

The NEW BERN

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Yesterday was when every New Bernian old enough to read or listen to the radio knew what had happened at Pearl Harbor. Ironically, none knew, in the months that followed, the flaming horror off our North Carolina coast.

A few did have a slight inkling, but no more than that. Wholesale destruction of tankers and other merchant vessels by German submarines, along the outer Banks, was one of the World War Two's best kept military secrets.

It all started on January 18, 1942, with the sinking of a tanker and a couple of cargo vessels. The United States was unprepared to muster a defense against the subs, and remained so for nearly six months.

By the end of June, 76 ships had gone down in flames, many of them in the vicinity of Cape Hatteras, long known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. Only 11 more boats were sunk from June until the war ended in 1945.

Much of the credit for the sharp reduction belongs to armed British trawlers that in desperation were transferred to North Carolina waters during the spring, to aid the few available vessels and planes.

Writing in his official history of World War II Naval Operations, Samuel Eliot Morison says, "The U. S. Navy was woefully unprepared, materially and mentally, for the U-boat blitz on the Atlantic coast that began in January 1942. It had no plans ready for a reasonable protection to shipping when the submarines struck, and was unable to improvise them for several months."

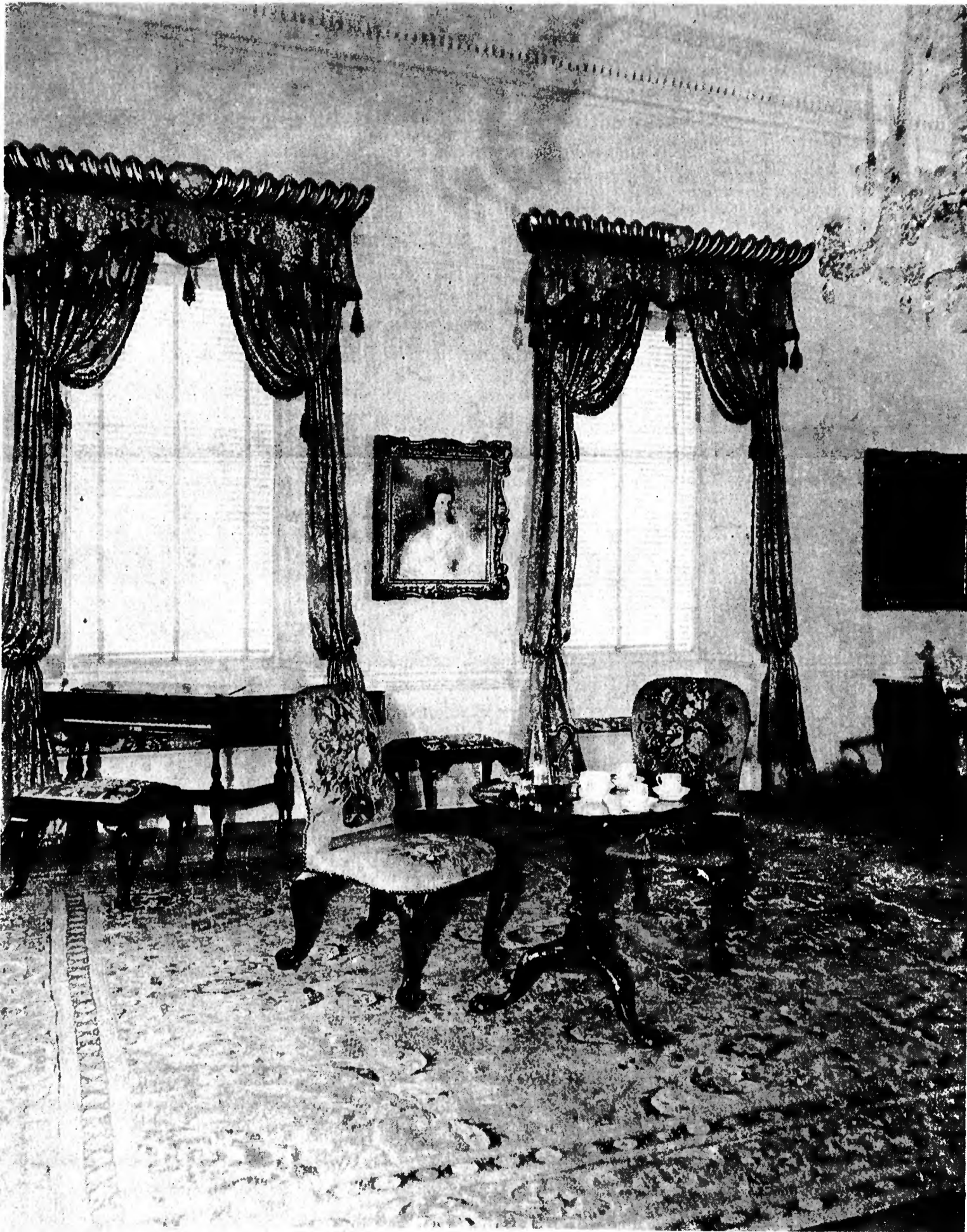
Most of the losses occurred at night, when the subs could operate under cover of darkness, and resulted from torpedoes. However, two freighters were destroyed, probably by mines, off Virginia Beach on June 15, within view of thousands enjoying surf and sun at this popular spot.

After this happened, Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz of the German Navy bragged that "Our submarines are operating close inshore along the coast of the United States of America, so that bathers and sometimes entire coastal cities are witnesses to that drama of war, whose visual climaxes are constituted by the red glorioles of blazing tankers."

Nothing was left to chance by the U-boats. They moved in packs. Each carried a supply of 14 torpedoes, and was capable of remaining at sea for 42 days. They lurked on the bottom in daylight, and surfaced at night.

Before the U. S. finally got around to ordering a coastal dimout on April 18, the subs had an easy time of it. They would approach vessels from the seaward side, so that their prey was silhouetted against lights along the shore.

Frank Blackford, who authored a splendid article in the Norfolk Virginian Pilot some time ago about the raids, told how on January 23 the ore



THE PAST LIVES ON AT TRYON PALACE