

The SOTCW World War I Compendium

Edited by Richard Baber

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German East Africa, WWI

Bryan Graves

After reading the fascinating "The Rif War 1919 / 26" in Issue 53, I became interested in WWI colonial history—especially the East African campaign, which led me to write this wargaming article about the East Africa Conflict of WWI.

This will show the guerilla warfare, trench slaughter, and naval invasion strategies that took place. Many nations fought in the area: German, British, Portuguese, South African, Indian, Belgian, and the local tribes-people, giving an abundance of figure and uniform types. The majority of the conflict is infantry-based, with some artillery, ranging from 37mm to 105mm, machine guns, and old-fashioned rocket launchers! But the main killer was climate and disease, as five men died of sickness to each man killed in action.

The Region

German East Africa (GEA) encompassed modern-day Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. This German colony was bordered to the north by British East Africa (Kenya), to the west by the Belgian Congo, and to the south by Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique). Its eastern shores lay on the Indian Ocean. East Africa is dominated centrally by a 1,000m high plateau; to the north and east by Mount Kilimanjaro, savannah, and huge lakes; and to the south by highlands. Additionally, there are jungles, plains, lakes, rivers, bush, rocky hills and thorny scrub land, and villages and towns. The majority of the fighting was conducted in the bush, where the terrain varied from open, slightly bushy ground to dense jungle or forest.



A soldier described the region as follows: "It's almost impossible for those unacquainted with German East Africa to realize the physical, transport, and supply difficulties of the advance over this magnificent country of unrivalled scenery and fertility consisting of great mountain systems alternating with huge plains...the malaria mosquito everywhere...everywhere belts infested with the deadly tsetse fly which make an end of animal transport. In the rainy seasons, which occupy about half the year, the country becomes a swamp and military movements become impracticable."

Brief History

The powers controlling the above colonies, making up the Central Africa Free Trade Area, agreed to respect each other's territory on the grounds that these colonies were neutral. Germany and Britain did not implement this agreement, but the Belgians did, and Germany soon showed what it thought of neutrality by attacking Belgium in 1914. GEA was at a disadvantage as it was surrounded by unfriendly nations when WWI started. Germany recognized the danger of hostilities and sent a capable commander, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, to defend its biggest German colony. Lettow-Vorbeck had overseas experience against the Boxers in China and Herero in South-West Africa and went through the GEA campaign never losing a battle. His unit was the last German unit to surrender at the end of WWI. Lettow-Vorbeck started the campaign with 3,000 Europeans and 11,000 native levies, and these forces were opposed by an Allied force of 373,000, commanded by a South African Boer war veteran called General Jan Smuts, who later went on to found the League of Nations. Lettow-Vorbeck's out-numbered force tied up, pinned down, eluded, and plundered a force twenty times bigger than itself for four years! A point not to forget is that both sides had thousands of porters, as there were no motorised transport systems, and horses died quickly of disease in the interior of GEA. By the war's end the Allies had 60,000 casualties and had lost huge quantities of resources. It was reported that no German Askaris deserted during the war, and these men were later given pensions. Lettow-Vorbeck was a German version of T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). Also, Lettow-Vorbeck and Jan Smuts had fought together against the British in the second Boer War. The strategic aims for the Germans were to tie down as many Allied troops as possible via a guerilla campaign targeting British interests such as the Uganda railway to lessen allied troop numbers in Western Europe. The Allies' main strategic aim was to destroy German forces and increase colonial territory. The campaign was harsh, and Lettow-Vorbeck spoke of wounded men being relieved of their guns, shot through the head, and left to the lions, hyenas, or vultures. The nationalities that fought in GEA were: German, German colonial regiments, East African tribesmen, British, British colonial regiments, South Africans, Indians, Portuguese, Belgians, and their respective local colonial forces.

German Forces

The *Schutztruppe* (protective force) was Imperial Germany's colonial armed force, and it was made up of German volunteers for colonial duty, along with native troops called Askaris (Arabic for soldier). This force was very loyal and well-trained, and numbered 14 companies (Feldkompanie) each consisting of about 200 men in three platoons (Zuge) of 60 men, a signal platoon, and 20 bandsmen. Each company had about 20 European officers and NCOs who were regulars and experienced bush fighters. Each company had two to eight Maxim machine guns and two 37mm light field guns; supplies were carried by 250 porters per company. Scouting was undertaken by some Ruga-Ruga irregulars, who were fast, lightly armed local tribesmen. Occasionally some German settlers joined with these forces. The Askaris were armed with modern rifles and bayonets, and several companies still used the old 11mm breech-loading Mauser with black powder cartridges which produced large clouds of dense smoke. Cavalry was

limited, as horses died of disease in most parts of GEA in the rainy season, which lasted six months per year.

