

A Slaughter of Ships

Naval Strategies and Tactics during the Second World War: The Role of U-Boats in the Battle of the Atlantic, 1939 - 1943

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The popular perception of the U-boat war in the Atlantic usually consists of a number of sleek black U-boats tearing into a group of helpless merchantmen like a pack of wolves at a herd of sheep. While this is an accurate picture to a large degree, it is not the only picture. Admiral Karl Dönitz, the *Befehlshaber der U-boat*, or Commander-in-Chief of U-Boats, actually employed a number of tactics other than the notorious *Rudeltaktik*, or wolfpack tactic. These included minelaying, lone wolf attacks, submerged daylight attacks, night surface attacks, surprise attacks in previously safe waters, or a combination thereof. However, despite the continually changing tactics, Admiral Dönitz's overall strategic aims remained the same. For the period 1939 to 1943, Dönitz's strategy continued to be the disruption of shipping between North America and Europe.

When war was declared on September 3, 1939, the U-boat Arm of the *Kriegsmarine* consisted of 57 U-boats, of which only 39 were fully operational.¹ Despite the small numbers, Dönitz still planned on immediately initiating a campaign against Britain's merchant shipping.² Consequently, in an attempt to sink as many ships as possible before the British were able to organize, Dönitz deployed his available U-boats at the end of August in a wide arc across the Atlantic trade routes west of the United Kingdom³ as well as in the North Sea.⁴ It was one of these boats, U-30 (Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp) which sank the passenger liner *Athenia* on the first day of the war. Mistaking the ship for an auxiliary cruiser, Lemp sank her with one

¹V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p.81.

²Günther Hessler, The U-Boat War in the Atlantic 1939 - 1945, Vol. I (London: HMSO, 1989), p.7

³Ibid

⁴V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, p.83.

torpedo in a submerged attack, killing 112 people.⁵ The British thought that Germany had instituted the same unrestricted submarine warfare exercised in WWI and unleashed an unprecedented propaganda campaign in an attempt to inflame American public opinion.⁶ The Germans retaliated with their own assertion that the liner had actually been sunk by a British warship.⁷ The fact was that, at the time, neither party knew the truth. It was only after U-30 returned from patrol and Lemp admitted to the mistake that the facts became known. Lemp and his crew were sworn to secrecy and the U-boat's war diary (KTB) was altered to delete the sinking.⁸ The *Athenia* was just one of 48 ships sunk by U-boat during the first September of the war.⁹ However, all of these ships were not sunk by torpedo attack. Submarine minelaying was another tactic Dönitz used to good effect.

Between the wars, Germany had secretly developed a highly effective magnetic mine. However, they were only available in small numbers, and Dönitz wanted to deploy them as quickly as possible.¹⁰ The sooner he could get them in place at strategic spots, ie. , the roads¹¹ leading to major harbours, the more damage could be done before the British were able to develop an

⁵Jurgen Rohwer and Gerhard Hümmelchen, Chronology of the War at Sea 1939 - 1945, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), p.1.

⁶Dan van der Vat. The Atlantic Campaign, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 6. It was unrestricted submarine warfare that finally forced the US into WWI. Hitler wanted to avoid this from happening again.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Dan van der Vat. Stealth at Sea, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), pp. 164-4.

⁹Jurgen Rohwer, Axis Submarine Successes, (Cambridge: Patrick Stephens Ltd., 1983), p.1.

¹⁰Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1990), p.65.

¹¹The term "Roads" refers to the sea lanes leading to a port.

effective countermeasure.¹² One of the best ways to do this, and attract the least attention of the enemy, was by submarine. Consequently, in the first six months of the conflict, fully 33 mining missions were carried out. A total of 350 of the new magnetic mines was sown, sinking 129, 419 tons of shipping.¹³ Overall, during this first phase of the war, 250 merchant ships were sunk for a total of approximately 850,000 tons.¹⁴ Significantly, only 33, or less than 14% of these ships were sunk in convoy.¹⁵

The British Admiralty did not forget the first naval lesson from World War I: the most effective way to protect merchant ships was to convoy them.¹⁶ However, they did forget the second lesson: these convoys needed to be adequately protected. Consequently, when escorts were scarce, they needed to be with the convoys, not used “like cavalry divisions,” as First Sea Lord, and future Prime Minister, Winston Churchill liked to say.¹⁷ As a result, early convoys were often subject to severe losses. Regardless, losses of independently routed ships were far greater than those travelling in convoy by a margin of more than five to one. This trend would continue into 1940, but would start to decline midyear as more and more ships were put into convoys.¹⁸ Dönitz decided it was time to implement his *Rudeltaktik* - wolfpack tactics.

