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**ADMIRAL KARL DOENITZ:  
A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP**

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## ABSTRACT

### ADMIRAL KARL DOENITZ: A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

This paper study examines the qualities of operational leadership and the application of operational art displayed by Admiral Karl Doenitz as Commander in Chief, Submarines. Through innovation and creative operational thinking, he developed the German U-boats into an effective weapon against the allies in World War II. As the operational commander in The Battle of the Atlantic, for almost six years, his success in pursuit of his operational objective of sinking the allied merchant fleet and escorts nearly brought Britain to defeat. This paper will highlight organizational decisions made in pursuit of his efforts to procure sufficient U-boats, well trained and motivated crews, and a unique command and control organization. He prepared his force to optimize their equipment and opportunities. His tactical innovation of the wolfpacks employed speed, concentration, and deception, which also maximized his limited supply of U-boats. He was a master of operational maneuver, and shifted his focus and his assets within his theater to take advantage of allied vulnerabilities. His personal character traits inspired his men to unparalleled loyalty throughout the war. He remains relevant today, as he is an example of operational leadership, innovative operational thinking, and a skillful practitioner of operational art.

YARD CANTON BRANCH, 3

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## CHAPTER I CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

*The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril. - Churchill*

The sea was dark, calm and silent. Suddenly, without warning, a violent explosion ripped through the night. Seconds later, fiery flames illuminated the wreckage. Everywhere, precious cargo bound for Great Britain was strewn, bobbing only briefly on the surface, before sinking slowly to the depths below.

It is the end of 1942 and this is the 575th merchant vessel bound for Great Britain to be sunk by a German wolfpack in the past six months.<sup>1</sup> The concept of Commodore Karl Doenitz, Commander in Chief of Submarines, lives!

### Introduction

Operational leadership has been called both one of the most critical elements in the practical application of operational art, as well as one of the most elusive to grasp or precisely define. At its core, it encompasses the entirety of actions required for planning, preparation and conducting campaigns to accomplish operational and strategic objectives. This concept also embraces an ability to "think operationally" which emanates from talent and skill, but also requires some outstanding personal traits of character.<sup>2</sup> While it is popular to study winners, and hopefully, to glean the reasons for their success, Admiral Karl Doenitz also exemplifies operational leadership in ways which are worthy of examination and emulation. Why? What did he achieve that is remarkable?

**Brilliant leadership is always relevant.** This paper will focus on his "operational thinking," his undaunted fight for resources, and the innovative means he used to maximize the utilization of his limited resources. Doenitz was a practitioner of operational art, as he blended theory with practice in the planning and application of his force to achieve his objectives. He operated in all levels of war, from the strategic to the tactical. His innovative tactical concept of operations, the wolfpacks, effectively countered allied convoys. To optimize U-boat efficiency, he developed a comprehensive training program

and command and control system . He was a master of operational maneuver, decisively shifting his focus from one part of his theater to another, taking advantage of the enemy's vulnerabilities. He inspired the loyalty of his men, through his own example of courage and commitment.

His operational genius guided the U-boats to their peak of success in World War II. He began with nothing and molded a force of over 800 U-boats and 38,000 submariners. He saw his U-boats in a new way, and he broke out of the old concepts of World War I to employ them as never before. He valued concentration, speed, deception, and he effectively altered previous methods used to achieve these principles. His creative concept of operations built the U-boats into an almost tide-turning war instrument for the Axis powers. "It was to prove probably the most perceptive appointment made in the Armed Services of any nation before or during World War II."<sup>3</sup>

#### **Background:**

Doenitz, a submarine commander in World War I, lost his submarine, was captured and held by the British. Following World War I, with the U-boat arm destroyed, he remained in the navy serving on surface ships. Known for his organizational and leadership skills, Captain Doenitz was appointed by Hitler to head the newly revived U-boat arm in 1935 under Admiral Raeder, head of the German Naval High Command. Germany had been stripped of all her submarines as a result of the Versailles Treaty. Following the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of October 1935, Germany was allowed to build up to 45% of the British submarine force.<sup>4</sup> However, Hitler's experience and focus was not on the navy. He hoped war with Great Britain could be avoided, but if it came, he was counting on the Luftwaffe and the army, with minimal assistance from his navy.<sup>5</sup>

