

Desperate Depths

Autumn of 1944

With US forces well established in liberated France and Soviet troops pushing into Eastern Europe, Nazi Germany is struggling to supply its armies while desperately trying to field its super weapons. The V-2 mobile launch platform ballistic missile, the Messerschmitt 262 jet fighter, the type XXI Elektroboot submarine, all are barely beyond the prototype stage, built in a crumbling economy that is managed by a bureaucracy under pressure to meet impossible demands with slave labor while different departments compete for scarce resources.

The type XXI is a revolutionary concept, the first real modern submarine. It operates primarily submerged with a snorkel to run the diesels and recharge the batteries for 8 hours every 3 days. It features radar and sonar systems, runs silent and faster than many surface ships, and carries enough rapid loading torpedoes to sink a flotilla. The accommodations are luxurious compared to the earlier type VII C. But the situation being what it is, only 4 out of over a hundred type XXI's constructed are ever put into service after extensive post-production work, and those never become as reliable as the old submersible VII C torpedo boats. That is what the official record states.

But another type XXI, U-2553, is rushed into service in secret, dispatched with sealed orders, and charged with a frantic hail-mary to turn the war around. SS officers are added to the experienced sailor crew. They are tight lipped and dismissive, to be delivered somewhere in the South Atlantic with their luggage of several heavy crates. In the dark of night along the African coast a type XIV 'Milchkuh' supply submarine is waiting to rendezvous for a final restocking. During approach the veteran sailors of U-2553 congratulate each other for sinking two Allied freighters on the way and speculate about the nature of the mission ahead in hushed voices.



U-2553

Typ XXI Manufacturer Blohm & Voss, Hamburg

Commissioned 1944 South Atlantic patrol

Displacement (tons)

1621 (surfaced)
1819 (submerged)
2100 (total)

Length (m)

76,70 overall
60,50 pressure hull

Beam (m)

8,00 overall
5,30 pressure hull

Draught (draft)

6,32 m

Height

11,30 m

Power (hp)

4000 (surfaced)
4400 (submerged)

Top speed (knots)

15,6 (surfaced)
17,2 (submerged)

Cruising range (miles / knots)

15500/10 (with snorkel)
340/5 (submerged)

Torpedoes 6 bow tubes

6 G7a steam
10 G7e electric
3 G7es homing

Mines

4 230kg TMA anchored, 270 m cable, contact
6 560kg TMB seabed down to 30m, magnetic release
2 930kg TMC seabed down to 36m, magnetic release

Deck guns

2x twin 2 cm (0.8 in) anti-aircraft guns

Crew

57-60 men

Max depth

ca. 220 m (919 feet)
The calculated crush depth of 330 m is unrealistic

- Transmitting Beacon -

An expendable beacon which can hold a recorded message is released from a submerged U-boat. The message is recorded, and the beacon released, where it floats to the surface and transmits the message after a preset delay. It sinks itself once the message is transmitted.

- Torpedoes 'Eels' -

Torpedoes are broadly categorized into two basic types - the steam powered G7a and the electrically powered G7e. All can be launched from the standard 21 inch U-boat torpedo tube. The G7a leaves a bubble trail in the water. The G7e is considerably slower and has shorter range. Both are fitted with the LUT II (Lageunabhängiger Torpedo) system that allows them to be set on a loop or grid search pattern. The G7es is a new homing torpedo that can optionally be fired blind from depth using the Nibelungen active targeting sonar. If one dares emit several pings to range a target.

The standard torpedo warhead has 617lbs (280kg) of TNT/HND/AL (a mixture of hexanitrophenyl-amine, trinitrotoluene and aluminium). Located at the forward section of the torpedo.

Trigger Magnetic proximity and impact pistols

G7a Torpedo-I LUT II

Maximum Speed 44 knots (at 5,000m range)

Maximum Range 12,500 m (at 30 knots)

Leaves a visible bubble trail in the water which is easily spotted by day.

G7e Torpedo-III a

Maximum Speed 30 knots

Maximum Range 7,000 m

G7es Torpedo-XI 'Zaunkönig II'

Maximum Speed 24 knots

Maximum Range 5,700 m

This homing torpedo becomes active after a straight run of 400 meters. The homing mechanism consists of hydrophone receivers which sense the sound waves of ship propellers, the sensor is only sensitive to targets moving at between 10 and 19 knots. Launching these requires the submarine to fire, then immediately dive and go completely silent to avoid being targeted itself. This latest model deals well with Allied Foxer decoys.


- Mines -


The TMA is a moored mine, secured by anchor and cable attached to the mine. Two can be carried in each torpedo tube.


The TMB is placed on the seabed and released by the magnetic field of a ship hull above it. Three fit in place of one torpedo.


The TMC is an improved version of the TMB with greatly increased warhead. It is a little smaller than the TMA and fits two to a torpedo tube.


