1. The Battle of the Atlantic: Peril on the Seas

The Battle of the Atlantic is perhaps the most underappreciated theater of World War II. This six-year struggle to keep critical supply routes in the Atlantic safe for Allied shipping was the war’s longest campaign. It was also among its most brutal, with the merchant seamen responsible for transporting goods suffering a higher casualty rate than any branch of the armed services. To Allied sailors, military and civilian alike, that silent, invisible, underwater predator known as the U-boat (a German submarine) became one of the most potent symbols of Nazi terror.

The fight for supremacy on the Atlantic began within hours of the start of the war, when German U-boats and surface raiders began roaming the waters of this vast area in search of the merchant ships that supplied the British Isles with the millions of tons of imported material they needed to survive. In this initial phase of the battle, U-boat numbers were small. Much of the damage inflicted on Allied merchant shipping—which was most often grouped together for safety in escorted convoys—was carried out by small armored ships and other vessels, as well as by mines planted in the approaches to British harbors.
By 1940, however, German strategy in the Atlantic began to change. The German navy suffered major losses during the invasion of Norway in April 1940, which, coupled with the sinking of the massive German battleship *Bismarck* a year later, effectively ended Germany’s use of its surface vessels as a primary weapon in the Atlantic. Instead, the Germans turned almost exclusively to their U-boats. Thanks to German successes on the battlefield, these combat submarines were now in a much better position to enter the Atlantic. Indeed, the fall of Norway and France in the spring of 1940 meant that Hitler’s regime possessed nearly the entire European Atlantic coastline, giving the Germans new U-boat bases and unhindered access to the ocean despite the naval blockade on Germany the Allies had imposed at the start of the war.

Moreover, Britain now stood alone against the Axis, making the island nation extremely vulnerable to this type of naval warfare. In these new circumstances, the German navy began a concerted effort to try to drive the British out of the war by massing submarines into so-called wolf packs. In this new and highly effective tactic, German submarines would form a line across the likely route of a convoy and, once the latter had been detected, would come together to attack it, usually on the surface at night and often with devastating effect. In October 1940, for example, one slow-moving eastbound convoy lost twenty-one of its thirty ships.

From top: The huge German battleship *DKM Bismarck* fires on the Royal Navy battle cruiser HMS *Hood*, May 24, 1941. After the Nazi sinking of the *Hood* off the coast of Greenland, the British hunted down the *Bismarck* and on May 27 sank her on the North Atlantic near France. The Germans stopped using surface vessels on the Atlantic, turning instead to the U-boat. © IWM (HU 381)

The dreaded German Unterseeboot (“undersea boat”), or U-boat, was especially effective against merchant convoys. Though U-boats were used in World War I, it was in World War II that the Germans developed the method of massing subs in a line across the expected path of a convoy, then converging on ships in so-called wolf packs. LOC

Ruins of the Norwegian port town Kristiansund, bombed in April 1940 by the German air force. That spring, the fall of Norway and France gave the Nazis control of a vast expanse of Atlantic coastline on which to establish U-boat bases. National Archives of Norway
The Allies Fight Back

By the end of 1940 it was clear to British prime minister Winston Churchill that such losses could not be sustained. In the winter of 1940–41, Churchill and his military planners took steps to extend the range of naval and air antisubmarine escorts, including establishing bases in Iceland in April 1941. It was also during this period that Churchill informed President Franklin D. Roosevelt that Great Britain no longer had the financial resources to continue paying cash for U.S. war materials and carrying them away in British ships, as required under the "cash and carry" policy established by U.S. neutrality laws. FDR responded with the Lend-Lease Act of March 1941, which turned the United States into "the great arsenal of democracy," making and shipping arms to Britain on a virtually unlimited basis.

But FDR also understood that America's ramped-up war production would prove useless if much of this valuable equipment was sunk en route to England. Since the outbreak of war in Europe, the American navy had been patrolling Atlantic waters near the Americas, accompanying Allied ships in that zone and broadcasting sightings of U-boats. In April 1941, FDR extended the security zone to within fifty nautical miles of Iceland. "How far may it possibly go?" he said in response to a reporter's question. "As far on the waters of the seven seas as may be necessary for the defense of the American hemisphere." Before the year was out, the president would dispatch marines to strategically important Iceland, and, after the targeting (perhaps mistaken) of the American destroyer USS Greer by a German U-boat, would finally authorize navy vessels to shoot these "rattlesnakes of the Atlantic."

The autumn of 1941 also saw the initiation of Allied convoys to Russian Arctic ports at Archangel and Murmansk, a response to the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941. Given the harsh, frigid conditions and risk of German air and naval attack from bases in northern Norway, these efforts to supply the beleaguered Soviets were extremely treacherous—and proved costly. In July 1942, for example, Convoy PQ17 lost twenty-four of its thirty-five ships in a relentless weeklong onslaught, the region's continuous daylight in summer months depriving the convoy of respite. Churchill described the event as "one of the most melancholy naval episodes of the entire war."

