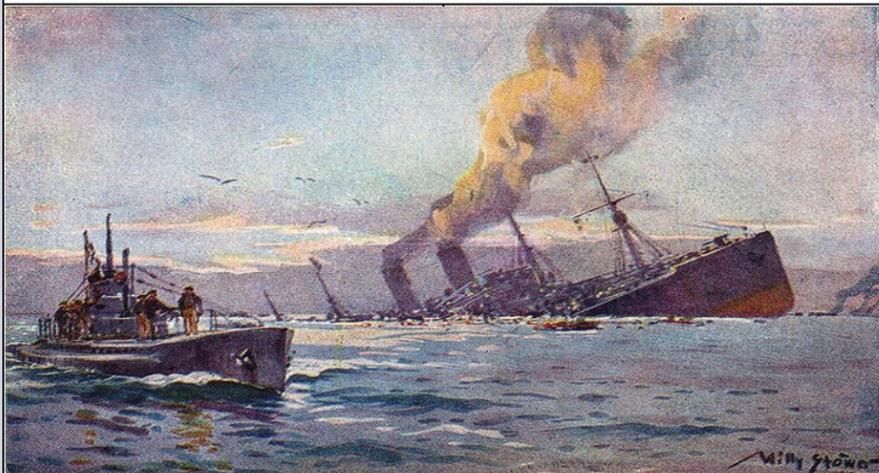




# The ASC History Newsletter

100th Anniversary of World War I:

## Unrestricted Submarine Warfare



Schwieger's U-20 sank the *Lusitania* without warning on May 7, 1915 off the west coast of Ireland. A total of 128 US citizens were among the 1,201 passengers and crew who lost their lives. On 9/18/1915, in response, the German High Command suspended the unrestricted submarine campaign and all U-boats had to adhere to the Prize Regulations of the 1909 Declaration of London.

From October 1915-January 1917, the naval war entered into a period of restricted submarine warfare. Despite successes during this time, there were many in the German High Command that called for a resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. Three primary reasons were given for a resumption: 1) German success on the Eastern Front, 2) Allied rejection of German peace proposals and 3) Economics. The economics portion was based on a German military report which highlighted Britain's food imports. It was theorized that a major push by the submarine fleet could starve the British Isles in 6 months.

The German High Command recognized that a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare would likely bring the United States into the war, but they were also convinced that they could knock Britain out of the war before U.S. military assets could be brought to bear. On January 9, 1917, the government decided that an unrestricted campaign would begin on February 1st. As expected, Germany's decision and the Zimmermann Telegram led to the U.S. declaring war in April 1917.

When the First World War began, Germany had 35 operational submarines. There was such a limited number of submarines because *Großadmiral* Alfred von Tirpitz had required German shipyards to build a balanced surface fleet, centered on dreadnoughts, in an effort to contest Britain for world naval supremacy.

Even as late as June 1914, Tirpitz rejected a recommendation that the Navy should build 222 submarines for a projected blockade of the British Isles. His stance changed as the war progressed leading to the building of 372 additional submarines, almost three times the number built by Britain. An additional 162 were under construction but were never completed by wars end.

German submarines during the war included 140 coastal boats; 107 oceangoing boats; 7 large merchant cruisers of the Deutschland class, built for blockade running and capable of carrying up to 400 tons of cargo; and 118 mine-laying submarines. Throughout the conflict, 178 German submarines would be sunk, roughly 40% of the fleet.

The British blockade, implemented early in the war, proved effective in cutting off Germany's access to most

foreign trade. Despite this, Berlin was well aware that unrestricted submarine warfare would draw disapproval from neutral trading nations, especially the United States. Despite this, on February 4, 1915, German leaders declared the waters around Great Britain, Ireland, the English Channel and the western portion of the North Sea, to be a war zone. In this area, British or neutral merchant ships would be destroyed without necessarily ensuring the safety of its crew or passengers.

During the first unrestricted submarine campaign from March to September 1915, usually no more than 25 operational U-boats were available. Of this number only about one-third were deployed on station at any one time, the remainder being either in transit or refitting. Despite the low numbers, these U-boats sank 480 Allied ships. During this same period British anti-submarine measures sank 15 U-boats. Unfortunately for the Allies, Germany commissioned 25 new boats.

There were immediate diplomatic repercussions for Germany, from neutral nations like the United States. This situation was made worse when Captain Walter

This  
**MONTH** in  
military  
history ...

1760: Cherokee attacked Fort Prince George

1781: The Battle of Cowpens

1787: Shay's Rebellion

1865: Fort Fisher falls to Union Forces

1915: Coast Guard formed

1917: American forces returned to USA after failing to find Pancho Villa

1933: Adolf Hitler is made Chancellor

1942: Wannsee Conference

1944: Operation Panther

1951: Operation Thunderbolt

1968: Operation Coronado X began

1968: Battle of Khe Sanh began

1986: Space Shuttle Challenger exploded after take-off

1991: Persian Gulf War began

2002: Operation Enduring Freedom -Philippines (OEF-P) began

2003: Operation Mongoose in Afghanistan