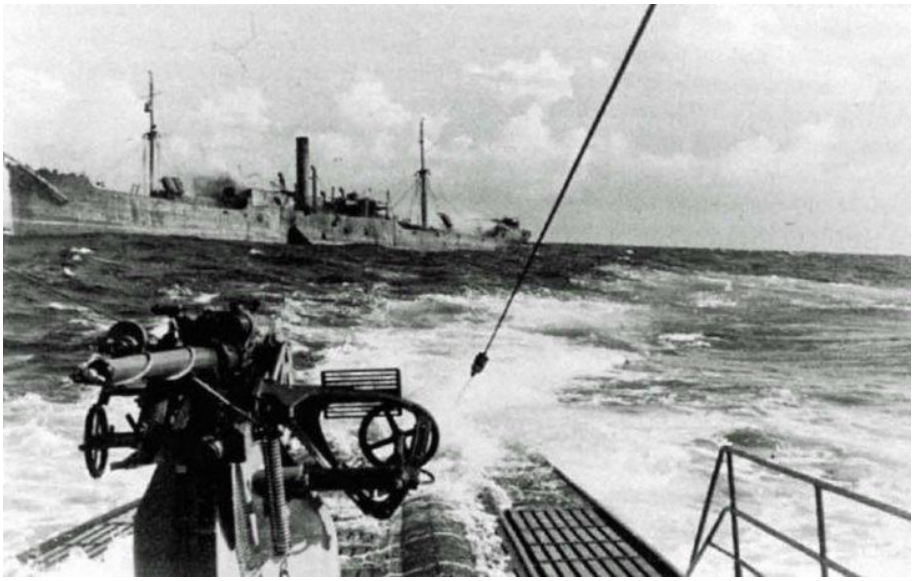
Coast Guard Corsair on U-Boat Hunt by Hunter Wood (Coast Guard Collection)

Submarines and Sailing Yachts

By Captain Bob Desh, U.S. Coast Guard (Retired), Foundation for Coast Guard History

In the early evening hours of Sunday, 11 January 1942, the German submarine *U-123* attacked and sank the British steamship *Cyclops* off the coast of Cape Sable, Nova Scotia. The U-boat's attack on the *Cyclops* was much more than the sinking of another merchant vessel by a German submarine; it marked the opening of a deadly new phase in the Battle of the Atlantic: a six-month mass U-boat assault on shipping along the East Coast of the U.S., as well as in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. Code named Operation DRUMBEAT, by the German navy, it is sometimes called America's second Pearl Harbor.



U-123 attacks SS *Cyclops* (uboatarchives.net)

In January of 1942, the Coast Guard was already very much on a wartime footing. Once again it was operating as a service within the United States Navy. For months, it had been engaged in operations to protect Greenland. It had rapidly improved the armament and combat capabilities of scores of veteran Coast Guard cutters that had fought the "rum war at sea" successfully. These cutters were on patrol, doing their best to protect merchant shipping and rescuing survivors from vessels that succumbed to U-boat attack. The service had also taken delivery of the first of a fleet of 230 eighty-three-foot patrol boats specifically designed for antisubmarine warfare and coastal rescue operations.

