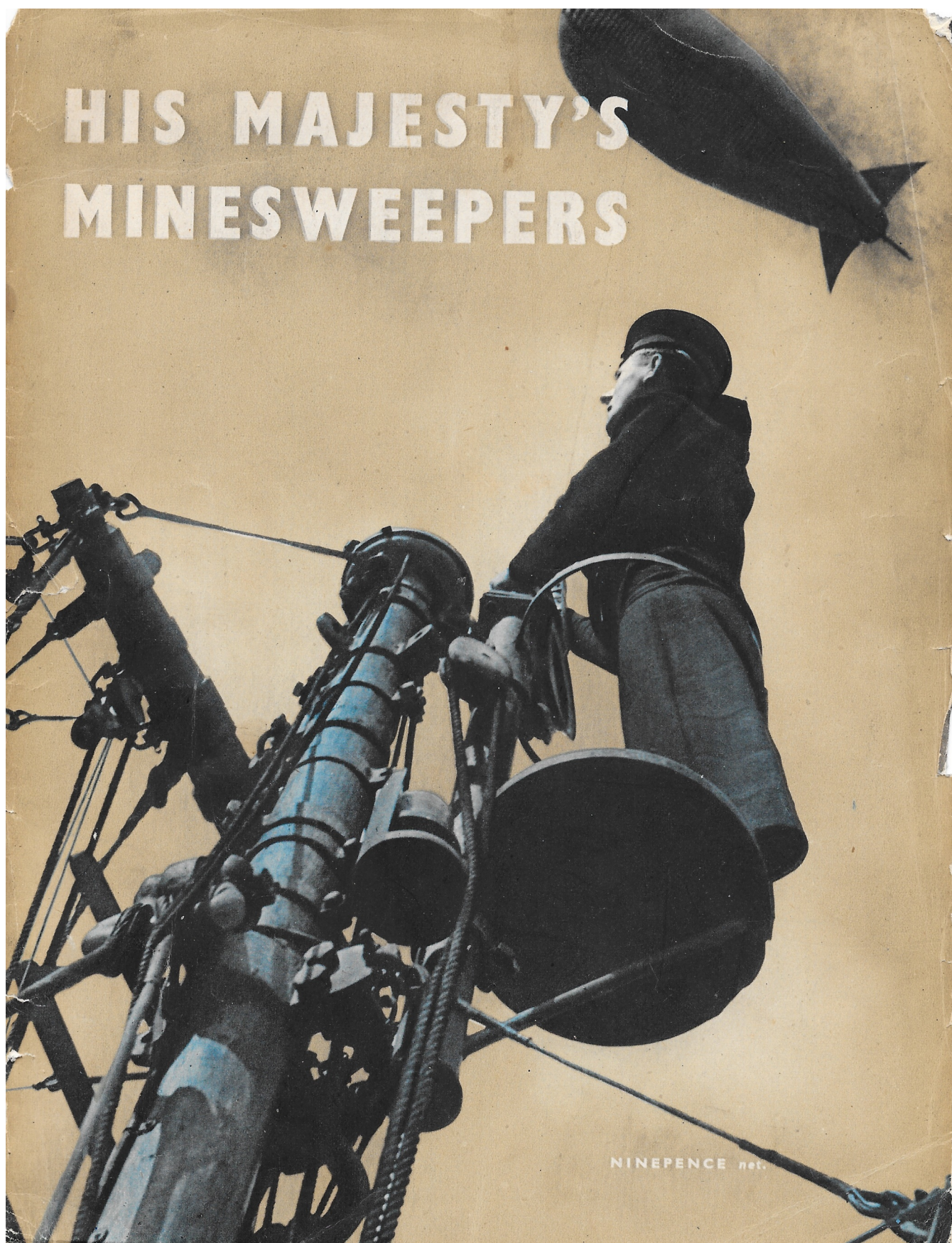
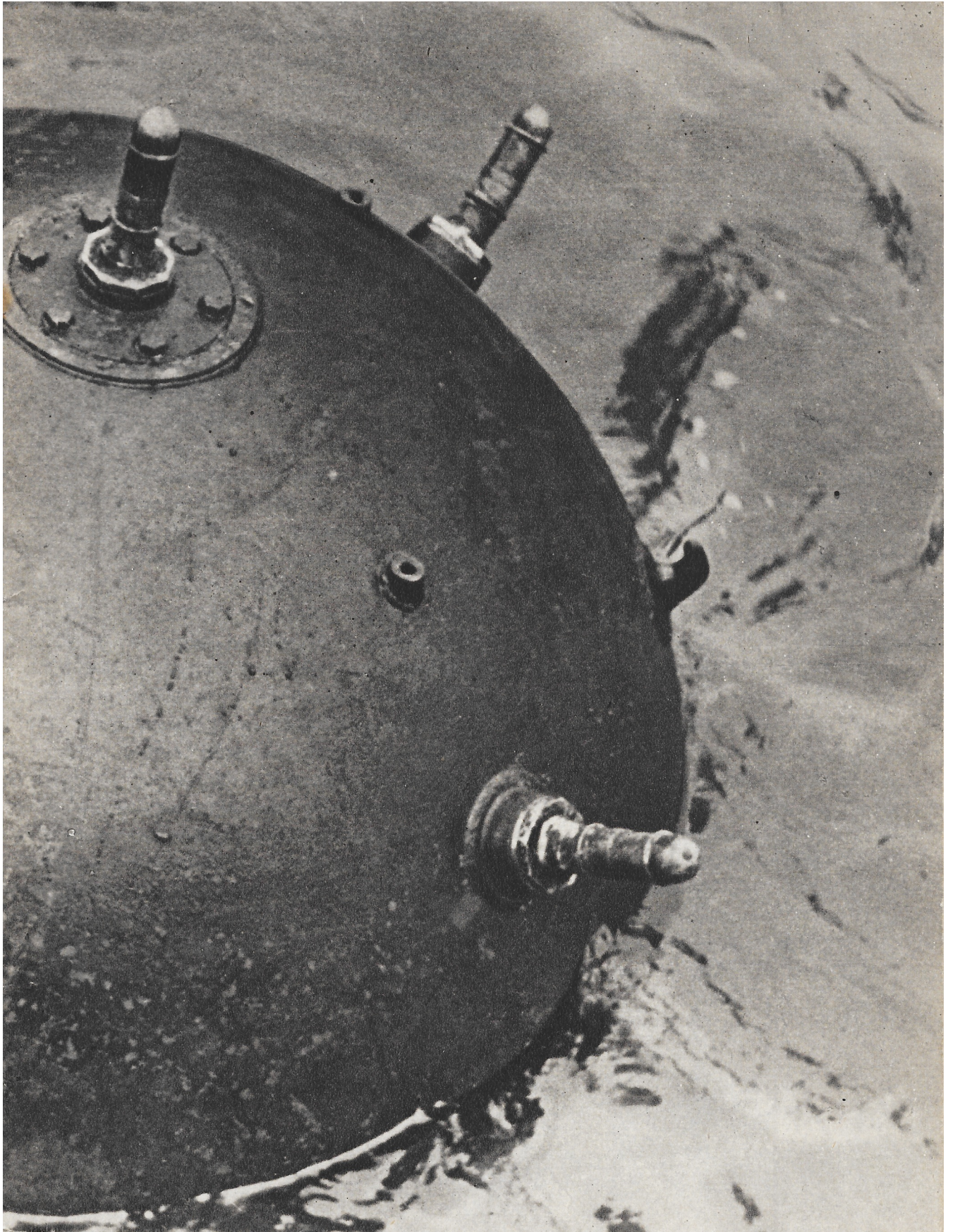
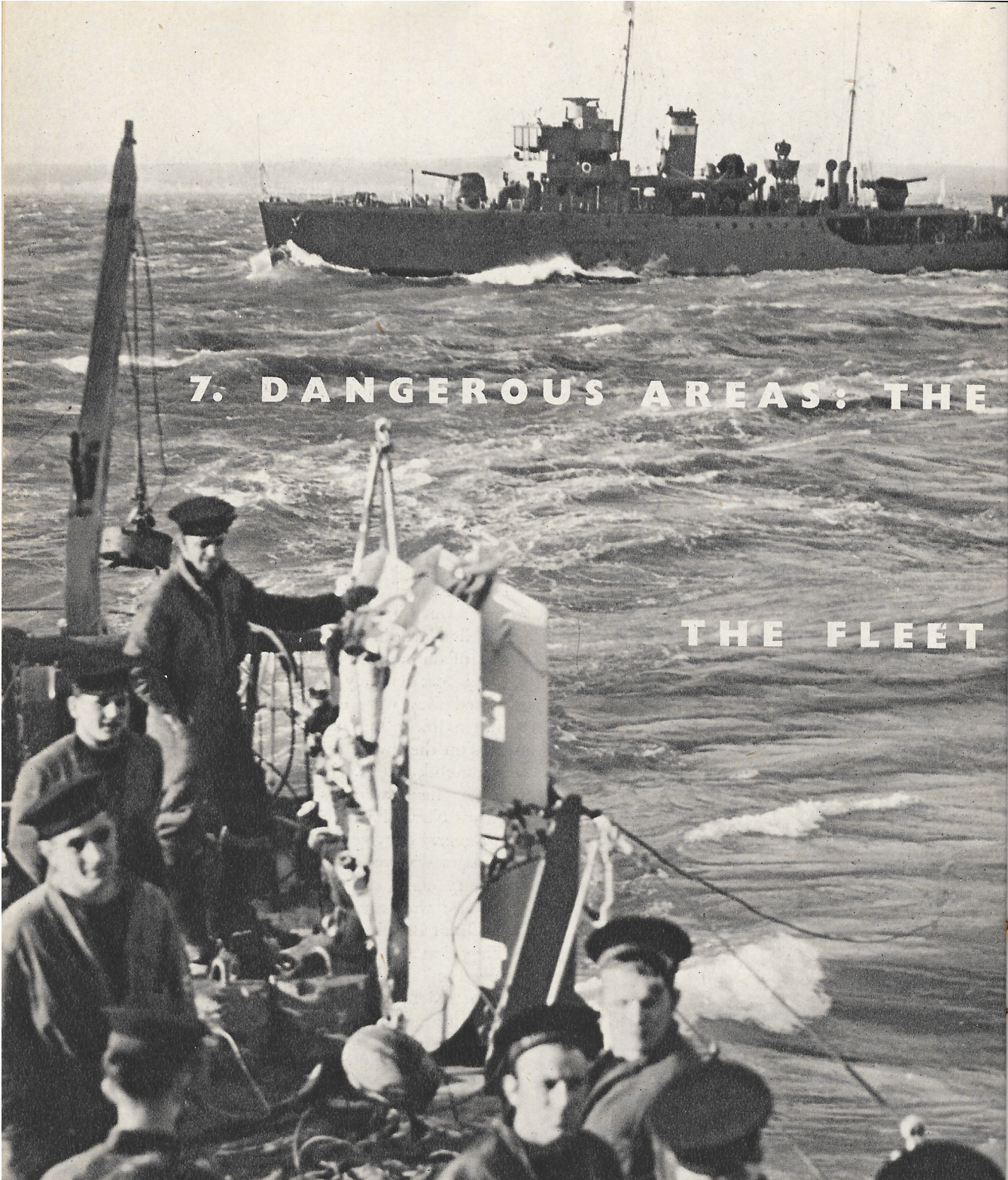