Above: Escorts and merchant ships gather at Hvalfjord in Iceland before sailing for Russia in the Allied convoy PQ17. The effort to supply the Russians via the Arctic Ocean was extremely dangerous as it exposed convoys to German air and naval attack from bases in northern Norway. Convoy PQ17 would lose twenty-four of its thirty-five ships in an unceasing weeklong attack. © IWM (A 8953)

Left: The first shipment of Lend-Lease food from America arrives in a British port. Under the Lend-Lease program passed in March 1941, huge quantities of war equipment and other aid would cross the ocean to Britain. To protect it from German torpedoes, Franklin D. Roosevelt beefed up patrols of the Atlantic by the American navy, even though the United States was still officially neutral in the war. LOC
III. Four Freedoms: Preparing for War, Envisioning Peace

1. The Battle of the Atlantic: Peril on the Seas

America Facing the U-boats

America’s full-scale entry into the war in December 1941 opened up vast new theaters of operation for the Germans, with the ironic consequence that the spring of 1942 proved one of the most deadly periods of the war for Allied shipping.

In the six months following Pearl Harbor, hundreds of U.S. merchant vessels, unaccustomed to the perils of modern war and silhouetted at night by the lights of America’s cities, went down to German submarine attacks off the East Coast of the United States. In May and June of 1942 alone, the United States lost more than a million tons of shipping off America’s Atlantic and Gulf coasts—roughly half the total lost in the entire Atlantic in 1941.

To counter this threat, the U.S. Navy instigated a coastal convoy system and aggressive air patrols in May 1942, forcing the Germans to withdraw their U-boats from U.S. coastal waters. Still, the Battle of the Atlantic was far from over, and heavy American losses continued through the end of 1942. Now the conflict was essentially a war of attrition, with the United States locked in a struggle to produce ships faster than the Germans could sink them. Franklin D. Roosevelt met this challenge with his usual vigor, initiating, in September 1941, a massive shipbuilding program that resulted in the construction of 2,751 merchant vessels by the end of the war in 1945.

Clockwise from top left: Welders Walter Norman and Louis Grisanti rush the cargo vessel SS Frederick Douglass to completion in May 1943 at the Bethlehem Fairfield shipyard near Baltimore. Franklin D. Roosevelt had signed an executive order in June 1941 outlawing discrimination in the defense industry, and this shipyard employed thousands of African American workers. The Frederick Douglass would be torpedoed by a U-boat in September 1943, only four months after its launch. But all aboard were recovered by the British rescue ship Rathlin. LOC

A new cargo vessel slides from the ways just twenty-four hours after its keel plates were laid at the Bethlehem Fairfield shipyard near Baltimore, Maryland. In September 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt launched a massive shipbuilding campaign aimed at producing merchant ships faster than the Germans could sink them. LOC

An Atlantic convoy escort ship, 1941. Escorts, including destroyers and other vessels, would create a screen around the convoy, which typically was arranged with ships in several columns forming a “box.” © IWM (A 3081)
Thanks in part to bad weather, a proliferation of U-boats, and a momentary loss of Allied intelligence capabilities, the Battle of the Atlantic reached its climax at the end of 1942 and beginning of 1943. The U-boats infesting the Atlantic posed a particular problem for the Allies in this period, as they were planning an invasion to reclaim Northwest Europe that required very large-scale transportation of men and supplies. Thus, when Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, they determined to give the Battle of the Atlantic priority over all other theaters of war.

The Allies now threw massive resources into the struggle, including new weapons, more sophisticated radar and sonar, newly introduced escort carriers, and, most crucially, a significant increase in long-range bombers to close “the gap,” an area in the mid-Atlantic formerly unreachable by anti-submarine aircraft. These developments, coupled with the repenetration of the main U-boat codes by Allied intelligence in March 1943, spelled disaster for the German commander of submarines, Karl Dönitz.

Having lost nearly a hundred U-boats to Allied action by the end of May that year, Dönitz felt he had no choice but to withdraw his forces.

The German wolf packs subdued at long last, the Allies now enjoyed the upper hand in the Battle of the Atlantic. Isolated losses would continue until the end of the war, but at nothing like the rates achieved by the Germans between the fall of 1940 and the spring of 1943. The way was now clear for the massive buildup of forces required for the Allied invasion of France in the anticipated D-day assault on Normandy of June 6, 1944.

By the end of World War II, more than thirty thousand British and more than nine thousand American merchant seamen had lost their lives in the Battle of the Atlantic. No branch of the armed services suffered a higher casualty rate than the men responsible for ferrying desperately needed supplies across a vast ocean. As FDR remarked, the seamen of the U.S. merchant marine had been “fighting side by side with our Army and Navy.”