

## ***An Enemy then Flying: The Troubridge Decision***

***A SEEKRIEG 5 after-action report by Brandon Musler***

Jack Joyner and Richard Sartore sponsored “The Troubridge Decision” (F-182) scenario using Seekrieg 5 rules on Friday Morning at Historicon 2005. The Troubridge Decision, as explained by Jack and Rich during their introductory comments, is a hypothetical Great War engagement between the German battlecruiser (BC) *SMS Goeben*, fleeing east with the light cruiser (CL) *SMS Breslau* across the Mediterranean towards sanctuary in Turkish waters.

It is an historical fact that the German warships successfully slipped their pursuers and navigated to Constantinople. It is also widely accepted that, through a combination of poor communications and lassitude, the British Admiralty in the person of Winston Churchill, and Sir Berkeley Milne, the Mediterranean Fleet Admiral, bungled the pursuit. Less clear cut (but suspect) is the role Admiral Ernest C.T. Troubridge played in the debacle by failing to bring *Goeben* to combat.

During the early morning hours of August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1914, Troubridge was leading a force of four outmoded armored cruisers: *HMS Defence*, *Black Prince*, *Duke of Edinburgh* and *Warrior*. Taken individually his capital ships were smaller (~14,000 tons each,) slower (~19 knots,) and less heavily armed (9.2” main batteries,) than their better protected adversary. (*Goeben*, at ~23,000 tons could make ~28 knots and carried an 11” primary battery.) Troubridge had initially been lead to believe the German battlecruiser was navigating north for a rendezvous with the Austrian fleet in the Adriatic. He positioned his force hoping to execute an evening encounter which would negate, to some degree, the range advantage enjoyed by his opponent. When it became clear that *Goeben* was fleeing east, he instead pursued a southern interception on his own initiative.

“...at 2:45 a.m. he found himself confronted in the flagship chart room by *Defence*’s captain, Fawcett Wray.

‘Are you going to fight, sir?’ asked Wray, who, as Flag Captain, was also Troubridge’s second in command. ‘Because, if so, the squadron ought to know.’

‘Yes,’ Troubridge replied. ‘I know it is wrong, but I cannot have the name of the whole Mediterranean Squadron stink.’ Troubridge then signaled his ships, ‘I am endeavoring to cross the bows of *Goeben* by 6 a.m. and intend to engage her if possible...If we have not cut him off...[I intend] to avoid a long-range action.’

Wray, a gunnery expert, went away disturbed by this answer.

...

Wray knew that Troubridge had orders not to engage ‘a superior force,’ and he shared Troubridge’s opinion that, at a range greater than 16,000 yards, *Goeben* was such a force. Wray explained to the admiral how *Goeben*, using her superior speed could circle the squadron ‘at some range outside sixteen thousand yards which her guns would carry and your guns will not. It seems likely to be the suicide of your squadron.’

...Troubridge said, ‘I cannot turn away now. Think of my pride.’ Wray replied, ‘Has your pride got anything to do with this, Sir? It is your country’s welfare which is at stake.’” – *Castles of Steel* by Raymond K. Massie, Random House, 2003, p. 43.

Wray summoned the navigator who told the admiral that *Goeben* could not be brought within range of the 9.2” guns before 6 a.m. and Troubridge subsequently called off the attack. According to Massie, “Wray told him, ‘Admiral, that’s the bravest thing you have done in your

life.' Later, Wray added, 'I think he was in tears.'" That may well be, but it didn't stop the Admiralty from later convening a court martial, "for failure to pursue the chase of his Imperial German Majesty's ship *Goeben*, being an enemy then flying."

The question on Friday morning, as then, was whether Troubridge and Wray were in fact right to refuse combat.

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At Historicon the role of German Rear Admiral Wilhelm Souchon was played by GAMA champ Bill Madison, known to many for his *Command at Sea* scenario design work. John Gordon acted as Troubridge. The players were asked to choose between using the "hit chart" included in the standard game distribution (which is based on engineering specifications,) or opting for a less optimistic "hit chart" (derived from analysis of historical results.) We unanimously chose the latter.

