

Horst and his Panzer crew on the way to prison in America

A week after leaving Oran, on a calm sea with a cloudless sky, the Panzer crew broke up its morning meeting, and Horst and Dieter went to the railing on the fantail and watched the other ships in the convoy plowing their slow way through the blue water. Their destroyer escort cruised on the north side of the Liberty ships.

The peacefulness of the scene ended as a brilliant orange explosion shattered the mid-section of the ship opposite them, throwing pieces of steel into the air. The ship shuddered, then slowed. Horst saw a sizeable hole at the waterline amidships, but all was quiet, as though the detonation shocked the world into stillness.

Then another explosion shook the ship, and flames and thick greasy smoke poured from the deck hatches. The ship listed toward its damaged side, and men clambered to the railings opposite. Horst heard explosions like corn popping and blaring horns of the destroyer as it turned eastward, making smoke. Gun crews manned the machine guns and ran to the depth charge launchers. He looked behind his ship and saw a U-boat submerging. Horst knew it could outrun the Liberty ships, but the destroyer was another matter. As it closed with the submarine, the damaged ship opposite rolled into the water, and flames from the interior spread to the oil floating on the water, creating a spreading inferno for fifty yards on the ship's port side.

The Liberty ship slowly rolled into the ocean, and crew and prisoners tried to release the lifeboats on the starboard side. Some luckless men slid from the crowded deck over the port side into the flaming water. Those who couldn't swim disappeared quickly. Others tried to escape the firestorm above by swimming under water. Few made it to clear water. As Horst watched this horror, Dieter grabbed his shoulder and pointed to their ship's crew, releasing lifeboats from the deck behind them. They ran to help and suddenly found themselves on the water next to their ship, an American sailor fore and aft and four German soldiers holding grappling hooks and life preservers speeding to men struggling through flames and water.

Horst screamed in German to the sailor manning the rudder to move closer to the flailing men, but the sailor pointed to the sinking ship, made a thumb down sign and ran a finger across his neck. Horst understood. If they sailed too close to the ship, they might go down with it.

Amid the sounds of the dying ship, burned men screaming in the water and calls for help on every side added to the boom/crunch vibration of depth charges seeking the U-boat. Geysers of seawater rushed skyward as barrels of explosive catapulted from the sides of the destroyer and sank to their preordained depths before detonating. Horst allowed only a moment to look behind. The flames around the sinking boat were diminishing as they consumed the surface oil, and the lifeboat came closer to men flailing in the water. The helmsman idled the lifeboat engine, and the German soldiers began pulling men from the ocean and stacking them in the lifeboat like firewood. Some were burned, some just covered in black oil, all exhausted.

Horst discovered that some men he grabbed with his hook were dead. Should he try to pull them into the boat? He looked at the helmsman, who sadly shook his head. The corpses floated toward the Liberty ship that was making groaning and hissing sounds as it overturned, exposing its propellers as the bow sank into the water.

In five more minutes, she was gone, the only trace a slick of oil and face down dead men bobbing in the water.

The destroyer slowed and stopped sending depth charges. Men in the lifeboat could see rainbow hues of a large oil slick on the water's surface near the destroyer reflecting bright sunlight. A helmsman shook his head and explained something in English, which one of the Germans in the boat understood.

"Maybe they got the U-boat and maybe not. They could go to depth in silent running and release fuel to make a slick. The destroyer must decide whether to stay there and listen or continue with the convoy."

The rescuers had no time to worry about that. Horst and the others busied themselves hoisting men up to the deck of the ship, where sailors wrapped them in blankets and provided needed attention. Later, as the destroyer resumed its defensive position and the convoy plowed westward, Horst and Dieter smoked cigarettes as they stood by the railing.

"When you saw the destroyer chase the U-boat, did you want the U-boat to escape?" asked Dieter.

"Right then, with the ship ablaze and our men struggling in the water—no," answered Horst. "But then I asked myself whether they were just doing their job, sinking American ships, just the way we killed Tommies and Americans in the desert. I'm not sure."

"That's how I feel, too," said Dieter. "But the men on that U-boat must know that convoys of our soldiers are being sent to prison in America. It was in the papers in Algeria, and Berlin surely knows it. And we're obviously not returning from Britain this far south in the Atlantic. Wouldn't you think the U-boats would leave us alone and not kill their own people?"

Dieter is right, thought Horst. Was Berlin inexcusably ignorant of their situation or didn't they care? Incompetent or callous?

The two men continued smoking their Chesterfields, staring across the bright sea at the churning wakes of the Liberty ships.

Had der Führer let them down?