

U-BOAT DEATH



Background: Sailors aboard destroyer USS *Borie* (DD-215) blaze away with a .30-caliber machine gun and small arms at men of the German submarine *U-405* in the first hours of November 1, 1943. *Borie*'s bow is stuck atop *U-405*'s foredeck after a failed attempt to ram the sub. The two vessels fought a battle to the death off the Azores in the North Atlantic.

MATCH

The sky was dark. The sea roared.
Water flooded in through gashes in USS Borie's hull.
But her crew fought on.
U-405 wasn't getting away, no matter what the cost.

by Mark Weisenmiller





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“RADAR CONTACT, BEARING 095 DEGREES, RANGE 65-HUNDRED YARDS!” The radar operator’s shout sent a wave of excitement tinged with anxiety through the men of the destroyer USS *Borie* (DD-215). It was only 8 P.M. but it was already dark as pitch on the North Atlantic that night, October 31, 1943. Somewhere out in the darkness was a U-boat, a submarine of the deadly Nazi German wolf packs that prowled the North Atlantic.

The *Borie*’s mission was to protect Allied convoys of war supplies and troops by hunting and killing U-boats (from the German *U-boot*, short for *Unterseeboot*, or “Undersea boat”). Now her defining moment had come. Starting with the first radar contact on that dark Halloween night, the *Borie* and her crew would enter into a two-day ordeal battling U-boats. Fought mostly in the black of night, during a storm and with seas running high, the battle would leave the *Borie* both victorious and defeated. And her crew—at least those who survived—would have a gut-wrenching story to tell.

The *Borie* had nearly a quarter century behind her as she swung into action that October night. A member of the *Clemson* class of flush-deck, four-stacker destroyers originally planned for use in World War I, she slid down the ways of the William Cramp and Sons shipyard in Philadelphia on October 4, 1919, just 11 months after Armistice Day. She was named for Adolph E. Borie, navy secretary for one year under President Ulysses S. Grant.

During the tense peace in the decades after World War I, the *Borie* served in the Black Sea, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. In December 1941, when the United States entered the new world war, the *Borie* was in the Caribbean, and she immediately went to work guarding convoys there and in the Atlantic.

In February 1943 the *Borie* joined her sister *Clemson*-class destroyers *Barry* (DD-248) and *Goff* (DD-247) in Escort Unit 23.2.4. Other vessels in the group were gunboats *Courage* (PG-70) and *Tenacity* (PG-71) and patrol boats *PC-575* and *PC-592*. Serving in the South Atlantic Fleet, the escort flotilla operated mostly between Recife, Brazil, and the island of Trinidad, protecting convoys.

Summer 1943 brought a new assignment for *Borie*, *Barry*, and *Goff*. The three destroyers were assigned to Task Group 21.14 for

hunter-killer duty, tracking down and destroying enemy submarines. Built around the escort carrier USS *Card* (CVE-11), the task group would protect convoys, using its destroyers and aircraft to find and stop enemy attackers at sea before they could strike.

As exhilarating as the designation “hunter-killer” sounded, *Borie*’s men quickly realized the reality was more mundane. The main role of their task group was still escort duty, plodding along in the Atlantic alongside slow-moving cargo ships. Many of the destroyer men longed for more stimulating action.

The *Borie*’s skipper—at that time the navy’s youngest destroyer commander at 30 years of age—was Lieutenant Charles Hutchins. In civilian life he had worked for a box company in Indiana. Cool, confident, and able to think clearly in the most desperate and confusing circumstances, Hutchins had the unquestioned respect and loyalty of his crew.



