

NORTHERN BARRAGE: WALL OF DEATH

Since the war's beginning, the U-Boats of the Imperial Germany Navy had thwarted every effort of the British Admiralty to close off the North Sea as the gateway to the Atlantic. Then came the combined American/British mine barrage

BY ROBERT PAYDEN

The failure of the German High Seas Fleet to wrest control of the open sea from Britain in 1916 made her battle fleet an impotent factor toward winning the war and it meant a continuance of the Allied blockade which was beginning to be sorely felt within Germany. Coupled with the mounting casualties on the

Few artists could better capture the danger and excitement of the Great War at sea than Willy Stöwer. The son of a sea captain, Willy originally trained as a metal worker and worked as a technician in the engineering offices of various German shipyards. However, he soon received commissions as a draftsman, illustrator, and painter. His talent was recognized quite early and his painting technique was self-taught. He married into a wealthy family, which allowed him to concentrate on this art. Kaiser Wilhelm II became Willy's enthusiast supporter and patron and he even accompanied the Emperor on several lengthy voyages between 1905 and 1912. During the Great War, his massive paintings became wildly popular. However, his greatest creative period came to an end when the Kaiser abdicated, thus bringing to a close the Imperial era in Germany. Willy died in relatively obscurity at age 67. This compelling artwork illustrates *U-21* shortly before sending a fatal blow to the *Linda Blanche* out of Liverpool. However, what the viewer sees is not the truth.

battlefronts, particularly at Verdun where the forces of the Kaiser were engaged in a desperate attempt to bring France to her knees, were the shrinking stores of foods and necessities.

Nevertheless, the news from Jutland produced a great sensation in Germany when it was announced that the High Seas Fleet had fought a victorious battle with the naval power of Britain and had returned to safety after severely battering her British adversary — as indeed she had. National pride and faith had been restored in the Navy; although in reality German leaders knew that unless Allied control of the sea lanes could be broken the hopes of the Central Powers for a decisive victory were doomed.

By the fall of 1916, conditions convinced both the German General Staff and the Naval command that one alternative alone remained for a possible victory — the adoption of an all-out submarine campaign against Allied shipping, and domestic conditions in Germany forced influential leaders in the *Reichstag* into a grudging acceptance of the policy.

Strategically considered, Germany's adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare was a sound move. The stalemate that had evolved from the initial military offensives in 1914 had progressively indicated the importance of sea control in determining the outcome of the war. Naval proponents had been fully aware of this vital advantage, even in the pre-war years when in the naval race with Britain considerable attention had been given to



The small and humble real *Linda Blanche* — a mere coastal trader. There were no casualties and the whole affair was conducted in as gentlemanly and civilized a manner as possible during a war. The *U-21* surfaced and forced the *Linda Blanche* to heave-to and gave her captain and crew time to get away in lifeboats. Then, some of the sub's crew went aboard and placed strategic explosive charges — much less costly than a torpedo. As the sinking occurred just 18-mi from Liverpool in very busy waters — a fact that made the U-Boat captain's decision to surface all the more daring — the crew had a good chance of reaching safety, which they did.

U-Boat ace and captain of the *U-21* was Otto Hersing. So, compare the actual ship to the *Linda Blanche* in the painting — why the lie? A lot of it has to do with Otto Hersing. On 5 September 1914, he torpedoed the British cruiser *HMS Pathfinder* in the North Sea off the Scottish coast — the first Royal Navy ship to be sunk in this manner. His victory over *Linda Blanche* was minor by comparison but the U-Boat ace's



greatest achievements were in the future. When the Allies landed at Gallipoli in April 1915, Otto and the *U-21* headed to the Mediterranean and he began a series of masterly attacks on British pre-dreadnought battleships that were providing bombardment for the shore forces. Almost single-handedly, he developed the tactics that would lead the Allies to fear, with good reason, Germany's U-Boats. He followed up by sinking 12,000-ton *HMS Triumph* (25 May) and 16,000-ton *HMS Majestic*. More victories quickly followed and Hersing was awarded Germany's highest military honor — the *Pour le Merite*. So why the grossly exaggerated image of *Linda Blanche*? It would not do well to depict the ship as it was and the German propaganda machine probably almost forced Willy for a more heroic image to depict the brave captain.



Willy Stöwer
1915