



All Guns Blazing!

Newsletter of the Naval Wargames Society

No. 180 – March 2009

Editorial

A slight delay this month, but a welcome one as it has allowed me to include something rather good. As noted below the NWS is putting on a game at Salute, using Mal Wright's new convoy rules. The bulk of this issue comprises the flyer that Simon Stokes has drafted as a handout for the show. Enjoy!

Good news – Richard Wimpenny has kindly agreed to take on the role of AGB editor! The plan at present has me carrying on until June, after which Richard takes over. I hope you'll all support Richard as he takes the helm of the newsletter in the Summer.

Yours aye,

DM

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NWS at Salute

The NWS is putting on a WW2 convoy game at Salute this year, using Mal Wright's rules that were also used in the Belfast game. We will also be showcasing a new range of 1/3000 miniatures from North Head in New Zealand. Simon Stokes is running the game and there are places available if you'd like to come along and help. If you do please contact Simon direct (or email me and I'll pass the message on). This year Salute is early, at the end of March

Atlantic Convoy

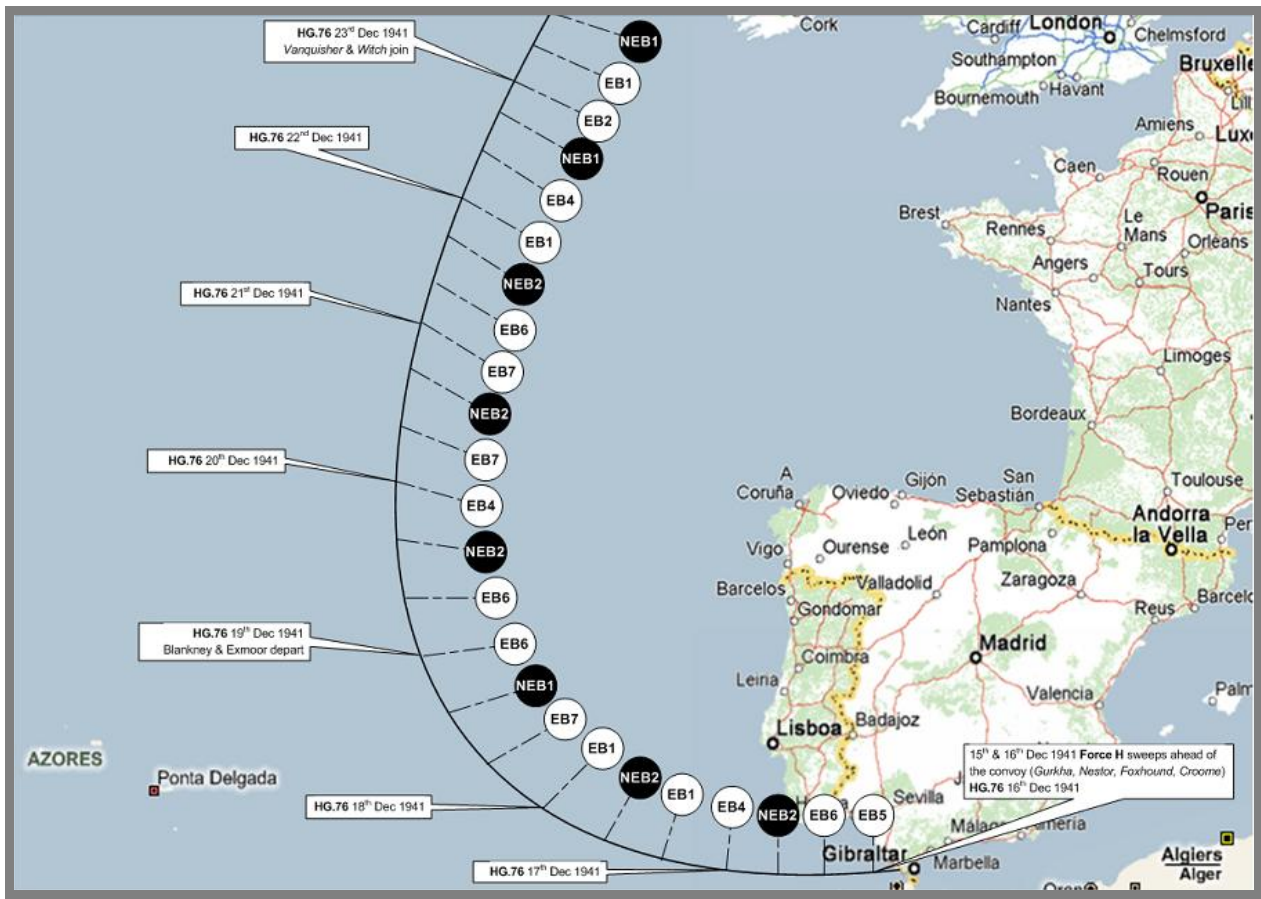
Participation Game Presented By The Naval Wargames Society
Based on the Battle for the Gibraltar Convoy HG.76 December
1941

