The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 401
"No Option but to Fight On"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The year 1942 was a good one for the German U-boats, and 1943 was shaping up to be even better. The Allies were losing merchant ships faster than they could build new ones. But by midyear, new longer-range aircraft had turned the tide.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 401. No Option but to Fight On.

Today I want to pick up the topic of the German U-boat campaign in the North Atlantic and the fight against it, often referred to as the Battle of the Atlantic. We talked about developments in this campaign in 1942 back in episode 365.

Overall, that was a pretty good year for the U-boats. The United States entered the war in December 1941 unprepared to deal with the U-boat threat. The first months of American involvement in the war were known to the German submarine crews as the "Second Happy Time," because American merchant shipping off the East Coast of the United States made for such easy pickings.

The plethora of new targets was not the only reason 1942 was a good year for German submarines. In February 1942, the Kriegsmarine changed over from the standard three-rotor Enigma machine to a new four-rotor Enigma machine, and the wizards of Bletchley Park were unable to decrypt German naval messages for most of the year. In a backhanded kind of way, it was fortunate for the Allies that there were so many new targets for the U-boats to attack, since the Germans understood *this* to be the reason for the sudden increase in ship sinkings and no one stopped to ask whether the changeover to a better Enigma machine also played a role, which might have tipped them off to the fact that the British had broken the three-rotor Enigma code.

On the last day of 1942, a force of German surface ships, consisting of the pocket battleship *Lützow* and the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper,* along with an escort of six destroyers, sortied

from Altafjord in the extreme north of Norway to intercept a British convoy bound for the Soviet port of Murmansk. You'll recall that in the summer of 1942, British convoy PQ 17 was on a similar mission and lost 23 merchant ships to German air and naval attacks. The next convoy, PQ 18, lost 13 merchant ships. The British concluded that convoys in the far north in summer, when the days are very long and the nights are very short, were too risky and suspended them. Then came Operation Torch, which diverted large numbers of merchant ships.

It was only in late December, in the dark of winter, that the British sent another convoy. This convoy, designated JW51B, was the target of the German force. The cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and three destroyers engaged the convoy's escorts, while *Lützow* and the other three destroyers were to attack the merchant ships.

Unfortunately for the Germans, the raid was ineffective. No merchant ship was sunk, while the Germans and the British lost one destroyer each and *Admiral Hipper* suffered serious damage. Unfortunately for Admiral Erich Raeder, the commander-in-chief of the German Navy, Adolf Hitler, who was at that time in the middle of losing the Battle for Stalingrad, went into one of his usual outbursts of rage when he learned of the failed raid. He spent 90 minutes dressing down Raeder, who responded by offering his resignation.

Hitler accepted it and declared that what was left of the German surface fleet would be scrapped and the Navy would henceforth concentrate on the U-boat war. To this end, he replaced Raeder with the commander of the U-boat fleet, Admiral Karl Dönitz, who assumed his new post while also retaining command of the Navy's U-boat fleet.

Dönitz was able to talk Hitler out of his plan to scrap the surface fleet, although naval expenditures were cut back, which was probably a good idea, in light of the losses at Stalingrad and Tunis. A surface navy was a luxury, one Germany could no longer afford. Repair work on *Admiral Hipper* and *Gneisenau* was abandoned. Neither of those ships would go to sea again. Also abandoned was the effort to complete *Graf Zeppelin*, the ship that would have been Germany's first aircraft carrier.

In February, Dönitz met with Hitler multiple times to discuss the German U-boat campaign in the North Atlantic. Here was where Dönitz always believed the U-boats could be put to best use; nevertheless, the results were disappointing. Why were they disappointing, and what could be done to improve them?

First of all, it had become clear to the Germans that the Allies seemed to know the locations of German U-boats and were rerouting their convoys to avoid them. How was this possible? Again, Dönitz and the Navy considered the possibility that Enigma had become compromised, but once again a review by the Navy's chief of communications security concluded that just wasn't possible. Once assured Enigma was secure, Dönitz suggested the Allies had some kind of electronic location device they carried aboard their patrol aircraft that could pinpoint the location of a U-boat.

