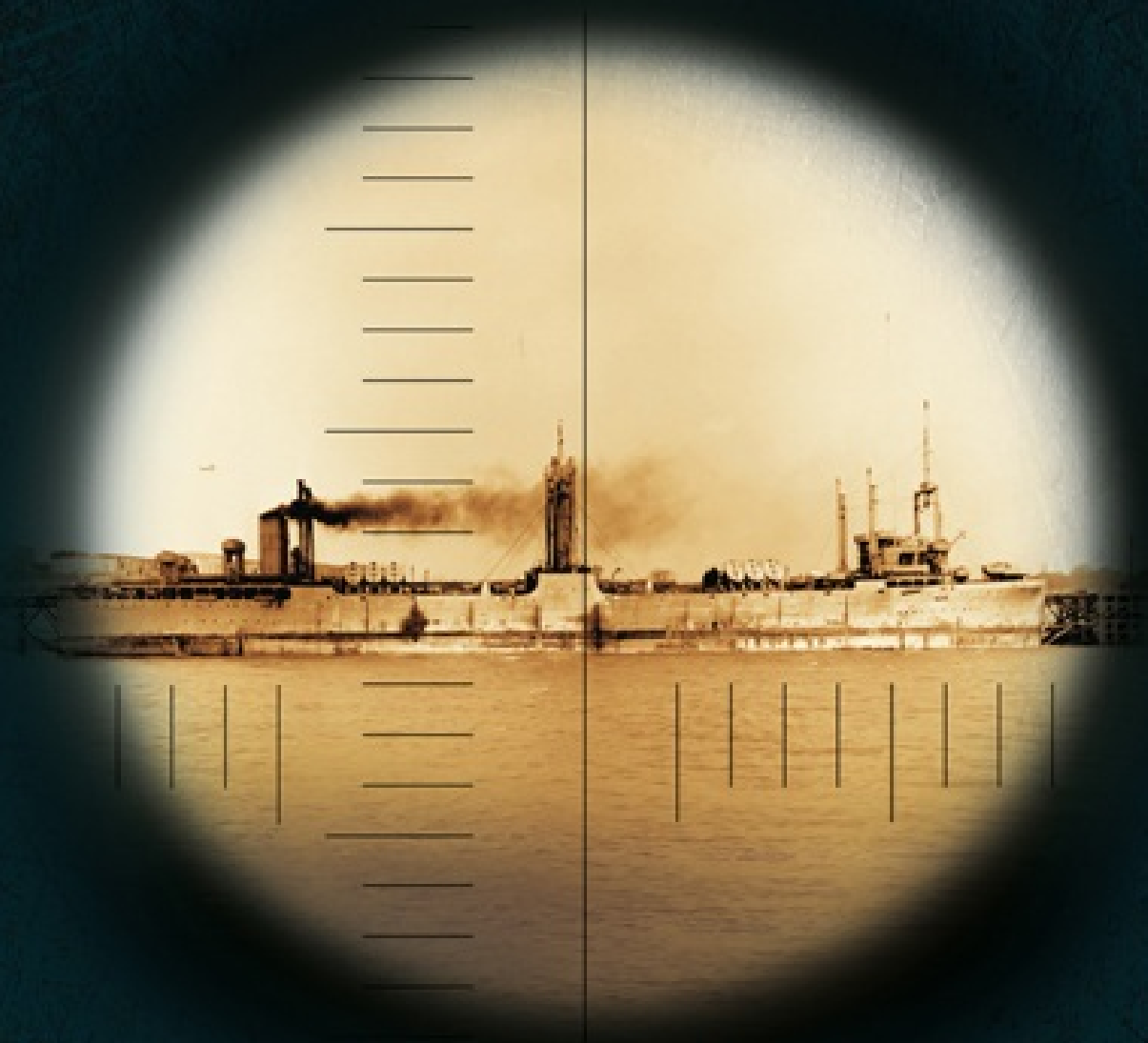


DARKEST BEFORE DAWN

U-482 AND THE SINKING OF
EMPIRE HERITAGE 1944



JOHN PETERSON

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SPELLMOUNT

For Mum and Dad

And in memory of James Peterson, 1904–1980
who endured and survived the events in this book

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INTRODUCTION

Out in the blustering darkness, on the deck
A gleam of stars looks down. Long blurs of black,
The lean Destroyers, level with our track,
Plunging and stealing, watch the perilous way
Through backward racing seas and caverns of chill spray.
One sentry by the davits, in the gloom
Stands mute: the boat heaves onward through the night.
Shrouded is every chink of cabined light:
And sluiced by floundering waves that hiss and boom
And crash like guns, the troop-ship shudders ... doom.