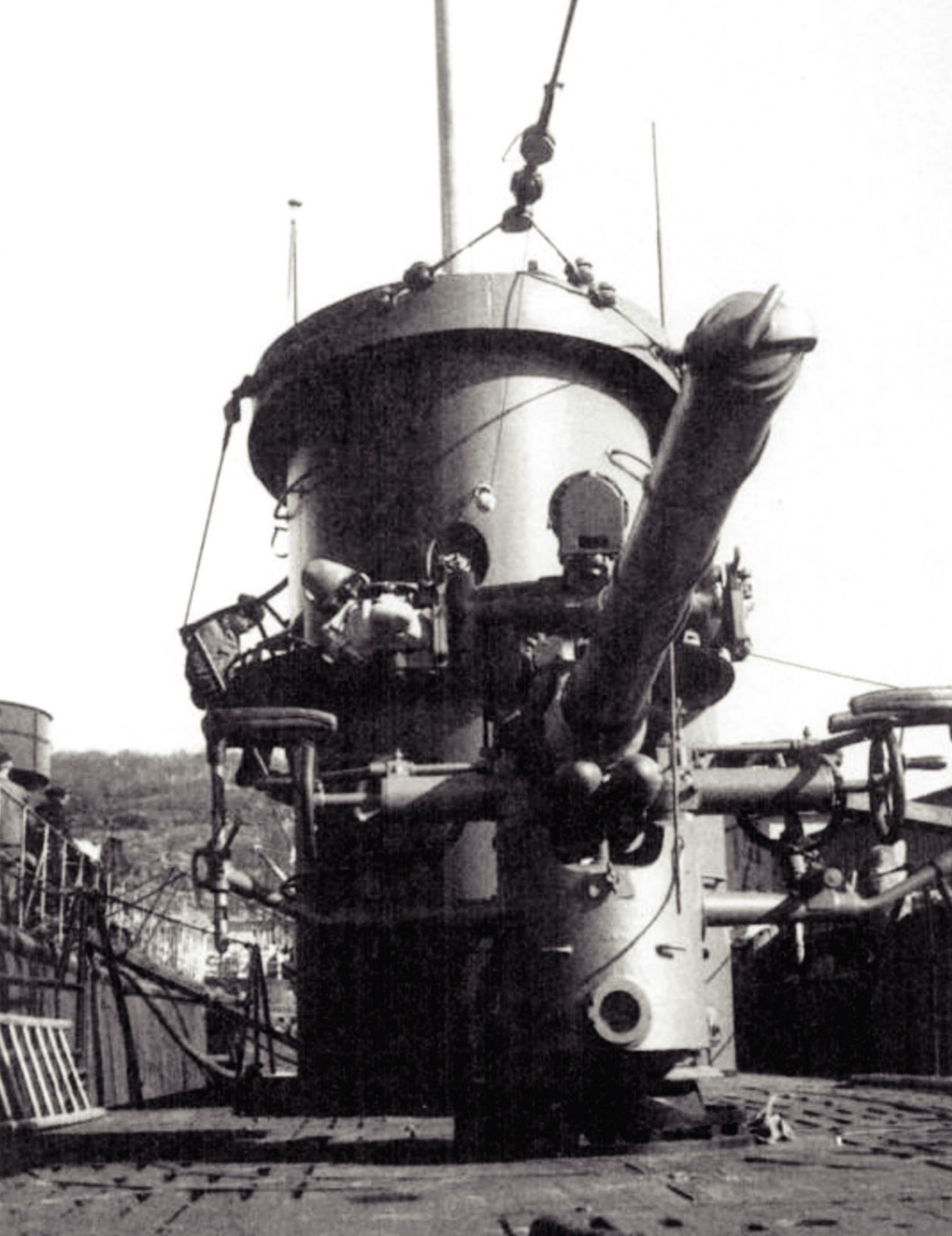
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From late July through October 1943, the *Borie* sailed with Task Group 21.14 on three North Atlantic patrols. The North Atlantic Ocean, with its seemingly perpetual gales and towering tides, was a favorite stalking ground for U-boats, which sent their torpedoes into Allied vessels of every kind, naval and merchant alike. The ongoing Battle of the Atlantic raged on and on as Allied forces struggled to neutralize the U-boat threat and keep supplies flowing from the United States to Great Britain and Continental Europe.

The *Borie*’s unique role in that struggle came to be as she traveled north from Casablanca, Morocco, after escorting a convoy there. It was late October 1943, and she was on her fourth patrol with the *Card* and Task Group 21.14.

