

This Day in History... October 17, 1941

The Kearny Incident

On October 17, 1941, a US ship was attacked and damaged by the Germans for the first time during World War II. This quickly led to escalated tensions and the sinking of the first US ship by the end of the month.

In the months leading up to the event, America, who had claimed neutrality, was growing more and more involved in the war. In March, the US initiated the Lend-Lease program, sending money, munitions, and food to Britain, China, and later the Soviet Union.

That spring, German U-boats stepped up their attacks in the Atlantic, threatening to interrupt the trans-Atlantic supply line. The US was sending out “neutrality patrols,” which reported Axis ship and submarine sightings to the British and Canadian navies. Starting in April, US Navy ships began escorting Allied convoys from Canada to the Mid-Atlantic Meeting Point where they met up with the Royal Navy to take them the rest of the way.



Stamp from the 1941: World at War stamp sheet

In June 1941, President Roosevelt worked out a deal with Prime Minister Churchill to send American forces to occupy Iceland to free up British forces for combat. By August, the US Navy established its own base at Reykjavik.

Among the ships stationed at Reykjavik was the USS *Greer*. On September 4, 1941, the *Greer* was fired upon, but not hit. Upon learning of the incident, President Roosevelt addressed the situation in one of his fireside chats, saying, “The *Greer* was flying the American flag. Her identity as an American ship was unmistakable. She was then and there attacked by a submarine. Germany admits that it was a German submarine. The submarine deliberately fired a torpedo at the *Greer*, followed by another torpedo attack. In spite of what Hitler’s propaganda bureau has invented, and in spite of what any American obstructionist organization may prefer to believe, I tell you the blunt fact that the German submarine fired first upon this American destroyer without warning, and with the deliberate design to sink her.”

Roosevelt called this event “an act of piracy” by Germany and issued a “shoot-on-sight” order. This gave American ships permission to fire on German ships, planes, and submarines as soon as they saw them, instead of waiting for them to strike first.

That October, the USS *Kearny* was docked at Reykjavik when a German wolf pack of U-boats attacked a British convoy nearby. The *Kearny* and three other destroyers were called in to assist. Once it reached the area of action, the *Kearny* dropped depth charges on the U-boats and would continue throughout the night. The next day, October 17, one of the U-boats fired a torpedo at the *Kearny*, striking the starboard side. The crew quickly confined the flooding to one area so they could move away from the fighting. The attack inflicted 11 American deaths and 22 injuries.



Commemorates the sinking of the USS Reuben James.

the war less than two months later.



Stamp honoring all those who served in World War II.



The *Kearny* was a US Navy Gleaves-class destroyer.

After this attack, Roosevelt again addressed the nation, saying, “America has been attacked. The USS *Kearny* is not just a Navy ship. She belongs to every man, woman, and child in this nation... Hitler’s torpedo was directed at every American... The purpose of Hitler’s attack was to frighten the American people off the high seas – to force us to make a trembling retreat. This is not the first time he has misjudged the American spirit. That spirit is now aroused.”

At the end of the month, a German U-boat would attack another US ship, the USS *Reuben James*. The *Reuben James* was the first American ship sunk by the Germans during the war. America would be drawn into

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