

### **U-boats in the Atlantic Ocean**

A number of German U-boats were already in the Atlantic when the war broke out, in September 1939. Britain came up rapidly with the convoy system. A convoy consisted of up to sixty, either slow or fast vessels, accompanied by up to ten naval escort ships. The first convoy set off in September. Also in September 1939, groups of three to five naval vessels were formed to control large areas in the North Atlantic Ocean. 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. German surface naval vessels, such as the battleships *Deutschland*, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, sailed in the Atlantic escorted by a number of escort vessels. Until the end of December 1939, the Allies and Neutrals had lost 55 vessels with a total tonnage of 300,000. Five U-boats were also sunk.

Fights increased in the North Atlantic during the war years 1940 and 1941. In August 1940, Germans lifted all restrictions on U-boat targets. The number of available U-boats was of 50 (in January 1940) and of 230 (in December 1941), of which about 8 were on permanent mission in the Atlantic during 1940, and 15 during 1941. The total loss inflicted on British, Allied and Neutral shipping by the Axis powers (U-boats, air forces, mines, and surface naval vessels) was of 3 million tons in 1940 and of 4 million tons in 1941. These figures relate to about 1,500 ships, with cargo, stores and fuel. The Germans lost about 40 U-boats in the Atlantic during these two years.