READ THIS BOOK AND

THE CONVOY GOES THROUGH

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BY

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"EPIC DEEDS OF NAVAL MIGHT" (Harrap, 1940)
" FAMOUS SHIPWRECKS " (Elkin Matthews)
"WITH JELLICO IN THE NORTH SEA" (Cassell)
" WHEN BEATTY KEPT THE SEAS " (Cassell)
" FULL FATHOM FIVE " (Macmillan, U.S.A.)
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FOREWORD

MORE and more, as the war drags out its tedious length, is the utility of the convoy system proving itself. Whether it be munitions for threatened India, or reinforcements for the Eighth Army in Egypt, or added supplies for the gallant, indomitable garrison of Malta, the. G. C. Island, or tanks, aircraft and guns for that Russia, which, once derided as a stronghold of potential world-destruction, has already proved itself a fortress of light and hope; or whether it be a loaf of bread for some hungry London stomach, or a cup of refreshing tea for a tired munition worker in South Shields, the substance taken to its assigned destination has reached there in the shelter of a convoy of Merchant Navy ships, which disdaining all the wartime sea's manifold perils, have trudged on the allotted courses to prove to Hitler and the world that, when faced by crisis and terror, the British seamen gives to his country a faithful, self-sacrificing service second to none.

There was a time when the Red Ensign men scoffed at the idea of convoys: they averred that to mass ships together made them a big target for enemy attack, that the persisting canopy of smoke over the armadas attracted unwelcome attentions from submarines scouting on the distant horizons; that the zig-zagging demanded by their naval escorts doubled the length of each voyage, and doubled its working costs. U-boats ignored the escorting warships and saved their death-dealing torpedoes for the more valuable freighters they shepherded; and the escorts had enough to do in fending for themselves to have time to spare for real worthwhile defence against submerged attack.

Times without number in the last war the writer has been told by self-respecting merchant seamen: "Convoys! Convoys be damned! Let us sail in pairs, and give us depth-charges, and we'll convoy ourselves till the cows come, home." Their idea was that in pairs they could run at normal or even excess speed, and that if one ship were torpedoed, the other could save life; that two ships would afford a less vulnerable and visible target than twenty, thirty or forty; and that, with U-boats attacking whilst submerged, deck-guns - "defensive armament" - were of no more use than so many peashooters, whereas depth-charges, thrown from a Y-gun, were the best defence any ship could require.

But the closing year of the last war, when we were almost

brought to our starved knees by the colossal losses of merchant tonnage, vindicated the convoy-idea, and taught valuable lessons which were immediately adopted and improved upon in September 1939.

The writer has helped to escort a convoy of well over one hundred valuable freighters across the Atlantic, without one single ship being lost or even suffering from scratched paint! And this through the most formidable waters in the whole world. True, U-boats were encountered in considerable packs; and air attack became almost a commonplace. Yet the lively escorts of corvettes and' destroyers and armed trawlers proved so aggressive and efficient that no real attack developed—that is, the convoy was not once thrown into confusion; for the escorting ships sought out the submarines before they were in a position to attack and by dint of zealous depth-charging, kept them humbled below periscope-depth, so that they could not see to aim their missiles.

Yet, in 1918, the writer, escorting a convoy of 24 ships through the Malta Channel of the Mediterranean, saw seven great ships sunk in the course of one blazing afternoon, and though the attacking U-boat was despatched, it was not before almost irreparable damage had been done.

The old practice of enemy submarines was to stalk a convoy from behind the skyline, tracking it by the great smoke-canopy that accompanied it;' to hurry well ahead during hours of darkness, to lie in wait in its track at dawn, submerged to periscope-depth; and then to let fly as many torpedoes as could be fired from this position, afterwards diving under the convoy, where the attacking craft were moderately safe from escort depth-charges, as an indiscriminate use of these destructive engines was apt to blow in the sides of the convoy freighters as the enemy underwater craft.

But to-day escort vessels are equipped with ingenious devices, such as Asdics and radio-location instruments, which indicate to them the approximate position of enemy craft, even if submerged and motionless. The hydrophones of the past required a *noise* from the submarine to bring results: the thresh of the propellers or the dulled whirr of engines; consequently any U-boat that, submerged to its maximum depth, stopped its engines and dynamos, was pretty sure to. escape detection. Now, thanks to well-controlled electrical impulses, echoes are created from solid bodies - the electric wave sent out by the instruments impinges on whatever

foreign object the sea may hide, and not only is the approximate bearing discovered by this means, but also the apparent distance. Not all the caution and precaution in the world can cut this detective ray; although any solid body will produce an echo—or "ping" as it is nautically termed.

With Asdics and radio-location sets working twenty-four hours a day, and watched by experts all the time, it is not easy for any submerged object to remain undetected.

Air-assault was, however—and still is—the most imminent menace. The lot of our Red Ensign ships is definitely unenviable under present circumstances. Targets for torpedoes, 11in. shells and heavy bombs; under threat of attack from the moment they leave port to the time of return; the marvel is that they continue so undaunted. As will be shown in ensuing chapters,' aerial attack can be infinitely horrifying. It is not enjoy our daily coastwise convoys that are subjected Jo this form of barbarism; Germany has concentrated on the construction of long-range aircraft, that can sweep half-way out into the Atlantic, that can fine-comb the Mediterranean; that can go almost anywhere. Each such aircraft can carry enough high explosives to destroy probably four big freighters. Their speed enables them to deliver ah attack, return, reload with H.E. and carry out another attack before. the threatened convoy has proceeded ten miles on its course. To the writer the abiding miracle is not that so many freighters escape but that any reach their destinations at all.

When the shipping slump overtook the dingy Red Ensign, its servants were jettisoned like so much useless dunnage; 60,000 and more of them being put on the beach, to live or die as Fate decreed. The owners, who had profited by their labours in boom years, ignored the debt they owed them. Ships were allowed to rot or were sold foreign—as often as not to our bitter enemy Japan, Shipowners railed at our lost sea-trade, whilst failing to recognise their own responsibility for such loss: their own lack of imagination and the nerve to take risks in securing new markets.

Yet, when emergency came, the Merchant Navy men took up their tools without protest, and returned to that sea which had granted them few ameliorations in the past and now promised them little beyond the blood, tears and sweat of inhuman warfare. They were sunk, they were burnt, they were required to die of hunger and thirst and frostbite and exposure in ill-provided open boats. They were required to run the gauntlet of savage attack, to be murdered in scores, in

hundreds, in thousands; yet, such as survived barely waited for recovery before thronging the shipping offices anew for further service. Of this tough breed were the men of the San Dimitrio, who, without thought of reward, went back aboard their blazing, crippled tanker in mid-Atlantic, and, determined to save their ship, did save her by superhuman gallantry and ski"..

When the full story of the glorious Red Ensign comes to be told it will fill as golden a page as any in our Imperial history; for had that story never been enacted,' the Empire would have ceased to exist within six months of, the declaration of hostilities. Without the desperate and devoted toil of these fearless mariners of England Russia could never have withstood the bestial assaults of the German forces, for on U.S. and British fighting tools has Russia relied for salvation. Few slices of bread are put into hungry English mouths without Red Ensign aid. The need to safeguard the Merchant Navy in its tireless tasks, gives excuse for the Royal Navy's existence: the work of mat fine service is to keep the sea-lanes open to our ships and closed to the enemy's.

These are general statements. The ensuing chapters are an effort—inadequate, alas, since words are such feeble things—to particularise the work that is involved in making good the proud British boast: Come hell or high water, the convoy goes through!

CHAPTER I.

THROUGH THE FROZEN HELL

"Cold!" said the destroyer's captain; "it's cold enough to freeze the tail off a brass monkey!"

He was discussing his last convoy trip to a Russian port in the Far North, during which he had helped to escort an armada of freighters of incalculable worth, in actual value and in potential usefulness. In view of the writer's intention of making a similar trip he was trying to impress upon him the enormous disadvantages of winter voyaging within the Arctic Circle. " . .

"Pack-ice simply tears the paint off your hull; if it doesn't tear the skin off the frames; and I've seen that happen. The cold freezes the oil in the gun-mechanisms. We usually have to thaw out the anchors with high-pressure steam," he mentioned, and showed photographs in proof. His natty little ship certainly looked more like a draggled iceberg than a smart, commissioned vessel of the Royal Navy.

It was quite as cold as he said when the big Murmansk convoy underwent its five days' ordeal by fire in the month of May, 1942. The Axis powers—especially Germany-were terribly determined that those vital shiploads of aircraft, tanks, guns, supplies in general should not 'reach the willing, capable hands of Marshal Timoshenko's

excessive that pulmonary complaints developed in some ships almost like plagues.

Not a man who sailed in a Murmansk or Archangel convoy but deserved the highest praise. The risks taken were—still are—enormous. Once the sun crosses the Equator on his northward journey the shield of night departs from the Arctic Circle; daylight, of a sort, continues through twenty-four hours every day; and night is the convoy's " easy," when the risk of attack is minimised. The exceeding cold froze the boat-lowering gear, thus rendering the life-saving devices inoperative. The delicate gear of protective armaments was also affected; oil froze in the gun-breech-blocks; and tears froze in the eyes of the gunlayers and sightsetters, dimming their vision. The glass lenses of telescopes and binoculars dimmed from within. Every drop of loose moisture condensed. Cocoa, carried with infinite care, to the watch-keepers, froze before it reached the lips of those for whom it was designed.

On crowded decks, both of warships and freighters, movement, to circulate the stagnant blood, was limited. The cases of frostbite occurring during an average arctic passage would stagger the layman if they were published.

Notwithstanding such drawbacks the Murmansk convoy kept station with the precision of a battle-fleet. Occasionally slight divergences had to be made on account of massed pack-ice. Sometimes, indeed, the escort ships could not close in on their charges because of the big ice forming between them. The thick weather increased.

The first destroyer attack developed from behind a mist- and smoke-screen. It came from the north: three big new destroyers of Germany's navy taking part. Our escorting destroyers were of old pattern and comparatively light armament: better fitted to tackle U-boats and aircraft than the big destroyers—they were almost light cruisers—of the enemy. Despite the odds, these small, gallant ships tore in to ward off the attack. H.M. Ships Bulldog, Beagle, Amazon and Beverley were their ever-to-be-honoured names.

It was bitterly cold: and when the blizzard blew the mist clear, snow-squalls followed. Loose ice demanded cautious navigation; and visibility was indifferent, notwithstanding which H.M.S. Bulldog—commanded by Commander M. Richmond, R.N. (now D.S.O.)—opened fire, she being in the van, at a range of 10.000. The enemy replied, with powerful, longer-ranged guns, and succeeded in scoring hits on our

Amazon. Amazon was captained by Lieut.-Commander N. E. G. Roper: who, like, Com. Richmond, was awarded the D.S.O. for his share in the battle—one carried out in the best traditions of the Royal Navy. Hit though she was, and not lightly, Amazon kept her station in line and continued to keep up a brisk fire.

Thanks to the indomitable pluck of the attack—aptly led by a "Bulldog"—the enemy made smoke-screens and used the weather to effect a hasty withdrawal, thinking he had bitten off a bigger mouthful than he could chew. The convoy of big, invaluable ships steamed steadily] onwards. The presence of so much ugly ice rendered such progress precarious. Our destroyers returned to take protective station on the convoy's vulnerable flanks; but hardly had they resumed position than the enemy ships came storming down again. As before, the British light craft headed round and pelted vigorously into another attack. So hot was their assault on the tip-and-run aggressors that once more the enemy deemed discretion the better part of valour and slunk away. The extent of the damage inflicted upon them was not known; but it was undoubtedly severe.

The convoy took to a stretch of open water running between great seas of ice; and because of this the situation of our destroyer-force was worsened, as only by following winding and uncertain leads was it possible to keep touch with the precious argosies consigned to their protection. Often apparently impassable barriers separated sheep from shepherds; but by dint of taking risks and employing exquisite navigation, protective contact was maintained.

An hour later the big enemy ships delivered a third attack —which was met courageously by Bulldog and her consorts; though the Germans failed to register a single hit, they retired as soon as our craft opened fire with their usual swiftness and accuracy.

The ice about the convoy was thickening; it was almost berg-ice as opposed to the normal floe-ice of these latitudes. The difficulties of maintaining real protective touch increased. Anyone who had seen photographs of Arctic ice-fields will readily understand the onerousness of the escort's task. The "leads"—canals of clear water through the ice—zigzag and radiate in the oddest, most bewildering manner, and the three-eighths steel of which destroyers are built, is not made to bite a way through ice almost as solid as.rock.

One hour later, the Axis destroyers launched a fourth

attack. This time, Commander Richmond and his gallant comrades noticed the enemy fire was straggling; almost wild. Only one Axis vessel was able to fire full salvoes—sure proof of damage sustained.

Checked by our powerful defence the raiders once again vanished behind the dual screen of smoke and mist. Thanks to prodigious work by her artificers and shipwrights, H.M.S. Amazon was able to continue the voyage as a well-worth-while fighting entity. The dash shown by our naval force effectively kept the enemy at extreme range, a thing he least desired, his object being, of course, to pick off the convoy vessels at a safe distance, inflicting the utmost damage without risking too much himself. Thus the freighters steamed on, unharmed, their own lighter guns ready for quick

of its own bomb-bursts and was overwhelmed. The big freighter signalled: " No damage!" and proceeded, amid the cheers that rose welkin-high from her consorts.

Incidents like this were common. One wonder in the writer's mind was how the ammunition supply lasted out. Another —which still persists—was the cool nonchalance of the crew of his own ship: in which he was merely an interested passenger. Nothing shook these alleged non-combatants. They treated the worst horrors of the Luftwaffe as so many vicious monkey-tricks. In the infrequent breathing-spells they laughed and joked like schoolboys. The mate was concerned about his paintwork; and on one occasion when a sharp attacked developed, the cook, who manned a machine-gun, fretted hard because the duty interfered with his cooking, and a special brew of soup on which he prided himself was spoilt!