Night on the Convoy, Siegfried Sassoon

At 0350 hours, in the early morning darkness of Friday 8 September 1944 the sea moved with a moderate swell in the north-westerly force 4 off the north coast of Ireland near County Donegal. The moon had shone intermittently throughout the night and early morning; there had been some cloud cover but it was generally clear and visibility was good. Sunrise would be in another two hours. The cliffs of Malin Head, the most northerly point of Ireland, were black, rugged silhouettes, and there was no movement but that of the sea. The only sound inshore was of the wind and waves. Some fifteen miles out to sea, the night was disturbed by huge black forms moving in from the west. Enormous shapes of steel and the rumble of massive steam engines moved through the dim air, frothing bow waves spread across the water creating white-tipped trenches on the murky morning surface. This was the darkness before the dawn.

An enormous convoy of ships slid east from the Western Approaches towards the North Channel, the narrow strait between Scotland and Ireland on its way to Britain. They were at the final stages of a voyage that had taken them across the North Atlantic from the east coast of the United States and Canada. The main convoy was composed of no fewer than 98 vessels, a variety of ships of all types, shapes and sizes, sailing together for the protection of safety in numbers and surrounded by an escort of armed ships. Collectively, the motley group was called HX-305, one of the thousands of supply convoys that moved across the world and converged on Britain throughout the Second World War. In the holds of these ships lay the necessary supplies to sustain the British people in this desperate time and supply the Allied forces with fuel and weapons for the continuing conflict in Western Europe.

The majority of the ships were American, though there were also British, Dutch, Norwegian and Panamanian vessels amongst the convoy, sailing from New York or Nova Scotia to Liverpool, before dispersing to other ports across the country such as Manchester, Cardiff, Hull, Belfast and the Clyde, amongst others. They carried cargoes of grain, foodstuffs, lumber, paper, fuel and mail for the British population,

alongside weapons, ammunition, trucks, tanks and oil for military use. In addition, they carried a large number of passengers, including many naval personnel who had lost their ships on previous voyages and who were heading back across the Atlantic to join new ones. They were known as DBS or 'Distressed British Seamen'. The most common reason for these men losing their ships was enemy action, and the most common perpetrator of those actions was the deadly U-boat.

By September 1944 U-boat activity in the North Atlantic was greatly reduced, having steadily tapered off over the previous fifteen months. Compared to the early days of the war, the U-boat threat was becoming negligible. Only a handful of merchant ships had been lost that year, a massive difference to the enormous losses suffered in 1940–1943 when U-boat successes had been at their height. In fact not a single ship had been lost to enemy action in an HX convoy since 22 April 1943, nearly seventeen months before. In previous years attacks had been much more frequent and deadly; for example, in 1942 the Allies had lost 124 ships in a single month and over 1,000 ships over the course of the year. Such losses represented an enormous number of men and shipping tonnage, lost forever beneath the freezing Atlantic Ocean, their holds full of supplies that would never serve their purpose. But by September 1944, as convoy HX-305 cruised east along the coast of County Donegal, successful U-boat attacks were at their lowest since the beginning of the war and developments in anti-submarine technology had given the Allies the upper hand. Also, the Allied invasion of Europe that had begun on D-Day had robbed Germany of her important U-boat bases along the Bay of Biscay. The subsequent breakout from Normandy and eventual liberation of France by the Allies meant that Germany had been forced to evacuate these bases and retreat her U-boats to her other occupied coasts such as Norway, or to Germany. This reduced her access to the Atlantic and meant a much longer trip for her U-boats trying to intercept Allied shipping as it moved through the Western Approaches.

But even though the Third Reich was rapidly unravelling and the Allies were edging ever closer to Berlin, the U-boat arm of the German Navy had proved itself notoriously determined and though the frequency and success of their attacks had certainly been diminished, the U-boats were still very much operational. In the previous two weeks at the end of August and beginning of September 1944, a number of unexpected and successful attacks had taken place in the coastal area where HX-305 was now sailing and three Allied ships had been sunk; a large American tanker, a Norwegian freighter and a Royal Navy corvette. Despite an extensive search the attacker had remained undetected and unidentified.

Whilst in Europe the war against Nazi Germany was slowly being won by the Allies, the men of the Merchant Navy had to remain ever vigilant, and could not for one moment forget the threat that the U-boats continued to represent. In late 1944, the tide had turned against Germany in nearly all the theatres of war, including the longstanding Battle of the Atlantic, but the Allied seamen were still sailing in almost constant danger.

That morning, as convoy HX-305 slid steadily eastwards, nobody looking out from amongst the vast scattering of ships could have known that they were not alone. There was nothing to tell them that they were being watched carefully by eyes from beneath the waves. In the calm of the dark September morning, a single periscope scanned

silently across the vista in search of a possible target and a victim to add to the three that had already gone before. With just two days of the voyage left, the convoy moved steadily on, many of the ships' crews asleep below decks at this early hour. On the submerged vessel lying in wait, every man was awake.

