

Role of the British Fleet

(New York Journal of Commerce.)

It has been suggested that as a sequel to Germany's supreme effort to force a peace of her own making, there will be a sortie of the German High Seas Fleet from the secure shelter where it has lain for the last three and a half years. Now that Germany has been freed from the menace of Russian naval power in the Baltic and is able to concentrate all her cruisers, destroyers and submarines in the North Sea bases, it is natural to expect a display of the naval daring which, in minor enterprises, has been by no means lacking. But the German High Command have made no secret of their decision not to engage in battle at sea unless they could do so with the odds in their favor. When, on May 31, 1916, the German High Seas Fleet put to sea on "an enterprise directed toward the north," it was hoped to fall in with the British cruiser fleet under Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty and defeat it before Admiral Sir John Jellicoe's battleships could reach the scene of action. The expectation proved baseless, and the German admiral, realizing that he was in danger of annihilation, ordered the detached sections of his fleet to get back to security as quickly as they might. The Germans claimed that they had won a victory, but events showed that they had not achieved even the moral success of displaying superior fighting efficiency. If they had, it is hardly conceivable that they would have permitted month after month to pass without making an attempt to gain some advantage from the discovery that they were able to handle their ships better and fight them better than the British. Since the battle of Jutland, as Mr. Archibald Hurd and others have pointed out, the Allies have been using the seas by day and by night in order to strengthen the military forces which confront the Central Powers in the various theatres of war. Allied naval power, represented chiefly by the British fleet, has robbed the enemy of the chance of sending out his cruisers; it has forced him to submit to the banishment of his commercial flag from the seas; it has made him the impotent spectator of the downfall of his colonial empire, and it has brought to ruin all the overseas trade, commerce and prestige on which Germany was building with the assurance of eventually dominating the world. More than this, it has been the essential support of the allied armies, since without it the war would long since have ended with a German victory.

Nor must the fact be lost sight of that while the war of the big ships waits on Germany's acceptance of the challenge which has been offered by the Grand Fleet for three and a half years, there are the wars of the small ships in which the German inferiority is not so well marked as it is in respect of battleships and battle cruisers. Manifestly, the Germans are now in a position to use all their light cruisers and destroyers as they think best, without being hampered as are the British by the necessity of retaining near the Grand Fleet the attendant craft without which it would be unsafe for the big ships to put to sea. That is to say, the High Seas Fleet in its defended ports need not always be ready for action, since the moment when it will accept the challenge of the German Fleet rests entirely with the German Command. The strategical situation in the North Sea favors surprise movements by German cruisers and destroyers, and quite apart from the danger of mines, the North Sea is also infested by submarines. The enemy, choosing his own time for action, has the benefit of interior lines and initiative for employing his light cruisers, destroyers, or submarines, in a water area of 140,000 square miles. Briefly, freed from the Russian menace, Germany can employ her light sea forces as she likes, because until her "selected moment" arrives, she need take no part in the big ship war for which the British Grand Fleet must always be in a state of preparation. It is true that while month succeeds month, and the silence of the British Grand Fleet remains unbroken, that very silence spells victory. The Grand Fleet, to do justice to the part it has played and will continue to play in this war, must be regarded as the complement to the army, its support, and the sentinel over its lines of communication. It supports the army not merely by guarding its transportation, but by blockading the enemy armies, thus robbing them of the material which they urgently need to be able to maintain the struggle.

On the other hand, the burden which is being borne by the British navy, happily reinforced by major and minor ships of our own navy, is one of extraordinary complexity. It has been pointed out that the returns

of submarine losses show that the enemy is offered between 4,000 and 5,000 "targets" for submarine, destroyer, or raider attack every week. That does not mean that there are 4,000 to 5,000 ships at sea, but it does mean that every week an unknown number of merchant ships enter or leave British ports 4,000 or 5,000 times. The same ship may appear 5, 6, or more times, but however many times she goes in or out of harbor she is liable to be sunk, and the navy has to give her as large a measure of protection as possible against any one of four forms of attack — raider, destroyer, submarine, or mine. Considering the extent and character of the work which the British fleet is doing — the dangers its officers and men face from day to day — the fact becomes rather impressive that the British navy consists of less than 450,000 men, as compared with about 7,000,000 men who are either in the army or supporting the army. It is on this relatively small force of seamen, only about one-third of whom had been on board a man-of-war before 1914, that the Allied control of the sea primarily depends. All things considered, an "offensive policy" on the part of the Grand Fleet is hardly among the possibilities. There is no stretch of coast as heavily defended as that of Germany fronting the North Sea. It is dominated by heavy artillery of long range, with Heligoland as an advance sea-girt fortress. German waters extending far out into the North Sea are under the surveillance of aircraft which watch every movement; elaborate mine fields have been laid; destroyers and submarines are constantly on guard against surprises. The Grand Fleet upon which the future not only of the British Empire but of all the allied countries depends, is not at all likely to rush in and court disaster against any such odds. Whether the High Seas Fleet, taking counsel of desperation, will stake everything on one more sally into the North Sea remains to be seen.

