

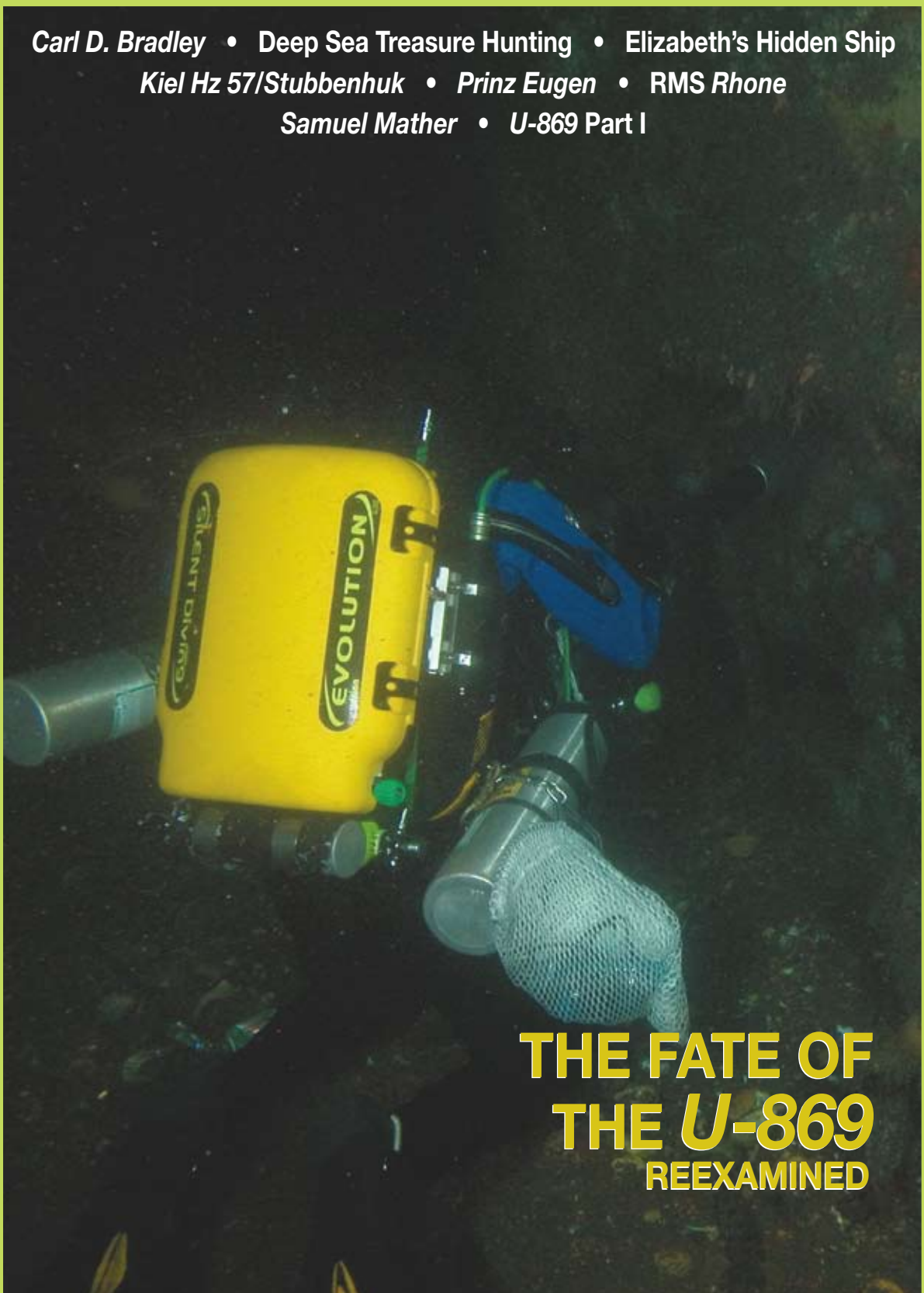
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