U-Boat Attack!

The dramatic and tragic story of how the U.S. got drawn into World War I

Characters

ALBERT J. BEVERIDGE, an American author, historian, and former U.S. senator
ALFRED VON TIRPITZ, grand admiral of the German Imperial Navy
WOODROW WILSON, president of the United States
EDWARD M. HOUSE, confidential adviser to President Wilson
ROBERT LANSING, a U.S. State Department official
THEOBALD VON BETTMANN HOLLWEG, chancellor of Germany
WILHELM II, German emperor, known as Kaiser Wilhelm
WALTHER SCHWEIGER, captain of a German U-boat
* BUTLER, serving Alfred Vanderbilt
ALFRED VANDERBILT, a millionaire sportsman and member of a prominent American family
ALICE VANDERBILT, Alfred Vanderbilt’s mother
* PASSENGERS 1 & 2, aboard a ship
* REPORTERS 1-4
JOHANN HEINRICH VON BERNSTORFF, German ambassador to the U.S.
NARRATORS A-E
* Indicates a fictional or composite character. All others were real people.

PROLOGUE

Narrator A: In August 1914, war broke out in Europe. On one side were Britain and its allies. On the other were Germany and its allies. But President Woodrow Wilson declared the United States neutral and told Americans to remain impartial in thought and action.

Narrator B: Of the warring powers, only Germany had an effective fleet of **U-boats**. But Britain had a superior surface fleet, which it used to blockade German ports. That kept Germany from receiving supplies of food or weapons from abroad.

Narrator C: The British blockade kept U.S. manufacturers from trading with Germany, but allowed them to keep trading with Britain. This infuriated Germany, because importing goods from the U.S. helped Britain keep its forces supplied. Germany eventually decided to use its U-boats to stop such trade.

Narrator D: That decision would soon put President Wilson’s declaration of neutrality to the test.

Words to Know

- **U-boat** (*n*): combat submarine used by Germany in World War I (The name comes from unterseeboot, German for “undersea boat.”)
- **merchant** (*adj*): having to do with trade
- **mine** (*n*): a hidden bomb that explodes when disturbed or touched
That would be suicide. A U-boat can be sunk with one shot.

Beveridge: But people on a ship hit by a U-boat’s torpedo have no chance!

Tirpitz: Neither does anyone on a ship that hits a mine. Everyone knows that the British have mined the North Sea to destroy boats coming into German ports.

SCENE 2

Narrator A: On February 4, 1915, Germany declares all waters surrounding Britain to be a war zone. Germany warns that any ship found in those waters will be sunk. President Wilson meets with aides over the crisis.

Woodrow Wilson: This could mean war.

Edward M. House: Yes, Mr. President. If American lives are lost because of U-boat attacks, the public may demand war.

Robert Lansing: Sir, you could prohibit Americans from sailing into the war zone.

Wilson: No. We have always demanded and enjoyed the right of freedom on the high seas. That freedom cannot be curbed.

House: Then what can be done?

Wilson: I will send a warning to the Germans.

SCENE 3

Narrator B: Wilson tells the German government that he will hold it accountable if American lives are lost in a U-boat attack, and will take any steps necessary in response. At the Kaiser’s palace in Germany, Wilson’s warning is taken seriously.

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Theobald von Bethmann
Hollweg: We can't risk war with the U.S.! Our troops have made little progress against the British and the French. If the U.S. joins the Allies, we'll lose the war!
Tirpitz: Don't be a coward, Hollweg! The U-boats are our most effective weapon. Don't you agree, Your Highness?
Wilhelm II: Yes, but Hollweg is right. The U.S. must be mollified. Tell Wilson that I have ordered the U-boat commanders not to sink any U.S. ships.

**SCENE 4**

**Narrator C:** With the Kaiser's new orders in effect, British merchant ships begin flying the U.S. flag, and German U-boats don't fire on them. When one such ship rams and sinks a U-boat, the German leaders are furious.
Tirpitz: Sir, you must not allow this British treachery to go on!
Wilhelm: You're right. The U-boats may resume attacks on all ships in the war zone.
Hollweg: Sir, the Americans—
Wilhelm: I don't care about the Americans! We will not continue to make sacrifices while they continue to supply our enemies.
Tirpitz (turning): Captain Schweiger, are you prepared to sail?
Walther Schweiger: Yes, sir.
Tirpitz: Then proceed to the waters off Liverpool, England. Spies tell us that British troop ships will sail from there soon.

