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All Hands on Deck: German U-boats and the Civil-Military Defense of the Gulf, 1941 - 1943

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All Hands on Deck: German U-boats and the Civil-Military Defense of the Gulf, 1941 - 1943

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
History

by

Richard Brunies

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Abbreviations

ASWU - Atlantic Fleet's Anti-Submarine Warfare Unit

DIO - District Intelligence Office

FBI - Federal Bureau of Investigation

LTA - Lighter Than Air

NAFW - National Archives at Fort Worth

NAS - Naval Air Station

ONI - Office of Naval Intelligence

RG - Record Group

STS – Steam Tanker Ship

USAAF - United States Army Air Forces

Abstract

During the Second World War, Germany unleashed a relentless U-boat campaign against shipping in the coastal waters of the United States. While most of this campaign was fought in the Atlantic Ocean, merchantmen in the Gulf of Mexico also received their fair share of U-boat attacks. The presence of the U-boats in the Gulf was brief but endangered vital merchant shipping, and the U.S. armed forces had to meet this threat. In nearly all aspects of defending the Gulf Coast and improving antisubmarine warfare, civilians participated with a will. Civilians were involved in reporting U-boat activity, monitoring coastal waters, reporting any suspicious activity, and performing numerous other tasks that aided the defense of the Gulf Coast. Even as the threat faded, civilian volunteers continued to act as coast watchers as a means to maintain home front morale.

Keywords: World War II, Louisiana, coastal defense, home front, civilian involvement, espionage

Introduction

One night Felicien “Dudu” Vizier went crabbing on the beach of a small island community in south Louisiana. While going about his business on the especially dark night, Vizier suddenly found himself surrounded by a group of armed men. Hardly speaking any English, as Cajun French was his native tongue, Vizier mustered only a few words: “Don’t shoot! It’s me, Dudu!” Much to Vizier’s relief, these men were not pirates, rum runners, or fish thieves looking to rob a Cajun fisherman. They were members of the United States Coast Guard, and they were looking for Germans.¹

Upon the United States’ entry into the Second World War, the German navy expanded its U-boat campaign to the coastal waters of the continental United States. To meet this threat, the United States formed three frontiers, the East Sea Frontier, the Caribbean Sea Frontier, and the Gulf Sea Frontier to create a unified coastal defense. German U-boats spread fear across all the frontiers and inhibited all forms of maritime transport. These attacks led to both an increase in paranoia in the civilian population and an increase in fortifications by the U.S. military along the three frontiers. The Gulf Sea Frontier experienced the majority of its attacks by the U-boats in 1942. During this time stories spread among Gulf Coast locals that Germans were coming ashore at night. Meanwhile, the United States Navy and Coast Guard explored every possible action they could imagine to stymie German agents from coming ashore.

This paper will explore how the civilian population and the United States military responded to the German U-boat attacks in the Gulf of Mexico. This paper will explain how these collaborative efforts of the United States military and the civilian population created a sound defense of the Gulf Coast’s coastal waters. By examining these efforts this paper

¹ This story about Felicien Vizier was told to the author by the author’s grandmother, Vernice Vizier Brunies.

contributes to the larger story of the Battle of the Atlantic that is often overlooked by prior studies. It puts an emphasis on civilian involvement in the defense of the home front. To understand how the U-boats affected the reactions and responses of the people on the Gulf Sea Frontier, it is important first to understand how the U-boats started their campaign and rapidly expanded their hunting grounds from the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. all the way to the Gulf Coast.

Engaging the Enemy

The German U-boat campaign was already in full effect by 1942. The first major U-boat offensive occurred in the North Sea against the British in 1940. In February of 1941, Adolf Hitler told his naval staff to investigate the feasibility of a U-boat attack on U.S. naval bases on the East Coast.² Admiral Karl Dönitz, the U-boat commander, advocated a major strike, believing the United States did not have a reliable system of anti-submarine warfare. The naval staff did not agree, and called off the operation. Once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Dönitz once again advocated for an offensive. On December 12, 1941, Hitler formally approved an attack but only on U.S. merchant shipping.³

Operation *Paukenschlag* (Drumbeat), was the result of Hitler's authorized attack on the Eastern shipping routes. U-boats utilized both direct attacks with torpedos as well as mine laying operations.⁴ The attacks continued through January 1942 with great success. By late February 1942, the U-boats started to hunt beyond the East Sea Frontier into new waters. Soon the

² Michael Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat: The Dramatic True Story of Germany's First U-Boat Attacks Along the American Coast in World War II* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1990), 69-70.

³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of Naval Operations in World War II: The Battle of the Atlantic, September 1939 – May 1943* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1947), 137.

Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico became part of the larger U-boat campaign.⁵ The decision to expand beyond just the eastern seaboard was made by Admiral Dönitz once he realized the organization of convoys made a southward shift and that shipping in the Gulf lacked a convoy system. This shift made the expansion into the Gulf and the Caribbean desirable for the U-boats.⁶

The U-boats arrived in the Caribbean in late February and by the end of April 1942, they had sunk 300 merchant ships.⁷ The initial estimates for U-boats entering the Gulf varied from no U-boats venturing into the Gulf to large numbers dropping commandos on the shore to commit acts of sabotage.⁸ While neither of the extreme estimates came about, the first attacks in the Gulf started in May of 1942 when U-507 patrolled deep into the Gulf of Mexico.⁹

The Gulf Sea Frontier already existed prior to the U-boats' arrival in the Gulf. Each frontier overlapped with the existing Naval Districts. A naval officer using the title of commandant operated each district. These commandants oversaw the operations in their respective districts. The Gulf Sea Frontier consisted of the Seventh and Eighth Naval Districts. The Eighth Naval District covered all waters from Texas to portions of the Florida panhandle. The Seventh Naval District covered the remainder of Florida. Combined, these two districts made up the Gulf Sea Frontier. Most of the activity in the Gulf of Mexico was in the Eighth Naval District, with much of the Seventh Naval Districts activity occurring on the East coast of Florida. Each of these districts would work with the commander of the Gulf Sea Frontier to combat the U-boat threat.