Admiral Dönitz had developed wolfpack tactics before the war with the clear intention of using it to attack convoyed merchantmen.¹⁹ The basic theory was for a number of U-boats to attack a

¹²Dan van der Vat. The Atlantic Campaign, p. 86.

¹³V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, p.83.

¹⁴Ibid., p.84.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Dan van der Vat. The Atlantic Campaign, p. 81.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, p.89.

¹⁹Peter Padfield, Dönitz: The Last Fuhrer, (London: Victor Gollanz Ltd., 1984), p. 170.

single convoy simultaneously, generally at night, and overwhelm the escorts. The British had become too confident in ASDIC, the underwater detection system now known as SONAR.²⁰ A transmitter in the bow of a warship would emit a sound wave which would bounce off a submerged object and return as an echo. The British felt that this equipment, and their antisubmarine measures in general, basically nullified the U-boat threat.²¹ To counter this, Dönitz promoted the night surface attack.²² Asdic could only detect a U-boat submerged, so Dönitz directed his commanders to attack on the surface, much like a torpedo boat. As radar was only in its rudimentary stages at this point, a U-boat attacking on the surface - at night - was almost undetectable. In his memoirs, Dönitz says he was quite surprised that the British were so unprepared when he initiated night surface attacks.²³ In January 1939, he had published a book called *Die U-Bootwaffe* wherein he promoted the advantages of a U-boat attacking on the surface at night. One U-boat skipper, Kapitän-leutnant “Silent Otto” Kretschmer, took the tactic one step further.

Kretschmer, who had previously commanded one of the small 250-ton “canoes”²⁴ earlier in the war with some success, developed the tactic of actually penetrating the convoy and heading straight for its centre.²⁵ Once inside, he would target a ship and fire one torpedo at it. At close range, Kretschmer seldom missed. This “one ship, one torpedo” tactic totally confused the escorts as they never suspected that a U-boat would actually enter the convoy.²⁶ With this

²⁰Grand Admiral Karl Donitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days.p.23.

²¹Marc Milner, North Atlantic Run, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p9.

²²Grand Admiral Karl Donitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days.p.22

²³Ibid.

²⁴The small Type II U-boats were relegated to training duties as soon as the larger, more powerful, Type VII became available in any number.

²⁵The Wolfpacks, (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, Inc., 1989), p.66.

²⁶Otto Kretschmer, interviewed in U-Boat War: Sea Wolves, Nigel Turner (Producer), Eagle Rock Entertainment Plc, 1997.

method, by the time his boat was sunk in February 1941, he had sunk 36 ships in seven patrols.²⁷ He ended the war in a POW camp in Canada, as the leading German U-boat ace with a total of 44 ships for 262, 203 tons of Allied shipping.²⁸

Dönitz had tried wolfpack tactics early in the war. In October 1939, he had planned to assemble a pack of nine U-boats west of the Iberian Peninsula to attack a Gibraltar - UK convoy.²⁹ However, two of the boats were delayed with dockyard repairs, one, U-47, was diverted to another mission,³⁰ and three more were sunk en route. As a result, the now diminished pack only sank three ships. He had tried it again in June 1940, but the patrol lines did not even sight the targeted convoys.³¹ However, by September 1940, Dönitz was ready to try it one more time. This time the results were so successful that Dönitz felt they justified his faith in the tactic.³²

The first of these attacks was against the inadequately escorted eastward convoy HX72³³ on the night of September 21/22.³⁴ Four U-boats, including U-99 captained by Otto Kretschmer, sank a

²⁷Kenneth Winn, U-Boat Operations of the Second World War: Volume II. (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998) p.81.

