

ODD TWIST OF FATE

In the early days of World War II newsreel accounts of Merchant ships being sent to the bottom were dramatically shown in movie houses around the world. Usually the scenes were the lead propaganda item to get your fullest attention for the sale of war bonds. BOOM.... BOOM....BOOM: Five second clips of ships sinking after being torpedoed, bombed or hitting mines.

Not much was said of the men that crewed on those doomed vessels other than “some survivors were rescued”. After the war those same men were all but forgotten. This is but one of their many stories, including a tale of why the German High Command considered the Allied merchant seamen the one single force that was to become the greatest threat to German Victory in Europe.

The Allied viewpoint was to arm the ships with so called defensive weapons and Navy Armed Guard gun crews. The civilian crews were also trained to assist the gun crews, such as passing ammunition and even assist firing the guns.

Who was in command of the Armed Guard? The civilian Merchant Marine Captain who commanded the ship. So, since the Navy never takes orders from a civilian, our government directed that all licensed ship’s officers were, in fact, naval reserve officers. However this did not include the documented crewmen, and the government didn’t even bother to inform the crewmen of that distinction, let alone many of the ship’s lower echelon officers.

The enemy considered that any act by the merchant ship such as firing weapons at them, trying to ram them, or even communicating their position, was an act of aggression by a belligerent military force. This started the infamous conduct of killing all surviving civilian merchant crew members of their sinking ships.

The Germans were not the only ones to do this horrible deed or, as the propagandists put it, “murdering and slaughtering the helpless survivors”.

The following three short paragraphs were taken verbatim from the book *MERCHANTMAN? OR SHIP OF WAR* by the noted Historian Author Charles Dana Gibson, whose accounts inspired this tale.

The ALTMARK, a German supply ship, was captured by the British in Norwegian waters in February of 1940. Gunners of the capturing British destroyer fired at the German sailors who attempted to flee across the ice. A similar instance took place in Norwegian waters when the Royal Navy sank the German minesweeper ULM on 14 September 1942. German survivors in the water were machine-gunned. The British justified their action by the statement “THE USAGES OF WAR PERMIT SHOOTING AT CREWS TO PREVENT THEIR REACHING SHORE AND REJOINING THE ENEMY’S FIGHTINGFORCE.” Remember that statement.

From the war’s on-set the United States Navy practiced a war of attrition against the Japanese merchant marine, and that warfare was, by policy and by practice, conducted against Japanese merchant seamen as well. “QUARTER” was not a consideration.

In a number of instances, Japanese submariners, with a flair bordering on pleasure, actually executed the survivors of sunken merchant ships. Merchant marine personnel who are known to have suffered under such treatment were from the following Allied ships: SS DAISY MOLLER in December 1943, SS BRITISH CHIVALRY in February 1944; SS TJISALAK in March 1944; SS RICHARD HOVY in March 1944; SS JEAN NICOLET in July 1944. There may have been others. In the case of the above ships there were few survivors who lived to tell the tale....on with our tale.

As a lad Franz Eckern grew up along the east coast of Kiel Bay in northern Germany not far from the Kiel Naval Base, where his father was stationed as an officer in the German Imperial Navy. Even in the hard economic periods of the early 30’s his parents were able to send him to private schools. Franz’s father was a Marine Engineer, and of course he influenced his son to follow in his footsteps and encouraged him at every turn.

The discussions on politics were not permitted in the house within earshot of Mama, for she had her own inner-feelings on where the politics were leading Germany and she let everyone know how she felt. Unfortunately for her, her predictions turned out to be true. Franz was twenty, and in his third year as a Naval Cadet on a trawler which was taking depth soundings off the coast of Norway. Word of hostilities breaking out in Poland cut short their task and they

immediately returned to their home port of Kiel. On returning home, he found out that his father was assigned to sea duty.

There was also a campaign on for volunteers for the Undersea Boats, with promises of rapid advancement. Since he was in his third year of a four-year course, he could receive an immediate commission. Thinking that would make his father very proud he accepted, and was assigned to U-boat training, and soon after to sea duty.

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In another part of the world, and at a slightly earlier time, three young brothers were growing up in a working family environment in a town in Essex, England, not far from Southend-On-Sea. Though Ned was too young, the other two brothers worked part-time at the Amusement park for enough money to help with the increasing household expenses incurred trying to raise three growing boys.

Elder brother Alfred worked as a dishwasher, cook and sometimes waiter in a restaurant, brother Bob maintained the mechanisms of the Ferris Wheel and Roller-coaster rides on the fairway. This year bad weather set in early, causing much of the amusement pier to shut down prematurely.

Al took off for Southampton with a letter in his pocket the owner of the restaurant gave him before letting him go, introducing him to the port Steward for Cunard White Star Lines. Al made a couple of trips to America and was able to get a berth for Bob in the engine room as a fireman. Ned, the younger brother, joined the British Army without the knowledge of his parents or his two brothers, and was quickly sent to basic training as a rifleman.

Ironically, the paths of these three brothers will cross on separate occasions with Franz Eckern, and without their knowledge that any of them had been touched previously by him.

