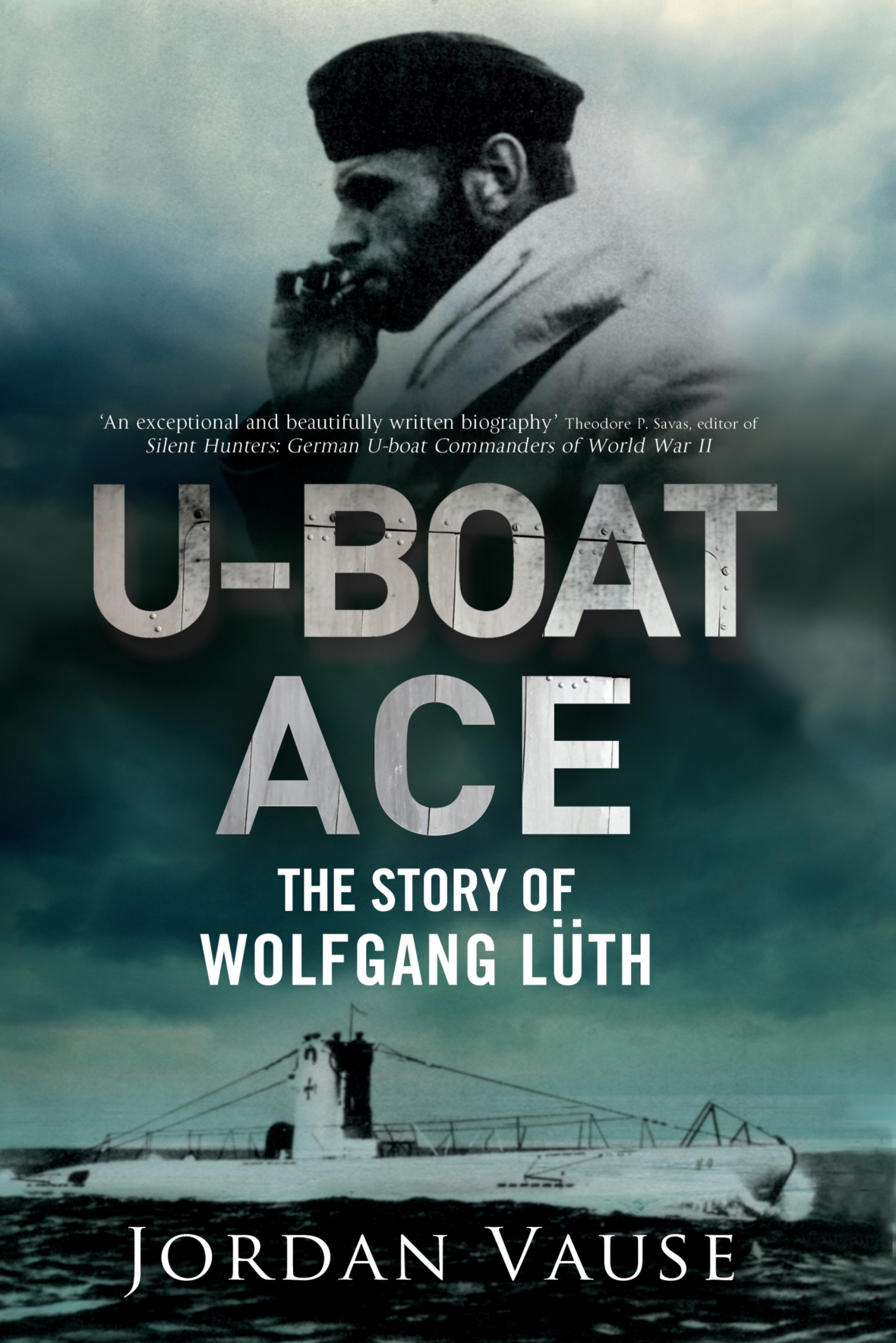

'An exceptional and beautifully written biography' Theodore P. Savas, editor of *Silent Hunters: German U-boat Commanders of World War II*

U-BOAT ACE

THE STORY OF WOLFGANG LÜTH

JORDAN VAUSE

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The Story of Wolfgang Lüth

Jordan Vause

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Books

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Contents

List of Equivalent Ranks (World War II)

