

"Hitler's U-Boat War, The Hunted 1942-1945"

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Published by Random House

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"After duty as a weather boat, the new IXC40 U-856, commanded by Friedrich Wittenberg, age twenty-five, followed U-550 into Canadian waters. Forewarned by Allied codebreakers Canadian ASW forces hunted for Wittenberg, but they had no immediate luck.

Upon learning from the codebreakers that U-856 intended to follow U-550 into the area off New York, American authorities mounted an all-out hunt for her by the "jeep" carrier Croatan and her five destroyer escorts plus two American hunter-killer groups comprising a total of seven destroyers.

In the early hours of April 7, one of two Avengers from Croatan, piloted by Wilburt A. Lyons, got U-856 on radar but could see nothing by eye. As the Avenger approached, Wittenberg made the mistake of firing at it with flak guns, giving away his position. In excited response, Lyons dropped a Fido rather than a flare, but U-856 was moving too fast for the Fido to home and Wittenberg escaped and went deep.

Other aircraft from Croatan and the armada of destroyers and destroyer escorts mounted a U-boat hunt to exhaustion. The destroyer Boyle got a sonar contact on U-856 and attacked with thirteen depth charges, but Wittenberg escaped again. Ten hours later, the veteran destroyer Champlin, which had sunk the IXC U-130 a year earlier, again found U-856. Assisted by the destroyer escort Huse, commanded by R. H. Wanless, who attacked with Hedgehogs, Champlin dropped twenty-one depth charges. These savaged U-856 and forced her to the surface.

Wittenberg ordered his crew to abandon ship and scuttle, but the conning-tower hatch was jammed shut and had to be pried open with a crowbar. While the Germans coped with this blockage, Champlin and Huse opened up with 6" and 3"/50 caliber guns. The Captain of the Champlin, John J. Shaffer III, then rammed U-856 solidly ⁱⁿ on the stern. Not to be outdone, Huse also steamed in to ram, but she missed. Presently, U-856 upended and sank. Tragically, an errant 20mm on Champlin wounded four of her own men, skipper Shaffer mortally. The destroyers Niels and Ordronaux fished out eleven and seventeen Germans, respectively. The twenty-eight survivors of U-856 included Wittenberg and his first watch officer."

Also, from "U-Boat Commander, a Periscope View of the Battle of the Atlantic" by Peter Cremer, published by Naval Institute Press: "Out of 820 U-boats that participated in the Battle of the Atlantic, 781 were destroyed in action; out of 40,000 men, more than 30,000 lost their lives."