The commander watching through the periscope finally selected a victim from amongst the ships as they moved past. He looked for a weak spot in the convoy, a way to get inside it, a way to get out again. The target he picked was a large ship, heavily laden and lying low in the water yet with a considerable superstructure. It was possibly a tanker, but sailing amidst the convoy it was just another shape in the night, nameless in the periscope crosshairs. The commander issued orders to the men waiting eagerly around him and the course was altered and set while preparations began deep in the innards of the long, sleek vessel. Slowly the U-boat began to turn, her whole body swinging round like a blade in the water to follow the path of the tanker, and to aim the deadly torpedo tubes moulded into her hull. The tubes were loaded whilst the distances were checked and various calculations made. Everything was set and confirmed whilst a constant watch was kept on the course of the unfortunate tanker, still unaware. The hydrophone on the U-boat scanned and listened to the surrounding wall of water outside. It locked carefully onto the sound of the enormous propellers turning beneath the ship. The U-boat rudder kept her turning until she pointed well to the east of her target; the extra angle on the trajectory was carefully calculated to give the torpedo time to get to the target. For such a calculation the distance to the target, the target's speed and the speed of the torpedo had to be vectored.

In the U-boat the crew were waiting, crowded around the commander at the periscope, watching him carefully. Even from behind the wall of water and layers of steel, they could hear the ships all around them ploughing through the darkness towards the North Channel. Everything was checked once more and then finally the order to fire was given.

The torpedo was pushed out into the darkness with a hiss of compressed air. Inside the U-boat a stopwatch began counting. Onboard the crew waited nervously as the seconds ticked away and everyone listened, their ears tuned to the ocean outside, for the sound of an impact. The stagnant air was thick with cloying diesel fumes and cooking smells along with the stink of unwashed bodies. Outside, the torpedo cut through the water just beneath the surface. At over seven metres in length, it was propelled by an electric motor capable of achieving a speed of 30 knots. At the front sat the deadly warhead, 280 kilograms of explosive power.

At 3.55 that morning, the torpedo struck its target in a perfectly aimed shot, and within seconds the fleet was plunged into chaos. The stricken vessel was a British merchant tanker called *Empire Heritage*. A large hole was blown in her side just above the waterline, and she immediately began to flood as the terrific blast from the torpedo ignited her massive oil tanks. The heavy ship could not possibly survive with her hull burst open and she subsequently became one of the biggest merchant losses of the war.

With news of the attack spreading through the convoy, a rescue ship called *Pinto* that was sailing nearby came quickly to her aid but within minutes of closing the wreck, she suffered a second torpedo from the same U-boat and went down in almost the same spot. As the convoy escorts tried desperately to reorganise a defensive screen, a third ship, the armed trawler HMT *Northern Wave* moved in, first to locate

the attacker and then to rescue the men who had spilled out of the two sunken ships. She narrowly missed becoming a third victim as the enemy U-boat began her run for cover, which she eventually achieved without reprisal.

In under an hour, the peaceful September morning just north of County Donegal had been brutally shattered and the large convoy flung into disarray. As a desperate search began to find the attacker and save further losses, the two British ships settled broken on the seabed, and over a hundred men had lost their lives. Once more, it was brought home to the Allies that the U-boats could still pose a significant and deadly threat to their supply lines.

This is the story of convoy HX-305 told in full for the first time. It is the story of the two ships lost that morning – and others – of the men that survived, the subsequent inquiry and the aftermath of the attack. It considers the development of anti-submarine warfare by the Allies – some of which was prompted by the events described. It is the story of U-482, and of how a lone U-boat on her first active patrol managed to pull off one of the most extraordinary and dramatic U-boat attacks of the Second World War.



A FEW CARELESS WORDS MAY END IN THIS—

Many lives were lost in the last war through careless talk
Be on your guard! Don't discuss movements of ships or troops

I

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

The Battle of the Atlantic was the dominating factor all during the war. Never for a moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere – on land, sea and in the air – depended ultimately on the outcome of the Battle of the Atlantic.

Winston Churchill

In the years since taking power in 1933, Hitler's National Socialist Party had turned around the crumbling post-war Germany and made her into one of the most powerful countries in the world through a programme of military expansion and rearmament that had led to worldwide tension, mobilisation and eventually war.

What became known as the Battle of the Atlantic was in fact the longest continuously fought campaign of the conflict. After war broke out between Britain and Germany, it became clear that the biggest initial threat to the island nation was to her shipping. Britain was an island of 48 million people with an average annual import of some 55 million tonnes of raw materials; upwards of a million tonnes a week. Some of these materials were for use in factories for manufacturing and export, but most was simply what the population needed just to survive, let alone fight a war. Hitler knew that these supply lines were the key to achieving a quick finish to the war with Britain – and thus in Western Europe – and so his *Kriegsmarine* ('War Navy') began a focused operation to cut off the small island, shatter her merchant fleet, destroy her supplies and bring her to her knees.

