



## EPISODE 12, 2004: NEWPORT U-BOAT BROCKTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Tukufu: Our next story investigates the Navy's largest single combat loss in New England waters during World War II. It is April 23, 1945. On a cold, clear afternoon in Casco Bay, Maine, Navy sailors carry out routine exercises. The U.S.S. Eagle 56, a World War I-era Patrol escort, tows buoys for target practice. Suddenly, a massive explosion rips the ship in two. It sinks within minutes, killing 49 of its 62 crew members. After they are rescued, several of the 13 survivors report seeing the conning tower of a submarine. The Navy, however, attributes the disaster to a faulty boiler, a story they stick to for the next 45 years, until 2001, when they finally admit the truth. The Eagle 56 was sunk by a German U-boat. Today, we've heard about two weathered old propellers said to have been salvaged from the wreck of a German U-boat in 1953. The possibility that these were part of the submarine that sank the Eagle 56 is of special interest to two brothers from Brockton, Massachusetts. Bob and Paul Westerlund's father was aboard the Eagle 56 the day it was destroyed.

Westerlund: In 1945, I recall a Navy chaplain and a Navy commander coming to the house, informing my mother that my dad was missing in action. I remember them crying in the kitchen, you know, saying it was lost. I think that any artifact that we can see that in relationship to my dad's death on the ship is very important to us.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. I'm headed to Newport, Rhode Island, to investigate this story. I'm meeting the Westerlund brothers at the inn at castle hill, where the propellers are located.

Westerlund: Well, here they are, Tukufu. What do you think?

Tukufu: These are impressive.

Westerlund: It's amazing they're just thrown out here in the lawn like this.

Tukufu: Yes, it is. Now what do you want to know about 'em?

Westerlund: We've always been under the impression that these are from the submarine that sunk my dad's ship in 1945, April 23, off the coast of Portland, Maine.

Tukufu: Okay.

Westerlunds: Okay, the U.S.S. Eagle 56. But we've never been able to prove it. And we'd like to know for sure to add a little closure to the story as to whether these are actually the props. To know that these are the props that came off of that submarine would really mean something to us.

Tukufu: Look, I can see this is an important story, and I'm going to do my best to get you an answer as quickly as I can. I can't take these propellers with me, so I'm taking some photographs for reference. Before I do anything else, I want to confirm these are, in fact, U-boat propellers. I've come to Chicago, to visit the Museum of Science and Industry. They have one of the few U-boats to survive the War in their collection. Keith Gill is the curator of a new exhibition space currently being built around their sub.

Tukufu: Whoa!

Keith Gill: This is it. This is the U-505.

Tukufu: Yeah, it's a pretty big boat.

Keith: It's 252 feet long, about 630 tons.

Tukufu: Now, how did you acquire this U-boat?

Keith: Well, it was captured on June 4, 1944, by an American hunter/killer group off the west coast of Africa.

Tukufu: I show Keith my photos of the Rhode Island propellers. To compare them to the U-505 props, we head down four stories.

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Tukufu: Wow! This baby is long.

Keith: Yeah, everybody's always surprised at the size of this thing.

Tukufu: All right.

Keith: There they are.

Tukufu: Okay.

Keith: Well, here we have a typical U-boat propeller. This is the starboard-side propeller of U-505. And let's do a little comparative analysis here. First of all, we have a one-piece propeller. The blades are not separate from the hub. And in your photograph here, I see you have exactly that.

Tukufu: Yeah.

Keith: We have two propellers, which is a good thing. And then they're handed. In other words, the starboard side has one shape and the port side has another shape, and that's what you have here. You have two different shapes. So the next thing we look at is the pitch of the blade. And this is very steep pitch because the engines are directly connected to the propeller and they move the boat. So that's what I see here. You have a very steep pitch as well.

Tukufu: So you're telling me that this propeller came from a German U-boat?

Keith: I would say most definitely this is a German U-boat propeller.