²⁸The Wolfpacks, p. 177.

²⁹V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, p.82.

³⁰U-49, under the command of Klt. Gunther Prien, was diverted to the British Home Fleet anchorage of Scapa Flow. Prien penetrated the anchorage on the surface on the night of October 14 and sank the British battleship *Royal Oak*, killing 833.

³¹Jak P. Mallmann Showell, U-Boat Command and the Battle of the Atlantic. (St. Catherines: Vanwell Publishing Ltd. 1989), p.39.

³²Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days, p.107.

³³Convoys were designated by their departure ports. Convoy HX72 originated in Halifax NS. Some designations also included the destination - Gibraltar to the UK convoys were designated GH for Gibraltar/Home.

³⁴V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, p.91.

total of eleven ships for 72, 727 tons and damaged another two.³⁵ The next two wolfpack attacks were just as successful. Over two nights, October 16/17 and 18/19, seven U-boats tore into SC7 (Sydney Cape Breton) consisting of 34 merchantmen and five escorts, and sank twenty ships for a total 79, 646 tons.³⁶ Kretschmer accounted for six of these sinkings. Another twelve ships were sunk from HX79 during the night of October 19/20, bringing the grand total for these three attacks to 43 ships.³⁷ Dönitz's *Rudeltaktik* was a success and he would continue to use it to great effect until mid-1943. In the meantime, the USA would enter the war on the Allied side, and Dönitz would be quick to exploit the US Navy's unpreparedness.

When Hitler finally declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941, Karl Dönitz was relieved.³⁸ It finally ended the "Undeclared War" that had been raging for months between his U-boats and American forces in the North Atlantic.³⁹ What had started as the Americans maintaining a Neutrality Patrol, had slowly but surely progressed to blatant escort of British convoys. This had not been without cost to the United States. In September 1941, U652 had torpedoed USS Greer, USS *Kearney* had been hit on October 17, and on October 31, USS *Reuben James* had been sunk by U522.⁴⁰ Now that the United States was officially in the war, Dönitz reasoned that, with the Americans' attention diverted to the Pacific, the whole east coast of the United States would be wide open for attack.⁴¹ In December 1941, eight U-boats left their

³⁵Jurgen Rohwer, Axis Submarine Successes, pp. 29-30.

³⁶Ibid. pp. 33-34.

³⁷V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, p.92.

³⁸Günther Hessler, The U-Boat War in the Atlantic 1939 - 1945, Vol. II, p.1.

³⁹Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days, p.183.

⁴⁰Jurgen Rohwer, Axis Submarine Successes, pp. 63, 69,71.

⁴¹Nathan Miller, The War at Sea, (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 291.

bases in France to make the hazardous journey across the Atlantic to North America. Dönitz codenamed the planned attack “Operation *Paukenschlag*.”⁴²

The first sinking of Operation *Paukenschlag*, occurred January 12, 1942 when Reinhard Hardegen’s U123 sank the British steamer *Cyclops* approximately one hundred miles southeast of Cape Sable, Nova Scotia.⁴³ Hardegen was one of five U-boats that made up the first of three waves of the initial assault on the United States. Hardegen was actually still on his way to his station off New York when he came upon *Cyclops*. Operation *Paukenschlag* was not supposed to start until the next day when his group mates were all expected to be in position. However, *Cyclops* was just too good a target to let go, and Admiral Dönitz had given permission to attack large vessels if they presented themselves.⁴⁴ *Cyclops* was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Worse was to come.

The United States was totally unprepared for the onslaught which commenced with the sinking of the *Cyclops*, despite having been warned well in advance by London.⁴⁵ Much of the navy’s assets were on their way to the Pacific theatre, and the remaining ships of the Atlantic Fleet were being held in harbour in preparation for an attack by the German fleet.⁴⁶ At his disposal, Rear Admiral Adolphus Andrews, C-in-C, North Atlantic Naval Coastal Frontier, had seven Coast Guard cutters, four converted yachts, four wooden sub-chasers, three patrol boats and two pre-WWI gunboats.⁴⁷ Within two weeks of the commencement of *Paukenschlag*, only five of these

⁴²Dönitz is quoted as wanting the attack on the US to be like *einen kräftigen Paukenschlag* - a hard strike of a kettledrum. Hence the name of the operation.