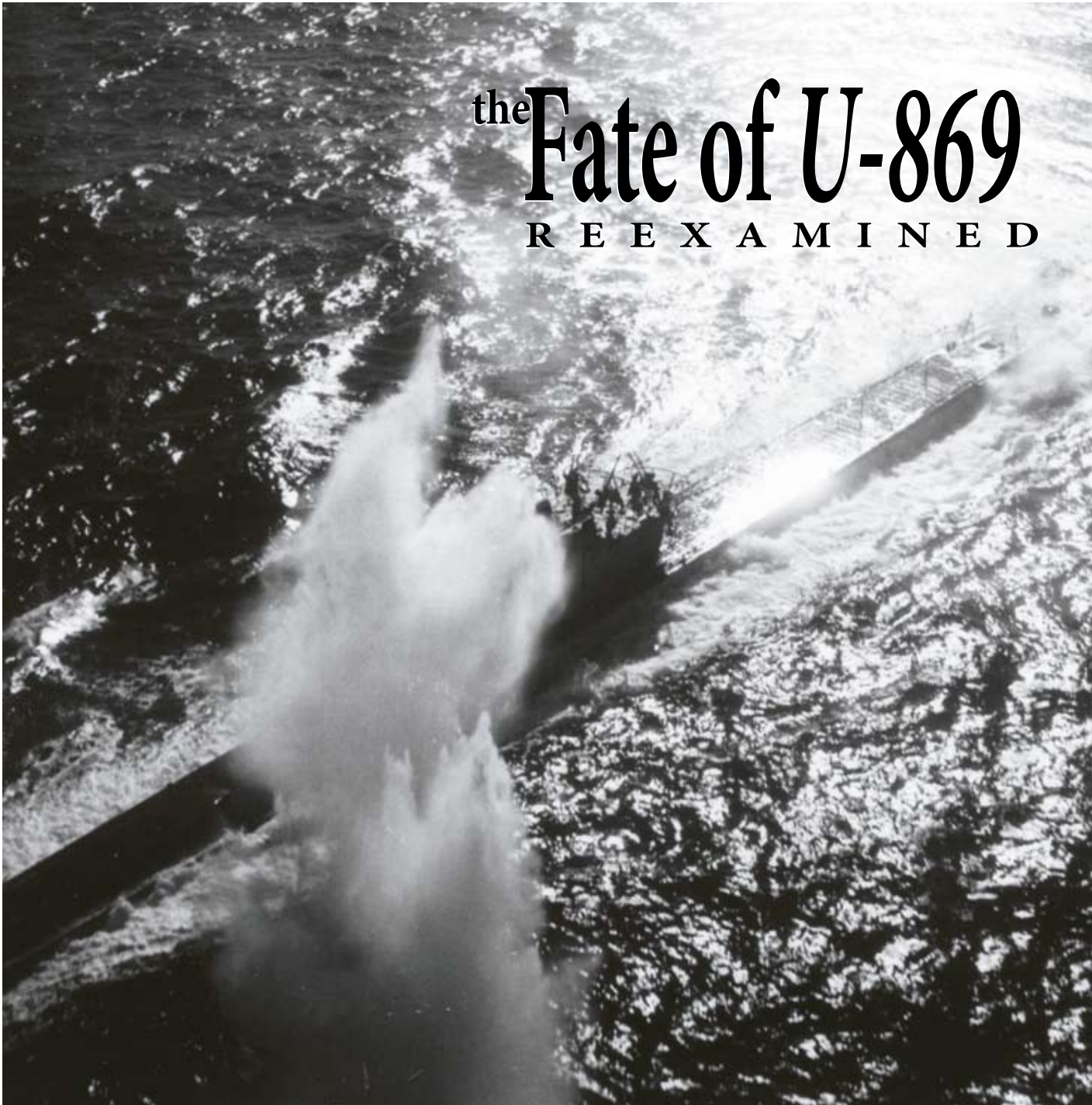
Magazine

