

# Lieutenant Eliot Winslow, Kapitänleutnant Johann-Heinrich Fehler and the Surrender of the Nazis' Top-Secret Submarine, U-234

by William H. Thiesen, PhD

This is the tale of two combat captains. The both shared a love for the sea, the ability to command a crew under extreme conditions, and each was loyal to his country and its wartime cause. But, at the same time, they fought on opposing sides of the Second World War.

Described as a “lanky, hawk-faced man,” Charles Eliot Winslow was born in 1909 and grew up in the Boston area. By 1940, he had become a successful paint salesman and was engaged to be married.



Eliot Winslow

COURTESY OF THE WINSLOW FAMILY

When Winslow began having second thoughts about his upcoming nuptials, instead of calling off the wedding, he joined the navy. So, in 1941, at the ripe age of thirty-one, Winslow found himself called to active duty with the enlisted rating of seaman second class. In his first assignment, he served out of Boston aboard USS *Puffin*, a Maine fishing boat that had been converted for minesweeping duties. In November 1941, just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he decided to apply for an officer's commission in the United States Coast Guard Reserve. He passed the competitive examination and by December had accepted a commission in the Coast Guard.



USCG COLLECTION

*Argo on patrol displaying her World War II armament and haze gray paint scheme.*

Winslow rose through the ranks quickly. In 1942, he served as executive officer in the Coast Guard weather ship *Menemsha*, and then received an appointment to the navy's anti-submarine warfare school in Miami, Florida. Following graduation, the Coast Guard promoted Winslow to lieutenant junior grade and assigned him to the *Argo*, a 165-foot Coast Guard cutter originally built for offshore Prohibition enforcement.

Johann-Heinrich Fehler followed a different career path from his American counterpart. A handsome, clean-cut man, Fehler was born in 1910 and, as a boy growing up near Berlin, longed to go to sea. After completing high school, he signed on with a German sailing vessel in the Baltic Sea and, after two years at sea, began serving on a German ocean-going freighter. He next entered the German merchant marine academy and earned a mate's certificate. In 1933, he joined Adolph Hitler's National Socialist Party, which was recruiting new members throughout Germany. He would remain faithful to the Nazi Party for the rest of his military career.

Fehler found within himself a natural, almost instinctive predisposition for command at sea. In 1936, he joined the German navy—the Kriegsmarine—as an officer cadet. He completed his training and climbed the officer ranks on board German naval vessels, including the notorious commerce raider *Atlantis*. Configured to look like a merchantman, this auxiliary cruiser sank twenty-two Allied and neutral merchant vessels early in World War II, before the

Royal Navy cruiser HMS *Devonshire* discovered the disguised raider and sank her. The British set *Atlantis's* crew adrift in lifeboats, which enabled nearby German U-boats to rescue the crew. It was after this rescue that Fehler altered the course of his naval career from serving on surface warships to joining the submarine corps.

In the later years of the war, Fehler's fate would be tied to the German submarine U-234. One of Germany's oversized Type X-B subs, this 1,650-ton U-boat was designed to lay mines rather than attack enemy shipping. To allow frontline German attack submarines to remain at sea longer, the German navy decided to convert these minelaying subs into *milchkuhs*



Johann-Heinrich Fehler

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(“milk cows”), or submarine fuel tankers. Fehler’s assignment to an undersea tanker proved disappointing—he was hoping to join the fight and command one of the attack subs. Nonetheless, Fehler stayed with *U-234* because requesting another position would have postponed his deployment or garnered him a shore assignment.

On the East Coast, the US Navy assigned cutter *Argo* and her sister ships to patrol and convoy duties. *Argo* carried a crew of seventy-five men and was fitted with radar and sonar equipment, an armament of three-inch and twenty-millimeter guns, and depth charges and other anti-submarine weapons. As escorts, *Argo* and her sister ships were typically assigned to a convoy, tracked underwater contacts, and attacked anything that resembled the sonar signature of a submarine.

Beginning in February 1943, Eliot Winslow served as senior watch officer and navigation officer onboard *Argo*, but he rose rapidly through the ship’s officer ranks and, in April, was promoted to executive officer while concurrently serving as gunnery officer. After only two months as the cutter’s XO, the Coast Guard promoted him again, this time to commanding officer. In June 1944, the senior member of a navy inspection team reported, “The [*Argo*’s] commanding officer is an able and competent officer, forceful, decisive, military in conduct and bearing, maintaining discipline with a firm yet tactful hand.” Recognizing Winslow’s leadership qualities and excellent seamanship, the service retained him as *Argo*’s CO for the rest of the war.

