KILLING SHORE

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The True Story of Hitler's U-boats Off the New Jersey Coast

K. A. NELSON

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Cover images: Front: a Type VIIC U-boat and a freighter being shelled, both during WWII (locations unknown).
Back: The R.P. Resor burns after being torpedoed off New Jersey in February 1942.

For

Eileen C. Gaynor
15 May 1963–24 June 2021

and

Captain Samuel A. Schultz, USMC
10 February 1990–3 April 2018

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Preface

History has a way of feeling far away in both time and space. This is particularly true in the American experience, the United States being effectively a continent-island geographically removed from most of the world. Long considered a blessing, this oceanic moat kept foreign threats at arm's length while facilitating access to global markets for ships carrying American exports. The sea therefore represented the United States' guarantor of prosperity and security well into the 20th century.

This perspective even survived World War I, during which the waters off the Jersey Shore briefly became a peripheral battlefield in 1918. Even so, few Americans recognized that summer for the omen it was. Just one generation after the "war to end all wars," the same ocean that had long impeded would-be aggressors instead carried them again to America's doorstep. Although the arrival of Hitler's U-boats in 1942 was not a surprise, what followed proved bloodier and more brutal than even the Germans had foreseen.

The Nazi assault began just six weeks after Pearl Harbor, and the ensuing months constituted what historian Michael Gannon described as "one of the greatest maritime disasters in history and the American nation's worst-ever defeat at sea." The storm would claim hundreds of ships and thousands of lives before it abated. Curious explorers can even lay hands on the physical remnants of these events, at the modest price of only the proper experience and equipment.

The seeds of what would eventually become this story were sown over the course of several dives on New Jersey's wartime wrecks. It was, more than anything else, their silence that struck me. These ships' last moments afloat were wrought with chaos, explosions, terror, and flames—yet they lie today in absolute, noiseless stillness. Finning over the derelict remains of smashed hulls and corroded boilers set me wondering: *What happened here? What were the final moments like? Who were the men on either end of this violence?*

Ideas for how to answer these questions were germinating in my imagination by 2019. One afternoon that summer found me at a grocery store, where I spotted an elderly customer bedecked in a jacket and baseball cap identifying him as a US Merchant Marine veteran of World War II. I approached and expressed my gratitude for his service before introducing myself as a Marine Corps veteran with an interest in the role of merchant shipping in the world wars.

The man's politeness did not conceal his lack of interest in conversing, so I kept my intrusion short. Before parting ways, however, I mentioned my dives on the wrecks of ships torpedoed by U-boats off New Jersey. A change passed over his face at the word "U-boats," and the tone of his reply was solemn: "Oh, they were out there, alright." Something substantive seemed to loom behind his words, and the observation hardly begged a question.

The elderly mariner had once labored under the threat of the deck being ripped out from under his feet in a sudden cataclysm of steel and fire. If he did not drown or burn to death then he would have found himself adrift on a seemingly endless sea, probably at night and possibly in the dead of winter. Lacking a raft or lifeboat in the Atlantic meant a quick death by hypothermia, regardless of the season. Even escaping this fate could entail interminable days of waves, thirst, sunburn, and hunger—enough for the living to envy the dead. "To perish or be cast adrift in such dreadful waters," wrote historian Lisle Rose, "was an ordeal past comprehension."

Whether or not this man endured any such trial, he was a witness to an era that had by then nearly passed from living memory. Despite continuing public interest in World War II, however, *Killing Shore*'s subject receded from America's collective memory even before my lifetime. That Nazi Germany once launched a prolonged and devastating assault along US shores is largely unknown by modern Americans, although this is less than surprising if one considers the Battle of the Atlantic's historiography.

Samuel Eliot Morison described World War II's longest campaign and history's most destructive naval conflict as "exceedingly difficult to relate in an acceptable literary form." This is partly because, as Jonathan Dimbleby explained, the Atlantic war "played out far from the correspondent's notebook or the photographer's lens." Its scale and complexity have largely relegated it to broad-brush treatments, and relatively few historians have endeavored to portray what its veterans and casualties experienced. For this reason, among others, *Killing Shore* was crafted with three primary purposes in mind.

The first purpose is to recount the war that raged offshore from Maine to Texas (and throughout the Western Hemisphere) and reached its grisly apex during the first half of 1942. By portraying the U-boat campaign in American waters through the prism of one US state, it presents a broad and complex subject by focusing on a narrow slice of the same. Likewise, although each chapter in Part II tells the story of a different ship, this is not an anthology of disparate events. These accounts and their broader historical context are instead presented as a single narrative.

This story's second purpose is to capture what a US Navy report from June 1942 identified as "an element in warfare that is frequently overlooked," that is, "the individual man." He is "forgotten amid the campaigns, the statistics, the correspondence, and the impressive movements of large forces," the unnamed staff officer wrote. "A convoy makes safe passage, a tanker moves through a swept

channel, a merchant vessel slips unseen through the black night—and where is the single man in all this?"