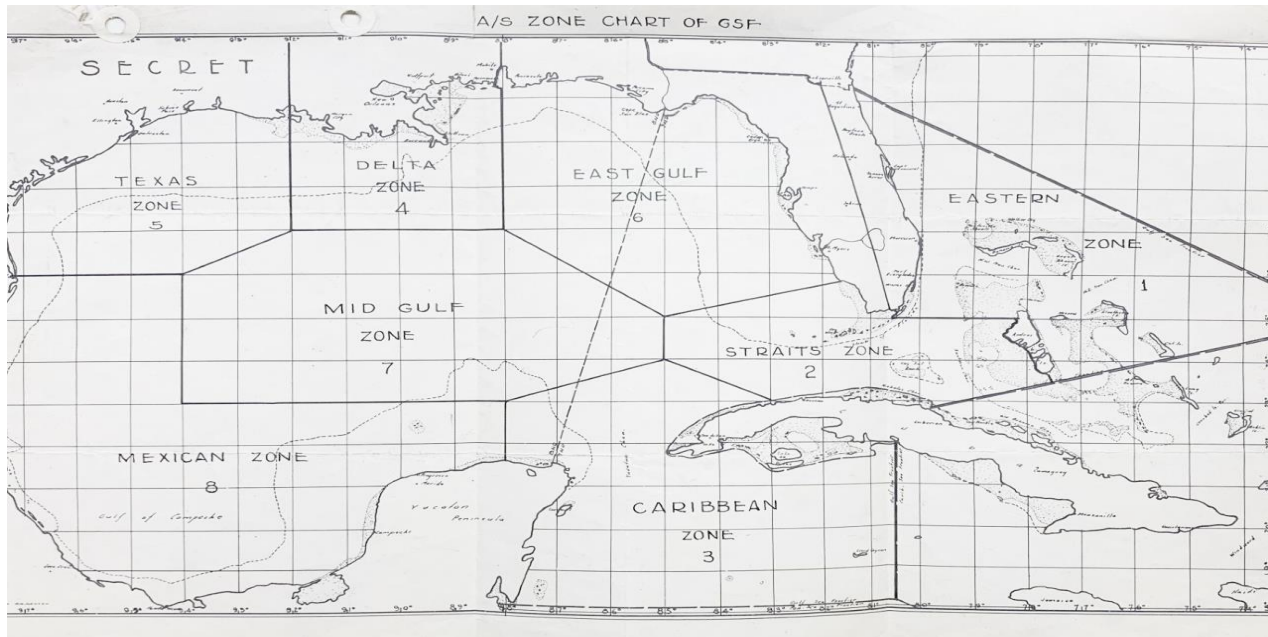
⁵ Ed Offley, *The Burning Shore: How Hitler's U-Boats Brought World War II to America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014), 124-125.

⁶ Morison, *The Battle of the Atlantic*, 137.

⁷ Jürgen Rower, *Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 73-92.

⁸ Morison, *The Battle of the Atlantic*, 136.

⁹ Homer H. Hickam, Jr, *Torpedo Junction* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 218.



Zone Chart of Gulf Sea Frontier, RG 181, Box 142.

The Navy knew it was only a matter of time before the U-boats would enter the Gulf. To prepare for this eventuality, the Atlantic Fleet's Anti-Submarine Warfare Unit (ASWU) issued bulletins to the Naval Districts. The purpose of these bulletins was to prepare the Naval Districts to combat the U-boat threat. Having started to learn the enemy's tactics, the Atlantic Fleet's ASWU provided information of known German methods of submarine warfare. One bulletin, dated March 14, 1942, covered the presence of suspected U-boat resupply ships flying under neutral flags. The Navy asked that merchant vessels investigate suspicious ships who may be signaling U-boats for resupply and refueling.¹⁰ The bulletin went on to describe various methods of deception used by German U-boats to lure in merchant vessels.

One method of deception used by the German U-boats in the Atlantic was when all the survivors of a sunken ship would be killed and the Germans would then board the life rafts with the hopes that after being picked up by U.S. authorities, they could infiltrate American ports

¹⁰ Anti-Submarine Warfare Unit Information Bulletin #2, 14 March 1942, Box 141, RG 181, NAFW.

under the guise of U-boat attack survivors with the intention of committing espionage or sabotage.¹¹ The report does not indicate whether this tactic was effective or to the extent that it was used. This bulletin goes on to detail specific methods for countering and sighting U-boats, and ended with a clear statement. “On a deliberate attack, every effort must be made to destroy the submarine.”¹² With the high rate of attacks, the Navy was adamant about not letting the U-boats escape. A letter from the Commandant of the Eighth Naval District to the Commander of the Gulf Sea Frontier from April of 1942 requested support in leading an aggressive offensive to “locate and destroy all enemy submarines entering [the Eighth Naval District].”¹³ The Navy intended to utilize all available means to combat the U-boat threat.

The military developed methods of anti-submarine warfare while the attacks occurred in the Atlantic, but some measures existed to defend the Gulf Coast prior to the United States entrance into the war. As early as December 1940, the Coast Guard exchanged letters with the Commandant of the Eighth Naval District to prepare to meet the emergency demands for blackouts if needed within the New Orleans District.¹⁴ Starting in January 1942, the Office of the Commandant of the Eighth Naval District began to send letters to state coordinators for civilian defense to seek the cooperation and ensure the enforcement of blackouts across the entire Gulf Coast. These letters were addressed to owners of “lighted bridges and maintainers of private lighted aids to navigation and other lights in or over navigable waters of [the Eighth

¹¹ Previously cited Anti-Submarine Warfare Unit Information Bulletin #2, 14 March 1942, Box 141, RG 181, NAFW.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Report from Commandant, Eighth Naval District, to Operating Forces, Eighth Naval District, 20 April 1942, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

¹⁴ Letter from Commander, New Orleans District, to Commandant, Eighth Naval District, 17 December 1940, Box 145, Naval Shore Installations Records of Commandant RG 181, The National Archives at Fort Worth, Texas.

Naval District].”¹⁵ The purpose of these letters was that in the event that a black out or air raid notice was issued, it would reach the operators of these lights in a timely manner. It is clear that the Navy knew that civilian collaboration was necessary to providing a meaningful defense to the coast.

