

Operation DRUMBEAT

The WWII U-Boat Campaign on the US East Coast

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If you asked someone what was the worst naval defeat in American history, I guarantee you that 99% of the time that person would respond "*Pearl Harbor!*" However, unknown to many today, German U-boats operating off the Eastern coast of the United States, the Caribbean, and the Gulf of Mexico, in what the U-Boat crews referred to as the Second Happy Time from January-August 1942, sank 609 ships totaling 3.1 million tons for the loss of only 22 U-boats. This was roughly one quarter of all shipping sunk by U-boats during the entire Second World War. During the first three months of this campaign U-boats ranged along the shoreline with virtual impunity, hiding underwater in the daytime, slipping into the shipping lanes at night time. With the coastline brightly illuminated, merchant ships passed by like targets in a shooting gallery.

Operation Drumbeat, billed as "The Dramatic True Story of Germany's First U-boat Attacks Along The American Coast In World War II," was published by HarperCollins as a hardcover in 1990 and as a trade paperback in 1991. It is 512 pages long, divided into 13 chapters, and has 16 pages of black and white photographs. Several appendixes are provided, along with a lengthy list of notes and citations, a glossary, and bibliography.

This book focuses primarily on the initial deployment of five Type IX U-boats in what Admiral Donitz called Operation Drumbeat, or if you prefer German, Operation *Paukensschlag*. These five submarines sank 25 merchants without reprisal from the United States Navy, an event which the author, Michael Gannon calls the "Atlantic Pearl Harbor." Gannon believes that the military impact of Drumbeat was far greater than the attack on Pearl Harbor. According to him, the primary effect of Pearl Harbor was to cripple obsolete battleships in shallow water, whereas Drumbeat came close to cutting off the supply of oil between the US and Great Britain.



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Foto: Dietrich / Februar 1942

U-123 Returning from Patrol



U-123, commanded by Kapitänleutnant Reinhard Hardegen, serves as the focal point for Gannon's narrative. In his two Drumbeat patrols, Hardegen sank 19 merchant ships, one of them barely 20 miles from New York City. Gannon recalls *123's* near-sinking at the hands of a Norwegian factory ship, her encounter with the Q-Ship *Atik*, and the infamous torpedoing and shelling of the tanker *Gulf America* just two miles from Jacksonville, Florida.

Reinhard Hardegen

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Operation Drumbeat also takes us inside the offices of the British Operational Intelligence Centre (OIC) and Bletchley Park, where the German *Enigma* ciphers were decoded. Gannon discusses how the OIC kept track of the five Drumbeat boats with extreme accuracy on a nearly hourly basis and passed the information along to the American Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), who were regardless, taken completely by surprise when they finally arrived.

The third major element of *Operation Drumbeat* centers round the United States Navy's unpreparedness at the beginning of the war and the perceived dereliction of Admiral Ernest King, Commander-in-Chief of the US Fleet. Admiral King is the target of a number of sharp criticisms by Gannon, who makes Clay Blair's comments in *Silent Victory* seem like child's play in comparison.



Fleet Admiral Ernest King, USN

The most surprising revelation, or perhaps the most shocking, is that the United States had accurate intelligence on U-boat positions and 25 of the most modern destroyers at their disposal, and didn't do a thing to take action against Donitz's first wave.

The U-boat War was at a slump before Drumbeat; the British were routing their convoys around known U-boat positions, their escorts were gradually improving, Hitler had unwisely forced a major submarine redeployment to the Mediterranean, and merchant sinkings were at a six-month low. Why wasn't the convoy system implemented sooner? Why wasn't signal intelligence employed more capably? Why did Admiral King throw *27 months* of hard-won British (and about eight months American) experience in fighting U-boats out the window?

Not easy questions to answer, and questions that Gannon, perhaps wisely, chooses to avoid answering. When one considers the almost total destruction of the U-boat fleet one year later, it's hard to believe that a handful of them sank nearly a quarter of the Allied merchants lost during the war in only six months right on the United States' doorstep. Gannon asserts the likelihood that King was an Anglophobe, which perhaps explains some of his decisions in the first few months of the war, but doesn't explain why he never made any Anglophobic statements.

References:

1. Gannon, Michael, *Operation Drumbeat*, Harper Collins, 1990
2. <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq36-3.htm>
3. <http://www.uboat.net/>