

Naval Mining: From Politics to Practicalities

By Captain Chris O'Flaherty - Royal Navy

Naval mines are one of the most pernicious weapons available to any maritime warfighter. Variouslly described as 'Weapons that Wait', 'The Unseen Enemy', or simply 'unsportsmanlike', they have long been a poorly understood source of political controversy as well as of military consternation.

In the 74 years since World War II naval mining has been used, or threatened, on 24 separate occasions. After significant technological development between 1939 and 1945, the sophistication of this weapon has continued to grow with stocks of simple 'contact' mines, actuated by the bumping contact of a passing ship, now supplemented by modern devices which sense the mere presence of a ship or submarine through its magnetic, acoustic or even its seismic signature.

The significant cost of highest-tech mine types means their ownership is confined to relatively few of the 50+ navies that maintain stockpiles of naval mines. But such scientific elitism does not necessarily translate into exclusive military effectiveness, due to the nuanced threat posed by every naval mine.

Unlike the majority of weapons, each naval mine is fitted with two warheads; the first, and most commonly understood, is generally made of high explosive or some variant thereof. Even the simple mines used by terrorist or insurgent organisations such as the Tamil Tigers (2008), Hamas (2010), and Houthi rebels (2017) contained high-grade explosives.

It is, however, the second warhead in each mine that generates its true effectiveness; this is the psychological warhead that is detonated either when a mine is formally declared as having been laid, or is alternately actuated when news emerges of a covert mine being inadvertently discovered by the explosive passing of an unsuspecting ship. The fear created by the mere threat of naval mining can be many times more powerful than the small explosive charge contained therein.



Figure 1 - HMS Volage, her bow blown off by a newly laid mine - 22 October 1946.

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Since 1945 approximately 18,300 mines have been deployed by 25 different state and non-state organisations. Over 100 ships have been sunk or seriously damaged by these mines, including 44 warships, with many hundreds of millions of pounds of damage inflicted by mines that often cost only a few thousand pounds each. These are striking figures for what is apparently a simple weapon. However, poor planning on the part of some minelayers has limited the achievement by naval mining of its strategic objective to only 12 of the minelaying operations in this period.

Beyond poor planning, the need for care in the handling of explosives has seen naval mining strategically backfire on four of the organisations that have employed this nuanced weapon. One of the most spectacular occurrences was in 1946 when the Albanian

government was complicit in new mining of the Corfu Channel, blowing the bows of two Royal Navy warships (HM Ships *Samauez* and *Volage*) as part of attempts to establish exclusive control of their territorial waters; the British response saw both minesweeping and Carrier-Group transits (on innocent passage) to re-assert normality and remind Albania of their international obligations.

The unfortunate mining in 1995 by the Tamil Tigers of an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) vessel resupplying their own supporting population again caused a strategic backlash, as the ICRC temporarily suspended their relief efforts until appropriate safety guarantees were made.

Many such mining events have required a coordinated international response not only using diplomacy to reduce the future threat

posed to maritime commerce, but also to clear mines already laid. One of the most prominent was in August 1984, when countering an unattributed (probably Libyan) mining campaign in the Red Sea required combining the Mine Countermeasures forces of the UK, US, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Egypt and Italy.

With 17 assorted merchant ships, representing 12 flag states, already affected by the mining, a cooperative operation lasting 3 months was vital to restore international shipping confidence in this approach to the Suez Canal.

Over 50 navies maintain mine countermeasures forces, with modern minehunting technology (much of which is unmanned) slowly supplanting the more traditional methods of minesweeping and ship self-protection such as the 'Ollis Gear' fitted to some Battleships in World War I.

Notwithstanding, the mainstay of most navies' counter-minewarfare capabilities remains what is often called the 'Oropesa' sweep, or the towing of serrated wires behind dedicated minesweepers; first trialled onboard Her Majesty's Trawler *Oropesa* in 1919, this highly effective countermeasure has now reached its centenary, and continues to uphold the observation by Ewart Brookes that minewarfare is still conducted 'at the same tactical speed as that used by Sir Francis Drake'.

