Minelaying of the Corfu Channel 1946 (Albania - United Kingdom)

INTRODUCTION

1. The Corfu Channel case constitutes the first public international law case adjudicated by the International Court of Justice in 1947, with its subject-matter being the assignment of state responsibility for damages that occurred in the sea, as well as the principle of innocent passage, which is provided by the Law of the Sea.

BACKGROUND

2. The Albanian coast line had been extensively laid with mines by the German Forces during WWII after the end of which Albania did not have the means to deal with the attendant danger. The said mission was undertaken by a British group of minesweepers of the 153rd Minesweepers Flotilla, which - from 11 to 13 October 1944 - established a safe passage within the Corfu Channel. The initial minesweeping operation was followed by checking operations, carried out by the 8th Minesweepers Flotilla, during which HMS Regulus struck a mine and sank (12 January 1945). The vessel sank in 46 minutes following the collision. At the end of 1945, the International Routing and Reporting Authority gave notice that that routes 18/32 and 18/34 of the Corfu Channel, as well as the Albanian territorial waters had been cleared off mines.
3. On May 1946, the aforesaid routes at the northern part of the Corfu Channel were being traversed by British cruisers “ORION” and “SUPERB”, when said vessels came under Albanian Artillery fire, nonetheless without this affecting any of the two, with Albania claiming that the vessels violated its territorial waters.
4. The British deemed the innocent passage across the Channel as being an inalienable right of theirs, which led the UK to order additional naval forces to sail towards the area. On 22 October, a group of vessels consisted of cruisers “MAURITIUS” and “LEANDER” and destroyers “SAUMAREZ” and “VOLAGE” sailed into the Channel. As a result of this action, “SAUMAREZ” and “VOLAGE” struck mines sustaining serious human and material losses. Both vessels lost their combat capacity and in addition there were 44 casualties and 42 injured persons. The aforementioned vessels were towed towards the Corfu harbour by the “MAURITIUS” and “LEANDER”.

5. On 12 and 13 November 1946, the Royal Navy, via Operation RETAIL, managed to sweep the Channel from mines, including within the Albanian territorial waters, without a prior authorization. Albania claimed that its territorial waters had been violated, bringing official charges UK before the United Nations. Overall, 22 anchored mines of German GY-type were cleared. During the hearing of the case before the International Court of Justice, a witness contended that 40-45 German mines were laid into the Channel (17 or 18 October).

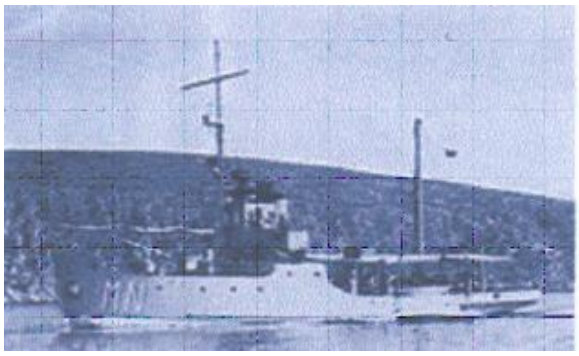

Image 1: Albona Class minelayer

6. The United Kingdom brought the case before the Security Council which, despite the Soviet Union's objection, recommended that the two countries (Albania – United Kingdom) settle their dispute before the International Court of Justice.
7. The International Court of Justice considered Albania an accomplice in minelaying and ordered the country to pay the United Kingdom a compensation of £844,000. However, the Court ruled that the British had violated Albania's sovereign rights, by carrying out minesweeping operations in her territorial waters, without being authorized to do so.

Hellenic Mine Warfare Command (DNAR) information on minefields laid during WWII

8. During WWII, 17.419 mines were laid in the Greek territory, out of which 6.225 that did not become inoperable due to weather conditions, were cleared off by minesweepers in an ongoing effort that lasted almost five years. More specifically, as regards the Corfu Sea region, the northern, western and southern coasts had been laid, as shown in the following diagram.