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**THE FATE OF
THE U-869
REEXAMINED**

Issue 17
A Quarterly Publication



the Fate of U-869

R E E X A M I N E D

During the Second

During the Second World War, few things inspired as much dread as the German U-boat. Designed to approach its victims from below the surface, attack and then creep away, it relied on stealth both to do its job and to survive. The possibility of being attacked by a U-boat nearly anywhere, anytime, was very real. Countermeasures developed by the Allies vastly reduced its effectiveness as a weapon, and by the second half of the war, these undersea hunters had become the hunted. Of the approximately 800 operational German U-boats that ventured out into the world's oceans, roughly three quarters never returned from their final voyages. These losses were due to several factors: the efforts of Allied Anti-Submarine Warfare Forces (ASW), mechanical failure, human error, or extreme weather. When a U-boat sank, for any reason, it often took its identity to the bottom along with it, and created a mystery that would, at times, be solved haphazardly by post-war assessors and historians.

The wartime loss of a U-boat could have involved survivors, but often a loss would include all



German U-Boat under allied attack.
Photograph - National Archives

Part 1 of a 3-Part Article - The U-Boat War

By John Yurga, Richie Kohler, and John Chatterton



hands. Without survivors, the loss of a U-boat might result in human remains, debris, and/or fuel oil coming to the surface. This would certainly be determined by the circumstances of the sinking. For ASW Forces to claim the sinking of a U-boat, the Navy wanted physical proof, which makes perfect sense. This would include the collection of debris, the sampling of oil, and the recovery of any human remains. In addition to verification of the sinking, these items often provided the Allies with valuable intelligence.

With physical evidence from a successful attack on a U-boat, military intelligence was often able to determine at the time of the sinking which U-boat was involved. For example, on June 2nd, 1943, the *U-521* was lost off Maryland after a successful attack by the USN *PC-565*. The patrol craft's sailors were able to pull from the water a single survivor, the boat's commander, Klaus Bargsten. Twelve hours after the sinking, the USS *Chickadee* responded to conduct a box search of the area. They reported an oil slick emanating from the site that was 19.7 miles long, and 100 feet to 900 feet across. Despite Bargsten's claim under interrogation that his U-boat had escaped, US Navy intelligence was able to confirm the sinking of *U-521* based on debris the *PC-565* collected, as well as the confirmation by the USS *Chickadee*. However, figuring out the fate of a lost U-boat was not always so clearly defined or convenient.

The *U-879* and the *U-548*

On April 19th, 1945, the US Destroyer Escorts *Reuben James* (*DE-153*) and *Buckley* (*DE-51*) attacked a sound contact in the North Atlantic, east of Cape Cod, in over 7,000 feet of water. Their attack produced an oil slick that was two miles by one mile when last seen by them. They also collected numerous objects including three pieces of human flesh, pillows, cork, a chronometer, half a yo-yo, and over 100 pieces of wood and/or paneling. Four of the pieces of wood were marked with either "*U-369*" or "*369*."

This would seem to be an easy one, the sinking of the *U-369*. The only problem was that when the war ended a short time later, the *U-369* was discovered to be one of the lucky few U-boats to survive the war! This was no longer a matter for military intelligence. It was now in the hands of military historians who chose to ignore the physical evidence, and who concluded that the *Reuben James* and the *Buckley* had in fact attacked and sunk the *U-879*, which had not returned from a patrol off the eastern seaboard of the US.

It was not until 1990 that an astute young German U-boat researcher named Axel Niestlé noticed that the "*U-369*" markings were from the inside of the paneling and woodwork that was recovered at the time. He concluded they were more likely the hull number from the shipyard, as opposed to the actual U-boat number, which was totally different. With further research, Niestlé concluded that the *Reuben James* and the



Buckley had not attacked and sunk the *U-879*, but U-boat hull number 369 from Deutsche Werft AG in Hamburg, also known as the *U-548*.

