

The Enemy in Home Waters

How World War I Came Home to
North Carolina

Informational Product

World War I

Report





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Cover Photo: An illustration from 1916 depicting a German submarine attacking an American merchant ship. Photo Credit: Willy Stower, Library of Congress

Inside Cover Photo: USS *Monitor* drawing, Courtesy Joe Hines

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Monitor National Marine Sanctuary The Enemy in Home Waters — How World War I Came Home to North Carolina

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The World at War	2
The U-boat	3
U-boat Tactics	4
The First Multi-Submarine Patrols	5
Unrestricted Submarine Warfare	6
<i>Deutschland</i>	8
U-53	9
Allied Countermeasures	10
U-boat Attacks in American Waters	11
U-151	12
U-140	14
U-117	18
Ex German Submarine Expeditionary Force and General Billy Mitchell	20
U-boats Success and a Future Threat	21
Bibliography	22

NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY SYSTEM



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Introduction

When World War I began in 1914, neither the United States Navy nor American coastal shipping vessels were directly affected. During the war's early years, the battles happened far from American shores and there seemed to be no direct danger to the United States. The people of North Carolina felt they had little to fear from Germany's new *Unterseeboot* (undersea boat) fleet that was prowling the North Atlantic. These German submarines, or U-boats, sunk scores of ships with the loss of hundreds of lives, but many Americans did not believe the U-boats possessed the range to reach the United States eastern seaboard. They were wrong. By the end of the war in 1918, three German U-boats, U-151, U-140, and U-117, had sunk a total of 10 vessels off North Carolina alone. When the U-151 arrived off the U.S. East Coast in May 1918, it was the first foreign enemy naval vessel to invade U.S. waters since the War of 1812. World War I had come home to North Carolina.



A U.S. Navy recruiting poster shows sailors in a lifeboat as one gestures toward a sinking, burning ship in the distance with a German submarine lurking in the background. Photo Credit: Frank Brangwyn, Library of Congress

The World at War

After war was declared in 1914, one of the first actions Great Britain took against Germany was to bring its powerful navy to bear by blockading German ports to limit food, supplies, and war material from reaching the German people and its military. Neutral vessels were theoretically permitted to continue trade but as tensions escalated, Great Britain declared German waters a war zone and seized cargoes that were deemed commodities bound for the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire). The British blockade caused Germany to retaliate by declaring its own naval blockade around the British Isles and the English Channel, using a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare with the goal of destroying all Allied and neutral ships. By this time, the German Unterseeboot fleet had proven itself very effective through the sinking of hundreds of ships by their U-boats. Then on May 7, 1915, tragedy struck **when Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare campaign led to the sinking of the passenger liner RMS *Lusitania* by U-20 off the coast of Ireland.** Nearly 1,200 people, including 128 Americans, lost their lives in this attack. Faced with the possibility of the United States entering the war over the incident, Germany backed down from unrestricted submarine warfare, but only temporarily. At the beginning of 1917, with increasing food shortages and urging from its naval commanders, Germany returned to the policy in hopes of quickly knocking Great Britain out of the war within a year. With the threat once again imposed on Americans, the United States joined the Allied Powers (France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, et al.), entering the war on April 6, 1917 against the Central Powers.

A British propaganda poster shows a figure rising from the sea to offer a sword, with the sinking *Lusitania* and drowning victims in the distance. Photo Credit: Bernard Partridge, Library of Congress



The U-boat

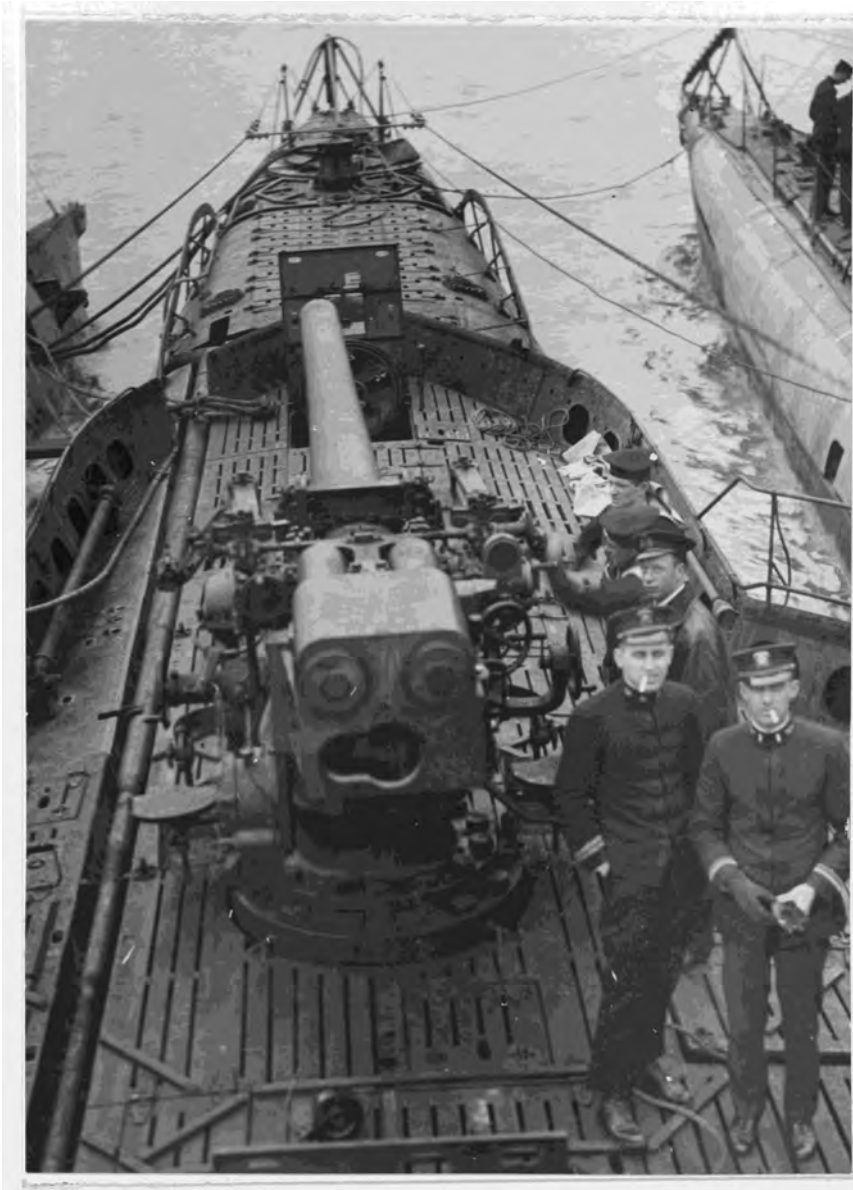
Typical World War I-era German U-boats were ocean-going, could submerge to a maximum depth of 50 meters (165 feet), and had a range of as much as 40,234 kilometers (25,000 miles). On the surface, a U-boat's diesel engines could propel it to a speed of 16 knots, which was faster than typical merchant ships of that time, but slower than the fastest warships. When submerged, a U-boat had a top speed of eight knots and relied on battery-powered electric motors. Not only was its speed and mobility limited when submerged, but its awareness of the surroundings were restricted to what could be seen through a periscope and sounds that could be heard underwater. A World War I U-boat's armament consisted of one or two deck-mounted guns and from six to 16 torpedoes fired from both bow and stern torpedo tubes. The crew consisted of approximately 39 men. A U-boat's major advantage was that it could submerge and hide from enemy ships until getting into position to launch a surprise attack with torpedoes. Another offensive advantage of a World War I U-boat was that it could attack with its deck guns while on the surface, using its supply of artillery shells instead of expending torpedoes.



