

This is the first in a series of articles about Fort Miles to be posted on the FMHA website. Future articles, posted quarterly, will include subjects such as the sinking of USS Jacob Jones (DD-130), Fort Miles antisubmarine defenses, the guns of Fort Miles, the establishment of Fort Miles, the sinking of SS John R. Williams, and the U.S. Navy at Fort Miles, among others.

Winter 2021

FORT MILES IN WORLD WAR II: THE GERMAN U-BOAT THREAT

By James D. Shomper

Although Fort Miles never had to fire a shot in combat during World War II, the Battle of the Atlantic was fought not far from its shores. The war was much closer to the U.S. east coast than many realize today.

PRELUDE TO WAR

At the outset of the war, the U.S. military believed the greatest threat to the Delaware Bay and coast was an attack by an enemy surface fleet. The German Navy (*"Kriegsmarine"*) had some of the most modern, powerful battleships in the world at the time. America's industrial might was essential to stopping Nazi Germany in Europe and the Japanese Empire in the Pacific. American industries critical to the war effort such as oil refineries, chemical production and shipbuilding lined the Delaware Bay and River up to Wilmington and Philadelphia.

A German attack on the Delaware Bay led by their battleships would strike a severe blow to U.S. industrial production and the delivery of vital war supplies to the U.S. military and our allies in Europe, most notably England and Russia, who were the last impediment to Nazi domination. Fort Miles was constructed precisely to counter this expected threat from an enemy fleet and to defend the entrance to the Delaware Bay. Fortunately, America's allies early in the war successfully destroyed many of the German Navy's surface warships, including its powerful battleships, or bottled them up in port, thus reducing their ability to launch an attack on the U.S.

THE U-BOAT WAR ARRIVES ON THE U.S. EAST COAST

The enemy surface fleet never materialized, but an even more ominous and devastating enemy attack did arrive on the U.S. east coast in the form of German U-boats.

Throughout the war, German U-boats patrolled the U.S. east coast and sank hundreds of U.S. and allied ships close to its shores, some within sight of land. These attacks claimed the lives of thousands of sailors and merchant seamen and in some cases civilians. Enemy U-boats laid anti-ship mines at the entrance to the Delaware Bay. U-boats were close enough to the U.S. coast to see lights from Lewes and other coastal communities. Merchant ships and U.S. Navy warships were torpedoed and sunk in or close to Delaware coastal waters. Rescued survivors (about 250 from at least 12 different ships) were brought to Lewes. Many were treated at Beebe Hospital. The Hotel Rodney in Lewes housed some of these survivors. *The 250 survivors brought to Lewes are believed to be the most rescued survivors brought to any point on the east coast during the war.*

German saboteurs also presented a risk to Fort Miles and the east coast. This was a risk made more urgent and real when two groups of German saboteurs were captured in Jacksonville, Florida and Amagansett, New York in June 1942. The U.S. Army and Coast Guard, with the assistance of civilian authorities, patrolled the Delaware coast continually throughout 1941 to 1945. Because the sandy beaches were difficult to walk on for long distances, the patrols on the stretch of beach from Cape Henlopen to Fenwick Island were mounted on horseback.

OPERATION DRUMBEAT

The German U-boat attacks on the U.S. east coast in 1942 were part of a coordinated German Navy strategy called *Operation Paukenschlag*, translated as “*Operation Drumbeat*” or “*Drumroll*”. When the U.S. entered the war in December 1941 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the German Navy launched an all-out submarine offensive against American and allied ships up and down the U.S. east coast. Their goals were to disrupt American deliveries of desperately needed war supplies, relieve pressure on the German army and navy fighting the war in Europe, and require the U.S. Navy to divert scarce resources to protect shipping in its home waters.