The primary means of coastal defense patrols prior to May of 1942 were air patrols, surface patrols, and striking groups all of which utilized the anti-submarine warfare tactics issued in the Atlantic Fleet’s bulletins. The air patrols would monitor the transportation lanes within their range. If an air patrol was to catch sight of a U-boat, it was to attack with depth charges and machinegun fire until surface patrols could enter the area. Surface patrols were to attack with depth charges in the event of a confirmed contact as well as with “guns of any caliber” if the U-boat was on the surface. If the surface patrol lost sight of the U-boat, they were to search the area for at least twenty-four hours and assist air patrols in searches if they made first contact. Attacking a visible U-boat was so important that the surface ships received orders not to rescue survivors if they are engaged with the enemy. Only in the event of a plane crash should the surface patrols abandon their attacks. Striking groups would deploy only in the event of positive contact with a U-boat. These striking groups were primarily air strike groups deployed from the closest naval air stations. Additional striking groups, in the form of planes, were also available from the U.S. Army if required.¹⁶

May 1942 was the first month since the beginning of the war in which the German U-boats sank over one hundred ships across all frontiers.¹⁷ During May, the Gulf Sea Frontier had

¹⁵ Letter from F. J. Birkety, Commander, U.S. Coast Guard, via Commandant, Eighth Naval District to State Coordinator for Civilian Defense, 3 March 1942, Box 142, RG 181, NAFW.

¹⁶ Previously cited letter from Commandant, 8ND, to Operating Forces, 8ND, 20 April 1942, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

¹⁷ Rower, *Axis Submarine Successes*, 92-101.

a higher amount of sinkings than all other frontiers with a total of forty one ships lost, resulting in a loss of 219,867 gross tons.¹⁸ Plans were in place to defend the Gulf Coast, both with military action and civilian cooperation. However, these plans did not stop the initial onslaught of attacks when the U-boats entered the Gulf. This amount of devastating loss persisted in the Gulf for most of the summer of 1942. By June and July, the District War Plans Officer was looking to expand the coastal defenses to curtail these losses. The Navy started to acquire portions of coastal lands to act as operating bases for both surface and aircrafts.¹⁹

Bases sprouted up along the entire Gulf Coast. These bases included Coast Guard patrol stations, naval air stations, and USAAF airfields.²⁰ The naval air stations also desired to utilize lighter than air means to search for U-boats. Two such lighter than air, usually abbreviated as LTA, naval air stations existed within the Eighth Naval District. In 1942, the Navy commissioned NAS Hitchcock and NAS Houma.²¹ The desire to use airships to search for U-boats did not become a reality until 1943 when the bases were completed.²² This was just the beginning of the military's planning to defend against a much longer and extensive German campaign against the Gulf Coast. The means to fight against the U-boats were steadily expanding, but another issue was present. Hundreds of sailors were being cast into the sea by U-boat attacks. Their rescue was vital not only for their individual survival, but for the war effort.

The survivors of a U-boat attack were eyewitnesses to the tactics used by these U-boats. If recovered, they could provide vital information that could assist in anti-submarine warfare or

¹⁸ Morison, *The Battle of the Atlantic*, 142.

¹⁹ Report from District War Plans Officer to District Public Works Officer, 8 June 1942, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

²⁰ Chart of military installations New Orleans Sector, Box 4, RG 181, NAFW.

²¹ Letter regarding LTA Program, 21 September 1944, Box 3, RG 181, NAFW.

²² C. J. Christ, "Blimps Stationed in Houma Play a Major Role in World War II," in *WWII in the Gulf of Mexico* (Louisiana: Self-published, 2005), 60.

give insight into the U-boats next destination. The Navy instituted various protocols for the recovery of survivors and their subsequent screenings by members of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). The Navy became highly proficient in the recovery of survivors and the writing of sinking reports based on their testimony.

Learning from Survivors

With the number of patrols in the Gulf, it did not take long to spot survivors of sinkings. Upon the discovery of survivors, numerous orders went out immediately to various offices within the Eighth Naval District. The District Operations Office would notify a string of other offices upon retrieval of the survivors and issued the number and general information about the survivors and the ship they were aboard. Then the District Disbursing Office would arrange the transportation of these survivors to any necessary locations. The District Intelligence Office would interview survivors along with the initial reports given to the Operations Office by survivors. The Intelligence Office would notify any ship owners of the status of their vessels as well as the Medical Office if any were injured from the attack. The District Public Relations Office would get any information from any of the previous offices for public release if the Navy felt such a release was necessary.²³ It was from these interrogations that the Navy found some of its most valuable information regarding the U-boats. The District Intelligence Officer would compile extensive reports for each sinking with the information coming directly from witness accounts.

When the STS *R. W. Gallagher* was sunk on July 13, 1942, the Navy had a full report on the sinking by July 15. The reports provide as much detail as possible to help understand the nature of the attack. The *R. W. Gallagher* was sailing from Baytown, Texas en route to Port

²³ Report from the Commandant, Eighth Naval District, to numerous officers of the Eighth Naval District, 15 May 1942, Box 145, RG 181, NAFW.

Everglades, Florida. It was hit by two torpedoes at around four in the morning about eighty miles from the Southwest Pass of the Mississippi River. The report goes on to list the bearing of the ship, its speed, the time it took to sink, where the torpedo hit, and numerous other statistics about the status of the ship prior to and during the sinking. Later in the report, a summary of witness testimonies is written. Special attention is made to the presence of U.S. and British codes on board the ship. The Navy prioritized finding out if Allied codes fell into enemy hands. The survivors of the *R. W. Gallagher* noted that there were both U.S. and British codes aboard and those codes were presumed to have gone down with the ship. The reports also asked for detailed information about the U-boat, if any was available. The details of the U-boat that sunk the *R. W. Gallagher* were vague. Witnesses described a bluish-gray color and the figures “U-28” written on the side of the conning tower.²⁴

The witness who claimed to see the “U-28” figure was a storekeeper aboard the *R. W. Gallagher* named A. P. Hubbard. On the day of the sinking, an agent with the Office of Naval Intelligence named W. J. Kirsch Jr interviewed Hubbard. Hubbard told Kirsch that he and two others boarded a lifeboat on the port side of the ship where they witnessed the U-boat on the surface of the water, the only light coming from the burning oil of the *R. W. Gallagher*. No other witnesses were able to get as clear a description of the German submarine as described by Hubbard.²⁵ These witness accounts were very helpful but could also be misleading at times. That is due to the fact that these witnesses, especially in the case of Hubbard, were already traumatized by the dramatic sinking of their ship only to be interviewed by the Navy soon after. This could lead to confusion and even false information. In the case of Hubbard’s account, he

²⁴ Report from District Intelligence Officer, Eighth Naval District, to Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, 15 July 1942, Box 27, RG 181, Naval Intelligence, NAFW.

