

# U-534 – THE MYSTERY BOAT

By Jan Heitmann

On Monday, August 23, 1993, German and Allied Second World War veterans, together with salvagers and press representatives from all over the world, gathered on the tiny island of Anholt, halfway between Sweden and Denmark, to witness the surfacing of a sunken German submarine believed to contain a treasure and secret documents. The men who sailed on *U-534* and the aircrew which sank it were the heart of the story and when the tip of the U-Boat's deck-mounted gun broke surface after 48 years on the Danish seabed, some of them had tears in their eyes as their memories went back to the last days of the war.

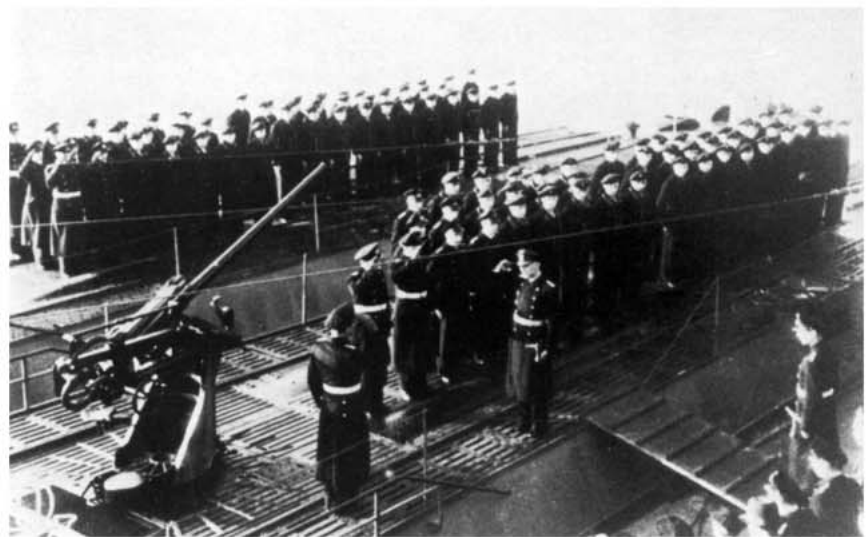
The final phase of World War II saw a marked deterioration of Germany's overall war situation. The Ardennes offensive had proved a failure, while the great Russian offensive, which opened in mid-January, brought about a complete collapse on the Eastern Front. On January 28, 1945, the Russians established a bridgehead on the left bank of the River Oder, only 30 kilometres from Camp Coralle, the U-Boat and Naval Staff Headquarters. However, the gravity of the situation did not affect the plans to continue the U-Boat campaign, except in so far as operations had to be intensified for the relief of enemy pressure against German coastal communications. The Allies' insistence on unconditional surrender whereby Germany would be split into separate zones, led to the decision to fight and hold out at all costs. Therefore the Kriegsmarine's first task was to evacuate from the path of the advancing Russians as many civilians and fighting men as possible. From February onwards, merchant vessels, aided subsequently by almost every serviceable warship, were used to transport troops and wounded from Lithuania and East Prussia. Later, they were devoted mainly to the rescue of refugees from East Prussia and Pomerania. At the same time, heavy warships bombarded the coast in support of the land battle for the Baltic ports. As far as the U-Boats were concerned, Memel, Pillau, Danzig and Gotenhafen (Gdynia) all had to be abandoned as bases, and the use of U-Boats for transport purposes on their passage to the West enabled officers and men to witness at first hand the indescribable misery of their compatriots.

The great Russian offensive on the Oder front achieved a decisive breakthrough, and on April 24, on Hitler's orders, Grossadmiral Dönitz and the rest of his staff moved from Berlin to Plön, in Schleswig-Holstein. All

those warships and merchant vessels which had managed to leave eastern Baltic and North Sea ports ahead of the Allied advance, and were not engaged on transport duty, had now assembled in the western Baltic, while, by the end of April, nearly 200 U-Boats had arrived in the Schleswig-Holstein bases. Dönitz was preparing to surrender the Kriegsmarine on his own responsibility, when, in the evening of April 30, to his great surprise, he received a message from Berlin appointing him Hitler's successor. Conscious that an orderly capitulation was essential if further bloodshed was to be avoided, he also still intended to save as many people as possible from Russian captivity, and attempted to gain time for the further transfer of troops and refugees by negotiating with the western Allies for a separate surrender. That same day, instructions were issued for the scuttling of the fleet. The code-word for this operation was 'Regenbogen' (Rainbow), upon receipt of which all warships were to be sunk or destroyed.

On May 2, at Flensburg, where U-Boat Command and Dönitz had established their last headquarters, the instructions were handed out to the U-Boat commanders assembled there from the boats lying in the western Baltic ports. At the same time, all boats capable of diving were ordered to move to Norway, away from the threat of attack from low-flying aircraft and to a position where it was thought that their presence, in large numbers, might strengthen the hand of the German representatives in their negotiations with the British 21st Army Group.