U-boat attacks were minimised by the ice: which was just as well. The frequent floes were a hazard the undersea boats refused to risk; but the Luftwaffe amply atoned for any remissness on their part.

Day and day, night and night, the attacks screamed in. Occasionally our box-barrage drove the F-Ws back before they were in a position to drop their loads; but more often the sea near-by was torn by the high-thrown waterspouts. The convoy kept precise station throughout, or, at least, as precise as the ice floes permitted; occasionally some ships had to follow twisting "leads" in the ice; which separated them from the main body for long intervals; but they always resumed station. We grew to welcome mist patches: a blessed screen between us and the remorseless attack.

Then Soviet craft, air and sea, came out to assist. After their advent the Luftwaffe slackened its attempts. Berlin boasted that the entire convoy and escort had been annihilated; but this was merely a feeler, hopeful of securing our contradiction with an exact statement of loss, which was not given. The convoy got through, having lost some ten per cent of its strength; and what it conveyed to the Russian port, was of such value that it enabled the Soviet armies to maintain a stout opposition to the enemy hordes, and was in part responsible for the super-human defence of Stalingrad.

It was a breathless experience to the writer; to the merchant seamen engaged it was simply a commonplace.

Whilst this convoy was proceeding outwards, another convoy was returning homewards, having delivered its loads

of vital munitions and taken aboard such raw material as would best serve Britain's need.

H.M.S. Edinburgh was flagship of the homeward escort, in company with H.M. destroyers Foresight and Forester. Edinburgh was a 10,000 ton cruiser of great hitting power; and from the beginning she became a target for enemy surface attack, as well as attempts by submarines. On April 30th a U-boat attack disabled Edinburgh's steering-gear. As she fell out of control, the two British destroyers, together with two Soviet ships of similar type, hurried to the big ship's aid. The homeward convoy proceeded under reduced escort. Forester got a towrope on board Edinburgh and gallantly proceeded to tow; but as high seas were running, the hawser parted almost at once; and though many efforts were made to resume connection, the attempts were futile; the destroyers were then able to do nothing better than stand-by.

After a while, the hard weather worsening, and the cruiser labouring heavily, as, unable to steer, she naturally fell off into the trough, H.M.S. Foresight managed to get a rope aboard aft. This is the customary way of assisting a rudderless vessel—the towed destroyer acts as steering gear, swinging from quarter to quarter to keep the distressed ship's head on an approximate compass-point. During this period the destroyer was clean-swept almost without a break; but she persisted for something like 16 hours.

At the end of this time, because the Soviet destroyers had to return to port, and leave the convoy, which they were detailed to protect, Foresight was ordered to cast loose and resume her previous protective station.

Edinburgh, though sorely hurt, pluckily attempted to keep station by the use of her twin propellers alone. This is a cumbrous way of steering a ship; she sheers through wide arcs, she is swept by many big seas, and is apt to " run away with herself."* To attempt to rig a jury-rudder likely to be serviceable, was out of the question. To-day's warcraft carry a minimum of spare material; the ship lacked derricks suitable for fashioning into the main stem of a rudder; and bulkhead doors, such as are usually bolted to a centre stem, were not available.

During the period of this desperate struggle by the wounded ship, enemy U-boats constantly hovered in the vicinity, awaiting an opportunity to deliver fresh, fatal blows; but the accompanying destroyers maintained such a desperate patrol

that every attempt at attack was defeated; the U-boats scurried away discomfited, not without loss.

Some twenty-four hours later four British minesweepers accompanied by a fresh Soviet destroyer, appeared on the scene. Modern minesweepers are sizable craft, capable of exerting great power; they can stand up to practically any weather. H.M.S. Harrier, Gossamar, Niger and Hussar brought with them a tug, suitable for rendering useful assistance. The weather was appalling; snow-squalls brewing up with monotonous frequency; and high seas running all the time; whilst the presence of much ice rendered the salvage efforts hazardous in a high degree. The tug got her rope aboard Edinburgh, notwithstanding superhuman difficulties, and started off, but failed to keep the great ship in control; consequently H.M.S. Gossamer tied on to her stern to assist, in the way Frobisher had done.

The convoy had proceeded at its normal speed; the accident to a great cruiser like Edinburgh was not permitted to interfere with necessary routine. At 6.30 in the morning following on the arrival of the minesweepers, Harrier and Hussar sighted three large German destroyers at a distance of some four miles. Only transitory glimpses were possible, thanks to the continuing snow-squalls, and the all-pervading mist of the stormy Arctic Circle; but the two British minesweepers at once ran forward into action. They were not designed for attack on huge destroyers, being comparatively lightly armed, but they did not hesitate, even though the hurling sprays made clear observation almost impossible. They opened fire, and almost as they did so, the Germans vanished in their own smoke, obscurity made doubly obscure by the sea-fog, and broke off the action; but our destroyers, Foresight and Forester at once raced up to support the minesweepers and did their utmost to close the range and bring the enemy to decisive action. Firing went on spasmodically for some time, it not being possible to observe the fall of shot, thanks to the baffling nature of the weather and the use the enemy made of his smoke screens. Temperature was very low, and the gun crews suffered agonies through the necessary exposure. But they kept at their action stations gallantly, and dropped their salvos whenever a possibility of scoring a hit occurred.

During this semi-desultory fight, H.M.S. Forester received an ugly hit by an enemy shell—five-inch—in her boiler-room, and this crippled her, bringing her to a standstill. Another

five-inch shell made a direct hit on one of the destroyer's guns for'ard, a splinter killing Lieut-Commander G. P. Huddart, her captain. Seeing Forester's sorry plight, Foresight at once ran herself as a protective screen between the damaged destroyer and the powerful enemy force, and drew Axis fire on herself, illustrating the code of the Navy, which is that you always ignore the risk to yourself if you can succour one less fortunate. H.M.S. Foresight scored a crippling hit on an unidentified German destroyer stopping her dead in her tracks.

Time after time the enemy force attempted to close the range, but each attempt was frustrated by the fire from our destroyers: Forester continuing in hot action whenever visibility permitted, although quite unable to manoeuvre. Then, baffled, the enemy force fired a desperate salvo of torpedoes, loosing off a large number, in the hope that one or more might score a destructive hit. The range' was long for this form of attack; but the enemy were desperate, seeing their prey escaping their clutches. Notwithstanding her sorry plight, H.M.S. Edinburgh contrived to elude most of these missiles. The helpless cruiser was naturally the principal target for attack, with the convoy hidden behind the Northern mists. But, unfortunately, being so imperfectly under control, our cruiser swung wildly away from one torpedo, and, before the swing could be checked, she ran fairly into the track of another "tinfish." This one scored a severe hit, and it appeared the Edinburgh was doomed.

To save her from further assault, Hussar laid a dense and continuous smoke-screen between her and the enemy, with whom all the advantage of manoeuvre lay. The seas ran mountains high; notwithstanding which Harrier and Gossamer closed in and actually ran close alongside the stricken craft. ft was seen Edinburgh, though not *in extremis,* was entirely unmanageable. She was a constant liability to the smaller ships, hampering their freedom of action, keeping them near at hand in protection, instead of enabling them to launch a desperate attack.

Harrier and Gossamer proceeded to take off the unneeded men of Edinburgh's crew, leaving merely her gun-crews behind. During this delicate operation—and only a seaman who has himself been concerned in similar exploits can appreciate the risks run and the daring displayed—H.M.S. Forester showed what a sting she carried in her tail. She was motionless, practically out of control; her captain was dead,

one gun at least was disabled; but she maintained a hot fire, and scored at least three telling hits on one enemy destroyer. As this fire was returned Foresight once again slugged in to draw the enemy's attention, and in so doing, herself received punishment, taking a shell in the boiler-room which caused her to stop. Despite the handicap of immobility, both destroyers kept up such a sustained fire that the enemy bolted back into his foggy fastness.

The position now was that Edinburgh was to all intents a sheer hulk, save that her guns were still manned and shooting. Forester was crippled, and sorely hurt; Foresight was in slightly better case, her commanding officer being still alive. One enemy destroyer was more or less hors de combat, at least two others seemed to be unharmed, or at least, not vitally hit. The grotesqueness of this spirited action must be imagined. Snow-squalls persisted; ice formed everywhere, the seas ran mercilessly from horizon to diminished horizon.

Occupying the front of the stage were a crippled cruiser and two crippled destroyers, like pugilists, knocked half-over the ropes but still hitting fiercely back at each new sortie. Somewhere out of sight was a ponderous convoy, vulnerable to surface attack if only these dogged British ships could be given the *coup de grace.* The British vessels were determined to maintain resistance, occupying enemy attention, until their charges steamed through to safety. Once throw up the sponge and allow a fairway towards the freighters, the powerful enemy craft could destroy them almost at leisure. Not so vital a convoy, from the Axis point of view, this homeward-bounder, as an outward-bounder, but the Axis knew that if our freighters once reached port, they would be turned round, refilled and despatched with thousands of tons more of decisive munitions for the Russians to use with their proved skill! But the much battered White Ensign craft said, in effect, " They shall not pass! "

When the enemy re-emerged from the screening fog. H.M.S. Forester managed, by dint of Herculean efforts by her stokehold crew, to resume her way. Some idea of the work done by her repair squads can be gained if it is remembered that her boiler-room was flooded with superheated steam, that a tangle of debris lay everywhere, and that many men had lost their lives or were so gravely wounded as to be no longer serviceable. Modern destroyers are not equipped for extensive repairs, such matters being normally left to the dockyards; improvisations had to be made whilst

enemy shells were screaming nearby. The effects of bursting shell below were appalling, debris was flung wildly to every corner; in this inferno the engineering staff worked with the aplomb of heroes—too intent on their instant task to give heed to the risks they ran.

Once more under control Forester promptly put herself into position to screen Foresight, returning a Roland for an Oliver. Foresight, by way of appreciating the service, got in a destructive salvo on that German destroyer which had been hit and stopped. There was a gigantic explosion, as if the enemy had been hit in the magazine, or in the boiler-room. Smoke and spray obscured the observation; but when that smother cleared, only two Axis destroyers remained afloat. Still continuing to fire Foresight and Forester scored another hit on another Axis ship: this resulted in yet another crashing explosion. The one survivor of the enemy force vanished from sight, not liking the odds, and was not seen again.

But during all this time the plight of H.M.S. Edinburgh had grown even more precarious. She was almost derelict; incapable of steaming, steering or anchoring. If salvage attempts were further persisted in, the odds were that the enemy would return with powerful reinforcements and claim her as good prize, or, at least, claim the satisfaction of sinking her. As she was she involved risk to many of our vessels —of which we had all too few to be so risked. It was reluctantly decided 'to sink the crippled cruiser; and this was done by our own torpedoes. There was nothing ignominious in such sinking; she had fought nobly and, unlike the Graf Spee at the River Plate, she was honourably in action to the last.

There in the fog-shroud, among the piling seas, H.M.S. Edinburgh met her fate—as glorious a fate as that of Sir Richard Grenville's immortal Revenge. Once again, the convoy had got through. Our destroyers contrived to limp home, their teeth bared throughout. Two enemy ships were an offset against our lost cruiser. The Germans claimed a victory: we, who know the facts, realise that the victory lay in securing our communications, despite the heaviest opposition, with our Russian allies.

Incredible as were the experiences of the Maytime convoys, those undergone by the August convoy fairly eclipsed them. Full details of this heroic venture are still to be published, but enough is known to show that this fresh Armada dared five unbroken days of terrific air-attack: the enemy aircraft

giving hardly one moment's surcease during the entire period.

Germany claimed total annihilation. A considerable number of freighters were, regrettably, lost; but the protection afforded by British carrier-borne fighter aircraft enabled the greater part to get through. Admiral Standley, in referring to this serial fight, said that if fifty per cent of supplies reached port, the victory was assured; and on this memorable occasion a much greater percentage escaped the most considerable Axis attacks—chiefly by U-boat and aircraft—to make safe harbour and further assist that world-astonishing Stalingrad defence.

CHAPTER TWO.

YOUR MORNING CUP OF TEA

THE S.S. Hiatus loaded five thousand tons of first-crop tea at Colombo. She had additional freight, since tea, in chests, makes bulk rather than weight. Her bilges were pumped full of essential oils; and she had collected a few hundred tons of rare woods here and there in the Eastern seas. Mahogany and teak and ebony: all useful in the construction of aircraft, which are among the most necessary munitions of war to-day.

With the Mediterranean closed to all but vitally essential traffic, the Hiatus was compelled to take the longer southern route around Cape Good Hope. She had been run all-out for two years. Normally she went for minor overhaul into Singapore's drydock; but with Singapore in Japanese hands, such facilities were denied her.

No layman can realise the jolt given to the Merchant Navy by Far East happenings. Singapore was always considered a restful place: a brisk, active oasis in a desert of monotonous sea-water. Chief engineers could take time out to tune-up their hard-run engines. Mr. Alistair Grahame, the Hiatus's chief, was as downy a bird as are most Clydeside engineers. An unsympathetic superintendent at home, determined to keep down running costs in the interests of the shareholders—and himself—vetted the engine-room indents very thoroughly at each voyage-end, and pared them down to the irreducible minimum. But, so ran Mr. Alistair Grahame's theory: if you got quite necessary repairs done abroad, you could be lavish in your indents, and when questions were asked at home, you could explain things away on the score that the

homeward freight had to be got through. But, with Singapore out of action, and with Colombo working double-tides to ready Ceylon for the imminent enemy attacks, makeshifts had to be adopted; only such repairs as were possible of execution by the ship's staff were likely to be made.

During sweltering days there on the Equator, the white engineers and Chinese engine-room staff dismounted cylinder covers, packed leaky glands, trued erratic bearings, ran white metal into jolting joints; and generally sweated things into shipshape order. Presently Mr. Grahame was able to report to Captain Truman that, granted the unlimited aid of Providence, the "job" below might do.