Tukufu: Okay. This is a strong start. But to prove our props are from the U-boat that sank the Westerlunds' father's ship, I need to know more about the sinking. I'm back in Newport at the McKillop Library. And what I find is fascinating. German U-boats seem to have hit a lot closer to home than most of us realize. Records reveal that after America entered the war in 1941, the German high command implemented operation drumbeat, a plan to use the latest generation of long-range u-boats to attack shipping off the east coast of the United States. On reaching American coastal waters, the Germans were surprised to find peace-time conditions prevailing. Lighthouses were still lit and open radio communications often gave away the position of American merchant ships. This allowed the Germans to sink some 400 ships in the first half of 1942 alone. But British code-breaking skills combined with U.S. computing power helped crack the German enigma codes, and by 1943 the U.S. Navy had begun to get the u-boat threat under control. However, attacks did continue, right up to the end of the war, attacks like the one on the Eagle 56 that killed the Westerlunds' father. I'm looking through this newspaper report of the sinking for any help identifying the submarine that sank the Eagle 56. But all I find is the official account of events.

Tukufu: "It was later determined that the gradual-sinking forward section of the ill-fated craft probably had been mistaken for an enemy sub."

Tukufu: To get to the bottom of this case, I need to meet the man who made the Navy reopen the case. I'm heading to Newport's Naval War College museum, where I've arranged to meet lawyer, diver and naval historian Paul Lawton. It was Paul's research that forced the Navy to reassess the incident back in 2001.

Tukufu: So was the U.S. Navy involved in a cover-up?

Paul Lawton: It appears that way. The official record from the Navy indicated that the Eagle 56 was sunk as the result of a boiler explosion. And that just didn't make any sense to me.

Tukufu: After two years of extensive research and analysis, Paul proved that a boiler explosion could not have sunk the Eagle 56. The Navy responded by revising its official report and admitting that a German submarine had been responsible. In June, 2001, purple hearts were finally awarded to the crew of the Eagle 56, only three of whom were still alive to receive them.

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Tukufu: But why was the U.S. Navy so interested in keeping the truth under wraps?

Paul: Let me show you some photographs I have from my research.

Tukufu: These images would have terrified the public if they had been published at the time.

Paul: And they had actually come up with a design to fire V-2 rockets from towed submersible launch containers. The intention was to attack New York City, and American intelligence found out about this plot.

Tukufu: Really!

Paul: Absolutely. This is an illustration of one of their target maps that was captured by Allied Intelligence after the war. This shows the epicenter of their intended attack, southern Manhattan, New York City.

Tukufu: This plan of attack is eerily reminiscent of the events of September 11. But according to Paul, the German plot never really got off the ground.

Paul: In actuality, they never completed these launch containers. So the attack was not actually going to take place.

Tukufu: The U.S. Navy didn't know that, though. They thought the sub that sank the Eagle 56 could have been coming to attack New York.

Tukufu: So the U.S. Navy was trying to avoid any public panic.

Paul: I'd say that's a fair estimate.

Tukufu: Having stripped away the cover-up, Paul was in the position to identify which submarine had sunk the Westerlunds' father's ship.

Paul: We started researching the case and found out that in actuality she had been torpedoed by the German U-boat, the u-853.

Tukufu: Built between 1942 and '43 by AG Weser shipyards of Bremen, Germany, the U-853 was a late edition to the German Navy. In early 1945, she crossed the Atlantic under the command of her young captain, Oberlieutenant Helmut Froemsdorf. She reached the New England coast in late April and immediately took on her first target, the U.S.S. Eagle 56. We know our propellers were once part of a U-boat, but did they belong to the U-853? To answer that question, I'm heading back to the inn at Castle Hill to meet the owner, Tim O'Reilly. The first thing I want to know is where his propellers came from.

Tim O'Reilly: They were purchased from a salvager by my grandfather, who ran a marine supply store. A gentleman named Oswald Bonifay showed up in town in 1953 and chartered a boat and went out diving with a crew.

Tukufu: Was he a professional salvager?

Tim: Well, he was somewhat of a mysterious character. He was very secretive about what he was doing. No one knows his background. He was apparently looking for treasure.

Tukufu: I ask Tim if he knows exactly where Bonifay died.

Tim: You can't really see it from here. If we go up by the lighthouse, I could show you more accurately.

Tukufu: Okay. So where is it at now?