Meanwhile, in December 1944, the German high command summoned Johann-Heinrich Fehler to Berlin for meetings where he learned his U-boat would not undertake the usual milchkuh refueling mission. Instead, *U-234* would serve as an undersea freighter to ship important war materiel to Japan. The German high command had sent U-boats to Japan before, with three out of four submarine freighters lost while attempting the passage. In the final stages

of the war, they were left with no alternative for shipping cargoes to Germany’s last remaining ally.

Space was limited in even the largest U-boats. To maximize *U-234*’s capacity, every conceivable watertight compartment on board was allocated to critical war materiel. The 300 tons of cargo *U-234* loaded for the voyage included many of Germany’s latest armaments and military technology, such as new radar, anti-tank and armor weapons, and the latest explosives and ammunition. Military aviation materials included documents and technical drawings for several fighter aircraft, high-performance aircraft engines, and three disassembled Messerschmitt fighter aircraft (ME 262, ME 163 and ME 309). *U-234* also carried raw materials rarely found in Japan, such as lead (74 tons),

Mercury (26 tons), optical glass (7 tons) and uranium oxide ore (1,200 pounds). By 1945, communication between Germany and Japan had become problematic, so *U-234* also carried one ton of mail and correspondence for German military, diplomatic, and civilian personnel located in Japan.

Not only did Fehler have to ship important cargo, his orders also required him to ferry critical military personnel to Japan. His twelve passengers included two Japanese military officers, an air force colonel, and a navy captain. In addition, two civilian employees of the Messerschmitt Aircraft Company, four German naval officers, and four German air force officers, including the flamboyant Luftwaffe general Ulrich Kessler, were on board when *U-234* embarked on her long voyage.



*Using the schnorkel mast, shown here next to the conning tower, U-boats could run their diesel engines while submerged by sucking air through an intake at the top of the mast while blowing diesel fumes out of the schnorkel’s exhaust manifold.*



Fehler departed Germany on 15 April, dubious of making it to Japan. *U-234* cruised without surfacing for more than two weeks, using the U-boat's advanced schnorkel system, and reached the Atlantic by early May. After their departure, however, the Nazi war machine collapsed, Adolph Hitler killed himself, and other Nazi leaders fled Berlin. The surrender of German military forces fell to Admiral Karl Dönitz, head of the German submarine fleet, and on 5 May 1945 he broadcast the order for all deployed U-boats to surrender to Allied naval forces.

By the time Fehler received Dönitz's order, he was halfway across the Atlantic.

Coast Guard played an important role in taking over these last enemy naval vessels of World War II. The navy selected six patrol vessels as its "surrender unit," including the three 165-foot Coast Guard cutters *Dione*, *Nemesis* and *Argo*; and the navy designated Winslow and *Argo* as the unit's leader.

Within ten days of Dönitz's surrender order, *Argo* began a busy routine of ferrying surrendering U-boats to Portsmouth from a pre-arranged offshore rendezvous point. For the first U-boat, Winslow kept *Argo* on station at the appointed location despite heavy seas and winds of sixty-five miles per hour. On 16 May, *U-805* arrived with her navy escort. *Argo* took on board her

to questions was "I am a Nazi. I will always be a Nazi." Within days of his surrender, he committed suicide in his jail cell.

Finally, on 19 May, the *Argo* rendezvoused with *U-234* and her escort, USS *Sutton*. Kapitänleutnant Fehler, his officers, and his passengers were ferried over to *Argo* from the *Sutton*. According to Commander Moffat, Fehler climbed over the rail, cheerfully introduced himself and extended his hand in greeting, but Moffat did not return Fehler's proffer of a handshake. Denied a warm greeting by the American, Fehler went on to remark: "Come now, commander, let's not do this the hard way. Who knows but that one of these days you'll be surrendering



US NAVY PHOTO

*Rare color photo of the newly surrendered U-805, 16 May 1945. "The U-805, first submarine to surrender, was escorted by Argo at 12 knots for the last 50 miles to Portsmouth. According to Winslow, "Ten prisoners were stowed in the forward anchor chain locker, 23 aft over the screws, with 5 officers below decks, all under heavy guard. Modern conveniences at their disposal consisted solely of a 10-quart pail. Shower baths with smelling salts and sandwiches were omitted."*