SHIPPING LOSSES IN MARCH.

To say that marine insurance men and shipping men generally were anything but disappointed with the British Admiralty's weekly statement of sinkings, as published recently would be untrue. The loss of sixteen vessels over 1,600 gross tons and 12 vessels of lesser tonnage is the worst week since that ending January 5 last as far as large ships go. In respect to the total number of vessels lost the week is the worst since that ending September 16, 1917, when the total was also 28, though only eight of them were vessels over 1,600 gross tons.

The weekly average sinkings since March of last year, made up monthly, are as follows:

Month—1917—	Over 1,600 Under 1,600		Total.
	gross tons.	gross tons.	
March	15.25	7.	22.25
April	26.4	10.4	36.8
May	19.5	9.25	28.75
June	21.25	6.25	27.50
July	16.	3.75	19.75
August	17.	3.	20.
September	13.25	7.75	21.
October	14.25	5.	19.25
November	8.25	5.75	14.
December	14.6	3.	17.6
1918—			
January	9.75	3.25	13.
February	12.25	4.5	16.75
March	13.5	6.75	20.25
56 weeks	15.6	5.7	21.4

It will be noted that the average for March is the highest in respect to large vessels lost since December, and that in respect total number lost it is the highest since September, 1917. The March sinkings of large ships are, however, two ships a week below the average for the whole period of 56 weeks.

From now on it will be possible to make a comparison between the sinkings of 1917 and those of 1918, month by month, though sometimes corresponding months will contain different numbers of official weekly announcement due to the way in which the latter are made by the British Admiralty. For March, however, a fair comparison can be made, as in this month in each year four official announcements of sinkings were made, as follows:

MARCH SUBMARINE LOSSES.

March, 1917		March, 1918	
Over 1,600	Under 1,600	Over 1,600	Under 1,600
tons.	tons.	tons.	tons.
14	9	12	6
13	4	15	3

16	8	11	6
18	7	16	13
61	28	54	27

From the above figures it will be seen that there is some improvement in March of this year over those for March of 1917, although the decreases are not very large. In large ships there were sunk in March last year 61 large ships, as against 54 during March this year. The decrease in smaller vessels is only one ship.

Speaking to a representative of The Journal of Commerce in regard to the general situation, Samuel Bird, Jr., of the Aetna Insurance Company, said:

"I think the comparison will be better each month as we go along, but the all-important thing to my mind is to make every possible headway with our shipbuilding programme. Unless we get 4,000,000 gross tons of new shipping this year we stand a chance of being in a very unfortunate position. We cannot send several million men overseas as well as vast quantities of munitions and food unless we get the ships.

"There are many factors which make a reduction of our losses probable. Our armed steamers are getting a better and better grip of the situation, and are increasingly able to repel attacks. They have gained a lot of experience. The convoy system is also an aid, and to this is to be added the alertness and earnestness of the destroyer fleets of this country and Great Britain. The two fleets are working together beautifully. Depth bombing, zigzag navigation and many other preventive measures are being improved all the time."

Valuable figures were published this month by the British Embassy at Washington in regard to losses of shipping, both war and marine. At the same time shipbuilding figures were also published. Below these figures have been put into tabular form.

WAR AND MARINE RISK LOSSES.

	(Gross Tons.)	
	Other Allies	Total
	Britain. & Neutrals.	gross tons.
1914 (Aug.-Dec.)	468,728	212,635
1915	1,103,379	621,341
1916	1,497,848	1,300,018
1917	4,009,537	2,614,086
Total	7,079,492	4,748,080

SHIPBUILDING (Gross Tons.)

1914 (Aug.-Dec.)	675,610	337,310	1,012,920
1915	650,919	551,081	1,202,000
1916	541,552	1,146,448	1,688,000
1917	1,163,474	1,539,881	2,703,355
Total	3,031,555	3,574,720	6,606,275

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