



U 96 & The Laughing Sawfish

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Part I - The Real U 96

A very popular insignia with U-boat modellers is the laughing sawfish. Also known as the laughing swordfish, this insignia was used on the famous U 96 as well as U-boats of the 9th U-Flottille. It also adorned the tower of the models used in the classic movie *Das Boot*.

The real U 96 was a very early Type VIIC U-boat. It was launched on the 1st August 1940 from the *Germaniawerft* shipyards in Kiel. A few weeks later, on the 14th September, it was commissioned into the Kriegsmarine. The boat lasted until March 1945, when it was destroyed during a bombing raid.

U 96 was the 11th highest scoring U-boat, sinking 28 ships of 190,094 GRT and damaging 4 ships of 33,043 GRT. All but four sinkings came under the command of Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock. He was the sixth highest scoring U-boat commander (or seventh depending on sources). U 96 would have another four commanders after Lehmann-Willenbrock but none would be anywhere as near as successful.

According to Georg Högel's *U-Boat Emblems Of World War II 1939-1945* (Schiffer Military History, 1999), the sawfish was first applied to U 96 by a friend of the commander called Kossatz. Högel also states that it was created after the end of the third patrol. This would be between the end of the third patrol (28/02/41) and the start of the fourth patrol (12/04/41).

In the late spring of 1941, an order was issued to apply snorting bull insignias to all boats of the 7th U-Flottille boats. This was to honour Günther Prien, who had died aboard U 47 in March 1941. As U 96 was a member of the 7th U-Flottille, bulls would have to be applied to Lehmann-Willenbrock's boat.

U 96 had at this time a sawfish on either side of the tower. There being no space to apply two bulls, only one snorting bull was added.

Later in the year an order to remove the personal insignia from U-boats was issued. This resulted in the sawfishes (as the personal insignia of Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock) being removed from U 96. However, as the order did not prohibit flotilla insignia, U 96 retained the snorting bull. Now that more space was available, the one central bull was removed in favour of two bulls (one on either side).



Above (1): A photo of Kossatz touching up the eyeball on U 96. Kossatz would have had no idea of how famous his design would become.

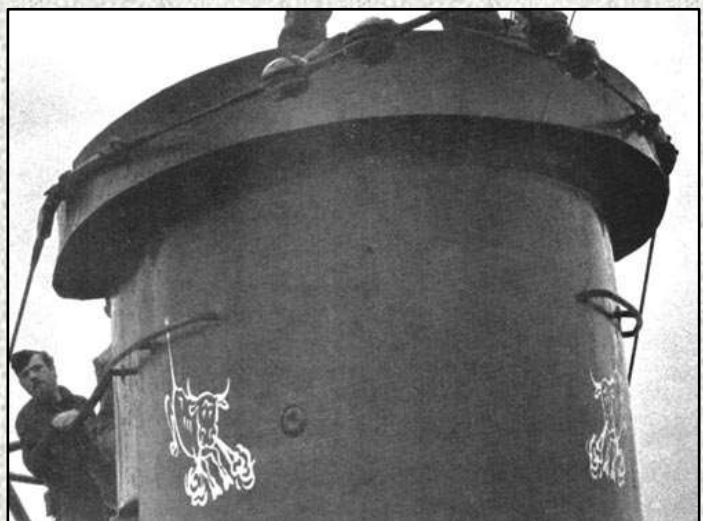


Above (2): U 96 entering St. Nazaire at the end of the fourth patrol on the 22nd May 1941. Although it is impossible to determine colours from black and white photos, in this and other photos the upper colour of U 96 certainly looks too dark for the light grey *Hellgrau 50*. The medium grey *Dunkelgrau 51* would arguably be more advisable. The tricky question of the colour of the U 96 sawfish will be left until Part IV.



Above (3): In late spring and early summer 1941, U 96 had two sawfishes and one snorting bull. The bull was at the front of the tower, facing to the left. The bull was the flotilla insignia while the sawfishes were the personal insignia of the commander.

Right (4): This photo of U 96 was taken by Lothar-Günther Buchheim during the boat's 7th patrol in late 1941. By this time the sawfishes had been removed, allowing space for two rather than one snorting bulls.



Right (5): U 96 with two very large snorting bulls.

Below right (6): U 96 at the end of her operational career. Normal sized bulls can just be seen on either side of the tonnage figure.



Later in U 96's career, the boat sported two very large bulls. The stencil used upon U 567 may have been used to apply this version upon U 96.

