German U-boat Victory Pennants

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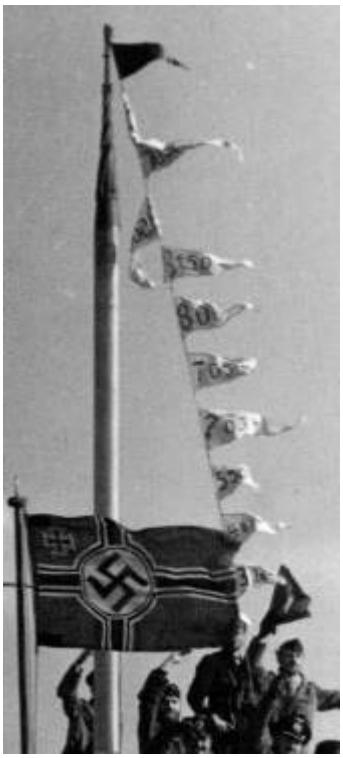
Part I - Merchant Ship Victory Pennants

The practice of displaying victory pennant flags (*erfolgswimpeln*) when German U-boats entered port after a patrol was commonplace. Crewmen would often paint the tonnage of a vessel they had sunk during that patrol upon a white pennant flag. Each pennant would denote a ship sunk, and they would be hung in a line from the attack periscope to the tower below. White pennants signified a merchant ship had been sunk, while a red pennant indicated the sinking of a warship.

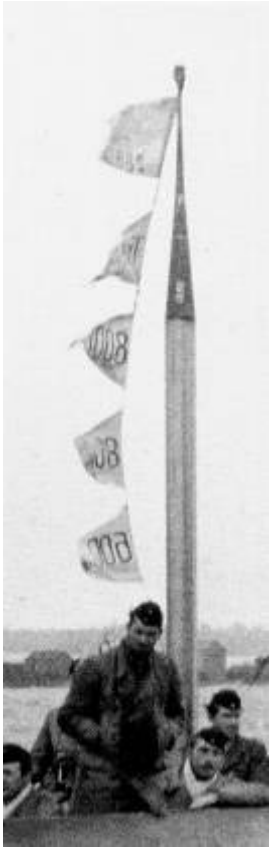
This practice originated from the First World War. After a particularly successful five week patrol, 23 pennants were hung from Lothar Von Arnauld De La Periere's U 35.



Above: An example of victory pennants flying from the attack periscope of U 123. U 123 was a particularly successful boat, sinking no fewer than 47 vessels. The Type IXC sank many of these ships while operating off the US coast in early 1942.

Above: Four pennants flying from the top of the attack periscope of U 588. The attack periscope was the rearmost of the two periscopes. The pennant is representative of the most common type of design: a tonnage value rounded up to the nearest thousand.

Now and again - when only a couple of victory pennants were to be displayed - the pennants were flown from the commander's flagstaff. This flagstaff can be seen in the middle of the image above.



Above: Five pennants flying from the attack periscope of U 124. We are looking at the pennants from the reverse side. As a result we see the mirror image of the tonnage values figures (again rounded up to the nearest thousand).

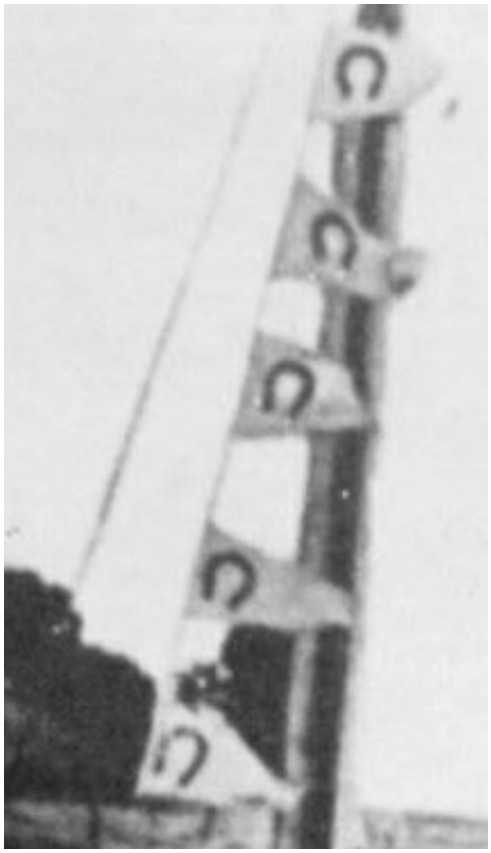
Above: Wolfgang Lüth, the second most successful commander (47 ships for 225, 756 tons), aboard U 181. In contrast to the image of U 124 above, the reverse side of these pennants does not show the mirror image of tonnage figure. These flags were sufficiently thick to allow the figures to be painted on both sides of the flag. However, it was more common to see thinner flags with figures painted on one side only.

