

Operation Drumbeat



**A Solitaire Wargame of
U-Boats Prowling America's Shores**

**By Peter Schweighofer
Griffon Publishing Studio**

German U-Boats Attack America!



Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Germany swiftly joined its Axis partner and declared war on the United States on Dec. 11, 1941. Admiral Karl Dönitz, commander of Germany's much-feared u-boat fleet, altered his strategy to bring the maritime war to America's east coast. Where once he relied on German submarines preying on supply convoys on the open Atlantic Ocean, now he deployed long-range Type-IX u-boats to prowl the American coastal waters along which freighters and tankers sailed to convoy assembly points in the Canadian maritime.

Initially u-boat commanders took advantage of America's unprepared defenses, hunting easy targets with few patrols and even coastal cities lit up, ignoring wartime blackout precautions; but the Americans quickly mustered their forces for war, increasing their patrols by aircraft and destroyers and ultimately chasing the German u-boats from the East Coast and back into wolf pack formations to prowl the North Atlantic once again.

Operation Drumbeat is a solitaire game in which a player assumes the role of a u-boat commander sent to hunt shipping along America's East Coast in early 1942. The player plots a course on a grid map like the ones used by German submarine captains to travel to the patrol area and hunt targets. A series of charts helps simulate the chances of running into American patrols, encountering freighters and tankers, and attacking them with torpedoes and deck guns. Each turn equals one day; the player tracks the u-boat's progress in a log much like actual German submarine captains used. How many ships can a captain sink before his u-boat runs out of torpedoes...or luck?

48 Crewmen

1 U-boat

Numerous Targets

Peter Schweighofer is a writer, editor, and game developer with more than 20 years' experience in the publishing field, including time working for many companies in the adventure gaming hobby. While best-known for his contributions to various iterations of the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*, he's also the author of period sourcebooks *Pulp Egypt* and *Heroes of Rura-Tonga*, as well as numerous other works for various roleplaying games. His interests also include playing and designing board and war games. He pursues his game-publishing activities under the auspices of Griffon Publishing Studio.

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“The principal task of the submarine, which is strong in attack and weak in defense, is the undetected, and therefore surprising, underwater or surface torpedo attack.”

– The Submarine Commander’s Handbook

Operation Drumbeat is a solitaire game simulating German submarine operations against shipping along the United States’ east coast in the months after the attack on Pearl Harbor and Germany’s subsequent declaration of war against America.

The player plots a course on a grid map like the ones used by u-boat captains, traveling to the patrol area and hunting targets. A series of charts helps simulate the chances of running into American patrols, encountering freighters and tankers, and attacking them with torpedoes and deck guns. Each turn equals one day; the player tracks the u-boat’s progress in a log much like actual German submarine captains used.

Getting Started: After reading through the rules, a few additional steps can help better prepare you for your u-boat patrol. Find three six-sided dice (d6) or some digital die-rolling application. Print the *Operation Drumbeat* charts (two pages) for handy in-play reference, one copy of the war logbook blank cover page, and several copies of the war logbook blank page. Print a copy of the u-boat status chart and either trim the hit and modifier markers from the bottom or use colored stones, coins, or other items to mark changes in the u-boat status. Now you’re ready to begin your first patrol!

Background

“The characteristic of invisibility serves both as a means of attack and a means of protection, and thus forms the basis for the naval use and suitability of the submarine... in short, the carrying out of independent operations in parts of the sea dominated by the enemy, where our own surface ships cannot operate.”

– The Submarine Commander’s Handbook



U-3008, a German Type XXI submarine, at Wilhelmshaven, Germany, in June 1945. The two Type IX submarines with her are U-806 (far left) and U-155.

Official U.S. Navy Photograph, Photo # NH 96270, from the collections of the Naval Historical Center.

Before the United States entered World War II on the side of the Allies, Germany’s u-boat fleet kept its distance from American shipping along the coastline. America’s great agricultural and industrial resources aided Great Britain and the Soviet Union in their stand against German military might. Freighters traveled along America’s east coast within territorial waters, in relative safety, gathering in the Canadian maritime to form convoys to England and Russia that, once they entered international waters in the northern Atlantic, became fair game for the German u-boat wolf packs. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, changed German u-boat strategies. Germany’s alliances with Japan forced the nation to declare war on the United States on Dec. 11, 1941, and accelerated plans for the u-boat war to extend to American shores. Where once submarines preyed on shipping in the open north Atlantic, now they could operate freely within sight of America’s coast.

