

History and Disposition of the *U-701*

By Joe Hoyt

Introduction

Perhaps the most historically significant U-boat to be investigated during this project is the *U-701*. It was by far the most successful of any of the U-boats to have been lost off North Carolina's coast during the war. It participated in one of the most aggressive U-boat assaults on the east coast of the United States, during which it had one of the most successful patrols of any U-boat of its class in American waters.

In addition to its history, the *U-701* is the most undisturbed representation of a Type VIIC U-boat in an accessible location in the United States, and possibly in the world. Despite being the most common submarine type of the war, just a few examples of this class still remain. Only a single preserved example remains as a museum ship, the *U-995*. There are hundreds of these vessels on the seabed world-wide, but very few within conventional diving depths. Of the known Type VIIC sites, the *U-701* has been protected by obscurity until recently. As such, only minimal interference with the site's integrity has occurred, which has the potential for the best returns for archaeological interpretation.

Aside from the archaeological information that can be obtained from *U-701* individually, the comparison of this site to other similar sites off North Carolina will potentially answer important questions. Technical questions relating to variations in submarine design and variability can be asked. Social questions from the meaningful distribution of artifacts can be raised. Additionally, impact can be assessed and

suggestions for mitigations may arise, which will allow for successful management of these important historic and economic resources.

History of the U-701

The *U-701* was the first U-boat to be built by Stülcken Sohn shipyard in Hamburg. The keel was laid on 13 May 1940, and was launched on 16 April 1941.¹ The vessel was subsequently commissioned into the Kriegsmarine on 16 July 1941 with the feldpost number 44 322.² It was unusual for the construction of a U-boat to take nearly a year. In this case, the duration of construction was attributed to the fact that the yard had not yet produced a U-boat and was inefficient in doing so. There was a great deal of significant issues in the construction of the *U-701* that required substantial refit and reworking. Most notably, the electrical wiring and the air and oil lines were improperly installed.³ It is possible that some of the alterations made following the refit may have left an archaeological signature.

Towards the end of the construction of the *U-701*, the crew was ordered to Hamburg to oversee the completion of the vessel. This was done to familiarize the entire crew with each intricate detail of the entire vessel. It was known as Baubelehrung, and was required of each crew taking command of a new U-boat. Baubelehrung on *U-701*

¹ *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, (Washington, D.C.: Navy Department, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1942), 5; Kenneth G. Wynn, *U-boat operations of the Second World War*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 125.

² Wynn, *U-boat operation of the Second World War*, 125.

³ *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 5.

began in May of 1941.⁴ After this, sea trials in the Baltic Sea began under scrutiny of the U-Bootsabnahmekommission (U-boat Acceptance Commission). During these trials the inadequacies of construction were exposed, at which point the vessel put into the Danzigerwerft in Danzing. Evidently the yard was unsuited to carry out the necessary repairs and it was ordered to report back to Stülcken Sohn for what would be an overhaul.⁵

Command of the *U-701* was given to Kapitänleutnant Horst Degen of the Naval Class of 1933. Degen, was born in Münster, Westphalia on 19 July 1913. He had served as the Second Watch Officer and the Torpedo and Radio Technical Officer on the destroyer *Z 10 Hans Lody* from September 1939 until June 1940. He transferred to the U-boat arm in July 1940 and by March 1941 Degen had completed the u-commanders course. Upon completion of the course, Degen was assigned to a U-boat for commanders training.⁶ He was assigned to the *U-552* as commanded by Erich Topp. Topp went on to become one of the most famous U-boat skippers of the war, ranking fourth in overall tonnage sunk. Degen was heavily influenced by Topp's aggressive U-boat tactics and held Topp in high esteem stating that he had, "taught me all I know."⁷

Almost immediately upon his return, Degen reported to Hamburg to begin Baubelehrung and take command of the *U-701*. The *U-701* was attached to the third Flotilla based at La Pallice. Leaving from Kiel on 27 December 1941, Degen and his crew embarked on their first war cruise aboard *U-701*.⁸

⁴ Rainer Busch and Hans-Joachim Röhl, *German U-boat Commanders of World War II: A Biographical Dictionary*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 53.

⁵ *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 5.

⁶ Rainer Busch and Hans-Joachim Röhl, *German U-boat Commanders of World War II: A Biographical Dictionary*, 53.

