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THE ASSASSINS UNDER THE WAVES

Discovered in an attic in Yorkshire, remarkable pictures of a U-boat crew that sank 19 Allied ships

By PAUL HARRIS

THEY were the hidden menace of the deep - an enemy that Britain seldom saw, and one that almost brought the nation to its knees. Germany's U-boat fleet - which comprised 1,170 craft in total during the war years - once ranked alongside the Luftwaffe and the Waffen SS as the most fearsome fighting force of World War II.

That was why the men who crewed and commanded these submarines became so hated abroad after years of torpedo attacks on warships and vital supply vessels.

Now, after lying forgotten in a Yorkshire attic for half a century, a series of remarkable photographs, taken from the Nazis by a British sailor as war booty, reveals for the first time the other face of the enemy.

What makes the collection so unusual is that it shows the human side of ordinary men forced to live together in a metal tube for months on end.

Men who shared elation and tragedy, for whom death or survival was an almost a daily lottery. Men who attempted, often thousands of miles from their families, to maintain some kind of normality.

We see them taking tea and biscuits, sharing a celebration cake, or having a shower. They are pictured diving and swimming or simply soaking up the sun of their Caribbean and mid-Atlantic patrols.

It is a contrast to the image of ruthless U-boat crews machine-gunning survivors in the water - as did happen - after sinking their ships. The apparently calm atmosphere depicted here was generated and encouraged by their commanding officer, Kapitanleutnant Reinhard Suhren.

He was one of Germany's top U-boat aces. In two commands, he probably fired more torpedoes than any other submarine commander of the war.

HE SANK more than 96,000 tons of shipping. His kills totalled 19 ships, including the British corvette, HMS Zinnia, and a succession of vessels carrying oil, troops and provisions from the U.S. to Britain. Another five were crippled.

His skilful and combative tactics won him the Fuhrer's most prestigious medal, the Knights Cross, to which he later added oak leaves and swords for acts of outstanding military accomplishment.

He danced with Hitler's lover Eva Braun and rubbed shoulders with some of Hitler's leading military henchmen.

Yet, here was a man who clashed with his superiors and had little respect for authority, other than his own.

He was once reprimanded by Admiral Karl Donitz, head of the German Navy, for swearing, and when his patrol returned home after months at sea to a heroes' welcome and a brass-band reception, he quipped: I see the bloody Nazis are still in charge.

It was this irreverence - coupled with his dedication and devotion to his crew - that endeared him to his men.

The pictures on board U 564 were taken by a cameraman assigned to the submarine in 1942 to send propaganda photos back to Berlin.

Normally, such photographs would portray heroic deeds. Therefore, it is likely that few of the pictures reproduced here would have been deemed suitable for broadcast at home.

Suhren saw the photographer as a nuisance. He subjected him to a tirade of abuse after he was too slow to record the explosion of an ammunition ship that U 564 had hit. In the absence of such morale-boosting works, perhaps the photograph showing the cake might

have been captioned to suggest the battle was going so well that the navy had time to celebrate a crewman's birthday.

In fact, Suhren had quietly asked one of the men to bake it as a mark of gratitude to those who quelled a diesel oil fire, which threatened to fry them all like sardines in a can.

The camaraderie worked both ways. While at sea, U 564 received a message that Suhren was to be promoted from Kapitanleutnant to Korvettenkapitan, the equivalent of a full commander, and was to receive another Knights Cross award.

He was resting in his bunk one morning when U 564's engine suddenly stopped. Fearing disaster, he leapt out to investigate - to discover his men assembled in grand military order on deck.

The engineers had fashioned extra bands of rank for his uniform from an old tin can, and crafted an oak-leaf cluster to pin on his chest. The pictures of this frivolous event seem not to have made it into official publications. Likewise, maybe the one showing tea being passed round was a little too quintessentially English.

U 564 was based off the coast of France, mostly in Brest. Among its kills' was a Mexican oil tanker that Suhren apparently suspected of being a disguised Allied vessel.

The attack brought Mexico into the war, allowing U.S. forces to set up bases there and increase their coverage of the U-boat infested seas.

WHILE the Germans were working on the development of a soap that its sailors could use to produce lather from salt water, the Allies were finalising a more significant project.

First, they had designed an airborne radar that could locate submarines; second, they were about to crack the Enigma code that U-boats used for communications.

Even while U 564 was sending what it thought were secret messages on its Enigma machine, seen in one of the pictures, the Allies were intercepting and decoding them.

U 564 went on to complete more patrols under Suhren's command until he left in October 1942 to spearhead the training of U-boat crews in Germany, later taking command of the fleet in Norway.

In July 1943, under a new commander, U 564 was crippled in a depth-charge attack and later sunk by a bomber off the coast of Spain, while under tow from another U-boat. Suhren died in Germany in 1984 at the age of 68 - but the photographs remained as a hidden legacy.

In 1944, a Royal Navy diver, who had been among the first to liberate Brest, found an archive of 400 pictures in an office there and kept them.

After the war, he gave them to a boy called Vic Parker and asked him to keep quiet.

Mr. Parker, now in his 60s and living in Yorkshire, retrieved them from his attic recently after watching a TV programme about U-boats. He showed them to local historian Frank James, who started to research their provenance.

Now the photographs have been passed to the Royal Navy Submarine Museum in Gosport, Hampshire, where U-boat expert Lawrence Paterson is liaising with Mr. James to piece together the story of Reinhard Suhren and U 564.

Mr. Paterson, who is publishing a history of the First U-boat Flotilla, said: 'They give us a rare insight into the more human side of what life was like on U 564.'