Of course, this posed yet another problem for historians, as they had already recorded the fate of *U-548* as being sunk off the coast of North Carolina by the US patrol Frigate *USS Natchez*, assisted by the Destroyer Escorts *USS Coffmann*, *USS Bostwick*, and the *USS Thomas*, on April 30, 1945.

Military historians then concluded that the *U-879* was lost to the *Natchez*, *Coffmann*, *Bostwick* and *Thomas* on April 30, 1945, off North Carolina, while the *U-548*, not the *U-369* or the *U-879*, was lost on April 15th to the *Buckley* and *Reuben James*. However, the remains of the *U-879* have not been located as of this writing, so its fate cannot be dismissed so readily.

The Gulf of Mexico and the *U-166*

On the afternoon of August 1, 1942, Henry White and George Boggs were on patrol in their USCG *Widgeon* (V-212) aircraft over the Gulf of Mexico, when they spotted a German U-boat on the surface. They immediately turned and attacked the disappearing submarine with a single Mk 17 Depth Charge. After the war, military historians credited them with the sinking of the *U-166*, the only U-boat to fail to return from patrol in the Gulf.

White and Boggs were not just credited with sinking a U-boat, but they were credited with the first sinking of a German U-boat by the US Coast Guard during the war. As you might imagine, they were elevated to hero status and their *Widgeon* was put on display in the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Florida.

However, the *U-166* became something of Gulf legend. Although the recorded site of the sinking was in much less than 100 feet of water, no one was able to find the wreck, although many individuals tried. It was even linked to all sorts of other U-boat legends involving mercury, Nazi gold, Hitler and just about everything else.

It was not until 2001 that Dan Warren and Rob Church, two brilliant young archaeologists working for C&C Technologies, doing survey work in the Gulf for BP and Shell Oil, discovered something amazing. In 5,000 feet of water, they found the remains of a WWII German U-boat, the *U-166*, well over a hundred miles from the location given by historians for the *Widgeon* attack, and only a mile away from the wreck of the merchant ship *Robert E. Lee*, the last ship reported as sunk by the *U-166*.



U-550 being attacked, with its last victim, the *Pan Pennsylvania*, burning in the background.
Photograph - National Archives

“On September 2, 1991, a group of deep air divers located the wreck of a submarine in 230 feet of water, sixty miles off the coast of New Jersey.

After extensive research, Warren and Church concluded that the *U-166* successfully attacked and sank the *Robert E. Lee* on July 30, 1942. The U-boat was then immediately set upon and sunk by the *PC-566*, whose crew always believed that they had sunk a U-boat that day. Apparently the Navy did not agree. Debris and oil from the sunken *Robert E. Lee* fouled the area to such an extent that it was impossible to determine if any of the debris was from the U-boat. The attack by the *PC-566* took place two days prior to the White and Boggs attack, so if the *U-166* was already on the bottom, what did White and Boggs actually see?

The only other U-boat in the Gulf at the time of the Widgeon attack was the *U-171*. The *U-171* was lost off the coast of France on the return trip from its mission to the Gulf. None of the boat's logs survived, but 30 of the crew did. Captain Günther Pfeffer not only survived, but he later reconstructed a report in which he mentions being attacked by a Flying Boat in the Gulf.

So, thanks to the work of Warren and Church, Captain Claudius and the men of the *PC-566* are now credited with sinking the *U-166*, and poor White and Boggs, who did their job as well as it could be done but did not sink the *U-166*, had their Widgeon removed from the National Museum of Naval Aviation. The USCG ended up losing, at least for the time being, credit for the only sinking of an enemy U-boat.

The Mystery U-boat off New Jersey, the *U-Who*

On September 2, 1991, a group of deep air divers located the wreck of a submarine in 230 feet of water, sixty miles off the coast of New Jersey. In very short order, china bowls from the site would identify it as a German U-boat from WWII, but the real question was *which* U-boat? As it defied an easy explanation, a budding wordsmith dubbed the wreck the *U-Who*.

