



U-900

Military fiction thriller

By

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE, THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to the novel THE LONE WOLF. It is a proposed alternate history of World War 2 and is strictly a work of fiction.

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CHAPTER 1 – A PAINFUL LOSS

09:24 (Newfoundland Time)

Sunday, February 28, 1943

Control room of the Type IXD3 submarine U-801

Navigating at periscope depth south of Newfoundland

North Atlantic

“A message from BdU¹ headquarters, Herr Kapitän.”

Korvettenkapitän Ulrich von Wittgenstein, in command of the long range oceanic patrol submarine U-801, took the printed message handed to him by one of his radio operators and thanked him before starting to read it while standing near the watch periscope of his Type IXD3. The men presently on duty in the control room then saw his expression become somber all at once, while his shoulders visibly sagged. They however didn't ask him what the message was about and returned their attentions to their individual tasks. On his part, von Wittgenstein, a tall and lean man in his late twenties, walked out of the control room, the message still in his hands, and went aft to his minuscule 'cabin', in reality a private space closed off by a curtain. There, he sat down heavily on his bunk bed and read the message a second time. It announced the death of Fregattenkapitän Otto Kretschmer and the loss of his U-800, sunk eleven days ago off Newfoundland. The only good thing said in the message was the fact that 36 men from the U-800 had been able to escape their sinking submarine and had been taken prisoners by the British.

Ulrich stayed silent and immobile for long minutes as he digested the news of the death of his mentor, friend and combat comrade and of other good men he had come to know well while he himself served on the U-800 for over two years. Otto Kretschmer had been in his opinion the best ever submarine commander in the Kriegsmarine and his talent and tactical genius, allied with the technological marvel that had been the U-800, had brought the British and American navies close to utter defeat in the Atlantic, while his single foray in the Pacific had all but sealed a Japanese naval domination there.

¹ BdU : Befehlshaber der U-Boote. Submarine Command in German.

Right now, Ulrich's own U-801 and the other German submarines operating around the North Atlantic were reaping the rewards from the U-800's hard work, which had broken the British convoy system through the sinking of dozens of escort ships. That was now forcing Allied cargo and tanker ships to navigate as free-runners, without escorts, on their way to Great-Britain. While that made for rarer encounters with the hunting German submarines, that also made those Allied ships sitting ducks if found.

Rereading the message again, Ulrich's sadness progressively turned to hard, cold resolve. Finally getting up from his bunk, he walked back into the control room of his submarine and went to the chart table, where he started calculating a new course. His Second Watch Officer, Leutnant zur See Werner Wendt, who was on duty at this time, approached him and spoke to him in a low voice.

"We are going to move to another location, Herr Kapitän?"

"Yes, Werner! We are going to move to the patrol area that was assigned to the U-800. Read this message."

Wendt, a 27 year old man with a bit of a baby face, took the message offered by Ulrich and read it quickly. When he looked back at Ulrich, it was with shock on his face, but he managed to keep the volume of his voice low.

"The U-800 sunk? Kapitän Kretschmer dead? Mein Gott! And what will we do once there, Herr Kapitän?"

Ulrich's expression was dead serious as he replied to his subaltern.

"The U-800 was a one-of-a-kind submarine with capabilities that were unequalled...anywhere. I am sure that the Americans and British wanted to learn about its secrets, so I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to explore and study its wreck to learn everything they could about it. We are going to make sure that they don't desecrate Kapitän Kretschmer's tomb and steal the secrets of the U-800. Have the helm steer to heading 280 and proceed on diesels and schnorchel at ten knots. Have our electronic warfare keep a vigilant watch for any enemy radar or radio signal, but keep electronic silence on our part."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!" said Wendt before giving out loud orders to the crewmen in the control room. Ulrich then finished reviewing his new course on the chart, calculating the distance and time of travel. In about five hours, he would enter the zone that had been patrolled by the U-800. For their own sake, he better not find any Allied warship snooping over the U-800's wreck.

15:56 (Newfoundland Time)

Rescue and salvage ship U.S.S. FALCON

Floating immobile 220 nautical miles southwest of St-John's

"So, is it the U-800?"

"I strongly believe so, sir." replied via the telephone cable linking the U.S.S. FALCON and its diving bell one of the divers sitting in the steel cylinder. "It is of the right shape and size, from what we know of it."