# HIS MAJESTY'S MINESWEEPERS



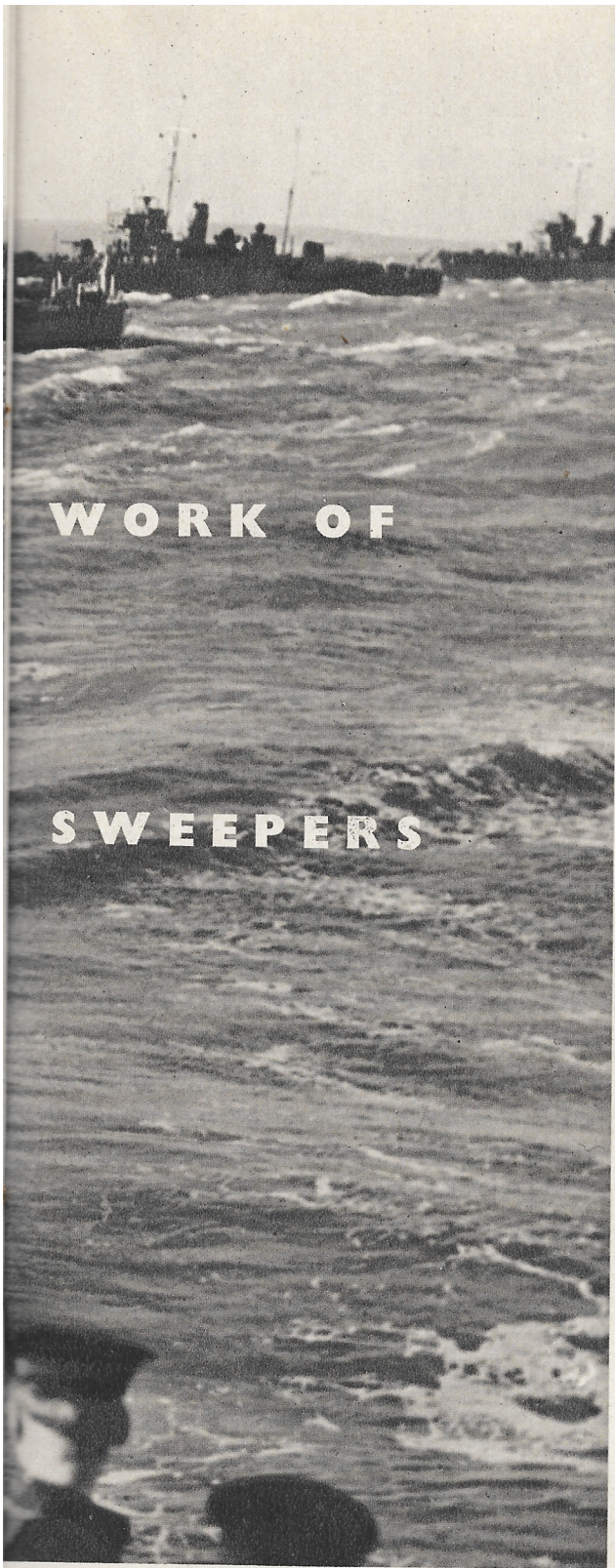
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7. DANGEROUS AREAS: THE