In fact, the Allies had two different location devices the Germans were unaware of. One was radar. The Germans knew about radar and were even beginning to experiment with equipping their U-boats with crude radar systems to help them locate Allied ships. German U-boats were also equipped with radar detectors. I'll return to this topic later, but for now let me just tell you that the German radar detectors were only capable of detecting wavelengths in the meter range, while Allied planes were equipped with radars with wavelengths of ten centimeters or less. Thus, these radar signals were undetectable to the Germans. The possibility that the Allies had shorter-wave radar sets aboard their planes was considered, but most German experts believed it was impossible to build such a radar small enough to fit in an airplane.

The Allies also had huff-duff, or high-frequency direction finding, which I've talked about before. The Germans already knew that it was possible for the enemy to detect a radio transmission and quickly determine the direction from which the transmission originated, but by "quickly," I mean a couple of minutes. German U-boats were therefore ordered to keep their messages brief, in order not to give the Allies time to home in on their radio transmissions, but they had no inkling of huff-duff, which could pinpoint the direction from which a transmission originated in a matter of seconds. So the Allies had in fact deployed two mysterious electronic location devices of the sort Dönitz was speculating about.

Dönitz's biggest gripe was that his U-boats were getting little or no support from the Luftwaffe. By early 1943, Allied aircraft, not Allied destroyers, had become the principal threat to German submarines. The Navy had repeatedly requested the Luftwaffe provide long-range aircraft capable of shooting down Allied anti-submarine aircraft, or at least aircraft capable of long-range reconnaissance that could help locate Allied convoys and pass that information on to the U-boats.

Hitler told Dönitz that the Luftwaffe simply didn't have long-range aircraft capable of meeting the Navy's requirements and expressed doubt that any new model of aircraft could be developed in time to affect the outcome of the war, but he did agree to transfer some long-range fighters, such as the Ju-88, to patrol the Bay of Biscay, where the RAF Coastal Command was flying large numbers of anti-submarine patrols, hoping to catch German U-boats departing from or returning to their bases on the west coast of France.

Dönitz suggested to Hitler a suspension of U-boat patrols against Allied Arctic convoys, in view of the fact the Allies were now running fewer of them. Hitler agreed to this. Dönitz's biggest ask, though, was for more U-boats. In order to have enough boats on patrol to find and sink Allied merchant ships, Dönitz wanted U-boat production ramped up to 27 boats per month by mid-1943, that production rate to be maintained for at least two and a half years, that is, until the end of 1945. Hitler agreed to this, and promised to supply the U-boat yards with enough workers and enough steel and copper, two metals very much in demand for wartime production, to meet this goal.

The Allies had new technologies and new tactics for fighting the U-boats, but by early 1943, new German technologies were being deployed as well. The Allies had their sonar, but the Germans had their hydrophones: underwater listening devices sometimes called "passive sonar." Remember that submarines of this era mostly ran on the surface. They submerged only to approach an enemy, or escape from one. While underwater, a submarine was virtually blind, but with their hydrophone gear, U-boats could detect a convoy thirty kilometers away, even if the boat was underwater, or it was night, or foggy, as it often was in the waters off Greenland or Iceland.

Since Allied aircraft were becoming the greatest threat to the U-boats, the Germans began equipping them with newer and better anti-aircraft guns. German torpedoes had improved, too. Some newer German torpedoes were electric, so they didn't produce a visible wake. New acoustic torpedoes were designed to listen for the sound of a ship's propeller, and when they detected one, to run in tight circles rather than a straight line. This increased the chances that a torpedo would find a target, even if it were badly aimed.

Meanwhile, the Americans began deploying a new class of aircraft carrier meant to assist in convoy escort duties in the Atlantic.