U-2553


 **Lettow, Siegfried** Kapitän zur See, Kommandant
(Commanding Officer) 38 Kapitän Lettow or **Käpt'n**


 **Raker, Thomas** Leutnant zur See, I. Wachoffizier
(First Officer) 27 **Leutnant Raker**


 **Peters, Wilhelm** Oberfähnrich zur See, II.
Wachoffizier (Ensign) 24 **Willi**


 **Großmann, Werner** Leutnant (Ing) der Reserve,
Leitender Ingenieur (Officer (technical)) 42
Herr Grossmann


 **Löw, Richard** Leutnant (Ing), Wach-Ingenieur
(Officer (technical)) 28 **Löw**


 **Träger, Hölderlin** Obersteuermann (NCO) 31 **Hölle**
(=hell)


 **Sauer, Gabriel** Steuermannsmaat (NCO low rank) 23
Keule (=club)


 **Becker, Tim** Bootsmaat (NCO low rank) 21 **Timmi**


 **Richter, Lars** Sanitätsobermaat (medic NCO mid
rank) 32 **Pille** (=pill)


 **Müller, Justus** Mechanikermat, Torpedo-Waffe
(torpedo NCO low rank) 23 **Justus**

 **Unruh, Manuel** Funkmaat (radio NCO low rank) 19
Manni


 **Schmidt, Christian** Funkmaat (radio NCO low rank)
20 **Schmidt**

 **Sutter, Norbert** Obermaschinist, Diesel Maschine
(NCO fuel engine) 29 **Budde** (=bottle)


 **Ende, Nikolas** Obermaschinist, E-Maschine (NCO e
engine) 25 **Nick**


 **Wiedermann, Jonas** Maschinenobermaat, Zentrale
(bridge NCO mid rank) 23 **Jo-Jo**


 **Frei, Gernot** Ma.Mt. (NCO low rank) 18 **Gero**

 **Walther, Knud** Maschinenmaat (NCO low rank) 19
Knuddel (=cuddle)

 **Schuster, Tristan** Maschinenmaat (NCO low rank)
20 **Sepp**

 **Meyer, Bastian** Maschinenmaat (NCO low rank) 21
Basti

 **Sondermann, Konstantin** Maschinenmaat (NCO low
rank) 19 **Stoffel**

 **Hahn, Robert** Maschinenmaat (NCO low rank) 21
Robbe (=seal)

 **Schwarz, Tobias** Ma.Mt. (NCO low rank) 22 **Tobi**

Trost, Otto Maschinenmaat (NCO low rank) 19 **Otto**

Weser, Mark Maschinenmaat (NCO low rank) 18 **Mark**
[These are the player characters. They
should be renamed by the players]

Seemännische und Maschinen-Mannschaft (enlisted)

Bärner, Rainer Matrose 18 **Rainer**

Bayer, Roland Matrosenobergefreiter 20 **Rolle**

Clement, Theodor Matrosenhauptgefreiter 26 **Theo**

Dalle, Gunnar Matrosengefreiter 19 **Gunni**

Dormeier, Heiner Matrosengefreiter 19 **Hein**

Hinzman, Josef Matrosenhauptgefreiter 21 **Hinz**

Holzweg, Ulrich Matrosenobergefreiter 20 **Ulle**

Köpp, Werner Matrosengefreiter 19 **Köppi**

Mueller, Patrick Mtr.H.Gef. 21 **Steppke**

Quintmann, Otto Matrosenhauptgefreiter 26 **Otto-Q**

Rakenstrauch, Klaus-Peter Mtr.Gef. 19 **K.P.**

Rether, Norman Matrosenhauptgefreiter 23 **Nocke**

Romanik, Erik Matrose 18 **Erik**

Schnittke, Jens Matrosenobergefreiter 20 **Schnitti**

Schmirschneider, Konrad 21 Mtr.H.Gef. **Pastor**

Schmitt, Hagen Matrosenobergefreiter 25 **Hagen**

Schnarrenberg, Peter Mtr.H.Gef. 21 **Pit**

Stolz, Ernst Matrose 18 **Erno**

Stedding, Gotthard Matrosengefreiter 19 **Göttle**

Stockl, Ferdinand Matrosengefreiter 19 **Ferdinand**

Stüben, Max Matrose 18 **Max**

Vondrowitz, Joseph Matrose 24 **Drowitz**

Walters, Herrmann Matrosengefreiter 19 **Walter**

Werom, Kurt Matrosengefreiter 20 **Kurt**

Westhafen, Gerold Matrose 18 **Westold**


Wattengel, Egon Matrosenobergefreiter 20 **Egge**


Wallgarten, Dominik Matrosengefreiter 27 **Wolle**


Zahn, Karsten Matrose 22 **Zahn**




U-2553

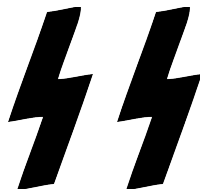
 **von Traustein, Herold** Standartenführer (*senior officer*) 46

 **Bramsfeld, Dieter** Obersturmbannführer (*off.*) 38

 **Reed, Wolfgang** Untersturmführer (*junior off.*) 36

 **Otzfeld, Rainer** Oberscharführer (*senior NCO*) 42

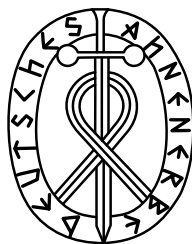
 **Burger, Klaus** Scharführer (*NCO*) 31



The **Schutzstaffel (SS)** is an elite force of military standing within the Nazi state. It is a party organ under the direct control of **Reichsführer-SS** Heinrich Himmler, and starting in 1939 it becomes a new branch of the German military with combat units and a glorified status. Spurred by an ideology of eugenics and totalitarian zeal, the SS presides over a gruesome range of projects, among them riot units, secret police, a breeding and indoctrination program overseeing orphanages, a holy castle with round table, ministries concerned with restructuring the population to an Aryan ideal, and the management of every *Konzentrationslager*.

Instructed by propaganda, U-2553's crew is not aware of any serious SS misconduct. The SS is the elite of the country. Still, everybody knows that facing off against even a mere SS Rifleman is a bad idea and can lead to immediate bruises and later repercussions.

The rank of the senior SS officer on board is the equivalent pay grade of the submarine's captain. As the captain on his own boat there should be no doubt as to who is in charge. And yet the captain must fear for his career in a navy run by the Nazi party if he manages to antagonize a political party officer.



The **Ahnenerbe** (*Studien-gesellschaft für Geistes-urgeschichte. Das Ahnenerbe*) is a peculiar growth of scientific research and race ideology initiated by the founders of the Nazi party. Conceived as a way to fund the scientific proof of Aryan heritage and its relevance in history, it also encompasses mystics and adepts of the occult going back to Aleister Crowley and other esoteric influences from the very beginning on.