THE FLEET



WORK OF

SWEEPERS

**B**ESIDES THE TRAWLERS, a number of other vessels are employed on the routine sweeping of the War Channel: the motor minesweepers, which have a displacement of about 200 tons, used mainly to sweep ground mines in the shallow waters of river estuaries and port approaches; the whalers, many of which burn oil fuel, a matter of importance when a small crew is required to steam the ship on a long passage; and the drifters, which in peace-time fish for herring with drift nets, their size making them handy ships for sweeping in confined areas.

These vessels are not usually employed in clearing extensive minefields laid outside narrow waters, a duty which is the function of the fleet minesweepers.

In the earlier days of the war the auxiliary paddle-sweepers were used for clearances. In fair weather a well-trained flotilla would carry out this work satisfactorily, but the paddlers' radius of action was limited, the risk of damage to their paddle-wheels made them particularly vulnerable, and when mined they were difficult to keep afloat, so that as more fleet sweepers came into commission they were relegated to other, but no less useful, duties.

The fleet sweepers do not belong to the Royal Naval Patrol Service, but are R.N. or "General Service" ships, and are classed as "major war-vessels." The oldest type is the Albury class, laid down towards the end of the last war, and named after inland towns in Great Britain—Pangbourne, Derby, Ross. They have a displacement of 710 tons, a speed of 16 knots, and are the only coal-burners left in the Royal Navy: hence their nickname of "Smoky Joes."

Next come the Halcyons, named after minesweepers of 1914, somewhat larger and faster than the Alburys, while the new Algerine class is the largest and fastest of all. Between the two are the modern Bangors, called after British ports, which have been encouraged to adopt the ships of their own name, send them comforts and books, and



**IT IS A TRICKY SWEEP.** The enemy has laid a minefield overnight. Chart and rule before him, dividers in hand, the Senior Officer (*centre*) plans the clearance with the commanding officers of his flotilla.

raise money on their behalf in Warship Weeks.

The larger and faster of these minesweepers operate with the Fleet. Their speed enables them to sweep ahead of the capital ships when necessary, and their size fits them to carry an increased offensive armament of guns and depth-charges, so that when not minesweeping they can undertake escort and anti-submarine duties, particularly when the Fleet is covering the passage of an important convoy.

One of them recently rammed and destroyed a German submarine in Arctic waters, and when H.M.S. Edinburgh was torpedoed three of the Halcyons put up a spirited fight against superior forces. The Flag Officer in command had given orders that they should retire at full speed under a smoke screen if attacked by surface-craft. These orders never reached them. When the Edinburgh was hit, instead of turning away they turned towards the enemy destroyers, "going in like three young terriers," as the Admiral said, and firing whenever visibility permitted. Then, while one made a smoke screen, the other two went alongside the sinking cruiser

and took off the whole ship's company. The Admiral was among the last to leave. As he stepped on to the sweeper's quarterdeck her Commanding Officer saluted.

"Everything correct, sir. Your flag is hoisted."

The Admiral looked upwards. Flying at the masthead was the Cross of St. George, with two red balls in the upper and lower cantons. Its ragged edge suggested that it was a Senior Officer's pendant from which the tails had been cut, and the red balls looked as though they had been hastily daubed on with red paint. But there was no mistaking it for anything but a Rear-Admiral's flag.

It was a gesture which no German could hope to understand: but one that Nelson himself would have appreciated.

The smaller fleet sweepers do not normally accompany the Fleet to sea or perform escort work, but nevertheless must have a speed which enables them to tow their sweeping outfit through the water faster than the trawlers, and sufficient fuel endurance to remain at sea during protracted clearance operations. They must be good seaboats, handy, with a low silhouette, equipped to hunt and sink submarines, with ample close-range weapons against aircraft, since when sweeping their restricted freedom to manoeuvre makes them an attractive target for the dive-bomber.

The Bangors fulfil all these conditions. They run as smoothly as a sewing-machine, and although lively movers in rough weather, they go with the sea rather than argue it and their buoyancy saves them from shipping green water. They cost about £150,000 each, have a displacement of about 700 tons, and their main armament is a three-inch gun forward and a pom-pom aft.

The bridge is covered and the helmsman has a steel protection round the wheel. The Commanding Officer's quarters are immediately below the bridge, the Ward Room aft, with the officers' cabin-flat below. There are

eight messes, but when the ship is sweeping only the special minesweeping mess-decks aft are used, the others being closed and made watertight.

The Bangors carry a total complement of about 80, including five or six officers. The First Lieutenant is responsible to the Commanding Officer for all the minesweeping gear on board. There is one Gunnery Officer to each flotilla; one, or sometimes two, Surgeons, with a sick-berth attendant in the Senior Officer's and Doctor's ships.

The principal Chief Petty Officer is the Bo'sun's Mate (known as the Buffer), who, under the First Lieutenant, supervises the hands engaged in sweeping operations. The Coxswain is the senior helmsman and the ship's housekeeper. The Chief Stoker is in charge of the engine-room ratings under the Commissioned Engineer and supervises the big winch on the quarterdeck when the ship is sweeping. About fifty per cent of the ship's company are "Active Service," or R.N. ratings, the remainder "Hostilities Only." There are about 36 deck hands, the others being signalmen, engine-room and technical ratings, cooks and stewards. When the sweeps are out every man not on watch is at his action station or on look-out, except the engine-room ratings and the two cooks.