Germany	United States
Obersteuermann	Chief helmsman, a senior enlisted rank of some importance*
Seekadett	Naval cadet*
Fähnrich zur See	Midshipman
Oberfähnrich zur See	Senior midshipman*
Leutnant zur See	Ensign
Oberleutnant zur See	Lieutenant (junior grade)
Kapitänleutnant ("Kaleu")	Lieutenant
Korvettenkapitän	Lieutenant commander
Fregattenkapitän	Commander
Kapitän zur See	Captain
Kommodore	Commodore (used only by a Kapitän zur See holding a flag officer's position)
Konteradmiral	Rear admiral
Vizeadmiral	Vice admiral
Admiral	Admiral
Generaladmiral	Navy equivalent of the German Army colonel general*
Grossadmiral	Fleet admiral

* No equivalent rank exists in the U.S. Navy.

2018 Foreword to *U-Boat Ace*

In 2010 I learned that Jürgen Oesten had died. He was ninety-six years old.

It is fair to say that not one person in a million knew who Oesten was when he died, or what he had done, or what he represented in history. For most people, he was just a very old man of courtly manner and no particular distinction, living quietly in a leafy suburb of Hamburg.

In fact Oesten was once among the most feared men of the twentieth century, one of the few remaining members of a small tribe that had terrorized Western civilization for five years during the greatest war in recorded history. Even Churchill was afraid of him.

Jürgen Oesten was a U-boat commander.

At the time I said to a friend that the last of the "great aces" had died. It was a remark made without thinking, and without any research. I had been out of the business for a while by that time and had not kept up on the literature as I should have. As we talked via e-mail, we both started

researching independently on the internet, and we soon discovered that Oesten was not actually the last. There were two other U-boat aces still living in 2010: Georg Lassen and Reinhard Hardegen. Lassen died in 2012, also age ninety-six, and Hardegen, amazingly, will celebrate his 104th birthday this year.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The original hardcover version of *U-Boat Ace* was written in the 1980s and published in 1990. I was asked to write this foreword for a revised United Kingdom edition that will come out in 2018 – twenty-eight years later. The Oesten anecdote is a small one. It actually doesn't have much to do with the book, but it does have a lot to do with the twenty-eight years.

Wolfgang Lüth, the subject of *U-Boat Ace*, was long dead when I wrote the book, but many of his crewmen were still alive. I corresponded with some of them, met some of them face to face, and they appear in the book in the present tense. They are probably all dead now. Many of Lüth's fellow commanders were alive in 1990, and I was able to contact some of them: Otto Kretschmer, Erich Topp, Ernst Bauer, and Jürgen Oesten. They are all dead now too. Within a very few years the Battle of the Atlantic will have passed from living memory, like the Somme in 2005 or Gettysburg in 1950.

The world has changed since 1990. There is a short passage in the last chapter of *U-Boat Ace* in which one of Lüth's crewmen, Franz Persch, wrote:

> We were proud of our Germany … we were prepared to die for her … I am an old man, over seventy years. I draw my pension, I have a nice house at the edge of the woods, my wife and I enjoy watching the rabbits play at the garden gate and the deer in the fields. And Germany, the divided Germany? The foreigners and the strange soldiers? My pride for this country has gone forever.

Four months after the contract for *U-Boat Ace* was signed, the Berlin Wall came down, and "divided Germany" is only a memory now. The strange soldiers are still there, but in 2017 we are in the midst of a heated debate on their role, the role of NATO, and the role of Germany itself in the new century. There are still foreigners in Germany, but there are more of them now, they are of a different kind, and they represent a different challenge. Europe itself has changed in ways that would have surprised Persch.

As the world changed, things were forgotten. In modern discourse people will say that someone is "just like Hitler" or an organization is "just like the Nazis" while having no idea whatsoever how evil a man Adolf Hitler really was, or how diabolical National Socialism was, or how much misery and destruction they caused in the world between 1933 and 1945. And let's face it, the U-Bootwaffe and its membership were a part of that misery and destruction, most of them willingly, some of them enthusiastically.