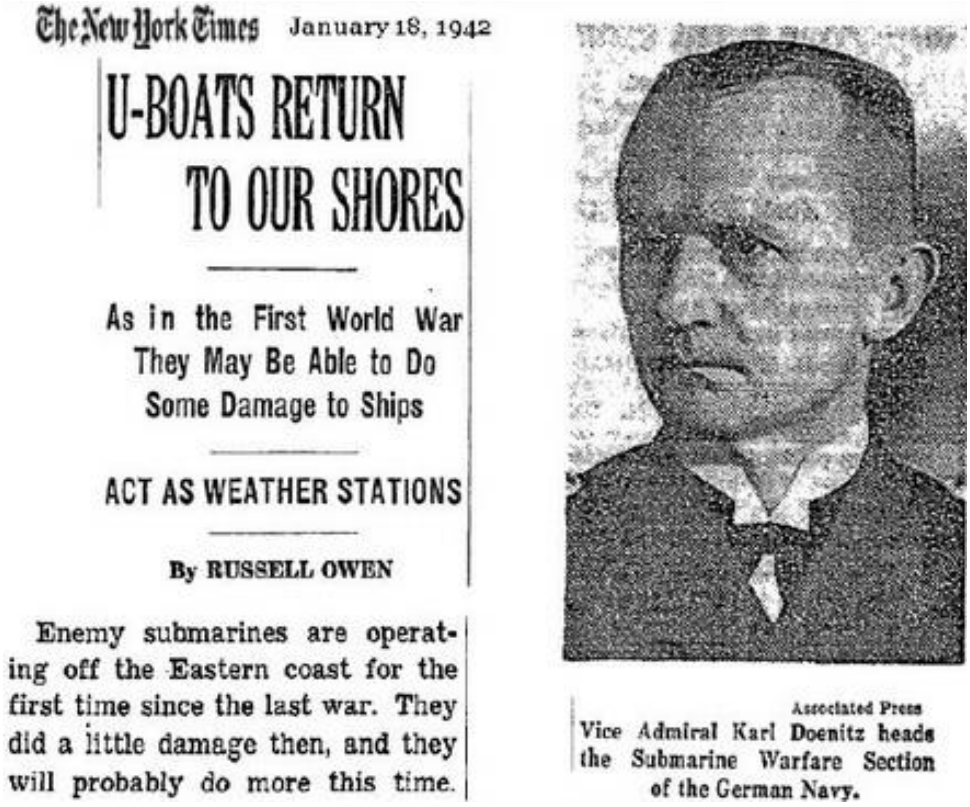
USCGC *Icarus* (WPC-110), veteran of the rum war, sank U-352 off Cape Lookout, 1942 (Coast Guard photo)

The wave of submarine attacks of Operation DRUMBEAT would trigger a wide variety of actions, responses, and initiatives by the United States military, including the Coast Guard. One of more unique was the formation of the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve Coastal Picket Force (CPF), including a collection of rugged offshore sailing yachts known as the "Corsair Fleet" that would be pressed into service to hunt the deadly submarine foes.

The Coast Guard was continuing to learn how best to use the boats, personnel and capabilities of its new volunteer civilian Auxiliary created in 1939. Throughout 1941 the efforts and enthusiasm to organize Auxiliary Flotillas grew rapidly. As the war came ever closer to U.S shores, Auxiliary boats and personnel were being utilized for coastal "Neutrality Patrols" in many locations. In July of 1941, as the need for patrol vessels increased and the nature of the mission intensified, the Coast Guard "took over" 280 Auxiliary vessels. After the attack on Pearl

Harbor and the subsequent declaration of war, Auxiliary patrols dramatically increased. However, the Coast Guard was not alone in its interest in utilizing readily available civilian boats to help stem the disastrous onslaught of successful enemy submarine attacks along the Atlantic Coast.

The loss of scores of vessels and the valuable cargoes they carried obviously was a huge blow to the war effort. However, perhaps the greatest loss was the skilled merchant mariners, no matter the flag country of the vessel, who perished with their ships.



The New York Times January 18, 1942

U-BOATS RETURN TO OUR SHORES

As in the First World War They May Be Able to Do Some Damage to Ships

ACT AS WEATHER STATIONS

By RUSSELL OWEN

Enemy submarines are operating off the Eastern coast for the first time since the last war. They did a little damage then, and they will probably do more this time.

Associated Press

Vice Admiral Karl Doenitz heads the Submarine Warfare Section of the German Navy.

New York Time, January 18, 1942 (New York Times archives)

The Dunkirk Factor – why not use volunteer small boats?