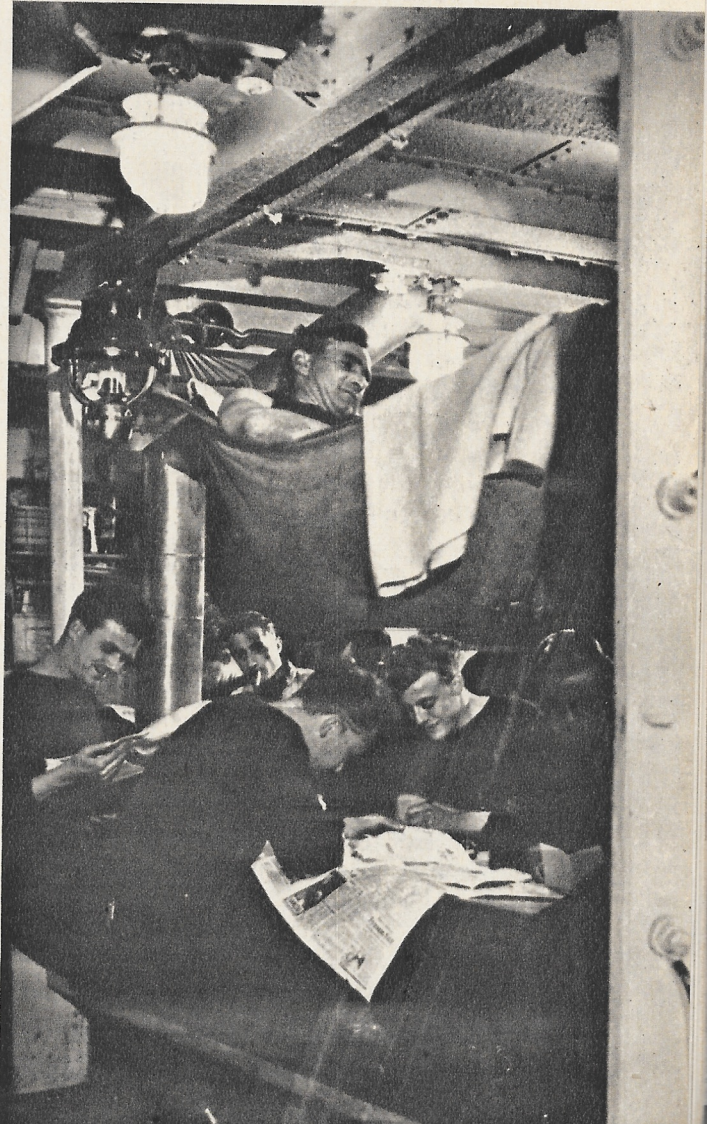
Like the trawler hands, the men in the fleet sweepers are well cared for. Each ship has her own NAAFI canteen, and clothing may be bought (without coupons) at the Base "Slop Shop."

During sweeping operations the Bangors usually anchor for the night, and, as in the trawlers, one watch goes on leave when boiler-cleaning comes round, so that each man has five or six days' leave about every six months, and three weeks' during the annual refit. When in port the ratings have shore liberty; entertainments are arranged and there are plenty of opportunities for sport. On board the favourite recreations are ludo, darts and tombola, the only form of lottery recognised in the Navy. Each ship

has a library, kept by the sick-berth attendant or a Petty Officer.

Since a flotilla is seldom at sea for more than four days at a time there is always plenty of fresh food on board. Each mess appoints its own caterer. The Coxswain issues meat, potatoes and fresh vegetables daily; tea, sugar and tinned milk twice a week. As in all naval ships, every man is entitled to a tot

**BETWEEN SWEEPS.** The crew of a minesweeper relax on one of the mess decks of H.M.S. *Rothesay*. Fleet sweepers carry about eighty men.



of rum daily at 11.30, or an allowance of threepence in lieu.

Two men from each mess are detailed every day to prepare the food, which they deliver to the cook in the galley. When the ship is sweeping, the men feed as opportunity offers, but an electric heater ensures a hot meal at any hour.

The officers have much the same food as the men, cooked in the same galley. Their Ward Room is small but comfortable, usually equipped with a dart-board and a wireless set, which is seldom silent. A fleet sweeper does not mark her score of mines on the funnel, but it is often to be seen in neat black letters on the white paint of the Ward Room bulkhead.

Sometimes the Ward Room rations are supplemented by a parcel, particularly when there is a Sub-Lieutenant from one of the Dominions on board. They are good parcels, put together by people of imagination, and the senders would be gratified if they could be there to see the reception they receive.

There is much friendliness between the officers of the flotilla. When in harbour the ships lie abreast in pairs, so that the Ward Room of the one nearest the quay forms a natural port of call. Nearly everyone has a hobby to which he can devote any spare time he may have on board. Making ship-models

is popular, and some enthusiasts have revived the old craft of inserting them in bottles, as fine a test of patience as any devised by man. In one ship the First Lieutenant, who left the Stock Exchange for the sea, has imbued the members of his Ward Room with a passionate but academic interest in the movements of stocks and shares, and one Senior Officer amuses himself with the compilation of "Famous Last Words" as applied to minesweepers, from which may be quoted "No mines there, we swept there yesterday"—"They won't bother us, we're too small"—"He won't have any bombs, he's going home"—and "It's only the engine-room fans."

There are eight ships in a flotilla of fleet sweepers, under the Senior Officer, who may be either a Commander R.N. or R.N.R., and a Commander as Second Senior Officer. Each flotilla works directly under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief of the Command in which it is required to operate. Its main function is to clear an area which has been declared dangerous.

The successful clearance of a minefield is the result of careful planning, meticulous training and rigid discipline. Lessons learnt in the last war must be studied, later technical developments efficiently applied. With perhaps as many as a dozen ships working



**BOWS ALMOST BLOWN OFF** by a mine, and her deck plating buckled back like tin over her bridge, a British fleet sweeper limps for home. This is one of the risks the sweepers face daily.

together, it demands navigation and seamanship of a high order. A faultless clearance does not appear spectacular, but is the result of the skill and leadership of the Senior Officer, combined with the team-work of every officer and rating in the flotilla.

Such an operation may be described to show the work which the Bangor sweepers are called upon to do. One morning, when the flotilla is in port, signals begin coming in to the Base showing that there is trouble in the War Channel. Two merchant ships in a south-bound convoy have been sunk, and one of the escorts damaged. It becomes clear that E-boats have laid a minefield during the night. The trawlers are on the spot and have swept the area for ground mines with negative results. As yet it is impossible to define the limits of the minefield, and the Commander-in-Chief directs the flotilla of fleet sweepers to make a hundred per cent clearance. Meanwhile the convoys which are in transit or about to sail are held back.