Later still, at the end of U 96's operational career, the boat had medium-sized bulls once again. The boat also sported the tonnage figure of 247543, with BRT below. The true tally was 190,094 tons. The overestimation of 30% accords with the general overestimation of one third made by U-boat commanders.



For model-makers wishing to make U 96, the following details of the boat's modifications may be useful -

Combination on U 96				
Boat	Time	Netcutter	Breakwaters	Wind deflector
U 96	14/09/40 (com)	Y	Y	N
	12/04/41-22/05/41 (P4)	Y	N	Y
	27/10/41-06/12/41 (P7)	N	N	Y
"U 96"	In movie <i>Das Boot</i>	Y	Y	Y

Y=yes, N=no, P = patrol number, com = commissioning ceremony

Part II - 9th U-Flottille Sawfish

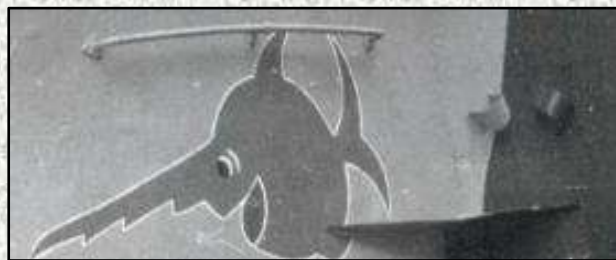
When Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock later assumed command of the 9th U-Flottille, his old sawfish personal insignia was appropriated as the flotilla insignia. As a result, many boats belonging to the 9th U-Flottille had sawfishes applied to their towers. This process of a personal insignia being later used as a flotilla insignia mirrors the same process that occurred with the snorting bull. The bull was originally the personal insignia of Prien and U 47, and was later appropriated as the insignia of the 7th U-Flottille.

Quite a few crews used sawfish badges on their caps. This was common practice for personal insignia, and on occasion flotilla insignia.

According to Georg Högel's book, the following boats had the 9th U-Flottille sawfish: U 90, U 91, U 211, U 214, U 217, U 218, U 230, U 256, U 309, U 377, U 407, U 409, U 443, U 450, U 456, U 591, U 595, U 604, U 606, U 621, U 659, U 664, U 739, U 744, U 755 and U 954. Usually each boat would only carry the sawfish during its service with the 9th U-Flottille. But in the case of U 230 the sawfish was kept until the end.



The colour guide in Högel's book on insignia indicates blue as the colour of the 9th U-Flottille insignia. Also included in this book is a Canadian report stating that U 659's sawfish was blue. However, there may have been variations in colour between these sawfishes. Blue, green and red have all been suggested as colours of the 9th U-Flottille. Some may indeed have been blue and others green. Red is much less likely but impossible to discount.



Above left (7): The sawfish on U 309. The background paint was a medium to dark grey. Again we see the sawfish colour is lighter than the background, and much lighter than the mouth. The eye is white with a black dot.

Above right (8): The sawfish on the camouflaged U 407. The background paint on the boat may have been the light grey *Hellgrau 50*, with the dark grey *Dunkelgrau 53* on the right-hand side. We can see that the sawfish is significantly lighter than the dark grey paint. We can also see that it is lighter than the red or dark red mouth, and the black eyeball. In both versions there are three saw teeth. In the U 96 version there were four saw teeth.

Part III - Das Boot

During U 96's seventh patrol (between 27/10/41 and 06/12/41) the war correspondent Lothar-Günther Buchheim was a guest on board. In the course of the patrol he took many photographs of the boat. Some of these photos are included in his book *U-Boat War*. However, it is another of his books - the novel *Das Boot* - which has become much more widely known. The novel is a classic of its type, authentically describing life aboard a wolf in the North Atlantic. One reason for the novel's feel of authenticity is that Buchheim based his work on his patrol aboard U 96. Indeed the commander in his book was largely based upon Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock.

The classic novel was then made into a movie of the same name. In the making of the movie, director Wolfgang Petersen continued with the detailed, authentic feel of the novel. The movie also became a classic, becoming very widely known around the world.

All of the models used in the movie had a black laughing sawfish. Everyone who watched the movie, whether on the small or large screen, saw the boat's insignia on the conning tower. Due to its appearance in the film it may now be the most well-known of all U-boat insignia. It is now arguably more famous and more popular than the snorting bull.



Above (9): The black sawfish on two of the movie's models. There were slight differences from the movie sawfish to the real U 96 sawfish.

