

1990

The Merchant U-Boat Adventures of the Deutschland, 1916-1918

John D. Alden

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Alden, John D. (1990) "The Merchant U-Boat Adventures of the Deutschland, 1916-1918," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 43 : No. 3 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol43/iss3/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Although most of its material is not new, the volume remains useful. Because of the abundance of references, recommended reading and citations, *Britain and the First World War* provides a worthwhile introduction to current scholarship regarding a most difficult period, a period of domestic and international conflict with almost too apt a relevance for the present.

A.J. PLOTKE
Cornell University

Messimer, Dwight R. *The Merchant U-Boat: Adventures of the Deutschland, 1916-1918*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988. 234pp. \$24.95

The *Deutschland*, the world's first and only merchant submarine, was the subject of widespread rumor, hysteria, paranoid secrecy, and exaggerated claims during her brief commercial career during the First World War. Dwight Messimer has done a workmanlike job of tracking down and documenting the facts and providing an interesting account of her real achievements. Originally conceived as a means of breaking Britain's sea blockade, which by 1916 was slowly strangling Germany's war effort as well as her civilian economy, the *Deutschland* was the prototype of a projected class of eight unarmed cargo-carrying submarines designed to transport 750 tons of high-priority materials between Germany and the then-neutral United States. In two trips,

first to Baltimore and then to New London, she evaded British hunters and brought dyestuffs and chemicals to America and returned to her homeland with rubber, nickel and tin. The value of her cargoes is said to have far exceeded the cost of her construction.

Actually, the *Deutschland* never really was a merchant ship. The program was always under naval control, and her crew was made up of naval submarine personnel, poorly disguised as merchant seamen. Strangely, her captain and that of her sister, the *Bremen*, although reserve naval officers, had no previous submarine experience. Their lack of expertise undoubtedly contributed to the accidents suffered by the *Deutschland* and the mysterious loss of the *Bremen*, which disappeared shortly after leaving Helgoland on her maiden voyage. Since no likely Allied attack has ever come to light, an operational casualty was probably her undoing.

Tubby, slow, and unwieldy, both surfaced and submerged, the *Deutschland* was no model for a successful warship, but in the end, she and her surviving sisters were armed and converted into submarine cruisers. Redesignated *U-155*, she made three long war patrols and was credited with sinking 43 Allied ships totaling 121,673 tons—no mean record for any submarine. She ended her career in a British scrapyard, taking final revenge on her captors by blowing up five apprentice workers who inadver-

tently cut into a fuel tank with their torches.

The author, a police officer and naval history buff, has made a few slips that should have been caught in the editing. At one point he identifies the *Deutschland* and *Bremen* as *U-200* and *U-201*; these were merely code names for the merchant submarine project. Later subs actually carried these numbers. Elsewhere he describes Captain Hansen of the Norwegian SS *Benguela* as a "British merchant officer" and refers to the "transport" *Lucia* as both SS and USS. (The *Lucia* was a cargo ship operated by the U.S. Army and taken over by the Navy, but sunk by the *U-155* before being commissioned.) Some of Messimer's technical descriptions are a bit weak, and on page 189 he misidentifies a UC-type minelayer as a UB-class boat. There are also a few gaps and loose ends in the narrative. Some information, such as the exact nature of the *Deutschland's* cargo on her voyage to New London, may not be available, but the details of her second war patrol as *U-155* could easily have been provided. The reader may also question whether some of the conversations (quoted verbatim) actually occurred, although they seem realistic enough in context. These are all minor flaws that do not detract from the basic quality of the book. The only serious omission is the failure to include outline drawings showing the ship's internal layout as either a cargo carrier or a warship. In all other respects the book is a useful and informative

history of one of the most unusual submarine developments of World War I.

JOHN D. ALDEN
Commander, U.S. Navy (Retired)
Pleasantville, New York

Douglas, W.A.B., ed. *The RCN in Transition, 1910-1985*. Vancouver, B.C.: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988. 411pp.

Edited by W. A. B. Douglas, official historian of the Department of National Defence in Ottawa, this collection of essays was published to mark the Canadian Navy's 75th birthday that occurred in 1985. The essays were written on time—but publishing is a slow process.

The period under review was a time of considerable change and naval development in the midst of intermittent political controversy—controversy which initially gave birth to the Royal Canadian Navy. Such controversy, at times, still appears to pursue that navy (now called the "Maritime Command" of the Canadian Armed Forces).

Dealing with the principal theme of "The Canadian Navy in the Modern World," the essays examine the importance of naval considerations to Canadian and North American national security interests. The close interplay of Canadian and American naval concerns, and Canada's "special relationship" with the United States is clearly demonstrated in most of the essays. The books also describe how Canada's