Historical Background

By December 1941 the war in Europe had raged for two years. The Kriegsmarine now had many more U-boats available to them than in 1939 and convoys sailed in expectation of heavy casualties. The proximity of occupied air bases in France, from which the Luftwaffe could locate them, meant that in particular the Germans were savaging convoys between Gibraltar and England. French Atlantic ports from which the U-boats could sortie were also close at hand for the ever growing numbers of submarines being churned out by German shipyards.

The Wolfpack tactics adopted by the U-boats involved concentrating several submarines around a convoy. The first boat to make contact took up a shadowing position and transmitted regular signals so that other U-boats could home in on it. To do this the shadowing boat had to remain on the surface. U-boats lacked enough battery power to maintain sufficient speed below the surface so even a slow convoy would soon out run it. While on the surface it could also transmit its homing signal. Even when other boats came up, they would be forced to stay on the surface by day, unless they could get far enough ahead to dive and wait. If the convoy altered course, dived boats could miss it altogether.

After dark the U-boats would also attack on the surface. Being low in the water, submarines had a huge advantage at night when on the surface. They saw the convoy and its escorts against the lighter night sky, but were almost invisible to the naked eye until very close. Also ASDIC, the main British detection device, could only locate them while submerged. Other than arranging a time the boats would attack individually, but the presence of several of them was enough to keep the convoy escorts dashing about to drive them off. An escort chasing one U-boat might well leave a gap through which another could safely proceed to attack. After a few hours of attacks, a previously tight escort screen could become badly scattered.



Thanks to the British code breakers at Bletchley Park the Admiralty knew that the German admiral Doenitz had been warned of the departure from Gibraltar of the England bound convoy HG-76 by agents in Spain, and had ordered the U-boat pack SEERAUBER (Pirate) to position itself for an attack. Thus forewarned the 31 merchant ships of HG-76 had a particularly strong escort. First among these was the Escort Carrier HMS *Audacity* (Commander. D.W. McKendrick). She was previously the German merchant ship *HANNOVER*, captured and converted as an escort carrier she was the first escort carrier to join the Battle of the Atlantic. She carried six Martlet fighters. The Catapult Armed Merchant Ship MV. *Darwin* was also with the convoy, though she had only a single Hurricane fighter which was reserved for emergencies, as the pilot had no way of landing back on board once launched.



However the most important factor in favour of HG-76 was Commander F.J. Walker RN and the 36th Escort Group (ASW sloops - *Stork* & *Deptford*, a lend lease WW1 US destroyer *Stanley* and 8 corvettes - *Rhododendron*, *Marigold*, *Gardenia*, *Vetch*, *Convolvulus*, *Pentstemon*, *Jonquil* and *Samphire*). The Hunt II class escort destroyers *Blankney* and *Exmoor*, which had an excellent Heavy AA armament, were also placed under Walker's command but due to their shorter range, could only stay with the convoy for a few days. Walker was an Anti Submarine Warfare expert and held strong ideas about how the U-boat war should be prosecuted, but had so far been denied a command at sea. This was all about to change.

The convoy sailed on December 14th and consisted of 32 ships arranged in eight columns of 4 ships. Convoys were usually wider than they were long, to make submarine attack more difficult, and the work of escorts easier. Walker arranged his escorts in two screens, one close to the convoy and one further out. Force H destroyers *Gurkha*, *Nestor*, *Foxhound* and *Croome*, based at Gibraltar, formed a 'Hunter Group' and was sent to sea first. This precaution paid off as the group found and sank U127 (*Hansmann*) with all hands, 35 miles off Cape St Vincent on December 15th.