On October 31, Avenger torpedo bombers from the *Card* spotted two German submarines, and the *Borie* set out to hunt them down. Suddenly, at 8 P.M., *Borie* radar man Earl Potter shouted

Top: *Borie* first exposed *U-405* by dumping depth charges on her. The sub, painted with the 11th U-Boat Flotilla insignia (seen here on a replica pin) popped to the surface. Above: Captain Rolf-Heinrich Hopmann and *U-405* had so far sunk two ships delivering boats to Allied forces. Opposite: *U-405* had machine guns on her tower and this 8.8cm gun on her foredeck. But her best hope of besting *Borie* was her torpedoes.



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out that he had picked up a German U-boat. He had discovered *U-256*, commanded by Navy First Lieutenant Wilhelm Brauel. *U-256* had been conducting a resupply mission to sister submarine *U-91*, which had already made its getaway.

U-256 was on the surface, but no matter how hard the *Borie's* crewmen strained to spot it, they couldn't make it out through the darkness. Hutchins gave the order to mark the sub's bearing, increase speed, and chase. *Borie* took off at 22.5 knots (26 mph).

Borie Fire Controlman First Class Robert Maher described what happened next in his 1998 book with Captain James E. Wise Jr., *Sailors' Journey into War*:

At almost the same time, the enemy detected us. We were in a perfect position for them to fire a stern shot, but we lucked out. With the obvious success of hunter-killer groups, the sub had recently been converted to an anti-aircraft U-boat. The after [rear] torpedoes had been removed to provide more room to store anti-aircraft ammunition. (Commanding officer of U-256 Wilhelm Brauel told me years later that we would have been dead except for that.)

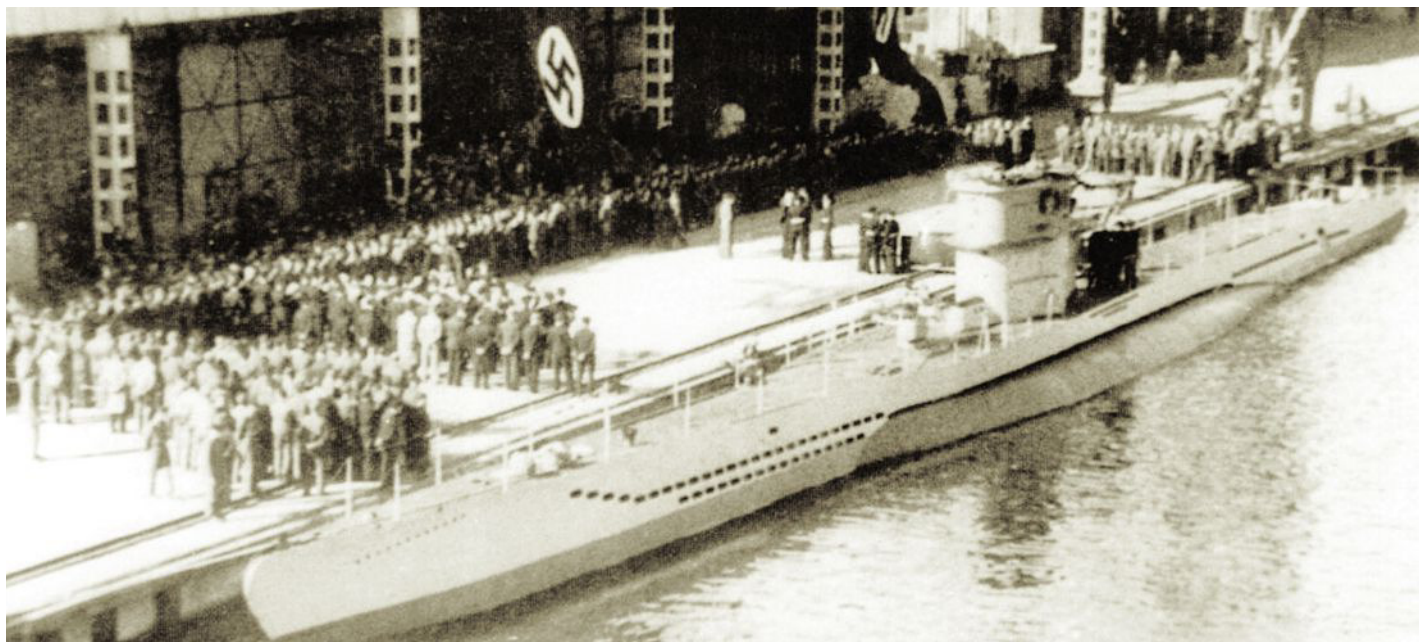
WHEN THE *BORIE* HAD CLOSED TO within a mile of *U-256*, Hutchins ordered a turn to starboard. *Borie's* gun crews sent up a spread of star shells that lit up the dark,