As the victory pennants were prepared by hand on the return home from a patrol, there were some slight variances in the values painted onto the flags. Usually this would consist of the tonnage value rounded up (or sometimes even down) to the nearest thousand.

The following are some of the typical practices utilised during the preparation of the flags –

- when the exact vessel had been identified the exact tonnage figure was sometimes applied to the flag
- some commanders chose to apply the name of the vessel to the flag rather than a tonnage value
- the insignia of the U-boat would sometimes feature (such as U 99 and U 564)
- some flags had a black border around the edge of the flag
- a few flags had a red border around the edge of the flag
- now and again the pennant flags would be marked with simply *Frachter* (freighter) or *Tanker*
- some flags had the silhouette of the vessel sunk
- a small number had the silhouette of the vessel sunk and the tonnage value
- a small number were painted with the image of a ship sinking

Above: The insignia of U 564 was the black cat with “3X” below. U 564’s commander Reinhard Suhren appropriated this insignia from U 48, the boat he previously served on as First Watch Officer. The pennants included U 564’s insignia as well as an indication of whether each vessel was a *Frachter* (freighter) or a *Tanker*. Note also that the flags included a border around the edge.



Above: The victory pennants on U 99 consisted only of a horseshoe. Rather than a painted insignia, U 99 actually had horseshoes welded onto both sides of the tower.

Above: On rare occasions the pennant flags would be marked with simply *Frachter* (freighter) or a *Tanker*. These also have a border around the edge.

Above: Ten pennants hanging from the attack periscope to the tower railings on U 47 on the 6th July 1940. Each pennant included a depiction of the merchant ship sunk. Some show the silhouette, while on others the ship is actually shown in the process of sinking.

Although crews proudly displayed the tonnage values they had sunk, it must always be remembered that each pennant represented the sinking of a ship. This often resulted in the bravest of sailors dying in the most brutal of circumstances. The showmanship involved in victory pennants does not respect the awful consequences that the crew had unleashed during the patrol.

Above: A tragic image. The 15501 figure is attributed to the sinking of the 15,501 ton passenger cargo liner *Arandora Star*. The crew of U 47 were unaware of the high number of men on board. Nor did they realise they had sent many of their own compatriots down to a watery grave. A total of 805 lives were lost in this tragedy: 243 Germans, 470 Italians, 55 crew and 37 military guard.

Part II - Warship & Aircraft Victory Pennants

While a white flag indicated the sinking of a merchant ship, a red flag was used to indicate the sinking of a warship. As the sinking of escorts was much rarer than merchant ships, it follows that the red flags were much less common than white merchant flags. Usually the white silhouette of the warship would be depicted upon the red flag.

On rare occasions when red flags were not available, a white flag would be used for the warship flag. Sometimes a small White Ensign would be added to the corner if a British warship had been sunk.

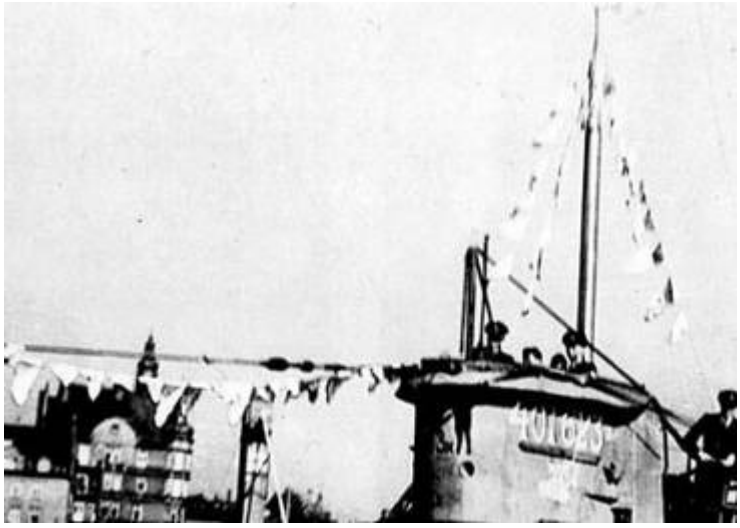
Above: This image shows the silhouette of two destroyers that the crew of U 968 believed they had sunk. The story of U 968's encounters with Allied destroyers can be found in the excellent *U-Boot Im Focus* Edition 1.

