

# Flotillenadmiral Otto Kretschmer

U-boat commander who sank an unequalled 1,000 tons of Allied shipping for every day at sea during the war, and in peacetime served within Nato

FLOTILLENADMIRAL OTTO KRETSCHMER, who has died aged 86, was the highest scoring U-boat "ace" of the Second World War — the Wolf of the Atlantic as the German press called him.

Kretschmer carried out 16 patrols in the first 18 months of the war, when he spent 224 days at sea and sank 44 merchant ships totalling 266,029 tons.

His record of more than 1,000 tons of shipping sunk for every day spent at sea was never equalled during the war.

He was one of only five U-boat commanders to be awarded the Knight's Cross with Swords, and Oak Leaves (presented to Kretschmer by Hitler himself in November 1940).

In September 1939, Kretschmer was CO of the small Type 11-B *U.23* which he had commanded since October 1937 and in which, despite repeated torpedo malfunctions, he sank over 20,000 tons of shipping and the destroyer *Daring*, in the North Sea on February 18 1940.

For his service in *U.23* Kretschmer was awarded the Iron Cross 1st Class and recommended for the command of a larger U-boat.

In April 1940 he took command of the new type VII-B *U.99*, known as the Golden Horseshoe because of the insignia painted on its conning tower. Thus began almost a year of astounding action in the Atlantic.

One of his most notable coups was during the height of what the U-boat crews

called "*die glücklich Zeit*" (the happy time) in the last months of 1940.

On November 3, Kretschmer attacked the outward bound convoy OB.237 and sank four large vessels of over 40,000 tons, including the armed merchant cruiser *Laurentio*.

On the same day, he sank a second armed merchant cruiser, *Patroclus*, when she had stopped to pick up *Laurentio's* survivors. Kretschmer himself thought *Patroclus's* Captain *unkriegsgerisch* — "unwar-wary" — to stop in such circumstances.

U-boat captains were instructed that 3,000 yards was the best range for torpedoes, which should be fired in salvos of four or six, so as to make certain of a hit. But Kretschmer evolved his own tactics. His motto was "one torpedo-one ship".

He stayed on the surface while attacking a convoy, making deadly diagonal strokes through the convoy's ranks, picking off individual ships from close range with a sniper's skill.

Trimmed down at night, with only the conning tower showing above water, *U.99* was almost impossible to detect by escorts which still lacked radar, and with a surface speed of 17 knots *U.99* was faster than a corvette.

Kretschmer was particularly proud of the attack which sank the armed merchant cruiser *Forfar* in the Atlantic on December 2 1940 — although he used five torpedoes.

"I had to submerge in the

face of an advancing destroyer," he said. "But I still continued to fire, having previously cleared the bridge. I got away across the enemy's bow."

*U.99's* war log showed one torpedo hit at a range of 3,600 metres — "a huge distance at night," Kretschmer commented.

*U.99* sailed from Lorient for its eighth patrol on February 22 1941. On March 16, Kretschmer penetrated the columns of the homeward-bound convoy HX112 to make one of the most accomplished surface attacks of his career, in which he sank five ships in an hour.

*U.99* was clearly illuminated in the flames from burning tankers — Kretschmer said later he felt "as exposed as a man sunbathing on a beach". He was retiring, having expended all his torpedoes, when *U.99* was detected by the escort in the early hours of March 17.

Kretschmer had been betrayed by his bridge staff. *U.99's* lookouts failed to spot the destroyer *Vanoc* until she was almost on top of them. Hearing the alarm report, the startled officer of the watch gave the order to dive — in direct contravention of Kretschmer's standing orders.

Once dived, *U.99* was immediately detected by radio and attacked by the destroyer *Walker*.

In what Kretschmer realised was the worst attack he had ever suffered, six depth charges burst around *U.99*, which plunged to 700 feet below the designed crushing



Kretschmer: known as the Wolf of the Atlantic

depth, before pulling out of the dive.