HG-76 remained unsighted until the 16th when U131 (Korvettenkapitan Arend Baumann) fell in with it. He reported, then dived to let the convoy pass over him, intending to follow along behind and make reports. Due to defective hydrophone equipment though he accidentally came to periscope depth in the middle of the convoy but after initially attempting an attack was forced to dive deep to avoid being rammed by one of the merchant ships. He was apparently not spotted. Once astern U131 surfaced in the safety of darkness and sent another sighting report. Baumann continued to make hourly reports to Lorient, from where Doenitz directed four other U-boats to head to the area.

U67 and U108 also attempted to approach the convoy but were forced to dive by *Audacity's* Martlets and could not locate it. The effect of air escort was already paying off. Two Fw200 of 1-KG-40 from Bordeaux had also sighted the convoy in the failing light of the 16th and made a report. Although spotted in the distance by *Stanley* the other escorts did not see them. Fighter controllers on *Audacity* doubted the report, choosing not send Martlets to investigate.

Walker was well aware he had been spotted though and requested McKendrick to provide dawn and dusk sweeps with aircraft from *Audacity* at a distance of about 20 miles around the convoy. Although the seas were very choppy and there was a lot of cloud cover overhead, visibility was quite good at sea level. The weather would remain much the same for most of the voyage.



Martlet

At 0900 on the 17th December aircraft from *Audacity* reported the shadower 22 miles off to the port of the convoy. The Martlet was unable to do more than scare U131 into a crash dive however. Baumann didn't know the fighter had no bombs and didn't wait around to find out. The Martlet then climbed high enough for a radar fix to be made on it, which established the exact location.

This was the chance Walker had been waiting for to test his theory of "offensive" escort. Calling for *Exmoor*, *Blankney*, *Stanley* and *Pentstemon* to join him, he raced toward the contact in *Stork*. By now U108 and U107 were also in contact but had remained unsighted.

U131 attempted to avoid further detection by aircraft, by moving closer to the convoy, and diving from time to time. But her faulty hydrophones failed to warn of the approach of *Pentstemon* and *Stanley*, both of which gained contact. U131 was heavily damaged by the depth charges. With it's last remaining reserves of air U131 blew tanks and struggled upward to the surface. It emerged ten miles east of *Stanley* but still hoped to get clear. However, following his ideas for hunting U-boats Walker had put his escorts out into a search line and when U131 did pop up *Stanley* immediately sighted it and Walker ordered his units to close and fire as soon as they were in range.

In the meantime a Martlet (Sub Lt. Fletcher) of Black Flight dived on the submarine to strafe it but was shot down and Fletcher killed. On this occasion Baumann had little choice but to fight off the aircraft as he attempted to out-run the escorts and clear his boat. His damage prevented him from diving, but in any case the lack of effective hydrophones would have left him deaf to the presence of his hunters when deep. Forced to run fully surfaced, U131 was easy to detect. The Escorts commenced fire at 14,000 yards and after twenty minutes of shelling at rapidly closing ranges, the crew of U131 could be seen going over the side. *Pentstemon* and others picked up the survivors. *Stork* led the escorts back to the convoy, which they rejoined at 1730.

Walker had made his first kill, using tactics of going out to meet the U-boats instead of waiting for them to attack. Even though *Audacity* was down to three Martlets high hopes were held for future co-operation between aircraft and escort vessels.

Despite U131's now ominous silence, U434 still sighted the convoy just after midnight, Heyda taking over as the shadow vessel. She lost the convoy around 0400 and continued on the surface. U434 was ten miles from the convoy, running on the surface at dawn of the 18th when it unexpectedly fell foul of the outer escort screen in the form of *Stanley*. The destroyer turned to attack immediately, despite her ASDIC giving trouble and signalled Walker. *Deptford* with *Exmoor* and *Blankney* were ordered to race to her aid. U434 crash dived, but her defective valves left a tell tale trail of oil behind her. Then depth charges exploded all around her. Her aft torpedo tube fired by itself, from the blast and water flooded in. Steering was lost and the control room was flooding fast as even more charges came down. Most of her instruments failed and the boat was sinking rapidly. Heyda had little choice but to blow tanks. Even then the damage was so severe U434 barely made it to the surface. The stricken boat was raked by gunfire as she broke the surface and *Blankney* headed in to ram. Heyda ordered his men over the side and her crew tumbling out of the conning tower, into the water just in time. Within minutes the U-boat had rolled over and slipped beneath the waves. Her crew joined the prisoner of war bag along with those of U131. Accurate depth charge patterns from *Stanley* and *Blankney* had dealt the U434 her deathblows before the other escorts could even arrive. Walker was delighted to be able to signal the Admiralty that they had so far sunk two U-boats without loss from HG-76.



