

# **HITLER'S ERROR THAT LOST WAR: THE PRICE OF WEAKNESS AT SEA**

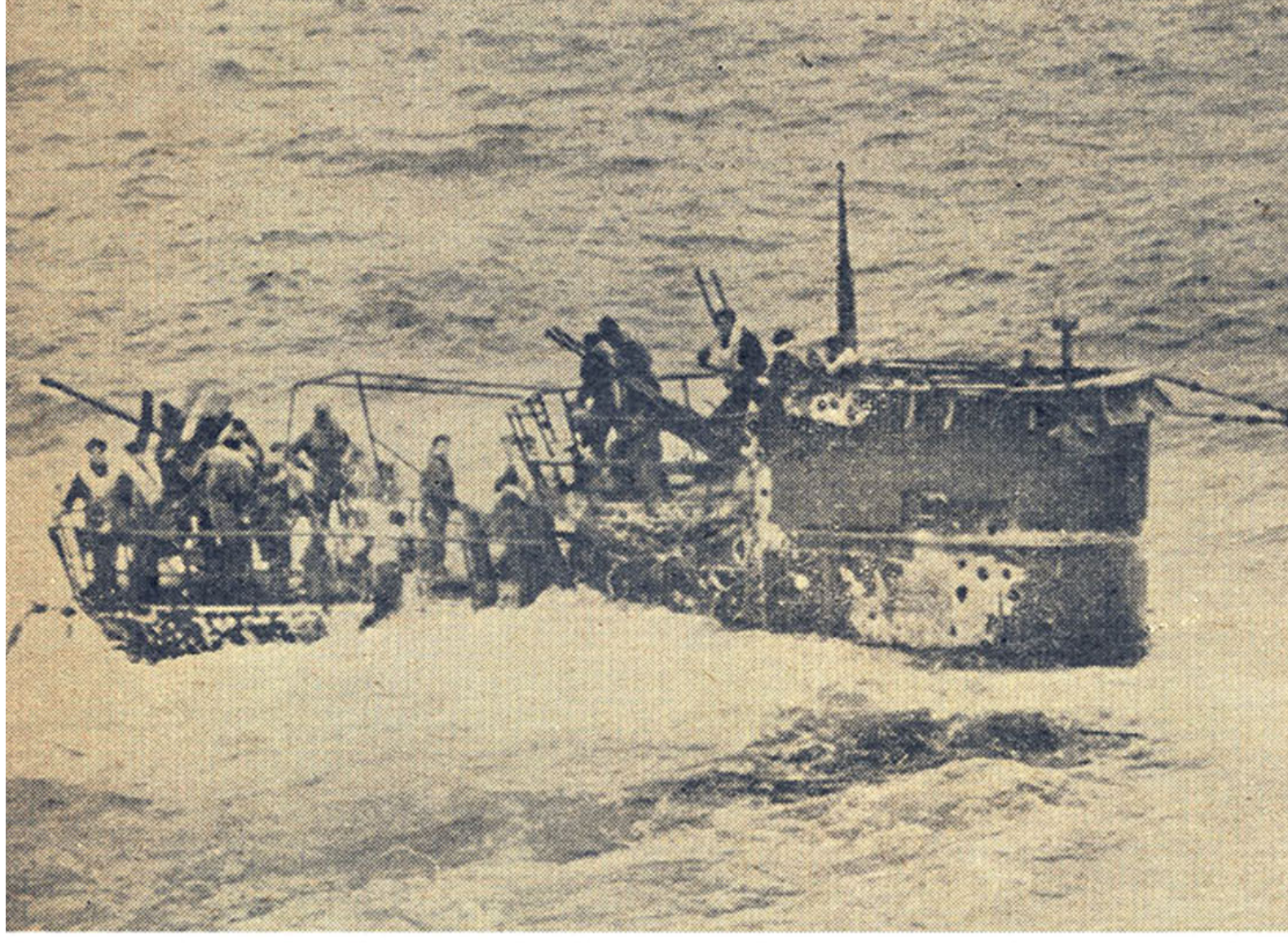
Explanation by Admiral Doenitz  
That Neglect of Fleet Was Crucial

**Role of naval power in Nazis'  
inability to invade British Isles  
or to prevent Allied landings**

Failure to build up sea power was a primary cause of Germany's defeat in two wars. This conclusion is drawn by Germany's Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz, head of the German Navy and successor to Adolf Hitler during the last days before German surrender.

