

## Naval War College Review

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Volume 46  
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 28

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1993

# The Odyssey of a U-Boat Commander: Recollections of Erich Topp

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### Recommended Citation

Beach, Edward L. and Rust, Eric C. (1993) "The Odyssey of a U-Boat Commander: Recollections of Erich Topp," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 46 : No. 4 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss4/28>

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officer is to be had "at sea" or "in the regiment." The author believes that academic facilities have in some instances fought a losing battle against the tide of military philistinism, and in others, adopted a policy of passive conformity.

Those who have been close to the British recruiting and training machine will recognize that much of what Downes says has a ring of truth to it. However, it is perhaps unfortunate that the author has not carried her investigation far enough to examine how the young officer fares in his first active unit, or evaluated later career opportunities for educational and professional development. Many will argue that there has been little evidence on the streets of Belfast, in the waters of San Carlos, or in the deserts of Iraq, of the reemergence of those military stereotypes beloved of British Broadcasting caricature that would appear as the logical products of the system as the author sees it. This may be the best opportunity in nearly a century for a fundamental review of the education and training process. Unfortunately, the Treasury mandarins are going to demand more evidence than this before they ease up on the purse strings.

Because of its specialist nature, this study is unlikely to appeal to a wide audience in the United States. Personnel and training experts who might be tempted to read it will find few answers to their own problems. Those who do persevere, however, will gain a fascinating insight into British social, political, and educational mores. They

will marvel at the tribal rituals of regimental recruitment, at the positive epidemic of different training schemes, at the declining but still substantial role of the public (private) schools, and at Service hierarchies that remain at best ambivalent on the subject of university education. Most Americans will stand quietly before a bust of George Washington and murmur a prayer of thanksgiving.

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Rust, Eric C., trans. *The Odyssey of a U-Boat Commander: Recollections of Erich Topp*. New York: Praeger, 1992. 242pp. \$49.95

Erich Topp is not an ordinary author, nor, evidently, was he an ordinary U-boat skipper during World War II. Neither is his "odyssey" truly an odyssey in the ordinary understanding of the word. Anyone expecting to read the autobiography of a first-class U-boat commander credited with sinking some thirty-seven ships in seventeen war patrols, is going to be disappointed. If, on the other hand, readers have a desire to analyse the deep-seated feelings and self-evaluation of the German war effort, as seen by a thoughtful German who joined the Nazi Party and swore an oath of everlasting loyalty to Adolph Hitler because it was the thing to do, this book will meet their need, for they will come away with an understanding of what made Germany tick.

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Topp was skipper of the *U-522*, the submarine that, more than a month before Pearl Harbor, sank the *USS Reuben James*, a World War I-type "four-piper" then engaged in escorting a British merchant convoy across the Atlantic. There is no description of the attack; Topp merely states that he sank her, that she was escorting a British convoy, and that he thought she was British—an understandable error when it is remembered that only a year earlier the United States had transferred fifty identical destroyers to the Royal Navy.

Topp describes his command of *U-522* in little detail. After only a few pages, he violates chronology by describing his feelings at the deaths of two of his friends, one in 1941 and the other in 1984. From here he goes on to discuss at some length the extraordinary state of mind and morale that enabled the German submariners to continue to go on patrol in the face of 75 percent losses. Quickly it becomes clear that Topp's purpose is to analyse the relationship of patriotic German fighting men to the Nazism that drove them.

The most penetrating comments one will find in this book relate to the Nazi regime and its effect upon honest people like Topp himself who, initially proud of Germany's resurgence under Hitler after World War I, gradually became horrified as they learned of the excesses their leader was committing in their name. He portrays clearly a dilemma every thinking American military man should have asked himself—and many

did. "What should (or could) I do if our political leaders became known as pathologic criminals? What do I do upon hearing of the atrocities committed in my name?" We, as Americans, were fortunate that for us this question remained a theoretical one. For Topp and his peers it was real, with overtones of mortal danger.

We now know that a great number of Germans, themselves innocent of wrongdoing, were aware that something terrible was going on; and we now realize that mere awareness exposed such persons, and their families, to unspeakable danger. Small wonder they closed their minds to the obvious!

However, what about the leaders? What about Admiral Karl Dönitz, the U-boat leader and first commander in chief of Hitler's navy? Although Topp states his admiration for the submarine admiral, more than once, he also says that there is no question in his mind that Dönitz was fully aware and had indeed been carefully briefed as to the actual details of the atrocious "final solution" imposed upon the "Jewish question." This is to be contrasted with Dönitz's own loud claims to innocence.

In 1959, I reviewed Dönitz's autobiography, *Ten Years and Twenty Days*, for *The New York Times*. In the course of my review I referred to the idea that while we might be willing to accept at face value Dönitz's defense that he had not been aware of the atrocities, his ten years in Spandau Prison gain scant sympathy

measured against the outrages Germany committed against millions of innocent people.

The next year the USS *Triton*, which under my command had just made a submerged circumnavigation of the earth, visited West Germany. At the suggestion of the U.S. naval attache, I called upon Admiral Dönitz. My reception was extraordinary. Dönitz walked up to me and snarled, "I understand you think I should have been executed!" He produced a copiously underlined copy of my review, along with a letter from Dr. Samuel Eliot Morison, the official historian of the U.S. Navy in World War II. Morison had written: "I accept your explanation that you knew nothing about the atrocities, but here is someone who does not agree." It was he who had sent Dönitz my review and evidently he who had underlined pertinent passages. I was taken by surprise, and stammered something to the effect that that was not an accurate statement of my meaning. Subsequent study, not only of the manuscript of my review but also of the slightly edited printed version, substantiates that I did not accuse Dönitz outright, but it could be interpreted to say that I had my doubts.

Since I did not then and there walk out of Dönitz's house, I do not look back on the incident with any pride; the tense situation was finally brought to order by Mrs. Dönitz, who brought a tray with wine and said to her husband, "Karl, stop that! Captain Beach

is here on a friendly social call." Now, reading Topp, one sees the following passage. "Grand Admiral Dönitz's apologists hold that he was an unpolitical officer, but I am not convinced, and here my criticism sets in. His unconditional commitment to Hitler, his decrees and speeches that reflect National Socialist Ideology and utterances of its chief spokesman—all this induces me to reject this assessment. . . . So much we know today from the talks he gave; so much we can deduce from his presence at meetings where . . . Himmler openly described his strategy of liquidation against Poles, Russians, and Jews. . . . I conclude . . . that Dönitz knew more than he ever admitted."

This was exactly what I had written! While Dönitz may not have had anything to do with the "final solution," he undoubtedly knew about it. His defense was false then and is false still. He, and others like him, get no good feeling from me.

Erich Topp's "odyssey" is of the mind, not of the material. The book is neither an autobiography nor an essay on having unknowingly been part of evil. It contains a little of both, but the most significant thing is its picture of the ultimate triumph of the soul over the extraordinary circumstances and tumultuous events in which the author found himself.

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