**SCENE 5**

**Narrator D:** A few months later, on May 1, 1915, the British ocean liner *Lusitania* is scheduled to depart from New York City for Liverpool. Among the people with tickets to sail on it is millionaire Alfred Vanderbilt.

**Butler:** Mr. Vanderbilt, your mother is on the telephone.
**Alfred Vanderbilt:** Bother! We're late already. We'll never make it to the dock by 10. *Picking up the phone* Hello?
**Alice Vanderbilt:** Alfred, did you see the notice in today's newspaper? The German ambassador warns that the war zone is in effect for all ships!
**Alfred Vanderbilt:** Don't worry, Mother. They wouldn't dare sink the *Lusitania*. It's not some merchant ship—it's the grandest ocean liner in the world!
**Alice Vanderbilt:** I wish you wouldn't go, Alfred.
**Alfred Vanderbilt:** Now Mother, I'm going, but I'll be back before you know it. I want to be there to see that horse of mine run in the London Derby.

**SCENE 6**

**Narrator E:** On May 7, 1915, Schweiger's U-boat is off the coast of Ireland—and low on fuel. It's about to return to Germany when the *Lusitania* appears.
**Schweiger:** Submerge and steer straight for her, men!
**Narrator A:** As the U-boat slips undetected through the cold waters, lunch is being served aboard the *Lusitania*.
**Passenger 1:** What would you do if a torpedo hit us?
**Passenger 2:** I'd have another drink. May as well—I'm an
unmarried man, so I’m probably not going to get a place on a lifeboat. Women and children go first!

Narrator B: At that moment, the German U-boat commander gives the order.

Schweiger: Fire the torpedo!

Narrator C: The torpedo strikes the bow of the Lusitania. The ship starts to sink.

Schweiger (looking through the periscope): They are in a panic! They’re lowering only a few lifeboats—and many boats are coming down head first and filling with water.

SCENE 7

Narrator D: The death toll is 1,198 people, 128 of whom were Americans. Alfred Vanderbilt was one of them. In the U.S., people are furious. Reporters corner the German ambassador, Count von Bernstorff, at a train station in New York City.

Reporter 1: Don’t you think you should make some statement, sir?

Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff: I will not say one word.

Reporter 2: Do you think sinking the Lusitania was justified?

Bernstorff: I said that I wouldn’t say a word.

Reporter 3: Don’t you think it was cold-blooded murder?

Bernstorff: I am my government’s representative.

Reporter 4: Don’t you know that more than 100 Americans have been murdered, and that people think you ought to make a statement?

Bernstorff (yelling): Let them think! I shall not say one word!

SCENE 8

Narrator E: Many Americans call for the U.S. to declare war against Germany. After three days in seclusion, President Wilson confers with his aides.

House: Is this it, Mr. President? Are we going to war?

Wilson (sadly): No.

Lansing: No?

Wilson: We must go on being an example of peace for the world.

Lansing: Many people will be surprised by your decision, sir.

Wilson: How can we help by joining the fight? We must work to persuade the warring nations to come to an agreement.

SCENE 9

Narrator A: In September 1915, Germany announces that it will not sink any more passenger liners. For the next 17 months, the U.S. stays out of the war. But in Europe, the war drags on. Every day, thousands of soldiers are killed without any progress being made by either side. With their supply lines still blocked by British ships, the Germans become desperate.

Tirpitz: Do you agree, Hollweg, that we must resume sinking all ships, even American ones, that supply Britain if we’re to have any hope of victory?

Hollweg: Yes. Only such a U-boat campaign can defeat Britain. It is our last chance.

Kaiser: If we want a speedy end to the war, the U-boat campaign should begin February 1, 1917.

Hollweg: This will mean war with the U.S., you realize.

Wilhelm: I know. But we are prepared to deal with that.

SCENE 10

Narrator B: Wilson breaks off diplomatic relations with Germany when he learns of the new U-boat campaign. In March 1917, three American merchant ships are sunk by U-boats. On April 2, Wilson goes to Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Germany.

Narrator C: As he travels back to the White House, people line the streets and cheer.

Wilson (to an aide): My message today was a message of death for our young men. How strange it seems to applaud that.

EPILOGUE

Narrator D: The war dragged on for another 19 months. By the time it ended in November 1918, nearly 9 million soldiers—including more than 116,500 Americans—and 6 million civilians had been killed.

Narrator E: Europe never recovered from its wounds. Just 21 years later, Germany would once again play a key role in a new bitterly fought conflict: World War II.

—Clare McHugh