This painting depicts what typical conditions were like for German submarines when they surfaced in the Atlantic Ocean. Photo Credit: Claus Bergen, Naval History and Heritage Command

U-boat Tactics

World War I U-boat tactics differed from those used in later wars because torpedoes of that period were often unreliable or ineffective due to the difficulty of positioning a U-boat for making an accurate attack, and the internal mechanical or guidance issues within the torpedo after it was launched. U-boats did fire torpedoes when they could expect success, but the limited number carried aboard a U-boat meant torpedoes were only expended when necessary. It was frequently more effective to attack an unarmed merchant ship by making an artillery attack with shelling from deck guns or to demand surrender and then dispatch a boarding party to place explosives onboard the vessel. During World War I, U-boats often made a surface approach to an enemy merchant ship, which provided time for the ship's crew to escape in lifeboats. This manner of attack also permitted U-boat crews to seize supplies and valuables from a targeted ship that surrendered. Valuable items could be taken from the helpless ship before it was sunk, sometimes hours after being captured. In addition, some U-boats were designed to transport and deploy naval mines. These underwater bombs were placed in areas of maritime traffic and proved to be very effective in sinking or damaging passing vessels, sometimes long after a mine was initially laid.



Photographed after World War I while on a U.S. Victory Bond campaign, U-117's 5.9 inch deck gun can clearly be seen. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

The First Multi-Submarine Patrols

History's first multi-submarine patrol occurred in August 1914, when a group of 10 German U-boats left their base and dispersed to attack British Navy warships in the North Sea. However, this particular operation was not a success, as no British vessels were damaged and two of the U-boats were sunk. That changed on September 5, 1914, as the tactical promise of the U-boat was realized when U-21 sank the British cruiser HMS *Pathfinder* off the heavily guarded entrance to Scotland's Firth of Forth. It was the first time a self-propelled torpedo launched from a submarine sank a vessel in combat, and the second successful submarine attack in history. The first was by the Confederate submarine *Hunley* in 1864, during the United States Civil War. Additional success followed in September 1914, when U-9 sank three British cruisers in quick succession off Holland, firmly establishing forever the submarine's essential role in naval warfare. Although the ships sunk, HMS *Aboukir*, HMS *Hogue*, and HMS *Cressy*, were of late nineteenth century design and outdated, their loss of 1,459 British sailors was a major blow to the Allies' morale. World War I naval combat expanded beyond warship-to-warship encounters when on October 20, 1914, U-17 was the first U-boat to sink an unarmed merchant ship. In that incident, a boarding party from U-17 captured and then scuttled the British steamer SS *Glitra* off the coast of Norway.



This poster created by the U.S. Recruiting Bureau in 1917 and illustrates sailors adrift in a lifeboat after being attacked by a German submarine. Photo Credit: Frank Brangwyn, Library of Congress

Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

In August 1914, Great Britain proclaimed a naval blockade of Germany and, by November 1914, declared that German waters were a war zone covered by an "enter at your own risk" policy. The German government interpreted this action as an effort to starve its people by cutting off food imports. In retaliation, the Imperial German Navy imposed a U-boat blockade of the British Isles and the English Channel. Germany considered these waters to be a war zone where enemy, and even neutral, ships were subject to attack.

Unrestricted submarine warfare came into full effect in 1915, when U-boats began focusing a majority of their attacks beyond warships to commercial shipping. This led to the May 7, 1915 U-20 torpedo attack on the British liner RMS *Lusitania*, **11 miles off Ireland's coast**. *Lusitania* sank in just 18 minutes. Of the 1,959 people onboard, 1,198 were killed, 128 of them U. S. citizens. Another attack upon a passenger liner occurred on August 19, 1915, when U-24 torpedoed the White Star liner SS *Arabic*, which was westward bound for America. The ship sank in less than 10 minutes with the loss of 44 passengers and crew, including three Americans. The horror of these attacks and the tremendous public outcry, especially for the *Lusitania's* loss, **prompted U.S. President Woodrow Wilson to send a strong message to the German government demanding an end to German U-boat attacks against unarmed merchant ships.**

One of the most famous war propaganda posters ever created depicts a woman, a passenger from the *Lusitania*, submerged in water cradling an infant in her arms. The poster was intended to capture the public outrage from the loss of hundreds of civilians and drive men to enlist in the military.

