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INFORMATION SHEET NO. 30

THE PORT OF LIVERPOOL AT WAR**Medieval and Early Modern Liverpool**

From the time of her creation as a royal borough by King John in 1207, Liverpool was used by several English Kings as a supply base to support their campaigns in Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Liverpool also played an important part in the English Civil War (1642-1649), being occupied successively by Royalists and Parliamentarians.

18th Century

In the 18th century Britain was constantly at war with France, Spain and latterly the rebellious North American colonies, and Liverpool played an important part in these wars. At least thirty-six wooden warships were built in Liverpool for the Royal Navy between 1741 and 1811. Liverpool sailors were often press-ganged or conscripted to serve in the Navy, sometimes without pay. Many Liverpool ships became 'privateers' or armed merchant ships licensed by the King to capture the ships of enemy countries. The captains of these privateers, such as Fortunatus Wright and William Hutchinson, became famous for their daring exploits. One of the most famous actions was the capture in 1778 of the French East Indiaman *Carnatic* by the *Mentor* - the richest prize taken by any Liverpool privateer. On the other hand, Liverpool shipping sustained many losses due to enemy privateers and raiders such as the Frenchman Thurot in 1758-1760 and the American John Paul Jones in 1778-1789, whose presence in British waters caused the town in each case to set up fortifications and maintain a garrison.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815), with their threats of invasion, caused the formation in Liverpool of local volunteer forces. Hundreds of French sailors were held in Liverpool as prisoners of war. Many were imprisoned in the Tower of Liverpool (the site of the present Tower Buildings, Water Street), where they produced excellent sketches of the waterfront and superb miniature model ships for barter in exchange for food and other necessities.

19th Century

During the 19th century the growing importance of the port and the continuing threat of wars caused port defences to be greatly strengthened. Forts were established on both shores of the Mersey, notably at Perch Rock, New Brighton, in 1826-1830. A Royal Naval volunteer reserve force was established, and armed guard ships such as HMS *Hastings* (1868-1886) were stationed at the entrance to the Mersey.

Due to her strong trading links with North America, and especially with the cotton-producing Confederate States of the south, Liverpool played a very important part in the American Civil War (1861-1865).

Merseyside shipbuilders built famous 'commerce raiders' such as the *Alabama* (Laird's at Birkenhead) and the *Florida* for the Confederates, as well as fast 'blockade runners' to carry cotton and supplies to and from the blockaded Southern ports. Indeed, Liverpool became the European headquarters for financing the Confederate war effort.

Towards the end of the 19th century many of the warships which enabled Great Britain to 'rule the waves' were built at the Cammell Laird Shipyard in Birkenhead.

20th Century

During the First World War (1914-1918), Liverpool was the premier strategic port of Britain's 'Western Approaches'. Hundreds of convoys sailed to and from the port, braving the deadly U-boat threat, in order to keep Britain supplied with food and other essentials for the war effort. Large numbers of Liverpool-owned ships were sunk and thousands of British and allied merchant seamen lost their lives in this struggle. Among the most notable incidents involving Liverpool ships were:

1. The sinking of the *Cap Trafalgar* by the armed merchant cruiser *Carmania* (Cunard Line) in 1914.
2. The sinking by a U-boat of the Cunard passenger liner *Lusitania*, 1915.
3. Participation of the Mersey ferries *Iris* and *Daffodil* in the gallant Zeebrugge Raid of 1918.

General Pershing landed at Liverpool with his US armies in 1917.

Liverpool's role in the Second World War (1939-1945) was even more crucial. Her importance as a convoy was second to none in that she maintained a lifeline, with the USA and Canada in particular, which was vital to Britain's survival, and eventual victory. Much of the 'Battle of the Atlantic' against the U-boats was indeed, fought and won from Liverpool. From 1941 the headquarters of Britain's Western Approaches Command was established in the fortified basement of Derby House, Exchange Flags, Liverpool. From there the anti-submarine war was planned. Pivotal to the campaign against the U-boats was the work of the Special Support Groups, composed of escort vessels such as corvettes, frigates and destroyers. One of the most famous and successful of these groups was that based in Liverpool's Gladstone Dock (where a plaque still hangs in its honour) and commanded by the legendary Captain 'Johnny' Walker.

Liverpool's importance to the allied war effort was clear to Hitler, who ordered his Luftwaffe to 'destroy' the port. During the war, Liverpool was subjected to more bombing raids (68) than any British city outside London, the worst being the terrible 8-night 'May Blitz' of 1941. Between 1940 and 1942, nearly 4,000 Merseysiders were killed and 4,000 seriously injured in these raids, which did immense damage to the port and city. But despite this devastation, the work of the port continued. As well as food and war supplies, from 1942 thousands of American and Canadian troops were transported to Britain via Liverpool in readiness for the Allied landings in Normandy, which led to the German defeat in Western Europe.

As recently as 1982 several Liverpool-registered ships were involved as part of the British Task Force during the Falklands War, notably the Atlantic Container Line's *Atlantic Conveyor* (tragically sunk by an Exocet missile) and the *Atlantic Causeway*.

Suggested Reading

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