⁷ *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 2, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

This was not only the first war cruise of the *U-701*, but the vessel was taking part in the first deployment of U-boats in American waters. Following Germany's declaration of war against the United States on 11 December 1941, Admiral Döenitz wanted to immediately deploy a U-boat offensive off North America. Degen and the *U-701* were part of the 16 U-boats (6 Type IXs and 10 VIIs) dispatched in December.⁹

This first war cruise was very difficult. Outbound to the operational area off Newfoundland the First Watch Officer, Lieutenant Weinitschke, was swept overboard and lost on 31 December, after going on deck in heavy weather without a safety belt.¹⁰ Between 2 January and 7 January, Degen found and attacked several ships, discharging eleven internal torpedoes. Only two of these torpedoes found their target, a 3,657 ton British Baron Class freighter the *Baron Erskine*.¹¹ Two electric torpedoes sunk the *Erskine* near Rockall, south of Iceland. After the *Erskine* was sunk, Degen approached the lifeboat with survivors to inquire as to the name of the vessel, which was refused. Due to severe weather, Degen later expressed his suspicion that the lifeboats would not make shore. He was right; there were no survivors of the sinking of the *Baron Erskine*.¹²

The weather encountered during the rest of the Atlantic crossing was atrocious. Degen could not maintain an appropriate topside watch. After heavy seas caused a bridge gun to come loose, injuring his Second Watch Officers, Degen decided to run submerged. Because of this, he was not able to replenish his torpedo supply until calm weather would

⁹ Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*, (New York, New York: Random House, 1996), 453, 727.

¹⁰ Michael Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat: The Dramatic True Story of Germany's First U-boat Attacks Along the American Coast in World War II*, (New York, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990), 144.

¹¹ Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*, 453.

¹² *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 7.

allow him to access the outboard torpedoes.¹³ After about five weeks of patrolling, *U-701* was recalled, and returned to St. Nazaire on 9 February 1942, having sunk only a single vessel. For this unimpressive patrol, Degen received harsh criticism from Döenitz. His expenditure of eleven torpedoes was thought to be excessive and rash. He did not conduct what Döenitz believed to be an adequate man overboard search and sunk only one vessel, which was outside of the intended operational area.¹⁴

After just over two weeks in St. Nazaire, *U-701* embarked on its second war patrol beginning on 26 February 1941. Döenitz had planned to send *U-701* back to American waters, but was obliged to divert Degen and his crew in order to maintain a strong presence in the Northwest Approaches. In contrast to the previous patrol, Degen conducted his second patrol with great success and boldness. From 6-11 March, Degen sank three confirmed ships (possibly a fourth as well, the *Rononia*, but this is unconfirmed), expending seven torpedoes. These ships were the 213 ton fishing trawler, the Faroese *Nyggjaberg* on 3 March, which sank within two minutes with all hands.¹⁵

In addition to the *Nyggjaberg*, Degen also attacked and sunk two armed British antisubmarine trawlers. On 8 March, the *U-701* sunk the 541 ton warship HMS *Notts County* and three days later sank another vessel of the same class, the HMS *Stella Cappella*. The remainder of the patrol was fruitless due to heavy weather, which prevented attacks. By 1 April, the *U-701* made its way to Brest, completing a successful

¹³ Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*, 453.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 472.

¹⁵ *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 8; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*. 552; Wynn, *U-boat operation of the Second World War*, 126.

second patrol.¹⁶ This patrol evidently redeemed Degen in the eyes of Döenitz, whom subsequently referred to him as the ‘Gallant Degen’.¹⁷

The crew of *U-701* enjoyed more than a month liberty while at Brest, and did not embark again until 19 May 1942. This was merely a transfer to Lorient, where they completed refueling and embarked on a third war patrol on 20 May 1942.¹⁸ This was to be by far the most successful patrol of the *U-701*, but also its last.

This patrol was in conjunction with seven other boats dubbed group *Hecht* (English: *Pike*). Five of the *Hecht* boats, including *U-701*, were diverted for special missions. The special operations of these five boats represent possibly the most aggressive coordinated U-boat assault on the United States in the entire war. Three boats were assigned to mining different ports along the East Coast. Delaware Bay, Boston Harbor, and the Chesapeake Bay were all targeted for mining operations. Meanwhile, two other U-boats landed Abwehr agents (German equivalent to a CIA operative) on U.S. soil in Long Island and in North Florida. These two groups of agents intended to meet in Cincinnati, Ohio and coordinate sabotage on aircraft, tank factories and shipyards. The five boats diverted for these special missions were to converge on the Cape Hatteras area following their completion.¹⁹

The *U-701* was assigned to mine the Chesapeake Bay area. On 12 June 1942, Degen arrived off the entrance to the Chesapeake and proceeded to strategically lay 15 delayed action TMB mines. Cape Henry and Cape Charles lights were bright and visible

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Theodore Taylor, *Fire on the Beaches*, (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1958), 178; Homer Hickam Jr., *Torpedo Junction: U-boat War off America's East Coast, 1942*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 242.