Commander William McKeoug, in charge of the salvage operation, nodded his head in satisfaction on hearing that. While the British and Canadians had balked at desecrating what was in essence a war grave site, Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations for the U.S. Navy, had quickly decided that the information they could glean from exploring the wreck of the infamous U-800 was too important to be prevented by some moral scruples. He had thus immediately ordered an underwater salvage operation to be prepared and sent as soon as he had learned of the sinking of the U-800 and of the capture of part of its crew. The U.S.S. FALCON had been sent, along with two destroyers as escort ships, and had found quickly enough via sonar the site of the wreck, with the U-800 lying in about 280 feet of water, in the silt covering this part of the continental shelf surrounding Newfoundland. A diving bell with two divers inside had then been lowered from the salvage ship in order to make sure that they had found the right wreck. Now, it seemed that McKeoug was in business.

"Very well! Start taking pictures from inside your bell. We will move forward slowly so that you can picture the whole submarine. How damaged is it?"

"The only damage visible to us is a spot on the port aft section of the hull that partly caved in, probably from a nearby bomb explosion, sir. Apart from that, the submarine looks intact."

"Excellent! First, drop a marker buoy, then start taking pictures."

As he waited for the confirmation from his divers that they had dropped their buoy, in order to more easily find again the wreck's site in the future, McKeoug looked around at the sea surrounding the U.S.S. FALCON. In the distance, about one mile away, he could see the destroyers U.S.S. MAYO and U.S.S. GLEAVES, patrolling at slow speed around the salvage ship and listening for any possible approaching German submarine. The Sun was already quite low on the horizon and darkness would soon fall. However,

McKeoug had already decided that the operation would continue even after dark. After all, the waters at the depth of the wreck were constantly dark anyway and the work conditions for his divers would not change noticeably, as the diving bell was equipped with powerful floodlights, which were already lit, illuminating the U-800. The one factor that would slow down or suspend temporarily the operation was if bad weather came in. Unfortunately, that happened frequently in these waters, something that pushed even more McKeoug in not wasting any time.

15:58 (Newfoundland Time)

Underwater observation dome of the U-801

Ulrich von Wittgenstein had a bitter taste in his mouth and also felt contained rage as he examined visually the wreck of the U-800, barely fifty meters away and well illuminated by the powerful lights of a diving bell suspended over it. His own U-801 was now lying on the silt bottom, parallel to the sunken U-800, and he was using the thick, transparent semi-sphere of his underwater observation dome, situated in the forward top section of his submarine's sail, to look at the U-800 with one of his Zelsaule C38 night director sights. The underwater observation dome concept had originated with the U-800 and, while at first being decried as an extravagant and wasteful feature, had quickly proved invaluable, allowing the crew of the U-800 to visually spot any approaching ship or submarine while staying in silent ambush position on the bottom. It also had proved priceless in helping to map underwater minefields in shallow waters, where the sunlight available was still able to provide a fair amount of illumination. He was now in a good position to get rid of that salvage ship and diving bell and to destroy the wreck, but he wanted to do one thing first. Grabbing the handset of the intercom telephone in the dome, he then spoke in it with a grave voice.

"Misters Koenig, Vormann, Hain, Dollman, Knocke, Bock, Falke, Limburg and Frick, please climb up to the observation dome for a last homage to the U-800 and to Kapitän Kretschmer."

It took only a couple of minutes before the nine other veterans who had served on the U-800 with Ulrich before transferring with him to the U-801 came up to the observation dome, crowding it. They all saluted in unison before they watched with growing emotion the wreck for a good minute, with a couple of photos of the wreck taken as well. Then, Ulrich gave a few orders by intercom.

“Control room, this is the Kapitän! Arm four of our sea mines in our port side tubes and be ready to eject them on my command. Helm, ballast control: take us off gently from the bottom, then use our lateral thrusters to push us towards the U-800. As soon as we eject our mines, you will move away on heading 075 and a speed of seven knots while staying near the bottom. Raise the sub now!”

A short hiss soon afterwards announced the injection of some compressed air into the ballast tanks of the U-801, making it come off the bottom and rise slowly. Under the directives from Ulrich, the helmsman then made their submarine slip sideways towards the sunken U-800, with its ex-crewmembers still watching. Once his U-801 was no more than 25 meters from the U-800 and a few meters higher, Ulrich gave another order.

“Launch the four sea mines now! Helm, get us away from here!”

“Aye, Herr Kapitän!”

