OPENING ROUNDS: THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY AT WAR, SEPTEMBER 1939 – MAY 1941

Early Days, September 1940
HMC *Ships* ***Assiniboine*** and ***Saguenay*** (astern) escort Convoy HX 77 out from Halifax on 28 September 1940. These are still early days, the ships are in spotless condition and the sailors in proper uniform -- five years of service on the North Atlantic would take its toll on the appearance of Canadian warships and sailors. The weapon is a 2-pdr. (40 mm) Vickers, an oversized machine gun, with a cyclic rate of 200 rounds per minute and a maximum range of 7,830 yards. It was largely replaced later in the war by the Oerlikon 20 mm gun. (Photograph by Glen Frankfurter, courtesy National Archives of Canada, PA 104390)

Immediately following the Canadian declaration of war, the Admiralty requested that the RCN be placed under its operational control in North American waters. This followed the precedent set in the First World War but things had changed since 1914 and it was not acceptable to Prime Mackenzie King, who had a deep distrust of British entanglements. The government therefore instructed NSHQ that, although the RCN might co-operate with the RN, it was not to come under formal Admiralty control.

The Canadian government, however, was agreeable to British control of merchant shipping. On 26 August, when the Admiralty sent out the code word "Funnel" from London, the RN assumed regulation of all merchant shipping departing from or sailing to ports within the empire. Fast merchant vessels were allowed to proceed independently but slower craft were restricted to convoys that only sailed under naval escort. As part of this measure, the RCN exerted its authority over merchant shipping in -Canadian ports, using the Naval Control Service, an organization that had remained in existence in shadow form throughout the interwar period. Commander Eric Brand, the RN officer posted to NSHQ in Ottawa, supervised it and appointed Canadian Naval Officers-in-Charge at major Canadian ports to oversee this vital function.

On 16 September 1939, six days after Canada's declaration of war, the first trans-Atlantic convoy, HX-1, departed from Halifax bound for Britain under the escort of HMC Ships *St. Laurent* and *Skeena* although *St. Laurent* had only arrived at Halifax the previous day, after a record journey from Vancouver. The two Canadian destroyers escorted HX-1 for 350 miles eastward into the Atlantic before turning it over to two RN cruisers, which took it into British waters, where it picked up a local escort. HX‑1 set the pattern for Atlantic convoys in the first months of the war.

The concern at this time was not U-boats but German surface raiders, hence the deployment of cruisers, heavy warships, to escort HX-1. At the outbreak of war the *Kriegsmarine* possessed 2 modern battle cruisers, 2 old pre-1914 battleships used as training vessels, 3 "pocket" battleships, 8 cruisers, 22 destroyers and 20 torpedo boats (small destroyers), and there were also plans to convert 26 fast merchant vessels into armed raiders. The *U-Boot-Waffe*, as has been noted, possessed just 57 submarines and of these only 20 could operate in the Atlantic, and to reach it they first had to traverse the narrow waters of the English Channel or the North Sea which were patrolled by the RN. This was a far cry from the 300 ocean-going submarines that Dönitz estimated as necessary to sever Britain's waterborne lifeline and it was his opinion that in 1939 the best his submarine crews could do was "subject the enemy to a few odd pin-pricks," which would not be enough to "force a great empire and one of the foremost maritime powers in the world to sue for peace."[1]

Grossadmiral Karl Doenitz (1891 - 1980)
Karl Doenitz joined the Imperial German navy in 1910 and served on submarines during the First World War. In 1935, he was given the task of creating and building the U-boat arm and worked tirelessly to train personnel and develop tactics. When the war began in September 1939, Doenitz had only 57 boats in commission, far fewer than 300 he considered necessary to wage a successful war against Great Britain. Throughout the war Dönitz proved to be a clever relentless, professional and implacable opponent for the Allied navies. (Author's collection)

