

CONFIDENTIAL

TRANSLATION OF A WRITTEN STATEMENT BY  
KORVETTENKAPITAN MOEHLE  
DATED 17TH JULY, 1945

A. THE ORDER OF SEPTEMBER, 1942

In september 1942 (I can no longer recollect the exact date), the following signal was made to all U-boats and operational flotillas by the Commander in Chief U-boats by W/T in officers' cypher, i.e. Top Secret:-

"All rescue measures such as righting of capsized lifeboats, going alongside, provisioning, towing to land, etc., are absolutely forbidden and must cease.

2. Previous orders concerning the rescue and taking prisoner of masters and chief engineers remain in force since their interrogation is of the highest importance to the High Command. Boats should rescue as many as they can carry.

3. All rescue measures contradict the most primitive principle of warfare that men and material should be destroyed.

4. You must be hard and remember that the enemy bombs German towns, women and children without consideration."

This signal was without any doubt made on the instigation of the Commander in Chief U-boats himself, i.e. Grand Admiral Doenitz. In view of my knowledge of the way in which the staff of the Command in Chief U-boats worked, I consider it quite impossible that an order of such importance could have been given without his knowledge.

I do not know whether the order was given with the concurrence or at the instigation of the Supreme Command, i.e. the Führer's headquarters, or at the instigation of the Führer himself after one of his many conferences with Grand Admiral Doenitz.

As Senior Officer of the 5th U-boat Flotilla, it was my duty to pass on these instructions of Commander in Chief U-boats to Commanding Officers of U-boats which were leaving on their war patrols.

*Comd. Doenitz*  
*for*  
*General Doenitz, P. C.*

So far as concerns the order itself, it undoubtedly states, and in particular for those who know the manner in which Commander in Chief U-Boats is wont to give his orders, that the High Command regard it as desirable that not only ships but also their crews should be regarded as objects of attack, i.e. that they should be destroyed; at that time German propaganda was continually stressing the shortage of crews for enemy merchant ships and the consequent difficulties.

Had the point of view of the High Command been other than it was, the order would undoubtedly have been expressed in different words. It would only have stated that for reasons of security rescue measures were to cease and this order would have been passed as a normal secret W/T signal. It was perhaps in fact the intention that this order could be interpreted in two ways and the reason may be that in the first place, it contravenes international laws of warfare and secondly, that it was an order which must give rise to serious conflicts of conscience in commanding officers.

It was very difficult for me as senior officer of the Flotilla to ask for clarification of this order from Commander in Chief U-boats since while I was senior officer (15.6.41 - 5.5.45.) I could only, owing to lack of time, visit Commander in Chief U-boats four or five times. I could not discuss this order with officers on my staff since I was the only one who might handle signals in officers' cypher. I was moreover of the opinion that commanding officers who were uncertain as to the meaning of this particular point always had the opportunity (an opportunity which they often took on other points) to clarify this matter when they went for their instructions to the staff of Commander in Chief U-boats itself; these instructions by the staff of the Commander in Chief U-boats were for the great part given by very young officers with much more recent operational experience than I had - the officers on Commander in Chief U-boats' staff changed frequently. Generally speaking, with very few exceptions, commanding officers received their instructions from the staff of Commander in Chief U-boats after I myself had given them their instructions. Commanding officers were generally speaking in much closer personal contact with these young staff officers than they were with myself as senior officer of a purely transit flotilla. There were many commanding officers whom I only saw and got to know for a few days in Kiel while they were fitting their boats out for operations.

Having given considerable thought to the whole of this matter I now remember that during one of my visits to Commander in Chief U-boats' staff in the winter of 1942/3 or the summer '43, one of his staff officers, Korvettenkapitän HESSLER or perhaps more likely Korvettenkapitän KUPPISCH, with whom because of very close ties of friendship I used to converse intimately so long as he was with

Commander in Chief U-boats' staff, told me of the following occurrence (whether I broached the subject or how the matter came up I can no longer remember).

A type VII boat (500-tonner) reported in her war log that when outward bound from a base in France she met far out in the Bay of Biscay a raft with five enemy airmen, but was not able to take them on board owing to shortage of room (she had a complement of 54 and carried full provisions for 14 weeks). The boat therefore proceeded without taking any notice of the survivors.

The U-boat was severely reprimanded by the Commander in Chief U-boats' staff for acting as she did. It was stated that she would have acted more correctly in destroying this raft since it was highly probable that the enemy air crew would be rescued by the enemy and might once more have destroyed a German U-boat.

This occurrence made the views of the Commander in Chief U-boats clear to me.

