

History and Disposition of the U-85 By Joe Hoyt

Introduction

The *U-85* is one of only 24 Type VII-B German U-boats ever built. It is certainly the only example of a Type VII-B in United States waters. It may also be the only example of a VII-B in waters accessible for traditional archaeological survey. The one possible exception is the *U-74* near Cartagena, Spain.¹

Unfortunately, most of the material remains have been haphazardly removed over the years by sport divers. This site was visited by navy divers just a day after its sinking, and in the 1960s was discovered by sport divers, after which it has been regularly visited. Virtually all loose artifacts externally have been collected by souvenir hunters, and the inside of the site has been indiscriminately dredged of nearly all of its contents. These activities have severely limited the type of archaeological research that can be conducted on this site, due to the absence of material cultural remains. There are however sections of the wreck that still have the potential to yield archaeologically important materials. Despite the widespread degradation of the site due to wanton looting, the hull itself still has archaeological significance due to such a small representation of subtype B. Additionally, the site still has a great deal of historic and economic significance.

The history of the *U-85* is important to American history because it was the first enemy submarine sunk by a US Navy warship in the Second World War. Additionally,

¹ Axel Niestlé, *German U-boat Losses during World War II: Details of Destruction*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 40.

the sinking of the *U-85* was the first submarine kill in U.S. waters in the war.²
Documentation and preservation of this valuable historic site is long past due.

History of the U-85

The *U-85* was the third Type VII-B built at Flederwerft in Lübeck. The keel was laid on 18 December 1939 it was launched on 10 April 1940 and commissioned by 7 June with the Feldpost number 40 935. *U-85* was attached the Third Flotilla based at Kiel and La Palice from June 1941 until the time of loss on 14 April 1942.³

Command of the *U-85* was given to Oberleutnant zur See Eberhard Greger of the naval class of 1935. Greger was born on 15 September 1915 in Lieberose, Netherlands. Greger first served in the surface fleet as the Second Watch Officer on the destroyer *Wolfgang Zenker* from February through October 1939. In October, Greger began attending the U-boat training school and by January 1940 was assigned to the *U-30* as First Watch Officer. The *U-30* was a Type VII-A commanded by Fritz Julius Lemp. Lemp was one of the most famous U-boat commanders of the war. In October 1940, Lemp was given command of the *U-110* a Type IX-B. At this time Greger joined Lemp for the Baubelehrung phase of the *U-110* construction, after which he resumed his position as First Watch Officer. Greger remained in this position until April 1940, at

² Karl Döenitz, *War Diaries of the German Submarine Command 1939-1945*, (Washington, D.C.: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1945), 28.

³ Kenneth Wynn, *U-boat Operations of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 64.

which point he began the U-boat commander's course. After completion of his training he was assigned a crew and given command of the *U-85*.⁴

Greger's first war patrol as Captain began on 28 August 1941. The *U-85* was assigned to Group *Markgraf* along with thirteen other U-boats dispatched to patrol for convoys Southwest of Iceland. Setting out from Trondheim, *U-85* immediately was subjected to harassment by patrolling antisubmarine aircraft. The first and second days of the patrol were not fruitful due this cover and the necessity to conduct evasive crash dives. Over the next two days the *U-85* encountered one freighter which escaped, and another which was determined to be too small to be worthwhile. On 2 September the *U-85* was spotted by a patrolling aircraft which dropped three depths charges to no effect.⁵

Days went by with no luck. Dönitz and the Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine (OKM) were completely unaware that British code-breakers were successfully reading naval enigma encoded signals. In an effort to maintain this secret, the British decided to reroute convoys around known U-boats rather than to act tactically against them. Contact with convoys was extremely difficult. Greger was unaware of this, and likewise unaware that his former Captain, Fritz Julius Lemp, was partially responsible as a result of allowing *U-110* and its secret materials to fall into British possession.⁶

In an effort to increase the possibility of contacting a convoy, Group *Markgraf* was ordered spread out over a larger area. Finally, on 9 September, *U-85* and *U-81* came across Slow Convoy 32. *U-81* was able to sink one ship, but *U-85* fired and missed their target. However, Greger was able to radio a contact report stating that he had come across

⁴ Rainer Busch and Hans-Joachim Röhl, *German U-boat Commanders of World War II: A Biographical Dictionary*, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 86.

⁵ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, (Washington, D.C.: Navy Department, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1942), 4.