The US Navy had commissioned USS *Essex*, its first new fleet carrier since the Pearl Harbor attack, on December 31, 1942. *Essex* was the lead ship of a new class of aircraft carrier, and the US would launch six more of them in 1943: the new *Lexington*, the new *Yorktown*, *Bunker Hill*, *Intrepid*, the new *Wasp*, and the new *Hornet*.

Because it took so long to build an aircraft carrier, the Americans also began building and launching the *Independence*-class of light carrier. These were smaller ships more of cruiser size than battleship size, and they carried fewer planes, but they could be built and put into service much more quickly. Nine of these were commissioned in 1943. The US Navy designated fleet carriers CVs and these light carriers CVLs.

And then there were the escort carriers. These were smaller still, less than one-third the weight of a fleet carrier, and they were built on the hulls of commercial ships. The light carriers were also smaller than fleet carriers, but they had the speed to keep up with other warships, and so they were employed in the same ways as the full fleet carriers. Escort carriers, on the other hand, were too slow to keep up with warships, so they were deployed to escort merchant ship convoys, their 24 or so airplanes used to find and attack enemy submarines.

The US built over 120 of these escort carriers over the course of the war. Many were handed over to the Royal Navy and two to the Royal Canadian Navy under America's "Lend-Lease" program. Escort carriers were useful in the war against the submarines, and in the Pacific Theater they served to escort troop ships and support amphibious landings. They were also the butt of many jokes. Their official designation, CVE, was said to stand for "combustible, vulnerable, and

expendable." The American sailors called them "baby flattops" or "jeep carriers." Some British sailors called them "Woolworth carriers."

For the benefit of you young people, Woolworth was the name of a chain of stores first established in the late 19th century, and by this time they were all over the United States, Canada, and the UK. Their retail niche was low-price goods. In America, Woolworth's and similar stores were known as five-and-ten-cent stores, or five-and-dime stores or dime stores. They were the forerunners of today's dollar stores or pound stores, so calling escort carriers Woolworth carriers implied they were the of sort of cheap merchandise one might find in a dime store.

On March 1, senior commanders of the Royal Navy, the Royal Canadian Navy, and the United States Navy met in Washington in what came to be known as "the Atlantic Convoy Conference," to discuss the war against the U-boats. In the previous two months, the Germans had sunk 80 Allied cargo ships in the North Atlantic, against a loss of 15 U-boats.

This was a loss rate greater than the three allies' combined shipyards could replace, while the Germans were known to be building U-boats faster than they were losing them. Projections suggested the Germans might have more than 600 U-boats in service by the end of 1943. The situation was building toward a crisis.

Something needed to be done. Operations in North Africa were demanding ever-increasing shipments from the United States, as was the build-up of US and Canadian forces in England for the planned Operation Overlord next year. And of course, the British people needed the food and supplies coming through the Atlantic convoys. The demand for Atlantic shipping capacity was going up and up, while the Allies were struggling to build cargo ships faster than the Germans could sink them.

The British came into this meeting once again asking for a single united Allied anti-submarine command across the entire Atlantic, and they wanted Admiral Max Horton, chief of the Royal Navy's Western Approaches Command, based in Liverpool, to lead it. The Americans wanted to be relieved of their share of the responsibilities for escorting the North Atlantic convoys. They had all they could handle escorting the convoys bound for Gibraltar and the Mediterranean, to supply Allied forces in North Africa.

The Canadians wanted approximately the same thing. They were carrying about half the burden of escorting the North Atlantic convoys, but the Royal Canadian Navy was still being treated as a junior partner by its allies. They wanted a solely Canadian Northwest Atlantic command to oversee their share of convoy duties. They wanted the American task force based at Argentia in Newfoundland out, and they wanted their own anti-submarine ships deployed in the British Isles and the Mediterranean returned home.

