ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

BIOGRAPHY

The Longest Patrol: A U-Boat Gunner's War
Gregory L. Owen
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Four Stars (out of Five)

In the United States they are known as members of the “Greatest Generation”: those young men who donned uniforms and sailed off to fight the Axis nearly seven decades ago. Their stories are heroic and legendary told in histories like Eisenhower’s *Crusade in Europe* and memoirs like William Manchester’s *Goodbye Darkness*.

But there is another perspective available to American readers: stories related by former enemies. *The Longest Patrol* by Gregory L. Owens tells one of these stories.

Owens relates the experiences of Karl Baumann born in Germany’s Ruhr Valley and raised during the tumultuous years of economic hardship and Hilter’s rise to power.

Baumann’s mother died young his father left to work in France as a *Reparationsarbeiter* (a post-World War I reparations worker) and young Karl moved into his grandmother’s multi-generational household. There he survived a gritty but loving childhood. Eventually Baumann escaped the life of a coal miner by going to sea. He served first as a ship’s boy on a small fishing vessel then moved to another fishing boat and finally enlisted in the German Navy the *Kriegsmarine*.

Baumann’s combat service was aboard the U-953 a sleek member of the submarine wolfpacks that roamed the Atlantic in search of Allied merchant and combat ships.

The Longest Patrol—which is as much U-953’s story as it is Baumann’s—is comprehensive; it strives for detailed accuracy and is well-illustrated with World War II-era photographs. Owens takes readers through Baumann’s childhood his indifferent flirtation with the Hilter Youth his hard schooling aboard fishing vessels and his day-to-day life as a submariner an *Ubootfahrer*.

With copious footnotes an index a bibliography and a glossary of terms readers are never lost. The book’s weakest facet is Owens’ over-reliance on U-953’s log—*Kriegstagebuch* (war day book)—rather than Baumann’s own words.

The final portion of the book chronicles Baumann's capture his term as a prisoner of war in a Virginia work camp and his post-war life. Baumann was wounded when a 20mm cannon exploded and was hospitalized at Brest France. He was captured after the US Army's VIII Corps successful siege of the city. Baumann was among the lucky:

> *"The Atlantic—and any ocean—was a mysterious and lonely place to die; nothing on the surface ever would indicate the location where the light of young and hopeful lives had flickered out…hundreds of boats and the ghosts of thirty thousand Ubootfahrer inhabit the deep. Their spirits like fleeting memories reappear mostly in the occasional thoughts and dreams of the few U-boat survivors and the passing generations who once knew and loved the young men."*

Baumann's story ends happily. He returned to his home in the Ruhr to find his beloved grandmother alive and his childhood sweetheart waiting for him. Later his immigration to the United States was sponsored by a Mennonite farmer for whom he labored as a prisoner of war in Virginia.

The Longest Patrol is a significant contribution to the chronicling of the era. It is one more individual window through which future historians will examine the twentieth century's greatest tragedy. Owens deserves praise for his work a book which may not be entirely literary in its writing but is thoroughly compelling in its humanity.

Gary Presley