The potential readership for this new edition has changed. Most people who will read *U-Boat Ace* now are the children of the original readers, and World War II is as far from them as World War I was from their parents. They will know about the war only from their antecedents, from historical sources, and, in a slightly mangled form, from Hollywood. I would trust them in that order, by the way, although to be fair the German movie *Das Boot* is actually quite good, much better than some of the books.

Certainly I have changed in twenty-eight years. When Greenhill made the decision to republish, they very graciously gave me the opportunity to go through the text to identify errors and to change any of the passages I wanted to. Most of the errors had been found and fixed for a 2001 paperback edition. There were a few I missed – fixed now, I hope – but in general I think the book holds up in terms of historical accuracy and technical detail. But, as I went through the text, I was painfully aware that the writing style could have been much better, and I had to restrain myself from rewriting large chunks of the book. The sentences are too short, the imagery is strained, some passages are excruciatingly trite, and

the structure could have been better (I should admit now that there was no formal outline).

In the end, I made only minor edits to the text and left most of it alone. For that reason, although so much has changed in twenty-eight years, the book itself hasn't really changed at all; it is a product of its time and readers should keep that in mind as they read it. Research in the area of naval warfare in general and the Battle of the Atlantic in particular has marched on, and I encourage readers who are interested in these subjects to search out and read newer works from any of several very good historians.

At the end of the book I paraphrased a short quote from Otto Schuhart, made in 1957 at the dedication of a memorial to Wolfgang Lüth: "Lüth is dead and many like him. Dare you now live for others as nobly, as fully, as unselfishly as those who died for you?" I followed by saying, "… whether it is appropriate to ask this question about a man such as Lüth (many readers will think it is not), Otto Schuhart challenged others to live as Lüth should have lived – as he lived in the minds of his family, his friends, his men, as he lived at his very best." I sometimes think about Wolfgang Lüth, and whether I had judged him fairly in 1990, but I would still stand by those last few lines.

Jordan Vause
February 2017

Foreword

We of Lüth's generation were given two lives. In our first life we were hard-charging and reckless; in our second life, after a fall like that of Icarus, we became introverted, restrained, confused. We survived the fall, but we must bear responsibility for it. We are still trying to understand why it happened.

Wolfgang Lüth plunged into the darkness with us. I can see him during a last conversation shortly before his death, "with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes" like one of the figures in Rodin's "Burgesses of Calais," exhausted after years of siege, a rope already at his neck, delivered unconditionally into the hands of a merciless victor.

Lüth, like the knight Parsifal, died a young man, but his conduct and his achievements had won for him the respect of his men and the recognition of the world. Like Parsifal, he lived in harmony with the values, the norms, the rules of behavior dictated by his social and political environment. Loyalty, courage, honor, and country were the pillars of his

life. Myths have grown up around these words, from the *Iliad* through the *Nibelungenlied* to Rilke's "Cornet"; the words are personified in the hero who stands up for them at the risk of his life, who errs, who suffers, yet who passes on his beliefs. Parsifal, the knight, the hero.

Lüth was not the knight of Dürer, accompanied by Death and Satan. He did not see the evil of the political state for which he lived and staked his life – the extent of its hubris, its perversion of values and virtues. He did not see that many of his traditional values were already gone, destroyed. He did not perceive the ambiguity of the state's skewed perspective, nor that of his own.

In the same way, many of the ideas that he presented and published, particularly those on leadership and personnel management, were shaped by circumstances and the spirit of the times.

Lüth's style of leadership was formed primarily by events far out of the ordinary in the U-boat war: long voyages to distant waters that lasted anywhere from two to seven months; a monotonous onboard routine; great but relatively easy success. His experience contrasted with that of others engaged in the terrible operations in the North Atlantic, where a man's life expectancy was about four months.

This style, which Lüth set forth in the lecture "Problems of Leadership," harmonized with his political surroundings. Thus the lecture attained the status of an ideological manual, the weight, almost, of an honor code at the German Naval Academy, whose commandant he became.