¹⁸ Wynn, *U-boat operation of the Second World War*, 126.

¹⁹ Karl Döenitz, *WarDiaries of the German Submarine Command 1939-1945*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1945), 76; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*, 602.

which allowed Degen to accurately judge his position. Within 30 minutes *U-701* had deposited all of its mines in 36 feet of water directly in the shipping channel.²⁰

This minefield was very productive sinking 2 ships and severely damaging 3 more. On 15 June 1942, convoy KN109 from Key West to Norfolk came into contact with the active mine field. The first two ships hit were American, the 11,237 ton *Esso Augusta* and the 11,615 ton *Robert C. Tuttle*. These ships were severely damaged, but were later returned to service. On the same day, the 448 ton British anti-submarine trawler, *HMS Kingston Ceylonite* struck another of Degen's mines and was destroyed with the loss of all hands. Additionally, the 1,190 ton 165 foot four stack Coast Guard Cutter, *USS Bainbridge*, was slightly damaged when one of its own depth charges detonated a nearby mine. Following this chaos the channel was closed until it could be properly swept of mines. After it was believed clear, the channel was reopened. Unfortunately this was not the case and a remaining mine struck and sunk the 7,117 ton American freighter *Santore*.²¹

This was a complete success in the eyes of Dönitz and afforded Degen a congratulatory radio message. Of each vessel in group Hecht assigned to a special mission, *U-701* was the only boat that achieved its goals. Furthermore, this was the only mining operation with appreciable success in United States waters in the entire war.

Following the mining operation, Degen took the *U-701* to waters of Cape Hatteras. For about a week the *U-701* had poor luck. Their ventilation system was functioning poorly and the boat was extremely hot in the warm gulf-stream waters off

²⁰ Homer Hickam Jr., *Torpedo Junction*, 246; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*. 602; Wynn, *U-boat operation of the Second World War*, 126.

²¹ June Eastern Frontier War Diary (PAGE NUMBER?); Homer Hickam Jr., *Torpedo Junction*, 256; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*. 602; Wynn, *U-boat operations of the Second World War*, 126

North Carolina. Degen sighted some convoys and fired off two torpedoes which did not find targets, and one occasion was depth charged by aircraft which caused damage to gauges and his main periscope.²²

On 19 June, the *U-701* came into contact with a small 170 ton armed U.S. Navy patrol boat, the USS *YP-389*. Degen had possibly encountered and avoided this same vessel a number of times over the preceding days, but this time he came up near the *YP-389* and it surprised him in the mist. Fearing the vessel would get off a location report, Degen decided to sink the vessel with his deck guns. After a brutal exchange of fire between the two vessels lasting over an hour, the *YP-389* succumbed despite an impressive resilience for such a small craft.²³

Another week of nothing went by. The crew of the *U-701* spent most of the day on the bottom conserving fuel, surfacing only briefly to flush the heat and stench out of the boat. During this time strict watch was in effect for patrolling aircraft. On 26 June 1942, *U-701* torpedoed the 7,256 ton Norwegian freighter *Tamesis*. On the following day, Degen came across the 6,985 ton British tanker *British Freedom* and sent one torpedo into its side. Fortunately, both the *Tamesis* and the *British Freedom* were only damaged and were later returned to service.

For Degen and the *U-701* this had already been an exceptional patrol. But on the very next day, they encountered the SS *William Rockefeller*. This was one of the largest tankers in the world at the time at 14,054 tons. Sinking the *Rockefeller* would be a perfect

²² Karl Döenitz, *WarDiaries of the German Submarine Command 1939-1945*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1945), 122.

²³ Karl Döenitz, *WarDiaries of the German Submarine Command 1939-1945*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1945), 135; *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 12; Homer Hickam Jr., *Torpedo Junction*, 262; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*. 606; Wynn, *U-boat operation of the Second World War*, 126.

ending to this highly productive patrol. Degen fired one well aimed torpedo at the tanker for a hit which caused severe damage and put the *Rockefeller* to a halt. The tanker was escorted by Coast Guard aircraft, which dutifully dropped two depth charges and called up the 83 foot Coast Guard Cutter *Number 470*. The cutter arrived at the site and conducted a depth charge attack that was ineffectual aside from it keeping Degen away. The *Rockefeller* was severely damaged and the crew had all safely abandoned the vessel. After dark, Degen returned to the drifting *Rockefeller* and fired one more torpedo into the burning hull putting it under.²⁴

Following the sinking of the *William Rockefeller*, Degen had sunk 21,789 tons and damaged an additional 38,283. Totaled at 60,072 tons, this was the best Type VII patrol of all.²⁵ Three of these nine vessels were warships and one was the largest tanker sunk by a U-boat to then. Additionally, the success of the mining operation was highly regarded by Dönitz. Unfortunately for Degen and the rest of the *U-701* crew, the patrol was not yet over.