" We can't take chances," said Captain Truman. " Think of the old ladies in England who'll miss their morning tea if we get it where it hurts! "

" We'll manage," said Mr. Grahame drily. " Maybe ye'll realise that the engine-room matters in modern seafarin'! " There was the usual semi-humorous feud between the navigation and engineering departments: a feud that has existed ever since steam crept in to limit the autocratic powers of the deck.

Mrs. Grahame was "unco' fond" of her morning tea, like a few million other women of Britain; and Mr. Grahame, not addicted to prayer, except in moments of grave emergency, vowed solemnly that he would do everything that lay in his power to see that she and her sisters were not deprived of the luxury that had become a necessity.

Harry Peters, one of the Hiatus's white quartermasters, told me most of the details of the ensuing voyage. He is a quiet little man, elderly—he served five years in sailing ships before those white-winged beauties became extinct—and if you met him ashore you would think he was nothing out of the ordinary: just a plain clothes idler, who fiddled whilst Rome was burning.

" We ran into it almost before the anchors were home," he said. "First warning we got was when something screamed over the funnel and plopped into the sea on the port bow, half a mile over. A Jap shell, see! Last thing we expected; but one of their surface raiders had sneaked into our waters, and there she was—just a hump on the skyline, as day broke. You know the way day comes on the Line—not five minutes between pitch dark and enough light to see by.

"Being at the wheel, as I was, I had a grandstand view of everything. Mr. Herbert, the chief officer, was on the bridge. Ex-R.N.R. he is; he ran a Q-boat in the last war; but he's too old for Admiralty service now. Mr. Herbert rang the telegraphs—we're twin-screw—for all the speed that could be got, and then went to the engine-room telephone.

'Make smoke—a hell of a lot of smoke!' I heard him say. Then he sounded the alarm, and the after gun-crew doubled to action stations. My station was at the wheel, being senior quartermaster, so I stayed put.

" Up came Captain Truman, in his lungi. Down in that hot weather you don't wear pyjamas more'n you can help. He'd been sleeping hard, but he was wide awake now.

" 'What is it?" he wanted to know.

One of their blasted Maru boats, converted,' said Mr. Herbert. 'As big as the Queen Elizabeth from her looks, at that.'

"' Well, we're taking it fighting,' said Captain Truman. ' No scuttling, remember, if anything happens to me.'

'O.K. sir,' said Mr. Herbert. 'I'll go aft, then.' So Captain Truman and the fourth officer—just a kid—stayed on the bridge, and Mr. Truman went aft to the gun. I'm not saying just what sort of a gun we carried aft; but Mr. Truman wasn't ex-R.N.R. for nothing.

" We ran into a six-gun salvo from the Jap before anything else much happened. But I fancy they'd mounted them bundoops in a bit of a hurry, because their shooting was wild. We were buried in waterspouts, o' course. The ship seemed to be lifted clean out of the water, and when she settled back the thump pretty near shook my teeth loose. But we weren't hit, except for a few splinters; and the Chink carpenter and his crew got busy plugging the holes almost before they happened. Down below they were making smoke in a way that'd surprise you. Chinks hate Japs rather more than I hate Huns—and I've good cause to hate the swine! — so the black squad down below weren't risking anything. As far as I could see we were smoke-smothered; but I expect the yellow-bellies fired at where the smoke was thickest, because two or three more salvoes came unpleasantly close.

" Captain Truman said to me: ' Steer a straight course, Quartermaster; we'll need our speed. She's doing close on seventeen knots as it is. That custard there is one of the 1928 Marus; she might just do eighteen, but I doubt it.' That's what comes of having experienced men on the job; through his glasses the captain had recognised the raider, having lain in company with her from Vladivostok to Bombay. But everything seemed to depend on the engine-room as to whether we'd get that extra bit of speed that would lick the Jap. He'd been cruising on the outlook for slow tramps, I fancy—he was a bit surprised when our Mr. Grahame showed him a clean pair o' heels.

" So we held on, hell-belt-for-the-election. Times were when the smoke cleared; as often as it did, another salvo came snarling over us. We were hit—sure enough we were hit. A shell went clean through the superstructure amidships and made hash of the officers' quarters. A fire broke out in the engine-room alleyway; but the fire-fighters tackled that and put it out. I steered as straight as I could, listening for the next scream of shot; and then I felt the ship shake all along her length.

" 'We've copped it!' I thought. But it was our after-gun going into action. Mr. Herbert had given extreme elevation and had gone into rapid, independent. The way that gun fired was a miracle. The Japs began to fire at the flash, with an idea of putting it out of action, I reckon, for the waterspouts climbed up dead astern, and some of 'em so near the after-deck was washed down better than it had been ever since I knew the ship.

" My opposite number in the wheelhouse—Hans Jenson, a Free Norwegian—was trainer of the gun aft; he told me the way the Chink ammunition-passers served the bundoop was a marvel; they sweated and yelled and danced, but there was no waiting. Mr. Herbert had climbed the main rigging to spot the fall of shot. I could hear him yelling: ' Up four hundred; down two hundred!' even in the wheelhouse.

" And the way the decks shook as them engines pounded on—it would have dazed you! Then I heard Captain Truman yell: 'Christ, he's got it! ' He chucked his cap down on the deck and danced on it. I couldn't see anything, o' course; the wheelhouse being protected the way it was; but our Mr. Herbert had lopped a shell plunk into that Jap where it seemed to do him a lot of harm. So after a bit we slowed down and things began to get more normal.

" Along came Mr. Grahame to the bridge, while the crew got busy making good the damage. The Chief said: ' We've overrun 'em, Captain Truman; and if we don't stop for overhaul, I won't guarantee anything.'

'What do you mean? ' asked the skipper.

"' We're leaking steam from every joint,' said the Chief. ' These engines are built for steady going, not suchlike bursts as we've just had.'

" So the captain rang Stop; and we just wallowed there. We didn't know what was likely to happen. Jap submarines might be cruising around; and for all we knew there was an aircraft carrier not so far off. We kept all gun-crews closed up and ready. Down below the engine-room was as busy as bees; and the Chippy-chap and his Chink mates was making good the patches he'd shoved in. Broad daylight it was, and every cloud showing on the horizon might be enemy stuff coming to make a finish. If a tide-rip caused a bit of a swirl the gunlayer aft was calling out the range. And the tea down in the holds had to be screened, in case the damp came in and spoilt it.

" But along about sunset Mr. Grahame said he thought the engines could move, in reason; so off we started again. Nothing much happened for a long time after that; we began to forget what we'd picked up in the Indian Ocean. We called in at Capetown to see if any extra cargo was offering: and we got some: oranges and fruit, mostly. I reckon most of us made ourselves sick eating oranges; I managed forty myself one day.

" There wasn't much to be scared of after that until we got up around Dakar, where the Huns were basing their U-boats. We knew we'd be liable to attack; with an off-chance of a Focke-Wulf or two coming to ask questions."

Captain Truman told me more of the story. " We aren't any tin-plated heroes," he said. " There are thousands like us. It's a job and we have to do it. If we'd been carrying troops or munitions we might have felt we were pulling more weight in the national boat; but the way I look at it is that if we bring home the tea, we keep things going and help the ordinary people to carry on.

" It was the engines that scared me. The way the steam poured through the engine-room skylight when we were running from that Jap raider would have paralysed most people. But Grahame, the Chief, is a magician. You know what engineers are like when their 'job' is concerned. They eat and sleep beside their precious engines, and they spend every minute tinkering with them. Here's a thing you might care to make a note of: the Merchant Navy wouldn't stand a chance of survival but for its Black Squads—engine-room and stokehold. The ships have to be kept going, and it's

the engineers who do that—often enough with poor working tools.

" We were attacked by long-range aircraft a bit north of Dakar. I kept well out to sea, hoping to dodge 'em; but one noon the alert sounded. We hadn't an escort then: we were entirely on our own; the Navy being overworked, as it is. Take it from me: those Vichy Frenchmen are Huns at heart. They grant all facilities to Hitler; and Dakar and thereabouts is pure Hun.

" We hadn't anything much to put up against the bombers. So far as I could see, we were a sitting shot. One came out, steering west, evidently on reconnaissance; he circled us twice, high up; and then flew back. I told the mate we were in for trouble. Speed wasn't going to help us here, so you'd notice. It was pretty awful just having to wait, to see what developed.

"Around about four o'clock that afternoon the lookout reported smoke on the western horizon. I knew Hun surface raiders were functioning; and thought it might turn out to be a repetition of the Indian Ocean business; but just as we were getting ready for that, a Focke-Wulf streaked out. He was quite deliberate about it, like a cat with a mouse. He circled us three times, as if picking out the weakest point of attack; and then he dived. I threw the ship into a zigzag. A bomb came screaming down; and it missed us by a cables-length. That wasn't anything to worry about. It shook us a bit, nothing more. The F-W zoomed up and did another circle. I reckoned it was the quickness of my eye against his hand; so I watched him, after telling the quartermaster to keep his eye on me. I saw the next bomb leave him; and I signalled to give hard-port helm. Then, just as we swung", I steadied and gave Hard-a-starboard. He thought we should continue on our hard-a-port track; he dropped a bomb accordingly; but—the ship's quick on her helm—we were far enough away when that one hit the water. So then I stopped the engines and went full astern, and his next bomb was far ahead. But Grahame spoke from the engine-room and said the shake-ups we'd got had burst a steam-pipe; and we'd have to stop. Just the sort of thing that *would* happen!

"Herbert was at the after-gun, hoping he'd come down within our elevation. We hadn't any shrapnel to burst in front of his nose; but Herbert thought that a hit with common shell was possible.

" But the Hun never came down low enough."

" How did your crew stand up to this sort of thing? " I demanded.

"Like heroes. It takes a lot to shake a Chink. In the last war they were a bit inclined to scare; but since then they've learnt a lot—and they class Japs, Huns and Wops all as one. They didn't try to rush the boats and get them away, as happened to me in 1918; and when a bomb-splinter laid out the man at the Hotchkiss gun on the bridge, it was a Chinaman who stepped forward to replace him.

" Still, we'd have caught the whole packet that time if it hadn't been for what I'd call a miraculous intervention: the miracle of the Royal Navy. That smoke we'd sighted was the smoke of a British cruiser on patrol. The White Ensign ship came racing in at full speed, and long before it seemed any use, every ak-ak gun she carried was at work. She put such a box-barrage around us that the Hun didn't know whether it was breakfast-time or Thursday. She hit him, too; and he made off, smoking hard and losing height; so I doubt if ever he got back to his come-from.

" Then along came another, all loaded for bear. He probably thought we were carrying troops or munitions; he made a hot attack; but just as he went into his dive—and I can tell you my sweat made a pool on the bridge—the cruiser got him in his bomb-rack. That was one of the prettiest sights I've ever seen, I think: he blew up in mid-air like a rocket bursting. Part of one of his crew slopped on my fore-deck: you'd hardly have known it had once been. a man! The rest of that F-W just sprinkled itself over the sea, in smoking fragments.

" So then we had a breather. The cruiser—they tell me I mustn't mention her.name—ranged up and asked how we were getting on. I told him we had to stop for repairs; and he said he'd stand by as a screen against further attack, of whatever sort. It seemed very quiet after the flurry died down. And night, when it came, was very welcome. You've no idea how quickly things happen at sea nowadays; you've hardly time to think, let alone eat or bathe or anything. When I have a bath at sea I do it by instalments; a leg now and another leg later on; with my hands ready to grab my pants; you see, it's a matter of seconds, more often than not.

" That cruiser screened us until Grahame had effected running repairs. But our regular speed was cut down a goodish bit. Not that that mattered a lot: we were due to join a big homeward convoy almost any day. You don't feel so lonely when you are in company with a score or more useful ships: you don't feel as if every aircraft you spot in the sky was aiming straight for you." •

In due course, then, the Hiatus joined a notable convoy of heterogeneous vessels. She cut deeply west into the Atlantic to join up; and a day dawned when the canopy of convoy-smoke was plainly discernible on the horizon.

" We hadn't escaped trouble, though," said Truman. " We were out of range of shore-based bombers; but Hitler has the whole Atlantic pretty well policed. He knows as well as we do that his only hope of staving off complete defeat is to starve Britain; and the only way to starve *her* is to sink every ton of shipping she's got, and then every ton of Allied shipping on top. He's doing his best. Full of surprises, the Huns—we reckoned they couldn't build enough U-boats to make up for losses, or, if built, they couldn't find trained crews enough to man 'em; but I bet a.payday there are more enemy submarines functioning just now than when the war started. And they've got to be manned—somehow. Press-gang work, as like as not; but when you remember that the U-boat crews are told as they start out that if they're taken prisoner they'll be tortured, and if they come back without making a kill they'll be Gestapo-ed; you can understand they fight the way they do, taking all sorts of risks. These young Germans have been well-tutored; they're fanatics, and they verily believe that Hitler is really God—and that to die in his service is a sort of high-falutin martyrdom. That's a fact; I've talked with some of them."

There was an attack on this convoy the night the Hiatus joined it.. The U-boats were hunting in packs; one operating at a distance in an attempt to draw off the escort, and the other near-by, chancing its luck. Fortunately the escort grasped the situation; instead of dispersing the destroyers and corvettes ran a close guard along the convoy's flanks.

"It was a bit of a job to keep speed, slow though that was at that," said Mr. Grahame, with whom I talked in his hot, oil-scented cabin near the end of the engine-room alleyway. " The job was ricked and shaken; and we struck a bad pocket of coal. But' speed we had to get; because, as you know, the Hun lags behind a convoy in the hope of picking up stragglers; and they can't spare escorts to shepherd each separate vessel. So I made steam; with homeward-bound patches everywhere, and half the Black Squad sick with scalds and burns. And when I think—"

He had left the sea for a safe, lucrative shore-job long before war came. He was highly qualified, the kind of man to be welcomed by any progressive engineering firm, where an extra-chief engineer's certificate of competency is considered an Honours degree. But war came, and he felt it his bounden duty to go afloat again, where his skill might be fully employed: as it was aboard the draggle-tailed Hiatus.