The simplicity of the design, with the jagged teeth and bold smile, makes it one of the most aesthetic of U-boat insignia. For many modellers it is better looking than the snorting bull. There are more artistic insignia, such as U 94's British bulldog being tugged by a little animal. But the details of intricate insignia are lost in the scale used by most U-boat models. Even in 144th scale the details of the sawfish remain. One enthusiast liked the design so much he contemplated having it tattooed on his arm!

Given the movie's association with the sawfish, it comes as some surprise to find that the sawfish wasn't even present on the boat when Buchheim was on board. By the time he was on board during the famous seventh patrol, the sawfish had been replaced on the real boat with two snorting bulls. If the filmmakers had wished to be historically accurate, depicting U 96 as she really was during the latter stages of 1941, two bulls should have been used instead of two sawfishes. The filmmakers may have decided that the aesthetic qualities of the sawfish made it a better choice than the white outline of a snorting bull.

And then there is the question of the colour...

Part IV - The Perennial Sawfish Colour Debate

Two questions have vexed modellers and enthusiasts for decades: what was the colour of U 96's sawfish; and what was the colour of the 9th U-Flottille sawfishes? Countless debates have spilled over into arguments on this irresolvable subject. Green, blue, red and black have all been suggested. As we shall see, nobody really knows for sure what the U 96 sawfish colour was.

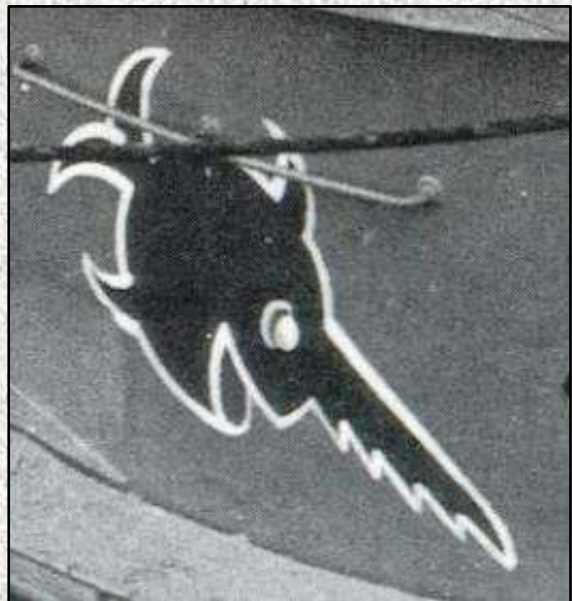
One confusing aspect is the assumption by some that the U 96 and 9th U-Flottille insignia were the same colour. But the colour (or colours) of the 9th U-Flottille sawfishes are consistently lighter than the sawfish on U 96. The 9th U-Flottille sawfish were therefore lighter in shade than the U 96 version. They may have been a different colour entirely.

Revell chose to make their U 96 sawfish decal for their 144th scale VIIC kit blue. They may have chosen the blue colour for their U 96 due to the report in Georg Högel's of a 9th U-Flottille sawfish being blue. However, due to the significant difference in shade, the 9th U-Flottille sawfish was not necessarily the same colour as the U 96 sawfish.

The makers of *Das Boot* opted for black. They may have chosen this option after seeing the sawfish looking so dark in the U 96 photos. We should be aware that Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock was himself involved in some capacity with the movie. He was pictured with Jürgen Prochnow, the actor who played the commander in the film. Was Lehmann-Willenbrock asked at the time about the true colour? Could he have told the movie makers it had been black? Or did he tell them he couldn't remember the colour due to the passage of time? Or was he even asked about his insignia?

Questions, questions and more questions. But as with all matters regarding sawfish colours, no definitive answers are forthcoming.

Right (10): A close up of the sawfish on the starboard side. In this view we can see the mouth was a different colour, very likely red. We can also see the eyeball. The sawfish does look very dark against the medium grey background. If the sawfish was not black then it was certainly very dark. Note the four saw teeth.



