



Jurgen Prochnow is the U-boat captain who leads the crew of the U-96 on a daring patrol of the North Atlantic in "Das Boot."

the movies
**Louise
Snider**

Life aboard U-boat reveals wartime from the other side

Many movies have conveyed the horror of war — the suffering, the pain, the waste.

"Das Boot" (The Boot) (R), a German film about life aboard a submarine during World War II, conveys the stench of war. If ever a movie made real the awfulness of close confinement, this one does.

Forty-three men are crowded aboard the U-boat. They share one toilet. They share bunks on a rotating shift because there aren't enough to go around. They work, sleep and eat in their 10-foot-wide tube.

They joke about how long it has been since they bathed or changed clothes. There is no such thing as privacy. Even the captain has no cabin of his own.

The crew appears to be an afterthought in submarine design. The long, narrow vessel is nothing more than a sheath for its stock of torpedoes. That there should be life within this metal envelope seems absurd.

IN THIS SURREAL environment, where salamis hang from machinery and stalks of bananas cover the chart table, you can believe in the eccentric humor of the German crew bursting into a chorus of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary."

Life aboard the sub is an unmerging mixture of extremes. For weeks it can be so utterly boring that nose picking is a recreational activity, then suddenly the crew is caught up in heart-stopping fear from an unremitting depth-charge attack.

Wolfgang Petersen, who wrote and directed "Das Boot," makes these scenes more vivid and realistic than those found in any other submarine movie.

This is what separates "Das Boot" from other "submarine" movies, a genre which doesn't allow for much originality. Although it uses familiar material — scenes of a ship as both hunter and hunted — it makes the scenes so intense and gives them so much muscle, you don't think of them as clichés.

Beyond that, the most interesting aspect of the movie, for an American audience, is seeing the war from a different perspective. One sequence is especially revealing. The U-boat just sank an Allied freighter and is confronted by the sight of survivors in the water crying for help.

THE SUB'S OFFICERS are upset that some other Allied ship in the convoy did not remove the men from the freighter, which had been burning for some time. In other words, they are angry because their consciences are troubled.

While the ship was intact, it was a target, but with the ship sunk and the crew in distress, the Germans are reminded that they are seamen as well as military men. They don't like being reminded. The law of the sea dictates that they help those in the distress. The reality of war argues against such action.

This kind of psychological realism adds to the integrity of the movie, which is supported by a roster of fine performances. On the negative side, the movie does run long. Fifteen minutes worth of scenes of the sub cutting through the water could have been pared away without affecting the content. The impact would still be there.

"Das Boot" gives us a cynical view of war from the losing side.



Cramped quarters and long months at sea take their toll on the crew.

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