The same morning two Fw200 Condor aircraft attempted to close the convoy at 1130 but were spotted when still low on the horizon and were chased off by the Audacity's fighters. During the afternoon, *Exmoor* and *Blankney*, reached the end of their fuel endurance, and were forced to turn back to Gibraltar. The latter took 45 prisoners with her as the fighters again carried out a sweep. Not long after, and despite the gathering dusk, *Pentstemon* sighted a U-boat on the surface ten miles off the port side of the convoy. This was U107 (Gelhaus) who sent off a contact report at 1819. Walker ordered *Convolvulus* to join her sister ship in the hunt, but as it was getting very dark, he decided to keep *Stork* close to the convoy with the rest of the escorts.

U-67 (Mueller-Stockheim) was closing the convoy at the same time and attempted to torpedo the corvette *Convolvulus* as she moved to obey her orders. The torpedo near missed and *Convolvulus* immediately counter attacked. This attack drove U-67 off. U107 was lucky and avoided detection.

Since making contact late on the 16th, U574 had waited for a pack to assemble. Having witnessed the probable destruction of U131, Gegalbach dropped well astern. After dark on the evening of the 18th he took his boat to an attack position. At 0415 on the 19th U574 was closing the rear of the convoy when it sighted a destroyer, which had also seen the U-boat and was turning to attack. This was *Stanley*, and the destroyer once again started to signal the sighting. Gegalbach immediately fired torpedoes one of which hit *Stanley* which blew up in a sheet of flame as the forward magazine was detonated. Her contact report had ended mid-message. Although shocked by the loss, Walker, not knowing where the U-boat was, ordered the escorts to perform "Operation Buttercup". This was a tactical idea of his own, that he had trained his group in. The escorts turned outward from the convoy, firing star shell and snowflake on every bearing the U-boat might use as an escape route.

Shortly after executing the order *Stork* picked up a positive submarine echo. This was U574, which had been forced to dive due to the Buttercup illuminations. An attack with a ten-charge pattern followed. Walker was still turning to attack again when U574 surfaced, badly damaged, but still attempting to escape. After sweeping the decks with gunfire, *Stork* turned in and rammed her just forward of the conning tower. The escort continued on over the rolling U-boat and finished her off with a pattern of depth charges set shallow. Some of the German crew were already in the water when these charges went off and did not survive, but five were later picked up.



HMS Stork

Stork had damaged her ASDIC in the ramming and had bent her bows so badly she could no longer steam at full speed. A search located twenty five crew of the *Stanley*, which was far more than was expected. These were also taken aboard. While in the middle of her rescue operation there was an explosion from within the convoy. This was the SS RUCKINGE an old British Tramp ship of 2,869 (gross) tons, carrying potatoes and some ammunition. Schonder of U108 had sneaked in and scored a kill. This was the first merchant loss for the convoy.

During the same day the Luftwaffe attempted to re-establish contact with the convoy. In the morning a pair of Fw200 Condors approached, but were intercepted. Sub Lieutenant Brown destroyed one in a daring head on attack. The other fled into the clouds chased by Sub Lt. Lamb and was not sighted again. During the afternoon another Fw200 was spotted by *Stork*, which passed on the information. Sub. Lt. Sleigh downed the Condor, but in doing so the Martlet was damaged. Sleigh returned to the carrier with part of the Condors wireless aerial wrapped around his tail wheel.

At dusk U107 (Gelhaus) was sighted 15 miles to port. Gelhaus took his boat down and although hunted by *Deptford*, *Marigold* & *Convolvulus* could not be located. This was fortunate for the Germans as U107 was directing the arrival of U108 (Scholtz), U71, U751, & U567 (Endrass), all of which were being homed in on HG-76.

Kapitanleutnant Endrass, commander of U567 was a holder of the Knights Cross and one of the few remaining early aces. He was 1st Lt of U47 (Gunther Prien), when that boat penetrated Scapa Flow, famously sinking the Battleship *Royal Oak*. Doenitz placed great faith in him and signalled the closing U-boats that Endrass was on the way, hoping this would boost morale.