Britain had the biggest Merchant Navy in the world with a fleet of around 18 million tonnes. These ships were continuously travelling all over the world, which meant that it would be an enormous and wide-ranging task to defeat them. Though the war was fought in every corner of the globe, it was the supply lines pouring into Britain from the Atlantic that were the key to her survival. On one side of the battle was the Allied Merchant Navy, desperately trying to make it through to Britain with food and supplies, and on the other side were the U-boats, intent on preventing them. For Britain to survive, it was imperative that the ships crossing the Atlantic got through with the food, the weapons and the fuel to keep the country running. The celebrated pilots of the Royal Air Force could never have fought off the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain without the fuel for their aircraft and the ammunition for their guns. They could not have defended their coastline, or sent bombers across the English Channel without the necessary materials to build them. The tanks and guns for the Africa Campaign, the fuel for the evacuation of Dunkirk, the aircraft for the bombardment of Germany, the equipment for the invasion force for D-Day all came across the Atlantic in the holds of the Allied Merchant Navy ships. It is little wonder that Churchill acknowledged the Battle of the Atlantic as the dominating factor during the war.

Within twelve hours of the declaration of war on 3 September 1939 it became clear

that Britain's greatest fears were to come true. The liner SS *Athenia* was torpedoed 200 miles out into the Atlantic on her way to Canada by U-30, who had mistaken her for a troopship. In fact she was carrying many civilians, of whom 118 died in the sinking. This tragedy was a sign of things to come. There grew an all-out tonnage war between the ships of the Merchant Navy and the Kriegsmarine as the U-boats began their campaign to starve Britain into submission. Later on, they would no longer be trying to simply defeat Britain – from mid-1942 when the war escalated with American involvement, the U-boats worked tirelessly to try and prevent the enormous movements of men, weapons and materials being shipped into Britain in preparation for the anticipated Allied invasion of Europe.

As the war progressed and it became clear that the U-boats were Germany's biggest hope in defeating Britain, production of the submarines escalated dramatically. At the outbreak of war Admiral Karl Dönitz who was *Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote* or Commander of Submarines, had just 56 U-boats in commission. This was nowhere near the number he wanted to begin his planned campaign but at least they were all new, and equipped with state-of-the-art submarine technology. Once war was declared U-boat production began immediately in nineteen different shipyards spread over eleven cities including Kiel, Wilhelmshaven and Hamburg. These shipyards would produce the 1,174 vessels that were ultimately launched during the conflict. Over the course of the war submarine technology developed rapidly and by 1945 the U-boat was a much more advanced fighting vessel than it had been at the start. But during the war years, the bulk of the U-boat fleet was made up of the Type IX and more importantly the Type VII, the latter a relatively small boat that varied in size from 630 to 760 tonnes. The Type VII was the most productive and widely used U-boat of the war, with almost 700 of them going into service. It was incredibly successful in theatre, totally unmatched as an attack submarine, and a combination of crew resourcefulness and endurance saw it succeed way beyond the parameters it was designed for.

In a time of war, all vehicles and crafts are used in any way they can to aid the war effort. From merchant ships to fishing boats, aircraft to motorcycles, cars and trucks, everything can be armed and armoured, and converted from its primary use to one of attack or defence. But a submarine is virtually unique in that it is exclusively a weapon, used for the stalking and stealthy attacking of enemy ships.

As an island nation, it is not surprising that in 1939 Britain had the largest Merchant Navy in the world. Somewhere in the region of 185,000 men crewed the ships that crossed the globe and it is estimated that during the war there were around 144,000 men at sea on any given date as they struggled to keep up the supply of food, men, supplies and munitions to Britain and the European front. Therefore there was enormous demand for merchant seamen and many experienced seamen chose to join the merchant marine over the Royal Navy. Life in the Merchant Navy would have been similar to life on a trawler or whaling ship. However, it was common for merchant seamen, fisherman or whalers to be part of the Royal Naval Reserve and many who were between trips at the outbreak of war were drafted straight into the Royal Navy. In 1938 the average age of a merchant seaman was 36 but there were also boys as young as fifteen or less aboard some of the ships, most of them from large ports areas such as London, Liverpool, Glasgow and the Tyne.

The men of the Merchant Navy – often referred to as ‘the fourth service’ – wore no distinct uniform like those in the Armed Services, and at most men on leave wore a small silver Merchant Navy lapel badge. This often resulted in sailors on leave being the victims of abuse from an ignorant public who seeing them without uniform mistakenly thought they were able-bodied men who were avoiding war service. In reality these were the men who were helping to keep the country alive and were often in much more significant danger than their uniformed counterparts in the armed services. In 1941 and 1942, 15,000 merchant seamen were lost as a result of enemy action and over the course of the war nearly 63,000 Allied and neutral merchant seamen lost their lives. It was a life spent endlessly crossing and re-crossing the seas, loading and unloading their cargoes, working four hours on and four hours off, never a full night’s sleep or a full day’s rest. And always there was a tenacious enemy lying in wait, ready to take the ship from beneath them. These men received little recognition for their dedication to duty. Ultimately many had no grave but the sea.