²⁵ Ibid.

stated that he saw U-28, but U-28 was not the U-boat that sunk the *R. W. Gallagher*. U-28 was stationed around Great Britain until it sank in a diving accident in March of 1944.²⁶ In reality, it was U-67 that sunk the *R. W. Gallagher*.²⁷ It is even possible that there was not even a number on U-67 since at the beginning of the war the U-boats removed their fleet numbers from their conning towers to prevent the use of their designation against them.²⁸ It is unclear as to how Hubbard came up with the number he claimed to see.

Even if the accounts of eyewitnesses were not completely accurate, it did not invalidate their importance to the Navy. In some cases, the survivors of the sinkings were the only people to make direct contact with the U-boat crews. Just as the Navy needed intelligence regarding the locations of the U-boats, the Germans need information regarding the ships they were sinking. When the SS *Tachira* was sunk on July 12 by U-129 en route to New Orleans from Colombia, the survivors soon found themselves not only stranded at sea but being questioned by the very people who sank their ship. The summary of the report from the survivors of the *Tachira* states that the U-boat surfaced about five minutes after the sinking. Seven men came on deck. One was the U-boat captain, Captain Hans-Ludwig Witt, whose name was unknown to the survivors. The others were an officer who questioned the survivors while a crewman aimed a machine gun at the them. The remaining men were lookouts who stayed on the conning tower of U-129. The interrogation consisted of the where the ship was going, where it came from, what was the cargo, and if the ship had passed through the Panama Canal. Once the questions were answered the

²⁶ Paul Kemp, *U-Boats Destroyed: German Submarine Losses in the World Wars* (London: Arms & Armour, 1997), 178.

²⁷ Robert M. Browning Jr., *U.S. Merchant War Vessel Casualties of World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 184.

²⁸ Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat*, 24.

crew gave a few bandages to the survivors before sailing off.²⁹ These interrogations were not uncommon. In some cases, the Germans would take a survivor on board the U-boat for the interrogation.³⁰

On a few occasions, the U-boats would sink ships close to the coastline. Military personnel and civilian fisherman often picked up the survivors of these attacks, such as the case of the *Benjamin Brewster* which was sunk just off the Louisiana coast. Fisherman recovered the survivors and brought them to Grand Isle, Louisiana before being transferring them over to the Coast Guard.³¹ Numerous civilians lived directly on the coastline. In Louisiana, most were fisherman who were not drafted into service as their fishing was a vital part of food production on the Homefront. However, fishing became difficult once the U-boats entered the Gulf of Mexico. To better protect the civilian fisherman and other merchant vessels, the Navy and the Coast Guard instituted various regulations on fishing.

The primary fear was that larger fishing vessels would fall prey to U-boat attacks. In many cases the fishing boats were small enough to not be targets. Fishing boats large enough were told specific times, locations, and depths that they could safely fish.³² Anyone that wanted to operate a fishing boat did have to obtain a Coast Guard identification card and have it on them at all times. To get these identification cards, the fisherman had to fill out a form describing their boat and its mechanical characteristics. These fishermen were given a guide to radio operations and made to sign an oath acknowledging that they would follow the new radio regulations.³³

²⁹ Report from District Intelligence Officer, Eighth Naval District, to Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, 27 July 1942, Box 27, RG 181, NAFW.

³⁰ Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat*, 57.

³¹ Browning, *U.S. Merchant War Vessel Casualties*, 181.

³² Memorandum from J. J. Gidiere, Captain of the Port, New Orleans, to Commander McKean, 25 June 1943, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

³³ Radio Instructions for Offshore Commercial Fishermen, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

During the day, fishing, both commercial and recreational, received very few restrictions, but by nightfall the restrictions increased tenfold. Ships had their running lights reduced to an absolute minimum and could not get within one hundred yards of bridges or the waterfront.³⁴ Local newspapers would publish these anti-sabotage regulations to better disperse this information.³⁵

Coastal Watchers

Civilian involvement was not limited to observant fisherman. In July 1942, Five Civil Air Patrol bases were commissioned across the coasts of Louisiana and Texas.³⁶ These patrol bases allowed civilians to fly planes for patrol missions along the coast. Training to be a pilot was not possible for everyone in these coastal communities. Therefore, some were also sought to operate as observers from the coast. The Coast Guard acted as the primary military means of coastal observation, but they found a need to expand this program into the civilian population. This led to the Coastal Observer System. This system sought out reliable informants in both large and small communities who could not only report quickly but knew what to look for in their observations. These informants were carefully selected and trained to write up reports. This system also involved having the local Coast Guard officers assess their knowledge of the surrounding coastal regions. The goal of this system was to fill in the gaps in the knowledge of the Gulf Coast.³⁷

The Coastal Observer System was the result of a long existing desire for active coastal information provided to each Naval District's intelligence officer on a regular basis and from reliable sources. This desire for active observations was made in the *Coastal Information*

³⁴ Regulations for Fishing Craft Operating in the Eighth Naval District, 21 July 1943, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

³⁵ "Rules to Permit Fishing at Night," *The Times Picayune*, 4 August 1943.

³⁶ Memorandum on Civil Air Patrol, 9 July 1942, Box 1, RG 181, NAFW.

³⁷ Report from the Officer in Charge, Section B-8, to District Intelligence Officer, Eighth Naval District, 8 September 1942, Box 5, RG 181, NAFW.

Manual in July of 1941. Following the United States' entry into the war, all district commandants needed to find reliable civilian sources for coastal information. The system was steadily developed and first implemented in the Fifth Naval District in May of 1942. It would not be until June 1942 that the Eighth Naval District would begin to officially recruit observers. By the end of the summer of 1942, the Coastal Observer System was fully operational in the Eighth Naval District and was being extended to all other Naval District at the recommendation of Admiral Ernest J. King.³⁸

Training was crucial for the members of the Coastal Observation System. Numerous individuals took part in the program. While the program was a voluntary one, the Navy did ask specific individuals to join. The reasoning often came from an individual's knowledge of a specific area on the coast. Even if the person was knowledgeable about the area, the Navy had to teach them what was considered valuable information and what was considered useless information. The report outlining the details of the Coastal Observer System states that they had to carefully instruct volunteers to avoid the submission of "exaggerated, misleading or inaccurate reports." The Navy found promising results from the Observer System and believed that it was adequately spotting suspicious activity and deterring possible information or supply gathering operations with U-boats on the coast.³⁹

The manual for the Coastal Observers was a four-page document issued to all coastal observers. The manual lists the type of activity that these observers were looking for along the coast. These activities varied widely. The most typical activity was communications, such as blinking lights at night and visual signals during the day. Strange radio interference or even

³⁸ Previously cited report from the Officer in Charge, Section B-8, to District Intelligence Officer, Eighth Naval District, 8 September 1942, Box 5, RG 181, NAFW.