While returning to the convoy the escorts were mistaken for the enemy and many of the Merchant ships fired snowflake rockets. The convoy was lit up brilliantly in the darkness. No attacks developed despite this error.

December 20th passed with few incidents. A Martlet sighted two U-boats ahead, but thus alerted HG-76 altered course, avoiding any contact with them.

December 21st also passed without attacks for most of the daylight hours, but numerous U-boats were sighted. Walker detached escorts to pursue them but all evaded further detection. The night of the 21st / 22nd was promising to be very dangerous.

HG-76 now turned onto a more direct course for the Western Approaches. The Germans obviously knew where they were, so it made little point to sail a longer, diversionary route. At dusk *Audacity* went to her night procedure of zigzagging well clear of the convoy. Walker recommended the port side, as being the safest, but McKendrick preferred the starboard. He went off without escort as having had two escorts turn back, one sunk and one now damaged; the convoy could not spare a screen for the little carrier.

Walker took two escorts with him and staged a mock battle, using snowflake and star shell, off the port rear side of the convoy hoping draw the shadowing U-boats away from the convoy. Unfortunately the merchant ships of the convoy believed this to be a real attack and commenced firing snowflake as well, which left them brightly lit up and spoilt the diversion Walker raced back to rejoin but as he did the Norwegian ship SS ANNAVORE, of 3,324 tons, was hit. She was the rear ship of the centre Column. U567 had already closed for the attack and the Norwegian ship exploded into flames.



HMS Audacity with Martlets on her flight deck. Note she had no hanger so the aircraft were open to the elements

Instead of sweeping astern of the convoy, Walker made a tactical mistake by ordering another 'Buttercup'. The merchant ships fired snowflake again, which unfortunately silhouetted *Audacity* against the bright flares. Ten miles to starboard of the convoy, Korvettenkapitan Gerhard Bigalk of U751 could not believe his luck. The small carrier appeared right in front of him and he immediately torpedoed her. *Audacity* was hit aft. Out of control the ship continued to steam in circles, badly down by the stern. McKendrick ordered engines stopped to avoid collision and the little carrier floated helpless in the darkness for twenty minutes. Escorts rushed to the area but before they could arrive, *Audacity* was finished off by U751. Two torpedoes, struck *Audacity* in the bow. She sank ten minutes later.

As escorts dashed about the site of the sinking, searching for survivors. *Deptford* spotted a U-boat on the surface and fired star shell. *Stork* raced in to help. The boat was U567 and she crash dived. A series of heavy depth charge attacks followed, which in turn brought on another underwater explosion. Kapitanleutnant Endrass and U567 had been destroyed with all hands. Walker's escorts were unsure of the kill, although oil was sighted. Tensions were running high, when shortly after, *Deptford* accidentally rammed the *Stork* at low speed. Damage was not severe, but the ship's brig was wrecked, killing two of five U-boat survivors locked in it. U67 also attacked but missed her target; the CAM ship MV DARWIN. The boat was forced to dive when illuminated by star shell. Her bad luck continued when an escort raced in to attack. Forty-one depth charges shook the helpless U-boat for the next two hours as *Rhododendron* plastered her, with some extra help from *Deptford*. She was not able to surface until 0430, when it was found she was trailing oil. This and machinery defects, forced her to withdraw well astern of the convoy.

By dawn of the 22nd of December 1941, HG76 had lost two of its merchant ships, the auxiliary carrier and one escort, but had sunk four submarines, a score which up till that time was unheard of. *Stork* and *Deptford* were damaged, depth charges were running low and various other equipment had started to fail. The sinking of *Audacity* meant fighter cover had also been lost, along with early warning of U-boats on the surface nearby. Help was on the way for both sides, but the convoy position was starting to favour the British. U71 and U125 made contact, having being diverted from missions to the US East Coast, but this was offset by reinforcements sent from Western Approaches. *Vanquisher* and *Witch* were V&W class destroyers left over from WW1. *Witch* had been converted to a short-range escort, and *Vanquisher* was just out of dock after conversion to a long range escort and carried a formidable load of depth charges. They soon joined the screen as welcome helpers.

A Coastal Command Liberator, from 19 Group, patrolled around them for several hours during the day. At 1600 it reported two U-boats stopped on the surface 25 miles astern of the convoy. Now however HG76 was nearing the UK.