The situation was made more difficult for Dönitz by Hitler, who, remembering the outrage over unrestricted submarine warfare that had brought the United States into the First World War, ordered German submarine commanders to obey international maritime agreements. Unfortunately for Hitler, just a few hours after hostilities broke out, *Kapitän-leutnant* Fritz Lemp, commanding officer of *U-30*, torpedoed and sank the Cunard liner *Athenia* northwest of Ireland causing the death of 118 of her 1,000 passengers, including 22 Americans. Lemp claimed that he thought the vessel was an armed merchant cruiser, which would have been a legitimate target, but few believed him. The damage was done, and although Hitler continued to restrict targets, these limitations were gradually lifted until by August 1940 the U-boats were carrying out unrestricted submarine warfare in all but American waters.

There were no U-boats in the western Atlantic in 1939, however, and the six Canadian destroyers which performed escort tasks from Halifax throughout the first autumn and winter of the war saw no action. In October they were augmented by the arrival of a sister ship purchased from Britain, which was commissioned into the RCN as HMCS *Assiniboine*. To assist the RCN, the Admiralty stationed its 3rd Battle Squadron at Halifax to add weight to the convoy escorts against possible Germans surface raiders. These fears seemed justified in -December when the pocket battleship *Graf Spee* made a very successful voyage in the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans before her captain scuttled his damaged ship after an inconclusive engagement with three British cruisers off the coast of Uruguay. When *Graf Spee*'s sister ship *Lützow* carried out a similar raid into the North -Atlantic late in the year, however, it intensified concern that German surface units might appear off the coast of Canada.

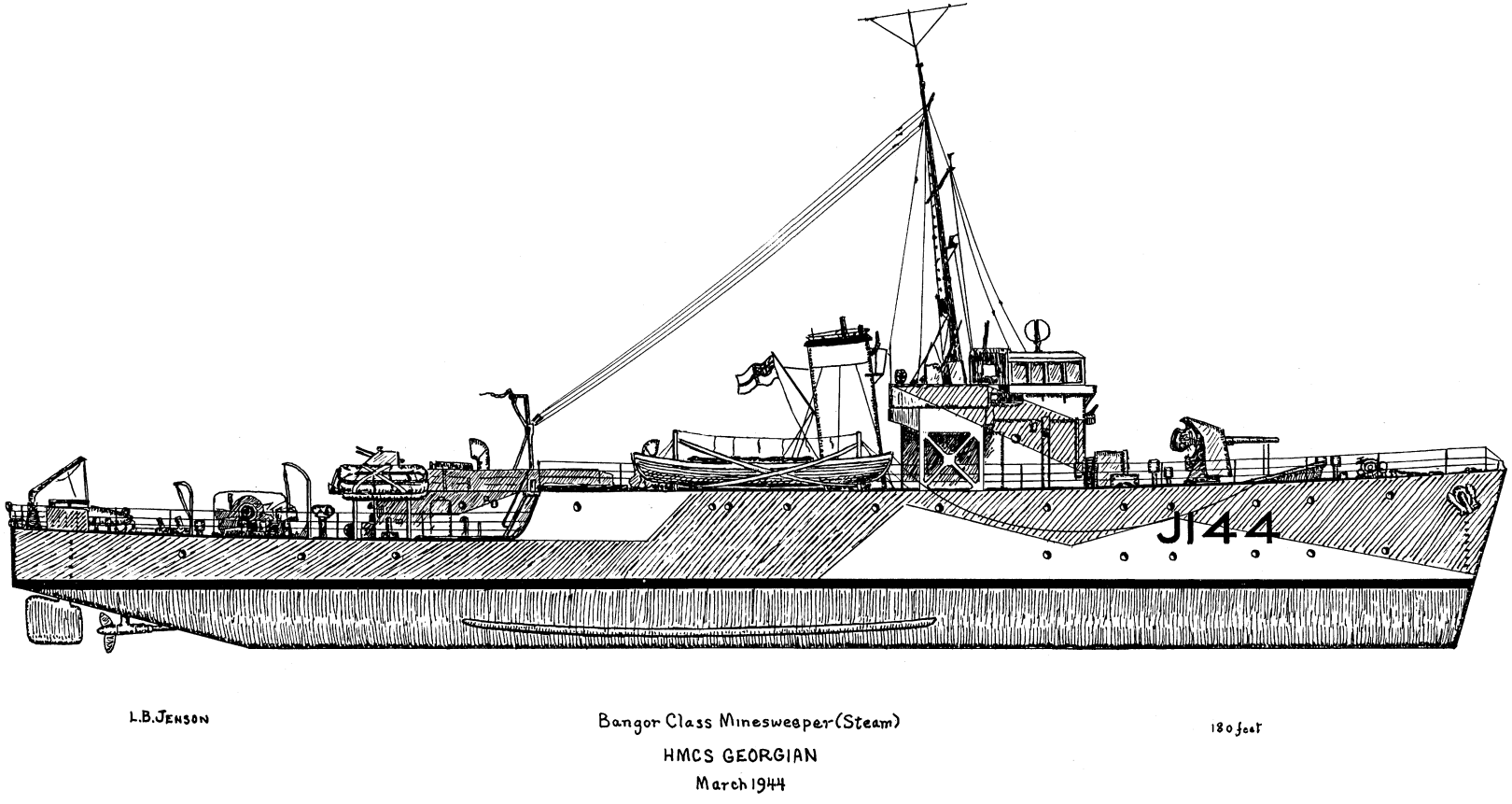
The RCN's plans for wartime expansion, 1939-1940