U-701 was patrolling off Cape Hatteras for over a week since the sinking of the *Rockefeller*. During the day they sat on the bottom, but came up occasionally to freshen the air. On 7 July 1942, while on the surface at around 1:00 p.m. the first watch officer, Konrad Junker, failed to spot an Army Air Force Hudson in a timely manner. By the time he noticed the plane it was too late. The Hudson, piloted by Lieutenant Harry Kane out of Cherry Point, North Carolina, accurately dropped three 325 pound depth charges.²⁶

²⁴ *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 12; Homer Hickam Jr., *Torpedo Junction*, 262; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*, 606; Wynn, *U-boat operation of the Second World War*, 126.

²⁵ Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*, 608.

²⁶ *Report of Interrogation of Survivors of U-701, Sunk by U.S. Army Attack Bomber on July, 7 1942*, 12; Homer Hickam Jr., *Torpedo Junction*, 262; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's 1939-1942*, 606; Wynn, *U-boat operation of the Second World War*, 126.

As the *U-701* was attempting to crash dive, they were already underwater when the charges fatally hit. The damage was such that Degen could not blow the ballast tanks and surface. Survivors had to bail-out of the *U-701* when it was already likely sitting on the bottom. Two separate groups of survivors reached the surface. All but seven of the crew escaped the boat. However, Kane was not able to offer assistance in his Hudson, except to radio a position and drop a smoke flare. The remaining crew of 36 drifted with the gulf-stream for 49 hours. During that time all but 7 of the crew drowned. On 10 July 1942, the Navy blimp *K-8* located the survivors and called in a Coast Guard sea plane, which landed and recovered the 7 crew members, Degen included.²⁷ The crew became POWs and remained in various prison camps in the United State until the end of the war.

The U-701 Wreck Site

The wreck of the *U-701* remained completely undisturbed for 47 years until it was discovered by sport diver, Uwe Lovas in 1989. The wreck sits in approximately 110 feet of water in the shifting sands and currents where the Gulf-Stream and Labrador collide off of Cape Hatteras. Though discovered in 1989, Lovas contacted Horst Degen and assured him that his comrades would not be disturbed, and to facilitate this Lovas kept the location very secret from the larger diving community. As a result, only a few artifacts were recovered during this time.²⁸

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Edwin P. Hoyt, *U-boats Offshore: When Hitler Struck America*, (New York, New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1978), 184.

²⁸ Henry C. Keatts and George C. Farr, *Dive Into History: U-boats*, Volume 3, (Houston, Texas: Pisces Books, 1994), 115. Catherine Kozak, "Saving a Sunk Sub from Salvage," *The Virginian Pilot*, 30 June 2004.

The site was rediscovered in 2004 and made more accessible to the diving community. Despite an outpouring of requests for protection by the dive community, the site was subjected to the salvage of artifacts.²⁹ Despite this interference with the site it is still believed that the level of degradation is nowhere near as bad as that of the *U-85* and the *U-352*.

The wreck is periodically covered in sand and in an area with unpredictable currents. It is possible that during the field expedition in July that the *U-701* is nearly completely obscured in sand, or may be comparatively exposed. This is a variable that will likely be unknown until the site is reached for the team. It is likely that at least the conning tower and the forward 88mm deck gun will be exposed.

When the vessel sank it was still carrying two or three torpedoes. As it was on patrol it is likely that these were loaded into the tubes. Depending on the condition of the bow and stern, and the variability of sediment, it may be possible to discern how many torpedoes are on the vessel, as well as their location. Additionally, depending on the amount of scour, it is possible that 20mm and 88mm shells could be encountered, and if so must be cataloged in detail.

²⁹ Catherine Kozak, "Scuba Diving Thieves Plunder Rare Unspoiled WWII Submarine Wreck U-701," *Virginian-Pilot*, 8 September 2004; Jerry Allegood, "The U-boat," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 5 December 2004.