The Senior Officer of the flotilla, having been given his orders and told the approximate position of the dangerous area, is left to make his own dispositions. He summons his commanding officers to a conference in his cabin or in the Ward Room of his ship. With a chart spread before him on the table and a pair of dividers in his hand he tells them what has to be done and how he proposes to do it. The operation is regarded as "tricky," and every precaution is taken against risking the ships unnecessarily. Each captain is given his orders, certain ships being detailed to act as dan-layers, others to follow the sweepers for mine-disposal.

The commanding officers return to their ships and in their turn call their officers together. The First Lieutenant is told the general plan so that he may know what sweeps to have ready. The Navigator is shown the position of the area to be cleared. The Commissioned Engineer is warned to have steam at the time appointed for sailing.

Before the flotilla puts to sea, the First Lieutenant gives orders for the watertight doors on the mess decks to be closed. This tells the ratings that they are going into a dangerous area. There is a hum of expectancy and everyone is on his toes.

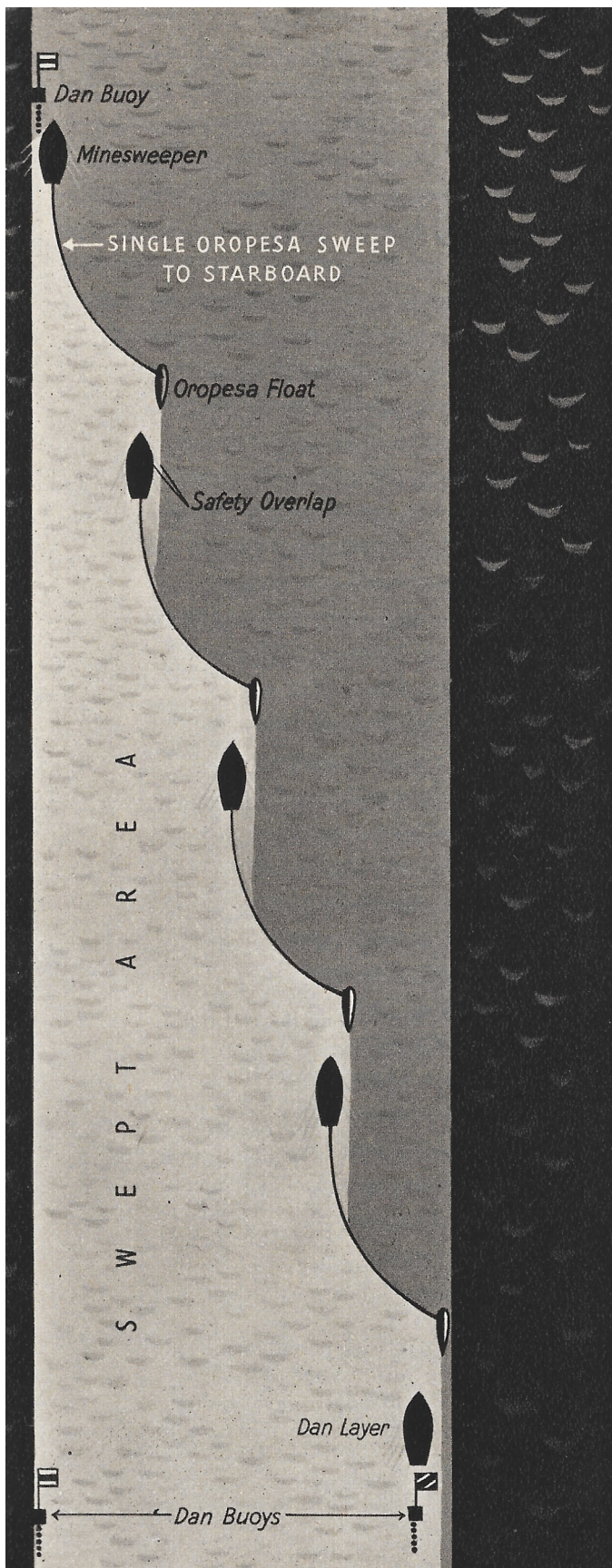
As each ship leaves port she "embarks" a balloon. The flotilla is a brave sight as it steams out from the coast on its mission, keeping accurate line and station. The Senior Officer has arranged the hour of sailing so that the flotilla may begin sweeping with the benefit of the extra depth at high water. When it reaches the area, the limits of which have been marked by dan-buoys, the sea is still covered with wreckage from the ships that have been lately sunk—rafts, waterlogged lifeboats, spars, hatch-covers, packing-cases, and tables floating with their legs upturned to the sky.

If the Senior Officer were making a search, he might take his ships over the area in line abreast with both port and starboard sweeps out, but since he has to sweep water which has already been declared dangerous he adopts an echelon formation, whereby only the leading ship—his own—is in unswept water during the initial lap. One of the danners—a millionaire's yacht in peacetime—follows the outside ships to buoy the limits of the area swept. These dans are steel canisters attached to long flagged poles, with strings of elliptical pellets to show the direction of the tide. A third vessel will weigh the dans when they are no longer required.

The flotilla approaches the dangerous water in formation. There is a signal hoist from the senior ship. In each sweeper a quartermaster pipes the order "Hands to sweeping stations." The First Lieutenant takes charge of the quarterdeck, the Buffer superintending the sweeping party, the Chief Stoker the winch.

The dangerous area is some eight miles in length and six in breadth. When the sweepers have completed the first lap—one length—they haul in their port sweeps, turn on to





the second lap, the senior ship following the line of dans, put out their starboard sweeps, and begin again.

On the first two laps the sweeps draw blank ; the Senior Officer has been cautiously edging on to the dangerous water. But the first mine is cut soon after the ships have started on the third lap. It floats up to the surface, shiny black with protruding horns, half above, half below the water. A signal goes up, " Mine to starboard." All hands off duty come up to watch.

A cut mine is a free target for all, and a difficult one in a rough sea ; when hit it will either explode or will sink as the water washes through the holes drilled by the bullets. The rifles of a destructor ship astern open fire, but the captain treats the mine with respect. He does not close to under 200 yards, and every man on deck wears his steel helmet. Suddenly there is a thud against the ship's side. A snowy mound of water rises from the surface of the sea, shaking the ship's gear. The mound swells into a mountain, then breaks into great columns of water and flying spray, high above the mast-heads of the ships, as the crash of the explosion comes. If the ship is in luck she will have time to gather a haul of fish.