Photo Credit: Fred Spear, Library of Congress



Unrestricted Submarine Warfare — Continued

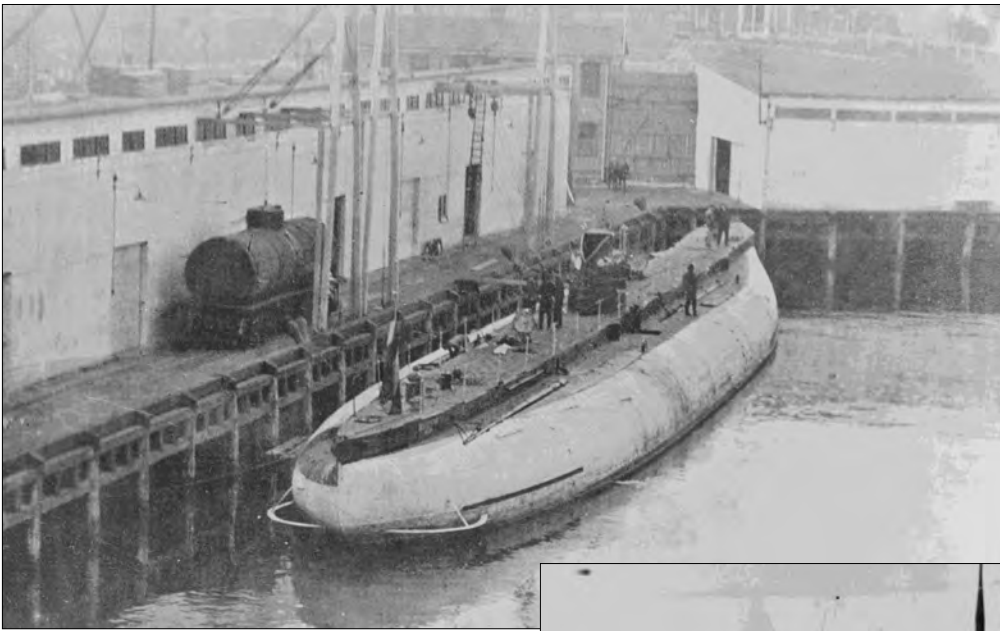
By September 1915, the German government had imposed strict constraints on U-boat operations that spared passenger vessels. However, this policy proved to be short lived. Not prepared to accept this level of passivity, German naval commanders continued to push for a more aggressive use of their U-boat fleet. The German Navy was convinced that the U-boat **was an essential part of Germany's war strategy**. As the months rolled on, **Germany began facing food shortages** and imposed unpopular compulsory service in the armed forces and in war industries. Although Germany knew the United States would most likely enter the war if unrestricted submarine warfare resumed, their military leaders believed they could defeat the Allies before the United States could land troops in Europe. Germany hoped that by once again unleashing their U-boat's **to operate without restrictions against the Allies, they would break the British blockade** of their supply ports and knock Great Britain out of the war within a year. On February 1, 1917, Germany announced they would resume unrestricted submarine warfare on all ships in the Atlantic, including civilian passenger carriers. When President Wilson went before a joint session of Congress on April 2, 1917, to request a declaration of war against Germany, he cited the *Lusitania* **sinking and Germany's subsequent violation of its pledge to suspend** unrestricted submarine warfare as some of the primary reasons. After much deliberation in the House and Senate, the U.S. declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917.



This propaganda poster calls for Irishmen to avenge the *Lusitania* by showing the ship in flames and sinking, with people in the water and lifeboats in the foreground. Photo Credit: Library of Congress

Deutschland

To the astonishment of the American public, the German non-combat merchant submarine *Deutschland* arrived off the **United States' East Coast in July 1916**. Operated by a subsidiary of the North German Lloyd shipping company and built to carry cargo, it crossed the Atlantic in 1916, as a demonstration project, making visits to Baltimore, Maryland and New London, Connecticut. Most Americans did not believe that submarine technology had advanced to the point they could make unassisted trans-Atlantic cruises and the Germans were welcomed as celebrities for accomplishing such an amazing voyage. *Deutschland* completed two very profitable roundtrips to the United States before being taken over by the Imperial German Navy in early 1917, and converted into the U-155, assigned to the U-Kreuzer Flotilla.



