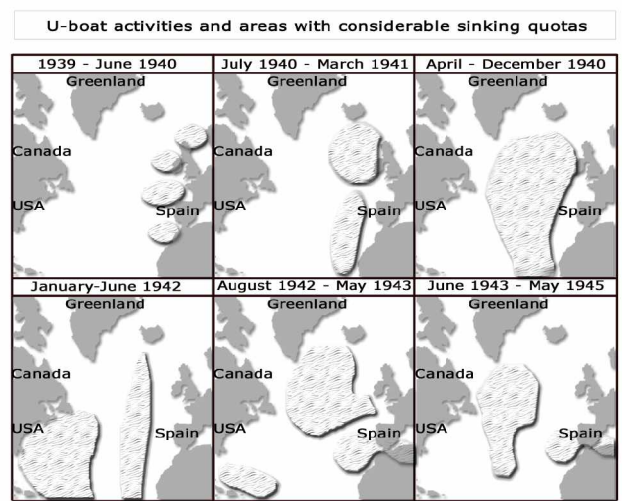### Submarine – U-boats

At the beginning of the war, German and British Navies had 57 submarines each. Britain eventually employed 270, the Germans about 1,000 during WWII.

British submarines had the difficult task of intercepting well protected German shipping around Northern Europe by direct torpedo attacks or by mine laying missions. Although Britain never managed to operate in the Baltic Sea during WWII, Royal Navy submarines took its heavy toll of German troop transporters, supply ships and escort vessels, quickly forcing the Germans to adopt the system of defensive convoys when operating in the North Sea or, since 1940, in the Norwegian waters. During the Second World War, British submarines were credited with the sinking of 475 merchant ships, 105 warships and 36 submarines, and with the damaging of many others.

What happened to submarines in North Sea and elsewhere for five years, day by day, since the 1st of September 1939 may be illustrated by a news report headlined: "British Submarines' Crew, Bombed All Day At Bottom of Sea, Passes Time by Betting" (The New York Times, 6 October 1939): "the Admiralty today released a story about the crew of a trapped, crippled British submarine who ran a penny sweepstake pool at the bottom of the North Sea while the Germans groped for them with sweep wires and shattered bombs and depth charges for twenty-four hours. In the first hour six depth charges sounded faintly and in the second hour the explosions, louder and nearer, averaged one every two minutes". Another report of the same date states: "British destroyer patrolling northeast of the English Channel had trapped two German submarines early this week and forced them into a mine field where they exploded and sank".

However, submarine warfare during WWII actually meant success and failure to German U-boats in North Sea and North Atlantic, strategic areas for Great Britain's vital supplies coming from Canada, USA, and the Southern Hemisphere countries. About a dozen German U-boats were already in the Atlantic when the war started in September 1939. Others operated in the European waters. In September 1939, groups of three to five naval vessels of the Royal Navy were formed to patrol large sea areas. These groups

criss-crossed the seas day and night searching for U-boats and dropping depth charges when a U-boat was detected or assumed to be around.

On the 14th of September 1939, U-39 operating in the Hebrides area shot its torpedo at the 22,000-ton aircraft carrier '*Ark Royal*', but missed. Escorting destroyers *Faulkner*, *Foxhound* and *Firedrake* depth-charged U-39 in a series of attacks reported by an eye witness as it follows: "We gained ASDIC Contact with the Sub and each ship in turn, went in at full speed and fired a pattern of depth-charges. *Firedrake* attacked last, as we came out of it and heard our depth charges explode, we thought we had missed, until up it came, vertical like a huge cigar and then flopped down slowly". U-39 surfaced briefly, and then sank. A few days later, the attack of U-29 succeeded. In the early evening of the 17th of September 1939, 22,000-ton British aircraft carrier *'Courageous'* was on an enemy hunt together with four destroyers, in the Southwest areas (Southwest of Ireland), 150 nautical miles WSW of Mizen Head, Ireland. The carrier could travel at a speed of 30.5 knots (56 km/h). But the days of HMS *'Courageous'* were numbered. "A German submarine struck a telling blow at the British Navy last night by sinking the 22,000-ton aircraft carrier *Courageous*, with loss of an unknown number of its complement of 1,100 officers and men. It was the first real success scored by the German Navy in this war." From a salvo of three torpedoes, two hit the Courageous on portside. The destruction was devastating as described by Sub-Lieutenant Charles Lamb: 'There were two explosions, the like of which I had never imagined possible. As if the core of the earth exploded and the universe split from pole to pole, it could sound no worse… In the sudden deathly silence which followed, I knew the ship had died.' The *Courageous* turned over and sank in fifteen minutes, with a loss of 519 men who formed its crew. Lieutenant Wesmacott 'heard two violent explosions which seemed to lift the ship'.