Admiral Doenitz has given his account of German failures in a hitherto unpublished statement to intelligence officers of the British Navy. At the time of making his statement, the German Admiral was a prisoner but was not yet a defendant in the Nazi war-crime trials at Nuremberg. His account was given from his own memory of facts, and not from documents. He was under no duress, and his statement was mainly an analysis, from his point of view as head of the wartime German Navy, of the causes of Germany's defeat.

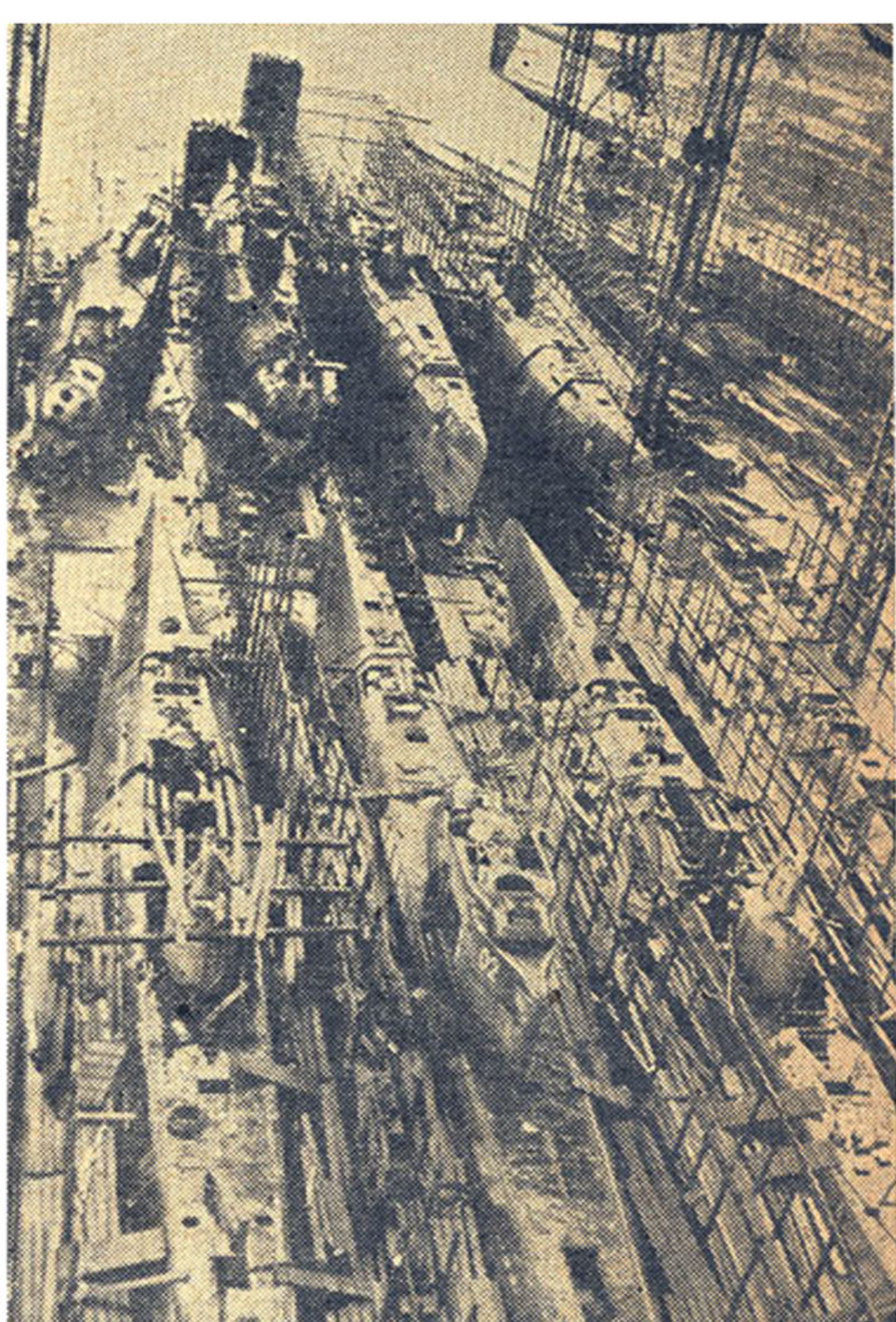
What Admiral Doenitz has to say is of interest to this country because of decisions that impend with regard to the position that this nation accords sea power in its future defense. The story is important too, because it gives the first account of