In September 1939, NSHQ initiated a regulated increase in the size of the Canadian navy for what was viewed as a limited war in Europe. The RCN had entered the war with a total strength of just under 3,000 officers and sailors and its first expansion plan, implemented in the early weeks of the war, called for a moderate rise in strength to 5,472 all ranks by March 1940, and 7,000 by March 1941. The inception of the 1939/1940 warship construction plan, however, caused the latter figure to be revised upwards to 15,000 all ranks. The problem was not finding men – the RCNVR Divisions, which functioned as recruiting centres across Canada, turned away many volunteers during the first eight months of the war – it was finding qualified instructors to train them. Fortunately, the Admiralty gave permission for retired British naval personnel living in Canada to join the Canadian service rather than return to the RN and this provided a small pool of about 40 badly-needed key officers. Another major problem was a shortage of accommodation – by April 1940, fewer than half of the 1,394 naval personnel at Halifax could be housed in government buildings and the navy was forced to take over structures at the Nova Scotia Exhibition Grounds to accommodate its sailors in what were little more than cattle barns.

Procuring warships proved more difficult. Over the winter of 1939-1940, the Canadian navy assembled a heterogeneous collection of some 60 auxiliary craft for port and local escort tasks. Many were acquired from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or government departments such as Transport and Fisheries, and this was convenient as their crews often came with them, simply switching uniforms. Others were civilian yachts, trawlers and whaling craft converted to carry out the myriad tasks that are the small change of naval operations: coastal and harbour patrols; mine-sweeping; boom defence; and the examination of merchant ships. To counter surface raiders, the navy took over three modern 6,000-ton liners from Canadian National Steamships – *Prince David*, *Prince Robert* and *Prince Henry* – and armed them with 6-inch guns to act as auxiliary cruisers.

NSHQ rightly regarded these vessels as temporary expedients that would later be replaced by proper warships. In its first shipbuilding programme, submitted to the government eight days after the declaration of war, naval staff emphasized that the RCN faced two major tasks – coastal patrol and

escort work; and defence against surface raiders – and asked for ships that could accomplish both tasks. Against surface raiders, NSHQ wanted fast and heavily-armed fleet destroyers that could take on major German surface units with some chance of success and it particularly favoured ships of the Tribal Class, the largest and most heavily-armed British destroyer type. For coastal escort and patrol work NSHQ, after some cogitation, settled on the Flower Class corvette and Bangor Class minesweeper, which would be joined by small motor launches, or patrol boats, for inshore work.



