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THE PORT OF LIVERPOOL AND THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

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This year, 1993, will be the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic, 1939-1943, with May 1943 as the date when the War with the U-boats in the Atlantic had reached a decisive stage. It was from this date that ship losses, sailing either in convoy or independently, dropped dramatically whilst the destruction of U-boats similarly increased.

The importance of this battle cannot be over-emphasised in as far as the determination of the enemy to cut the very life-lines of this country came, at times, very close to success. Whilst every endeavour to protect Allied shipping was made by naval forces it has to be remembered that, at first, between September 1939 and April 1941 close anti-submarine escort across the Atlantic could only be provided to Longitude 15°W - 19°W and then picked up again between 53½°W - 56°W. Figures of merchant ships lost give some indication of the severity of the campaign, showing a monthly peak of 63 vessels in Oct and 97 in Nov 1940, the latter figure being a combination of sinkings by bomber and U-boats nearly all within 250 miles of NW Ireland

These sinkings accelerated so that in the month of May 1942, 120 British, Allied and Neutral ships were lost from enemy action in the North Atlantic alone. (It is interesting to note here that the number of ships flying the 'Red Duster' currently is less than 600, and falling.) The average monthly figure for that year was 83 vessels. In March 1943 the figure was 82 ships but by May of the same year the numbers had dropped to 34 and afterwards fell away considerably. None of these figures include naval vessels lost in convoy, escort and search- and-kill operations.

At the height of the campaign and because of air attacks on shipping the Ministry of Defence required Coastal Command to concentrate its main strength to "protect the ports on which we specially rely" (Mersey, Clyde and Bristol Channel) and between February and March 1941 Churchill gave absolute priority to Fighter Command to defend the North Western Approaches.

What of Liverpool during these years? The Royal Navy recognised both the strategic position of Liverpool and its port facilities to provide round-the-clock berthing for naval vessels for stores and repairs. The HQ of Western Approaches Command and the Liverpool Sub-command were soon to be established in the basement of Derby House. This was no small fleet to be controlled, eventually comprising, between Liverpool, Greenock and Londonderry, 25 groups of escort vessels totalling 70 destroyers, 18 sloops, 67 corvettes and 10 ex-US coastguard cutters. This force was to employ some 100,000 personnel. Apart from these vessels Liverpool also was to provide facilities for capital ships such as "Rodney", "Barham", "Illustrious", "Hood", "Furious", "Ark Royal", "Ramillies", "Indomitable", "Eagle", "Devonshire", "King George V", and "Duke of York". The port grew to be one of the largest naval bases known in the Empire and the Flotilla Club on West Gladstone Dock known the World over for its cheer and hospitality.

On the civilian side the potential for Liverpool to become the vital UK port in a war had been recognised before the outbreak of hostilities and certain committees and powers were already in place. Nevertheless the transfer of trade from the East and South coast ports was to prove a considerable challenge. The expansion of port facilities to deal not only with the naval vessels but merchantmen in convoys of up to 50 ships at a time, each to be docked, unloaded and quays cleared in time for the next arrivals was to be achieved not only by organisation but by the determination and dedication of all the port workers. At no time was this more evident than during the 68 bombing raids on Merseyside between July 1940 and January 1942 - particularly between September '40 and May '41. In 62 of these raids bombs were dropped on the docks and it is little wonder that in the desperate fight to keep open this life-line of food and war supplies, via the West Coast ports, Churchill was to refer to it as "... the most dangerous part of our whole front". During this time, seen now now as being the most bitter part of the Battle of the Atlantic, 3,966 people on Merseyside were killed and 3,812 seriously injured. Ten thousand homes were completely destroyed with 184,000 damaged and the area became the most severely attacked in the UK outside London. Despite all this the population continued to get to work with those on the Dock Estate averaging approximately 50,000 daily. Ships continued to be docked, turned round and undocked rapidly and often in the most difficult and hazardous circumstances. Within the total war period the port handled 1,285 inward convoys bringing in essential food and war supplies totalling 75,150,000 tons. Some 18,655,000 tons were sent out to battle fronts all over the World, 73,782 aeroplanes and gliders were landed in the port from ships and over 4,700,000 troops passed through, of which 1,200,000 were American.