To state that a ship was sunk is one thing, but to portray the actual experiences of victims, attackers, and rescuers is a very different undertaking. The characters in the following pages were ordinary people every bit as real as the elderly mariner at the supermarket. Many perished within sight of New Jersey's boardwalks, and the effort that produced this book was girded by the conviction that their stories deserve to be told as they were experienced. Dan Lieb, president of the New Jersey Historical Divers Association, put it best during an interview with *South Jersey Magazine* in 2016:

"Shipwrecks are very much human stories, and I like being able to tell them."

Killing Shore also serves a third purpose. Thousands of ships and lives lost during mankind's bloodiest war were "minor in themselves when weighed in the scales of global war," Johnathan Dimbleby wrote. "Such losses were easily overlooked and rapidly forgotten except by those who grieved for the loved ones they had lost." Indeed, only one of the eleven vessels featured in Part II has previously been the subject of a long-form narrative backed by serious scholarship. This book consequently represents the definitive account of what the men aboard these ships experienced in New Jersey waters.

This is not a work of historical fiction, nor is it "based on a true story." These are instead real events reconstructed with as much factual accuracy as available sources allow. Accessibility was also a primary consideration: *Killing Shore* was always intended as a work of popular history that any interested reader can understand and appreciate. For this reason, relevant scientific, nautical, and military topics are explained throughout.

New Jersey serves as *Killing Shore*'s primary setting, but there was nothing particularly unique about the Garden State's wartime experience. An alternate version of this book could easily use North Carolina or Florida as its geographic frame. New Jersey was chosen partly for its proximity to my own native soil (the Philadelphia area) and partly for the inspiration drawn from diving the state's war wrecks.

Another motivation, however, lay in the opportunity to tell a story that has never really been told. Little has been written about the ships most prominently portrayed in Part II, and myths and misconceptions persist even among the wreck divers most familiar with them. Finally, although other nonfiction books portray U-boat operations along New England, the Gulf coast, and North Carolina, no comparable long-form account exists for New Jersey. *Killing Shore* is therefore as much a work of local history as a chronicle of combat and survival at sea.

Sometimes history hits closer to home than you'd think.

K. A. Nelson
February 2023

Sources and Methodology

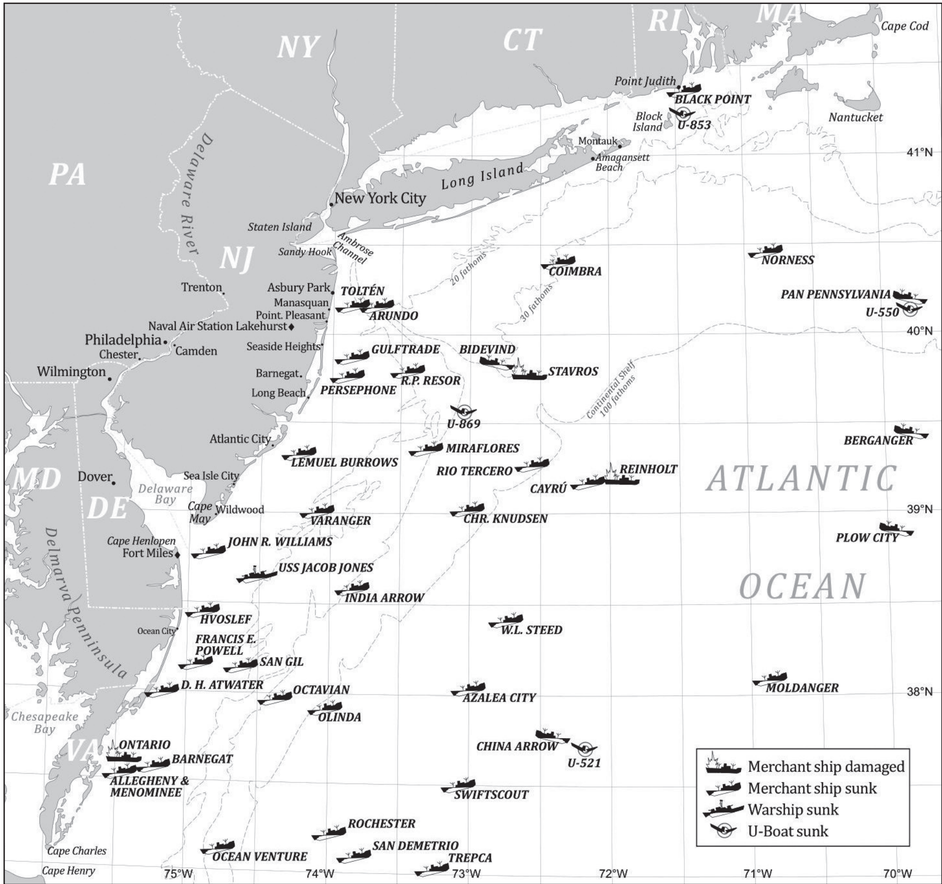
Killing Shore's main story was largely drawn from three categories of primary sources. One was American and British military files such as after-action reports and POW interrogation records. Another was wartime newspapers, which proved an important source of minor details often absent from official documentation. Finally, the German perspective was sourced primarily from the logbooks (*Kriegstagebücher*, or KTBs) of individual U-boats and the headquarters staff. These three categories of documentation were supplemented by books, journal articles, genealogical records, websites, and other sources.

