

The Laconia was a liner carrying 268 British Servicemen and their families, returning home from prewar stations in the Middle East, and 1,800 Italian prisoners of war during World War II. The Laconia was torpedoed and sunk off the west coast of Africa by a German U-boat, whose commander did not know who its passengers were (liners were used extensively by the Allies as troop ships). When Admiral Doenitz, the head of German naval forces, learned of the sinking, and of the identity of the people in the water, he ordered a massive rescue effort involving, initially, a number of other submarines. Italian warships were also asked to hurry to the scene, and the U-boat commander responsible for the sinking radioed in English a general call for help. But the submarines were instead attacked by several Allied planes whose pilots presumably did not know what was going on in the seas below, or did not believe what they were told. As it turned out, the planes did little damage. Nevertheless, Doenitz directed the German commanders to confine their rescue efforts to the Italian prisoners of war. The British soldiers and their families were to be set adrift.

Was the Admiral's command morally justifiable? If so why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Admiral Doenitz's order that the German armed forces cease rescue efforts in regard to non-combatants in the face of the Allied air attack was morally unjustifiable. Granted, had he not issued this order, the forces involved in the rescue effort would have themselves in a situation involving serious risk to their lives. A military commander, however, must make a positive effort to restrict the range of damage inflicted by fighting forces under his command, even in militarily necessary operations, and the fighting forces must assume risks to prevent injury to non-combatants. If a military commander believed that an effort to rescue non-combatants would imperil an operation of the utmost strategic importance then this would present a difficult and grave problem in which the commander, conceivably, might conclude that the balance of considerations justified not placing his fighting forces at additional risk. There is no evidence, however, that the circumstances of the Laconia situation posed such a problem.

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