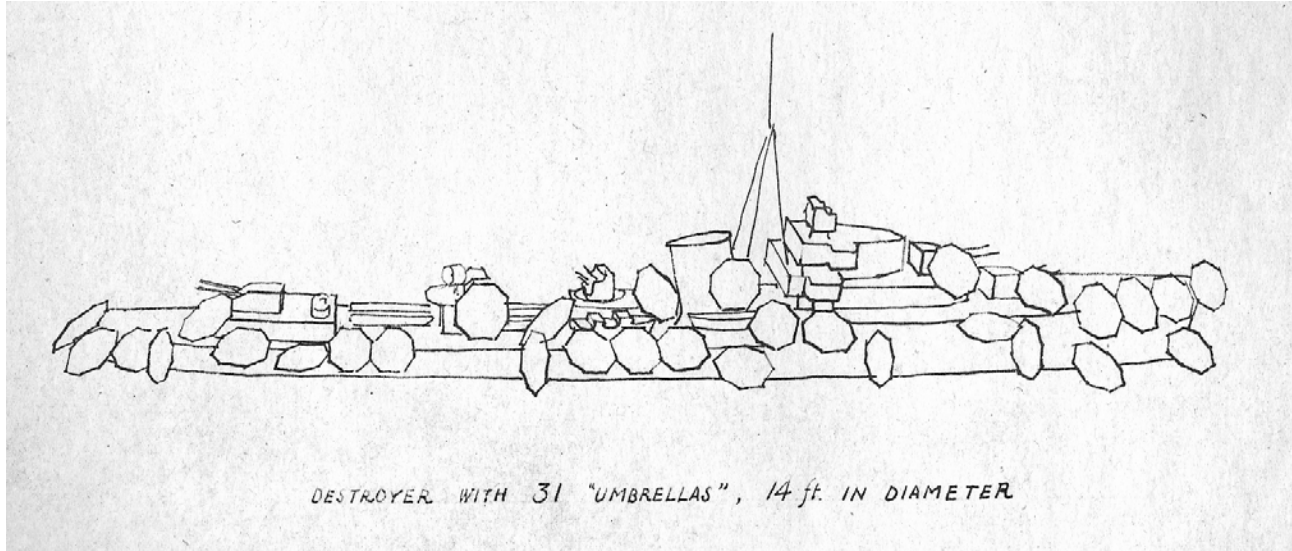


Diagram to show the umbrellas in position

Catalogue ref: ADM 212/129



What is this source?

This photograph shows a Royal Navy ship using experimental camouflage. The photograph comes from the records of the Admiralty's research laboratory. The idea was to camouflage ships against land backgrounds. The diagram shows how many umbrellas were needed to camouflage a ship. The purpose was to provide a quick solution. The structural camouflage (the umbrellas) would be used as well as painted camouflage. The umbrellas also broke up the outline of the ship. This made it difficult for an aircraft or a submarine to work out what kind of ship it was. The umbrellas would help the ships to avoid attack or even allow them to lie unobserved in order to ambush enemy shipping expected in the area. It was thought that such circumstances might occur in the Far Eastern theatre of war.

The Admiralty was the department of government that looked after the navy.

What's the background to this source?

Throughout British history the navy has always been the most important of the armed forces, because Britain is an island and is also a trading nation which needs to protect its shipping. The navy played a critical role in WW2. It helped to deter Hitler from invading Britain in 1940. It also helped to protect Britain's vital supply convoys as they crossed the Atlantic from North America. The biggest threats to naval ships and merchant ships came from aircraft and submarines firing torpedoes.

WESTERN EUROPE 1939–1945: DECEPTION & BLUFF

The Royal Navy was always interested in new ideas. In December 1941 the navy received a devastating blow as they lost two battleships to torpedoes fired by Japanese aircraft. The other key danger to naval ships was torpedo attack by submarine. Torpedoes were expensive and valuable, so enemies would usually only fire them if they were sure about their target. Anything that would give doubt to an attacker was potentially useful.

It's worth knowing that...

As well as illusionists, the armed forces also used artists. Surrealist artists like Paul Nash tried different ideas for camouflaging ships and other weapons. They were designed to fool aircraft from a distance, and would not have fooled anyone close up.

Scientists also played their role in military research. One scientist at the Admiralty laboratory was Francis Crick. He went on to become one of the discoverers of DNA.

How does this source help us to understand the importance of deception tactics during the war?

1. What are the advantages of using these umbrellas as a camouflage method?
2. Try blocking out the sea and showing the picture to someone who does not know what it is. How effective is the camouflage when you do this?
3. Do you think this source can help you to convince your friend that the British used deception tactics in WW2?

You could do this as a presentation or a written report. Use the following report sheet to help.