Firsthand accounts were leveraged to the greatest extent possible, although this required scrutiny to weed out the errors and ambiguities inherent to all eyewitness recollections. Numerous characters were brought to life in part by memories and photographs provided to the author by their children, grandchildren, and nephews. Biased or inaccurate sources like Karl Dönitz's memoirs were cited only in specific contexts, and pseudohistory from the likes of Sharkhunters International or Franz Kurowski was excluded entirely.

No facts have been changed or altered for dramatic effect. Small gaps in the historical record, however, were bridged using intuition and deduction. Sparingly performed to advance the narrative, this included reconstructing some dialogue. Other dialogue was drawn verbatim from primary sources, as were all radio messages. All persons portrayed are real people, and no details about them have been altered insofar as they are known.

All sources are cited using endnotes. To find the source(s) for any content in this book, simply find the next endnote in the text and then reference the "Endnotes" section. Source citations were consolidated to no more than one endnote per paragraph for readability's sake. Full details about many sources are listed in the bibliography. Some endnotes also include remarks about historical accuracy and attribution.

Distances, ocean depths, and seafloor topography were verified using Google Earth and other cartographic tools. Units of measurement were converted from metric to imperial for a primarily American readership, and distances are in statute miles, or "ground miles," unless nautical miles are specified. All times are in Eastern War Time (today, Eastern Daylight Time). All statistics about tonnage, sinkings, and fatalities related to U-boat attacks were calculated by the author using raw data sourced from Uboat.net.



All vessels sunk or damaged by combat operations in the area shown, 1942–45. (Custom art by Bob Pratt)

Part I

CHAPTER ONE

Eins Zwei Drei

"The nation still stirs uneasily, like a man half-awake on a morning of disaster, still half-hoping that the evil thing is in the dream and not a reality."
—*New York Times* (8 March 1942)

14 January 1942
Grid quadrant CA 2896
21:56

Thirty-seven days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, *Kapitänleutnant* Reinhard Hardegen ordered the *U-123* to a stop. The roar of the U-boat's diesel engines faded to a whir before ceasing entirely. An uncanny silence prevailing within the vessel's musky confines was mirrored by the chilly winter night around it. The U-boat was on the surface, where submarines of that era usually traveled. It was impossible to dive here, anyway, as the depth was less than 40 feet.

Kapitänleutnant Hardegen was standing on the *U-123*'s bridge, or open-air command station atop the conning tower. Huddled around him were a half-dozen other unshaven young men sporting a mishmash of dark-colored attire. A double-breasted leather coat insulated the U-boat commander's lanky frame while atop his unkempt hair sat a military-style hat with a dark blue brim and white, rumpled-looking crown. Its brim's edge was embroidered with gilt thread and its center band displayed oak leaves flanking a tricolor roundel. Above this, centered on the white crown, gleamed a gold insignia of an eagle clutching a swastika.

The Germans clustered on the conning tower murmured as they marveled at the distant spectacle off the *U-123*'s starboard bow. By their feet, another young man's face peered out from the open hatchway. Clouds of hot breath rose in the cold air. One of the four lookouts was staring agape in the same direction as his crewmates. His inattentiveness went unnoticed by Hardegen, who was similarly transfixed by the sight before them.

A few dozen miles northwest lay the blazing incandescence of New York City. It was unlike anything the U-boat crewmen had ever seen. Even before the war, when Europe's cities were still illuminated at night, there was no sight so stunning anywhere on the continent. Manhattan's electric luster cast a sail of light far into the sky that

shimmered and shifted in front of the waning moon. “I cannot describe the feeling with words, but it was unbelievably beautiful and great,” Hardegen later wrote. “I would have given away a kingdom for this moment, if I had one.”

Hardegen oriented himself geographically. To the north, the lights of Rockaway Beach shined off the U-boat’s starboard beam. West of here, off the starboard bow, the dark ocean terminated on a stretch of beach featuring a lighted circular shape which Hardegen recognized as Coney Island’s Ferris wheel. Faint points of light marked cars driving along Atlantic Avenue, and a neon blur indicated where Nathan’s Famous Hot Dog Stand stood open for business even at this cold and late hour. Beyond Coney Island glimmered Brooklyn.