## Strategy

Doenitz was more certain that Germany would eventually be at war with Britain. He believed that Britain would resort to use of convoys, which had proven so effective against submarines in the later days of World War I. Doenitz recommended a force of 300 submarines. However, the 1938 Naval Building proposal, Plan Z, authored by Admiral Raedar, and approved by Hitler, envisioned a balanced fleet of both surface vessels and submarines (only 233), to accomplish the dual task of waging a campaign against both the British merchant fleet and the British naval vessels protecting them.<sup>6</sup> The concept of Plan Z was based on a classic *guerre de course* to achieve the strategic task of the navy-- destruction of the British merchant navy.<sup>7</sup>

From the outset, Doenitz viewed the submarine force as the optimum way to indirectly attack both Great Britain's operational and strategic centers of gravity. Destruction of her merchant fleet would impact her ability to sustain military operations, and hunger would crush the will of the people. Neither Raeder nor Doenitz harbored any illusions about the naval superiority of the British fleet, or the vulnerability of the German surface ships due to geography and lack of basing in the Atlantic. Both wanted to avoid a naval strategy which relied on a fleet to fleet, Mahanian battle, which would pit them against the superior surface fleet and increasing air superiority of the British. Rather, they chose an indirect, "Sun Tzuian " approach of attacking the vulnerable merchants. Doenitz viewed his force, vice the surface fleet, as ideal. Submarines were platforms which could more effectively avoid the strength of the British at sea. They were capable of submerging, especially in dangerous waters, like the North Sea "gauntlet."<sup>8</sup> They could remain at sea longer, they were cheaper to build, and they were easier to protect in port,

by using concrete pens. For these reasons, they provided a much higher return on their investment, and gave the German Navy "more bang for the buck."

Doenitz had become the operational commander in the Atlantic theater of operations long before the six-year Z Plan was completed. He started his campaign with a serious shortage of submarines, but operational thinking allowed him to conceive of the most efficient way to employ his small force. As the operational commander, he understood that only the U-boats had real strategic value, because through their operations alone, they could achieve the decisive objectives necessary to accomplish the strategic goals in this theater.<sup>9</sup> His operational objective was to sink 700,000 tons per month of merchant shipping, which was the figure established by his analysts to force Britain to capitulate.<sup>10</sup>

### **Personality Traits of the Operational Leader**

Possession of experience, insight and vision are not in themselves sufficient for superb operational leadership. There must be more.

What this task requires in the way of higher intellectual gifts is a sense of unity and a power of judgment raised to a marvelous pitch of vision, which easily grasps and dismisses a thousand remote possibilities which an ordinary mind would labor to identify and wear itself out in so doing. Yet even that superb display of divination, the sovereign eye of genius itself, would still fall short of historical significance without the qualities of character and temperament we have described.<sup>11</sup>

Carl Von Clausewitz, On War

For Clausewitz, courage, intellect, determination, and balance were also crucial for leadership at the higher level. Professor Vego lists 18 traits important for the operational commander.<sup>12</sup> While, within the scope of this paper, it is impossible to cover



every trait, Doenitz, arguably, more than many military leaders of World War II, possessed many of these traits. Notably, he inspired trust from his subordinates, and he trusted them in kind. They responded with loyalty and dedication to him, personally, as well as professionally, in a most grueling and dangerous environment. He was a decisive leader who made numerous decisions concerning the planning, conduct, and sustainment of an Atlantic campaign that would last six years. He possessed a steadfastness of purpose and persistence in his belief in the strategic value of his U-boats. Through his training, he was able to instill good habits, as well as communication of his intent, both of which provided motivation and purpose for his men. He was creative in the way he employed his force and had the courage to see what they might accomplish.

## CHAPTER II ORGANIZATIONAL PLANNING

*In naval warfare only numbers can annihilate. - Nelson*

To affect his visionary plan for the achievement of his strategic objective, he needed four things: U-boats, well-trained and motivated crews, a command and control system, and a concept of employment. This section will address the way he approached these issues.

### Resources

When war with Britain came in 1939, Doenitz had only 22 U-boats capable of operating in the Atlantic. Although Admiral Raeder immediately shifted the naval building priority entirely to submarines, Doenitz recognized that in order to obtain the means to achieve his objective, he would need a 'master stroke.'

Scapa Flow, the home of the Royal Fleet, had long fascinated him. When he was briefed by a commander in 1939 on the strange currents in the area, he devised a bold plan to influence his resource planning objectives. Assigning one of his top commanders, on October 14, 1939, Scapa Flow was penetrated by U-47. This risky mission culminated with the sinking of a British battleship, the Royal Oak.<sup>13</sup> The frenzy of excitement and publicity was intense. What was truly remarkable was the deliberate manipulation of Hitler. This was the type of event likely to influence Hitler. It did, and the increased building rate of more U-boats was ordered immediately.

