

months aboard the cruiser *Admiral Hipper* to gain supplementary experience before joining the U-boat Arm in the rank of Lt Commander at about the time of the outbreak of war.

From July until December, 1940, Bleichrodt commanded U-48 (Teddy Suhren and Otto Ites were his watchkeeping officers), and in two voyages sank the sloop HMS *Dundee*, and fifteen mercantile vessels of 81,038 tons net register plus two others damaged. For this achievement he was awarded the Knight's Cross.

On the night of 18 September, 1940, U-48 sank two steamers within a six-minute period, one of which was the 11,081-ton liner *City of Benares*. Aboard this ship were a number of evacuee children, many of them from prominent Jewish families. Seventy-seven lost their lives. For reasons best known to the British Admiralty, the *City of Benares* had not been declared as a hospital ship and was sailing by night in convoy without lights. She was therefore a legitimate target and the entire responsibility for the sinking lay with the British Admiralty.

However, a slander was created that the Germans knew in advance about the Jewish children aboard the *City of Benares* and Bleichrodt had been detailed to lie in wait for the ship. A likely candidate, Frank Laskier, a Liverpoolian steward, who had lost a leg during the sinking of the *Eurylochus* by the raider *Kormoran* in January, 1941, and therefore had a score to settle, was recruited by Terence de Marnay and Eldon Moore of the BBC to record a number of live talks which were broadcast mainly at peak listening time on Sunday evenings during the war. This propaganda was later published in book form and on 78rpm records (BD958 and BD959) by HMV.

In *My Name is Frank - A Merchant Seaman Talks* (published by Allen & Unwin in 1941), Laskier said, 'We know - we sailors know - they had waited for the *City of Benares*. I am sorry if anybody listening to me had children on the *City of Benares*. It's opening up old wounds I know, but it's infinitely better that these old wounds should be opened and remain open until the end of the war than we who are left, strong and healthy, should forget about it.' More was to be made of this incident once the war was over.

After a short spell as captain of U-67, Bleichrodt was given command of U-109 in June, 1941, and made six Atlantic voyages with this boat, sinking thirteen ships of 81,133 tons net register plus one freighter damaged but salvaged.

In September, 1942, he was awarded the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross. Otto Köhler, former commander of U-377, stated in an obituary that it was about this time that Bleichrodt began to confide his fears for Germany's future and Wolfgang Hirschfeld told



the matter on 26 December, the conclusion drawn about the enemy ship was unjustified. The presumed depth charges were undoubtedly the torpedoes detonating at the end of their run after missing.

The author does not have the War Diary extract for the period preceding the 27 December, 1942, the day when Bleichrodt first reported himself to be suffering from lassitude and deep depression, but it is not difficult to guess what must have transpired on 26 December. Following the failed attack on the merchant vessel, Bleichrodt had fallen victim to a delusional state common in those suffering from the *City of Auckland Syndrome*.

Bleichrodt was next given a shore job as a U-boat crew training officer. On 1 July, 1944, he was promoted to full Commander and made Chief of the 22nd U-Flotilla at Gdynia. On 28 January, 1945, aboard the tender *Weichsel*, he supervised the civilian evacuation from Gdynia by sea as Russian forces encircled the town. In May, 1945, Bleichrodt surrendered the Flotilla to British naval forces at Wilhelmshaven.

Later that year Bleichrodt was detained on a trumped-up war crimes charge in connection with the *City of Benares* sinking. The British admiralty alleged that the Germans had known in advance about the Jewish children of the *City of Benares* and had given Bleichrodt mysterious 'secret orders' to wait for the ship to put out. They had no documentary evidence and the only witness was Laskier, who just *knew*.

In the trial of Lt Eck earlier that year a British military court had introduced the precedent that an enemy naval officer accused of a war crime could be convicted and executed on Affidavit evidence without the right to cross-examine the witness.

Bleichrodt was warned privately that the British wanted a show trial and a hanging and his interrogators would need to resort to a perjured Affidavit to secure a conviction as they hadn't been able to find any evidence. Bleichrodt therefore refused to speak during the entire period of his incarceration and eventually the prosecution had to be abandoned.

In marked contrast to the allegations made against Bleichrodt over the sinking of the *City of Benares*, a very different view of him has been given by Gordon Gill, Second Radio Operator of the *Tuscan Star*, who was saved from drowning by the crew of *U-109* and spent thirty days aboard the U-boat as a prisoner.

Following the arrival of *U-109* at Lorient, Gordon Gill was taken by train to North Germany and interned at the Milag-Nord camp, Tarmstedt, near Bremen. He was eventually freed on 28 April, 1945.