In 1939 the Ahnenerbe is integrated into the SS. It has sprouted over 50 *Institutes* for the exploration of languages, history, archaeology, religion, music, folklore, runes, biology, botany, genetics, astronomy, cave climbing, geology, geochronology, nuclear physics, weapon development, and the occult. Many expeditions are backed by Ahnenerbe, including a secret one to Antarctica in 1938/39 and one into Tibet.

- Keepers can keep reading -

Life on board the submarine runs in three shifts of six hours. After six hours on station there's twelve hours for other duties, meals, and sleep, for an 18-hour-day cycle. During combat every man is on station as there are more systems to be manned than there are officers in a shift. The enlisted have to reload torpedoes and move around for ballast.

The normal shift officers are:

Commanding Officer (Zentrale)

Engineer (Zentrale)

Helmsman (Zentrale)

An **SS officer** remains on the bridge with every shift

Sonar Operator (Horchraum)

2 **Diesel Engine** NCOs (Dieselraum)

2 **Electric Engine** NCOs (E-Maschinenraum)

Other stations to man include the radio and *Enigma-M4*, *Bold Pillewerfer* (decoy launcher), *Lessing* aircraft radar and multiple passive radar sensors, the second periscope, map, deck guns, and countless pumps, valves, cranks, and hatches.

There should also be 11 **Matrosen** (sailors) to a shift. However, to make room for the SS officers, 5 NCOs had to move in with the men and 5 men remained at shore. Then there was a fire in the torpedo room earlier in the mission, 2 men suffocated and were buried at sea. This leaves the shifts short one or two enlisted men each. In a pinch that could mean trouble. The deceased crew members are Jonathan Jürgens (19) and Michael Nolte (18). Honoring the memory of their sacrifice is now part of the crew's mission.

By 1944 most of the installed systems are reliable designs, tested on other submarine types. The type XXI itself however is a new hull rushed into production. U-2553 is a secret project and was commissioned while the design still underwent testing. The crew has been on missions with U-2553 already and knows how to handle the boat. But things still go wrong.

The snorkel remains sealed too long due to waves and since the Diesels draw air from inside the hull when that happens, air pressure in the cabin rapidly drops, popping ears. Exhaust can leak into the hull. Vibrations in the snorkel make speeds above 5 knots impossible when it is extended. Beyond 8 knots the periscopes vibrate too much to aim weapons reliably. The batteries produce hydrogen and oxygen while charging and the ventilation system can fail due to humidity. When reversing without releasing the Diesel gears, sea water can get sucked into the engines. There are separate engines for silent drive, the hull is normally filled with loud noises. While extending the snorkel it is too loud to talk on the bridge, just like in the Diesel room with running engines. With an actual bed for every man, 3 toilets with a door, and a shower it could have been a cruise compared to earlier submarines, but it is not.

Stage 1

Exposition: Premise and character intros, immediate mission (travel from Africa to Antarctica inconspicuously), social structure on board. Arrogant SS, frustrated officers, wary men. Restock from support submarine and depart for Antarctica.

Tension: Baseline is excited expectation with some pressing questions.

PC goodies: Make friends among crew for later on

Stage 2

Conflict over the mission. Intrigue and careful investigation. Overhearing SS. Bridge officers showing strain. NPC positioning.

Tension: Rapidly rising, party line v military pragmatism - light insubordination, risking lives over an unknown mission.

PC goodies: Spy on SS or break into crates to increase dark foreshadowing. Possibly discover cryptic notes about an expedition and Atlantic operations.

Stage 3

Allied destroyer hunting in unlikely area, possibly warned of U-2553. Conflict between officers and SS escalates, lose days evading or attempt to pass hidden near the searching destroyer. SS eventually eliminates the destroyer with a ritual that somehow damages it like it ran aground in a shallow (which isn't there).

Tension: Rises with threat, abates with escape, lingers over SS ritual.

PC goodies: Action scene. Clear up loyalties. Discover traces of a large creature following the submarine (and attacking allied destroyers).

Stage 4

Secret Neuschwabenland base arrival, fuel restock and retrofit boat for pressurizing hull with helium and oxygen. Vast concealed underground complex with submarine bunkers only reached by diving under Antarctica, little staff or stocks.

Tension: Rising as mission objective gets close, base staff acting peculiar because of dark isolation unsettles crew.

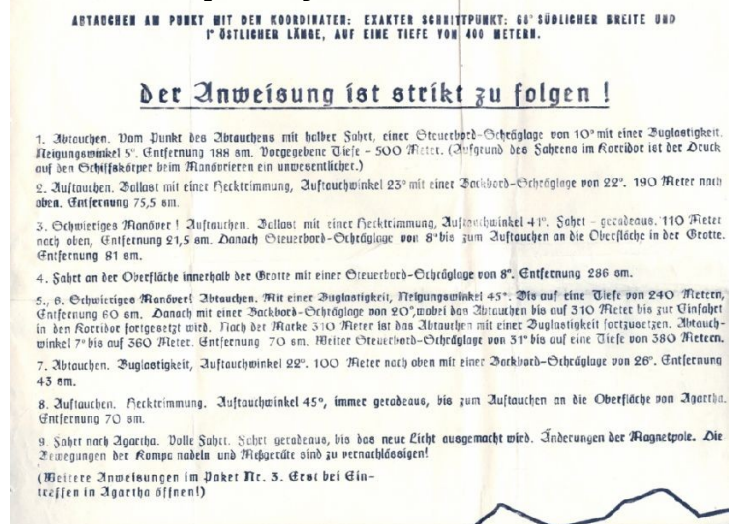
PC goodies: Steal from base armory, kitchen. Speculate about helium/oxygen pressure system.