Four compressed air discharges were then heard in quick succession, while four cylindrical dark shapes flew out of their storage and launch lateral tubes, situated just under the deck casing of the submarine. To Ulrich’s satisfaction, three of the sea mines landed just beside the starboard side of the U-800, with one even bouncing on its hull before dropping into the silt barely one meter away. As for the fourth sea mine, it actually glided over the deck of the U-800, bouncing on it before dropping in the silt two meters away from the port hull side of the sunken submarine. The U-801 then accelerated forward under electric motor power, taking a safe distance before the sea mines would arm themselves. Being activated via a combined acoustic and magnetic sensor, the mines were designed to arm themselves half a hour after their launch, in order to let their launching submarine time to go away and avoid sinking it by accident.

The watchers on the two destroyers patrolling around the sinking site suddenly saw and heard four powerful underwater explosions, which bodily raised the U.S.S. FALCON out of the water before it splashed back on the surface, its belly ripped wide open. The 1,400 ton ex-minesweeper then sank quickly, giving little time to its 91 crewmembers to escape. As for the divers who had been inside the diving bell, they were already dead, killed nearly instantly when the sea mines had exploded. Both stunned and furious, the commanders of the U.S.S. MAYO and U.S.S. GLEAVES then turned their destroyers around to rush towards the site of the FALCON’s sinking. They did order their sonar operators to sweep the depths around them, but the breaking noises and air escaping from the unfortunate salvage ship all but covered any other

noise around. On his part, Ulrich, wanting to confirm the complete destruction of the wreck of the U-800, had gone back in as soon as he saw the flashes of the mines exploding on the bottom. Seeing that the FALCON was now on its way down to the bottom and was going to end nearly on top of the U-800, Ulrich quickly seized that occasion and ordered his submarine to rise to near periscope depth and to flood and open its torpedo tubes. When the MAYO and the GLEAVE approached him, navigating close to each other, they presented themselves as easy targets to Ulrich, who was watching them from the observation dome. Using the torpedo aiming sight normally used for attacks on the surface, he relayed a series of orders via intercom.

"Fire control, heading to first target: 054. Mark! Heading to second target : 087. Mark!"

He then waited a few seconds before announcing a second set of headings.

"Fire control, heading to first target: 051. Mark! Heading to second target : 093. Mark!"

"Fire solution computed on both targets, Herr Kapitän."

"Match bearings and fire tubes one and two on first target, plus tubes three and four on the second target. TORPEDOS, LOS!"

As soon as he had heard all four torpedoes leave their tubes, Ulrich gave more orders.

"Reload forward torpedo tubes! Helm, turn 180 degrees to port, so that we could fire our stern torpedo tubes if needed."

By the time his submarine had turned around, three of his four torpedoes had hit, crippling both destroyers. However, still incensed by what he perceived as a violation of a war grave, he took careful aim and fired his two stern torpedo tubes, hitting again the two wounded destroyers. That was fatal to the U.S.S. MAYO, which broke in half, while the U.S.S. GLEAVES' list to port increased dramatically. Five minutes later, the GLEAVES capsized, watched and photographed by Ulrich. The MAYO was also photographed as both of its halves sank at the vertical. Satisfied and more calm by now, Ulrich ordered his U-801 back down again, so that he could take final pictures of the remains of U-800. What he found was little indeed, the nearby explosions of the four sea mines having utterly crushed or blown open the hull of the big submarine. Taking three pictures of the wreck, Ulrich sighed with regret.

"Sorry to have disturbed your sleep like this, Herr Kapitän. You may now rest in peace."

17:48 (Berlin Time)

Monday, March 8, 1943

'Die Ferkelchen'² restaurant, Munich

Germany

Otto Hannig, wanting to relax a bit on his return from a rather stressful day of work at the food processing plant where he held a position as a production manager, went first inside his family restaurant, 'Die Ferkelchen', intent on having a cold beer. He was a bit dismayed when his daughter Barbara, who worked as a waitress in the restaurant, came to him at a near run, shouting to him.

"FATHER! FATHER! WE GOT A TELEGRAM FROM THE KRIEGSMARINE TODAY, ABOUT DIETER."

"Mein Gott!" said Otto, freezing on the spot. "Don't tell me that Dieter is dead!" Barbara took the time to glue herself to him before answering him.

"No! Thank God for that! However, his submarine was sunk by the British and he is now a prisoner of war. He is said to be in good health."

Otto, a big, tough man, couldn't help have tears appearing at the corner of his eyes as he shared an emotional hug with his elder daughter.

"At least he is safe now for the rest of this war, Barbara. Where is that telegram?"

"Upstairs! Mother has it."