HMCS Georgian, Bangor Class Minesweeper

Fifty-six Bangor Class minesweepers served in the RCN as coastal and local escorts although 16 vessels reverted to their original function for Operation NEPTUNE, the invasion of Normandy. Bangor minesweepers displaced 672 tons, were 180 feet in length, had a top speed of 16 knots, carried a complement of 83 and were armed with either a 4-inch, a 3-inch or 12-pdr. main gun, and two 20 mm AA guns, as well as depth charges. The antennae on foremast is for the Canadian SW2C radar. **Georgian** as a coastal escort in 1941-1944, participated in the Normandy invasion and was sold for scrap in 1945. (Drawing by L.B. Jenson, courtesy, Directorate of History and Heritage, DND)

These plans found a positive response, as now that Canada was at war the Liberal government viewed the navy's need for new warships more favourably. For political reasons, Prime Minister Mackenzie King wished to avoid the heavy casualty lists of 1914-1918 and hoped to engage in hostilities with the minimum of human loss and the greatest financial profit. The government was therefore keen to reap economic benefits from the war and the RCN's construction programme, which would both stimulate the Canadian shipbuilding industry and create employment, appeared to fit the bill very well. The figures for new construction were thus constantly revised upwards until by August 1940 the government had placed orders for the construction of 64 Flower Class corvettes and 28 Bangors, all to be completed by the end of 1941.* It was planned that ten of the corvettes built in Canada were to go to the RN, which in turn undertook to construct four Tribal Class destroyers for the RCN in British yards as the building of such "state of the art" vessels was beyond Canadian capacity in 1940. Determined, however, to gain some industrial advantage from the war, the government did eventually contract for four Tribal Class destroyers to be built at Halifax, but, such were the delays entailed in mastering the necessary technology, none were commissioned until 1945. Worse still, their construction occupied valuable facilities and acted as a drain on Canada's ability to build and maintain its escort fleet.

From the outset, the 1939/1940 construction programme encountered problems. Although the corvettes and minesweepers were simple to build in terms of marine engineering, the construction of such a great number was still a mighty undertaking for the small national shipbuilding industry, which was also under pressure to construct merchant vessels. Corvette and Bangor keels were laid at 15 shipyards across Canada, many on the Great Lakes, but delays in receiving plans from Britain and shortages of materials, skilled workers, armament and equipment, hampered their completion. Only 14 corvettes were ready by the end of 1940, including the 10 destined for British service, and the last vessel ordered under this program was not completed until well into 1942. Nonetheless, despite some growing pains, the RCN's expansion plans were well under way by the spring of 1940 when they were derailed by events in Europe.