Since the beginning of April, Allied aircraft had been operating unchallenged over the western Baltic and Kattegat in daylight, and had already sunk five U-Boats on passage through the latter straits. The sudden exodus to Norway was therefore quickly spotted, and the RAF concentrated large numbers of aircraft in the area. In the



Above: The *U-534* (with *U-535* behind) under Kapitänleutnant Ellmenreich on the day of her commissioning: December 23, 1942. Top: *U-534* in late 1943 when the U-Boat belonged to 2. U-Flottille. (UBAC)



absence of any Luftwaffe opposition, these aircraft were able to range over the whole of the Kattegat, even into bays and harbours, destroying 21 U-Boats within a four-day period.

On May 3, Dönitz's parlementaires proceeded to Field-Marshal Montgomery's headquarters to negotiate a separate surrender. Montgomery agreed to accept the surrender of the North German area on condition that Holland, Denmark and the German fleet were included and that no weapons or ships would be destroyed before the surrender, which was to take effect from 8 a.m. on May 5. This meant handing over every available unit of the Kriegsmarine, a heavy blow to Dönitz, since any such action would violate German naval tradition and every concept of military honour.

With heavy heart, Dönitz accepted, in order not to prejudice the chances of escape of the eastern armies and the refugees. Details of the surrender terms were transmitted to all German forces and on May 4 all U-Boats at sea were ordered to cease hostilities and to return to base immediately. However, the commanders of U-Boats in the western Baltic, who had already prepared their boats for scuttling in accordance with the 'Regenbogen' orders, were of the opinion that the orders forbidding the sinking of their ships was contrary to Dönitz's real intention. Therefore, they scuttled their boats that night, a total of 218 ending up on the bottom.

After further negotiations with Eisenhower, the general surrender came into force at 00.01 a.m. on May 9, the Allied demand for the German fleet to be handed over intact having been passed to the U-Boats on the previous day. In complying with this order, the U-Boats duly surfaced and, flying the black flag, all the operational boats proceeded to their allotted surrender ports, the Allies taking over 154 boats all told.

One of the U-Boats which made off for the safe Norwegian bases in early May and eventually fell victim to enemy aircraft, was *U-534*. Launched in Hamburg in September 1942 and commissioned on December 23, *U-534* was a type IX C40 long-range ocean-going vessel with a range of more than 11,000 nautical miles. Her early operations took her on meteorological-observation duty to the North Atlantic until the late summer of 1944, its commanding officer, Kapitänleutnant Hermann Nollau, serving on the submarine until she was sunk.

In August 1944, *U-534* called at the U-Boat base at Bordeaux to be fitted with a Schnorchel device to enable her to use her diesel engines when submerged. She then sailed from Bordeaux to Flensburg, via the North Atlantic, during which voyage the boat shot down a Wellington bomber but encountered serious technical problems. She reached Flensburg in late October 1944 and joined 33. U-Flottille as a non-operational U-Boat. For five months from November 1944, she was laid up in the Stettin shipyard.

Fully armed and equipped, *U-534* left Kiel U-Boat base in the early morning of May 2, 1945, Kapitänleutnant Nollau having been ordered to sail to Kristiansand in the south of Norway and to await further orders there. At first, the voyage passed uneventfully and the boat spent the night of May 4-5 submerged. Thus, lying silently on the bottom of the Baltic, *U-534* did not receive the order to return to her home base and she continued on her course for Norway. However, at 1.39 p.m. on May 5, the day after the German forces in the Baltic and northern Europe area surrendered, *U-534* was making her way through the Kattegat, in the company of two other boats, when they were spotted by two Liberators of No. 18 Group of RAF Coastal Command. The first aircraft of No. 547 Squadron was shot down by one of the U-Boats, which began to dive, there being

