

# German U-boats blockade Puerto Rico 68 years ago next month

In February 1942, U-boats advanced westward across the Atlantic and arrived in the Caribbean, signalling the beginning of Operation Drumbeat, a prolonged aggression on merchant ships, tankers and Navy vessels in the sea corridor between the Caribbean and the U.S. Atlantic coast. Because of the ease and frequency with which they found and destroyed their targets, the first eight months of 1942 became known to German U-Boat captains as the "Second Happy Time."

The concerns about increasing trading difficulties were compounded by the fact that Puerto Rico had suffered economic contraction during the 1930s. By the time the United States entered World War II on December 8, 1941, the economic situation was already dire. The Great Depression had devastated the island, leaving large segments of the rural population lacking in essentials such as shoes, income for adequate medical care, or a permanent home. During the war, food became scarce and prohibitively expensive, and

unemployment was rising exponentially.

The U-boat assaults traumatized the population across the East Coast of the mainland U.S. and throughout the Caribbean, but the effect of submarine warfare in 1942 was detrimental in specific ways to the economy of Puerto Rico.

The expansion of sugar production during the first 40 years of the 20th century had turned the island into an export economy, whose survival was acutely dependent on food imports. Because the island depended on trade for one-third of its staples, open sea lanes were crucial to guaranteeing the food supply. The costs of imported food staples began to spiral out of control as cargo capacity was increasingly dedicated to war materials at the expense of consumer goods.

The U.S. military by no means had the U-boat assault under control before the end of 1942. In his memoir, Puerto Rican Governor Rexford Tugwell recounts the difficulty of living with a view of the harbor that exacerbated his anxiety.



**José L. Bolívar**  
Commentary

"The submarines were coming down our way. They were a familiar ghostly phenomenon. We never saw one; but we felt their presence constantly. I will not say that we got used to them; but they were sinking a ship a day or thereabouts in our waters, and the survivors were all over the place. So there was nothing strange any more about the awareness of their presence." The sinkings resulted in the Coast Guard picking up survivors who ended up in Puerto Rican ports.

The first German attack on western soil was a U-boat strike at

American-owned Standard Oil Co.'s Lago Refinery in Aruba, on February 16, 1942, which was less than a week after American troops landed to secure the oil refineries of Aruba and Curacao at the request of the Netherlands government. The attack on the Aruba facility, the largest oil refinery in the world, was the first Nazi attack "against American soil." The refinery in Aruba was not destroyed by the attack, but three tankers were lost, 23 men died, and another 18 were hospitalized in the incident. The Associated Press reported that Nazi broadcasts beamed to Puerto Rico three weeks before the Aruba attack had addressed islanders with the message, "Fellow-countrymen and friends! We'll be there by February 15."

By Feb 19, 1942, 9 tankers had been sunk. And two million tons of shipping losses were suffered in January and February alone in the Atlantic corridor

Comparatively few U-boats were sunk during Operation Drumbeat, as the U-boat operators learned the schedules of the anti-submarine

destroyers and were able to avoid them. Despite being advised by the British commander to take specific precautionary actions, the Americans did not issue blackout orders until July, so the passing freighters and tankers were starkly silhouetted by shore lights, like sitting targets for the waiting U-boats and their "wolf packs." Also, British advice to use convoy escorts was not heeded until later in the war.

The Commander-in-Chief and Chief of Naval Operations of the U.S. fleet, Admiral Ernest J. King, who had resisted the British advice earlier in the year, finally agreed to use a convoy system in the Caribbean on June 10, 1942.

Fortunately, by mid-1943, the threat of U-boats had subsided, and Puerto Rico could, at last, start to receive its needed supplies on a more regular basis.

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## VOICES

### Pat Robertson, Rush Limbaugh Haiti comments draw fire

Commentators show unique interpretations of accountability, compassion in remarks about the earthquake in Haiti

Leave it to certain commentators to display unique interpretations of compassion and reason when everyone else is merely adhering to the traditional definitions of the words.

