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Site Menu

- [Home](#)
- [News & Events](#)
- [Departments](#)
- [Dive Site Profiles](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Diving Specialties](#)
- [General Interest](#)
- [Back Issues](#)
- [The Dive Directory](#)
- [Site Topic Map](#)
- [User Login](#)

Search

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Links



New Jersey War Wreck Comes To Life

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Death of Tanker: RP Resor Creates AMAZING Dive Site

By Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver  
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During World War I, German forces used the new technology of submarine warfare to terrible advantage, inflicting significant damage to Allied shipping and very nearly achieving the ultimate success of victory because of the crippling damage to England's supply lines they were able to create. With the signing of the Treaty of Versailles at the conclusion of the war, Germany was forbidden to possess submarines of any type as part of this agreement. In fact, 176 German U-boats were turned over to the Allied forces at the end of the war, and any remaining submarines in German possession were either destroyed or dismantled.



It did not take long, however, for Germany to begin rebuilding its once formidable underwater fleet. Working first as consultants to other nations and then covertly for the German Navy, German engineers worked to further the development of submarine technology. Then, on June 18, 1935, negotiations

concluded on the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, which legally permitted Germany to once again build and operate a fleet of submarines. It was a surprise to everyone that Germany, due to its on going efforts behind the scenes was able to launch its first U-boat only four months later! Of course, during World War II, the U-boat would again become one of Germany's most menacing and feared weapons.

Along with the development of new submarine technology, Germany had also devised new strategies and tactics for submarine warfare. Admiral Karl Doenitz, commander-in-chief of Germany's U-boat fleet, had long advocated the use of the rudeltaktik or "wolf-pack" attack. Rather than isolated attacks on ships by submarines operating independently, this strategy called for stretching all the available submarines across the ocean in long lines. Once a target convoy was sighted, all available U-boats were then deployed to that location and would attack in unison. This was an effective strategy, which caused an average of 250,000 tons of merchant-shipping losses per month in 1940.

In 1941, the United States entered the war and only five weeks later, began to feel the bloody wrath of



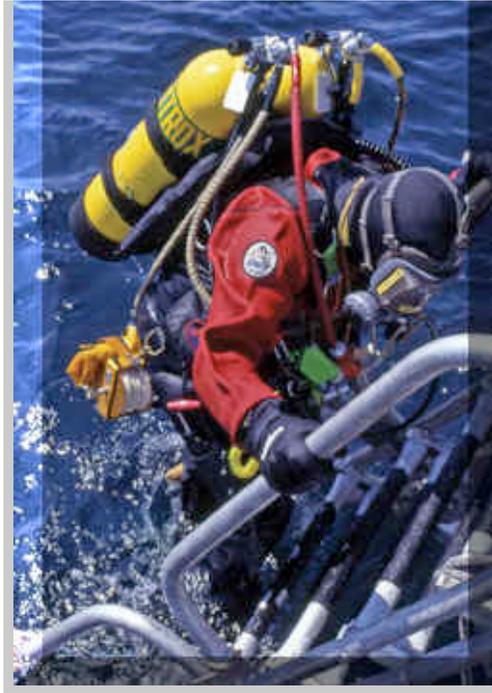
Mystery Creature



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Germany's "wolf-pack" in a campaign known as Operation Paukenschlag off the North American East Coast. Doenitz originally requested 12 Type IX boats for this operation, but was only given six. One of these was delayed in deployment due to repair work, so the operation began with only five vessels. With a surface range of 8,100 nautical miles and the ability to achieve a maximum surface speed of 18 knots, they were ideally suited for this type of long-range endeavor. Each Type IX boat displaced 1,000 tons, measured 250 feet in length and had a crew of 48. Each was armed with 22 torpedoes, two anti-aircraft guns and a 10.5-cm deck gun.