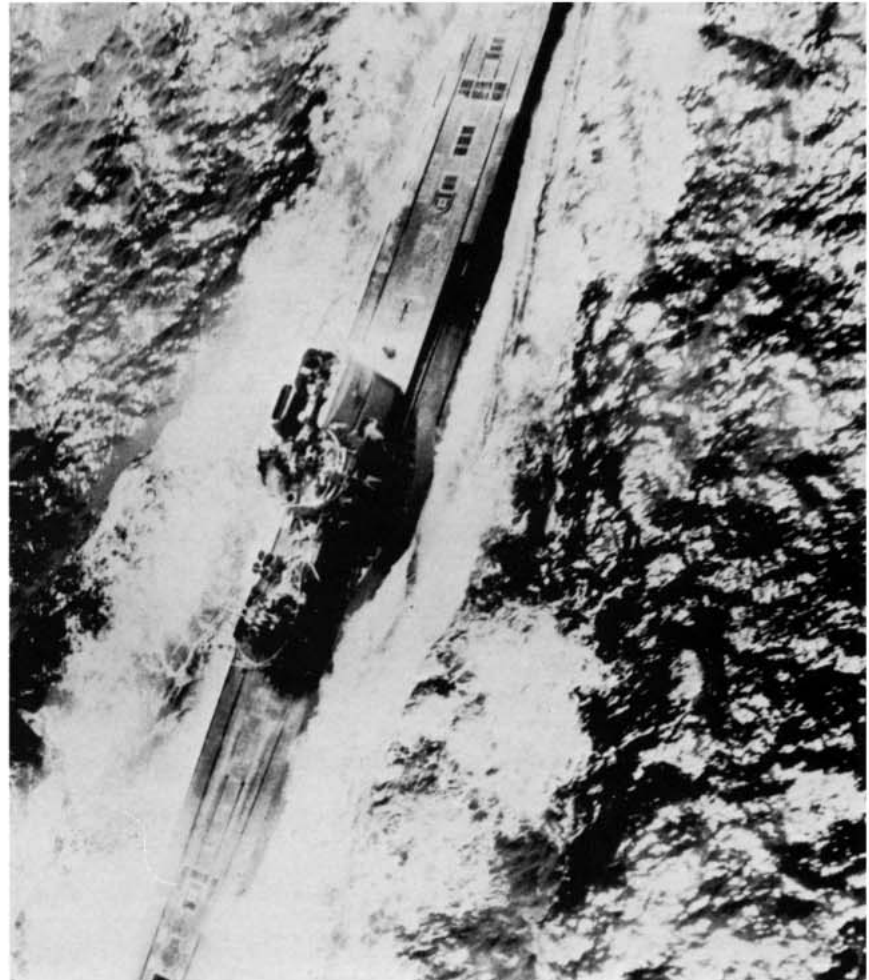


On May 5, 1945, as the U-Boat was proceeding through the Kattegat (the strait between Denmark and Sweden), the crew (above) of Liberator KH347 achieved two direct hits. In the picture below, the order has been given to abandon ship and crew members can be seen climbing down the conning tower. (UBAC)

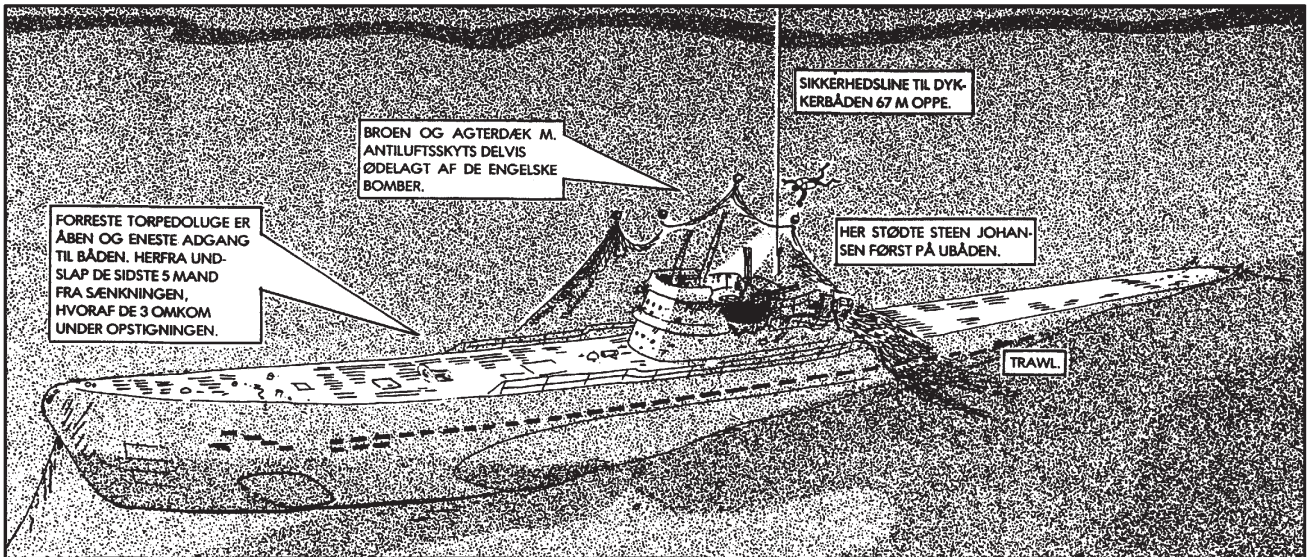
one survivor. The second Liberator, KH347, 'G' George of No. 86 Squadron, piloted by Warrant Officer John Nichol, launched its attack on the only U-Boat still on the surface and on its second run dropped four depth charges. Two hit aft, one right behind the conning tower, the other striking the deck before exploding in the water, wrecking the stern.

Kapitänleutnant Nollau gave orders to abandon ship and most of the crew of 52 managed to reach the deck before the boat sank stern-first at the position 56°39'N,

11°48'E, taking down five crewmen in the forward torpedo compartment. However, the trapped men below deck were able to escape through the torpedo hatch a little later when the boat settled on the bottom. A Kriegsmarine vessel, *Wachtschiff 101*, being on patrol nearby, immediately started to pick up the survivors, although three crewmen succumbed from cold, exposure and injuries. Once on board, Nollau wired his report, informing U-Boat Command about the circumstances of the loss. The next day, the U-Boat crew were landed at Aarhus.







For nearly half a century, *U-534* rested in her watery grave on the Kattegat seabed. However, it was not an undisturbed sleep because of stories that the boat had been carrying treasures and secret documents when it went down. These rumours were mainly based on the fact that the boat was of a type designed for long trans-ocean missions and that it belonged to 33. U-Flottille whose main task was to transport valuable cargo to Japan. Other U-Boats of that flotilla, which were either seized or surrendered, were found to be carrying valuable materials and documents hidden in specially-modified compartments. One, *U-234* under the command of Kapitänleutnant Johann-Heinrich Fehler, which surrendered off the US coast on May 18, had uranium and mercury hidden in the hull, blueprints for rockets, pieces of the Me 262 fighter aircraft, a Luftwaffe general and even two Japanese rocket experts, who committed suicide!