Image 2: Corfu WWII Minefields

9. The mines that were laid were German GR, GX, GY, and GV type anchored mines, British VICKERS-type mines and Italian TORPENTINO-type mines.
10. Vessels of the Hellenic Navy have carried out minesweeping operations in the sea area between Corfu and Albania. As to the minefield, which mainly includes the Albania-Corfu Strait, its minesweeping operation took place in 1958, without rendering specific findings, which confirms the fact that the minesweeping operations of the British in '44 and '45, as well as the subsequent ones (November '46) that led to the incident of October '46 had been efficient.
11. The minesweeping operation of the minefield located to the North and West of Corfu took place between 10-3-53 until 27-3-53 by a Patrol Vessels Command flotilla, where the channel extending from Aghios Stefanos to KARAVIA islet (West of Corfu) of 1.500 yards of width, was cleared off, destroying 25 GY mines and 9 GX.

General Details on the firing method of anchored contact mines

1. The first and most common way to initiate a mine is by contact, whereby a passing vessel must touch a part of the mine for the firing mechanism to activate.

   The operating principle of the anchored contact mines (GR, GX, GY, GV, GY*, VICKERS, TORPENTINO) is common. When the mine is touched or closely approached, the external soft lead arm bends, shattering the internal glass vial, allowing the acid to run onto two electrical contacts, thus forming a battery, which electrically detonated the explosive.
2. Russian scientist, B.S. Jacobi, greatly contributed to this field. In 1847, following relevant research, he successfully tried mines of galvanic action (such as electrocontact mines) in which the generation of an electric current, produced by the contact of the vessel hull

with part of the mine caused the explosive charge included in the mine to explode. A respective research had been conducted in Great Britain for the manufacturing of a firing mechanism that would require a smaller scale collision and a more immediate actuation. Advabces both in Engineering and Chemistry, assisted by the innovations in electrical triggering methods, led Germany to the discovery of a simple chemically activated mine, whereby an acid vial is placed within a lead horn, protruding from the mine. When a ship collided with such a mine, it would bent the external soft lead horn, shattering the internal glass vial of acid, allowing the acid to run onto two electrical contacts, thus forming a battery, which electrically detonated the explosive. The said discovery dates back to 1868 and is attributed to Dr. Alfred Hertz of the German Mine Defense Laboratory. These became known as the Hertz horns, and were used as the most common contact mine firing method.

3. Aiming at expanding the contact mines' actuation range, some mines were fitted with extensions known as snag lines, constituting 20-30-meter tethers, attached to the horns' ends, which - as the vessel sailed near the mine - came into contact with the vessel and bent or pulled the mine horn, thus causing the mine's actuation.

Image 3: Hertz Horn in actual dimensions (17.5X7X7 cm)

GR-type anchored mine

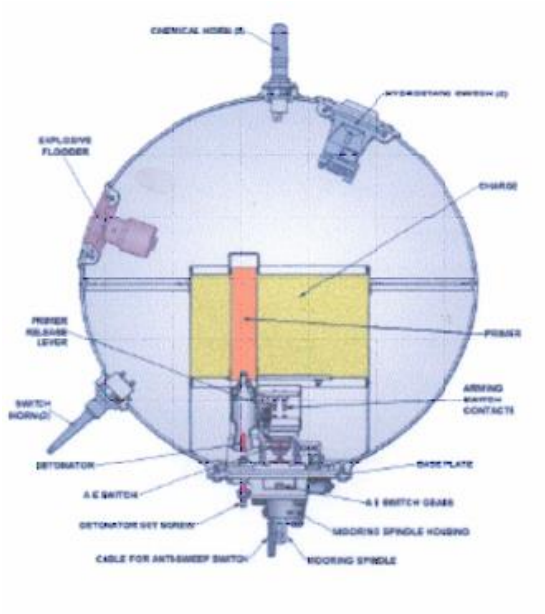

Image 4: GR-type anchored mine

Shape: Spherical

Color: Black

Diameter: 33,5 inches (0,851 metres)

Explosive charge: 90 lbs (41 kg) of Hexanite (equivalent to 50 kg of TNT)

Features: Studded with seven Hertz lead horns, protruding from the mine, where the acid vial is included. One is found on top and four on the upper hemisphere of the mine, placed at equal distances. Two (2) contact horns for the generation of electric current, which is produced by the contact of the vessel's hull with part of the mine, causing the explosive charge included in the mine to explode, are placed on the lower hemisphere at equal distances.