Jack and Richard also asked us to test out a new card based "special damage" system. Since prior to this experience I had only occasionally played Seekrieg IV, I can't comment on how the deviations might have impacted play. The cards did, however, keep us from knowing more than we should about what was happening inside wounded warships. To some degree the following AAR will reflect this, however.

The game began at 6 a.m. with *Goeben* and *Breslau* steaming eastwards under full power. The four British armored cruisers were approximately at right angles to Souchon's bows, in line ahead formation (*Defence* in the lead followed by *Black Prince*, *Duke of Edinburgh* and *Warrior*) traveling south, far beyond the range of even *Goeben*'s 11" rifles. Both fired ranging shots as they closed, Troubridge wasting no time in bringing his line about to a NNW heading.

06:16

An 11" shell from *Goeben* registers the first hit, penetrating *Defence*'s belt armor. A return salvo from *HMS Black Prince* plunged down on *Goeben*'s 'A' turret but glances off the Krupp steel doing only superficial damage.

06:18

Having registered the correct range, *Goeben* again pierces *Defence*'s belt. Troubridge's lead ship is seen to rapidly lose momentum and fall out of line. It would seem that her engineering spaces or propulsion systems have been damaged.

06:20

Despite the speed loss and course alterations, *Defence*'s gunnery officers do her credit by hitting *Goeben* with 7.5" secondary guns. These smaller caliber shells, however, fail to penetrate even the extreme end of *Goeben*'s belt armor.

06:22

Continuing east, *Goeben* switches fire on to the new column leader, *Black Prince*, smashing her forward barbette. *Duke of Edinburgh*, (my command,) lands her first hit on *Goeben* but the 9.2" shell fails to penetrate her thick deck armor. On the upside, *Defence*, which had been falling away to starboard, is seen surging forward again. The way her wake broadens out, it appears her propulsion has been partially repaired. Cheers resound on *Duke of Edinburgh*'s bridge.

06:24

An 11" shell lands squarely on *Black Prince's* 'B' turret, killing crew and temporarily silencing those guns. When 4.1" shells begin ricocheting off *Defence's* superstructure I realize that *Breslau's* diminutive primaries are now in range as well. A light cruiser has no business being in a brawl between capital ships. Accordingly, I order my gunnery officer to give *Breslau* "what for." Our 6" secondaries straddle the impetuous ship, one shell falling on an open gun position and plunging down into her hull. Roiling black smoke billows skyward.

*Black Prince* retaliates against *Goeben* but her 9.2" primaries fail to penetrate the belt. Her 6" secondaries fare better, smashing one of *Breslau's* turrets.

*Defence* swats at *Goeben* with her 7.5" secondaries, but these can't penetrate the ship's armored superstructure. *Warrior* also finally finds the range -- landing her first hit -- but neither do her shells smash through *Goeben's* tough hide.

Sailing slightly north of true east, Madison (Souchon) has skillfully kept all his guns in action while navigating his way to *Goeben's* sweet spot. Our four armored cruisers have simultaneously straddled *Goeben* without inflicting any significant damage. Our heaviest shells can punch through neither *Goeben's* protective main belt, nor her thick deck armor and the return fire is beginning to take out our turrets and propulsion. We are fighting on the enemy's terms; if Souchon succeeds in keeping us in this range band, he can defeat the British force in detail.

06:24

The crews seem dispirited, or maybe it's merely fatigue, but our next set of salvos all miss.

Perhaps smelling blood, Madison (Souchon) does the unexpected by continuing to close with our line. Charging into short range, *Goeben* spews out 11" shells that careen through *Black Prince's* belt into her engineering spaces, abruptly slowing the armored cruiser. She too falls out of line. Secondary hits from the battlecruiser's 5.9" guns bounce off *Black Prince's* barbette.

06:28

Peppering her superstructure, turret and hull, *Goeben* continues punishing *Black Prince*. Even her 5.9" guns, are now at medium range, where they can punch through the armored cruiser's turret protection and soon all the beleaguered ship's guns are silenced.