Mines soon begin to go up at frequent intervals, until the sea resembles what the Senior Officer calls " a veritable sago pudding of mines," but there is no damage. One sweep hauls in a waterlogged lifeboat. On the fourth lap the look-out of one ship reports that the float is no longer " watching"; it has suddenly disappeared. There is no knowing what may have happened. There

**SWEEP IN PROGRESS.** When an area known to be mined is swept, the sweepers adopt an echelon formation, so that only the leading ship, that of the Senior Officer, enters unswept water. The others follow, each leaving a safety overlap, so that the ship herself is in water already swept by the ship ahead. Last of all comes the " danner," laying buoys to mark the area. When one length has been completed, the flotilla turns and repeats the sweep in the opposite direction, the process continuing until the whole area has been cleared.

may be a mine caught in the sweep, or only a piece of wreck. The First Lieutenant orders the winchman to haul in. The wire comes in bright and burnished, proof that it has been running along the bottom.

"Clear the quarterdeck!" commands the First Lieutenant.

The sweeping hands retire (but not far), leaving the First Lieutenant and the Buffer at the stern, peering intently for a sign of any object caught in the sweep or the otter as the winch hauls slowly in. Most of the ship's company line the starboard guard-rail, watching.

"It's wonderful what them wires'll tell you," says one, with his eyes on the sweep. "They'll generally start singing if there's a mine there. But you can't be sure till you've hove in."

Next moment the float reappears, bobbing and plunging through the water like a hooked shark, the staff of the green flag cutting a veil of spray on either side. It is drawn closer and closer to the ship's quarter, but it is impossible to see the wire itself; the danger is that the mine—if mine there be—will be hauled out of the water under the counter before anyone can see that it is there.

When the float is about 30 yards from the stern it leaps out of the water and the otter rises for a moment above the surface, clear of whatever obstruction that caused it to sink. The ratings return to the quarterdeck to get the sweeping-gear in. By the time the fourth lap has been swept dusk is falling. Half the area has been cleared. The flotilla anchors inshore for security and continues operations at daybreak next morning, sweeping till dark with satisfactory results. The last lap is covered, the dans weighed. The Senior Officer's signal "In Sweeps" is hailed with relief, for it has been a long day for every man in the flotilla.

The Senior Officer makes a laconic signal to the Base: "Area cleared." The Bangors steam back to port at full speed in line ahead, taking flurries of spray over their bows. As

they go, they see far away on the horizon two great convoys—one from the northward, the other from the south—approaching the water they have lately cleared. Not an hour has been wasted in speeding the trade on its way once it is safe to pass.

When the flotilla reaches port the Senior Officer receives a signal from the Flag Officer in command of the Base:

"In these days of rationing, I congratulate you and your ships on the number of eggs found during the last two days. You are entitled to crow."

"Many thanks," he replies, "fortunately we were not broody."

**MARKING THE SWEEP CHANNEL.** Behind the last of the sweepers comes a special vessel, the "danner." She lays dan-buoys, seen here on deck, along the limits of the safe area.



**A**LTHOUGH THE CHIEF DUTY of the fleet sweepers is to clear dangerous areas, there have been times when they have responded to a call which was beyond their normal experience and made the utmost demand upon their endurance.

Such was Operation Dynamo : the evacuation of Dunkirk. Among all the ships which brought the British and French troops to safety the minesweepers have a proud record.

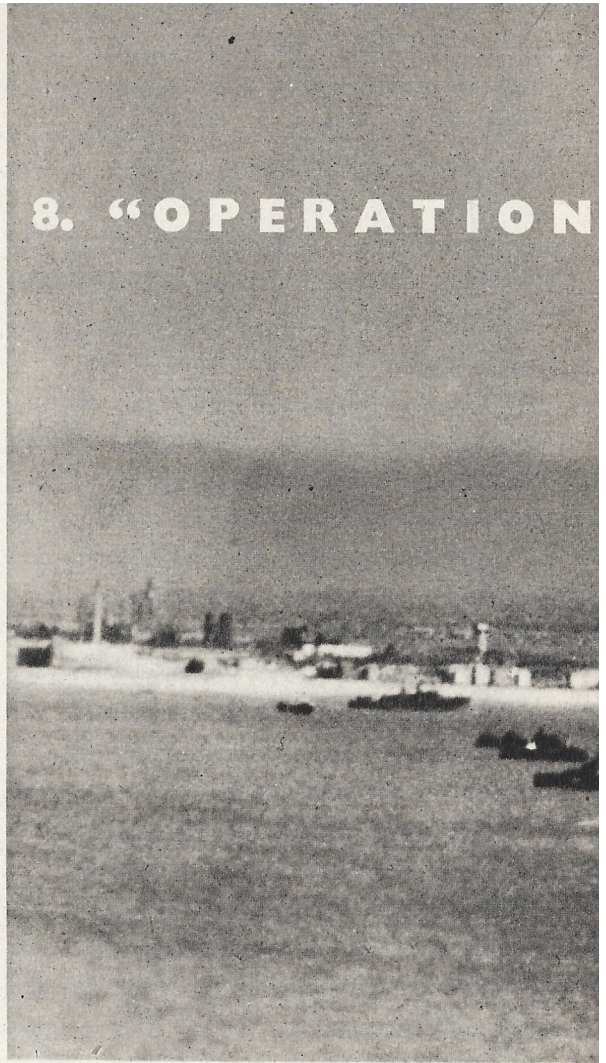
The "Smoky Joes" were there, among them H.M.S. Pangbourne (Commander Douglas Watson, R.N.), a veteran of the last war. When she reached Dunkirk on the afternoon of her first day she went alongside the mole and embarked 200 unwounded British troops. Later, under shell-fire all the time, she moved to the jetty on the south side of the harbour where a long line of ambulances was waiting. The cot cases were stowed side by side on the quarterdeck ; the walking cases found room where they could. There were fifteen men in each officer's cabin, others in the baths, round the funnel and round the "handstand" of the gun.

It was still dark when the Pangbourne steamed out of harbour, expecting to take her direction from a green light outside. Unknown to Commander Watson, the buoy had been bombed. He followed what turned out to be the starboard light of a steamer, and the ship ran aground on a sandbank. Fortunately the tide was flowing and she backed off two hours later. The exhausted soldiers did not realize that they had been aground.

The Pangbourne reached Ramsgate, disembarked the troops, and returned for more. One sergeant, who had tucked himself away in a corner, slept so well that he found himself back at Dunkirk.