sky. Her stern then starting sliding underwater, and Hutchins was convinced she was no more. "Scratch one pig boat, am searching for more," he signaled to the *Card*. That was just after midnight on November 1.

Incredibly, *U-256* was still operational, and Brauel managed to return the damaged vessel to the massive German U-boat base at Brest, France. She arrived there for repairs on November 17.

Still searching for the second U-boat, the *Borie* cruised along at 17.5 knots, north-northwest of the Azores islands. Around 1:45 A.M. Manning yelled, "Radar contact, bearing 170, range 8,000 yards." Hutchins ordered, "All ahead full, come left to course 170." *Borie's* boilers went into overdrive as the ship quickened her pace to 27 knots. When she was 2,800 yards away from the unknown submarine, she temporarily lost radar contact. But Hutchins kept hunting and suddenly the U-boat was back on the screen, just 600 yards away.

Borie slowed down to 15 knots. Soundman Second Class Lerten V. Kent could hear a crystal-clear "ping-ping-ping" on sonar as sound waves bounced off the sub. When *Borie* was 500 yards away, the U-boat swerved to starboard, and *Borie* followed. Meanwhile, the seas were getting dangerously rough. Journalist John Hersey described the situation in an article for the December 1943 issue of *Life* magazine: "So heavy was the sea's impact that



LEFT & OPPOSITE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

overcast sky—and there, in plain sight, was the surfaced German sub. *U-256* dove immediately, slipping off *Borie's* radar, but Soundman Bob Manning quickly reestablished contact via sonar.

U-256 was creeping along at four knots. The *Borie* easily overtook her and made two depth-charge attacks, blasting her back up to the surface. When the sub re-submerged, Hutchins ordered a third depth-charge attack. The sound of a massive underwater explosion followed, and the Americans saw and smelled a large diesel slick. The German sub surfaced, her bow visible against the

four of the portholes on the bridge—30 feet above water level, and made of $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch glass—were smashed, and after that, water only a few degrees above freezing began splashing into the wheelhouse through the broken ports."

When the mystery U-boat dove, Hutchins ordered the *Borie* directly over the submarine for a depth-charge attack. Chief Torpedoman Frank G. Cronin prepared the ashcan depth charges (so called because of their resemblance to refuse bins) and received orders to drop two. To his dismay, a malfunction in the release

Above: *U-405* (perhaps at her June 1941 launch at Werft Danziger shipyard in Danzig, now Gdańsk, Poland) was a Type VIIC U-boat, well built for combat. Opposite: After *U-405* broke loose in the November 1 battle, *Borie* overcame her with depth charges and gunfire. But *Borie* herself was sinking; on the 2nd, 27 men died abandoning ship. The survivors stood on USS *Card's* deck for a memorial service on November 7.



mechanism loosed all the ashcans in the racks. One cylindrical bomb after another went rolling off the stern and into the sea. Lerten Kent could hear the thunderous underwater explosion that resulted. The crew lit a floating flare to mark the spot where the attack was made.

Moments later, Maher shouted “There it is—about 40 feet to the right of the flare!” Poking up above the waves was a U-boat conning tower decorated with a painting of a polar bear (the insignia of the 11th U-boat Flotilla). The depth charges had blown the submarine to the surface. The suddenly exposed sub was U-405. Commissioned in 1941 and commanded by 37-year-old Corvette Captain Rolf-Heinrich Hopmann, the 500-ton, 220-foot-long sub had already been on eight patrols and sunk five ships.