*Goeben* seems intent on dealing a knockout blow, but by closing the gap she has opened herself up to counterpunches. For the first time in the battle, *Warrior* penetrates *Goeben's* superstructure. *Duke of Edinburgh* also sneaks a shell through the end of *Goeben's* protective belt, a second "penetrating hit" that ignites a flash fire below decks. Although the pyrotechnics are dealt with efficiently, it breathes renewed hope into our battle line. My gunnery officer, who deserves a commendation for his accurate shooting, continues pummeling *Breslau* with 6" superstructure hits.

06:30

*Goeben* continues to target both her primaries and secondaries on the helpless *Black Prince*. A salvo tears into her turrets, hull and superstructure. *Black Prince* experiences heavy flooding in her engineering compartments and loses all effective communications.

*Defence* hits *Goeben's* superstructure doing superficial damage.

O6:32

*Black Prince's* ordeal abates when *Duke of Edinburgh* and *Warrior* pass to port, temporarily shielding her behind. *Goeben* accordingly directs her guns back on *Defence*, hitting with both 11" and 5.9" shellfire. *Defence* remains capable of striking back however, and penetrates *Goeben's* hull at the end of her belt.

O6:34

*Goeben* switches to high explosive (HE) shells against *Defence* with immediate results when a lucky hit penetrates the deck and does huge damage. Her 5.9" shells collapse *Defence's* rear stack, sending it crashing back against the superstructure.

O6:36

*Goeben's* use of HE seems less decisive when her shells bounce ineffectually off *Defence's* "A" turret.

With the range now down to a breathtaking 3,200 yards, *Defence* lashes through *Goeben's* main belt with her 9.2" rifles. *Duke of Edinburgh* is able to punch through the end of *Goeben's* belt with 6" shells, despite delivering duds with her primary battery. These close-in hits cause damage to *Goeben's* helm, making her more difficult to maneuver. The big battlecruiser's firepower has also been diminished.

*Breslau* attempts to finish *Black Prince* but her shells bounce ineffectually off the conning tower. The CL has lost 4 knots of speed and it's difficult to believe her torpedo mounts are still in tact. Slowed like this, she has little hope of surviving the battle.

## Debriefing

It took the full eighteen game turns but in the end *Goeben* was seriously wounded and the British still had two and a half armored cruisers in the fight. Due to Madison cooperating in bringing on a short range engagement, *Goeben* was not only damaged (some guns were inoperative and the helm didn't always respond,) but quite likely to sustain further penetrating hits.

It is true that *Black Prince* had been reduced to a hulk and *Defence* was likely to suffer a similar fate. Yet even had the Germans gone on to destroy a third armored cruiser, they still would have lost the battle because multiple "I" class British battle cruisers were hastening to the fray. If *Goeben* couldn't outrun them in a stern chase (increasingly doubtful,) she had no chance of making Turkey and changing the course of the war.

The question at the outset was whether Troubridge made the "right" decision in avoiding action. I am part of a decided minority who believe that his choice was logical, correct and courageous. Because I believe that had Madison (Souchon) not continued closing the range, *Goeben* would have slowed our four cruisers in rapid succession and escaped, I found plenty of ammunition to buttress my position in this reenactment.

The trouble with this line of reasoning is that many would scoff at my assumptions. How fast was *Goeben*, really (24 knots or 28 knots?) And how much coal could she afford to burn? Taking into account elevation, what was the real effective range of her 11" weapons (19,700

yards or 16,000?) Gamers and their scenario source materials disagree considerably, and our conclusions are almost invariably dependent upon our assumptions.

As for the Admiralty's verdict, Troubridge was acquitted. But he never again captained a ship which was a bitter denouement for a man whose great grandfather had sailed to glory with Nelson at the Nile. Acting as Troubridge at Historicon on the other hand, John Gordon, won "Player of the Game" and a nifty Seekrieg swag!

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SEEKRIEG.COM EDITORS NOTE: This is a completely unedited (except for formatting and a date correction) version of the AAR submitted by the author, Brandon Musler. I was tempted to add notations regarding the details of damage inflicted on the GOEBEN and BRESLAU but decided against it. Mr. Musler has recorded the facts as he understood them from his position on the bridge of *Duke of Edinburgh* during the action and that is just as it should be. History rarely presents us with complete and thoroughly accurate details of naval engagements and an AAR like this, even though it was a game, is no exception.