On a similar theme, the shooting down of an aircraft was celebrated using a red flag. Instead of the silhouette of a warship, these flags would be adorned with the top view of an aircraft. These aircraft pennants were very rare in the early years. From the mid-war period, the threat posed from the air greatly increased. To battle against Allied planes, U-boats were fitted with much heavier anti-aircraft guns. In the end the U-boats became overwhelmed by aircraft, being sunk in very large numbers. However, on occasions U-boats did manage to shoot down the Sunderland, Hudson, Catalina or other aircraft that was attacking.

Above: The aircraft pennant fluttering from the attack periscope celebrates the downing of a British Sunderland. On some occasions the aircraft pennant was white rather than red.

Part III - Tonnage Figures

Usually the number of flags indicated how many ships had been sunk during the patrol. But it was reasonably common on the most successful boats to sport a flag for each ship sunk during the boat's career to date. U-boats such as U 48, U 123, U 181 and U 552 did amass an unfortunately high tally of ships sunk. On occasions the towers of these boats were decorated with dozens of flags, too many in fact to fit on a line from the attack periscope. In these cases the jumping wires were used as makeshift lines on which to hang the pennants.



Above: The most successful Kriegsmarine U-boat - the Type VIIB U 48 - at the end of an illustrious operational career in June 1941. The pennants all denote the ships the crew thought they had sunk during the boat's career. The tonnage figure of 401623 tons that is painted in white on the tower is the figure estimated by the crew to have been sunk by the boat. The actual figure now credited to U 48 is 51 ships for 306875 tons. This discrepancy of 30.8% is an ideal indicator of tonnage overestimation.

When it was possible to identify the ship, the exact tonnage was sometimes added to the pennant. Or, to match the rest of the pennants, the exact tonnage was often rounded up to the nearest thousand or half thousand. But we cannot take for granted that the tonnage values we see on the flags were accurate, nor that the number of flags was the true number of vessels sunk. The pennant flags indicate the number of ships the U-boat crew *thought* they had sunk during the patrol. The difference between what the crew though they had sunk and what they actually *did* sink is often marked.

Sometimes the commander and crew would not see the consequences of their torpedo hit. Many would make a fallacious presumption that they had sunk a vessel, when in fact they had only wounded their prey. If they were operating against a convoy, on occasion the torpedo would hit a different ship from the one that had been aimed at. The commander and crew may not realise that another vessel was hit, thinking instead that they had successfully struck their intended target. In such a scenario the commander would add his estimation of the ship he had aimed at rather than the one he had actually hit.

Often the commander would have had no choice but to make a rough estimation of the tonnage of the ship attacked. The commander may have been hampered by the poor meteorological conditions that can often prevail in the rolling seas of the North Atlantic. Furthermore, he may only have been afforded a snapshot through his attack periscope. Such circumstances would preclude accurate estimation of the intended target. Often attacks were made at night, when the black cloak of darkness would help camouflage the attacking U-boat. But the darkness would also hinder the estimation of target size and type.

We can see, therefore, that the conditions under which commanders were operating would result in errors in tonnage estimation. Human nature being what it is, these estimations were usually made on the higher side rather than lower. The overestimating of tonnage values was very common indeed, with U-boat commanders generally overestimating by around a third. This is consistent with submarine commanders from other nations, who were also prone to the same degree of over-claiming.

Let us take an example of the estimations made by the commander of U 47, Günther Prien, during the boat's sixth patrol. Prien was rather competitive with respect to tonnage sunk. In one war diary entry Prien actually pours scorn on Schepke's tonnage claims!

During patrol 6, the commander estimated that they had sunk 10 ships of 66,587 tons. The actual tonnage sunk was 8 ships of 51,189 tons. This equates to an overestimation of exactly 30%.

In the table below, the fourth column shows the ships Prien thought they had sunk, while the fifth column shows the tonnage he estimated these vessels to have been. These are the ship names and tonnage values as recorded by Prien in the boat's KTB (war diary) and shooting reports. The sixth column shows the tonnages on the ten pennant flags.