He decided he would surrender to the Americans, but first disposed of all top-secret devices and papers. As *U-234* steamed westward, the two Japanese officers on board chose to commit suicide to avoid capture, and Fehler buried their bodies at sea before *U-234* came into contact with the Americans. Four other U-boats would choose to surrender to American forces, including *U-805*, *U-873*, *U-1228*, and *U-858*, which surrendered to an armed yacht patrolling off the Delaware coast. The US Navy decided to escort the four remaining U-boats to the Portsmouth Navy Yard, near Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

As it had played a major role in capturing the first German vessel of the war (the arctic trawler *Buskoe* in 1941), the US

officers and transferred armed personnel to the U-boat to oversee the German enlisted crew operating the sub. The senior US Navy representative in *Argo*, Commander Alexander Moffat, was struck by the youth and naiveté of *U-805*'s enlisted crew. Most of them, he recalled, were little more than boys, and their superiors had denied them any information about the war and the enemy they were fighting.

After delivering *U-805* to the American navy base and the crew to an armed guard detail, *Argo* returned to sea and repeated the process twice over the next two days with *U-873* and *U-1228*. Some of the U-boat officers, such as *U-873*'s Kapitänleutnant Fritz Steinhoff, proved to be fervent Nazis. Steinhoff's only response

to me? In a few years, you will see Germany reborn. In the meantime, I shall have a welcome rest at one of your prisoner of war camps with better food, I am sure, than I have had for months. Then I'll be repatriated ready to work for a new economic empire."

Surprised by his less-than-warm reception by the Americans, Fehler proceeded below decks with his officers and passengers. The prisoners were ordered to sit still with their arms folded, which prompted Fehler to complain bitterly to the American interpreter about their treatment. After learning about Fehler's behavior, Winslow went below and ordered the guards to "shoot any prisoner who as much as scratches his head without permission." Later, the Germans were disembarked with local journalists





This image shows *Argo* moored at Portsmouth Navy Yard on 19 May 1945, with U-234 crewmembers assembled on the fantail and Coast Guard officers and men looking on.

observing from the dock. Luftwaffe General Kessler saluted Winslow and politely asked permission to depart the ship, to which Winslow silently pointed the way. Fehler left the cutter protesting to Winslow, “Your

men treated me like a gangster.” Already simmering over Fehler’s hubris and loud behavior, Winslow pointed to the gangway and barked, “That’s what you are. Get off [my ship]!”

In his personal collection of photos from the event (below), LTJG Eliot Winslow’s hand-written captions included: “The Finger: May 19, 1945, Kapitaneut [sic] Jahann Heinrich Fehler was captain of the 1600 ton submarine U-234 bound for Japan with a \$5,000,000 cargo of mercury and tons of blue prints of the latest robot bombs and jet-propelled planes. He complained bitterly when ordered with 4 of his officers to sit on the deck with arms folded. Informed by the interpreter of the situation, I went below and ordered the guards to ‘shoot any prisoner who as much as scratched his head without permission.’ An apology must accompany every shooting. When Fehler was about to disembark, he was still growling. He was informed to save his grumbling for the captain, who would be at the gangway. When asked by the interpreter what were his troubles, he replied first in German. Then turning to me, he said in good English, ‘Ach—my men have been treated like gangsters.’ I had been simmering for an hour but that remark brought me to a boil. With eyes meeting head on, I barked ‘that’s what you are GET OFF!’ My outstretched arm pointed to the gangway. Strange as it may seem, there was no profanity for the moment, but I must confess the air was blue for 5 minutes while I muttered to myself.”



After they disembarked, an armed guard escorted U-234’s prisoners to the base prison at the navy yard. Meanwhile, the navy’s surrender unit was disbanded, and Winslow asked the senior naval officer in charge if there were any further orders for *Argo*. The navy captain responded, “*Argo* has done an excellent job, Winslow, and the navy appreciates it. For the record, I shall thank you in a letter. If there is anything I can do for you at any time, don’t fail to contact me.”