³⁹ Ibid.

unusual radio equipment was considered reportable activity. With all civilian craft having to register their radio equipment with the Coast Guard, any additional equipment was met with suspicion. Specific criteria on what to look for between small crafts and larger crafts also existed. In the case of small craft, observers would watch for excessive amounts of radio equipment, loitering for no observable reason, and or carrying excessive amounts of crew. In the case of larger vessels, the observers had to look for ships operating in unusual transport lanes, any signs of sabotage, or collisions involving other vessels.⁴⁰

If in any case an observer witnessed any activity listed in the manual, they were told to report to the Eighth Naval District. If the information was not an emergency, they were permitted to mail the reports to the Office of the District Intelligence Officer, located in New Orleans. If it was emergency information, they were to contact the Navy by the quickest possible means, telephone being the listed example in the manual. The manual goes on to emphasize that if the matter is truly urgent, the observer is to report the situation to the nearest Coast Guard Station who would then take appropriate action and contact the appropriate agencies.⁴¹

Keeping a watch on coastal activity was important to the Navy, but there were also concerns over the local population. Due to this concern, the observers were also tasked with monitoring the activity of the people in their own towns. Suspicious individuals were those who wandered to isolated areas frequently, professed an unusual interest in military activities, and individuals who expressed sympathy with the enemy nations. The Navy took rumors very seriously. A person was considered suspicious if they spread any rumors discrediting the allies or emphasized the strength of the enemy powers. The manual gives many specific examples of

⁴⁰ Instructions to Coastal Observers, 1942, Box 5, RG 181, NAFW.

⁴¹ Ibid.

suspicious activity, but also leaves room for interpretation by individual observers.⁴² The desire to turn the gaze of the Coastal Observer System back onto land brought some contention with other intelligence gathering organizations.

An officer from Intelligence Zone 4 of the Eighth Naval District noted in a report to the District Intelligence Officer that the FBI was criticizing the system. The complaints from the FBI regarded an overlap in intelligence gathering operations. The FBI stated the naval activity was within the purview of the Coastal Observers, while the information about possible suspicious activity on the shore was under the jurisdiction of the FBI. During the weekly conference between the FBI and the Office of Naval Intelligence, a Special Agent expressed concern over the manual issued to Coastal Observers and demanded that the FBI should receive all information not regarding naval activity.⁴³ Issues between these intelligence gathering agencies did arise on occasion, but for the most part the FBI and the Office of Naval Intelligence had a cooperative relationship.⁴⁴

The Navy was aware that the goal of the U-boats was to disrupt U.S. shipping. They had succeeded at that goal for a time and the fear of the U-boats returning to the Gulf prevented a return to independent merchant vessel sailing.⁴⁵ With the creation of an effective convoy system in the Gulf and along the Eastern Seaboard, the amount of attacks lessened. By the end of August 1942, no more U-boats would attack merchant vessels in the Gulf until a small number of attacks occurred in 1943. After 1943, no more attacks occurred in the Gulf as the Allies started

⁴² Previously cited Instructions to Coastal Observers, 1942, Box 5, RG 181, NAFW.

⁴³ Report from Officer-in-Charge, Zone 4, 8ND, to District Intelligence Officer, 8ND, 3 September 1942, Box 5, RG 181, NAFW.

⁴⁴ Report from Officer in Charge, Zone 2, to District Intelligence Officer, 8ND, 30 November 1942, Box 5, RG 181, NAFW.

⁴⁵ Intelligence Summary - Enemy Activity in the Eighth Naval District, December 1942, Box 27, RG 181, NAFW.

to gain the upper hand and pushed the U-boats back into the Atlantic. However, operations in the Gulf did not cease. ONI still monitored U-boat activity but the actions of enemy actors on the coast became a priority. ONI was worried more about saboteurs coming ashore from the U-boats than they were about the U-boats still sinking ships.

With the fear of attacks coming from within the country, ONI established ten intelligence zones to cover the entire Gulf Coast as well as some regions in the interior of the U.S.⁴⁶ These intelligence zones existed prior to the cessation of the U-boat attacks in the Gulf but continued to operate long afterwards. Monthly reports would cover the sea-based information. These reports would note confirmed U-boat sightings as well as ship attacks.⁴⁷ These monthly reports were often summaries of smaller reports detailing approximate positions of U-boats that were sighted. The commander of the Gulf Sea Frontier would make the approximation of the U-boat's location and then send it off to the District Intelligence Officer.⁴⁸ Even though the attacks stopped, there still was a suspicion that some U-boats continued to operate in the Gulf.

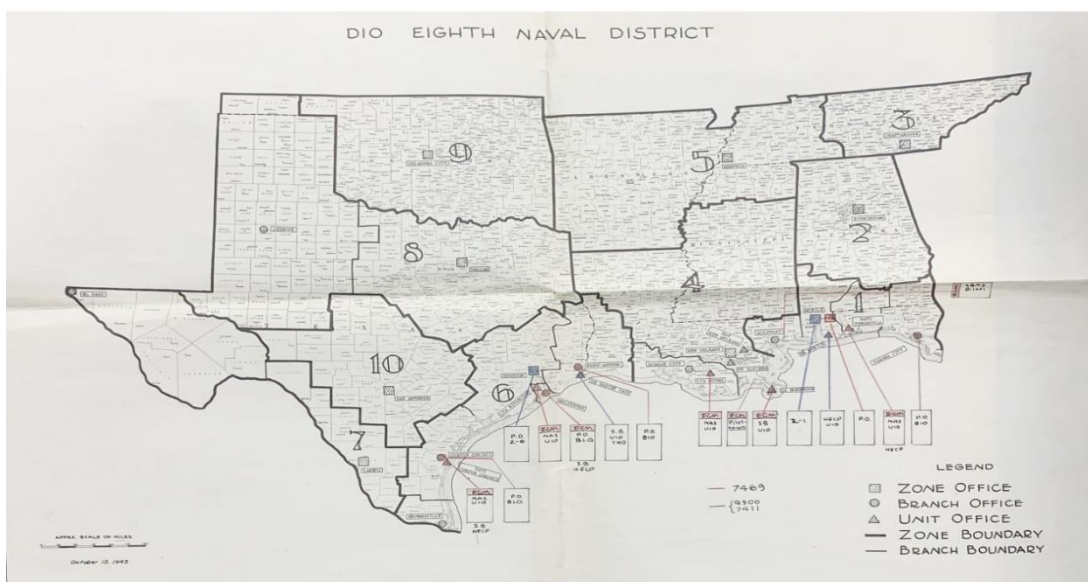
ONI also handled intercepted enemy information. Most of these interceptions detailed various tactics utilized by the U-boats to either increase their attacks or gather reconnaissance on the Gulf Coast. An example of these interceptions come from a letter with an unnamed yet considered highly confidential source stated that U-boats were using lights to attract patrol and merchant ships into attacks. That same letter also stated that German resupply ships were flying British flags and disguising themselves as merchant ships. They would secretly have smaller motorboats on board that they would launch along with torpedoes and depth charges to attack

⁴⁶ Report from District Intelligence Officer to all Officers in Charge, 8ND, 34 August 1942, Box 5, RG 181, NAFW.

