

WANTON
FATE

C. S. Forester

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BY C. S. FORESTER

In telling this story, the first picture I have in my mind's eye is one which I have never seen in actuality. It is the edge of the great icecap that covers the interior of Greenland; in the north this vast shield of ice, hundreds of feet thick, extends to the very edge of the land and even beyond, far out to sea. The snow which falls there both in winter and summer turns to ice under the steady pressure of its own vast weight, and this ice, continually renewed in the center, spreads out so that its edges in the sea continually break off, forming the icebergs which drift south to their ultimate fate in the warmer waters of the North Atlantic. In summer it is eternally day, if you can call it that, where skies are leaden gray and excruciating winds sweep over the icy surface.

Captured German records which, in my capacity as naval historian, I was allowed to consult, show that it was here, immediately after the German conquest of Norway in the spring of 1940, that two Germans named Marwitz and

Diepholz brought their ski-equipped plane to a landing. This is the place where much of the weather of the world originates, and the German High Command, with its plans for the conquest of France and the invasion of England, needed for its weather forecasts the data that Greenland could supply. German scientists had devised ingenious automatic apparatus, weatherproof and coldproof. Once installed, each unit at regular intervals would emit a radio signal giving the barometric pressure—a feeble enough signal, but strong enough for a German submarine lurking off the coast to be able to pick it up and relay it to Germany.

It was the duty of Marwitz and Diepholz to install one of these self-recording, automatic broadcasting barometers and to see that it was functioning properly before they left. They did the job thoroughly enough; at Ballestrand, Norway, the Germans had a Naval Air Arm base, and the newspapers published there for several months during 1940 carried notes of the instrument's broadcasts being received. But Marwitz was the only one of the two who returned to Norway.

I have read with my own eyes Marwitz' explanation of Diepholz' disappearance. Marwitz reported that Diepholz fell down a crevasse—an easy enough thing to do on the seaward edge of the Greenland icecap. For here the ice is widely seamed; the slowly advancing ice sheet curls over lofty cliffs and, in its curling over, cracks wide open in crevasses a hundred feet deep which close again when the ice levels itself out on the surface of the sea.

Judging by his notes, the Gestapo spy at Ballestrand had no doubt that Marwitz had pushed Diepholz into the crevasse, but nothing could be proved. Two men had gone out and one had returned.

The Gestapo spy knew there had been causes of enmity between the two men—no unusual thing in Germany where standing in the Party was often a matter of life and death. But when I interviewed Marwitz in his padded cell in a prison hospital, at Clayton, Ohio, he said many things the spy never knew.

It was a sufficiently revolting story. There was a Norwegian girl—or rather there *had been* a Norwegian girl until the moment of her death—over whom Marwitz and Diepholz had quarreled. A nasty story, and one which reflected no credit whatever on either Marwitz or Diepholz.

The men had not quarreled during their two or three days on the Greenland ice, although heaven knows (and the Gestapo spy hinted) that it would be easy enough for two men to quarrel in that bleak, gray, frozen hell. But Marwitz, I know from his own lips, murdered Diepholz, caught him unawares on the edge of a crevasse and pushed him down.

The fall did not kill Diepholz. He lay there at the bottom of the crevasse, crying up to Marwitz for mercy until at last hunger and cold combined with his injuries to kill him. But just before the end he left off crying for mercy and feebly screamed threats of retribution, threats at which Marwitz could well afford to smile as he stood on the lip of the crevasse with the snow-laden wind blowing round him and waited for the end.

Then Marwitz climbed back into the plane and took off on his flight back to Norway.

The records show that soon after his return to Ballestrand, Marwitz was transferred to new duties—he undoubtedly left Ballestrand under a cloud as a result of the scandal about Diepholz' disappearance. At this time the German U-boat attack was expanding gigantically and so were the German U-boat losses.

