The Submarine War—I

Our Ship Construction Increases But U-Boats Are Delaying Victory

By HANSON W. BALDWIN

With the recent appointment of Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz, U-boat expert, as Commander in Chief of the German Navy, the German submarine campaign may be said to be entering a new and unlimited phase, roughly comparable with the intensive unrestricted warfare of 1917-18.

Indeed, Admiral Doenitz's alleged exhortations to his sailors to "Kill! Kill! Kill!" are reminiscent of the ruthless "spurlos versenkt" policy of the first World War. There is no doubt that the elevation of Admiral Doenitz to supreme command, and the constantly increasing number of German U-boats mean that we must face this year a supreme Nazi effort to cut our vital supply lines to our global fronts.

This effort has already had such success that there is not much doubt the war has been lengthened and the strength of our blows against the enemy reduced. But ship sinkings, though extremely serious, must be viewed in the proper perspective. Because of the lack of official statements, they have been both minimized and exaggerated in public reports.

In many months of last year—though by no means all—the rate of destruction exceeded the rate of construction, and it seems certain that the average for the year exceeded the average maintained by the Germans during the twenty-one-month period of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917-18 when the enemy sank roughly about 600,000 deadweight tons of merchant shipping a month.

Our Building Is Increasing

Despite the large 1942 losses—and the necessity of repairing damaged ships—it is probable that the total amount of shipping available to the United Nations was not reduced and probably was somewhat increased last year and this rate of increase can be expected to mount this year when more than twice as much merchant tonnage is scheduled to be completed. The German submarine campaign, in other words, has not crippled our offensive capacity.

The Casablanca conference, which the President broadly hinted set our strategy for 1943 and decided what part of the continent of Europe we were to attack, demonstrated that. Obviously no such conference could have been held in any realistic atmosphere if our shipping shortage was so severe as to prevent the mounting of a new offensive.

Nevertheless, ship sinkings are severe enough to delay the day of victory, and if they increase, as the Germans obviously hope, the submarine campaign might indefinitely prolong the war.

There is no simple, or single, answer to this problem though each one of many correspondents feels he has found the solution. One of them writes that captains and officers in the merchant service have complained about the slowness of our merchant vessels.

"The most frequent—and to me one of the most important—criticisms of my friends," he writes, "is the slowness of the ships being built. * * * They dwell on the fact that the ships today are nothing more than floating targets for any submarine. A ship doing between 15 and 22 nautical miles an hour is in their opinion an almost impossible victim for a U-boat. And such ships can be built easily in their opinion. Instead, our Victory [Liberty] ships do little better than ten miles and English ships are built to do only eight and nine."

Speed is, of course, a great asset in any ship and is a defensive asset of considerable importance in any war against the submarine. That is why fast liners or fast merchant ships are usually sent across the ocean unescorted, and usually arrive at their destinations safely.

Few Fast Ships Available

Yet there were at the time the war started only a handful of fast merchant vessels in the world's carrying trade; the great majority of cargo carriers were ocean plodders, vessels of eight to eleven knots, or even less. Economy of construction and operation usually dictated this peacetime design, but as the war went on and the demand for merchant ships increased all those available had to be worked for long periods without overhaul. Their hulls were fouled with growth, their mechanical efficiency suffered and consequently the average speed of merchant vessels tended in the first years of war to decline.

Nor was it possible to replace overnight these slow cargo carriers with fast ones, or to base a new and vast merchant ship construction program on a new fast design. The Maritime Commission was definitely reluctant to undertake the construction of a great number of the Liberty ship design, with about ten knots speed Its designers and engineers felt this design represented a definite retrogression in relation to the C-2 or C-3 cargo types in marine engineering.

Yet the Liberty ship was a simplified design of standardized construction, and a thorough survey of every possible marine engineering construction facility in the nation showed that no such vast program of ship construction as that envisaged—8,000,000 deadweight tons in 1942, perhaps 19,000,000 in 1943—could possibly be achieved if fast ships were to be built.