On top of these terrible human losses was the incredible tonnage of ships and cargoes being sent to the seabed by the enemy submarines. By the end of 1939, after fewer than four months of war, 147 ships had been lost; a total of 510,000 tonnes. This level of loss could not possibly be withstood by the British population, and the country was under immense strain as it continued to stand alone against Nazi Germany. It became clear that even a single U-boat was capable of inflicting levels of damage at sea that would have taken an entire army to achieve on land. Admiral Dönitz later wrote in his memoirs of the colossal impact a U-boat could make: ‘How many soldiers would have to be sacrificed, how great an endeavour made, to destroy on land so great a mass of enemy war material?’

At the beginning of the war, the U-boats were under orders to observe ‘Cruiser Rules’, which meant that passenger ships were not to be attacked, and merchant ships were only to be attacked once fair warning had been given and the crews allowed to abandon ship, and even then only if they were within a reasonable distance from land. As time went on these rules were less and less adhered to, almost immediately in some cases – the *Athenia* being the earliest example. In some ways it is hardly surprising, as to follow the rules meant the U-boat having to reveal her presence, something which defeated the effectiveness of the surprise attack and which put her at unnecessary risk from counter attack.

Dönitz still did not have enough U-boats ready by the end of 1939 and it soon became clear to him that following the ‘Cruiser Rules’ was putting his precious submarines at unnecessary risk. For this reason in December 1939 Dönitz issued Standing Order 154, the first step towards what would be termed ‘Unrestricted Submarine Warfare’. It was a controversial order that would later be used against him by the prosecution when he stood accused of war crimes at Nuremberg. Standing Order 154 read:

Do not rescue crew members or take them aboard and do not take care of the ship’s boats. Weather conditions and the distance from land are of no consequence. Think only of the safety of your own boat and try to achieve additional success as soon as possible. We must be harsh in this war. The enemy started it in order to destroy us, and we have to act accordingly.

Germany had already scored unprecedented success against the ships of the Merchant

Navy, and there seemed to be little defence against the aggressive U-boats. And now with no restrictions on their attacks, things were only going to get worse for the merchant ships.

By September 1940 after a long twelve months of war, Britain stood alone. Her troops had been forced back to Dunkirk, Italy had joined the war against her and Norway had fallen to Hitler's forces giving Germany strategic bases right on the western coast of northern Europe. Finally France was defeated. Having the fourth largest navy in the world at that time, France's capitulation was a massive loss to Britain's war effort and the German occupation gave the Kriegsmarine potential bases right on the Bay of Biscay with direct access to the Atlantic. With control of France, the Kriegsmarine gained some 800 miles of Atlantic coastline, spreading from the Dover Strait right the way down to northern Spain. This meant the U-boats could now avoid the dangerous trip through the heavily mined and guarded English Channel and head straight to the Western Approaches where merchant ships poured into Britain every day. In effect, this doubled the active U-boat force by allowing each submarine to spend much longer on active patrol because they spent much less time travelling to and from port.

In the first months of the war, losses in the North Atlantic averaged some 80,000 tonnes a month, but with more operational U-boats than ever, the casualty rate had grown to losses of over 250,000 tonnes a month by the latter half of 1940; an enormous proportion of the ships that supplied Britain and three times what her crippled shipyards could manage to replace. It could not really be called a war of attrition because the attritional losses were on one side only. In the period from July to October 1940 an incredible 220 Allied vessels were sunk.

For the merchant vessels, U-boat detection technology was extremely primitive and to attack one was very imprecise because they simply could not be seen unless they were sailing on the surface. Therefore it was possible for a submerged U-boat to inflict enormous losses for proportionally little risk. In October 1940 there was a million tonnes of shipping sunk for every three U-boats that Germany had operational. Without doubt, the U-boat had become the primary weapon of the Kriegsmarine, and the destruction of the Allied Merchant Navy was their primary endeavour. In his memoirs, Admiral Dönitz later wrote that 'the most important task of the German Navy, and therefore of the German U-boat arm ... was the conduct of operations against shipping on Britain's vital lines of communication across the Atlantic.'

The following is taken from an instructional handbook that was issued to the US Air Force during the war, highlighting the potential material losses created by the sinking of a merchant ship:

If a U-boat sinks two 6,000 ton ships and one 3,000 ton tanker, here is a typical list of the sort of losses we should incur: 42 tanks, 8 6-inch howitzers, 88 25-pounder guns, 40 40-mm. guns, 24 armoured patrol vehicles, 50 Bren guns or self-propelled gun mountings, 5,210 tons of munitions, 600 rifles, 428 tons of tank accessories, 2,000 tons of rations and 1,000 drums of petrol. Just think what we could have done with that lot, if the three ships had reached port safely! To inflict similar losses by air-raid the enemy would have to fly 3,000 sorties!