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Tim: If you look straight out -- we have fog today, fog haze bank -- but block island is out that way about eight miles.

Tukufu: Over there?

Tim: It's about a mile to the east of block island.

Tukufu: Okay.

Tim: Right that way.

Tukufu: So about right there.

Tukufu: Now where is Bonifay? Do you keep in contact with him?

Tim: No. He was a mysterious guy, as I said, and he left town and that's the last I heard of it.

Tukufu: Do you have any records regarding this sale, any documentation that i can use?

Tim: No, no, there's no paperwork that I'm aware of. This was just a transaction between two individuals, not between companies.

Tukufu: This looks like a dead end. I need to try a different approach. I'm in Washington, D.C., to meet Bernard Cavalcante, a senior archivist at the Naval Historical Center. In 2001, Bernard helped Paul Lawton prove the U-853 had torpedoed the Eagle 56.

Tukufu: I'm trying to establish if these propellers came from the U-853. How would I do that?

Bernard Cavalcante: Well, it's a matter of geography. If the propellers are in the area of where the U-853 was sunk, it is most likely that they belong to the 853.

Tukufu: Using intercepted radio communications between the German High Command and its U-boats, Bernard has managed to track the movements and wreck sites of many of the German submarines that patrolled the American coast.

Bernard: The U-869, the U-550, the U-856, U-215 and U-857.

Tukufu: But what about the U-853?

Bernard: I have reconstructed here the movements of 853 at that time. Starting with the sinking in the Gulf of Maine of the U.S.S. Eagle by 853, she slowly moved down the coast along Cape Cod, into the area here where she sank the merchant ship, Black Point.

Tukufu: So this is really close to the coastline.

Bernard: It's very close to the coastline. At that point, after the sinking of Black Point, the U-853 herself came under attack by a lot of the naval anti-submarine warfare forces in that area around Newport and they attacked throughout the night with hedgehogs and depth charges until debris came up from the ocean so they knew that they had sunk the ship.

Tukufu: So I know that...I tell Bernard that our propellers were found just off Newport.

Tukufu: So where was U-853 sunk?

Bernard: Right where you're pointing. It was sunk midway between Point Judith and Block Island, four to five miles away from land.



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Tukufu: This is strong circumstantial evidence. But I need proof.

Bernard: Did you see any markings on the propeller itself?

Tukufu: Yeah, I think I did. Let me just look real quick. One of my photos could contain the evidence we need.

Bernard: This is interesting. This shows the weight of the propeller. It shows a serial number, and it's quite possible that serial number could be located among the shipyard records and could be associated with a U-boat, which the propeller was installed on.

Tukufu: Bernard suggests I contact Jurgen Rohwer, one of Germany's foremost naval historians. I e-mail him images of the engravings. When he finally replies, his e-mail tells me everything I need to know. I'm traveling back to Newport to tell the Westerlund brothers what I've discovered, that these are indeed U-boat propellers. Then I tell them about the e-mail I received from German archivist Jurgen Rohwer. The key was the number DB 1059. DB stands for the shipyard that built the U-boat, and 1059 represents the shipyard's construction number, which Mr. Rohwer says matches his records for the U-853.

Westerlunds: Oh, wow. That's great. Thank you very much. We was just wondering if they were from the U-853. Now we know. Now we know.

Tukufu: Yes.

Westerlund: And when I look at them and when I touch them, I think it means a little more than the first time I saw them.

Tukufu: Absolutely.

Westerlund: I'm sure my mother and my sister and my brother, who can't be here, would love to hear this information. They're going to be really happy when they hear the outcome of this.

Tukufu: And we want to help you bring closure to this event, so we've purchased transport for both of you down to Portland, Maine, and we're going to hire a boat to take you out to the spot where your father's ship went down.

Westerlund: Oh, wow. That's great.

Tukufu: All right.

Westerlund: Thank you very much.

Tukufu: Let me give that to you.

Westerlund: Unbelievable. Thank you. That's awesome; that's awesome.

Tukufu: I hope this allows you to place these objects in a context, which is meaningful for you.

Westerlund: Thank you very much. Again, I appreciate everything you've done.

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