The political and military subtleties of both naval mining and naval mine countermeasures have often led to the generation of discrete articles, publications and think-pieces that pull together the details evident during each naval mining event, together with some analysis of what this means for both the legacy and the future of the 'Infernal Machines' known as mines.

A forthcoming book has now aggregated this history into one volume that not only consolidates the key factual data of each of the 24 mining events since World War II (including the two ongoing events off Yemen and in the Sea of Azov), but also analyses them to determine the key political and military issues that make naval mining stand out as particularly unique method of maritime warfare.

It also examines the confused international legality of naval mining, with the sole multi-national convention on such weapons already 110 years old and now of such irrelevance that only five of these 24 mining events have conformed to its provisions.

Over 200 years (and arguably 2000 years) of history has seen naval mining evolve into a highly effective and nuanced method of

maritime combat that is rarely understood by those who have not made it their profession. WARSHIP



Figure 2 - Argentine Type 1925 contact mine laid off the Falkland Islands in 1982.

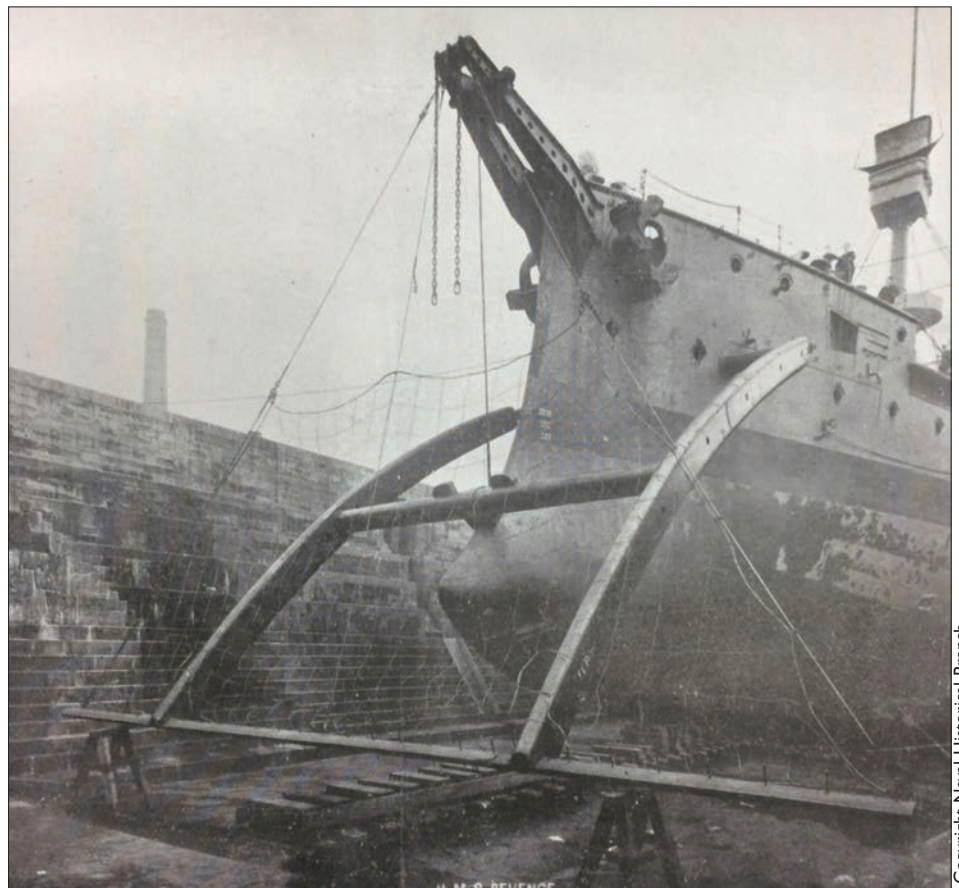


Figure 3 - 'Ollis Gear' WWI Bow Minesweeping equipment fitted to HMS Revenge.

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