I have seen a picture of what looks like a Napoleonic rocket launcher being fired, manned by a *Schutztruppe* crew, which could have been used by both sides as the weapon and ammunition are not that heavy and therefore easier to manhandle.

Uniforms

Schutztruppe

Officer - Brownish khaki tunic with a high collar with blue piping around the outer rim, down the front of the tunic, and around the upper cuff. Black, silver, and red twisted cord shoulder straps. Brownish khaki trousers with blue piping down the outer seam. Short boots with grey puttees or leather gaiters. Grey peaked cap with white hat band and piping. Officers carried very little except for a brown leather belt with a brass square buckle with a silver centre, with a revolver holster and binoculars.

NCOs - Brownish khaki tunic of lower quality than the officers uniform, with blue piping around the collar rim, down the front of the tunic, and around the cuff to about two inches up the arm. Shoulder straps were of black, red, and white twisted cord. Trousers were brownish khaki with blue piping down the outer seam. Grey puttees or leather gaiters with short boots. Khaki tropical hats were common or grey slouch hats with white hat band and outer rim piping.

Askaris - Light khaki short five-button tunic with plain shoulder straps and no piping. The trousers were of the same material, again with no piping. Brown leather boots with grey puttees. The hat was made from wicker with a khaki cloth covering and neck sunshade, and the whole item was a tarbush which was finished off with a large white metal Imperial eagle. Brown leather belt and bullet pouches with plain brass buckle. Metal water bottle on separate brown strap. Blanket strapped onto the top of a leather or material backpack with two leather straps. A cloth bread bag is suspended from the belt.

There were two coloured Askari officers in 1914 titled Effendi, who wore a similar officers uniform but without the blue piping, with three silver stars on the shoulder straps, a tarbush hat, and a brown leather belt with red, black, and silver thread twisted and worn to one side of the small buckle. They wore knee-high brown leather boots.

Askari NCOs wore the same Askari uniform but had one to four red stripes on the upper left arm and marksmanship black, red, and white lace bars on the forearms which could resemble cuff piping at first glance. The tarbush was often furnished with vegetation to help with camouflage for ambushes.

Naval detachment

Officer - Khaki tunic with four pockets and braided shoulder straps. Khaki trousers, brown boots with brown leather gaiters, white tropical hat, and brown leather belt. Khaki bread bag with brown leather flap.

Rating - Either dark blue or white sailor uniform, with large, pale blue collar with white piping, black boots, and sometimes khaki gaiters. Black leather equipment (bullet pouches and bayonet holder) with rear Y strap. Khaki tropical hat, or dark blue or white German navy sailor cap with rear black ribbon and ship's name.

Ruga-Ruga

Irregular native troops who wore tribal costumes, went barefooted and may have a bandoleer and old-fashioned firearm and / or spear.

Mounted volunteers and reservists

Mostly civilian clothes with a red, white, and black left arm band and a mixture of personal equipment and weapons. These units were absorbed into *Schutztruppe* units and uniformed in khaki as much as possible.

Shortly into the campaign all the above uniforms can be mixed around into *Schutztruppe* khaki or Allied bits of uniform, as not many units remained neat and tidy and supplies were not plentiful.

Figures

Lancashire Games have a fantastic 20mm range of white metal figures for the WWI Colonial African period including British, German, Askari, Belgian, and Portuguese figures (<http://tinyurl.com/sotcw-01>) The following plastic figures are of use: Askaris HaT - German WWI Colonial infantry / Waterloo - Anglo Egyptian infantry. You can do some head conversions on the Waterloo figures from Airfix WWI British infantry as the supply shortages led to all sorts of kit being used. I've seen photographs of Askari units wearing fezzes, peaked caps, pill box hats, and floppy bush hats, all within the same unit. You can also mix and match the HaT and Waterloo figures, because in the same photos the Askari have various leather bandoleers and a mixture of cartridge-holding leather belts. You don't have to mix and match, but I have a HaT Askari unit and a Waterloo Askari unit which resembles Belgian Congo Askaris.