The three allies also had to work out allocation of these new escort carriers the Americans were producing, as well as the new American B-24 bombers, known as "Liberators." American

factories were cranking out these planes at rapidly increasing rates. At Willow Run, Michigan, Ford Motor Company built the largest assembly line in the world to produce these planes, and at its peak was turning them out at the astonishing rate of one bomber every hour.

Large numbers of new Liberators were coming into service, but they were also in high demand. The RAF and the US Army wanted them for their bombing missions over Germany and in the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy wanted them for anti-submarine duty in the Atlantic. The US Navy wanted them in the Pacific.

Land-based anti-submarine aircraft of the RAF Coastal Command patrolled out of Britain, Iceland, and Canada, but there was a region in the mid-Atlantic that was out of reach of any of these planes. Naturally, the Germans discovered this and took advantage of what was known as the Mid-Atlantic Gap, or sometimes more dramatically as The Black Pit.

The Black Pit was a safe zone where German submarines could gather into wolfpacks, teams of submarines, numbering as many as fifteen, that would attack a convoy at the same time. Some of them would distract the 6-8 escort ships protecting the convoy, leaving the others with clear shots at the merchant ships. Also, here is where the Germans sent their tanker submarines—the Germans called them "milk cows"—which could rendezvous with and refuel U-boats on the Atlantic patrol.

B-24 bombers, properly equipped, had sufficient range they could close the Mid-Atlantic Gap and deny the German U-boats one of their biggest advantages, but a request for the necessary planes had to compete with the demands of the other Allied services.

The British also came to the conference with some bad news regarding the codebreaking operation at Bletchley Park. You'll recall that the German Navy switched to a four-rotor Enigma machine in February 1942, and it took until December before Bletchley Park could begin decrypting messages from these new machines. The breakthrough involved the Royal Navy's capture of *U-559* in October 1942, and their recovery of the German "short signal book."

Remember I said the U-boats sent only brief radio transmissions to minimize the chances the Allies could use the broadcast to locate the boat? To facilitate this, the German Navy had this "short signal book" that made it possible to condense a U-boat's message into a small number of characters before it was encrypted by Enigma and sent over the radio. Once the men and women of Bletchley Park had their hands on this book, it provided them with "cribs," or commonly used words and phrases they could search for, which facilitated cracking the new Enigma machines.

Bletchley Park was operating some sixty three-rotor bombes, which were of limited use against a four-rotor Enigma. The Americans had a project going to produce a hundred four-rotor bombes, but they were still working out the kinks in their own machines. But Bletchley Park's bombes plus access to the short signal book, were enough to break the naval Enigma.

But here was the catch. Enigma intercepts were telling the British that on March 10, the German Navy planned to introduce a new short signal book. This meant that Bletchley Park would lose the ability to decrypt the German Navy's messages for an indefinite period of time. That was grim news.

Everyone mostly got what they wanted out of the conference. The Americans would assume sole responsibility for escorting convoys between the US and Gibraltar. US naval forces currently based in Newfoundland and Iceland would be withdrawn. The Canadians would be responsible for all convoys north of the port of Boston in the United States and as far east as 47 degrees west longitude, roughly the longitude of the southern tip of Greenland. There the Royal Navy would assume responsibility; the RN would also be responsible for convoys from Britain to Gibraltar and for the Arctic convoys to Russia.

The Germans did indeed change their short signal codebook on March 10, but Bletchley Park was able to work their way back into Enigma in a mere nine days, much faster than anticipated. But the Germans had broken the Allied Number Three code that was the principal code the Atlantic convoys were using. In the seesaw war of cryptography, the Germans had evened the score, at least for a while.

[music: Chopin, Prelude No. 14, "The Storm."]

While the Allied naval leaders were meeting in Washington, the U-boat war in the Atlantic was going as badly as it ever had for the Allies. On February 23, Slow Convoy 121 left New York City with 69 merchant ships bound for Liverpool. It was intercepted by a German U-boat wolfpack designated Westmark. Between March 6 and March 10, the Germans sank twelve merchant ships, killing 270 of their crews. The Germans suffered no losses.

