

Debris: A Novel of War, Love, and the *Lusitania*
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Part I: The Ship

Chapter One: 5 May 1915, 14:05, St. George's Channel, Ireland

"Mind your head!" Chief Petty Officer Seiden shouted. Captain Walther Schwieger heard the familiar bark aimed at one of the taller seamen who had no doubt been daydreaming as he walked through the vessel, forgetting about the pipes and valves hanging from the ceiling like stalactites in a cave.

Schwieger sat in the quarters of *Seiner Majestats Unterseeboot 20*, His Majesty's submarine, or U-20 for short. A canvas curtain separated Schwieger's domain from sailors moving fore and aft. Two slabs of stout wood fitted into the curvature of the wall. They were wide enough for a narrow cot bolted to the deck, a fold-down table, and a chair under it. Through the bottoms of his boots, the captain felt the twin screws, driven by a bank of batteries and two electric motors, churning them forward. The wall in front of him, freckled with condensation, was the pressure hull. Schwieger heard the sea water slipping over its steel skin. The last time in port, he had depth and nautical gauges welded into his cabin: now he knew his boat glided 40 meters under St. George's Channel, doing five knots.

At the table, Schwieger had just finished lunch from the mess. The cook had made boiled potatoes and pickled herring with a wedge of black bread. The smell of the fish and potatoes infiltrated the length of the submarine. It wouldn't clear until they went to the surface in the dark and popped the hatches. Some of the men, Seiden for example, entertained superstitions about eating fish at sea. But Schwieger was not one of them.

Except for the padlocked weapons cache near the mess, the captain had the only secure lockup on the boat, a safe welded between two struts in his quarters. The combination to the safe was known only to him and his second-in-command. The log, his orders, and the codes for passing messages on the wireless had been stuffed into the small safe. The log-book for *Unterseeboot Zwanzig* lay open in front of him for the next update. He reminded himself to cap and store the ink bottle after he filled his pen, just in case they scraped something. The fallen bottle might add more stain to the floor.

The boat depth had changed to 33 meters, about 100 feet, moving slowly still, three or four knots, among shoals and granite ledges. The charts showed only those nearby. Off the shelf of the Irish coast, they were blind. The boat could hit sand banks, rocks, wrecks, or the wire nets set by the British to snare them like rabbits. After a year of missions, dry dock would reveal scrapes and dents on the outer hull, along with barnacles like white crust. But as long the boat didn't strike a British contact mine, a lethal flower on a steel chain stem, they would likely be fine.

On the small table, his orders sat in a red binder labelled Top Secret. In it, Colonel Klein, German Imperial Intelligence, *Abwehr*, reported on the two-front war against the Allies in the west and the Russians in the east. The legendary Klein, with his two Iron Crosses, served as a model for the officers at cadet school in Fliesen. He wrote to the submarine captains leaving for English waters, providing part information and part inspiration.

In the orders, Klein emphasized the cost of the blockade to German civilians. Schwieger himself had seen malnutrition sapping communities, every meager backyard tilled for vegetables. Guards had been posted around livestock on the farms, and cats no longer roamed the streets.

“The Kaiser's government has asked America to intervene with the British and stop the war against our civilians. Food is not considered contraband by international law,” Klein wrote.

Schwieger knew that the Americans sold munitions and food to Great Britain and the Allies, but could not do the same for Germany given the iron cord the English Navy had strung around German ports. The Kaiser didn't need the munitions, just food. Germany protested to no avail. Schwieger's fellow officers believed the American government either had a secret alliance with Britain or made so much money selling to England that they would not risk their profits. Some neutrality, Schwieger mused.

“The Imperial submarine fleet is devastating the Atlantic lifeline to the British war effort. The tonnage lost has grown – 40 ships in a month – and the insurance rates are rising. By every measure, we are succeeding.”

Schwieger agreed with that. Every sailor in the U-boat service had been encouraged by U-9's sinking of three British cruisers in one day. Klein had boasted in a previous briefing that the submarine force would break the British blockade and shorten the war. Schwieger knew that every soldier or sailor wanted to believe that his efforts might win the war. But with submarines, the propagandists might just be telling the truth.

Schwieger read of his mission, struggling to concentrate as each voice, scuff, or hammer dropped echoed into the surrounding sea. Sound amplified in his iron tube. Each drop of sea water searched for the tiniest breach.