⁶ Wynn, *U-boat Operations of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, 64.

a massive convoy with as many as 65 ships. As a result of this contact report, Dönitz activated the wolf-pack tactics by calling for all Group *Markgraf* U-boats to report to Greger's position.⁷

During the attack on Slow Convoy 42, Greger fired five torpedoes which were failures, described as, "hot tube runners".⁸ *U-85* was able to sink one ship, the 4,748 ton British freighter *Thistle Glen* on 10 September. In response, the Canadian escorts *HMCS Skeena* and *HMCS Alberni* delivered a very accurate depth charge attack. Greger narrowly escaped. The following day Greger surfaced the *U-85* with the intent to conduct repairs and resume his patrol. During test diving, he determined that *U-85* was not able to dive with the requisite effectiveness. The damage from the depth charge attacks was so great that he had no other alternative but to abort the rest of the mission and return St. Nazaire.⁹

Although Greger had to abort, the wolf-pack attack that he instigated continued for six more days. Several U-boats attacked in the end causing the loss of nineteen ships for a total of 74,574 tons. Up to that point, this was the second most successful attack on a convoy since the war began. Greger arrived at their new base at St. Nazaire on 18 September after 22 days at sea and the *U-85* began repairs.¹⁰

Following repairs the *U-85* transferred from St. Nazaire to Lorient on 11 October. After taking on fuel and fresh provisions Greger was ready to take *U-85* on a second war patrol. This was a very frustrating and disappointing patrol for the *U-85*. British

⁷ *Ibid.*, Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's, 1939-1942*, (New York, New York: Random House, 1996), 361

⁸ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Wynn, *U-boat Operations of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, 64.; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's, 1939-1942*, 361.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

intelligence on U-boat locations was so effective that the convoys were easily evading the *U-85*. The boat was plagued by rough weather, heavy antisubmarine patrols and elusive convoys. After having spent 43 days in the North Atlantic and being occasionally depth charged by planes, the *U-85* found little and attacked nothing. Greger and his men returned to Lorient unsuccessful.¹¹

The men of the *U-85* enjoyed an extended stay in port. They did not embark on their third war patrol until 8 January 1942. By this time, the United States had entered the war and Germany was prompt in bringing U-boats to bear on the East Coast of the United States. The *U-85* was among the second wave of type VIIs to be deployed in American waters. Due to the expanse of the area patrolled the wolf-pack tactics were not as practical and many vessels, though still in loose groups, effectively were operating individually. *U-85* took a patrol station between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.¹²

U-85 had no luck until 21 January. In the Mid-Atlantic, Greger fired four torpedoes at what was judged to be a 10,000 ton steamer. The crew of the *U-85* claimed to have scored at least one hit, but the vessel evidently did not sink and no confirming allied records of this incident are known.¹³

On 28 January while operating off Newfoundland, the *U-85* was attacked by with depth charges in what the crew described as a “baptism of fire.”¹⁴ The *U-85* was rocked, but not seriously damaged. This attack is attributed to the Aviation Machinist Mate First Class Donald L. Mason. Mason attacked a sub on the surface in the same reported position on 28 January. Believing that he had been successful, his first report on the

¹¹ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, 6; Wynn, *U-boat Operations of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, 64.

¹² Wynn, 64.

¹³ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

action was a radio message stating, "Sighted sub, sank same."¹⁵ This utterance is one of the most famous quotes in American naval history and certainly the most famous American naval quote in reference to the U-boats of World War II.¹⁶

On 8 February, *U-85* along with the *U-654* found and attacked the Southwest bound Convoy ONS 61. *U-654* was able to sink one vessel in this convoy, while Greger fired at least 3 torpedoes with no hits. On the following day, Greger found a ship sailing alone. This was the 5,408 ton British freighter *Empire Fusilier*. Greger sank this vessel with torpedoes, the only success of the patrol. Shortly after this the *U-85* headed for St. Nazaire, arriving on 23 February 1942.¹⁷

By 21 March 1942, the *U-85* set sail out St. Nazaire for what would be its final patrol. On this patrol the *U-85* was to return to American waters, this time specifically off the coast of the United States. Greger and his crew had a reasonably uneventful crossing. However, this was the first group of boats dispatched to operate in the United States with the assistance of a u-tanker. This was an enormous advantage for operating in such remote waters, especially for the Type VIIIs which were not intended to have such a range. Though the re-supply operations during this deployment were problematic due to inexperience, it still represented an important development in the nature of the U-boat war against the United States. The *U-85* probably refueled with either the *U-459* or the *U-A* at some stage before heading for Cape Hatteras, but this is uncertain.¹⁸

¹⁵ United States Fleet, *Patron 82 Cominch File, Comtaskfor 4 282317 of January, 1942*, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters of the Commander In Chief Navy Department, 28 January 1942).

¹⁶ As evidenced by the inclusion of the quote in the section, *Famous Navy Quotes, Who Said them and When*, <http://www.history.navy.mil/index.html>

¹⁷ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, 7; Wynn, *U-boat Operations of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, 64.

¹⁸ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, 8; Wynn, *U-boat Operations of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, 64; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's, 1939-1942*, 541, 729.

Off the New Jersey coast they found their first target on 10 April. It was the 4,904 ton Swedish freighter *Christina Knudsen* outbound from New York to Cape Town. Greger sunk the ship with two torpedoes and then proceeded directly for his station off Cape Hatteras.¹⁹

On 13 April 1942, *U-85* was sitting in shallow water off of Bodie Island lighthouse waiting for targets. Earlier that day the four-stack destroyer USS *Roper* set out from Norfolk on its way to Cape Hatteras for antisubmarine patrol. Just after midnight the *Roper* was approaching the area of the *U-85* when they detected a weak radar contact. The crew of the *Roper* did not suspect much at first, but dutifully pursued the contact.²⁰

Greger, being in very shallow water, evidently decided that they would try to escape on the surface. The speed was greater on the surface and would increase his chances of getting to deep water. However, the *Roper* was closing. It was now suspected on board the *Roper* that they may be pursuing a submarine. These suspicions were confirmed when in the crew witnessed the track of a torpedo narrowly miss, running close down the port side. Greger had fired one torpedo from his stern tube an attempt to shake his pursuant.