Admiral Karl Dönitz, commander of the u-boat fleets, boldly ordered several long-range Type IX submarines to patrol areas along the American coast in Operation Drumbeat. The boats left the German submarine base at Lorient throughout late December after hastily refitting for another ocean patrol. They arrived along the United States’ east coast throughout January and spent about a month hunting freighters while the American Naval command responsible for patrolling coastal waters scrambled to deal with the new, immediate threat. Subsequent patrols met greater resistance until, in April the u-boats were recalled to focus more on north Atlantic supply convoys.

Initially Donitz dispatched five type IX u-boats to the American coast: Group Hardegen consisting of U-123 (Kapitanleutnant Reinhard Hardegen), U-66 (Richard Zapp), and U-130 (Ernst Kals); and Group Bleichrodt with U-109 (Heinrich Bleichrodt) and U-125 (Ulrich Folkers). During the initial two weeks of operations, these five u-boats sank 20 Allied freighters and tankers with a total of more than 150,000 tons. In January five more u-boats (U-103, U-106, U-107, U-108, and U-128) left Lorient, France, to hunt Allied shipping off America’s east coast. Ultimately 30 u-boats participated in Operation Drumbeat in patrols ranging from Maine to the Gulf of Mexico. Between January and May 1942 Operation Drumbeat claimed 360 vessels totaling around 2,250,000 tons and the lives of almost 5,000 Allied personnel.

Statistics on losses in the u-boat war vary, but some generalized numbers offer some perspective on the scope of the action. During the entire course of World War II, 325 u-boats involved in attacks on Allied craft sank more than 14 million tons of shipping, accounting for more than 2,600 vessels. Of the 1,171 u-boats operational throughout hostilities, 663 were lost in combat (the remainder of the total 805 lost were scuttled, lost in accidents, or destroyed in bombing raids on u-boat support facilities); 30,000 crewmen, or 75% of all u-boat crews, never returned.

The Game

“I believe everyone would have had enough targets. I had seen about 20 steamers, some of them with lights and additionally a few colliers. All en route close to the shore.”

– Reinhard Hardegen, U-123

Operation Drumbeat is a solo game simulating German u-boat operations in early 1942 against shipping along America’s east coast. Admiral Dönitz hoped to gain an advantage by hunting freighters in American coastal waters where shipping had previously felt protected by aerial and ocean-going patrols close to shore. America was still reeling from the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. In addition to mobilizing its population and industry for war, America focused on defending its west coast and Pacific interests against the Japanese and working more closely with allies fighting the Nazis in Europe and north Africa; and thus east coast defenses against a distant enemy in Europe were not a priority.

Operation Drumbeat constituted a second “Happy Times” for u-boat crews when they could operate against plentiful targets against an enemy not quite ready for the war to come so close to its shores (the first being the period from the summer of 1940 to the end of that year, when u-boats first began operating from captured French ports).

Operation Drumbeat covers a very limited period and theater in World War II: America’s east coast from January to April. After this time United States Naval and Coast Guard forces realized the growing u-boat threat, increased their forces and took more aggressive approaches to neutralizing the u-boat menace. This period provides an ideal setting in which gamers can explore the u-boat war from the German perspective with a bit more game balance and a greater chance of survival than later periods or operations against escorted convoys in the north Atlantic. After April, 1942, however, American patrols became so successful against Germany’s long-range u-boat raiders that Admiral Dönitz ended the operation and focused his remaining u-boat fleets against the immense freighter convoys bringing supplies to Great Britain and the Soviet Union across the north Atlantic.

Operation Drumbeat is not meant to simulate wolfpack operations in the North Atlantic, when u-boats (primarily the smaller Type VII vessels) worked in teams to intercept and sink Allied convoys under destroyer escort. This game focuses on single vessels occasionally aiding each other with reports of convoys or lone freighters, but primarily pursuing their own independent attacks against merchant shipping along America’s coastline.

To play *Operation Drumbeat* one must understand two systems used by actual u-boat commanders to keep track of their submarine’s location and activity: the grid map and the war logbook.



Sailors lead a U.S. Navy blimp onto the apron of an East Coast lighter-than-air station before taking off on a patrol flight over the Atlantic Ocean.

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Technical Reference

Type IXB U-boat

Speed: 21 mph surface, 8.5 mph submerged

Armament: 105mm deck gun, 37mm deck gun (aft), 20mm anti-aircraft gun, 6 torpedo tubes (4 fore, 2 aft), 22 torpedoes

Crew: 48

Range: 10,000 miles (surface)

Type IXC U-boat

Speed: 21 mph surface, 8.5 mph submerged

Armament: 105mm deck gun, 37mm deck gun (aft), anti-aircraft gun, 6 torpedo tubes (4 fore, 2 aft), 22 torpedoes

Crew: 48

Range: 14,450 miles (surface)