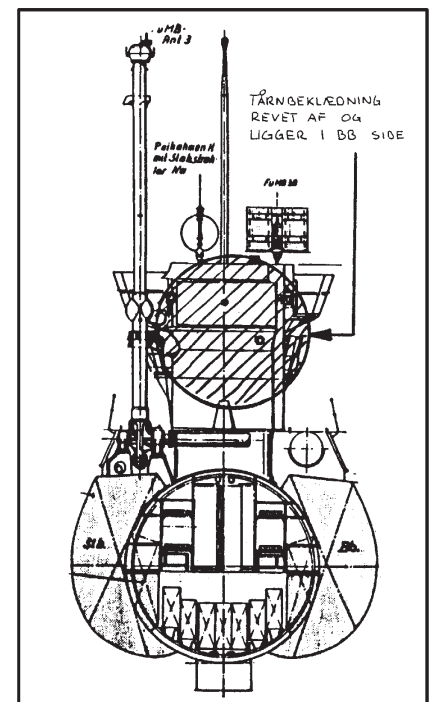
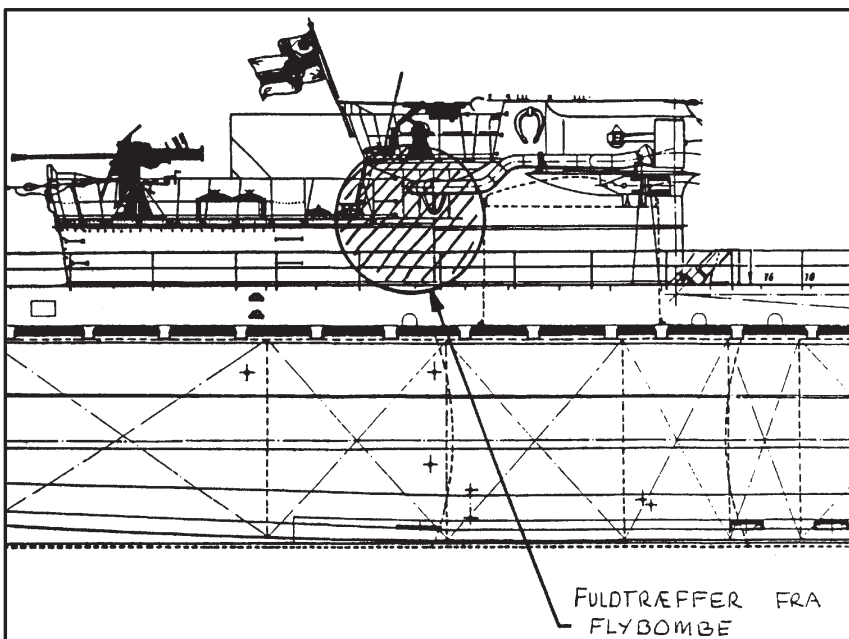
Speculation about the contents of *U-534* ranged from secret documents, war booty and valuables of all kinds, paintings and artifacts to gold, jewellery, currency and a 'Nazi treasure' of immense value. According to these rumours, the secret cargo was stored in hidden compartments which had been added

to the boat while it was undergoing major repairs in Stettin. It was also suggested that high-ranking Nazis and military leaders had attempted to escape from the Allies aboard *U-534* when the Reich collapsed. Even the names of Eva Braun, Martin Bormann and Joseph Mengele were brought into play to make the story more sensational. It was even said that the SS had given a special 'SS transport order No. 1744' to the Kriegsmarine to secure smooth escape of top Nazis and their valuables to Argentina or Japan. The existence of such an order is unknown to historians who doubt that the Kriegsmarine ever received any instructions from the SS. Besides, Dönitz, being already the head of the state and supreme commander of the Wehrmacht on the day *U-534* sailed from Kiel, would never have permitted Nazi officials to use one of his U-Boats for their own purposes.

The air of mystery was heightened by the fact that British military records indicate that

there was considerable activity by air from Berlin to Kiel on the nights before *U-534*'s departure. However, on the night before the submarine sailed, the city was set ablaze by 126 Mosquito fighter-bombers and anyone would have found it almost impossible to reach Kiel from Berlin. Notwithstanding, the rumours continued to flourish, the press referring to the *U-534* as 'one of World War II's major mysteries' and 'the Nazi treasure submarine'. Although it appeared useless to stress that all this was nothing but fiction, the stories about a secret cargo aboard *U-534* occupied the minds of military enthusiasts, journalists, sub-aqua divers and treasure-seekers for decades.