Naval detachment - Airfix WWI figures with cloth caps - I needed some head conversions from the surrendering and stretcher parties to get extra figure poses for the headless *Picklehaube* helmet figures. Airfix WWI Germans, again with some head conversions using Call to Arms British infantry of the Zulu War, or Revell Colonial British Infantry heads with pith helmets. Also, Revell German Navy figures of WWII are of use.

Cavalry / reservists - Strelets Boers or any civilian-looking figures with rifles or shotguns that don't look too modern. Lancashire Games / IT Miniatures do a nice GEA cavalry unit.

Ruga-Ruga - Italeri Zulus, Call to Arms Zulus - Some figures are holding rifles and wearing tunics which can be painted khaki and look great with the native costume. Also throw a few spearmen in for affect.

European troops - Lancashire Games - Nice figures with colonial German bush hats, which look very flattering with a blue rim and band.

Regulars - Airfix WWI *Picklehaube*-headed figures. I gave these figures an Austrian-type paint job (sand helmet covers with red regiment number, light grey tunic with red piping, and blue pants) to make them look a bit different and stand apart from the khaki Askaris. I have no idea if this uniform was present, but it looked good.

Weapons

Mountain & field guns - Airfix ACW cannons with cut-down barrel, Airfix, Emhar WWI Artillery; also, Irregular Miniatures have a large range of cannons.

105mm ships' guns - HaT German WWI 75mm cannon, and pretend.

Maxim Machine guns - loads available, take your pick.

Rockets - HaT Napoleonic British rocket troop, or build your own.

Rifles - Old fashioned rifle / muskets.

Spears / Bows and arrows.

Later war - Armoured cars, mortars, Lewis gun and grenades for the Allies, or if Lettow-Vorbeck can capture them.

German forces had one aeroplane in GEA, which was shot down early in the war.

SMS Königsberg

The German light cruiser Seine Majestat Schiff (His Majesty's Ship) *Königsberg*, armed with ten 105mm guns, arrived at Dar es Salaam in June 1914. At the war's start it captured the British steamer *Winchester*, in August 1914, and sank HMS *Pegasus* around Zanzibar in September 1914. The British salvaged the 4" guns from HMS *Pegasus* and mounted them on carriages which could be towed by Packard trucks to increase the Allied artillery power. Shortly after leaving the Zanzibar area, SMS *Königsberg* suffered a major engine breakdown and had to take refuge in the Rufiji River delta south of Dar es Salaam while repairs took place. The *Königsberg* was camouflaged and concealed five miles into the river delta, but was discovered several weeks later and attacked by two shallow-bottomed river monitors, HMS *Mersey* and HMS *Severn*, with indirect fire called in by a sea plane. *Königsberg* could not see the river monitors and suffered heavy damage, resulting in her captain, Captain Loeff, scuttling the ship after 35 crew were killed and 28 wounded out of a crew of 325. The ship was heavily salvaged, especially the ten 105mm naval guns, which had carriages and extra shells made in Dar es Salaam's railways yards. These guns aided the German forces, and were manhandled by porter throughout GEA highlands, jungle, bush, and savannah to deliver extra fire power to German actions. The guns were distributed to various parts of GEA. The ship's crew went on to act as guns crews and a special *Schutztruppe Königsberg* along with other naval personnel trapped in the area whose ships were blocked. Only 15 crew and Captain Loeff survived the war, and returned to Germany as heroes in 1919.



One of the *Königsberg*'s 105mm guns on its carriage

The Campaign

The GEA campaign started in August 1914 with German raids against Belgian East Africa, Uganda, Congo, Nyasaland, and Northern Rhodesia, and ended in November 1918 with Lettow-Vorbeck still planning raids against the Allies. This encompassed the whole region in dozens of actions, ranging from small skirmishes to large land battles.

There were many battles and skirmishes; this is just a few to give a taster for the wargamer.

Surrender

Lettow-Vorbeck learned of the 11th November 1918 armistice from a British prisoner while planning more raids against the Allies with his far-from-beaten force of 3,000 troops. He decided to surrender to the British at Abercorn in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) on 25th November 1918, making him the last German to surrender and lay down arms in WWI. He and his German troops returned to Germany in 1919 and marched in Berlin as heroes. Many years later, Lettow-Vorbeck returned to East Africa and was treated as a hero by his old Askaris. Ironically, Jan Smuts heard that Lettow-Vorbeck was living in poverty after WWII and arranged a small pension to be paid until Paul Emil Von Lettow-Vorbeck's death on 9th March 1964.