"Then, I will go read it at once. We will talk together about this as a family this evening, once you will have finished your shift at the restaurant."

His heart heavy, Otto then left the restaurant by its side door, which connected it to the entrance and staircase for the apartments situated above it. He already had lost his son Klaus to this war, killed on the Eastern Front two months ago, and Dieter was his only other son, while he also had three daughters. His wife Greta ran to him in tears as soon as he opened the door of their family apartment.

"Otto, we received bad news about Dieter from the Kriegsmarine."

"I know: Barbara told me when I went into the restaurant for a cold beer. Show me that telegram, please."

² Die Ferkelchen : 'The little piglet' in German.

His wife obeyed at once, disappearing for a moment into their bedroom before coming back with a telegram in her hands.

“Here you go, Otto.”

“Thanks!”

Otto sat down in his favorite sofa before reading slowly and carefully the telegram. It was a very terse one, of the kind too many German families received these days. It said little, apart from the fact that Dieter had been taken prisoner by the British after they had sunk his submarine at some undisclosed location in the North Atlantic. Otto closed his eyes for a moment as he digested those words. He himself had been a submariner once, serving as a cook aboard a German submarine during World War One. He luckily had survived that war and the hard, lean years that had followed in Germany, before finally marrying and opening the family restaurant, which was now run by his younger brother Johan. Those years as a submariner had been hard, demanding ones, but he still remembered the strong bond of comradeship that had held him and the other members of his submarine’s crew together. Even today, he still communicated often with the comrades who were still alive, including with a few who also lived in Munich. As his wife sat beside him and hugged him emotionally, a thought formed in his mind. He was no Nazi, but that didn’t prevent him from being a proud and patriotic German.

“Greta, we now have no sons able to serve the Fatherland in this war. My parents, their parents and grand-parents all served when needed in past wars. I believe that it is time for me to volunteer back into the Kriegsmarine. I already am an experienced submariner and a top notch cook: I am sure that they will be able to use my services again.”

His wife looked at him with eyes wide opened, horrified.

“But, but, you are 49 years old, Otto: you are too old to serve! Beside, the family needs you here.”

“Not really, Greta. Johan is there to run the restaurant and our youngest daughter, Ingrid, is now fifteen and studying at the college. As a production manager at the food processing plant, I don’t earn that much more than if I would serve in the Kriegsmarine and I would be fed and housed at my assigned place of duty.”

“But that’s not the real point, Otto!” protested his wife, getting a bit angry with him. “What if you get gravely wounded or, worse, killed? Our daughters have only one father: you!”

“Are we Germans or not, Greta? The Hannigs have always served their country in times of war and I don’t intend to hide here in Munich while Dieter is languishing in some British prisoner of war camp. As for my job at the food production plant, I am sure that plenty of men trying to avoid conscription will be more than happy to take my place there. My mind is now made, Greta. Please don’t protest anymore.”

Greta, knowing how pig-headed Otto could be, didn’t insist and instead laid her head on his chest while sobbing quietly.

“Please, Otto, come back alive.”

CHAPTER 2 – A NEW ASSIGNMENT

11:13 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, March 23, 1943

Offices of Admiral Dönitz, BdU headquarters

Keroman, Lorient, France

Ulrich von Wittgenstein, closely shaved and wearing a clean, pressed uniform, came to attention and saluted militarily after coming to a stop in front of Admiral Dönitz's work desk. However, despite his best efforts and multiple showers, he still stank of diesel fumes, a universal affliction for submariners just back from sea patrol.

"Reporting as requested with my completed patrol report, Herr Admiral!"

"At ease, my dear von Wittgenstein. Please, have a seat."

Ulrich sat down in one of the comfortable easy chairs near the work desk and handed his report to Dönitz, who eagerly accepted it.

"So, Kapitän von Wittgenstein, how did your patrol go, overall?"

"Quite well actually, Admiral, that is until getting the news of the sinking of the U-800. We lost the best U-Boote commander we ever had out there, but I was able to make the enemy pay for it. When I went to investigate what happened to the U-800, I found three American warships roaming over the wreck: two destroyers and a salvage ship. When I arrived there, there was already a diving bell in the water, suspended just over the wreck and most probably taking pictures of it. I launched four sea mines astride the hull of the U-800, then took some distance until the mines armed themselves and exploded. That sank at once the salvage ship. Taking advantage of the noise created as that ship broke up and sank, I got close to the surface and greeted the two rushing destroyers with six torpedoes, sinking them. You will find the photos of those three American warships, along with a few taken of the U-800 as it lay on the bottom, both before and after the mines detonated. As you will see, Admiral, there is now little left of the U-800 to be exploited by the enemy."

