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With British Navy in the North Sea

By RUDYARD KIPLING

ON the edge of the North Sea sits an admiral in charge of a stretch of coast without lights or mark, along which the traffic moves much as usual. In front of him there is nothing but the east wind, the enemy, and some few of our ships. Behind him there are towns, with M. P.'s attached, who, a little while ago, didn't see the reason for certain lightning orders. When a Zeppelin or two came they saw. Left and right of him are enormous docks with vast crowded sheds, miles of stone-faced quays, edges, loaded with all manner of supplies and crowded with mixed shipping.

In this exalted world, one met staff-captains, staff-commanders, staff-lieutenants and secretaries, with paymasters so senior that they almost ranked with admirals. There were warrant-officers, too, who long ago gave up splashing about deck bare-footed, and now check and issue stores to the ravenous, untruthful fleets, said one of these, guarding a collection of desirable things, to a cross between a sick bay attendant and a junior writer (but he was really an expert burglar): "No! An' you can tell Mr. So-and-so with my compliments that the storekeeper's gone away—right away—with the key of these stores in his pocket. Understand me? In his trousers' pocket."

He snorted at my next question. "Do I know any Destroyer-Lootenants? This coast's rank with 'em!" said he. "Destroyer-Lootenants are born stealing. And what they daren't pinch they take out in lyn'. It's a mercy they're too busy to practise forgery, or I'd be in gaol. Engineer-Commanders? Engineer-Lootenants? They're worse. Look here! If my own mother was to come here beggin' brass screws for her coffin, I'd think twice before I'd oblige the old lady. War's war, I grant you that; but what I've got to deal with is crime."

I referred him to a case of conscience in which everyone concerned exactly as they should, and it nearly ended in murder. During a lengthy action the working of a gun was hampered by some empty cartridge cases which the lieutenant in charge made signs (no man could hear his neighbor speak just then) should be hoisted overboard. Upon which the gunner rushed forward and made other signs that they were "on charge" and must be tallied and accounted for. He too, was trained in a strict school. Upon which the lieutenant, but that he as busy, would have killed the gunner for refusing orders in action. Afterwards he wanted him shot by court-martial. But everyone was voiceless then, and could only mouth and croak at each other till someone laughed and the pedantic gunner was spared.

"Well, that's a what you might fairly call a naval crux," said my friend among the stores. "The lootenant was right. Mustn't refuse orders in action. The gunner was right. Empty cases are on charge. No one ought to chuck 'em away that way, but... Damn it, they are all 'em right! It ought to ha' been a marine. Then they could ha' killed him and preserved discipline at the same time."

The Coast Problem.

The problem of this coast resolves itself into keeping tough with the enemy's movements; in preparing matters to trap and hinder him when he moves, and in so entertaining him that he shall not have time to draw clear before a blow descends on him from another quarter. There are then, three lines of defense; the outer and inner and the home waters. The traffic and fishing are always with us.

The blackboard idea of it is always to have stronger forces more immediately available everywhere than those the enemy can send. x German submarines, draw a, British destroyers. Then x calls x plus y to deal with a, who in turn, calls up b, a scout, and possibly a-2, with a fair chance that if x plus y plus z (a Zeppelin) carry on they will run into a-2 plus b plus c (cruisers). At this point the equation generally stops; if it continued, it would end mathematically in the whole of the German fleet coming out. Then another factor, which we call the Grand Fleet would come from another place. To change the comparisons: The Grand Fleet is the "strong left" ready to give the knockout blow on the point of the chin when the head is thrown up. The other fleets and other arrangements threaten the enemy's solar plexus and stomach. Somewhere in relation to the Grand Fleet lies the "blockading cordon" which examines neutral traffic. It could be drawn as tight as a Turkish bow-string, but for reasons which we may arrive at after the war, it does not seem to have been drawn so tight up to date.

The enemy lies up behind his mines and our, raids our coasts when he sees a chance, and kills sea-going civilians at sight or guess, with intent to terrify. Most sailor-men are mixed up with a woman or two; a fair percentage of them have seen men, women go down choking in horrible tangies and heavings of draperies. To say that the enemy has cut himself from the fellowship of all who use the seas is rather understating the case. As a man observed thoughtfully: "You can't look at any water now without seeing Lusitania sprawling all across it. And just think of those words—'North German-Lloyd,' 'Hamburg-America'—and such things in time to come. They simply mustn't be."

He was an elderly trawler, respectable as they make them, who, after many years of fishing, had discovered his real vocation. "I never thought I'd live killin' men," he reflected. "Never seemed to be any o' my duty. But it is—and I do."