The losses did not go unnoticed. Coastal citizens, government officials, and more importantly the national press, were confused and angry, and they demanded action. The following is an extract from a letter sent by British representative of the Ministry of War Transport to Sir Arthur Salter of the Office of the British Merchant Shipping Commission: *"There is a rather alarming sense of disquiet among many merchant seamen in vessels arriving at Canadian ports…I think the morale would be enormously improved if the U. S. A. could organize and publicize a voluntary fleet of small craft which would undertake patrols. Of course, I do not know what sort of arrangements have been made, but there must be any number of Americans who, if the government could supply them with some sort of craft, would be only too willing to take a crack at it. After all, we have the example of Dunkirk where every available craft that could float was pressed into service. While my suggestion would not be quite so spectacular, I do feel that a*

voluntary patrol would give tremendous heart to a lot of seamen. How effective it might be, it is, of course, impossible to say but I lay a great deal of stress on the voluntary end of it." This letter was forwarded by Admiral Sir Charles C. J. Little at the British Embassy in Washington, to Admiral Stark, then Chief of Naval Operations (CNO).

This was by far not the earliest correspondence by senior naval officers highlighting the potential value of acquiring and employing civilian small boats for coastal defense. On 22 September 1941, Commander North Atlantic Naval Coastal Frontier wrote to the CNO, explaining, *"It is considered important that contacts and means be arranged for using the eyes and ears of yacht clubs, power squadrons, fishing fleets, and marine supply stations, etc. to obtain certain types of information…it is considered that the Coast Guard is the Service best equipped and organized, in view of its general duties, to obtain most of this information. District Commandants should have a flow of such information in connection with the Coastal Intelligence. It is therefore recommended that the matter be taken up with Coast Guard Headquarters, so that a definite Coast Guard organization can be developed which will be effective under present conditions, and likewise be suitable for full war requirements."*

On 10 March 1942, Admiral Stark wrote, *"The situation on our coasts with regard to patrol vessels is well known.…District Commandants should leave no stone unturned in the search to acquire vessels which may be useful...[T]he local knowledge of Coast Guard officers and officials of yacht clubs should be utilized."*

This is a small sample of the correspondence from a variety of sources championing the idea of acquiring civilian small craft for rescue operations, antisubmarine patrols, port security, and coastal defense. Of all these letters, one of the most influential was written by Alfred Stanford, Commodore of the Cruising Club of America. On 23 February 1942, CDRE Stanford proposed to Commander, Eastern Sea Frontier the use of oceangoing sailing vessels for antisubmarine patrol work. Intrigued, Commander Eastern Sea Frontier immediately encouraged Stanford to draw up a detailed plan to bring his proposal to fruition.

Sailing vessels of the Coastal Picket Force on patrol (Coast Guard Collection)

Seal of The Cruising Club of America (Cruising Club of America image)

Stanford presented the following outline to the governing board of the Cruising Club on 5 March and then to the annual meeting of the Cruising Club on 24 March. The eight primary tactical advantages of using sailing vessels for antisubmarine patrol were listed as follows:

1. A vessel under sail gives no warning of her presence or approach to a submarine. (This advantage is shared by no other type of craft, either water or air. Even a blimp can be heard or, in the day, be seen, in time for the surfaced submarine to submerge into deep water. The minor water noises of a sailing vessel would allow her to come very close to a submarine before detection on listening apparatus.)

2. A vessel 'hove to' (headsails backed, helm up) is a steadier type of observation platform than a destroyer or other type of patrol craft. (This is due to the keel in the water and the counterbalancing keel action of the sail in the air. An observation post aloft at the hounds, 40' to 60' from the deck, gives approximately the same or better height of eye as the bridge of a large patrol vessel.)

3. There is less leeway or drift with a sailing vessel properly 'hove to' due to the counterbalancing action of the rudder forcing the ship up into the wind and the backed headsail or reefed foresail tending to drive the bow off. (Under gale conditions this leeway will not amount to more than 1 1/2 knots or at the most 2 knots. Thus, a small vessel can comfortably, safely, and effectively hold her station at sea, as has been demonstrated many times in our members' experience.)

4. There is less noise on a sailing vessel -- there is no engine noise to compete with the audible submarine diesel proceeding on the surface at night or charging her batteries. It is surmised that this submarine diesel exhaust can be heard 2-5 miles depending on conditions.