⁴³Spencer Dunmore, *In Great Waters* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1999) p.144.

⁴⁴Michael Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), p.205.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p.172.

⁴⁶Michael Gannon, interviewed in *U-Boat War: Attack America*, Nigel Turner (Producer), Eagle Rock Entertainment Plc, 1997.

⁴⁷Michael Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat*, p. 176.

ships were still “capable of keeping the sea and taking offensive action against enemy submarines.”⁴⁸ To make matters worse, blackout regulations were not enforced along the coast, silhouetting passing ships, and navigation buoys and beacons were not extinguished. As Reinhard Hardegen observed, “it was like in peacetime.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Admiral Earnest King, C-in-C of the US Navy, refused to instigate convoys because he felt a poorly escorted convoy was worse than none at all.⁵⁰ All in all, this made for a slaughter, the magnitude of which is still cause for discussion today.⁵¹ In the first month of Operation *Paukenschlag*, thirty five ships were sunk.⁵² By February sixty-two ships had been lost. In March, a total of seventy-nine Allied and neutral ships were sunk worldwide; seventy-four of these were sunk off North America.⁵³ By the time the USN, with the help of the British and the Canadians, finally got control of the situation in July 1942, the frontier extended all the way down into the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. A total of 2.5 million tons of shipping had been sunk for the loss of only eight U-boats.⁵⁴ It was the USN’s worst naval defeat in history.⁵⁵

There is no debate about what Dönitz’s overall strategy was during the first years of World War II. It was clearly to disrupt the sea lines of communication between North America and Europe. What debate there is revolves around how close he came to achieving it, or even if he was able to at all. Clay Blair, in *Hitler’s U-Boat War*, recognises the carnage in the North Atlantic during the

⁴⁸Admiral Adolphus Andrews, as quoted in Operation Drumbeat, p.177.

⁴⁹Reinhard Hardegen, interviewed in U-Boat War: Attack America, Nigel Turner (Producer), Eagle Rock Entertainment Plc, 1997.

⁵⁰Nathan Miller, The War at Sea, p. 297.

⁵¹Dr. Marc Milner, e-mail to author, October 31, 2001.

⁵²Ibid., p 293.

⁵³Michael Gannon, Operation Drumbeat, p. 266.

⁵⁴Nathan Miller, The War at Sea, p 294.

⁵⁵Michael Gannon, interviewed in U-Boat War: Attack America.

first half of the war, but disputes the oft-quoted assertion that the U-boats were close to completely severing the lines of communication by early 1943.⁵⁶ As he points out, during the first four months of 1943, the Allies convoyed 2401 ships across the Atlantic. Only 111 of these vessels, or 5%, were sunk. The obvious conclusion is that 95% of those ships convoyed across the Atlantic during the period often touted as the darkest hour of the Battle of the Atlantic, got through unscathed.⁵⁷ Noted British historian Geoffrey Will raises the question of whether or not the Battle of the Atlantic was even winnable by the Germans. He points out that the US alone constructed twice the tonnage sunk by the Germans during the war, and as early as June/July 1943, the Allies found they had a surplus of shipping available.⁵⁸ This fact also calls into question Admiral Dönitz's contention that if he'd had 300 U-boats early in the war, he could have brought Britain to her knees.⁵⁹ During the months in question, Dönitz had more than 400 boats in commission, but could only field 42 in January, 55 in February, 40 in March, and 72 in April.⁶⁰

By May 1943, all the improvements in Allied tactics, equipment, and organization came together. Very Long Range (VLR) aircraft became available, and the first escort carrier appeared. High Frequency Direction Finding (Huff Duff) equipment was being installed on escort ships in ever increasing numbers, and 10-centromeric radar was finally available for both warships and aircraft. As a result, in this one month 41 U-boats were sunk, many by aircraft. Dönitz had no choice but to withdraw his forces from the Atlantic. They would return to the battle with new tactics and equipment later that summer but they would never again hold the initiative.