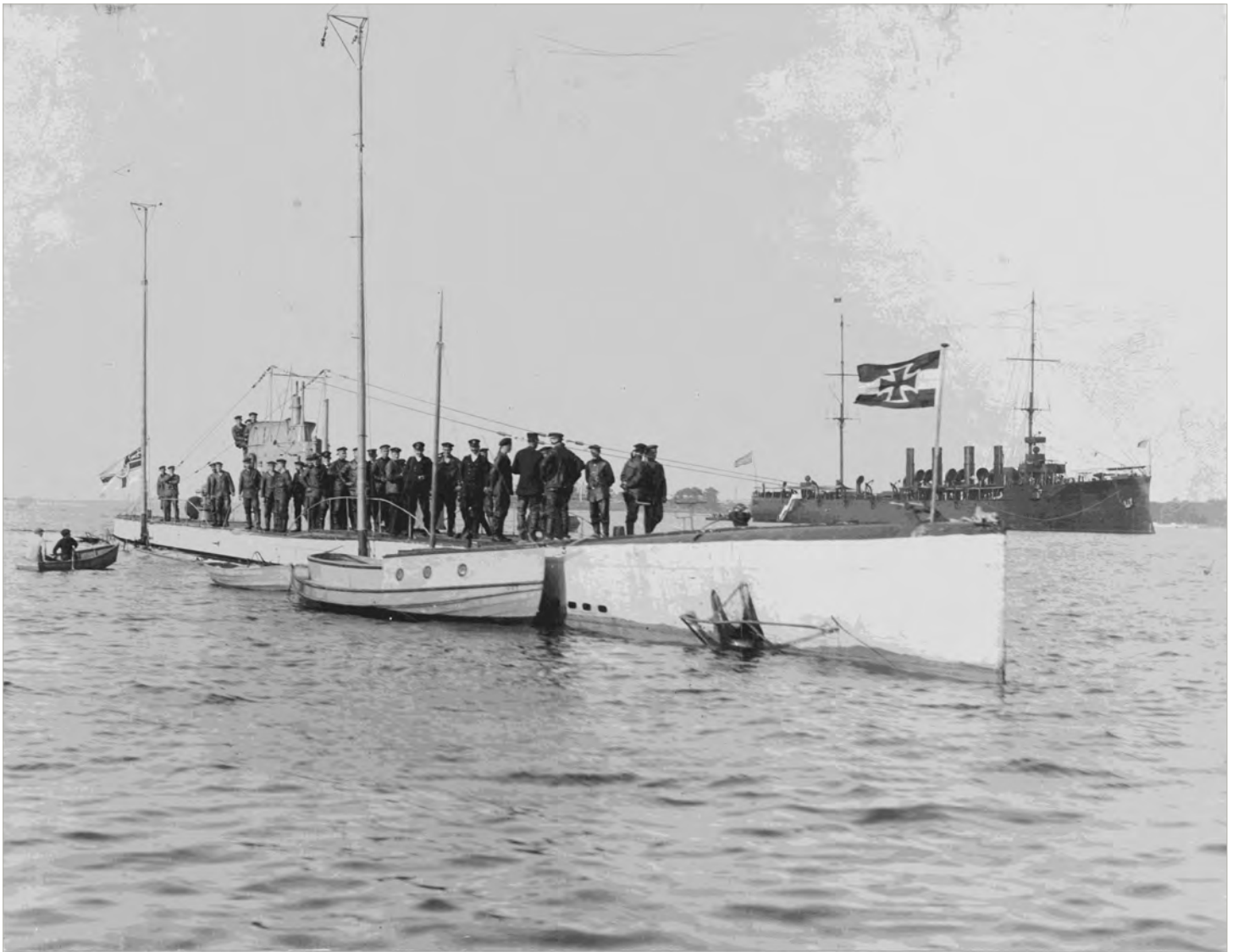
Top: *Deutschland* was docked at New London Connecticut during its port call on November 1-21, 1916. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

Bottom: U-155 (ex-*Deutschland*), surrendered after the war, and is shown here anchored within the shadow of the famed Tower Bridge, London England, 1919. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command



U-53

A more ominous visit was made by the armed U-53 in October 1916. It arrived unexpectedly at Newport, Rhode Island, where its captain arranged courtesy visits with senior officers of the U.S. Navy. The United States was a neutral nation at that time and not at war with Germany. Before long, the U-53's captain became concerned that port authorities in Newport might place the U-boat under quarantine, and he quickly put to sea. The U-53 navigated to the vicinity of the Nantucket lightship, where it attacked and sank a number of non-American merchant ships affiliated with Great Britain. The U.S. Navy sent several warships to the area in response, but did not attack the U-boat because the United States was still a neutral party. After expending its last torpedo, the U-53 departed for home. This action was seen as an affront to the U.S., which, following later German provocations, declared war against Germany six months later on April 6, 1917.



U-53 was in Newport, Rhode Island on October 7, 1916. It subsequently attacked Allied shipping off the U.S. East Coast. USS *Birmingham* (Scout Cruiser # 2) is in the right distance. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

Allied Countermeasures

Although a number of effective strategic, tactical, and technological measures were quickly adopted for the land-based war during World War I, the Allies took longer to develop countermeasure to the new U-boat threat. These countermeasures included maritime minefields, depth charges dropped from surface ships and detonated using hydrostatic triggers, rammings, Q-ships (warships disguised as unarmed merchant ships), zig-zag maneuvers, radio direction finding, and submarines. The introduction of the convoy system with armed escorts on May 24, 1917, proved to be the most important and successful countermeasure against the U-boat. Initially, the British Admiralty opposed using convoys for nearly three years, believing that the Royal Navy did not have the capability to protect so many ships at once. However, the spectacular number of ships sunk by U-boats in early 1917 convinced the British to adopt the convoy system.



U.S. Navy recruiting poster shows a florid German soldier, wearing pirate skull-and-crossbones and brandishing a bloody sword as he wades in a tide of women's and children's bodies. Photo Credit: W.A. Rogers, Library of Congress

U-boat Attacks in American Waters

U-boat operations continued through 1918, as Germany strove to shut down Allied shipping around the British Isles, Arctic, and Mediterranean regions. Eventually, German U-boats became a serious threat to merchant and naval shipping along the U.S. East Coast. Following the United States' declaration of war against Germany, the U.S. military focused on sending vast manpower, supplies, and naval forces to Europe. With resources devoted elsewhere, it became difficult to provide an adequate defense against submarine attacks close to the homeland, leaving shipping traffic in U.S. waters vulnerable from April 1917 until the war's end in November 1918. During this period, four U-boats (U-151, U-156, U-140, and U-117) voyaged across the Atlantic and attacked vessels in U.S. waters. Three of them, U-151, U-140, and U-117, **sank a total of 10 vessels off North Carolina's coast.**



German military officer (possibly Alfred von Tirpitz) stands on a submarine, next to a flag with skull and crossbones labeled "Kultur" and "frightfulness," in New York Harbor, with the Statue of Liberty in background. Photo Credit: Library of Congress

U-151

The arrival of U-151 off the U.S. East Coast in May 1918 made it the first foreign enemy naval vessel to invade U.S. waters since the War of 1812. The German U-boat's initial actions included cutting undersea communication cables near the port of New York, laying mines off Long Island and the entrances to Delaware Bay and Chesapeake Bay, and sinking three schooners off Virginia. Afterwards, U-151 went on to sink and damage additional vessels off the coasts of North Carolina and New Jersey.