During the night, a very heavy sea hit the SS OGMORE CASTLE. The crew panicked, convinced they had either rammed a submarine or being damaged and abandoned ship. The Corvette *Convolvulus* had found the merchant ship quite undamaged. The highly embarrassed crew went back on board and the vessel resumed its place in the convoy just before dawn. After days of strain and tension, the merchant sailors were near breaking point.

From dawn of the 23rd U751, U125 and U71 attempted to penetrate the escort screen but were driven off by the alert and determined escorts. During this action U751 was badly shaken and barely managed to elude her attackers - *Vanquisher* and *Witch* assisted by the corvette *Vetch*. Coastal Command was also now able to maintain heavy air

patrols as around HG-76 as the range from UK airfields steadily diminished. The danger for attacking U Boats had become extreme.

Seeing the struggle coming to an end, Doenitz called off the attack on HG-76. It was time to seek out easier targets. The epic struggle around convoy HG-76 had proved far too costly.

In London the Admiralty decided there would have to be a re-think about tactics. Walker's aggressive style had worked and communication with Western Approaches Command commenced before the convoy even reached port. Prime Minister Churchill was delighted that at last a convoy had forced the attacking U-boats into a one for one swap. As far as the merchantmen and their valuable cargoes were concerned it was a two for one swap in British favour. Walker's report on the proceedings of the convoy was anxiously awaited. On January 6th 1942 he attended a special meeting at the Admiralty with the Director of Anti Submarine Warfare during which his tactics were examined, his advice sought and his new approach considered. As a commander ashore he had been unable to convince his seniors of his ideas on how to tackle the U Boat menace, but as a commander at sea, in charge of an escort group, Walker had been able to prove his theories. His ideas were listened too, taken note of, passed on, and became standard practice for escort groups.

Captain Walker would later go on to command the famous 2nd Support Group that sank a hefty score of U-boats as the Battle of the Atlantic swung against Germany. The ships under his command always enjoyed a high priority for repair and refit, and were mostly manned by pre-war regular navy personnel and acquired a reputation for efficiency and skill that was the envy of all escort groups. Walker's signature tune "A hunting we will go" greeted him from shore on his return from successful sorties. The previously "passed over" officer was re-instated in the seniority list and won the DSO four times. He was to have been made a Knight Commander of the Bath and promoted to flag rank after August 1944, but his untimely death earlier in that same year, which was listed as natural causes though there can be no doubt that this aging warrior had been worn out by long hours on the bridge as well as many sleepless days and nights, put paid to those plans. He was an anti submarine ace and convoy HG-76 had been his proving ground.

The Game

The game will run continuously throughout the day and participants are invited to take command of either a German U-boat or a flight of aircraft as they make their attack on the convoy.



Contacts are randomly determined using a pre-defined set of tables depending on the convoys progress along it's route. Individual encounters typically last no more than 30 minutes, but it's the cumulative effect of these attacks on the convoy that determine whether or not it makes it through.



The game uses Mal Wright's "Deadly Waters" rules which are due to be published this year by "Clash of Arms". It is played out using 1/3000th scale ship models and 1/1200th scale aircraft models from a number of suppliers including Magister Militum, Navwar and Skytrex, but also a new New Zealand based company North Head Miniatures (<http://www.nhminiatures.com/>). The terrain is by a Terrain Mat (<http://www.terrainmat.com/>).

NWS Events and Regional Contacts, 2009

NWS Northern Fleet – Falkirk East Central Scotland

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Falkirk Wargames Club meets each Monday night at 7pm with a variety of games running each evening. Naval games are popular with 2 or 3 run each month. Campaign games sometimes feature in our monthly weekend sessions. Games tend to be organised week to week making a 3-month forecast here a waste of time. Please get in touch if you'd like to come along.

- Popular periods – Modern (Shipwreck), WW1 and 2 (GQ), WW2 Coastal (Action Stations), and Pre-dreadnought (P Dunn's rules)
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NWS North Hants [Every 3rd Sunday]

Jeff Crane 31 Park Gardens, Black Dam, Basingstoke, Hants, 01256 427906
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NWS Wessex [Bi-Monthly Meetings]

The Wessex Group has gone into (hopefully) temporary abeyance for the moment. If anyone living in the Bath / Bristol / Gloucester area (or further afield) would like to take on managing the group please contact myself or any of the other NWS officials.