Cursory research showed that the historical record listed two German U-boats lost off the Jersey coast, the *U-521* and the *U-550*. These were both well-documented losses with German survivors, and witnessed by more than one ASW ship. For the *U-Who* to have been either of these submarines, the locations reported by the USN vessels would have to be off by more than a hundred miles, making it virtually impossible.

The question became, if not the *U-521* or the *U-550*, then, which boat was it? There was no obvious answer to be found in the historical record; however, a former U-boat Captain, Karl-Friedrich Merten, suggested the wreckage could be that of a specific U-boat listed simply as “Missing” -- the *U-851*. Merten was a close personal friend of the commander of the *U-851*, Hannes Weingärtner, and Merten believed we had found his old friend. However, the *U-851* was a Type IXD and 87.58 meters in length (roughly 270 feet). Divers then measured the length of the wreck at approximately 240 feet, which disqualified the *U-851*.



Left to Right:

The *U-550* being fatally wounded, just before she sank to the bottom.
Photograph - National Archives

German U-Boat under allied attack.
Photograph - National Archives

At roughly the same time, Major Gregory Weidenfeld, a historian for the Civil Air Patrol, suggested that an attack by a CAP Widgeon on July 11, 1942, was responsible for sinking the enemy U-boat. Unfortunately, no German submarine was found to be missing in that time frame, and the location given by the pilots was significantly distant from the known wreck site.

Subsequent dives to the wreck revealed important information. An aluminum schematic drawing of the Trim and Ballast Systems indicated that the boat was a Type IXC and that it had been built at the Deschimag shipyard in Bremen. In addition, an escape lung recovered from the wreck initially revealed no outward clues, but, when it dried out, the still-charged aluminum oxygen bottle exploded. The now corrosion-free bottle revealed a hydrostatic test date of April 15, 1944, which meant that we were able to eliminate any U-boat that had sailed prior to that date.

As we looked at all of the Deschimag Type IXCs that had also operated off the east coast of the US, we narrowed the field to two U-boats, the *U-857* and the *U-879*.

After the war, military assessors had debated the fate of the *U-857*, and concluded that the submarine was lost within sight of Cape Cod Lighthouse, sunk after an attack by the USS *Gustafson* (*DE-182*), on April 7, 1945, in roughly 200 feet of water. The incident consisted of 6 Hedgehog attacks, of which only the second attack resulted in a detonation.

Hedgehogs, a forward-firing array of depth bombs, weighed about 65 pounds each and carried 35 pounds of Torpex. Their purpose was to locate and disorient the underwater enemy, in what was called an “embarrassment attack,” and then bring the submarine to the surface. Hedgehogs had magnetic triggers that detonated when they contacted a ferrous object, like a submarine or a shipwreck. This made the Hedgehog a valuable tool to help locate a U-boat, but it is a stretch of the imagination to expect a single Hedgehog to sink a U-boat, something it was simply not designed to do.

Other than a missing U-boat, and an attack that was listed at the time as being on a “Possible” U-boat, there was really no evidence to indicate that the *U-857* was lost to a Hedgehog from the *Gustafson*. With this attack’s scrutiny after its link to the *U-Who*, many historians came forward with doubts about the veracity of the record. In spite of this fact, the United States Naval Historical Center still lists credit for the sinking of the *U-857* by the USS *Gustafson*.

We have discussed the fate of the *U-879* above, where it was first thought to be the *U-548*, and originally the *U-369*. We concluded that the *U-Who* could possibly be the *U-879* for no other reason than there was significant confusion around the *U-548* attack. It seemed as though the *U-879* had been determined to be lost off the coast of North Carolina, only through default. The *U-879* certainly seemed possible, but not likely.

Finally, we received information from Robert Coppock at the Ministry of Defense in London, that another Deschimag boat, the *U-869*, could possibly have been lost off the east coast of the United States, instead of off the coast of Africa, where historians had originally placed it. The assessors had recorded the *U-869* as being sunk in an attack by the USS *Fowler* (*DE-222*) and the French Sub Chaser, *L’Indiscret*, on February 28, 1945, near Gibraltar.

