DF or “Huff-Duff”) that was causing *U-161* such grief.

Dönitz ordered the boats to abandon their chase of SL-109 and to shape a course for their designated operations area off Brazil. But Hitler was uneasy about declaring Brazil a war zone and hence, on May 15, Dönitz issued new orders. While the boats were still to proceed to Fernando de Noronha Island, thereafter they were immediately to work their way northwest, up the coast of Brazil toward British Guiana and the Lesser Antilles. There, they were to disperse. Unsurprisingly, “the ferret of Port of Spain” headed back to his old hunting grounds off Trinidad.

The site of his former triumphs had been radically transformed: almost every day during the first week of June, Achilles ruefully entered terse, telling comments into the war diary: “Alarm! Aircraft,” “Alarm! Flying boat!” Every time *U-161* surfaced, it was met by an aircraft, sometimes by two or more. They came out of the sun or through heavy rain clouds. They came by day and they came by night. They were bombers or flying boats. They delivered a constant hail of aerial bombs, star shell, machine-gun, and rocket fire.

Shortly after surfacing around midnight on June 9, Able Seaman Otto Tietz had the bridge watch. “Alarm! An aircraft mounting lanterns is approaching the boat over the stern.” The rest of the watch split their

sides laughing. "Dear Able Seaman," one of the lookouts chided Tietz, "have you ever heard of an aircraft having identified a U-boat by night on the surface?" In seconds, the drone of the plane's engines could be heard. "Alarm! Emergency Dive!" Three bursts of star shell illuminated the dark waters around the boat. Then, three aerial bombs detonated in the water, the last one "severely rattling" the slender craft as it began to slip beneath the waves.

"Damage report. At once!" Chief Engineer Heinrich Klaassens was as efficient as ever. "Damaged: depth-regulator motor, gyrostabilizer, magnetic compass, depth-pressure gauge, all water-gauge glasses." For the rest of the night, *U-161* stood out to sea while Klaassens and his technical crew undertook what repairs they could. *U-161* had just survived its first encounter with the Leigh Light, the suspected "lanterns" swinging from under the plane's fuselage.<sup>15</sup>

After endless days of tropical rain showers and almost daily attacks from the air, Achilles surfaced off the Dragon's Mouth, the northern exit of the Gulf of Paria. The heat and humidity in the boat were unbearable. The men desperately needed fresh air and a few hours of rest. They got neither. As soon as *U-161* broke the surface around 5 p.m. on June 13, the watch spied a tanker, then a freighter. For most of the night, Achilles shadowed the freighter. In fact, he had discovered a large convoy on an easterly course.

"Ajax" awaited the convoy's arrival at periscope depth just off the Los Testigos Islands. At 3:34 p.m., the merchantmen and their escorts hove in sight.

"4 columns of 4 freighters each; one destroyer each on the port and the starboard side." He took the boat down to position it between the two inner columns, "where the larger freighters are." The escort off the starboard side was already launching depth charges. How had it ascertained the U-boat's position? Time: 6:12 p.m. Range: 1,250 meters. He fired two bow shots. The usual slight jolt and the G7a torpedoes were on their way to the targets. After one minute and 20 seconds, Achilles heard a muffled detonation. Through the attack periscope he could see two columns of water rising from the side of a large freighter.

"Alarm! Alarm!" The hydrophone operator was screaming that, apart from the high-pitched whine of the torpedoes, he could hear the dull

thrashing of a freighter's propeller blades. In his excitement, Achilles had brought the boat too close to the foremost ship on the starboard middle column. "Hard a-port! Both engines full ahead! Down periscope!" It was too late. With a sickening feeling in his stomach, Achilles witnessed the horrendous screech and rending of metal as one of the freighters scraped along the entire starboard side of the boat. *U-161* heeled hard to port. The steamer ground away part of the conning tower and the "shark's teeth" net cutter on the bow. As *U-161* righted itself, water trickled into the boat: the hostile had also sheared off several of the radio dipoles and jumping wire on the conning tower. But the pressure hull remained intact. Achilles at once took the boat down to 150 meters. The men in *U-161* could hear the distant thunder of depth charges exploding.

The Old Man apprised the crew of what had taken place over the intercom. "We just barely managed to escape that one. At the last moment, with rudder hard to port and full power on both engines, we managed to avoid a fat freighter and to bring in the periscope.... Perhaps they saw the periscope when I ran it out for the attack."<sup>16</sup> He was always straight with his men.

After an hour, *U-161* came up to periscope depth. The convoy had broken up, ships heading in all directions. The two destroyers were frantically working the strays like sheepdogs, trying to regroup the lost vessels. "Ajax" could make out only eight remaining targets. Since it was still light, he decided to stay down. At 10 p.m., he brought *U-161* to the surface to survey the scene and to inspect the damage to the boat. He was barely able to squeeze through the damaged bridge tower hatch. An awful sight greeted him. The collision had bent the starboard shielding of the tower inward. On the outer tower, some radio dipoles and jumping wire were gone, as was the starboard antenna. The spray deflector had been ripped from the bridge. Both the bow and the stern net cutter on the starboard side had been cleanly sheared off. But neither of the periscopes had been damaged.<sup>17</sup> It had been a close call. Too damned close.

The convoy was nowhere to be seen. The detonation of ammunition aboard *U-161*'s target had caused chaos within the convoy, and its captains had taken evasive action in every conceivable direction to avoid plowing into the burning wreck. Achilles had alerted Jürgen von Rosenstiel to the whereabouts of the convoy, and it is likely that *U-502* torpedoed the

American 8,001-ton freighter *Scottsburg* out of New York, bound for the Persian Gulf with 10,500 tons of general cargo and war material, including five tanks and seven bombers, as well as the 5,010-ton freighter *Cold Harbor*, en route from New York to Basra, Iraq, with seven aircraft and 28 tanks on board.<sup>18</sup> The unrequited slaughter of Allied shipping continued. So far, not a single Neuland submarine had been lost. But that was about to change.



