

Escape from the Great Orme – August 1915

U-Boats and their Commanders

Part 1 - The Escape Attempt

On 15th August 1915, U38, commanded by Max Valentiner, edged slowly towards the rocky headland of the Great Orme, Llandudno, North Wales. The darkness of the New Moon concealed an audacious rescue attempt of three captured German officers.

The tale starts with Heinrich von Hennig, commander of U18, on 24th November 1914. While probing the defences of Scapa Flow, his boat was rammed by HMS Garry. Von Hennig and his crew were captured. Von Hennig, though, had seen just how poorly defended was the anchorage of the British fleet. With no radio on the submarine, there was only one way to get this vital information back to German Naval Command. He would have to escape.



U18 (2nd from right – front row)

Using a series of coded postal messages, the escape had been planned. Then, on 13th August 1915, Korvetten Kapitan Herman Tholens, Kapitänleutnant Heinrich Von Hennig and Cavalry Captain Wolf Deitrich Baron Von Helldorf broke out of the Dyffryn Aled Prisoner of War camp, and made their way to the coast.

Now they waited, signal lamp in hand, to rendezvous with the submarine. For the second night running though, they failed to make contact with U38 and the officers were soon recaptured as they tried to make their way to London.

The U-Boats

U18

U27

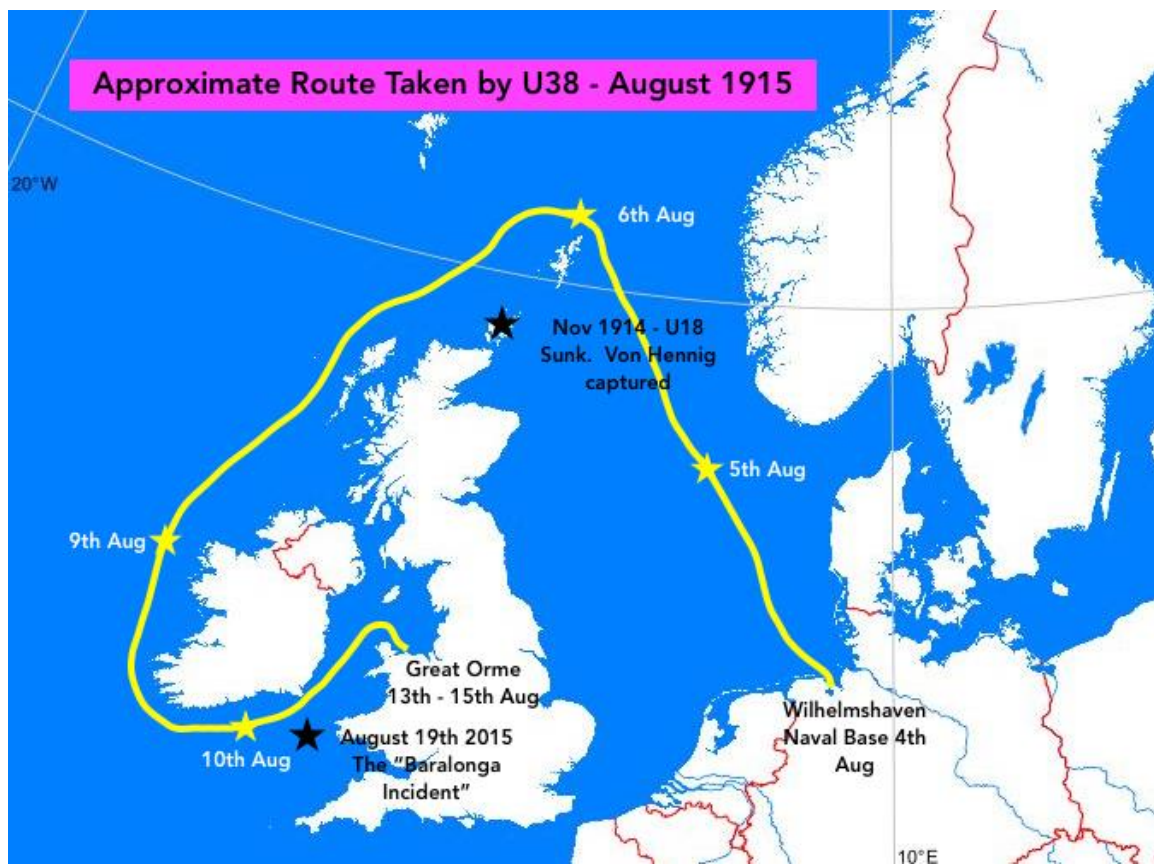
U38

The Commanders

Heinrich von Hennig

Max Valentiner

Bernd Wegener



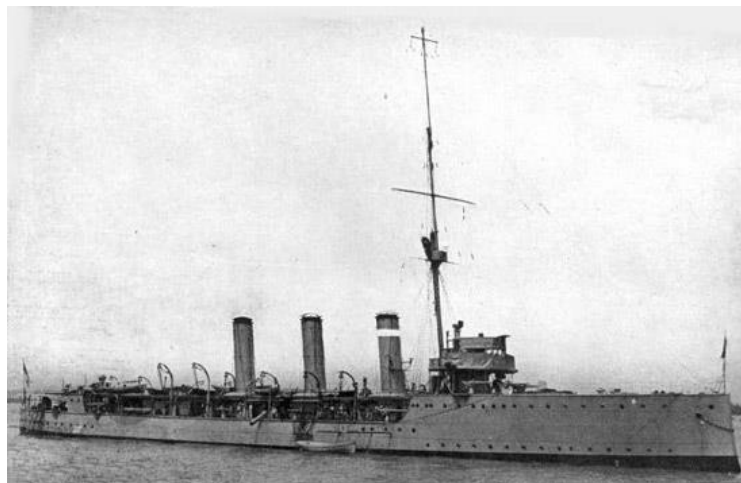
The attempted escape, by U-Boat, from the Great Orme of Heinrich von Hennig during World War 1 unravels a fascinating tale of U-Boats, their Commanders and consequences that shaped the course of Naval War at Sea and beyond.