The next eastbound convoy was the fast convoy Halifax 228. It included 60 ships and also began at New York, bound for Liverpool. Allied naval authorities routed Halifax 228 far to the north of Slow Convoy 121, in order to avoid Westmark. They didn't realize they were directing the convoy right into another German wolfpack, Neuland, a force of nine U-boats, which attacked the convoy on March 10. Neuland managed to sink four merchant ships and one of the escorts, the British destroyer HMS *Harvester*. But then they had to break off the attack, as the convoy had come within air range of Iceland and the U-boat commanders well understood the threat of Allied anti-submarine aircraft.

The next slow convoy, 122, including 50 merchant ships, left New York on March 5. They had nine warships escorting them, including two destroyers: HMS *Havelock* and USS *Upshur*. Three days later the next fast convoy, Halifax 229, departed New York with 39 ships bound for Liverpool.

On March 10, the British lost the ability to read naval Enigma messages; that same day, huff-duff picked up a German U-boat's radio signal right in the path of the convoys. That boat was part of

the wolfpack designated Raubgraf, or Robber Baron. Allied commanders ordered both convoys rerouted to the south.

Ah, but they used Cipher Number 3, which the Germans had broken. U-boat Command ordered Raubgraf also to move south and intercept the two Allied convoys.

On March 16, U-boats from Raubgraf spotted Halifax 229. They mistook it for Slow Convoy 122, but that convoy had already passed them by. This was the fast convoy, catching up to the slow convoy ahead of it. That night, U-boats from Raubgraf attacked, sinking eight Allied merchant ships in eight hours.

Regrettably, though the Allies tried to include a rescue ship in each convoy—that is, a ship assigned to rescue crew members of sinking ships—Halifax 229 did not have one. Some of the convoy's escort ships were diverted to rescue survivors of the sinkings, but of course this took them away from convoy duty and made 229 more vulnerable.

The wolfpack Stürmer had been ordered to meet up with Raubgraf and assist in the convoy attack. Along the way, one of Stürmer's U-boats, *U-338*, spotted the slow convoy, 122. Its commander, 27-year-old Manfred Kinzel, out on his first patrol as commander, radioed the convoy's position back to U-boat Control and attacked. *U-338* slipped past the escorts and fired a full spread of torpedoes at the merchant ships. He was incredibly lucky: these five torpedoes sank three merchant ships and damaged a fourth.

Kinzel's report produced consternation at U-boat Control. He was nearly 200 kilometers away from Raubgraf, and yet he claimed he had sighted a convoy. It took a few hours for Command to figure out that Kinzel had stumbled across a different convoy, which they took to be Halifax 229. In other words, the Germans had mixed them up. Not that it made much difference.

Once he realized his convoy was under attack, the commander of 121 radioed Iceland and called for air cover and surface warships to reinforce his escorts. Five ships departed Iceland, but once it became clear that both convoys were under attack, these ships were split up and sent to reinforce both. The relief ships encountered awful storms that slowed their progress.

As soon as dawn broke on the morning of the 17th, squadrons of B-24s took off from Iceland and Northern Ireland to defend the convoys. These aircraft spotted and attacked several U-boats. They didn't score any kills, but their attacks forced the boats to scatter. The following day, *U-221* was able to sink two ships in Halifax 229.

Overall, the Germans sank 22 merchant ships against the loss of one U-boat, making this the biggest convoy battle in the North Atlantic, and the second biggest of the war, after the attack on the arctic convoy PQ 17 the previous year.

These losses greatly alarmed Winston Churchill, who sent an urgent message to Franklin Roosevelt on March 18, pointing out the difficulties the Royal Navy was having and the losses

suffered by these two convoys in the North Atlantic. In Churchill's words, these losses "are a final proof that our escorts are evidently too thin. The strain upon the British Navy is becoming intolerable."