Type IX German U-boat. Photo US Naval History and Heritage Command

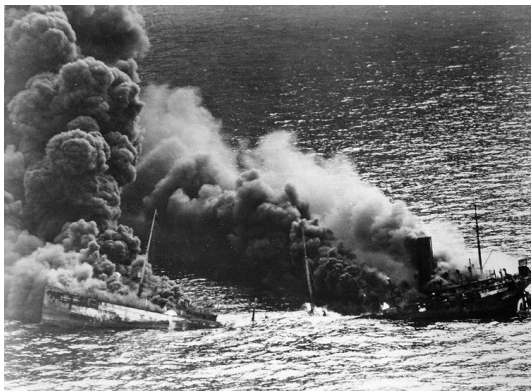
Operation Drumbeat was a tactical success for the German Navy in sinking or damaging hundreds of ships in U.S. coastal waters. Between January and June 1942 alone, over 100 ships were sunk along the U.S. east coast; sixteen to eighteen of these were sunk in the vicinity of Cape Henlopen or approaching the Cape from the sea. During that six-month period, which German U-boat commanders called the “Happy Time,” merchant ships were being sunk faster than they could be built and replaced with new ones.

In all during *Operation Drumbeat*, German U-boats sank nearly 400 ships between Newfoundland and Florida and in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean, causing the loss of over 5,000 merchant mariners, sailors and civilian passengers, numbers so high it is almost impossible to imagine today. Over two million tons of critical war materials were sent to the bottom of the ocean. All this at a cost of only seven U-boats lost through June 1942.

The U-boat campaign in WWII caused significant damage to the U.S. and its allies, but not without cost to the German Navy: Nearly 800 U-boats were lost during the war with 28,000 German submarine sailors killed, for an estimated casualty rate of 75%.

In subsequent years of the war (1943 - 1945), the U.S. slowly turned the tide in the battle against U-boat attacks on the east coast. Although German U-boats continued to attack ships along the east

coast, they were less successful as the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard improved their antisubmarine warfare capabilities (e.g., tactical air-sea coordination, convoys, increased numbers of patrol aircraft and ships, and improved weapons and depth charges). These defensive efforts reduced the risk of U-boat attacks but could not eliminate them. German U-boats operated off the U.S. east coast throughout the war and continued to menace ships until war's end.



U.S. Navy photo of torpedoed tanker Dixie Arrow off Cape Hatteras, March 26, 1942

THOUSANDS OF MERCHANT SAILORS PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE

Most of the ships targeted by U-boats were merchant ships whose crews were civilian volunteers with the Merchant Marine. Merchant marine sailors faced extreme dangers. Thousands died during the war; estimates range from 9,300 to 12,000 merchant marine deaths.

Although merchant marine sailors were paid more than their military counterparts, a source of some consternation, they received no military benefits. And, incredibly, their pay stopped the moment they left the ship, even if it was their ship was torpedoed and sunk. They rarely got paid for the time after a U-boat attack that they spent in lifeboats or treading water while waiting to be rescued.

A merchant mariner in WWII faced a risk of being killed in action that rivaled or even exceeded that of any military branch, including the U.S. Marine Corps.

Their story of sacrifice is one of the most tragic and perhaps least remembered of WWII.

Surviving a torpedo attack was mostly a matter of luck. Even if a sailor was fortunate enough to survive the initial torpedoing and resulting explosions and fire on their ship, they had to run a gauntlet of life-threatening dangers which included burning oil slicks around the ship, exposure to extreme cold in lifeboats (assuming they were lucky enough to get into one) or numbingly cold water where life expectancy was measured in minutes, shark attacks, drowning, explosions from live ordinance and suction from the sinking ship.

FORT MILES PLAYED AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN DEFENDING THE U.S. EAST COAST

Note: Fort Miles' antisubmarine defenses will be the subject of an in-depth article later in this series.

The war was never far from Fort Miles. To counter the U-boat threat to the Delaware Bay and surrounding coast, Fort Miles implemented a multi-pronged antisubmarine strategy that included anti-submarine nets, underwater mines and submarine detection equipment. The U.S. military and civilian authorities increased coastal patrols both at sea and in the air. The Civil Air Patrol added privately owned search and patrol aircraft, some of which were piloted by women.