⁴⁷ List of Incident for the month of July 1942, 8ND, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

⁴⁸ Daily Intelligence Submarine Report for District Intelligence Officer, 8ND, 10 September 1942, Box 27, RG 181, NAFW.

other Allied ships that approached.⁴⁹ Another report from the commandant of the Seventh Naval District to the Florida Sub-Sector detailed claims of German air reconnaissance. The report claims that the U-boats were carrying collapsible planes meant for the reconnaissance of coastal activities. The report calls for preparations to be made to counter and report any enemy air activity.⁵⁰ It was intercepted messages and reports like these that had a major influence on how the military prepared for any possible attacks by the Germans, even if some of the claims were false.



Map of Eighth Naval District Intelligence Zones, RG 181, Box 27.

Internal Threats

The threat of enemy sabotage or raids from inside the country or from the sea created a level of paranoia among both local populations and military personnel. A message from July 1943 to the District Intelligence Officer warned of a potential landing in the area around Mobile, Alabama. The report does not state where the information came from other than a call being

⁴⁹ Translation from confidential source, Box 24, RG 181, NAFW.

⁵⁰ Report from the Commandant, Seventh Naval District, to the Commanding General, Florida Sub-Sector, 25 May 1942, Box 27, RG 181, NAFW.

made to the Coast Guard Tower in the area about an imminent landing. The call demanded that all available men get to the beach. This message went to various other members of the local Coast Guard command. No landing ever occurred, and the message later states that the information came from a rumor that a U-boat was present offshore. ONI could not find the source of this rumor as the area had been under normal curfew and due to the weather, no fishing boats had been out for several days.⁵¹

This message was not unique. Rumors spread rapidly of possible landings and enemy saboteurs coming ashore. Another report from July of 1943 stated that prisoners of war suggested that U-boats were performing mining operations as well as planting saboteurs posing as observers.⁵² ONI was so concerned about potential enemies within the country that they would follow nearly any lead that came to it. In many cases, civilians would offer up information that they believed to be interesting to ONI, even if these civilians were not members of the Coastal Observation System. One such person was Sara Mayfield from Alabama who had experience as a freelance reporter and was working for the District Postal Censor in New Orleans. She claimed that she had information relevant to the refueling of U-boats and other undisclosed enemy actions. Upon further investigation, all of Mayfield's evidence consisted of excerpts and copies of newspaper articles relating to members of the Huey Long political machine. ONI found no evidence of any wrongdoing in her reports. ONI then suggested her termination from the District Postal Censor as she may continue to provide irrelevant

⁵¹ Message from District Intelligence Officer, Panama City, to District Intelligence Officer, 8ND, 29 July 1943, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW

⁵² Message from Command of East Sea Frontier to all other Sea Frontier Commands, 28 July 1943, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

information.⁵³ Rumors were everywhere but ONI could not take the risk of not investigating these claims.

Many of these unsubstantiated claims came through the District Postal Censor and the District Cable Censor. They hired numerous civilians to check the correspondence to ensure that no military secrets were being exchanged between soldiers and their families back home.⁵⁴ The censors also listened to phone calls. Usually when monitoring phone calls, the individuals on the call were already persons of interest. Transcripts of these calls were distributed by ONI and in cases where enough information was found, they would intervene and take people in for questioning.⁵⁵ In some cases arrests were even made on suspicious individuals. A man named Karl Albert Kretschmer was arrested with charges of assisting the U-boats. This particular claim was that Karl Kretschmer was the brother of Otto Kretschmer, a well-known U-Boat commander sometimes referred to as the “tonnage king” for the amount of tonnage he sunk.⁵⁶ The information gained regarding the arrest of Kretschmer was minimal. The report also claimed that a U-boat landing occurred in Mexico. The report of Kretschmer’s arrest states that “little information concerning submarine refueling or the landing of enemy agents in Mexico has yet been definitely established, there are many reports about such activities, and it is entirely possible that they actually exist.”⁵⁷ Once again, the reports were numerous, but the investigators lacked evidence to pursue any further action.

On occasion, some reports would have valuable information. Another employee of the Postal Censorship in New Orleans named Mrs. Edward G. Williams provided some information

⁵³ Report from W. S. Hogg, District Intelligence Officer, to I. C. Levy, District Postal Censor, 10 January 1944, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

⁵⁴ List of Cable Censor Personnel, 27 November 1943, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

⁵⁵ Telephone Censorship Log, February - April 1944, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

⁵⁶ Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat*, 30.

⁵⁷ Sub Activities Report, Box 15, RG 181, NAFW.

to ONI. Mrs. Williams had owned a duplex in New Orleans with her husband but transferred the title of the duplex to a Mrs. Edward Bagley. While still the owner of the duplex, Mrs. Williams leased the property to a Berthold Rasmus, who was the Chancellor of the German Consulate Office in New Orleans at the time. Rasmus had since returned to Germany with the German Consul in New Orleans Edgar von Spiegel. Mrs. Williams stated that while living in the duplex Rasmus and his family installed a high-powered radio receiver. Mrs. Williams claimed that the machine sounded like a printing press when in operation. The report notes that at the time, Mrs. Williams did not pay any particular note to this machine.⁵⁸

After selling the property to Mrs. Bagley, Ramus and his family returned to Germany, the duplex was occupied by a German man named Alexander Albrecht and his family. The report notes that, upon the declaration of war with Germany, Albrecht and his family were picked up by the FBI and were being held at an undisclosed location somewhere in the United States. Since the Albrecht's' internment, a friend of the family named William Graves, Jr. moved into the duplex. The report notes that Mrs. Williams believes that the radio equipment was still present upon Graves' moving into the duplex and that Graves had expressed sympathy for the Albrecht family. The report closes noting that Mrs. Williams was fearful that the radio equipment also included transmission facilities.⁵⁹