Klein had sketched the profile of a huge ship, nearly 800 feet long with a crew of more than 600 for 1200 passengers. She had six decks: top four for the guests and crew, the rest for supplies, cargo, boilers, turbines and coal. The ship displaced over 40,000 tons when boarded and provisioned. The six thousand tons of supplies in her holds could support the British on the Western front for nine days. Schwieger's boat displaced less than a thousand.

The *Lusitania* was slightly smaller than her sister, the *Mauretania* of the Cunard Line, considered until a few years ago the largest ship in the world. When the U-20 submerged, it could hear and indeed feel the *Lusitania* ten miles away: the four screw propellers created their own wave action. The U-20 itself drew a mere 1700 horsepower from the two diesel engines, whereas the ship they hunted had 70 times that power. Schwieger had 34 men on board, six torpedoes, and a deck gun on a vessel a third of the size of its prey. In the chess game of war, Germany risked a slim bishop that could sink a mighty queen and check the king of British blockade policy.

Schwieger felt a shot of confidence from Klein's New York agents. They'd never meet, but the agents exerted such influence over his life and those of the crew. Schwieger viewed their diagram of the decks, along with a cargo manifest, any page of which justified her sinking. The spies provided an accounting as accurate as that of the British admiralty.

Hidden among the lard, toothpaste, butter, glasses, shoes, and automobile parts, sat 1200 cases of fragmentation shells for English 13-pound artillery, five to six million rounds of British .303 ammunition for rifles and machine guns, 500 tons of gun cotton for mines and shells, lathes for gun barrel manufacture and grooving, 20 tons of food packets for troops in the field, and a crate of metal plates.

The crate had been marked "Cheese," but instead of dairy, it contained an alloy, a mingling of metals consigned to the Royal Navy's Weapons Testing Establishment at Essex. One of Klein's operatives had smuggled a sample plate for German metallurgists to evaluate.

His orders were clear. All the cargo needed to be on the bottom of the ocean. It would be a pity about the passengers and crew. Klein had heard a rumor, not corroborated, that the ship might be traveling slower than her well-publicized speed.

Klein had attached a personal note in handwriting as disciplined as the writer.

My dear Captain Schwieger,

We met when you were a cadet at the officer academy at Fliessen. I lectured on intelligence analysis.

You have distinguished yourself in every operation. Now you must prevent a British vessel from delivering military supplies to the Allies.

Please know this: the German Embassy in Washington warned passengers that they were entering a war zone at their own risk.

Germany has made every effort to alert American citizens and their government about the dangers of traveling to England at this time. It is unfortunate that there will still be passengers on board.

The cargo holds enough supplies to kill and injure thousands of German soldiers. By its very definition, duty is never easy.

Oberst Friedrich Klein

Given the approximate speed and course of the *Lusitania*, she should come down the channel to Liverpool in the next two or three days. U-20 would be waiting.

The captain used the voice pipe, rubber tubing with a funnel into which he spoke, to carry commands to the bridge. He called his torpedo officer, Wiesbach. Schwieger wanted to check the charts again, used to direct the seaman on the hydroplane and the helmsman on the rudder. These men kept the vessel going forward, all the while trying to avoid the rocks and ledges around them.

Wiesbach acknowledged the call and came immediately.

“Yes, captain?”

“Put her on the bottom, Leutnant. The crew can rest until night. We have an important guest coming in the morning.”

“How will we know when she arrives?”

“Four screws and 70,000 horsepower. She can do at least 25 knots.”

That night they surfaced to change the air and run the diesels for the batteries. In the distance the

lookouts saw points of light from Ireland, eleven miles away. Powerful fans pushed stale air out from one hatch, while clean salted air pulled in through another. Everyone breathed deep, enjoying the salt taste and the extra oxygen. The year before, a German submarine crew of 33 had breathed stale air so long that they lost consciousness and asphyxiated off the British coast.

As light tinged the eastern horizon, they submerged and waited. Schwieger knew that this could prove U-20's most important mission. Would the ship arrive at night, take advantage of its immense power and speed to pass by or even slice right through them? No, the captain would wait for daylight to avoid running aground. Her double-hull dipped 33 feet into sea. And he'd need his British escorts to lead her through the shallows and block an attack. Friday, May 7th, had to be the day.

That morning, the helmsman felt strong oscillations. Schwieger stood on the bridge, sure this wave action meant the *Lusitania*, displacing tons of water in its path.