Fort Miles' antisubmarine defenses together with its long-range artillery proved to be an effective deterrent to enemy surface operations against the Delaware Bay and coastal area and prevented German U-boats from entering the waters of the Bay. By any measure, the soldiers of the U.S. Army and their civilian support workers at Fort Miles successfully executed their wartime mission despite the serious challenges facing them.

THE WAR OFF OUR SHORES

War Begins for America's "Greatest Generation"

To fully appreciate the legacy of the merchant seamen and U.S. Navy sailors who fought the Battle of the Atlantic near our shores, it is important to understand what was happening in the war at the time (e.g., late 1941 and 1942).

The war was not going well for the United States and its allies, and victory was far from certain. Much of Europe and Asia had already been at war for two years, and our allies had suffered mostly defeats. In December 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in a surprise aircraft carrier raid that destroyed much of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet, and the Japanese army and navy had invaded and overrun Hong Kong, the Philippines, and many other island territories in the western Pacific. Japan had earlier conquered much of China and South Asia in a brutal war that had already cost hundreds of thousands of lives. An imminent invasion of Australia and Hawaii by the Japanese was feared, with real justification. The Empire of Japan had experienced nothing but victory so far.

In the west, Germany and its Axis partners similarly appeared invincible. They had invaded and occupied most of Western Europe, including France, Poland, Belgium, and The Netherlands in unprecedented *Blitzkrieg* attacks. Germany was laying the groundwork for an invasion of England. London and other cities in the UK had been bombed in relentless and devastating air raids by the German *Luftwaffe*, costing the lives of thousands of British civilians. And further to the east,

following Germany's invasion of Russia in June 1940, those two nations were engaged in an immense land battle of historic proportions with Germany then appearing to have the upper hand.

To make matters worse, in the inter-war years between WWI and WWII the US military had shrunk to a relatively small size and had neither the numbers of soldiers and ships nor the modern weapons needed to fight a global war.

For the men and women (military and civilian) at Fort Miles, for the merchant mariners and for the U.S. soldiers, sailors and airmen, things looked bleak in 1941 and 1942. That they so willingly volunteered and were prepared to sacrifice in the face of such adversity in those early years, and the rest of the war, is a testament to the "Greatest Generation" and the debt of gratitude subsequent generations will always owe them.

SHIPS SUNK NEAR THE DELAWARE COAST DURING THE WAR

Many ships, both Merchant Marine and US Navy, became victims of U-boat attacks in the waters off Fort Miles and the Delmarva coast, particularly in the first year of the war. The story of some of the most prominent ship sinkings is one of terror, sacrifice, destruction and, most of all, personal bravery and determination.

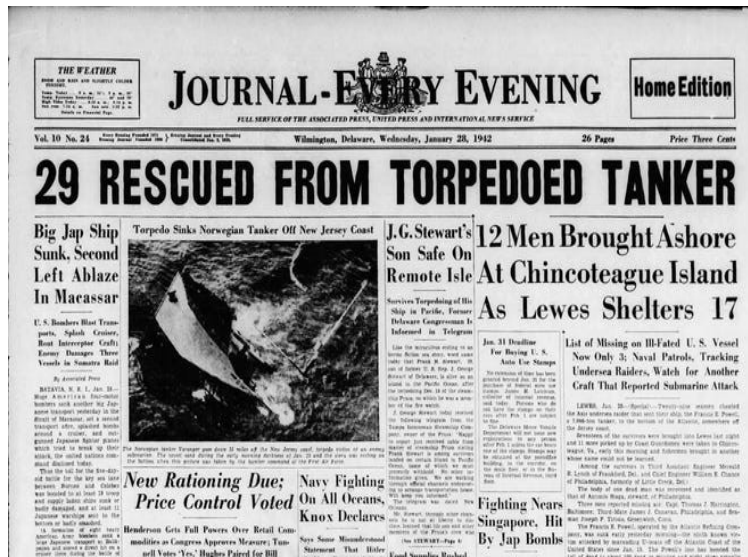
The intensity of the U-boat war off the coast of Delaware and Fort Miles is best understood by learning about the merchant and U.S. Navy ships torpedoed and sunk in and near our waters. Reviewed here are some of the prominent sinkings.