The same day he received the message, Roosevelt issued his own memo to General Marshall and Admiral King, ordering that as many B-24s as possible be withdrawn from the Pacific Theater and sent to the Atlantic to help close the Black Pit and protect the convoys.

This marked the second and final time that Roosevelt issued an order to the US military overruling their own judgment. The first time, you'll recall, was last year, when he ordered that Operation Torch proceed and that it be made the highest priority.

Overall, March was a very good month for the Germans. They sank 84 merchant ships, plus the British destroyer HMS *Harvester*. They lost 12 U-boats.

But things were already beginning to change. Losses in April were 40 merchant ships, still a lot, but less than half last month's number. The Germans and Italians lost 15 U-boats in the same period, meaning that from February to March to April, the kill ratio went from 7 to 2.7. The first is a good number for a submarine campaign, the second is decidedly not.

One of the reasons for the increasing number of sunk U-boats was RAF Coastal Command's patrols of the Bay of Biscay, which became intensive during this time. You probably remember how just a few weeks ago, in episode 394, I told you the story of how one of these German patrols flying cover for the U-boats in the Bay of Biscay on June 1, 1943 shot down a commercial flight, BOAC 777, killing everyone aboard, including the celebrated film star Leslie Howard.

Also, these Coastal Command planes were now equipped with radar that operated in the centimeter wavelengths, which German radar detectors could not pick up. As I noted, some German experts didn't believe that radar sets with such a high frequency could be made small enough to fit in an airplane. An alternative theory accepted by many Germans was that the U-boats' own radar detector equipment was somehow giving off a signal that Allied planes could detect. U-boats were ordered to stop using their radar detectors—they were useless anyway—until improved versions were ready.

Things were not going so well in the Mediterranean either. Once Operation Torch began and the Allies expanded their control over French North Africa, they stationed anti-submarine aircraft at coastal airfields from Casablanca to Tunis, making the Mediterranean increasingly dangerous for submarines. You also have to consider that the Mediterranean is a much shallower and more placid body of water than the raging Atlantic, which made it harder for submarines to dive deep enough to escape being spotted from the air. In August 1943, as Italy was collapsing, the Germans moved their Mediterranean U-boat base from La Spezia in Italy to the captured French

naval base at Toulon. The Germans continued the Mediterranean U-boat campaign until they lost Toulon in 1944, but Allied shipping losses remained minor.

The month of May 1943 would prove to be pivotal for the U-boat campaign. It started off reasonably well for the Germans. In late April, a convoy of 42 merchant ships designated ONS 5 left Liverpool on the journey west toward North America. It was intercepted by two German wolfpacks. The U-boats and the convoy escorts dueled with one another for more than a week in late April and early May.

The U-boats sank 13 of the 42 merchant ships in the convoy, which sounds like a pretty good result for the Germans, until you consider they lost 7 U-boats. A further 7 were damaged. That's a kill rate that barely reaches 2, but as bad as that is, the rest of the month was worse. Just considering the other North Atlantic convoys, they were only able to sink an additional six merchant ships at a cost of sixteen U-boats. Yes, you heard that right.

Overall, for the entire month of May, counting all the Atlantic convoys, the Allies lost 40 merchant ships, while the Germans and Italians lost 38 U-boats. Just dismal numbers. Roughly one-third of German U-boats that went out on patrol in May 1943 never came home.

Many historians point to this moment, May 1943, as the turning point in the Battle of the Atlantic. In the Kriegsmarine, they called it "Black May." Allied technological superiority had definitively turned the tide.

On May 24, Karl Dönitz ordered a change in patrol priorities. The Atlantic U-boats would concentrate on the Caribbean Sea, the coast of South America, and the African coast south of Dakar. In order to conceal the redeployment from the Allies, he ordered 13 U-boats in the North Atlantic to broadcast frequent dummy radio messages, intended to convey the impression that large numbers of U-boats were still operating there. The Allies weren't fooled for a second, thanks to their ability to decode Enigma messages. Three of these 13 boats were sunk by Allied aircraft.