The U-boat commander identified Staten Island farther west and forward of his bow. On the opposite side of Ambrose Channel from Staten Island was the low, dark shape of the Sandy Hook barrier spit that extends from northern New Jersey and marks the southern boundary of the entrance to New York Harbor. The *U-123* was too far south and east of the Narrows—the tidal strait separating Staten Island from Brooklyn—to discern individual buildings in Manhattan, but the electric radiance insinuated the skyline’s grandeur.

The *U-123* commander contemplated the symbolic weight of the dazzling view. “For the first time in this war, a German soldier looked upon the coast of the USA,” he later reflected. A smirk blossomed under three weeks’ growth of beard. Without taking his eyes off New York, Hardegen remarked to *Oberleutnant* Rudolf Hoffmann: “I have a feeling the Americans are going to be very surprised when they find out we’re here.”[1]

***

The handbook for their trade depicted the ideal U-boat commander as possessing “an aggressive spirit, a capacity for making quick decisions, initiative, tenacious endurance, and unfailing skill.” Hardegen possessed all these in spades, just as surely as he lacked humility and discretion. His radioman felt that “sometimes he took too many risks,” his peers thought him a braggart, and his superiors knew him to disobey direct orders when it suited him. These same superiors nonetheless also recognized an aggressive commander with a stellar combat record and a penchant for independent action. “A commander who missed his targets, that would demoralize an entire crew,” explained *U-123* boatswain Walter Kaeding. “But you can’t say that about Hardegen.”

Reinhard Hardegen, age 28, was tall and thin with a gaunt face garnished by a short and scraggly beard that was red, unlike the hair on his scalp. A naval pilot before transferring to the U-boat fleet, a 1936 plane crash had left him with a shortened leg and chronic stomach bleeding that medically disqualified him from U-boat service. He had evaded his medical records until they reached the attention of the U-boat fleet commander, but the admiral recognized Hardegen’s “dash and tenacity” and only issued a good-humored scolding.

Hardegen's inclination to irritate superiors would be on full display six months after his New York voyage. Invited to dine with Adolf Hitler after being awarded the coveted Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves medal, Hardegen left the dictator red with anger by castigating him for allowing Germany's naval aviation capability to be absorbed by the air force. A mortified General Alfred Jodl sternly admonished him after the meal, but the *U-123* commander was unfazed: "*Herr General*, the Führer has the right to hear the truth, and I have the duty to speak it."

"I've always loved the sea since an early age," Hardegen explained. "So you could say it was in my blood." He was just 4 years old when his father, a teacher and accomplished history author, was killed in action during World War I. Young Reinhard was subsequently raised under the tutelage of renowned naval commander and family friend Paul König.

School records indicate that his nonconformist tendencies predated his military career. "Hardegen constantly ill-mannered," "Hardegen interrupts the class," and "Hardegen eats breakfast during the lesson" were among a litany of offenses against good order and discipline. He preferred sailing to studying, and only his dream of becoming a naval officer forced an improvement in his behavioral and academic performance. A recommendation from König helped secure Hardegen's admission to Germany's naval academy at Mürwik.[2]

***

The *U-123*, known to its crewmen as the "*Eins Zwei Drei*" (One, Two, Three), was a Type IXB U-boat measuring 251 feet long and 22 feet wide at the beam. Two diesel engines manufactured by Maschinenfabrik Augsburg-Nürnberg AG provided a top speed of 18.2 knots (20.9 miles per hour, or mph) on the surface. The boat had an operational range of 12,000 nautical miles at 10 knots. Electric motors provided a maximum underwater speed of 7.3 knots (8.4 mph) with the battery fully charged, though this was only sustainable for about an hour. The *U-123*'s armament consisted of twenty-two torpedoes complemented by a 105mm gun, a 37mm gun, and a 20mm gun.

Three weeks earlier, the *U-123* and its crew of four officers and forty-eight enlisted men had departed from the port of Lorient in German-occupied France. Hardegen knew that putting to sea on Christmas Eve risked having drunk and homesick men aboard, so he opted to sail on 23 December instead. The U-boat slipped its mooring lines while a pierside band played "*Wir fahren gegen Engeland*":

> Farewell, my darling, farewell, my darling,
> For we sail, for we sail,
> For we sail against England, England.

It seemed as appropriate a tune as any, considering that not even Hardegen knew where they were going. His instructions were to proceed west and open

the sealed orders after reaching 20° West longitude. The U-boat's official logbook reflected his curiosity by noting that their assigned route took them past "all six contemplated patrol areas." And so they ventured *Westwärts*—westward—a word that encapsulated the sense of glory and adventure that still held U-boat men in its thrall in December 1941.