Stage 5

SS Mission briefing: Special deep dive maneuver to reach archaeological dig site in the ice that warrants immediate SS attention. Social tension climax. Conflict escalates either between boat officers and SS or between seamen and officers. Mission questioned, boat is needed in the battle for Europe, nobody wants to risk life for archaeology.

Tension: Climax of mundane conflict, possibly casualties or mutiny. Ultimately SS triumphs and the mission continues with a chasm between the men on board.

PC goodies: Action scene. Call in loyalties. Players decide plot progress to be either under direct SS command or with SS standing on board severely damaged but mission continued at least for a few days longer.



Stage 6

Dangerous dive under the ice with helium/oxygen pressurizing the boat to 20 atmospheres to an ancient gate large enough to navigate through. SS perform ritual to open the gate, which leads to an unknown ocean.

Tension: Unknown conditions outside, strange sounds, hints to alienness, the SS calls it Inner Earth.

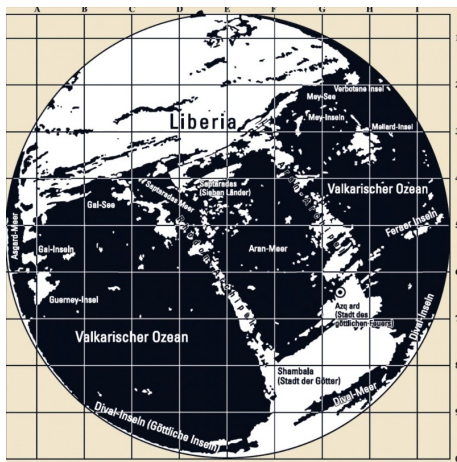
PC goodies: A trickle of details about the place and possible implications as to the mission.

Stage 7

Arrival at alien coast. SS unpacks diving gear and suits up in hatch, ordering 2 NPC crewmen to join them and transport a crate. The submarine must stay submerged below periscope depth.

Tension: Immense. The ocean seems otherworldly, the SS are harsh and tight lipped, exiting a submerged submarine is very dangerous, and the mission is unclear.

No goodies



Stage 8

3 SS men return an hour later with 2 empty suits and demand 2 more crew join them. After they're gone a large creature that lingers can be detected in the waters around the submarine.

Tension: Where are the men who had those suits? How will they get back? Can they breathe right now?

PC goodies: Ransacking the remaining SS crates reveals enough suits for the party.

Stage 9

The captain orders the players to retrieve his men. The ocean and coastline are distinctly alien, the dark sky seems wrong. An enormous staircase carved from the strange rock of the sheer cliffs ascends from the water line, the steps are too large but can be climbed. Flashlights flicker in a temple entrance in the rock high above.

Tension: Still rising with mysterious temple.

PC goodies: The air is breathable but

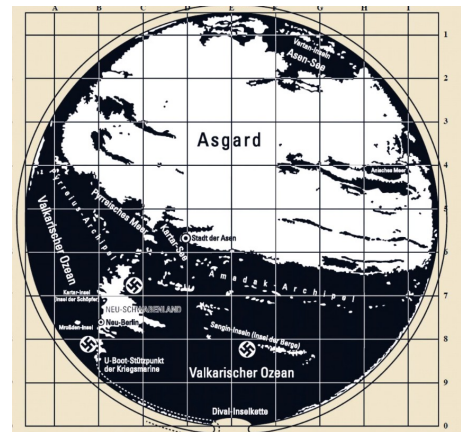
will cause mild hallucinogenic effects after a few minutes: relaxation, fascination with detail, observed faces deform slightly, patterns emerge everywhere.

Stage 10

In the strange temple lie the mutilated corpses of 2 sailors and 2 SS men, the 3 remaining SS men are occupied with a blood ritual involving a revolting altar and an artifact that looks to belong here but was brought in the crate. The partially Latin incantations translate to a request for ultimate power to smite enemies. The eyes of the SS leader begin to glow cold blue.

Tension: Drops slightly with possible action scene, overall high with threat from SS leader.

PC goodies: Kill 2 SS men, the leader is mostly impervious to weapons with regeneration, strong like 10 men, and able to dive to the submarine without suit. He will avoid an armed group. His objective is to sacrifice more people using the ritual to gain more power, doing it at the altar is preferred but not required.



Endgame: Control over the creature will slip if the lead SS man is attacked and be lost if he dies. At this point the creature will start to attack anything and anyone, especially the holder of the artifact. The world will end by god emperor or godzilla if the SS leader or the creature is allowed back through the gate, or if the gate remains intact.

Context

In **1936** active sonar testing in Antarctic waters, far from Allied listening posts, reveals passages under the ice. Investigation results in the decision for a systematic exploration of these passages.

1937-38 Covert submarine missions, usually organized as maneuver exercises, explore and map the liquid expanses under Antarctica with sonar technology. Techniques are developed to overpressurize the hull and dive beyond the crush depth of unpressurized submarines. However, this severely limits the time crews can remain submerged and careful depressurization procedures must be followed. Several submarines are lost. Experiments replacing nitrogen which becomes toxic at pressure are begun in Buchenwald.

From **1938 to 39** a large expedition is mounted to explore ruins discovered under the ice from both below and above. A large gate is discovered deep under Antarctica that can be opened with arcane rituals to grant passage to another unfamiliar ocean which surrounds unknown land masses of an alien nature. The discovery is labeled Inner Earth and sealed under utmost secrecy. A base of operations is erected under Antarctica from where submarine expeditions into Inner Earth are initiated, mapping the other side. It is named Neuschwabenland, identical to a frivolous claim to Norwegian territory near the Expedition route in order to misinform any possible disclosures.

In **1940** an artifact is recovered from an abandoned temple-like structure on the coast line of an Inner Earth continent. A creature is spotted trailing the submarine carrying the artifact through the gateway back to Neuschwabenland base.