By the time they had direct access to the Atlantic from their French bases at ports such as Brest, La Rochelle and Lorient, the U-boats were able to attack at will, sinking

merchant shipping on a daily basis with very little reprisal. It is little wonder that the men of the Kriegsmarine called this period in the autumn of 1940 '*Die Gluckliche Zeit*' or 'The Happy Time'. For the men of the Merchant Navy it was the beginning of the most concentrated period of loss that they would endure.

The closeness of the U-boats to St George's Channel at the south entrance to the Irish Sea meant that the Allies were now routing most of the shipping through the North Channel but still most of the attacks took place in the Western Approaches, the stretch of sea to the west of Ireland where the convoys passed through. Even in that targeted area there was a massive expanse of ocean to patrol and one of the biggest difficulties facing the U-boats was actually locating a convoy, particularly at night. To counter this problem, Admiral Dönitz initiated '*rudeltaktik*', the formation of several U-boats into a single hunting unit or 'wolf pack'.

This meant several vessels, commonly between six and ten, under orders from BdU or *Befehlshaber der U-boote* (U-boat Headquarters) taking up positions along a likely convoy route and lying in wait for enemy ships. Then when one of the U-boats located a convoy they would report it and begin to shadow them without attacking. The other boats were then directed to the location while the initial spotter continued to track them so that they could report any changes of direction. Then when the rest of the pack was together they would strike simultaneously, often at night. The result was usually enormous damage to the convoy and it was often so sudden that the escort ships did not have a chance to react. In many cases the U-boats would manoeuvre right into the middle of a convoy before attacking so as to have a clear shot at several vessels at once, or they would position themselves behind the moonlight in the path of an incoming convoy, so that the convoy was bearing down on them. Then they could simply line themselves up and strike whenever the targets had moved within range. They usually chose to attack concealed under the cover of darkness, which also meant they could attack on the surface, thus avoiding detection by ASDIC, the early form of sonar that could only detect U-boats when underwater. It was an invention born from a combined Anglo-French scientific group who created a device that attached to the hull of a ship encased in a metal dome. It transmitted and received high-frequency sound waves sent in pulses that would ping and bounce back when they came into contact with any underwater object. The acronym ASDIC allegedly stood for 'Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee', the name of the group who developed the device. In fact, no trace of such a committee has ever been found in the Admiralty archives; it was more or less a 1939 bluff by the Admiralty! The quartz piezoelectric crystals first used for underwater detection back in 1917 were referred to as ASDivite and the word supersonic was replaced with ASDics. So we are left with 'Anti Submarine Detection (or Division)' and no more.

For the Merchant Navy, the worst period of the entire war was the twelve months from June 1940 to May 1941 when they lost 806 ships; more than two a day. The majority were lost to the U-boats patrolling in the North Atlantic. Personnel losses were high because ships commonly sank in a very short time after a torpedo attack. Often a heavily laden ship with a hole blown in her side would flood incredibly quickly and begin to sink before the men on board had any chance to escape. It is estimated that 75 per cent of shipping sank within fifteen minutes of a torpedo impact but it was common for them to disappear within only two or three minutes. Any crew

who were working deep below decks or were off duty and asleep at the time of an attack had very little time to get outside to a lifeboat. Those working in the engine room really had no chance. Therefore it became increasingly common for men to sleep in their clothes, even wearing a life belt so that they had every possible chance to escape in the event of an attack.

In June 1942 the Allies lost 124 ships, a total of 623,545 tonnes in a single month, the highest rate of loss in the war. Things were becoming increasingly desperate, and it was clear that to lose the Battle of the Atlantic not only meant the starvation and defeat of Britain, but also the prevention of any possible Allied invasion plans. If Hitler was to be defeated, it was vital that the ships kept getting through. Furthermore, the U-boat attacks had become far more aggressive, deadly and murderous under orders of the Führer himself. On 3 January 1942 he had ordered Admiral Dönitz, 'Merchant shipping will be sunk without warning with the intention of killing as many of the crew as possible.'

The early years of the war were the most successful for the U-boats, so they were inevitably the halcyon days of the U-boat aces, a time when the Third Reich elevated their most successful commanders to the status of national heroes. These original U-boat aces became household names throughout the Third Reich and their names are still synonymous today with the U-boat war, men like Otto Kretschmer, Wolfgang Lüth, Günther Prien, Erich Topp, Fritz-Julius Lemp and Joachim Schepke. These men became celebrities.