U-151's warfare activities off North Carolina began on June 5, 1918, when it sighted the British steamer *Harpathan* with 40 men onboard and westward bound from London, England to Newport News, Virginia. The steamer was approximately 90 miles southeast of Cape Henry and directly east of Knotts Island, North Carolina, when U-151 torpedoed the unarmed vessel. *Harpathan* sank seven minutes later without loss of life. U-151 struck again nine hours later, some 50 miles east of the *Harpathan*, when it sank the Norwegian steamer *Vinland*, en route from Cuba to New York with a cargo of sugar.

Three days later on June 8, U-151 captured the Norwegian freighter *Vindeggen*, a vessel of 3,179 gross tons, en route from Chile to New York with a cargo of copper ingots, wool, and salted skins. U-151 quickly realized the wealth *Vindeggen* was carrying and set about transferring as much copper as possible to the U-boat. Two hours after capturing *Vindeggen*, the American steamer *Pinar Del Rio*, on its way to Boston with sugar from Cuba, came upon the scene and was quickly shelled by U-151, sinking it 80 miles northeast of Nags Head, North Carolina, without loss of life. After transferring a portion of *Vindeggen*'s copper cargo to the U-boat, U-151 sank the freighter on June 10. Later that day, U-151 continued its attacks by sinking the Norwegian steamer *Hendrik Lund*. *Hendrik Lund* was carrying general cargo and coal when it sank approximately 240 miles offshore of the Virginia-North Carolina border. U-151 continued its patrol and moved north before returning to Germany in July 1918. In total, U-151 sank 23 ships in the western Atlantic during its 94-day voyage from Germany to the U.S. East Coast and back.



U-151 stopped a Spanish liner off Cadiz, Spain. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

U-151 — Continued

With the German U-boat threat now in United States home waters, the U.S. military dispatched naval ships and pressed a number of smaller vessels, such as yachts, fishing boats, and powerboats, into action as sub chasers and minesweepers. Other anti-submarine measures included using aircraft for aerial anti-submarine patrols and the placement of large submerged nets outside harbors to stop U-boats from entering. These efforts were partially successful against Germany's 1918 U-boat campaign in U.S. waters, and provided a valuable learning experience that helped later in combating the enemy U-boat threat during World War II.



U-151 docked in Cherbourg, France, after the close of World War I. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

U-140

Following U-151's departure, the next German U-boat to prowl the North Carolina coast was U-140, under the command of Korvettenkapitan Waldemar Kophamel. U-140 was a new, heavily armed U-boat cruiser, launched on November 4, 1917, and was larger and more modern than U-151. It was 296 feet long with a cruising speed of 15 knots on the surface, and eight knots while submerged. Its armament consisted of two deck guns, four bow torpedo tubes, and two stern torpedo tubes.

U-140 reached the coastal waters off North America, just south of Newfoundland, on July 26, 1918, and opened its campaign with a running gun battle with the 13,967-ton British steamer SS *Melitia*. The merchant vessel was too fast for U-140 and gradually outpaced the U-boat and escaped. That evening, U-140 engaged another British ship, the 4,147-ton SS *British Major*, in a surface gun battle. The U-boat was able to slowly close the distance between the two vessels but the gathering darkness forced it to break off the action before it was able to get within the enemy's range. The next day, however, the U-boat scored its first victory. Just south of Halifax, Nova Scotia, it stopped the Portuguese bark, *Porto*, carrying a cargo of lumber. In order to save ammunition and torpedoes for more valuable and dangerous game, U-140's boarding party placed explosive charges at strategic points in the ship and exploded them to sink the vessel. The next day, difficulties controlling U-140's depth in heavy seas spoiled an attempted submerged attack on SS *Kermanshah*, a 4,948-ton American cargo ship. These same heavy seas also precluded any attempt at pursuit and *Kermanshah* escaped without harm.

The first week in August brought U-140 a series of victories. On August 1, some 200 miles off New York, U-140 made a submerged attack on the 7,029-ton Japanese ship SS *Tokuyama Maru* and scored a torpedo hit. When the torpedo explosion proved to be less than fatal, U-140 surfaced to deliver the final blow with its deck guns.



U-140 docked at the Philadelphia Navy Yard on July 19, 1920. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

U-140 — Continued

On August 4, U-140 attacked the American tanker *O.B. Jennings* some 115 miles southeast of Cape Henry, Virginia. The U-boat attempted a submerged torpedo shot at the tanker, but it was unsuccessful and had to surface to bring its 5.9-inch guns to bear. For 22 minutes, *O.B. Jennings* fought back bravely with its own 4.7-inch gun, but a shell from U-140 hit *O.B. Jennings'* ammunition magazine, putting its gun out of action. At that point, *O.B. Jennings'* crew abandoned ship, and the U-boat closed range and sank the vessel. U-140 then turned its attention to the crew adrift in the lifeboats. **U-140's commanding officer interrogated the crew members, took *O. B. Jennings'* second officer prisoner, and then cleared the area.**

U-140 then navigated southward and on August 5, sank the American four-masted coal schooner, *Stanley M. Seaman*, 128 miles off Cape Hatteras. *Stanley M. Seaman* was headed from Newport News, Virginia, to the Dominican Republic when the U-boat fired a warning shot at the ship's rigging. The crew scrambled quickly into their yawl boat without bringing supplies. When Captain Kophamel learned of the crew's situation, he allowed them to return to *Stanley M. Seaman* to collect provisions. Men from the U-140 then boarded and sank the vessel with explosive charges.