The artifact is transported back to

Germany with the creature in close pursuit. It is discovered that the creature can be directed to some degree by handling the artifact in specific ways. Archaic rituals and blood sacrifice seem to be involved. By the time the submarine reaches the North Sea half the crew has succumbed to an unspecified condition according to the log, and the boat is diverted to Norway. The creature is soon used to attack shipping to the British isles, its success credited to the wolf packs of the Kriegsmarine.

By **1944** control has been slipping and in a desperate effort the Ahnenerbe dispatches an U-Boot with the artifact retrieved 4 years earlier to Antarctica to strengthen control over the entity with a large sacrifice on the altar where the artifact was discovered so that the creature can be directed to wipe the Allies from France.

The Ahnenerbe unit on board knows the entity will follow the artifact, and they are preparing to sacrifice most of the crew when they get to the altar. But it won't be enough to control the entity. Instead it will be strengthened and unleashed upon the world and can only be stopped by the U-Boot crew overcoming the Ahnenerbe unit and ensuring the gateway is sealed when the creature is on the Inner Earth side.

On board are

- 1 **MP-35** 9mm (1400 rounds)
- 10 **Mauser pistols** 7.65mm (650 rounds)
- 3 **bayonets**
- 2x2 20mm Flak mounted (3540 rounds)

- 11 rechargeable flashlights
- 77 emergency air masks
- 6 CO2 fire extinguishers
- 4 zodiacs 4m
- 1 maintenance zodiac 3,3m
- 57 inflatable one man rescue boats
- Tools and supplies for the submarine
- The crates the SS brought along

Notes

This adventure seed is far from done. You should give it some thought before inviting players. It needs work, but this also means you can customize it to your preferences. It can be one crammed session, a long adventure with slow reveals and space for intrigue, or part of a larger campaign. The elements of the boat, the SS unit, and the mission can easily be patched together differently, and they have been.

One area you should definitely look at is the central reveal. Points to jump in are **SS documents** the PCs liberate, conversations they overhear on the crowded submarine, and possibly even rumors they pick up before the mission or at Neuschwabenland. A few handouts can describe the discovery of the gate, the exploration of Inner Earth, and the use of the creature to conduct attacks. **Inner Earth** can be the forgotten inside of our planet, another world far away, a parallel reality in the multiverse, or a limited pocket universe. Just because the SS calls it Inner Earth does not mean this must confirm that particular conspiracy theory in your game.

The creature itself is certainly a subject to investigate, and whether the SS in general or the people on board know details about it beyond how it is controlled is entirely up to you. Even what its nature is can be defined by you or not. It could remain mysterious, be an entity of Lovecraft's Mythos like a magically enslaved great Deep One, or it could show characteristics of a Japanese movie Kaiju. It could be a dinosaur, an elemental, or an ancient weapon system. Just pick something that will impress your players and subvert expectation.

Another crucial area are combat stats. This works with any crunch because the crunch is up to you. Stat **NPCs** so that they challenge your players.