A Corvette is Launched, 1941

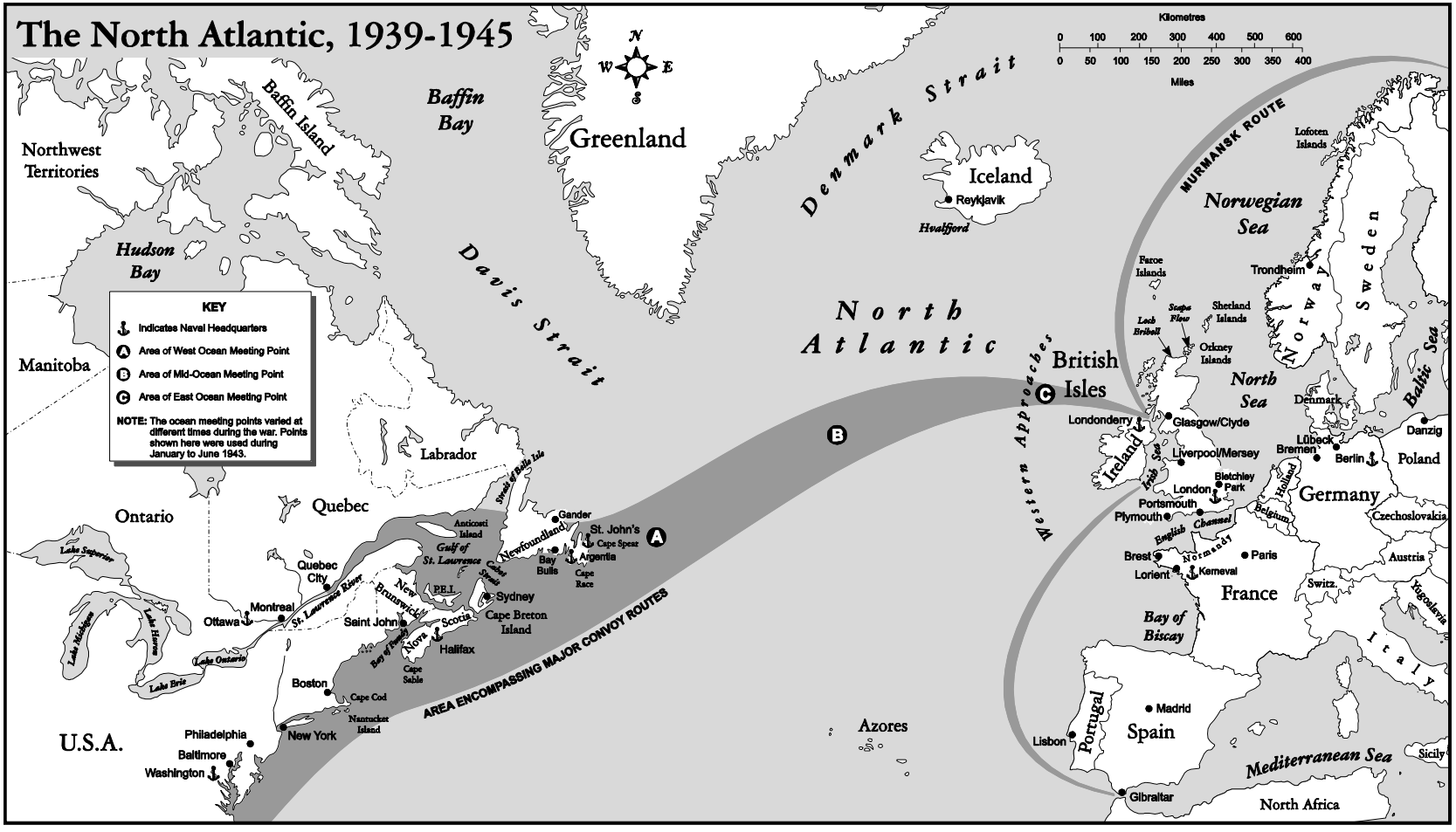
In 1940 Canada initiate a massive programme of warship construction which included many corvettes. The small size and simple design of these vessels made them suitable for construction at small shipyards which did not have the production facilities or experience to build larger, more sophisticated warships. Here, *HMCS **Moose Jaw*** is launched sideways at the Collingwood Shipyards in Collingwood, Ontario on 10 April 1941. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA-037449)

The fall of France, May-June, 1940

During the first eight months of the war, while the RCN carried out escort duties in Canadian coastal waters and NSHQ planned a moderate expansion in ships and men, the war in Europe seemed distant. Poland succumbed after a valiant struggle at the end of September 1939, but thereafter the war on land -appeared to have reached stalemate. Britain and France, anticipating a rerun of the First World War, mustered their armies on the eastern borders of France to forestall a possible German invasion, but when it did not come, they settled into winter quarters. The lack of action led journalists to dub this period the "Phoney War" and there was hope that Hitler, being satisfied with his Polish conquest, might begin negotiations for peace. In April 1940, the tempo of the war changed radically when Germany occupied Denmark and Norway in a lightning campaign. In early May, German armies, using new methods of mobile warfare and overwhelming air support, launched a devastating blow against western Europe, overrunning Holland and Belgium and gradually forcing the British and French armies back to the Channel coast. Hitler's success prompted his Italian fellow dictator, Mussolini, to join the war on Germany's side at about the same time as a despairing France began to seek peace terms.

