

Helgoland Bight (Deutsche Bucht)

At the beginning of the war, the German Navy laid a large mine field starting from the Netherlands' coastal waters (near Terschelling island) and going northwards across the Helgoland Bight up to the entrance of the Skagerrak, at a distance between 50 and 100 km off the coast of Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark. This barrage was known under the name of "Westwall". For about three weeks, a flotilla of at least 25 naval vessels was engaged in laying mines along this "Westwall".

The number of mines laid during the period in question could be somewhere between 20,000 and 200,000. But as the distance from Terschelling to 56° 30' North is of about 350 kilometres (170 sea miles) and the 25 naval vessels charged with this task were able to lay thousands of mines per day, it seems reasonable to assume that, by the end of the year, the Reichsmarine could have placed somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 mines.

Home Fleet's surface vessels undertook a number of missions as well, with the purpose of laying mines in the German home waters. Such an illustrating example would be the mission undertaken by the British destroyers *Esk* and *Express*, which laid mines where "Westwall" 'exit channels' were assumed to be (in mid-September).

Mining the Baltic Sea - 1939

War had just started when the 1,555-ton, Greek ship *Kosti* hit a German mine, two miles south of Falsterbo/Sweden, on the 4th of September, and sank after a terrible



explosion in the minefield in the south of the Great Belt and the west of the Danish island of Zealand. Danish Government made public its plans of planting mines in its own waters. From the very first days of the war, the Germans had laid about 1,000 mines at the entrance in the Danish waters and they continued to lay mines during autumn as well. In the early November, gales had loosened several hundred mines from the German mine field, drifting them off the Copenhagen shore, where some of them exploded, breaking windows and frightening citizens with the terrific noise of their detonations.

During six long years, the situation got worse day-by-day. It is difficult to verify and tell the exact number of mines the Germans planted in the Southern Baltic Sea. Many thousands of mines were also placed in the Western Baltic Sea before the winter of 1939/40, and, as a result, the German Baltic waters suffered the impact of a compact ice cover starting with January 1940.

Other riparian countries planted mines as well. The Soviet Navy started laying mines in the Gulf of Finland in late September. An important number of mining activities of the Germans, Finns and Russians took place in this sea area during November and December 1939. The total number of mines laid in various parts of the Baltic Sea during the late 1939 could have been of several thousands.