5. A sailing vessel is cheap and quick to build. While at war, economy is not a governing consideration, speed of construction is. We estimate the rough finish production cost of a 50' sailing vessel as being about $20,000-$25,000 on a production basis, maybe lower. There are probably in excess of 100 small yards on the Atlantic Coast not now engaged in naval contracts that could be geared up to handle this type of production. (A fleet of only 80 such vessels -- 40

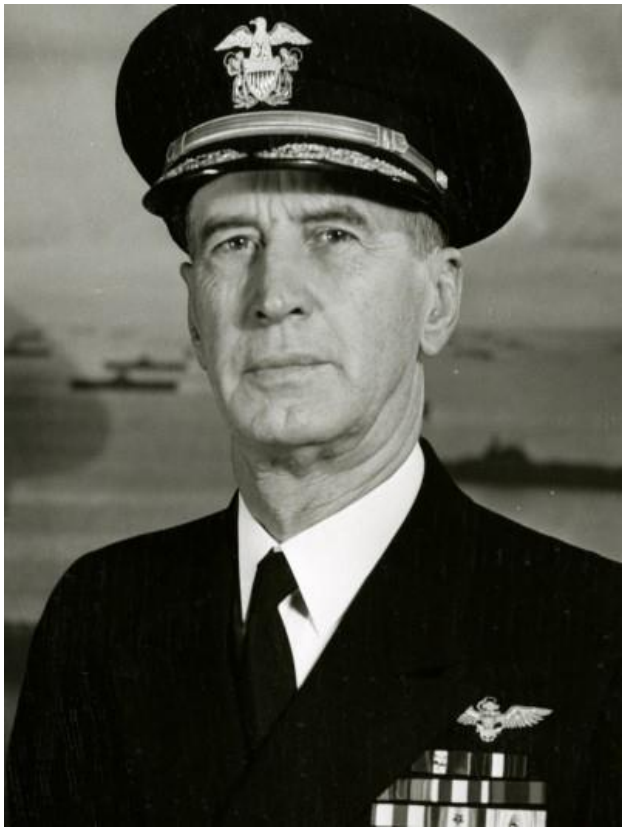
operating; 40 relief -- could constitute an observation and patrol screen at 10-mile intervals from Cape Cod across the Gulf of Maine to Cape Sable and up the coast to Halifax; or from Ambrose Light Vessel down the Jersey Coast, across the Delaware Bay area to Cape Hatteras.)

6. Construction of a fleet of such wooden sailing vessels -- should the experiment prove successful -- would not compete for steel plate, specialized welding and riveting shipyard labor.

7. Having only auxiliary power, these vessels would not require engineer personnel. (A regular crew member could be quickly trained to give the relatively simple power installation such attention as it might require afloat.)

8. Cruising range, due to tankage being available for water rather than fuel and space for provisions rather than machinery, would extend far beyond normal for patrol craft of considerably greater size. (Such vessels as are being proposed could keep the sea for a two-week tour of duty easily, 30 days in emergencies.)

By the end of March, Commander Eastern Sea Frontier informed the Cruising Club that he hoped to have arrangements complete for volunteer ships to go on assigned patrol areas off shore by the first of June. To supervise all these plans for making proper use of sailing vessels, auxiliary yachts and fishing boats, he appointed Commander Vincent Astor, USNR, a yachtsman in his own right. Thus, the stage was set for the use of small craft in various phases of antisubmarine warfare throughout the waters of the Atlantic coast.



CNO Admiral Ernest King (Naval Heritage Command Collection)

For many months, new Chief of Naval Operation, ADM Ernest King, had not been a fan of utilizing civilian small boats, but the pressure to do more to combat submarine attack combined with the support of his many advisors, including Commander Eastern Sea Frontier and the Commandant of the Coast Guard, resulted in his go order on 15 May 1942 —"*It has been directed that there be acquired…craft that are in any way capable….These craft will be acquired and manned by the Coast Guard as an extension of the Coast Guard Reserve.*"

Coast Guard Corsair on U-Boat Hunt by Hunter Wood (Coast Guard Collection)

Birth of the Corsair Fleet

With its decades of experience in small boat operations and the ready resources of its civilian Auxiliary, the Coast Guard was the logical service to bring the CPF concept to fruition. The task would fall to the District Coast Guard Officer in each Naval District acting under the Sea Frontier Commanders.

