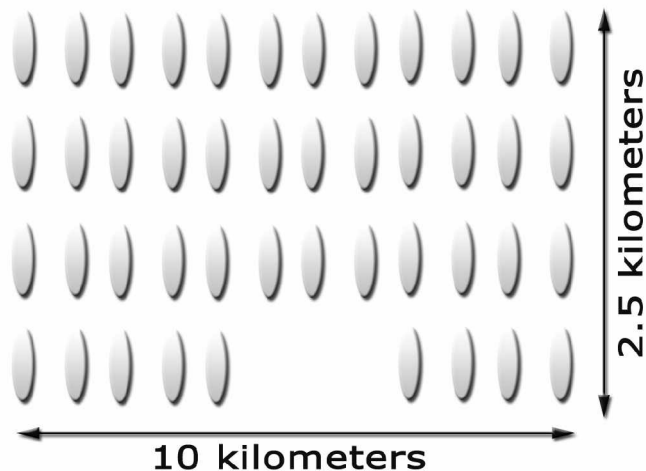


The Merchant Fleet and the Convoy System

At the beginning of the war, world merchant fleet counted 30,000 ships with a total tonnage of about 70 million. British fleet was by far the largest with 20 Million tons, followed by Norway with 5 Million tons, Germany with 4.5 million tons, and France, the Netherlands and Italy with about 3 Million tons each.

As far as Britain was concerned, shipping activity was of utmost importance, so no effort was spared in order to maintain this. Atlantic supremacy should ensure sufficient supply to Great Britain at any time. Allies introduced the convoy system without delay, this strategic display having been very successful during WWI. The convoy system was supported by the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill who



once said that it was "the dominating factor all throughout the war... Battles might be won or lost, enterprises might succeed or miscarry, territories might be gained or quitted, but dominating all our power to carry on the war, or even to keep ourselves alive lay our mastery of the ocean routes and the free approach and entry to our ports"⁶.

Convoying meant that up to 50 ships sailed in a display of four to five columns, frequently altering course by up to 90 degrees simultaneously (zigzagging), while naval escort vessels formed a shield around them. The threat of submarines and raiders was imminent everywhere. Britain announced that it would arm 2,000 merchant ships with guns. In 12 months 3,000 vessels were armed with a 4.7-inch gun each. By December 1939, 5,756 ships had sailed in convoys, which mean that more than 1000 convoys have been organized in a short period of time.

⁶Source: www.usfi.af.mil/dhh/hamon_series/docs/Harmon36.doc.