Once we know their limitations, we have to ask ourselves if his words can be accepted now as they were spoken then. It is as though one were looking into a kaleidoscope, glimpsing many-colored stones in a shifting mosaic. The stones represent the cardinal virtues, Lüth's virtues, of intelligence, moderation, courage, and justice. But when the kaleidoscope turns, another picture takes shape. The stones are the same, their effect different; they have been changed by their surroundings in some way.

Mankind has always had to live with the prospect of the apocalypse, the *Götterdämmerung*. The many-headed beasts from land and sea were

always there, and the harnessing of nuclear power brings them that much closer. In place of a Parsifal, the ideal knight, therefore, we have the logician, the clear thinker who can lead his men with steady nerves, discrimination, and intelligent self-control.

From my acquaintance with Wolfgang Lüth, by tradition a Balt and a Prussian, and therefore combative but disciplined, I am sure he would have pursued this path had fate allowed him to survive.

Erich Topp
Konteradmiral A.D.

Preface

Most writers claim to have too many people to thank and too little space to do so. I am no exception to this unfortunate rule.

Information on the early part of Wolfgang Lüth's life is sketchy. Herr Franz Hahn, former director of the Wehrgeschichtliches Ausbildungszentrum (WGAZ), the museum of the Marineschule-Mürwik, and Lüth's niece, Dr. Vera Lüth Brown, were both helpful in filling the gaps. Wolfgang Lüth himself gave us a few biographical facts when his own book, *Boot Greift Wieder An,* was published during the war. His career from the time he entered the Reichsmarine until the beginning of the war is documented by records at the Deutsche Dienststelle in Berlin, which is fortunate, since his Marineschule and Reichsmarine records seem to have been lost for good.

The deck logs of Lüth's four boats, U-9, U-138, U-43, and U-181, are all available on microfilm at the National Archives in Washington, DC. They were of inestimable value, not because anything of Lüth

himself can be read from them, but because they are the only record of his actions besides *Boot Greift Wieder An.* The book itself is surprisingly accurate. Covering a period of almost two years (through January 1942), it contradicts neither Lüth's deck logs nor Admiralty records, and men who served in his boats can verify many of the specific episodes he describes.

Lüth's crewmen are the primary source of information about him. At least a dozen contributed to this research, five of whom were interviewed in their homes. One or two men wanted nothing to do with this book, but most were helpful. I am deeply grateful to one officer in particular, Fregattenkapitän Theodor Petersen, for his patience and generosity over the years. Most of the photographs in the book were given me by crewmen. Both Petersen and Josef Dick surrendered their equator crossing certificates, and Dick provided a stack of U-181's old newspapers.

Wolfgang Lüth's lecture, "Problems of Leadership in a Submarine," can be found in German and English. Many books about the Battle of the Atlantic or about U-boats contain excerpts. I worked from an English version given me by Mr. Gus Britton of HMS *Dolphin,* but the translation (by the U.S. Navy Office of Intelligence) was not a good one and some passages had to be taken directly from the German original. Several source books deserve mention. *The Naval War Against Hitler* by Donald McIntyre and *War in the Southern Oceans* by L. C. F. Turner et al. were especially useful. Peter Padfield's *Dönitz: The Last Führer,* though controversial among members of the surviving U-boat community, was also good. Dönitz's autobiography, *Ten Years and Twenty Days,* is factual but self-serving and dull.

I would like to thank Dr. Jürgen Rohwer, who took the time to read and comment on the manuscript, and Admiral Erich Topp, who was good enough to write the foreword to it. Special thanks go to Dr. Jack Sweetman and Mr. Dwight Messimer for their encouragement, and to my German teacher Mrs. Virginia Hunewill, wherever she is.

As for others who provided assistance, I regret that in many cases I was unable to find out the name behind the title or see the face behind the signature. The following individuals and organizations have my

sincerest thanks: Frau Ilse Lüth, Kapitän zur See Ernst Bauer, Herr Jürgen Bialuch, Lieutenant-Commander Donald Crawford, RN, Flottillenadmiral Otto Kretschmer, Burkard Freiherr von Müllenheim-Rechberg, Korvettenkapitän Jürgen Oesten, Konteradmiral Karl Peter, and the staffs of the National Archives, the Public Records Office, the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, the Royal Navy Submarine Museum, the Deutsche Dienststelle, the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, the Stiftung Traditionsarchiv Unterseeboote (now the Deutsches U-Boot-Museum), the Marine-Offizier-Vereinigung, the Verband Deutscher U-Bootfahrer, the Danish Meteorological Office, the Berlin Document Center, and Schaltung-Küste.