" It's not unco' pleasant down below in action," he admitted. "They on deck have the best o't; they can see the trouble coming; we just hear it as it happens; and when you feel your engine-room trying to capsize and spill its guts all over the ocean, you get a queasy feeling inside ye that isn't too good for your peace o' mind."

I know that feeling. To be cooped up in a noisy, whirling steel den, where long steel arms strike out grotesquely and recover themselves just as you feel sure they must tear down the enamelled walls, to expect those steel sides to cave in any moment to the stern bidding of a torpedo; to see half the Atlantic pouring through a rent into which a laden motor-truck could be driven with ease: to hear the boilers explode and to see the whole intricate maze of arms and cranks and chattering governors suddenly brought to a jolting standstill, with odd bits of steel flying like hail through the steam and oil-filled air: that's worse than any hell Dante imagined.

Undoubtedly Truman was right when he said that the debt owed by England to her seagoing engineers is one that can never adequately be repaid, either in honour or cash. The Black Squad stand the toughest watches of all: they are the last to be given a chance for life; often the encroaching water drags them back from the greasy ladders which they attempt to scale, and they drown in cold darkness, just before they are boiled or roasted to death.

Two ships of the convoy perished during that first attack. One U-boat was kicked up to the surface by our depth-charges; as it cavorted there four four-inch guns targeted on its conning tower; and an escort ship rammed it, carving such a gash in its upperworks as caused it to go under like a lead plummet. But the sinking of one U-boat is small compensation for the loss of two deep-laden freighters, each crammed to the water-line with vital necessities for the Allied war-effort.

The escort did notable things; illuminating the sea's surface when one U-boat came up right in the convoy's middle.

Evidently the Hun was astounded when the whole scene was lit up like day by the devices now employed by H.M. ships. He fired two torpedoes—one at the Hiatus, but that one missed; one at a tanker, which fell out of line and burst into flames.

" I've seen big ships fold up like pocket-knives and go under in four minutes," Truman said. " Their 'mouldies' are uncommonly powerful; like our 'big, beautiful bombs' that the R.A.F. let loose on Germany. The tanker was astonishing: one minute she was steaming on as if she owned the world, the next—phew! she was a volcano; fire everywhere, and when I say fire I mean *fire*. The flames leaped over her mastheads in a jiffey; she was incandescent in another. You could see her swung-out boats fluff up like tinder before the crew could lower them. Then the sea all around took fire. It's no pleasant sight to see your own countrymen swimming in a sea of white flame. There was enough wind to blow the blaze aside at times; and when it did you'd see a blackened face lift up and two scorched arms wave; then the fire drove down again, and you knew—you knew!

" Nearly every ship in the convoy: warships and freighters alike: opened fire on that submarine, whose conning-tower hadn't even opened. The idea of surfacing in among a convoy is so that the ships will blanket your guns; but our lads didn't care what risks they took; they blazed away like mad. That U-boat was mashed into scrap before you could wink. One after another the shells got her, burst, up went wreckage; other shells poured in."

" I'd seen that tanker go," said Mr. Herbert, interrupting. " I'd seen those poor devils trying to swim among the burning oil; and it made me hate Jerry as I never thought I could hate anything. So I pushed the gunlayer off his seat and got down to it; smack-smack, like that. I hit him four times in four seconds; or it seemed like it. I fancy a hundred shells got him: what he was like inside I can hardly imagine. Chewed up and spat out, I'd say."

A Sunderland flying-boat met the convoy not long after the second U-boat attack. This aircraft reported attacking two U-boats at a certain point; and two escort ships started off to enquire. Then the Sunderland suddenly altered course and dashed off, signalling as she went that another submarine was sighted; she dropped bombs, and said that a lot of oil came up—spreading like a silken film over the pobble of the

wind-whipped sea—but that as the U-boat hadn't been actually sighted in its death-throes, a certain kill couldn't be claimed.

" Two of the convoy ships carried Hurricane fighters, fired off the decks by catapults," said Truman. " Next time we were attacked from the air, these R.A.F. lads went into instant action; and it was grand—ah, grand! When enemy aircraft attack even a big convoy: and ours was big as the Spanish Armada: you get a feeling that it's not just *your* ship they're coming for but *you*, yourself! Silly; but there it is. Once our Hurricanes took off, though, that lonely, bull's eye feeling went.

" I'll say the R.AF. knows its job-plus. You could almost hear those pilots laughing; it was shown in the gay way they climbed to meet the big Huns. I don't know the technique of air-fighting; but I do know that one Hurricane got the weather-gauge of a Focke-Wulf, sat on his hinder-parts, and cut him clean in two with a burst of cannon-fire. I never saw anything like it—the air seemed full of bits and pieces.

" The other Hurricane chased off two F-Ws.; it looked as if they'd seen what happened to their mate, and they tried to sheer off; but they went off limping. I bet they didn't go far. But these R.A.F. lads take a lot of chances, too—they've got nowhere to land after fighting. We were too far from any land base to allow them return there; all they could do was bale-out by parachute and let their aircraft crash. It seems wasteful at that; but they'd probably saved half a dozen ships, so the expense was worth while.

"So the convoy went on. I can't tell you the route we took though I expect you know it. A bit different from old times, when we ran through Suez and home in three weeks! It takes months these days. But the old ladies get their morning tea, just the same."

Then Truman told me stories—strictly' true, understated even—of the wastage involved in getting home that morning cup of tea. He had picked up a boat; the only one surviving of four, that had left a torpedoed ship in mid-ocean. One man was alive; one was dying; and the sole survivor said that when the boat left its parent ship, seventeen men were its crew. They had been adrift for close on three weeks: the boat was charred. The fresh water was inadequate, food was scarce, weather was bad. It is likely that the single survivor was all that was left of some fifty-five honest sailor-men.

"When we got nearer to home waters," Truman narrated, "we came in for the worst sort of trouble. The Luftwaffe was turned on to us in full strength: wave after wave came over. But we were within range of our own aircraft by this time; and just when things were getting hottest: the bombs dropping like hail: in came our fighters. Man, if ever I felt like cheering it was then.

" Not that the Navy didn't do its share. Every ship of the escort closed in as the attack developed, and filled the sky with bursting shrapnel. Honestly, there seemed to be nothing but smoke-puffs wherever you looked. There must have been a hundred guns in action, counting those of the convoy itself; and although I didn't see any direct hits scored on the Huns, they were kept so high that when they dropped their stuff it went wide. Only, the scream of the falling bombs set your teeth on edge; and the everlasting jolting as they burst kicked up as big a sea as you'd get off Cape Horn. All the same, they couldn't shake the convoy; it steamed on as if being inspected by the King.

" Our fighters fetched down a big chap, and he dropped in the sea so closely alongside that we could have chucked a heaving-line to the crew and collected them.

" There were some more U-boats hanging around all this time and I saw more than one torpedo fired at our ships. Nothing was hit, however, not that time. And I saw one example of poetic justice that if you read it in a story you wouldn't believe.

" A big Hun—a Heinkel, I think—was making up- for attack when one of our Beaufighters got after him. Mind you, the last man to see all the details of an action is the man taking part in it; but just at the moment we seemed to be isolated from all the rest, and merely spectators. We had our gruelling; but our end of the line was now ignored. We were able to breathe again and the steward brought up coffee in pint mugs; and was that coffee welcome! It's true that an occasional jolt from a bursting bomb would shake the ship and spill the coffee all over our chins and down our chests; but what little we took down did us a lot of good.

" This Heinkel doubled in an attempt to escape the Beaufighter. But our plane was after him like a greyhound after a hare; it was mighty pretty work. So the Heinkel jettisoned his bomb-load, to lighten himself and get height for the homeward trip.

" He was shot to bits a minute later. His bombs screamed

down and burst more than a couple of miles away, and in bursting they fetched up a U-boat that had been sneaking along on our flank."

" It was too good a chance to miss," put in Mr. Herbert. "I was watching those bombs burst and thinking we were mighty lucky not to be in their way; when I saw the Hun come up in the swirls. He was just like a flurrying whale. So I got the gun down—we'd elevated to extreme angle, in case we got a pot at a bomber—and let drive. First shot went over, second short—a thirty-yard bracket. Then the third shell hit him—plonk! Not that he needed it; he was already spitchered. No survivors that I could see."

There were several more air attacks after that: the enemy seemed to develop a special hate against Truman's convoy. But no more vessels were lost; though one, leaking badly, floundered ashore in soundings that promised early salvage. The port of arrival was savagely bombed the night the convoy arrived. Once again the Hiatus's ak-ak guns were in hot action. But the screening of the ships was really a matter for the shore defences and the R.A.F.; both of which dealt faithfully with the assassins.

" The main thing was," Truman said, modestly, and entirely without vainglory, " We got the tea landed without a single box being even wetted. Five thousand tons of first-crop tea. Not so bad; I wish it had been ten thousand; but if we'd been ten thousand tons and eleven knots we might never have brought a pound home.

"And if it hadn't been for our Mr. Grahame, we'd all be at the bottom of the Locker, as like as not. We didn't do a lot on deck; but down below it was serial Hades. It's men like the Chief the country owes its existence to: the dour Scots engineers Kipling wrote about, who keep the wheels, of supply turning and don't stand forward to catch the limelight."

Herbert chuckled. "A girl gave me a white feather the day I landed," he observed. " Humorous—very! "

CHAPTER THREE.

MAIDS OF ALL WORK

CAPABLE of sinking a battleship: speedy to race to save a shot-down airman, to-day's destroyers are one of the few types of Navy ships surviving in a state still approximating to the original idea of their utility. The destroyer's purposes are so varied that it is impossible in the scope of a short chapter to do more than touch the varied fringes. But their principal role, one in which they are well accomplished and tirelessly engaged, is in the provision of escort to our convoys: coastal and deep-sea. Even though they were chiefly designed for coastal work, to-day they esteem no ocean too wide or sea too high for their operations.

The Royal Navy's utility ships, they are equipped with practically every fighting-tool human ingenuity can devise: from the 21 in. torpedoes which were their original reason for existence, to exquisite anti-aircraft guns capable of blasting any aircraft out of the furious sky.

To sail in such a ship is to experience the ultimate ecstasy of feverish activity. Their depth-charges are racked astern to deal with any under-water threat, their guns are ready and powerful to tackle whatever the surface has to offer in the way of hazard. They are the fastest sea-going ships afloat, if you exclude those wasp-like motor torpedo boats, which are seaplanes as much as ships. They carry the power of thirty-five thousand horses below their vibrant decks, which is power enough to hurl them through startled water at forty knots' speed.

Day by day, week by week, year by year they cross the Atlantic Ocean in fair weather and foul as a matter of course, to safeguard and shepherd our invaluable convoys: which are the arteries of our continued existence. They go out to the distant Pacific with as much equanimity as they tackle the icy Arctic; they go everywhere where there is sea-room and the chance of action.

In the last war they definitely proved their utility when Commander—later Vice-Admiral—Evans, " Evans of the Broke," made history off Dunkirk by crashing into enemy destroyers and carrying them by the board. Admiral Beatty, at Jutland, his flagship disabled, transferred his flag to a destroyer which ranged neatly alongside the crippled battle-cruiser Lion, and conducted the further action from that comparatively humble unit of H.M. Navy.

In this war the swift, light, razor-keen craft go on distinguishing themselves. There was the boarding of the Altmark, for one thing, and Warburton Lee's dashing gallantry at Narvik. The Dunkirk evacuation gave our destroyers a chance to display their supreme qualities of handiness, desperate courage and unfailing resourcefulness.

Crete and Greece gave other chances; they took a prominent part in the sinking of the great German battleship Bismarck; and it was only due to geographical limitations that they failed to be in at the death of the pocket battleship Graf Spee, when that disgraced ship showed all Christendom how despicable a fighting force the Third Reich navy really is.

I have known destroyers intimately for a long time. To refresh that knowledge I recently made an extended trip in such a vessel, and my eyes opened to their utmost when I realised her capabilities. This comparatively trifling ship, displacing little more than 1,000 tons—could have taken on and sunk the combined French and British fleets at Trafalgar without suffering so much as a scratch on her sleek paint. Though that paint *was* rusted in patches, come to think of it, as proof of tireless, unresting service in protection of the Merchant Navy.

H.M.S.————carried a crew of about 160 men, and almost every one of this band of brothers was a specialist of a high order. But in the heat of action half these specialists forgot the dignity accruing to them and buckled-to like navvies to pass ammunition and handle guns and the other fighting tools. Her eager, monstrous heart—the engine-room—was in charge of a man who had started his Navy career as a stoker, and was now a warrant officer: an expert who could have run the Queen Mary's engines with equal competence. In the -closest emergencies he was as unruffled as a summer mill-pond, but the service he got from his subordinates would have tickled the vanity of an Admiral. He had a quality of leadership equalled only by that of the ex-Dartmouth cadet—he was little more than a gay-hearted boy—in supreme command of this astounding complexity of men and material.

Without outside aid that two-striped youngster could have taken his miniature command clean round the world and won a war on his own account. The little ship, sharp as a razor, was a self-contained entity, in which the destinies of those eight-score human beings were enacted. Her only reliance on the outside world—and then only at prolonged intervals—was for fuel and food. When a German Luftwaffe bomb tore a hole or two in her side and disorganised a few minor fittings, her captain first shot the bomber down into the bomb-torn sea, rescued the survivors of its crew, and then ran her into shallower water where her own specialists effected perfectly satisfactory repairs, and she was on her way inside

twenty-four hours. Lathes and machine-tools were carried in sufficiency; there was an abundance of spare material, and there was tireless, enthusiastic energy: a spirit amongst all hands to back up the captain to the limit.