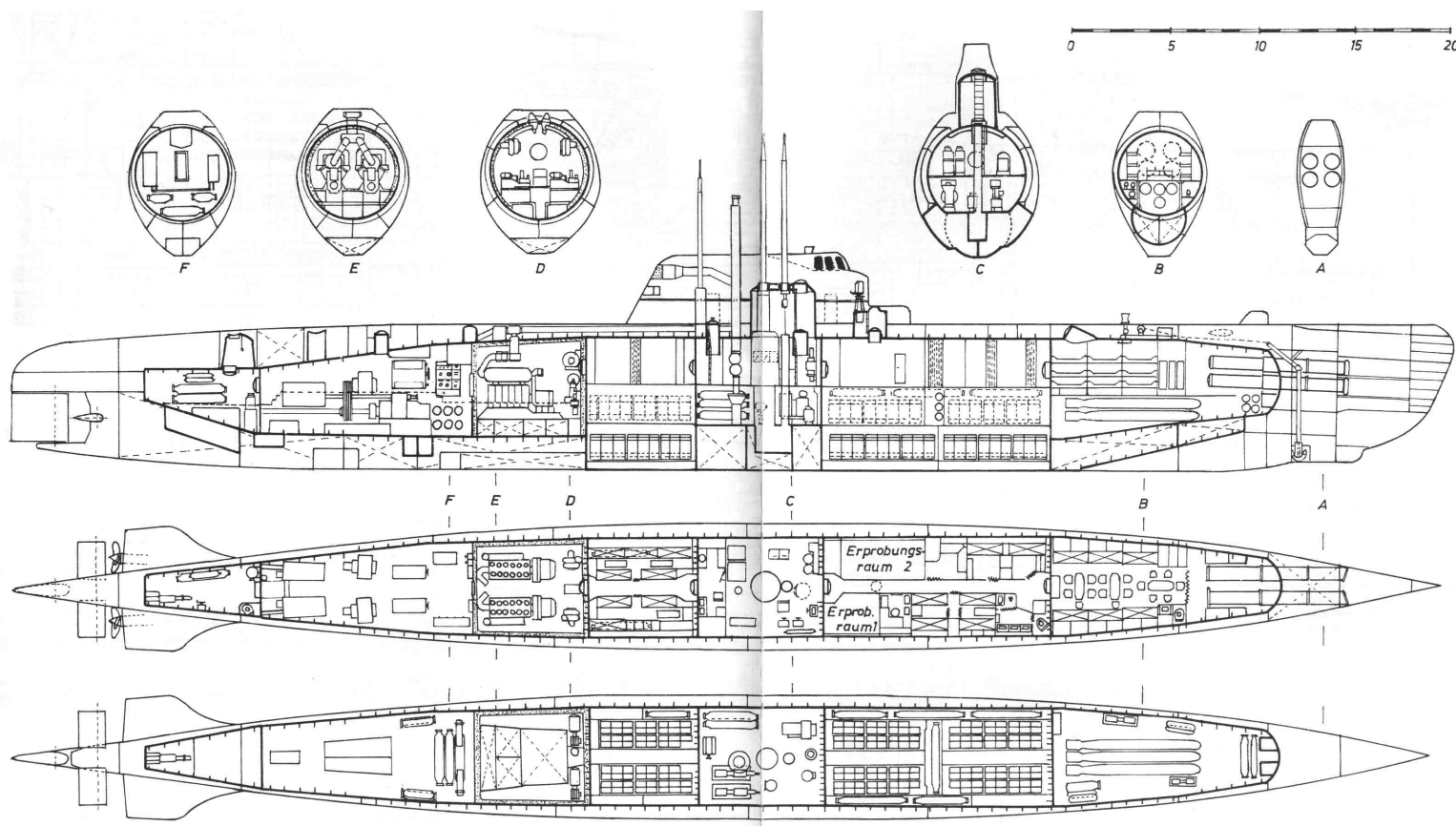
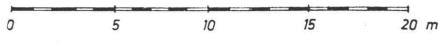
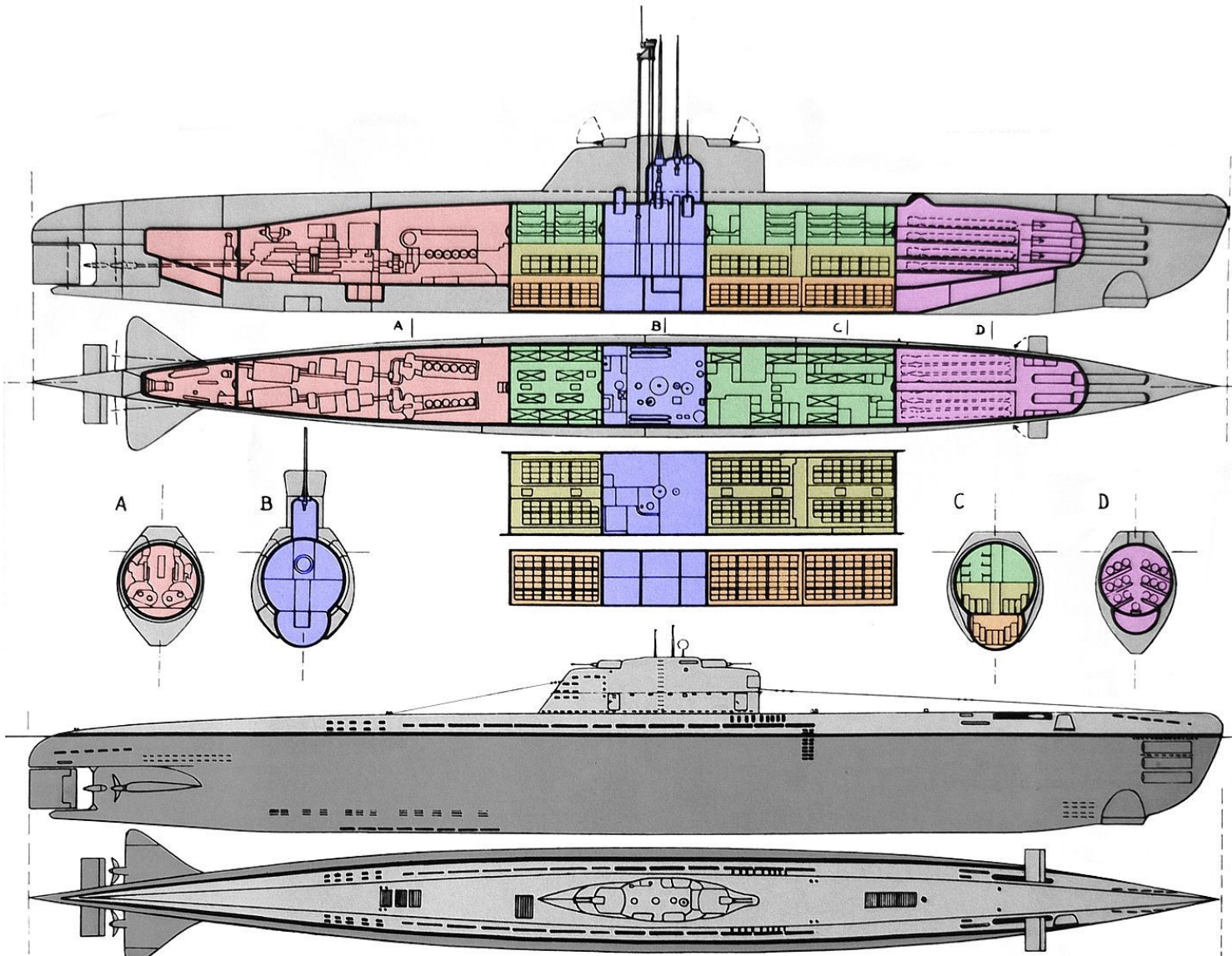
If firing a torpedo at an ancient gate or creature is a simple attack roll, an invocation of aspects, or a detailed technical procedure with **skill checks** depends on what your system was made for and what your group prefers to play. I see potential for meticulously researched historical accuracy just as much as pulpy action play following rule-of-cool. You could play this without any combat and rely on intrigue, misdirection, and sneaking challenges.

