

THE FIGHTING FLEETS

BY RALPH D. PAINE

THE FIGHTING FLEETS

FIVE MONTHS *of* ACTIVE SERVICE
WITH THE AMERICAN DESTROYERS
AND THEIR ALLIES IN THE
WAR ZONE

BY RALPH D. PAINE

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PREFACE

THIS book is an attempt to convey certain truthful impressions of the day's work of the Allied Naval Forces in the war-zone. Although the intention is, first of all, to tell what the American ships and sailors are doing, such a record would go very wide of the mark unless it included some account of the heroic toil and achievements of the British Navy as well as the unquenchable courage of the French seaports. For England and America, the first intimate contact of the war was between their navies, antagonists on blue water a little more than a century ago, but now linked together in the finest possible spirit of mutual friendship and respect. Without friction, clear of all jealousies or self-interest, they have strongly helped to banish such clouds of misunderstanding as may, hitherto, have befogged the relations of the two nations. The candid vision of fighting men is usually clearer than that of the politician.

Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly, commander-in-chief of the British Naval Forces on the coasts of Ireland, issued the following order, addressed to the American destroyer fleet, on May 14, 1918: —

On the anniversary of the arrival of the first United States men-of-war at Queenstown, I wish to express

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my deep gratitude to the United States officers and ratings for the skill, energy, and unfailing good-nature which they all have consistently shown and which qualities have so materially assisted in the war by enabling ships of the Allied Powers to cross the ocean in comparative freedom.

To command you is an honor, to work with you is a pleasure, to know you is to know the best traits of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Whatever the motives of the United States, — to save democracy, to protect her own future, to smash the hateful ambitions of Germany, — the bold prediction of Vice-Admiral Sims has come true. It was in 1910 that he was stormily criticized in certain quarters at home for declaring at a Guild-hall banquet: "If the time ever comes when the British Empire is seriously menaced by an external enemy, it is my opinion that you may count upon every man, every dollar, and every drop of blood of your kindred across the sea."

But we are fighting, not for England, but against Germany, objects the man in whom the ancient grudge still rankles, while the Sinn Feiner and his friends seek to kindle open hostility on American soil. There is one reply to this, — and Benjamin Franklin said it for us, — that if we do not hang together we are almost certain to hang separately.

At home the American Navy has displayed an extraordinary efficiency of organization which en-

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ables it to meet all the emergencies of war; abroad it has been everywhere vigilant and valorous. A tenfold expansion within a year has found it elastic, prepared, with the spirit of team-work highly developed. Without a serious flaw it has been able to keep fifteen hundred ships afloat and handle four hundred thousand men. Its fighting traditions have earned new lustre, and they are reflected in such routine reports as those of the destroyers, the battleships, the armed yachts, the ships of the Coast Guard, and the armed merchant steamers.

A Congressional committee of investigation, which frankly professed to be searching for faults, was able to sum up, among its conclusions: —

All appropriations have been expended or obligated with judgment, caution, and economy, when you consider that haste was necessary to bring results and abnormal conditions obtained in reference to all problems of production or operations.

The Navy, with limited personnel and matériel, was suddenly called to face many difficult and untried problems in sea warfare and has met the situation with rare skill, ingenuity, and dispatch and a high degree of success.

The efficiency of the Navy's pre-war organization, the readiness and fitness of its men and ships for the difficult and arduous task imposed by war were early put to the acid test, and thus far in no way have they been found wanting. And we feel that the past twelve months presents for the Navy a remarkable record of achievement, of steadily increasing power both in personnel and matériel, of rapidly expanding resources,

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and of well-matured plans for the future, whether the war be of long or short duration.

Our committee undertook this investigation expecting to find that no matter how well, in the main, the Navy had made its expansion into a war force, we would find some matters subject to adverse criticism. We brought with us the desire to coöperate with the Navy to the one end — success. An examination of the records will show how little occasion we have had to find fault. Some mistakes have, of course, been made, yet the Navy has shown its strength by the manner of their correction.

The Secretary of the Navy has been particular to disclaim personal credit and has loyally given all praise to other officials of the Department, to his admirals, to the civilian advisers of the Naval Consulting Board, and, in his own words, "to the spirit of unwearied diligence and expert efficiency in every bureau and every agency organized under the Navy Department. In this period the Republic has been fortunate in the proven capacity of the naval officers who have filled important stations ashore as well as in the splendid men who have commanded fleets and ships. . . . In the stress of war work it has been a delight to serve one's country in such comradeship as exists in the Navy Department. To this spirit and to the ability of these men who are experts in their profession the chief measure of naval preparedness is due."

To Secretary Daniels it has been a matter for good-humored surprise that he has ceased to be

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the target of ridicule and hostile criticism. When recently asked how it felt to be patted on the back instead of dodging brick-bats, hurled from every quarter, he replied: —

“Well, if people should say nice things about me from now until the day of my death, it would n't raise my batting average above .175.”

Far less spectacular than the operations of the Navy in the war-zone has been the silent service of the Fleet in home waters, of many of Admiral Mayo's great fighting ships which have been denied the dearest ambition of engaging the enemy. They were kept “out of the game” — officers and men eager to encounter any perils and hardships. They have played a noble part, however, doing their duty as it came to them, always ready for the call, and overworked as the training schools of the war personnel. To toil without hope of glory, to serve for the honor of the flag, — this is the spirit of the Navy.

There are other American ships and bases besides those described in this book, and I wish I might have visited them all. The Azores and the Mediterranean had to be deferred for another pilgrimage. Tireless ships and eager crews patrol those waters, including the fleet of the Coast Guard which is more familiar to those at home as the Revenue Cutter Service. These vessels, which used to put to sea to save imperilled mariners, with no weather so terrifying as to make them hesitate,

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are doing their part, in this same spirit, to banish the German submarine from ocean highways.

It would be most ungracious should I fail to express gratitude and thanks for the hospitality so freely granted during my five months on active service with the Allied Naval Forces. To be at sea with the ships and the men, and to enjoy the friendship and confidence of the admirals and other officers ashore was a memorable privilege and a singularly interesting experience. British, French, American, they were men whom one felt proud to know, sailors and gentlemen who had mastered their trade.

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THE FIGHTING FLEETS

CHAPTER I

OUR DESTROYERS IN THE WAR-ZONE

MY first glimpse of these splendid destroyers of ours was from the deck of a liner out of an American port, cracking on at nineteen knots through the war-zone, navy gun crews standing watch and watch, smoke-boxes ready to be dropped overside, passengers prudently girdled with life-belts, regarding it as a great adventure to imperil their precious lives in daring the Atlantic voyage. Among them was a senator of the United States and this was his first experience on salt water. To such pilgrims as these the Navy had been remote and unfamiliar, and its achievements of no immediate consequence. And now these insular opinions suffered a sea-change amusing to behold.

Where were those destroyers which the captain of the ship assured them would be sent out to take care of them and chase the submarines away? These importunate pilgrims fidgeted and walked the deck all night, conscious of a new and intense interest in the American Navy.

Morning broke and two or three specks appeared on the rim of a heaving ocean. They grew larger,