Look at her, as I saw her. She carried a multitude of secret devices by which she could detect the proximity of an enemy—sub-surface or in the air. She could receive messages from half round the world, and, if necessary, could transmit them equally far. She carried enough heavy artillery to fight a by no means forlorn hope with anything short of a pocket-battleship : lovely guns, as true as the steel from which they were built. She could hide her position by means of smoke-screens and under their cover manoeuvre into the best fighting positions. Her pom-poms could hurl torrents of high-exrplosive miniature shells to a fantastic height against air-raiders. Her. weightier anti-aircraft guns could deal with low-fliers, or with snarling E-boats on the surface; could repel possible boarders if her engines happened to fail—though the warrant engineer would not let them fail so long as the pertinacity of materials held them together. She had six torpedo-tubes and enough spares to cripple a fleet of powerful ships. Aft she was fitted to tackle the U-boat problem; not only were fifty depth-charges stacked ready to hand at the mechanical droppers, she was also fitted with a Y-gun for throwing those destructive cylinders at any visible periscope or into the swirls crashed by a fast-diving undersea boat.

Her crew were practised soldiers if required for landing-party work ashore: trained to use rifle and bayonet with the deadly skill of so many Guardsmen, though opportunities to acquire hard physical fitness were few—astonishingly few, oddly enough. The close crampedness of the lean destroyer's decks, upper and lower, allows little exercise; even a watch on deck means nothing more vigorous than the fisherman's " three steps and overboard."

After vicissitudes at Dunkirk, Narvik, in the Channel, in the bleak North Sea, and at Crete and elsewhere, my busy destroyer was now engaged in convoy work—escorting the vital freighters by whose courage and determination we continue to live on our feet, and not on our degraded knees. Nobly she performed her task. She was here, there and everywhere at once, questing wide on the great armada's flank. Now, with quick reports coming from the detector-room, she worked up her speed to all-out and raced on a course that brought her into lively action. Somewhere below the Atlantic

surface, unseen, unheard, and yet detected by the scientific gadgets of to-day, there cowered a killer-ship. Down splashed our depth-charges, up soared monstrous water-spouts; we bucked and jolted as if kicked by a Titanic foot; we reeled rails awash, swung back, reeled again as another depth-charge exploded to give a rude buffet to Mother Atlantic's unresilient breast. A streak of dirty oil sleeked the swirls. The gun-crews were tense and watchful around their pieces: the lean muzzles swung to cover accurately the oily patch; and the destroyer herself circled like a wily scrum-half-back on the outskirts of the final scrimmage. A look-out shouted—pointed: a wavering upright thing showed far from the whirlpools.

" Y-gun—fire! " A cannister of T.N.T. was flung with almost the accuracy of a shell; there was suspense, then another spout climbed towards the ragged clouds; but no U-boat's corpse accompanied it: just a trifle of waterlogged wreckage that the first discharges had jolted to the surface: a sodden boat with a stump mast that startlingly resembled a periscope. >

What was happening in the sixty-fathom deep we could not tell. The detectors received no answering "ping" to their persistent challenge.

" We'll drop another pattern," quoth the boyish commander, duffle-coated over his sea-clothes; for he had been snatching a "stretch off the land" when the alarm jerked him off his settee. Another long, lean, grey shape came questing—senior officer, anxious to be in at the death. We joined forces and created such turmoil beneath the surface that any U-boat cringing there must have suffered from shaken nerves. And meantime the convoy steamed sedately past, relying on our vigilance and activity; and the captain was moved to remember an occasion when he held up a German supply-ship, probably intended to re-fuel and re-store the Bismarck.

" We signalled that scuttling would be well repaid," he declared. " But they know we're humane, the swine! They took to their boats—it was like ants swarming. Then fire started; we rounded up the men in the boats and sent 'em back, along with our boarding-party. No use; she was for it. They'd laid explosive charges, opened the seacocks, and fired her all at once. So we got a bit of practice with the Y-gun; I thought it would do the men good. She sank all right."

" Her crew? " I asked. I shouldn't have blamed him if that crew had gone down with their scuttled ship. But—no.

"A lousy lot! We took em home; to England, I mean." Had the positions been reversed machine-guns would have settled the fate of the runaway seamen.

This young N.O. remembered Hun airmen bombing our rescue-ships at Dunkirk, and admitted he felt like administering a bit of poetic justice; but there it was: those men were officially non-combatant, entitled to the honours and courtesies of war. He had also found riddled British merchant ships' boats, with starved dead men lying in the swilling bilges: men who had endured for a month before kind death gave them surcease from suffering. " One day we'll see Jerry get what's due to him: they'll be abandoned in their boats, same as they've abandoned thousands of our chaps—see how they'll like that! "

After a while, with interludes of depth-charge dropping, we raced back to the convoy, in time to help in an air-attack, which was -pretty noisy and sloppy and destructive—to the attackers. A big ugly German bomber, took a shell from our 3in. H.A. gun in the inout and disintegrated. We snorted down to where the wreckage fell, but beyond oil and flotsam got nothing. " He hadn't time to bale out, poor devil! " said the watchkeeper.. Requiem for a Hun! Another big black bomber dropped his eggs at random, creating high splashes, and a stench of smoke drifted down-wind acridly. But a Hurricane had already been catapulted into the startled air from the deck of an inconspicuous freighting ship. We saw the gnat reach out for the exaggerated dragon-fly; we thinly heard a stamner of gunfire; then a smoking wisp spun down from the upper air.

" Another of our jobs! ' said the captain, and we quickened our engines t offe8aedfe8aed t h e i T j 0

down with a warning to us to look out, and a rifleman fired a line across our deck which, hauled in, brought an oil-skinned secret instruction. Then again we suddenly quickened to almost lurid speed; I went up the wardroom ladder to the chattering bridge, wind-blown so fiercely as hardly to be able to stand against the furious wind-gusts, made by our own roaring passage.

" Anything? " I asked, like a child waiting for Punch and Judy to perform.

"Reported surface-raider; we're going to look-see! " was the terse reply. It might be a pocket-battleship, or " a cruiser of the Hipper class," or a camouflaged Q-ship: a big-gunned craft masquerading as an Allied freighter; it might have been the whole German Navy, but it was the destroyer's duty to seek the menace, report on it, do her damnedest to hold it in check until stronger reinforcements arrived, even if it meant going down as a tangle of flaming scrap. Up towards the Arctic Circle we frothed, a bow-wave piled bridge-high on' either side, and the sea astern creamy with our wake for miles beyond eye-range. This was life—or death!

The little ship: maid of all work in the endless Atlantic battle: shivered in her eagerness. Never had I experienced such purposeful thrusting into the Unknown. There was stark grey sea and there was greedy dark cloud: there was nothing else but us, a pinpoint in immensity, urgent to save our charges from annihilation. To show one's face above the wind-dodger on the bridge was to be pushed over backwards as though slammed by a giant land. The long slow Atlantic swell rolled us through a hundred degrees of arc; spindrift washed us without cessation. The brine clung to our faces in sticky completeness. The bridge-party's faces dripped; their cap-peaks were scupper: to direct a steady flow of moisture to their duffled fronts.

We seemed as irresistible as an 11-inch shell hurtling through space.

"How'll you engage, if you spot him? " I asked the wise youngster in charge of our destinies.

" Smoke-screen to close in, then all the mouldies we've got on hand," he crisply returned no longer a suave host but a keen man of action, tensed as every man aboard was tensed, like a harp-string. " We tab it fighting in destroyers!" It probably meant annihilation: faced with the big guns of the Tirpitz, might be, or even the 5.9s. of a sneaking commerce destroyer in disguise, we should melt to ruin at a broadside.

But swift zizgzagging would baffle the enemy gunlayers for long enough to enable us to launch our levin-bolts: dodging in to let the last ones go. I remembered that another hour or less might present me before a certain Throne for judgment, and endeavoured to find savoir faire; but it was a feeble attempt. The big raider might have scouting aircraft out, telling him mile by mile of our progress, in which case we should be blasted before blasting. So I went below to where the warm oiliness of the engine-room gave a fictitious security; and found that hawk-faced engineer as imperturbable as if he were merely running speed-trials. His only concession to the occasion had been to inflate his Mae West life-jacket, about which we had chaffed him in less strenuous times.

" Running as sweetly as a chronometer," he declared, of his turbines. It seemed impossible that those stealthy marvels, showing little more than a couple of giant tubes along the floors, should be sending that knife-sharp ship along at something like forty-five miles an hour. But I had the bridge's affidavit for that. The roar of the blowers that gave the draft to the boilers "was deafening, but that was the only hint of haste.

Visions of huge shells crashing through the paper-thin sides and flooding that vibrant chamber with the unchecked Atlantic, however, proved too disturbing: a sort of claustrophobia beset me and drove me to the miniature wardroom, where the surgeon pondered over a code-message nonchalantly as ever; though his operating tools were laid handy, and a sick-berth steward stood by for possible casualties. The Hun prisoners were livid: they had been told what was afoot; our R.A.F. passenger was buried in an Edgar Wallace. Speed of this sort was to him a pitiful crawl; 400 miles per hour was more in his line.

" Wallace for thrills! " he grinned at me, who was thrilled to the marrow. Poking a head up through the companion—more like a submarine's conning-tower than any other staircase I have seen—meant drenching showers of spray, and the drumming beat of other sprays, unbroken, on gun-mountings, torpedo-tubes and the canvas covers of the boats. Always there was the thunderous bellow of the " blowers," a strident, horrific note of purpose. I thought of the Waterloo Cup: the drive of the galloping greyhounds after the doomed hare; I thought of rockets screaming through open raw space. I thought of everything to find a simile, but could only fasten to that pitiless downward race of a giant coaster at a fun-fair,

when all one's insides seem left to dangle on the horn of the new, young moon!

But the torpedo crews at the tubes were singing about a nightingale in Berkeley Square; and a couple of ratings were telling a petty officer a lot of interesting, if intimate things about a " Judy " somewhere on the River Clyde, who reacted to a box of chocolates as if to mesmerism!

The raider took fright: probably from air-reports of the nearness of one of our big convoy-guards; for the Navy takes few chances to-day in shepherding home its priceless argosies. The Jervis Bay showed the trend of to day's Atlantic war; and it is recognised that an armed merchant cruiser cannot afford adequate protection against the big metal of the few remaining surface-raiders under the poisonous swastika, not even if Navy gallantry be added to the handful of six-inch guns such makeshift craft carry.

We received a terse recall that spun us on our heel like a cockchafer; and with little abatement of speed, we chased back to rejoin the convoy: no light task, for mist was closing and the assumption was that' the general course had been widely altered to throw the vulnerable procession clear of the threat up north.

" A lot of water to search! " said the laughterful navigator who, until war called him, had never navigated anything more important than a five-ton cutter around the Thames shoals. But we raised dim shapes in the dullness, and almost immediately a vivid eye began to wink: S.N.O. was calling.

" Seaplane reports ship's boat in such and such a position," ran that signal.

"Ah, some real navigation! " rejoiced the R.N.V.R. two-striper to whom the correct travelling of this little ship was entrusted. He corresponded to the old-time sailing-master of a Nelson frigate. I bent with him over the chart laid out on the table of the little chart-room. Already he had given a rough alteration of course, and the destroyer's head had swung wide. The thunder of the blowers was accentuated, the virile little craft was pulsating with more eagerness than a terrier at a rabbit-hole.

" There or thereabouts," surmised the navigator, pencilling a dot, running the parallel ruler to the pictured compasS on the sea-map. It was as nearly instantaneous as makes no difference. An accurate course was laid; the quartermaster notched the lubber-line on that compass degree.

"We'll hurry; they may have been adrift a long time,"

ordered the captain. We certainly hurried. Not being at action stations exactly, I went to the wardroom, where the furniture was scattered and dishevelled as if after a rough-house, because the faster the destroyer raced the harder she rolled; and there I encountered the chief engineer, calm, imperturbable as ever. " She'll work up to top speed quickly," he advised me. "Time for a game of crib, I think." He had done all he was able to do, and worry and fret get a man nowhere; too, they unsettle the underlings who look upwards for guidance and example. The Chief was the physical embodiment of the spirit of the Royal Navy: that same inconspicuous mechanic, who admitted to starting life by selling newspapers—a barefoot guttersnipe. "Do your damnedest and hold on to God! " might be set up as the Navy's working slogan.

We scooted; the whole Atlantic astern seemed creamed with our wake; we ran from mist into late sunlight, and the effect was beautiful. The ship glittered as if decked with more than all Sheba's jewels—her workmanlike grey paint was transformed into coruscant radiance, and in my fancy she took a new shape: no longer was she murderously destructive, but a harbinger of hope, of life. She was a high-speed lifeboat carrying salvation to such as must otherwise have perished.

"I hope they've got flares in that boat," said the first lieutenant, imbibing a modest glass of beer. " We won't be up to them before dark, and the moon's late this week."

To me, knowing the Atlantic's vast immensity, it appeared impossible to discover an infinitesimal speck in watery chaos. The reporting seaplane might easily be a fistful of miles—even degrees—out in his estimate. The boat might be travelling under sail, unaware of being sighted; or this unexpected current or that might reasonably waft her from her recent position—whither? Such trepidations in no wise affected the destroyer's crew; they were sure of themselves; as sure as a cock house at a public school. There was no swagger, no bounce, no boasting: just a calmness that impressed. How these ex-schoolboys acquired that Navy fortitude is the Navy's own secret. They hoped the old convoy would be all right without their protection, but their sublime faith in S.N.O. Escort assured them that he would never have despatched them off their beat if he had suffered from any premonitions of evil. They were right: no attack developed on the convoy in our absence: that came later.