U-boat successes were short lived . . .

what really happened in the Atlantic during the days before this country entered the war and in the period right after the war started when Nazi submarines were having a field day off the U. S. coast, sinking many thousands of tons of shipping.

Germany's lack of sea power, as Admiral Doenitz showed, resulted in failure at four crucial stages of the war.



NAZI NEST

**Failure to invade England.** The German plans had been based on an assumption that England would not fight. The German Navy had been built to cope only with a relatively small navy, such as that of France or Italy or Russia. But, when the original assumption proved false, and England did enter the war, Germany was unprepared to meet the British Navy on equal terms, and her Air Force was not strong enough to compensate for her Navy's weakness. Thus, in 1940, Germany's lack of sea power kept her from being able to follow up her conquest of France with an invasion of England, when England was her one remaining enemy.

**Failure in the Mediterranean.** Later, even with Italy in the war on Germany's side, the two Axis navies were unable to control the Mediterranean, a second area where a decisive blow against England might have been struck. The Axis forces failed to cut British supply routes to the Middle East, and, by 1942, their own supply lines to Rommel's forces in North Africa were subject to Allied interference.

**Failure to stop Allies in Africa.** New proof that Germany had made a fatal blunder in neglecting sea power came when the Allies invaded North Africa in November, 1942. The German naval forces could not stop the invasion, even though all submarines within 10 days' cruising distance were called to attack the Allied ships.

**Failure to stop Normandy Invasion.** Most conclusive showing of Germany's weakness on the sea came when the Allies stormed the Fortress of Europe in June, 1944. All the strength the German Navy could muster off the coast of France, in the form of submarines, torpedo boats and E-boats, could not change the tide.

The story of Germany's failure at sea, and the way in which those failures contributed to her final collapse, was traced step by step by Admiral Doenitz in his statement given to the British.

**The period before 1939.** The Doenitz account showed that Germany had accepted a definitely inferior status for her Navy when she concluded her naval agreement with England in 1935. By agreeing to a fleet limited to only 35 per cent of the size of the British fleet, and with only half the number of British submarines, Germany placed the big emphasis of her rearmament on land and air forces rather than on sea power.

Not only did Germany limit the size of her fleet, but she failed to push technical developments. For example, she was behind the Allies in developing radar, and her torpedoes were mechanically deficient. She was ahead of the Allies in perfecting magnetic mines, but these proved to be a short-lived advantage. Admiral Doenitz, in his statement, told how he himself had urged development of a submarine that could stay submerged indefinitely, but for several years did not receive backing from the High Command. The priority for naval construction was so low that, when the war began in September, 1939, the naval strength allowed Germany in the treaty of 1935 had not been reached.

**U-boat warfare, 1939-40.** England's unexpected entry into the war immediately thrust upon the German Navy the job of cutting British sea communications, said Admiral Doenitz. Plans for a balanced Navy were abandoned, and a new submarine-building program was adopted. However, the U-boats built under that program were not available until 1942.

