

U-BOATS IN THE BAHAMAS

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If anyone looking from the ridge behind Nassau Harbor or Forts Fincastle, Charlotte, or Montague, had strained their eyes seaward in the last week of February, 1942, they could have seen two German U-Boats, U-128 under Ulrich Heyse, and U-504 under Hans-Georg Freidrich ('Fritz'), steaming past, looking for more prey. Luminaries living in such posh locales included the Governor of the British colony, HRH the Duke of Windsor, his aide-de-camp Lord Brownlow, gold magnate Sir Harry Oakes, his son-in-law Count Alfred de Marigny of Mauritius, real estate developer Sir Harold Christie, Sir Frederick Sigrist (co-founder of Sopwith Aviation),¹ and the Swede Axel Wenner-Gren, founder of Electrolux. The channels north of Nassau, the colony's capital, would see nearly a dozen U-Boats in transit, including U-67, U-159, U-506, U-558, U-753, U-103, U-518 and U-134, en route to sink the only United States Navy Airship to be attacked by enemy forces. For three months they were able to dally like tourists lingering over their favorite sites – by the end they were rushed and harried unable to come up for air or see much of anything.

These U-Boats, (the name derives from "*Unterseeboot*," for 'under sea boat') were the vanguard of 64 axis submarines which would attack or sink over 130 ships representing nearly 600,000 tons of allied shipping (605,000 by the authors' count) in the Bahamas and waters surrounding them, mostly in the winter and spring of 1942. Over 400 survivors from 15 merchant and navy ships would be landed in the islands.² If the adage "*Britannia rules the waves*" still held true, then it could also be said that Germany's flotillas of submarines and their Italian counterparts ruled *beneath* the seas. For half a year they struck unchecked terror in merchant seamen sailing through or around the Bahamas, leaving land folk dismayed and littering shorelines with the detritus and human flotsam of war.

Since geographic parameters vary in axis and allied records, the author includes incidents according to whether they occurred anywhere in the 20's latitude or

70's longitude or inside the 'Bermuda Triangle' (Key West/Bermuda/San Juan) or if they are nearer to the Bahamas than, say, Cuba or Florida. Other criteria are if there is a physical nexus with the Bahamas, in that a faraway attack leads to survivors being landed in the Bahamas or owners of Bahamas-registered ships being affected commercially

While the Bahamas were not the operational center of any singular campaign during the time-period covered, the archipelago was in the center of - and straddled - a number of major choke points for merchant shipping traffic, which became flash points. The Bahamas form a sieve through which merchant shipping as well as U-Boats needed to pass in order to reach the US Gulf, the Caribbean, and the Halifax convoys to Europe from Venezuela's oil-producing Maracaibo basin. If the Bahamas were deep (the very name derives from *baja mas*, or too shallow) then U-Boats would have had to chase ships across ten thousand square miles. Because of the islands the Old Bahama Channel is a mere 20-30 miles across in places, and the Straits of Florida only about 50 miles in width. The islands thus place merchant ships – and their attackers - between a rock and a hard place on two of three sides.

In order to enter the Caribbean, U-Boat crews of 50 to 60 men sacrificed their water tanks to add fuel and range, and gave up bunk space to accommodate the extra provisions required to sail a month back and forth to the new hunting grounds. They were highly motivated and celebrated as elite heroes back home. Germany began picking off defenseless ships near the US and Caribbean coasts shortly after declaring war on the US in two waves of attack named *Paukenschlag* (Drumroll) and *Neuland* (New Land) in January and August 1942. *Neuland* alone, which was directed specifically at the Caribbean, accounted for over one third of all allied tonnage sunk in 1942 - 36%, in fact; an astounding figure.³ In contrast to those being bombed from the air, Bahamians were to prove that a people could be surrounded by an enemy and hardly