In January 1942, it became extremely perilous to travel the well-worn shipping lanes off the American coast. Within 15 days of arriving off the East Coast, Doenitz's "wolf-pack" destroyed 20 ships and damaged three others, with a loss of over 600 lives.

The *RP Resor* was an oil tanker built in 1935 by the Federal Shipping Co., Kearney, N.J., and launched Nov. 13, 1935. She was owned and operated by Standard Oil Co. and was commanded by Captain Frederick Marcus. She was noted for being the first ship ever built in the United States with the Isherwood Arcform hull design. Furthermore, she was also the first new ship outfitted with a Contra Guide propeller and rudder, which would add speed and maneuverability through its asymmetrical design. The *Resor* was 445 feet long, 66 feet wide and displaced 7,451 tons.

On Feb. 19, 1942, the *Resor* left Houston, Texas, for Fall River, Mass. She was carrying 78,729 barrels of bunker C crude oil and on board, in addition to the crew of 41 officers and men, was eight Navy gunners and an ensign. The ship had been outfitted with a 4-inch deck gun mounted astern. Because of the fear of German U-boat activity, the *Resor* traveled in a zigzag pattern, displayed no navigation lights and posted extra lookouts for safety. The assignment to deliver crude oil up the coast was routine, but the outcome of this particular trip would become infamous.

By Feb. 26, the *Resor* had reached the New Jersey coast. The ocean was calm, and only a few surface ripples could be seen as the ship was gently rocked by a long, gentle ground swell. The winter night air was crisp and cold and the light from the moon above danced over the surface of the water. On deck, the lookouts marveled at the clear sky and brilliant display of stars over head and in the distance some 20 miles away, the lights that dotted the coast of New Jersey could easily be seen.



Seamen John J. Forsdal, one of two men on lookout duty that night, spotted a ship off the port side traveling with its running lights on at about 11:30 p.m. Mistaking the mysterious



ship for a fishing boat, Forsdal reported the sighting to the bridge. Forsdal's mistake would soon become

evident as the *U-578*, using the running lights as a disguise, maneuvered to within 200 yards of the *Resor* and fired a torpedo, which exploded amidships. A fiery explosion followed, with oil and debris blown skyward.

The *U-578*, under the command of Korvettenkapitän Ernst-August Rehwinkel, launched a second torpedo, this one rupturing the *Resor's* oil tanks. A ball of fire engulfed the ship immediately, killing most of the crew and naval guard on board. Two men, however, did manage to make a narrow escape. Seamen Forsdal, standing watch on the bow, found himself trapped by the flames. With the quick thinking of a well-trained mariner, Forsdal lowered a life raft over the side and then swiftly slid down a line into the frigid Atlantic Ocean. The water was covered with thick, floating crude oil that was gushing from the bowels of the dying ship. As Forsdal tried to swim through this oil towards the life raft, flames began to spread across the surface of the icy waters behind him.

After struggling for 20 minutes, Forsdal heard a voice nearby, that of Radio Operator Clarence Armstrong clinging to a raft. When Forsdal reached the raft, they were about a half-mile from the burning tanker. Forsdal would later recall that, "I was heavily weighted down with cold and clinging oil; the exertion of climbing on the raft taxed my strength so seriously that I was unable to do anything but lie down. The cold and heavy oil seemed to be paralyzing my body."

On shore, a lookout from the Shark River Lifeboat Station spotted the towering flames from the crippled ship at about 12:40 a.m. and dispatched a picket boat immediately. When the boat arrived on the scene, they found the entire vessel and about 500 feet of water in front of the bow enveloped in flames from the leaking crude oil. Cries for help could be heard over the roar of the blaze. Within minutes, they spotted the life raft with Forsdal clinging desperately. The picket boat and its crew of four maneuvered close to the raft and threw him a life buoy. Forsdal managed to get his arms around the ring. Once free of the raft, the rescue boat's motion yanked the life buoy from Forsdal's grasp. The picket boat carefully moved in closer so the crew could use their arms to try to pull Forsdal aboard. Forsdal's oil covered body was slippery and extremely heavy which made it impossible for the crew to haul him to safety. Furthermore, the intense heat from the burning ship nearby was actually blistering the paint off the sides of the rescue vessel. The Coast Guardsmen then decided to slip a towline under Forsdal's arms and drag him away from the inferno. This nearly drowned him in the process. Eventually, the crew managed to pull Forsdal to safety. Armstrong was never seen again.