In addition, the roll of the *U-869* had listed among the crew a radioman, Martin Horenburg. Divers had previously recovered from the *U-Who* a dinner knife with “Horenburg” carved into the wooden handle.

It seemed that if Horenburg had been on the *U-869* with his knife, then the *U-Who* had to be the *U-869*. However, it was equally possible that Horenburg had lost his dinner knife to another sailor,



Left Top and Bottom: Collection of debris recovered from the sinking of the "U-369."
Photograph - National Archives

Right Top to Bottom: Collection of debris recovered from the sinking of the "U-369."
Photograph - National Archives

The bottom of a bowl recovered from the U-869 revealing the German Swastika.
Photograph by John Chatterton

Oxygen bottle from a Drager Escape Lung off U-869 that shows a hydrostatic test date of April 15, 1944. Photograph by John Chatterton.

Top to Bottom:
A schematic drawing recovered by the dive team shows that the *U-Who* was built at Deschimag, in Bremen.
John Chatterton collection.

Spare Parts Box that positively identified the *U-Who* as *U-869*.
Photograph by John Chatterton.



or that he had been transferred to *U-857* or *U-879*, with his knife, at the last minute. All three boats had been docked in Norway in the same time period, and most of the personnel records for that time had been destroyed in Allied bombings or were otherwise unavailable. It all came down to three Deschimag boats, the *U-869*, the *U-857* or the *U-879*.

Ultimately, the wreck off New Jersey would be positively identified as the *U-869* through additional evidence recovered from the wreck site. The original historical record that detailed the loss of the *U-869* as occurring near Gibraltar was revised. Rob Kurson would write a bestselling book about the U-boat, titled *Shadow Divers*, and the Nova television series would air an award-winning program about the discovery and identification, *Hitler's Lost Sub*.

Years after the success of *Shadow Divers* and *Hitler's Lost Sub*, the US Coast Guard Historical Center would again revise the history of *U-869*. Now, the USCGHC was giving the Coast Guard credit for the sinking of the U-boat. According to them, it was successfully attacked and sunk by the USCGC *Crow* (*DE-252*), while assisted by the US Navy Destroyer Escort *Koiner* (*DE-331*) on February 11, 1945.

There is no debate as to which U-boat rests on the seabed off New Jersey; however, there is now some controversy as to how it came to be there. Did the US Coast Guard actually sink another enemy submarine in WWII? We will examine that possibility in our second article (*WDM* Issue 18) entitled, *The Crow/Koiner Incident*.

Conclusions

With regard to the American servicemen and servicewomen who served this country in WWII, they did everything that was asked of them, and more. The job was not glamorous, or easy, and many of them lost their lives in service to their country. Somehow, they won the war and the rest of us are forever in their debt. This includes White and Boggs, who from their Widgeon did a fine job of suppressing the U-boat threat, regardless of whether they are credited with sinking an enemy

submarine or not.

All of these men, as well as the American people, deserve more than “Feel Good History” that does not reflect what really happened. Every man and woman to wear the uniform of the United States military deserves the most accurate accounting of their accomplishments that we can possibly give them.