What-If Scenario Ideas

Zeppelin L59

The L59 zeppelin was a normal zeppelin with a 30-metre section spliced amidships to increase the lift capacity, increasing the zeppelin's length to almost 750 feet. The first attempt at such a conversion ended in failure (L56) but the second attempt resulted in the L59. The L59 left Jamboli in Bulgaria on 21 November 1917 carrying 500 tons of medical supplies, military supplies, 48,000 pounds of fuel, and 22 crew on a one-way mission to resupply Lettow-Vorbeck's forces in the southern Lake Tanganyika region in GEA. The mission was to meet up with Lettow-Vorbeck's forces, hand over the supplies, and then use the zeppelin materials (aluminium frame and acres of outer skin cloth) and fuel to help in any way; the crew would have probably been converted into riflemen reinforcements. On the second day of the flight in the Khartoum area in British-controlled Sudan, the zeppelin's captain received orders from Berlin to turn back, as news had been received that Lettow-Vorbeck's forces had been overrun and had surrendered. The L59 turned around and flew back to Bulgaria, setting a world flight record of over 90 hours in the air, covering 4,200 miles with 24 hours' worth of fuel remaining. The real situation for Lettow-Vorbeck was that he'd had to retreat from the rendezvous but he had not surrendered. He raided into Portuguese East Africa to obtain supplies, which kept his force going until its surrender on 23 November 1918. What would the L59 have carried besides medical supplies and a few reinforcements? My best guess would be any combination of the more modern, lighter machine guns; sniper rifles; grenades; mortars; anti-tank rifles; rifle grenades; flamethrowers; rifles; uniforms; and maybe gas or a vehicle or two. The determining factor would be the volume and weight of the weapons and the quantity of ammunition. I have seen a scenario about this called amusingly "Grey Sausage Down" and briefly it's about the L59 running out of fuel in the middle of nowhere and the crew trying to get to friendly territory while being ravaged by unfriendly Askaris and natives.

French Connection

Colonial France was present in Madagascar, and a force comprised of two battalions of infantry (four were planned) with artillery and engineers, was raised within Madagascar. This force was offered to Britain to help fight the German forces in GEA. Britain turned down this assistance as it

was feared that France had plans to expand its African colonies and this assistance would give France a foothold in East Africa.

Friends and Allies

Before hostilities broke out in 1914, Germany and Britain had secret talks about the occupation and division of Portuguese East Africa. Portugal was the oldest of Britain's allies!

These are some facts to generate additional ideas and maybe extra scenarios. This is just a brief wargamer's view of a very interesting WWI campaign.

Scenery

The Square does an excellent range of resin Tribal huts, WWI-type trenches and colonial-looking buildings, along with other items.

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The Battle for the Bundu - Charles Miller

Indian Army in East Africa - S D Pradhan

<http://tinyurl.com/sotcw-02>

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Also links from the above addresses.

Closing the Dover Straits 1914-18

Rob Morgan. Edited by Stuart Emmett

Introduction

The determined forays of units of the imperial German fleet in the early part of WWI, and the even more effective attacks of the U-boats, led to some drastic actions by the Allies in order to protect the vital sea lanes between Britain and France.

The loss of three ships (HMS *Aboukir*, *Cressy*, and *Hogue*) to a single U-boat, the U-9, during the first months of the conflict, led to the installation of anti-submarine net defences at all of the Navy's war stations and bases from Scapa Flow to Plymouth.

