

WW I U-Boats off the New England Coast

(The United States entered the war on
April 6, 1917.)

In early fall 1916 Kapitänleutnant Hans Rose's submarine U-53 was dispatched to sink any British warships in position to ambush the merchant submarine *Bremen*, as it approached the Nantucket lightship. *Bremen* was the first of seven privately-owned submarines built in 1916 to carry cargo between the still-neutral United States and Germany through the naval blockade of the Entente Powers. The blockade, mainly enforced by Great Britain's Royal Navy, had substantially hindered the German war effort because it made it difficult for German companies to acquire raw materials not found in quantity within the German sphere of influence. *Bremen* was constructed without armaments, with a wide beam to provide space for cargo. The cargo capacity was 700 tons (much of it outside the pressure hull), relatively small compared to that of surface ships. On 28 September 1916, Kapitänleutnant Rose heard a radio broadcast indicating that *Bremen* had been sunk.

The Visit

A little over a week later, on 7 October 1916, Rose anchored U-53 off Goat Island in Newport Harbor and made a cordial visit to the US Naval Station, touring the Naval War College.

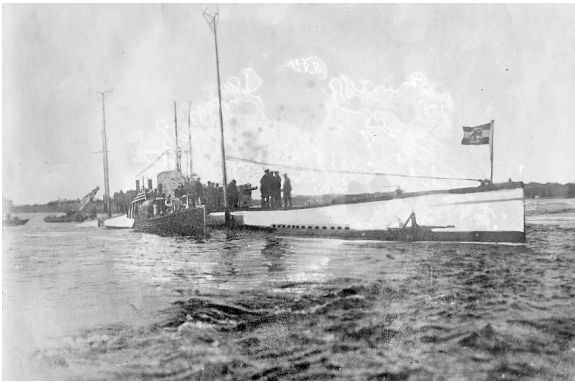
Rose met with Commander, Destroyer Force, Atlantic, Admiral Albert Gleaves and Naval War College President Rear Admiral Austin Knight for an amiable chat.

A number of US sailors, including Admiral Gleaves and his wife and daughter, as well as other officers, toured U-53. Along with Commander H.B. Price, commander of USS *Melville*, they were given a complete and candid tour of U-53 from stem to stern. They discussed the U-Boat's voyage to Newport, her engine design and armament. It was noted that many of the submarine's officers and crew spoke English. Higher-ups became uneasy with the German boat's presence. The Harbormaster was sent around to enquire about U-53's quarantine status. Rose left immediately to avoid being interned.

Ambush off Nantucket Lightship

U-53 commenced military operations the next morning two miles off the lightship *Nantucket*. The American steamer *Kansan* was stopped by a shot across the bow at 0535 (5:35 a.m.) and then released when examination of the papers revealed no contraband cargo. A large passenger liner was allowed to pass at 0600 because Rose felt unable to provide for the safety of a large number of passengers. The 4,321-ton British

steamer *Strathdene* was stopped at 0653 and torpedoed at 0743 after the crew had abandoned ship. The 3,878-ton Norwegian steamer *Christian Knutsen*, with a cargo of diesel oil for London, was stopped at 0803 and torpedoed at 0953 after the crew had abandoned ship. The 3,847-ton steamer *West Point* was stopped at 1130 and sunk by explosive charges, also after the crew had abandoned ship.



U-53 in Newport Harbor October 7, 1916.

Seventeen American destroyers were dispatched from Newport to search for survivors in response to lightship *Nantucket's* report of sinkings. The destroyers arrived about 1700 as U-53 stopped the Dutch steamer *Blommersdyk* bound for England with contraband cargo. The 3,449-ton British passenger liner *Stephano* was stopped, and the assembled American destroyers took off its crew and passengers. Rose used his last torpedoes to sink *Blommersdyk* at 1950 and *Stephano* at 2230. Rose set a homeward course via the Gulf Stream and evaded three British destroyers sent from Canada to intercept him.

Political Ramifications

There was a great deal of anger among the Allied powers after the visit of U-53 to the American port and the subsequent sinking of Allied ships. Although all of the sinkings were done according to Prize Court laws and nobody was killed during them, the attacks instilled fear in the British because of the reach of the German U-boats, and in Americans because these attacks occurred so close to American shores.

The British were further outraged that most of the attacks occurred while the submarine was surrounded by American destroyers. After a soothing speech by Sir Edward Grey, these complaints were calmed when he pointed out that the American ships had no legal right to interfere with these attacks and had done all they could to rescue the sailors in the water. German newspapers celebrated the trip as a great demonstration of the reach of the German Navy and Kapitänleutnant Rose was praised for his actions.

Kapitänleutnant Hans Rose

Rose became the 5th-ranked German submarine ace of World War I and was awarded one of Germany's highest military honors, the Orden pour le Mérite, for repeated and continual gallantry in battle. His 6 December 1917 sinking of the US destroyer *Jacob Jones* as it patrolled the Irish Sea marked the first loss of a US destroyer to enemy action. She sank in eight minutes without making a distress call, and 66 officers and men were lost. Following the rules of war and calling on his sense of humanity, Rose took two badly



Refugee from Submarine Disaster at Naval Hospital, Newport, R.I., Oct. 9, 1916

injured sailors aboard and radioed the American base in Queenstown, Ireland, with the position of the survivors. U-53 sank 87 merchant ships for a total of 224,324 gross register tons.

After the war Rose left the Navy and became an industrial businessman. During WW II he commanded a U-boat training unit. He died in Germany in 1969 at the age of 84.

U-156

On 16 June 1918 Kapitänleutnant Richard Feldt took command of U-156, the first conversion of a freight submarine, outmoded by the U.S. entry into the war. The freight submarines became the largest U-boats in the war. Feldt was to lay mines in New York harbor. On his way across the North Atlantic he sank a steamer and two sailing vessels. It is not clear whether he entered New York harbor, but he did lay mines along

the shipping lanes of the south shore of Long Island, one of which was probably responsible for the sinking of the armored cruiser USS *San Diego* ten miles off Fire Island. On 19 July the ship was following a northeasterly zigzag course at fifteen knots. At 1105 there was an explosion adjacent to the port engine room, and the ship began taking on water. The ship's radio had been knocked out, so the captain sent his gunnery officer off in a boat to the mainland to get help.

San Diego sank in 28 minutes with the loss of six crew. *San Diego* was the only major warship lost by the United States after she entered World War I. U-156 was credited with the sinking.

Feldt next attacked the tug *Perth Amboy* and sank her tow of four barges off Orleans, Massachusetts. At least two planes from the nearby



USS *San Diego*.

Naval Air Station attacked U-156 with bombs that failed to explode.

Feldt found easy targets for the rest of the cruise, sinking wooden fishing vessels after the crews had taken to their dories. There were reports that U-156 had commandeered the Canadian fishing trawler *Triumph* and used her to lure other trawlers to their doom. U-156 sank at least 23 American, Canadian, and French fishing vessels with no loss of life, the last on August 26, 1918.

U-156 was not heard from again. While trying to return home, she hit a mine in the North Barrage minefield in the North Sea on September 25, 1918, with the loss of 77 officers and men.



The Canadian fishing schooner *E. B. Walters* sunk by U-156.