Introduction

The Battle of the Atlantic – the series of conflicts between Allied navies and German U-boats fought primarily in the convoy lanes of the Atlantic Ocean – proceeded without quarter from the first day of World War II to the last. On 3 September 1939 Fritz-Julius Lemp, commanding U-30, sank the British passenger liner *Athenia*. On 7 May 1945 an RAF bomber dispatched U-320 off the west coast of Norway. Between those dates, according to most sources, U-boats sank some 2,800 Allied merchant ships of 14 million tons.

"Until [the Germans] were beaten," wrote Nicholas Monsarrat at one time, "they were total enthusiasts for world domination, wholehearted agents of a hideous tyranny which, if not finally checked, would have brought the curtain down on human freedom for generations to come … and among the worst of these willing servants of world enslavement were the men serving in German U-boats."[1] Half the world agreed.

But the U-Bootwaffe was not that simple, and it is no surprise that opinions about U-boats and the men who sailed in them are still divided today. Some people look upon U-boat sailors as heroes. Others consider them to have been no more than modern-day pirates. Today, almost fifty years after the last U-boat sank the last ship, the general view seems to be that the U-boat sailor had a dirty job to do and he did it very well. As Captain Richard Compton-Hall, RN, writes: "All war is murderous: that is its nature; and submariners were particularly skilled at dealing destruction and with it, necessarily, death. The Germans, as losers in both wars, saw their (very few) U-boat contraventions of the seaman's code proclaimed and punished whilst the Allies, as winners, were not arraigned. But any belief that there was some kind of clear-cut division between U-boat men and Allied submariners in their conduct is arguably untenable and invidious."[2]

The most successful and probably best-known U-boat ace of World War II was a man named Otto Kretschmer, who accounted for over a quarter million tons of enemy shipping in the space of eighteen months. Second only to him was Kapitän zur See Wolfgang Lüth. Lüth achieved the distinction of sinking 230,000 tons of shipping, almost fifty ships. He completed sixteen war patrols in four U-boats, and on his last patrol he was at sea a record 203 days. He was the first of two officers in the Kriegsmarine to receive the Reich's highest award for valor, the Knight's Cross with Diamonds, and when he became commandant of the German Naval Academy in August 1944 he was thirty years old – the youngest full captain on the books.

Wolfgang Lüth did a dirty job well. More correctly, he did his job well most of the time, badly some of the time. For behind the glitter and impressive numbers there moved an intriguing, elusive, contradictory figure, a man whose combination of strengths and imperfections seemed to encapsulate the paradox of the careers led by so many U-boat commanders, men spawned by the Nazi regime they served and yet not entirely of it.

You may not like what you read about Lüth. He was a Nazi. He advertised it, loudly and often. He could be prudish and petty, cruel

sometimes. His best friend in the Kriegsmarine went so far as to say that Lüth had no idea of the misery he so often inflicted on the crews of sunken ships, nor did he care.

Lüth did have one remarkable virtue. Not bravery so much, not brilliance, but this: He cared for his men. He watched over them like a stern but well-intentioned German father, and his concern did not stop at the brow of his boat. From the day a sailor reported aboard to the last day of the war, wherever he was, whatever he did, however he sinned, that sailor was the valued ward of Kapitän zur See Wolfgang Lüth.

The result is an odd imbalance of achievement and notoriety that the following pages are unlikely to change. History could not make up its mind about Wolfgang Lüth – whether he was good or bad, whether he was a hero or a villain, whether he was worth mentioning at all.

I think he was. You must decide for yourself.

1

Preparation

An early spring day in the North Atlantic, nothing in sight except the sea and the clouds. The sea was black and quietly speckled with moonlight, and the gray clouds only half concealed the stars in the sky. It was cold, very cold.