The *U-123* submerged the following day to celebrate Christmas 66 feet under the Bay of Biscay. Gifts secreted aboard by Hardegen were distributed by *Leutnant* Horst von Schroeter, formally designated as "*Knecht Ruprecht*," one of Saint Nicholas' helpers in German folklore. Pancakes and wine punch were served, and the crew gathered around a Christmas tree in the control room where Hardegen read the story of Christ's birth from the Gospel of Luke. "The war was forgotten for a few hours," he wrote in the log.[3]

Upon reaching 20° West two days after Christmas, Kapitänleutnant Hardegen retreated to the alcove just forward of the control room which constituted the captain's quarters. He drew its green curtain closed, then doffed and placed aside his reefer jacket cut from dark blue doeskin-type fabric and featuring a gold eagle and swastika embroidered on the right breast. Hardegen then removed a large blue envelope from the boat's safe, gently slid out its contents, and laid them out on his schoolhouse-sized desk. His face tensed quizzically.

In addition to the operations order, the envelope contained a 1939 World's Fair handbook and a tourist guide to New York City. There were no nautical charts or pilot books, nothing that showed depths, navigational buoys, or lighthouses, not to mention shoals and other hazards. A bemused Hardegen realized that war with America had arrived so suddenly that the naval high command had not even possessed charts of the US coast. Inside the tourist book's back cover he found a folded map portraying ports and bays in somewhat more detail.

His eye was drawn to the entrance to Lower New York Bay, which was labeled "Ambrose Channel." The map also indicated the location of Ambrose Channel's lightship, a type of navigational aid. In addition to tourist information, the envelope contained a standard large-scale 1870G *Nord-Atlantischer Ozean* map. This copy of the map featured several areas along the East Coast which some staff officer had labeled with Roman numerals.

The operations order directed the *U-123* to grid square "CA," which spanned the US East Coast from Boston, Massachusetts to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Specifically, the Eins Zwei Drei was assigned a quadrant within CA formed by squares CA 28, CA 29, CA 52, and CA 53. Hardegen consulted the 1870G map and saw that this encompassed all of Long Island in addition to most of New Jersey's coast out to roughly 150 miles offshore.

The orders read: "Off the American littoral you will attack unescorted, independently sailing coastwise merchant traffic … Following initial attacks at destination New York, *U-123* will pursue targets as far south as Cape Hatteras." The orders

further specified the date on which the U-boats could begin engaging targets at will, and they reiterated the imperative not to transmit any messages whatsoever. "You will maintain strict radio silence until after your attacks commence."

Only broadly familiar with the geography, Hardegen found New York City on the map and traced his eyes south along the coast. His gaze passed New Jersey, the Delaware Bay, then the Chesapeake Bay. He found Cape Hatteras among North Carolina's barrier islands nearly 400 miles south of New York. A smile spread across his face.

Hardegen had long hungered for a bite of the Americans. On earlier combat patrols, he had watched "neutral" American merchant ships bringing cargo unmolested to Britain while US Navy destroyers and Coast Guard cutters patrolled the north-central Atlantic. But now the leash was off, and Hardegen relished the opportunity to teach them some humility.[4]

***

The 3,600-mile voyage to New York took the *U-123* through all the fury of a North Atlantic winter. The U-boat pitched and rolled hideously as 30-foot waves crashed down and exploded into foaming torrents against the foredeck, the noise of which was thunderous even inside the boat. Winds of 35 mph lashed the faces of the four lookouts posted on the bridge atop the conning tower. Each wave attempted twice to claim them from their swaying perch, first when its weight broke over their heads and then again when it washed back out over the bridge and gun platform to rejoin the boiling sea.

The U-boat climbed each dark mountain, its sharp bow rearing high on the crest before the entire vessel tipped forward and skidded down into the deep trough to bury its nose in the bedrock of the next wave. Bronze propellers revolved in the air for a moment, then the sea crashed down again and enveloped the boat. It emerged again each time to continue its odyssey through a frigid seascape of white-crested hills chasing one another eastward. "The North Atlantic is where the seaman takes his graduate course in weather," wrote US Coast Guard veteran John Waters, "and the curriculum is tough."

The *U-123* was approximately 250 miles southeast of the Canadian port of Halifax, Nova Scotia on 9 January 1942 when Hardegen received his final coordinating instructions via an encoded wireless transmission: "OCCUPY FOLLOWING ATTACK AREAS: ZAPP ATTACK AREA ROMAN NUMERAL I. HARDEGEN II. FOLKERS III. BLEICHRODT IV AND V. KALS VI." He consulted the 1870G map again and saw that the coastline in his assigned zone ran from Long Island, New York to Atlantic City, New Jersey. The message continued. "BDU COUNTS ON YOUR ARRIVING IN ATTACK AREA ON 13 JANUARY." Its final sentence designated the U-boats as "GROUP PAUKENSCHLAG."[5]

In addition to radio silence, the five U-boats of *Gruppe Paukenschlag* were instructed not to conduct any attacks before reaching their attack zones off North

America. The only exception was if a ship of 10,000 or more gross registered tons presented itself, and the *U-123* encountered just such a target on the night of 11 January when a lookout spotted a large two-masted ship 316 miles east of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. "These steamers and all other English and American ships with double masts are about 10,000 gross registered tons or more," Hardegen explained in the log, "so I am allowed to attack."

