



Walther Schwieger was born in Berlin during the early spring of 1885. From a respected family, he spent his career with the German navy.

When World War I erupted, Schwieger was promoted to the rank of Kapitänleutnant. He commanded a U-boat known as *U-20*.

Schwieger, and his *U-20* crew, wanted to sink as many ships as possible so they could keep improving their tonnage “kills.” The bigger the ships they sank, the more their tonnage totals improved.

During May, of 1915, Schwieger—30 years old at the time—was patrolling an area near Ireland. He wanted to get his U-boat to Liverpool, where he’d have lots of potential targets, but foggy weather interfered with his plans.

Turning his vessel toward his home base, Schwieger saw a potential “prize” on May 7, 1915. It was the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship with 1962 people aboard. Three of those individuals were Germans who had been spotted on board, after the vessel left New York, and placed in confinement for the entire passage.

Schwieger sent one torpedo toward the *Lusitania* when it was about 10-12 miles offshore from Ireland’s Old Head of Kinsale (near Kinsale in County Cork). The great ship—which was 800 feet long and weighed 30,396 tons—sank in eighteen minutes.

Schwieger’s strike killed 1201 people, including men, women, children and infants (plus the three German prisoners).

How many bodies, of the *Lusitania* victims, were recovered? Fewer than 300.

Sixty-five of the 289 recovered bodies were never identified.

All the rest of the bodies were lost at sea.

After transferring from *U-20* to *U-88*—because his original ship ran aground off the Danish coast on November 4, 1916—Schwieger continued to sink vessels, including those from neutral countries (like Norway and Denmark).

Before Schwieger and his crew died aboard *U-88*—likely from a mine which the boat hit, in the North Sea, on September 5, 1917—his destroyed-or-damaged-tonnage totals were:

- 185,212 from 49 ships which he and his crew sank;
- 3,092 from 3 ships which he and his crew damaged; and
- 397 tons from 1 warship which he and his crew damaged.

In all, Schwieger sank or damaged a total of 188,700 tons.

One month before he died, Schwieger was awarded Germany’s highest military award, the *Orden Pour le Mérite*—also known as “The Blue Max”—for his war efforts.

Although some of his countrymen valued Schwieger’s actions, people elsewhere in the world did not consider his repeated sinkings to be either courageous or gallant. In Britain, after the demise of the *Lusitania*, Schwieger was known as the “Baby Killer.”

Credits:

Image of Kapitänleutnant Walther Schwieger—commander of *U-20* on May 7, 1915—taken on July 31, 1917

(when he received Germany's highest military award, the Orden Pour le Mérite, also known as "The Blue Max").

Photo by Horst Sturm, working for ADN (Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst)—that is, the General German Intelligence Agency—and maintained by Das Bundesarchiv (the German Federal Archives) as "Bild [picture] 134-C1831."

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