

LIFE LINE

BY

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PRAYER TO BE USED AT SEA

O ETERNAL Lord God, who alone spreadest out the heavens, and rulest the raging of the sea; who has compassed the waters with bounds until day and night come to an end: Be pleased to receive into thy Almighty and most gracious protection the persons of thy servants, and the fleet in which we serve. Preserve us from the dangers of the sea, and from the violence of the enemy; that we may be a safeguard unto our most gracious Sovereign Lord, King GEORGE, and his Dominions, and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions; that the inhabitants of our Island may in peace and quietness serve thee our God; and that we may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land, with the fruits of our labours, and with a thankful remembrance of thy mercies to praise and glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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IN GENERAL

ONLY the First Lord and the Board of Admiralty can possibly envisage and focus the gigantic tapestry of naval warfare as it is being fought to-day from Singapore to Nova Scotia and from the Arctic to Cape Town. Compared with the last war, the task of the Royal Navy is now immeasurably greater. It is scarcely necessary to point out the appalling consequences of the Irish Free State's refusal to allow us to use her ports, thus compelling Great Britain to fight the Battle of the Atlantic from England, Scotland, and Ulster—hundreds of miles farther away from the real scene of combat.

It is true that the Treaty of Versailles resulted in the German Navy having, on the outbreak of this war, a mere handful of capital ships. But necessity being the mother of invention, each pocket battleship was designed and armed so brilliantly that it is a fleet in itself, or at any rate needs a fleet to sink it.

Even people who have crossed the Atlantic fail to realise its immensity, and do not appreciate what it meant to find the *Bismarck*, which was only a third of a mile in length and with a beam of only a few yards, in the midst of thousands of square miles of sea, much of it covered in fog and mist. If not equivalent to finding a needle in a haystack, it was certainly equivalent to finding a golf-ball in a hundred square yards

of gorse bushes. And the golf-ball had to be found promptly.

But everyone has read the accounts of that remarkable performance, even though many of the highlights, such as *Suffolk's* escape by a matter of thirty seconds from a complete salvo fired by *Bismarck*, have not been officially revealed. In this book I do not propose to elaborate on any of the major actions of the war such as the Battle of the River Plate, Cape Matapan, and the other naval engagements in the Mediterranean. They have been written and rewritten. I am devoting myself to the destroyers, corvettes, submarines, armed trawlers, and the other little ships of war who have been so largely responsible for saving Britain's life-line in the Battle of the Atlantic and the Battle of the North Sea and the English Channel Convoy.

Everyone has heard of the Battle of the Atlantic, though few details have leaked out. The Battle of the North Sea is never mentioned, and yet experienced naval officers who have taken part in both of them consider that the Battle of the North Sea is more tense and dangerous than the Battle of the Atlantic. In the Atlantic there is the continuous danger from submarines and Focke-Wulfs and a certain number of mines near the British coast. In the Battle of the North Sea there are E-boats, Messerschmitts, Heinkels, and every type of mine, together with the continuous risk of collisions. Naval officers say that after experience of the North Atlantic, the South Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and Norway

during this war, they consider that the North Sea is the toughest spot of them all. They say it is not so bad in summer with short nights and reasonable weather, but in winter when it grows dark at 4 p.m. and stays dark until 8 a.m. the strain on the captain, who has to remain on the bridge all that time, is very considerable.

It is not just a matter of being bombed and mined or torpedoed; it is the navigational worries and dangers of collision that cause the greatest anxiety in narrow waters. To shepherd a convoy of fifty ships in snow-storms and fog, very strong tides, and with all those dangerous sandbanks off the Norfolk coast seems almost suicidal; but it has to be done. It frequently happens that a whole convoy will follow one another with the escort vessels on the flank. Perhaps the whole column will fail to go round the corner, and continue straight on, with the escort vessels between them and the shoals. It must be the very devil to get out of such a fix. Remember, too, that the convoy may be proceeding at only seven knots, with a three-and-a-half-knot tide, and no radio in the merchantmen able to be used for inter-communication and guidance.

I would like to pay a tribute to the crews of the merchantmen. They are absolute heroes, and receive the greatest admiration from the Royal Navy. Their pay is infinitesimal compared with the dockers'; their danger is acute and continuous; they may grumble, but they carry on. Pay in the Royal Navy itself is absurdly low, too, if judged by civilian standards.

And what is more, only one-fifth of the officers, and perhaps twenty-five per cent of the ratings, are Royal Navy. The rest are R.N.V.R. and R.N.R., "hostilities only" personnel. This is not meant in any way as a reflection on the latter, but with the vastly increased menace from the sky, from the surface of the sea, and from U-boats now operating off France, the navigational difficulties are increased out of all proportion, and are bound to throw a greater strain than ever on the straight-run Navy. •

It is true that the American Navy since the early summer of 1941 has been taking some of the responsibilities off our hands, but in the last war we had the whole of the French Navy, the whole of the Italian Navy, and the whole of the Japanese Navy to assist us. To-day we have the scattered remnants of the Free French, Free Dutch, Free Polish, and Free Norwegian Fleets to render certain assistance; but, willing and eager as they are, their small numbers do not begin to make up for the complete Allied Fleets which were on our side in 1914 to 1918.