To the latter group belonged Aage Jensen, a professional Danish diver and his partner, Steen Johannsen. In August 1986, they reported that, following a long, systematic search of the waters around the small Danish island of Anholt, they had found a U-Boat about 25 kilometres off the island. Lying in a



Left: 'Damage to *U-534*.' The extent of the destruction to the conning tower. Right: 'Covering from the tower torn off and lying at "BB" side.' (UBAC)



crevice 67 metres below the surface, the boat was in a remarkable good condition. With the help of Horst Bredow, head of the 'Stiftung Traditionsarchiv Unterseeboote' in Cuxhaven and one of Germany's leading experts in U-Boat matters, the submarine was reliably identified as *U-534*. However, it seems that this is only half the story as there is ample evidence that the very first discovery of *U-534* actually occurred in 1977 when Jensen reported that he had found a submarine off the Anholt coast. The records suggest that in fact he had discovered two boats, *U-534* and *U-251* (sunk on April 19, 1945 by enemy aircraft) which were lying close together. The latter was not of interest to him, because permission to recover the submarine was refused after the German authorities had declared the vessel a war grave due to the many who had perished when she went down. The reason that the *U-534* was 'discovered' for a second time in 1986 would seem to be because when Jensen dived on the boat for the first time, nobody was really interested. Since then, Wolfgang Petersen's film epic *Das Boot* had aroused a worldwide interest in U-Boat warfare and Jensen, looking for financiers to raise the boat, now saw the opportunity to realise his project. He was proved right and his discovery received enormous press coverage.

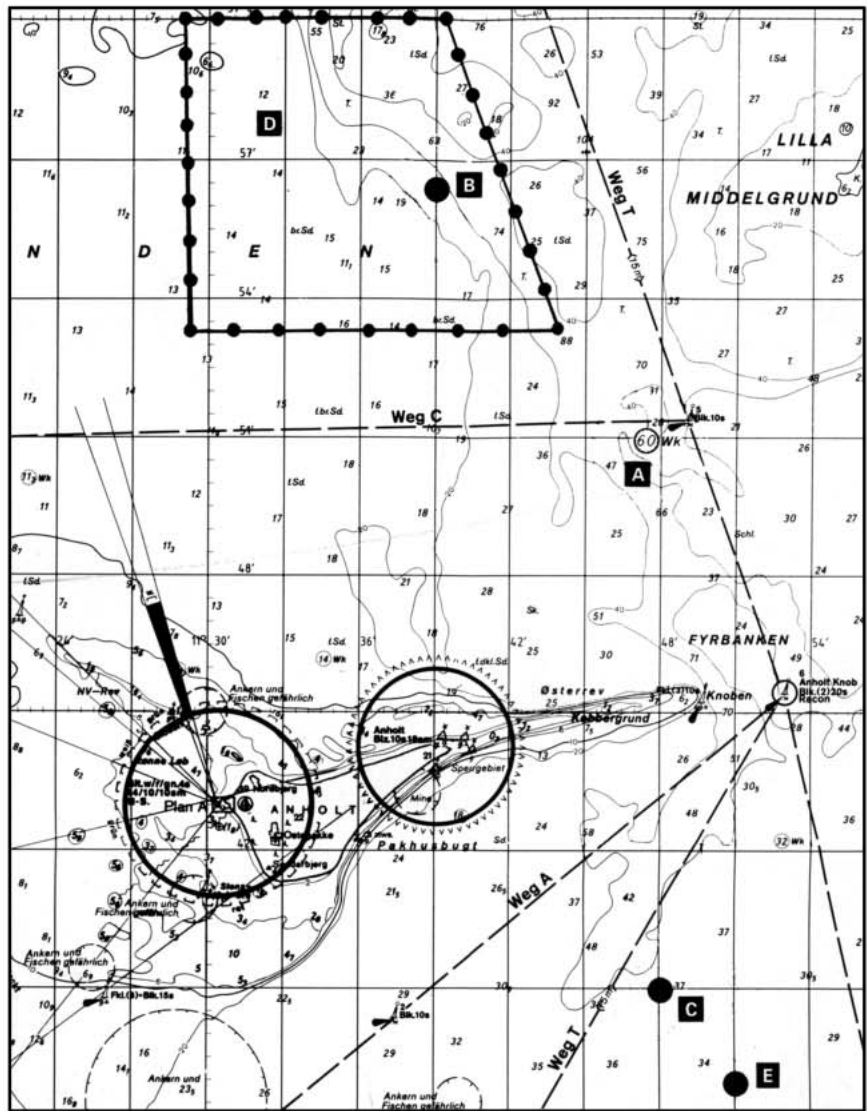
This time he had no problem in finding financial backing through a Danish-Dutch consortium, with the Danish publisher and businessman, Karsten Ree, acting as the main sponsor to finance the £2 million salvage operation. (Jensen sold the salvage rights to Karsten Ree who has the intention of turning the U-Boat into a museum.) However, it still took a couple of years before the preparations for the difficult recovery operation were completed. The consortium was granted permission by the Danish authorities to raise the boat, whereupon they contracted the world-famous Dutch salvage company, Smit Tak to carry out the task.

Salvage work began on August 2, 1993 with a diving survey, the cutting away of old fishing nets covering the tower, and the removal of mud surrounding the vessel using a huge underwater vacuum cleaner. The Dutch marine salvage experts, operating the huge floating cranes *Taklift 4* and *Takcrane 1*, then dredged three channels in the seabed underneath the U-Boat so that steel cables could be passed beneath her. On Tuesday, August 17, Smit Tak raised the boat from the sea bottom, without having it break surface but leaving it suspended some 36 metres below the waves. In this position, it was then moved some three miles to calmer waters for the actual raising. However, this operation was then delayed by high winds that made it impossible for the floating cranes to further lift the vessel.

The boat's resurrection was not only watched by journalists and naval enthusiasts but also by eight German survivors of the U-Boat and four Allied airmen from the *Liberator* which had sent it to the bottom.