Schwieger put his hand on the pressure hull. The *Lusitania* was drawing closer. Wiesbach had already brought the boat to periscope depth and armed two torpedoes in the front tubes. Two more waited in the stern tubes, each tipped with over 300 pounds of explosives.

Seamen checked pressure gauges for enough compressed air to expel the 20-foot torpedo. As the torpedo hurled out of the tube, its alcohol and compressed air engine started. Two whirring propellers – clockwise and counterclockwise to keep the torpedo straight -- would not stop for 3700 yards, unless it struck its target first.

The *Lusitania* could outrun or outmaneuver a torpedo -- if she had time. She moved twice as fast as the U-20 on the surface, three times below. Schwieger remained concerned about the prospects. Klein's words about duty came back to him like a wrench dropped on deck. The U-20 might have to die trying.

Schwieger draped his arms over the handles of the periscope and did a 360 for the escorts. There were none. Nor did they seem to be lurking in the fog. The *Lusitania* would soon pierce that fog at 25 or 30 knots. Then she would slow briefly as the ship turned into the channel. Schwieger adjusted the magnification of the periscope back and forth, waiting.

When she pulled through the fog, the name on the blue blade of the *Lusitania*'s bow filled the aperture of

the periscope. Wiesbach could see his commander's grin spreading.

"This is curious," Schwieger said. "No escorts. And she's maybe 20 to 22 knots now. What happened to her vaunted 25 or 26? Klein must be correct about her slowing. She's heading right toward us. No evasiveness. Lieutenant Wiesbach, get a reading. Periscope down and back off to course 160. No more than five knots, slow and steady."

"Aye, Captain. What does she look like?"

"Like a city afloat, Raimund." Schwieger replied to Wiesbach. "Up 'scope."

Schwieger breathed deep and locked his arms around the periscope. He was thinking about how much his boat had been through: the attempts to ram and cut them in half, the hard bread they chewed, the threats of wire nets and drifting mines, the stale air, the leaks. Now their greatest prize headed toward U-20 as if ordered from a Cunard menu.

"She's at 700 yards and getting ready to make her turn into the channel. Her captain either is supremely confident or this is a trap. We have to take the chance. Helmsmen go steady. Open tubes. Be ready to fire one."

The *Lusitania's* bow crossed the longitudinal lines of the periscope. Schwieger lined up to lead the vessel so that the torpedo struck amidships, right at her center. It was possible to break the ship in half along its spine. Schwieger nodded to Wiesbach, who shouted, "Torpedo 1 fire!"

Wiesbach echoed his words into the voice tube. They heard the sharp exhale of compressed air. The torpedo departed with a fading whir. The boat shuddered.

Wiesbach counted the seconds off until impact. The bow of the submarine had been lined up at right angles for a straight shot. Schwieger watched the torpedo's wake. Its counter propellers churned and roiled the water from its tiny engine. He saw figures on the ship point at the wake moving toward them. The torpedo travelled straight as a carpenter's plumb line, not to the center of the ship, Schwieger's calculation, but toward its bow.

"I've misjudged her speed," the captain said to his torpedo officer. "She is slower than I thought, maybe no more than 18."

The torpedo struck not in the center, but forward, between stacks two and three in front of the bridge. Schwieger saw the explosion toss water and debris in geysers. The U-20 crew felt the concussion and shouted. Then came a second explosion, severe as the first.

Wiesbach felt the second blast through his fingers against the hull.

"Is it from the munitions, sir?" Wiesbach asked.

"Some gun cotton explodes in sea water. Maybe our torpedo ignited dust from the coal bunkers. She's already listing 15 degrees. Take a look?", Schwieger asked his officer.

Wiesbach came forward. Eye pressed into the rubber gasket of the periscope, he glimpsed havoc. Water rushed into the ship through the jagged hole they had blown. Unless water tight compartments held, this alone would bring her down. The list to starboard made half the lifeboats useless, held fast against the side of the ship. Flames and smoke shot through the stacks.

The passengers looked desperate and confused. Wiesbach adjusted the six-power periscope. He much preferred sinking a navy ship, with men like himself who had taken an oath and knew the risks. These were civilians on holiday. What did they know about the contraband the Cunard ship carried? Wiesbach saw small figures moving about, no larger than toy soldiers.