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Part 2 - The U Boats

On 5th September 1914, Otto Hersing, commander of U21, became the first to sink a British warship in WW1. HMS Pathfinder, a light cruiser, was torpedoed with 260 casualties.

HMS Pathfinder



Most people associate U Boat warfare with the 2nd WW but they played an equally important part during the 1st WW. It could be argued that, with a reluctance to commit the surface Home fleets to battle, U Boats were even more important. They were used to devastating effect.

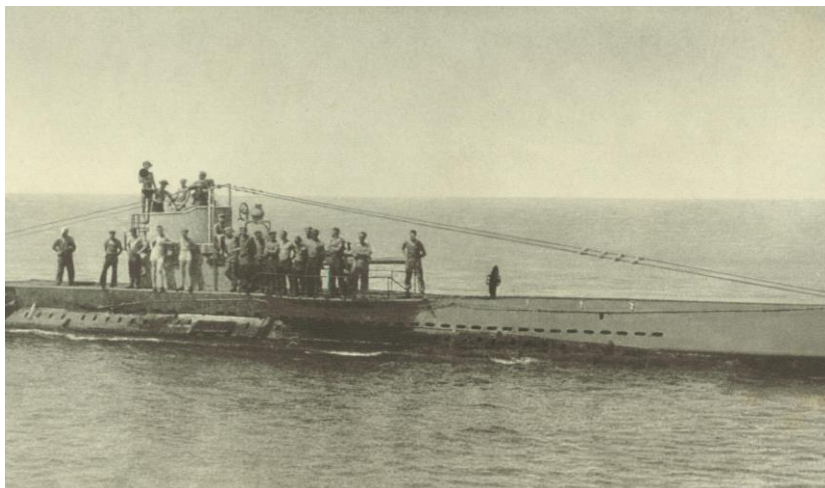
One could be forgiven also for thinking that the early U Boats were rudimentary, unsophisticated machines in much the same way that aircraft or tanks of the 1st WW compare to those of the 2nd WW. Not so! The U Boats of the 1st WW were very similar to those of the 2nd WW. They represented the pinnacle of technology. That said, it is probably more accurate to describe them as “submersible boats” – surface craft with the ability to submerge. This sets them apart from the U Boat of the 2nd WW.

On the surface, they were fast, well armed with an immense range; they roamed at will in the North Sea, Western Approaches and the Mediterranean. When submerged, there were no effective counter measures against them. No SONAR or ASDIC to aid detection and depth charges were in their infancy; unreliable and used only in small numbers. They were, however vulnerable to surface attack and this is how many met their fate.

The U Boats associated with the Escape Attempt belonged to three different classes or Types. Types U17, U27 and U31. As an example, below is the specification of Type U31 (U38, commanded by Max Valentiner was of this type).

