

## Hunter Became Hunted

When the news of the Pearl Harbor attack reached British prime minister Winston Churchill, he telephoned a shocked Franklin Roosevelt. When he retired later on that fateful Sunday night, Churchill reported that "went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful."

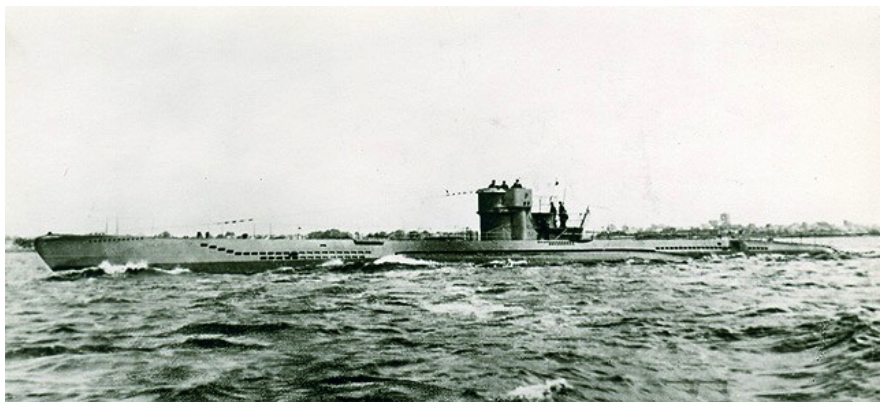
Churchill's comfort was in knowing that the United States, the "arsenal of democracy," was in the war as a full partner and as such, the transport of war materiel, food, fuel and other necessities would now be freed from the restrictions previously imposed by American neutrality. But before the unrestricted flow of these goods could turn the tide of the war, the Allies had to win the "Battle of the Atlantic."

Since the outbreak of the war on September 1, 1939, German submarines, or U-boats, had enjoyed great success against British shipping. The Germans had also targeted neutral vessels bound for British ports. Once the United States entered the war, German U-boats shifted into the waters off of America's east coast and began sinking cargo ships and tankers from the Allied nations, most of which, at this stage of the war, were unescorted. In February of 1942, U-boats sank 70 Allied merchant ships, the majority in the western Atlantic. The following month, losses were worse, with 85 ships sent to the bottom, most of these along the approaches to America's major east coast ports.

The steamship *Otho*, was a combination cargo, mail and passenger vessel of 4,839 gross tons. Built in Tacoma, Washington in 1920, the ship was a "three-island well-deck ship," which had made trips between east coast and African ports before the war. In April 1942, *Otho's* third mate was Clemson alumnus Fred Busbee Williams.

Williams was a member of the Class of 1918. A mechanical engineering major, Williams attended Clemson for two years before enlisting in the Navy and serving during the First World War. According to a 1942 newspaper article, Williams, a native of Camden, subsequently attended the Naval Academy and was commissioned as an ensign. Having retired from the Navy in 1941, Williams continued his seafaring life in the Merchant Marine. As third mate of *Otho*, Williams would have been one of the ship's officers, responsible for standing watch at sea, navigating and safely guiding the ship.

Hans Oestermann was also a ship's officer. A *Kapitänleutnant* in the German *Kriegsmarine*, or navy, Oestermann was the captain of U-Boat 754. Sailing from the occupied French port of Brest, Oestermann and his crew had, by April 1942, compiled an enviable record. On their first war patrol in the North



Atlantic, Oestermann and his crew had dispatched four merchant ships totaling more than 10,000 tons. Now on its second patrol, *U-754* had already sunk six more ships—including four on one day-- sending 17,000 additional tons to the bottom of the Atlantic.

On Friday, April 3, 1942, the unescorted *Otho* was steaming toward Philadelphia on its return voyage from Takoradi in Africa. Its cargo included manganese ore, tin and palm oil. Lurking beneath the blue waters about 200 miles east of Cape Henry, Virginia, *U-754* sighted the ship and began tracking its prey. The *Otho* was cruising at 9.5 knots on a non-evasive course, making Oestermann's task simpler. Using his periscope, Oestermann calculated the firing problem and launched one torpedo. At 11:49 am, the torpedo struck *Otho* on the starboard side amidships, exploding between the engine room and the number 3 tank. Fatally damaged, the ship began to sink.

Of the 53 aboard *Otho*, most were able to abandon ship in three small boats and a raft. As they watched, their ship sank within twelve minutes of the torpedo's explosion. Sixteen survivors were rescued by a patrol yacht on April 8 and landed at Cape May, New Jersey. Six others were rescued by a Norwegian tanker on April 25 after three weeks in an open boat. In all, the *Otho's* master, five other officers, including Williams, and 25 others were lost at sea.

Oestermann and his crew soon returned to their home port in France, but by summer, they were back in North American waters. *U-754's* successful campaigns came to an end after its notorious sinking of the small fishing vessel *Ebb*. As the *Ebb* sank, the U-boat crew machine-gunned a number of the fishing boat's survivors as they attempted to launch a life raft. Three days later on July 31, 1942, a Royal Canadian Air Force bomber sank the *U-754* with all hands.

Fred Busbee Williams was survived by his wife and three daughters, the oldest of whom was a student at Winthrop College. He is memorialized at Camden's Quaker Cemetery. Though often overlooked in the history of World War II, the Allied victory could not have been won without the bravery, skill and sacrifice of the Merchant Marine.