Doenitz, through his persistence, courage, and sincere belief in his submarines, continually strived to influence the political leadership. Throughout the war, he was unremitting in his demands to his chain of command for more and better quality U-boats, weapons, and technology. He was never silent and did not acquiesce to the opinions of

others, nor did he avoid any opportunity to persuade Hitler personally. Doenitz fought for his U-boats throughout the entire war, highlighting their striking success whenever possible to prove his point.

### Training

As he took charge of the first U-boat flotilla in Germany since 1918, he had definite ideas about training his new force and was given the freedom to implement them. Doenitz had spent his interwar years as a surface sailor. His experience operating on both the surface and in submarines laid the foundation for his innovative wolfpack tactics. He believed that a well-rounded background was vital for his U-boat commanders, and felt that only after sailing on the surface with convoys could they most effectively understand the value and use of submarines, and their relation to convoy operations.<sup>14</sup>

He was committed to an intensive training program designed to confront his crew with the same conditions they would face in wartime. He developed a six-month, comprehensive program, covering all the situations that could confront a submarine. These included working in all weather conditions, diving, surface operations, and various war game scenarios. He replicated every defensive situation which might arise. His crews had to conduct 66 surface attacks before they could proceed to torpedo firing.<sup>15</sup> He was adamant that his crews be completely familiar with their environment and have intensive rehearsal under all conditions. One of his commanders later stated that the foundations in principles of submarine warfare, even though modified throughout the war, never changed and were a valuable grounding for their efforts.<sup>16</sup>

His commitment to training seems innovative, as in many earlier conflicts, recruits were rushed into combat immediately. Even later in the war, when resources and

manpower were so slim, Doenitz insisted that his submariners receive as much training as possible. He believed that the training counterbalanced the extra time to add them to the fighting force.<sup>17</sup> While his training program was geared to the tactical level, it had operational impact, as it was one of the ways he used to optimize his limited resources. Better trained crews would carry out their missions more effectively, and his training did accomplish operational objectives.

He also used his training program to promote and sustain morale in this unique, demanding service; imputing to his men a sense of purpose, direction, and motivation. These key elements are the mark of a successful leader at any level of command.<sup>18</sup> He made them feel part of a vital team that was destined to do great things. He was able to pass his guidance and vision to his crew personally. This is a rare phenomenon, with today's operational leaders often limited to providing only remote guidance and motivation. From the outset, Doenitz sought to instill enthusiasm and a desire to be a part of this great service. He wanted to erase the inferiority complex that haunted the submarine service after World War I. As early as 1935, he reported that the results of the thorough training, the underway schedule "and the feeling among the crews themselves that the training made sense," all resulted in a fine spirit which lasted through peace time and carried into the war.<sup>19</sup>

He believed in the personal touch and took every opportunity to visit with his men. He was known throughout the submarine service as their "uncle" or their "lion."<sup>20</sup> Many submariners knew him and they seemed to sense that he cared about them and they responded with unparalleled loyalty. His ability to blend tactical proficiency, morale and team building, and his ability to convey his intent through training, was remarkable. He

was able to bond these men together from the beginning, train them into acting with almost automatic responses underway, and make them feel that they knew what and why they were so important to Germany and to him.

### Command and Control

Another way Doenitz optimized the use of his assets in his theater was through his unique command and control organization. An operational leader needs a workable command and control organization to impart and collect information, provide direction, and attain unity of effort. His wolfpack tactics required coordination, as mass, concentration, and unity of effort were the pillars of their success. After experimenting with an at-sea commander, he decided against tactical command at sea. He directed the submarines to communicate directly with headquarters, reporting all pertinent information about weather and enemy convoy sightings.<sup>21</sup> Submarines would not communicate with each other, in order to minimize signal traffic and lessen chances of detection. Headquarters would assimilate the data and pass directions to each submarine up to the point of attack. Doenitz believed that the wolfpacks were more efficiently directed from headquarters. Based on orders from the command and control center, each would assemble from his station on the patrol line to the optimum position for striking the reported convoy. Then, in the spirit of decentralized execution, each submarine commanding officer would execute the attack as he saw fit. Consequently, Doenitz and his staff had "on the spot" feel and directed attacks from the central point to ensure "unity of thought and ideas" between the staff and the commander at sea. The orders were clear and unambiguous, and the direction from the headquarters was "skilled and purposeful." It was said that the communication center ran the U-boat force like an