The night closed in as black as the mouth of Eblis. Even the high-piled bow-waves lacked phosphorescence. We were a black shadow roaring through gross blackness; guided only by a tiny binnacle-light and the deft hands of the young helmsman, who had, a year or so before, sold ladies' lingerie over a West End store counter, but who now, he told me, hoped to pass for leading-seaman within a dog-watch or two. Below, the thrifty evening meal was served precisely, though the dishes shot to leeward every now and then, and a lifted glass missed the aimed-at mouth and decanted its contents in a neighbour's ear! Once my chair was sent slithering down to the wardroom's low side into a horrid debris of spilt vegetables, coffee, beer and breadcrumbs. What of it—destroyers do not tie themselves to walls and become 'stone frigates'; they are sea-going ships; and do not the crews get 'hard-liers' to atone for trifling discomforts?

Midnight came; natural anxiety kept me on the riotous bridge. We peered anxiously through the murk; but though a horn of the moon was slowly lifting from an obscured horizon, the Stygian blackness still held.

" We should be getting near," said the Navigator, manfully hiding his excitement. This, he admitted, was the keenest test ever applied to his navigational prowess. " I think we should slow down a little, sir," he advised the captain, who was gulping down red-hot cocoa from a Navy bowl.

" Two-thirds speed," said the man who held our fortunes in his hands. This little ship had started her career under the Stars and Stripes, being one of the historical fifty gifted to the White Ensign when the need grew great. So her telegraphs were differently marked from the home-made products: we had no " Slow, Half, Full" on the dials, but only " One-third, Two-thirds and Full."

The roar and fret eased perceptibly. " Pilot" sped between chartroom and lookout. He paid a compliment to age by inviting me to a conference, explaining all details, such as actual speed, slip, compass error and current, plus leeway, and a few other intricacies. We drew a circle on the Atlantic chart and agreed we were within its circumference—so, if report ran true, was the castaway boat. The captain shoved his boy's head in at the door—the lights went out automatically as it opened—and asked a question.

" Can do," was the answer. A few minutes later a concussion shook the little throbbing ship as if she had been torpedoed.

"Just a night-light for Baby," said Pilot, unperturbed. I have been torpedoed in my day: this shuddering concussion was very reminiscent: it dried the palate, it weakened the knees. Then—ah! then.

A gun had fired an illuminating projectile that may not be described in words likely to reach an enemy's eye. The night seascape was suddenly as vivid as noontide; so that every tide-rip showed disconcertingly. Fragments of drift stood out in excellent perspective. For counted moments that brilliancy endured; and my thought was: "Woe betide the basking U-boat coming within its orbit! " That was its real design, of course: to show up attacking submarines by night when they crash upwards in a convoy's midst and fire browning shots almost at hazard before submerging in double haste.

" See anything? " barked the captain, as authoritative now as an Admiral. Nothing was seen. " We'd better quarter your circle, Pilot," advised old experience masquerading as extreme youth.

And then a lookout yelped: " Light showing stabbud beam, sir! " It was a thin, reddish thread of fire, and no natural circumstances produced it. The Northern Lights had given more than one fantastic display during the cruise; but this was a man-made wisp of radiant glory.

" Starboard helm—bring it ahead! " said the captain, stooping to the compass for a quick bearing. " It might be their last flare."

We had come to within five miles of the lost boat. But for our high-fired illuminant we might well have missed it, missed it completely. Actually, night—with man's scientific aids—suited us better than day, for in the sluicing immensity of the North Atlantic the ship's lifeboat would have been no more noticeable than a waterlogged packing-case. But the upsoaring filament of radiance from the boat's penultimate rocket had pointed a finger to salvation

We ranged down, rolling like fury. No sound came from our salvage; but the moon was higher now, and we spotted the dim shadow. A ship's big lifeboat: rising and falling in derelict fashion, it was. As we neared our frequent hails remained unanswered.

" Tell the doctor to stand by," the captain said, as the First Sea Lord might have done. He thought of everything. Wind and sea made a close approach precarious. What actually happened was that a petty officer grabbed a rope and

dived overboard, huskily calling a few moments later that he had made it.

There were seventeen human beings in that scarred, bleached boat; and three of them were dead. One died on the wardroom table as the surgeon and I worked on him. We handed such as lived over the low side, not without difficulty and drenchings: they could not help themselves, other ratings were required to leap into the boat as it drew alongside to the petty officer's drag. All work was done in darkness, in case a hovering U-boat appeared and added cold murder to inhumanity by firing a torpedo into our merciful hull.

As the last man was drawn to safety the petty officer tied the dead to the thwarts, hacked a hole in the boat's planking with an axe, and the captain, bareheaded, recited from memory as much of the Burial Service at Sea as he knew. The boat sank: as proud a bier as any seaman might desire.

"Set course for the convoy," was the order to the pilot. We woke to movement again, quickening furiously. Down below the castaways were being treated like new-born babes: cosseted by all that humane crew who could make excuse for their presence. They were draped in hot blankets. Cocoa, laced with rum, soup, cigarettes, all the forgotten luxuries were heaped upon them. The second mate of a torpedoed freighter was senior survivor. The captain, wounded, had died a week before. There was another boat adrift: had we heard of its fate? he asked weakly.

It was he who had heartened his men during nineteen days of exposure and suspense; who had tended their hurts, rationed them so as to conserve their sparse supplies; who had compelled them to exertion to keep the stagnating blood aflow in their veins.

Like Phillip Sidney, when his turn came for surgical attention—and his body was bloated and excruciating with salt-water boils and festering abrasions—he said: " See to my chaps first, please."

This was his third mishap, he said, in a hoarse, inhuman voice: for the salt was caked in a throat down which no fresh water had slid for seventy-six hours. That was why he could not hail us, although he heard our shouts. But—now he was safe his voice was coming back famously; so he would soon be fit to go to sea again! Twice torpedoed, once bombed, was his proud record; and he itched to be back at the grim, glorious game. I thought of cushioned shirkers of my

acquaintance who moved all heaven and hell to retain smooth, dangerless billets.

The Ancient Mariner's shipmates might have shown more haggard, more disembodied, unfleshed spectres than these survivors, but I doubt it. Their eyes were glazed: not all at once did the consciousness of survival penetrate to their numbed minds. As reason settled, all were anxious about the fates of shipmates. They were very grateful for favours, almost embarrassingly so. For myself, I wanted to cry. Tragic heroism, if ever I saw it. These are the men who see to it that the convoys go through, despite the worst the Axis can attempt.

Bunks were freely surrendered by the mothering crew. U.S. destroyers, even when flying the White Ensign, carry no hammocks, but standing bed-places. The dead man was reverently sheeted in honest canvas, with a roundshot at his heels. At eight o'clock he was buried from the wet deck with all the rites of shrouding Ensign, mourning-party and Prayer-book ritual.

" It makes you feel cheap," said the captain, pocketing the Prayer-book and flushing a little. " What those Merchant Navy chaps go through! We don't know the beginnings of seafaring compared to them. And there's nothing can stop them." He had the rescued second mate of the S.S. —— sharing his cabin.

We stormed across the livid Atlantic to rejoin the convoy, the pilot making all allowances for its advance during our absence. We sighted a negligible canopy of smoke later in the day, and, closing, signalled the commodore and S.N.O. our news. Commendations came back, also—

" Proceed at speed to Base and land survivors! " was sent to us by light signal.

" Good egg! " said the navigator; " I'll see my girl on Sunday! "

"We'll just about be able to do twenty-five, but we'll empty the bunkers at that," said the Chief. So this little maid-of-all work ship picked up her heels and began to hurry homewards. The tedium of convoy escort was over for the nonce; the brisk, invigorating run cleared away the slight depression that had settled down after that simple sea-funeral. The First Lieutenant looked out his Number Ones, with a view to what he called "a spot of poodle-faking" next Sunday afternoon. There was a family at Base with three inviting daughters. The 20-year-old "dog's body"—watch-

keeping sub-lieutenant R.N.R.—already had a girl, but was dubious about the Sunday trains. " Still, there'll likely be a bus," he brightened.

Our two German passengers and the Hurricane pilot were honorary members of the mess for the run home. The former glowered uglily from a corner of the transom settee as the second mate of the lost freighter hobbled down to the wardrobe for pre-lunch refreshment. The second mate carried a 20-packet of Players, had just lit one—a gift from the captain—for he now owned nothing but the ragged clothes he wore. I waited somewhat breathlessly. It seemed to me to be one of life's big moments. If that young merchant seaman had run amok and torn the stony hearts from the two ship-killers 1, for one, should have applauded.

" Squareheads, by God! " said my countryman. " Here you are, Heinie—have a gasper! " and he proffered the carton.

" Na, na! " growled the senior Hun. " Heil Hitler! " And the entire wardroom burst into ribald laughter. " Isn't that the chap who once wrote a book? " asked a Gunner.

Whilst we tore, unmolested, back to Base, a wolf-pack of U-boats, aided by F-W's, attacked our convoy. Two ships were killed, but two Focke-Wulfs died also; and what the toll of U-boats was only the Admiralty can tell. I had missed one part—perhaps the most important—of this little maid-of-all-work's duties. But I am convinced that had not humanity despatched her ahead with her suffering cargo of salvage, she would have acquitted herself in hot combat as worthily as she had done in all other circumstances.

As we ran alongside to land our passengers: prisoners to an armed guard, friends into the care of busy helpers, I said to the captain: " What now? "

" We'll refuel: that'll take an hour or two," he replied. " Then we're off to rejoin the convoy: she still has a day or so to go. Afraid my officers will miss their Pleasant Sunday Afternoon! We're working a seven-day week."

Tireless, unadvertised work, but very useful to a country whose continued existence depends on the convoys going through! Day by day, month by month, year by year, the little general servants ply back and forth—so that, these young men seeing visions, the people live.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COMMODORE

THAT so many big, vital convoys travel safely through the hellish Axis blockade is due in great measure to the Convoy Commodores: officers whose tireless work is seldom advertised. Actually the Commodore is the most significant individual of all the countless people engaged in sailing our slow-moving, vulnerable freighters from one end of the world to the other and those other people whose business it is to make sure the convoys do so sail—no matter what actual or potential threats are voiced against them.

Sometimes, if you study the Navy's casualty-lists, you will see a curt mention that Admiral————(Retd.) is reported Killed in Action, or Missing, presumed Killed, or Died on Active Service. As Admirals (Retd.) do not command battle fleets under the White Ensign, the correct assumption is that such casualties have occurred amongst the notable band of stalwarts who hold themselves responsible for the safe conduct of our commercial armadas through the worst of the danger-zones.

The loss of life amongst these tough-hearted veterans is heavy. They are a gallant breed: true salt of Britain's sea. Instead of decorating Service club armchairs in comfort and ease, they prefer to fight salt water and all that wartime salt-water implies as Commodores in charge of convoys. At an age when most men are thinking of a decent retirement; with a little gardening and some bridge to pass the time, these hardy veterans have emerged into the open to. challenge the Hun to outwit them in the ever-changing strategy of the oceans.

Not that all, or nearly all, our convoy commodores are retired admirals: pride of place goes to the veteran merchant shipmasters who have had this onerous task laid on their shoulders at a time when Britain's continued existence as a free country is seriously jeopardised. Every convoy, large or small, that shuttles its way across the Seven Seas: be it a coastwise collection of little ships or a world-rounding fleet of powerful deepsea craft, is under the direct control of a Commodore, whose task it is to shepherd the many units in his charge to safe harbour.

Commodore Casey, C.B.E., D.S.O., D.S.C., R.D., R.N.R., is a good specimen of the breed under discussion. Recently awarded his D.S.O. for " bravery, resolution and seamanship in bringing a convoy from Murmansk in the face of relentless

and determined attacks by enemy U-boats and aircraft," Commodore Casey is a sound example of the deep-water Commodore, whose qualities to fill the position are exceptional. He is one of scores of men of equal calibre. Thanks to him and his fellows Russia is provided with invaluable munitions in the hour of her greatest need. When the final balance is struck, the hardy resolution of Britain's elderly commodores will be found to have played a considerable part in the victory of right over wrong. Britain is also supplied with raw material by the homeward-bound freighters, which need as careful shepherding back to our ports as they do when steaming outwards to Archangel and Murmansk.

Casey started life as a Merchant Navy apprentice. He obtained a junior appointment as sub-lieutenant in the Royal Naval Reserve and was 24 years old or thereabouts when the last war began. Naturally, he was roped into this conflict from the outset, and he elected to do his volunteer wartime service in submarines. That is good training in resolution, courage and excellent seamanship under the most arduous conditions. It is well known to everybody how "The Trade" toughens its disciples and rears them to be completely indifferent to death and the hazards of war.

Commodore Casey earned a D.S.C. for his 1914-18 work, and earned it well. Peace sent him back under the Red Ensign, in the Royal Mail Line, but this new war found him primed and ready for whatever action might be decreed. He had been beached to serve as marine superintendent, after many years of noteworthy service, but the outbreak of this World War took him—after certain delays—afloat once more. His type of man was much in request. With the early introduction of the convoy-system the services of tried, experienced men were of vital worth: absolutely necessary to the continued existence of the Merchant Navy, by which existence is permitted to the 45,000,000 Britons of these islands. He presently went to see again—though the conservative Admiralty seemed reluctant to use him to full capacity. However, when the evacuation of Dunkirk came, when Britain ran the risk of losing the flower of her Army, Casey mobilised every small craft he could lay hands on, to the number of 100, and saw that they crossed the Channel and salved unnumbered thousands of our hard-set Expeditionary force men.

When the real, ferocious Atlantic Battle set in with

cumulative fury, Commodore Casey insisted on playing an active part. He had reached the tank of Captain R.N.R. He knew the seas as few men do; he knew them under all circumstances. He knew, by his own worthy service in The Trade, the possibilities and limitations of submarines; what man could have been better fitted to control the—so-called—non-combatant fleets of dogged freighters? He had conducted thousands of tons of Red Ensign craft through the foulest waters in the world. The Murmansk route is, admittedly, the worst of all the sea-lanes; though the Mediterranean offers excitement and hazard, as does the whole Atlantic, and, for that matter, the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.

