

In one of the strangest decoy operations of the US Navy, a battered four-masted schooner was sent out in search of German U-Boats during the Great War. Her secret armament? A torpedo-laden submarine on a tow line!

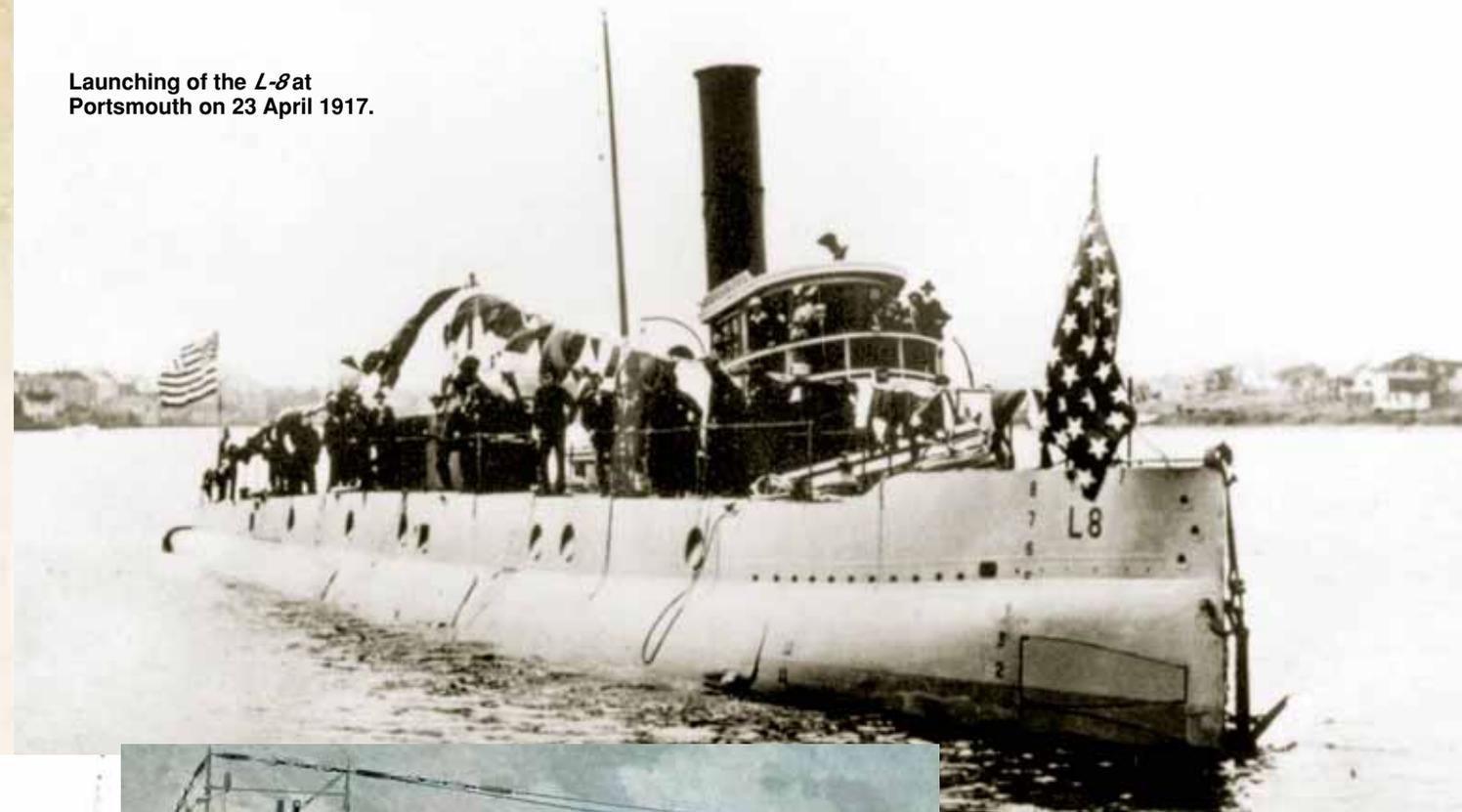
During July 1918, a battered four-masted schooner, the *Charles Whittemore*, lay at anchor off the US Naval Training Station at Newport, Rhode Island. During boat drill, a load of recruits on boot training decided to board the shabby wooden craft. To their astonishment, armed guards appeared on deck and profanely ordered them to “get away from this ship!”

The recruits had innocently approached America’s first mystery ship — a ship preparing for a strange secret mission. The

USS *Charles Whittemore* was no floating semi-derelict, but rather she would be roaming shipping lanes while towing a submerged fully armed US Navy submarine behind her to trap unsuspecting German U-Boats!

This ingenious scheme provided plenty of excitement. Although a war diary and other papers from the National Archives reveal some adventures, many particulars of these top-secret patrols went, unfortunately for modern day historians, unrecorded.