S.S. Clan MacAlister, which had been bombed at anchor outside the mole, was on fire aft and the German gunners were ranging on her. The Pangbourne took off the Master and twelve men. This time Commander Watson sent his whaler and motor boat to the beach. A score of dive-

## 8. "OPERATION"



bombers circled overhead, peeling off one by one to attack their targets. One dropped five bombs close to the Pangbourne. The explosions lifted her out of the water, and the men in the boats thought she had gone. Four of the gun's crew were killed, and the gun would not train. The First Lieutenant and the Sub-Lieutenant were wounded. A second aircraft bombed the ship beam on, but the only damage was from the splinters, which tore up the degaussing gear and holed the hull in over a hundred places above and below the water-line.

Commander Watson then gave the order to weigh, while the engineers plugged the holes

DYNAMO":

## THE SWEEPERS AT DUNKIRK



with chips of wood. The boats brought off a number of soldiers. Many French and Belgians, most of them wounded, climbed aboard from small boats. There was no surgeon on board, but they were made as comfortable as possible.

By that time it was 7 p.m. Commander Watson decided to return to Dover. On the passage he fell in with the Gracie Fields, a new paddle-sweeper which had been hit in her engine-room. The Pangbourne took off most of her people, leaving a skeleton crew aboard, and began to tow her with the sweep-wire. Her rudder was jammed, so that she towed out on the starboard quarter, sinking slowly.

After an hour she had to be abandoned. The Pangbourne took off the skeleton crew, and since her compass had been knocked off the board by the bombing she steered by "lamp-post navigation"—from buoy to buoy—for darkness had fallen.

She approached Dover in the misty dawn, to be told that magnetic mines had been laid during the night in the harbour approaches. Her degaussing gear being wrecked, she had to steam in a circle until trawlers had swept the channel, but was able to disembark her troops later in the morning.

Meanwhile the paddle-sweepers were playing their parts beside the "Smoky Joes."

The first on the scene came from Dover. They arrived each day at dusk, spent the night filling up with troops and tried to sail before daylight. There was no time for organized meals, but although they had only enough food on board for their crews, somehow every soldier was given at least a bowl of soup and a hunk of bread.

The senior ship of the flotilla, the *Sandown* (Commander K. M. Greig, R.N.) had a dachshund who became known as "Bombproof Bella." The ship was bombed repeatedly on every passage, but was never hit, and the ratings ascribed her preservation to their mascot. Two other ships of the flotilla were not so fortunate. The *Gracie Fields*, which the *Pangbourne* tried to save, sank on her second trip. The *Brighton Belle* struck a wreck on her first return passage. As she was sinking, the fourth ship of the flotilla, the *Medway Queen* (Lt. A. T. Cook, R.N.R.), went alongside and took off all the survivors. The *Medway Queen* herself made seven trips to and from Dunkirk, which was the sweepers' record.

Another flotilla of paddle-sweepers, consisting of the *Waverley*, *Marmion*, *Duchess of Fife* and *Oriole*, reached Dunkirk from Harwich. On the first day the *Waverley* (Lieutenant S. F. Harmer-Elliott, R.N.V.R., Senior Officer) had embarked 600 troops when twelve Heinkels made a concentrated attack on her from a height of 8,000 feet. For half an hour she evaded the salvoes showered upon her crowded deck, but finally a bomb struck her on the port quarter and after wrecking the Ward Room flat passed through the bottom of the ship, leaving a hole six feet in diameter.

Four soldiers were killed and several wounded. The attack continued for another fifteen minutes, the bombers machine-gunning the upper deck, but the *Waverley* kept up a rapid fire with her 12-pounder and Lewis guns, supplemented by rifle-fire from the troops. No further bombs hit the ship,

and Lieutenant Harmer-Elliott had hopes of keeping her afloat until he fell in with another vessel to which he could transfer the troops. Soon, however, she became unmanageable and would not answer the wheel; then began to sink rapidly by the stern. Within one minute of the order "Abandon Ship" she had disappeared.

Lieutenant Harmer-Elliott went down with her, holding on to the bridge rails, and kicked himself free of obstructions as she heeled over to port. When he came to the surface he saw many of the troops trying to keep afloat, but the numbers thinned out within twenty minutes. The first ship to arrive was a French destroyer. Later, guided by aircraft, several drifters and a tug picked up more survivors. Lieutenant Harmer-Elliott was rescued after being in the water for 45 minutes, but many of his ship's company perished and with them between 300 and 400 of the troops. He paid a high tribute to the soldiers, who behaved "with the highest courage and calmness and obeyed all orders implicitly," and of his own men he wrote, asking that the survivors might be allowed to serve together again, "It has been my privilege to command one of the finest ship's companies."

The *Marmion* (Lieutenant H. C. Gaffney, R.N.V.R.) and the *Duchess of Fife* (Lieutenant J. Anderson, R.N.R.) fared better, each making three trips and bringing back over 2,000 British and French troops between them. Lieutenant Gaffney mentioned the fine spirit shown by his officers and men, many of whom were under shell-fire for the first time, in what he called "the somewhat arduous conditions," and Lieutenant Anderson reported that when he had sent his sea-boats off to the beach to embark troops his junior engineer, Mr. V. N. Wood, volunteered to take the 13-foot skiff ashore. In this way Mr. Wood and the Second Engineer, Mr. A. R. Japp, with the Coxswain, Petty Officer A. Brassington, brought off 30 men in parties of six at a time.



**THE SWEEPERS WERE THERE.** With all the other "little ships," vessels of the Minesweeping Service helped to bring home the British Army from Dunkirk. These men are safe on the deck of the drifter Fidget.

Lieutenant E. L. Davies, R.N.V.R., who was commanding the Oriole, finding on his arrival that there was a scarcity of power boats, and having none himself, took the responsibility of deliberately running his ship ashore, so that she could be used as a pontoon to evacuate the men on the beach. In this way he distributed 3,000 troops among the vessels in the offing, although the Oriole was being continually straddled by bombs. He refloated his ship in the evening during another severe bombing attack, returned to England with 700 soldiers and nurses on board, and then went back.

The Captain M.S., Harwich, wrote of the Oriole's company :

"There was no question of their requiring rest, but only a burning desire to get their ship coaled and turned round in order that they might get back to Dunkirk in the shortest time."

During these operations the men in the three surviving paddlers of the flotilla worked for four days and nights without sleep, almost without food, and between them brought 4,755 troops safely home.

Some of the minesweeping drifters also took part in the evacuation. Towards the end of

1939 H.M.S. Vernon had specially equipped a flotilla of five East Coast herring drifters with the object of recovering ground mines by trawling. The flotilla consisted of the Lord Cavan, Silver Dawn, Fisher Boy, Jacketa, and Formidable, whose name was subsequently changed to Fidget, a blow from which her Skipper never fully recovered. In May, 1940, this flotilla, which had come to be called "Vernon's Private Navy," was operating from Ramsgate under Lieutenant-Commander A. J. Cubison, D.S.C., R.N., with Lieutenant R. S. Armitage, R.N.V.R., as Second-in-Command. The individual ships were commanded by Skippers, R.N.R., from the Grimsby and Hull deep-sea fishing fleets, and carried a crew of ten : mate, chief engineer, signalman, cook, four deckhands and two stokers.