Whenever Hutchins found himself in the high-pressure environment of combat, he would start punctuating his orders by lowering his head, raising his right arm high, and then bringing it crashing down as if he were striking his opponent with a club. That was what he did as he ordered Seaman Third Class James M. Aikenhead, who was manning *Borie*'s helm, to turn hard to starboard. This swung the destroyer *away* from rather than *toward* the sub. This maneuver, thought Hutchins, would give the *Borie*'s gunners a better field of vision for the upcoming battle. The trouble was, it also made the *Borie* a broad, visible target for return fire.

In volume 10 of *The History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, titled *The Atlantic Battle Won: May 1943–May 1945* (published in 1956), naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison described what happened next:

*Then followed a gunfire-torpedo duel. Hutchins trained his 24-inch searchlight on the target and opened fire with main battery and machine guns, starting at 1,400 yards, and also trying to ram. German sailors swarmed out of the conning tower, some wearing only skivvies, many with long hair and brightly colored bandannas, which offended our bluejackets' sense of propriety and made them the more eager for a kill. A few submariners reached their guns and slammed shells into *Borie*'s forward engine room and bridge, but many were cut down by the destroyer's 20-mm machine gunfire; and U-405's largest gun was literally blasted over the side by a well directed 4-inch shell.*

HOPMANN KNEW HIS U-405 HAD a much tighter turning radius than the *Borie*, so he kept moving in circles, trying to get his stern into position for a clean torpedo shot. The *Borie* kept moving too, to avoid becoming a static target. When Hopmann finally fired torpedoes, his “eels,” as the U-boat men called their underwater missiles, missed their mark, streaking off harmlessly into the open sea.

All the while, the Germans who rushed on deck to man U-405's guns were being killed most gruesomely. Maher described one incident that “was to give me nightmares for months”:

A man appeared on the bridge in the bright and shining beam of our searchlight and started to wave his arms in crossing movement.... Seeing the man on the deck of U-405 waving, Captain Hutchins commanded “Cease fire.” But the galley deckhouse four-inch gun continued to fire. Hutchins then tried to shout directly

across to the gun crew, and we on the flying bridge could hear plainly “Cease fire, cease fire.” Unfortunately, no gunner could hear above the noise on the galley deckhouse, and the big gun continued to boom out its deadly fire. Watching that one man standing alone amidst all the destruction...was awesome. It was not to last. Within a few moments his body stood there momentarily, arms extended over his head, and then his head just disappeared.

GUNNERY OFFICER LIEUTENANT Walter Dietz Jr. next passed down the order “Stand by for a ram!” The men of the *Borie* braced themselves for the collision, but they were in for a surprise. At the last possible second, Hopmann turned *U-405* hard to port. At the same moment, a massive wave lifted the *Borie*’s bow high above *U-405* and brought it down on the sub’s foredeck. There was no scraping of metal, nothing to alert the below-decks crew to what had just happened. But the sub and the destroyer were caught fast, interlocked in a V shape at a 25-to-30-degree angle, neither vessel able to break free.

The battle that now developed was like a scene from the age of sail—gunwale to gunwale with crews shouting, rifles cracking, and blades flashing. *Borie* Chief Boatswain’s Mate Richard Menz broke open the main deck’s small-arms locker with a fire ax and quickly passed out pistols, rifles, shotguns, and tommy guns. There weren’t enough weapons to go around, so *Borie* crewmen improvised. Chief Boatswain’s Mate Walter Kurz threw a four-inch shell casing at a man on *U-405*’s main deck; it hit him directly in the head, knocking him overboard, and he was never seen again. Fireman First Class David Southwick threw a knife at an oncoming *U-405* crew member; it pierced deep into his abdomen, and he fell overboard and disappeared.

While the fighting raged, the sea fought a battle of its own against both vessels, twisting and tossing their metal hulls. The *Borie* got the worst of it. As John Hersey wrote, “The submarine, built to withstand tremendous underwater pressures, was better able to survive the grinding than the destroyer, whose skin was only $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch thick.” Water began flooding the *Borie*’s

THE TWO BORIEs



BOTH IMAGES: US NAVY

Two US Navy ships have born the name USS *Borie*: DD-215 and DD-704. After DD-215 sank following the battle with the *U-405*, the navy had DD-704 afloat in time to fight at Iwo Jima in early 1945.