On 23 May 1940, the urgency of the crisis was -underscored by Vincent Massey, the Canadian High Commissioner to Britain, who, in passing along an Admiralty request for Canadian warships to serve in British waters, noted the possibility "in the near future of [a] sea-borne invasion of the United Kingdom."[2] The Canadian government approved the British request and 24 hours later HMC Ships *Restigouche*, *Skeena* and *St. Laurent* sailed for Britain, to be followed later by the RCN's remaining four destroyers (HMC Ships *Assiniboine*, *Fraser*,* *Ottawa* and *Saguenay*). Canada's response to Britain's need was generous – she sent every modern warship in her navy to European waters, leaving, as Prime Minister Mackenzie King noted, her own coasts bare. But King had no doubts about this decision as it was his belief that Canadians owed Britain "such freedom as we have" and it was only right that Canada should strike with Britain "the last blow for the preservation of freedom."[3]

The three destroyers arrived at Plymouth a week later and were immediately armed with an additional 3-inch anti-aircraft gun which was needed as the German *Luftwaffe* was a dangerous threat. They were too late to participate in the evacuation of more than 350,000 British and allied soldiers from the beaches of Dunkirk, an operation that cost the Royal Navy 32 destroyers sunk or damaged (one seventh of its total number of this type of useful warship). Over the next three weeks, however, the -Canadian ships participated in a series of hair-raising missions evacuating military and diplomatic personnel from small French Atlantic ports. On 24 June, the day after France surrendered to Germany, disaster struck when *Fraser*, manoeuvring at night in close proximity to the British cruiser *Calcutta*, was cut in half when the two vessels collided. The bridge of the Canadian vessel ended up on *Calcutta*'s forecastle and Commander W.L Creery, RCN, *Fraser*'s captain, and his bridge personnel were able to step down to safety but 47 Canadian and 19 British sailors died in this tragic incident.


The North Atlantic, 1939-1945
N
W
E
S
Kilometres
0 100 200 300 400 500 600
0 50 100 150 200 250 300 350 400
Miles
Baffin Island
Baffin Bay
Greenland
Denmark Strait
Iceland
Reykjavik
Hvalfjord
Northwest Territories
Hudson Bay
Davis Strait
North Atlantic
MURMANSK ROUTE
Lofoten Islands
Norwegian Sea
Faroe Islands
Trondheim
Norway
Sweden
Baltic Sea
Shetland Islands
Scapa Flow
Loch Eriboll
Orkney Islands
British Isles
North Sea
Denmark
Western Approaches
Londonderry
Glasgow/Clyde
Danzig
Lübeck
Bremen
Berlin
Poland
Ireland
Irish Sea
Liverpool/Mersey
Bletchley Park
Holland
London
Germany
Portsmouth
Plymouth
Belgium
Channel
Czechoslovakia
English
Brest
Normandy
Paris
Austria
Lorient
Kerneval
France
Switz.
Yugoslavia
Bay of Biscay
Italy
Madrid
Spain
Portugal
Lisbon
Mediterranean Sea
Sicily
Gibraltar
North Africa
Azores
KEY
Indicates Naval Headquarters
A Area of West Ocean Meeting Point
B Area of Mid-Ocean Meeting Point
C Area of East Ocean Meeting Point
NOTE: The ocean meeting points varied at different times during the war. Points shown here were used during January to June 1943.
Manitoba
Ontario
Quebec
Labrador
Straits of Belle Isle
Anticosti Island
Gulf of St. Lawrence
Gander
St. John's
Cape Spear
Newfoundland
Bay Bulls
Argentia
Cape Race
Cabot Strait
Quebec City
Lake Superior
Montreal
St. Lawrence River
New Brunswick
PEI
Sydney
Ottawa
Saint John
Scotia
Cape Breton Island
Lake Michigan
Lake Huron
Bay of Fundy
Nova
Halifax
Lake Ontario
Cape Sable
Lake Erie
Boston
Cape Cod
Nantucket Island
AREA ENCOMPASSING MAJOR CONVOY ROUTES
U.S.A.
New York
Philadelphia
Baltimore
Washington