The Commandant's letter of 25 June 1942 set the general policies for procurement of vessels. Possibilities included voluntary induction into the Reserve, gift or purchase for nominal consideration, requisition by charter, and requisition by purchase.

The last piece of the puzzle was crewing. This issue was solved by an amendment to the Coast Guard Reserve and Auxiliary Act in June 1942 giving the Commandant authority to enroll members of the Coast Guard Reserve for temporary duty. It also provided considerable leeway on age and physical qualifications, facilitating rapid induction of skilled yachtsman and those boat owners who might want to come with their vessel as it made its transition to utilitarian haze gray.

Those volunteering their vessel were often tasked with finding their own initial crew. There is a widely held belief that the majority of boat owners took advantage of the ability to accompany their vessel. While this was sometimes the case, it was more the exception than the rule, particularly with the large sailing yachts. Some examples of this actually occurring include renowned yachtsman Charles Vose lending his schooner *Sea Gypsy* and being enrolled as a Chief Boatswain's Mate to be her skipper. John Pugh went into service as a member of his schooner *Bettatrix*'s crew, given a rating in the Temporary Reserve as Boatswain's Mate Second Class. Laurence and John Ely would serve with their steel-hulled schooner *Askoy* as skipper and executive petty officer.

However, the more typical crewing model saw the owner choosing a known, trusted sailing master as the officer in charge, who would then help round up a crew. The officer in charge (aka "skipper") was enrolled as a chief boatswain's mate, the next most skilled and experienced crewman as a boatswain's mate first class and the rest of the crew as seamen first class. The size of the vessel dictated crew size, typically six to nine personnel. They underwent a background check, physical, and were then enrolled directly into the CG Reserve (Temporary) on a full-time, with pay status.

Training largely was accomplished "on the job." The volunteer manner of the process resulted in enrollment of some of the best-known pleasure craft along the Atlantic coast, guided firsthand by men whose sailing knowledge and ability had been acquired through years of experience. Many of the younger men who enlisted were so much at home on sailing craft that they needed little training in seamanship.

Of the hundreds of sail and power boats that served in the CPF, the rugged oceangoing sailing yachts definitely held the greatest mystique. Surrendered for wartime duty by some of the nation's most famous yachtsmen, they were manned by young, skilled crews in the harshest of conditions. When other vessels of the CPF were ordered to seek cover because of foul weather, they and their dedicated crews continued to stand the watch bravely. Proudly known as the "Corsair Fleet," they were, rightfully so—the media darlings of the CPF.

The Navy Hunts for CGR 3070

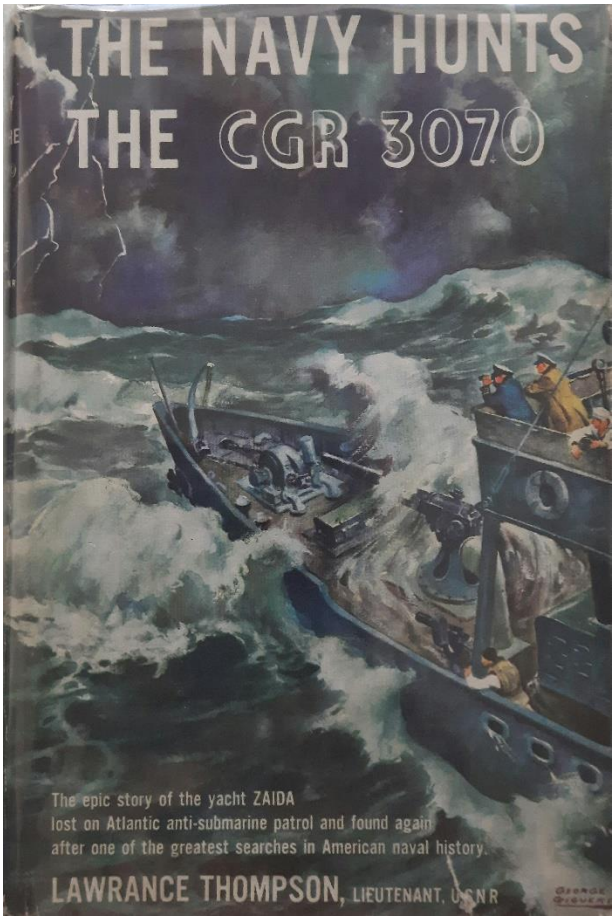
In December of 1942, *CGR-3070,* the former sailing yacht *Zaida,* and its crew were caught in a violent nor'easter off Long Island. The crew of nine Coast Guardsmen and their sturdy 58-foot yawl endured a trying but dramatic adventure, finally ending with the damaged vessel and exhausted crew being rescued by the CG Cutter *General Green* off the Grand Banks of North Carolina. This extraordinary story is chronicled in the book *The Navy Hunts the CGR 3070* written by Lieutenant Lawrance Thompson, USNR, and published in 1944.

