

Two Sea Captains of World War Two, Doug Hayhoe, March 2020

The recent movie Greyhound, starring Tom Hanks, gives us a good idea of the World War II “battle of the Atlantic” between German U-boats and Allied warships. This essay is a true story that contrasts a Corvette captain (my father-in-law) with a U-Boat captain, Herbert Werner.

Over the years I loved hearing my father-in-law, Bob Munnings, share his wartime experiences in the British Navy, as second in command of a small warship called a Corvette. Their job was to protect the Allied supply convoys traveling across the Atlantic from German U-boats. Several years ago, a friend sent me something from the opposite side to read. It was the book by German U-boat captain, Herbert Werner, called *Iron Coffins: A Personal Account of the German U-Boat Battles of World War II* (Figure 1). When I read it, I had a *déjà vu* moment. Werner’s activity below the surface of the Atlantic was the counterpart to that of Bob Munnings above.

As I read Werner’s description of how he steered his U-boat around the depth charges dropped by the Corvettes, I could hear Dad’s voice in the background describing how he hunted and tried to sink the U-boats. Up to this point, however, I had only heard and sympathized with the one side. Now I was able to feel for the German sailors, trapped in their “iron Coffins.” For, although Dad and the other Allied sailors had some horrific experiences, I don’t think the death rate of those above the surface came anywhere near that of the German U-boat sailors, of whom 28,000 of the 38,000 ended up at the bottom.

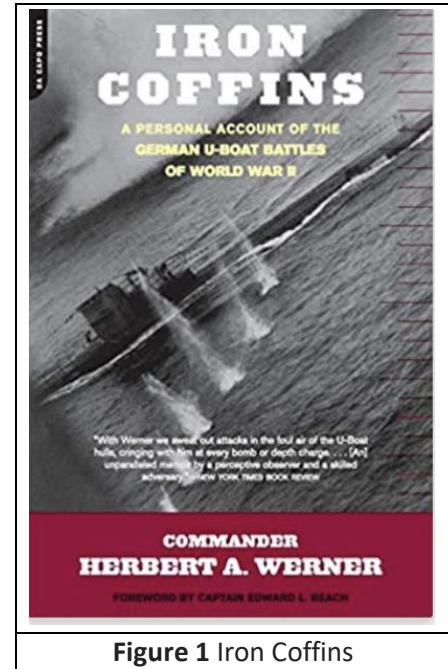


Figure 1 Iron Coffins



Figure 2 U-boats surrendering in the Trondheim Fjord



Figure 3 Bob Munnings’s ship at war’s end

Bob Munnings and Werner both entered the navy at age 19. Both rapidly moved up the ranks to become first officer, because of their skill and sense of responsibility, and both achieved the rank of captain before the war ended. Both sailed into the long Trondheim Fjord in Norway, at war’s end, one to surrender his U-boat (Figure 2), the other to take over the U-boats and bring them to their final resting place, using his warship, the Corvette called the St. Boniface (Figure 3). If I had read *Iron Coffins* five years earlier, when Dad’s memory was still good, I might have found out whether they actually met in person. Fascinating to think about!



Figure 4 A torpedoed Allied ship, captured close up by Bob Munnings's camera

Munnings and Werner also shared another trait, long life. After immigrating to the United States, Werner died in Florida in 2013 at the age of 92. Munnings passed away in Toronto in 2019 at the age of 95. Werner's funeral notice was removed from the web at the family's request, the funeral home told me. So, I don't know if he, like Dad, had a large number of descendants. But I do know Dad was very thankful that his ship was not torpedoed like ones close by, sometimes with friends aboard (Figure 4). I'm also very thankful, as my wife was born after the war!

There were some crucial differences, however. Despite Werner's responsible leadership when in command, he had no misgivings about indulging in alcohol and women when ashore. He excused himself by using pseudonyms in his book for the women he bedded, and noting that they ended up marrying anyways. How he would know this, in the postwar confusion in Germany, is another question! His account is also devoid of any religious sentiments, other than some expressions in common use. When I think of the impact of Martin Luther's Reformation in Germany in the 16th century, with his translation of the Bible into German, I felt sad that no sign of this had trickled down through the centuries to even merit a mention in *Iron Coffins*.

In contrast, Munnings always carried a small Gideon Bible in his pocket. He did this not from superstition but because of his strong convictions that it was God's living Word and he wanted to be able to read at any time. When he was ashore during the war, in contrast to Werner, he exercised physically in walking and bike riding, and spiritually in meeting with Christians. He always maintained, in a self-deprecating way, that the reason he became first officer so quickly was that the captain trusted him not to get drunk when in port and so could entrust the ship to him while the rest went ashore. But his Christianity was also displayed in his courage in jumping from the third deck of his ship to a hard cement dock to rescue a sailor from certain death by being crushed by the ship (see Figure 5). This led to severe arthritis in later years. But it may have been a factor in his ship's captain later becoming a Christian.



Figure 5 The high decks

Most British commanders were probably not dedicated Christians, and some U-boat captains probably were. Someday I may hear their stories. But, underneath it all, this is not a story of a British versus German captain, but a true believer versus an unbeliever. They both survived a terrible war to live until old age. I don't know about Werner, but Munnings's long life blessed his family, business, church, and mission because of his trust in God's Word. As Psalm 1:2-3 says, "Those who delight in the law of the Lord ... will be like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season ... whatever they do will prosper!"