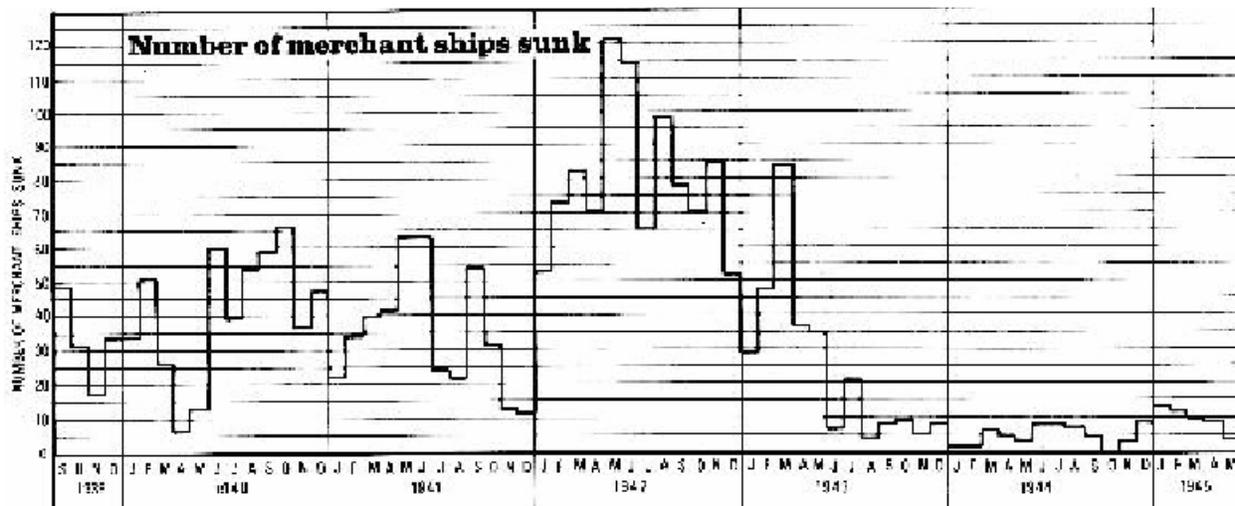
⁵⁶Clay Blair, Hitler's U-Boat War. Volume II, (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 169.

⁵⁷Ibid. p.167.

⁵⁸Geoffrey Till. "The Battle of the Atlantic as History," p.586.

⁵⁹Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days, p.43.

⁶⁰Clay Blair, Hitler's U-boat War, p.167.



The Battle of the Atlantic can be clearly divided into two distinct periods with the undisputed dividing line being the year 1943. We can do this for two reasons. The first is that it was during 1943 that the battle reached its peak, and was ultimately lost by the Germans. The second is related to the first, but is still considered separately. It was during 1943, and because the battle was lost - although he did not really know it at the time - that Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz changed his strategy from one of offence to one of defence.⁶¹ In the last years of the war, attacking merchant shipping was not a war against commerce. It was a means of tying down naval assets and manpower which, if otherwise unoccupied, could be used elsewhere to the detriment of the German war effort. This was a complete reversal of his previous strategy. Up to and including 1943, Dönitz's strategy was to sever the lines of communication between North America and Europe. In some eyes it was a near thing.

During World War II, U-boats sank or seriously damaged approximately 2500 ships in the Atlantic Theatre, including the North Sea and Arctic.⁶² Of this number, fully 95 percent were sunk in the years 1939 - 1943. Regardless of whether or not Admiral Dönitz could have severed the lines of communication is still up for debate. However, what cannot be debated is that for the

⁶¹Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days, p.344.

⁶²V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive 1914 - 1945, pp.149 - 151.

period from September 1939 to December 1943 merchant shipping was his prime target. And it was, indeed, without question, *A Slaughter of Ships*.

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