The rank of Commodore, RNR, is not lightly granted to merchant shipmasters; normally it is reserved for those retired but combative admirals mentioned before. But Casey is officially entered in the Navy List as Acting-Commodore, R.N.R., which proves his outstanding quality.

He recently endured the serial hell of the Murmansk attack when he kept the bridge of his modest flagship for an unbroken period of seventy hours and more, expecting every minute to prove his last and the ship's. The enemy reported this particular convoy as being totally annihilated: Commodore Casey, still living, still undaunted, is living refution of German lies.

It is not by any means a light task to take something like a hundred ships from our Western Approaches to North Russia. Every sea-mile of the way is fraught with dangers: from U-boats, from surface-raiders, mines, E-boats and long-range and short-range aircraft. Every convoy is a target for Hunnish spite and ingenuity. The Axis naval staff ashore plots its every movement in advance and attempts to arrange counter moves. The -weather conditions during each mile steamed are plotted and charted; a schedule of attack, varying with! the conditions, is arranged beforehand. Every available weapon is thrown into the combat, to leave nothing to chance.

In addition to man made perils, there are additional dangers: thick weather, loose ice, hard gales. No convoy is completely homogeneous: especially is this so to-day when grave shipping losses have impressed any sort of hull that will float and steam into precarious service. Consequently there are bound to be stragglers, and U-boats and E-boats like stragglers, which can be picked off at leisure, whilst escort craft cannot be spared from the main convoy for

individual protection. The Commodore's duty is to encourage, to chide, even to bully the slacksters and the inefficients into keeping efficient station, and to prove to the masters of such vessels that their excuses may be just, but that the age of miracles is not yet past, and that so long as fires will burn and engines turn, speed must be maintained!

As Commodore, he is responsible for the safeguarding and correct general navigation of the convoy itself; the S.N.O. Escort is responsible for its protection against human attack. But it is up to the Commodore to explain to the S.N.O., as a practical seaman, knowing the difficulties of running ordinary freighters with man o' war precision, just how best his defensive force can be disposed. This applies to every type of convoy: whether it be merely voyaging from Thames mouth to the Firth of Forth, or round Good Hope to the Persian Gulf, or to the North American coast, or even through Panama to Australia.

Whilst any convoy is assembling, the Commodore appointed to its charge meets all the shipmasters concerned; sometimes they number a hundred or more. The tonnage, speed, defences, idiosyncrasies of every vessel engaged are carefully listed: together with their cargoes. The method of progression is determined: that is, whether the convoy will form up and steam in column of line ahead or column of line abreast. Except in close waters or swept channels, column of line abreast is the formation chosen: this renders the armada less vulnerable, as long, exposed flanks are liable to disconcerting attack; and a large convoy, extended, might easily measure eight, ten or more miles from van to rear. Indeed, so widely spread are to-day's giant mercantile fleets that it is quite possible for one wing to be attacked by aircraft or U-boats and for the other wing to be ignorant, or almost ignorant of the fact. Especially is this so in areas of poor visibility or in the dark of the night.

At the conference the Commodore satisfies himself that every shipmaster is conversant with the rules and circumstances governing the immediate position. He selects his flagship: usually the fastest of the great collection of craft, though not necessarily the biggest. He is entitled to such comfort and security as might be on offer; though the leading position of the commodore ship naturally advertises itself, being in the van, thus rendering the vessel liable to even more vicious enemy attack than the normal unit of the convoy. The enemy believes that with the commodore's

flagship torpedoed or bombed, the rest will fall into confusion; but to avoid this circumstance a vice-commodore is usually appointed: a sage, well-experienced veteran shipmaster, with no naval rank, but plenty of common sense and " guts."

When steaming in column of line ahead the Commodore usually heads the starboard line; the Vice-Commodore the port column. When proceeding in column of line abreast the flagship takes up a position where it is easiest seen by as many ships as possible, so that signals—flag or flash, for wireless is used only in extreme emergency—can be instantly picked up by all units.

The Commodore addresses the conference. Most of the shipmasters he knows; they know him; there is mutual trust and good feeling. He tells them of any departure from customary convoy procedure, and he makes sure they understand. He dictates whether the ships shall zigzag or steer a steady course; how they are to behave in the face of attack; he fixes the positions of the rescue-ships, with which practically every convoy nowadays is provided; and he also has a say in the disposition of such vessels as carry fighter aircraft—catapult Hurricanes—of which there may be several. The masters listen to him as to an oracle, well knowing his catholic experience. They are probably as good seamen as he is, maybe much better; but they have not had similar opportunities to consider the greatest good of the greatest number; a shipmaster's normal life being wrapped up in his own particular command.

If the Commodore happens to be, as is so often the case, an RNR man, rather than "pukka Navy," they give him greater and more respectful attention, for they are well aware that his life's experience has familiarised him with their Red Ensign problems—which are not the commissioned Navy's problems—of indifferent fuel, of overworked engines and insufficient crews; the ex-merchant commodore will naturally not expect miracles. Practically all our Arctic and coastwise convoys are commodored by the Royal Naval Reserve: invaluable experts, with more actual sea-time to their credit than even the most senior R.N's can show;and it is sea-time that teaches, not short-taught theories.

So that a perfect understanding is reached before the Commodore sits down, to give place to this expert and that: an artist, perhaps, who in lightning-like fashion sketches a Fokker-Wulf aircraft on a blackboard, and explains: "Here's

an F-W. But you'll usually see him like this—diving down on you!" promptly replacing the stereotyped impression with a lively suggestion of the aircraft in a steep bombing dive—which is precisely as it would appear to the master of an attacked freighter.

The Commodore nods approval: graphic sketching of this sort impresses on shipmasters' minds precisely what the sky is likely to disgorge with only the briefest warning. As attack comes so swiftly and, mostly, so unadvertised, every shipmaster has to be prepared to act on his own initiative instantly, if circumstances demand, without awaiting orders from the Flag, which may be at that moment concerned with a U-boat assault from an entirely different direction.

Then, with this quick sketch rubbed into the masters' intelligent minds, the artist as rapidly delineates an E-boat racing in to attack; he draws a British M.T.B. to point out the differences, so that an astonished merchantman may not open a hurricane of fire on a friendly vessel. Coming at fifty m.p.h. through high-piled foam, it is easy to make such a mistake, unless certain outstanding features of build and behaviour, with the general silhouette, are stressed. The silhouettes of possible surface-raiders are also exhibited and explained, especially if the convoy be Arctic-bound, for it is in these inclement latitudes that the big surface-craft may be expected to operate.

Then an expert in gunnery—both deck and anti-aircraft—speaks his specialist piece in convincing fashion, advising how the drums of machine-gun ammunition shall be packed: so much tracer, so much common, so much armour-piercing: in order that any attacking aircraft or E-boat shall be resisted in the most damaging way. Armour-piercing bullets will cripple the stoutest aero-engines,'tracer sets the aircraft afire, common slays the crew.

Having answered all questions—and some pretty shrewd questions are put by these hard-bitten seamen who have faced and outfaced the toughest problems ancient ocean can offer—the Commodore makes his own purposeful contacts with commanders of escort-craft: showing the exact dispositions of his, command: where the vital tankers and munitions-ships take station in the convoy, which ships can put up the most worth-while barrage in attack, and so on. He receives from S.N.O. Escort all particulars of new and newly-detected threats to safe travelling; they put their heads together and plan craftily—if not always strictly officially:

the real safety of the convoy being their main concern. It is a wonderful system that has been evolved out of the pooled experience of the many.

Thus, satisfied that everyone knows what is in his quick-working mind, the Commodore proceeds aboard his flagship, to get acquainted with his immediate shipmates and the calibre of the Ship itself.

Most liners and freighters of to-day have their bridges well-protected against bomb-and shell-splinters; which is just as well for the Commodore's continued safety. But, apart from her bridge, the modern merchantman affords very little protection against the devilish engines of modern war. There are no armoured conning-towers from which to fight the ship, for instance; and, at best, her protective armament is limited. So that the Commodore's situation is really much more hazardous than that of any Navy officer of his escort. As was proved not long ago, when a retired Admiral, acting Commodore, was torpedoed twice in a few hours in two different ships, suffering prolonged immersions on both occasions.

If, however, dread of future happenings were allowed to weigh in a Commodore's mind, few would accept the onerous appointment; how little such fear occurs is shown by the insistence with which the sturdy veterans continue at sea, long after the normal age of retirement is passed. Perhaps in the Merchant Navy alone of all the Services, is age permitted to contribute its sagacity and experience to the common weal. Shipmasters of sixty-five, Commodores of equal age, are no rarity.

CHAPTER V.

OUT INTO THE UNKNOWN

AT a given time the convoy assembles; and, depending on the assembly port, of course, this period is fraught with considerable danger and anxiety. For the enemy has his secret agents who send him a lot of useful information, and it not infrequently happens that the mustering of a convoy coincides to a hair with a furious aerial attack. The enemy assumes that the great armada, bunched together, moving slowly, as individual vessels take up station, with the general signal organisation not yet functioning adequately, will afford a grand target for his bombs. The escort are assumed to be busy shepherding units into

position, and in drawing out their own plans of campaign. Confusion by all hands may be predicted. A relentless dive-attack might cause the ships to blunder into one another in collision and so cause losses before the voyage is actually started.

Assembly, then, is one of the testing-times for the Commodore. He is required to make instant decisions as to dispersal or closing-up. He is mostly a spectator aboard his flagship of her own defensive measures—a ship's captain usually fights her under practically all circumstances—but it has been known for the Commodore to replace a wounded Lewis or Hotchkiss gunner at his weapons and fight hard as the screaming aircraft swoop down. It is not unknown for a Commodore to be wounded whilst so serving a gun. For your average sailor of much experience cannot bear to be left out of any schemozzle, since from early youth he has been trained to fight—if not mankind, then the equally pitiless sea.

It may be, too, that scouting aircraft report the proximity of enemy submarines, lying in wait to deliver a crippling attack as the convoy emerges from the swept channels leading from the harbour: the idea being, once again, to spread confusion and timidity among the attacked. The Commodore must make such dispositions as will best protect his charges against such vicious assaults. The convoy goes through: that is this senior officer's working motto; and when the unabridged, unbowdlerised story of the greatest sea-war in history is written it will be found that this nation owes its continued existence to the fearless service of veteran men who have answered humanity's call in no uncertain measure.

The Commodore's life from the period of assembly to the final delivery, is one of almost unbroken tension and watchfulness. His vast command is an object of enemy spite and hate throughout its existence as a convoy, as well as before and after, when it breaks up into its component units to proceed independently to various harbours. • But this challenge is one that arouses every fighting instinct in men whose lifelong trade it has been to fight Nature in the raw.

Never in the whole history of war has the element of surprise been of greater importance than it is to-day. Incredible speed of surface-craft and air-raiders renders possible the most fantastic alarms—out of a serene sky death and destruction might strike without more than a second's warning. E-boats flash from concealing mists to

dash into torpedo-range, fire their missiles, and turn on a sharp heel to make off through the barrage of shellfire that instantly breaks out from every ship—commissioned or mercantile—in the assembly. Aircraft, lurking behind friendly clouds, dive with silenced engines to drop half-ton bombs like so much confetti at a Society wedding. Even infrequent surface-raiders use the element of surprise for their attacks: steaming out of fog-banks or rain-squalls to deliver their assaults, or else, availing themselves of their high speed, as compared with the slow crawl of the convoy, dash in from apparently nowhere—as in the case of the Jervis Bay affair—sink as many merchant craft as they can, then speed back to their cover as soon as equal forces are brought against them. Submarines, also, would use surprise as their principal strategy if it were not, as has been explained in a previous chapter, for the scientific devices with which our escort craft are fitted.

So that the life of a Commodore affords few chances for rest and recreation; indeed, the opportunity to take so much as a bath is practically non-existent, and I know of more than one grave and reverend Commodore who admits he never removes more than one leg of his trousers at a time, so long as the convoy is under way.

When at sea the Commodore holds frequent parleys with his escort ships as well as his own Merchant Navy units. There is much signalling to be done, according to changing circumstances, and the Admiralty furnish him with an adequate number of efficient signal ratings, who are at his immediate service, day and night. Although the flagship seldom alters its position in relation to the other convoyed ships, the escorts will occasionally run down alongside and carry out conversations with the loud-speakers with which most of to-day's warships are fitted; secret messages are written, rolled in oilskin, and fired by rifle and line across the inevitable gap of salt water between ship and ship.

Although the Commodore issues orders regarding convoy discipline, such as keeping station, darkening ship at the appropriate time and so forth, from his leading position he cannot always see that his orders are being followed; but the ever-roving escorts see to that, and report any infringements—not that such are many, since to show an irresponsible light might endanger the entire fleet—to the man in supreme command who takes an early opportunity to rap the knuckles of such as offend, by visual signal, wireless never being used.

as before mentioned, for transmission during the whole of a convoy's progress from start to final port—in case its position is thereby disclosed to an enemy that seldom, if ever, misses an opportunity. U-boats customarily surface enough to keep their aerials in action whenever the presence of a convoy is suspected, in hope that an incautious exposure of position may be made.

Normally, in either air or U-boat attack, the convoy does not scatter; indeed, if anything, it closes its ranks to bring a more furious barrage of fire to bear on the attackers, but if a surface-raider of great strength takes a hand, it is up to the Commodore to say if dispersal shall be attempted, in order to scatter the targets and make them less vulnerable. Moreover, when the Asdics and radio-location sets disclose the presence of lurking U-boat packs, it is the Commodore's obvious duty to make wide alterations in course and, if desired, speed, to avoid the menace. Furthermore, on long voyages, the flagship is more or less responsible for the general navigation; at noon each day each ship hoists signals denoting its then position, for comparison with the position fixed by the Commodore's ship.