When most people are using their time and efforts to brainstorm ways to help the citizens of Haiti, who have no doubt endured massive suffering after Tuesday's huge earthquake, Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh opted to use theirs in a decidedly different fashion Wednesday.

Robertson, the go-to guy for agreeing with outlandish premises surrounding victim-blaming after horrific tragedies, said that the reason for Haiti's earthquake was that the nation-state made a deal with the devil. Lest you think that College News is exaggerating Robertson's Church Lady-like proclamations, there's video of Robertson stating the following (via):

Robertson: "Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about. [Haitians] were under the heel of the French ... and they got together and swore a pact to the Devil. They said, 'we will serve you if you'll get us free from the French.' True story. And the Devil said, 'OK it's a deal.' Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after another."

Never letting one to get useless facts in the way of good rhetoric, Robertson's statements conveniently ignore the fact that, like that 80 percent of Haitians identify themselves as Roman Catholics, with Protestants representing a distant second place with 16 percent. But, you know, voodoo is spooky, and even if one person practicing it means that the whole country has gotta go. God had some Old Testament wrathin' to do, apparently.

But while you could certainly excuse Robertson's

remarks as Pat just being Pat, it takes a certain kind of mind to take a tragedy and politicize it.

(Rush Limbaugh enters the room).

Did anyone else feel a chill?

On his radio program Wednesday morning, Rusty said that President Barack Obama and company would use Haiti to get closer to the "light-skinned and dark-skinned black [communities] in this country" while adding that the U.S. has "already donated to Haiti. It's called the U.S. income tax."

If you were wondering who would be so cynical as to suggest that a president would use a monumental tragedy to gain support amongst a group of voters who already overwhelmingly support him--to the tune of 89 percent who view him favorably, natch--well, now you have your answer.

There's perhaps a point to be made about private organizations and individuals helping out on their own. But, of course, local churches and government have been helping each other out since Katrina hit. It's not like they have to be mutually exclusive or anything.

But hey, why deal with subtleties when canned outrage will suffice?

**Kal Wagenheim**  
Jan. 14

### Shame on you

To the cowardly, racist "Cantaclaro" who had his racist letter published in the Daily Sun on January 13 - You and your kind are despicable. I can understand why you did not use your whole name or where you reside, as people such as you usually hide under rocks and other dark places.

You claim that the media favors black and Latino people and are pandering to minorities. This is an outrageous lie, but then, you and your ilk are experts in lies. You then cite as an example of this racial pandering the fact that the male and female athletes of the year were Tiger Woods and Serena Williams. Tiger just happens to be the greatest golfer of all time, and

Serena Williams will go down in sports history as one of the greatest tennis players of all time. That is not good enough for you, as you then cite the sex scandal of Tiger and the shouting of Selena in a match to disqualify them as great athletes. This is just an excuse by a racist. You then have the audacity of also saying Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor (you call her not only a Latina, but a mulatto) as having been chosen solely because she is female, a leftist and a minority. You are scum, Mr. or Ms. Cantaclaro, and the readers of your letter will know immediately what you are. I can understand why you did not use your real name, as cowards such as yourself cannot stand to be recognized in the light of day. Stay hidden, as no one wants to see you ... or hear from you again.

**J. D. Aragon, Old San Juan**  
Jan. 14

### The role of monkeys in science

Don Scott ("Horrific Bioculture," Daily Sun, Jan. 15) takes the untenable (and rather immature) position that if a breeding facility for monkeys destined for scientific research is approved for Puerto Rico, the island will be ruined and he will pick up his marbles and go home. He alleges that "[t]here is nothing beautiful about monkey experimentation." He apparently is unaware of the strict rules regarding the use of primates in scientific research or the need for scientific research involving mice, monkeys, and other animals. This is not the same as spraying aerosol cosmetics into the eyes of rabbits, a practice generally discontinued, if I'm not mistaken. I won't insist that for consistency Mr. Scott should not wear leather shoes or eat meat; I will assume, however, that if he becomes seriously ill and a cure discovered through scientific experimentation on animals, that he will reject it on principle.

**William Leffingwell, Cayey**  
Jan. 15

These remarks do not necessarily represent the views of the Daily Sun.