U-234’s prisoners were held at Portsmouth for a few days before the navy bused them to a larger facility in Boston. Most of the enlisted men were dispersed to internment camps on the East Coast, but a few returned to the Portsmouth Navy Yard to help unpack U-234’s important cargo. Navy officials deemed Fehler, his passengers, and officers to be of high intelligence value and flew them from Boston to Washington, DC, for further interrogation and processing.

To determine the contents of U-234’s cargo, the navy drydocked the U-boat and surrounded it with a shroud to shield the sensitive unloading activities. The US Navy Department ordered a full inventory of the U-boat’s cargo and sent the ME 262 and ME 163 to the Army Air Force’s Wright Field in Ohio for analysis and testing. Much of the remaining technology, including some





NAZI CIVILIAN ABOARD COAST GUARD CUTTER ARGO  
THOUGHT BY SOME TO BE ADOLF HITLER

JOHN FLOYD MORRIS  
USCGR MAY 17 - 1945



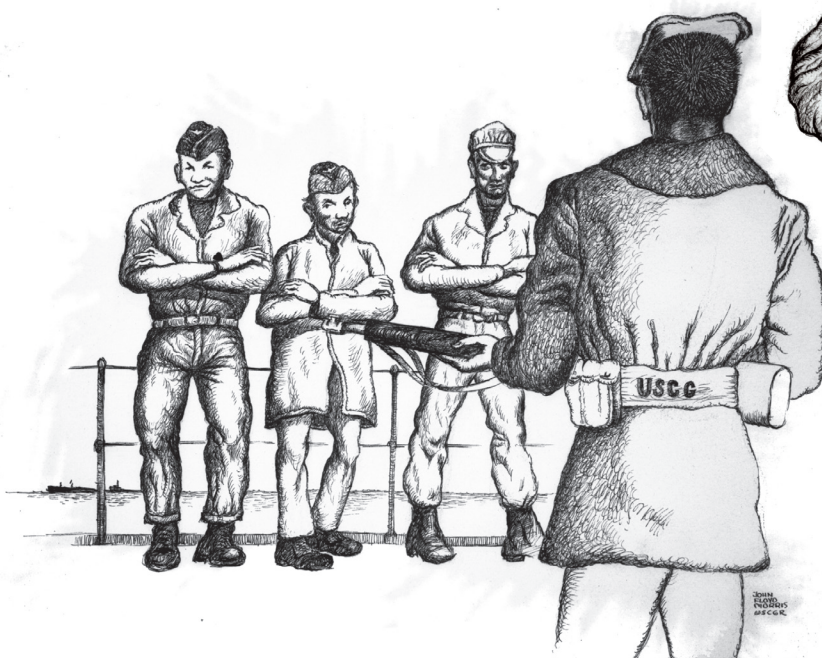
NAZI PRISONER OF WAR  
TAKEN FROM SUB U-234  
ABOARD U.S. COAST GUARD  
CUTTER ARGO

JOHN FLOYD MORRIS  
USCGR MAY 17 - 1945



NAZI LT. GEN. ULRICH KESSLER ABOARD COAST GUARD CUTTER ARGO

JOHN FLOYD MORRIS USCGR  
MAY 19 1945



*Argo enlisted man and Coast Guard artist John Floyd Morris, who was on board at the time, made a series of sketches showing members of U-234's passengers and crew.*