It is possible to touch on only a few of the activities of our Commodores to-day: many of them are still too secret to be disclosed. But it may be seen that such duties are exacting and practically uninterrupted, demanding tireless vigilance, clear-wittedness and an ability to stand up to the hardest sort of hard-lying and bitter exposure. Many a Commodore eats, sleeps, and has his entire being on his flagship's bridge for days, even weeks, at a stretch: knowing little shelter, less recreation and only a persistently taut nerve-strain which increases more often than it decreases.

Coastwise convoys are controlled by comparatively young Commodores, whose RNR rank is usually that of Commander. Pay for these unique services is not in any way high, being the pay of the naval rank, plus an infinitesimal allowance of a shilling or two per day for the added exactions and responsibilities. The Commodore of a 100-ship convoy gets less additional remuneration than does the young commander of a submarine, so that it is certainly not the hope of dazzling rewards that takes these able men afloat. It is, indeed, a staunch desire to help the country in her hour of grave peril that actuates them, from top to bottom.

Casualties amongst them are relatively high, since the Commodore ship is a favourite target for enemy attack. It

may safely be assumed that every cup of tea, almost every joint of beef, drunk or eaten in Britain in recent years owes its arrival to one or other of these determined old-timers, who face bad weather and bad enemies with equal sangfroid. If you have seen, as I have seen, a white-haired, wrinkled man keeping the bridge for hour after hour in fog and in driving sleet-storms, working a precarious way along narrow swept channels, where loose mines' might well be afloat directly underfoot, with few, if any sea-marks to guide, with no shore-lights to warn of dangers; with E-boats buzzing like wasps immune from risk across the protecting minefields, and Fokker-Wulfs plumbing down from the screen of dingy cloud-layers; carrying on their capable shoulders the load of responsibility for perhaps half a million tons of vital, invaluable shipping, you will realise to some extent the incalculable debt Britain—the whole world, indeed—owes to her Convoy Commodores.

CHAPTER VI.

SUCCOUR TO THE G.C. ISLE

IT is no exaggeration to say that the convoys to Malta are the most important of all our seaborne trade. Malta, gallant, isolated island that it is, depends for existence on replenishments of her supplies—of munitions, of oil, of food, even: and the entire Middle East depends for continued survival as a British stronghold on the continuance of Malta's incredible defence.

Consequently, the Axis efforts, increasing in bitterness as the months drag by, to overwhelm this rocky fortress, are even more violent in their way than are their savage assaults on the Russian armies. Malta frustrates the intention of linking Germany-Italy-Japan in a world-circling chain of steel. Malta may conceivably form an invaluable jumping-off base for the inevitable invasion of Italy: the weakest link in the Axis girdle. It serves as a pistol pointed at General Rommel's heart since naval and aircraft operating from its harbours, can challenge attempts to reinforce the Africa Korps, and, by dint of wreaking heavy damage on those supply lines, upon which the Axis commander must rely if his dreams are ever to become realities.

But Malta's situation is precarious. It is within easy reach of many Axis airfields and ports. Its expenditure of ammunition

in combating the 3,000 air-raids which have been launched against its sturdy defence is, naturally enormous: for it requires many tons of anti-aircraft shell to destroy or even cripple a single Axis aircraft. Only by the maintenance of a great box-barrage of shellfire clean round the island can the persistent attacks be countered. And Malta has few natural resources or factories by means of which this deadly wastage can be made good. Moreover, fighter-aircraft—one of the most potent weapons in this serial defence—by reason of their limited range of action, can only reach Malta by sea-transport: it is practically impossible to fly them there. From Gibraltar, the Western extremity of the Mediterranean, and the only British possession between the Motherland and Malta, to the George Cross island, is 991 miles. From Port Said the distance is 936 miles, but stores take many months to reach Port Said by the Good Hope route; and the 936 miles from Port Said run through the most hostile stretches of the Middle Sea: each mile, practically, dominated by Axis power. To fly a fighter-plane 991 miles may be a feasible proposition, but it is certainly not an easy one. True, fighter aircraft have been transported to the island by aircraft-carriers: notably by the U.S.S. Wasp; but such replacements are merely a trickle, whilst what is needed is a spate.

Thus the need for convoys increases with every month in this dreadful war of attrition. France's secession made the entire Mediterranean trebly vulnerable; Axis occupation of Greece and Crete doubled that vulnerability. Malta became the focal point of joint German-Italian hate. Orders were issued to deny the Mediterranean to the Red and White Ensigns, so that Malta might be starved into the surrender frantic bombing and E-boat attacks could not force. The glorious, indeed the fantastic defence of this rocky island does not enter into a narrative of the present type; indeed, the epic story of the tireless resistance deserves a library to itself. But the gallantry and devotion displayed by the convoys, and their escorts, in keeping Malta supplied with the necessities of continued existence must needs be mentioned, however briefly, in a volume whose title is The Convoy Goes Through. For the Malta Convoys do go through—depleted, perhaps, harassed beyond human belief, certainly; subjected all the way from starting-point to arrival port to ferocious attack, mainly by U-boat and bombing aircraft; but not infrequently by the whole might of the Axis surface fleets operating in these troubled waters, where most

of the trouble is created by man, since the Mediterranean is normally a placid sea, more designed for lazy pleasure than for the cumulative horrors of war.

In the spring of 1942 Britain was stirred to her deeps by the report that Admiral Vian, escorting one vital convoy, had inflicted a crushing defeat on the Italian fleet. Even to-day the intimate facts of that Homeric encounter have not all been disclosed. But, as did Admiral Harwood, off the Plate, disprove the theory that the modern battleship was invulnerable, so did Vian show the world that, rightly and fearlessly handled, small, fast cruisers were more than a match for capital ships of great tonnage and practically unlimited hitting-power. Vian's convoy reached its destination with comparatively small loss. At this time German U-boats were not operating widely in the Mediterranean, and the prolonged battle was more between ships and aircraft than between surface ships and submarines.

The Axis hurled attack after attack on the cumbersome convoy. Aircraft came in noisy waves; but the fire of our ships—freighters and fighters—broke up the waspish assaults, and crippled the aerial strength then available, Fighter, bomber and torpedo-bomber aircraft from Malta and from all too few aircraft carriers helped in the good work. But the main honours went to Vian and his surface ships; these attacked the Italian big ships with the ferocity of tigers and sent them to the rightabout with their dishonoured tails between their legs. Notwithstanding the menace the convoy steamed steadily forward, weaving its undaunted way between the bomb-spouts and the torpedoes fired by the few U-boats able to operate. The losses were astonishingly small, compared with the continuance and fury of the attack; and Malta put the much needed reinforcements to excellent use, as quickly as the aircraft brought could be unloaded and assembled. Rommel's situation in Libya was rendered parlous, as much through these reinforcements as through any other cause.

The Luftwaffe redoubled its attacks on the island, determined to destroy these rich cargoes; but Malta, freshly inspired by the fortitude of those who had dared everything to aid her, redoubled her efforts and inflicted such heavy punishment on the enemy air force as to give it pause.

So swiftly, however, in this heroic saga, does one gallant episode eclipse another, that Admiral Vain's almost miraculous feat of courageous endurance is now ancient

history; whilst the even more devoted behaviour of Admiral Syfret's armada occupies public attention, and deservedly so.

As this recent episode displays every quality of seamanship, courage, resourcefulness and continuing determination, it is fitting that a scanty description should wind up a volume devoted to the grit of our convoys.

Malta's need was increasing: and as it increased so did the Axis determination to isolate it grow. Air-attacks redoubled in intensity, as Rommel's reinforcements 'scurried across the Mediterranean narrows, and the Luftwaffe concentrated on crippling Malta's air-striking power. Ammunition was expended by wholesale. Permanent plant was ruined by concentrated bombing. Aircraft were destroyed on the few, vulnerable airfields; medical supplies ran short —this in the summertime when the island heat grows intense.

When the great Malta convoy assembled, determined to ease the almost overpowering strain on the Islanders, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. A. V. Alexander, addressed a special, personal message to each merchant shipmaster engaged in the desperate operation. This is probably the first time such a message has been sent from the chief of the Admiralty to men of the Red Ensign. Mr. Alexander warned the shipmasters that a truly incredible operation was meditated; that the succour of Malta depended on the personal efforts of all concerned; he wished the actors in the forthcoming drama God-speed; and generally complimented them on their opportunity to show the world what British seamen could do against overwhelming odds.

Fortified by this confidence, the convoy sailed, laden to the scuppers with the vital necessities of war; from aircraft petrol to sewer-disinfectants. Sporadic attacks were delivered against aircrafd

split-new leviathans: the Impero and Roma—each of 35,000 tons. Actually this ponderous fleet did not join action, although it was well capable of blowing Syfret's escort out of the water and the convoy after it. Doubtless the Italian Admirals remembered how Vian had shamed their big ships in May, 1942; and were not anxious to try conclusions with a stronger force than that commanded by Vian.

The hottest arena of the continued fight was in that triangle of Mediterranean water between the Balearic Isles Majorca and Minorca—Sardinia and the N. African coast. In this stretch of sea the convoy was within easy range of everything the Axis could offer. There was no shelter; no port of refuge offered: the only defence was the courage and gun-power of the British ships. And every man aboard all those hulls well knew that the chances of survival were extremely small. Yet the convoy never wavered by so much as a hairsbreadth from its ordained course.

Prevention being better than cure, our carrier-borne aircraft took off in strength and assailed the Axis airfields from which the Luftwaffe operated and intended to operate, subjecting them to such drastic punishment as to stultify their efforts at destruction most handsomely. This was in spite of fact that H.M.S. Eagle had been sunk by torpedo off Oran, well to the westward of the main battle. This veteran carrier had a proud record of service from the outbreak of war; and much of Malta's heroic defence is attributable to her gallant conduct in carrying fighter aircraft within flying reach of the island. H.M.S. Eagle died like the gallant old lady she was: she was torpedoed repeatedly, by U-boats and by torpedo-carrying aircraft; out of her total personnel, the great majority, including her captain, were saved. Endless stories of cool courage and devotion to duty are narrated of her crew. One of her surgeons especially distinguished himself, swimming with wounded men to security, swimming with narcotics to administer relief to men in grievous pain.

But there were other carriers, including the battle-scarred Illustrious, still with the convoy; and their aircraft sailed into action with proverbial F.A.A. zest, shooting down at least a dozen of the Luftwaffe, and probably many more.

The Italian cruiser force emerged from Naples and Genoa, with the apparent intention of attacking the convoy between the west of Sicily and Bizerta. Astern steamed the great sea-castles: Mussolini's pride. But the F.A.A. and the RAF attacked this cruiser force so savagely that it never joined

action; it turned back to its anchors; and on its return journey one of our own submarines—unnamed, but commanded by a young Newfoundland lieutenant, named Mars, scored torpedo hits on two of its number and damaged them severely; one so seriously that if it did reach port at all, it arrived there in a condition of complete wreckage. As before stated, the battleship interception force did not appear in the picture: obviously it was deterred by the fierceness of the air-attack on the outward cruiser screen.

Meanwhile, the main attack on the convoy developed south of Sardinia, a base for the Luftwaffe, the Regia Aeronautica, U-boats and E-boats. The convoy sailed steadily eastwards. H.M.S. Manchester, a light-heavy cruiser, paid the price of Admiralty: being sunk by bombs and torpedoes in the course of this day's action. Nothing deterred the force under Admiral Syfret pursued its intention: it made a feint withdrawal, as if checked; but after a detour, using darkness, it resumed its course. The Axis claimed its dispersal, first, then its total annihilation. Actually, it had laid course for Malta. It is doubtful if the Axis realised its destination as Malta; with the situation in Egypt being what it was, the inference was that a vast armada of supplies for General Auchinleck was en route.

Wave after wave of enemy aircraft swept down on the long flotilla. Bombs dropped with the greatest profusion, aerial torpedoes whipped through the startled seas like speed-boats at a regatta. But the air-barrage set up by all ships—Merchant and Royal alike—kept the air-attacks at such a height that calculated aim was impossible.

U-boat attacks developed in force; but indifferent success rewarded their efforts. Two U-boats at least were sunk without trace; when the final count is made it is more than likely that this total will be greatly increased.

On this day and during the following night, strenuous efforts were made by the enemy to spread dismay and destruction, as fast torpedo boats and E-boats emerged from the Sardinian harbour of Cagliari, and raced in to attack. But the Malta convoy treated these wasps with scant consideration. Continuing to repel the air-attacks—maintaining such a barrage that, on the Luftwaffe's own confession, it was utterly impossible to approach within effective striking-range—the lighter guns of the escort, together with the deck-guns of the freighters—concentrated on the speed boats and

literally blew them to fragments before they could launch their levin-bolts.

Destroyers and corvettes quartered the troubled seas assiduously, hunting enemy submarines, keeping them submerged and impotent. The Luftwaffe, its airfields bombed relentlessly, called up reserves from less vulnerable bases; and these were met in open combat by our Malta-based fighters of the RAF, plus the F.A.A's nimble craft, and shot down by wholesale.

At this time of writing it is not known exactly what losses were sustained by the convoy proper, as apart from the escort, of which H.M.S. Eagle and Manchester were the principals. It is conceivable that a high percentage found Davy Jones' Locker, since in the main the effort of the enemy were naturally directed against the Merchant Navy; but a heavier loss was anticipated, and the fact that a large proportion of the convoy got through justified the attempt; half a loaf being better than no bread to the hard-pressed island garrison. If one individual figure be needed to typify the entire Merchant Navy, could a better one be chosen than Capt. Dudley Mason, G.C., Commander of the S.S. Ohio?

But at the time when Germany and Italy were "burning the air" to claim a colossal Axis victory, the fact remains that the convoy for Malta was harbouring there in the Grand Harbour, and Admiral Syfret's glorious force was returning —attacked relentlessly as it was—to Gibraltar, having got yet another convoy through; and proving incontrovertibly that not only does the convoy go through, but that so long as British courage remain as it is, the convoy always will get through.