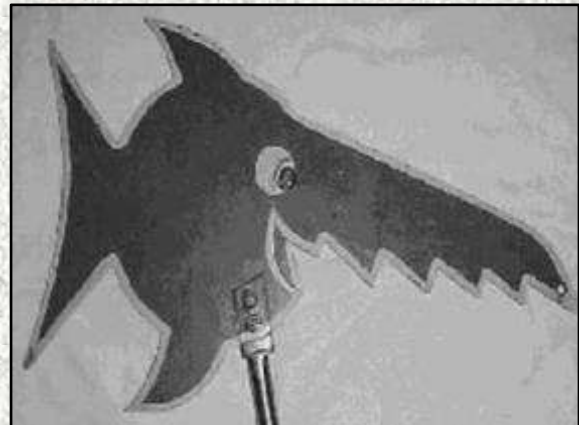
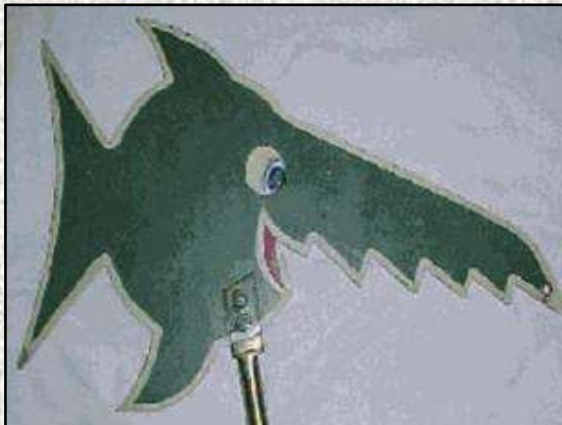
One interesting aspect relates to the metal sawfish pennant that was attached to the top of the commander's flagstaff on U 96. The metal pennant is still in existence, having belonged to Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock until his death in 1982.

This metal pennant is very roughly a lime green colour. As it would not make sense for the painted insignia and the metal pennant to have been different colours, could the sawfish painted on U 96's tower also have been a lime green colour? Of course the piece could very easily have been painted a different colour over the years. There may not have been a desire to keep the authentic colour, or the correct paint might not have been available. As a result I offer this information as a matter of interest rather than proof.

It has been suggested that the lime green colour in the photo above is too light for the shade evidenced in period photos of U 96. However, one only has to remove the colour from this photo to prove this to be inaccurate.



Above (11): The metal sawfish pennant in a wartime shot.



Above left (12): This is the actual metal pennant used on U 96. Note the colour of the paints used.

Above right (12b&w): The same photo of the metal pennant, with the colour removed. No other adjustments have been made. The lighter parts are where light is directly striking the object. The darker parts, at the top and the left, are so dark they may be mistaken for black.

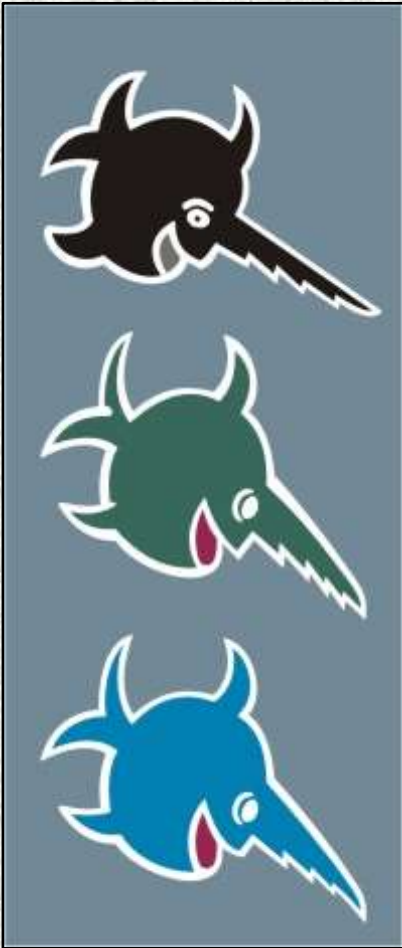
This debate still leaves the modeller no wiser. It is all very interesting, I hear you ask, but what colour do I make my sawfish on my model?

Given the faint scraps of information at our disposal, I would suggest either a very dark green or black for the U 96 sawfish. As for the 9th U-Flottille sawfish, I would opt for either a medium green or a medium blue.

I fear we shall attain a definitive resolution on this question. So we must be very careful not to criticise others too much when they opt for a colour that is different to our preference.

Part V - AMP Sawfish Decals

The sawfish is available to modellers through the range of decals by Accurate Model Parts. Rather than one sawfish design, three separate distinct designs were created during the research stages.



Das Boot movie version - Designed from video captures from the movie *Das Boot*. This is characterised by the following: black colour, grey mouth, narrow saw, eye with black dot, eyebrow directly over eye.