JOHN FLOYD MORRIS SKETCHES COURTESY OF THE US COAST GUARD COLLECTION



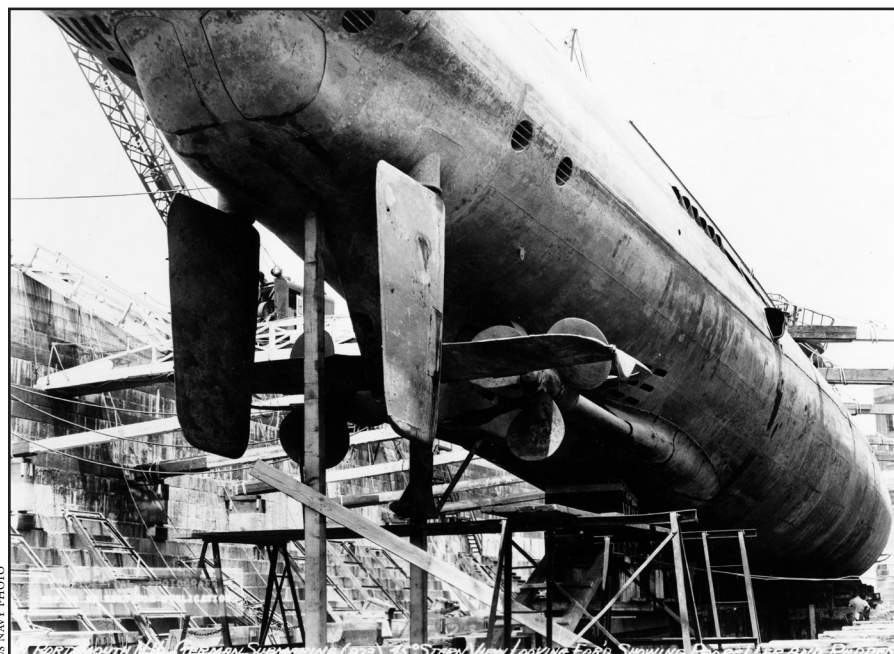
of the Messerschmitt aviation material, was retained for US Navy research. The fate of the uranium oxide remains unknown, but the ore was likely shipped to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, for processing.

With *U-234*'s surrender, the sub's operational days were over; however, for two more years, the navy analyzed her design and construction. The U-boat was subjected to numerous tests to compare the durability and performance of German U-boats to the latest American submarine technology. By the spring of 1946, extensive dockside inspections and testing at sea had been conducted and, for another year, advanced equipment and sophisticated technology was stripped from the U-boat for testing and analysis on shore. Finally, on 19 November 1947, *U-234* was sunk as a target by the American submarine *USS Greenfish*. Surprisingly, it took two torpedoes to send the U-boat to the bottom.

Naval Intelligence officials processed Fehler and the other *U-234* officers through Fort Hunt, near George Washington's Mt. Vernon home, before the men were dispersed to internment camps along the East Coast. The navy sent Fehler to a facility reserved for fervent Nazi officers and, in 1946, he returned home by sea, along with other repatriated Germans. While Fehler sank no ships as a submarine commander, his association with *U-234* made him the subject of journalists, writers, and researchers, making him, perhaps, one of the better-known U-boat



US NAVY PHOTO



US NAVY PHOTO

captains. After returning to Germany, Fehler settled in Hamburg and passed away in 1993 at the age of eighty-two.

After the war, the Coast Guard experienced a dramatic decrease in personnel levels, forcing the service to retire ships such as *Argo*. At first, the service mothballed the cutter at the Coast Guard's training station at Cape May, New Jersey; however, in 1948, the service decommissioned the vessel and then sold her in 1955. In 1959, a New York

(above) Ultimately, *U-234* was used for target practice by the US Navy. On 20 November 1947, *USS Greenfish* shot a torpedo at her as she lay on the surface, approximately 40 miles off Cape Cod. (left) This dramatic image shows the immense size of *U-873* in drydock in Portsmouth. All the German submarines dwarfed *Argo* in terms of length, tonnage, and armament.

sightseeing business acquired *Argo* and she began a second career as a city tour boat.

After his wartime responsibilities had ended, Eliot Winslow was ready to go home. In a letter to his command, he wrote, "If the *Argo*...is scheduled to fight the wintry blasts alone all winter, my answer is, 'Get me off.' One winter upside down was enough for me. It took me three weeks [on shore] to regain the full use of my feet!" After retiring from active duty, Winslow settled in Southport, Maine (near the port city of Bath), where he started a business running tugs and local tour boats. For years, Winslow gave summertime tours of the southern Maine coast aboard the sightseeing vessel he named for his old cutter, the *Argo*. Winslow lived to see his nineties at his home in Southport.

Winslow and Fehler fought on opposite sides of World War II and took very different paths in their wartime journeys. Both men found a unique role to play in the conflict, one as a German U-boat commander and the other as a Coast Guard cutter captain. Neither officer could have imagined the roles they would play in the



COURTESY OF THE WINSLOW FAMILY

*After completing the successful transfer of surrendered U-boats to Portsmouth, Captain Winslow navigated Argo up to Southport, Maine, to anchor in front of his parents' home situated on Love Cove. The cutter barely fit through the rocky narrows and is the only vessel of its size and kind to have visited the sparsely populated area.*

war, nor how their paths would cross in the closing act of the Battle for the Atlantic. ⚓

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