The British freighter *Cyclops* survived two U-boat attacks during World War I and had narrowly escaped Japan's capture of Hong Kong the previous month, but her good fortune was now depleted. Hardegen chased down the *Cyclops* and put a torpedo into her hull, prompting the passengers and crewmen to abandon ship. While a trio of sailors fired the U-boat's 20mm gun at the *Cyclops*' midship house to silence her distress call, Hardegen saw the merchant crew attempting to re-board. A second torpedo then broke the 485-foot ship in half. Torpedoes killed only 2 of 181 passengers and crew, but 86 more would die from hypothermia before a Canadian destroyer rescued the survivors and landed them at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Hardegen's copy of Erich Gröner's *Merchant Fleets of the World* revealed that the *Cyclops* was only 9,076 gross registered tons, but he knew that nobody whose opinion mattered would care. He was instead concerned with the detour's impact on his timetable. As the *U-123* resumed her course with both propellers turning at 300 revolutions per minute (rpm), Hardegen remarked in the U-boat's logbook that "I have lost a lot of time and have to hurry to be in the patrol area on 13 January."[6]

***

At 21:28 on 13 January, four days after sinking the *Cyclops*, Hardegen finally laid eyes on the American coast. Mercifully calm weather and clear visibility enabled him to spot a distant light pulsing in a dot-dot-dash pattern. "Light to starboard. Probably the Montauk lighthouse," he noted, referring to the easternmost tip of Long Island. More artificial illumination soon appeared on the dark horizon. "Glow from the direction of New York and the cities on the Narragansett Bay."

Three hours later and 68 miles southeast of Montauk Point, Hardegen's lookouts spotted a much nearer light off the port bow. The *U-123* approached to find the tanker *Norness*, which was sailing under Panamanian registry with a mostly Norwegian crew. The ship was laden with fuel oil and sailing a straight course with navigation and running lights on, as if in peacetime. Hardegen closed to within 900 yards on the surface before loosing a pair of torpedoes.

One torpedo missed, but the *Norness* lurched when the other struck under her aft mast to satisfying effect. "Heavy detonation. 50 meter high column of fire, 200 meter high black mushroom cloud … impressive view against the bright starlit sky," Hardegen observed. The tanker was listing to starboard with its stern slouching low in the water when a third torpedo crashed into the hull amidships. "Again a very

strong detonation, high column of fire," yet this was still not a mortal blow. "Tanker now lies on even keel again," an annoyed Hardegen observed. "Does not sink."

The *U-123* launched another, but a depth-keeping malfunction caused the torpedo to pass harmlessly beneath the *Norness*' keel. "Now I have to sacrifice a fifth torpedo," the incensed U-boat commander explained, "because he has to go, or else he can be towed in." The merchant crew was rowing a single crowded lifeboat away from the abandoned *Norness* when the fifth torpedo exploded against her engine room with a thunderous roar. The aft compartments now flooded rapidly as the *Norness* listed further, her masts toppling against the deck. "The stern hits the bottom at seventy meters, the bow protrudes about thirty meters vertically from the sea," Hardegen noted. "An interesting menace to navigation."

All but two of the *Norness*' forty-one crewmen survived the attack. Not until the following morning would the US Navy blimp *K-3* sight the shipwreck's bow and men huddled on a raft nearby. A Navy destroyer and a Coast Guard cutter then rescued thirty survivors and a fishing boat picked up the remaining nine. The *Norness* later fully sank.

The sun was rising astern by 06:38. Even the daredevil *U-123* commander recognized the danger of traveling on the surface so close to shore during daylight, so he elected to submerge and wait on the seafloor until nightfall. The chief engineering officer directed the sailors in the control room to flood the boat's ballast tanks and steer it downward to the seafloor. The crew passed the daylight hours sleeping and conducting torpedo maintenance 180 feet beneath the sea while Hardegen pored over his maps.[7]

After sunset on 14 January, the *U-123* surfaced and resumed its westward course as the German radioman on duty tuned in to American radio frequencies. "Heard announcement by the Navy Department, Washington in American broadcast that a tanker was probably torpedoed by a U-boat 60 NM south of Block Island," Hardegen wrote in the log. The same message was repeated on the 600-meter frequency, then by German naval headquarters. Hardegen relished the recognition by friend and foe alike that he was boldly sauntering through the Americans' front gate. *Knock, knock*.

Lacking proper charts, the *U-123* followed the Long Island coast toward the Lower Bay. "I could see on Coney Island, the houses and lights and motorcars and so on," Hardegen would later recount, "therefore navigation was very easy." A stationary light ahead became visible at 20:09. Presuming it to be the Fire Island lightship, he ordered the helmsman to steer toward it. "Twenty meters under the keel!" shouted boatswain Walter Kaeding from the control room. "Fifteen meters! … Ten meters!" The irritated captain interjected: "Which idiot is depth-sounding? They can hear us on shore!"