Hitler was well aware in August, 1939, that his action in Poland would provoke a European war, and sent out his U-boats to stations on each of Britain's ocean trade-routes. Surface raiders were despatched to more distant areas, and supply ships for their maintenance were arranged. For example, the *Admiral Graf Spee* met the *Altmark* in the Atlantic on August 28, 1939, nearly a week before war was declared. Our trade-routes were intensely vulnerable

IN GENERAL

in the opening stages of the war because our ships were still scattered on their lawful occasions, and it is only surprising that in the initial stages Great Britain did not suffer greater losses at sea.

In the first fortnight twenty-seven British merchantmen, totalling 131,000 tons, were sent to the bottom by U-boats. Everyone will remember the sinking of the *Athenia*. Others may be unaware that George Prien's first victim was the *Bosnia* on September 5. By the middle of September, 1939, however, the convoy system had been introduced, and merchant ships were being armed defensively. The Royal Navy's counter-offensive against the U-boats was also taking effect (in those days France was still with us and we could send destroyers out on a U-boat hunt instead of having to keep them, as now, for defensive convoy duties).

By October it was clear that Germany's faith in her initial submarine campaign had been ill-founded. The Admiralty did not announce the losses inflicted on U-boats. For, apart from giving away valuable information, the moral effect of disappearance without trace is greater than the knowledge that a vessel has been sunk in certain well-defined circumstances. During this stage we lost the aircraft-carrier *Courageous* and the battleship *Royal Oak*, but the U-boat campaign was failing to achieve its object, and ruthless warfare was begun against neutral merchant ships. November, 1939, was a bad month, for it was then that the Germans began to use their magnetic mines, which they laid indiscriminately.

Within a few days, it is true, the secret of dealing with them was discovered, but it was natural that weeks had to elapse before the cure could be put into practice.

Then came the inglorious end of the *Graf Spee*, followed by air attacks on shipping and even on light-ships, which shocked the world. These air attacks became an even greater menace than the U-boats. The Norwegian campaign followed, and though the Royal Navy took heavy toll of Germany's destroyers and cruisers, we lost another aircraft-carrier, two cruisers, and seven destroyers. The overrunning of Holland and Belgium made the situation bad enough for the Royal Navy, but it was the collapse of France when matters became critical. There is no space here to tell of the miracle of Dunkirk. In any event, you can read all about it in John Masefield's little book, *Nine Days Wonder*.

In the meantime it is impossible not to emphasise again and again the terrific advantage that Germany has gained by the collapse of France. Her aircraft can harass our shipping from bases only a few minutes' flying time from the convoy routes. The U-boats do not have to run the gauntlet of the Dover barrage or the Fair Island Channel.

As for Italy's decision to join Germany while the going was good, this was really much more serious than optimists chose to believe. But for the British Mediterranean Fleet, the Italians would have had complete control in what they chose to call "Mare Nostrum". The French naval bases in North Africa

might have fallen into Italian hands. Without the Navy, General Wavell could not possibly have captured those half a million Italian troops in his various campaigns. Without the Navy, the Syrian campaign would also have been impossible.

Despite all these operations, however, it is the Battle of the Atlantic and the Battle of the North Sea which claim first attention. As the Prime Minister has stated on various occasions, the crux of the world war is the successful defence of the British Isles. The most scintillating victories in the Near East or Russia would be of no avail if Great Britain were successfully invaded or starved into submission. Much play has been made of the Premier's tribute to the Royal Air Force in those famous words about so much being owed to so few. It would startle the world if the actual numbers of officers and ratings in the Royal Navy, R.N.R. and R.N.V.R. were ever disclosed.

Frequent criticisms have been levelled against the Admiralty for seeming to go out of its way to prove that the Royal Navy is still the Silent Service. Such attacks are ill-judged. Whereas the R.A.F. operations are completed within a few hours, those of the Navy may last for weeks at a time. And while the enemy are certain to know within a few hours the number of their aircraft or ours which have been destroyed in raids or dog-fights, they cannot discover for days or even weeks whether their own ships or ours have been sunk. For, thanks to radiolocation and other scientific marvels, it is most dangerous for ships at

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sea to send out signals either of victory or disaster. The Admiralty is therefore justified in concealing its activities both on the debit and credit side until there is not the slightest risk of a single brave man's life being endangered by premature release of news.

Service Suitability and Security are two phrases which have become anathema to ignorant or ill-advised persons. The answer is that it does not matter if curiosity kills the cat, but its gratification should never be allowed to injure or even risk the injury of a single officer or man. It is for that reason that there are bound to be certain blanks in this account of the activities of the little ships of war. Their dangers are even greater than described here, and their gallantry, endurance, and adventures are still more vivid.