The heavy losses in April and May triggered a debate within U-boat Control. Some commanders, including a couple of highly decorated veterans, advocated ending the campaign in the Atlantic. Others wanted to fight on. Karl Dönitz later described what he faced in early June as "the most difficult decision of the whole war." In the end, he reached what he called the "bitter conclusion" that "we had no option but to fight on."

That was what Hitler wanted, and Dönitz calculated that Germany's U-boats were tying down thousands of Allied ships and planes that could be redeployed against Germany in some other way, were the U-boat campaign to end. And there was the hope that new technologies under consideration might counter the Allies' advantages and even the odds.

But until then, U-boat patrols would be extremely risky and everyone in the service knew it. Just one more data point here: the June numbers in the Atlantic were 7 Allied merchant ships sunk versus 17 German and Italian submarines lost.

Over the years, Dönitz had won the respect and admiration of Germany's submarine crews and officers. They called him "the Lion" and had faith in his skill and judgment. But this decision was indeed a bitter one, for no one more than the crews who would be taking these risks, and in many cases be sent to their deaths.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Robert for his kind donations, and thank you to stopped-clock for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Robert and stopped-clock help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I am happy to report that my son continues to do well, but I'm still going to have to take a bye week to finish catching up. So I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the various resistance movements in occupied Europe. That's in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Among the Allied ships sunk in the North Atlantic in early 1943 was SS *Dorchester*. *Dorchester* had been built in 1926 as a passenger ship and had served routes along the East Coast of the United States between Boston and Miami. After Pearl Harbor, it was requisitioned by the US War Shipping Administration, converted to a troopship, and allocated to the US Army.

On January 23, 1943, *Dorchester* left New York City bound for Greenland, with 902 aboard, most of whom were US Army soldiers newly assigned to the Army base there. It traveled with two merchant ships and three US Coast Guard cutters. On February 3, just before 1:00 in the morning, a torpedo from a German U-boat struck the ship. Dorchester's boilers went out almost immediately. The ship lost power; there wasn't even enough steam left to blow the whistle that would signal "abandon ship." Panic broke out as those aboard attempted to evacuate.

At the time, both the air temperature and the sea temperature were only slightly above freezing. Only 230 of those aboard the ship were rescued; the other 672 died, the deadliest sinking of an American ship in the European Theater over the entire war.

Among those who died were four US Army chaplains: Lieutenants George Fox, a Methodist minister, Clark Poling, a Reformed minister, John Washington, a Catholic priest, and Alexander Goode, a rabbi. Survivors from the *Dorchester* reported that the four chaplains helped organize the evacuation. When it was discovered that there weren't enough life jackets for everyone, the four chaplains gave away their own to other soldiers. A witness reported seeing them praying and singing hymns as they went down with the ship.

The Four Chaplains were each awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross. They were not eligible for the Medal of Honor, America's highest military award, because they did not serve in combat, so in 1960, Congress created a special award, the Four Chaplains' Medal, just for them.

It is customary in some places in the United States to this day to hold special ceremonies or religious services each year on or near February 3, in honor of the Four Chaplains. Among them is the Unitarian Church in Dorchester, Massachusetts, the lost ship's namesake, which hosts an annual ecumenical service in honor of the Four Chaplains.

On February 3, 1951, the eighth anniversary of the sinking of *Dorchester*, an all-faith Chapel of the Four Chaplains was established in Philadelphia, in the basement of Grace Baptist Church. In 1972, when the church moved to a new building, it sold its former building to Temple University, which continued to host the chapel. In 1983, I took the Pennsylvania Bar Exam at Temple University, and I may have stopped by the chapel at lunchtime to pray. For what it's worth, I passed the exam.

In 2001, the Chapel was relocated to the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. There are dozens of other chapels and memorials dedicated to the Four Chaplains across the United States.

[music: Closing War Theme]