

## TRANSFORMED BY WAR 1939 - 1945

### The coastal shipping lifeline

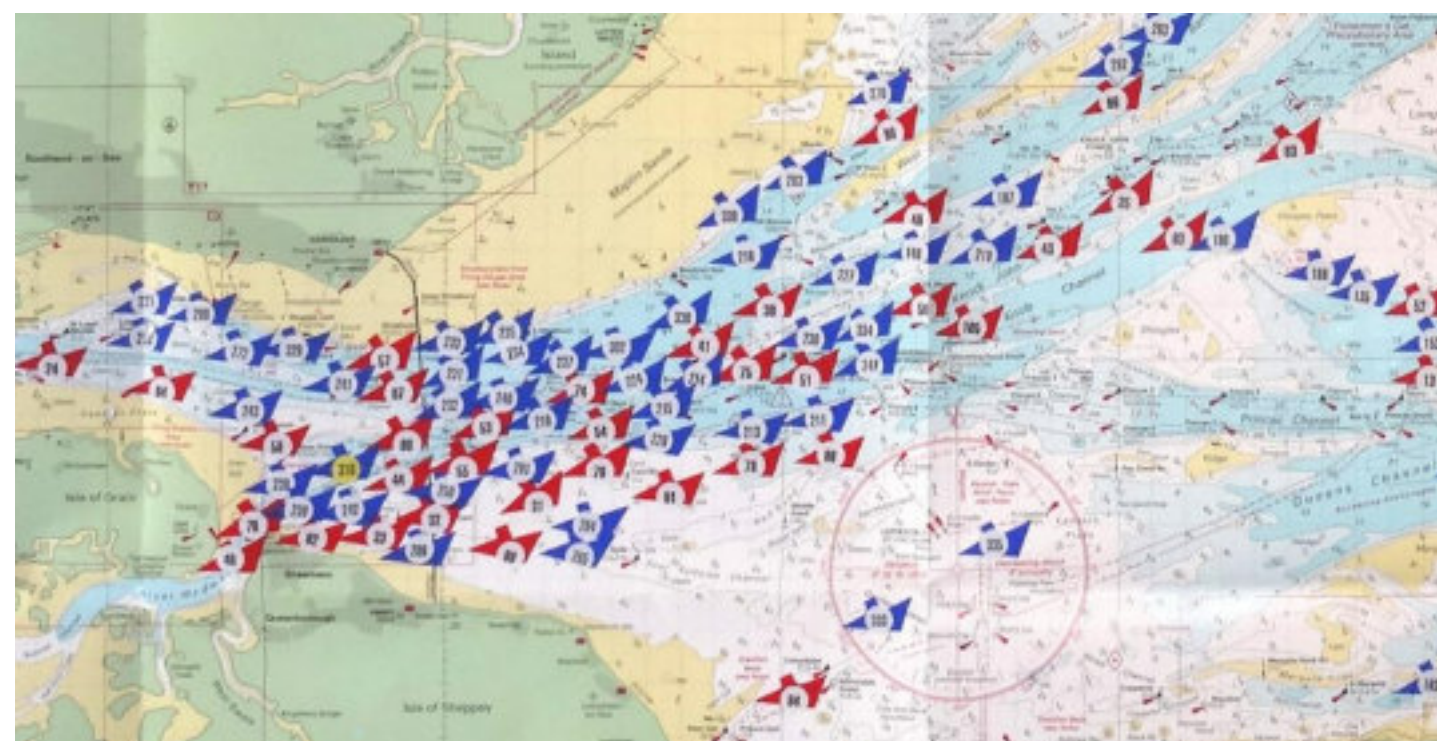
From the start of the war a crisis had developed due to the shortage of coasters, which distributed goods from the major ports. Of a fleet of around 1400 ships about 30% had been supplying coal to France as part of sustaining the French war effort and another 20% had been requisitioned for naval supply.

Congestion delays in port, blackouts and waiting for a coastal convoy turned a peacetime trip of 6 days from the Tyne to London to 13-14 days, effectively a loss of over half the capacity.

In 1940-41 a crisis developed in maintaining power, gas and electric supplies in Portsmouth, Southampton, Plymouth and London itself as all had been dependent on north-east coal carried by sea.

Nearly all coastal traffic was routed "northabout" through the Pentland Firth. Voyages on the East Coast faced the hazards of E-boats, mines and aerial attack; between April 1941 and December 1942, when attacks started to diminish, around 20% of the coaster fleet had been lost.

*"Imagine a convoy leaving the Thames Estuary composed of say 50 ships- at least 5 miles in length – threading its way during the night (without lights of any kind) between sandbanks, shoals and numerous wrecks in a narrow swept channel, seldom more than 6 cables wide with strong tides erratic in direction and rate....The only way of finding accompanying ships is by discovering shapes made visible by being darker than the surrounding night...Dark nights with bad visibility and stormy weather are bad enough but our worst enemy is fog"  
....Captain of a regular coastal convoy vessel  
(From C I Savage UK WW2 Official History)*



300 WW2 Thames Estuary wrecks  
Image: HMS Wildfire Assoc.



The Norwegian Shipping and Trade Mission (Nortraship), established in London in April 1940, operated a 1,000 strong Norwegian merchant fleet outside German-controlled areas.

Norwegian tankers were critical to maintaining supplies of Britain's aircraft fuel.

The steamship SS Hestmanden  
Image: Norwegian War Sailors Museum