On August 6, 1918, U-140 attacked the unarmed American steamship *Merak*, approximately four miles west of the U.S. Lighthouse Services Light Vessel 71 (LV-71) anchored on the Diamond Shoal Station. *Merak* was headed from Newport News, Virginia, to South America with a cargo of coal and was traveling at eight knots when U-140 fired its deck gun at the ship's bow. *Merak's* captain quickly turned the ship towards shore and started an evasive zig-zag course, but the U-boat followed and continued to attack. After a 30 minute chase, the *Merak* reportedly ran aground and its 43 man crew launched lifeboats to escape. The entire scene that afternoon played out in full view of the LV-71's crew. At that time, the vessel's assigned captain, Charles Swanburg, was on liberty, along with two other crew members, leaving first mate Walter L. Barnett in charge.

Upon hearing the sound of gunfire, Barnett climbed one of the masts and observed smoke in the distance. After sighting the German U-boat on the surface north of the lightship, Barnett directed the LV-71's wireless (radio) operators to broadcast a message telling of the attack. The transmission went out using LV-71's call sign, KMSL. It was received by the American steamer *Mariners Harbor* and transcribed as follows:

KMSL SOS. Unknown vessel being shelled off Diamond Shoal Light Vessel No. 71. Latitude 35° 05', longitude 75° 10' (Navy Department 1920:78).

The message transmitted from LV-71 was received by other ships in the vicinity as well. A Lighthouse Service Bulletin from 1919 stated that 25 vessels heard the warning and sought shelter from possible attack in the Cape Lookout Bight.

U-140 immediately changed course after the LV-71's message was broadcast, leaving the grounded *Merak* behind, and made for the light vessel. LV-71 was unable to take any evasive action because it required five hours to get steam up for its engine and raise anchor. The U-boat soon began shelling LV-71 with its deck guns. The light vessel's chief engineer, Alonzo Roberts, remarked later that he believed U-140 attacked LV-71 because it had monitored the transmitted warning (Richmond Times-Dispatch, 15 August 1918).

U-140 — Continued

The U-boat's gunfire soon disabled LV-71's radio and the ship's destruction was imminent. The 12 man crew hastily lowered a lifeboat and evacuated the vessel without gathering supplies or saving any of their personal belongings. U-140 continued to fire on LV-71 as the crew rowed west. First mate Barnett recounted that "Finally we could see her go down in the distance. By then the sub was way out of sight, so I told the boys to pull in the oars, and I mounted the sail, using the sweep oar for a mast" (Stick 1953:202). The light vessel's crew consisting of two officers, two radio operators, and eight others left LV-71 around 2:30 PM and reached shore a short distance north of the Cape Hatteras wireless station at 9:30 PM. After sinking LV-71, U-140 returned to the *Merak* and sent men with explosives aboard the abandoned steamer and destroyed the vessel. The U-boat also fired shells at another vessel in the vicinity, the British steamer *Bencleuch*, but it escaped.

"Secretary (of the Navy) Daniels said today that undoubtedly the purpose of the submarine commander in destroying the lightship was to hinder commerce as much as possible. Great volumes of both coastwise and overseas commerce pass Cape Hatteras both to and from Southern ports, and the German probably believed that with the lightship gone, some vessels might be wrecked on the shoals (New York Times, 8 August 1918)."

"The attack upon the lightship may represent a new phase of enemy submarine operations off the American coast, designed to hamper shipping by destruction of important navigation signals. On the other hand, it may merely represent an isolated case of frightfulness. If the raider has definitely set out to destroy lightships, exposed light houses and the like, it is believed that he cannot do very extensive harm before his ammunition supply is exhausted (Macon Telegram, 8 August 1918)."



This is a photo of the Diamond Shoals Light Vessel 71 from 1917. Photo Credit: U.S. Coast Guard

U-140 — Continued

U-140 remained off North Carolina for several more days after the attacks on *Merak* and LV-71. On August 10, it attacked the Brazilian steamer, *Uberaba*, which radioed for help. USS *Stringham*, a destroyer, was nearby and hurried to the scene where it sighted U-140, which quickly submerged. USS *Stringham* dropped depth charges, but the U-boat escaped, leaving *Uberaba* undamaged. U-140 suffered a number of leaks in her pressure hull as a result of the depth charge attack and began leaking fuel as well. The damage and leaking fuel reduced its operational timeline off the American coast to a single week before it would be forced to return to Europe. During those seven days, U-140 encountered only one vessel, the naval supply ship USS *Pastores*, on August 13. The two vessels traded a few shots before *Pastores* escaped. Finally, on August 17, with the loss of about 9,000 gallons of fuel, U-140 was forced to begin the long voyage home.

The cruise back to Germany did not, however, end U-140's combat activities. On August 22, it engaged the 7,523-ton armed British merchantman, SS *Diomed*, in a gun battle and scored its last victory of the war when *Diomed* succumbed to the U-boat's gunfire and slid beneath the sea. The next afternoon, U-140 traded salvos with the armed American ship, SS *Pleiades*, but the gathering darkness covered *Pleiades'* escape forcing U-140 to break off action and resume its homeward voyage. On September 12-13, U-140 stopped near the Faroe Islands for a fuel replenishment from U-117 and about 5,000 gallons of diesel was transferred from the assisting U-boat. A week later, U-140 re-entered Kiel to end an 81-day cruise, during which it sunk over 30,000 tons of Allied shipping.