A great deal of the east coast work concerns minefields—our's and the enemy's—both of whom shift as occasion requires. We search for and root out the enemy's mines; they do the like by us. It is a perpetual game of finding, springing and laying traps in the least, as well as the most likely runways that ships use—such sea-snaring and wiring as the world never dreamed of. We are hampered in this, because the navy respects neutrals, and spends a great deal of its time in making their path safe for them. The enemy does not. He blows them up, because that cows and impresses them, and so adds to his prestige.

The easiest way of finding a mine field is to steam into it on the edge of night for choice, with a steep sea running, for that brings the bows down like a chopper on the detonating horns. Some coats have enjoyed this experience and still live. There was one destroyer (and there may have been others since) who came through twenty-four hours of highly-compressed life. She had an idea that there was a mine-field somewhere about, and left her companions behind while she explored. The sea-

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she was dead calm and she walked delicately. She saw on Scandinavian steamer blow up a couple of miles away, rescued the skipper and some lands; saw another neutral, which she could not reach till all was over, skied in another direction; and between her life-saving efforts and her natural curiosity got herself as thoroughly mixed up with the field as a camel among tent-ropes. A destroyer's bows were very fine and her sides very straight. This causes her to cleave the wave with a minimum of disturbance, and this boat had no desire to cleave anything else. None the less, from time to time, she heard a mine grate, or tinkle (I could not arrive at the precise note it strikes, but they say it is unpleasant) on her plates. Sometimes she would be free of them for a long while and began to hope she was clear. At other times they were numerous, but when at last she seemed to have worried out of the danger zone, lieutenant and sub. together left the bridge for a cup of tea ("In those days we took mines very seriously, you know!")

As they were in act to drink they heard the hateful sound again just outside the wardroom. Both put down their cups with extreme care, little fingers extended ("We felt as if they might blow up, too!") and tiptoed on deck, where they met the foc'sle also on tiptoe. They pulled themselves together and asked the foc'sle what it thought it was doing. "Beg pardon, sir, but there's another of those blighters tap-tapping alongside our end." They all waited and listened to their common coffin being nailed by Death himself. But the thing bumped away. At this point they thought it only decent to invite the rescued skipper, warm and blanketed in one of their bunks, to step up and do his further perished in the open.

"No, thank you," said he. "Last time I was blown up in my bunk, too. That was all right. So I think now, too, I stay in my bunk here. It is cold upstairs."

Somehow or other they got out of them after all. "Yet, we used to take mines awfully serious in those days. One comfort is, Fritz 'll take them seriously when he comes out. Fritz don't like mines."

"Who does?" I wanted to know. "If you'd been here a little while ago you'd seen a commander comin' in with a big 'un slung under his counter. He brought the beastly thing in to analyze. The rest of his squadron followed at two knots intervals, and everything in harbor that had steam up, scattered."

Presently I had the honor to meet a lieutenant-commander-admiral, who had retired from the service, but, like others, had turned out again at the first clash of the guns, and now commands—he who had great ships erupting at his least signal—a squadron of trawlers for the protection of the Dogger Bank Fleet. At present prices—let alone the chance of paying submarine—men would fish in much warmer places. His flagship is a multi-millionaire's private yacht. In her mixture of stark, carpetless, curtainless, carbolished present, with her voluptuously curved, broad decked, easy stairwayed past, she might be Queen Guinevere in the convent at Amesbury. And the lieutenant-commander, most careful to pay all due compliments to admirals who were midshipman with him go through very strange experiences, because they love him and because his language is volcanic and wonderful—what you might call Popocateapocalyptic. I saw the Old Navy making ready to lead out the New under a grey sky and a falling glass—the wisdom and cunning of the old man backed up by the passion and power of the younger breed, and the discipline which had been his soul for half a century binding them all.

"What'll he do this time," I asked of one who might know. "He'll cruise between Two and Three East, but if you'll tell me what he won't do, it 'ud be more to the point. He's minehunting, I expect, just now."

Here is a digression suggested by the sight of a man I had known in other scenes, despatch-riding round a fleet in a patrol launch. There are many of his type, yachtsmen of all sorts accustomed to take chances, who do not hold master's certificates. Like my friend they do general-utility—often in their own boats. This is a waste of good material. Nobody wants amateur navigators—the traffic lanes are none too wide as it is. But these gentlemen ought to be distributed among the trawler fleet as strictly combatant officers. A trawler skipper may be an excellent seaman, but slow with submarine shelling and diving, or in cutting out enemy's trawlers. The young ones, who can master Q. F. work in a very short time, would—though there may be friction, a court martial or two, and probably losses at first—pay for their keep. Even a hundred or so of them, more or less, controlled by their squadron commanders, would make a happy beginning, and they would all be extremely grateful.

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