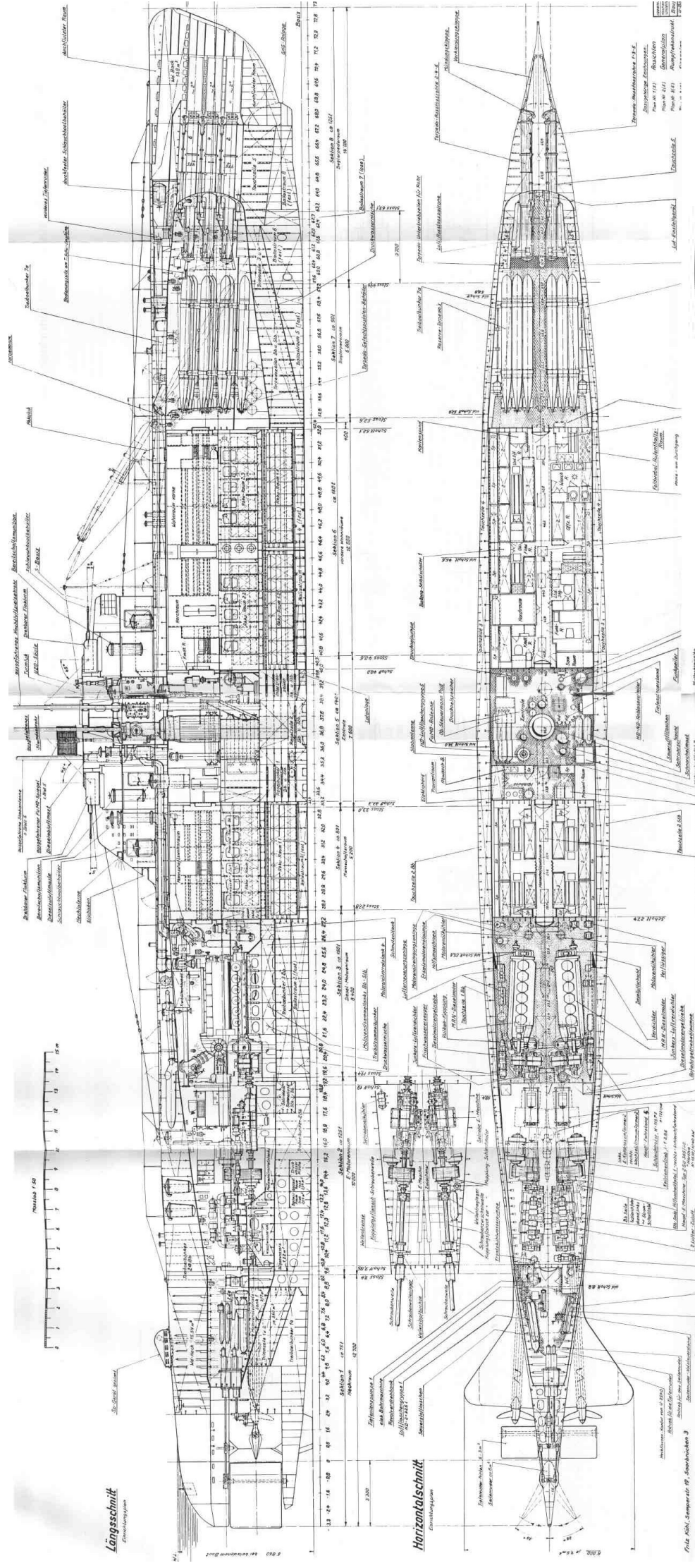
Use a plan of a Type XXI that your players can work with. Submarines look complex until you research them, then it becomes hard to understand how the players aren't seeing the, to you, obvious. Research and explain the **systems on board** you wish to include, ignore or automate any that you don't. The PCs are veteran submariners and at least in that they should feel secure in their professional pride.