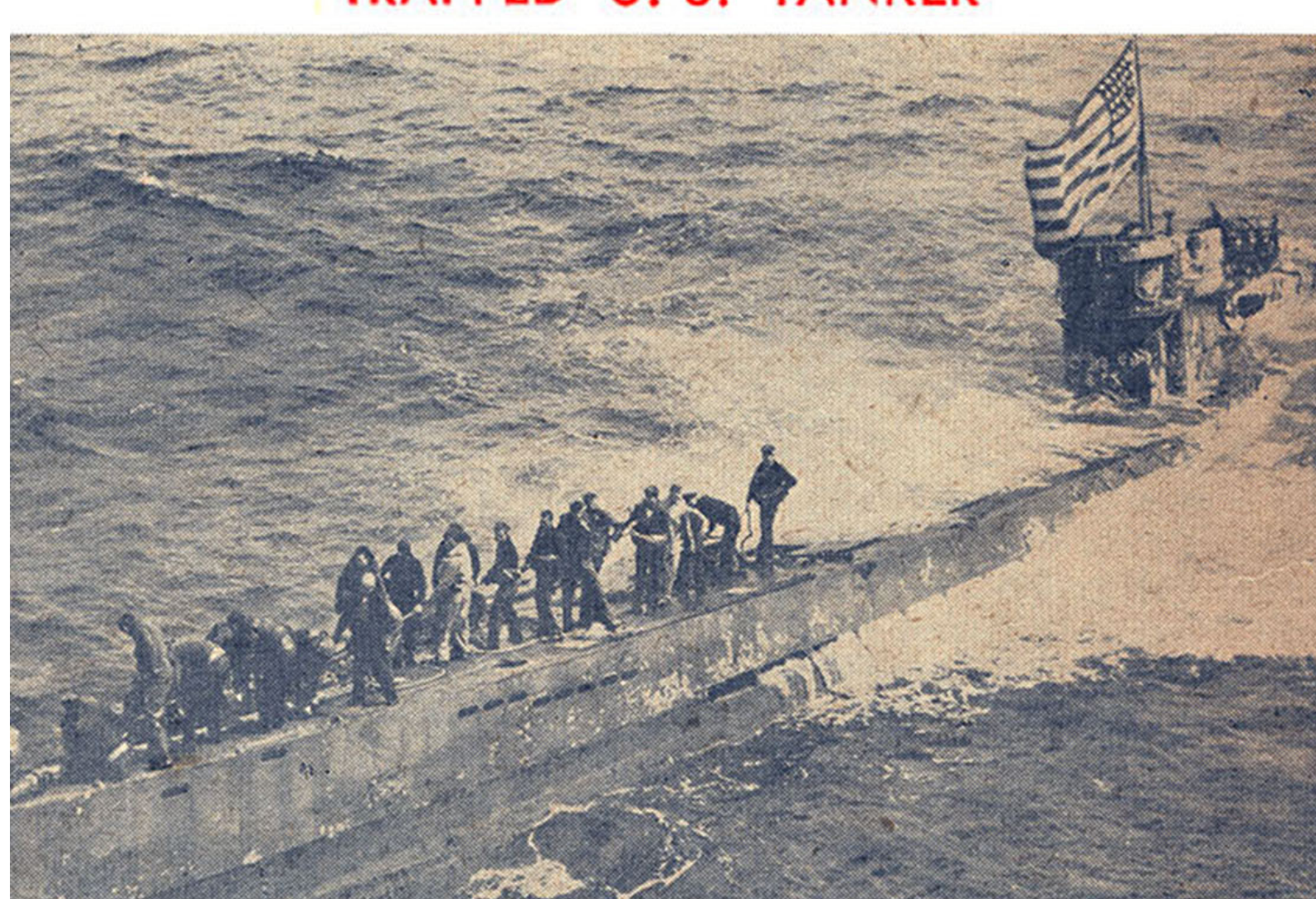
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**TRAPPED U. S. TANKER**



**SUBMARINE SURRENDER**

of taking the long route north of England to reach merchant sea lanes. Attempts were made to go through the English Channel, but losses were too high. Torpedo failures often hampered the U-boats.

