

# U-550 Sunk Off Nantucket

by Tim Coleman

The carnage of World War II left many watery scars off the northeast coast, some very real, some imagined. It seems any talk about shipwrecks always turns up rumors and bits and pieces of information about submarines sunk at various times and places, many supposedly inside the continental shelf of this country.

All the talk about U-boats made its way into the commercial fishing community, as witnessed by the notations in many of the hang logs, the records that dragger captains make when they foul their nets on an unknown obstruction on the ocean floor. Some of these hangs have been incorrectly identified as submarines thought to have been sunk anywhere from Maine to Montauk Point.

While many are false, creating many victims of dockside rumor, some are indeed true, backed up by the hard, cold facts of countries at war. One of these is the German navy's U-550, sunk on April 16, 1944 in roughly 320 feet of water about 65 miles south-southeast of the loran tower on the south end of Nantucket Island. The sub met her fate after she torpedoed a tanker that was part of a convoy formed the day before outside New York Harbor, bound for the United Kingdom.

The events of her sinking come to us from a variety of sources, including a retired Navy executive officer who now lives near Newport, RI, the archives of the fighting ships of the U.S. Navy, and perhaps the most comprehensive, a six-page account of events that day from Eastern Sea Frontier (ESF), a part of the U.S. Navy charged with defense of the northeast coast during the war.

On the afternoon of April 15, 1944, Convoy CU-21, 28 merchant ships and six escorts, left from New York, making a course change to due east instead of exiting over the Hudson Canyon due to inbound traffic. That night, because of low visibility, the tanker *Sag Har-*

*bor* and cargo vessel *Aztec* collided, forcing them to return to port with the escort *Patterson* detached back with them. At dawn the next day, the procession of ships that was making 14 knots in two columns was at a point roughly 14 miles northeast of the tip of Veatches Canyon, a large indentation in the continental shelf marked on most offshore charts.

At about 8 a.m., a torpedo hit the tanker *Pan Pennsylvania* in the boiler room, starting fires in that area. The ship listed slightly, but was not in immediate danger of sinking. However, gasoline quickly covered the surface around the ship, causing great concern about fire, so the order was given to abandon ship. Right after the attack, the escorts *Joyce* and *Gandy* began sonar sweeps looking for the attacker. *Patterson* arrived on scene after escorting the two ships in the collision back to New York.

While conducting the sweep, U-550 fired two torpedoes at *Gandy*, but both missed. *Joyce*, meanwhile, picked up a double echo on her sonar near the stricken tanker, indicating the U-boat was hiding under her victim, trying to evade her fate. *Patterson* also proceeded to rescue survivors from the tanker while the other two escorts continued to hunt down the sub. About 10 a.m., *Joyce* got a solid contact and made an immediate attack, dropping 13 depth charges, all with shallow settings. *Gandy* was



*The U-550 was forced to surface after a successful depth charge attack by a destroyer escort roughly two hours after the sub torpedoed a tanker in a convoy from New York to the United Kingdom. Photo courtesy U.S. Navy*

ready to make her own run on the target when the sub surfaced 2,000 feet astern in the wake of the depth charge run. The U-boat, commissioned on July 28, 1943, 252 feet long with a 22-foot beam, was mortally wounded.

With their target now flushed to the surface, all escorts, including the *Patterson*, brought their deck guns to bear, all firing on the conning tower of the U-boat, as most of the rest of the sub was below the surface. In the short fight that followed with the U-boat crew manning their conning tower gun and the escorts firing back, a round hit the tanker, setting her on fire and dooming her,

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