Sadly, they tell their own story.

SS Francis E. Powell torpedoed and sunk on January 27, 1942

In the early morning hours of January 27th on a cold, rainy winter sea, the *SS Francis E. Powell*, an American tanker carrying oil and gas, was heading north along the Delmarva Peninsula toward Cape Henlopen when it was struck on the port side by a single torpedo fired from German submarine U-103 off Ocean City, Maryland. The tanker broke in two and sank several hours later.

The *Powell's* captain, Thomas J. Harrington, and 2 crewmen were killed when their lifeboat was swamped by a swell from the sinking ship and they were thrown into the icy waters. The U-boat surfaced after the attack causing the survivors in the lifeboats to worry that the sub would fire on them with its deck guns, but it left without further incident.



American tanker Francis E. Powell. Photograph News Journal Archives/Newspapers.com.

The twenty-eight survivors in two lifeboats were rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard the next morning after spending sixteen hours on the icy water; seventeen of the survivors were brought to Lewes. Three were treated at Beebe Hospital.

[W.L. Steed torpedoed and sunk on February 2, 1942](#)

The *W.L. Steed*, an oil tanker owned by Standard Oil of New Jersey, was about ninety miles off Cape Henlopen heading for New York with a cargo of 66,000 barrels of fuel oil when it was struck by a torpedo on February 2nd from U-103, one of the most successful German U-boats of the war that had already sunk thirty ships by that time.

Before the attack, Captain Harold McAvenia slowed the *Steed's* speed due to limited visibility from heavy snow. The captain and crew were already on edge because they had spotted a submarine two days before.



Without warning, the torpedo tore into the starboard side of the *Steed* just forward of the bridge. The explosion set fire to the fuel oil, and Captain McAvenia gave the order to lower the

lifeboats. After sending a hurried SOS, all thirty-eight crewmen made it off the *Steed* into four lifeboats. As the lifeboats pulled away from the burning ship, the U-boat surfaced and fired more than a dozen rounds from deck guns into the ship and an additional torpedo until the ship exploded and sank.

The *W.L. Steed* is a stark reminder of the hazards every merchant marine and US Navy sailor faced daily in the war against U-boats.

The 38 crewmen now in a snowstorm on rough seas no doubt huddled together in the four lifeboats to try to keep warm. The attack was so sudden the survivors had no time to change into warmer clothing. The icy saltwater spraying over the lifeboats from the strong northwest winds soaked the men, further adding to their misery. Without a fast rescue, they stood little chance of survival.

The cold winter winds blew the four lifeboats miles further out to sea and away from each other. The first lifeboat was found by a passing ship on February 4th, two days after the attack; hypothermia from the frigid and wet sea air had already claimed the lives of 2 of the 5 crewmembers on board. A second lifeboat with 15 crewmen was found four days after the sinking but 13 of them were already dead from hypothermia. The two crewmen still alive in that lifeboat survived by rigging a heater from scavenged wood from an oar and parts from the boat and oil from a broken lamp; despite this, one of them died soon after his rescue. A third lifeboat was found on February 12th, ten days after the attack, over four hundred miles seaward from the site of the torpedo attack; 3 of 4 crewmen on board were dead and the fourth one died shortly after rescue. The fourth lifeboat is somewhat of a mystery; some reports say it was never found, but other reports say it was found two weeks after the attack drifting empty in the sea near Cape Hatteras.

All 38 crewmembers of the *Steed* made it off the sinking ship into lifeboats, but only 4 survived their fateful ordeal. The attacking submarine, U-103, would meet its own end when it was attacked and sunk by Allied aircraft in April 1945 off the coast of Poland with the loss of all hands.

