

The Dread of the Adriatic - an Austro-Hungarian Submarine Ace of the Great War by Simon Wilson

The modern Austro-Hungarian Navy was founded at the end of the 18th Century and saw action a number of times, principally against the Italians, the Ottoman Empire and a variety of Mediterranean pirates. They also took part in operations against the Chinese in the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the century as part of the Eight-Nation Alliance.

Officers of the Austro-Hungarian Navy were responsible for two significant innovations in naval warfare – the torpedo (invented by Commander John Luppis, though the first working models were built by Robert Whitehead, a British engineer based in Trieste) and what is often claimed to be the world's first hovercraft (built by Dagobert Müller von Thomamuehl in 1916 and known as the *Versuchsgleitsboote* – Gliding Boat). Whitehead's torpedoes, incidentally, were powered by compressed air engines developed by an English engineer called Peter Brotherhood. On his death, Brotherhood's son Stanley took over the running of the business and moved the factory from London to Peterborough in 1903.

The Italians did not immediately enter the war, declaring war on Austria-Hungary only in May 1915 once they had done a deal with the allies about the division of Austro-Hungarian lands at the end of the war. Allied coordination was poor and although the Austro-Hungarian Navy was bottled up in the Adriatic for the duration of the war, they were, in turn, able to make the allies use valuable resources in the Otranto barrage and other operations.



One of their early successes was the sinking of the French armoured cruiser *Leon Gambetta*, (left), when Korvetenkapitan Georg Ritter von Trapp, after stalking it for a day and a half, obtained an attack position and launched two torpedoes at 00:40 on 27 April 1915. Both torpedoes were successful and the ship sank within ten minutes with the loss of 684 lives. This was the first ever submerged night attack made by a submarine.

Von Trapp (right), had followed his father into the Austro-Hungarian Navy and was decorated for his part in the assault on the Taku Forts in China in 1900. Joining the submarine service in 1908, his first command was U-6 (1910-13). His second command was the U-5 and within a month of taking command he sank the French armoured cruiser, *Leon Gambetta*.

He had further success when he sank the Italian submarine *Nereide*. Having had reports of the submarine's presence von Trapp found her in harbour. The *Nereide* turned towards the U-5 and fired first, but missed. As it submerged von Trapp fired and his shot hit, sending the enemy down with all hands. This was the story of the Austro-Hungarian submarine service. They were a small service, and their boats were technically limited, but they were efficient and well-trained. They launched 79 torpedo attacks during the war, with a success rate over 90%.

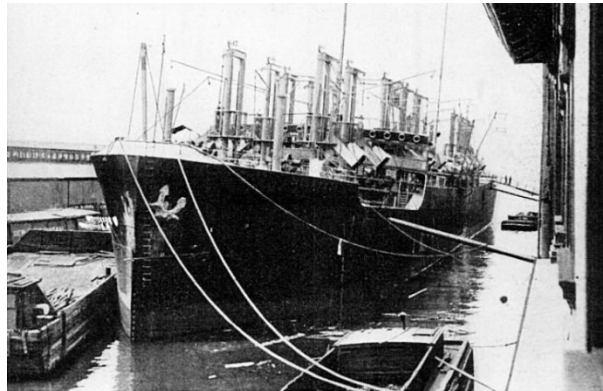




The U-5 (*left*), went on, under different command, to sink the *Principe Umberto*, an Italian cargo ship being used as a troop transport. She was torpedoed on June 8 1916 whilst shipping Italian troops back from Albania, with the loss of 1,926 lives, the largest single maritime loss of life in the war.

Von Trapp, meanwhile, had been given command of the U-14, formerly the French submarine *Curie*, which had been caught in anti-submarine nets whilst trying to infiltrate the Austrian fleet anchorage at Pola. In U-14 he would go on to become the most successful Austrian submarine captain of the war.

In February 1916 U-14 was badly damaged in a depth charge attack and the subsequent repairs and improvements took nine months. With a new conning tower, more powerful engines and increased range the boat entered its most successful phase of the war. One of its notable sinkings was the *SS Milazzo* (*right*), the largest cargo ship in the world, which was only a year old when he torpedoed it. It was the second largest ship sunk by the Austro-Hungarians, the largest



being the *Leon Gambetta*, another of von Trapp's victims. Known as the "Dread of the Adriatic", he finished the war in command of the submarine base at Cattaro.



The U-5 and U-14 survived the war too. U-5 struck a mine in 1917. Six crew were killed and the vessel sank, but she was salvaged and recommissioned before being handed over to Italy and scrapped in 1919. U-14 (*left*), was returned to the French Navy, renamed *Curie* and served in the Mediterranean until being scrapped in 1930.

After the war he was able to retire to a comfortable life with his wife (Agathe, granddaughter of Robert Whitehead the torpedo man) and their seven children. Agathe died in 1922, having caught scarlet fever from one of the children. In 1924 the family moved to Salzburg and in 1926, during the illness of another of the children, von Trapp engaged the services of a nanny who was working at a nearby convent.

After that life became a roller-coaster for von Trapp. He married the nanny, Maria Kutschera, in 1927, had three more children, lost his money in the Austrian banking crisis, started to earn money as a family singing group, upset the Nazis (turning down a commission in the reformed Kriegsmarine and refusing to sing at Adolf Hitler's birthday party) and, eventually, escaped to Italy. From there they moved to the USA, where they had a popular singing act until 1957, and then ran a holiday resort.

Georg and Maria formed Trapp Family Austrian Relief Inc. in 1947 and Georg died of lung cancer later the same year. It was an ailment that U-Boat crews were prone to, having lived in an atmosphere of fumes during their service, though he was also known to have been a heavy smoker.

Is the story sounding familiar yet? It should do, as they made it into a film, though the real story and the film do differ in places. It's strange to think that a man best known to most of us as the father from *The Sound of Music*, was a pioneer of submarine warfare and the most successful U-Boat commander of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Note on U-Boat Numbering – the Germans and the Austrians both prefixed their submarines with the letter “U” and a number. Some writers use Roman numerals to denote Austrian submarines – U-V and U-XVI – but the Austrians themselves used Arabic numerals and called the boats U-5 and U-14, which, at times, can be confusing, but is accurate.