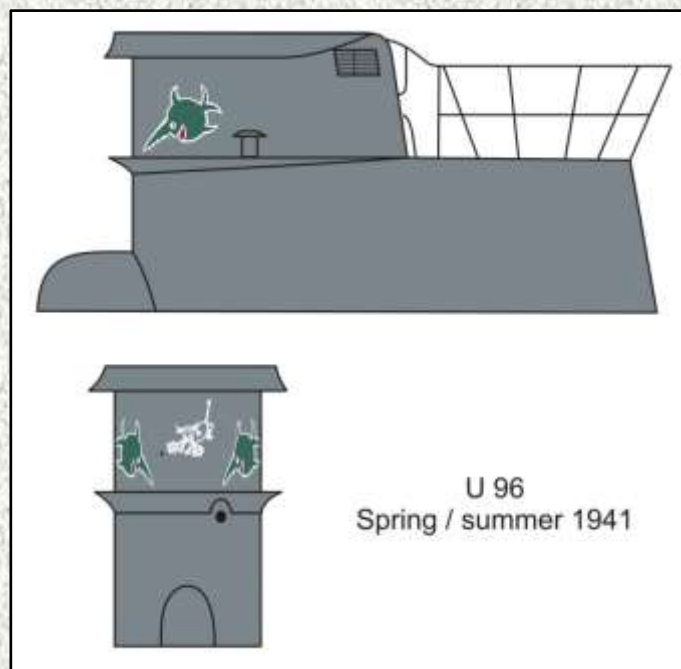
U 96 version - Designed from photos of U 96 returning to St. Nazaire on 22nd May 1941 (see photo E2). This is characterized by the following: dark lime green colour, red mouth, four saw teeth, white lines from fins extend into green area.

9th U-Flottille version - As this version differed between boats, it is a compromise between several sawfish designs. The main characteristics are the blue colour and three saw teeth.

Each decal sheet includes all three designs in both starboard and port sides. They are available in 35th scale (SAW-35), 72nd scale (SAW-72), 144th scale (SAW-144) and 350th scale (SAW-350).

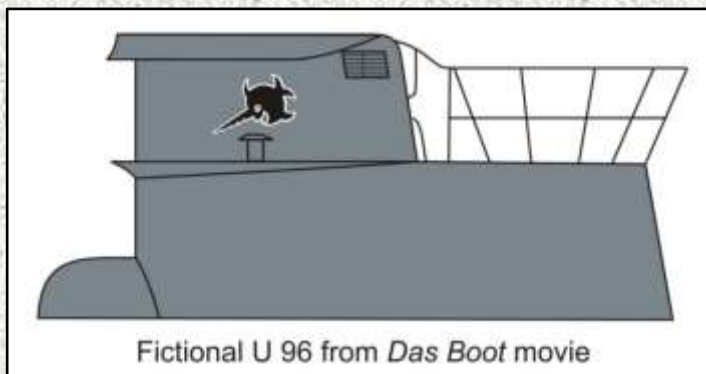
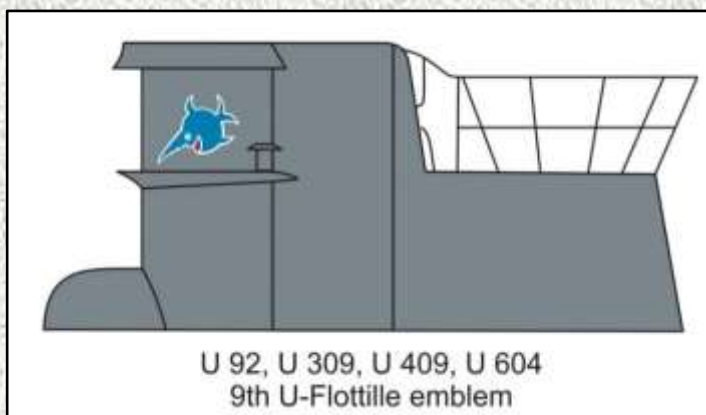
Left (13): The AMP sawfish decal designs illustrate several key differences between designs. One difference is that the U 96 design had four teeth, while most 9th U-Flottille designs had three saw teeth.

Right (14): The position of the green sawfish on the real U 96. Note that modellers also require a snorting bull (normal size) if they are depicting the real U 96 with the laughing sawfish.



Right (15): The blue sawfish was present on many boats serving in the 9th U-Flottille. The position was the same for U 92, U 309, U 409 and U 604 which all had the early Turm 0 tower.

Below right (16): The position of the black sawfish on the fictional U 96 in the *Das Boot* movie was much farther aft and also higher up.



Part VI - References & Photo Sources

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