LAUNCHED IN 1919, the USS *Borie* (DD-215) was a relic of a bygone age when she sailed into WWII service in 1941. Together with 155 other ships, *Borie* belonged to the *Clemson* class of destroyers, named for USS *Clemson* (DD-186) and based on a design created during World War I. The *Clemson* class was actually a re-jiggering of the *Wickes* class, with improved fuel capacity.

Clemson-class destroyers such as the *Borie* had four smokestacks, and her decks lacked the raised forecastle that was common on earlier destroyers. Consequently, the *Clemson*-class destroyers were dubbed four-stackers or four-pipers, or flush-deckers. Sailors also called these older destroyers tin cans, as comfort was seemingly not a design consideration.

The twin-screw *Borie* was 314 feet, 4 inches from stem to stern; 31 feet, 9 inches at the beam; and had a draft of 9 feet, 10

inches. Her top speed was 35 knots. She could carry 122 men, including officers.

Regarding firepower, *Borie* definitely had teeth. In addition to four 4-inch guns, she had a 3-inch anti-aircraft gun, two 20mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns, two .30-caliber machine guns, and four clusters of three 21-inch torpedo tubes mounted along the beam on either side. For coaxing enemy subs to the surface (or sending them to the bottom), she had ashcan depth-charge racks plus depth-charge projectors. Radar and sonar gave her eyes and ears for surface and underwater enemies.

After the sinking of the *Borie* following her victory over *U-405*, another destroyer of the same name took to the seas, in time to fight in World War II. Built by Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company, the second *Borie*—DD-704—was launched at Kearny, New Jersey, on the Fourth of July

1944 and commissioned that September 21. She was an *Allen M. Sumner*-class destroyer, a modern ship very unlike her WWI-era predecessor.

The new *Borie* sailed to the Pacific and helped bombard Iwo Jima before and during the February 1945 invasion. She participated in raids against Tokyo in February and against Okinawa from March through May. While on a raid against the Japanese home islands that August, she was struck by a kamikaze that caused serious damage and claimed the lives of 48 men and wounded 66.

DD-704 underwent repairs and went on to serve in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Decommissioned in June 1972, she was sold to the Argentine navy the next month. She remained on active duty as *Hipólito Bouchard* (D-26) until 1984, after which she was broken up for scrap.

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engine rooms, pouring in through holes torn in her port side.

In the forward engine room, water reached the men's chests. Lieutenant Morrison Brown, the chief engineer, sent everyone up, staying behind alone to keep the boilers lit and the steam up. In the after-engine room, Motor Machinist's Mate Irving R. Saum dove beneath the compartment's oily saltwater multiple times until he succeeded in closing a drain that was preventing the application of suction to remove the water. He broke his arm in the process.

At last the two vessels separated, and Hopmann rushed *U-405* away. *Borie* gave chase with its searchlight fixed on the sub. Hopmann tried desperately to get his stern pointed at *Borie* so he could fire torpedoes; he had many opportunities, but never managed to make it happen. The Americans fired a torpedo of their own, but it missed.

Finally, Hutchins, frustrated at steering in endless circles in constant danger of being torpedoed, ordered the searchlight turned off. He expected *U-405* to make a desperate break to escape in the darkness, and he was right. When he snapped the light back on, the U-boat had broken from its circular course and was pulling away to the northeast.

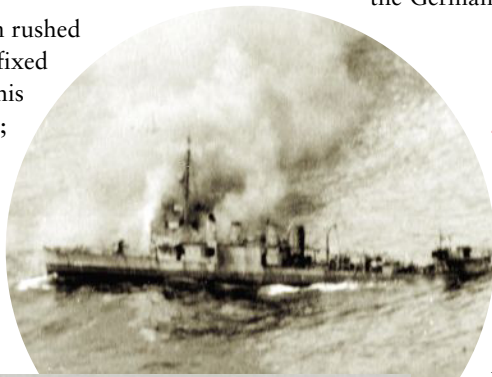
Hutchins pursued *U-405*. He ordered depth charges to be mounted on projectors (explosives-powered devices that hurled depth charges overboard) and set the detonations to occur at a shallow level. Then he put the *Borie* on a path to ram the sub.