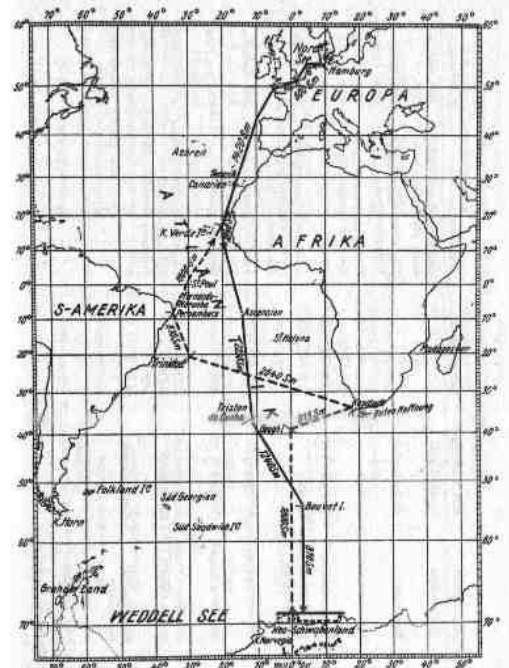
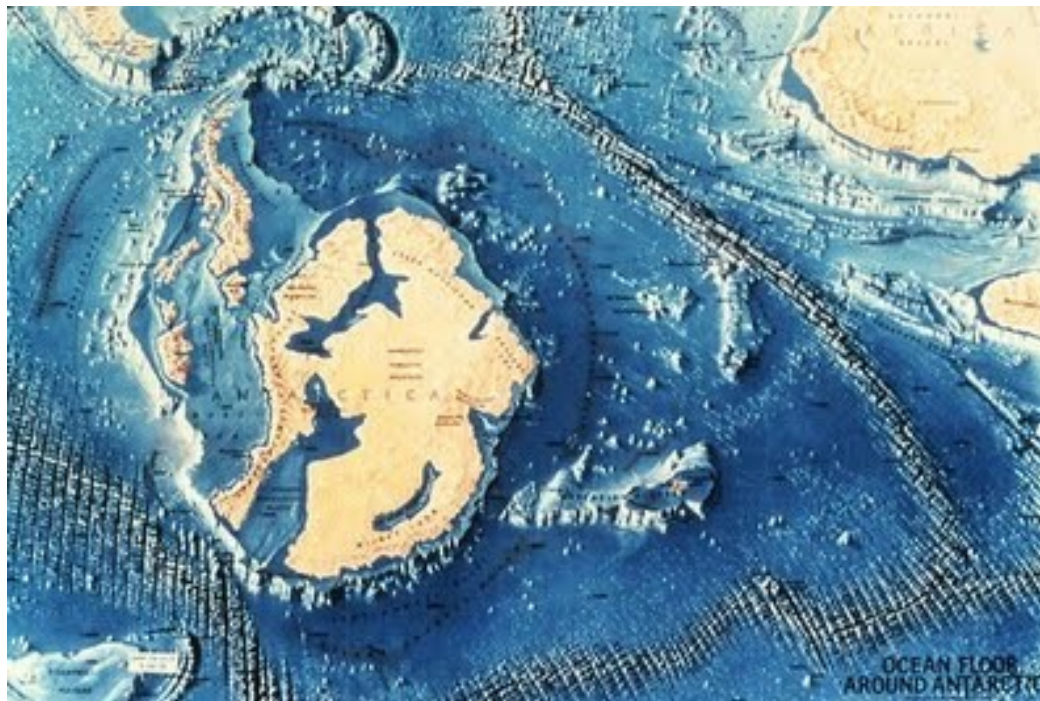
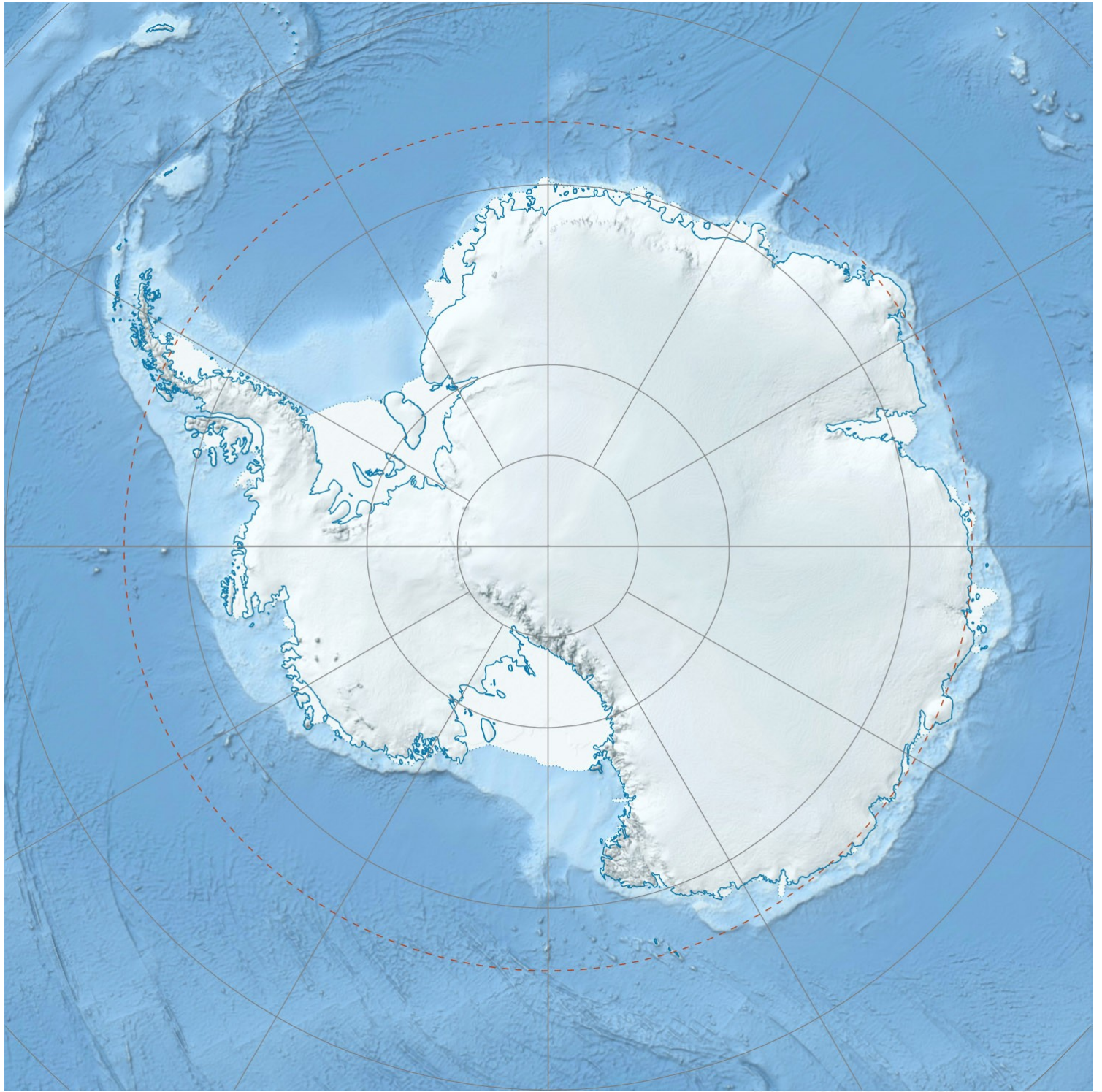
I like to keep my players in carefully managed suspense, and the **tension** section of each stage provides cues to how this can be controlled. But it still takes Keeper experience to make it work. Horror isn't easy.

Like most horror this seed should feature more **player agency**. The characters can't make a lot of decisions. I tried to mitigate this by making the order on board depend on their choices, but ultimately short of mutiny there is nothing that will get the submarine off the track to the alien coast. All they get to control is how the NPCs relate to each other, and what they can find out about the mission before they're supposed to know. To make this more interesting you could make two lower ranked SS officers conflicted about the mission. Or you can gloss it over with lots of action.

So take this and make it your own.







Streckenkarte der SCHWABENLAND-Expedition 1938/1939 (Luftfahrt-Archiv).