Admiral and head of the Abwehr, Wilhelm Canaris also served as commander on two different U 31 U-boats. He took over from Max Valentiner on U38 and later commanded U34.

The 30 or so most successful commanders of 1st WW U Boats sank 2,686 ships with a total of 5,929,772 tons. This compares with 873 ships and a total of 4,826,177 tons for the most successful 30 or so 2nd WW U Boat commanders. The U Boats of the 1st WW were a formidable enemy.



Type 31 U Boat

Technical information for type U 31

Displacement:	685 (sf)	Speed:	16,4 (sf)
(tons)	878	(knots)	9,7 (sm)
	(sm)		
	971	Range:	8790/8 (sf)
	(total)	(miles / knots)	80/5 (sm)
Length: (m)	64,70	Torpedoes:	6
	oa		2/2 (bow /
	52,36		stern tubes)
	ph	Mines:	No mines
Beam: (m)	6,32		carried
	oa	Deck gun:	105mm
	4,05		300
	ph		rounds
Draught:	3,56 m	Crew:	35 men
(draft)		Max depth:	ca. 50 m
Height:	7,68 m		(164 feet)
Power: (hp)	1850		

Note: sf = surface; sm = submerged

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Part 3 - The Commanders

Heinrich von Hennig

Commander of U18 – Captured November 1914 – No Ships sunk

Von Hennig's U Boat war was short lived. His boat was rammed and he was captured very early on in 1st WW when he took his U Boat into Scapa Flow – the safe anchorage of the British Fleet. Why was it so important to risk two U Boats trying to effect his



escape? In fact, Von Hennig's intelligence regarding Scapa Flow was vital. Contrary to German belief, the defences at Scapa Flow were relatively weak. A concerted attack by U-Boats would have had a devastating effect. His escape was essential.

In the 2nd WW Von Hennig became a Naval port Commander. He is also remembered as an excellent chess player, famous for the Von Hennig - Schara Gambit.

Max Valentiner

Commander of U38 - Made the rescue attempt - 147 ships sunk (303,032 tons)



Max Valentiner was one of the most successful 1st WW U Boat Commanders. What was his relationship to Von Hennig that made Von Hennig's escape essential and worth risking two U Boats? A fellow submariner? Duty? Or was it indeed the value of the intelligence regarding Scapa Flow?

Valentiner was considered a War Criminal by the British due, possibly to his ruthless methods of attack that included sinking at least two neutral ships. His Naval career continued into the 2nd WW when he became the equivalent of Rear Admiral of the Fleet.

Bernd Wegener

**Commander of U27 - Assisted in the rescue attempt - Killed after the rescue attempt
12 ships sunk (37,445 tons)**

In March 1915 Wegener was exploring the North Channel, leading north from the Irish Sea. It may be this was the intended route for the escape attempt. That said, Max Valentiner's route avoided the North Channel taking instead a route around the West coast of Ireland. Wegener's route to the Great Orme is not known. Perhaps he used his earlier experience of the North Channel and approached stealthily?



During the March patrol, he sank HMS Bayano; three of the casualties came from Llandudno.

U27 stood offshore from the Great Orme during the rescue attempt but immediately after, Wegener sailed south where U27 was surprised on the surface by the British "Q" ship, the "Baralong", sailing under false colours. U27 was sunk and the 12 survivors, including Wegener, shot.

The "Baralong Incident", considered by some a War Crime, was a major factor in re-writing the rules of engagement for German U Boats. All-out war resulted, where no ship was safe and their crews even less so; crews of merchant ships were no longer, for example, given time to leave their ship before it was sunk.

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Part 5 - Online References and Further Reading

Relevance	Link
All manner of U Boat Warfare both 1 st and 2 nd WW. A superb resource. Biographies of all the Commanders and U Boats	https://www.uboa.net/wwi/
Von Hennig's raid on Scapa Flow	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SM_U-18
The Baralong Incident and the "London Agreement"	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baralong_incidents https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unrestricted_submarine_warfare
The memoirs of Admiral Tirpitz – 1 st WW Submarines	https://www.naval-history.net/WW1Book-Adm_Tirpitz-Memoirs.htm#c19
"Kaiserliche Marine U-Boote" 1914-1918 - Records of German 1 st WW U Boat Commanders – in French.	https://fr.calameo.com/read/000802552841bc1ae847e
An overview of U Boats in 1 st WW	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U-boat_Campaign_(World_War_I)

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Jack and Bob Greenhalgh

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