Good submarine officers, always hard to find, were growing scarcer, and Marwitz was put into the U-boat service, based on the French coast at La Rochelle, where he was given a boat of his own, U-295, and the rank of *Kapitän-Leutnant*.

The Ballestrand and La Rochelle records told me much about Marwitz, as did a petty officer who had served under him and whom I was fortunate enough to be able to trace to a prisoner-of-war camp in California. As I had seen for myself, Marwitz was a bulky silent man, with slightly protuberant gray eyes, and the petty officer made it plain that he was also a cold man, with a certain lust for cruelty.

He was, therefore, feared and hated in the U-295, but that hardly mattered to the German Naval Command as long as he maintained a fair record of sinkings. And he did go out repeatedly from the spring of 1941 to the spring of 1944; they had some narrow escapes, but they did not meet with disaster for three years—four years after Diepholz had met his death in the crevasse.

They were after the North Atlantic convoy in May, 1944.

With the invasion of France in the immediate future every German submarine available was given the same task. But the convoy they attacked was heavily guarded by ships manned with experienced veterans. U-295 was detected below the surface and attacked repeatedly by depth charges. The petty officer's round blue eyes grew wide with terror as he told me about the awful ordeal of that hunt—the constant rain of depth charges, the explosions which flung them about inside the flimsy hull, the leaks which developed and the machinery which broke down. Marwitz had kept his head—the petty officer gave me a neat word picture of him standing in the control room giving his orders—and at the very last second, U-295 had escaped from her tormentors.

They were compelled to surface, because of the leaks; in fact the submarine was in a bad way, with holes in her hull, and her fuel tanks leaking so that she left a long trail of oil behind her. But her Diesels were unharmed and on the surface she could still make twenty knots, as Marwitz ordered when he came out on the bridge. The weather was as thick as North Atlantic weather usually is, and he was momentarily out of sight of the pursuing escort vessels which for the last thirty-six hours had hounded him remorselessly away from the convoy. Twenty knots and thick weather still gave them a chance for safety. With her engines at full throttle she went roaring over the gray sea.

My petty officer informant was up on the bridge with Marwitz. He told me, still wide-eyed, about that mad chase, the freezing spray bursting over them from the bows of the submarine, the wreaths of fog now concealing, now revealing them to their pursuers. Marwitz, still cool, saw a thicker patch

of fog on the horizon and headed for it.

Five seconds later it happened. That fog was the mist which almost always surrounds an iceberg. They saw the glassy vertical surface gleam coldly through the mist, and then they crashed against it, not head on but a diagonal glancing blow which ripped open the bottom of the fleeing U-boat.

It could not have been for very long that they hung against the wall of ice—not more than two or three seconds—but it was long enough. The petty officer's thick lips trembled and his hands gesticulated wildly as he told me about it: There beside them, clearly visible through the glassy ice, entombed a yard deep within the iceberg, stood the body of a man.

"What was he wearing?" I asked.

"A flying suit," replied the petty officer.

"Of what country?"

To this question the petty officer hesitated to reply, and I was obliged to prod him with allusions to the powerful secret government department which I represented and which would stick at nothing when in quest of information.

"A German officer's flying suit," he said at length.

"Did you recognize him?"

"No, I did not," said the petty officer.

"And what did the *Kapitän-Leutnant* say?"

A longer pause this time. Maybe if the petty officer had not heard about the methods of the Nazis for extracting information and imagined me to be versed in the same sort of procedure he would not have answered at all.

"What did the *Kapitän-Leutnant* say?" I repeated.

"He said 'Diepholz! Diepholz!' But I don't know what that means."

I knew what it meant. In the four years since 1940 the ice on the edge of the Greenland icecap had progressed far enough to sea to break off, and an iceberg enclosing Diepholz' body had started on its southward voyage, to a rendezvous with U-295. Maybe it was chance, or maybe a wanton fate had arranged it.

[The end of *Wanton Fate* by C. S. (Cecil Scott) Forester]