Because of the possible danger from unexploded ordnance, the air and sea space around the wreck site was completely sealed off, and a Danish environment protection vessel was standing by in case of acid or fuel leakages. At 10.45 a.m. on Monday, August 23, *U-534* finally rose clear of the water. The barrels of the anti-aircraft gun broke surface first, then the hull emerged, slung in a cradle of cables from the floating cranes.

**After spending 48 years under water, the remains of the *U-534* broke the surface on Monday morning, August 23, 1993. The Dutch salvage vessel *Taklift 4* with a lifting capacity of 2400 tonnes, aided by *Takcrane 1* (2720 tonnes), raised the 1200-tonne U-Boat even though some 400 tons of mud were clinging to the hull. (AP)**



[A] The position where *U-534* was found by the Danish divers (56°51'0"N, 11°47'4"E). The annotation '60 WK' on the chart indicates that the existence of a wreck at this position at a depth of approximately 60 metres was already known to the German Bundesamt für Seeschifffahrt und Hydrographie (Federal Board for Shipping and Hydrography, the authority for compiling the charts). [B] Before the final raising of the *U-534* could start, the boat had to be lifted and towed into more shallow waters to position 56°56'3"N, 11°38'8"E. Here, the U-Boat was finally brought to the surface. [C] The position recorded in Kriegsmarine files where *U-534* was officially reported sunk. [D] The area sealed off while salvage work was in progress. [E] Position of *U-251* sunk April 19, 1945.