When French ports on the Atlantic became available, in the summer of 1940, the submarines trying to cut the British supply lines became more effective. They were able to operate in the North Channel, between Scotland and Ireland, and in the Bristol Channel, between Ireland and England. German U-boat losses were decreased, and the placing of impact fuses on torpedoes increased the number of Allied ships sunk. As a result, Admiral Doenitz said, the war against Allied shipping was relatively successful until October, 1940.

However, with the immediate threat of invasion over, British naval and air units were transferred to antisubmarine defense. This prevented the U-boats from operating close to shore, and made it more difficult to locate convoys. The rate of sinkings of Allied ships fell.

**Use of wolf packs, 1940-41.** Admiral Doenitz told how, with the drop in sinkings, the German naval command adopted the military principle of concentrating strength against strength. U-boats were sent against the convoys in packs, being directed in their operations by instructions radioed from Lorient, on the West Coast of France. They were handicapped by a lack of reconnaissance, however. To correct this, a squadron of four-engined Focke-Wulf planes was obtained and based at Bordeaux. Even then, the first joint operations were unsuccessful, due to the unfamiliarity of the Luftwaffe pilots with naval tactics. Also, during the summer of 1941, the German submarines were without victories in the North Atlantic, due to the lack of an extensive naval air arm and the consequent failure to locate convoys.

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**Effect of U. S. defense.** The American zone of defense proclaimed by President Roosevelt early in 1941, before this country actually was in the war, also handicapped the German Navy. Admiral Doenitz, in his statement, claimed that the U-boats were ordered by the German "politicians" to avoid any incidents involving U.S. ships. (This evidently referred to Hitler's strategy of that period of not drawing the United States into the war.) The submarines were not allowed to go west of Newfoundland. This prevented their getting near Halifax, where convoys assembled, and forced them to wait until after convoys had passed Cape Race and dispersed. It was impossible to attack destroyers at night, because of the difficulty in distinguishing between British and American ships. Finally, the occupation of Iceland by Allied forces made operations in these waters even more difficult.

**War against U. S.** An entirely new phase in Germany's submarine campaign began after Hitler declared war on the United States in December, 1941. All restrictions on submarine operations in American waters were lifted. The first six U-boats achieved considerable success. The American defense was inexperienced. It was possible for the German submarines to operate on the surface and near the East Coast of the United States. Admiral Doenitz explained that the main operating areas were off Cape Hatteras, in the Mona Passage between Haiti and Puerto Rico, and off the Northern Coast of South America. Scores of Allied ships were sunk in these areas. However, by the end of 1942, the U.S. defense had improved enough to make these operations costly.

**The North African landings.** The Germans then were forced to shift their attention to the eastern portion of the Atlantic, where a big Allied ship movement obviously was in progress. But, even though they concentrated U-boats on both sides of Gibraltar, said Admiral Doenitz, they were unable to interfere seriously with the landings in French North Africa, in November, 1942. An effective Allied air defense made U-boat losses high.

**Development of new submarines.** Shortly after the North African landings, it became evident that new methods or new devices would have to be developed



**DOENITZ (dark glasses) IN NUREMBERG DOCK**

... defeat came long before surrender

if Germany's submarine campaign was to be successful. Admiral Doenitz told how the Germans found themselves unable to break Allied convoy ciphers as easily as before. At the same time, Allied radar began to be more effective in locating the German submarines when they surfaced. Two alternatives faced the German Navy: to develop a device by which submarines could absorb the short-wave radar beams, or to abandon surface tactics and develop a U-boat with a high underwater speed and great radius of action while submerged. While the Germans failed in the first, they succeeded in developing a submarine that could go 22,000 miles without

surfacing. If this new submarine could have been placed in operation at the beginning of 1943, it might have affected the course of the war. But, fortunately for the Allies, it was not available for action until March, 1945.