U-43 was four days out of port. The lookouts, four of them, yawned as they scanned the horizon in every direction. They were tired and they were wet, but still they stood and watched. They watched the water not for its beauty but for ships, the clouds not for birds but for bombers. The North Atlantic in 1941 was a killing ground. They were the hunters; they were the quarry.

"Ship!" called one of them suddenly. "Red Six Zero." He pointed and the three beside him turned and looked. "I see it," said another with a quiet whistle of amazement. Not a tanker, this one, not a tired old tramp;

she was a fully rigged sailing ship, a big three-masted schooner. He called down the alarm.

Almost at once another man emerged. He had a dirty white cap on his head and a cigar in his mouth. "Good," he shouted, clapping his hand on the lookout's back, eyes following the boy's outstretched arm. "What do you have for me?"

The boy grinned proudly. "A sailing ship, *Herr Kaleu.*" Wolfgang Lüth raised his binoculars. From the distant darkness the ship approached him soundlessly, a spirit of the sea. "About a mile," he said through his cigar. "Very pretty."

Two officers had followed Lüth up to the bridge. Hans-Joachim Schwantke, his second watch officer, had a look. "She is a pretty ship," he agreed. The second man, a *Konfirmand,* a commander in training along only for the one patrol, asked if they were going to sink her.

"Of course," replied Lüth impatiently. "But she isn't worth a torpedo. "Schwantke, call away the gun crews. All of them. Get Becker up here. Let's give him something to shoot at."

The word was passed. A mad invisible scramble ensued belowdecks, then the gunners came up. They climbed down and out to the guns, putting on their lifejackets and buckling themselves into their lifelines. Boxes of ammunition were taken from the magazines and placed in the control room. The men formed a human chain from the control room to the bridge and from there to the gun mounts, ferrying up the boxes hand to hand. The bridge watch was doubled. Gunnery Officer Richard Becker and *Obersteuermann* Theodor Petersen appeared, Becker with glasses so that he could spot, Petersen with a megaphone so that he could relay Becker's commands to the gun crews.

The sailing ship waited serenely; she and U-43 were now only 500 meters apart. "Watch," said Lüth to the Konfirmand at his elbow. "I'm going to give the order to fire and when I do there'll be hell on that ship." Lüth stared at the sailing ship, completely absorbed, as the ammunition boxes were passed up around his legs.

"Clear for firing!" called Becker from the weather deck.

Lüth kept his eyes on the ship. He hesitated briefly, then cried, "Open fire!"

With a roar and a flash, the 105-mm cannon forward of the tower opened up on the sailing ship. The first shot was short; the second misfired. "Damn!" hissed Becker. The 20-mm machine gun in the bridge wouldn't fire either. "Wet ammunition," someone remarked laconically.

The silence resumed as U-43 moved closer to her target. A new box of 20-mm shells came up the chain. In flagrant disregard of established procedure the faulty shell was extracted from the cannon, carried hot across the deck, and tossed overboard. A new one was loaded.

"Clear for firing," called Becker, this time not so loudly.

The cannon roared again, then a bang and a stutter heralded the two after guns, a machine gun in the bridge and a 37-mm gun on the main deck aft. The gun crews in U-43 were stale but they had no trouble finding their range. The schooner was almost on top of them and the first shot from the cannon hit her pilot house. It collapsed in a puff of smoke.

Now the besieged ship came alive, men pouring from her smoking interior. "Look," shouted someone in the bridge, "they're trying to launch their boats." The third shot started a fire on the schooner's decks. It spread quickly up the masts and into the rigging, burning hard and roaring higher with each additional shell until the entire ship was aflame.

No effort was made to save her. Two lifeboats got away safely, floating in a sea made orange by ashes and embers raining down from the sky. A column of smoke rose above the burning deck and into the clouds. "The foremast is going," called a voice after several minutes. "The mizzenmast …"

"Like the *Flying Dutchman*," the Konfirmand said nervously, but Lüth didn't hear him. At that moment a freak wave swept up and over U-43's tower. As it subsided, so did the deafening sound of the U-boat's three guns. Turning toward the 105-mm cannon, Lüth saw that it was unmanned. The wave had washed one of its crew straight over the side. He was hanging by his lifeline and the rest were struggling to pull him in.