

Hi all (particularly Mark, Matt & Laurence who've asked me when I'll be doing the next Naval write-up. Here it is).

This time it was a poorly defended Western Approaches convoy which had left Freetown, around the Cape, via Gibraltar, and was now heading through the Bay of Biscay. Destination: Liverpool.

The convoy ran in two columns and consisted of the following vessels.

RMS Laconia

Built in 1921 this passenger carrying liner was owned by the Cunard White Star Line. Displacement was 19,695 tons. Her maximum speed was 16 knots. Normally she carried 2,200 passengers, but having been taken over for "war work" she carried 3,000 Australian troops.

MV British Motorist

Built in 1924 this ship was an oil tanker. Gross displacement was 6,891 tons.

SS Empire Morn

Built in 1941 this cargo ship was converted to a "Camship" (Catapult Armed Merchantman"). Displacement: 7,092 tons. Speed: 10 knots.

MV Brisbane Star

Built in 1936 this ship displaced 11,076 tons. Refrigerated cargo ship. She was a DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship) equipped with 2 x 4" low angle guns (one fore, one aft) and 1 x 12 pdr QF Mk V (AA) gun. She also had Direction Finding equipment and an Echo Sounding Device.

SS City of Cairo

Built in 1915 she displaced 8,034 tons (7,422 tons of cargo and 311 passengers & crew). Speed: 12 knots.

SS Clan Alpine

Built in 1918 she displaced 5,442 tons. She could (under extreme circumstances) carry up to 11,317 tons of general cargo in her hold/on her deck). Speed: 11 knots.

SS Clan Forbes

Built in 1938 she displaced 7,529 tons. Her maximum speed was 17.5 knots. She was also a DEMS. She also had 2 x 4" low angle guns (one fore, one aft and 1 x 12pdr QF Mk V (AA) gun. On this occasion she was carrying ammunition. She had Wireless Direction Finding Equipment & an Echo Sounding Device.

MV Dunedin Star

Built in 1935 she displaced 12,891 tons. She was a DEMS. Wireless Direction Finding Equipment & an Echo Sounding Device were also fitted. She had 2 x 4" low angle guns (one fore, one aft) and 1 x 12pdr QF Mk V (AA) gun.

SS Dover Hill

Built in 1918 she displaced 5,818 tons. Her maximum speed was 10 knots. She was equipped with 1 x 40mm AA gun, and 1 x 20mm AA gun.

MV Automedon

She was built in 1922 and displaced 7,528 tons. Maximum speed of 14 knots.

That comprises the convoy. Now to the escort.

HMS Witch (V & W Class destroyer). Built in 1924 displacing 1,550 tons, speed 34 knots. Armament: 4 x 4.7" guns, 2 x 2pdr QF pompoms (40mm AA), & 6 x 21" torpedo tubes.

HMS Ledbury (Hunt Type 2 destroyer). Built in 1941 displacing 1,430 tons, speed 27 knots. Armament: 6 x 4" QF guns, 4 x 2pdr QF pompoms (quad mounting), 2 x 20mm, 110 depth charges (2 x depth charge throwers + 3 x depth charge racks).

HMS Violet (Flower class corvette). Built in 1940 displacing 940 tons, speed 16 knots. Armament: 1 x 4" gun, 2 x 0.5 mg (twin mounting), 2 x .303 Lewis mg (twin mounting), 2 x depth charge throwers + 2 x depth charge rails (40 depth charges).

Convoy Diagram

NORTH (to Liverpool)

SS Empire Morn
(Cam ship)

MV Dunedin Star

MV Brisbane Star

SS Dover Hill

HMS Ledbury

SS City of Cairo

SS Automedon

HMS Witch

SS Clan Alpine

RMS Laconia
(troopship)

SS Clan Forbes
(ammo ship)

MV British Motorist
(oil tanker)

HMS Violet

TURN 1

Poor weather, reduced visibility.

HMS Witch's radar picks up aircraft approaching the convoy. They are some distance off. The convoy continues on course (Convoy commanded by Laurence).