When the evacuation began, the Mine Recovery Flotilla was sent over to Dunkirk with orders to act as ferry vessels between the harbour and the larger ships lying outside. On the evening they arrived they warped up to the East Mole, where the troops were lined up ready for embarkation. The drifters took 150 men each and then

set out to unload them into such larger ships as they could find. This proved difficult in the darkness. For a while they made determined efforts to discharge their troops into a merchant ship and were aggrieved at her apparent lack of interest, until they discovered that she was aground on a sandbank and had been abandoned. Eventually they succeeded in finding suitable ships, and returned to the harbour for a second load.

It was then decided that the Lord Cavan should remain at Dunkirk with Lieutenant-Commander Cubison, and that Lieutenant Armitage, in the Fidget, should sail the remainder of the flotilla back to Ramsgate with the troops. On the two following days the four drifters continued their work, sailing from Ramsgate in company, splitting up on the other side, collecting men as and how they could, and returning independently as soon as each ship was loaded. Although their instructions were to limit their loads to 100 men, they usually took over 200, the record being made by the Silver Dawn, who on one passage carried 312. Such loads would have been unsafe in anything but calm weather, but even so a number of soldiers who had swum out to the ships had to be refused passage. Lieutenant Armitage described

these men as being "amazingly philosophical," and they swam back to the beach with cheerful comments on the wetness of the water.

Although subjected to incessant bombing attacks the only one of Lieutenant Armitage's drifters to suffer damage was the Silver Dawn, who lost a propeller blade on some wreckage in Dunkirk harbour on the third day, but succeeded in reaching Ramsgate with her troops on board.

On their outward passage on the last day the remaining three drifters came up with a large troopship, the Scotia, which had sustained five direct hits from bombs, and was lying on her side burning fiercely. The sea was full of French troops, whom German aircraft were machine-gunning as they struggled in the water. Having rescued everyone left alive, the three drifters turned back with the survivors, most of whom were severely wounded.

In all, the four drifters brought back 4,085 soldiers. The Lord Cavan was sunk by shell-fire, but the entire ship's company returned safely.

The trawlers also did valiant work, although many of the skippers were over fifty years of age and most of the junior officers and ratings had previously seen nothing of war. Eight trawlers alone brought back 1,606 British, French and Belgian troops. Losses were severe. One Skipper, as he was picking up soldiers from the water, saw a bomb strike a sister ship. There was no sign of her when the smoke of the explosion had cleared away. Another sank near the East Pier alongside the wreck of a British destroyer, her White Ensign still flying just above the water throughout the evacuation.

Perhaps H.M.T. St. Melanté had the most varied experience of all. She had been sweeping off the Hook when the Germans invaded Holland. A near miss from a bomb wounded both the Skipper, the Second Skipper and three seamen, and flung Second Hand (now Skipper) F. Hayward violently



**THE END OF THE SCOTIA.** From this large troopship, wrecked by enemy bombs, everyone alive was rescued by three drifters usually employed for mine recovery by H.M.S. Vernon. These three drifters and two others (one was the Fidget) were known as "Vernon's Private Navy."

on his back. Hayward gave the men first aid and took them to hospital. He refused to remain himself, although in great pain, since there was no one else to take charge of the ship. Next day the Germans captured the hospital and his shipmates became prisoners of war.

The *St. Melanté*, with her consort the *Arctic Hunter*, then went to Flushing, where she was bombed and raked by machine-gun fire, and later reached Zeebrugge. The water was thick with mines, and ships were going up every hour. The trawlers swept the harbour approaches and took on board the crew of a bombed Greek ship, then were ordered to return to their Base. On arrival both ships' companies were given five days' leave. An hour later leave was cancelled and the *St. Melanté* was told to proceed to Dunkirk.

There was no need to look at the chart, for over Dunkirk hung a pall of smoke which could be seen for miles. Bombs were dropping as the trawler reached the quay, where she embarked 600 troops. The men were worn out but revived once they were on board, under the impression that they were "safe with the Navy." They were distributed along the deck, in the cabin, in the stokehold, and on the gun-platform. The ship was bombed the whole way back to Dover, but there were no casualties.

The *St. Melanté's* next duty was to sweep at Le Havre. As she approached the harbour the oil tanks were blazing, and on arrival she was ordered to *St. Valery*, where 6,000 troops were believed to be surrounded on a strip of beach. The relief force consisted of a score of small vessels: trawlers, sloops and a destroyer. They reached the rendezvous at midnight and sent the boats in. But the beach was empty. When dawn broke there was no sign of troops. All had been taken prisoner. During the night the *St. Melanté* found a French yacht adrift. She was intact, but everyone aboard was dead. They looked as if they had been murdered.

The *St. Melanté* then returned to Portsmouth and was ordered to *St. Nazaire* in company with the trawler *Asama*. They reached the harbour to find the quay lined six deep with troops, who extended as far as the eye could see. The *St. Melanté* took 670 on board. The *Asama*, a destroyer and a French tug took others, and ferried them to the transports waiting in the harbour. The ships were bombed all the way out, but the soldiers stood the ordeal unflinchingly.

This work went on for three days and nights. There seemed no end to the troops. The *St. Melanté's* men found themselves "napping on their feet," as Skipper Hayward put it. They saw the *Lancastria* go down.

Skipper Hayward was beginning to lose the use of his legs from the effect of his fall, but he refused to go to hospital. Then a fleet of trawlers arrived, with civilian crews and their fishing gear still on board, and the evacuation was at last completed. But the troopships still had to be taken safely out of harbour, the approaches to which were suspected of being mined. Skipper Hayward was told, "Although your crew are off their feet, you must sweep us out."

At dawn the *St. Melanté* and the *Asama* went ahead of the great convoy—twenty merchant ships packed with troops, with ten fishing trawlers and the destroyer escorts. They swept from the lock gates into the open sea; then took up their position on either side of the convoy and steamed with it to Plymouth.

That, so far as Skipper Hayward was concerned, was the end of what he called "all that bother across yon side."

He was loud in his praise of his men. They were all landsmen except the Leading Seaman, a giant with ginger hair, who, when he sighted enemy aircraft, would man the gun and bawl out imploringly, "Come over 'ere! Just come over a little closer!"

"Yes, the men behaved as though they had a job," said Skipper Hayward.