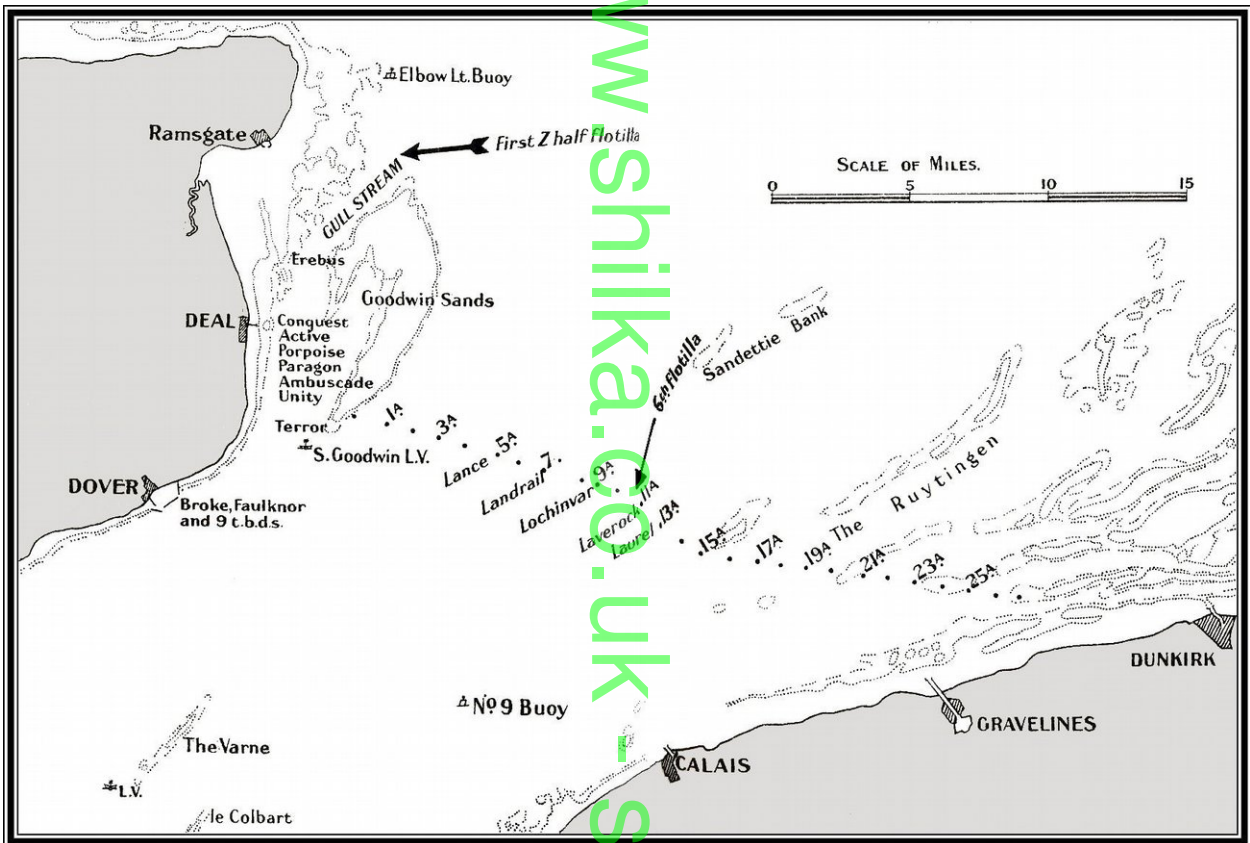
Anti-submarine nets were not enough, though; the U-boat threat continued to rise and the straits of Dover proved a danger to shipping. The U-boat had an effective patrol time of 30 days; if they could be forced to sail around the Scottish coast, their patrol time could be seriously reduced. Many top secret schemes were proposed by the Admiralty—most suggested an anti-submarine net the length of the Channel!

Different methods were suggested, composed of nets, anchored monitors and a barrage similar to that used at Otranto to hole up the Austro-Hungarian fleet. The need for a barrier was pressing; Allied losses by 1917 were becoming unsustainable.

An anti-submarine/torpedo net had been placed from Cap Gris Nez to Folkestone, but it was never completely closed to submarine infiltration. A second extended from Dunkirk to Goodwin Sands, (a vast mined buoy 60ft deep) with flank nets off the Goodwins and the Belgium coast. Subsidiary nets backed up the main line, despite the Admiralty itself considering that the net was not effective against U-boats on the surface or those diving to 130ft! The Admiralty estimated that some 90 enemy U-boats had penetrated the net in only two months of it being operational.

Despite the exorbitant costs, an Admiralty emergency plan was proposed to deny the Dover straits to all shipping. This plan would emplace shallow and deep mines between the coast lines, supported by searchlights. A "top secret" listening device (a form of early echo sounder), which could detect U-boats at three miles' distance, would be utilised too. Like Topsey, new schemes were added and the project grew and grew.

