

# DANGER AND DEATH IN TORPEDO JUNCTION

by Joe A. Mobley\*

Explosive action erupted off the North Carolina coast during the first six months of World War II. Even before Germany declared war on the United States in December, 1941, the waters of the Atlantic had become a major site for German submarines or U-boats [unterseeboots] on the lookout for the ships of their enemies. North Carolina fishermen often reported spotting German submarines on the surface before the Japanese bombing at Pearl Harbor. After that event, when the war between America and Germany became official, American ships in the vicinity of North Carolina's Cape Lookout and Cape Hatteras also fell prey to the skilled and deadly hunters on the U-boats.

Unlike the United States, Germany entered the war well prepared. The powerful German navy boasted an entire fleet of 500-ton U-boats, each manned by a determined crew. Shortly after Pearl Harbor the German Admiral Karl Doenitz, commander of the submarine fleet, dispatched six of the dangerous underwater vessels to destroy American East Coast shipping. He called his naval campaign *Paukenschlag*, which means "Roll of Drums." By January, 1942, at least nineteen German submarines patrolled the western Atlantic. The accuracy of their attacks quickly earned the ships and crews the nicknames of "hearses" and "pallbearers" among American seamen because death followed U-boat strikes time after time.

These Nazi raiders first struck off the Tar Heel coast on January 18, 1942. Several hours before the dawn of that day the oil tanker *Allan Jackson* was proceeding northward in a calm sea sixty miles off Cape Hatteras. The tanker transported crude oil from Colombia, South America, to New York. At 1:30 A.M. a German U-boat lurking in the area fired two torpedoes that struck the *Allan Jackson* and exploded. The second explosion split the ship in two and spilled its cargo of 7.5 million gallons of crude oil into the Atlantic. The vessel and the oil-soaked sea around it were engulfed in flames. Unfortunately most of the tanker's lifeboats were not serviceable and many sailors died. Some of the crew who managed to abandon ship clung for hours to wreckage. Later that day the United States destroyer *Roe* picked up the survivors.

The first submarine attack along the Tar Heel coast had been costly. The tanker and its valuable cargo were lost, and only thirteen of



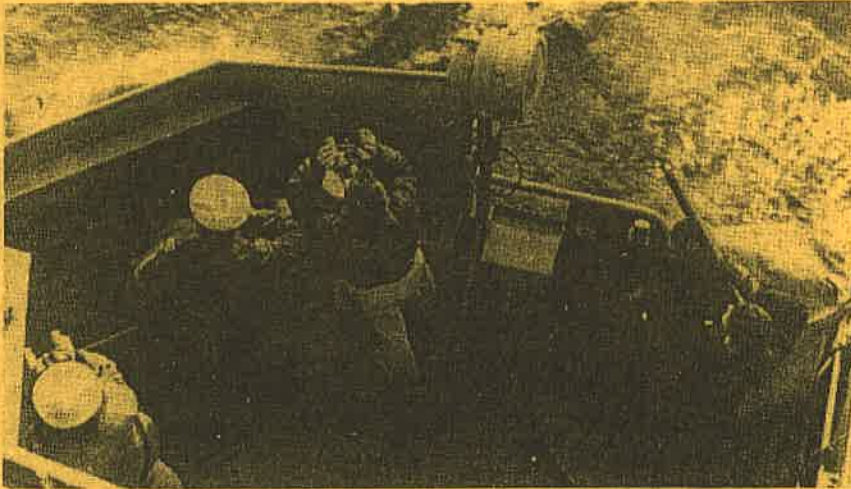
the thirty-five crewmen survived. The sinking of the *Allan Jackson* marked the start of the large-scale destruction of Allied shipping that quickly earned the North Carolina coast the wartime name of Torpedo Junction.

U-boats sank eight more Allied ships during January, 1942, and the same number went down in February. Among these victims was the British tanker *Empire Gem*. Only the captain and one crewman survived its sinking. One Hatteras resident recalled watching the ship's demise. "Here at Hatteras the island shook with explosions at sea. We could hear the cannon. We felt the shocks, one after another. Windows rattled. . . . A big oil tanker, the *Empire Gem* . . . burned for days, filling the sea with flames and smoke." Another victim was the American *Venore*. Twenty-one sailors from the *Venore* died when that vessel sank off Diamond Shoals. Other ships destroyed by German torpedoes included the Brazilian passenger ship *Buarque* and the Norwegian cargo vessel *Blink*. Although twenty-three men from the *Blink* escaped in a lifeboat,

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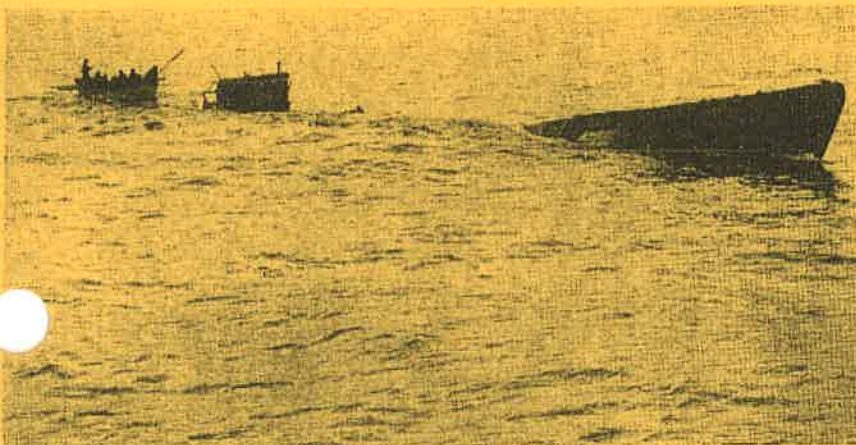
July, 1942, to the close of the war, the Germans managed to sink only a few ships in North Carolina waters. According to David Stick, an authority on North Carolina ship disasters, eighty-seven vessels were lost off the Outer Banks during the war. Two thirds of these went down during torpedo attacks by U-boats. The others struck mines, were

stranded, or foundered at sea. When these ships descended to the ocean floor, they joined hundreds of other silent wrecks in North Carolina's maritime graveyard. There they still rest—eerie underwater reminders of World War II's naval battles off our coast when German U-boats patrolled and briefly dominated Torpedo Junction. ☒☒



The USS *Roper*, a destroyer dating from World War I, became the first American vessel to sink a German U-boat during the war. That event occurred on April 14, 1942. Here the officers and crewmen on the starboard bridge wing of the *Roper* study a sighting. Courtesy of both Commander Winfield DeLong, U.S. Navy (Retired) and Homer H. Hickam, Jr.

In 1942 Lieutenant Winfield DeLong, shown testing a rifle, served as the torpedo officer on the USS *Roper*. When the *Roper* battled the U-85, DeLong did not have time to aim and fire his torpedoes before the German vessel began submerging. The *Roper* crew sank the U-85 by firing deck guns and depth charges. There were no German survivors. Courtesy of both Commander Winfield DeLong, U.S. Navy (Retired) and Homer H. Hickam, Jr.



Three German crewmen on board this U-boat in 1944 were luckier than the crew of the U-85. They survived the sinking of their submarine and were picked up by a coast guard boarding party. U.S. Coast Guard photo.