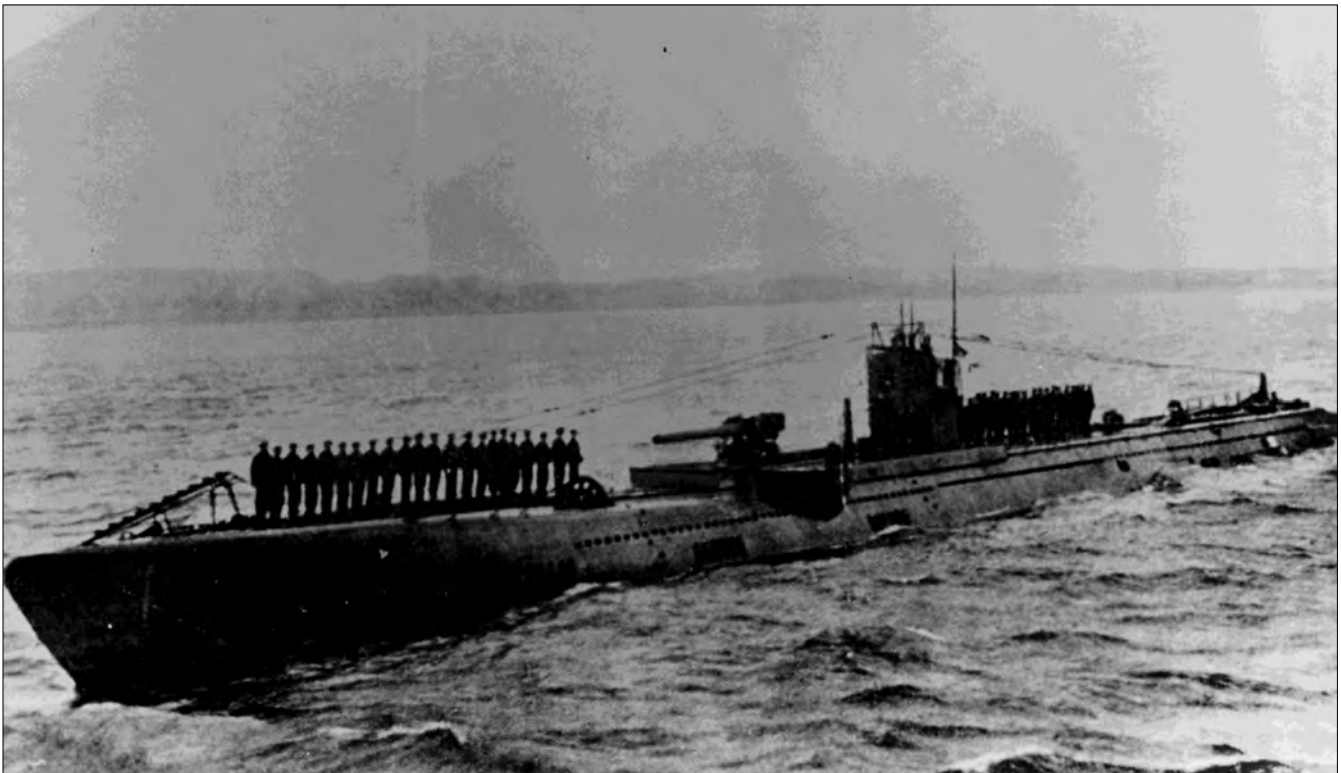
U-140 anchored off Cape Charles, Virginia, in 1921, before being sunk as a target ship by the USS *Dickerson*. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

U-117

The next German U-boat to arrive off North Carolina was U-117. Launched on December 10, 1917, with Kapitänleutnant Otto Droscher in command, U-117 was a UE-II series long-range minelaying U-boat. It was 267.5 feet long with a cruising speed of 14.7 knots on the surface and seven knots submerged. Its armament consisted of one deck gun, two mine tubes with a capacity to carry 42 mines, and four torpedo tubes. Departing Kiel shortly after U-140, it set a course for North America to lay mines off the coast of the United States and to conduct undersea cruiser warfare. During the voyage across the Atlantic, heavy weather foiled its attempts to attack two lone steamers, two convoys, and a small cruiser.

U-117 reached the American coast on August 8, 1918, and soon thereafter encountered a fishing fleet off the coast of Massachusetts. On August 10, U-117 attacked and sunk nine fishing vessels with explosives and gunfire. On August 12, it sighted the Norwegian steamer *Sommerstadt* and, after observing that the ship was armed, made a submerged attack that sank the steamer with a single torpedo. The following day, the U-boat made another submerged torpedo attack and hit the 7,127-ton American tanker, *Frederick R. Kellogg*, bound from Tampico, Mexico, to Boston, Massachusetts, with 7,500 barrels of crude oil. The action occurred only 12 miles north of Barnegat Light, New Jersey, in shallow water, which ultimately enabled the ship to be salvaged.

Later that same day, U-117 began the minelaying phase of its operations by laying mines near Barnegat Light, New Jersey. Months later, that mine field claimed a victim when the Mallory Line steamship, *San Saba*, struck a mine and sank on October 4, 1918. On August 14, U-117 took a break from minelaying operations to resume undersea cruiser warfare when it encountered the American schooner, *Dorothy B. Barrett*. The U-boat brought its deck guns to bear and quickly sunk the sailing vessel. Shortly thereafter, however, the hunter became the hunted when an American seaplane and submarine chaser SC-71 forced the U-boat to seek refuge beneath the surface. The aircraft subjected U-117 to a brief barrage of bombs, and SC-71 attacked the U-boat with depth charges before losing track of the submarine.