TURN 2

The Convoy commander orders the Camship (SS Empire Morn) to launch her solitary Hurricane fighter. The German air attack consists of 2 x Me-110 fighter-bombers (each with 2 x 500lb bombs) and 3 x He-111's (torpedo bombers) each carrying 2 x torpedoes. The Hurricane attacks the escort and shoots down 1 x Me-110. It goes on to attack the He-111's but fails to hit any. The German aircraft split up and 2 x He-111's attack RMS Laconia (troopship), and 1 x He-111 and the surviving Me-110 attack MV British Motorist (oil tanker). Defensive AA fire is ineffective. RMS Laconia is hit by a torpedo from one of the He-111's. She sinks slowly (4 turns) allowing a number of the Australian troops to get off the ship into the lifeboats. The Convoy commander (Laurence) is asked what orders are to be given in light of this disaster. He orders the convoy to continue on course leaving the survivors to fend for themselves (not sure the loss of 3,000 Australian troops, many of whom could have been saved, will be 'welcomed' in Liverpool).

TURN 3

HMS Witch's radar picks up a further air attack. Again 2 x Me-110 fighter-bombers and 3 x He-111 bombers. They link up with the surviving Me-110 (minus bombs) from the first air attack. The Hurricane makes a further attack on this raid driving off one Me-110 (unfortunately the one without bombs). The Hurricane continues onto the bombers and damages/drives off 1 x He-111. This leaves 2 x Me-110 fighter-bombers and 2 x He-111 torpedo bombers attacking the convoy. Defensive AA fire is (again) ineffective. The He-111's attack MV Dunedin Star from both sides but the torpedoes miss her. The 2 x Me-110's bomb SS Dover Hill causing damage to her hull and rudder and reducing her speed. The Hurricane ditches near to SS Empire Morn. U-76 surfaces in the poor weather conditions. She isn't spotted.

TURN 4

No air attacks this turn. The convoy reforms. SS Dover Hill begins to drop behind the convoy. The first "straggler".

TURN 5

The convoy continues on its path towards Liverpool. The Convoy commander (Laurence) decides once and for all to leave the Australian troops from the Laconia, to their fate in the water. (That won't go down well with the Admiralty, Laurence). U-201 fires torpedoes. The U-boat isn't spotted. All the convoy is aware of are torpedoes coming towards them from their starboard leading quarter.

TURN 6

The Convoy Commander orders the convoy to turn 45 degrees to port to avoid the torpedoes. U-76 surfaces ahead and to starboard of the convoy. HMS Witch spots U-76 on her radar (and visually) through the murky weather. U-201 is not detected although she fired her torpedoes at the convoy. All 4 torpedoes miss due to the convoys turn. An "object" is detected on asdic ahead of the convoy by HMS Ledbury. As yet this remains unidentified. HMS Witch opens fire on U-76 with both of her fore 4.7" guns. She fails to score any hits.

TURN 7

Aircraft are picked up on HMS Witch's radar. The Luftwaffe return. U-76 crash dives, her captain having decided it's too unhealthy on the surface with a British destroyer firing at him. The "contact" ahead of the convoy is still unidentified this turn. 3 x He-111 high level bombers attack MV Dunedin Star. They fail to score any hits.

TURN 8

No air attacks are detected this turn (much to the Convoy commander's relief). U-47 (Gunther Prien – Ace. Dave's idea) surfaces undetected. The "unidentified contact" is now virtually under SS Empire Morn. Further torpedoes are launched from the starboard side of the convoy. There are two different sources of these torpedoes (U-76 & U-201). U-201's 4 x torpedoes have been fired at MV British Motorist. One hits, and the oil tanker is sinking (she takes 6 turns to sink – some of the crew spend 5 turns pumping out water, but eventually she succumbs to a watery grave). Not good. U-76's 4 x torpedoes have been fired at the Dunedin Star. One torpedo hits and she sinks (taking 6 turns to go under – time for some of the crew to get off). U-201 is detected by HMS Witch's asdic. U-201 fires her stern torpedo at HMS Witch (very unsporting). HMS Ledbury fails to detect the anomaly in the water with her asdic which is now inside the convoy (good job Dave had decided it was a whale, Laurence, otherwise more ships would be heading to the bottom. I think Laurence had worked out it wasn't a sub as it may well have fired torpedoes long before now).

TURN 9

No aircraft detected this turn.