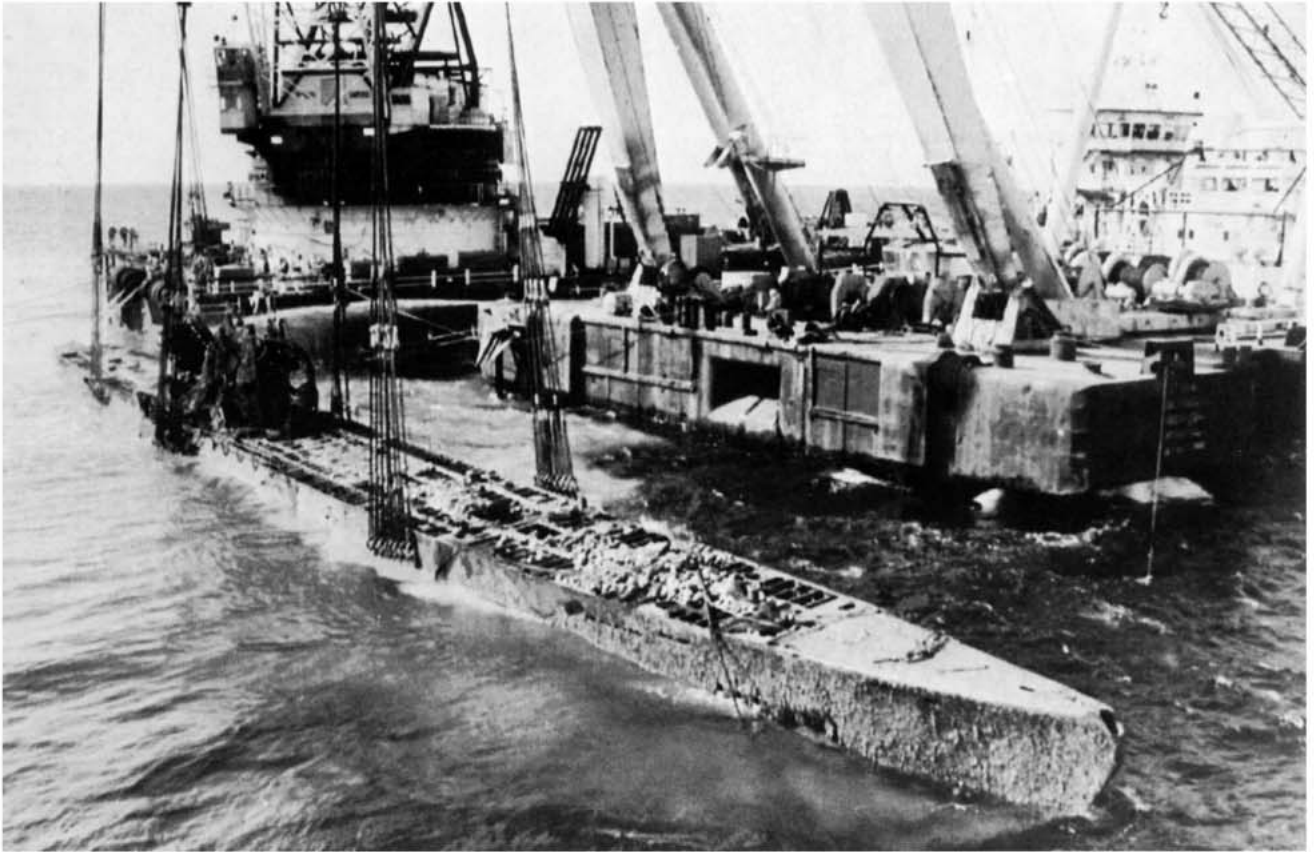










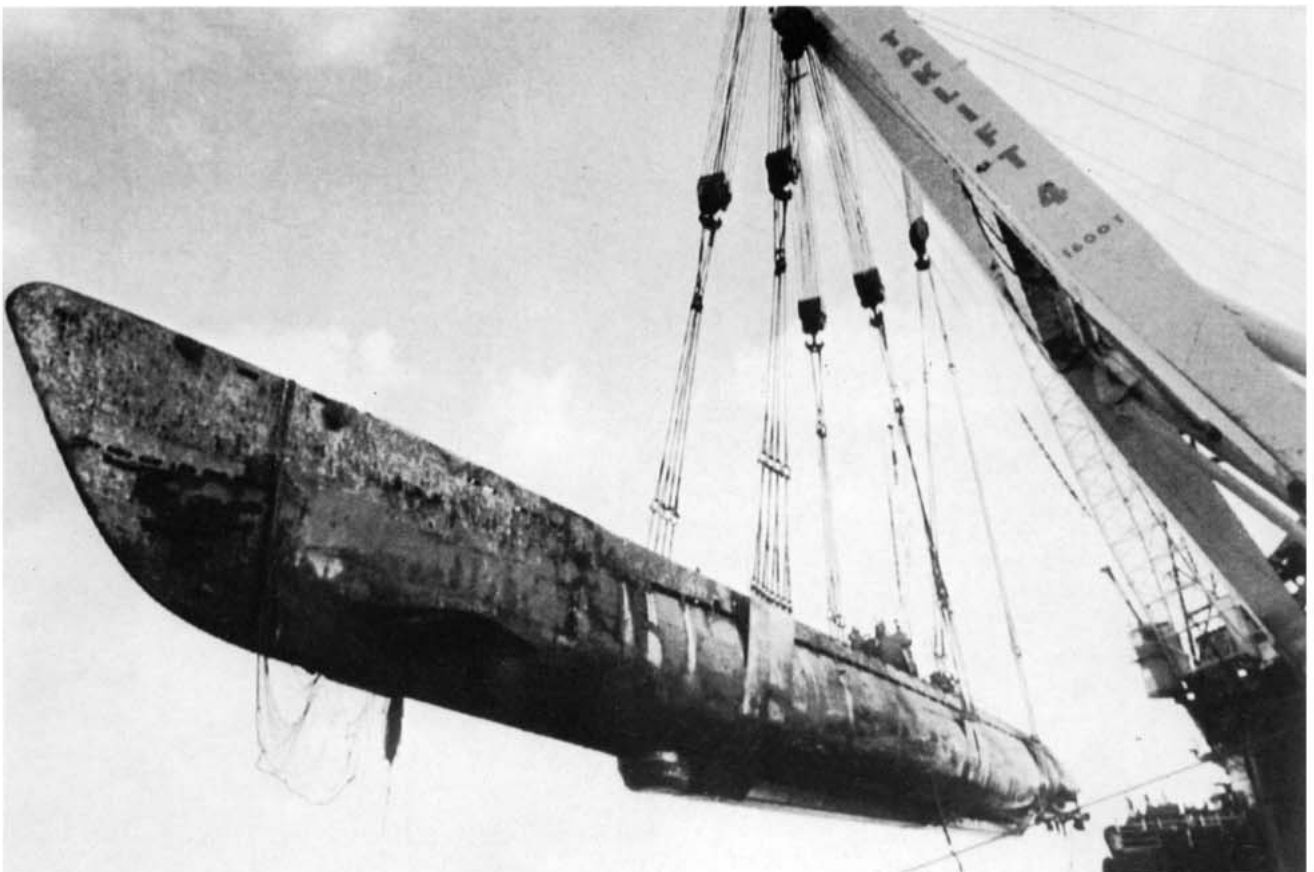


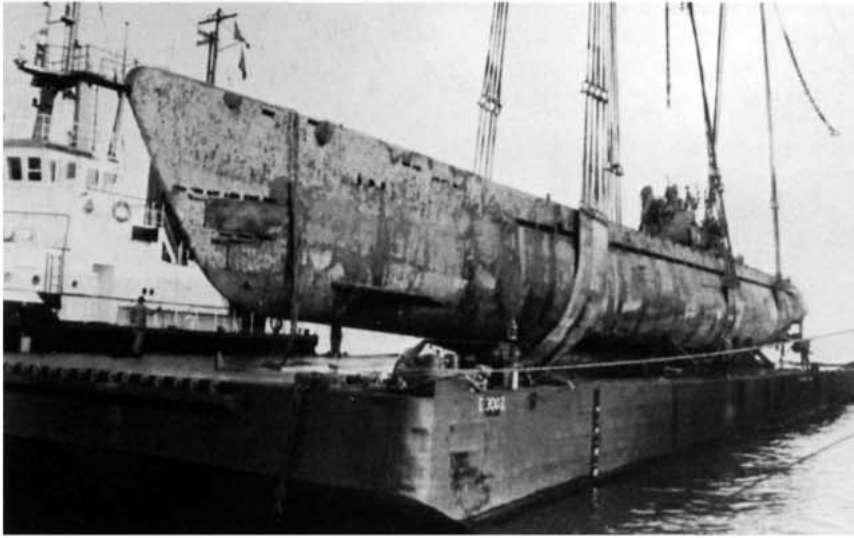
**After removing the excess weight, the U-Boat was lifted clear of the water almost like a toy. (AP)**

*U-534* was initially raised to her original operational waterline without any oil spillage. Then a pumping operation removed some 400 tons of clay that was stuck between the inner and outer hulls to make the vessel

light enough to enable it to be lifted onto a submersible off-shore barge. Apart from extensive superficial damage caused to the periscope and the conning tower by the wartime explosion, fishing nets and corros-

ion, the boat was in very good shape, much better than the consortium could have hoped. The hull was only slightly corroded and even retained patches of its original grey colour.