Five minutes later, Hardegen's heart leapt into his throat when he suddenly sighted the white flash of surf breaking over sand dead ahead—the "lightship" was, in fact, a beachside building. "Both back emergency full!!" he bellowed. The *U-123*

halted jarringly, pushing a comber of its own toward the beach. Diesels snarled as the propellers were thrown into reverse. Beyond the surf, Hardegen could see dunes, a lit hotel, and the darkened silhouettes of trees. Chastened, he resumed following Long Island's shoreline at a safer distance.

Hardegen ordered the helmsman to steer well clear of the fishing boats swarming innocuously around them, each a point of light moving on its own course. "No mines, then …" observed Oberleutnant Hoffman, his second-in-command. "Yeah, nothing to chew on either," the commander replied. "I advance further," his log noted. The Ambrose Channel and Fire Island lightships both seemed to be either off or relocated elsewhere, but Manhattan's radiant glow swelled off the starboard bow as the Germans approached the Narrows.

Hardegen soon halted the *U-123* and invited the rest of the crew up to the bridge for their first view of New York. They took turns ascending the conning tower ladder to marvel at the incandescent tableau. The city carried a symbolic resonance beyond that of simply a large metropolis. Here was the land of cowboys, gangsters, swing music, and Hollywood. Washington, D.C. may have governed the United States, but New York embodied it. "You just imagine to yourself: America," an enraptured Walter Kaeding reflected, "and there it is."

Alwin Tölle was snapping photos. Tölle was not a U-boat sailor, but rather a photographer assigned to document the historic mission. Later claims that the Germans had watched people dancing on the roof of the Waldorf Astoria hotel were mere sensationalism, however. Tölle was too far away for such images, so Ufa Film Studios would instead fabricate close-up photos of Manhattan for Joseph Goebbels' propaganda reels.

To the *U-123* commander, the lustrous panorama also embodied that particularly American arrogance which had come to annoy him. German cities had been blacked out for over two years, and yet here were the Yankees with their damn lights on. Yet even in his most triumphant moment, Hardegen felt a twinge of guilt and nostalgia. This was, after all, not his first visit to New York.[8]

His naval academy education had included a round-the-globe training cruise aboard the light cruiser *Karlsruhe* in 1933. Among the ports of call was Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, where he met an American commander's daughter who arranged for him to tour a US Navy submarine. Later, in New York City, he rode the elevator to the top of the Empire State Building. He would recall of America that he was "amazed at the people and how kind they were to us."

Yet Hardegen had developed considerable scorn for the Americans during the more than two years since the war began. His vanity and nationalism also made him an enthusiastic mouthpiece for Hitler's propaganda; Hardegen would be credited with authoring the 1943 propaganda book *To Action Stations! U-boats Against England and America*, which extolled the U-boat sailors' rugged warrior spirit while deriding the "soft" and "degenerate" Americans.

These ridiculous claims were, however, wrapped around a kernel of truth. Hardegen had been stunned by the relative spaciousness and luxury of the US Navy submarine he toured in Hawaii, which contrasted starkly with Germany's cramped and austere U-boats. "As far as the German soldier is concerned, private wishes and conveniences quite naturally take a back seat," he boasted in 1943. "The American, however, places great value on his so-called comfort … Recent history has shown us just how well they stand up in combat."[9]

Hardegen lingered near Sandy Hook, New Jersey in the hope of catching a merchantman departing or entering New York Harbor, but none presented itself. He reasoned that by backtracking eastward, toward the open ocean, he might cross a ship's path. "Come to one-zero-zero," he ordered the helmsman seated below the open hatch in the conning tower compartment. At around 01:00, Hardegen retired below deck to catch some sleep. His respite would be brief.

"*Kommandant auf Brücke!*"

The *U-123* was 86 miles east of Sandy Hook at 01:40 when Hardegen was awakened by the second watch officer's voice. Donning his leather coat and white cap, he rushed into the control room and up the ladder. He emerged into the winter chill where the bridge watch indicated a ship roughly 2 miles astern.

Lifting his binoculars, Hardegen sighted a large tanker on an eastward heading, indicating that it had just departed Ambrose Channel. The ship was not hard to see, as it was conspicuously backlit by New York's lights in addition to having all its own lights on. "Don't these crass *Schweine* know there's a war on?" Hardegen quipped derisively. He ordered his helmsman to slowly turn the *U-123* for a head-on approach.

The U-boat crept forward while its commander assessed the target. The tanker's beam and masts suggested its large size, and the hull riding low in the water indicated a full cargo. "He seems bigger than *Norness*, especially the superstructure on the stern," the log stated. "Amazingly long." A sailor emerged from the hatch carrying an optical targeting device that resembled a large set of binoculars. Oberleutnant Rudolf Hoffman installed it on a post extending to chest height from the bridge's deck and pressed his face against the eyepiece.