To the Americans' shock, *U-405* suddenly turned toward the onrushing destroyer and prepared to do some ramming of its own. Hutchins reacted fast, slamming the *Borie* to a stop that skidded it across *U-405*'s path, with the destroyer's starboard side facing the sub. At that moment, Hutchins ordered the depth-charge projectors fired. Three charges arced from the ship, splashing down on both sides of *U-405*, and exploded. The force of the blasts lifted the sub completely out of the water. Somehow, however, the sub's engines were still functional, and Hopmann made a break for it.

There was no getting away this time. *Borie*'s crew continued plastering *U-405* with gunfire and shells, one of which killed Hopmann. Of the sub's 49 men, 35 were now dead. Finally, the few remaining German sailors realized they should surrender, so one of them yelled "*Komrade!*" The Germans evacuated their sub in yellow life rafts, and *U-405* slid lifelessly below the waves, stern-first, at 2:57 A.M., just a little more than an hour from the time *Borie*'s radar had first detected her. She exploded underwater and sank.

The *Borie* approached to pick up survivors. To the Americans' surprise, however, flares shot into the sky from some of the survivors' rafts. They were signaling yet another German U-boat that was in the area, and soon a distant flare revealed that a sub was responding. Suddenly, radar operator Earl Potter announced,

"Torpedoes bearing 220" (coming from a point 220 degrees clockwise from the ship's bow). The approaching enemy sub had fired on the *Borie*. To avoid the torpedoes, Hutchins immediately commanded "Hard to port, heading 220, all available speed." It was the only way to save the *Borie*, but the evasion sent the destroyer right through the *U-405*'s lifeboats. The U-boat that fired the torpedoes did not come for the handful of *U-405* survivors who were left behind when the *Borie* had to flee. None of the Germans lived.



Top: The abandoned *Borie* erupts in smoke and flames after an Avenger torpedo bomber from the *Card* bombed her to sink her.

Above: Aboard *Card*, Admiral Royal E. Ingersoll, the US Atlantic Fleet commander, pins the Navy Cross on Lieutenant Charles Hutchins, the late *Borie*'s fearless skipper.

AS DAYLIGHT CAME ON, it became clear the *Borie* was in serious trouble. She struggled along through dense fog and seas with waves 20 or more feet high. The forward-engine room was completely flooded and what little electrical power it could generate went to pump out seawater. There was no way around it; the *Borie* was sinking. Hutchins ordered his exhausted men to jettison everything they could to lighten the ship.

Communications officer Lieutenant Robert H. Lord had an idea to try to restart the emergency radio's generator with a combination of lighter fluid and alcohol from the ship's medical supply. It worked, and at 11 A.M. he was able to send "Can steer another two hours. Commencing to sink" before the radio's generator went kaput.

An Avenger from the *Card* spotted the foundering destroyer, and Barry and Goff hurried to *Borie*. But high waves and the great distance from any port ruled out towing the wounded destroyer. At 4:30 P.M. Hutchins ordered "Abandon ship!" and the thoroughly exhausted crew put their lifeboats into dangerous seas, with water a shockingly cold 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

No *Borie* men had died in the battle with *U-405*. Now, 27 men—24 sailors and 3 officers, one of whom was Robert Lord—died during the rescue process. Some died in the cold water when their lifeboats capsized. Others were crushed between lifeboats and the rescuing destroyers. Still others were just too tired and weak from exertion, wounds, and the cold to pull themselves aboard the rescuing vessels.

On the morning of November 2, 1943, Barry and Goff opened fire on the abandoned and unsalvageable *Borie*. But a torpedo missed, and artillery and machine-gun fire weren't enough to sink her. Finally, an Avenger from the *Card* dropped a 500-pound bomb and *Borie* sank at 9:55 A.M. She had emerged the victor in one of the hardest-fought and most unique naval battles of World War II. But her victory had cost her everything. ★

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