Apart from the considerable damage done to the Dock Estate the Mersey Docks & Harbour Board salvage craft gave assistance to 202 vessels, some sunk in dock by bombs or by aircraft or mines at the Bar, in the approach channels or in the River. This does not include vessels within the port environments to which no help was possible. Pilot cutters rescued between 200 and 300 persons and a number of deeds of personal heroism are recorded.

The following list of ship sunk or seriously damaged within the port does not record the outstanding services rendered by ships' crews, salvage workers and NFS firemen, pilots and tugmen; often in circumstances of considerable difficulty and great danger to themselves.

Late 1939: Three vessels, not directly due to war-time exigencies but after shoreside blackout and all navigation lights had been drastically reduced in intensity. "Pegu" ran ashore outside Crosby Channel - lost. "Ionic Star", part of inward convoy, overran Bar in poor visibility, grounded on Mad Wharf - lost. No 1 Pilot Boat, "Charles Livingstone" ran ashore Off Ainsdale - salvaged; but 8 pilots, 8 apprentice pilots and 7 crew lost.

Early 1940: Five vessels sunk at Bar by mines before salvage vessels could reach them.
Feb. Four vessels of an inward convoy ran ashore near Bar in fog
- all refloated by tugs.

"Gracia"	15th Jan.	(S.642grt) Mined at bar. Salvaged; later sunk in Irish Sea
"Counsellor"	9th March	(T&J Harrison) Mined at Bar. Sank
"Lady Mostyn"	23rd July	(coaster) Mined, Askew Spit. Sank
"Ousebridge"	29th July	(S.601 grt) Mined Crosby Channel, broke in two, sank immediately. Crew rescued by pilot boat.
"Katanga"	26th Oct.	Outward, mined. Beached by pilot. Later salvaged. Loaded with military stores.
"Dositia"		(Shell) Outward. Mined inside Bar. Broke in two. Pilot boat laid alongside; crew of 57 rescued including injured.
"Gorsethorn"	Late 1940.	Underwater explosion (mine?) at Bar. Sank
"Europa"	20th Dec.	Bombed and sunk Brocklebank Dock. Refloated and moved to drydock. Bombed again see March 1941. Scrapped.
"Poolgarth"	20th Dec.	(tug) In River off Canning Dock.
"Innisfallen"	21st Dec.	(B&I Ferry) Mined near New Brighton. Sank
"Silvio"	21st Dec	Bombed Alexandra Dock. Sunk. Scrapped.
"Elax"	22nd Dec	(Shell) Mined off North Wall. Beached by pilot on Waterloo foreshore. Attacked by bombers, no hits. salvaged.
"Citrine"	21st Dec	Mined at Bar. Salvaged and docked.
"Bifrost"	22nd Dec	Bombed(?) Sank in Alfred Dock. Dock run down, vessel patched and salvaged.
"Buenos Aires"	31st Dec	Mined at Bar, Abandoned. Large pumps put aboard by "Vigilant" and towed into River. Salvaged.

1941

Two minesweepers lost early in the year

"Mancunium"	15th Jan	(M/c Sludge vs1) Mined at Bar. Sank
"Karri"		(Fishers 350grt) Mined at Bar. Salvaged.
"Westmorland"	29th Jan	(Federal 9,001grt) Mined at Bar. Pumps put on board, vs1 docked with name on stern just above water.
"Empire Simba"	4th March	Attacked and damaged in Irish Sea. Towed in with after deck awash. Salvaged.
"Ruth"	4th March	Damaged at Bar. Salvaged.
"Mammoth"	12th March	(MD&HB crane) Bombed and sunk. Later salvaged. Also damaged at same time cranes "Titan", "Hercules" & "Sampson".
"Tacoma City"	13th March	(Reardon Smith) Mined at anchor in River. Sank.
"Europa"		Bombed in dry dock. Scrapped.
"Myrmidon"	14th March	(Bl. Funnel) Sunk by underwater explosion in West West Float. Bombed in later raid whilst refloating. Salvaged.
"Ullapool"		Mined at anchor in River. "Vigilant" and Pilot Boat rescued crew.
"Virgo"	April	Sunk by mine. Possibly wreck "F" about 10 miles West of Bar.
"Nestos"	April	Went ashore in poor visibility on East Hoyle Bank - well to south'ard of Bar.
"Domino"	April?	(Ellerman Wilson) Bombed and gutted in No. 3, Alexandra Dock. Salvage attempted but eventually scrapped.
"Elstree Grange"	April	(Houlder) Bombed and set on fire. Scrapped.
"Malakand"	3/4th May	(Brocklebank) Loaded with high explosive in Rusiksson Dock. Set on fire during air-raid, initially by stray barrage balloon and again by dockside fires. Blew up in early hours after long fire-fight. Most sensational incident on Merseyside. Destroyed whole of No 3 branch and sank two other vessels. Parts of ship's

