

Playtest by John Curry

The 2nd Battle of Dogger Bank, November 1941.

Playtesting the Fletcher Pratt Naval Wargame on the floor of the Officers Mess, Fort Purbrook, March 2007.

The scenario involved a classic 'What if...?' for German sea power. It assumed that Germany husbanded its naval power and put maximum effort into putting a fleet strong enough to contest control of the seas against the power of the Royal Navy.

It was also a large test of the classic Fletcher Pratt Naval Wargaming rules with 1:1200 scale ships .

The German fleet a fleet commanded by Admiral Cordory, with the Bismark (Captain Cordery), the Tirpitz (Capt Salt), the Scharhorst under Capt Mouat and Gneisenau under Admiral Rapier. These were supported by the Heavy Cruisers Admiral Hipper and Prince Euan under Admiral Basset, who was also the Nazi party representative.

Due to the limited sea going range of the German lighter vessels, the fleet lacked escorts, but the Germans were confident of the superiority of the gunnery. When they realised how far their 11" guns could shoot, an impressive 93", they were confident that could outgun the British by 20"+ inches.

The British Home Fleet had suffered many detachments over previous months, but it still had the Battleship Nelson under Captain Essler, the King George the V under Capt Langford, the Prince of Wales Capt Indermaur and the Hood under Captain Anguillar-Milan.

They were supported by ample lighter vessels. On the British left flank were two light cruisers under Captain Dragge and 4 destroyers under Capt Curry. On the right flank were 2 heavy cruisers(Superb/ Exeter) and 4 more destroyers (Capt Brooks). The vanguard of the British fleet had 2 heavy cruisers (Swiftsure/ Minataur) and 4 more destroyers as a screen under Capt Hayes and Bradbury

Admiral Thomas, as the senior British officer, gave a traditionally rousing speech (which can be seen at <http://www.johncurryevents.co.uk/wargaming/fortPurbrook2007/photoofevent.htm>)

This short video includes the great phrase, "engage the enemy more closely". (Which was actually a sound piece of tactical advice.)

One of the advantages of the Fletcher Pratt game is that it takes less than 5 minutes to explain how to play, then play can commence. If the ship cards have the gun range and ship speed on them, then the players are ready to go in moments.

Running a large naval wargame needs referees who understand the need for speed. The main umpire was assisted by Capt Mitchell and Capt Kleanathous. The referees need to measure the range of shot and occasionally intervene when a player steers their ship like a racing car to avoid torpedo tracks. Inevitably, as the tension grows, players attempt to pressure the referees

with phrases such as 'I am sure that must have been a hit'. When a ship is hit, the referee tells the ship owner the damage and gets them to do the book keeping (which speeds up the game).

Initially, the fleets were 20 feet apart, so the referees called for double moves every 60 seconds. This started to introduce pressure and the initial perfect alignment of each fleet started to breakdown.

The British plan called for a right flank to cross the German 'T', with the British left flank sent in as a sacrifice to keep the German right flank out of the initial battle. The German plan was less clear, relying perhaps on natural superiority of German gunnery and confidence in their ships.

The battle opened on the British left flank, where Capt Dragge discovered the need to manoeuvre. The combined firepower of the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau rapidly wrecked the light cruiser, the Achilles. In most 20th century naval games, ships manoeuvre is assumed, but in the Pratt game, it is not. The initial German salvo went over, the next under and as the Achilles failed to take evasive action, the Germans next bracket straddled the ship.

However, Capt Dragge learnt from this experience and the Ajax survived longer by some hard turns. While the Germans focussed their attention on the poor Ajax, Capt Curry, following Admiral Thomas's orders 'engage the enemy more closely' ordered his destroyers to charge. Over the next half an hour, they manage to score two torpedo hits and a dozen 4.7" gun hits on the Scharnhorst. They then continued to engage the Gneisenau, scoring perhaps 20 more hits. The Germans evaded and over the next 30 minutes they savaged the Ajax and then the destroyers. The wider impact of this action, was that it slowed down the two German battle cruisers from going to support their two beleaguered cruisers on their left flank.

While this action was going on. the British light vessels engaged the German left flank and started to score hits on the Admiral Hipper and Prince Euan. At the same time the British crossed the T of the approaching German fleet and the big ships started to straddle the German Heavy Cruisers.

Initially, the British gunnery was more dangerous to their own light vessels closely engaging the Admiral Hipper and Prince Euan, than it was to the Germans. One of the destroyer Captains was heard to yell, "Do the battleships know which side they are on"? The number of shell splashes (golf tees) seemed to confuse the British as the Capts seemed unclear which splashes were from which salvo. However, the sheer weight of fire (50 guns) started to tell and the German cruisers started to slow down and their guns fell silently. As soon as a ship slows down, it becomes much easier to hit in the Pratt game.

As the Bismark, followed by the Tirpitz started to close, they started to hit the Hood. The Germans started to line up their target arrows by the Tectonic trick of lying on the floor to aim. This considerably increased their accuracy.

Cunningly the Capt of the Hood, Anguillar Milan, made out his ship was badly damaged by slowing down and not returning fire. The only indication that players get of a hit on the enemy is the sight of a red golf tee, so most people assess the damage on the enemy by what the target actually does. However, the Hood was not seriously damaged and its first salvo put 4 * 15" shells onto the centre of the Bismark, making the German battleship judder.

The Germans realised that the tide was turning. They had lost the Admiral Hipper, Prince Euan was badly damaged, the Scharnhorst was at 9 kn and its sister ship, Gneisenau had taken 1/3rd damage. Although they had sunk some enemy cruisers and destroyers (actually 1 was sunk by the British in the confusion around the Admiral Hipper), the British had crossed their T. The Bismark and the Tirpitz made smoke and retreated. The Scharnhorst was doomed, but chance would tell if Gneisenau made good its escape.

The British plan was cautious, but worked. As Admiral Thomas said, if the Royal Navy had lost the day, the Royal Navy could have always tried again with another fleet in a few weeks time, but the Germans could not afford to loose once.

**2nd Battle Dogger Bank,
1941**