As the gap between the vessels was closed it became a surface engagement. The crew of the *Roper* manned their machine guns and 3 inch deck guns. As German sailors attempted to exit the conning tower to man their guns they came under heavy fire from the *Roper*. *Roper* not only had the advantage of more surface artillery, but was able to

¹⁹ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, 8; Wynn, *U-boat Operations of the Second World War*, Vol. 1, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

man their guns sooner. This prevented the *U-85* from getting to their guns at all. A well aimed 3 inch shell breached the pressure hull just aft of the conning tower.²¹

At some point, Greger must have made the decision to scuttle and abandon the *U-85*. The crew of the *Roper* observed the U-boat sinking at the stern and watched as the crew jumped into the water, begging for rescue. During this time, the *Roper* believed it got a sonar contact, which was likely the *U-85*. Believing that U-boats operated in packs as they did in other regions, *Roper* did not want to take the chance of being sunk by an additional U-boat. As a result, rather than rescuing the crew of the *U-85* the *Roper* rode right through the mass of sailors in the water and dropped an additional 11 depth charges to ensure that it was sunk. The deployment of the depth charges killed the entire crew of the *U-85*. *Roper* then hauled off for fear of another boat in the area. The *Roper* returned after daylight and recovered the bodies of 29 sailors and later interred them in Hampton Roads, Virginia.²²

The U-85 Wreck Site

Since the wreck of the *U-85* was in such shallow water, there were high hopes for salvaging the vessel and acquiring a great deal of valuable intelligence. Navy hard-hat divers were on site almost immediately. What they were hoping to recover was a four-rotor enigma machine. Germans had recently added a fourth rotor to this encrypting device which completely prevented allied forces to break naval code. Had they been more vigilant in locating this device at that time it could have changed a great deal in the Battle

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

of the Atlantic. The divers did not locate enigma. They did however recover several items from the wreck site. The 20mm bridge gun was recovered. The 88mm deck gun was dismantled, the IZO torpedo aimer, the gyro-compass and an unexploded depth charge was recovered.²³

After this, the *U-85* wreck site was left alone for nearly 20 years. In the late 1960s an avid sport-fisherman, Ray Wingate, located the wreck site. Rod Wagner was deployed by Wingate to confirm the find, which was done by the recovery of a brass flare gun with *U-85* inscribed on the barrel. The Wingate and Wagner had exclusive access to the site until 1975, when salvage diver Art LePage learned of its location and began contracting Wingate to run a regular charter service. From this point on the site has been regularly visited by groups of sport divers.²⁴

Over the years the site has been nearly completely stripped of artifacts by souvenir hunters. 88mm deck shells once littered the site and now not a single one can be found. All of the hatch covers have been removed. The inside of the wreck has been dredged out by sport divers seeking artifacts. The degradation of the site continued at a steady pace from the 1970s until at least 2002. Most of the artifacts recovered were kept by various individuals. Despite this degradation the *U-85* is still an important historical resource and is a key economic draw for the diving community of North Carolina.²⁵

The site now rests in approximately 100-110 feet of water about 14 miles east of Oregon Inlet. The currents shift and the site can be nearly calm or have a substantial

²³ *Report on the U-85, Sunk by the U.S.S. Roper on April 14, 1942*, 9; Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War: The Hunter's, 1939-1942*, 543.

²⁴ Henry C. Keatts and George C. Farr, *Dive Into History: U-boats*, Vol. 3, (Houston, Texas: Pisces Books, 1994), 81; Jim Bunch, *Germany's U-85: A Shadow in the Sea*, (Nags Head, North Carolina: Deep Sea Press, 2003), 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

current. Depending on currents the visibility and the water temperature vary greatly. In the summer months it can be expected to be around 80° F on the surface and in the mid 60s on the bottom. Visibility can range from 10-100+ feet. The wreck lies on its starboard side with approximately an 80° list. At the bow the outer-hull is gone, exposing the pressure hull and the four forward torpedo tubes. Some of these tubes still have visible torpedoes inside. It is also possible that the remains of a torpedo stored externally at the stern are still visible. Documentation of the ordnance is a high priority. Aft of the conning tower there is visible battle damage from the Roper's 3 inch deck gun.²⁶

Documentation of degradation to the *U-85* is a high priority for this survey. Data collected during this expedition will be used to compare to earlier representations of the site. It will be important to note what is natural degradation is due to formation processes, and what was caused by interference with the site by sport divers and looters. This will hopefully allow for an assessment of impact that will allow for educated recommendations for future mitigation.

²⁶ Ibid; Roderick M. Farb, *Shipwrecks: Diving the Graveyard of the Atlantic*, (Birmingham, Alabama: Menasha Ridge Press, 1985), 45.