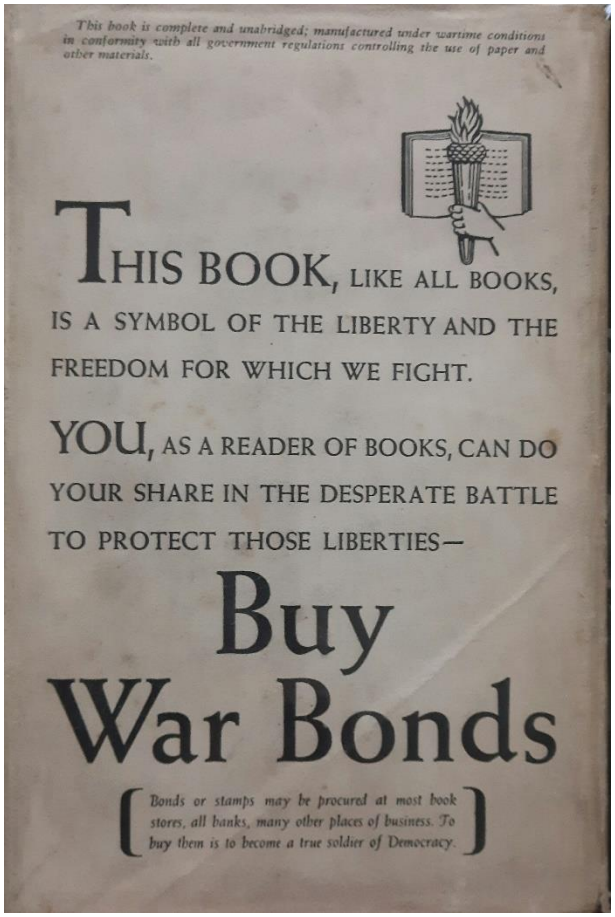
The following is from the book's forward—*"The Navy Hunts the CGR 3070"* is a magnificent modern saga of the sea that might well be called a 1944 version of Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon.* It is the true story of the Coast Guard Reserve Boat 3070. Blasted for twenty-one days by hurricanes and blizzards sweeping along the Atlantic seaboard, CGR 3070 became the object of one of the greatest searches in maritime history before she was finally located off the coast of

North Carolina, after having traveled 3,100 miles south of the position from which her strange odyssey began.

“Before she became a Coast Guard Reserve Boat, CGR 3070 was the ocean-going yacht *Zaida,* owned by George E. Ratsey, the famous sailmaker. *Zaida* is a beautiful, smooth-lined, 58-foot yawl whose style and sailing record are known in yachting circles all along the Atlantic seaboard. *Zaida* had never been designed for the work that was assigned her, but she took the job in her stride, and despite the pounding she underwent during the twenty-one days she went back to hunting submarines shortly after having been towed into port.