The Albrechts were more direct examples of suspicious individuals. In most cases, the information regarding potential enemy agents was not as concrete. ONI assembled large list of suspicious individuals. These lists included the names, addresses, occupations, and reasons for suspicion. Even though Nazi sympathies and known ties to Germany were the main reasons for

⁵⁸ Report from Lieutenant J. P. Swift, U.S.N.R. Liaison Officer, Branch B, to The Officers in Charge, Section B-5 and Section B-7, 2 September 1942, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

inclusion on the list, numerous individuals included on the list were of Japanese descent. Any pro-Communist behavior, even just subscribing to Communist newspapers was enough to get put on these lists.⁶⁰ It is possible that false allegations could result in a person's name appearing on these lists, but very few people arrest occurred based on these suspicions. There were also no reports of vigilantism amongst the local populace against any suspected individuals.

The source of this information did largely come from the Coastal Observer System, but that program was not ONI's sole means of intelligence among the civilian population. There were numerous part time and full-time agents and special employees working directly for the naval district.⁶¹ These individuals were not concerned with the operations of sea crafts like the coastal observers', their job was to find possible enemy agents in the United States. Some of these special employees were civilian informants. An example of these special employees was a prostitute from Morgan City, Louisiana, who was hired by naval intelligence to gather information from local fisherman and ship operators.⁶²

In some cases, even non-Americans were reported as working for ONI. In October of 1942, the Director of Naval Intelligence issued a letter to all district intelligence officers regarding the reporting of foreign aliens being employed as agents. The purpose of this memo was for each district intelligence officer to detail the extent of a foreign agent's work as many of these foreign agents had presented claims to the Department of Justice to seek exemption form

⁶⁰ Previously cited report from W. S. Hogg, DIO, to I. C. Levy, DPC 10 January 1944, Box 2, RG 181, NAFW.

⁶¹ List of Special Employees to the Commandant, Eighth Naval District, from the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, 1 December 43, Box 15, RG 181, NAFW.

⁶² Letter from Theodore Andress, Officer in Charge, Morgan City Branch to District Intelligence Officer, 8ND, 02 November 1943, Box 15, RG 181, NAFW.

the Foreign Agents Registration Act and the Director of Naval Intelligence needed to prove the validity of these claims for exemption.⁶³

While finding enemy agents within the United States could prove itself difficult. ONI was aware of numerous enemy agents, primarily in Mexico and the Caribbean. ONI had issued a list of names, addresses, and classifications for each individual on the list. This list also included members of the German Consul in Mexico.⁶⁴ A number of the records from the District Intelligence Officer started to focus heavily on Mexico. On many occasions there was worry that U-boats were making landings in Mexico. There was also concern that German agents would attempt to get across the U.S.-Mexico border.

ONI issued regular reports on various groups and organizations it was monitoring. Activity in Mexico had its own dedicated section. In the subsection dedicated to German agents, most of the information covered known operatives and any updates on their whereabouts and activity. Mexican officials are noted as restricting these individual's movement and even detaining them, yet the report lists that some unreliable Mexican officials impeded the effectiveness of these actions. Additional concerns existed around the movement of refugees into Mexico as their political leanings were unknown and this was considered to be a potential threat.⁶⁵

This shift in attention from the coastal waters to the U.S.-Mexico border was an early sign that the U-boat threat was all but gone. The Battle of the Atlantic had returned to the Atlantic; but a threat did still exist in the Caribbean. By August of 1943, even the monthly

⁶³ Memo from The Director of Naval Intelligence to all District Intelligence Officers, 23 October 1942, Box 15, RG 181, NAFW.

⁶⁴ Names and addresses of known undercover agents in Mexico, Box 15, RG 181, NAFW.

⁶⁵ "Counter Intelligence Section B-7 Monthly Summary Eighth Naval District," 30 September 1942, Box 15, RG 181, NAFW.

counterintelligence summaries had shifted their focus. Earlier in the war, German activities were listed first. In the August 1943 report, the list placed communist activity first. German activity had fallen to fourth on the list, behind Falangist activity.⁶⁶ This was an indication that while a threat still existed, the priority had shifted. By 1944, the Gulf of Mexico no longer experienced any attacks from U-boats.

Conclusion

The day after the official German surrender on May 7, 1945. Admiral Harold M. Burrough of the Royal Navy, acting on behalf of the Supreme Commander, ordered all U-boats to surface and report their position to the nearest allied radio station. The war was over, with the Battle of the Atlantic lasting nearly its entire duration.⁶⁷ While the Gulf of Mexico was only a player in the Battle of the Atlantic for a short time, the number of merchant vessels lost proved to be a great success for the U-boats.

The Navy, Coast Guard, and the Army Air Forces did the active fighting against the U-boat threat. They patrolled the land, air, and sea and used every means possible to hunt U-boats and prevent any possible enemy landings on the Gulf Coast. Yet they could not do it alone. They could do the fighting, but they required assistance from the civilian population to monitor the entire Gulf of Mexico.

It was the sailors who survived the sinkings that provided eyewitness accounts of U-boat tactics and the effectiveness of anti-submarine warfare. Coastal observers that gave the intelligence that supplied the monthly intelligence reports. Employees of the various censorship

⁶⁶ "Counter Intelligence Section B-7 Monthly Summary Eighth Naval District," 31 August 1943, Box 15, RG 181, NAFW.

⁶⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume 10 The Atlantic Battle Won May 1943 – May 1945* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1956) 359.

offices monitored suspicious communications. These are just a handful of examples of the contributions made by civilians to the defense of the Gulf Coast. Be it at sea, in the air, or on the shore, the civilian population was an invaluable asset to coastal defense. Although, they hindered sometimes with false reports or inaccurate observations. The urge to panic did exist, but not so much as to invalidate their contributions.

Even though this cooperative defense was not fully realized until after the U-boat threat had largely ended. At the time, no one knew if the U-boats would return. The war had yet to be decided. Therefore, every precaution was taken in ensuring the defense of the Gulf Coast. Based on the increased defensive measures outlined in this paper, had the U-boat attacks continued beyond the summer of 1942, the combined efforts of the military and civilian population would have provided a much more capable defense against the U-boats. Without the cooperative and collaborative efforts of the military and the civilian population, the Gulf of Mexico and its coast would have been at a greater risk from the German U-boats.