orchestra.<sup>22</sup>

Did this method undercut decentralized execution? Was this too much centralized control by the operational commander? In this case, it was not. With limited sonar capability and without radar or other long-range sensors, the U-boat was inherently a poor search platform. The central control center functioned as the eyes and ears for the U-boats and placed them in the best position for execution of attack. This system maximized protection from radar detection as well as allowing the operational commander to view the entire area of operations and visualize the entire picture of engagements. The control center also ensured concentration which was central to wolfpack success. Decentralized execution was always left up to the individual submarine, as Doenitz relied on the "efficiency, initiative and determination" of each commander, and believed that freedom of action was essential for both morale and safety of the crew.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to "orchestrating" his wolfpacks, Doenitz would have liked to have had aircraft under his command and control. An early proponent of jointness, he consistently requested air assets for both search and attack.<sup>24</sup> Due to jealousy among the services and Goering's egomaniac personality, this was never realized in any meaningful or long-term manner. However, after obtaining the strategically valuable bases in France, Doenitz was finally authorized the use of 40 aircraft. While they realized only limited success, due mainly to **lack of joint training**, he said that his lack of air power was one of the gravest flaws of the war.<sup>25</sup> Truly ahead of his time, he saw that "in any given theater of operations, it is essential that all means must be committed to the battle under a single command."<sup>26</sup> Doenitz' words from over fifty years ago, have an eerily contemporary ring to them.

### Concept of Employment

On the night his submarine was sunk in World War I, Doenitz' new strategy for use of U-boats was born. He realized that they should no longer work alone. In order to offset allied developments in radar and the use of convoys, he devised his wolfpack tactics. These tactics provided several benefits. First, they employed concentration to maximize surprise. Second, attacks would be conducted under cover of darkness, providing protection for his submarines. Third, they would operate on the surface as much as possible. All of these concepts were different from the norm practiced in World War I, and resulted in another "Sun Tzuian" precept, to keep the enemy off balance. These changes in tactics did achieve surprise, result in confusion, uncertainty, and were initially extremely successful.<sup>27</sup>

The use of wolfpacks also substantially increased firepower, as more damage could be inflicted by a group, than by the use of four or five submarines acting independently. While wolfpacks were a tactical organizational innovation, their development and employment in the theater was was a third way that Doenitz maximized assets to attain his strategic and operational objectives.

## CHAPTER III OPERATIONAL DECISIONS

*How willingly would I have exchanged a full-scale attempt at invasion for this shapeless, measureless peril, expressed in charts, curves and statistics. - Churchill*

### Centers of Gravity

Doenitz had correctly identified the strategic and operational centers of gravity of Britain; the will of the people, and their merchant fleet naval escorts, both on the surface and in the air.. He realized that an island nation could not be self-sustaining with regard to food and a variety of other war sustaining materials such as metal, rubber, oil and manufactured goods. He was convinced that if he could sink the merchant vessels, Britain would be defeated. This came close to occurring. In 1941, the "effect on the British war and domestic economy was crippling."<sup>28</sup> The imports shrunk so drastically that an single ration diminished to two ounces of tea a week, and one egg for two weeks.<sup>29</sup>

After Pearl Harbor and the formal entry of America into the war, Doenitz was given permission to launch an attack on Britain's most powerful ally. American support, which shored up both the will of the British people and their naval fleet, was probably the only reason Britain had not capitulated. However, until December 1941, Hitler had been overly cautious about provoking the United States by attacking her "neutral" vessels.

### Operational Maneuver

Doenitz coupled his tactical innovation of wolfpacks with an operational one, in the movement of his forces from one part of the theater to another to achieve decisive results.

