

A DIVE ON THE U-853

by Janice Raber

The water has a slight chop, nothing serious, and it looks very inviting with a bit of an aquamarine color, but it doesn't match the robin's egg blue of the mid-day sky. My buddy, Les, and I try guessing how good the visibility on the shipwreck will be by watching the first diver descend the anchor line to the submarine below.

Today's dive destination: the U-853.

The World War II German submarine, Type IX, C-40, was the last U-boat sunk in American waters. Adolph Hitler had committed

suicide. World War II was over, and on the night of May 4, 1945, Admiral Karl Doenitz gave the order to all U-boats to cease fire at once. Somehow that transmission did not reach the German submarine, or perhaps it was ignored. Perhaps the Oberleutnant Helmut Fromsdorf, commander of the U-853, and his men allowed their dedication to attacking Allied shipping vessels override their ability to face the facts. Perhaps they intuitively sensed that chances of surviving a return trip to the motherland would be futile. Whatever the reason, they continued patrolling, and on the afternoon of May 5,

until the morning of May 6, when her demise was certain. She was declared "sunk and on the bottom."

Navy divers immediately made unsuccessful dives on the U-boat attempting to retrieve papers from the captain's safe. The hard hat equipment used was too bulky to fit into the narrow, confined quarters of the sunken submarine. The search was abandoned, and she lay on the bottom in 130 feet of water for eight years before unconfirmed rumors of treasure, gold and valuable mercury lured scuba divers to exploration. No valuables were ever recovered, but the site continued to become popular with sport divers.

"When I travel down the anchor line, it feels like every

foot you descend you travel a small distance back in time, till you reach May 6, 1945," wrote veteran commercial diver and underwater photographer Peter Venoutsos in an e-mail.

Today the blue-green on the surface deceived us as the visibility decreased to 20 feet when we passed through the thermocline, where the water temperature dropped about 10 degrees. Through an eerie haze of brown the conning tower came into view as we descended. The ship sits upright on a sandy bottom and the perimeter can be navigated easily for a satisfying dive; however, the years of salt and silt have taken their toll.

The round hatch to the engine room lies behind the conning tower. It is a tiny-looking hole, very dark and forbidding even when shining a light into it.

How could sailors function in such a small, tight space?

You would think it impossible for a diver to penetrate.

I have seen a video of renown historian and diving pioneer Captain Bill Palmer removing a set of doubles from his back, climbing inside and bringing the air tanks in after him, for the record an extremely dangerous feat and not something your average diver should ever consider doing. Both Palmer and Venoutsos agree, and it cannot



The U-853



The U-853 Crewmembers

Photo by Peter Venoutsos

be stressed enough that only a properly trained and equipped diver should try to penetrate the U-boat. It has very confined spaces which could easily trap and kill a diver.

There is blast damage on the starboard side near the engine room where some penetration is possible. The aft torpedo load hatch is visible and the 37-mm gun mount is on her stern. Her bow is sticking up slightly, as if she were ready to make way for the surface.

Forward of the conning tower is a big jagged hole in the pressure hull, the result of what might have been the fatal depth charge. In his book, *Legacy of New England's Shipwrecks*, Henry Keatts writes, "a diver with a set of double air tanks can easily enter through the



The aft torpedo loading hatch

Photo by Peter Venoutsos

gaping hole. From that point, the diver can pass through a circular hatch and enter the control room...but massive deterioration has occurred."

The history of this wreck permeates your mind like cold water against your skin during this dive. You are swimming over a tomb, the final resting-place of the crew that manned this U-boat. The thought pounds in your head like the sound of your own heartbeat.

Peter Venoutsos described his feelings as a mixed bag of emotions "from sadness to trepidation that I was trespassing someplace that was private. I have never photographed any human remains."

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A dive on a submarine like this offers a chance to touch history. It is an exciting challenge, but also a privilege that is afforded to scuba divers. We must remember it is, after all, a war grave and should continue to be respected as such.



A profile of the conning tower and submarine

Photo by Peter Venoutsos

targeted the *Black Point*, a steel-hulled collier, a coal carrier en route from New York to Boston. The decision to fire that last torpedo sealed their fate.

The projectile exploded the stern of the *Black Point* near Point Judith, R.I., sinking her within minutes. The attack outraged Americans, and a U.S. Navy task force was dispatched within an hour. The Navy gave merciless pursuit of the sub despite her evasive maneuvers, following her with sonar and hammering her with depth charges relentlessly for over 12 hours. She was trapped in shallow water seven miles due east of Block Island. The assault continued



The port side of the control room

Photo by Peter Venoutsos