The German U-117 was captured off Charleston, South Carolina, May 7, 1919. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

U-117 — Continued

The next day, August 15, 1918, U-117 resumed its minelaying operations, now off Delaware near the Fenwick Island Lightship. Later that year in September, mines laid claimed two victims, one damaged and the other sunk. The first victim was the battleship, USS *Minnesota*, which struck one of the mines on September 29, and suffered extensive damage. The cargo ship, *Saetia*, entered the same field on November 9, struck a mine, and sank.

U-117 continued to move south on August 15, 1918. After laying a third minefield near Winter Quarters Shoal Lightship off Virginia, U-117 halted an American sailing vessel, the 1,613-ton *Madrugada*, and sank it with gunfire. Later that day, a patrolling American seaplane foiled a subsequent attempt by U-117 to stop another sailing ship, and it escaped unharmed.

On August 16, 1918, U-117 resumed minelaying further south off of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, but the approach of the 6,978-ton British steamer, *Mirlo*, interrupted its operation. Approaching the target submerged, U-117 fired a single torpedo that fatally damaged the steamer off Wimble Shoals. The ship's flammable cargo caught fire and nine of the 52 aboard lost their lives. A heroic rescue effort by U.S. Coast Guard personnel from the Chicamacomico Lifeboat Station under the command of Warrant Officer John Allen Midgett, Jr., brought the others safely ashore. Following the attack, U-117 again began laying mines, sowing its fourth and final field. At that point, a shortage of fuel forced the U-boat to begin making plans to return to Germany. U-117's next and final attack off Cape Hatteras was against the Norwegian bark, *Nordhav*, which U-117 sank two days later farther offshore. U-117 then began its voyage back across the Atlantic to Germany.

After an unsuccessful attempt at a torpedo attack on a lone British steamer, *War Ranee*, on September 5, 1918, U-117 concentrated on making the final run toward Germany and safety. Three days later, U-117 was contacted over the wireless by the homeward bound U-140 requesting a fuel replenishment rendezvous due to its critical fuel shortage. The two U-boats met on September 12 and 13 near the Faroe Islands, and U-140 took on about 5,000 gallons of diesel before continuing on toward Kiel. U-117 pulled into Kiel rather ignominiously on September 22, having had to call upon a patrolling torpedo boat to tow it the last leg of its journey having run out of fuel before making it back to port.

The Imperial German Navy recognized the success U-boats were having in United States waters, and planning for additional U-boat operations continued. Germany was in the process of sending three additional U-boats (U-155, U-152, and U-139) into U.S. waters when the war ended in November 1918. These U-boats were ordered to cancel their missions and surrender.



U-117 was bombed by a Navy F-5L flying boat during tests conducted by Army Air Force General Billy Mitchell off Cape Charles, Virginia, 1921. Photo Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command

Ex-German Submarine Expeditionary Force and General Billy Mitchell

The armistice of November 11, 1918 ended hostilities, and required Germany to turn over its U-boats to the Allies. Both U-140 and U-117 surrendered ten days later in Harwich, England. Over the next few months, the U.S. Navy expressed an interest in acquiring several former German U-boats to serve as exhibits during a Victory Bond campaign. U-140 and U-117 became two of the six U-boats set aside for that purpose. In March 1919, American crews took over the U-boats and prepared for the trans-Atlantic crossing under their new task group name, the Ex-German Submarine Expeditionary Force.

On April 3, 1919, the Ex-German Submarine Expeditionary Force departed Harwich with a group that included the submarine tender *Bushnell*, U-140, U-117, U-111, UB-88, UB-148, and UC-97. The captured U-boats made port calls in the Azores and Bermuda before reaching New York City on April 27, 1919, where they were opened to the public. Tourists, photographers, reporters, Navy Department technicians, and civilian submarine manufacturers all flocked to see the war trophies. Then, orders came for U-117 to begin a series of port visits to sell Victory Bonds, during the course of which it stopped in Washington, D.C., and spent a significant period of time at the Washington Navy Yard. At the conclusion of the bond drive later that summer, U-117 was laid up at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, along with U-140 and UB-148. The U-boats remained there, partially dismantled, until the summer of 1921, when U-140 and U-117 were both selected as target ships. U-117 was selected for aerial bombing tests led by Army Air Force General Billy Mitchell to demonstrate the value of naval air power against capital ships and was sunk by aerial bombs on June 21, 1921. U-140 was sunk a month later on July 22, 1921, by the destroyer USS *Dickerson*. Both U-boats were sunk off Cape Charles, Virginia.



Posters like this one prompted American's to invest in the Victory Liberty Bond campaign and used German war trophies like the U-117 and U-140 to attract attention. Photo Credit: L.A. Shafer, Library of Congress

U-boat Success and a Future Threat

Almost 5,000 merchant ships (amounting to approximately 12,000,000 tons) were sunk during World War I by the U-boats of Germany and Austria-Hungary, with the loss of approximately 15,000 Allied sailors. Great Britain suffered the worst losses with almost 3,800 attacks on its vessels, while the United States suffered less than 200 attacks. The most successful U-boat was U-35, which sank 226 ships between 1915 and 1918, totaling over 500,000 tons. Following the close of World War I, Germany surrendered or broke up all of its U-boats as required by the war's Armistice and the subsequent Treaty of Versailles. Despite Germany's defeat, submarines had proven to be an immensely successful weapon against the island nation of Great Britain, which depended heavily on seagoing commerce. During the peacetime years, from the end of World War I to the outbreak of World War II, German naval commanders internalized the lessons of submarine warfare and continued to improve its technology. The U-boat would return with a vengeance **20 years later during Germany's resurgence, sinking thousands of ships, and once again striking terror into the hearts of merchant ship captains the world over.**



U.S. Navy enlistment poster shows a sailor reaching out to a young girl in a lifeboat labeled "*Lusitania*." Photo Credit: W.A. Rogers, Library of Congress

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