An excellent example of his operational maneuver occurred in early 1942. He decided to employ his forces in one of the more successful major operations in the Battle of the Atlantic, *Operation Paukenschlag*. When America finally entered the war, Doenitz



correctly anticipated that the American submarine operations and antisubmarine capabilities were not as advanced as the British. Also, America was not using the convoy system, as she had been relatively immune from attack due to Hitler's caution. Doenitz saw an opportunity to exploit these vulnerabilities; lack of preparation and anti-submarine devices. He deployed a group of five submarines to reap this harvest of "rich targets."<sup>30</sup> With logistical support provided by the "Milch Cows," a new, large supply submarine, this minuscule number of submarines were able to sink 148 ships, for 752,000 tons in less than two months. The Western Atlantic could be considered an economy of force effort at its best, and Doenitz exploited a "fruitful theater, 3,000-4,000 miles away from his closest base of operations in Biscay."<sup>31</sup> In the spring of 1942, the theater of operations was expanded to the Caribbean, also achieving remarkable results, also primarily due to surprise and lack of preparation. The allies were on the defensive and "the U-boat enjoyed all the advantages of a guerrilla."<sup>32</sup> Doenitz had struck a powerful blow through operational maneuver, and he sustained his forces there as long as they enjoyed success. By May, 1942, the Americans began using escorted convoys in littoral waters, and the U-boat success diminished. Doenitz, recognizing what we might an approaching culminating point, withdrew his U-boats from the American waters.<sup>33</sup>

As the operational commander in the German theater of operations that included the British Isles, and the commander responsible for achievement of the strategic and operational objectives in the theater, Doenitz was able to effectively used limited resources through operational maneuver and wolfpack tactics to conduct a cumulative campaign against the British.

### Culminating Point of Victory

The most difficult decision made by Doenitz during the war was the eventual withdrawal of U-boats from the Atlantic. Determination of the culminating point of victory remains a challenge for leadership. Although continually fighting for resources, he was unable to reconstitute his U-boats with sufficient speed to replace his losses. Yet, as late as March 1943, success was still being achieved in the Atlantic. However, when 31 submarines were lost in May, he withdrew them from that theater of operations, as the cost and risk had become too high.<sup>34</sup> Arguably, with the incredible loss of life in the German submarine force, he waited too long. Out of the 39,000 submariners, 28,000 were killed in action and 5,000 were taken as POWs.

## CHAPTER IV CONCLUSION

*Admiral Doenitz was a great naval officer; our main regret should be that he was not on our side. He and a few thousand men in submarines came very nearly defeating the Allies through interdiction of sea lanes. - Admiral Raymond H. Bass, Submarine Commander, World War II*

Strategic thinkers are cautioned not to place too much emphasis on the last war. The study of leadership, however, is different. Superb leadership skills and qualities are transcendent and always relevant. Admiral Doenitz exemplified remarkable operational leadership and was an adept practitioner of operational art. He was able to break out of the established paradigms. His submarine and surface naval experience laid a foundation for a new way to fight submarine warfare. He could see beyond the usual and expected; and use his creativity and skill to write new rules. **This is genius.** War and the world are constantly changing. The leadership, who can conceive of new ways to use old tools, set patterns for the rest of the military. Recently, the end of the cold war brought innovative thinking to the U.S. Navy in "Forward. . . From The Sea," and its predecessor. Sea power is now viewed in a new way. Another recent example of this creativity occurred during the Haiti operation. The Army used an aircraft carrier as their platform of operations. This made sense, and it took creativity and initiative to pair these two services.

Doenitz possessed great creativity and insight. As the operational commander in the German Theater of Operations, he was able to effectively use his limited resources through operational maneuver and wolfpack tactics. Hitler wasted seven months in the strategic bombing of Great Britain to accomplish what the U-boats were capable of doing more efficiently and at less cost. If sufficient resources had been devoted earlier to building up the submarine arm, and if air assets had been put under the control of Doenitz, as the operational commander in support of the destruction of convoys, what a

different war it might have been. Doenitz' real defeat was from above.

Despite the failure of national support and strategic blindness, the accomplishments of Doenitz were impressive. He built a force from scratch and molded them into a deadly, dynamic weapon. "No other military leader or commander was ever identified so fully with a particular weapon system as Doenitz was with the submarine war in general."<sup>35</sup> He influenced the leadership with every means he could and never gave up his fight for resources. He also influenced his men to a degree that is impossible today. ". . . 'their' Doenitz, (was) far more to them than merely their own special commander."<sup>36</sup> His natural skills and abilities as a warfighter, combined with his personality, significantly contributed to morale for the duration of the war.<sup>37</sup>

Admiral Karl Doenitz was an operational thinker and a skillful practitioner of operational art. He was able to blend his theory with the practical application of his concept in pursuit of his objectives. This is the essence of an operational leader. Sadly, perhaps best known as a war criminal and one of Hitler's commanders, he was much more. He was a talented operational commander who is still relevant in the way he helps to shape and define the elusive concept of operational leadership.

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