SS San Gill torpedoed and sunk on February 4, 1942

The freighter *SS San Gill* was attacked and sunk in the early morning on February 4th by a German submarine U-103 off Assateague, Maryland. The torpedo struck the port side and killed two crewmembers. The remaining 39 crew and one passenger escaped in lifeboats.

In a scene familiar to other survivors of torpedoed ships, as they pulled away from the burning wreckage, the U-boat surfaced and fired shots from its deck gun into the ship and an additional torpedo into the port side, striking the death blow to the stricken ship. The 39 survivors of the *San Gill* were rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard and brought to Lewes. Two of them were injured and treated at Beebe Hospital.

SS China Arrow torpedoed and sunk on February 5, 1942

On February 5th, the *SS China Arrow*, an American tanker heading north toward New York City, was torpedoed and sunk by U-103 about 100 miles from the Maryland coast. U-103 then

surfaced and fired 15 to 20 shots from its deck guns into the burning ship until it sank. The 37 crewmembers were able to get into three life rafts but spent nearly 5 days adrift at sea before they were rescued and brought to Lewes Coast Guard Station and Beebe Hospital.

DAILY NEWS, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1942

U-Boat Sinks Tanker In Daylight; 37 Saved

(Special to The News)

Lewes, Del., Feb. 8.—Somewhere in the heaving Atlantic off this port tonight a German U-boat captain was writing in his log details of the 21st Axis "victory" over defenseless merchant shipping in North American waters since Jan. 12.

Here in Lewes, which has known much of war since the Dutch fought the Indians in 1631, the entire crew of the latest victim, the 37 officers and men of the 8,403-ton tanker China Arrow, were recovering at the Coast Guard Station and in Beebe Hospital from injuries and the effects of 56 hours of exposure in three lifeboats.

The China Arrow, sister ship of the Socony-Vacuum Company's India Arrow which was sunk last



The China Arrow when it went aground near the Narrows in 1936.

Wednesday with the loss of 26 lives, was torpedoed in daylight on Thursday.

The China Arrow was the 22d ship attacked in American and Canadian waters since the U-boat drive began, and the 21st listed as sunk. One ship, the Malay, made port after being torpedoed.

The China Arrow's master, 46-year-old Capt. Paul H. Browne of 20 Hart Boulevard, Staten Island, said the attack was made about 80 miles off the Delaware Capes at 11:15 A. M. Feb. 5.

Escape in Pajamas.

The China Arrow was struck in the engine room and in the oil storage tanks. Although she immediately took fire, all of her crew, even members of the night watch who

Last to Leave Their Ship



Kenneth W. Maynard, 29, the radio operator (left), and Capt. Paul H. Browne after they landed at Lewes, Del. They were the last two off the torpedoed China Arrow.

were asleep, escaped into boats without suffering burns. Some of the night watch, however, were forced to flee in their pajamas and suffered the most from exposure.

The radio operator, 29-year-old Kenneth W. Maynard of Bellingham, Wash., who made his first sea trip six months ago after volunteering for radio training while in the CCC, was the last, except for the captain, to leave the sinking, burning ship.

Maynard, who got his training at the Maritime Radio School, said the first torpedo "hit like a burst of flame." He was writing on his typewriter in the radio shack at the time. "Flames," he added, "shot up all over the ship. That first blast took away the antenna."

Permitted Crew's Escape.

He continued: "The captain and I tried out our temporary antenna, but we don't know whether or not it worked and hadn't time to give our position. Capt. Browne and I got off around noon, as the ship was sinking rapidly astern. The sub was in sight, but it let us get clear of the ship before it started shelling."

With the first torpedo blast, Capt. Browne ordered the crew to the lifeboats.

Capt. Browne related that a second torpedo blasted the China Arrow after he and Maynard had rigged a makeshift antenna.

"It was then noon, and I flagged No. 2 lifeboat to pull alongside, and the radio man and I dropped

(Continued on page 15, col. 1)

COMMUNIQUE

UNITED STATES

Washington, D. C., Feb. 8 (AP).—War Department communique No. 97, as of 1 P. M.

