

The Battle of Ist and the Discovery of the *UJ-201*

By Angelo Colla



Artemide, the same class of ship as the UJ-201 (Courtesy of A. Colla)

INTRODUCTION

By the winter of 1944, the tide of World War II had definitely turned against the Axis powers. In June, Allied Forces successfully landed in Normandy and began their eastward march to Berlin. From the east, the Soviets, after crushing the Nazis at Stalingrad, also began their inexorable march towards Berlin.

At sea, the Nazis fared no better. The Kriegsmarine (German Navy) was no longer a match for the Allies. Destroyer escorts coupled with radar and sonar use turned U-boats from predator

to prey, and the Battle of the Atlantic had effectively been won. Their growing setbacks in the Atlantic forced the Nazis to divert more and more men and materials to the Atlantic theater, thereby reducing their naval strength in the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, the Nazis continued naval operations in the Mediterranean theater using captured Italian vessels following the armistice on September 8, 1943.

Abandoned in harbors and shipyards, these Italian vessels—destroyers, torpedo boats, corvettes, etc.—continued the war under the German flag, with German crews, and under different names; some became *TA* (or *Torpedoboot Ausland* aka *Foreign*





D. Remmers

A GUE exploration diver examines a wreck.

Torpedo Boat) followed by a number, others became UJ (or *U-Boote Jager* aka *U-Boat Hunter*) followed by a number.

THE KAPITAN DIEDERICHSEN

In February of 1944, the Kriegsmarine launched Operation *Frechdachs*, intended to support the transit of two larger merchant steamships—the *Kapitan Diederichsen* (ex. *Sebastiano Veniero*) and the *Citta di Tunisi*—from Pula, Croatia to the Aegean Sea in order to supply German troops fighting on the Greek islands.

On February 29, 1944, the convoy left Pula at 18:00 for the Aegean, but only one armed freighter, the *Kapitan Diederichsen*, made the trip. Fortunately for the *Citta di Tunisi*, it was left behind because of engine problems. Torpedo boats and corvettes escorted the freighter. The *Kapitan Diederichsen* was a modern, diesel-powered ship with a top speed of around 14 knots. Given its properties, the Germans appropriated it at the shipyard in Monfalcone, outfitted it with eight turrets of anti-aircraft guns and mine-laying equipment, and launched it under the name of *Kapitan Diederichsen*.

Though the delays caused by the *Citta di Tunisi* helped the German convoy avoid an ambush set for it by two Royal Navy Hunt class destroyers south of Pula, the *Kapitan Diederichsen* did not make it to its destination.

In February, two Free French “super” destroyers, *Le Malin* and *Le Terrible*, joined the British 24th destroyer flotilla at Bari, Italy.

Of the Fantasque class, these ships were superb warships; they were capable of sailing at 40 knots, and were both equipped with radar, artillery, and torpedo tubes. They were lethal, especially during night engagements.

On February 29th, the French ships set sail from Manfredonia, a harbor 50 miles north of Bari, and headed north at cruising speed. Some hours later, the German convoy left Pula heading south towards the Aegean. German sailors knew they were setting off on a very dangerous mission across a sea that was under the control of the RAF and the Royal Navy. The convoy consisted of the freighter *Kapitan Diederichsen* and a strong escort: the ex-Italian Ariete class torpedo boats *TA-36* (ex. *Stella Polare*) and *TA-37* (ex. *Gladio*). On their second operation after being launched a few months earlier, the ships were formidable opponents; they were fast and powerful vessels, equipped with artillery and torpedoes. Other units completing this small flotilla were the former Italian Gabbiano class corvettes *UJ-201* (ex. *Egeria*) and *UJ-205* (ex. *Colubrina*) and the motor minesweepers *R188*, *R190*, and *R191*. The German crews were young; even the captains were not yet 30 years old.

It was a very dark night and the new moon had just set. The French ships, led by Capitaine de Frégate Pierre Lancelot, sailed northwest at 25 knots, running parallel to the Adriatic island of Dugi Otok to camouflage their shape. At 21:35, as the French made their way north of Dugi Otok in the vicinity of the island of Ist, *Le Terrible*'s radar detected ships approximately 18,600 yards to the north. Turning west, the French destroyers increased their speed to 30 knots; nine minutes later, as the distance between



The light cruiser, Le Fantasque (Courtesy of US Navy - Paul Carré, ISBN:2-909675-25-4; U.S. Navy All Hands magazine January 1948.)

the French and German ships decreased to 8,750 yards, the French ships fired broadside, catching the Germans by surprise. *Le Terrible*, the leader, hit the freighter, while *Le Malin* targeted the nearest escort units. The German response was fierce; *TA-36* and *TA-37* headed at top speed into the glow of the French guns, returning fire and creating smoke to try and hide the *Kapitan Diederichsen* from the French destroyers. However, what the Germans didn't know was that the French were using radar to target them. The French destroyers continued to hit the German convoy and close the distance.

