



Hitler's U-Boat Fortresses

Randolph Bradham

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The French naval bases at St. Nazaire and Lorient, occupied by the Germans in June 1940, quickly became the homes of massive U-boat fortresses—nearly indestructible submarine pens, built by mostly slave labor. The Royal Air Force began an all-out bombardment of the two ports. Despite their extensive efforts—and those of the Americans who joined them in 1942—the fortresses would survive, surrounded by the decimated French towns and countryside. This is the story of what was, perhaps, the longest ongoing battle in Europe during the Second World War, seen through the eyes of someone who experienced much of it firsthand.

The desperate battle was waged on land, air, and sea. Because the dock at St. Nazaire could house and repair Hitler's powerful warship Tirpitz, British commandos carried out a daring raid to destroy it in March of 1942. They succeeded, but with great loss of life. The defenses of these fortresses were so strong that Eisenhower would ultimately decide to seek containment rather than destruction. The 66th Division, on its way to take up the task, lost its troopship Leopoldville to a German torpedo, with a loss of 802 men. The French underground movement in the area spawned a fighting force of 40,000 men to fight alongside the Americans, but the subsequent German reprisals would ultimately destroy many families in Brittany. Yet the bases stood, and continue to stand today.

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