Philippine theater: Bombardment of our fortifications at the entrance to Manila Bay by concealed enemy batteries on the Cavite shore was resumed. The fire was concentrated on Forts Mills, Hughes and Frank for two hours. Projectiles were fired at four-minute intervals. No serious damage was done.

On Bataan Peninsula the enemy our right. A sharp counterattack repulsed this attack. Fighting is increasing in intensity on our left.

Aerial bombing by the enemy on our positions in Bataan was heavy throughout the past 24 hours.

There is nothing to report from other areas.

BRITISH

Singapore, Feb. 8 (AP).—The British communique:

Enemy air and artillery activity has been on a considerably increased scale today, chiefly directed against our positions in the northern part of the island.

One of our boat patrols in Johore Strait sank an enemy boat patrol which contained about 30 men.

Enemy working parties in

Newspaper article on the China Arrow sinking. Daily News/Newspapers.com.

Given the U.S. Navy's reluctance to publicize the extent of U-boat attacks off the east coast, news articles like this one were the exception. In many cases, unless the ships were sunk in sight of land or their survivors were brought to the local community, the American public was not aware of many of the U-boat attacks until after the war.

U.S. Navy Destroyer USS Jacob Jones (DD-130) torpedoed and sunk thirty miles off Cape Henlopen on February 28, 1942. One hundred thirty-eight U.S. Navy sailors killed.



Photo USS Jacob Jones (DD-130). US Naval History and Heritage Command

In the early hours of February 28th, U.S. Navy destroyer *USS Jacob Jones* (DD-130) was on antisubmarine duty along the U.S. east coast about thirty miles off Cape Henlopen when it was struck by two torpedoes fired from German submarine U-578. The explosions destroyed the fore and aft sections of the ship, killing every sailor in those sections.

Out of a crew of 149, only about 30 sailors, all located the ship's mid-section, survived the initial torpedo explosions. Unable to launch the larger and more durable lifeboats, the survivors made it onto three life rafts. As their ship was sinking in the frigid Atlantic waters, one life raft was still near the spot of the sinking; exploding depth charges from the sinking ship caused devastating concussions that ultimately killed all but three sailors on the unfortunate life raft. From their life rafts, several survivors saw the enemy U-boat quietly slip past their sinking ship.

The three life rafts with the remaining survivors drifted in the frigid waters. Exposure to the cold February sea quickly took its toll. When they were finally rescued, only 11 sailors were found alive out of the approximately thirty who survived the initial explosions. A search was made for the other survivors for two days, but none were ever found.

Out of a crew of 149 officers and men, only 11 crewmen survived. No officers survived. The dead sailors include three sets of brothers.

The attacking submarine, U-578, met its own fate when it was reported missing on August 11, 1942, off the Bay of Biscay (on the Atlantic coast of France) with its entire crew of 49. Its fate was never determined.

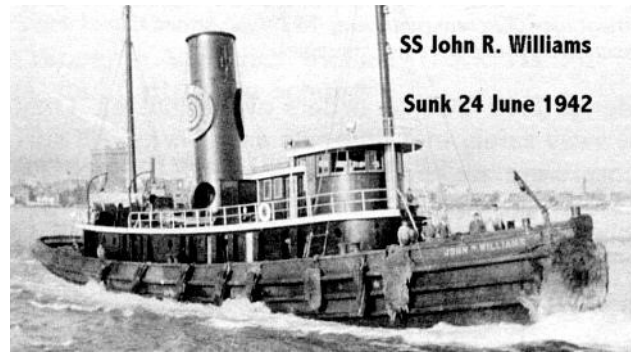
Hvoslef torpedoed and sunk on March 11, 1942

On March 10th, the Norwegian tanker *Hvoslef* was making its way from Cuba to Boston heading north along the U.S. eastern seaboard with a load of sugar. In an ominous sign as the *Hvoslef* passed Cape Hatteras, its crew spotted debris and two sections of a ship in the water, the victim of an earlier U-boat attack. That night just after 10:00 pm local time as the *Hvoslef* was off Fenwick Island, it was struck by two torpedoes from German submarine U-94. The attack was close to the Fenwick Island coast (most reports put it 10 miles off the coast; some put it at only 2 miles).