**U-534 was then lowered onto a submersible off-shore barge for its journey to Hirtshals in North Jutland where its contents were to be examined. (AP)**

A search for treasure and secret documents on board had to wait until all ordnance had been removed as it was feared that the ammunition might have deteriorated and become dangerously unstable. After it had been pumped out, Captain Finn Linne-mann, a Danish Navy explosives specialist, together with a Dutch Royal Navy salvage officer, Bert Kleijwegt, boarded the U-Boat. They found the shells in the deck lockers still in excellent condition, and once the two deck hatches had been prised open, ammunition disposal specialists entered the interior of the boat and began disarming torpedoes, detonators and shells, a risky and slow job which lasted a couple of days. One of them said that the interior was an indescribable mess, but although three-quarters of the vessel had been filled with water, the officers' quarters and the radio room were dry behind watertight hatches, closed by crewmen before they abandoned ship. Parts of the living quarters and storage space had also been preserved by large air bubbles.

After the explosives — 13 torpedoes, some 150 rounds of 37mm ammunition and 300 20mm shells — had been removed, the boat was transported by barge to a dry dock in the Danish North Sea port of Hirtshals in north Jutland where a team of conservation experts continued the long task of examining the wreck and removing and registering its contents. (The disposal of the torpedoes and other ordnance was carried out by the Dutch Navy on August 28.)

Ree and his partners had believed that the discovery would unravel some of the mysteries surrounding the last days of the Thousand-Year Reich, but in this their hopes were disappointed because the items found in the boat have not proved to be out of the ordinary. Early investigations of the boat's interior revealed that the fine mud on the seabed had preserved many objects. The light bulbs, for instance, remained intact, and cups and saucers were unbroken. Three pairs of binoculars were uncovered together with a smoker's pipe, clothes, gasmasks, a box of condoms and a hundred bottles of a German 1936-vintage wine, many still tightly corked. Inside a metal box belonging to a crew member, a slide rule, cravat and nose drops were found.

However, the salvagers were not too disappointed because there was still the commander's safe to be inspected. Before the U-Boat went down, someone had tried to save its contents, and when the salvagers entered the room, the key to the safe's upper compartment was still in the lock, attached to an officer's fob with three other keys, part of

a chain and a whistle. The silence was broken only by dripping water and the creak of the safe door swinging on its hinges. Conservationists were ecstatic when they realised that the safe was full with papers. The documents were so tightly packed that they remained sealed. Many were legible. Each bundle of handwritten records, typed notes, printed papers and military drawings was carefully numbered, sealed in polythene and temporarily stored in a freezer. Hans-Christian Bjerg, archivist and historian of the Danish State Archive, had the opportunity of checking the papers before they were sealed and he stated that they were not secret or incriminating documents but merely nautical material and technical data which were a standard part of the inventory on all U-Boats.

So far, the most valuable items to be retrieved have been two rare, passive,

acoustic guidance torpedoes. There is no indication that U-534 had carried any treasures or secret items, which came as no surprise to the survivors of the U-Boat as they had always expressed serious scepticism about the possibility of finding any such thing, let alone bodies. They reiterated that there had been no Nazi official on board, and no treasure.

At the time of writing (December 1993), it remains unclear who has the rights to the contents of U-534, although valuables which can be proved to have been stolen from occupied territories remain the property of their original owners. Other items on board are technically the property of the German Ministry of Defence. However, the Danish state laid claim to valuables found in their territorial waters and a 74-year-old Norwegian salvage diver, Einar Hoevding, maintains that after the war he obtained salvage rights to all German wartime property off Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Italian Embassy in Denmark is also reported by one source to have put in a bid for a sealed strong box known to them to be aboard. This is particularly interesting as Italy had broken its alliance with Germany 21 months before the U-Boat was sunk.

However, those who survived one of World War II's last battles at sea are not interested in the legal wrangling surrounding the affair. After the salvage operation, the veterans, all now in their seventies, who watched the raising of U-534 with great excitement, attended a reunion party in the Casablanca Restaurant in Anholt. For them, 48 years had put events into perspective and wartime hatreds had long been forgotten. Eight German seamen and four Allied airmen avidly discussed the early afternoon attack by the two Liberators and swapped wartime reminiscences. Then they started to sing wartime songs, including *Lilli Marlene* and *Waltzing Matilda* at a celebration which went on into the early hours. By the time they returned home, the secret of U-534 had been revealed: that there was really no secret after all!



**It was soon evident that far from there being any secrets on board, the items recovered were 'run-of-the-mill', and those to be expected on any wartime U-Boat. Nevertheless, many were well preserved as some of the watertight doors had held and air pockets had protected other areas. Here, newspaper owner and salvage sponsor Karsten Ree examines one of the screws of the vessel he plans to restore and display as a museum piece. (AP)**