So far as concerns the manner in which I passed on the order to commanding officers: the order was always passed during a commanding officers' conference while their boats were having their final overhaul or while they were being fitted out in Kiel from operational patrols; it was my duty during these conferences to pass on to commanding officers once again all important orders about the provisioning of their boats, procedure on departure, in home waters and while in convoy to Norway. Operational orders were not given by my flotilla; they were always given by the Commander in Chief U-boats or by Captain U-boats West on his behalf.

I was wont to pass on this controversial and serious order with the following words:- "I have now to inform you of a High Command order concerning conduct towards survivors. It is a very ticklish matter. Commander in Chief U-boats in September 1942 gave the following order in an 'officers only' signal (.....the exact words of the order were then read out)."

Since I am myself in my innermost conscience in disagreement with this order, I was very <sup>relieved</sup> that in most cases commanding officers raised no queries and I was therefore relieved of any further discussion on this point.

Sometimes however queries were raised and I was wont to answer somewhat as follows:-

"I will explain the viewpoint of the High Command, which gave this order, by reference to the following event": (I then mentioned the example of the Type VII boat in the Bay of Biscay together with the explanation and viewpoint expressed to me by Commander in Chief U-boats' staff). I then went on to say,

"Gentlemen, you must yourselves decide as your own consciences dictate. The safety of your own boat must always remain your prime consideration."

Since with the coming of the Schnorkel U-boats have operated entirely underwater, I have in this connection in various ways further stated that commanding officers were in a much easier position in this respect since they had no occasion to surface and that the order was therefore illusory. They had to keep clear of everything which was not worth the firing of a torpedo.

I also remember that many commanding officers after the order of September 1942 had been read said, "That is quite clear and unequivocal however hard it may be". Had this order been given to me as a commanding officer I would have taken note of it in silence but in practice would always have been able with a clear conscience not to carry it out since I consider I would endanger my own boat by acting in this way, (i.e., by shooting at life rafts).

If therefore U-boat commanding officers state that they had received from me the order to destroy life-rafts, this does not correspond with the facts, since they received from me insufficiently clearly expressed instructions from the High Command together with my personal views thereon.

Before the order of September 1942 was issued I never discussed this difficult question at a commanding officers' conference and the subject of conduct towards survivors was never broached.

#### B. Conduct Towards Neutrals and Hospital Ships

On this matter which I treated together with what has gone before, I gave commanding officers the following directions:

There was an express order of the High Command, and Commander in Chief U-boats was adamant on this point and would relentlessly pursue the breach of it by court martial (i.e. he insisted on the order being strictly obeyed), that no neutral or Red Cross ship might be molested even if the enemy misused neutral flags or the Red Cross.

The political results of sinking a neutral were much more serious than would have been the usefulness of the tonnage sunk.

I directed commanding officers in doubtful cases - in bad visibility, when neutral markings were not distinct, etc. - that it was better to allow five enemy vessels to go free than to sink one neutral.

So far as concerns the stopping and examination of neutrals, an order was made in January 1944 that in particular Spanish and Portuguese steamers in the North and Central Atlantic were to be stopped and examined for contraband and members of enemy nations of military age. I told commanding officers "Don't touch them. Stay underwater. You are endangering yourselves too much if you do anything else because you will certainly be reported by wireless and we know from experience that when such examinations are made lookout is liable to suffer. You are only exposing yourself to the danger of being surprised. If a ship carries neutral markings let it go by unscathed."

Objection was often made that German hospital ships had often been destroyed by the enemy, as German propaganda had stressed for years. My answer was: That does not matter, however unpleasant it may be. The order of the High Command is authoritative and binding. Politics come before warfare.

OR

#### C. Rendering of Reports

There was an order - I do not remember whether it was in the form of a written or verbal instruction - that no events during a war patrol which contravened established international agreements should be entered in the war logs. I believe that the reason for this order was that eight copies were made of war logs and were available to many authorities; there was always the danger therefore that events of this nature would become known and it was undoubtedly undesirable for reasons of propaganda that this should be so.

Events of this nature were only to be reported if asked for when commanding officers made their personal reports; these were invariably made after every patrol to Commander in Chief U-boats or later in certain instances to Captain U-boats.

I also gave instructions on this point.

To conclude, I can only stress that the order of September 1942 appeared to me personally to go too far and I am in total disagreement with it at heart. As a serving officer I had however to carry out the command which had been given me to pass on this order to commanding officers for their instruction.

During the long time that I was senior officer of the Flotilla no single commanding officer mentioned to me that he could not reconcile obedience to this order with his conscience and that he was therefore unable to carry it out.

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An order of this nature was never given by me, i.e. on my own initiative, and could not be given by me since had I exceeded my authority in so serious a way I would immediately and without question have been relieved.

(Signed) MOEHLE  
Korvettenkapitän