plates found 2 1/2 miles away. Fire continued for 72 hours. Only four people killed. Branch subsequently filled in.

"Baron Inchcape" May Bombed. Sank by the bows. Salvaged.
 "Stromboli" (376 grt) Bombed. Sank in Huskisson Dock. Scrapped.
 "Skirmisher" May (Cunard tender) Damaged by fire. Salvaged.
 "Sirius" May (Lightship) Sunk in Herculaneum Dock. Scrapped.
 "Clan MacInnes" (Clan Line) Bombed. Sank in Kings Dock. Salvaged.
 "Mimosa" Damaged in Kings Dock at same time as above. Salvaged.
 "Corbet" May (468grt coaster) Set off unexploded bomb when passing Herculaneum Dock. Destroyed.
 "Bra Kar" May Sank in Canada Dock. Raised and off-loaded but then scrapped.
 "Moscha D Kydoniefs" May Set on fire in Harrington Dock. Fire extinguished and eventually towed for re-fit elsewhere.
 "Nadin" May Set on fire in no 3, Alexandra Dock. Circumstances as above.
 "Salland" May Set on fire as above. Saved by Fire Service. Further work by MD&HB salvage team.
 "Cantal" May As above.
 "Asiatic" May As above, Harrington Dock.
 "Adda" Elder Dempster) Severely damaged by fire. Salvaged.
 "Roxburgh Castle" (Union Castle) Sunk by bomb in Alexandra Dock. Complicated salvage operation but vessel eventually dry-docked in Birkenhead. When on blocks the sides split, then unexploded bomb found between stern and dry-dock gates ! Salvaged.
 "Marton" (Kaye & Co 4,969grt) Destroyed by bombing in Langton Dry-dock.
 "Trentino" May Sunk in the Langton sytem. Salvaged.
 "Talthybius" May Survived raids with unexploded bomb in hold and further one in dock shed.

HMS "Hurricane" June Both badly damaged in a/raid on Gladstone Dock and moved to West Float dry-dock in sinking condition. Returned to service June.
 HMS "Viscount"
 HMS "Maplin" Both destroyers survived
 HMS "Adventurer" bombs in Canada Dock.

"Lobos" (PSNC) Unexploded bomb in no. 5 hold. Survived.
 "Silver Sandal" Arrived in port after being set on fire during air attack. NFS extinguished fire. Ship berthed in Birkenhead.

Three destroyers (Unnamed) Damaged in air-raid on Birkenhead

The following vessels were damaged in one way or another but survived after fire services and salvage assistance rendered in dock:
 "Leopold 11", "Argos Hill", "Empire Bronze", "Keswick".

"Waiwera" (Shaw Savill 10,800grt) Unexploded bomb penetrated three decks in No 6 Hold whilst in Canada Dock. Bomb defused.
 "Hornby" (Alex. Towage) Sunk, then salvaged in East Hornby Dock.
 "Kylmount" In sinking condition after raid on Gladstone Dock. Salvaged.

1941 summary Casualties dealt with: 153. Vsls Salvaged: 125. Awaiting attention: 16.
 In one period there were 60 ships damaged in the port and very considerable damage to the dock estate.

1942

The following vessels arrived in the port with damage and requiring assistance:

"Mosfruit" (fire), "Jamaica" (fire), "Clarissa Radcliffe" (sinking condition).
 "John Wise" (hold flooded), "Clan Ross" (making water), "William Daniels" (sank).
 "Lautro" (fire), "Aegeus" (making water), "True Reward" & "Birdlip" &
 "Tai Shan" accident. "Diloma" & "Empire Mist" (accidents). "Silverteak"
 (fire in engine room), "Empire Rowan" (grounding), "Bonaire" (making water),
 "Lucita" (hull fracture).

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