**New successes against convoys.** In the meantime, the German Navy's picture brightened for a time. Admiral Doenitz said that, in March, 1943, the Germans achieved some of their greatest successes against convoys in the North Atlantic. Supply submarines increased the radius of operations of the attacking U-boats. From a defensive standpoint, shelters in the French ports on the Bay of Biscay protected the submarines against loss from air bombing, and permitted them to operate from bases relatively close to the area of battle. Also, acoustic and looping torpedoes increased the probability of hits.

However, successes were short lived, Admiral Doenitz continued. With the coming of spring, there was an enormous increase in Allied air strength in the North Atlantic. Radar-directed attacks on German submarines were more successful. U-boat losses increased from 13 per cent to between 30 and 50 per cent. In May, 1943, alone, 43 submarines were lost.

Again, new tactics were devised. The submarines were ordered to operate on the surface at night, attacking convoys by penetrating the destroyer screen first and then striking at the convoy itself. The first such attack failed after the screen had been pierced, because the Allies used a smoke screen. In the second, the Allied air force was too strong and the submarines were driven off or sunk.

**Co-operation with Japan.** Co-operation between the German and Japanese navies was limited mainly to reporting of events and exchange of experiences, Admiral Doenitz revealed. When the Japanese developed Penang, on the West Coast of Malaya, as a U-boat base, more German submarines were sent out to the Indian Ocean. German armed merchant cruisers, acting as blockade runners, used Japanese bases, as the North Atlantic and Bay of Biscay became more dangerous. These blockade runners carried rubber, metals, and fuel oil to Germany, said the Admiral, until late in 1943, when Allied air power brought operations practically to a halt.

**The last battle.** When Germany needed her Navy most, to repel the Allied invasion of the Continent, it proved ineffective. A landing was anticipated east of Normandy. However, according to Admiral Doenitz, no new mines were laid. Magnetic mines could be swept easily by the Allies, and acoustic mines, which the Germans considered unsweepable, would hamper their own activities. After the Allies succeeded in landing, the German naval command regarded the situation as grave. Submarines, torpedo boats, E-boats, mines, long-range torpedoes, and one-man torpedoes could not stop the Allied armada. Another serious blow occurred when the Allies knocked out the German E-boat base at Le Havre in mid-June by an air raid. The German Army's surrender of Cherbourg was considered by the Navy to be premature and a grave error. The loss of Antwerp, undamaged, was a major setback.

**The collapse.** Throughout the winter of 1944-45, when the chance of victory was recognized by the German High Command as very slim, the German Navy abandoned all repairs that could not be made immediately, and concentrated on new U-boats. Surplus naval personnel was placed in infantry divisions. By the end

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of 1944, nearly all available U-boats had the Schnorkel device, which enabled them to recharge their batteries under water, but the loss of the Biscay ports put them at an enormous disadvantage, and most were operating from Norway. Two months before the collapse, the first completely submarine boat went to sea. It would have been available in the autumn of 1944, except for the Allied air bombing. But it came too late.

Thus, in the opinion of Admiral Doenitz, Germany, for the second time within 25 years, lost her bid for world supremacy because of her weakness at sea. She did not prepare adequately to fight against strong naval powers, and failed to build a surface or submarine fleet, or to have a naval air arm, capable of taking command of the sea away from those powers. Britain and the United States, keeping command of the sea, were able to draw on the whole world for supplies. They could move their men and weapons over the water at will. They could concentrate their forces for a landing at any given point. In the end, the naval and air superiority of the Allies made possible invasion of the continent of Europe, and opened the way to Germany's defeat.