The U-boats begin to threaten: July–December 1940

The fall of France irrevocably changed the nature of the war at sea. At one stroke, Britain lost the assistance of the French fleet while the entry of Italy into the war doubled the naval power arrayed against her. Britain was now threatened with invasion, and even if this did not come, German and Italian naval forces and aircraft, operating from bases just across the Channel, would be in a position to cut her seaborne lifeline. The worst menace, although it was not fully appreciated at the time, was not air or surface units but Dönitz's submarines, as they could now operate from ports on the Atlantic coast, extending their operational range 600 to 1,000 miles west and also their time on patrol. Up to this point, owing to their small numbers, the effect of the U-boats had been more psychological than actual. Between 3 September 1939 and 1 March 1940, when they were temporarily withdrawn from anti-commerce operations to support the German invasion of Norway, Dönitz's U-boats sank 277 merchant ships with a total displacement of 974,000 tons for the loss of 17 submarines. Britain was able to compensate for the merchant tonnage by the construction, capture or charter of new vessels, but Dönitz could not replace his losses as fast, since the German wartime construction programme had only just got underway. By the end of March 1940 his operational strength was 23 boats, only marginally higher than it had been at the outbreak of war.

The collapse of France, however, tilted the scales in his favour. On 23 June, the same day that France surrendered, Dönitz made his first inspection of French Atlantic ports for possible use as submarine bases – two weeks later, *U-30* became the first boat to operate from Lorient and it was shortly followed by others. The result was that shipping losses increased steadily throughout the summer of 1940 and for the first time began to outstrip the rate of new construction.

The westward movement of the German submarine fleet and the presence of German air power over the Channel rendered ports in southern Britain unsafe and trans-Atlantic convoys began to sail instead from the north-western ports on the estuaries of the Clyde and Mersey. The situation, however, quickly began to deteriorate. By late August 1940, Dönitz had enough boats in service to mount group attacks and he spread his submarines individually across the most heavily-travelled convoy routes. When one boat sighted a convoy, it informed his headquarters at Kerneval near Lorient by radio and Dönitz then guided others toward the target. The German submarines attacked in numbers to overwhelm the escorts, on the surface to take advantage of their greater speed, and at night when they were very difficult to see. Their tactic was to close to point blank torpedo range at the fastest possible speed, fire at as many ships as possible, and then escape before the startled escorts were able to react.

These methods brought immediate results – from July to September 1940, the U-boats sank 350 vessels, and in October alone 63 ships, totalling 350,000 tons, were lost. Some convoys were nearly destroyed. On the night of 18-19 October, six U-boats attacked Convoy SC 7, escorted by only a single British sloop, and sank 20 merchant ships totalling 79,646 tons. The slaughter of SC 7 was epitomized in the report of *Kapitän-leutnant* Otto Kretschmer of *U-99*, who sank six vessels that night:

> Fire a bow torpedo at a large freighter of some 6,000 tons, at a range of 750 meters. Hit abreast foremast. Immediately after torpedo explosion, there is another explosion with a high column of flame from the bow to the bridge. The smoke rises some 200 meters. Bow apparently shattered. Ship continues to burn with green flame.[4]

On the following night, five U-boats savaged Convoy HX 79, sinking 12 of 24 merchantmen although there was a strong naval escort. It is small wonder that the German submariners termed this period their "Happy Time."