GX-type anchored mine

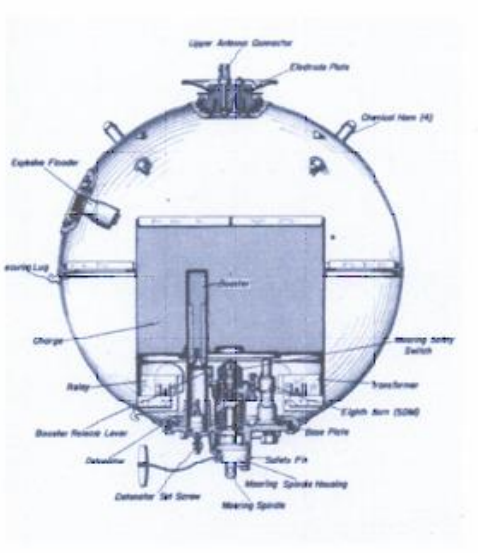

Image 5: German GX type mine

Identical to the GY* type mine, the only difference being that it is not fitted with an Upper Antenna Connector.

Shape: Spherical

Color: Black

Diameter: 40 inches (1.015 meters)

Length: 46 inches (1.168 meters)

Explosive charge: 330 lbs (165 kg) of Hexanite (equivalent to 200 kg of TNT)

Features: Studded with five Hertz horns, protruding from the mine, where the acid vial is included. They are arranged on the upper hemisphere (a central one on top of the hemisphere and four on the upper hemisphere of the mine, placed at equal distances).

GY-type anchored mine

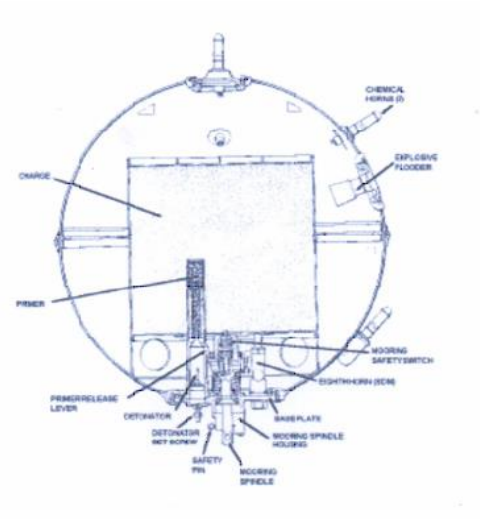

Image 6: German GY type mine*

Shape: Two hemispheres welded on to a 2-inch screw

Colour: Black

Diameter: 48 inches (1.219 meters)

Length: 46 inches (1.168 meters)

Explosive charge: 660 lbs (330 kg) of Hexanite (equivalent to 400 kg of TNT)

Features: Studded with seven horns in total, five Hertz horns, which protrude from the mine, where the acid vial is included. They are arranged on the upper hemisphere (a central one on top and four on the upper hemisphere of the mine, placed at equal distances), and two contact horns to generate electric current, which is produced by the contact of the vessel's metal hull with part of the mine, causing the explosive charge included in the mine to explode, upon anchors placed at equal distances on the lower hemisphere.

GY* type anchored mine

The GY* type anchored mine is identical to the German GY-type mine, the only difference being that it was also equipped with an explosive flooder, an explosive mechanism that filled the mine with water and/or a timer of 80 or 200 days to enable the mine deactivation.

GV-type anchored mine

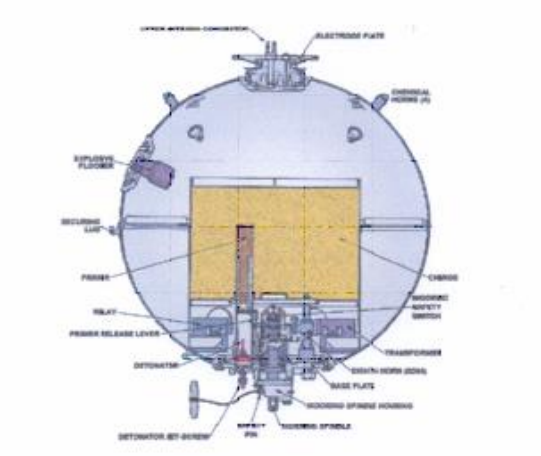

Image 7: German GV type mine

Shape: Spherical, fitted with a top copper electrode plate

Colour: Black or grey

Diameter: 40 inches (1.016 metres)