Estimated vs actual tonnage sunk by U 47 during patrol 6					
Date	**Real ship name**	**Real tonnage**	**Estimated ship name**	**Estimated tonnage**	**Tonnage on flags**
14/06/40	*Balmoral Wood*	5,834	*Balmoral Wood*	5,834	5,800
21/06/40	*San Fernando*	13,056	*Cadillac*	12,100	12,100
21/06/40	(unknown, missed)	0 (missed)	unidentified freighter	7,000	7,000
21/06/40	(unknown, missed)	0 (missed)	*Gracia*	5,600	5,640
24/06/40	*Cathrine*	1,885	*Kadri*	2,775	2,775
27/06/40	*Lenda*	4,005	*Lenda*	4,005	4,000
27/06/40	*Leticia*	2,580	*Letitia*	2,800	2,580
29/06/40	*Empire Toucan*	4,127	*Empire Toucan*	7,000	7,000
30/06/40	*Georgios Kyriakides*	4,201	*Georgios Kyriakides*	4,201	4,201
02/07/40	*Arandora Star*	15,501	*Arandora Star*	15,501	15,501

Totals	-	51,189	-	66,816	66,597

The differences between the war diary figures and the figures painted on the tonnage flags are due to a re-examination of the ship registers between the time when the war diary entries were written and the flags made. This is evidenced by the fact that Prien reported on the 1st July that they had sunk 9 ships for 51,086 tons. The 15,501 tons for the *Arandora Star*, which was sunk the following day, would take the tally to the 66,587 tons painted on the tower. However, the tonnage figures on the flags total 66,597 rather than 66,587! Presumably the crew made a mistake when making the pennant flags.

The overestimation by Prien in the example above illustrates exactly how the tonnage figures on the pennants could be different to the real tonnage sunk. We can also see evidence of mistakes made by the crew in relation to the values added to the flags. In the case of the *Balmoral Wood* and the *Lenda* we can also see evidence of a slight rounding down.

Above: U 132 arrived at La Pallice at the end of the 4th patrol on 16th August 1942. Members of the crew are preparing five victory pennant flags to be displayed on the boat's tower on that date. The boat sank five ships during the patrol; these ships were 2555, 3382, 4312, 4367 and 6734 tons. The figures on the pennants are 4000, 4500, 7000, 8000 and another of indeterminate value. This shows an overestimation of tonnage values, and of rounding up to the nearest thousand.

Part IV - Commissioning Pennant

Even more common than the victory pennants was the commissioning pennant, which was also known as the command pennant or commander's pennant. This was a narrow strip of white material flown from the commander's flagstaff when the boat was in port. The commander's flagstaff was attached to the rear of the inside of the tower bulwark. On Type VIICs that had the horizontal air intake grill at the very top of the air trunks, there would usually be a hole in the grill for the flagstaff to be mounted.

Above: The commissioning pennant is flying from the commander's flagstaff.

Above: This photo shows how the commissioning pennant was attached to the top of the commander's flagstaff on U 96. We can also see how the material splits into two at the bottom of the pennant. As there was only one white merchant victory pennant, it has been attached to this flagstaff rather than the attack periscope.

Part V - AMP Flag Range

Commissioning pennants and a full range of tonnage flags are available from AMP in our "Germany 1939-1945 U-Boot Pennant sheet" (code DK-UBPEN-072). The fabric flags depict the most common design of pennant - the white flag with the tonnage figure rounded to the nearest thousand. The following values are included in the fabric sheet –

500, 1000, 1500, 2000, 2500, 3000, 3500, 4000, 4500, 5000, 6000, 7000, 8000, 9000, 10000, 11000, 12000, 13000 and 15000

Also included in the sheet are –

- Frachter (lower case lettering, with border) X4
- Tanker (lower case lettering, with border) X4
- U 564's Frachter X1
- U 564's Tanker X1
- warship pennant (red flag with destroyer silhouette in white) X2
- warship pennant (white flag with destroyer silhouette in black) X2
- twin-engined aircraft pennant (red flag) X1
- four-engined aircraft pennant (red flag) X2
- twin-engined aircraft pennant (white flag) X1
- four-engined aircraft pennant (white flag) X4
- commissioning pennant X4

Exact figures can be custom designed to order.

As we know, the real number of sinkings and the true tonnage values were often not applied to the flags. This does present difficulties for modellers striving for authenticity. The best method is to find period photos showing the chosen boat with tonnage pennants. However, such shots are usually unavailable to most modellers. The next best method is to look up the boat's patrol history. The patrol history and sinkings of all Kriegsmarine U-boats can be found at the following website –

http://ubootwaffe.net/

Even though we know the true number of sinkings and the true tonnage values, we will still have to make educated guesses as to how many flags were flown and the values painted upon them. If three ships were actually sunk and two damaged, it may be that the crew thought they had sunk all five. They may even have thought they had sunk an extra vessel or two. In this case, having six flags flying from the attack periscope would be perfectly reasonable. As for the values, it may be prudent to round up the real values. For a ship of 3,456 tons, one could use a pennant flag of 4,000 or even 5,000 tons.

Part VI - Sources

Primary sources

War diaries (*Kriegstagebücher* or KTBs) of U 47 (T1022, roll numbers 2970 and 2971).

Photo sources

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