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Life on the U-boats was entirely different from what Franz expected or hoped for. Having sailed on surface vessels with their spacious quarters, the poor and cramped accommodations, lousy food when on offshore tours, poor personal

hygiene, and the heavy odor of Diesel oil which permeated everything was a rude awakening. On one brief shore liberty, Franz's date complained that he smelled like an engine, the odor was ingrained into his uniform.

The constant failures of equipment, due to age and lack of upgrades, kept him working almost to exhaustion since he was the Engineering Officer. From early 1940 to 1942 promotions came at a fast pace, mainly because of the successful tours accounting for mounting figures in tonnage and enemy ships destroyed; also the rapid construction of new U-Boats.

Returning home on a rest leave he saw his father for the first time since the war started and they swapped sea stories for three days, but never in front of Mama. Franz's father was stationed on a battle cruiser which was holed up in Brest, waiting for a chance to break through the blockade and make a run for freedom and home.

Anyone seeing the two men together could see the pride they displayed in one and other. When Franz returned from leave he was re-assigned as executive officer on a rebuilt boat which promptly put out to sea.

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Al and brother Bob migrated to California and shipped out with Matson Navigation, sailing on the Mololo, Mariposa, Monterey and Lurline. Al married an American lady who had a son, filed for United States citizenship, and continued shipping during the first part of the war. On one occasion Al was crewing on a ship to England, hoping to get to visit the old family, when his ship was torpedoed in the mid-Atlantic. He was rescued without any problems, and the name of this torpedoed ship appeared in a log that was presented at a trial later on in this tale.

Bob ventured to Australia, married, started raising a family and settled down until the war started. Bob also felt a need to try and see how the old folks were doing after hearing of the heavy bombing raids over his part of the homeland. He signed aboard a freighter bound for America, with a stop at Cape Town, South Africa. At Cape Town he was able to transfer to a Greek ship heading for Gibraltar, and from there would take his chances. But Bob never reached his destination, his ship was also sunk.

Young brother Ned wound up in Egypt, trying to keep from being run over by the Panzers on their march to Alexandria. He was slightly wounded but was returned to duty as an automatic weapons instructor with the Somaliland forces on the east end of the Red Sea.

Franz Eckern, now in command of his own U-Boat and on freelance assignment to harass enemy shipping, was venturing into the South Atlantic Ocean in hopes of making a few kills. He was nearly spotted by the British Navy as he surfaced to charge his batteries. He submerged before they spotted him.....he hoped.

At the Midshipman graduation ceremony of one of Franz's junior officers an address had been given by Admiral Doenitz, Grand Admiral of the German Navy, in which he expressed the need to not only sink the ships but to kill the seamen as well, explaining that the rapid production of ships out-stripped the supply of trained men to man the new ships and stated that "THE SUPPLY LINES OF THE ENEMY IS OUR WORST THREAT TO VICTORY". This thought by Doenitz so impressed Franz by its reasonable assertion that merchant ships, no matter how many there were, were no longer a threat to the Fatherland if they had no crew to man them, that it would, in the months ahead....be his downfall.

Franz ran further south in the Atlantic but always felt that the hounds were just over the horizon. He spotted a plump cargo vessel heading north that was too good to pass up, so he put a fish into her. She took a long time to go down and there was a lot of debris, so he surfaced and started shooting at all the floating objects, including any survivors. The crew of the U-Boat tossed grenades at any large masses of flotsam so that enemy planes and surface craft wouldn't find them. Satisfied that all the telltale signs were scattered or sunk, he continued on his journey south.

After cruising up and into the Indian Ocean, Franz headed for the Gulf of Aden, knowing that he could hit the jack-pot. Unfortunately for him, the U-Boat batteries were not holding the charges for any length of time, and operating in shallow waters required full charges. On one of his extended stays on the surface enemy planes surprised them and dropped charges that damaged the U-Boat too severely to continue. He stayed on the bottom until dark and then headed for the beach in hopes of abandoning the boat and escaping inland. No

such luck. Just over the hill the British controlled Somaliland Camel Corps were waiting for them, forcing their surrender.

A court-martial was held for Franz Eckern when word was passed that his U-Boat was accused of shooting at the surviving seamen of a Greek freighter sunk in the South Atlantic some months before. Some survivors were able to hide under the debris and escape the slaughter, and then were picked up a short time later. Brother Bob was one of the fortunate survivors.

During interrogations a list of ships Franz was credited with sinking included the one that brother Al was a crewman aboard.

The defense made every effort to show that the Kapitan-lieutenant was following the direct orders of his Commanders and that the British were equally guilty of the same conduct, but it was to no avail. Kapitan-lieutenant Franz Eckern was found guilty of the atrocities and was executed.

Brother Ned was assigned to guarding the German Submarine crew, without any inkling of the relationship to him or his brothers with this crew.

Al, Bob, and Ned survived the war and were reunited in California. While making plans to return to South-End-On-Sea Essex, and in telling of their war-time experiences, these unbelievable occurrences unfolded.