He could make out what looked like a woman approaching a man. He saw her frantic response – hands thrown up in despair – then she ran across the deck promenade to the other side of the ship. Wiesbach saw the crew directing passengers. Wiesbach saw blue-jacketed seamen and crew filling those boats that could be launched, helping passengers don white life vests and belts. They were launching lifeboats, cutting lines with axes and dropping boats onto the sea. Stewards in white coats helped their fellow crewmen. One life boat crammed with passengers slipped off a hawser and smashed into the water, tossing men and women into the brine.

Lifeboats bobbed alongside the sinking vessel, picking up swimmers. Boats that became full took no

more. Swimmers were there one moment, and then simply disappeared. The crew used oars to push off the ship. They dipped and lifted in a desperate race to get far away from the vessel before she sank and sucked everything down with her.

The *Lusitania* now listed further on her starboard side, the distance between the sea and the upper decks closing. As a deck became awash, crew and passengers jumped off a rail or clambered for higher ground. Around the ship, islands of buoyant objects gathered. Two men on C deck lashed life vests to furniture to make rafts. As the water rose, they gave up and jumped. The Zeiss lenses could only do so much, but Wiesbach felt compelled to see more. He moved the periscope to other sections of the ship, and then to the failing starboard side. At the rails, dozens of men, women, and children leaped into the sea. Sea water pouring into the vessel put out the fires below. Smoke and steam now rose like volcanic spew.

Wiesbach's eyes shifted back to the navigation deck, the B deck, one deck below the highest point of the ship. Here the captain and executive officers had commanded the ship, and now it would provide a last refuge for the passengers and crew. He saw a cluster of men, women and children. Two men carried something that looked like baskets, securing children in them. The two men pushed the little rafts off the deck into the water, a few feet below.

An adult with a white life belt went over the rail with them. It must have been a woman, her black skirt and dress misshapen with wetness. She swam after five or six small baskets. Wiesbach's attention then caught another pathetic scene on B deck. A man wearing a life vest was approached by a girl, her arms pumping up and then dropping to her sides. The man took off his own life vest and passed it to her. He helped her put it on. The girl climbed over the rail and dropped into the ocean.

Water at their feet, the group climbed the short stairway to the last deck, A, and the navigation bridge. The group clustered. One of the men shook hands with another man who left. Then the man who left the group moved forward toward the bow. He steadied himself on rigging and sat on a capstan. Still another man dressed in white, perhaps a steward, left the group and stood beside the man. He did an odd thing: the steward stood at attention and saluted the passenger. Then he left for the stern.

No sooner had he gone, then a wave broke over the last rail, its curl pushing the men and women on A deck aside. The man on the capstan was washed off. The wave receded. The group was gone and the man too. Wiesbach could make out the the steward running ahead of the waves that leaped over and through the rails and flooded the deck. The deck had merged with the sea, rails and vents enveloped.

The propellers were in the air. The steward must have jumped, he thought. There was nothing left to hold onto.

As compelling as the scene remained, Wiesbach knew that the sea around them would soon fill with British destroyers looking for them. He watched the *Lusitania's* four funnels enter the sea, and then he closed the periscope. He had seen enough.

Schwieger nodded and told the helmsman the new depth and course. The captain left the bridge. The men cheered Schwieger as he returned to his quarters.

"*Die alte Dame*," the helmsman said to Wiesbach, who stayed on the bridge.

He nodded. When a ship sank, her metal plates pulled and buckled against millions of rivets. Air deep under decks squeezed its way to the surface, and sea water flushed out the contents. The U-20 crew heard the drowning ship groan like an old woman. That was *die alte Dame*. Wiesbach said a silent prayer. He looked at the bridge clock. It had taken fewer than 20 minutes for the *Lusitania* to sink. Her wake was surrounded by tons of litter, looking like garlands around the swirl where she went down.

Back in his quarters, Schwieger closed the curtain and opened the safe. He took out his log-book and a bottle of schnapps. Schwieger poured a drink into his tea cup and tossed it to the back of his throat without tasting. All that British ammunition, artillery shells, raw explosives, and the curious metal plates now rested in the dark green water of St. George's Channel, 300 feet down. Schwieger dated the log, "7 May 1915, 14:37." He gave the position of the attack, distance to target, torpedo depth, and his speculations as to what had caused the second, equally powerful explosion.

Schwieger wrote a final entry:

"It looks as if the ship stayed afloat only for a very short time. I gave an order to dive to 25 meters and leave the area seawards. I couldn't have fired another torpedo into this swarm of people who were trying to save themselves."