There would be a standard net and mine structure built from coast to coast, with heavier electrically operated mines slung between wooden floats, all backed up with floating contact mines moored in front of the net. Desperately, Trinity House was contacted with a request to release spare light ships which could be anchored along the main net to carry searchlights, and the number of shore-based batteries was increased.



Project M & N

One remarkable top-priority plan started by the Admiralty was a line of twelve 10,000-ton concrete and steel armoured towers (floating blockhouses that were flooded into position), placed on the sea bed from Dungeness to Cape Gris. Nets capable of closing the straits to the enemy high-seas surface fleet and submarines would be deployed between these towers.

Each tower was 180ft high and armed with redundant 12" guns from the majestic class of battleships, (eighteen pre-war dreadnought battleship turrets were available for the task) backed up with anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, a set of the new secret submarine-detecting devices, and wireless stations. Each was backed by interconnecting nets with light mines and telegraph cables slung between them. Each would be crewed by 100 sailors and Royal Engineers.

Several towers were completed by the Armistice in November 1918. If the war had continued till 1919 as expected, the tower barrage would have been fully operational. As it was, this white elephant was never operational; one tower was eventually converted into a lighthouse after the war (Nab Tower) —less its gun turret, naturally!

Wargaming Possibilities

The M & N project provides an interesting game option for the WWI naval gamer, either a one-off battle or a campaign.

It is possible to construct a low-level ongoing 1918-19 campaign in which the Axis play attempts to move U-boats through the net, or a surface fleet attack on the towers themselves. Certainly for the latter you would need more than cruisers for the German force to be able to tackle the majestic turrets with their 850lb shells, capable of penetrating three feet of armour!

The game idea isn't as lengthy as the Dardanelles barrier, but is still a tempting game idea, which could initiate a great sea battle in the Dover straits.

A third idea is to consider that the partially submerged M & N defences were built and updated (a sea-going Maginot Line) post-war by both governments and came under attack as part of a pre-invasion assault on Britain by the German army and air force.

Assuming the guns were upgraded to the 30 available 13.5 inch /45 Mark V guns from the scrapped *Iron Duke* class of ships, two to a turret, the turrets would have been even tougher to crack. The Trinity House boats would certainly have been replaced by faster specialised craft, able to gather and fall back to the protection of the heavy guns if needed, too.

For the Germans to gain maximum use of the French Atlantic ports to attack Allied shipping in the Atlantic, this formidable barrier would have to be reduced by air (like Fort Drum, in the Philippines), and surface fleets (assisted by specialised commando forces). If some of those in French hands fell to the enemy, would a constant battle between the forts have ensued throughout WWII?

Again a "what-if", but the celebrated channel dash by the capital ships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau would have been more risky if facing the 12" guns of the M&N barrier. The stable gun platforms of the M&N barrier were little more effective than a squadron of swordfish torpedo bombers, but their presence could have partially closed the straits, considerably changing the effectiveness of the German U-boat fleet during the early part of the battle for the Atlantic.

During the battle for France it would have represented a secure flank position, making a German attack on Calais extremely vulnerable to the fire of six of its guns at long range. If not indestructible, the sunken towers would have at least proved tough nuts to crack, and this would be an extremely interesting table-top "whatif" scenario!

I'd suggest laying out a pack of towers across a table, each a scale of three or five miles apart, and seeing how you would respond to their presence in the Channel. I believe you would quickly see that their presence would have changed the Royal Navy's use of the Channel during the early part of WWII.

Model Availability

Models of the towers are available from MY Navy in 1:1300 scale (10mm high x 5mm wide), set number 3149 costing £2.00 with six towers. For £4.00 you can complete the entire fortified link from Britain to France. MY Navy can be found at 7 St Peters Lane, Laxton Goole, E Yorkshire. DN14 7UA.

Recommended Reading

I'd suggest reading "The Mystery Towers of WWI", an A5 booklet (36 pages long) by Frank Turner. It is available to buy at £4.50 including P&P from Frank at Glendale House, Marling Cross, Gravesend, Kent. DA12 5UE, or books@seaforts.co.uk

The booklet also contains information on other bizarre developments planned around these concrete towers, including floating concrete "monitors". It's one in a series of booklets dealing with unusual British weapons and fortifications of the 20th Century, so for less than a tenner you can make your table-top Britain unassailable!

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