Notes on Sources

The current literature related to the Battle of the Atlantic covers a wide range of material. The Battle of the Atlantic lasted for the duration of the war and spanned well beyond the Atlantic Ocean itself. The exact details of the larger Battle of the Atlantic are well covered in various books, book chapters, and articles. The most extensive sources for the entire war is Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, which is a fifteen volume series. The most relevant of Morison's work comes from *The Battle of the Atlantic, September 1939 – May 1943* and *The Atlantic Battle Won, May 1943 – May 1945*, which are respectively volumes one and ten. Some texts cover the U-boat's first attacks on the Eastern seaboard like in the case of Michael Gannon's *Operation Drumbeat*. Some give detailed accounts of the sinkings and the reactions by the U.S. Navy for the duration of the war like in Jonathan Dimpleby's *The Battle of the Atlantic*. Other works just focus on the East Sea Frontier and the later success against the U-boats in 1943 such as Ed Offley's *Turning the Tide*. Others include the Battle of the Atlantic as a chapter in works that cover the entire Second World War, such as Williamson Murray and Allan Millett's *A War to be Won*. The records from the German side are used in some of these texts. There is not much else to be said about where the attacks occurred and who the U-boats were sinking.

Many volumes exist that are more reference works than historical analysis. *U-boats Destroyed* by Paul Kemp lists every German U-boat destroyed in both World Wars with various statistics including time, place, and brief notes about the circumstances of the sinkings. *U.S. Merchant Vessel War Casualties of World War II* by Robert M. Browning Jr. provides statistics similar to Kemp but in regards to U.S. merchant vessels during the Second World War. *Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945* by Jürgen Rohwer provides a highly detailed list of German

attacks on allied ships. In many cases, these reference books are cited in the other mentioned works. Another compilation of U-boat related information is from a website titled <https://uboat.net/> which acts as a similar reference resource, but it is information compiled by online contributors who are mostly transferring information from the printed reference books. However, the community that maintains the website keeps track of recent scholarship which allows access to more up to date information in cases where new information is found.

Operation Drumbeat is the most often covered topic of these books when focus is paid on the U-boats. Operation Drumbeat is often the center of attention as it was the beginning of the U-boats' assault on the U.S. and many of these texts cover how the U.S. was unprepared for these attacks. From Operation Drumbeat in early 1942 until early 1943, this was the time where most of the sinkings occurred and where many of these texts like to detail the locations of these sinkings and tell about the U-boats and their commanders. A lot of focus in these books is based on the point of view of the U-boats and their encounters with both the merchant marines and the military. The focus of these texts then shifts to later in 1943 where the tides turned and the U.S., along with other allied forces, started to gain the upper hand and eventually win the Battle of the Atlantic. In the case of these texts, most of the focus is on the U-boats and when a region is specified it is almost always in the Atlantic Ocean.

When covering the Gulf of Mexico, also known as the Gulf Sea Frontier, very little exist on the topic. In most cases, the Gulf Sea Frontier gets a brief mention or a small chapter in a larger work covering U-boat activity, such as in *U-boat Assault on America* by Ken Brown. The same can be found in *Torpedo Junction* by Homer Hickam Jr. These texts offer well-researched insights on the U-boat campaign, but their attention tends to fall on the Atlantic proper. Even when covering the Gulf, the focus is almost entirely on the sinkings and little focus is paid on the

coastline itself and how these sinkings were affecting the homeland. There is a degree of coverage over the changes in U.S. anti-submarine warfare in response to the German U-boat attacks, but most of this focus happens to be in the Atlantic and the Caribbean.

There are a few works that look directly into the impact of the U-boats on the Gulf Coast. Melanie Wiggins' *Torpedoes in the Gulf* is the most prolific text on this subject matter. Her book covers primarily the impact of U-boat activity on Galveston, Texas as well as providing a detailed account of the attacks in the Gulf from the perspective of the U-boats. Wiggins' writing tells practically all someone would need to know about where the U-boats were and when they were attacked for the duration of 1942 until the U.S. started to succeed and push back against the U-boats in 1943. Wiggins does provide many accounts from newspapers but most of those accounts are centered around Galveston.

The other works that are similar to Wiggins are much more local in scope. Jerry P. Sanson's *Louisiana During World War II* covers politics and society for the duration of the war. However, Sanson primarily covers the political changes in Louisiana during the war as well as the increase in industry due to wartime demand, but not so much the impact of the U-boats. A self-published book titled *WWII in the Gulf of Mexico* by C. J. Christ covers a wide variety of topics, albeit each topic is covered briefly. The book is not so much a book, but an omnibus of short articles based on information that Christ gathered over the years. These articles offer a more local look at the war in southern Louisiana. Christ does not provide any citations for his information, but it is inferred in many of his articles that his information came from speaking with people who were alive at the time. His input offers a collection of local voices that no longer exist. Much of Christ's information also comes from some of the other texts covering the larger Battle of the Atlantic that were previously discussed in this paper. An article written by

Jason P. Theriot titled “Cajun Country during World War II” published in *Louisiana History: The Journal of Louisiana Historical Association*, covers similar topics that both Christ and Sanson write about, in which Theriot cites both of them extensively.

When considering the combined works of Wiggins, Sanson, Christ, and Theriot, a fair amount of information is covered, but many holes still exist. Wiggins presents a well-researched examination of the U-boats. She gives a little attention to the U-Boats impact on the U.S. Gulf Coast, but mostly in relation to Galveston. Sanson covers politics extensively but has very little crossover with the topics covered by Wiggins. Christ and Theriot both provide the most local look at the war from the perspectives of people who witnessed the events first hand. There is a lot of overlap between these sources, but there are also a lot of holes. The larger reactions from both the military and the civilian population across the Gulf Coast is partially touched on in these texts but not extensively. The reactions by the civilian population are covered by Christ and Theriot while the military is covered by Wiggins, and yet she focuses more on what was happening off the coast.

Overall, the literature on the Battle of the Atlantic is quite extensive. Considering the fighting in the Atlantic lasted the duration of the war this is no surprise. Yet the Gulf Sea Frontier tends to be overlooked due to the brevity of the action that occurred in its waters. Of the previously mentioned texts, those that do address the Gulf and the events that transpired within it tend to focus solely on the sinkings. Primarily when and where these sinkings occurred. This leaves a gap in knowledge of the activities on the Gulf Coast itself and the heavy involvement of the civilian population in the defense of the Gulf Coast.

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