As the first watch officer, Hoffman now took over execution of the attack. In what Hardegen described as a "textbook approach," Hoffman ordered the helmsman to steer to port and orient the U-boat's bow perpendicular to the tanker's track. He then centered the targeting reticle on its midship house as the *U-123* maneuvered into attack position. "Flood tube one for surfaced firing and open tube door," the first watch officer ordered. "Running depth … two-point-five meters."

The unwitting victim's shadowy form grew nearer. "Target angle starboard zero-nine-five, target speed ten-point-five," Hoffman announced. "Range nine-zero-zero." A voice from below the hatch echoed his words in confirmation. His gaze tracked the ship through the optic while ready reports were shouted from below, then issued the order to fire. "*Rohr eins, LOS!*" Hoffman shouted as he punched the firing lever.

Fifty-eight seconds later, the torpedo slammed into the ship's starboard side just aft of the bridge. The blast reverberated across the sea as flames mushroomed skyward in a grisly palette of red, orange, and black that illuminated Hardegen's toothy grin. Burning oil showered the tanker's deck as the fire quickly spread. "The effect was stunning," he wrote in the U-boat's log. "A fierce detonation, a column of fire rose over 200 meters high, and the whole sky was as bright as day."

The stricken vessel lost headway and began listing to starboard as Reinhard Hardegen and Rudolf Hoffman surveyed their handiwork. Flames engulfing the tanker's bridge indicated that there would be no distress message. However, they spotted flashlight beams near the stern, where the fire's glow illuminated a naval cannon mounted on the aft deck. Seeking to finish off the ship before its crew could shoot back, Hoffman fired another torpedo from one of the *U-123*'s two stern tubes.

It struck home 45 seconds later: "Heavy detonation, high columns of fire, black mushroom cloud." The tanker finally succumbed, sinking aft until its stern was scraping the seafloor 177 feet below and its bow protruded forlornly from the surface amid a burning oil slick. "These are some pretty buoys we're leaving for the Yankees as replacement for the lightships," Hardegen quipped, amusing himself so much that he recorded his wisecrack in the log.[10]

The flaming wreck they left behind was the British-flagged tanker *Coimbra*, which had been carrying a cargo of lubricating oil to Britain. Ten of her forty-six crewmen survived and were rescued that afternoon by the US Navy destroyers USS *Rowan* (DD-405) and USS *Mayrant* (DD-402). An eleventh survivor had a mental breakdown in the liferaft and died shortly after rescue. Like the *Norness*, the partially exposed wreck of the *Coimbra* later fully sank.

Lights ashore, lights at sea, and the apparent absence of the US Navy left Hardegen dumbfounded at the United States' apparent disregard for the realities of war. A dozen U-boats could easily turn the entire East Coast into a maritime graveyard, he reasoned, later remarking that "it's a pity there weren't a couple of minelaying boats with me on the night I was off New York to plaster the place with mines." To have sent only five U-boats seemed like a squandered opportunity. After returning to port, Hardegen would urge the U-boat fleet's commanding admiral to dispatch every available boat to the American coast. The admiral would need little convincing.

The *U-123* turned south after sinking the *Coimbra*. Remaining surfaced, it hugged New Jersey's shoreline while the lookouts scanned the horizon for merchant ships. Lighthouses winked as automobiles cruising blithely along coastal roadways formed a ribbon of light off the boat's starboard beam. The Germans were 8 miles off Wildwood, New Jersey when Leutnant Horst von Schroeter directed Kapitänleutnant Hardegen's attention to the southwest where searchlight beams were visible at the Delaware Bay entrance. "It was a special experience for us to be that close to the American shore, to be able to see the cars driving on land, to see the lights on the streets, to smell the forests," von Schroeter later recalled. "We were that close."

At dawn, the *U-123* dived to cruise underwater. This more than halved its speed, but also concealed it from visual detection. The batteries were running low by that afternoon, and the U-boat surfaced 15 miles off the Jersey Shore at 16:23. The Germans maintained a southward heading as whirling propellers turned the drive shaft that recharged the batteries. Exactly thirty-eight minutes later, an American patrol aircraft appeared in the overcast sky.

"*ALAAAARRMM!!!*"

The emergency bell rang as men on the bridge tumbled unceremoniously down into the control room and the chief engineer initiated the crash-dive procedure. Hardegen slammed the hatch shut behind him, muffling the angry rasp of aircraft engines swelling louder as the American plane swooped low over the ruffled water. Clattering diesel pistons gave way to humming electric motors, the winter sea closed over the deck, and the Eins Zwei Drei slid beneath the waves.

Seconds later, the boat trembled as four explosions reverberated through the water; the aircraft's depth charges had fallen well starboard of the *U-123*. The American air crew was presumably jittery, inexperienced, or both. Reinhard Hardegen noted in his log: "They were badly aimed. The Yankees have much to learn."[11]

Indeed, they did.