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LIFE ON BOARD U-505

U-boats were designed with little concern for the comfort of their crews. The subs were first and foremost weapons platforms with one goal: delivering their torpedoes to Allied targets as efficiently as possible. To maximize the number of torpedoes a U-boat could hold, and to ensure they were easy to access and load, crew space was kept to an absolute minimum—making conditions extremely cramped, claustrophobic and uncomfortable for these young sailors.

More than 60 sailors could pack into U-505 for patrols that lasted 100 days or more. Inside the overcrowded sub, daily life for many was filled with laborious and monotonous chores. The long, dreary days spent waiting for orders or signs of the enemy were broken up only by terrifying moments of being in battle. Ironically, the shared hardships on board a U-boat often led to strong bonds among crew members, making for high morale during the war.

In the Atlantic Ocean, the physical discomforts of a U-boat intensified dramatically during the winter. Turbulent waters tossed the subs around on the surface and produced bone-chilling temperatures on board. Whenever possible, the crew members attempted to warm themselves in the engine room. But the noise inside could be deafening and in the warmer months, the temperature in this room might exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

In addition, sleeping proved difficult in the crew quarters, which were packed with equipment and spare parts for the sub. Only 35 bunks were on board, so most of the sailors had to “hot bunk,” or take turns sleeping in bunks still warm from the use of a fellow crewmember. Officers, however, were fortunate enough to have their own private bunks. The fore and aft torpedo rooms doubled as crew quarters as well, which meant that sailors snug in their beds were lying alongside highly explosive torpedoes.

To make matters worse, because of the diesel engines that propelled the vessel on the surface of the sea, the odor of diesel fuel permeated the U-boat. It was accompanied by the stench of unwashed bodies, dirty clothes and unsanitary toilet facilities. As the war progressed, fewer and fewer opportunities arose for crew members to go to the bridge for fresh air—some did not go outside for as long as three months.

The food typically tasted like diesel fuel as well. Typical rations included preserved and tinned meats, cheese, eggs, dried potatoes, bread, rice and noodles, beer and coffee. The small galley, or kitchen, was only big enough for one person to stand. Cooks had to maintain an accurate count of every pound of food and kitchen supplies consumed—and their exact storage location within the boat—in order to help the diving officer keep the boat in balance.

Seventy percent of the young men who served in the U-boats in World War II never returned home. Ironically, by capturing the men of the U-505, Captain Gallery probably saved their lives.

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