

"A lot of the shallow wrecks were dynamited or wire-dragged because they were considered navigational hazards," says CSI's John McCord. "At 250 feet, the *E.M. Clark* is still completely intact. And that's what makes it iconic." Photo: NOAA/CSI

IN THE EARLY STAGES OF WORLD WAR II, EAST COAST SHIPS HAD ONE PURPOSE: KEEP OUR EUROPEAN ALLIES FLUSH WITH RESOURCES. ARMS. FOOD. FUEL. BUT GERMAN U-BOATS HAD ANOTHER MISSION: SINK EVERYTHING.

On March 18, 1942 the *E.M. Clark* was 22 miles southwest of Hatteras, completely blacked out, until a thunderstorm lit her up — and two torpedoes took her out — dropping the nearly 10,000-ton tanker 240 feet to the seafloor inside of ten minutes. One week later, the *Dixie Arrow* met a similar fate, except this time three torpedoes detonated the 96,000 barrels of crude oil onboard. She blazed for a full day, slowly drifting toward shore. Come April 7, it was the *British Splendour's* time to burn and bottom out.

Four months into the war, and the Nazis were officially kicking our butt. By the end of July, 397 vessels would meet their doom between America's East and Gulf Coasts, the bulk of the action occurring off the Outer Banks. In his book, *War Zone*, North Carolina maritime historian Kevin Duffus says America's first six months of 1942 marked "one of its worst defeats of the Second World War" as "nearly 5,000 people were burned to death, were crushed, drowned or vanished into the sea."

But more shocking than the numbers is how so few people know these battles took place. Ask the average U.S. citizen about our role in WWII and they usually start with Pearl Harbor and end with Hiroshima, with a little D-Day in-between. Ask anyone who's done a little diving off the Outer Banks, however, and they'll give you a completely different story.

"When you get down there on one of those big wrecks, it boggles the mind," says Marc Corbett, who when not researching and identifying nearshore wrecks works as a mate for two Hatteras dive charters, *Lion's Paw* and *Under Pressure*. "Your knees are in the sand as you're looking up at one of these monoliths, and it's blocking out your whole field of view. You feel like one of those monkeys in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. When you realize Adolf Hitler's U-boats were sinking those things out there every other day, it's like, 'Wow, we really could have lost the war.' And they don't exist to the world, except when a fishing boat snags a line on one." ▶

JUST OFF OUR SHORES LURKS A MODERN WONDER OF WORLD-CLASS DIVING — AND A STUNNING MEMORIAL TO OUR WARTIME PAST. ITS FUTURE, HOWEVER, MAY BRING A WHOLE NEW BATTLE.

WHAT LIES BENEATH