

Dancin' JANSSEN and the Capture of a Spy

By John Epp

Last summer, Marc Suttle reached out to us suggesting we produce an episode of our podcast, DE Classified, on USS JANSSEN (DE-396). After exchanging emails, he relayed a remarkable story of survival and humanity involving JANSSEN and the German U-boat, U-1229.

Ralph Wille Janssen was born in Chicago Heights, Illinois on 28 January 1915. At the age of 25, he enlisted in the Naval Reserve and was assigned to the destroyer USS PORTER (DD-356). On 26 October 1942, the newly promoted Lieutenant (j.g.) was killed in a torpedo attack during the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. In recognition for his service and sacrifice, the Navy chose to name one of their newest ships after Lt. (j.g.) Janssen.

Laid down by the Brown Shipbuilding Co. in Houston, Texas on 4 August 1943, the future USS JANSSEN was launched only two months later, sponsored by the stepmother of Lt. (j.g.) Janssen, Mrs. Alfred Janssen. Another two months passed and on 18 December, the tin can was placed into commission at the Tennessee Coal and Iron Dock, Lt. Cmdr. Harold E. Cross in command.

With only half of her officers having been out to sea and most of her crew fresh out of boot camp, the "Dancin' JANSSEN," as she came to be known, completed her sea trials and shakedown cruise in Bermuda in February 1944. At the end of the month, she joined Escort Division 51 and rendezvoused with Task group (TG) 21.11 formed around the "baby flattop"

USS BOGUE (CVE-9) as one of the first hunter-killer groups in the Atlantic. It wasn't long until she met her first action.

On 9 March, JANSSEN made a sound contact with U-575. She quickly deployed a pattern of nine depth charges, but no immediate debris was found. Four days later, U-575 was sunk by other elements of TG 21.11. Survivors relayed that though JANSSEN had failed in damaging their boat, they had been forced to crash dive and would have otherwise been able to fire a clean shot at BOGUE.

Only days later, JANSSEN suffered her lone personnel casualty of the war. On the morning of the 15th, Thomas E. Polk, S2c, was reported missing. A search of the area failed to find him and he was listed as missing at sea, presumably having fallen overboard unseen and unheard.

In May, the hunter-killer group was reformed as TG 22.2 and found themselves at Casablanca, French Morocco. Planes from the BOGUE returned after attacking a sub contact. JANSSEN and USS HAVERFIELD (DE-393) investigated and found blocks of crude rubber and other flotsam from the sunk Japanese submarine, I-52. Following this, the group returned to New York City and Casco Bay, Maine for refresher training.

On 1 August, the hunter-killer group set out for their third war patrol, now as TG 22.3. On the 20th, JANSSEN and three other destroyer escorts were detached from BOGUE to attack a U-boat. By the time they arrived, it had been sunk by aircraft. 42 survivors from U-1229 were found in the water in two large groups of rubber life rafts lashed together. At 1606, JANSSEN maneuvered alongside the two groups and with the aid of cargo nets and lifelines, rescued all 42 from the water by 1620. Despite medical treatment, one of the submariners, Stabs Ober

Steuermann Fritz Beer, succumbed due to immersion and shock. He was buried at sea in accordance with the traditions of the Navy and in the presence of the senior surviving officer.

In the late 1990s, about ten years after his father had passed, Marc went through his father's Navy memorabilia. Among the items were some buttons and insignia from a German uniform, a small piece of beadwork that contained several swastikas, a small metal comb, German made multi-purpose pocket knife and what appeared to be a German military ID "dog" tag. On one side of the tag was the word Kriegsmarine (the name of the German navy from 1935-1945) and what he assumed was the wearer's service number. On the other side was a name - Rich Sobotta.

Marc then set out to learn more about Rich and through the power of the internet, got in contact with him. Through numerous letter exchanges, Sobotta described his attempts to climb the cargo net onto the JANSSEN but due to weakness from blood loss and having only one good arm he fell back into the water. Marc's father, Alvin, immediately jumped into the cold Atlantic waters and tied a rope around Sobotta's upper body and he was brought aboard. He credits Alvin with saving his life. Once aboard, he was rushed to the medical officer who was forced to amputate his arm due to his severe injuries. Somewhere along the journey, Sobotta's clothing and personal effects were removed, and Alvin took possession, keeping them for the rest of his life.

Unbeknownst to TG 22.3, U-1229 was close to completing a top-secret mission prior to her discovery and sinking. After the survivors were given medical treatment, clothing, and food, the interrogations began. Most of the crew answered questions rather easily including an interesting fellow by the name of Oskar Mantel. Unlike most of the others, his English was spectacular, thus making him a prime target for intelligence gathering. Through questioning, it

was learned that Oskar had never been on a submarine before and in fact, wasn't even a Navy man! He had joined the Army early in the war with most of his work revolving around propaganda and espionage with the Abwehr, the German military-intelligence service for the Reichswehr and the Wehrmacht.

At the time of his capture, he was 40 years old and had been a resident of New York City for twenty years, working in the wholesale cosmetic business, until he returned to Germany in 1941. His sister remained there and owned three beauty shops. After he left the United States, he briefly spent time in Japan, Russia, and one and a half years in Paris where he "was always laying up with the women." He said he had a lovely time there, with a smile on his face.

Other information gathered from him indicated he had no idea what the mission of the submarine was other than the commanding officer, Korvettenkapitän Armin Zinke, having been ordered to stay submerged as they approached Nova Scotia due to the dangers of escort vessels. Zinke apparently chose to stay on the submarine as it sank rather than be captured. Mantel, on the other hand, chose to swim to a life raft after realizing he would be unable to drown himself. His story up until this point did not make sense. It wasn't until the discovery of a large amount of United States currency that the pieces began to be put together: Oskar Mantel was a spy!

At this point in the war, very few U-boats were even able to enter the North Atlantic, let alone land an agent on American soil. Thus, the discovery and sinking of U-1229 by aircraft from BOGUE and subsequent rescue of its crew by JANSSEN, meant further espionage efforts in the United States by elements of the German military had been severely damaged. Oskar Mantel was eventually repatriated to Germany in 1947.

The remainder of JANSSEN's Atlantic service was quiet until April 1945. Intelligence had been gathered indicating a large-scale U-boat operation was planned, with some boats

equipped with V-1 rockets to attack coastal cities. And who you may ask was one of the informants? None other than Oskar Mantel.

With this information at hand, Operation Teardrop was commenced after learning of numerous U-boat deployments in March. Two “Barrier Forces” were deployed to intercept the incoming advance of U-boats. In total, four escort carriers and forty-two destroyer escorts set up picket lines. For the next couple of weeks, five U-boats were sent to the ocean floor and four others were captured when Germany surrendered. JANSSEN had made an attack on U-546 following the sinking of USS FREDERICK C. DAVIS (DE-136) but was forced to retire after expending all of her depth charge pistols needed for deep water depth charge attacks.

With Germany’s surrender also came the end of Dancin’ JANSSEN’s service. Though she was overhauled for Pacific service, she only made it as far as Pearl Harbor before Japan surrendered. She returned to the mainland, ferrying veterans of the Pacific Theater back home. She entered Green Cove Springs, Florida for deactivation in late October 1945 and was decommissioned 12 April 1946. She earned one Battle Star for her World War II service and shares the Presidential Unit Citation for her role in the BOGUE hunter-killer groups.