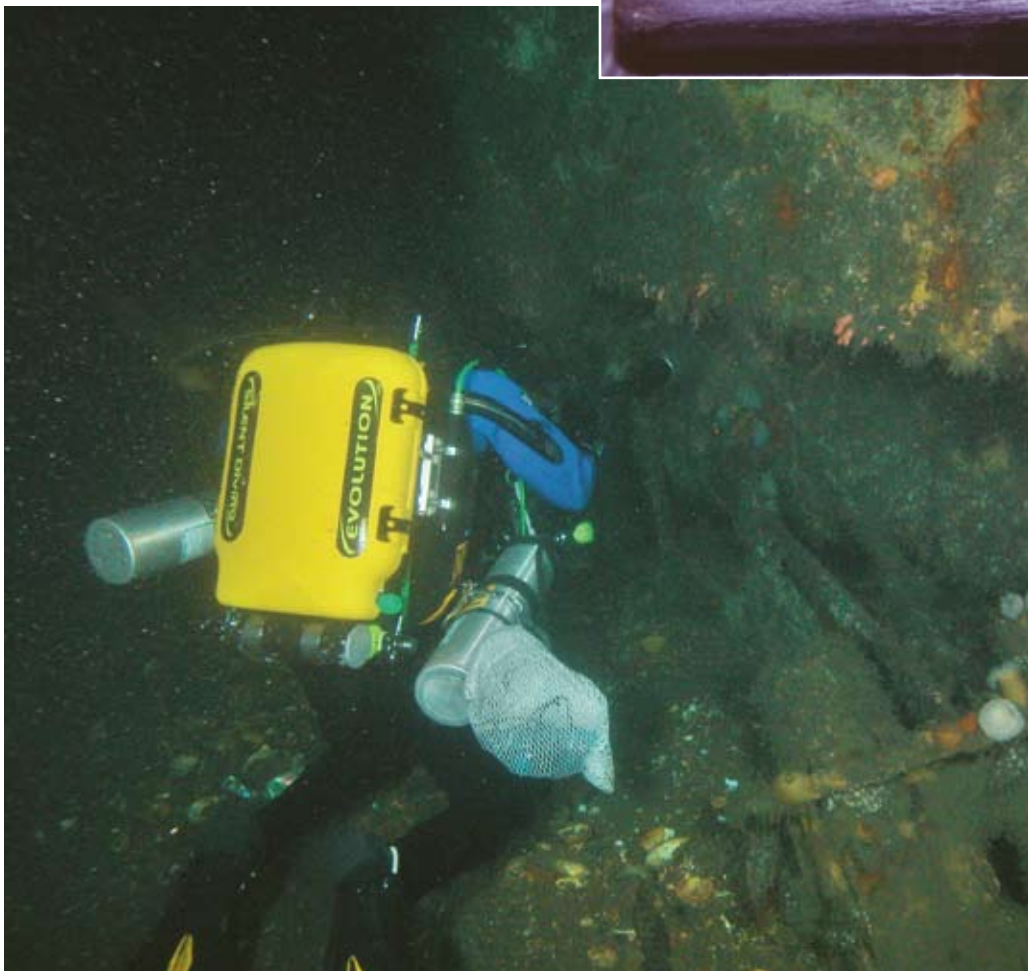
The secretive nature of the U-boat does not make the job of naval historians easy. Then again, the difficulty of a particular job is not a suitable excuse for poor performance. Unfortunately, the confusing histories of the U-boats we have discussed so far are not unique. Of the approximately 600 U-boat losses during World War II, over 100 U-boats have had their fate revised, according to the Uboat.net website. This is to say that researchers have revised the histories of better than 1 out of 6 of the lost U-boats. Remember, some of these boats have had their fate revised more than once, like the *U-879*, and now *U-869*.

With so many questions, and so many versions of history, whom can we really trust? We suggest that you trust the evidence, and take nothing for granted. The evidence has no hidden agenda, no reputation to protect, and cannot help but to be simply what it is. If we follow the evidence, we believe we will get closer to the truth. As we have already learned, our history is a work in progress....

Next Issue

Part 2 – The Crow/Koiner Incident

About the Authors: John Yurga, John Chatterton and Richie Kohler have known each other and dived with one another for more than 15 years. They developed as divers on wrecks local to New York and New Jersey waters, like the *Andrea Doria*. As a team, they worked on identifying the mystery submarine they located 60 miles off the New Jersey coast in 230 feet of water. In 1991. It took them six years to positively identify the WWII submarine as *U-869*. Together they all contributed to the Nova documentary, *Hitler's Lost Sub*, and worked with author Robert Kurson on his bestselling book, *Shadow Divers*.