The torpedoes struck without warning and the *Hvoslef* sank within minutes. Captain Arthur Dahl and 1st Mate Andreas Amjornsen managed to get into a raft but the suction from the sinking ship pulled the raft under the water taking both occupants with it. Somehow Andreas was able to swim back to the surface and cling to debris until the survivors in another lifeboat heard his cries for help and pulled him aboard. They searched in vain for the captain. The surviving 14 crewmembers spent thirteen hours in the damaged life raft before making land just north of Fenwick and were brought to Lewes. Three were treated at Beebe Hospital. Two days later the body of the Captain Dahl was found by a search plane. In addition to the captain, five crewmen were killed.

The attacking U-boat U-94 would meet its own fate in August 1942 in the Caribbean when it was sunk off Haiti by depth charges dropped by a U.S. Navy aircraft and rammed by a Canadian corvette. Nineteen of its crew were killed in the attack.

SS John R. Williams struck an underwater mine in the entrance to the Delaware Bay and exploded on June 24, 1942



On June 10th, a submarine was detected at the entrance to the Delaware Bay, but a search could not locate it. Authorities suspected an enemy sub was laying anti-ship mines, and a subsequent mine sweep found several TMB mines (a type of underwater magnetic mine specially designed by the German Navy for submarines). Subsequent events would show that German U-boat U-373 had laid a total of about 15 TMB mines at the Bay entrance two weeks before the fateful events on June 24th.

On June 24th, as it crossed the mouth of the Delaware Bay outside the mine swept area just off the Delaware Breakwater, tugboat *SS John R. Williams* with a crew of 18 struck one of the

undiscovered 2,000 lb. TMB mines. The explosion obliterated the 396-ton tugboat, instantly killing fourteen of its crew. Four crewmen who had been on the stern of the boat were blown overboard and survived. The four lucky survivors were rescued and brought to Lewes.

U-373 would later be sunk off the Bay of Biscay in June 1944 from depth charges dropped by a British Liberator aircraft, killing 4 of the submarine's crew.

German U-Boat U-858 upon its surrender in May 1945 brought to Fort Miles

In a fitting conclusion to the U-boat war off the Delaware coast, a German U-boat, U-858, surrendered to U.S. forces and was brought to Fort Miles along with its crew on May 14, 1945.



Official US Navy photo of surrender of U-858. Note the absence of the U-boat's 20-mm anti-aircraft deck guns which the crew threw overboard to prevent any risk that the U.S. navy would misinterpret their intention to surrender.

Upon Germany's defeat and death of Adolf Hitler, the German *Kriegsmarine* ordered its deployed submarines to surrender to Allied forces. German U-boat U-858, a Type IXC long-range attack submarine, was one of several German the U-boats patrolling off the U.S. coast at the time. U-858 surrendered at sea to two US Navy destroyer escorts on May 10th. It was brought to Lewes along with crew of 56 and tied up at the Fort Miles Mine Warf, now the fishing pier at Fort Miles

State Park. U-858 did not sink any ships on its two war patrols, but it did come under a depth charge attack in 1944. U-858 was the first German U-boat to surrender to US forces in the continental US after Germany's surrender.



Official US Navy Photo. Crew of U-858 being taken to Fort Miles on a tugboat.

The crew was held at the base brig at Fort Miles for several days before being transferred to Fort DuPont where they were held as prisoners of war. Some of them would not return to Germany until 1948.

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U-858 being taken to anchor at Fort Miles. Official US Navy Photo. Note the American flag and crew on deck.

CONCLUSION

Although the war against Japan in the Pacific continued for another four months after VE Day (“Victory in Europe”), the surrender of U-858 brought an end to the U-boat war off Fort Miles and Delaware. It was a fitting tribute to the courage and tenacity of the soldiers and civilians posted at Fort Miles during the war. They are forever part of its history.