“*The Navy Hunts the CGR 3070* is one of the great stories of the United States Navy. It is also one of the first books to be released by the Navy that gives a detailed account of our war against the German submarines that menaced Allied shipping on our Atlantic seaboard during the gloomy year that followed Pearl Harbor. The *Zaida* was one of a number of private yachts, called picket boats or Hooligan's Navy, that had been turned over to the Navy which were manned by crews of experienced amateur yachtsmen. Theirs was an important job well done. Lieutenant Thompson has made the story of this boat a fascinating and exciting book.”





front and back cover of book dust jacket (author photo)

While glowing, even this introduction does not do the book justice. I have discovered no book or publication that gives a better feel for what it was like to be a crewman on a CPF sailing vessel and certainly none that is better written. I have read scores of books on CG history and this is one of my all-time favorites! In his "To the Reader" introduction, Lieutenant Lawrance explains his research and approach in telling this fascinating story:

"Before I undertook to tell this story, I wanted firsthand knowledge of Coastal Picket duty. Fortunately, I was permitted to sail on patrol aboard *CGR 3070*, after she had resumed her duties. I shipped as crew, took orders as crew, and stood watches with the crew—except for a few humiliating hours when I was excused because of seasickness. As a result of those experiences, I came ashore with a desire to tell this story in part, at least, from the oft-neglected viewpoint of the crew. To achieve the desired goal of actuality, I have told most of the story as it might have been related by one of the crew, interrupting his first-person narrative only where it is necessary to give some account of the background of the episode and of the complex and persevering search which was organized by the Commander Eastern Sea Frontier. This accent on the viewpoint of the crew may give a one-sided slant to the tale; if so, that is the slant I should like to give, as a kind of tribute to those enlisted men who constitute so large a percentage of the Navy and the Coast Guard, those enlisted men who have done such magnificent work in this war, during the tense moments of battle and during the dull hours of waiting, waiting, waiting."

Pulitzer Prize Medal (Columbia University)

The background of the author explains much about the quality of the writing. Dr. Lawrence R. Thompson began his career as an English professor at Wesleyan and Columbia in 1934 and later served as library curator and English professor at Princeton University. During World War II, he served with US Navy Reserve, rising to the rank lieutenant commander, and was awarded the Legion of Merit. Later, Dr. Thompson won the Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for his biography titled *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915–1938*. His research and writing skills are very much reflected in *The Navy Hunts the CGR 3070*. It is a great read!

The Navy Hunts the CGR 3070 was published only once, in 1944, by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., of Garden City, NY. Original copies can be found on a variety of out-of-print book websites. Reproductions are also available, and it can be found in digital format. That said, there is something very special about holding and reading an original copy. If you are going to read only one book on the history of the Corsair Fleet, read this one!

Photo Courtesy of the Outer Banks History Center

The Navy also pressed Hatteras and Ocracoke boats into service to fight the German U-boats. The vessels, photographed in Ocracoke's harbor, were known as the Hooligan Fleet.

A dramatic surge in warship construction at shipyards across the country eventually provided a fleet of much more capable vessels well suited for the antisubmarine mission. This, combined with a shift in emphasis and tactics by the German submarine force, eliminated the need for the offshore efforts of the CPF. By fall of 1943, the process of decommissioning the majority of the Corsair Fleet sailing vessels was well underway. Many of those still in suitable condition were prepared for return to their original owners. The end of the Corsair Fleet would mark the last time that a significant U.S. naval force went to war under sail. The crews who took these rugged sailing yachts to sea certainly hold a very special place in U.S. military and CG history.

CGR 3070 / Zaida in WWII configuration (SARDEMAN photo)

The sailing yacht *Zaida*, aka *CGR-3070,* survived WWII. The haze gray paint that adorned her hull during war has long been removed. Constructed in 1937, she is now restored to her former glory as a premier sailing yacht. However, her service to the nation is not forgotten. In addition to its own proud name, it still carries its Coast Guard Reserve hull number, CGR 3070. It is a most fitting tribute to her ability to bring her crew home safely. Semper Paratus!

Zaida today (soundingsonline.com photo)

Primary Sources:

Eastern Sea Frontier War Diary, March, 1942, Chapter VII, "Small Craft for Observation and Rescue."

Ed Offley, "The Drumbeat Mystery" *Naval History* 36, no. 1 (February 2022).

Lawrance Thompson, [LT USNR] *The Navy Hunts the CGR 3070* (Garden City, NY Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1944)