Explosive load: 330 lbs (150 kg) of Hexanite (equivalent to 182 kg of TNT)

Features: The GV mine was identical to the GY* type mine, also equipped with an antenna, whereas the central horn on the upper hemisphere was replaced by a dish-shaped electrode plate. Fitted with a top electrode plate and four Hertz horns, which protrude from the mine and contain the acid vial. They are arranged on the upper hemisphere of the mine, placed at equal distances.

Antenna: Upper, diameter of 5 mm, having a spherical float of 0,444m of diameter. Below, a copper grid covers the rope/ tether of the anchor, nonetheless keeping it insulated therefrom thanks to a rubber case.

VICKERS mine

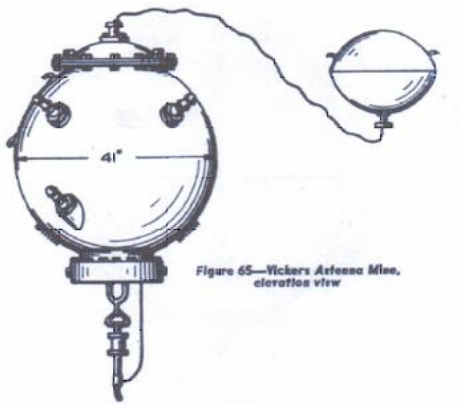

Image 8: British VICKERS mine

Shape: Spherical

Colour: Black

Diameter: 32,9 inches (0.836 metres)

Explosive charge: 220 lbs (100 kg) of TNT

Features: Studded with six lead Hertz horns, protruding from the mine, where the acid vial is included. One is found on top and four horns on the upper hemisphere of the mine, placed at equal distances.

TORPENTINO Mine

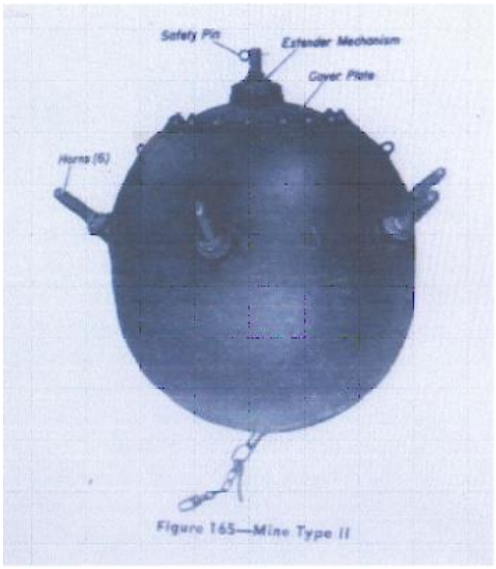

Image 9: Italian TORPENTINO Mine

Shape: Oval

Color: Black

Length: 40 inches (103 cm)

Diameter: 33 inches (0.84 meters)

Explosive charge: 275 lbs (125 kg) TNT

Features: Studded with six lead Hertz horns, protruding from the mine, where the acid vial is included. They are arranged at equal distances on the upper hemisphere of the mine. An extender mechanism or a snag line is found at the center of the upper hemisphere to enable the antenna use.

References

- Ιστορικό Αρχείο Διοικήσεως Ναρκόπολέμου
- «Αλβανικαί Νάρκαι εις τον Δίαυλο της Κέρκυρας», Πύρρου Γιαννόπουλου Ηπειρώτου (Πρώτη Έκδοση 1947) εκδόσεις Ελίκρανον
- «Η ναρκαλιεία στις Ελληνικές θάλασσες 1944-1949», Αντιναυάρχου Αριστείδη Γιαννόπουλου, (1980)
- “The case of the Corfu Minefield”, Hector A. Munro, Modern Law Review
- “Naval Mine Warfare: Politics to Practicalities”, Captain Chris O'Flaherty RN
- «Η νάρκη θαλάσσης, ένα ξεχασμένο όπλο», Υποναυάρχου ε.α. Θ. ΓΙΟΥΡΓΑ Π.Ν.