On board the picket boat, the chief boatswain's mate later stated that "Forsdal was so coated with thick congealed oil that we had to cut his clothes and life jacket off with knives. Even his mouth was filled with a blob of oil." The crew reported that, with all the oil covering Forsdal's body, he must have weighed about 600 pounds.

Shortly thereafter, the only other person to survive the explosion was Daniel L. Hey, a member of the U.S. Navy Armed Guard who was asleep in his bunk when the torpedo struck. He survived by jumping overboard and was able swim through an opening in the ring of fire that was floating on the surface. Eventually he was found clinging to a life raft in the bone chilling water and was heavily covered with oil as well. He almost did not survive the rescue, as he was too exhausted to help himself.

Of the 50 men on board the *Resor*, only Forsdal and Hey survived. The *Resor* continued to burn spectacularly for two days, its towering flames and billowing clouds of smoke was clearly visible from the shore. During the day on Feb. 27, motor boats, planes, Navy vessels and even a blimp searched the ocean for survivors, but there were none to be found.

On Feb. 28, the Navy tug *USS Sagamore* attempted to tow the drifting wreck to safety. By then, she had burned herself out, and since there

was a considerable amount of trapped air in its hull, the *Resor* was still afloat. However, at 8 p.m., the stern struck the bottom and the *Resor*, a once proud tanker in the service of her parent company, rolled over and sank to 130 feet some 30 miles east of the Barnegat Light. A month later, the American Marine Insurance Syndicate paid Standard Oil Co. \$1,716,416, which was the value of the hull as per the war risk agreements in place at the time. The *Resor* was the 24th ship and the 15th tanker sunk or damaged in U.S. coastal waters since the infamous U-boat campaign had begun.

The danger posed by the German U-boats in general, and the *U-578* in particular, was not over. In fact, the *U-578* was still lurking nearby when the rescue ships were searching for the survivors from the ill-fated *Resor*. On the morning of Feb. 28, the U.S. destroyer *Jacob Jones* (DD-130) made a pass by the mangled remains of the *Resor*, still looking for survivors. She then continued southward, directly into the path of the *U-578*. *Rehwinkel* fired two torpedoes at the *Jacob Jones*, sinking her in under an hour and killing about 140 men. Six months later, while on duty in the North Atlantic, the *U-578* was attacked and destroyed by Czechoslovakian Squadron 311. There were no survivors.

Today, the remains of the *Resor* are a thriving haven for marine life. Divers from Long Island- and New Jersey-based charter boats as well as fishermen flock to this site.

Besides abundant resident marine life, divers encounter larger pelagic species like amberjack, ocean sunfish and sharks. The wreck itself is covered with splendidly colored sea anemones and there are many resident lobsters inhabiting the nooks and crannies of this large wreck. Divers who explore the deeper recesses can still find the deck gun, pointed down into the sandy bottom off the stern.

The wreck site is a memorial to those who perished in her sinking. Her twisted remains have always been a popular dive spot for sport divers. Many of these visitors, however, are not aware of the drama that accompanied the sinking of the *Resor*, a victim of a chance encounter with an enemy vessel during a time of war.

***Michael Salvarezza and his associate Christopher P. Weaver have documented a world of adventure topside and underwater through their Long Island, N.Y.-based business Eco-Photo Explorers. They are popular lecturers and their work has been published in leading diving and general interest magazines. Learn more at [www.ecophotoexplorers.com](http://www.ecophotoexplorers.com).***

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