By now the Convoy commander (Laurence) has had enough of "sitting and taking it". HMS Violet is ordered to leave the starboard side of the convoy (where she was covering for HMS Witch who was hunting U-201) to join HMS Witch in attacking U-201. HMS Ledbury also leaves the port side of the convoy and heads to join in the "hunt". Laurence is determined to sink a U-boat and says words to that effective (which I can't repeat here, but he does question their crews' parentage!!). The torpedo U-201 fired (un-sportingly) at HMS Witch, misses. The escorts then lose contact with both U-boats.

TURN 10

HMS Witch's radar picks up aircraft.

U-47 (Gunther Prien – ace – Dave insisted) surfaces directly ahead of the convoy. U-135 surfaces ahead and to port of the convoy. The aircraft appear (3 x He-111 high level bombers and 2 x Me-110 fighter-bombers) over the unescorted convoy (Laurence's worst case scenario – a combined air/sea attack and the three escorts are away hunting 2 U-boats). The 3 x He-111's attack the Dover Hill who has by now dropped well to the rear of the convoy due to her hull and rudder damage earlier reducing her speed. The AA fire (such as it is) is ineffective. HMS Ledbury luckily hadn't gone too far from the head of the convoy. She turns with the intention of returning to her position, and opens fire with her 4" guns on U-132. No hits. U-135 fires her 3.5" deck gun at MV Brisbane Star. No hits. U-47 fires her 3.5" deck gun at SS Automedon. She hits her, causing 50% hull damage (and a "Critical Hit"). The crew's morale breaks and they abandon ship (I'd say that's a fairly "Critical Hit"). HMS Witch re-acquires U-76 on her asdic. She launches a depth charge attack and sinks it. Perseverance paid off Laurence. You 'got one'.

TURN 11

No aircraft detected this turn.

U-47 fires torpedoes, as does U-135. Both submerge. The convoy resumes its original course which is north (towards U-47 & U-135's last known position ahead of the convoy). The escorts head towards the last known position of U-47/U-135. They re-join the convoy. The abandoned SS Automedon narrowly avoids colliding with the Dunedin Star (which is still sinking slowly). The torpedoes fired from U-47/U-135 fail to hit anything.

There you have it. The end of another Wednesday evening's Naval game, packed with 10 x turns of action. As Dave put it afterwards, "that was something really different". It certainly was. I thoroughly enjoyed it (and I think everyone else did, including Laurence who said it had been a challenge, but an enjoyable one).

Dave took the part of the "Game Master" – he brought on the German aircraft (random die rolls to determine what if anything came on each turn). He also 'positioned' the U-boats at the start (some not in a good position) and then it was left to Paul to command/manoeuvre the U-boats and decide which target/s the aircraft went for. I did the 'paperwork' (mainly for the write-up) for the convoy and escorts leaving Laurence free to manoeuvre the ships, launch attacks, etc. He did well. The only thing he may have done differently would have been to try and rescue some of the Australian troops instead of leaving them to (eventually) drown. But that's the difficult decisions that had to be made. Attacking two U-boats and leaving the convoy unescorted was a gamble. Yes, he did well sinking one. There are a number of documented instances of just that occurring. Certainly in the early part of the war. Mediterranean convoys were heavily escorted (even in 1941) at the expense of Western Approaches (hence a destroyer, destroyer escort and a corvette – very typical of those I've read up on in 1941).

For those who like "statistics" here's the final tally.

RMS Laconia - sunk.	19,695 tons
MV British Motorist – sunk.	6,891 tons
MV Dunedin Star – sunk.	12,891 tons

That's a total loss of just under 40,000 tons of shipping (39,477 tons to be exact).

Add to that SS Dover Hill badly damaged and lagging behind the convoy (5,818 tons) where she would no doubt be "picked off" by any lurking U-boat.

In addition SS Automedon badly damaged and abandoned by her crew (7,528 tons). How long would she last!!!!

That's 5 lost out of 10. The most keenly felt would be the troopship and the tanker.

Next time I'll be able to put more individual detail to the merchantmen (although a convoy ran at the speed of the slowest ship unless it was a "fast convoy" – these tended to be Mediterranean convoys with 6-8 ships or even the Queen Mary crossing the Atlantic at a speed too high for the U-boats to catch her).

Watching Laurence have to make decisions faced by the convoy commander's during the war brought it home to me just how good this game was.

You're right Dave, it was something different.

Chris.