

The Story of German Submarine U-625

Background

U-625 was of the VIIC Type, one of the many U-boat variations built by the German industry - derived from the U-18 series of 1916 – and it formed the majority of the Ubootwaffe. The Type VIIC bore the brunt of the campaign against the Western Allies.

There were 568 Type VIIC U-boats constructed and these were responsible for nearly 60 percent of all U-boat successes. From the blunt shark-like bow to the tapered narrow stern, the Type VIIC measured 220ft (67m) in length; draught of just over 15ft.; beam (widest part) of 20ft 4in; displacement of 769 tons (surfaced). Expertly handled, it could be totally submerged in just over 20sec from the order “Dive.” The authorized safe diving depth for the early Type VIICs was 100m (330ft) and 25m deeper for the later models – but the maximum depth was 220m (722ft). The Type VIICs best surface speed was 17.7 knots, not as fast as a destroyer or a frigate, but fast enough to outrun the sloops and corvettes employed on convoy escort duties. Under water, carrying 100 tons of water ballast to counter its built-in buoyancy, the top speed comes down to 7.6 knots, just enough to keep up with the faster moving convoys and overtake the slower ones.

With a normal fuel load of 113.5 tons of heavy diesel oil, running on twin 6-cylinder 1400hp M.A.N. engines at an economic cruising speed of 10 knots, the Type VIIC had a range of 8200 nautical miles, but that was cut by ½ if the top speed was sustained. Under water, running on batteries at about 2 knots, the range was 180 nautical miles, reduced to 80 nautical miles at a speed of 4 knots. When the battery power ran out, the boat was obliged to surface to run on the diesel engines until the batteries were recharged.

The Type VIIC was equipped with four torpedo tubes in the bow and one in the stern. Fourteen torpedoes could be stored aboard in the torpedo tubes and in compartments beneath the floor plates. The word “fire” is commonly used in connection with the torpedo, but in fact, the torpedo is not a projectile at all. It is not expelled from the tube by the force of an explosion but rather by the blast of compressed air. Equipped with an engine, propellers and a rudder of its own, the torpedo is itself a highly-developed unmanned submarine, streaking along just below the surface of the water. Its cargo is a high-power explosive charge.

The normal ship company was 44 (though U-625 had a crew of 53):

- 4 commissioned officers – the Commander, First and Second Officers, and the Chief Engineer
- 10 Petty Officers – responsible for the watches, engine rooms, electrics, radio and control rooms – and a Quartermaster and Coxswain
- plus a total of 30 seamen and technicians – including torpedo men, engine room artificers, electricians, telegraphists, control room hands, and a cook.

Cramped as they were, the crew had to find room for passengers – official observers, newly-trained officers gaining combat experience, and war correspondents. The crew usually included a sailor with some first aid experience.

For emergency, the men were equipped with inflatable life jackets, breathing tubes and masks. A 20-man rubber life raft was carried on the outer hull forward of the bridge.

U-Boot U-625

U-625 was laid down on July 28, 1941 by Blohm & Voss in Hamburg, Germany, and was commissioned on June 4, 1942. U-625 was of a slightly different design than the original VIIC design; it had a 2-level tower with increased armament — two twin-barrel 20mm guns and one 37mm cannon — no 88mm deck gun, no net cutters on the bow, and better radar capability.

U-625 served with three different Arctic Flotillas. Admiral Karl Donitz repeatedly informed Berlin that the Arctic was the last remunerative hunting ground for U-boats, so in 1943 U-625 was transferred to No. 1 Flotilla of the Atlantic Command. Her first Commander, Kptlt. Hans Benker, had previously served on U-75 and commanded both U-152 and U-80.

On U-625's first cruise, she received a rough introduction in the 1944 Atlantic. On January 2, 1944, a B-24 bomber from Squadron 224 attacked her. Benker managed to damage the plane and drove it off. Then a second B-24 attacked. Benker had a Naxos antenna on the bridge with its wire running to the control room through the conning tower hatch. Under attack, Benker elected to dive but forgot to pull down the Naxos antenna. With the wire caught in the hatch it prevented the hatch from sealing and caused flooding. Benker cancelled the dive, and he and another crewman rushed to the bridge to unsnarl and reel in the antenna wire. Benker's order to cancel the dive was not heard and the boat went deep, leaving Benker and the crewman topside. They were not recovered. Control promptly told all U-boats that this tragedy was wholly unnecessary; firm hatch pressure on the Naxos antenna wire would snip it.

The first watch officer, Kurt Sureth, brought the boat into Brest on January 6, 1944, and he remained the boat's Acting Commander until January 25, 1944. Kurt Sureth was detained until after the War and was freed on October 10, 1945.

On January 26, 1944, Siegfried Straub was made Commander of U-625. Born in 1918, he has served as 1WO since the U-boat had been commissioned.

Two submarines, one of which was U-625, proceeded to its station off the coast of Ireland, one of a number of U-boats forming a line to intercept incoming convoys. On the night of 09 March 1944, in the company of U-741, they shot down an attacking Wellington of 407 RCAF Squadron.

On March 10, 1944, Sunderland 111, EK591 "U" of 422 RCAF Squadron, commanded by F/L SW Butler, reached its assigned area – for its anti-submarine patrol – west of the coast of Ireland and sighted a surfaced submarine about six miles to port. He immediately sounded the alarm and began to manoeuvre for an attack. Aircraft crews had been briefed to attack from the bow of a submarine, if possible, in order to avoid damage from the formidable fast-firing cannons on the "bandstand" aft of the conning tower. U-625 did everything it could to keep the stern pointing toward the attacker. After about 10 minutes, Butler attacked from the U-boat's beam, levelling out at a low level of 50 feet. One brave sailor ran to the cannon – since the plane was now below the depression limit of the anti-aircraft guns – and fired a shot. The aircraft was hit near the nose, below the waterline.

Butler carried out a classic 6-depth charge attack and straddled the U-boat, which submerged briefly. After U-625 returned to the surface, one of its crew signalled "Fine bomish" ("Good bombing") from the conning tower. Butler circled the scene for 90 minutes giving the alarm. Commander Straub in the U-625 assessed the damage and decided to abandon ship. While preparing to do so, he got off an SOS to Control, which in turn directed two nearby U-boat – U-256 and U-741 – to rescue Straub and his crew. After the crew had abandoned the submarine in rafts and dinghies, Straub scuttled the U-boat.

While racing to locate and rescue the U-625 sailors, U-256 and U-741 ran into serious difficulties themselves and although they later continued the rescue operation, the crew of U-625 was never found by friend or foe. Sadly, in spite of being in flotation devices, all hands of U-625 (53) were lost, most likely in high seas.

U-boat U-625 lies on the ocean floor of the North Atlantic off the west coast of Ireland at: 52° 35' north, 20° 19' west.

Sir Winston Churchill kept the aerial photographs of the sinking of U-625, taken by the crew of the Sunderland, in his library. A picture of the sinking of U-625 is currently shown in the Battle of the Atlantic section of the new War Museum located in Ottawa, Canada.

Sources:

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