

EAST COAST WAR DRUMS

THE INCREDIBLY DARING OPERATION DRUMBEAT SAW GERMAN U-BOATS
ATTACKING SHIPPING NEXT TO MAJOR AMERICAN CITIES

BY KELLY BELL

On the afternoon of 11 January 1942, U-Boat skipper *Kapitänleutnant* Reinhard Hardegen was on the conning tower of his *U-123* when one of his men spied a portly target through the gathering dusk. Some 400 miles east of New York City, it was the 9076-ton British freighter *Cyclops* and the German submariners wasted no time commencing their stalk. It took almost four hours, but at 8:18 pm they pumped a torpedo into her starboard hull, prowled around her and then drilled her port side with a stern torpedo. Five minutes later *Cyclops* foundered. The Second World

War's first submarine offensive off the America's eastern seaboard was consummated, and for still-naive, still-unsuspecting America a painful introduction to modern marine warfare was underway.

Adolf Hitler declared war on the USA on 11 December 1941. On 9 December, his ranking naval commander, Adm. Erich Raeder, had anticipated his *Fuehrer's* action and lifted all restrictions on attacking American vessels by his surface and submarine fleets. Sporadic incidents of violence had been occurring between the two powers for several months, but now hostilities evolved

into open warfare. The United States would soon learn a rueful lesson on the consequences of arrogance and complacency.

Despite their already-fearsome reputation, Germany's U-Boats were few in number early in the war. When hostilities had first flared in Europe in September 1939, submarine commander Adm. Karl Donitz had just 46 operational boats. Even soon-to-be-defeated France had more. With Hitler



In one of the great German mistakes of the Battle of the Atlantic, the enemy began the action with too few submarines.

obsessed with proliferating land and sea battles, the Third Reich's manufacturing capability was geared to tanks and warplanes. Submarine production lagged at just two per month. Still, despite their paucity and chronic problems with mechanical breakdowns and unreliable torpedoes, Donitz's crews sank more than a million tons of British shipping from July through October 1940 in what the submariners called their "Happy Time."

Germany's navy, the *Kriegsmarine*, correctly anticipated America would eventually enter the war on the Allied side and transform the British

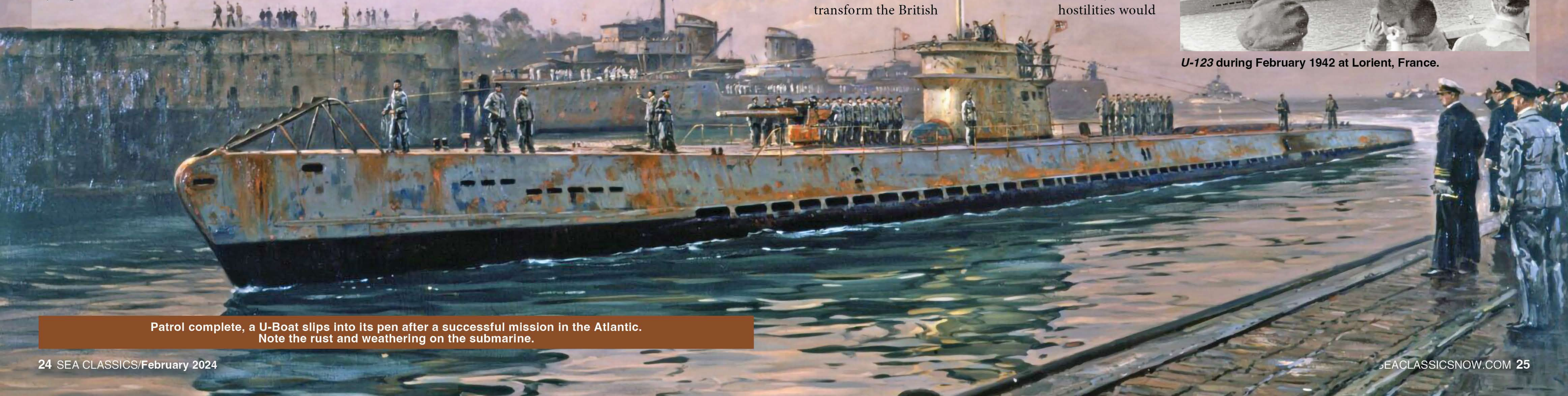
Isles into a giant, unsinkable aircraft carrier for massive fleets of heavy bombers, and a staging area for millions of combat troops. Following the official commencement of US-German hostilities, Raeder and Donitz hoped to disrupt Atlantic shipping. By this point, production figures had risen to 20 subs per month, and if this growing fleet of "Gray Wolves" could choke off the supply lines between Mother England and her powerful American daughter then perhaps the US entry into hostilities would



Despite the smile, Reinhard Hardegen had to hide the fact that he was constantly sick from his superiors. Incredibly daring, Hardegen took *U-123* into New York's Lower Bay where he surfaced on the evening of 14 January 1942. Climbing onto the bridge, he could not believe the blaze of New York's lights. "I cannot describe the feeling with words, but it was unbelievably beautiful and great," he would write. "I would have given away a kingdom for this moment if I had one. We were the first to be here, and for the first time in this war a German soldier looked upon the coast of the USA."



U-123 during February 1942 at Lorient, France.



Patrol complete, a U-Boat slips into its pen after a successful mission in the Atlantic. Note the rust and weathering on the submarine.