But the elevation of these men only made it a greater blow to the national morale when they were lost, as many inevitably were. As it turned out several of them were lost in quick succession providing a propaganda problem for Hitler's government. Günther Prien, the Bull of Scapa Flow, was lost in the North Atlantic on 7 March 1941. The loss was attributed to a depth charge attack by HMS *Wolverine*. Prien's loss was an enormous shock to the German people and to the other men of the U-boat arm. Just over a week later on 17 March 1941, during a wolf pack attack on convoy HX-112, Otto Kretschmer was taken prisoner after the destruction of his U-boat U-99 following a depth charge attack by HMS *Walker* to the south-east of Iceland. In the same battle, Joachim Schepke was attacked by depth charges from HMS *Walker* and then rammed by HMS *Vanoc* after he was forced to surface. The vessel was totally destroyed and 38 of the crew killed, including Schepke who was on the bridge at the time of the ramming; he was reportedly severed in half by the collision. Three of the most famous and successful U-boat commanders of the war had been killed or captured in the space of ten days. Advances in Allied technology and tactics, as well as an increase in the availability of escort vessels meant the U-boats were finding that the hunt was not as easy as it was in the early days. After months of freely sinking massive quantities of shipping without reprisal, the U-boats found the enemy was fighting back.

Dönitz countered the problem of the escorts by sending his ships farther out into the Atlantic to hunt. The escort ships were only protecting the convoys in the closing stages of the voyage, joining up with them as they approached the west coast of Britain. So by sending the U-boats farther west they were able to attack undefended ships before the escorts arrived. It immediately changed the balance once more in favour of the U-boats. In early April, convoy SC-26 was attacked by several U-boats

in the mid-Atlantic. The group of 22 ships which had left Halifax on 20 March en route to Liverpool came under attack over a period of three days, resulting in the loss of ten ships, with another three being damaged including the warship HMS *Worcestershire*. Only a single U-boat was lost in the battle.

Then on 9 May, another of the famed U-boat aces was lost when Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp was killed during the capture of U-110. Lemp had already gained some notoriety by torpedoing the liner *Athenia* on the very first day of the war. During an attack on a convoy, U-110 was damaged by a depth charge attack by HMS *Aubretia*, which forced her to surface. Lemp gave the order to abandon ship but already they were under further attack by two nearby destroyers who thought they were preparing to fire the deck gun. HMS *Bulldog* and HMS *Broadway* began firing, causing further damage and casualties, only stopping when they realised the U-boat was sinking. HMS *Bulldog* moved in to capture the vessel as the crew abandoned ship but Lemp quickly realised that U-110 was not sinking fast enough. He reportedly swam back to the submarine to destroy the code books and Enigma code machine, which he had assumed would be lost when she sank. He was not seen again, though German eyewitnesses later claimed he was shot in the water by a British sailor, presumably because he realised his intentions. HMS *Bulldog* captured the vessel and recovered the codebooks, logs and Enigma machine. This capture by the Allies helped towards the eventual breaking of the German codes by the code breakers at Bletchley Park and was one of the most significant intelligence coups of the war.

In response to the U-boats shifting farther west, the Allies decided to arrange escorts for the convoys for the entire duration of their voyages. The Canadian Navy began escorting the convoys for the western part of their trip, before meeting up with an inbound convoy and escorting them back.

Meanwhile, Allied anti-submarine tactics continued to advance, with sonar technology improving and weapons becoming more destructive and accurate. Direction-finding equipment was gradually beginning to pierce the U-boats' cloak of invisibility, and improvements in aircraft range plus the addition of Catapult Aircraft Merchantmen (CAM) ships, and increased coastal patrol aircraft made air coverage more extensive and effective. Also in the latter part of 1941 the breaking of the Enigma code meant the Allies were able to calculate and plot the location of the U-boats, and so reroute the convoys to avoid them.

Although the Allies were gradually beginning to detect and avoid the prowling U-boats, they were still not able to put up much of a defence, and with more German submarines coming into service there was still no tangible signs of an Allied victory. But before the year was out, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

The attack on 7 December 1941 brought the United States fully into the conflict, and meant that Admiral Dönitz immediately ordered his U-boats to cross the Atlantic and begin attacking shipping on the east coast of America. The operation was known as '*Paukenschlag*' or Operation *Drumbeat*. By early 1942 the Americans had also begun sailing their ships in convoy and losses quickly dropped. Once the potential for a turkey shoot faded, Dönitz redeployed his U-boats once more, withdrawing them from the east coast of the United States and returning them to the North Atlantic.

On 12 September 1942, U-156 under command of Kapitänleutnant Werner Hartenstein torpedoed the enormous British liner *Laconia* (19,695 tonnes), in the

South Atlantic between Ascension Island and Freetown, Sierra Leone, and brought about one of the most controversial – and remarkable – episodes of the entire Battle of the Atlantic. The ship was carrying 136 crew, 268 military personnel, 80 civilians, and 1,800 Italian prisoners of war guarded by 160 Polish soldiers. Upon realising there were Italians on board, who were still allies of Germany under Mussolini at that time, Hartenstein immediately began a rescue attempt and began signalling for assistance, first to BdU and then to any nearby vessels or aircraft. In a desperate attempt to make up for his mistake, he promised to cease hostilities against any vessel coming to assist regardless of nationality. At 0600 hours on 13 September 1942 Hartenstein broadcast the following uncoded message: ‘If any ship will assist the ship-wrecked *Laconia* crew, I will not attack provided I am not attacked by ship or air forces. I picked up 193 men. 4, 53 South, 11, 26 West.’