Capitaine Lancelot's flagship registered hits on the *Kapitan Diederichsen* at 21:48, followed shortly thereafter by torpedo strikes from *Le Terrible*. Ablaze, but afloat, the doomed freighter started to drift, already out of the crew's control.

Following its attack on the freighter, *Le Malin* engaged the *UJ-201*. Outmatched and thus ultimately doomed, the German corvette fought bravely against the French destroyer. The fight was terrible, but *Le Malin* was so occupied by the *UJ-201*, which maneuvered dangerously to escape salvos, that the *TA-36* and *TA-37* were freed to engage *Le Terrible* until she was forced to give up her attack on the *Kapitan Diederichsen*. Struck several times by *Le Malin's* 90-pound guns, and then by a torpedo to the stern, a huge explosion finished off the *UJ-201*. She

sank immediately with all her crew; ninety-nine young men perished.

Ultimately, Capitaine Lancelot realized that the Germans were not willing to stop fighting despite their casualties; concerned with a possible torpedo attack, he disengaged and headed south. He had already secured his trophies: one ship was sunk and another one had been badly damaged.

The aftermath was terrible for the Germans: the *Kapitan Diederichsen* was on fire in the dark night, listing to starboard; the *UJ-201* was sunk; and the *TA-37* was badly damaged and on fire. Two salvos had struck the *TA-37*, one of which had hit the engine room, reducing her speed to 10 knots. Only the *TA-36* and *UJ-205* remained in good condition.

The *TA-36* and *UJ-205* stood by the *Kapitan Diederichsen* all night long struggling to rescue the crew and to stop the fire. In the early morning hours, the *TA-36* began to tow the damaged vessel, still

afloat, back to Pula. The desperate tow failed, however, and at 11:45 the next day, *Kapitan Diederichsen* sank about 12 miles off Premuda Island. She came to rest almost completely capsized at 65 meters depth.

Following their ordeal, the *TA-36*, *TA-37*, *UJ-205*, and the minesweepers made their way back to Pula. With the position of the freighter well-known, all participants of the doomed convoy were now accounted for—except for the *UJ-201*, whose position remained unknown.

That is, until the summer of 2013.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE *UJ-201*

Krnicia is a small fishing village in Istria, Croatia. Its harbor is the base for Krnicadive, a GUE affiliated diving facility where many GUE instructors and divers go to dive into history by visiting the amazing wrecks that lay on the bottom of Adriatic Sea. Krnicadive has grown year by year, becoming a benchmark for wreck diving.

In 2009, Maurizio Grbac, the owner and manager of Krnicadive, began venturing beyond the usual dive sites, seeking to explore new wrecks. This gave rise to "Exploration Week," which





Exploration divers plan their day's activities

takes place every summer and includes seven to eight days of exploration trips heading south from Krnica. I have attended Exploration Week since 2010. During these expeditions we search for wrecks using position information provided by both fishermen and historical data. The main goal for the 2013 Exploration Week was to find the *UJ-201*, a wreck we had hunted for years.

In past Exploration Weeks, we had searched for the *UJ-201*, and while we managed to find other wrecks in the area, we could not locate our target. In 2013, we decided to explore a position marked as an airplane wreck that we learned about three years earlier from fishermen on Losinj Island. We ran sonar in that area for more than a few hours before we finally got a hit. It was immediately clear that this was not an airplane. The shape on the sonar screen indicated a shipwreck, roughly 55 meters long, lying on its side but we didn't know yet which wreck it was.

We shot the line, and a few minutes later we were ready to dive. The maximum depth of the dive was 63 meters, and we planned for a thirty minute bottom time. On the way down, visibility was quite good at about ten to twenty meters. When we got to the wreck, we saw that our shot line was just on top of the 100 mm cannon. There was no doubt now that it was *UJ-201*.

THE WRECK

The wreck of the *UJ-201* lies on its port side; its stern is completely bent at 90 degrees. Amazingly, the stern is still connected to the rest of the vessel by two propeller shafts, while the back of the

hull is completely destroyed. The ship more than likely sank stern-first, with the bow pointing up to the sky. It likely dropped quickly, which explains the distortion of the stern as a result of a violent impact with the sea floor. Unfortunately, depth charges and marine debris, including beer bottles, surround the wreck. At the bow there is the 100 mm gun, partially hidden by fishing nets. Diving this wreck one can really feel the drama of the battle; the ship is badly damaged, hit hard and in many places. It still maintains its shape; however, the damage done by the artillery and the torpedo is evident. Every single round window has broken glass. Swimming toward the stern divers can see anti-aircraft artillery, the control bridge, and slides for depth charges. After thirty minutes it was time for us to return to the surface. Unfortunately, we did not have a chance to dive this wreck again during Exploration Week because of strong winds.

The wreck of the *UJ-201* captures a moment in World War II history. We hope that in the upcoming Exploration Weeks we will be able to dive the wreck and locate other historically significant shipwrecks that will provide us even more insight into this time period and this battle in particular.