A grim-faced Dönitz looked at the photos for a long moment, concentrating especially on the prints showing the U-800, then looked back at Ulrich.

"You did a truly excellent job there, Wittgenstein. You also showed great initiative at the same time. The service certainly needs more U-Boote commanders like you."

"Thank you, Herr Admiral."

"Now, apart from those three American warships, how many other ships did you sink during your patrol?"

"I encountered and sank nine cargo ships and three tanker ships, for an estimated total displacement of 61,000 tons, Admiral. Unfortunately, one troopship that I spotted proved too fast for my submarine to catch it. No doubt that the U-800 would not have had problems to catch that troopship."

That made Dönitz smile. The tall and lean admiral then extracted a file marked 'TOP SECRET' from a drawer of his desk and offered it to Ulrich while speaking.

"You are probably right, but you won't have that kind of problem during your next war patrol, my dear Wittgenstein. Please read this file."

Opening the file, Ulrich needed only one look inside it before grinning to Dönitz.

"The U-900! It is ready, at last?"

"Yes, and not a moment too soon. The good thing is that it is only the first of a long series of similar boats to be built. In fact, five other Type XXI³ submarines are already under construction, with one to be completed in five weeks. The U-900 now only needs a crew to pass its sea trials, and you will command it, my dear Wittgenstein."

"Uh, talking of its crew, would I be allowed to simply transfer the present crew from my U-801 to the U-900, Admiral? At the least, I would like to take with me the veterans from the U-800 who are part of my present crew."

Ulrich nervously expected to get a 'no' on that, but was quite surprised to see Dönitz nod his head soberly.

"Normally, I would not agree to that, my dear Wittgenstein, but getting the U-900 into combat as rapidly and as efficiently as possible is now a crucial matter for our war effort, in my opinion. The Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy are now teetering on the brink of collapse in the Atlantic and it is critical to keep the pressure on them at sea in order to finally force Great Britain to accept our terms through starvation in war supplies and fuel. Throwing the U-900 in the arena is now even more urgent with the loss of the U-800. Before you ask more questions, I would like you to read the file I gave you and to get

³ The Type XXI submarine class that actually served in World War 2 is not the same as the U-900 depicted in this novel, even though it used many of the same technologies described in this novel.

yourself acquainted with your new boat's capabilities. You should find that beast very impressive indeed, as the designers of the U-900 incorporated into it all the lessons and comments brought forward by Kapitän Kretschmer when he returned from each of his war patrols. As a result, the U-900 promises to be better, faster and meaner than the U-800, apart from being slightly larger."

Two minutes of reading convinced Ulrich that Dönitz was not exaggerating. He had a nearly reverend look on his face as he finally raised his nose from the file.

"Mein Gott! With such a machine and with a good crew, I believe that about anything is possible, Herr Admiral."

"And that is why I will allow you to take your whole present crew with you when you will go take command of the U-900."

Dönitz then looked at his watch and gave Ulrich a warm smile.

"Well, it is now close to noon, I skipped breakfast and am quite hungry. How about you come and have lunch with me at the officers' mess?"

"I would be honored, Herr Admiral." said Ulrich, truly pleased.

"Then, let me lock back that file before we go eat."

With the precious file locked away in the Admiral's safe, the two men walked out of Dönitz' office and went to the officers' mess of the headquarters, which was established in a posh estate with view on the sea. The dining room of the mess itself proved to be well-furnished and convivial, with white-gloved stewards in attendance, ready to serve the officers who came to eat. However, contrary to the situation in German Army garrisons, Dönitz, who truly cared for his submariners, had made sure that the facilities for his enlisted men in Keroman were nearly as good as those for the officers, something that Ulrich could attest from past visits to the enlisted men's mess. In fact, the men's facilities in Keroman included things like an internal swimming pool, a theatre and a ballroom. Taking place at an empty table, the two officers took the time to read the day's menu and order their lunch before continuing to discuss together, setting the modalities and details of Ulrich's transfer of command to the U-900. Their food arrived some fifteen minutes later and Dönitz, who was really hungry, dived on his plate. However, on chewing on his first bite of meat, he had to close his eyes in near ecstasy as he savored the meat and sauce in his mouth. Once he had swallowed his bite, he looked down with respect at his plate.

"Mein Gott! This must be the best veal I ever tasted."

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