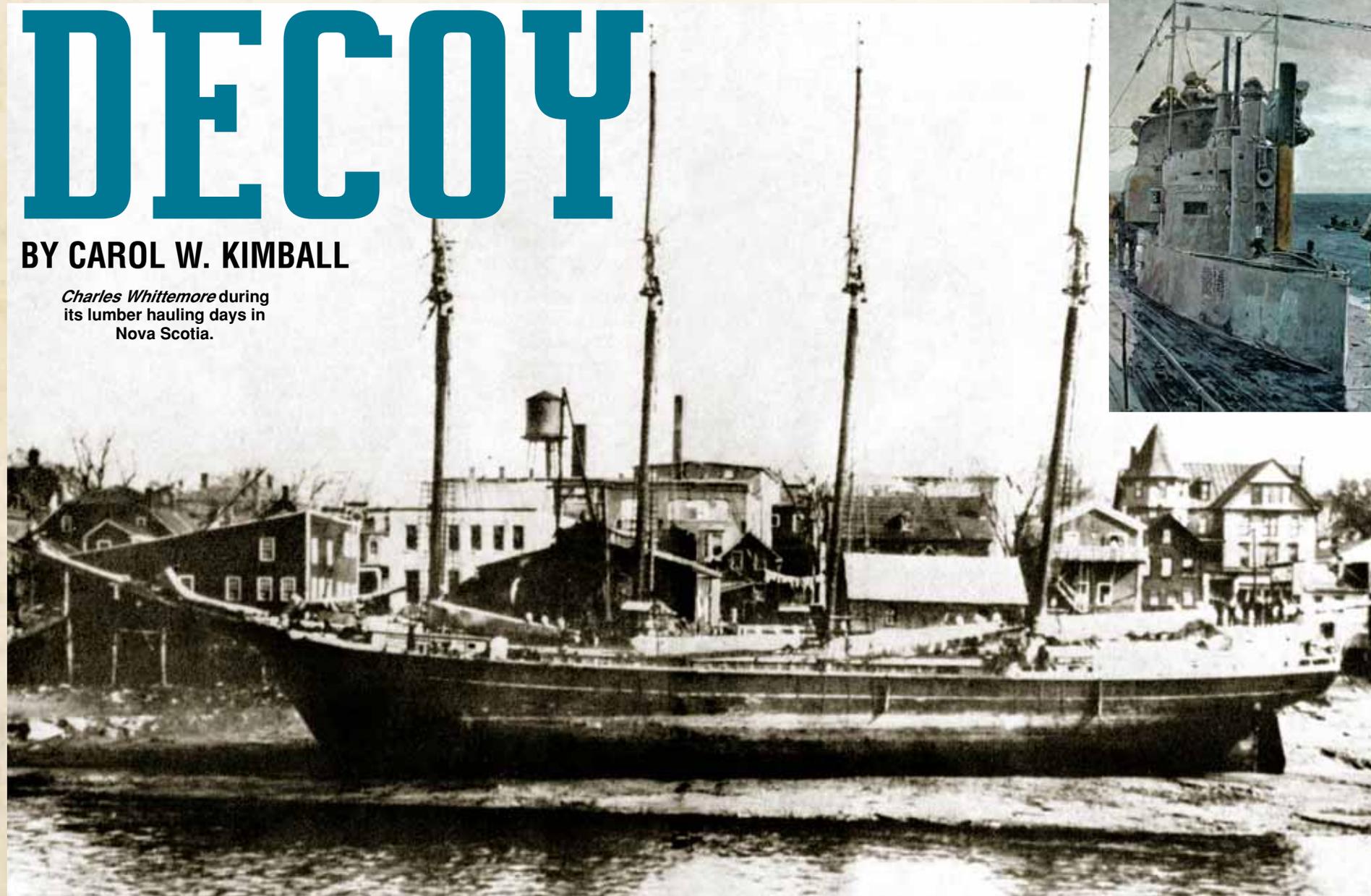
Launching of the *L-8* at Portsmouth on 23 April 1917.



THE TOP-SECRET DECOY

BY CAROL W. KIMBALL

Charles Whittemore during its lumber hauling days in Nova Scotia.



When the vessel did not (or could not) offer any opposition, the German U-Boat commander would often elect to send a crew aboard to see if there was anything worth taking. If there wasn't, once the merchantman was evacuated, explosive charges would be placed aboard and then the ship would be sunk. In this painting by Claus von Bergen, members of the raiding party are depicted rowing back to their U-Boat while the Allied cargo ship sinks. This method saved the valuable — and expensive — torpedoes for more important targets.

in October for Georgetown, South Carolina, with a cargo of hard pine. On routine coasting trips, Capt. Perry's wife went along, making the schooner their second home. All went well until the 13th of March, 1918, when the lumber-laden *Whittemore* lost her rudder in a storm off Block Island, New York. No ocean tugs were available, so the owners applied to the Navy Communications Officer at Boston for a tow to port.

Previous to her Navy hitch, the vessel sailed in the lumber trade nearly 13-years with Capt S.H. Perry in command. Mike McDonald built the schooner during 1905 at Mystic, Connecticut, and his family called her the “ghost ship.” Her launching was set for early August, but McDonald’s yard went into receivership, as the schooner’s owner, F.P. Boggs, of Boston, was involved in a lawsuit. So the *Whittemore* went into the river on 21 September, some six-weeks late, splashing in stern first with banners flying. She was christened by Miss Edna Perry, the skipper’s daughter, and named for a stockholder.

This typical lumber schooner, 582-tons, 177-ft x 38-ft x 14-ft, sailed

The old *Don Juan de Austria*, a relic of the Spanish War, located the schooner drifting near Montauk Point. Without a rudder she was unmanageable in heavy seas and it took the cutter *Tuscadora* and two patrol boats to help the *Don Juan* get the four-master into Newport.

But this rescue led to the schooner’s wartime career. In May, after an inspection at Providence,