Top to Bottom:

Knife recovered from *U-869*

Photograph by John Chatterton

Horenburg carved into the handle.

Photograph by John Chatterton

John Chatterton examines the exterior portside torpedo tubes on the *U-869*.

Photograph by Richie Kohler

Useful Links:

– [http://www.worldwardiary.com/history/Hedgehog_\(weapon\)](http://www.worldwardiary.com/history/Hedgehog_(weapon))

Offers a good description of the Hedgehog as used in WWII

– <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/g10/gustafson.htm>

USNHS history of the *Gustafson* listing the sinking of the *U-857* by Hedgehogs

– <http://www.uboat.net/fates/revised.html>

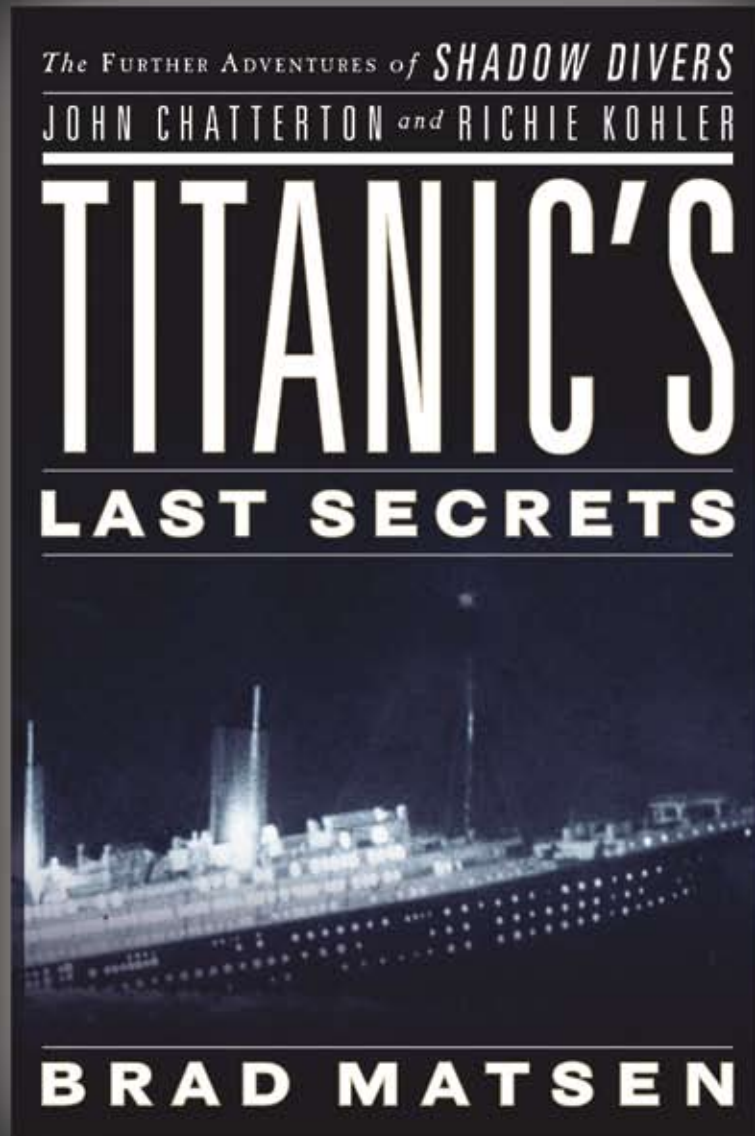
A list of U-boats whose fates have been revised since the post-war assessors completed their work.

– <http://www.pastfoundation.org/U166/>
The official site of the *U-166* discovery and identification

– <http://www.uboat.net/men/merten.htm>
Karl-Friedrich Merten, U-boat Ace

– <http://www.uboat.net/men/commanders/1327.html>
Hannes Weingartner, *U-851*

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