NORTH SEA CONVOY

"RIGHT, Number One?"

"Yes, sir . . ."

"Slow ahead both . . ."

"Port ten."

"Port ten, sir."

"Stop starboard."

"Starboard engine stopped, sir."

"Port twenty."

"Port twenty, sir."

"Midships."

"Midships, sir."

"Slow ahead both; steady as you go." . . .

H.M.S. *Duckling*, trim, battleship-grey, is off to pick up a convoy of forty-nine ships fifteen miles out at sea. She is a corvette, the time is 8.30 a.m., and her engines hum quietly as she gathers way. It is still hazy, but there is every promise of a lovely day as the men put on their "Mae Wests". The convoy has left from a more southerly port, and H.M.S. *Duckling* is one of the warships detailed to escort it northwards to a given point, where other corvettes and destroyers take charge, and *Duckling* herself joins a south-bound convoy. In other words, *aller-et retour*, as the French say.

Number One, a photogenic youth from Putney, produces a lifebelt. "I don't want to be morbid, but still . . ." he smiles. The Captain now looks round.

He is a jolly burly native of Wallasey, married to a Manx woman. This is his second trip in *Duckling*. A fortnight previously he was in a battered destroyer operating in the Battle of the Atlantic.

"I'll bet there are some awful toads among the convoy," he grins, and turns to his Number One.

"If we have any casualties, we and the armed trawler will try to pick them up. It would be a waste of a destroyer," he continues. "If the casualties come from bombing we will tell the trawler to make for deep water. If they come from an E-boat we don't stop."

"Aye aye, sir."

From the bridge one can see the four-inch naval gun immediately below.

Duckling is now heading for the open sea, and a steward brings up the Captain's mail. This includes a letter from the widow of a member of the crew in his previous ship, thanking him for the money she received as a result of the auction of her late husband's effects.

"The troops are marvellous," the Captain explains. "If a man is killed, his widow is informed that she can reserve something from his kit, like a cap ribbon or his watch, together with his personal effects. The rest is put up for auction by the coxswain. He will say: 'Here's a good cap: how much may I bid?' Someone will bid 15/- and then throw it back into the ring. This enables the dead man's shipmates to subscribe to the widow, and yet it does not seem like charity. Time and again I have seen an ordinary seaman's kit

NORTH SEA CONVOY

worth a fiver sold for £30 or £40 in a destroyer. In battleships it may go for over £100. On this occasion an old seaman with a wife and three children, whose pay, when allowances had been deducted, was reduced to 12/6 a fortnight, bought the dead sailor's flannel for 15/- and then threw it back to be put up for auction again."

Duckling continues to glide forward. She has an official displacement of something under 600 tons. She passes a buoy, clanging mournfully like a church bell. Two sweep trawlers which have been looking for the latest German mines pass us on the port side. So far, the Admiralty has not granted any distinguishing mark to a trawler that has shot down an aircraft. That seems a pity, especially as the trawlers have shot down more Huns than the warships, if only because they look so inoffensive. •

The Captain picks up the loud-hailer, which is rapidly superseding the old-fashioned megaphone. It is like a huge electric microphone, the mouthpiece of which is attached to a ten-foot tube. They say that on a clear night it can be heard twenty-five miles away.

"A very useful gadget," explains the Captain. "You can insult anyone who has not got one with impunity. They have no come-back."

A moment later "action stations" are rehearsed, and steel helmets and respirators are served out; whereupon the gun's crew, six of them, practise aiming and firing the four-inch gun. One man swings it round all by himself with a hand-wheel.

Now comes an Admiralty signal that *Judge* and *Solicitor*, two Legal class destroyers, will join the convoy to-night, followed by the motor-launches later still. The armed trawler a mile astern of us asks permission to test her anti-aircraft gun (a twelve-pounder). This is approved. Then comes the first incident. "Guns" has received permission to loose off a couple of practice shots from the starboard A.A. gun. Simultaneously with the discharge and report, flames break out, and there is a tearing sound. The shell itself dribbles out of the muzzle into the sea. Orderly confusion reigns. There has been a premature burst; most unusual and most unpleasant.

The Captain orders the hoses to be played on the barrel and the pan of unexploded shells, which is clearly torn wide open. Bright flames lick the breech for what seems like two or three minutes. By God's grace the barrel does not burst, and neither "Guns" (who looks like a sergeant pilot and comes from Portsmouth) nor sub (an Irish baronet, blond and curly-haired) is hurt. "Guns" is slightly cut about the back of the hand and the forehead: that's all. Which is just as well, as *Duckling* does not carry an M.O., though the coxswain is said to be able to put in stitches under protest. A few minutes later "Guns" fires the port A.A. gun without any trouble, and a Hurricane flying overhead seems offended, especially when the Lewis guns are also given a few preliminary bursts, though in another direction.

Duckling is now looking somewhat anxiously for her convoy, but there is not a sign of it, only a wreck