Kretschmer hoped to catch a trim at about 300 feet, when he might have a chance to work out an evasion plan.

But *U.99* rose uncontrollably to the surface, where *Vanoc* illuminated the U-boat with searchlight and *Walker* opened fire with main and secondary armament.

Kretschmer ordered "Abandon ship".

He then had the message flashed to *Walker*: "Captain to Captain: Please save my men drifting in your direction. I am sinking." *U.99* sank but *Walker* picked up Kretschmer and all but three of the ship's company of 43. Kretschmer became a PoW.

Otto Wilhelm August Kretschmer was born on May 1 1912, the son of a schoolmaster. He went to his father's primary school and then to a Staatliche Bildungsanstalt (State Education Institution).

Too young to join the Reichsmarine, he joined "Crew 30", the class who would begin in 1930. Meanwhile, he travelled and studied in England, France and Italy.

He did his basic naval training at Stralsund on the Baltic coast and was rated sea cadet in October 1930, before joining the sail training ship *Niobe*. Rated petty officer in January 1932, he served in the pocket battleship *Deutschland* and the cruiser *Emden*.

He was commissioned Leutnant in October 1934 and joined the U-boat Command in May 1936, being appointed to the 2nd U-boat Flotilla. From 1935 to 1936 he was a Watch Officer in *U.35*, serving in Spanish waters during the Spanish Civil War.

After the sinking of *U.99*, Kretschmer was a prisoner for the rest of the Second World War, in Bowmanville Camp, Ontario, where he devised a system, circumventing camp censorship, of

transmitting intelligence back to Germany.

It was so refined that he was able to arrange for a U-boat to rendezvous at the mouth of the St Lawrence River to pick up escaped prisoners. The prisoners were recaptured before they could be picked up, but the U-boat did appear punctually at the right place.

Released in 1947, Kretschmer married Dr Luise-Charlotte Mohsen-Hinrichs. nee Bruns, in 1948.

He was the first President of the newly formed German Marine-Bund (Navy Federation) and joined the Bundesmarine in 1955.

Promoted to Kapitän zur See, he served in the United States, France, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Norway, Greece, Portugal, the Netherlands and Turkey. Frau Dr Kretschmer launched *U.1*, the Bundesmarine's first U-boat, in 1962.

Kretschmer was promoted to flotilla admiral in 1965 and was Chief of Staff, Allied Naval Forces Nato Baltic Approaches, until his retirement in 1970.

Nicknamed "Silent Otto", Kretschmer often incurred official displeasure by his extreme reluctance to signal while at sea. In his opinion, there was far too much signalling to and from U-boats. He suspected that the Allies had penetrated some of the German Navy's secret cyphers.

He was a household name in Germany, where his deeds were hailed in national headlines, and he was obviously very useful for the Nazi pro-

paganda machine. But unlike some other U-boat aces he would not make propaganda speeches, nor write his autobiography for propaganda purposes.

In 1993, he took part in television programmes celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic. Speaking from his house in Spain, he stressed that his chief care had always been the welfare of his sailors.

Kretschmer gained the most favourable reports on his ability from his earliest days in command. But perhaps the most telling appraisal of him came from an opponent. In 1941, Captain George Creasy, Director of the Anti-Submarine Division at the Admiralty, especially asked to meet Kretschmer.

"I was anxious," Creasy recalled, "to judge for myself what manner of man a successful U-boat captain might be: to see for myself, if I could, the state of his nerves, to measure his judgment, gauge his reactions to his seniors and his juniors, the expected and the unexpected. In simple words, to size him up."

"I saw a young and obviously self-confident naval commander who bore himself, in the difficult conditions of recent captivity, with self-respect, modesty and courtesy."

"His record stamped him as brave and quick-witted: his appearance and manners were those of an officer and a gentleman. When he left me, I sincerely hoped that there were not too many like him."