U-156 ended up with her hull literally covered in survivors, with the deck and conning tower packed with men clinging on to their only hope of survival. The U-boat had some 200 men aboard her and had helped another 200 into lifeboats while they waited for more help to arrive. Eventually on the 15th, U-506 arrived on the scene and joined in the rescue, followed shortly after by U-507 and the Italian submarine *Cappellini*. The U-boats began making their way towards land, towing the lifeboats behind them, now with hundreds of men in the lifeboats, and on and inside the U-boats.

Then at 1125 hours on 16 September, an American B-24 bomber flying from its base on Ascension Island arrived on the scene. The pilot spotted the U-boats and the lifeboats flying the flag of the Red Cross. He reported back to base and was instructed to attack immediately. At 1232 hours he began attacking, and the U-boats were forced to immediately cut the tow lines to the lifeboats and dive for cover leaving hundreds of men stranded in the water once again. The men who had been taken inside the U-boats were safe and soon afterwards ships arrived on the scene from Dakar and began picking up the rest of the survivors, but the incident still resulted in the loss of 1,658 lives out of the 2,741 aboard. The incident prompted a change in the way that the Kriegsmarine would deal with such situations for the rest of the war. In response Admiral Dönitz issued what became known as the ‘Laconia Order’:

1. All efforts to save survivors of sunken ships, such as the fishing out of swimming men and putting them on board lifeboats, the righting of overturned lifeboats, or the handing over of food and water, must stop. Rescue contradicts the most basic demands of the war: the destruction of hostile ships and their crews.
2. The orders concerning the bringing-in of skippers and chief engineers stay in effect.
3. Survivors are to be saved only if their statements are important for the boat.
4. Stay firm. Remember that the enemy has no regard for women and children when bombing German cities!

This order became one of the mainstays of the case against Dönitz at the Nuremberg trials. The issuing of the Laconia Order along with the equally controversial ‘War Order No.154’ – issued at the end of 1939 and ordering the use of unrestricted submarine warfare, where U-boats would sink merchant ships without warning and

without stopping to rescue survivors – were the two points that resulted in Dönitz being found guilty of causing Germany to be in breach of the Second London Naval Treaty of 1936. At his trial, Dönitz was accused of being a war criminal on three counts and was found guilty on two of those counts resulting in a ten-year prison sentence, which he served in Spandau Prison, Berlin, finally being released on 1 October 1956.

Operation *Torch*, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942, resulted in a significant increase in shipping as men and equipment were moved in to support the invasion, and this created a newly stocked hunting ground for the U-boats who saw another increase in successes, mostly owing to the fact there were simply more targets in the vicinity.

Although the U-boats were continuing to have enormous successes against them, the Allies were increasingly getting a grip on the situation. In October 1940 there had only been three U-boats lost for every million tonnes of Allied shipping sunk – by November 1942 they were losing seventeen U-boats for that same tonnage. There had been a distinct boost in the Allies' ability to fight back.

By early 1943, there was no doubt that the U-boats were up against a much more prepared and aggressive enemy, and there were disturbing reports coming into U-boat command from the returning commanders. They were beginning to find that they were falling victim to sudden air attacks, even when hidden at periscope depth, when previously they had been concealed below the waves. Even in darkness or in heavy fog, conditions that had previously been ideal for a hunting U-boat, the enemy aircraft seemed to be locating them with uncanny precision. Furthermore, the U-boats were finding that when they had located a convoy and had begun shadowing it until ready to attack, the escorting destroyers and corvettes were quickly detecting their position and they were having to break off almost immediately and dive for safety before a barrage of depth charges came down upon them. It was as though the Allied escorts could literally see them through the waves, and so they were no safer submerged than they were on the surface. The U-boat's most precious ability was the ability to hide, to prowl unseen and escape without trace; now it looked like that gift might have gone. It even became more difficult for the U-boats to locate the convoys and it began to seem as though the convoys were detecting them at a distance and adjusting their course to keep clear of them. Neither the U-boats nor Admiral Dönitz at U-boat Command could understand what had led to this loss of their invisibility. The truth was that several different factors were working against them.

By January 1943 Dönitz had some 400 U-boats under his command, seven times what he had at the start of the war, but this was no longer enough to ensure victory because of the dramatic technological improvements in submarine detection, defence and attack. By the beginning of 1943 it took 55 U-boats to achieve the success rate achieved by only 18 vessels in late 1940. And things were to get even worse for the German Navy that year. For the U-boat men, the fifth month of 1943 would be known as 'Black May'.

On 21 April 1943, Convoy ONS-5 departed Liverpool for Halifax, a group of 42 ships in twelve columns. Ahead of the group in the North Atlantic lay a record number of U-boats, as many as 36 spread over two patrol lines in the air gap below Greenland, an expanse of sea that lay outside the operational range of reconnaissance aircraft and