

**THE
NAVY
AT
WAR**



**BERNARD
STUBBS**

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by

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Preface

There are a great many books about the Royal Navy, ranging from serious treatises on strategy to light sketches of life in the Service, as well as some excellent novels with an accurate and faithful Service background. By far the majority of these have been written by retired naval officers. It is obvious and right that this should be so, for no civilian can know the Navy as well as the men who have spent their lives serving in it, and it would be presumptuous for me to write a book about the Navy which pretended to be anything but impressionistic and interpretive in character.

This book, therefore, is not intended for the naval officer or the naval expert, even though I hope it may find its way into some of the many ward-rooms in which I have been a guest. It does not attempt to deal technically with any branch of the Service, or with such complicated subjects as strategy and tactics, the big battleship controversy, and so on. It is intended primarily to give the general reader who is interested my impressions as a reporter of the Royal Navy at war.

Preface

It has been my good fortune, as one of the news observers of the British Broadcasting Corporation, to see a great deal of the Royal Navy in actual war conditions—a privilege accorded to few civilians—and since shortly before the war began I have broadcast in the news a large number of reports or ‘observations’ on what I have seen. In broadcasting, as in the newspapers, there is always the problem of getting the quart into the pint pot. I have never yet broadcast a news-talk without feeling that I ought to have had more time, because I had so much more that seemed worth saying. But in this book there has been no ruthless chief sub-editor to say: ‘Three minutes, and make it two and a half, if you can.’ I am indebted to the British Broadcasting Corporation for permission to reproduce my scripts, most of which are incorporated in the text, and to them I have added those impressions and much further information that the time-factor kept from the microphone.

I am also very much indebted to Mr. H. C. Ferraby, who must now be the *doyen* of the British naval correspondents. He served as one in the last war, in that body of newspaper correspondents who, when they were put into uniform by the Admiralty, dubbed themselves ‘The Royal Naval Lying Corps’. To him I am indebted for a great deal of practical help and advice, and for the free use of his extensive and long-established library of books, articles, and records on naval affairs.

The chapters on the French Navy are all too inadequate for that fine service, which is worth a book of its own; but the work done by the French naval officers and men in this war could not be overlooked, and I decided that it was better

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to cover its activities briefly rather than ignore it altogether. These chapters were written in France during visits to various French naval bases, to the Ministère de la Marine, and to some units of the French Fleet. Like the rest of the book, the events at sea, piling up rapidly one after another, will probably make many of the figures quoted out of date almost as soon as they are published, and for this reason I have refrained from giving any more than were absolutely necessary to my story.

I am also grateful for help of various kinds from the Press Division of the British Admiralty, from the Service de la Presse of the Ministère de la Marine in Paris, and from the British Naval Attaché's office in Paris.

B. S.

'Somewhere at Sea'

February 1940

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CHAPTER 1

The Curtain Raiser

I little thought, as I stepped on board a naval drifter at Weymouth Pier in the early hours of the 9th August 1939, to go out to the Reserve Fleet flagship to watch and report the King's inspection of the Fleet, that I was stepping into an entirely new branch of my profession. I am not 'fey'. I had no foreboding that in less than a month I should be making almost constant contact with the Fleet as a naval war correspondent. That inspection of the Reserve Fleet was my first important 'naval occasion'. I went on board the *Effingham* not without some of the landsman's ignorance of sea ways and sea customs. And looking back to that day, now, it comes to me that there are thousands in this country to whom the Navy is a mystery, to whom the work it does in war, though fully appreciated, is largely incomprehensible. It has been my luck to be with the Fleet, afloat and ashore, throughout the opening months of this Second Great War. Perhaps from the impressions and the facts I have gathered in these wanderings on many parts of the ocean front I can lift a corner of the veil of mystery and

The Curtain Raiser

enable landsmen to form some conception of what the Navy does in war-time.

Let us begin with a pen-picture of the King's inspection of the Reserve Fleet on the 9th August 1939. It is not an exaggeration to say that it was an outstanding day in British naval history. Not since 1924 had the Reserve Fleet been in commission on anything like the scale it was then. On the 9th August the Reserve Fleet assembled in Weymouth Bay provided a spectacle of sea power that was greater than the entire Navy of many smaller nations, and for the King's inspection there were over 130 ships in full commission, ranging from the battleships *Revenge*, *Ramillies*, and *Iron Duke*, down to the little motor torpedo-boats. Weymouth was already full of holiday makers, but the King's visit and the presence of the Reserve Fleet brought a further influx of people. On the night of 8th August nearly every boarding-house sofa was occupied, and many of those who had motor-cars slept in them.

On the day of the inspection, at eight o'clock, I was in a drifter on my way to the flagship *Effingham*, and when the clock on shore struck the hour, like a flash every ship in the bay dressed over all or broke masthead flags. It was a thrill to watch those silent, grey ships suddenly become gaily dressed, and it was a foretaste of that quiet efficiency for which the Navy is famous and which is the hallmark of all its activities. It is unnecessary to say that everything in a far from simple programme, arranged in only a week or two, went off without a hitch; but it's certainly worth while mentioning that His Majesty passed through the lines of ships in a fairly choppy sea, a cruise of some twenty-